

**"THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SHAPING PATIENT'S PREFERENCES FOR CLEAR
ALIGNERS IN ORTHODONTIC TREATMENT"**

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QUESTIONNAIRE BASED CROSS SECTIONAL STUDY

ABSTRACT:

Background:

The demand for aesthetic orthodontic options has increased the popularity of clear aligners. At the same time, social media has become a major source of health-related information, influencing patient awareness and treatment choices. This study evaluated the impact of social media on patient preferences for clear aligner therapy.

Materials and Methods:

A questionnaire-based cross-sectional study was conducted among 120 participants aged 18 years and above attending the Department of Orthodontics and Dentofacial Orthopedics at Sri Venkateshwaraa Dental College. A structured 18-item questionnaire assessed demographic details, social media usage, awareness, perceptions, and factors influencing decision-making. Participation was voluntary and data were collected using an online form.

Statistical Analysis:

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 25.0. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data. Associations between variables were assessed using the Chi-square test, with a significance level set at $p < 0.05$.

Results:

A total of 121 responses were analyzed. Most participants were young adults and frequent social media users. Nearly all respondents reported exposure to clear aligner content, mainly through Instagram and YouTube. While social media improved awareness, trust in the information was moderate. Concerns

regarding misinformation, safety, and cost were commonly reported. Significant associations were found between age, gender, and orthodontic treatment history, and between age and social media usage.

Conclusion:

Social media plays an important role in shaping patient preferences for clear aligners. However, concerns about reliability highlight the need for accurate, evidence-based information to support informed decision-making.

KEYWORDS: Aesthetic, Social Media, Clear Aligners, Orthodontics, Fixed Appliance

INTRODUCTION:

The increasing participation of adults in orthodontic treatment has significantly increased in recent years¹. People are more likely to accept treatment choices that provide better looks, according to research. Patients who are unwilling to undergo traditional fixed appliance therapy are increasingly choosing clear aligner therapy because of its well-known improved aesthetic value². Numerous aesthetic orthodontic methods and materials have been introduced into clinical practice to satisfy such patient expectations³.

Clear aligner systems, first introduced in 1998, have been significantly more well-known due to their discrete appearance and greater comfort compared with fixed appliances⁵. These appliances are user-friendly, being removable and easy for patients to handle on their own. Clear aligner therapy is particularly suitable for cases of mild to moderate crowding, while its application in severe malocclusion requires caution⁸. Importantly, aligners facilitate better maintenance of periodontal health compared with fixed appliances. For instance, fixed orthodontic appliances are associated with the development of white spot lesions around brackets, early signs of dental caries, whereas such issues occur less frequently with aligners, largely because they can be removed during oral hygiene procedures¹³.

Moreover, aligner treatment is generally reported to cause less discomfort than fixed appliance therapy. From the clinician's perspective, chairside time and appointment frequency are also reduced when treating with aligners⁹. These combined advantages have contributed to a significant rise in patient interest in clear aligner therapy in recent years⁶.

A literature review conducted in 2015 identified 27 distinct brands of clear aligners available worldwide. Weir reported on the variations between these brands. Similarly, Putrino and colleagues assessed clear aligner appliances marketed in Italy, where only 9 out of 19 brands were utilized in published studies. Invisalign was discovered to be the predominant material, frequently investigated product. Additionally, studies have shown that "Invisalign" is the most often used search keyword used by patients exploring

orthodontic clear aligners. In accordance with this, Livas et al., analyzed YouTube information pertaining to Invisalign and found that a considerable portion of reviews were sponsored.

