Preferences, perception and impact of using dental social media in Kuwait

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Original Article

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ABSTRACT

Objective(s): To explore the pattern and impact of social media usage in the dental field as well as the users' perception on the dental accounts' existence including their credibility level and professional image.

Design: Cross-sectional study

Setting: Online survey disseminated on social media platforms as well as to the patients attending a governmental specialized dental center in Kuwait between 24th Jan 2019 and 27th March 2019.

Subjects: Only participants aged 16 or above and using social media were eligible to participate.

Intervention(s): No intervention applied.

Main outcome measure(s): The usage pattern and impact of social media platforms on oral health

Results: A total of 506 participants were included. Results showed that 76.1% of the participants (n=385) preferred to use Instagram™ among other platforms. Posting videos instead of static photos were preferred for oral health information delivery by 72% of the survey responses. The credibility level of the dental accounts varies according to the employment nature with the governmental sector being the highest. Most of the participants (n=382, 76%) validate the dental information disseminated on social media mainly through searching on the internet (n=357, 71%). While 54% of them (n=275) found that the existence of dental accounts on social media is a major reason to find and choose a dental clinic or dentist for a visit.

Conclusions: Social media has a positive impact on oral health awareness and habits. However, educating the public about the evidence-based practice should be considered especially with the inflated misinformation on social media.

KEYWORDS: Social Media, e-health, Online Health Information, Community Oral Health, Dental Education

INTRODUCTION

Social media is one of the most influential factors in our global electronic-era and has become an integral part of our daily life.[1] At least, 3.5 billion people in the world are present online, which means that one in three people in the world are using social media platforms.[2] The utilization of social media in healthcare sectors is very popular worldwide and considered as a platform to provide health information, intervention, promotion, and education as well as being a communication medium between healthcare professionals, including dentists and patients.[3-10] It has the potential also to change the way we deliver care and treat some diseases and behaviors such as obesity, depression, diabetes, heart diseases, and sexual behaviors.[3, 11]

Currently, there is a consistent trend of using web-based resources including social media as a telemedicine/teledentistry platform. Teledentistry is an evolving area that covers wide dental services such as providing remote consultations, preventive care, and continuous education.[12] This trend is being evident with the current severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic, which is leading to COVID-19 disease. These resources have been used as informative platforms and a triage gate allowing patients to be efficiently screened while avoiding the virus to spread between patients, healthcare professionals, and the community.[13-17]

Despite of providing beneficial opportunities in its platforms, sharing health-related misinformation and inaccurate evidence on social media found to be more prevalent and popular than accurate information.[18, 19] Being actively present on social media means being aware of its usage risks including disseminating poor quality of information, damaging the professional image, and violating the patient-healthcare professional boundary with its legal consequences.[7] Thus, the United Kingdom General Dental Council, American Dental Association, and Australian Dental Association have published different posting protocols and guidance on using social media platforms.[20-22]

This study aimed to explore the pattern and impact of social media usage in the dental field as well as the users' perception on the dental accounts' existence including their credibility level and professional image. The reporting of the study follows the STROBE checklist.[23]

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

A cross-sectional study was carried out using an online survey focusing on Kuwait population. The survey comprised of sets of questions in Arabic regarding the use and impact of social media platforms related to dentistry. The survey was distributed electronically via social media platforms as well as to the patients attending a governmental specialized dental center in Kuwait. Participants were eligible to be enrolled into the study only if they were using any social media platform and aged 16 and above. The study was carried out from 24th Jan 2019 and 27th March 2019. Responses were entered into SPSS version 23 for statistical analyses. The study was approved by Division of Research and Surveys, Dental Administration, Ministry of Health, Kuwait, with internal number (0005/2018).

RESULTS

Demographics

A total of 506 participants were enrolled into the study; 173 (34%) male and 333 (66%) female participants. Most of the participants (n=338, 67%) aged between 16-35 with university education as a highest academic level in 70% (n=356) of the participants (Table 1).

