

THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN MEDICAL COMMUNICATION: IMPACT ON COLLABORATION WITH PATIENTS IN DENTAL SERVICES

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INTRODUCTION

The topic addressed has as starting point the important transformations that have occurred in the communication between healthcare professionals and patients as a result of the emergence of social media platforms. Since the use of social networks is currently intense increasingly, it is important to understand their most effective use to improve doctor-patient communication and for the distribution of information, patient education and the creation of a support community. The topic is current and relevant for the development of modern communication strategies and for the improvement of medical services through technology. Patients have, through social platforms, access to quality medical information always updated, through direct communication with healthcare providers.

The role of social media in communication between doctors and patients has become increasingly important, especially in the context of technological evolution and the increased need for quick access to information.

Accessibility and fast and always updated information, strengthening doctor-patient trust through positive testimonials that show the doctor's involvement, the use of platforms for the purpose of transmitting educational information regarding disease prevention through videos, infographics or live sessions, adopting a healthy lifestyle, the possibility of online consultations, are just some of the advantages of using social media in doctor-patient interaction. In a digital era in which social media plays a central role in everyday life, the effective management of communication with patients on these platforms can bring multiple benefits, but also involve certain challenges. Communication with patients through social media, when done correctly, can significantly improve the patient experience and contribute to their education and support.

Keywords – social media, communication, digital age, online consultations, doctor-patient interaction, dental clinic.

The choice of this current topic is motivated by the significant transformations of the communication paths between healthcare professionals and patients, facilitated by social media platforms. Taking into consideration the important increasing use of social networks, it is essential to understand how they can be effectively used to improve communication, education and patient involvement. Internationally organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recognize the crucial role of social media in medical education, patient communication, and dissemination of current information. At the national level, ministries of health and professional organizations in various countries are promoting the use of social media to disseminate information and interact with patients. At the regional level, clinics and hospitals are implementing social media strategies to improve communication and services provided to the community.

Medical communication is the process health information is transmitted between health professionals - doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and other specialists - and patients. In addition to the medical information transmitted, elements of holistic patient care are also involved, including emotional, psychological, and social aspects.

Effective communication between doctor and patient is crucial for patient education and engagement [1], for better patient compliance with recommended investigations and treatment and lifestyle changes, for reducing medical errors caused by communication errors [2], as well as for improving clinical outcomes and increasing patient satisfaction. [3,4]

Some of the areas social media platforms can be successfully used in are the following:

Telemedicine. The use of WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and specialized telemedicine platforms for

virtual consultations allows patients to access medical care remotely, reducing the need for physical visits, while improving access to medical services for people in isolated areas.

Patient support groups, such as support groups for patients with cancer, diabetes or autoimmune diseases, can be formed on social networks where these patients can share their experiences and can give and receive emotional support, experiences and information about managing their conditions.

Disease monitoring and control. As an example, the X platform (formerly Twitter) can be used to track the spread of influenza. In general, platforms can help monitor disease outbreaks, identify them and implement control measures.

Mental health awareness. Mental health campaigns, such as #BellLetsTalk and #MentalHealthAwareness, encourage open discussion, support those affected, and reduce stigma associated with mental illness.

Public Health Education. Health organizations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), use these platforms to reach the general public and quickly disseminate information of great interest and importance, as well as to provide information on public health, vaccinations, disease prevention, and other health topics.

Research and Collaboration. Platforms like LinkedIn and ResearchGate allow doctors, researchers, and other professionals to collaborate on research projects, discuss complex cases, and share research results.

Marketing and Patient Education. Clinics and hospitals use social media to promote their services, educate patients, and build a community of informed patients. Social platforms allow healthcare institutions to reach a wider audience and interact directly with patients.

OBJECTIVES:

- To analyze the effectiveness of different social media platforms in communicating with patients,
- To identify best practices for using social media in patient education and engagement,
- The impact of social media communication on patient satisfaction and trust,
- To assess the risks associated with the use of social media in medical communication and the potential benefits for patients and healthcare professionals,
- To formulate recommendations for the effective integration of social media into the communication strategies of medical institutions.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The research method was of mixed type, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches. A questionnaire was applied to doctors and patients to observe the level of use and usefulness of social media platforms.

A monitoring of the social media platforms used by medical offices was conducted: Facebook – used for education-

al posts, patient interactions, service promotions and responses to reviews and questions, Instagram – used for sharing images and videos, posts about dental procedures, "before and after" transformations and interactive stories and YouTube – used for educational videos about oral hygiene, dental procedures, patient testimonials and treatment guides.

