CONTEMPORARY COSMETIC SURGERY PRACTICES ON SOCIAL

MEDIA: AN ANALYSIS ON ETHICAL ADVERTISING STANDARDS

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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RESEARCH COMPLIANCE CERTIFICATION

Research activities involving the use of human subjects, vertebrate animals, and/or biohazards must be reviewed and approved by the appropriate Texas A&M University regulatory research committee (i.e., IRB, IACUC, IBC) before the activity can commence. This requirement applies to activities conducted at Texas A&M and to activities conducted at non-Texas A&M facilities or institutions. In both cases, students are responsible for working with the relevant Texas A&M research compliance program to ensure and document that all Texas A&M compliance obligations are met before the study begins.

I, Georgia Elgohary, certify that all research compliance requirements related to this Undergraduate Research Scholars thesis have been addressed with my Research Faculty Advisors prior to the collection of any data used in this final thesis submission.

This project did not require approval from the Texas A&M University Research Compliance & Biosafety office.

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary Cosmetic Surgery Practices on Social Media: An Analysis on Ethical Advertising Standards

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Throughout human history, society has regarded certain physical characteristics and traits as "beautiful." Individuals have gone to extreme measures to live up to these standards, and cosmetic surgery is today's solution for people who wish to adhere to what society deems as aesthetically pleasing. People often credit social media as being the primary method of enforcing these standards for physical appearances. Research has shown that continuous exposure to photo-sharing sites has caused an unnatural expectation of body image. As a result, many people suffer from body dissatisfaction, a condition when an individual feels that he, or she, does not meet society's standard of what is considered beautiful with negative feelings about their physical traits as a consequence. As the number of Americans using social media for personal purposes has increased significantly over the past few decades, the number of businesses utilizing these

platforms as an advertising tool has increased as well. Given the role of cosmetic surgery in assisting individuals to achieve a certain appearance, there is concern that if presence of cosmetic surgery practices on social media could worsen this elevated standard of beauty. This study explores the ethical standards these accounts uphold. Thus, 417 Instagram accounts and 554 Facebook accounts were reviewed and categorized by use of the platform to promote cosmetic surgery or to educate individuals on this specialty. The accounts were then grouped by number of followers, and the primary content type for each was recorded. A trend was then constructed to show the change in content type as the following increased.

DEDICATION

For Michael. Thank you for checking my colors.

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Contributors

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All work conducted for the thesis was completed by the student independently.

NOMENCLATURE

B/A   Before and After

FB   Facebook

IG   Instagram

1. INTRODUCTION

Until the rise of the Communist Party in China in the mid-twentieth century, foot binding was a common practice among elite women. The toes were folded down to the sole of the foot, and the ball of the foot was folded towards the heel to increase the arch of the foot (Levy, 1970). The small foot was said to replicate the golden lotus (Starch, 1986), an ancient symbol of beauty originating from Hallu dancers who performed on carpets decorated with images of the flower (Berg, 1995). The small foot symbolized gracefulness and femininity of elite women, while, by contrast, larger feet were symbols of commoners and peasants (Berg, 1995).

Women of the Victorian era viewed the hourglass figure as a symbol of vanity and romance and wore corsets that compressed the ribs and internal organs to form a smaller waist (Whyte, 2003). In a pamphlet from the Kalamazoo Corset Company in 1921, the company advertised their product by saying women fear "sagging bodies…lost figure…shiftless appearance in the nicest of clothing…sallow complexion," and this product will prevent these unseemly appearances (Fields, 1999). But most doctors were outspoken against them, the first being Samuel Thomas von Sömmerring, who warned of the dangers of hiatus hernias caused by corseting (Fee, Brown, Lazarus, & Theerman, 2002). Furthermore, most who wore them agreed that the undergarment was both uncomfortable and painful, and yet, the desire to meet a societal beauty standard seemingly outweighed the risks (Steele, 2003).

Women of the Padaung tribe, originating in Burma, create the illusion of longer necks by wearing stacked brass rings that collapse the clavicle and compress the rib cage into the chest (Stone, 2012). The process begins in early childhood and symbolizes feminine beauty and

strength. The weight often causes much discomfort and bruising, and women must maintain certain postures, even while asleep, to prevent lesions and sores (Theurer, 2014).

Pre-Hispanic Mayan society commonly practiced many forms of body modification, including filing or decoration of the teeth, flattening of the skull, and elongation of the skull (Tiesler, 1999). Each custom symbolized a different status symbol or standing in society.

In present-day American society, standards of beauty are held in equally high regard. Women today are considered beautiful when they are thin around the waist, but curvy around the breasts and butt. In a study done by Victoria Hoff in 2019, 1,000 American women stated that the "perfect woman is 5'5", 130 pounds, and has a 26-inch waist." However, the average size of an American woman's waist is closer to 38 inches (Hoff & Hancock, 2022). Similarly, the ideal size of a man is 6', 192 pounds, and has a 33-inch waist (Treadmill Reviews, 2019). How then are these unnatural standards introduced and continuously enforced, especially given modern understanding of the health concerns regarding significant body modification?

A study done in 2021 showed that young adults, young women in particular, primarily use and view social media as a platform to communicate physical aesthetics (Monks, Costello, Dare, & Reid Boyd, 2021). The participants in the study responded that they viewed the body standards they were exposed to on social media as "unrealistic," but still found the individuals portrayed in the photos beautiful. Even though most individuals do recognize these standards of beauty as unrealistic, many still compare themselves to them and experience body dissatisfaction. Body dissatisfaction is the experience in which one interprets a standard of beauty in their society and feels they do not meet that standard (Mills, Shannon, & Hogue, 2017). Much research has shown that this condition is a major risk factor in developing eating disorders and chronic dieting, among other unhealthy practices. Individuals can often be influenced by

what they encounter on social media from both public figures and peers. One study found that a reward, such as financial success or a romantic partner, is associated with a physical characteristic and people will attempt to gain that trait in order to receive that reward (Engeln-Maddox, 2006). With this desire to meet a standard set by society often comes issues regarding one's self-esteem. To mitigate this dilemma and to adhere to society's accepted image of beauty, body modification is accomplished with cosmetic surgery.

A study done in 2009 found that participants felt an overall increase in self esteem and acceptance of their body image after undergoing a cosmetic surgical procedure. The likelihood of undergoing cosmetic surgery is positively correlated with negative body image, low self-esteem, and the need for conformity (von Soest, Kvalem, Roald, & Skolleborg, 2009). Social media encourages people to conform to a certain image, and those who are more susceptible to that influence are more likely to seek professional alterations of the body (Furnham & Levitas, 2012). Social media's purpose of upholding society's image of beauty is also a tool utilized by many businesses to advertise their service or product. Data collected in January 2021 from a survey found that 93% of the businesses that responded used Facebook as a marketing resource and 78% used Instagram (Statista, 2021). Cosmetic surgery practices are businesses, and many use these platforms to market the procedures. Those who question the ethics behind cosmetic surgery raise the argument that social media by itself does damage to the body image of many people by bombarding them with unrealistic beauty, and the promotion of this extreme "solution" on the same platform would only make the issue worse. One critic suggests that elevation to a higher status by undergoing a cosmetic procedure results in "lost human values" (Nejadsarvari, Ebrahimi, Ebrahimi, & Hashem-Zade, 2016). The purpose of this study was to investigate the

current ethical standards and methods of cosmetic surgery practices for promoting their services on social media platforms.

