

An Assessment of Social Media Behavior in Orthodontic Patients

Ortodontik Tedavi Gören Bireylerin Sosyal Medya Kullanım Eğilimlerinin Değerlendirilmesi

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: The main objective of this study was to assess orthodontic patients' use of and preferences for social media.

MATERIAL and METHODS: A questionnaire was administered and distributed by hand to 150 consecutive adult and adolescent orthodontic patients to determine their demographic background and perceptions of social media. The patients were 14 years of age and over, and patient and parental (where appropriate) consent were obtained.

RESULTS: Of the participants, 63.5% of adults and 57.8% of adolescents use social media to search for orthodontic treatment. In the adult patient group, the question "How often do you research orthodontic treatment through social media?" was most frequently answered with "Once every 3-6 months" at a rate of 30.2%, adolescents selected "Once a month" and "Once every 3-6 months" the most (21.9%). The main reasons for these searches were treatment time and a newly developed appliance/mechanics (34.9%) for both groups.

CONCLUSION: Most of the patients used social media about orthodontic treatment but generally doubted its reliability. Instagram and YouTube were the preferred platforms, with interest mainly in new appliances and treatment duration.

Keywords: Social media, survey, orthodontics

Öz

GİRİŞ: Bu çalışmanın amacı, ortodonti hastalarının sosyal medya kullanımını ve tercihlerini değerlendirmektir.

YÖNTEM ve GEREÇLER: Demografik özellikleri ve sosyal medyaya ilişkin algıyı belirlemek amacıyla, 14 yaş ve üzerindeki 150 erişkin ve adolesan ortodonti hastasına anket uygulanmıştır. Katılımcılardan ortodontik tedavi amacıyla sosyal medya kullanımlarına ait algılarıyla ilgili soruları yanıtlamaları beklenmiştir.

BULGULAR: Katılımcıların %63,5'i yetişkin ve %57,8'i adolesan olmak üzere ortodontik tedavi hakkında bilgi edinmek için sosyal medyayı kullanmaktadır. Yetişkin hasta grubunda, "Sosyal medya aracılığıyla ne sıklıkla ortodontik tedavi araştırıyorsunuz?" sorusuna en sık verilen yanıt %30,2 oranında "3-6 ayda bir" olmuştur. Ergenler ise en çok "Ayda bir" ve "3-6 ayda bir" seçeneklerini tercih etmiştir (%21,9). Her iki grup için de bu araştırmaların temel nedeni, tedavi süresi ve yeni geliştirilen aparatlar/mekaniklerdir (%34,9).

SONUÇ: Hastaların çoğu, ortodontik tedavi ile ilgili bilgi edinmek için sosyal medyayı kullanmasına rağmen, bu bilgilerin güvenilirliğinden şüphe duymaktadır. Instagram ve YouTube en çok tercih edilen platformlar olup, hastalar en çok yeni geliştirilen aparatlar ve ortodontik tedavi süresiyle ilgilenmektedir. Ortodontistler tedavi sürecinde hastalarını sosyal medya platformlarına yönlendirmemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sosyal medya, Anket, Ortodonti

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INTRODUCTION

One of the primary concerns in healthcare is the effective delivery of health-related information to patients to enhance patient comprehension. The success of educational strategies largely depends on recognizing patients' current preferences for accessing information, which can be a critical factor in ensuring engagement and compliance throughout the treatment process particularly in long-term treatments.¹

The introduction of social media has revolutionized the way people collect information through the social Web.² Social media offers a cost-efficient platform for reaching a large number of potential patients in need of a practitioner's expertise and services.³ In orthodontic practices, utilizing social media offers advantages in patient communication, building a reputation, and attracting new clients.⁴ The widespread use of social media is significantly influencing healthcare, providing an opportunity to engage with patients through non-traditional channels, ultimately aiming to enhance treatment outcomes.

Patient compliance and effective communication are critical components of orthodontic treatment, with adherence to treatment protocols often leading to more favorable outcomes.⁵ Patient cooperation is influenced by several factors, with the development of a strong rapport between the patient and the treating clinician being a key determinant.⁶ Studies have shown that enhancing communication can improve patient satisfaction, promote better knowledge retention, and boost the motivation required for sustaining compliance throughout the treatment process.⁷

The communication strategies utilized by orthodontists are pivotal in ensuring that patients not only grasp their responsibilities but are also motivated and committed, fostering sustained compliance throughout the entire treatment process.⁵ In recent years, the potential of the internet and social media to enhance patient knowledge during treatment has garnered significant attention. A survey has revealed that 32% of participants use social media for healthcare-related purposes.^{8, 9, 10} However, recent studies indicate that hospitals are not fully utilizing social media platforms to optimize communication with patients.