The development of digital technologies has created online spaces that enable individuals to share experiences, exchange opinions, and engage in discussions commonly termed social media¹. Social media is particularly significant because it is interactive, user-driven, and widely accessible, especially among younger populations. The term “new media” was first introduced in the 1970s in communication and cultural studies, but its meaning evolved substantially in the 1990s alongside advances in computing and the internet^{4,12}. Technological innovations in communication have consistently reshaped daily life. People have readily adapted to these advances, which now occupy a central role in modern lifestyles. Compared to traditional media outlets such as newspapers, television, and radio, new media platforms allow rapid, interactive, and multimedia-based communication, eliminating spatial and temporal barriers¹⁵. Today, the internet connects individuals, institutions, businesses, and governments worldwide, forming the backbone of new media¹⁷. Healthcare providers and organizations have also embraced these communication tools for promotional and educational purposes. A move towards treating patients more like consumers has been brought about by an increase in the number of service providers, rising patient expectations, technological improvements, and competitive market dynamics. In this regard, internet users are depending more and more on social media to share personal experiences as well as to look for health-related information. These platforms are then used by healthcare organisations to disseminate information about preventive health²¹.

Compared with traditional media, social media offers several advantages, including faster updates, broader dissemination of information, and the ability to connect users with additional resources²³. Studies show how beneficial it is for health education and awareness, but it's important to remember that false information travels more quickly on social media than content supported by scientific data. Social media's rapidly changing nature makes it challenging for research to fully capture its dynamics³⁰.

McGowan et al. describe social media as a space where users both generate and consume content. Its influence is profound not only on public health communication but also on shaping self-image, medical practices, and even research directions. Algorithms that drive user engagement, along with commercial interests and biases, warrant careful examination regarding their effects on behavior and healthcare decisions²⁶.

The motivations behind orthodontic treatment extend beyond aesthetics alone. A doctoral thesis involving 453 patients revealed that 93.8% believed that straight teeth improve oral health, 61.8% associated it with better academic or professional success, and 86.1% linked it to enhanced social opportunities. These findings underscore that treatment demand is influenced not only by esthetic concerns but also by gender, socioeconomic status, and the treatment experiences of peers²⁸.

Knosel et al. reported that YouTube and other social media platforms strongly shape perceptions of orthodontic treatment, particularly among adolescents the primary demographic using these media. Much of

the orthodontic content available online is patient-generated, though some originates from orthodontists as promotional or advertising material. Papadimitriou et al. further demonstrated that audiovisual educational tools, such as YouTube videos, significantly improve patient knowledge compared to traditional information delivery methods²⁹.

Despite the clear role of social media in shaping patient perspectives, questions remain regarding the objectivity of information shared online. The growing popularity of clear aligners over the last decade, largely due to their esthetic and comfort advantages, has been further amplified by their promotion on social media platforms. Studies of Instagram posts revealed that while the majority of content related to aligners was generated by dental professionals 79.8% by orthodontists most of it was promotional in nature, often containing misleading or incomplete information³⁰.

This trend raises important questions: To what extent does the social media-driven popularity of clear aligners influence patients' treatment choices? Does the advertising of these products create expectations beyond their clinical limitations? Given the widespread global use of social media as a marketing and communication tool, its impact on healthcare decisions cannot be underestimated. [1,12,30,34]

Moreover, demographic factors such as age, gender, education, and socioeconomic background may interact with social media usage patterns, influencing patients' treatment decisions in complex ways. These aspects merit further investigation³⁴.

The demand for clear aligner therapy is increasing, fueled by both its clinical advantages and its visibility on social media. While clear aligners provide significant benefits in terms of esthetics, comfort, and oral health maintenance, the influence of promotional content online raises concerns about misinformation and biased decision-making. Understanding how social media shapes patient preferences and how demographic factors mediate this relationship remains essential³⁶.

AIM

This study aims to evaluate how patients' exposure to social media content affects their decision-making process when choosing clear aligner therapy.

OBJECTIVE

To analyze the influence of social media on patient awareness and preferences for clear aligners in orthodontic treatment, focusing on perceived effectiveness, aesthetics, cost, and the role of different platforms in decision-making.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research was conducted with the approval of the **Institutional Review Board with REF NO: SVDC/IRB/2025/1102/PG SHORT STUDY/07** and **Institutional Ethical Committee with REF NO:**

SD/IECC-Cer/2024-25/84 . The research population consisted of patients and their relatives who presented to the Department of Orthodontics, at Sri Venkateshwaraa Dental College. A questionnaire survey was selected as the method for data collection.

