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ORIGINAL ARTICLE**The Impact of Social Media and Online Reviews on Patient Choice of Dentist Among the General Public in Tiruvallur- A Cross-Sectional Study**

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ABSTRACT

Aim: To evaluate the impact of social media and online reviews on patient choice of dentist among the general public in Tiruvallur.

Methods and Materials: This cross-sectional study utilized a Google Form questionnaire, which was designed to evaluate the impact of social media and online reviews on patient choice of dentist. The questionnaire consisted of 22 questions. Additionally, it had information like age and gender of the respondents. The questionnaire was distributed via Gmail and social media platforms, including WhatsApp and Instagram. The target audience included patients aged 10 and above. A total of 318 responses were collected over a period of 4 weeks. The responses collected from the Google Form questionnaire were exported to a Google Sheets document for further analysis.

Results: An analysis of the collected data from 318 participants suggests that social media platforms are popular among respondents with 81% using it on a daily basis. Nearly 49% have searched for a dentist online and 59% of them reported having a positive experience with a dentist they found. 51% of participants tend to base their decisions on less than 5 online reviews. While 34% of respondents believe that dentists should respond to online reviews sometimes, 63% have not left an online review for a dentist. The data revealed that 49% of the participants rated the online presence of a dentist as moderately important suggesting that an online presence is not the most critical factor in choosing a dentist. 58% of respondents have not avoided a dentist based on their online reviews.

Conclusions: In conclusion, social media and online reviews are significant factors that influence patients' decisions in choosing a dentist. While reputation, qualifications, and credentials remain crucial, a positive online presence through social media can provide dental practices with a competitive edge, especially among younger generations. However, patients should not rely solely on online reviews, and dental practitioners must find a balance between traditional and modern marketing strategies to appeal to a wide range of patients. This study highlights the importance of social media and online reviews as a game changer in dentistry, and dental practices that embrace this trend are likely to thrive in the digital age.

Key-words: social media, dentistry, digital, online reviews.

The definition of “social media” is broad and constantly evolving. In a practical sense, it is a collection of software-based digital technologies usually presented as apps and websites. It is a very active and fast-moving domain that allows sharing of ideas and information through its platforms. However, social media also has its drawbacks. It is a double-edged sword. It has the potential to provide information and can also contribute to the spread of misinformation. Users may also experience social isolation or anxiety as a result of their online activities. As with any technology, it is important to use social media mindfully and understand its potential risks and benefits can weaken the tooth structure. [2] social media can be used to improve or enhance professional networking, education, patient care, and patient treatment choices and to attract a diverse group of people that we may not have thought would be interested in oral health. It is increasingly utilized by patients to educate

themselves on a disease process and to find hospitals, physicians, and physician networks most capable of treating their condition. Social media and online reviews have become a significant part of the patient-dentist relationship. Patients are not passive consumers of health information anymore. they are increasingly relying on online platforms to find a dentist, with many feeling that they can trust the information provided by other patients more than what is stated by the dentist in person or on their website. This has led to an increase in competition between dentists who want their practice to be seen as the best option for patients looking for treatment.

The use of social media platforms has enabled dentists to reach out to patients beyond their physical location and offer oral health education and advice. Patients can now interact with dentists, ask questions, and get answers in real time, creating a more collaborative relationship. Social media platforms provide an avenue for dentists to exhibit

their expertise, display their work, and offer a glimpse into their dental practice, which includes patient reviews and testimonials. Dentists from various fields, such as orthodontics, periodontics, cosmetic dentistry, dental surgery, and dental implants, rely on social media to showcase their cases by sharing pictures and videos. As a result, many dental clinics and dentists use social media to promote their services. In this study, we aimed to investigate how social media usage and online reviews affect the patient's choice of dentist among the general public in Thiruvallur.

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

This cross-sectional study utilized a Google Form questionnaire, which was designed to assess the impact of social media and online reviews on patient choice of dentist. The questionnaire consisted of 22 questions regarding the impact of social media and online reviews on patient choice of dentist. Using a chain referral approach, the questionnaire was distributed to a wide range of non-dental Indian professionals and individuals via Gmail and social media platforms, including WhatsApp and Instagram. The initial link was sent to a group of friends and contacts, who were encouraged to forward it to their own networks. This process continued until the questionnaire reached a diverse and extensive audience. The chain referral approach proved to be a quick and effective method for distributing the questionnaire. The target audience included patients aged 10 and above. A total of 318 responses were collected over a period of four weeks.

INCLUSION CRITERIA

Patients who responded were considered in the inclusion criteria.

EXCLUSION CRITERIA

Patients who did not respond were considered in the exclusion criteria.

RESULTS

Among 318 respondents in the study, 56% (178) were females and 44% (140) were males. The respondents age ranged from 10 years to more than 50 years. An analysis of the collected data from 318 participants suggests that social media platforms are popular among respondents, with 81% using them daily. Facebook (7%) and Instagram (37%) were the most popular platforms for searching for dental services and dentists. Reputation (24%) and qualifications/credentials (22%) were considered the most important factors in choosing a dentist. Regarding gender, there was a significant difference between males and females in terms of their use of social media to search for dentists, with females being more likely to use social media for this

purpose ($p = 0.000072$). There was also a significant difference between males and females in terms of the importance they placed on online reviews when choosing a dentist, with females rating this factor as more important than males ($p = 0.03$).

