

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Patient Preferences in Selecting a Dentist: Survey Results from the Urban Population of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Awareness of gender- or nationality-driven preconceptions can help dentists to have a better interpretation of the dentist-patient relationship. It is even more noteworthy to understand these predilections in Saudi society, where women and men are usually segregated due to religion- and culture-based considerations. This study is one of the first to explore the preferences of patients when selecting a dentist with respect to gender and nationality in the city of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Materials and methods: A total of 445 community residents residing in Riyadh were randomly selected for a cross-sectional study. The participants completed a survey designed to assess which of two factors (gender and/or nationality) were perceived as most relevant in choosing a dentist. Statistical analysis of the data was performed using the SPSS 11.5 software.

Results: Female participants did not show any preference for the gender of the dentist, whereas 40% of the male participants preferred a male dentist. Participants also favored male dentists in the fields of oral surgery (78.9%), implants (74.1%), endodontics (67.5%), orthodontics (65.8%) and prosthodontics (64.2%). An exception was noted in pediatric dentistry, for which female dentists were favored by 52.8% of the participants. Additionally, most (66.1%) participants did not have any preference for the nationality of the dentist.

Conclusion: Riyadh residents showed a general preference for a male dentist but demonstrated no preference for nationality when selecting a dentist.

Keywords: Dentist-patient relationship, Dentist, Gender preference, Saudi Arabia, Patient satisfaction, Specialties.

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INTRODUCTION

Demographic factors, such as gender, age, and nationality can contribute to patient preferences for dental and other healthcare providers. Patient preferences and provider characteristics may have implications for the treatment received. Choosing a dentist can be difficult. People's personalities, including their ways of thinking and perspectives differ and might influence the decision-making process. Several factors have been considered when patients choose a dentist or medical practitioner.^{1,2} Studies have suggested that patients prefer practitioners from their own ethnic background.³ This concordance is rooted in the perception of having a better communication, which promotes improved patient participation, understanding and tolerance in the consultation.⁴ However, other researchers have found that more patients were accepting practitioners from other ethnic backgrounds, particularly if the practitioner had a positive and welcoming personality.⁵

For several years, the demographic profile of healthcare practitioners in Saudi Arabia has become increasingly diverse.⁶ The same diversity in gender and nationality has been observed among dental practitioners in Saudi Arabia. Recent estimates from the Ministry of Health indicate a ratio of 1:2 for male to female dentists and a ratio of 1:2 for Saudi to non-Saudi dentists. This diversity brings important challenges in the delivery of effective, culturally sensitive, and respectful services to patients seeking treatment.⁶ This issue becomes more important in Saudi society, where women and men are usually segregated due to religious and cultural considerations.⁷ In the medical field, studies have shown that female practitioners communicate more with their patients during

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the collection of information, sharing and discussion of psychosocial topics, partnership building, and encouragement of preventive health practices.⁸ This style reflects a closer aligned therapeutic environment with greater patient engagement and partnership, whereas male practitioners tend to devote more time to technical practice behaviors.⁹

Academic and government institutions bear the responsibility of meeting the healthcare needs of the public by providing a workforce that is sufficient in both number and quality.¹⁰ Unfortunately, very few studies have examined the effects that practitioner demographics have on patient preferences.⁶ Research findings have revealed that knowing how patients make certain healthcare decisions can allow for a better interpretation of the dentist-patient relationship.¹¹ Awareness of gender- and ethnic-driven preconceptions can help policy makers improve the services available to patients in both the public and private sectors.¹²

Social and cultural factors might influence the selection of a medical practitioner in Saudi Arabia. The smaller number of foreign nationals in various fields of medical practice in Saudi Arabia could make the decision-making process more complex. There is a scarcity in the literature on patient preferences in choosing a dentist in Saudi Arabia. Hence, the present study aims to evaluate patient preferences in selecting a dentist in Riyadh, an urban city in Saudi Arabia.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the College of Dentistry Research Centre (CDRC), King Saud University. Participants were invited to take part in this study and were not remunerated for participation. Verbal consent was secured from participants. A total of 445 residents from Riyadh were selected for this cross-sectional study. A pilot study was conducted to identify any shortcomings. Participants provided their demographic information, including gender, age, ethnicity and marital status, which were considerably diverse. Statistical analysis of the data was performed using the SPSS 11.5 software, and univariate analysis

was used to study the independent effect of the different variables.