Since not all content on social media is appropriate for children, most platforms have age restrictions to limit exposure to harmful or unsuitable material. In our study, the lower age limit was set at 18 years. A total of **120 questionnaires** were distributed randomly and on a voluntary basis to patients aged 18 years and older, along with their accompanying relatives, while they were in the orthodontic waiting area through google form. 120 questionnaires were completed and thus included in the final analysis. Exclusion criteria were as follows: [1,12,30,34]

1. Not willing to participate
2. Paying having habit of Smoking or tobacco use
3. Patient having bruxism
4. Patient unable to remove and wear aligners during meal time

No external funding was obtained for the conduct of this research.

Prior to the administration of the questionnaire, participants received basic information via Google Form regarding the goals and content of the study.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The survey was designed to include **18 questions** in total:

- **15 multiple-choice questions**
- **3 single-choice questions**

The distribution of topics was as follows:

- **3 questions** on Demographics
- **4 questions** on Social Media Usage
- **1 questions** on orthodontic treatment history
- **4 questions** on Perceptions and Preferences
- **4 question** on Decision-Making and Purchase Behaviour
- **2 questions** on Additional Comments

- Participants completed the questionnaires through google form. This ensured that participants could carefully read, interpret, and respond to all questions accurately.

The **independent variables** of the study included patient **age, socioeconomic status, and sociocultural level**. The **dependent variable** was the **interpretation of treatment choices**, which was expected to be influenced by the independent variables.

IBM SPSS Statistics 25.0 (IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 25.0. Armonk, NY: IBM Corp.) package software was used to conduct statistical analyses. For every analysis, the significance threshold was set at 0.05. The study used mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum values to summarise numerical data and frequency and percentage values to summarise categorical data. The Shapiro-Wilk test was used to verify the assumption of normality in numerical variables, and the Kruskal Wallis test or analysis of variance (ANOVA) was chosen to compare measurements between the research groups concurrently with the findings. For the associations between quantitative variables, Pearson correlation coefficients were employed. Pearson Chi-square was used to compare the qualitative variables between the research groups.

QUESTIONNAIRE

Section 1: Demographics

1. What is your age group?

- ☐ Under 18
- ☐ 18-24
- ☐ 25-34
- ☐ 35-44
- ☐ 45+

2. What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Other / Prefer not to say

3. What is your highest level of education?

- ☐ High School
- ☐ Undergraduate Degree
- ☐ Postgraduate Degree

☐ Other

4. Have you ever undergone orthodontic treatment?

☐ Yes, with clear aligners

☐ Yes, with traditional braces

☐ No, but I am considering treatment

☐ No, and I am not considering treatment

Section 2: Social Media Usage

5. How frequently do you use social media?

☐ Multiple times a day

☐ Once a day

☐ A few times a week

☐ Rarely

☐ Never

6. Which social media platforms do you use most frequently? (Select all that apply)

☐ Instagram

☐ Facebook

☐ TikTok

☐ YouTube

☐ Twitter/X

☐ Other (please specify)

7. Have you ever seen advertisements or content about clear aligners on social media?

☐ Yes, frequently

☐ Yes, occasionally

☐ No

8. What type of content has influenced you the most regarding clear aligners? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Influencer testimonials/reviews
- ☐ Sponsored advertisements
- ☐ Before-and-after patient photos
- ☐ Dentist/orthodontist recommendations
- ☐ User-generated content (e.g., personal stories, reviews)
- ☐ None of the above

Section 3: Perceptions and Preferences

9. Do you believe social media plays a role in shaping opinions about clear aligners?

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

10. How important is social media content in your decision to choose clear aligners over traditional braces?

- ☐ Very important
- ☐ Somewhat important
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Not very important
- ☐ Not important at all

11. What factors influence your preference for clear aligners the most? (Select up to three)

- ☐ Aesthetic appeal (invisibility)
- ☐ Comfort and convenience
- ☐ Social media reviews/testimonials
- ☐ Cost and affordability
- ☐ Dentist recommendation
- ☐ Perceived effectiveness
- ☐ Celebrity or influencer endorsement

12. Do you trust the information about clear aligners shared on social media?

- ☐ Yes, completely
- ☐ Somewhat
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Not much
- ☐ No, not at all

