

The Effects of Social Media on the Choice of Dentist and Dental Clinics in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Introduction: The aim of this study was to assess the influential effects of social media on choosing dentists and dental clinics in Saudi Arabia.

Methods: This cross-sectional study surveyed 318 individuals living in Saudi Arabia who were 18 years or older. A questionnaire was used to assess the percentage of public dental clinics visited based on social media, opinions of dental clinics about using social media, factors for choosing a dental clinic, and the most important factor within social media that makes individuals choose a dental clinic and dentist.

Results: A total 47.17% of participants had visited a dental clinic based on social media. Around 60% believe that social media is necessary to attract new patients (66%) and that the return on investment in social media is better than traditional marketing (61.7%). The most important factor for choosing a dental clinic was modern equipment and technology (M = 4.37, SD = 1.05). Reviews and ratings from other clients were the third most important factor (M = 4.25, SD = 1.13). The most important factor within social media were positive high ratings of the dentists at the clinic (M = 4.46, SD = 0.93), dentist qualifications (M = 4.27, SD = 1.08), and special offers (M = 4.08, SD = 1.12). Conversely, the least important factors were the number of followers (M = 3.06, SD = 1.36), likes on posts (M = 3.00, SD = 1.34), and celebrity endorsements (M = 2.28, SD = 1.31).

Conclusion: Around half of the public in Saudi Arabia have visited a dentist or a dental clinic based on social media, making such sites valuable to dental professionals.

Keywords: Social Media; Dentists; Dental Students; Dental Clinic; Selecting; Choosing; Saudi Arabia

Introduction

The internet has grown to be a vital component of daily life, exceeding conventional forms of communication [1]. Social media may be defined as online platforms where people can share their thoughts, experiences, and perspectives [2,3]. It is a new mode of communication that uses the internet to connect individuals from all over the world through computers or cell phones [2,3]. Different social networking platforms have various features and functions [4]. WhatsApp, Snapchat, X (previously known as Twitter), Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and LinkedIn are among the most popular social networking sites that continually expand their numbers of users [5]. These sites are well-known among Middle Eastern individuals, particularly in Saudi Arabia [6,7]. According to data, there are over 18 million people using the internet in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, with more than 65% of the population using the internet in 2014 [8].

Social media usage has become essential in the dental field [9,10], with more and more of dentists using them, particularly newer graduates [11]. Pediatric dentists, for instance, utilize these tools for patient awareness projects [12]. They can also facilitate communication between practitioners, which is useful for professional development [13]. Furthermore, some dentists use social media platforms to share about their clinical cases and market their services [14]. In a recent study, a large percentage of individuals were using the internet to seek health-related information, making it rank as the third most frequent online activity [15].

Patients prefer to use digital platforms as a guide when selecting their physicians [16]. A Saudi study stated that the majority of participants strongly agreed on the value of having a social media presence in dental practices and believed it was effective at attracting new patients [17]. In India, more than half of the patients said that they visited a dental clinic after viewing or reading about it on social media [18]. In Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, nearly 66% of respondents in one study agreed about the effectiveness of social media for dentists [19].

A total of 37% of patients in a Saudi Arabian study preferred that their dentist have a social media account, with X being the most favored platform [20]. The favored platform can vary from country to country, and patients in Spain indicated they use Instagram more than the others [21]. Another study in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, found that social networking sites have greater influence among women than men (61.3% vs. 52.9%), and this can affect their dentist preferences [17]. Additionally, the facilities and technology at a clinic, qualifications of the dentist, and positive reviews were the key decisive factors when selecting a dental practice or evaluating a dentist's or clinic's social media account [17].

While there are existing studies that addressed the effects of social media on the selection of dentists and dental clinics in Saudi Arabia [17,19,22], they each focused on only a specific region rather than the entire country [17], and much of the existing studies were conducted before COVID-19 and therefore need to be reassessed, given that the COVID-19 pandemic made people more dependent on using internet services [23].

Aim of the Study

This study aimed to assess the effects of social media influence on choosing dentists and dental clinics across all regions of Saudi Arabia.

