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Use of social media sites as a source of information about dental treatment options, clinics, and practitioner

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Abstract

Introduction: Internet and social media today have become an integral part of our lives, a source of information in healthcare, including dentistry. This study was carried out to find out the use of social media sites for information on dental treatment options, dental clinics and dental practitioners.

Method: Cross-sectional study was conducted among 362 participants from Apr to Jun 2024. Information was collected from people residing in Bharatpur, Chitwan, Nepal, who were approached during the community programs, using pre-designed proforma. Face-to-face interview method was employed to collect information after obtaining consent from the participants and ethical clearance from the IRC. Descriptive statistics were presented where for categorical variables frequencies and percentages were given and for continuous variables mean and standard deviation were given. Chi square test was applied to find out the association of the social media use for dentistry with gender. Data entry was done in Microsoft Excel and data analysis in IBM SPSS version 20.

Result: Total of 362 participants was included in the study with mean age of 27.89±8.16 and age range of 18 to 55 years. 351(97%) of the study participants use Facebook, followed by 283(78.2%) Instagram users. Among the study participants, 42(36.8%) males and 76(30.6%) females follow dentist/dental clinic on social media. Among the males, 68(59.6%) and females 121(48.8%) would go to a dentist based on before and after pictures posted in social media.

Conclusion: Social media is being used widely and affect the choice in dental treatment and selection of dental clinic.

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Introduction

Internet today has become an integral part of our lives and social media being the cornerstone of today's high end science and modern technology is connecting billions of people worldwide.^{1,2} At the start of 2024, there were 15.40 million internet users in Nepal of which 13.50 million were social media users equating to 43.5% of the total population. Most commonly used social media applications for communication as well as information sharing include Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Tiktok.^{3,4}

In the past few years there has been an increase in trend of use of social networking sites by health care personnel and researchers to disseminate information on health related issues as well as for the marketing of their practices which comes with its own pros and cons.⁵ We cannot ignore the power social media and digital marketing in dental care.⁶

Literature revealed that 98.3% of participants had at least one social media account, with 81.6% using these accounts daily. Approximately two-thirds (66.2%) of participants obtained dental information from social networking platforms, and about 45% reported that their dental aesthetic treatment choices were influenced by family and friends through these digital channels. The findings from the Arabian Gulf region highlight the substantial role social media plays in shaping dental healthcare decisions in certain populations. However, limited research exists examining whether similar patterns of influence are present in Nepal, particularly in emerging centres like Bharatpur, Chitwan. Therefore, this study was carried out to find out the use of social

media sites for information on dental treatment options, dental clinics and dental practitioners.

Method

A descriptive A cross-sectional study was conducted among participants residing in Bharatpur, Chitwan, Nepal from Apr to Jun 2024 after obtaining ethical clearance from College of Medical Sciences Teaching Hospital Institutional Review Committee (Reference number: COMSTH-IRC/2024-016). Subjects older than 18 years of age who gave consent to participate in the study were included.

Sample size was calculated with the following formula, $n = Z^2 pq / e^2$, where Z stands for confidence interval which was 1.96, p for prevalence 38.2%⁷ and q is 1-p, e is permissible error of 5%. Hence, sample size was calculated to be 362. Convenience sampling technique was used.

Participants were approached at different wards of Bharatpur, where community camps were organized by the institution. Face-to-face interviews were conducted by three trained researchers for data collection. The interview process took approximately five minutes per participant and it was ensured that all the questions were answered for the completeness of the data. Information was collected from pre-designed proforma based on published studies.⁶ Informed consent was obtained from each study participants prior to the inclusion in the study. Translation - back translation of the questionnaire was done in Nepali language by researcher themselves. The questionnaire consisted of two sections: the first section comprising of demographic details of the study participants along with the social media used.

The second section consists of questions regarding use of social media for treatment options, dental clinics and dental practitioners, effect of advertisements and influence of families, friends and celebrities.

All the collected data was entered in Microsoft Excel and data analysis was done in IBM SPSS version 20 (Statistical Product and Service Solutions). Descriptive statistics were presented as frequencies and percentages for categorical variables and mean and standard deviation for continuous variables.

Result

A total of 362 participants were included in the study with mean age of 27.89 ± 8.16 and age range of 18 to 55 years. Out of total participants, 248(68.5%) were females and 114(31.5%) were males, Table 1.

Although a majority of the participants were social media users, only 118(32.6%) of them follow dentist/dental clinic on social media. When asked regarding communication of dentists with people through social media rather than conventional media, 229 of them comprising of 63.3% replied with a "Yes". For 216 of them i.e. 59.7%, social media is the first choice for information about aesthetic dental treatment. 153(42.3%) trust the information obtained from social media on dentistry and

treatment options and for 209(57.7%) decision of choosing a dentist or dental clinic is affected by their activity in social media sites. However, only 106(29.3%) write about their visit to dental clinic / dentist in their social media post. 220(60.8%) believe that criticism to a dentist / clinic in a social media site would affect their decision for a visit. 213(58.8%) would visit a dental clinic based on the social media sites they visited, and 189(52.2%) would go to a dentist by seeing before and after pictures on social media. Chi square test was applied which showed statistically significant difference among genders with regards to choice of dentist because they saw a before and after pictures in the social media (p value=0.03), Table 2.

