

Challenges and Experiences of Dentists in the Practice of Their Profession Using Social Media Communications

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Abstract - Social media has significantly transformed dental communication, offering innovative channels for marketing, education, and patient engagement. This study explores the experiences and challenges faced by dentists in integrating social media into their professional practice. Using a qualitative multiple case study design, data was collected through interviews with practicing dentists in Silang, Cavite, Philippines. The findings highlight key challenges, including limitations in remote diagnosis, difficulty converting inquiries to clinic visits, and ethical concerns about free consultations. Conversely, social media enhanced accessibility, pre-appointment inquiries, and visual communication, and served as a platform for education and professional promotion. The study concludes that while social media presents practical advantages, its effective use requires clear professional boundaries, ethical safeguards, and strategic communication planning.

Keywords: social media, dentistry, patient engagement, professional boundaries, digital communication

I. INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms have reshaped how individuals access information and interact, with profound implications for healthcare, including dentistry. Dentists now use platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to promote services, educate the public, and communicate with patients (Liang et al., 2021; Sakshi et al., 2020). This growing trend introduces new opportunities but also raises ethical, professional, and logistical concerns. The balance between accessibility and professional boundaries becomes especially complex when dealing with patient confidentiality, misinformation, or free consultation requests (Paternoster et al., 2019).

Despite its widespread adoption, limited empirical research exists on how dentists navigate the use of social media in their daily practice. Most existing literature focuses on general healthcare or patient outcomes but lacks focus on the dental profession. This study addresses that gap by examining both the benefits and challenges of social media integration from the perspective of dentists.

The study is guided by three research questions:

1. What are the challenges faced by dentists in using social media for communication?
2. What are the experiences and strategies of dentists who have successfully integrated social media?
3. How can social media enhance patient communication, trust, and satisfaction in dental settings?

By addressing these questions, the study offers practical and ethical insights relevant to both practicing dentists and healthcare policy developers.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and messaging apps like Viber have become integral tools in modern healthcare communication. For dental professionals, these platforms serve multiple purposes: enhancing patient engagement, sharing oral health education, and promoting services (Klee, 2018; Paternoster et al., 2019; Sakshi et al., 2020). Social media allows dentists to interact with existing and potential patients beyond the confines of traditional clinic hours, creating a broader and more immediate reach.

According to Househ (2014), social media offers key benefits for healthcare: it promotes two-way communication, increases accessibility of health information, and fosters collaboration among professionals. These tools can aid in marketing, patient retention, and health promotion, often at minimal cost (Neiger et al., 2012; Ventola, 2014). Dentists, in particular, benefit from the ability to visually demonstrate procedures and outcomes, which can boost patient understanding and interest.

However, these advantages are accompanied by serious challenges. Patient privacy, data security, and the blurring of professional boundaries are among the main ethical and legal concerns (Ventola, 2014; American Dental Association, 2021). Inappropriate content sharing, lack of consent, and casual tone in digital communications may compromise the trust between dentist and patient (De Melo Simplicio, 2019). Furthermore, social media has been linked to the spread of misinformation, posing risks to patient health and safety if not addressed responsibly (Househ, 2013).

Best practices emphasize professionalism, simplicity in language, and respect for privacy. Moorhead et al. (2013) recommend avoiding medical jargon, maintaining professional tone, and setting clear communication policies. Dentists must navigate the fine line between accessibility and professional responsibility, ensuring that social media use enhances—rather than undermines—patient care.

In sum, while social media is an increasingly powerful tool in dentistry, its ethical, legal, and professional implications necessitate careful navigation. This study builds on existing literature by exploring how Filipino dentists integrate these tools into their practice, the challenges they face, and the strategies they employ to use them effectively.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and Everett Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations (DOI) to understand how dentists adopt and manage social media in their professional practice. SCT posits that behavior is shaped by the dynamic interaction of personal, environmental, and behavioral factors (Bandura, 1986). In the dental context, personal factors include a dentist's confidence in using digital platforms and their beliefs about the value of online engagement. Environmental influences involve social norms in the profession, technological accessibility, and patient expectations. Behavioral factors refer to the dentist's actual use of social media and how they navigate communication, professionalism, and time management.

This theory also emphasizes observational learning, which is relevant as dentists often model their social media behavior after peers who are perceived to be successful or influential online. Complementing SCT, Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations theory explains how innovations—like social media—spread within professional communities. DOI identifies five key factors that influence adoption: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability (Rogers, 2003). For dentists, the perceived benefits of social media (e.g., increased patient engagement, marketing reach) must outweigh its risks and learning curve to encourage adoption.