1.1   Hypothesis

The main hypothesis tested in this study was: As public exposure to cosmetic surgery practices on Instagram and Facebook increases, the content type will shift towards educational posts and away from promotional posts.

1.2   Objectives

The objectives of this study were to describe how cosmetic surgery practices utilize social media platforms and to identify how the content changes as the target audience changes.

2.   METHODS

A large number (679) cosmetic surgery practice websites were reviewed for links to a public Instagram or Facebook account. Links to private or personal social media accounts were excluded from this study. Each account was categorized by the types of content posted on each account. The content was categorized into one of the following types: Before and After Photos, Advertising, Offers, Products, Procedures, Testimonials, Procedure Information, and Office Information. The three most prominent categories present on each account were recorded. The number of posts on each account was recorded. The number of followers of each account was recorded.

Posts were grouped into two main categories: *Promotional* and *Educational*. Subcategories grouped under *Promotional* were *Advertising*, *Offers*, *Products*, and *Testimonials*. The subcategories that were under *Educational* are *Before and After photos*, *Procedures*, *Procedure Information*, and *Office Information*. The types of posts that fall under Advertising are those that feature elaborate backdrops and models promoting the business. The types of posts that fall under Offers are those that promote a monetary discount on a service. The types of posts that fall under Products are those that promote followers to purchase a certain item, such as a skin serum or face cream. The types of posts that fall under Testimonials are messages from real patients about their experience, typically positive. The types of posts that fall under Before and After Photos are those that feature real patients before and after their procedure has been completed. The photos are often full body and are unedited. The types of posts that fall under Procedures are videos or photos of the surgeon performing the surgery. These posts are often flagged by Instagram or Facebook to warn viewers that they contain graphic material. The types

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of posts that fall under Procedure Information are those that describe a specific operation with text, or answer frequently asked questions about what the patient can expect from the procedure. Finally, the types of posts that fall under Office Information are those that give details on the business, such as contact or location information.

2.1 Recording Followers and Posts

The number of followers from each Instagram and Facebook account were recorded to compare public exposure levels for each page. The number of posts from each account was recorded as well to compare how active each page is.

3.   RESULTS

In the study, 679 websites of cosmetic surgery practices in the United States were catalogued. Of the 679 practices, 417 had a link to the practice's Instagram account and 554 had a link to the practice's Facebook account. Figure 3.1 shows the average number of followers and posts for both the Instagram and Facebook accounts reviewed. Of these, 7 of the Facebook accounts were personal accounts and were excluded from this study. As displayed in Figure 3.1, the average number of Instagram followers was 7913. The average number of Facebook followers was 2312. Each practice posted an average of 506 pieces of content on Instagram and 617 pieces of content on Facebook.
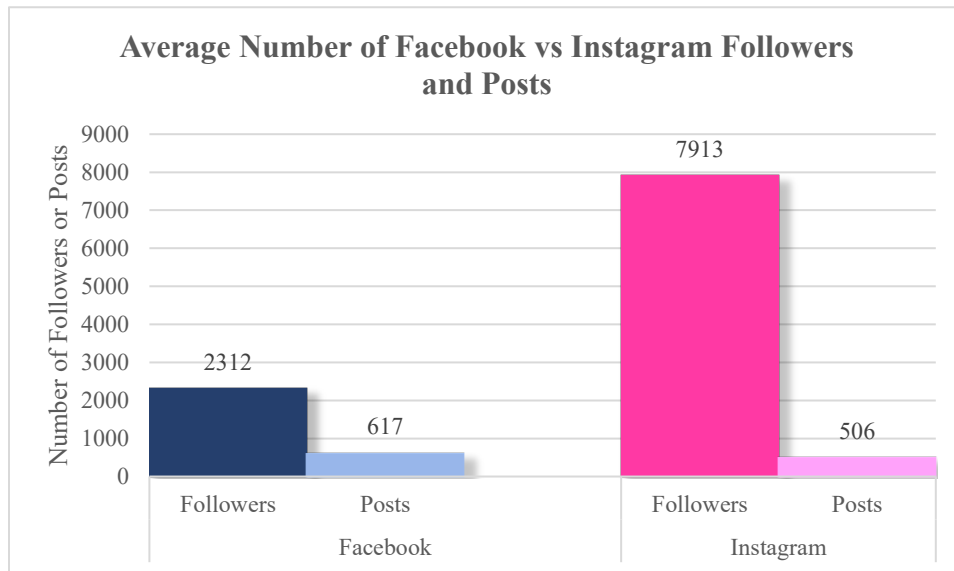
Figure 3.1: Average Number of Facebook vs Instagram Followers and Posts

The content for each account on Instagram and Facebook was categorized into one of the following: Figure 3.2 shows how many of the accounts on Facebook analyzed in the study had each of the 9 categories as the primary type of content. *Advertising* photos appeared most often

as the primary form of content on Facebook, as 206 of the 554 accounts reviewed had

Advertising photos as the main post type. The second most common primary form of content was

Before and After photos, which accounted for 155 of the Facebook accounts reviewed. 42 of the

accounts had *Offers* as the primary form of content; 32 accounts had *Procedure Information* as

the primary form of content; 16 had *Testimonials* as the primary form of content; 11 had

Products as the primary form of content; 7 had *Procedures* as the primary form of content; and

another 7 had *Office Information* as the primary form of content. The remaining accounts did not

have any posts yet to categorize. To summarize, 275 accounts had *Promotional* content as the