Since the benefits of social media are currently seen in the field of health care, there is an increasing number of studies that aimed to evaluate the quality and adequacy of health-related content in social media to clarify the level of content and determine whether this sharing platform is useful for patients. Patients' use of various social media platforms and their primary motivations for doing so, still requires further exploration. Therefore, this study aimed to assess how orthodontic patients use social media, and examine patient preferences regarding social media.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Ethical approval was received from the Ege University Faculty of Medicine Clinical Research Ethics Committee (reference number 22-9T/29). Individual signed written informed consent was obtained from all of the patients who accepted to participate in the study.

This study consisted of a questionnaire survey of two groups of patients who were all attending the Ege University, Faculty of Dentistry, orthodontic department, for fixed appliance orthodontic treatment. The participants included patients of both sexes, aged between 14-18 years for adolescents and aged 18 and over for the adult group. Patients were not included if they had a history of previous orthodontic treatment, were receiving orthodontic treatment with only removable orthodontic appliances or headgear, required complex multidisciplinary treatment, or had a craniofacial syndrome.

The first part of the questionnaire consisted of questions regarding the demographic information of the respondents: gender, income, and education level. In the second part, questions were asked about the participant's usage habits and perceptions of social media usage about the orthodontic treatment.

The participants could take the survey at any time during treatment. They were provided with a detailed description of the aims of the study and potential benefits arising from it. The questionnaires were distributed by hand to each patient at the clinic and collected instantly.

The questionnaire was first presented to a group of ten patients. They were asked to complete the questionnaire and to provide all possible remarks and suggestions regarding content and clarity of the questions. Based on this information, the questionnaire was further refined.

Questionnaire data were entered in a database using Excel 2021 (Microsoft). Data were analyzed using dedicated statistical software (Statistical Package of Social Sciences [SPSS] for Macintosh Version 25.0; IBM, Armonk, NY, USA). The normality of variables was checked using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Descriptive statistics were calculated to describe the two groups (means or percentages, as appropriate). Categorical variables were presented using frequencies and percentages.

RESULTS

A total of 150 orthodontic patients, both new and in treatment, were included. In adolescent group, 49 female patients and 26 male patients, and in adult group, 45 female patients and 30 male patients completed the survey. The frequency and percentage distributions of the participants' demographic information are presented in

Table 1.

Table 1. Percentage distributions of participants' demographic information and the orthodontic treatment reason.

	Variables	Adult	Adolescent
Gender	Female	60.0	65.3
	Male	40.0	34.6
Education level	Primary school	-	18.66
	High school	73.84	81.34
	University	21.21	-
	Master's degree	-	-
	PhD	-	-
Income / Family income	0-5000	17.46	13.63
	5000-15000	65.15	62.12
	15000-25000	12.12	15.15
	25000 <	1.52	6.06
Reasons for Orthodontic Treatment Requests:	Speech problems	7.94	4.62
	Crowded teeth	65.08	76.92
	Unesthetic smile	22.22	15.38
	Problems with biting and chewing	9.52	7.69
	Other	3.17	4.62

* Since more than one answer can be selected, the total number of answers/ percentage may be higher than the total number of participants

Participants were asked to list which social media websites they use. Social media type for each group is summarized in Table 2. When comparing the different media platforms among adults, Instagram (85.7%) was the most commonly used social media platform, followed by YouTube (69.8%). Adolescents also used Instagram (93.8%) more than any other site, followed by YouTube (80.0%). In the adult and adolescent groups, daily social media usage was most commonly reported as 1-3 hours (46.0% and 42.2%, respectively).

Table 2. Percentages use of specific social media platforms by group.