Together, these frameworks help explain not only why dentists choose to integrate social media into their practice, but also how their behavior evolves in response to personal experiences, peer influence, and changing patient expectations.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative multiple case study design to explore the challenges and experiences of dentists using social media in their professional practice. This approach allowed for an in-depth examination of how social media is integrated, managed, and perceived by practitioners in a real-world context (Yin, 2014).

Participants and Sampling

Ten licensed dentists practicing in Silang, Cavite, Philippines were selected through purposive sampling. Selection criteria included active use of social media for professional communication, variation in practice type, and at least one year of experience. The sample size was guided by data saturation principles, ensuring thematic redundancy (Guest et al., 2006).

Data Collection

Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were conducted using a flexible question guide. Interviews focused on dentists' experiences, challenges, and strategies for social media use. Open-ended questions allowed participants to elaborate freely, while researchers ensured ethical standards and confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Colaizzi method, a rigorous approach for extracting themes in qualitative research. First, significant statements were identified and meaningfully clustered. Researchers bracketed their biases to ensure authenticity of interpretation (Morrow et al., 2015). Themes were then cross-compared among participants to identify common patterns and unique perspectives.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents findings from interviews with dentists, organized by the three research questions and summed of by the table below:

	Main Themes
RQ1 Challenges Faced by Dentists Using Social Media	Diagnostic limitations
	Inquiries without follow-through
	Free consultations and ethical concerns
	Missed appointments/ unreliable engagement
RQ2: Strategies and Experiences of Successful Integration	Enhanced convenience and accessibility
	Pre-appointment inquiries as engagement funnel
	Visual Communication for clarity
	Advertising and branding
RQ3: Effective Use of Social Media for Communication, Trust, and Satisfaction	Maintaining professional boundaries
	Responsible and ethical issue
	Patient education through online content

RQ1: Challenges Faced by Dentists Using Social Media

1. Diagnostic Limitations

Dentists emphasized the inability to accurately diagnose or provide definitive treatment plans via social media. Without physical examination, responses are constrained. As one participant noted, "You can't really see the issue clearly unless they're in the chair." This aligns with findings from Islam et al. (2022), who stress the limitations of teledentistry in evaluating intraoral conditions.

2. Inquiries Without Follow-Through

Several participants reported a high volume of online inquiries that rarely led to clinic visits. Social media served more as an information-gathering tool for patients, who often compare clinics without committing to appointments. This reflects a broader consumer behavior pattern in digital health engagement.

3. Free Consultations and Ethical Concerns

Some patients use social media to bypass clinic fees, messaging dentists with detailed concerns expecting free advice. This creates an ethical dilemma: balancing compassion with professional boundaries and economic sustainability. Dentists reported pressure to respond to such requests but often struggled with drawing clear lines

4. Missed Appointments and Unreliable Engagement

Even when appointments were booked through messaging apps, patients frequently failed to appear. Dentists highlighted frustration with "no-show" behavior despite confirmed online bookings, emphasizing the gap between digital convenience and real-world commitment.

These findings illustrate that while social media expands communication channels, it introduces new professional risks: overextension of services, blurred expectations, and diagnostic uncertainty.

RQ2: Strategies and Experiences of Successful Integration

1. Enhanced Convenience and Accessibility

Most dentists found social media effective in reaching patients with limited time or mobility. It streamlined initial consultations, allowed patients to send photos or questions, and supported emergency triage. This echoes the broader utility of digital tools in expanding access to care (Al-Khalifa et al., 2021).

2. Pre-Appointment Inquiries as Engagement Funnel

Social media was frequently used for inquiries about treatments, pricing, and schedules. This functioned as an informal triage and promotional tool, helping patients decide whether to pursue in-person visits. Dentists appreciated the ability to screen and prepare for patient concerns ahead of appointments.

3. Visual Communication Improved Clarity

Platforms like Facebook Messenger and Viber allowed image sharing, which helped dentists better understand patient concerns before visits. Though limited for full diagnosis, visual cues enhanced communication and improved efficiency in managing initial assessments.

4. Advertising and Branding

Some dentists reported strategic use of social media for marketing and patient education. Posting treatment success stories, health tips, and promotions built clinic visibility and patient trust. However, this required effort in content curation and attention to ethical boundaries.

RQ3: How Dentists Can Effectively Use Social Media to Improve Communication, Trust, and Satisfaction

1. Maintaining Professional Boundaries

Several dentists emphasized the need to set boundaries between personal and professional interactions. Strategies included avoiding personal friend requests, responding only during consultation hours, and using dedicated clinic pages. These measures helped manage patient expectations and preserve the integrity of the dentist-patient relationship (Professional Boundaries Practice Standard, n.d.).