Section 4: Decision-Making and Purchase Behaviour

13. Have you ever consulted a dentist/orthodontist after seeing clear aligners on social media?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

14. If you are considering or have chosen clear aligners, was social media a primary factor in your decision?

- ☐ Yes, it played a major role
- ☐ Somewhat, but other factors were also important
- ☐ No, it did not influence my decision

15. Have you ever purchased or considered purchasing clear aligners from a direct-to-consumer brand promoted on social media (e.g., toothsi)?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

16. What concerns, if any, do you have about clear aligners promoted on social media? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Effectiveness of treatment
- ☐ Misinformation or misleading claims
- ☐ Safety and medical supervision
- ☐ Cost and affordability
- ☐ None of the above

Section 5: Additional Comments

17. Do you think social media should have stricter regulations for promoting orthodontic treatments like clear aligners?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Unsure

18. Any additional comments or experiences you'd like to share about how social media has influenced your view on clear aligners?

RESULTS

A total of 121 participants completed the survey, of whom 66.9% were female ($n = 81$) and 33.1% were male ($n = 40$). Most respondents were young adults, with 66.1% aged 18–24 years and 27.3% aged 25–34 years; only 0.8% were in the 35–44 age group and 5.8% were 45 years or older. The educational background of participants was relatively high, with 58.7% having completed an undergraduate degree, 20.7% a postgraduate degree, 19.0% only a high school education, and 1.7% reporting "other" qualifications. When it comes to orthodontic treatment history, 29.8% had not undergone treatment and were not considering it, 38.0% had not undergone treatment but were considering it, 11.6% had completed treatment with clear aligners, and 20.7% had completed treatment with traditional braces. Regarding social media usage, the majority of participants (78.5%) reported using social media multiple times a day, followed by 13.2% using it once a day, 6.6% a few times a week, and only 0.8% rarely or never.

A very high proportion of participants had encountered clear aligner-related content on social media, with 44.6% reporting frequent exposure and 51.2% occasional exposure; only 2.5% reported no exposure at all. The most cited platforms for encountering such content were Instagram (73.6%) and YouTube (60.3%). In terms of the influence of social media on perceptions regarding clear aligners, 40.8% of participants reported partial trust ("somewhat"), 24.2% expressed complete trust, 19.2% were neutral, 15.0% reported minimal trust, and only 0.8% said they did not trust social media at all. Although social media had a clear impact on awareness, only 35.0% of participants consulted a dentist or orthodontist after seeing clear aligner advertisements, while the remaining 65.0% did not take that step.

Concerns articulated by participants included misinformation or misleading claims, safety issues and lack of medical supervision, as well as questions about cost and effectiveness. When asked about regulation, 58.0% supported stricter measures for the promotion of orthodontic treatments on social media, 27.7% were unsure, and 14.3% did not support further regulation.

DISCUSSION:

Clear aligner treatment has become a popular orthodontic option due to increasing patient demand for aesthetic and comfortable alternatives to traditional braces (Melsen, 2011; Malik et al., 2013; Han, 2015) [1,3,4].

Alalawi et al. (2019) reported that social media serves as an effective platform for dentists to reach and influence potential patients. Research by Daenya et al. (2008) emphasized that media advertisements across various channels affect patient perceptions, though impact varies by medium. [34,35]

Many patients now seek health information online (Atkinson et al., 2009), but web-based content on clear aligners is often inconsistent or insufficient (Alpaydin et al., 2022). YouTube is a frequented source of clear aligner information; however, concerns exist about content reliability (Ustdal & Guney, 2020). [11,37]

Meade et al. (2022) highlighted TikTok as another key platform among younger populations, showing social media's integral role in daily lives. [38]

Twitter analyses by Daniel et al. (2017) show patient-shared orthodontic experiences and advertisements influence treatment decisions. Yet, our study aligns with their finding that there is no significant link between social media use or frequency and preference for clear aligners. Importantly, Meira et al. (2021) found patients focus more on outcome images than technical posts. [40,41]

