



The Impact Of Social Media On Orthodontic Treatment Decisions And Perceptions: A Review

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Abstract

Social media has emerged as a powerful influence on dental treatment perceptions, motivations, and decision-making. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and WhatsApp serve as primary sources for patients to access information, share experiences, and observe peer and influencer content, with visual tools like before-and-after images and augmented reality simulations shaping expectations. While social media increases awareness of treatment options, including fixed appliances and clear aligners, it also fosters cosmetic-driven motivations, trend-based behaviors, and, in some cases, unrealistic expectations. The dissemination of non-verified or misleading content can negatively affect compliance, satisfaction, and treatment outcomes, particularly among younger patients susceptible to social comparison and aesthetic pressures. Active professional engagement by orthodontists, emphasizing evidence-based, ethical, and educational content, is crucial to guide patients, counter misinformation, and promote realistic treatment understanding. Responsible utilization of social media can enhance patient education, motivation, and informed decision-making in contemporary orthodontic practice.

Keywords: Social media; Orthodontic treatment; Patient perceptions; Treatment motivation; Professional engagement.

Introduction

The influence of social media on orthodontic treatment decisions and patient perceptions has become increasingly significant, as platforms like Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat, and YouTube serve as primary channels for patients to share experiences and gather information. Visual content, particularly "before and after" treatment images, strongly shapes patient expectations, treatment choices, and overall satisfaction, with content featuring fixed appliances and clear aligners fostering greater trust and interest, while less commonly shared options, such as functional appliances or orthognathic surgery, remain underrepresented, leaving gaps in awareness.¹ Younger patients and women, especially those under 36 years old, appear more susceptible to social media influence in selecting treatments and providers.² Social media also plays an educational role by raising awareness and shaping perceptions regarding the reliability and effectiveness of various orthodontic modalities. Patient-generated content largely reflects positive sentiments, with studies showing that over 40% of posts express satisfaction and enthusiasm for treatment, although notable concerns persist, including anxiety and complaints about treatment limitations.³ Instagram dominates as the primary

platform for sharing experiences, accounting for nearly 97% of posts, while professional engagement is substantial, with approximately 90% of content originating from dentists or clinics, underscoring the need for accurate, supportive, and comprehensive guidance. Despite its benefits in promoting patient interaction, education, and engagement, social media presents challenges, such as the spread of misinformation and the necessity for orthodontists to actively manage their online presence.⁴ Overall, social media acts as a powerful driver in shaping patient behavior, influencing preferences, treatment acceptance, and outcomes by guiding decision-making processes in contemporary orthodontic care.⁵

The Role of Social Media in Orthodontic Marketing and Patient Engagement

In 2025, social media platforms have become fundamental in shaping orthodontic marketing strategies and patient engagement, with Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and Snapchat serving as primary channels for sharing content and interacting with audiences. Each platform caters to distinct demographics and content styles: Instagram and TikTok are particularly effective for visually-driven, short-form videos such as patient testimonials, before-and-after smile transformations, and educational clips, engaging younger audiences like Gen Z and Millennials; Facebook and WhatsApp are widely utilized for practice promotion, patient communication, and community building, with WhatsApp favored by orthodontists for direct interaction; while YouTube provides longer, in-depth educational videos and patient stories, albeit with less interactivity.⁶ Commonly shared content includes authentic patient outcomes, influencer endorsements, hashtag-driven viral trends (e.g., #bracescheckin, #smiletransformation), and educational posts explaining treatment options, with algorithm-driven visibility ensuring that high-quality, engaging posts reach broader audiences and enhance practice recognition.⁷ Engagement trends indicate that approximately 37% of orthodontists use social media to attract patients, while 36% engage because their patients are already active on these platforms, illustrating its role as an extension of patient interaction that influences treatment perceptions and choices; additionally, about 41% of prospective patients rely on social media when selecting their orthodontic provider, with visual content especially before-and-after imagery playing a critical role in motivating treatment-seeking behavior.⁸ Strategic use of targeted advertising on Facebook and Instagram allows orthodontists to reach specific demographics, such as parents of teens or professionals aged 25–45, whereas TikTok offers cost-effective opportunities to engage younger audiences.⁹

Influence on Patient Knowledge and Awareness

Social media has become a widely accessed source of orthodontic information, with platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat offering content from both peers and professionals. Posts by orthodontic professionals, particularly those featuring educational material and before-and-after treatment visuals, enhance patient trust and the perceived reliability of information. Nevertheless, substantial risks exist due to peer-shared or influencer-driven content, which can propagate misinformation, including unsafe DIY aligner use and exaggerated claims regarding treatment outcomes.¹⁰ The quality and accuracy of information on social media vary considerably, and only about one-third of patients actively use these platforms to supplement their orthodontic knowledge, despite widespread awareness of such content. Active clinician involvement is therefore essential to safeguard accurate information, address misconceptions, and provide clear guidance. Common social media-driven misconceptions include unsafe DIY devices, unrealistic treatment timelines, and underestimation of procedural complexity. Specialized treatments, such as functional appliances and orthognathic surgery, are less frequently covered, highlighting the need for professionals to share content to bridge these knowledge gaps.¹¹ At the same time, social media effectively increases awareness of common orthodontic options, including metal braces, clear aligners, and lingual appliances, using visual storytelling and patient testimonials. Clear aligners, in particular, benefit from growing popularity due to perceived aesthetics and convenience. Engaging content such as before-and-after photos and educational videos improves knowledge retention and motivates patients to seek treatment. Overall, social media enhances patient awareness and understanding of orthodontic options, but its full potential relies on the quality of content and proactive professional oversight to ensure safe, effective, and informed treatment decisions.¹²

