

Call for regulation of social media health content: an initiative of the Italian Association of Hospital Dermatologists (ADOI)

Fortunato Cassalia,¹ Andrea Danese,² Carmine D'Acunto,³ Antonio Russo,³ Corrado Zengarni,^{4,5} Ignazio Stanganelli,^{6,7} Francesco Cusano,⁸ Fabrizio Fantini,⁹ Salvatore Amato,¹⁰ Davide Melandri,^{3,4} Cesare Massone,¹¹ Anna Belloni Fortina,^{1,12} on behalf of the Italian Association of Hospital Dermatologists (ADOI)

¹Dermatology Unit, Department of Medicine, University of Padua; ²Section of Dermatology and Venereology, Department of Medicine, University of Verona; ³Cesena Skin Clinic and Regional Skin Bank, AUSL Romagna, Forlì; ⁴Department of Medical and Surgical Sciences, University of Bologna; ⁵Dermatology Unit, IRCCS Azienda Ospedaliero-Universitaria di Bologna; ⁶Dermatology Unit, Department of Medicine and Surgery, University of Parma; ⁷Skin Cancer Unit, IRCCS Istituto Romagnolo per lo Studio dei Tumori, Meldola; ⁸Dermatologist in private practice, Benevento; ⁹Dermatology Unit, Azienda Ospedaliera "A. Manzoni", Lecco; ¹⁰Department of Dermatology and Sexually Transmitted Diseases, ARNAS Palermo; ¹¹Dermatology Unit and Scientific Directorate, Galliera Hospital, Genoa; ¹²Pediatric Dermatology Regional Center, Department of Women's and Children's Health, University of Padua, Italy

Introduction

Social media platforms have become an indispensable part of modern society, with approximately 59.9% of the global population actively engaging on these platforms.^{1,2} In the realm of health-care, and particularly in dermatology, a specialty that relies heavily on visual assessment and patient education, social media serves as a powerful conduit for disseminating information.³⁻⁶ The ability to share visual content makes these platforms uniquely suited to raising awareness about skin health, promoting preventive measures, and encouraging early detection of dermatological condi-

tions. The impact of social media on public health awareness is significant. Campaigns promoting sun safety, skin cancer awareness, and other dermatological issues have leveraged platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter to reach broad audiences.⁷ Studies have shown that social media can effectively increase knowledge about skin diseases and influence health-seeking behaviors.⁸ However, the unregulated nature of social media also presents substantial risks. Misinformation about treatments, such as unverified home remedies or the misuse of over-the-counter products, can exacerbate conditions and pose serious health risks. This underscores the critical need for regulation and guidance to ensure that the information disseminated is accurate, evidence-based, and ethically presented.

Correspondence: Fortunato Cassalia, MD, Department of Dermatology, University of Padua, via Gallucci 4, 35128 Padua, Italy. Tel.: +39.3474833875
E-mail: Fortunato1287@gmail.com

Key words: dermatology; social media; public health; health information regulation; professional guidelines; patient education; digital communication.

Conflict of interest: the authors declare no potential conflict of interest, and all authors confirm accuracy.

Ethics approval and consent to participate: not applicable.

Availability of data and materials: the datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Received: 15 October 2024.

Accepted: 17 October 2024.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0).

©Copyright: the Author(s), 2025

Licensee PAGEPress, Italy

Dermatology Reports 2025; 17:10169

doi:10.4081/dr.2024.10169

Publisher's note: all claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article or claim that may be made by its manufacturer is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

The Italian survey initiative

In response to these challenges, on behalf of the Italian Hospital Dermatologists Association (ADOI), we have launched a nationwide survey titled *Use of Social Media by Dermatology Professionals: Impact on Public Awareness, Appropriateness of Information, and Correctness of Prevention Messages—An Italian Survey*. This initiative was introduced during the National Congress of ADOI, held from October 10 to 12, 2024, and has the full endorsement of the ADOI executive committee.

Objectives of the survey

- **Analyze social media usage among dermatology professionals.** Understanding how dermatologists currently utilize social media – including the most frequently used platforms and types of content shared – will provide valuable insights into current practices and identify areas for improvement.
- **Evaluate the impact on public awareness and preventive behaviors.** By assessing the influence of dermatologists' social media activities on the public's knowledge and actions regarding skin health, we can measure the effectiveness of these platforms as tools for health promotion.
- **Examine the appropriateness and correctness of shared information.** Ensuring that information disseminated by professionals is accurate, evidence-based, and compliant with ethical standards is essential to maintain public trust and prevent the spread of misinformation.
- **Identify challenges and opportunities.** The survey will

explore issues related to patient privacy, ethical considerations, professional boundaries, and the need for specialized training in digital communication.