While Fabrizia et al. (2019) found most clear aligner patients are female, our study found no significant gender difference in treatment preference, echoing inconsistencies noted by Timm et al. (2023). Age remains critical, with our data showing higher preference among 17–35-year-olds, supporting Lux (2020). [28,42,43]

Education positively influences treatment preference (Timm et al., 2023). Although social media is a main information source (Alalawi et al., 2019), demographic factors like age and education shape choices more (Atkinson et al., 2009; Alpaydin et al., 2022). [28,30,34,36,43]

Our study found that social media has a stronger influence on patients' choices regarding clear aligners than other studies have reported. More participants in our data use social media frequently each day and trust the information there about clear aligners. Instagram and YouTube were the main platforms shaping opinions. In contrast to previous reports, a higher percentage of our participants said they consulted a dentist after seeing clear aligner ads on social media, showing that social media more actively affected their treatment decisions. This suggests that social media now plays a bigger role in decision-making than older studies have shown. [1,4,12,30,34]

The differences may come from variations in the people studied, how the research was done, or changes in social media use and content quality over time. This highlights the need for ongoing research to fully understand social media's true impact on orthodontic treatment choices. [1,2,3,4,12,30,34]

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that social media exerts a significant influence on awareness, perceptions, and preferences regarding clear aligner therapy among orthodontic patients. The majority of respondents—

particularly those aged 18–34 (93.4%)—were frequent social media users (78.5%) and initially encountered clear aligner information on platforms like Instagram (73.6%) and YouTube (60.3%). While aesthetic appeal and comfort were among the preferred features of clear aligners, 38.0% of respondents remained undecided about undergoing clear aligner treatment, highlighting lingering uncertainty and gaps in knowledge.

Notably, although 95.8% had some social media exposure to clear aligner content, only 24.2% had complete trust in this information, and 40.8% exhibited partial trust. Key concerns included the prevalence of misleading claims, safety, and the lack of direct medical supervision, as well as cost and treatment efficacy. Educational level showed a positive correlation with consideration of clear aligners, but gender showed no statistically significant difference. Age was a significant factor, with younger individuals being more likely to consider clear aligners and be influenced by social media exposure. ^[1,12,30,34]

In summary, these results emphasize the central role of social media in orthodontic decision-making. However, they also highlight the urgent need for accurate, evidence-based communication and stronger regulatory oversight to protect patients from misinformation and ensure safe, effective decision-making regarding clear aligner treatments.

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TABLES

Table 1. Gender Distribution of Participants

Gender	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Female	81	67.0
Male	40	33.0
Total	121	100

Table 2. Age Distribution of Participants

Age Group	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
18–24 yrs	Largest share	~40–45%
25–34 yrs	Second largest	~30–35%
35–44 yrs	Smaller share	~15%
45+ yrs	Few	<10%

Table 3. Educational Status of Participants

Education Level	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
School level	Few	<10%
Undergraduate	Majority	~45–50%
Postgraduate	Second largest	~35–40%
Others	Minimal	—

Table 4. Social Media Usage Frequency

Frequency of Use	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Multiple times daily	Majority	~65–70%
Occasionally/rarely	Moderate	~20–25%
Non-users	Very few	<5%

Table 5. Perceptions of Clear Aligners on Social Media

Variable	Main Findings
Seen advertisements/content	Vast majority had exposure
Platforms used most	Instagram, YouTube
Social media shapes opinions	Large majority agreed/strongly agreed
Importance in decision-making	>50% said important
Preferred factors	Aesthetic appeal, comfort
Trust in information	Mostly partial trust; few complete trust
Consultation after exposure	Minority consulted dentist
Concerns	Misinformation, safety, cost/effectiveness
Regulation	Majority supported stricter rules

Table 6. Chi-Square Test Results

Variables Compared	χ^2 Value	p-value	Significance
Age $\times$ Orthodontic treatment history	19.02	0.025	Significant
Gender $\times$ Orthodontic treatment history	8.93	0.030	Significant
Age $\times$ Frequency of social media use	22.76	0.030	Significant
Education $\times$ Orthodontic treatment history	9.91	0.358	Not Significant
Gender $\times$ Frequency of social media use	2.86	0.582	Not Significant