Social Media Usage

Instagram™ (n=385, 76%), Snapchat™ (n=226, 45%), and Twitter™ (n=175, 34.6%) were the most social media platforms used and preferred by the participants while 9% (n=46) of participants preferred other platforms. The time spent on social media vary between participants, however, 60% (n=304) of them spent between 1 to 4 hours a day (Table 2). The data showed that 44.9% (n=227) of the participants were following five account or less that related to dentistry, 16.2% (n=82) following between six to ten accounts, 11.7% (n=59) following more than ten accounts. However, 23.7% (n=120) of the participants were not following any dental related accounts and 3.6% (n=18) did not know how many dental related accounts they were following.

Post Preference

Posting videos in its different forms were preferred by 72% of the responses compared to posting pictures. Similar percentages were found between the participants' preference on type of videos such as professional high-quality videos (26%), selfies videos (24%), and motion graphic videos 23% (Figure 1).

Impact on Oral Health Awareness and Habits

Social media usage in general has a positive impact on the participants' oral health awareness and habits; by encouraging them to visit their dentist on a regular basis (n=160, 31.6%) and correcting misconceptions and improving oral health habits (n=246, 48.6%). However, a considerable number of participants believed that dental related accounts on social media did not affect them at all (Table 3).

Psychologically speaking, data showed that 52% (n=260) and 40% (n=201) of the participants found that picture and video posts have eliminated their fears and concerns and encouraged them to visit a dentist respectively (positive impact). Whereas only 8.3% (n=42) and 18.8% (n=95) found that picture and video posts increased their fears and concerns and prevented them from visiting a dentist respectively (negative impact). While in both type of posts, in average 32% of the participants thought that they have not been affected at all.

Online Consultations and Gifts

The majority of the participants (n=407, 80.4%) did not have any personal diagnostic consultation via direct messages. Similarly, 86.8% (n=439) of the participants did not receive gifts such as free file opening, dental examination, or dental x-rays through social media competitions/raffles. However, who received gifts, only 5.9% (n=30) of them have visited the dentist.

Credibility

Credibility level has been categorized as poor credibility (no or slight credibility) and good credibility (satisfactory or high credibility). Local dentists' accounts who are working only in the governmental sector ranked with the highest good level of credibility among other accounts on social media according to 78% (n=396) of the participants' perception, followed by dentists who are working in both governmental and private sectors (n=340, 67%), and dentists working only in private sector (n=261, 51%). Interestingly, non-Kuwaiti dentists who are working outside Kuwait having a higher good credibility level (n=304, 60%) than local dentists who are working in private sectors only. In addition, official governmental dental accounts were found to be with good credibility (n=368, 73%) than the official private sectors' accounts (n=234, 46%) such as private dental clinics. On the other hand, social media influencers (non-dental) had the poorest credibility level amongst all types of accounts according to 87% (n=440) of the participants followed by the dental companies and official private sector accounts in 62% (n=313) and 54% (n=272) respectively. Figure 2 illustrates the credibility levels among different dental social media accounts.

Validity

About 10% (n=52) of the participants never validate neither dental advices nor dental products shared on social media, however, about 14% (n=73) of them rarely validate this information. Whereas the majority of the participants (n=382, 76%) sometimes/always validate any dental advices or products posted on social media. The methods of validating the information posted on social media were mostly through searching on the internet (n=357, 71%), asking the dentist in person (n=270, 53%), asking relatives and friends based on their personal experience (n=98, 19%), and other methods (n=12, 2%).

Professional Image on Social Media

About 54% (n=275) of the participants found that the existence of dental accounts on social media platforms including their contents considered as a major reason to find and choose a dental clinic or dentist for a visit (Figure 3). Surprisingly, 63% (n=319) of the participants preferred to see the dentists' accounts to be solely related to the area of specialty only without any personal-life involvement. In addition, 83% (n=419) of participants thought that dentists should display their qualifications on their social media pages while 64% (n=322) of them found that displaying the university name and country where dentists obtained their qualification is necessary and could be a reason for their dental visit choice. Figure 4 compares the participants' perception on the dentists' professional image on the social media.

DISCUSSION

The popularity of using social media in the dental field is currently being evident especially with the evolving social media platforms' features. The data obtained from this study showed that getting dental personnel involved in social media is vital due to its good impact on oral health. It is important to state that this study included a potential young participants group (16-year-old group), which may affect the validity of the outcomes due to their views and judgments on dental information presented on social media platforms.

