

Social media: the good, the bad and the ugly

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A few years ago, the last thing you'd probably expect to find in a dental magazine would have been an article about social media.

The world has changed greatly since many of us began our practising careers. Whether we like it or not; we are now truly in a digital age where social media plays a huge part in how we now communicate both with patients and fellow colleagues. With the ease of uploading images and video's straight from our smart phones Social Media has never been so accessible.

What is social media?

You may think this is pretty obvious, who doesn't know what Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn are?

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, social media is defined as 'websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking.'

But do we really know what these platforms were created for and are we using them correctly? Or are these platforms so engrained in us now that we as individuals customise the way in which we use them and create derivatives that may actually be causing more harm than good?

Uses in dentistry

There are so many reasons why dentists would choose to use social media platforms.

Practices will advertise any promotions they may have, entice patients to register, encourage and motivate patients to follow recommended dental advice and also advertise cosmetic dental treatments or facial aesthetics.

A dentist may set up a personal page highlighting their own particular work,

before and afters, video testimonials, patient reviews. Associates often are keen to build their own brand, hence patients now can potentially find dentists online just from scrolling through a profile.

For an associate like myself it is a huge advantage to be able to attract patients through their own platforms, this can enable more freedom for associates. Practice owners are now often looking specifically for associates who are 'social media aware' as it is less of a burden on owners to market and advertise their clinics using traditional, often expensive, methods.

There are many private dental groups on Facebook which offer an area for candid discussion about cases, treatment planning, failures and success stories, questions about faulty equipment, job opportunities etc. On these forums dentists may ask questions about treatments, seek advice, praise each other and sometimes even criticise.

The good

Dentistry is an artistic profession. With the boom of cosmetic and aesthetic dentistry in the UK in recent years the standards have never been higher. A dentist needs to be able to set themselves apart from other associates when applying for jobs and also attracting clients. With the increased use of SLR photography, social media is the perfect way to display a portfolio of work in an easy to navigate media. This is both helpful for prospective employers and patients. Since setting up my Instagram page (@teeth_by_janine) I have found that I have been able to connect with a wider pool of colleagues worldwide, it can be hugely beneficial to see different workflows and be inspired by other clinicians who are producing incredibly natural restorations.

Dentistry can be a lonely profession, often working in the same room day after day with the same nurse and little interaction with other

colleagues. It is refreshing to see the work of others and see how high the standards are worldwide. It can be easy with little interaction in the wider dental field to get stuck in your comfort zone and feel unmotivated in the drill and fill mentality. However, dentistry is so much more than that, with biomimetic, minimally invasive approaches, the aim is to mimic nature and be as realistic as possible. There the challenge lies but the sense of achievement and fulfilment in reproducing nature is incredibly rewarding and it's no wonder a dentist wants to share their work.

I often get messages from younger dentists asking me for advice re: courses or career progression or asking questions about my approach to a case that I have posted. I am always happy to help and actually I think it's important to connect with younger dentists coming through. When I first qualified, I would have relished the chance to have some extra guidance as I often was unsure of how to approach the more complex cases. Being able to see everyday dentistry such as rubber dam placement, quadrant restorations and bonding indirect restorations is invaluable as it can be easy to fall into bad habits and cut corners.

Most businesses now are finding that a social media page is just as valuable as a website. Younger patients in the demographic 18-35 use Instagram and Facebook to often assess whether a restaurant, a gym, or hair salon is for them. It's the same with a dental practice. If you can hit the right balance of clinical work and likeability, then you will find patients begin to connect with you to seek advice regarding booking in for a consultation. Throughout the years



dentists have always been portrayed in a negative light in the media, this is changing now, and social media allows patients to see that their dentist is human too rather than the old butcher stereotype. Don't underestimate the power of marketing yourself on social media.

In my case I love the work that I am able to offer my patients and actually I find when explaining a type of treatment to a patient often referring them to my page or showing them before and after photos really helps them understand the procedure before they commit to extensive cosmetic treatment. It helps them feel more confident and I think they see the pride I take in my work which is most definitely reassuring for them.

The bad

Pages displaying seemingly flawless cases can often be misleading. With the best will in the world a case may fail for a multitude of reasons despite your best efforts and meticulous planning. We have to remember, once the patient is out of the surgery, we lose control. We rely on them to take on board the advice they have been given in terms of looking after the work, but do they always comply? The answer is no.

