

# The science of nutrition in a world under the influence of social networks

La ciencia de la nutrición en un mundo bajo la influencia de las redes sociales A ciência da nutrição em um mundo sob a influência das redes sociais

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REVIEW

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#### Abstract

The aim was to evaluate the influence of social networks on the food environment. This is a narrative review, where the inclusion of articles from the last five years was prioritized and the databases that were consulted are Scientific Electronic Library Online and Google Scholar. Detailing food and its broad focus on subjects sought in social networks, which are capable of generating beneficial and harmful effects. The development of this study made it possible to look at the new junction created by the modern world, of food associated with social networks. Allowing perceiving the impacts generated to the nutritionist profession, as well as in the lives of those who interact and are influenced by the so present virtual life.

Descriptors: Social Networking; Modalities, Alimentary; Feeding Behavior; Diet, Healthy; Nutritionists.

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# Resumén

El objetivo fue evaluar la influencia de las redes sociales en el entorno alimentario. Esta es una revisión narrativa, donde se priorizó la inclusión de artículos de los últimos cinco años y las bases de datos que se consultaron son: Scientific Electronic Library Online y Google Scholar. Detallando la alimentación y su amplio enfoque en temas buscados en las redes sociales, que son capaces de generar efectos benéficos y nocivos. El desarrollo de este estudio permitió mirar el nuevo cruce creado por el mundo moderno, de alimentos asociados a las redes sociales. Permitiendo percibir los impactos que genera a la profesión de nutricionista, así como en la vida de quienes interactúan y son influenciados por la vida virtual tan presente.

Descriptores: Red Social; Modalidades Alimentarias; Conducta Alimentaria; Dieta Saludable; Nutricionistas.

#### Resumo

Objetivou-se avaliar a influência das redes sociais voltado para o ambiente alimentar. Trata-se de uma revisão narrativa, onde priorizou-se a inclusão de artigos dos últimos cinco anos e as bases de dados que foram consultadas são: *Scientific Electronic Library Online* e o Google Acadêmico. Pormenorizando a alimentação e seu amplo enfoque nos assuntos buscados nas redes sociais, que são capazes de gerar efeitos benéficos e maléficos. O desenvolvimento desse estudo possibilitou um olhar voltado à nova junção criada pelo mundo moderno, da alimentação associada às redes sociais. Permitindo perceber os impactos gerados à profissão de nutricionista, como também na vida daqueles que interagem e são influenciados pela, tão presente, vida virtual.

Descritores: Rede Social; Modalidades Alimentares; Comportamento Alimentar; Dieta Saudável; Nutricionistas.

#### Introduction

With the significant increase in the use of social networks in recent times, a survey was carried out by Social Media Trends in 2018 which exposed that in Brazil 78% of internet users are on some social network, and data from 2016 in the United States show that 69% of Americans were active on some media platform<sup>1,2</sup>.

In a way, the use of social media and its influence have been the subject of studies for several areas in order to capture the impacts of its exhibition for different individuals. In this way, the social network is a means of communication in which its messages are transmitted in real time, where any individual can express themselves, becoming transmitters and receivers of information, which may or may not be true. These communication channels are responsible for propagating issues related to the body, which leads to the characterization of patterns of the same, being able to influence body and food satisfaction or dissatisfaction<sup>2-8</sup>.

The construction of body image is mainly related to sociocultural factors, in which the forms presented are constantly changing. There is an increase in the marketing of the body due to the wide range of products, services and accessories. It is noticeable the change in the food pattern of the population, which previously consisted of in natura foods and today the search for more practical products for consumption has expanded. These changes in the dietary profile portray changes in lifestyle habits and the involvement of the food industry and the media, with consequences for physical and mental health. In this context, the objective of this article was to investigate, according to studies carried out, the influence of social networks focused on the food environment<sup>9-15</sup>.

#### Methodology

This is a narrative review, where the inclusion of articles published between the years 2015 and 2020 was prioritized because they are related to the last five years, which show more recent data, but older references were used for the conclusion of some paragraphs. The selection of articles and books available in electronic media such as Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) and Google Scholar was used as a research basis, and data collection was carried out from August 2020 to November 2020. The review consisted of searching articles with keywords: social networks, influence, health, eating habits, nutritionist, advertising, nutrition.

#### **Results and Discussion**

### The transition of influence over the standard of beauty

The Aurélio dictionary describes beauty as a "characteristic, particularity, character or attribute of what is beautiful", so simple and succinct that it differs from the metamorphosis of this pattern over the years. The historicity of aesthetics is narrated since Ancient Greece, where bodies were seen as a representation of strength, and muscles in total nudity were contemplated as a guarantee of being worthy of a warrior<sup>16</sup>.