main post type, while 201 accounts had primarily *Educational* content.
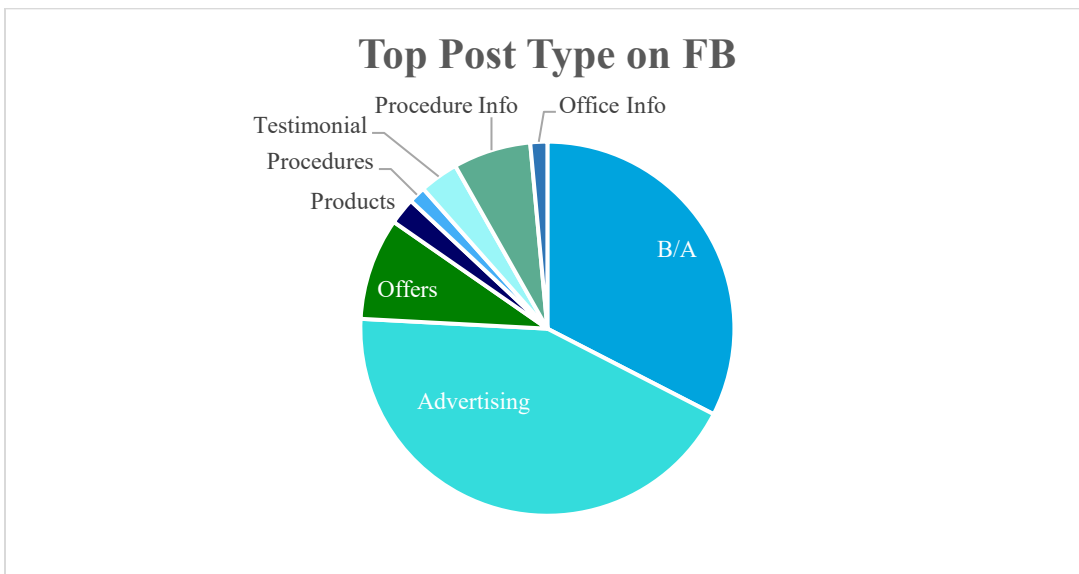
Figure 3.2: Percentage of Each Content Type as Primary Content on FB
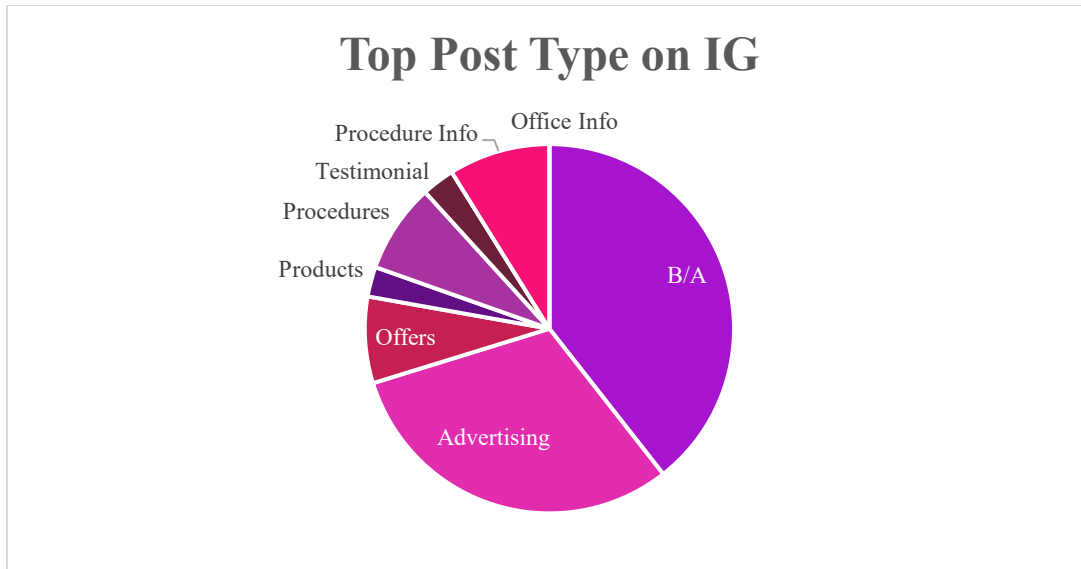
Figure 3.3: Percentage of Each Content Type as Primary Content on IG

Figure 3.3 shows the same collection of data from the Instagram accounts analyzed in this study. Before and After photos were the most common primary form of content, as 151 of the 417 accounts were recorded in this category. The second most used primary post type was Advertising, with 118 accounts in this category. 34 accounts had Procedure Information as the primary content type; 30 accounts had Procedures as the primary content; 29 accounts had Offers as the primary content; 11 had Testimonials as the primary content; 10 had Products as the primary content; and none had Office Information as the primary content. As stated above, all remaining accounts documented had no posts to review. To summarize, 168 of the Instagram accounts had primarily Promotional content, while 215 accounts had primarily Education content.

The number of accounts each category of post appeared on was recorded, as shown in Figure 3.4, even if it was not the primary form of content. As illustrated in the graph, the most common form of content on Facebook is promotional photos. The most common form of content on Instagram is before and after photos.
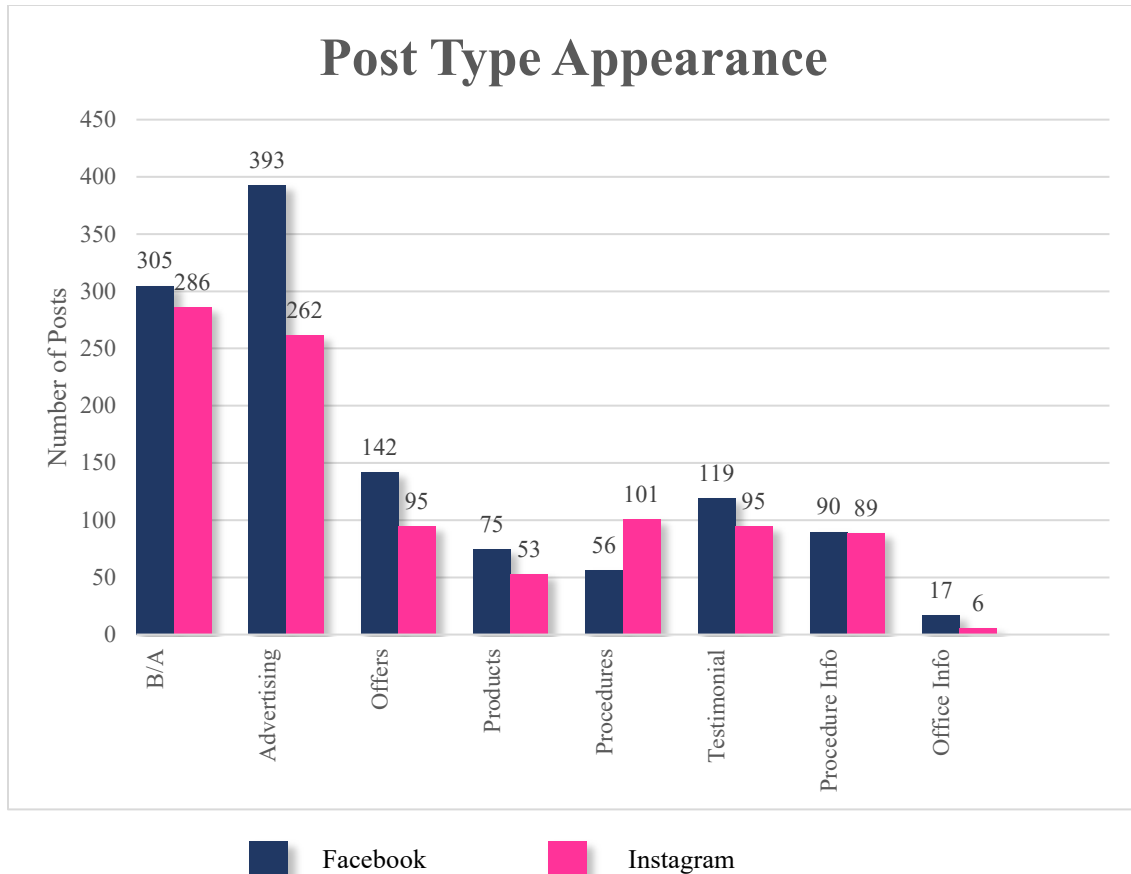
Figure 3.4: Number of FB and IG accounts that posted each type of content

On Facebook, the most accounts had Advertising content, totaling at 393 of the 554 accounts reviewed using this type of content. The second most used type of content was Before and After photos, totaling at 305 accounts posting these pictures. The other categories of content were used significantly less on Facebook. On Instagram, the two most commonly used types of posts were also Advertising and Before and After. However, Before and After photos appeared on 286 accounts of the 417 reviewed, while Advertising content appeared on 262 accounts. Similar to the Facebook accounts, the other types of content did not appear on Instagram as often as the top two.