Furthermore, the effects of aesthetic dental clinic advertisements where 70.4% of participants responded that special offers on treatment attract them regardless of the quality of treatment, Table 3.

In addition, 310(85.6%) of the study participants ask about the dentist or dental clinic if they see a friend or family in social media with a smile makeover. Among them, 89(78.1) were males and 221(89.1) were females. The effects of influence of family, friends and celebrities was found significantly different between male and female ($p=0.005$), Table 4.

Table 1. Use of social media sites by the study participants, n=362

Social media sites (Multiple response)	n(%)
Twitter	62(17.1)
Facebook	351(97)
Instagram	283(78.2)
Tiktok	246(68)

Table 2. Use of social media sites as a reliable source of information about dental treatment options, n=362

Questions	Male n(%)	Female n(%)	Total n(%)	p-value (χ^2 test)
Do you follow dentist/dental clinic on social media?				
Yes	42(36.8)	76(30.6)	118(32.6)	0.14
No	72(63.2)	172(69.4)	244(67.4)	
Do you think dentist should communicate with people through social media rather than conventional media?				
Yes	72(63.2)	157(63.3)	229(63.3)	0.53
No	42(36.8)	91(36.7)	133(36.7)	
If you want to get information about an aesthetic dental treatment / clinic is social media your first choice for information?				
Yes	65(57.0)	151(60.9)	216(59.7)	0.28
No	49(43.0)	97(39.1)	146(40.3)	
Do you trust the information you get from social media about dentistry and treatment options?				
Yes	46(40.4)	107(43.1)	153(42.3)	0.35
No	68(59.6)	141(56.9)	209(57.7)	
Is your decision of choosing a dentist or dental clinic affected by their activity in social media sites?				
Yes	69(60.5)	140(56.5)	209(57.7)	0.27
No	45(39.5)	108(43.5)	153(42.3)	
Do you write about your visit to dentist or dental clinic in social media?				
Yes	40(35.1)	66(26.6)	106(29.3)	0.06
No	74(64.9)	182(73.4)	256(70.7)	
Would a criticism to a dentist or dental clinic in social media affect your personal decision to visit the dentist or clinic?				
Yes	63(55.3)	157(63.3)	220(60.8)	0.09
No	51(44.7)	91(36.7)	142(39.2)	
Would you visit a dental clinic because you visited or read their page on social media sites?				
Yes	68(59.6)	145(58.5)	213(58.8)	0.46
No	46(40.4)	103(41.5)	149(41.2)	
Would you go to a dentist because you saw a before and after pictures in the social media?				
Yes	68(59.6)	121(48.8)	189(52.2)	0.03
No	46(40.4)	127(51.2)	173(47.8)	
If you need to get an aesthetic dental treatment, is your first choice a clinic that a celebrity tried or talked about in social media?				
Yes	48(42.1)	80(32.2)	128(35.4)	0.04
No	66(57.9)	168(67.7)	234(64.6)	

Table 3. Use of social media sites as a reliable source of information on dental clinic advertisements, n=362

Questions	Male n(%)	Female n(%)	Total n(%)	p-value (χ^2 test)
Reliance on the accuracy of the results and displays advertisements which belong to cosmetic treatment, resulting from				
Number of followers	6(5.3)	1(0.4)	7(1.9)	0.003
Comments and opinions	20(17.5)	34(13.7)	54(14.9)	
Pictures	9(7.9)	10(4.0)	19(5.2)	
I only trust my own experience or my family	79(69.3)	263(81.9)	282(77.9)	
Does advertisement that contains special offers for different aesthetic treatment attract you, regardless of the quality of treatment?				
Yes	47(41.2)	60(24.2)	107(29.6)	0.001
No	67(58.8)	188(75.8)	255(70.4)	

Table 4. Use of social media sites and effects of influence of family, friends and celebrities, n=362

Questions	Male n(%)	Female n(%)	Total n(%)	p-value (χ^2 test)
If you saw on social media a friend or family member with a new smile, would you ask about the dentist or dental clinic they were treated in?				
Yes	89(78.1)	221(89.1)	310(85.6)	0.005
No	25(21.9)	27(10.9)	52(14.4)	

