

Assessment of Patients' and Dentists' Attitudes towards Social Media Usage

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Received: 18.08.2024

Revised: 15.09.2024

Accepted: 27.10.2024

ABSTRACT

Background:The rapid integration of social media into healthcare has transformed communication between professionals and patients, including within dentistry. As dental practices increasingly use social media for engagement and marketing, it is essential to understand patients' and professionals' perspectives on these platforms. While social media offers an avenue for education, practice promotion, and patient engagement, it also presents concerns regarding professionalism, privacy, and boundaries. This study aims to assess patient attitudes towards social media use by dental practices and to explore the factors influencing dental practice choice.

Methods:This cross-sectional study recruited participants through social media (WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Facebook), using an online questionnaire to collect data from a sample of adults aged 18 and older. The survey comprised 19 questions across four sections: informed consent, sociodemographics, patient behavior, and factors influencing dental practice choice. Descriptive statistics and Pearson's Chi-square tests were used to analyze relationships between variables. A final sample of 503 responses was analyzed after applying exclusion criteria.

Results:Of 503 respondents, 41.4% had engaged with their dental practice's social media, while 7.2% actively followed them online. Engagement was higher among those who had recently switched providers, with the practice's website being the most commonly visited platform. Respondents who had changed providers within the last year were more likely to report that social media influenced their decision. The quality of facilities and technology was ranked as the most important factor in choosing a dental practice, while social media presence was considered the least influential.

Conclusion:Social media plays a growing yet nuanced role in dentistry, with patients more likely to consult online information when changing practices. While essential for marketing and patient engagement, social media's influence on practice choice remains secondary to traditional factors like facility quality and personal recommendations. Clearer guidelines may help dental professionals navigate the advantages and ethical challenges of social media use in patient interactions, supporting informed and secure engagement for both parties.

Keywords: professionalism, privacy, interactions, supporting, education.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid rise of social media has transformed communication, particularly in healthcare, where it significantly affects interactions between professionals and patients. Dentistry, like other healthcare sectors, has not been exempt from this digital shift. In the UK, for example, the dental market is valued at £5.8 billion, reflecting the substantial role of online engagement in health service delivery. However, along with this evolution come challenges, as dentists must navigate social media's benefits while upholding professional principles, ethics, and standards (1,2).

One key feature of social media is its encouragement of self-disclosure and informal interactions, enabling individuals to share personal information and engage publicly. While this openness fosters dialogue, it also presents a dilemma for dental professionals who must maintain their professional identity amid the often-casual nature of these platforms (3). This raises questions about boundaries and comfort levels: Do patients and dentists

feel at ease communicating on platforms like Facebook? Or do these interactions introduce concerns related to privacy and professionalism? Investigating these attitudes could reveal both opportunities and limitations in using social media within dentistry (4).

Social media use among healthcare professionals, including dentists, has grown as a tool for education, skill development, and networking. Platforms like YouTube, LinkedIn, and specialized forums are now commonly used for training, knowledge sharing, and mentorship among professionals across different locations. Within the field of dentistry, social media also enables practitioners to discuss clinical cases, share experiences, and engage in lifelong learning. Despite the well-documented value of peer-to-peer exchanges, less is understood about the potential of social media for dentist-patient interactions (5).

Despite social media's advantages, dental professionals have been cautious in fully incorporating it into their practices. This reluctance largely stems from potential risks associated with the informal nature of social media and the visibility of information shared online. Professionals often worry that social media could compromise their image, and casual exchanges could be perceived as unprofessional (6). For patients, social media use may also raise privacy concerns, as they may worry about how their personal information is managed and displayed. As a result, understanding the perspectives of both dentists and patients is crucial to developing effective guidelines for social media use in dentistry (7).

Beyond communication, social media can also support marketing activities for dental practices, allowing them to promote services broadly and cost-effectively. Traditionally, dental practices relied on local advertising and word-of-mouth referrals (8). However, social media now provides a wider reach, making it a valuable tool for timely and efficient marketing that can connect practices with potential patients (9).

Additionally, dentists are beginning to use social media as an educational platform to address issues like dental anxiety. Research suggests that pre-procedure communication on platforms like Instagram can help reduce patients' anxieties around dental care. By sharing posts and videos, dentists can create a more approachable online presence, making it easier for patients to engage with dental care in ways that traditional methods often couldn't achieve (10).