In order to test the hypothesis, the Facebook and Instagram accounts were grouped by how many followers each had and compared by which type of content was most prominent. The

first grouping, as shown in Figures 3.5 and 3.6, was of accounts with between 0 and 500 followers.
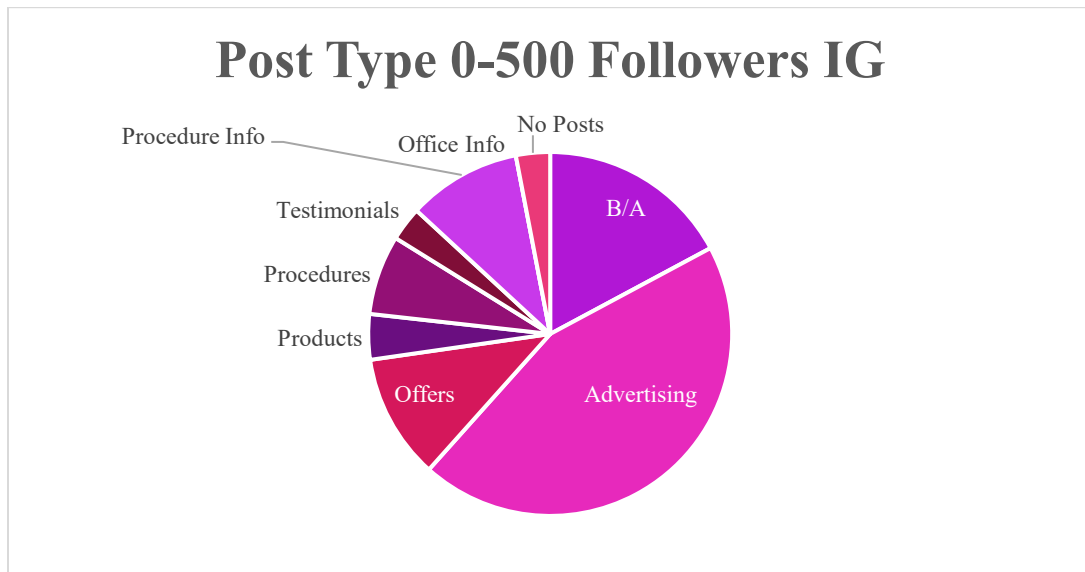
Post Type 0-500 Followers IG

Figure 3.5: Primary content type on IG for accounts with between 0-500 followers
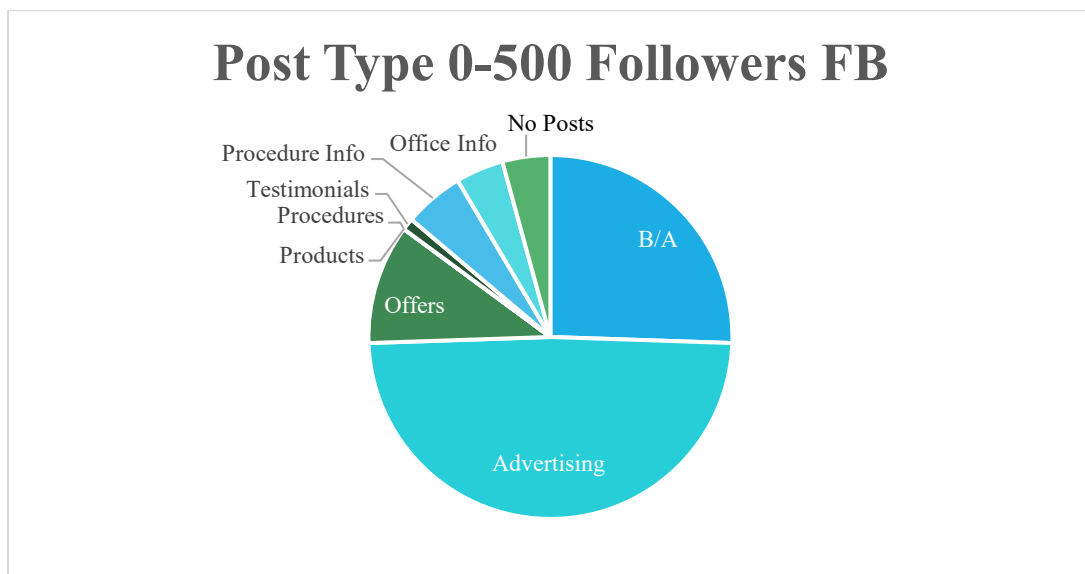
Post Type 0-500 Followers FB

Figure 3.6: Primary content type on FB for accounts with between 0-500 followers

Also, 71 Instagram accounts and 101 Facebook accounts were included in this grouping. On Instagram, 44% of the accounts had Advertising photos as the primary type of content.

Before and After photos made up 17% of the primary content; Offers made up 11%; Procedure Information made up 10%; Procedures made up 7%; Products made up 4%; and Testimonials made up 3%. The remaining accounts had no posts yet to review. In this grouping on Instagram, 62% of the primary content fell under Promotional and 34% of the content fell under Educational. Similarly on Facebook, 46% of the accounts had Advertising photos as the primary type of content. Before and After photos as the primary content type made up 24% of the accounts; Offers made up 10%; Procedure Information made up 5%; Office Information made up 4%; and Testimonials made up 1%. The remaining accounts had no posts on the page. In this grouping on Facebook, 57% of the primary content type was Promotional and 33% was Educational.

The second set of groupings was for accounts with between 500 and 1,000 followers on Facebook and Instagram. This data is illustrated in Figures 3.7 and 3.8.
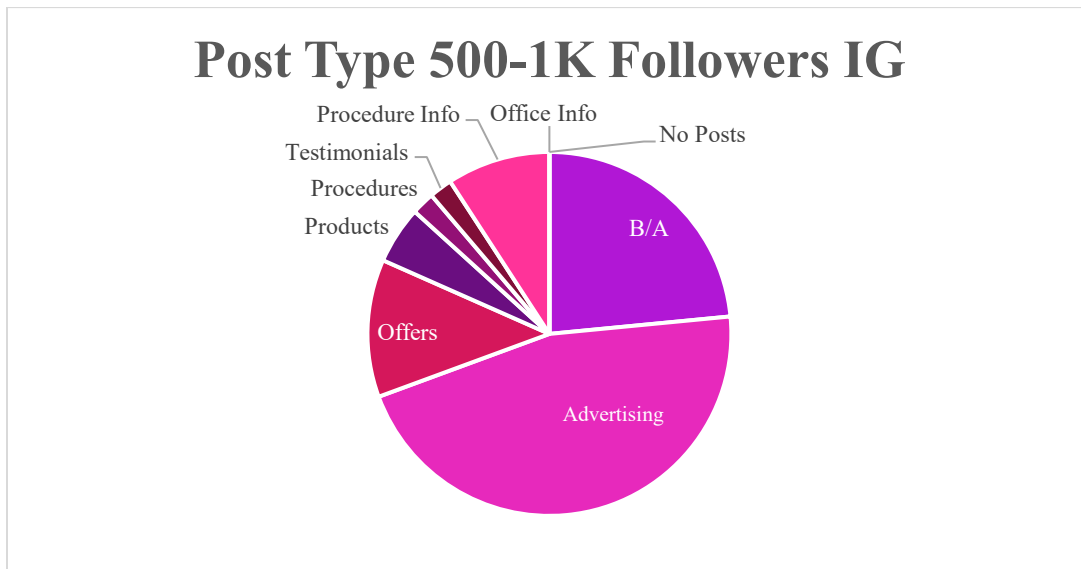