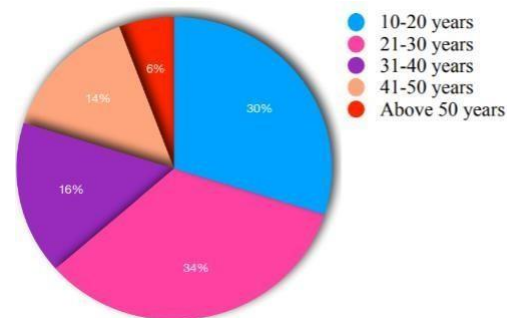


Figure 1: Age distribution of the respondents

In terms of age, there was a significant difference between age groups with respect to the frequency of social media use to search for dentists. Specifically, younger individuals were more likely to use social media for this purpose compared to older individuals ($p = 0.000001$). Additionally, there was a significant difference between age groups in terms of the social media platforms used to search for dental services and dentists. Younger individuals were more likely to use Instagram, while older individuals were more likely to use Facebook ($p = 0.009$). Overall, these results suggest that gender and age may play a role in how individuals use social media and online reviews to search for dentists and choose dental services. Regarding the impact of online reviews, 39% of respondents reported that they were moderately important in their decision-making process, with 18.5% reporting that they had chosen a dentist solely based on their online reviews. However, only 33% of respondents reported that they would definitely recommend a dentist based on their online reviews [Table 1]. In terms of negative experiences, 58% of respondents had never had a negative experience with a dentist they found online, and 41.5% reported having avoided a dentist based on their online reviews. Furthermore, 78% of respondents reported that their preferences for choosing a dentist had somewhat or significantly changed over the last few years due to social media and online reviews.

DISCUSSION

In our “e-society,” social media are pervasive, rapidly evolving, and increasingly influencing the healthcare landscape. In fact, it is becoming more important that all healthcare providers understand the basic function of social media processes including what they are, who uses them, what they can be used for, and how they might affect one's practice.⁷ Adapting to modern dentistry, changing consumer demographics, attitudes, and preferences

is crucial for dental practitioners to maximize their income. Social media is one of the marketing strategies that can enhance their efforts, along with their clinical skills. Social media creates a forum for patient participation that extends beyond the reach of the hospital or the local clinic. Such resources can help empower and uplift patients when they read the experiences of other patients⁹. This study aimed to evaluate the impact of social media platforms and online reviews on patients' decisions when selecting a dentist. 49% of the participants believe that online reviews are mostly or completely reliable when choosing a dentist. This is comparable to the study conducted by Taneja, et al¹⁰ wherein 62.9% of participants reported trusting the information they get from social media about dentistry and treatment options. The reason behind this could be that online reviews provide valuable insights into the quality of services provided by a dentist, and people rely on the opinions of others to make informed decisions. Additionally, online reviews are easily accessible and readily available, making it convenient for people to check them before choosing a dentist. The present study revealed that (n=185) 58% of respondents reported that their preferences for choosing a dentist have changed somewhat due to online reviews. Furthermore, a pronounced difference in preferences based on both age (P=0.014) and gender (P=0.0403) was observed. Respondents aged 21-30 were the most likely to be influenced by online reviews, with 33.6% of them stating a significant change in their preferences. Furthermore, 43% of women have reported that they use Instagram to look for a dentist. This is in accordance with the study conducted by Abdullah Alalawi et al.¹¹ Therefore, in today's social media era, a positive online reputation is no longer a bonus for dental practices, but a necessity to attract and retain young patients. Of the participants, 24% identified the reputation of the dentist as their top priority when selecting one, with qualifications and credentials (22%) and personal recommendations (21%) following closely behind. This is in accordance with the study conducted by Alalawi et al¹¹ wherein (56.4%) reported that the qualification of the dentist is very important while looking at a social media Account for a Dental Practice. This finding is also comparable with the study conducted by Taneja, et al¹⁰. This may be due to the reputation being built on clinical expertise, quality of care, and patient satisfaction, which are important indicators of high-quality care and can help to build trust with patients. Additionally, reputation may be particularly important for patients who are anxious about dental treatment or have had negative experiences with previous dentists.

The study indicates that "Information on dental procedures and treatments" is the most desired content (25%) on a dentist's social media page across

all age and gender groups. This may be due to the fact that many individuals have queries or reservations regarding dental procedures and treatments, and are seeking more information before finalizing their decision. The second most preferred content (21%) is educational content on dental health, which suggests that people are interested in gaining knowledge on maintaining good oral health. According to the study conducted by Al Awdah et al¹² 70.9% of the respondents were not attracted to the advertisements with special offers suggesting that individuals prioritize the quality of dental care over cost. Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on the impact of social media and online reviews on patient choices of healthcare providers, specifically in the field of dentistry. Possible future research directions for this study include conducting a longitudinal study to track changes in patients' preferences and behaviour over time and investigating the impact of different types of online content (e.g., videos, photos, testimonials) on patient engagement and conversion rates. Additionally, researchers could examine the effectiveness of targeted advertising and search engine optimization, in attracting and retaining patients. Finally, it would be valuable to explore the potential ethical implications of using social media and online reviews in the healthcare industry, such as issues related to data privacy and information accuracy.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, social media and online reviews play a significant role in shaping patients' decisions when it comes to selecting a dentist. While the reputation, qualifications, and credentials of a dentist are still vital factors in a patient's decision-making process, having a positive online presence through social media can give dental practices an extra edge, particularly when appealing to younger generations. However, it's important to note that patients should not rely solely on online reviews as they may not always be reliable or unbiased, and considering multiple sources of information is crucial. Dental practitioners need to strike a balance between traditional offline methods of recommendation and modern online marketing strategies to adapt to the changing times and appeal to a wide range of patient populations.

LIMITATIONS

The study's small sample size makes it challenging to generalize the results to larger populations. The study relied on self-reported data, which could be influenced by social desirability and recall bias. Furthermore, the study did not investigate the accuracy and reliability of online reviews, which could have an impact on patients' decision-making. Future research is necessary to validate and broaden

these results, as well as to overcome the limitations of this study.

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