- **Assess the need for official guidelines supported by ADOI.** Establishing standardized guidelines will help dermatologists navigate the complexities of social media, promote responsible use, and enhance the overall quality of health information available to the public.

Importance of the study

The importance of this study lies in its potential to improve public health outcomes and professional practices in dermatology. Previous research indicates exposure to preventive content on social networks prompted 13.38% of users to seek a dermatology consultation, with 21.93% of these individuals receiving new diagnoses, including a skin cancer diagnosis in 1.65% of cases. These findings highlight the crucial role that social media can play in early diagnosis and prevention.¹ However, without proper regulation, the risks associated with misinformation are considerable. Misinformation can lead to delayed diagnosis, worsening of conditions, and increased healthcare costs. For example, individuals may rely on inaccurate online advice instead of seeking professional advice. This underlines the need for guidelines to ensure that health information shared by professionals on social media is accurate and reliable.

By conducting this survey, we aim to:

- **Provide data-driven insights.** The collected data will inform the development of targeted strategies to enhance the effectiveness of social media as a tool for health promotion in dermatology.
- **Develop professional guidelines.** The findings will support ADOI in creating official guidelines that address ethical considerations, content accuracy, and professional conduct on social media platforms.
- **Enhance patient education and outcomes.** Improved regulation and professional engagement on social media can lead to better-informed patients, earlier interventions, and overall improved health outcomes.
- **Address ethical and privacy concerns.** Understanding the challenges faced by professionals will help in creating solutions that protect patient confidentiality while promoting public health education.

Call to action

We urge all dermatology professionals in Italy to participate in this important survey. Your insights and experiences are invaluable in shaping the future of dermatological care and public health education.

Participation details

- **Access the survey.** The questionnaire is available at <https://www.surveio.com/survey/d/A0A3C7K8X2I2P7A5S>.
- **Voluntary and anonymous.** Participation is entirely voluntary, and responses are anonymous, ensuring confidentiality and adherence to ethical research standards.
- **Privacy protection.** All data will be processed in compliance with EU Regulation 2016/679 (GDPR) and used exclusively

for research purposes.

- **Time commitment.** The survey takes approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.

Conclusions

The integration of social media into dermatological practice presents both significant opportunities and challenges. While it offers a platform to enhance public awareness and promote preventive behaviors, the risks associated with misinformation necessitate careful regulation. By participating in this survey, dermatology professionals can contribute to the development of official guidelines that will promote ethical, accurate, and effective communication on social media.

The outcomes of this study have the potential to:

- **Improve public health education.** By ensuring that accurate information is disseminated, we can empower the public to make informed decisions about their skin health.
- **Enhance professional practice.** Establishing guidelines will support dermatologists in navigating the digital landscape responsibly and effectively.
- **Foster collaboration.** Collaborative efforts among dermatological associations, scientific societies, and social media platforms can amplify the reach and impact of health messages.
- **Contribute to scientific literature.** The study will add valuable data to the existing body of knowledge, paving the way for further research and innovation in digital health communication.

We believe that this initiative is a critical step toward improving the quality of dermatological information available on social media and, ultimately, enhancing patient outcomes. We appreciate your attention to this important matter and look forward to the valuable contributions from our colleagues.

References

1. Cassalia F, Ciolfi C, Scolaro F, et al. Use of Social Media by the Public Regarding Skin Health: Effects on Dermatological Awareness and Preventive Behaviours. *Acta Derm Vene-reol* 2023;103:adv15341.
2. DataReportal. 2023. Global social media statistics. Overview of social media use. Available from: <https://datareportal.com/social-media-users> [accessed 2023 May 1].
3. Patel RR, Hill MK, Smith MK, et al. An updated assessment of social media usage by derma-tology journals and organizations. *Dermatol Online J* 2018;24:13030/qt3jr646v0.
4. Cooper BR, Concilla A, Albrecht JM, et al. Social media as a medium for dermatologic educa-tion. *Curr Dermatol Rep* 2022;11:103-9.
5. Barrutia L, Vega-Gutiérrez J, Santamarina-Albertos A. Benefits, drawbacks, and challenges of social media use in dermatology: a systematic review. *J Dermatolog Treat* 2022;33:2738-57.
6. De La Garza H, Maymone MBC, Vashi NA. Impact of social media on skin cancer preven-tion. *Int J Environ Res Public Health* 2021;18:5002.
7. Jhawar N, Lipoff JB. Variable potential for social media platforms in raising skin cancer awareness. *Dermatol Online J* 2019;25:13030/qt2t78m4x1.
8. Geist R, Militello M, Albrecht JM, et al. Social media and clinical research in dermatology. *Curr Dermatol Rep* 2021;10:105-11.