2. Responsible and Ethical Use

Participants highlighted the importance of discretion in posting online. Some strictly avoided sharing patient images; others obtained explicit consent and masked identities. One dentist encrypted files and avoided storing patient information on social media apps, citing data breach risks. These practices reflect professional guidelines that prioritize patient confidentiality and online professionalism (De Melo Simplicio, 2019; American Dental Association, 2021).

3. Using Social Media for Patient Education

Dentists shared that posting educational content—such as oral hygiene tips, procedure explanations, and myth-busting posts—was well-received by patients. This use of social media enhanced public awareness and encouraged preventive care. Educational content also helped establish authority and foster trust among followers, reinforcing the dentist’s role beyond clinical treatment (The Importance of Patient Education in Dental Assisting, 2023).

Synthesis with Theories

Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura) explains how dentists’ social media behaviors are shaped by reciprocal interactions among personal (self-efficacy, ethics), environmental (patient expectations, technology), and behavioral (posting, consultations) factors. Diffusion of Innovation, DOI on the other hand explains the pace and extent of adoption, where some dentists are innovators/early adopters (leveraging branding, education), while others face barriers due to compatibility (ethics), relative disadvantage (diagnostic limits), or lack of observability (patients not showing up).

Table below shows the summary of challenges encountered, the strategies created and outcomes:

Challenges	Strategies	Outcomes
Diagnostic limitation	Enhance convenience and access	Improve access to care
Free consult/ethical dilemmas	Pre-appointment triage funnel	Better patient engagement
Missed appointments	Visual communication tools	Stronger trust and satisfaction
Inquiry without follow-through	Advertising and branding	Professional Identity and Visibility
	Professional boundaries	
	Ethical posting and patient education	

Synthesis of Results

Overall, social media serves as a double-edged tool in dentistry. It improves communication and visibility but also requires careful navigation to avoid ethical pitfalls and operational inefficiencies. Dentists who integrated social media successfully reported a proactive approach—setting clear policies, protecting privacy, managing time, and using content strategically for both education and marketing. These findings support existing literature on healthcare digitalization and provide grounded insights into the practical realities of social media use in Philippine dental practice.

V. CONCLUSION

This study explored the real-world experiences of Filipino dentists using social media as part of their professional practice. Through qualitative interviews, it revealed that while social media offers opportunities for improved accessibility, marketing, and patient engagement, it also introduces significant challenges related to clinical limitations, ethical boundaries, and inconsistent patient follow-through.

The first research question uncovered major difficulties, particularly the inability to conduct thorough diagnoses online, low conversion of inquiries to visits, and the prevalence of free consultation requests. These issues affect clinical accuracy, time management, and financial sustainability. For the second question, dentists who successfully integrated social media demonstrated strategic use of platforms for pre-appointment screening, visual communication, and marketing. They highlighted increased convenience and improved patient interactions when platforms were used responsibly and with clear protocols. The final research question emphasized how social media can improve trust and satisfaction when ethical standards are upheld. Key practices include respecting professional boundaries, posting responsibly, and using digital platforms for patient education. These efforts foster patient loyalty and reinforce the dentist's professional credibility.

Therefore, social media is a valuable yet complex tool in dental communication. Its successful use depends not only on digital skills but also on ethical awareness, boundary-setting, and strategic planning.

Recommendations

To optimize the use of social media in dental practice, dentists are encouraged to establish clear clinic policies that define professional boundaries, consultation hours, and ethical communication practices. These guidelines should emphasize the importance of maintaining a distinction between personal and professional accounts and help manage patient expectations by setting limits on after-hours engagement. Dentists are also advised to use social media as a platform for patient education, sharing accurate and accessible information that empowers patients and reinforces professional credibility. Educational content, such as oral hygiene tips or treatment explanations, can enhance patient trust and encourage preventive care behaviors. In addition, dentists should actively monitor patient feedback and online engagement, responding promptly and respectfully to inquiries and reviews to foster loyalty and improve service delivery. Finally, staying updated on emerging digital trends and social media ethics through continuing education and professional development is essential to ensure that dentists adapt effectively to evolving technologies while upholding privacy and ethical standards in all online interactions.

Limitations

This study focused solely on dentists practicing in Silang, Cavite, which may not represent the full diversity of dental experiences across the Philippines. The sample size was small and leaned toward younger, female practitioners, which may have influenced the insights shared. Furthermore, the study did not capture patient perspectives on social media interactions. Future research should broaden

geographic scope, include a wider demographic of dentists, and incorporate patient viewpoints to offer a more holistic understanding of social media's role in dental care.

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