RESULTS

Sample characteristics: The age distribution of the participants ranged from 15 to over 70 years with the largest age group (26.1%) being 25 to 30 years. Among the participants, 69% (309) were female, 96% were Saudi, and 49% held a university degree (Table 1).

Distribution of patient preferences: The results indicate a statistically significant difference ($\chi^2 = 15.81$ and $p < 0.05$) between the responses of males and females in terms of selecting the gender of the dentist. Though the females did not show any preference for the sex of the dentist, 40% of the male participants preferred a male dentist (Graph 1). A similar statistically significant response ($\chi^2 = 40.196$ and $p < 0.05$) was observed when 16.9% of females and 2.3% of males preferred a male dentist for treating their family members. When further probed about gender preferences within the different specialties of dentistry, most study participants favored a male dentist in the fields of oral surgery (78.9%), implants (74.1%), endodontics (67.5%), orthodontics (65.8%) and prosthodontics (64.2%). An exception was noted in pediatric dentistry, for which female dentists were favored by 52.8% of the participants (Table 2 and Graph 2).

Of the 445 participants, 19% preferred to be treated by a Saudi dentist and 14% by a non-Saudi dentist. The remaining 294 (67%) participants did not show any preference in terms of nationality of the dentist (Graph 3). Additionally, the majority (61.9%) of participants from both genders preferred the private sector’s dental services rather than the government dental services.

DISCUSSION

Most studies by social scientists related to gender or nationality stereotypes have had direct implications for clinical settings.¹³ However, few studies have investigated whether these findings mirror the traditional perceptions in dentistry.¹⁴ Awareness of gender- or nationality-driven

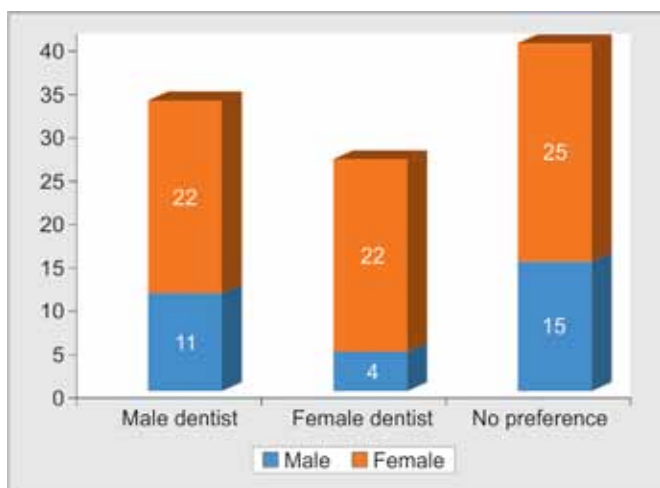
Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the study population

		Number	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	136	31
	Female	309	69
Nationality	Saudi	427	96
	Non-Saudi	18	4
Education	Graduates	219	49
	Non graduates	226	51

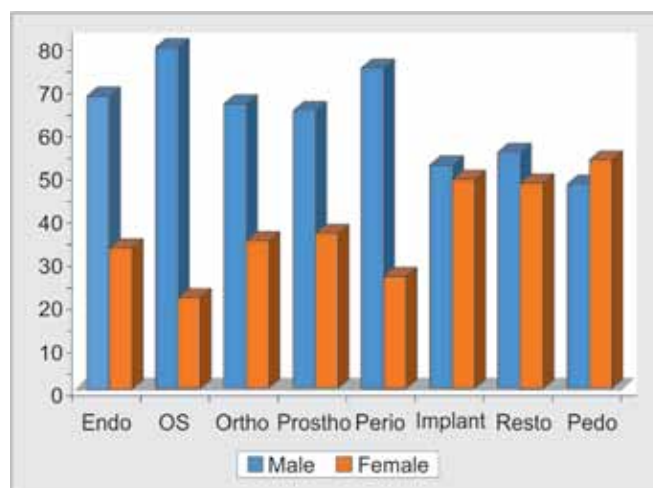
Table 2: Patient preference for dentist’s gender based on dental specialties

Specialty	Male (%)	Female (%)
Endodontics	114 (67.5)	55 (32.5)
Oral surgery	127 (78.9)	34 (21.1)
Orthodontics	104 (65.8)	54 (34.2)
Prosthodontics	102 (64.2)	57 (35.8)
Periodontics	117 (74.1)	41 (25.9)
Implant dentistry	80 (51.6)	75 (48.4)
Restorative dentistry	87 (54.4)	73 (47.6)
Pediatric dentistry	77 (54.4)	87 (52.8)