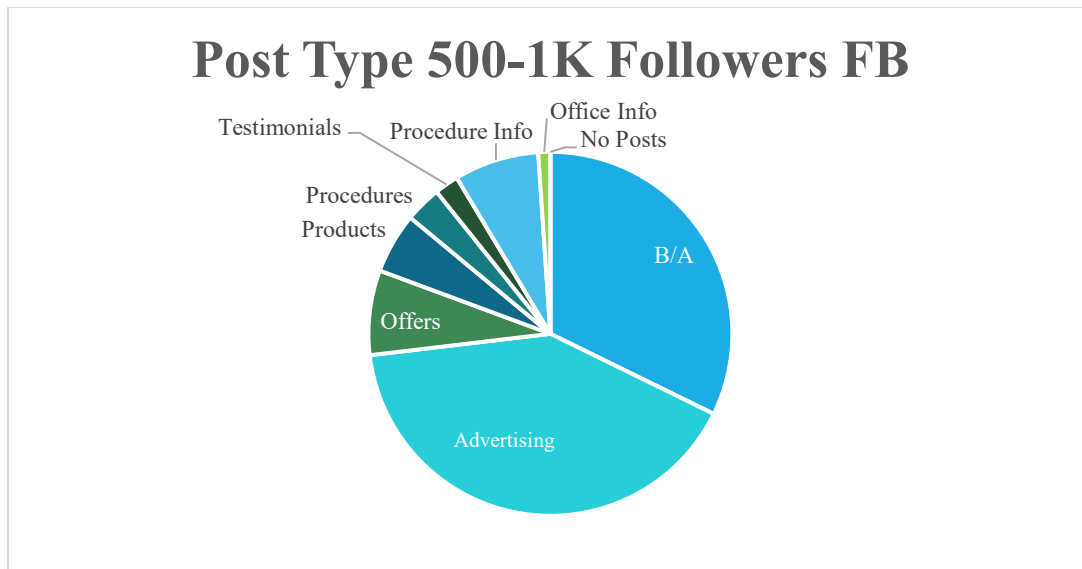*Figure 3.7: Primary content type on IG for accounts with between 500-1K followers*

Figure 3.8: Primary content type on FB for accounts with between 500-1K followers

In this case, 80 Instagram accounts and 116 Facebook accounts make up this grouping. Similar to the first grouping, the Promotional content made up the majority of the content on Instagram, totaling 64% of the total content. The subcategories make up the total content as follows: 45% Advertising; 12% Offers; 5% Products; and 2% Testimonials. Educational content made up 34% of the content on Instagram. The subcategories make up the total content as follows: 23% Before and After; 2% Procedures; 9% Procedure Information; and 0% Office Information. The breakdown to the subcategories on Facebook followed a similar trend. Promotional content made up 52% of the total content, and its subcategories make up the total content as follows: 38% Advertising; 7% Offers; 5% Products; and 2% Testimonials. Educational posts made up 41% of the total content, and its subcategories make up the total content as follows: 30% Before and After; 3% Procedures; 7% Procedure Information; and 1% Office Information.

The third grouping was of Facebook and Instagram accounts that have between 1,000 and 5,000 followers. This data is shown in Figures 3.9 and 3.10.
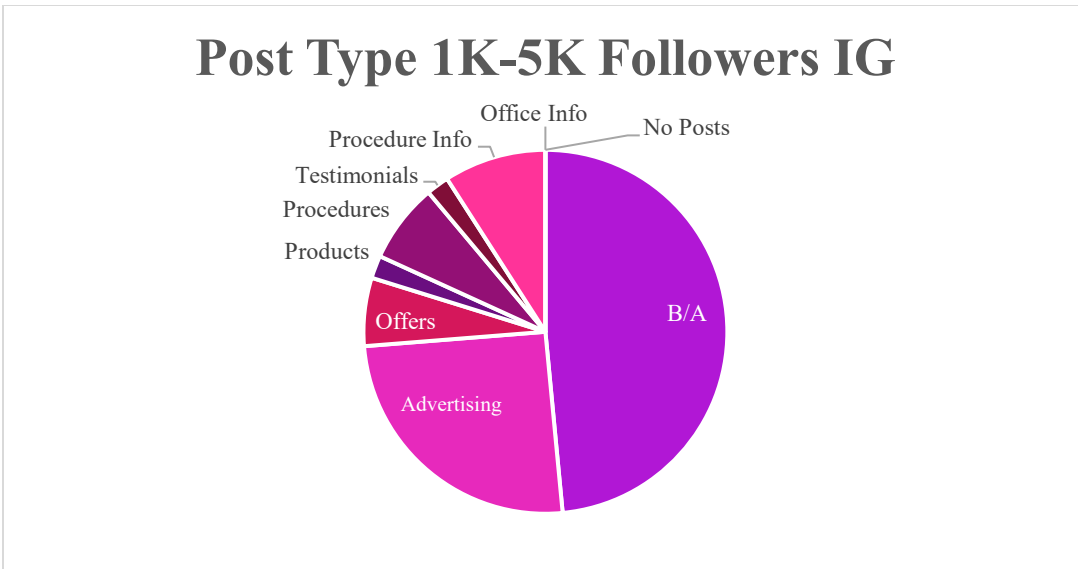
Figure 3.9: Primary content type on IG for accounts with between 1K-5K followers
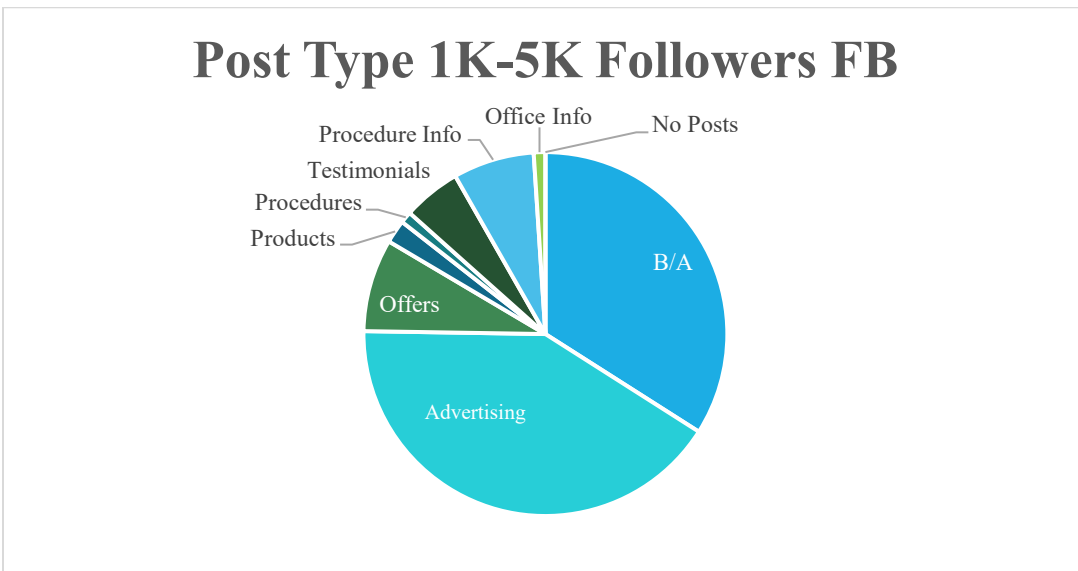