This study aims to assess the attitudes of both patients and dentists toward social media use in dentistry. Although governing bodies have issued general guidelines for healthcare professionals on social media interactions, these are often broad and may not fully address the nuances of dentist-patient dynamics. By examining the behaviors, perceptions, and preferences of both groups, this research seeks to bridge the knowledge gap and inform practical guidelines that balance professional standards with the unique opportunities presented by social media.

Methods

Recruitment

This is a cross-sectional study that will utilize an online questionnaire to collect data. Using a 95% confidence level and margin of error at 5%, the minimum sample size calculated in this study was 385 respondents. Respondents should be aged 18 years old or more, and using social media and dental services. For this reason, dental professionals, such as dentists and dental students, were excluded from the study since their attitudes and considerations could be very different compared with the general population.

The participants were recruited from the social networks of the authors using WhatsApp, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed using Microsoft Forms (Microsoft Inc., Seattle, WA, USA), which allows access across multiple electronic devices without registration. A pilot version of the survey, included 21 questions across four sections, with an estimated completion time of three minutes:

Informed Consent

This section introduced the study's purpose and informed participants of the survey's duration, voluntary nature, anonymity, and option to withdraw. Consent was obtained through a **yes/no question**, with those declining consent unable to proceed.

Sociodemographic Information

Four questions captured basic demographics. Two dichotomous questions asked if the respondent was a dentist or dental student and their gender. Two additional polytomous questions requested age range (18–25; 26–35; 36–45; 46–60; >61) and the last time the respondent switched dental practices (within the last year; 2–5 years ago; 6–10 years ago; >11 years ago).

Patient Behavior

This section explored patients' use of dental practice social media through questions informed by previous studies on patient behavior [23, 30]. Respondents were asked:

1. If they had ever visited a dental practice's website or social media page. If 'yes,' they were prompted to:
 - Select the platform(s) (e.g., Website, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, LinkedIn).
 - Identify the primary reason for visiting (e.g., education, learning about facilities, meeting the team, viewing treatment costs, finding promotions).
2. If they followed their dental practice on social media. If 'yes,' they were prompted to:
 - Indicate which platform(s) they used.
 - Specify their main reason for following (e.g., educational content, team information, facilities, treatment costs, promotions).
3. If they checked online platforms (Website, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter) before changing dental practices. If 'yes,' they were asked:
 - Which platform(s) they consulted.
4. If visiting a dental practice's social media had influenced their decision when changing practices. If 'yes,' they were asked:
 - Which platform(s) affected their decision.

Factors Influencing Dental Practice Choice

Participants ranked the importance of six factors in choosing a dental practice on a 3-point Likert scale (not important, important, very important), based on items identified in prior studies [23, 30]. These factors included social media presence, website quality, online reviews, treatment cost reimbursement, facilities/technology, and recommendations from friends or family.

The questionnaire's questions were reviewed by 10 university faculty members, who rated each item's importance on a 5-point Likert scale (very important to not important) and advised whether to include them. As a result, questions on the main reasons for following dental practices on social media were removed. Ten dental students then assessed the clarity of the 19 remaining questions on a 5-point scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree), confirming clarity in all items. The final questionnaire consisted of these 19 questions.

Statistical Analysis

Responses were stored in a password-protected Excel file (Microsoft, Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA) accessible only to the lead researcher. After data collection, the survey was deleted to ensure security. Descriptive statistics were performed for sociodemographic data and variables of interest. Pearson's Chi-square test was employed to examine variable relationships, with significance set at $p > 0.05$. Analyses were conducted using SPSS software (IBM SPSS Statistics, v.22, 2013).

RESULTS

Characteristics of the Sample

The questionnaire reached 828 potential participants, distributed via different channels: 155 on WhatsApp, 504 on LinkedIn, 118 on Facebook, and 51 through the provided tablet. The overall response rate was 71.01% (588 of 828), with a nearly perfect completion rate of 99.65% (586 of 588). After exclusions—including ten participants who did not consent, 26 under the age of 18, and 49 who were dentists or dental students—a final sample of 503 responses was used for analysis.