Questionnaires were administered to patients to assess their perception of the clinic's social media presence and the impact on their decisions to choose the clinic's services as well as to obtain detailed information about their experiences and expectations related to social media communication.

Descriptive statistics were used for the descriptive analysis to analyze the data collected from the social media analysis tools and questionnaires. This included measuring the engagement rate, the number of appointments generated by social media posts and patient satisfaction.

Qualitative analysis was conducted by evaluating interview responses and patient comments, to identify common themes and understand their perceptions and experiences related to the clinic's communication on social media.

DATA COLLECTION

The prospective observational study was conducted between October and November 2023 and included two stages:

- composition of the target group, with agreement to participate by completing the informed consent.
- oral re-evaluation and questionnaire completion.

The target group was composed of dentists and their patients from Timiș County in individual dental offices or dental clinics, in total a number of 50 participants.

The method used was the questionnaire, and the chosen form of data collection was face-to-face discussion with the interviewed doctors. This method was selected to be able to provide additional explanations where the questions in the questionnaire were not fully understood, in order to obtain correct answers, with unbiased study results.

RESULTS

1. Demographic structure of the target group

The group the questionnaire was applied on consisted of 50 patients from dental clinics in Timișoara and Timiș County, aged between 17 and 72 years. We present in table no. 1 the distribution of people according to gender and age.

The following is noted: the age group with the largest number of respondents was 36-45 years, with 11 respondents, representing 22% of the total, followed by the 46-55 years group, 18% of the total. The fewest respondents were those in the under 18 group, with 8%. Women represent 48% of the study group, and men 52%. (table 2)

Considering the situation highlighted in Table 2, approximately half (44%) of the selected sample has completed high school, which implies a good level of education. The number of those who have completed

Table no. 1. Structure of the doctors' group according to gender and age

Age	Men – 26		Women – 24		Total	
	No	% Of total men	No	% Of total women	No	%
under 18 years	1	3,80%	3	12,50%	4	8%
18 – 25 years	2	7,70%	4	16,70%	6	12%
26 – 35 years	4	15,40%	3	12,50%	7	14%
36 – 45 years	4	15,40%	7	29,20%	11	22%
46 – 55 years	5	19,20%	4	16,70%	9	18%
56 – 65 years	3	11,50%	3	12,50%	6	12%
>65 years	4	15,40%	2	8,30%	6	12%
Total	26	52,00%	24	48,00%	50	100%

university or postgraduate studies among the patients of the participating clinics in the study is only 2 percentage points lower than high school graduates. Thus, 86% of the population included in the study has graduated at least high school, a situation illustrated in Graph 1.

A comparative analysis of the educational level of the respondents shows an approximately equal level of education between the female and male population, illustrated in Graph 2.

2. Social Media Use

It was assessed by asking the question "Which of the following social media platforms do you use most frequently?", with 5 response options that included the platforms Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, LinkedIn and an open response option to indicate another platform. (table no. 3)

All participants used at least one of the mentioned social media platforms. Only one participant responded that uses only one network. Two participants indicated that they use all 5 mentioned platforms. The average across the entire sample was 2.5 social networks used by each participant.

There is no difference between men and women.

In Romania, currently the most popular social networks are YouTube with 88% of users and Facebook with 86%, followed by the Instagram platform.

Graphs 3 and 4 present the audience and usage shares of each social media platform.

Based on made measurements we consider that dental clinics should focus their efforts on distributing messages and educational materials on Facebook, YouTube and Instagram, adapting the content to the specifics of each platform. Twitter (X) should not be neglected either, even if in our country it does not have as high a spread as other platforms, because messages addressed to Twitter could attract patients from other areas of the globe.

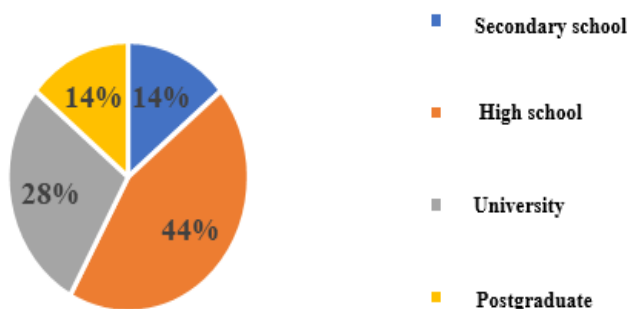
The next considered aspect was the frequency of social networks use. This time the answer to the question "How often do you use social media to search for information about dental health?" was a single one from a list of options (Daily, Weekly, Monthly, Rarely or Never). The answers received are summarized in table no. 4

74% of respondents open at least one social media platform at least once a week. People who indicated that they rarely use social networks represent 6% of the total. Only one person (2% of the total) stated that they never use social networks. The distribution of responses is very suggestive in graph number 5.