Media Platforms	Adolescents	Adults
YouTube	80.00	69.84
Instagram	93.84	85.71
Facebook	12.31	25.40
Twitter	29.23	41.27
Telegram	9.23	12.70
Tiktok	23.80	9.52

The majority of participants (63.5%, adults; 57.8%, adolescents) used social media to research about the orthodontic treatment. The results also indicated that 60.9% of the adolescent group and 68.3% of the adult group searched about orthodontic treatment on internet search engines. In the adult patient group, the question

"How often do you research orthodontic treatment through social media?" was most frequently answered with "Once every 3-6 months" at a rate of 30.2%, followed by "Once a year" at 22.2%. For the same question adolescents selected "Once a month" (21.9%) and "Once every 3-6 months" the most (21.9%). The main reasons of these researches before the orthodontic treatment were treatment time and a newly developed appliance/ mechanics (34.9%) for both groups.

For the question "Do you believe the information you obtain about orthodontic treatment from social media is accurate?", 39.7% of the adult group answered "Rarely," while 43.8% of the adolescent group answered "Often." For the question "Do you think the information you get from social media influences your treatment process?", 54.6% of the adult group and 59.4% of the adolescent group chose "Never." To the question "Does your doctor direct you to social media platforms to obtain information about your orthodontic treatment?", 71.2% of the adult group and 81.3% of the adolescent patient group responded "Never." The social media platform most frequently recommended by doctors was marked as "YouTube" in both groups. For verifying the accuracy of information on social media accounts, participants responded with 'I ask my doctor' (46.0%, adults, 28.8% adolescents). Among the information on social media platforms, the response most frequently received in both groups was that posts from doctor accounts (79.4%, adults; 52.4% adolescents) were found to be more accurate (Table 3).

Table 3. Percentage distributions of participants' use of social media

Question	Answers	Adults	Adolescents
		%	%
Time spent on social media daily	0-1 hour	9,5	9,4
	1-3 hours	46,0	42,2
	3-6 hours	38,1	34,4
	>6 hours	6,3	14,1
Have you researched orthodontic treatment on social media?	Yes	63,5	57,8
	No	36,5	42,2
How often do you search for orthodontic treatment on social media?	Every day	0,0	0,0
	Every week	1,6	3,1
	Once a month	14,3	21,9
	Every 3-6 months	30,2	21,9
	Once a year	22,2	14,1
	Never	31,7	39,1
Reasons for researching orthodontic treatment:	Pain	7,9	10,6
	A new appliance	34,9	27,3
	Oral hygiene	27,0	16,7
	Appearance of the materials used	19,1	21,2
	Experiences of other patients	25,4	25,8
	Treatment duration	34,9	34,9
	Encountering a problem	20,6	9,1
	Other	1,6	1,0
How often did you research during your orthodontic treatment?	Every day	0,0	0,0
	Once a week	6,4	3,1
	Once a month	17,5	18,8
	Every 3-6 months	9,5	11,0
	When I encountered a problem	42,9	35,9
	When I received new information from my doctor	15,9	17,2
When was the last time you researched orthodontic treatment on social media?	Within the last week	14,3	7,8
	Within the last month	22,2	26,6
	Within the last six months	33,3	29,7
	I have never researched	30,2	34,4
Do you share the information you get from social media with your orthodontist?	Always	7,9	6,3
	Often	6,3	33,3
	Rarely	41,3	39,7
	Never	39,7	19,0
Do you believe the information you get from social media is accurate?	Always	6,3	3,1
	Often	33,3	43,8
	Rarely	39,7	29,7

	Never	19,0	14,1
To verify the accuracy of the information from social media, I:	Ask my doctor	46,0	28,8
	Consult my relatives	4,8	7,6
	Ask people undergoing orthodontic treatment	25,4	27,3
	Use social media	23,8	19,7
	Use Google	27,0	25,8
	Other	1,6	1,1
	Which social media accounts do you believe provide accurate information?	Doctor accounts	79,4
Advertisements		3,2	27,0
Orthodontic material companies		0,0	17,5
Other		4,8	1,6
Has social media influenced your decision-making process regarding orthodontic treatment?	Yes	27,0	25,0
	No	52,4	50,0
	undecided	19,1	15,6
How often have the information obtained from social media affected your orthodontic treatment process?	Always	6,1	3,1
	Often	6,1	9,4
	Rarely	27,3	18,8
	Never	54,6	59,4
Do you ever research information you learned from your orthodontist on social media?	Always	4,5	4,7
	Often	24,2	12,5
	Rarely	33,3	37,5
	Never	31,8	42,2
Do the information you get from your orthodontist and the social media match?	Always	30,3	25,0
	Often	36,4	40,6
	Rarely	15,2	14,1
	Never	7,6	9,4
Does your orthodontist direct you to social media platforms to learn more about your orthodontic treatment?	Always	1,5	1,6
	Often	12,1	0,0
	Rarely	7,6	15,6
	Never	71,2	81,3