Figure 3.10: Primary content type on FB for accounts with between 1K-5K followers

This grouping is made up of 162 Instagram and 246 Facebook accounts. The Instagram accounts continued on a downward trend of Promotional content (as hypothesized), which made up 35% of the total content, and upward trend of Educational content, which made up 64% of the total content. To break down the components of the Promotional category on Instagram,

Advertising photos make up 25% of the total content; Offers made up 6%; Products made up 2%; and Testimonials made up 2%. The components of the Educational category on Instagram are as follows: 48% of total content was Before and After photos; 7% was Procedures; 9% was Procedure Information; and 0% was Office Information. The Facebook accounts follow the same trend, as 55% of the total content is Promotional and 42% of the content is Educational. The break down of the Promotional subcategories are as follows: 40% Advertising; 8% Offers; 2% Products; and 5% Testimonials. The breakdown of the Educational subcategories are as follows: 33% Before and After; 1% Procedures; 7% Procedure Information; and 1% Office Information.

The fourth grouping is of Instagram and Facebook accounts that have between 5,000 and 10,000 followers. This data is shown in Figures 3.11 and 3.12.
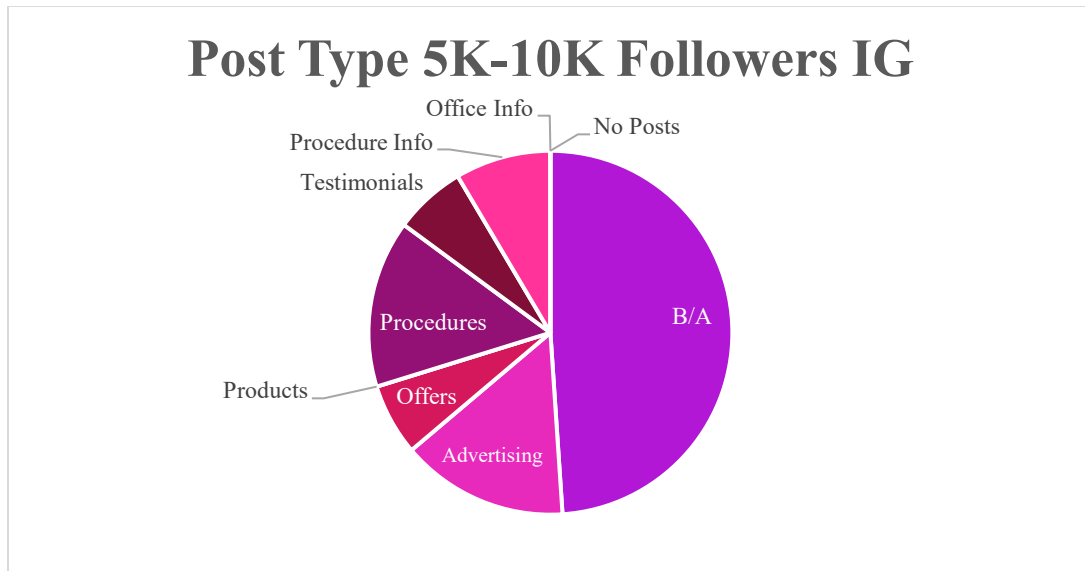

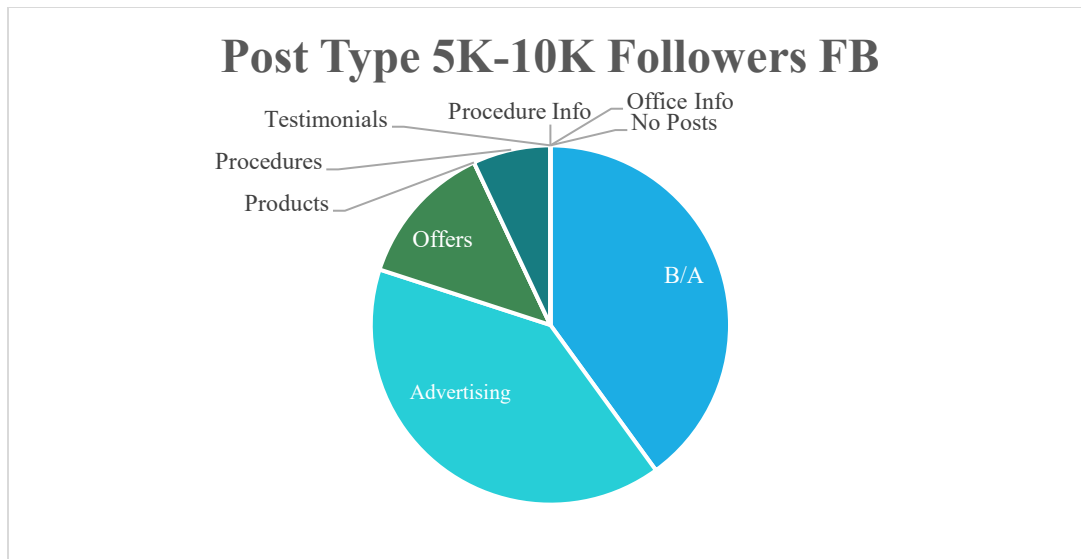*Figure 3.11: Primary content type on IG for accounts with between 5K-10K followers*

Figure 3.12: Primary content type on FB for accounts with between 5K-10K followers

In this grouping, there were 35 Instagram and 22 Facebook accounts. On Instagram, 26% of the total content was Promotional and 68% was Educational. Among the Promotional subcategories, 14% of the total content was Advertising photos; 6% was Offers; 0% was Products; and 6% was Testimonials. The Educational subcategories made up the total content as follows: 46% Before and After; 14% Procedures; 8% Procedure Information; and 0% Office Information. On Facebook, 41% of the total content was Promotional and 59% was Educational. The breakdown of the Promotional subcategories is as follows: 32% Advertising photos; 9% Offers, 0% Products; and 0% Testimonials. The breakdown of the Educational subcategories is as follows: 50% Before and After photos; 0% Procedures; 9% Procedure Information; and 0% Office Information.