Table no. 2. Structure of the functional group by gender and profession of respondents

Profession	Men – 26		Women – 24		Total	
	No	% of total men	No	% of total women	No	%
Secondary school studies	3	7,70%	4	5,90%	7	14%
High school studies	10	15,40%	12	11,80%	22	44%
University studies	7	0,00%	7	41,20%	14	28%
Postgraduate studies	4	76,90%	3	52,90%	7	14%
Total	26	52,00%	24	48,00%	50	100%

Graph 1. Structure of the target group according to the last studies completed



Graph 2. Comparative situation of educational level between men and women

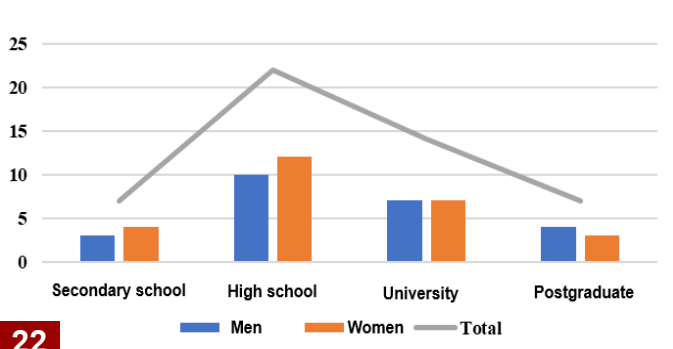


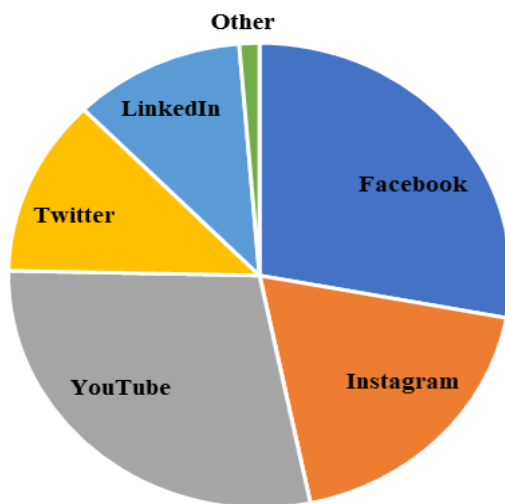
Table no. 3. Group structure by gender and number of users of a particular social network

Platforma de social media	Men – 26		Women – 24		Total	
	No	% of total men	No	% of total women	No	%
Facebook	22	84,60%	21	87,50%	43	86,00%
Instagram	12	46,20%	17	70,80%	29	58,00%
YouTube	20	76,90%	24	100,00%	44	88,00%
Twitter	8	30,80%	11	45,80%	19	38,00%
LinkedIn	10	38,50%	7	29,20%	17	34,00%
Other	1	3,80%	1	4,20%	2	4,00%
Total	2,5 rețele sociale utilizate în medie de fiecare participant					

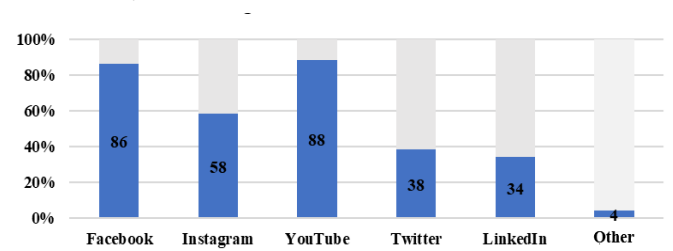
Table no. 4. Group structure by gender and frequency of social media use

Frequency of social media use	Men – 26		Women – 24		Total	
	No	% of total men	No	% of total women	No	%
Never	1	3,8%	0	0,0%	1	2,0%
Rarely	0	0,0%	3	12,5%	3	6,0%
Monthly	5	19,2%	4	16,7%	9	18,0%
Weekly	5	19,2%	8	33,3%	13	26,0%
Daily	13	50,0%	11	45,8%	24	48,0%
Total	26	52,0%	24	48,0%	50	100%

Graph 3 – Audience share of each social network included in the study



Graph 4 – Usage share of each social network included in the study



The obtained data indicates the immense potential that social networks have in the dental clinic's activity. Attracting new patients and retaining the loyalty of existing ones can be achieved very easily using these tools that have already entered the market in such a large share.