Materials and Methods

This cross-sectional study recruited people living in Saudi Arabia who were 18 years or older. Those who did not agree to and complete the study consent form or who did not read Arabic were excluded from this study. A convenience sampling method was used to recruit participants for the study, with the sample size calculated using an alpha of 0.05, a predicted prevalence of 50%, and a 95% confidence level, setting the number of participants needed at 385. To recruit participants, a survey was distributed on multiple social

media platforms, including WhatsApp, X (formerly known as Twitter), LinkedIn, TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram, and Telegram. Additionally, personal contacts were used to recruit participants. Participants had to click the “approve” button to accept the study’s informed consent form, after which 5 - 10 minutes were needed to complete the questionnaire. All of the information collected was utilized in an anonymous manner, and any identifiable information that would have revealed a participant’s identify was deleted.

A soft copy (electronic link) questionnaire was used to answer the study questions, and was self-administered in Arabic. The questionnaire was composed of 33 questions divided into three sections. The first section asked eight questions to gather demographic data. The second section had 13 questions regarding the usage of social media by dental clinics. The third section inquired about important features of a dental clinic’s social media accounts via 12 questions. Questions were answered via different methods, including yes/no questions, on a 5-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), and on a 5-point Likert scale from not important at all (1) to very important (5). Questions in the second and third sections were taken from a previous article [17] with modifications. This study was approved by the institutional review board (IRB) at Umm Al-Qura University with the number (HAPO-02-K-012-2024-10-2215).

Statistical significance was set at a p-value of 0.05. The data are shown using count, percentage, mean, and standard deviation (SD) in descriptive statistics. For data analysis, linear regression, t-test, analysis of variance (ANOVA), and chi-square were employed. Microsoft Excel (Microsoft Corp., Redmond, WA, USA) and SPSS v.27 (IBM, Inc., Armonk, NY, USA) were used for data analysis.

Results

Data were collected from 318 respondents with a mean age of 35.289 (SD = 10.75). Table 1 presents the participants’ demographic data.

Item		n	%
Gender	Male	63	19.8
	Female	255	80.2
Nationality	Saudi	281	88.4
	Non-Saudi	37	11.6
Region	Central	32	10.1
	West	228	71.7
	East	39	12.3
	South	12	3.8
	North	7	2.2
Working status	Student	36	11.3
	Employee	165	51.9
	Freelance work	22	6.9
	Not working	95	29.9

Table 1: Participant demographics (N = 318).

The participants were asked a question about their social media account ownership on various platforms, and the answers are displayed in table 2. The participants were also questioned about their average daily time spent on social media. The mean of their answers was 5.52 hours (SD = 3.48). Participants were also asked if they had ever visited a dentist or a dental clinic chosen through social media, and 150 (47.17%) answered yes.

Social Media Platform	Yes	No
WhatsApp	317 (99.7%)	1 (0.3%)
Snapchat	297 (93.4%)	21 (6.6%)
Instagram	292 (91.8%)	26 (8.2%)
X (previously known as Twitter)	247 (77.7%)	71 (22.3%)
YouTube	239 (75.2%)	79 (24.8%)
TikTok	238 (74.8%)	80 (25.2%)
Facebook	140 (44.0%)	178 (56.0%)
LinkedIn	129 (40.6%)	189 (59.4%)
Discord	36 (11.3%)	282 (88.7%)
Others	94 (29.6%)	224 (70.4%)

Table 2: Social media account ownership on various platforms.

Table 3 and 4 show the influence of social media on the choice of dental practice via questions rating the importance of various factors.

Statement	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Mean (SD)
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	
Use of social media is effective for attracting and acquiring new patients for the dental clinic.	52 (16.4%)	56 (17.6%)	210 (66%)	3.85 (1.3)
The return on investment from social media marketing is better than traditional marketing for a dental clinic.	57 (17.9%)	65 (20.4%)	196 (61.7%)	3.74 (1.29)
A dental clinic must have an online presence through social media.	65 (20.4%)	59 (18.6%)	194 (61%)	3.72 (1.32)
Social media is generally effective at improving the relationship between patients and the dentist.	107 (31.4%)	72 (22.6%)	139 (43.8%)	3.17 (1.38)
Choosing a dental clinic and dentist based on their presence on social media.	142 (44.7%)	86 (27%)	90 (28.4%)	2.68 (1.4)

Table 3: Patients' opinions of dental practices' use of social media.