The description by Hesiod, a Greek poet of the 7th century BC, is also known, where women were like kalon kakon, which meant to be "a perverse and beautiful thing" since by their beauty they could drive men to madness and submission. However, the focus of what was considered beautiful remained concentrated on men, and women, had little value.

In the 15th and 16th centuries, with the Renaissance, the male body continued to be praised, while



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as reported in II libro dell'arte, nothing could be said about the female body, since it did not have any perfect measure.

Slowly, the female body starts to receive prominence for its fertility power and its abundance of measures becomes appreciated. In the modern age, the media started to gain space in the formation of new concepts, and the radio started the beauty trend where the ideal was to resemble crockery dolls from 1910, being the kick-off of a solidification of beauty standard through the media<sup>16</sup>.

From the retraction of the female body, in an ideal of beauty based on thin bodies with few curves, it made women hostages of a new idealization of their bodies, leading them to an unbridled search to obtain the perfection of their image. In 1970, the promotion of natural products and greater health promotion appeared. The 1980s and 1990s are marked by the introduction of surgical interventions, miracle diets and an unreal and inaccessible body pattern for a plurality of common bodies<sup>17</sup>.

Currently, social networks have played a role of great influence, dictating or subtly inserting their convictions, causing a search for belonging and user acceptance of what is posted and liked<sup>18</sup>.

All this technological advance was capable of a new era where any common person, regardless of professional training or place they are, can share their daily lives, experiences, tips; ceasing to be just a receiver and starting to generate your own content on the subject you want, and promote interactions with your followers<sup>19</sup>.

However, this flood of information just a click away can be the gateway to a certain problem, given that the veracity of the publications is not questioned, nor is their scientific evidence, or if the information is clear and complete. Which can be harmful especially in relation to debates about health, food choices and treatment of diseases. Added to the social comparison generated through photos and videos, it reinforces the demand for appearance and the ability to raise dissatisfaction with the body image of those who watch and thus, leads those who consume to develop psychological and eating disorders<sup>20,21</sup>.

Having its effect potentiated by excessive hours of use, as reported by Ribeiro (2018) in which 29% of adolescents interviewed said they browse for more than 5 hours, being exposed to all kinds of ads, which in just 30 seconds are capable of influencing the young public in their food choices, inducing them to suggest the purchase to their parents<sup>22,23</sup>.

Therefore, with the globalization of information without obtaining control of its authenticity, in a theme as incisive as food and the great visibility given to profiles of non-nutritionists, such as publications on supplements and food preferences, opinions can be divided.

# The influential role of social networks

In the last decade, a metamorphosis in technology, through the Internet, has revolutionized access to information. Anyone, regardless of the profession, anywhere in the world, is no longer just a receiver of news and has become a protagonist and generate content, through social networks, promoting debates and mutual interactions<sup>16,24</sup>.

With such visibility and distortion of real images with what is published on social networks, great dissatisfaction with one's own body is caused, which can change the perception of self-image, by reaffirming a standard of beauty not accessible to different biotypes, maintaining the constant rotation of this body transition, which causes a constant discontent to the individual<sup>25,26</sup>.

Therefore, the media associated with all other aspects experienced throughout life, influences how the individual understands himself with his body, in this way, eating habits are also determined through sociocultural influences, in which the media has a fundamental role in construction and deconstruction<sup>27-29</sup>.

With all the power obtained, a tool constantly used in this environment, which causes a significant impact on food attitudes, is advertising, being the medium that transmits communication capable of instigating the consumption of a certain product or its cult of beauty<sup>30-32</sup>.

By projecting ordinary people, social networks make them subcelebrities, a kind of public figures of this new era. Thus, brands benefit from the engagement of these people with their broad audience to provide sponsorship, so that fans can get closer to their products, having a very successful return among teenagers<sup>33</sup>.

Therefore, this social environment can cause positive and negative impacts according to its use, it can both inspire and encourage, as well as generate eating and psychological disorders for those who think it is not within the standard imposed by society<sup>34</sup>.

# The role of nutritionists and non-nutritionists on food in social networks

Based on CFN Resolution No. 600/2018, the nutrition professional has a vast field to work in. Assertively discriminated its divisions and subdivisions, which help in the search for the appropriate segment for each graduate, such as the Nutrition Area in Collective Food - Food and Nutrition Unit Management (UAN), with its subareas covering public institutions and their programs already established, such as the National School Meal Program (PNAE), the Worker Meal Program (PAT), and the entire scenario of private institutions, from various sectors, from industry, education and tourism.