Interaction with the dental clinic

The 3rd section of the questionnaire focused on virtual interaction with the dental clinic. Within this set of questions, 3 points were targeted: interest in the dental clinic's social media page, the content that was found to be the most useful, and an assessment of the usefulness and novelty of the information presented. The first question was a single-answer question between the "Yes" and "No" options related to visiting the dental clinic's social media page. The distribution of answers is presented in Table .

It is observed that 28% of dental clinic clients do not access the practice's social media page.

The following two questions were asked to those who responded that they had visited the dental clinic's page at least once.

The first question was formulated as follows: "If yes, what type of content attracted you the most?".

The response options were:

- Educational articles about oral hygiene
- Videos about dental procedures
- Pictures before and after treatments
- Promotions and special offers
- Patient testimonials
- Other (Please specify)

The distribution of responses received along with a percentage analysis of their weight is presented in table number 6.

In first place are documentary images before and after dental treatment, as well as testimonials from other patients (graph no. 7).

In second place in terms of interest for patients are videos about dental procedures. These multimedia materials also solve the human side of dental office fear but the greatest benefit is the medical education that patients receive. In third place in preferences are certain materials that present marketing or discount campaigns from the clinic. Educational articles about oral hygiene are in last place.

The last question in the set refers to the usefulness of the posted material. To the question: "How useful did you find the information posted by the clinic on social

Graph 5 – Frequency of social networks use

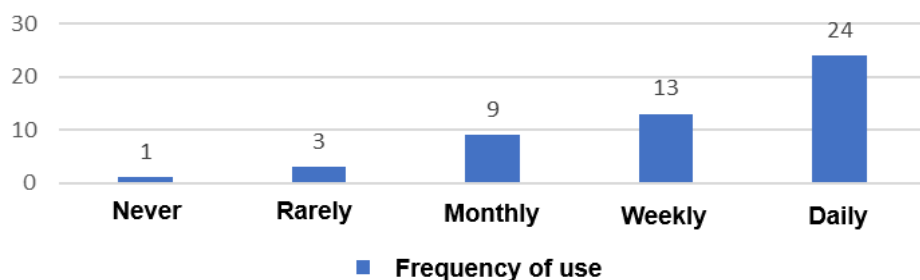


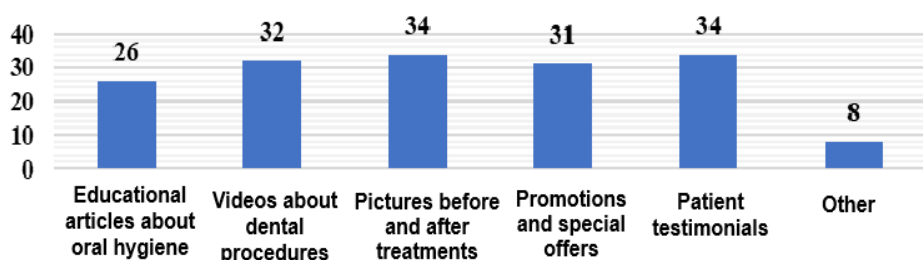
Table no. 5. Group structure by gender and the extent to which they accessed the clinic's page

Have accessed the page	Men – 26		Women – 24		Total	
	No	% of total men	No	% of total women	No	%
Yes	18	69,2%	18	75,0%	36	72,0%
No	10	31,8%	6	25,0%	16	28,0%
Total	26	52,0%	24	48,0%	50	100%

Table no. 6. Group structure by gender and the frequency participants identified one of the topics of interest on the clinic's social media page

Useful resource found on social media page	Men – 18 accessed the page		Women – 18 accessed the page		Total - 36 accessed the page	
	No	% of total men	Număr	% of total women	No	%
Educational articles about oral hygiene	13	72,20%	13	72,20%	26	61,10%
Videos about dental procedures	14	77,80%	18	100%	32	77,80%
Pictures before and after treatments	17	94,40%	17	94,40%	34	83,30%
Promotions and special offers	13	72,20%	18	100%	31	75,00%
Patient testimonials	16	88,90%	18	100%	34	83,30%
Other (Specified by participant)	5	27,80%	3	16,70%	8	22,20%
Total	Each participant indicated 2 options on average.					

Graph no. 7. Frequency of various materials accessing by patients on the clinic's media page



media?" on a Likert scale from "Not at all useful" to "Very useful" the answers varied as follows (table 7).