Influence on Treatment Motivation and Decision-Making

Social media plays a substantial role in shaping both cosmetic and behavioral motivations for orthodontic treatment while influencing patient psychology and expectations, with platform-specific effects. Aesthetic considerations, driven by visually compelling content such as before-and-after photos and smile transformations, constitute a dominant motivation, amplified by peer influence and the visibility of influencers undergoing treatment.¹³ Trend-driven behaviors are particularly prevalent on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, where viral challenges and aesthetics-focused trends create a “bandwagon” effect, increasing the appeal of treatment types such as clear aligners. Instagram primarily exerts its influence through curated, polished imagery and influencer endorsements, establishing aspirational treatment goals and high aesthetic expectations, whereas TikTok leverages short, engaging videos that blend entertainment with education, promoting curiosity about newer or less conventional options.¹⁴ Psychologically, social media exposure can enhance confidence and motivation to pursue treatment by allowing patients to visualize positive outcomes through before-and-after imagery and augmented reality simulations. Conversely, it may also induce anxiety regarding body image and foster pressure to meet unrealistic standards, particularly among younger and impressionable audiences. Overall, social media both drives interest and engagement in orthodontic care through appealing aesthetics and peer influence and presents psychological challenges, underscoring the importance of orthodontists providing authentic, educational, and engaging content to guide patient motivation and expectations effectively.¹⁵

Influence on Treatment Expectations and Satisfaction

Social media can significantly influence orthodontic patients’ expectations, compliance, and overall satisfaction, particularly when content is idealized or edited. Edited before-and-after images and influencer posts often emphasize rapid aesthetic results while minimizing the complexity, duration, and potential discomfort of treatment, creating a mismatch between patient expectations and clinical realities.¹⁶ This disparity may lead to frustration, disappointment, and perceptions of slower or less effective outcomes, negatively affecting motivation and adherence to prescribed protocols, including wearing elastics, maintaining oral hygiene, and attending appointments. While positive visualizations and augmented reality simulations on social media can enhance enthusiasm and engagement, they must be balanced with realistic messaging to manage expectations effectively.¹⁷ Active clinician involvement is therefore crucial; orthodontists can mitigate risks by maintaining a professional presence online, providing accurate and transparent information, and sharing authentic treatment journeys that highlight both benefits and challenges. Such strategies help align patient expectations with clinical realities, fostering improved compliance, satisfaction, and treatment outcomes.¹⁸ Overall, social media has the potential to motivate and educate patients, but its benefits are maximized only when coupled with responsible professional guidance and realistic patient education.¹⁹

Role of Orthodontists and Professional Engagement

Orthodontists play a pivotal role in shaping patient perceptions and behavior through social media by balancing educational content with ethical marketing practices. Professional engagement includes sharing educational posts, myth-busting content, real case studies, FAQs, and infographics, all aimed at building trust, improving patient literacy, and guiding realistic treatment expectations.²⁰ Ethical considerations are central, as the line between advertising and patient education can be blurred; clinicians must avoid exaggerated claims, maintain patient confidentiality, and disclose paid partnerships or influencer endorsements to ensure transparency and uphold professional integrity. Social media also offers opportunities to enhance informed consent and patient education through interactive posts, Q&A sessions, and digital resources explaining treatment options, risks, and maintenance protocols. Standardized guidelines, such as those provided by the World Federation of Orthodontists (WFO), recommend accuracy, evidence-based content, proper consent for patient images, and active efforts to counter misinformation.²¹ By integrating social media into ongoing patient education, retention, and motivation strategies through regular follow-ups, compliance reminders, and authentic treatment journey showcases orthodontists can maximize the platform’s impact on patient engagement while maintaining ethical standards. Collaborative efforts between clinicians and professional organizations, supported by digital monitoring and content

moderation, further ensure that social media serves as a safe, reliable, and effective tool for patient education and empowerment.²²

Challenges and Risks of Social Media in Orthodontics

While social media offers substantial opportunities for patient engagement and education, it also poses significant challenges and risks in the context of orthodontics. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube frequently host non-verified or misleading content, including unsafe DIY aligners and exaggerated treatment claims, which can deceive patients regarding treatment efficacy, safety, and duration.²³

The primary difficulty lies in the sheer volume and rapid proliferation of online orthodontic content, making it incredibly hard for both patients and clinicians to discern reliable, high-quality information from the vast noise. Social media also amplifies cultural pressures for aesthetic perfection, fueled by edited images and influencer portrayals of flawless results, which can cause dissatisfaction and anxiety when real treatment outcomes differ.²⁴ Younger patients and adolescents, who are highly active on these platforms, are particularly susceptible to social comparison and algorithm-driven reinforcement of biased content, heightening their vulnerability to unrealistic standards and trend-driven treatment-seeking behaviors. This digital environment has a profound impact on patient decision-making, with choices regarding providers and treatment options often swayed by a practitioner's social media popularity or marketing appeal, rather than their clinical expertise.²⁵

Conclusion

Social media profoundly shapes patient perceptions, motivations, and decisions in orthodontic care. While it offers opportunities for education, engagement, and treatment awareness, it also poses risks of misinformation and unrealistic expectations. Active, evidence-based professional involvement is crucial to ensure accurate guidance and ethical communication. Ultimately, responsible use of social media can enhance patient understanding, satisfaction, and treatment outcomes.

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