

Comprehensive Social Media Analysis on the SmileDirectClub Bankruptcy

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Introduction/Background

Clear Aligner Therapy, known for its transparency and ease of removal, offers a more convenient treatment approach for patients interested in more subtle and comfortable alternatives to traditional braces (Zhao, 2019). SmileDirectClub, a Teledental platform specializing in aligner treatment for orthodontic purposes, was established in 2014, to offer this convenient approach in a faster and more cost-effective way (SmileDirectClub). In contrast to many companies providing Clear Aligner Therapy, SmileDirectClub served its patients through online interaction mailing services. They would send impression kits directly to patient's homes and the molds would then be returned to the company for evaluation by nearly 250 orthodontic and dental professionals worldwide (SmileDirectClub). Despite being a well-marketed company, SmileDirectClub experienced financial difficulties revealing an outstanding debt of nearly \$900 million (SmileDirectClub).

The financial difficulties led to the closure of the company leaving patients with unanswered questions. While SmileDirectClub had promised lifetime warranties on appliances, patient-centered care, refund options, and effective doctor-patient communication in their contracts, there has been no indication of whether these commitments will be honored (SmileDirectClub).

Objectives

The purpose of this study was to assess comments and concerns of patients directly affected by Smile Direct Club and the bankruptcy. This study will help providers understand how clear aligner therapy companies can affect the dental profession.

Methods

The study gathered data from the 2 platforms and searched for responses among patients. For the purpose of collecting data, an Excel sheet was created for the three authors to extract the data needed for the study. The data extraction, including monetary reimbursement, discontinuing the treatment, and concerns regarding esthetics, problems with current dentition, losing the lifetime warranty, and quality of life. The de-identified data collected was stored in an NYU password-protected folder. A search was conducted on various social media sites TikTok, Instagram, X (twitter), and Reddit. Terms used in the search box were "Smile Direct Club," "Smile Direct Club treatment," and "Smile Direct Club therapy."

Exclusion criteria included: posts or comments that were commenting on a different clear aligner company, positive outcomes unrelated to the bankruptcy, posts before January 2021 and comment sections with less than 8 other relevant comments. A total of 2327 posts were reviewed, with 1017 moving to critical analysis after 1310 were removed due to exclusion criteria. Usernames will not be incorporated into the data analysis, as they are not needed for the purpose of the study.