75% of respondents find clinic posts useful or very useful. There are no posted materials that patients find useful at all.

Satisfaction and impact of communication

The fourth section of the questionnaire aimed to measure the satisfaction and impact of dental clinics' social media communication. The first two questions measure the interaction that patient has with the dental clinic on the internet. The last two questions explore the improvements needed for the clinic's social media page, in the opinion of patients and general suggestions.

The first question was "How satisfied are you with the interactions with the clinic on social media?" with a single response on the Lickert scale from "Very dissatisfied" to "Very satisfied". Table no. 8 presents the structure of the received responses.

Patients are generally satisfied with the interaction with the website, but the content of the information is better than the way it is presented.

To the question "Do you consider that the clinic's presence on social media influenced your decision to choose its services?", the answers received were summarized in table 9.

The effectiveness of the communication channel represented by social media networks is also given by the fact that 56% of the interviewed clients stated that they visited the dental clinic following their interaction with it on the internet, according to table number 9. The quality of the information and materials posted are a determining factor for bringing new patients to the clinic. Also, another aspect that should be monitored is the frequency of postings. If there is a high frequency, then the clinic is very present and visible in the online space.

CONCLUSIONS

Synthesizing the results obtained from the study at the level of dental offices in Timișoara and Timiș County, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- The group on which the questionnaire was applied consisted of 50 patients from dental offices in Timișoara and Timiș County, aged between 17 and 72 years.

- The age group with the largest number of respondents was 36-45 years old, with 11 respondents, representing 22% of the total, followed by the 46-55-year-old group, →

Table no. 7. Group structure by gender function and utility found in materials published by the dental clinic (only patients who stated that they visited the clinic profile)

Articles utility	Men – 18		Women – 18		Total	
	No	% of total men	No	% of total women	No	%
Not useful at all	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
Not very useful	2	11,10%	1	5,60%	3	8,30%
Neutral	4	22,20%	2	11,10%	5	13,90%
Useful	6	33,30%	7	38,90%	13	36,10%
Very useful	6	33,30%	8	44,40%	14	38,90%
Total	18	50,00%	18	50,00%	36	100%

- 28% of dental clinic clients do not access the practice's social media page.
- In first place in terms of interest for patients are documentary images before and after dental treatment and testimonials from other patients. In second place are videos about dental procedures.
- The effectiveness of the communication channel represented by social media networks is also given by the fact that 56% of the interviewed clients stated that they visited the dental clinic following their interaction with it on the Internet.

Table no. 8. The structure of the group according to gender and the satisfaction of the interaction with clinic on the Internet

Frequency of social media utilization	Men – 26		Women – 24		Total	
	No	% of total men	No	% of total women	No	%
Very dissatisfied	5	19,20%	4	16,70%	9	18,00%
Unsatisfied	5	19,20%	6	25,00%	11	22,00%
Neutral	6	23,10%	8	33,30%	14	28,00%
Satisfied	4	15,40%	6	25,00%	10	22,00%
Very satisfied	4	15,40%	2	8,30%	6	12,00%
Total	26	52,00%	24	48,00%	50	100%

DISCUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The role of social media in communication between doctors and patients has become increasingly important, especially in the context of technological evolution and the increased need for quick access to information [5,6].

Accessibility and fast and always updated information, strengthening doctor-patient trust through positive testimonials that show doctor's involvement, using platforms to transmit educational information regarding disease prevention through videos, infographics or live sessions, adopting a healthy lifestyle, the possibility of online consultations, are just some of the advantages of using social media in doctor-patient interaction.

Each social media platform has unique characteristics and advantages, and their effective use depends on adapting the content to the specifics of the platform and the target audience.

Table no. 9. Group structure by gender and intention to visit the clinic following interaction with the social media page on the internet

Frequency of social media utilization	Men – 26		Women – 24		Total	
	No	% of total men	No	% of total women	No	%
Yes	14	53,80%	14	58,30%	28	56,00%
No	11	42,30%	9	37,50%	20	40,00%
Not sure	1	3,80%	1	4,20%	2	4,00%
Total	26	52,00%	24	48,00%	50	100%

18% of the total. The fewest respondents were those in the under 18 age group, with 8%. Women represent 48% of the study group, and men 52%.