SD = Standard Deviation.

For table 3-5, answers were given in the form of a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) or a 5-point Likert scale ranging from not important at all (1) to very important (5). Thus, we calculated the mean and standard deviation for each answer, and the results are displayed in the tables.

The participant answers regarding the key factors that influence patients' perceptions of dental and medical practices' social media accounts are provided in table 5. The t-test found that none of the variables shown in table 3, 4, or 5 were significantly different against age.

Also, none of the variables in table 3, 4, or 5 were significantly different against working status except for “The return on investment from social media marketing is better than traditional marketing for a dental clinic” ($p = 0.027$). The Tukey post hoc test revealed that participants who were not working ($M = 3.43, SD = 1.43$) had a significantly ($p = 0.046$) lower rate of belief in social media marketing’s return on investment compared to employees ($M = 3.86, SD = 1.21$). However, there were no significant differences between students ($M = 4.06, SD = 1.12$), employees, or private job participants ($M = 3.68, SD = 1.21$) and any other group.

Statement	Mean	SD
Positive high ratings for the dentists at the clinic	4.46	0.93
Qualifications of the dentists at the clinic	4.27	1.08
Special offers	4.08	1.12
Testimonials from others who have received treatment at the clinic	4.05	1.20
Before and after treatment photos	3.93	1.19
The account’s interaction and response to comments	3.79	1.24
Original and engaging content	3.71	1.21
Consistently updated content	3.63	1.22
Awards received by dentists at the clinic	3.37	1.28
The number of followers	3.06	1.36
The number of likes on posts	3.00	1.34
Celebrity endorsements of the clinic	2.28	1.31

Table 5: Factors that are most important to patients when choosing a dental practice based on social media content.
SD = Standard Deviation.

Discussion

Social media began growing rapidly across medical and dental areas and altered how medical professionals practice and interact with patients [24]. This study aimed to assess the effects of social media’s influence on the choosing of a dentist or dental clinic across all regions of Saudi Arabia. A total of 47.17% of our respondents indicated that they had visited a dentist or a dental clinic based on social media. The most common social media sites used by more than 90% of the participants were WhatsApp, Snapchat, and Instagram. Around 60% of the participants believed social media is necessary to attract new patients and that the return on investment via social media is better than traditional marketing. The most important factors when choosing a dental clinic in general were modern equipment and technology and recommendations from family and friends. The reviews and ratings from other clients was the third most important factor. The presence of social media was the least important factor. Within social media, the most important factors were positive high ratings for the dentists at a clinic, qualifications of the dentist, and special offers. Conversely, the least important factors were number of followers, likes on posts, and celebrity endorsements.

Our study found that 99.7% of participants were using WhatsApp, 91.8% were using Instagram, 93.4% were using Snapchat, 77.7% were using X (previously known as Twitter), and 75.2% were using YouTube. These findings are somewhat similar to a previous Saudi study by Alalawi [17], which reported that 75.1% of participants used Snapchat, 73.8% used Instagram, 62.1% used Twitter, and 32.4% used Facebook. However, the Alalawi [17] study did not investigate WhatsApp usage. In contrast, our results indicate significantly more social media usage than a study conducted in India, where only 49.5% of participants used WhatsApp, 36.7% used Instagram, and 12.8% used Facebook [18]. These differences may reflect variations in demographic preferences and social media trends across different communities and societies.