DISCUSSION

With the growing popularity of online information-sharing Websites, the number of studies about the significant role of the social media in health care and the professionals' posts, whether informative or promotional increases.³ To the best of our knowledge, there is a lack of studies in the literature that have investigated the impact of social media on patients particularly seeking orthodontic treatment in public hospitals or how they perceive the online information. Therefore, the scope of this study was to evaluate the perspective of patients under and over the age of 18 who are undergoing orthodontic treatment regarding social media posts. Our results indicate that individuals use social media

before/during the orthodontic treatment.

According to a previous research, from the patient's perception, the presence of the dentist on social media and an appropriate interaction, is an important way to communicate with and reach new patients.¹¹ Evaluating the public's perception of professionalism and credibility is essential for developing guidelines on professional conduct in digital media and promoting best practices for social media use.^{12,13} Over 95% of participants reported using social networks, with Instagram and YouTube being the most popular platforms. More than half of them utilized these networks to search for information regarding orthodontic treatment. We found Instagram to be the most used social media network to seek health

services. In recent years, Instagram has gained significant global popularity, and many professionals have begun to leverage the platform for commercial purposes. Social media preferences are known to be influenced by factors such as education level and socioeconomic status; however, these variables were not investigated in the present study. It is generally observed that younger individuals tend to favor platforms with high visual content, such as Snapchat and Instagram, while older users are more inclined to use platforms like Facebook.¹⁴ In our study, participants in the adult group also demonstrated a preference for visually oriented platforms. This may reflect the evolving popularity and features of social media platforms, which may have influenced the present findings.

Over 3.5 billion people use social media every day, and it has been estimated that people spend an average of 3 hours each day online.^{15,16} Regarding the present study, most of the participants declared spending 1-3 hours on social media and the second-most declared spending between 3-6 hours online consuming information in both adolescent and adult group. It is considered that this duration is sufficient for patients to access accurate information about orthodontic treatments, and it is believed that, when producing content, it is important to ensure that evidence-based information is included, thereby guiding the time spent on social media in a constructive manner.

The participants in the present study stated that they generally researched on treatment duration and newly introduced appliances on social media. Meira et al.¹³ also found, in categories related to specific mechanical factors of orthodontic treatments, such as 'mechanics with mini-implants', 'dental traction', and 'intermaxillary elastics', laypeople assigned significantly lower values. On the other hand, categories related to general orthodontic treatments and newly developed mechanics such as 'clear aligners' were more highly valued by laypeople. The category most related to the perception of greater credibility was also 'treatment duration.' Other studies^{11,13} also have found that content about before and after images were considered very important to patients when looking for the orthodontic treatment which may positively contribute to patient motivation and treatment cooperation, representing one of the potential benefits of such social media posts. In light of the factors that individuals consider most important, it can be asserted that providing accurate information, particularly regarding newly introduced devices and treatment duration, becomes a crucial responsibility for professionals, as these aspects are of significant concern to patients seeking orthodontic care.

The vast majority of participants answered 'Never' to the question of whether their orthodontist directs them to social media. Hameed et al.¹⁷ found that only one-third of the advertisements included scientific references that were nonclinical, and less than 2% were deemed to

represent high-quality evidence. Social media content tends to contain less scientific information compared to advertisements in journals.¹⁸ Therefore, it is unsurprising that doctors did not direct their patients to social media, as found in our study; however, given the targeted nature of social media, it is important that any claims are based on reliable evidence. Although the referrals to social media was low, it was found that most of these were directed to the YouTube platform. It is believed that these results stem from the fact that videos shared on YouTube, which demonstrate procedures such as tooth brushing with the orthodontic appliances, help orthodontists by visually explaining important topics, thus making the clinician's work easier. However, numerous studies¹⁹⁻²¹ in the literature have highlighted that YouTube is inadequate in providing comprehensive information on various orthodontic treatment topics. As a result, it is crucial to be very cautious when directing patients to this video-sharing platform. Although individuals receiving orthodontic treatment at a university hospital do not initially seek an orthodontist through social media, their considerable reliance on these platforms for treatment-related information underscores the significance of online content. It should also be considered that orthodontists in university clinics may be less likely to direct patients to social media, whereas this situation might differ in private practices. Therefore, future studies that include patients from private clinics would be beneficial in further examining the responses provided.