Although that Instagram found to be the most used and preferred platform in Kuwait based on this study, preferences and popularity of social media platforms vary between different regions and countries.[24-29] Using these findings could help the dental account holders in focusing on the targeted population to maximize their beneficial influence on the popular social media platforms in their region of interest. Despite of the high number of dental accounts presence on social media, nearly 50% of the participants in this study were following only 5 or less and 23.7% of them were not following these accounts at all. This may reflect the lack of interest, poor marketing strategies, or unattractive content of the dental accounts on social media. In contrast, this may show that following fewer dental accounts would be adequate instead of filling up the users' timelines with dental content. Dental account holders may think to invest in their pages in social media by posting videos and using high-tech quality in particular if possible as we found that 72% of the participants preferred watching videos regardless of its form in comparison to static pictures. It is pleasing to see almost 75% of the participants found that using social media in general has a positive impact on their oral health awareness and behaviors similar to a survey that showed 67.1% of respondents believed that they changed some of the oral health behaviors based on social media information.[26] Despite of the small negative

psychological impact revealed in this study, having a caution message or alert at the beginning of the videos and pictures should be considered especially in surgical-related posts.

The demand of seeking online consultations and advice through social media is being evident through comments, tweets, and direct messages. However, healthcare providers on social media keep posting about the importance of having face-to-face consultations to be capable of performing physical examinations and tests for proper diagnoses. A study conducted in Dublin showed that web-based consultation with a dentist appealed to 37% of patients surveyed.[10] The author concluded that such online services seem to be unusual if not potentially dangerous due to the importance of taking history and preforming examination prior to drawing any conclusions regarding the patient care. At the same time, 90% of the healthcare providers who are performing online consultations found the task often or very often challenging.[30] Dentists therefore should bear in mind that providing personal online diagnostic consultations without proper history taking, examination and special tests if needed, may be considered as negligence, thus should be avoided.

In contrast, for example with the recent COVID-19 disease pandemic, the trend was to avoid face-to-face visits temporarily in both medical and dental fields as much as possible. For example, healthcare providers were encouraged to offer online consultations through their official hospital applications or social media platforms as well as their social media professional accounts mainly via direct messages. Creating virtual clinics on web-based resources, which can be run from home by most senior staff, has been emphasized in order to avoid physical contact with patients with unknown COVID-19 status for oral and dental problems.[15] Therefore, online-based consultation is crucial in such critical status to minimize the exposure risk for both patients and healthcare providers.

Seeking dental information on social media gives a high responsibility for dental account holders to share and disseminate accurate information.[11] Despite of this great opportunity to enrich the internet including social media platforms with cutting edge health-related information, it is also a low-cost environment that keeps misinformation and fake news flourishing.[18] Dentists should carefully utilize this tool by avoiding any misinformation, or giving advices based on poor quality of evidence, in which online dentists' credibility may play a major role in this situation, although that credibility perceived as a reader perception rather than information accuracy.[31] The variation on credibility levels observed in this study among dental personnel on social media was not surprising. Although that the reasons behind this finding was not assessed in the survey, we believe that Christensen arguments on potential negative influences on the public perception of dentists may still be valid. [32] These include having a commercial and self-promotional orientation, carrying out excessive elective or not required treatments, or applying unjustified high fees charges. However, people are trusting dentists as they believe that dentists have the competency to protect their health and well-being as well as recognizing their rights and dignity.[33]

Validating the information or tackling potential fake news provided by dental accounts on social media is a right that everyone should be taking it into consideration.[34] In this study, we found that the majority of the participants do validate the dental information disseminated on social media, however the dilemma was that 71% of them were using the internet for validation purposes. Although dentists agreed that the internet was a useful source of information on oral health, majority of them also agreed that patients were likely to

misinterpret such information, and some believed that information gained from the internet had led to patients demanding more complex treatment or inappropriate care.[35] Also, the readability and quality of websites regarding dental topics and treatments vary. Several studies analyzed dental websites to be very difficult to read or understand and contained inaccurate information, whereas other websites were good and reliable.[36-39] Moreover, as our study conducted in Arabic, reliable and accredited Arabic dental websites almost do not exist on the internet and most of the Arabic dental information were sought through social media platforms. Thus, lack of trusted and high credible websites especially in Arabic language can be of a major downside when using the internet for validation. Hence, there is a great need for valid and credible online oral health related information websites in different languages including Arabic.[37, 40] Dentists should also educate their patients of the basics on how to assess the credibility of health-related information and guide them to the concept of evidence based practice.[41]