In terms of demographics, as shown in Table 1, 62% (312 of 503) of respondents were women. Regarding changes in dental practice, 30% (151 of 503) had changed their provider within the past 2–5 years, while 29.6% (149 of 503) had not changed practices for over 11 years.

Engagement with Dental Practice Social Media

Table 2 provides insights into participants' engagement with dental practice social media. Of the 503 respondents, 41.4% (208) reported engaging with social media content from their dental practice, and 7.2% (36) actively followed their dental practice online. The practice's website was the most commonly visited platform, while Instagram was the preferred platform for following a practice.

As shown in Table 3, 23.5% (118 of 503) of respondents used social media from dental practices before switching providers. Furthermore, 86.4% (102 of 118) of those reported that the information obtained influenced their decision to switch, with the practice's website being the most frequently consulted platform.

There was an association between the timing of participants' last change in dental practice and their use of social media. Those who had switched within the past five years, or more recently, were more likely to have consulted social media compared to those who had last changed providers over 11 years ago ($p > 0.05$). There were no significant differences in social media use between male and female respondents ($p > 0.05$).

Influence of Social Media on Dental Practice Change

The influence of social media on decisions to change dental practices was similar across genders, showing no significant difference ($p > 0.05$). Respondents who had changed their practice within the past year were more frequently influenced by social media than those who had switched at earlier times ($p < 0.05$).

Factors Important in Selecting a Dental Practice

The most valued factor in choosing a dental practice was the quality of facilities and technology, followed closely by recommendations from family and friends. Social media presence and the quality of the website were rated as the least important. No significant differences in these preferences were found between male and female respondents ($p > 0.05$).

Table 1: Respondent sociodemographic data ($N = 503$)

Characteristic	Participants
Sex, n (%)	
Male	191 (38)
Female	312 (62)
Age group (years), n (%)	
18–25	106 (21.1)
26–35	119 (23.7)
36–45	103 (20.5)
46–60	108 (21.5)
> 61	67 (13.2)
Last change of dental practice, n (%)	
This or last year	113 (22.5)
2 to 5 years ago	151 (30)
6 to 10 years ago	90 (17.9)
More than 11 years ago	149 (29.6)

Table 2: Respondent behavior in relation to dental practice social media ($N = 503$)

Characteristic	Respondents
Participants that visited dental practice social media, n (%)	
Yes	208 (41.4)
No	295 (58.6)
Platform used^a, n (%)	
Facebook	38 (18.3)
Instagram	54 (26)
LinkedIn	10 (4.8)
Twitter	8 (3.9)
Website	173 (83.2)
YouTube	15 (7.2)
Participants that followed dental practice social media, n (%)	
Yes	36 (7.2)
No	467 (92.8)
Platform on which followed^a, n (%)	
Facebook	15 (41.7)
Instagram	23 (63.9)
LinkedIn	3 (8.3)
Twitter	4 (11.1)
Website	7 (19.4)
YouTube	2 (5.6)

^aGiven that respondents could indicate several platforms, the sum of the percentage values is not 100

Table 3: Respondent behavior in relation to the use of dental practice social media before changing dental practice ($N = 503$)

Characteristic	Respondents
Respondents that visited dental practice social media before changing dental practice, n (%)	
Yes	118 (23.5)
No	395 (76.5)

Platform visited ^a	
Facebook	16 (13.6)
Instagram	21 (17.8)
LinkedIn	5 (4.2)
Twitter	6 (5.1)
Website	100 (84.7)
YouTube	1 (0.8)

^aGiven that respondents could indicate several platforms, the sum of the percentage values is not 100