Discussion

This cross-sectional study involving 362 participants in Bharatpur, Chitwan revealed that social media significantly influences the patients' dental healthcare decisions. Our study revealed that most participants didn't follow dentists or dental clinics on social media, a majority of 63.3% believed that dentists should communicate through these platforms rather than conventional ones. Males were likely to visit a dentist after seeing before and after pictures on media. Although 58.8% of participants indicated willingness to visit a dental clinic after viewing its social media page, some (29.3%) reported sharing their visit experiences on social media. This suggests patient testimonials and experience may influence dental practice. This transformation in information-seeking behaviour reflects broader changes in how

healthcare information is accessed and consumed in this digital age.⁸

A notable finding is the prevalence of social media users, with 97% Facebook users, similar to other studies showing 95.3% social media users.⁹ In the current study, 32.6% follow dentist on social media which is similar to various studies⁷ whereas in contrast to other studies which have shown that 53.3% follow dentists on social media.⁶ Large of participants i.e. (63.3%) believed that the dentist should communicate with the people through social media which were in accordance to the different available literatures,^{7,10} where the participants appreciated the social media communication of health care providers. One of the reasons for such belief could be the fact that there would be direct communication with the dentist and the possibility of the information being credible,

without filtration or manipulation. The 153(42.3%) of the participants trusted the information regarding a dentist or a dental clinic from social media in our current study which is in contrast to other studies where a high percentage of people used internet as a source of information regarding health. Most of the participants in the present study (58.8%) visited the dentist's social media page which is in contrast to a study¹⁰ where a total of 64% (296/460) never searched their medical doctors and dentists on social media. Majority of the participants (60.8%) were affected by the criticism of dentist on social media which is similar to these studies.^{6,7} Statistically significant difference in gender was found with regards to questions on effects of aesthetic dental clinic advertisements and effects of influence of family, friends and celebrities similar to the study.⁷

The growing use of social media has changed the way how medical professionals interact with their patients and have changed the ways of health care delivery.¹¹⁻¹⁵ Many individuals have been using social media to help them lead a healthier life.¹⁶ According to the literature, the power of social media in dental practice promotion is undeniable.^{17,18} Though there can be many advantages to social media and dentistry we cannot deny that it comes with many misinformation and unverified claims about treatment procedures and outcomes. Also, patient may be unable to differentiate between marketing-driven content that may prioritize commercial interests over patient education. Lack of regulations could be an issue with regards to general professional behaviour and use of social media.^{19,20} Also there can be limited representation of complex dental procedures and potential complications. Development of guidelines for social media health educational contents is the need of the day to help maintain ethical standards while using these platforms.

Conclusion

These findings suggest that dental professionals in Bharatpur should develop targeted, gender-specific social media strategies while maintaining ethical standards in their online communications. Educational efforts to improve

patients' knowledge on social media use regarding dental information would benefit both practitioners and patients. Though these platforms provide immediate access to the dentists, effective communication between the doctor and patient, there is always the need to be cautious about content quality authenticity and ethical implications.

Author contribution

Concept and design: RB1; Literature search: RB1; Data acquisition, analysis and interpretation: All; Drafting: RB1; Review: All Final approval and accountability: All

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Conflict of interest

None

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Supplementary material

The data and supplementary material that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request

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Questionnaire/tools

Participant ID: _____ Age/Gender: _____
 Social media used
 Twitter: Yes _____ No _____
 Facebook: Yes _____ No _____
 Instagram: Yes _____ No _____
 Tiktok: Yes _____ No _____
 Frequency of use: Everyday _____ Once a week _____ Once a month _____ Sometimes _____

Use of social media sites as a reliable source of information about dental treatment options, clinics and practitioner

1. Do you follow dentist/ dental clinic on social media?
 Yes _____ No _____
2. Do you think dentist should communicate with people through social media rather than conventional media?
 Yes _____ No _____
3. If you want to get information about an aesthetic dental treatment/clinic is social media your first choice for information?
 Yes _____ No _____
4. Do you trust the information you get from social media about dentistry and treatment options?
 Yes _____ No _____
5. Is your decision of choosing a dentist or dental clinic affected by their activity in social media sites?
 Yes _____ No _____
6. Do you write about your visit to dentist or dental clinic in social media?
 Yes _____ No _____
7. When you read a criticism to a dentist or dental clinic in social media, would that affect your personal decision to visit the dentist or clinic?
 Yes _____ No _____
8. Would you visit a dental clinic because you visited or read their page on social media sites?
 Yes _____ No _____
9. Would you go to a dentist because you saw a before and after pictures in the social media?
 Yes _____ No _____
10. If you need to get an aesthetic dental treatment, is your first choice a clinic that a celebrity tried or talked about in social media?
 Yes _____ No _____

Effects of aesthetic dental treatment advertisements

11. Reliance on the accuracy of the results and displays advertisements which belong to cosmetic treatment resulting from
 - A. Number of followers
 - B. Comments and opinions
 - C. Pictures
 - D. I only trust my own experiences or someone from my family
12. Does advertisement that contains special offers for different aesthetic treatment attract you, regardless of the quality of treatment?
 Yes _____ No _____

Influence of family and friends

13. If you saw on social media a friend or family member with a new smile, would you ask about the dentist or dental clinic they were treated in?
 Yes _____ No _____