

# Social Media Use in the Dietetics Profession

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## Introduction

The use of social media platforms has been on the rise among businesses and professionals for many years now.<sup>1-3</sup> The field of healthcare has not been immune to the societal shifts driving the increases in professionals on social media, particularly because it has become an expanding outlet for the marketing and promotion of healthcare.<sup>4-9</sup> Dietetics, as part of the healthcare field, has also experienced an increased presence on social media in recent years. However, even though there are more registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs) on social media than in the recent past, RDNs continue to express concern over utilizing social media as a professional tool.

## Goals

1. Understand if, how, and why dietitians are utilizing social media professionally
2. Analyze RDNs' experiences on social media in their career
3. Collect quantitative data representative of the attitudes and beliefs held by RDNs about social media

## Objectives

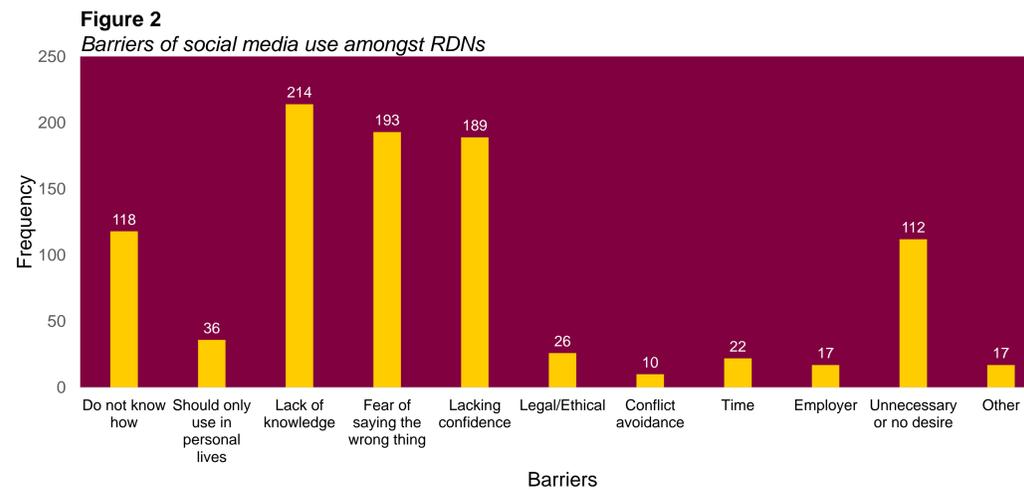
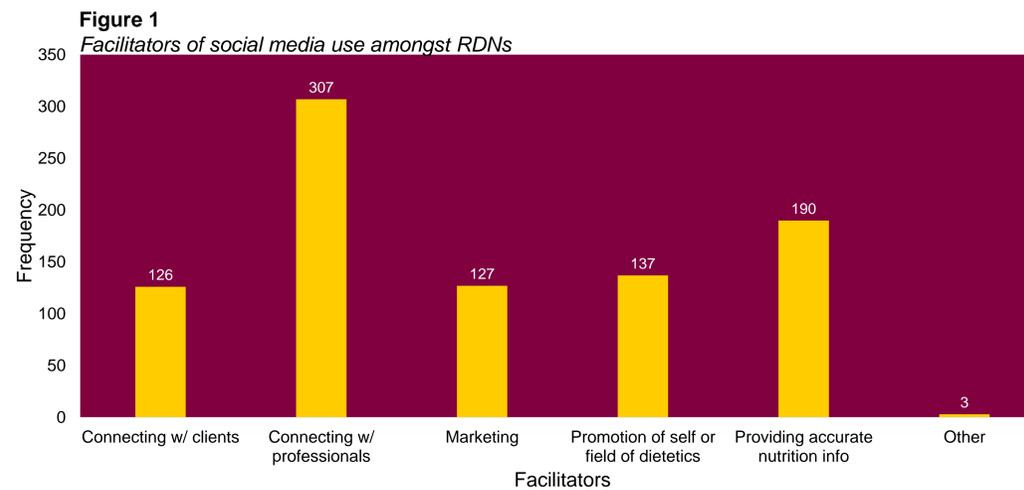
1. Assess current use of social media among RDNs
2. Uncover specific needs and concerns about use of social media among RDNs
3. Record priorities RDNs hold regarding promotion, marketing, professionalism, and misinformation
4. Determine type of product or service RDNs feel they would benefit from having

## Procedures

- Study was approved by the Commission on Dietetic Registration (CDR) and Institutional Review Board of Concordia College
- The CDR supplied a list of 5,000 randomly-selected email addresses of RDNs in the United States
- An invitation to participate was sent via email with an anonymous link that redirected participants to a web-based questionnaire the researcher constructed using Qualtrics
- Participation was voluntary and responses remained anonymous
- Survey included an introduction, two matrices, and a series of multiple-choice questions
- Statistical analyses were performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 26 (SPSS®)
- Data analyses included descriptive statistics, correlations, and one-way analyses of variance

## Results

- Of the 746 initial responses, 77 were discounted for incompleteness, leaving a final sample of 669 (13.3% response rate)
- Majority of participants were female (95.9%,  $n = 635$ ) with the remaining reporting male (4.6%,  $n = 31$ ) and nonbinary (0.3%,  $n = 2$ )
- Mean age of participants was 39.9 years (range: 22 to 81 years)
- Mean length of time practicing dietetics was 14 years (range: <1 to 50 years)
- Participants included RDNs in all 50 states and Washington D.C.; largest percent of participants from the same state was 6.8% from Texas ( $n = 43$ ); smallest percentage of responses were received from Hawaii, Maine, and New Hampshire, each making up 0.1% ( $n = 1$ )



## Significant Findings

- Majority of RDNs like and use social media
- Acceptance of social media negatively correlated to years practicing
- Clinical RDNs least likely to see value in social media
- Top three facilitators of social media use amongst RDNs: connecting with professionals, providing accurate nutrition information, and promotion of self or the field of dietetics
- Top three barriers to social media usage amongst RDNs: lack of knowledge, fear of saying the wrong thing, and lack of confidence
- Majority of RDNs believe social media has a place in the promotion and marketing of nutrition
- Over 75% of participants did not consider RDNs the primary source of nutrition information online
- Less than half of RDNs indicated having access to resources to navigate social media
- The majority of RDNs feel an obligation to combat nutrition misinformation



## Conclusions

Both general and professional use of social media is accepted by RDNs. While clinical RDNs were not as likely to see value in social media as a professional tool, RDNs in other practice areas were interested in the promotion and marketing possibilities. This indicates social media products or services would be better suited for RDNs in non-clinical settings. The present study identified several facilitators and barriers to embracing social media in dietetics. Despite incentives, a minority of RDNs feel they have adequate tools to assist them in social media utilization, highlighting a deficit in professional resources. Furthermore, barriers continue to inhibit many RDNs and exacerbate the need for additional resources.

Nutrition information is a high priority for potential social media usage, but RDNs are not considered the leading source of nutrition information sharing on social media. These data represent a gap in communication between the field of dietetics and the public. In addition to nutrition information, a professional presence on social media, and the promotion of dietetics are major goals conveyed in the results of this study. To overcome the barriers and take advantage of the opportunities social media can offer, the field of dietetics is in need of products or services in order to help RDNs navigate social media as a professional tool.

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