Moreover, particularly on platforms such as YouTube, patients may be influenced not only by professional and evidence-based information but also by the opinions and personal experiences of other patients. Knösel et al.²³ found that the majority of the orthodontics-related YouTube videos were uploaded by patients. Such videos may offer personal insights that help some individuals cope with orthodontic limitations and uncertainties.²⁴ However, for others, these shared experiences may have a negative impact, potentially increasing anxiety. Therefore, when patients or prospective patients search for information online, they may encounter misleading content that lacks scientific evidence and is instead driven by commercial or other motives. It is evident that, in modern culture, young people use internet-based tools for easy access to information. This presents an important opportunity for healthcare providers to disseminate evidence-based information about various treatment strategies and modalities online. This opportunity should not be overlooked, particularly in the field of orthodontics, where health literacy can be significantly improved. To avoid potential negative impacts on patient motivation caused by personal experience videos, greater efforts should be made to promote the dissemination of accurate information through professional and credible channels.

In our study, a significant proportion of participants expressed that the information obtained from social

media is 'rarely' reliable. Although fewer in number compared to those who believe it is always accurate, the results also indicate that there are individuals who trust the reliability of information on social media. The findings of the study conducted by Meade et al.²² indicated that the quality of information contained within the websites of orthodontic product providers was poor and that most statements within the websites were not objectively true. Another questionnaire study¹⁴ found that patients felt less confident in their ability to evaluate or trust information about dental treatments obtained through social media. Nevertheless, the majority of patients seem to find accessing information via social media is easy and useful. Consistent with previous studies,^{14, 24} 25% of participants in our study also valued seeing others' experiences with dental treatments. These findings suggest that dentists having social media profiles may play a significant role in promoting adequate health literacy. Considering these findings and insights, increasing evidence-based sharing by professionals would be beneficial for users who seek health-related information online.

The findings of this study have important considerations that social media was used by most of patients surveyed and that social media may be an effective tool in an orthodontic practice. Future advancements and the rigorous enforcement of orthodontic advertising policies are imperative to protect the rights and interests of both patients and consumers. Additionally, the establishment of comprehensive ethical frameworks by professional healthcare organizations is crucial to ensuring that clinicians recognize their ethical responsibility to provide accurate and high-quality information, whether directly or indirectly.²² Striking a balance between the commercial interests of product providers and orthodontists and the necessity of shielding patients from misleading or potentially harmful advertising practices will require careful deliberation and regulation.

This underscores the importance for clinicians of utilizing diverse digital platforms to enhance patient education. Providing access to accurate and comprehensible information, particularly regarding treatment duration and newly introduced orthodontic appliances, can help patients better understand their treatment options and facilitate clearer communication during clinical consultations. The findings of this study reflect patients' growing awareness and evolving

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perceptions of the increasing orthodontic content on social media. In light of this, clinicians are encouraged to strengthen their presence on these platforms to align with patients' changing expectations, increase engagement, and effectively use social media as a tool for patient education. Nevertheless, patients are still advised to consult their healthcare providers to verify the accuracy of the information obtained online, which remains essential for maintaining trust and informed decision-making.

A limitation of the present study is the recruitment of participants through social media groups affiliated with the university environment, which may have led to an overrepresentation of individuals with comparable educational backgrounds and social status. Another limitation is that our patient population was able to take the survey at any time during treatment. Perhaps a prospective approach could have added to the strength of this study. On the other hand, it should be kept in mind that this study needs to be replicated with a larger sample size, including individuals from diverse groups, to ensure a more comprehensive representation of the general population.

CONCLUSIONS

Most of the participants in the study used social media to keep informed about orthodontic treatment; however they generally did not find this information reliable.

Instagram and YouTube were the favorite social media platforms.

The primary reasons for seeking orthodontic information on social media were newly developed appliances and treatment duration.

Although orthodontists do not frequently direct the patients to social media, they are often observed to recommend the YouTube platform.

Social media has the potential to serve as an effective tool for marketing and communication in orthodontic practice. Utilizing social media to interact with patients can facilitate the delivery of accurate and realistic information regarding various treatment options, support their preparedness for treatment, enhance their involvement, alleviate anxiety, and ultimately enhance overall treatment satisfaction.

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