Results

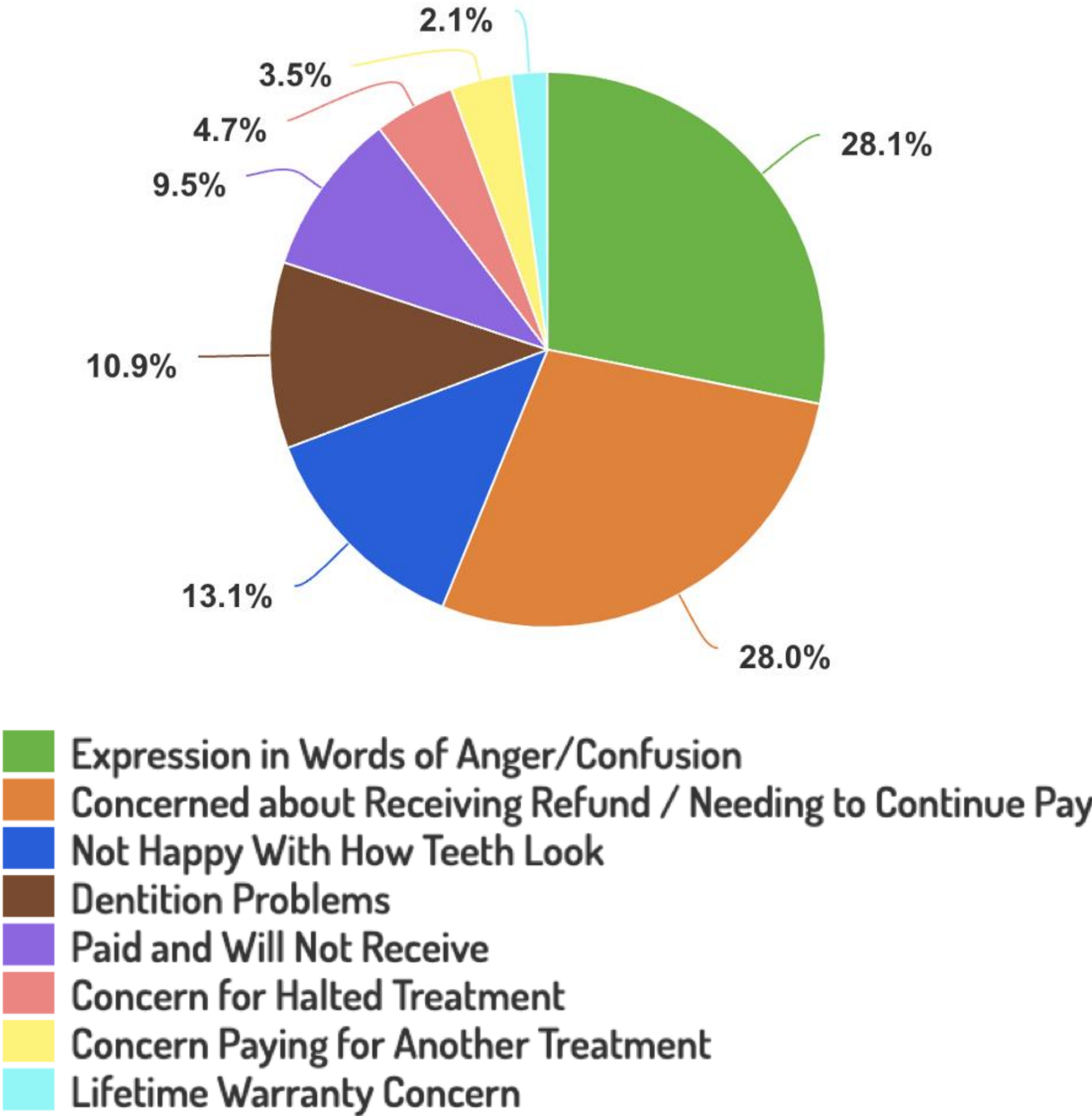


Figure 1: These various overlying themes cover relevant questions patients had regarding their experience with Smile Direct Club.

The results of this study are to provide dental practitioners with the current knowledge about this problem and to provide future patients with updated and more optimal patient-centered care. 649 posts were appraised to find themes observed and within these posts, 2,408 entries were evaluated. 213 posts and 465 comments were excluded and 1,943 comments were included. Focusing on the 1,583 comments with clinically relevant themes, the most common themes were: 'Expression in words of anger/confusion' (28%), 'Concerned about receiving a refund and/or needing to continue to pay' (27.9%), 'Not happy with how teeth look' (13%), 'dentition problems' (10.8%), 'Paid and will not receive' (9.5%), 'Concern for halted treatment' (4.7%), 'Concern for paying for another treatment' (3.5%), 'Life-Time Warranty Concern' (2.10%). Sufficient examples that addressed these issues include "My treatment stopped halfway through and I need my money back", "I paid for the treatment in full and the treatment never arrived", and "My teeth are not straight and my jaw is in excruciating pain, even though I finished my treatment".

Conclusion/Summary

A problem faced in modern dentistry is associated with well-marketed companies promising improvement in esthetics, for example teeth alignment, without having direct control by the practitioners. Problems that arise as a result is dealing with unhappy patients. This study has highlighted the vast array of patient concerns and dissatisfaction following the bankruptcy of SmileDirectClub. The sentiments expressed on social media platforms are indicative of a larger issue within the dental industry, where balance between patient care and business models is precarious. The bankruptcy of SmileDirectClub not only disrupted ongoing dental treatment plans but also undermined the trust patients place in dental service providers. While focusing on the innovative aspects of dental technology and its marketing, its imperative that dental professionals also ensure that the ethical implications and patient care standards are rigorously maintained. The findings from the bankruptcy of SmileDirectClub call for a reevaluation of current practices and underscore the necessity for improved patient-practitioner communication, enhanced regulatory measures, and a more patient-centered approach in dental healthcare services. Not only will this protect the patients, but also preserve the integrity and trust in dental healthcare providers.

References :