The fifth grouping is of 30 Instagram and 15 Facebook accounts with between 10,000 and 50,000 followers. The data collected is shown in Figures 3.13 and 3.14.
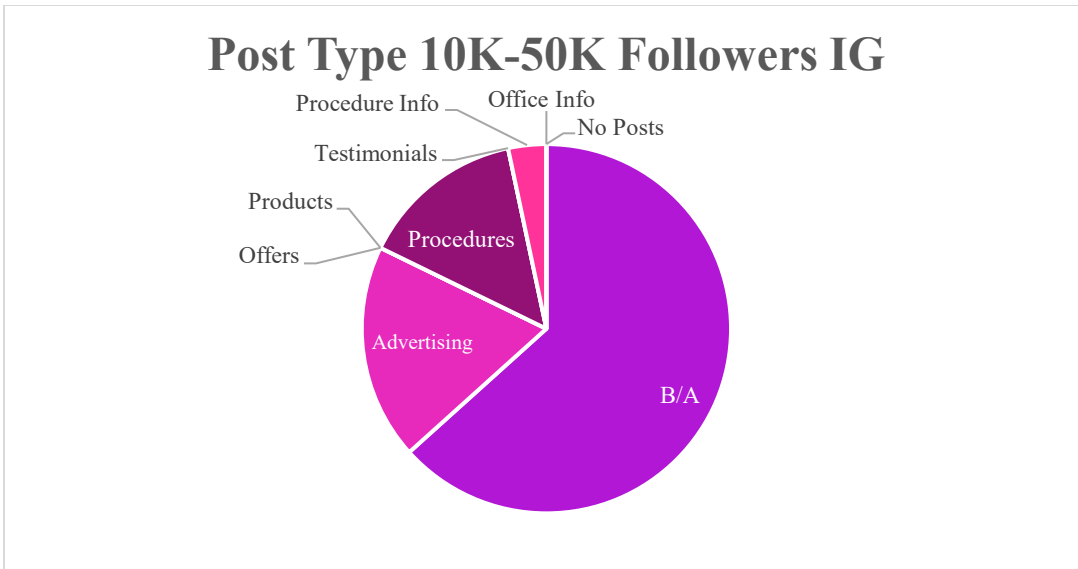
Figure 3.13: Primary content type on IG for accounts with between 10K-50K followers
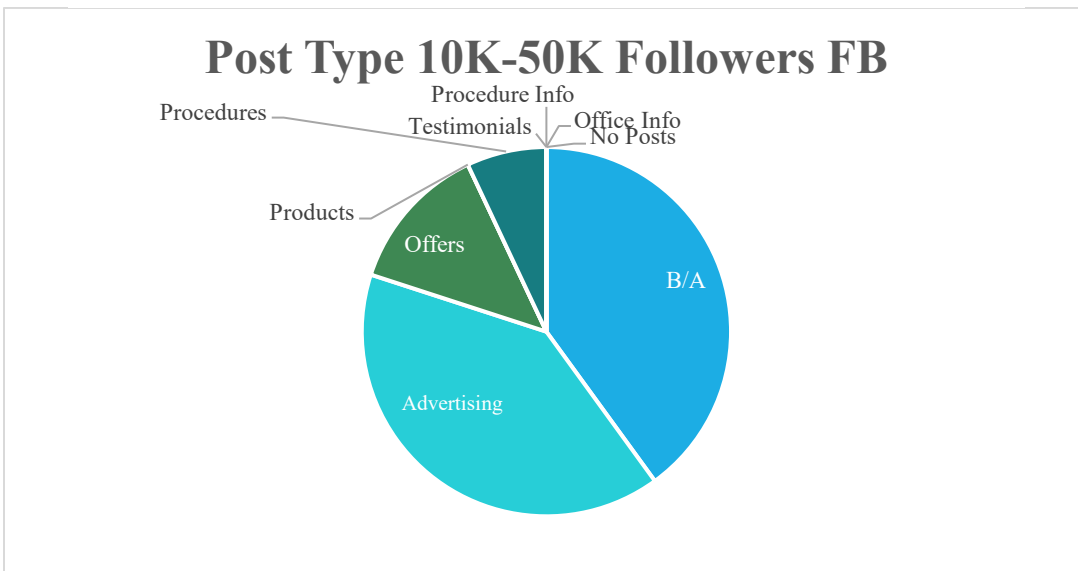

Figure 3.14: Primary content type on FB for accounts with between 10K-50K followers

On Instagram, 17% of the total content is Promotional and 73% is Educational. The

Promotional content is made up of 17% Advertising photos; 0% Offers; 0% Products; and 0%

Testimonials of the total content. The Educational content is made up of 57% Before and After

photos; 13% Procedures; 3% Procedure Information; and 0% Office Information of the total

content. On Facebook, 53% of the total content was Promotional and 47% was Educational. The breakdown of the Promotional content was 40% Advertising photos; 13% Offers; 0% Products; and 0% Testimonials of the total content. The breakdown of the Educational content was 40% Before and After photos; 7% Procedures; 0% Procedure Information; and 0% Office Information.

The sixth grouping was made up of 9 Instagram accounts that had between 50,000 and 100,000 followers. There were no Facebook accounts reviewed that fell into this category. Figure 3.15 shows the data collected for this section.
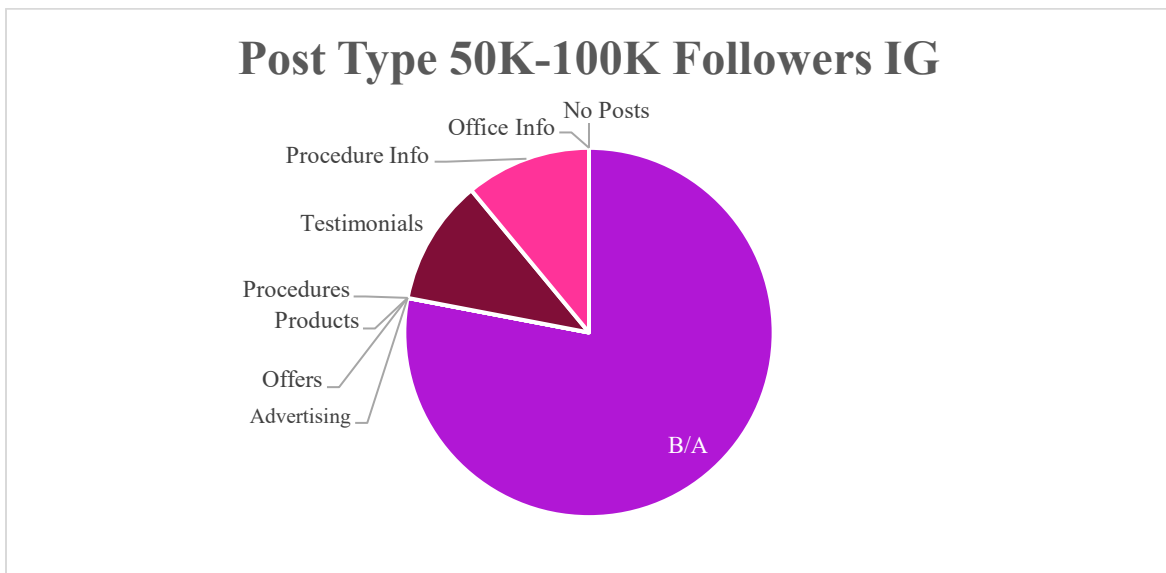

Figure 3.15: Primary content type for IG accounts with between 50K-100K followers

In this grouping, 11% of the total content was Promotional and 89% was Educational. The Promotional content was made up of entirely Testimonials. The Educational content was comprised of mainly Before and After photos, which made up 78% of the total content. Procedure Information made up the other 11% of the Educational content.