Many participants (66%) agreed that social media is generally effective at improving the relationship between a patient and a dentist, which is somewhat similar to a study from India in which the majority of participants (89.4%) agreed that dentists should communicate with people through social media [18]. With regard to using social media to attract new patients, our results showing agreement on its necessity (66%) are similar to a previous study (78.5%) [17]. Also, both our study (61.7%) and the previous study (74.8%) [17] evaluated social media to be a better return on investment than traditional methods. Despite the difference in percentages, both studies showed generally positive attitudes. This difference might be due to the sample selection between our study, which recruited a more diverse population in Saudi Arabia, compared to the previous study that concentrated in only one Saudi Arabian city. Taken together, all of these results indicate a growing recognition of the importance of social media for enhancing patient-dentist interactions across different cultural contexts.

Having social media accounts was not the least important factor to respondents when choosing a dental clinic. In fact, modern equipment and technology and recommendations from family and friends were the most important factors. This is exactly what was found in the previous Saudi study [17]. Almost half of our participants answered that they had visited a dentist or a dental clinic based on information from social media (47.17%). This is a high percentage. Reviews and ratings from other clients, which is typically found on social media, was the third most important factor. In previous studies where almost half of respondents were affected by a dentist's or clinic's activity on social media accounts when choosing a dentist [25,26]. Also, a majority (62.4%) of participants admitted to being affected by written experiences and criticism about dental care on social networking sites [25,26]. Also, 41.4% indicated that they had visited dental practice on social media [21], and 65.9% would visit a dental clinic because they viewed or read their page on social media sites [19]. This might indicate that the presence of social media accounts alone is an important factor to choose the dental clinic, but rather other features inside the social media itself, that made half of participants to choose their dental clinic based on social media. As google map is considered one of the most commonly used method to view services rating, it should be investigated in future studies.

When investigating the most important factors within the social media accounts in the dental clinic, high and positive ratings of dentists at clinics are the most significant factors influencing patients' perceptions on social media, which is supported by previous study [19]. This underscores the critical role of online reputation in building trust and attracting potential patients, as individuals increasingly rely on peer reviews as a form of social proof. Additionally, the qualifications of the dentist are highly valued, reflecting patients' awareness of the importance of expertise in their healthcare decisions. Special offers also play a vital role in attracting patients, highlighting the influence of financial incentives and the desire for affordability in a competitive healthcare market.

Conversely, the least important factors include celebrity endorsements and the number of likes on posts. This is surprising result and unexpected despite confirming the same results of the previous literature in Saudi Arabia [19]. Literature in Saudi Arabia indicated that celebrity endorsement is an important factor to improve marketing and sales in Saudi Arabia [27]. These findings suggest that patients in Saudi Arabia might not significantly influenced by social media popularity metrics or endorsements from celebrities when choosing a dental clinic. Instead, they prioritize tangible evidence of quality care, such as qualifications and patient satisfaction, indicating a more reasonable approach to selecting healthcare providers. This emphasizes the need for dental clinics to focus on delivering quality services and fostering genuine patient relationships rather than relying solely on superficial marketing tactics.

This study has strength, including the participation of a sample from different regions in Saudi Arabia. As a result, there was diversity including different cities in compared to previous study that mostly investigated in Jeddah city. Our study is suffering from some limitations, including the female gender and the western region constitutes a large part of the sample, which may include bias. However, we compared our findings to a few previously reported studies because we did not come across many that covered the areas that we address in marketing the use of social media among dental practices specializing in Saudi Arabia. We suggest and recommend for more detailed research with larger sample size and relative proximity between the gender. Also, it is important to investigate Google Map review and its influence on choosing dental clinic and dentists in future studies.

Conclusion

Around half of the public in Saudi Arabia have visited a dentist or a dental clinic through social media. The reviews and ratings from other clients was the third most important factor in general for choosing a dental clinic. Within the social media, the most important factors were high and positive ratings of the dentists at the clinic, qualifications of the dentist, and special offers. On the other hand, the least important factors were number of followers, likes on posts, and celebrity endorsements.

It is recommended that dental professional to take care of their social media content as they might be very important to the patient to recognize their services. Nevertheless, dental professionals should be encouraged to adhere to the ethical manners when using social media including honesty, privacy and professionalism.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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