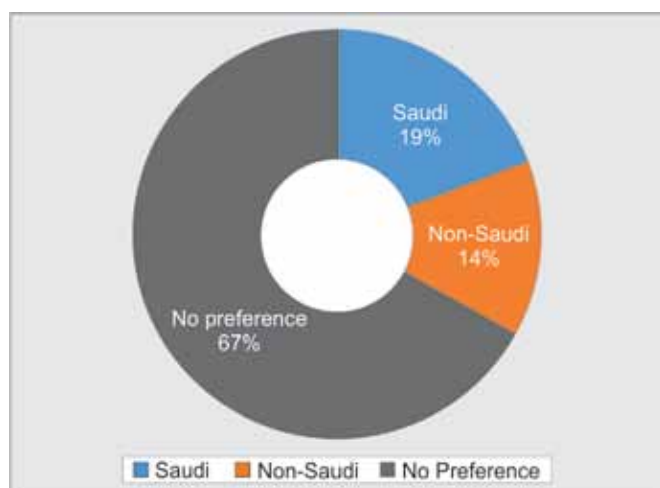




Graph 1: Patient preference for the gender of the dentist



Graph 2: Patient preference for dentist's gender based on dental specialties



Graph 3: Patient preference for the nationality of the dentist

preconceptions can help dentists anticipate patient expectations, which can play a role in the clinician-patient relationship.⁹ It is even more noteworthy to understand these predilections in Saudi society, where women and men are usually segregated due to religious and cultural considerations.¹⁵ Additionally, patient preferences in selecting a dentist according to nationality can provide important insights into the psychosocial parameters involved in dental care, particularly in Saudi Arabia, where a large number of practicing dentists are foreign nationals.¹⁶ This study is one of the first in Saudi Arabia to explore the preference of patients in the selection of a dentist with respect to gender and nationality.

In the present study, the majority of females did not show any gender preference, whereas the participating males generally preferred a male dentist, a finding that is in agreement with most previous studies.¹⁷ Nevertheless, a significant number of participants favored male dentists for treating their family members. Furthermore, with respect to different specialties within dentistry, participants expressed a preference for male dentists regard-

less of their own gender, except for pediatric dentists, a finding that is also consistent with previous studies.^{13,18,19} This could be attributed to the female practitioners having greater empathy traits, such as more humanness, compassion, communication through nonverbal cues, caring, patience and an expressive attitude towards patients.^{17,20} The preference for a male dentist might be due to various factors, such as the sense of more competency in male compared with female practitioners or the general notion of male dentists as more career-oriented and professional than their female counterparts.¹² Most participants reasoned from their previous experiences and dentist's expertise to explain their bias towards male dentists, thus validating the above assumptions. However, it is interesting to note that more than a quarter of the sample participants justified their selection using religious and cultural values.

The results of this study indicate that most of the sample participants were not concerned about the nationality of the dentist. This finding is in accordance with earlier studies.^{21,22} Participants did not rate the nationality-concordant provider higher on any measure, thus emphasizing the importance of expertise. Another key point was that all participants had a high educational background, with the majority having at least a bachelor's degree, which could help explain their preferences.

The communication between medical practitioner and patient remains the core factor in building confidence in patients.²³ Studies have shown that the physician-patient communication has a significant influence on the outcome of patient care, including patient satisfaction, compliance with treatment, recall and understanding of medical information, and coping with disease.^{24,25} Communication could be a key factor for choosing a Saudi as a dentist.

Several factors limit the generalization of this research. Because the study is based on a small sample,

we cannot generalize the findings to a larger population. In addition, the majority (70%) of respondents were female. Furthermore, the items included in the survey were by no means comprehensive. Other questions might have revealed whether gender-based assessments of dentists could be influenced by a myriad of other factors, such as the office environment or the interaction between the clinician's gender and communication style.^{26,27}

CONCLUSION

The study reveals a general bias towards male dentists irrespective of the patient's gender but no preference over the nationality of the dentist. These findings contradict the gender-nationality concordance hypothesis. Previous experience and religious and cultural values have been suggested as the reasons for selecting a male dentist. However, further research on other factors should be conducted to allow for a broader understanding of patient preferences as they play a major role in the dentist-patient relationship.

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