This study found that online existence of dentists on social media was a major factor to communicate with the audience as well as reaching out new patients as previously shown in different studies. [27, 42] Not only the presence and content of the accounts matter but displaying the qualifications and the universities/countries where the dentist obtained them from were also considered as necessary factors to choose the dentist for a visit. Hence, it is important to make sure that your social media presence is accurate and up to date. Moreover, 63% of the participants preferred that dentists' accounts should be solely related to their area of specialty. Thus, deciding to keep the account representing the professional or personal identities separately or combined while thinking of its potential consequences should be taken into consideration. It is crucial to carefully think about the digital footprint that dentists are leaving on social media, which is representing them and reflecting their personal or professional identity.[43]

CONCLUSION

Understanding the social media usage pattern and preferences would be extremely beneficial to the oral healthcare providers. Dentists should consider their active presence on social media to raise oral health awareness and improve dental habits and attitudes. At the same time, dentists should carefully use social media platforms as a public place and not a personal diagnostic tool. This study offers a guidance for the use of social media in oral health field and could be considered as a foundation for further research.

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Table 1: Demographics of the participants

Demographics			
Variable	**Frequency**	**Percent**	**Cumulative Percent**
Participation			
Via social media distributed hyperlink	452	89.3	89.3
Attendance at a dental clinic	54	10.7	100
Total	506	100	
Gender			
Male	173	34.2	34.2
Female	333	65.8	100
Total	506	100	
Age group			
16-25	168	33.2	33.2
26-35	170	33.6	66.8
36-45	92	18.2	85
46-55	56	11.1	96
56+	20	4	100
Total	506	100	
Nationality			
Kuwaiti	399	78.9	78.9
Non-Kuwaiti	107	21.1	100
Total	506	100	
Academic level			
Below high school	4	0.8	0.8
High school	43	8.5	9.3
University level (Bachelor/Diploma)	356	70.4	79.6
Postgraduate	103	20.4	100
Total	506	100	

Table 2: Time consumed by the participants on social media

Time spent	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Less than 1 hour	27	5.3	5.3
Between 1 to 2 hours	149	29.4	34.8
Between 2 to 4 hours	155	30.6	65.4
More than 4 hours	133	26.3	91.7
I don't know	42	8.3	100
Total	506	100	

Table 3: The impact of using different social media platforms on oral health

Impact/Social Media Platform	Twitter		Instagram		Snapchat		General Usage	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Encouraged me to visit a dentist in a regular basis	74	17.20%	145	20.70%	78	18.10%	160	21.80%
Corrected misconceptions and improved my oral health habits	132	30.70%	237	33.80%	122	28.30%	246	33.50%
Encouraged me to try new products and tools related to oral health	62	14.40%	133	19.00%	66	15.30%	144	19.60%
Made me take wrong personal decision related to oral health	16	3.70%	23	3.30%	9	2.10%	33	4.50%