- Approximately half (44%) of the selected sample has completed high school,
- All participants used at least one of the mentioned social media platforms. Only one participant responded that they use only one network. Two participants indicated that they use all 5 mentioned platforms
- In Romania, currently the most popular social networks are YouTube with 88% of users and Facebook with 86%, followed by the Instagram platform.
- 74% of respondents open at least one social media platform at least once a week. People who indicated that they rarely use social networks represent 6% of the total. Only one person (2% of the total) stated that they never use social networks.

target audience.

A dental office can use social media to increase its visibility, to educate patients and to build a relationship of trust with them.

Instagram targets young people and adults (18-35 years old), but the platform is increasingly popular among other age groups. It allows posts with attractive and easy-to-understand images, educational reels (short 15-60 second videos) to explain complex medical concepts in a simple and visual way, interactive stories (polls, quizzes) to engage the audience. As examples of using this platform in the dental field, types of posts would be "before and after" photos of treatments (with the consent of the patients) for teeth whitening, veneers or dental reconstructions, simple infographics about the importance of oral hygiene (e.g. "5 steps for perfect dental hygiene"); "Behind the scenes" in the office: modern equipment, the team at work,

preparation for an intervention; Reels: a short educational video on how to properly use dental floss, the process of applying a dental veneer, explained in a way that everyone can understand; Stories: Interactive quizzes: "What is the right age for the first orthodontic check-up?". quick answers to questions about teeth whitening or other services, Hashtags: #OralHealth, #TeethWhitening, #PerfectSmile.

TikTok is primarily targeted at Gen Z and Millennials, but is becoming popular among all demographics. Short, impactful videos can be posted that include visual explanations, such as debunking an oral hygiene myth: "Is teeth whitening dangerous?". Funny videos can also be posted with the office team, using a trend or a popular song, containing quick tips, such as: "3 common mistakes we make when brushing our teeth.", or series of educational lessons - "A common mistake patients make #1/5.", explaining the steps for a dental consultation (e.g. "What to expect at your first visit to the dentist?"). Challenges such as "Show us your healthy smile" can also be included and invite followers to participate [7].

Facebook targets older age groups (30-60 years old), as well as parents or families. Posts can be longer, with detailed health information. Live events can be created for question and answer sessions (Q&A), support groups can be formed for patients with similar conditions. In the case of dental offices, articles can be posted about the benefits of regular dental check-ups, feedback from satisfied patients (with their permission), announcements about promotions or special packages (e.g. "10% discount on teeth whitening in March!"), live events, such as Q&A sessions on popular topics: "When are braces necessary?" or "What solutions are there for sensitive teeth?". The platform also allows the creation of a group for loyal patients, where they can receive exclusive advice or information about offers.

LinkedIn is aimed at healthcare professionals, as well as other categories interested in academic information. Of interest are long articles or posts about medical news, recent research, stories about professional experiences or innovations in the medical field. The platform also allows networking and collaboration with other doctors or organizations. As a type of post: articles about modern technologies used in the office, such as the digital scanner for dental crowns, stories about the success of a patient, to inspire others to take care of their oral health [8]. The platform allows partnerships or collaborations with other offices or equipment suppliers and connection with other healthcare professionals to promote the office.

Twitter is targeted at people interested in breaking news and information, including journalists and other professionals. Posts are short and concise, limited to 280 characters. Links to detailed articles or medical studies can be posted. The platform allows participation in discussions on public health topics (using popular hashtags). Quick tips can be posted: "Did you know that a toothbrush should be changed every 3 months?" announcements about office hours or team changes, Hashtags: #OralHealth", #BeautifulSmile, #Dentistry, #ProfessionalWhitening. The platform promotes interaction: "Answer users' questions about dental services."

As general strategies for all platforms, the following should be followed:

- Consistency: Post regularly to maintain audience interest.
- Interaction: Actively engage in comments and answer questions.
- Authenticity: Transparency and empathy build trust.
- Visual resources: It is important to use images, videos and infographics to make information more attractive.
- Collaboration: Working together with other professionals or influencers reaches a wider audience.

Examples of effective use:

- Instagram and TikTok: Short educational videos about health.
- Facebook and LinkedIn: Articles, live streams to answer general questions.
- Twitter: Quick updates on current health topics.

Communicating with patients through social media is an increasingly important aspect of modern medical practice. In a digital age where social media plays a central role in everyday life, effectively managing patient communication on these platforms can bring multiple benefits, but also involve certain challenges. Communicating with patients through social media, when done correctly, can significantly improve the patient experience and contribute to patient education and support [9]. However, it is essential to approach this communication with attention to confidentiality, professionalism, and consistency to maximize benefits and minimize risks.

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