The final grouping was of 5 Instagram accounts with between 100,000 and 200,000

followers. Again, no Facebook accounts fell into this category. The findings for this section are
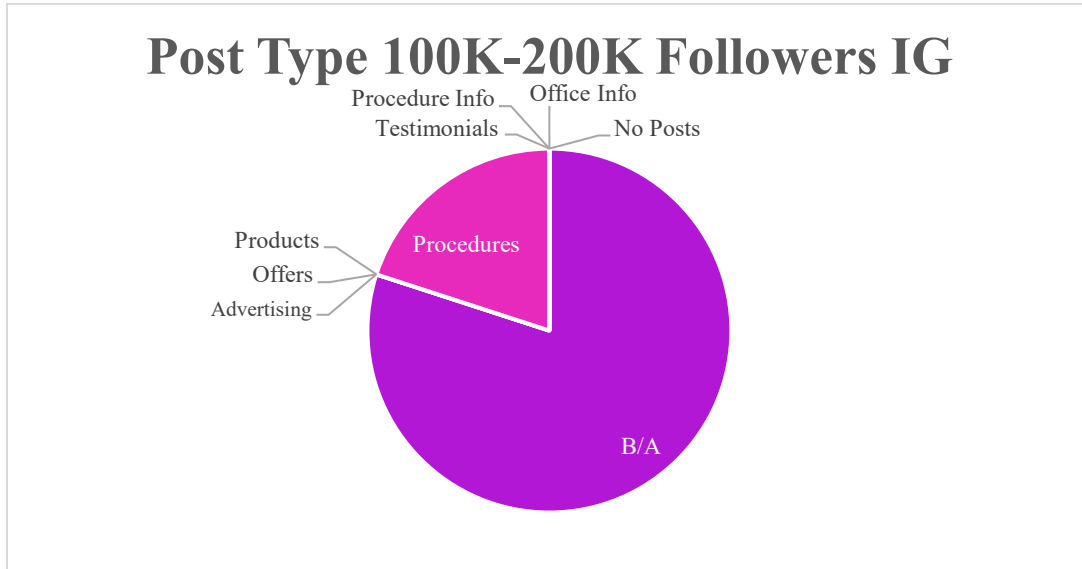
shown in Figure 3.16.

Figure 3.16: Primary content type for IG accounts with between 100K-200K followers

Educational content made up 100% of this grouping's total content, which is made up of

80% Before and After photos and 20% Procedures. Figure 3.17 shows the trendlines for

Instagram and Facebook accounts for category of content compared to the number of followers.
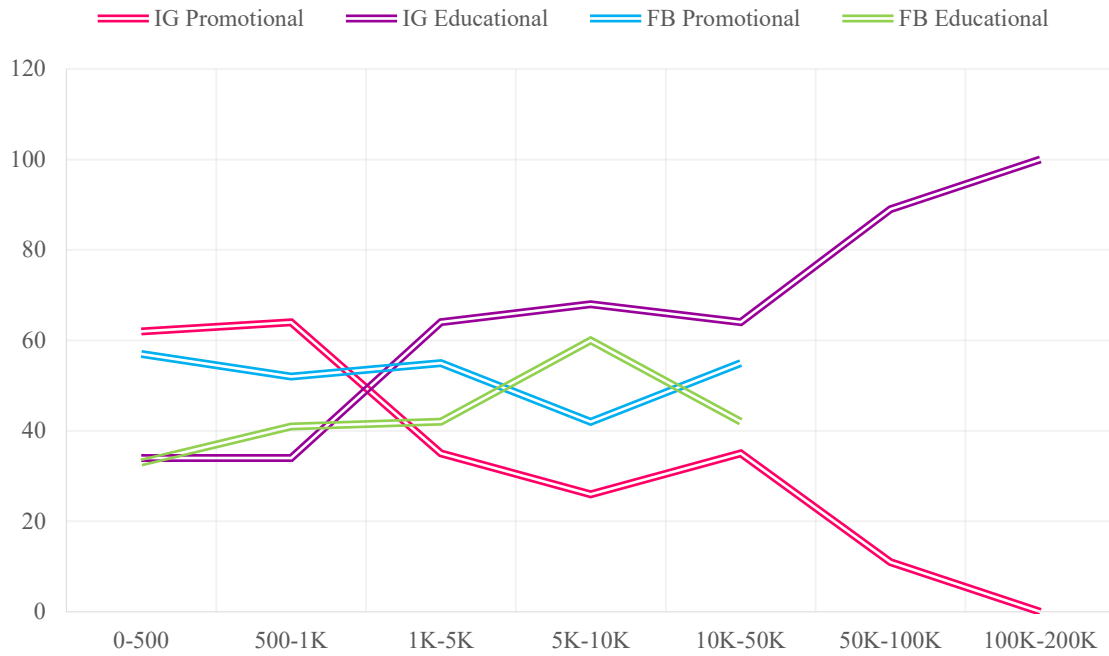
Trend of Content Type

Figure 3.17: Percentage of content that falls under Promotional or Educational compared to number of followers on Facebook and Instagram

4.   CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the overall trends of content on Facebook and Instagram by content type differed slightly. On Instagram, the promotional content had a significant downward trend as the number of followers increased, and the educational content had a significant upward trend. This supports the hypothesis that the content will shift towards educational as the account gains a larger following. On Facebook, however, the overall trends towards both promotional and educational content were more stagnant than those for Instagram. The promotional content had a slight decrease at 5K-10K followers, but then came back up. This content type appeared relatively the same across all Facebook accounts, regardless of the number of followers. The educational content on Facebook had a minor overall increase as the number of followers also increased, but it was not nearly as significant as the increase seen in the Instagram accounts. The hypothesis was supported by the Facebook accounts, since the educational content did increase overall, though to a much lesser degree.

A possible explanation for the trend towards educational content is that as the number of followers increases, it is less likely that those followers are current patients. Thus, the surgical practice cannot anticipate how an audience will interpret certain content if they are not personally familiar with that individual. Certain promotional content, such as stock images of models and phrases about becoming beautiful, can have negative impacts on one's self esteem, and it is difficult to avoid that in potential patients if a practice doesn't know that person. It is more logical for a practice with many followers that are not patients to post educational content about cosmetic surgery to prevent this potential issue among viewers.

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