Prompted me to undergo oral health treatment plans that I don't need them in my opinion	16	3.70%	34	4.90%	16	3.70%	34	4.60%
Spent a lot of money for consultations or treatment I consider purely commercial	10	2.30%	18	2.60%	10	2.30%	14	1.90%
Didn't affect me at all	120	27.90%	111	15.80%	130	30.20%	104	14.10%
Total	430	100.0%	701	100.00%	431	100.00%	735	100.00%
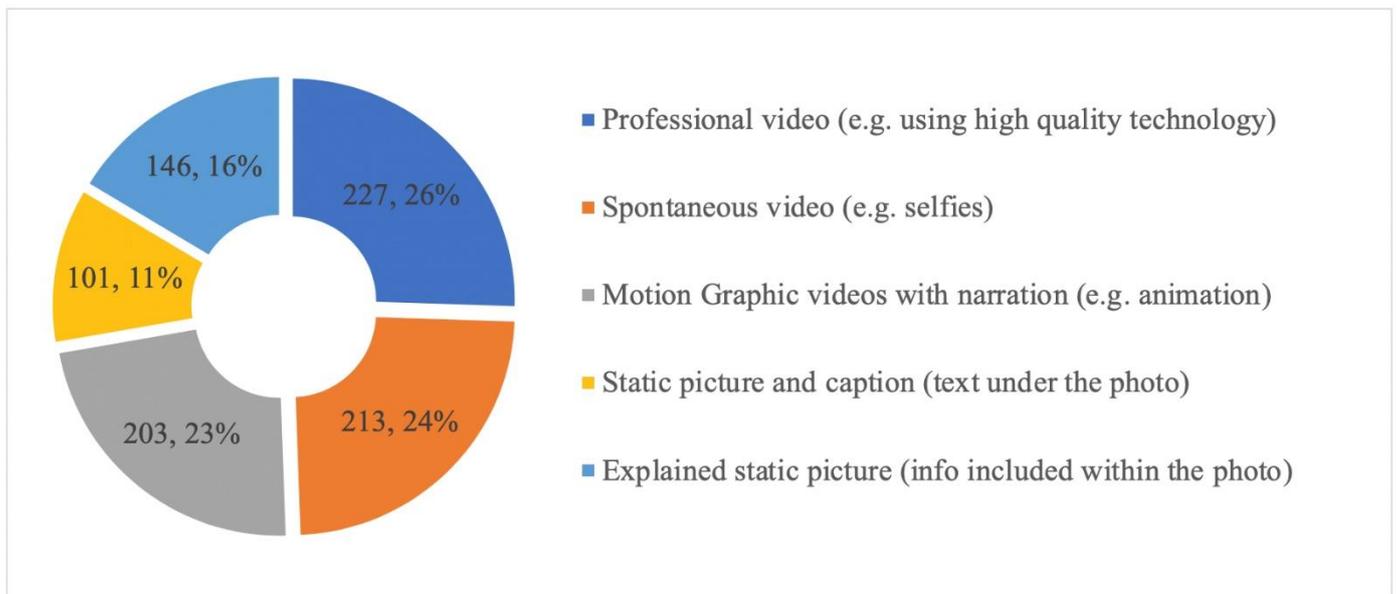
**Figure 1:** Type of post preferences
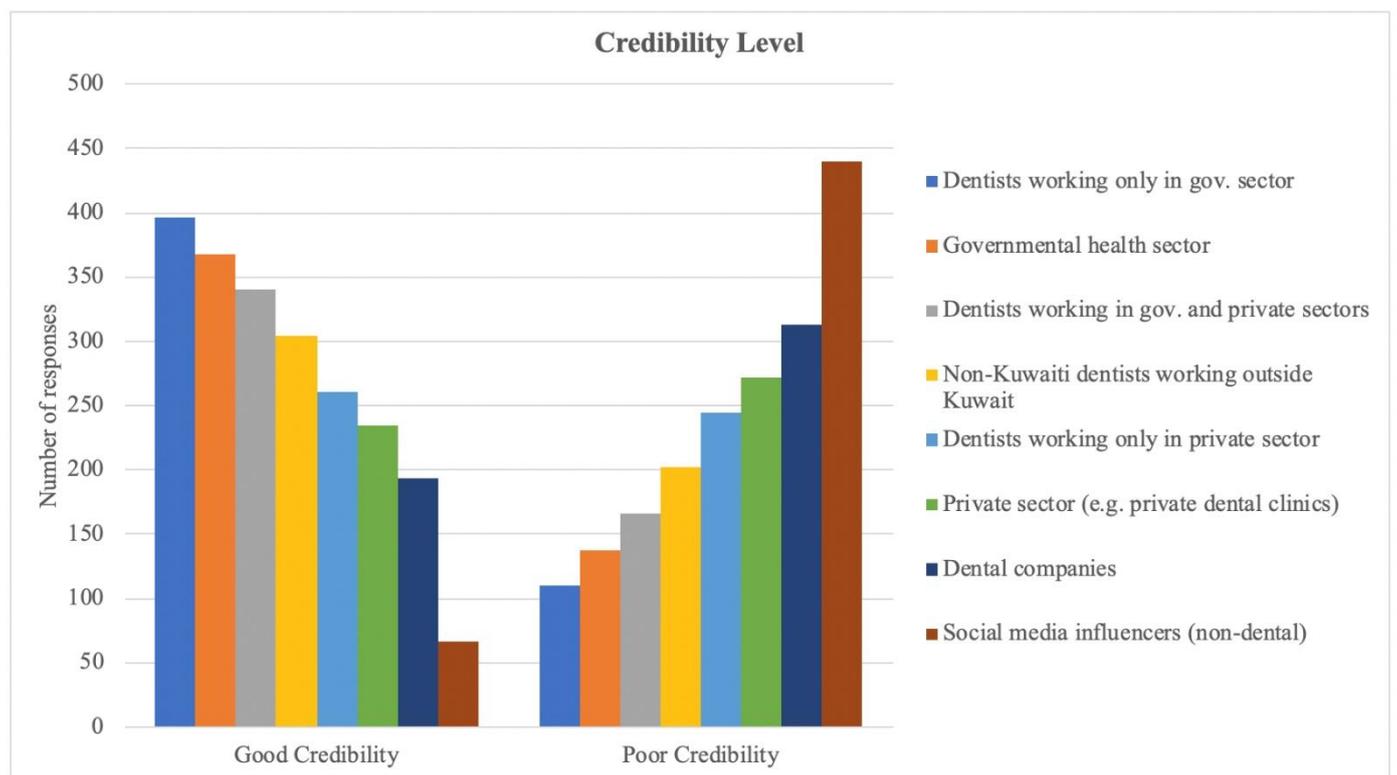
**Figure 2:** Comparison of the credibility level among different dental social media content accounts
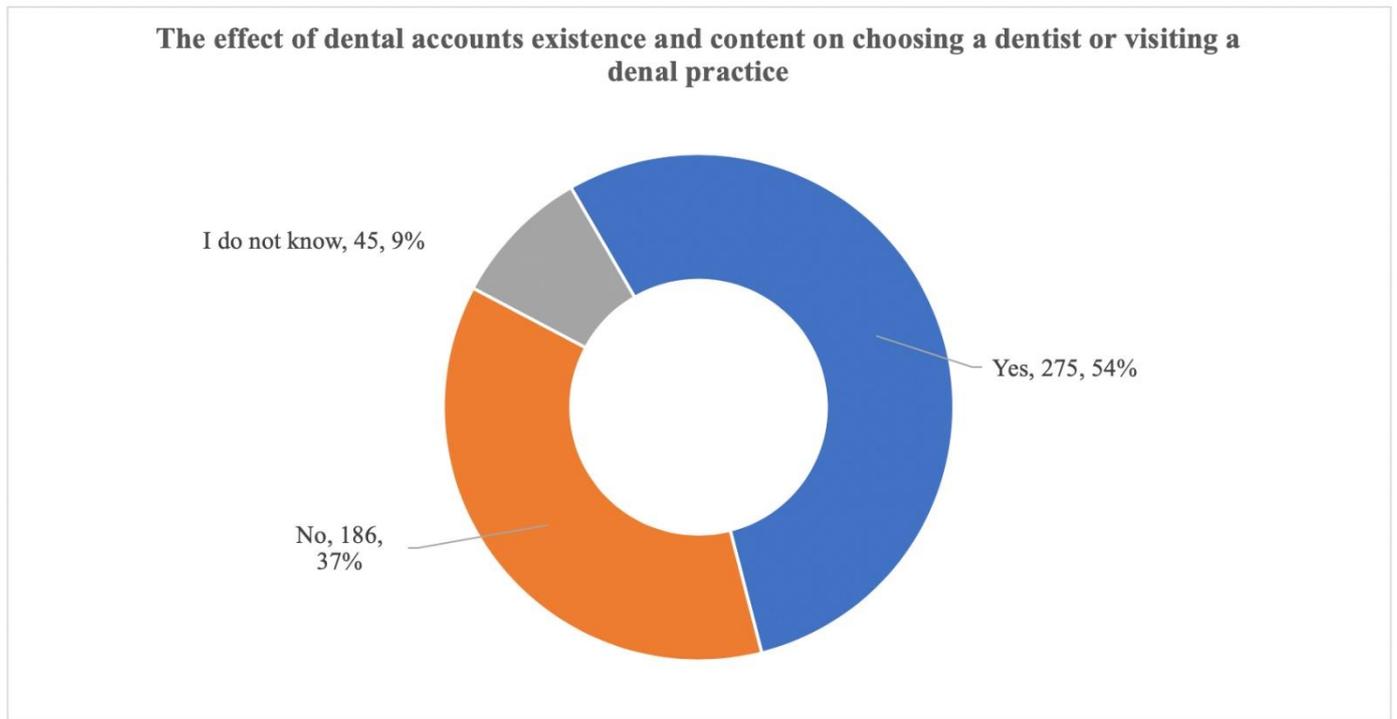