DISCUSSION

With the rapid growth of Internet access, social media has become an essential communication tool across numerous sectors, including dentistry (5). Dental practices increasingly leverage social media to engage with potential patients and to highlight their services (31). In fact, studies have shown that a significant portion of the general population is active on social media (5, 7). In this study, about 41.1% of participants (208 of 503) reported using social media platforms associated with their dental practice, which aligns with findings from previous studies, such as those conducted in the UK (23). However, this proportion was lower than the overall social media usage rate among adults, suggesting that patients may not yet fully engage with dental practice social media compared to general social media platforms. Similarly, a relatively small percentage (7.2%, 36 of 503) followed a dental practice on social media, a finding consistent with Parmar et al. (23), who reported that fewer than half of patients searching for their dentist on social media added them as "friends" or followers. Marketing remains one of the primary reasons dental practices use social media (25), as dental professionals see it as a valuable tool to attract new patients (23). Our study examined the extent to which patients engage with social media prior to changing their dental provider. We found that only 23.5% of respondents (118 of 503) reported utilizing dental practice social media before switching providers. This indicates that, while social media is influential, other factors, such as a dentist's reputation, patient recommendations from friends and family, or the quality of facilities and technology, play a more significant role in practice selection (23, 29, 30, 31). Among those who did use social media prior to switching practices, the majority (86.4%, or 102 of 118) reported that the information they encountered had impacted their decision to change providers. This reinforces findings from other studies, which suggest that social media information can positively influence patients considering a new practice (1). These insights highlight that, although only a minority consult social media, its impact on patient choice can be substantial, making it a potentially effective marketing and communication tool for dental practices.

Interestingly, no gender differences were found in the use of social media for changing dental providers or in its influence on decision-making. This aligns with the findings of Parmar et al. (23). However, other research suggests that women may be more inclined to prefer practices with an active social media presence (30, 31), while some studies show that men are more likely to seek dental practice information on social media (29). Additionally, women have been reported to follow their dentists on social media more frequently than men (32), indicating that specific patterns of engagement may vary.

The study also revealed that recent adopters of new dental practices (within the last five years) were more likely to have used social media in their decision-making process than those who last changed over six years ago. This trend was even stronger for respondents who changed practices within the past year, suggesting that as social media access expands, more patients are utilizing these platforms before making healthcare decisions (5, 17, 30).

Our findings further indicate that dental practice websites were the primary source of information for patients considering a change in provider. Websites were more frequently consulted than other social media platforms before switching practices, although Instagram and Facebook were commonly used for ongoing engagement with a practice. This finding agrees with Cox et al. (7), who reported that patients were more likely to visit a practice's website than its Facebook page before initiating treatment. In contrast, Henry et al. (25) found that Facebook was the most frequently visited platform, highlighting some variability in platform preference.

The role of social media in influencing patients' decisions is growing, though it appears that other factors, such as technological facilities and personal recommendations, remain higher priorities when choosing a dental practice (23, 30). This finding aligns with prior research, suggesting that while social media can attract patient attention, the practical aspects of dental services often outweigh the online presence when finalizing a choice.

Study Limitations and Future Directions

This study's limitation lies in its geographic scope, as it was conducted in a single country, where Internet and social media usage patterns may differ from other regions (5). Additionally, there was an underrepresentation of respondents aged over 61, likely due to lower Internet usage among older populations (34). Another limitation is the possibility of duplicate responses from the same user, which is challenging to control when using Microsoft Forms (35), although previous studies suggest that only a small fraction of respondents repeat submissions (36).

Future research could explore the potential of social media not only as a marketing tool but as a means to provide patient education, facilitate appointment scheduling, and enable communication between patients and dental professionals. Expanding these functions could enhance the role of social media in patient engagement and satisfaction. Moreover, investigating social media usage across diverse geographic and demographic contexts would provide a more comprehensive understanding of its impact on patient decisions in dentistry.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the evolving role of social media in patients' decisions regarding dental practice selection. Although social media is increasingly recognized as a valuable marketing and engagement tool within the dental sector, our findings show that its direct influence on practice choice remains secondary to other considerations, such as the reputation of the dentist, available facilities, and personal recommendations. Nevertheless, for the minority who consulted social media before changing providers, its impact was significant, suggesting a high potential for patient influence through these platforms. The preference for dental practice websites as a primary information source reflects a continuing trend where patients seek reliable, comprehensive information prior to making healthcare decisions.

The findings suggest that dental practices may benefit from expanding their social media strategies, not only for marketing but also for enhancing patient education, facilitating communications, and streamlining appointment scheduling. As access to social media and the Internet continues to grow, especially among younger demographics, integrating these digital tools more effectively into patient outreach and engagement strategies could support a broader influence on patient decision-making. Future research across varied geographic and demographic populations would further elucidate the impact of social media on patient behavior, providing insights to help dental practices adapt to the digital landscape and better meet patient expectations.

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