Social media probably isn't the most common place where dentists will post failures, though there are some dentists who are all too happy to show the reality of how a case may not always have the expected longevity. It is only through failure that we can learn and improve.

For some seeing post after post of beautifully bonded anterior teeth or a set of full veneers may feel disheartening as for the majority of dentists out there this type of cosmetic work is not a reality. When we see our day list consisting of full clearances, denture fits, swellings and fillings it can be easy to feel some resentment. You must remind yourself that we are all colleagues and we should wholeheartedly support each other – it is futile being reproachful even if you disagree with treatment choices. If you want to do more cosmetic treatment, then it is down to you to make the necessary changes in order to facilitate this.

One of the first things I was told in my first year of university was two dentists will never agree with each other, but they will always agree that the third dentist is wrong. It is worth remembering that. We are all doing our best and we should remember that everyone has to start somewhere. When a colleague uploads a clinical photograph, it should be noted that it does take a level of bravery to display work so publicly and

open ourselves up to criticism. There is a fine line between being genuinely inquisitive or deliberately negative and condescending.

For some, social media is all about validation. The LIKE button is now standardised on all of the three major platforms. When we upload a post we want to see likes and comments from colleagues and potential patients. The more notifications the better, yet when a post doesn't do well, we are left feeling a little dejected, or worried that maybe there's something wrong with the post. You might just get the feeling, it's not good enough.

Social media is often in the press for its link with cyber bullying and trolling. It is sad to say that this does exist within our profession. Facebook hosts several closed groups with administrators who regulate that all members are registrants; some are well managed but sadly not all. There have been incidents where threads have become overly toxic, sexist and hateful with a bullish nature from colleagues who will stop at no cost to get their opinion across.

It seems we are more concerned with filtering our photographs rather than our opinions. There is nothing wrong with a polite discussion keeping comments respectful but when a colleague behind a keyboard loses control and crosses the line, they need to remember that social media is not a safe zone for sexism, misogyny, racism or hateful comments. These comments can bring the profession into disrepute and there have been GDC cases where screenshots from forums have been sent and a dentist called up to answer for unacceptable comments.

The ugly

There is often a trend on closed forums where a post will lead to explosive discussions often with clinicians joining forces to express a strong opposition to another colleague's post. If these forums are not regulated by administrators, then it may appear that trolling/hate comments are condoned. Freedom of speech does not mean that ethics and professionalism are disregarded as per GDC guidelines. It may be time to have a refresh on the professionalism guidelines if you are unsure. Administrators of these groups have a duty to regulate that the members are using the group in a positive way in order ensure that forums are education, informative and remain a positive community.

Perhaps it's the isolation of the job or differing mentalities of what dentistry should be that cause some of the disputes we hear about. It may be a tough pill to swallow seeing the enthusiasm and genuine passion that

Some top tips for social media

- Show support and keep things positive
- Stay united as a profession
- Engage in discussions with colleagues in a professional and dignified manner
- Don't bring the profession into disrepute with sexist/racist/misogynistic/overtly rude comments
- Remember social media is just a snap shot of a colleague's clinical activity; try not to take it so seriously. If you don't like something, rather than expressing it online just keep scrolling past it

dentists have nowadays – better materials, better photography – more knowledge means the level of dentistry that is provided has surpassed previous standards. It's not too late to get motivated and join in. Go on courses, watch videos online, learn new skills and methods, you might surprise yourself.

It's okay to disagree but it's important to stick to the point. There is no need to be rude to a fellow colleague or try and deliberately prove each other wrong.

Social media is here to stay. Its positives far outweigh the negatives. But we as a profession need to be more supportive of each other and that's where the improvement is needed. It's important to remember before you type, there is another person at the end of the screen. Think about how your comments may affect them. Don't get too comfortable, social media is not a safe place to demonstrate strong opinions that may bring the profession into disrepute. It should be noted during the current climate of COVID-19 there is understandably a huge amount of panic and worry worldwide. Each profession/work sector has different concerns, but social media reports are not always to be trusted. Beware of fake news and unsubstantiated reports which are only adding to the pandemonium and hysteria. The truth is, no one really knows what is happening from one day to the next and we are to be guided by the government meanwhile. It does take trust and it will take time, patience is prudent here whilst we take slow steps to normality.
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41404-020-0391-y>