Figure 3: The response of the participants on whether dental accounts existence and content would affect their choice for a dentist or dental practice
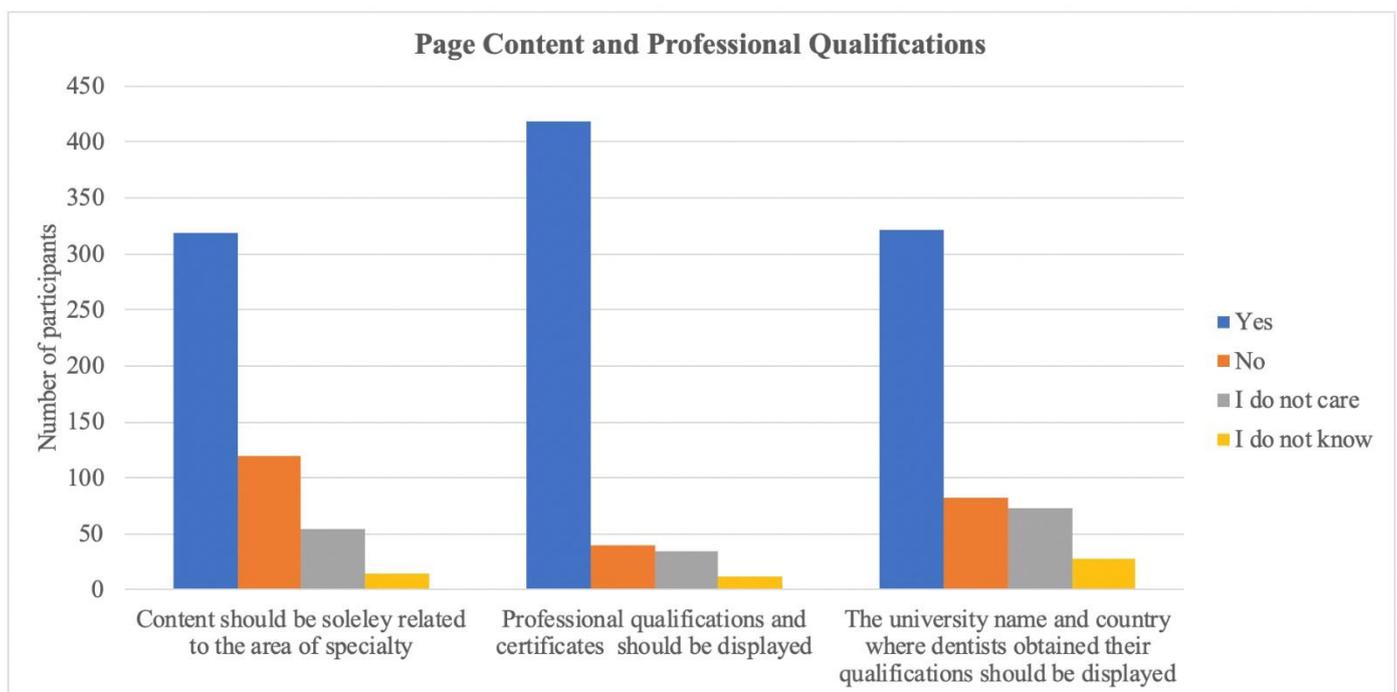

Figure 4: Participant's responses about dental accounts content and displaying professional qualification when choosing a dentist for a visit or consultation