These divisions also cover Clinical Nutrition in hospitals, clinics, Emergency Care Units (UPA). Diet therapy aimed at maintaining care for patients affected by Chronic Non-Communicable Diseases; Lactries and Human Milk Banks (HMB); Home Nutritional Care (public or private) and Personal Diet to promote personalized diets.

6,538/1978 was implemented to supervise these areas, establishing the Federal Council of Nutritionists (CFN) and the Regional Councils of Nutritionists (CRNs) with the aim of guiding, disciplining and monitoring the nutritionist's performance. Prior to the implementation of this law, the nutritionist's field of action was occupied by unqualified individuals due to lack of supervision. This change only occurred after the president of the Brazilian Federation of



Nutrition Associations (FEBRAN, current ASBRAN) forwarded the proposal on the creation of councils so that this law could be authorized<sup>35</sup>.

Over the years, the exercise of the nutritionist profession has been improving, and to guide and ensure that a professional has a conduct within the limit exercised by his profession. The code of ethics was established, which reports a set of rights and duties for the development in the practice of its performance. Despite the existence of such conducts, some professional and non-professional nutritionists in the search for greater visibility on social networks disrespect the code of ethics<sup>36</sup>.

From the analysis of the studies, it was found that 93.5% of the analyzed population acquired nutritional prescriptions from nutritionists and 3.3% were prescribed by other professionals such as endocrinologist and nutrologist, that is, even the analysis presented a low index in the elaboration of nutritional prescriptions by other professionals, it is observed that there are individuals who do not have adequate training performing activities that are private to nutritionists<sup>6</sup>.

In addition to these, studies also conducted a survey focused on the phenomenon of the social network Instagram<sup>®</sup> in nutrition, thus inspecting the profile of 3 women, Brazilian, not health professionals, over seven days, but who for their posts on nutrition and on the whole fitness segment, are recognized as examples by the people who follow them<sup>34</sup>.

To corroborate the results, the presence of requests for indication or information about supplements and diet guidance was verified. Those who managed the accounts returned the questions with nutrition tips and if there were comments from their followers demonstrating that they were stimulated by the photos and phrases in order to target the represented body.

It was then found that all profiles brought some kind of cult of the body. Providing nutrition tips, even though they are not professionals in the area, and despite encouraging the consumption of water and the consumption of vegetables and fruits, there was no incitement to consume rice and beans, milk and their derivatives; often supporting the restriction of these foods. Also reporting the confirmation of indication of supplements.

However, despite the benevolence in encouraging the practice of physical activities and other mentioned actions that can be considered beneficial, it raises a problem because such guidelines are passed, if not by a specialized professional, so that it is consistent with each organism. Mainly because there is greater encouragement in their disclosures to protein consumption via food and supplementation<sup>34</sup>.

#### Tips x Science: what has become more attractive

With such a strong influence of social networks and the new public figures created by them, customer loyalty occurs from the large number of their interactive followers, providing the desire to purchase various items, as well as food and food products<sup>23,30</sup>.

Therefore, food, having a broad focus on the subjects sought in social networks and gaining more and more space with the association of public figures, can generate beneficial and harmful effects, since being represented by handpicked people and belonging to the vigorous standard of beauty, consumers of this content are vulnerable to an exacerbated charge, contributing to the development of eating and psychological disorders<sup>34</sup>.

With all the visibility gained by these influential profiles in food, being non-nutritionists, a number of nutrition graduates stated that, despite social networks promoting them professionally, a loss of space is perceptible<sup>37</sup>.

As much as users claim to verify that the content is produced by a professional in the area, when reporting what catches their attention and their preferences, they do not match what the professionals claim to post. They are transmitted by the fitness profiles, preferences regarding the choice of food, and indications of supplements and even diets to be followed, which are exclusive activities of the professional nutritionist and also, comparative photos, which do not match the ethics of the profession. This shows an incompatibility of the answers with the current scenario<sup>37</sup>.

Therefore, the posts have their reliability compromised, since their focus on an aesthetic standard leaves health and quality of life in the background<sup>20</sup>.

# Conclusion

The development of this study made it possible to look at the new junction created by the modern world, of food associated with social networks. Allowing to perceive the impacts generated to the nutritionist profession, as well as in the lives of those who interact and are influenced by the so present virtual life.

When scrutinizing the proposed objectives, it is possible to perceive the primordiality of a greater security to the nutrition professional, supporting him in all support for the responsible exercise of his activities. Above all, that the internet and all its scenarios preserve the physical and psychological integrity of its users.

Since influencers and nutrition professionals are allies in the conscious, proven, clear, complete and inclusive promotion of health.

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