

Article

Patient Facing AI Chatbots in Digital Orthodontic Education: A Comparative Evaluation of Understandability, Actionability, Quality, and Safety of Dietary Advice

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Abstract

Background/Objectives: Patient-facing artificial intelligence chatbots are increasingly used as informal digital health education tools. In orthodontics, eating and drinking advice may directly affect appliance integrity, oral hygiene, enamel demineralization, caries risk, and clear aligner use. This study compared the understandability, actionability, overall quality, and potential harmfulness of responses generated by free and paid versions of ChatGPT and Gemini to patient-oriented orthodontic dietary questions. **Methods:** This cross-sectional comparative observational study evaluated 160 responses generated from 40 Turkish patient-oriented orthodontic eating and drinking questions across five clinically relevant categories. Each question was submitted separately to ChatGPT free version, ChatGPT Plus, Gemini free version, and Gemini Pro on 1 May 2026, using newly opened independent chat sessions without prompt engineering, follow-up prompts, response regeneration, or manual editing. Responses were anonymized, randomly coded, and independently evaluated by two specialist dentists. PEMAT-P actionability was defined as the primary outcome. PEMAT-P understandability, Global Quality Score, and potentially harmful advice classification were secondary outcomes. Repeated-measures comparisons were performed using Friedman tests and Bonferroni-adjusted Wilcoxon signed-rank tests. **Results:** PEMAT-P understandability was high across all groups, with median scores of 100.0 in every group. Significant group differences were found for understandability, actionability, and Global Quality Score. ChatGPT Plus achieved the highest actionability score and Global Quality Score and produced no responses classified as potentially harmful. Potentially harmful responses were identified in ChatGPT free version, Gemini free version, and Gemini Pro. For the primary outcome, PEMAT-P actionability, the overall group difference was statistically significant with a small effect size ($\chi^2 = 20.527$, $p < 0.001$, Kendall's $W = 0.171$), while the largest effect was observed for GQS with a moderate effect size ($\chi^2 = 46.520$, $p < 0.001$, Kendall's $W = 0.388$). **Conclusions:** All chatbot groups generated highly understandable responses; however, actionability, overall quality, and safety varied across systems. ChatGPT Plus showed the strongest overall performance under the specific interface, subscription, language, and date conditions tested; however, this finding should be interpreted as a time-specific benchmark rather than evidence that paid chatbot systems are intrinsically safer or more clinically reliable. Structured evaluation, transparent reporting, digital health equity considerations, and professional oversight remain necessary before AI-generated orthodontic dietary advice can be integrated into routine patient education.



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Keywords: artificial intelligence; digital health; patient education; large language models; ChatGPT; Gemini; orthodontics; health literacy; actionability; AI safety

1. Introduction

Patients undergoing orthodontic treatment frequently seek guidance about eating and drinking habits, particularly regarding foods and beverages that may damage fixed appliances, increase enamel demineralization or caries risk [1–4], or interfere with clear aligner use [5,6]. Clear, accurate, actionable, and safety-conscious patient education is therefore essential for supporting appliance integrity, oral hygiene, and treatment adherence [7].

Large language model (LLM)-based chatbots are increasingly used by patients as informal sources of health information. These systems can provide rapid and accessible responses, but their outputs may vary in accuracy, specificity, completeness, and clinical safety [8–10]. In digital health education, the accessibility and fluency of patient-facing AI systems may create an impression of reliability; however, accessibility does not guarantee that advice is individualized, clinically complete, or safe to follow. In orthodontics, previous studies have evaluated artificial intelligence-generated responses to general orthodontic treatment, clear aligners, orthodontic emergencies, and risk-related questions [11–19]. However, practical daily-life issues such as eating and drinking during orthodontic treatment require specific attention because the advice may directly influence patient behavior during active treatment.

From a medical informatics and digital health perspective, the evaluation of patient-facing chatbot outputs should move beyond apparent fluency or readability. A response may be easy to understand while still being vague, insufficiently actionable, incomplete, or potentially unsafe. This distinction is particularly important for patient self-management, where individuals may translate chatbot-generated information into immediate behavior without professional interpretation. Structured assessment of understandability, actionability, global quality, and potential harmfulness is therefore necessary before LLM-generated health information can be considered a reliable supplementary patient education resource.

The Patient Education Materials Assessment Tool for Printable Materials (PEMAT-P) provides a structured approach for evaluating the understandability and actionability of written patient education materials [20]. The Global Quality Score (GQS) allows an overall assessment of information quality and usefulness [21]. Combining these tools with an explicit safety classification may provide a more comprehensive evaluation of AI-generated patient education content than readability or accuracy assessment alone.

This study aimed to compare the understandability, actionability, overall quality, and potential harmfulness of responses generated by free and paid user-facing versions of ChatGPT and Gemini to patient-oriented orthodontic eating and drinking questions. PEMAT-P actionability was defined as the primary outcome because the central question was whether chatbot-generated dietary advice could be translated into practical, patient-manageable behavior. PEMAT-P understandability, GQS, and potentially harmful advice classification were evaluated as secondary outcomes. The study also aimed to determine whether high understandability necessarily corresponded to high actionability and safe advice in a patient-facing digital health education context.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design and Reporting Framework

This cross-sectional comparative observational study evaluated the quality, understandability, actionability, and potential harmfulness of responses generated by LLM-based

chatbots to patient-oriented orthodontic questions. The study focused specifically on eating- and drinking-related issues during fixed orthodontic treatment and clear aligner therapy. PEMAT-P actionability was prespecified as the primary outcome because actionable advice is central to patient self-management in dietary and appliance-related behaviors. PEMAT-P understandability, GQS, and potentially harmful advice classification were evaluated as secondary outcomes. The overall workflow is presented in Figure 1.

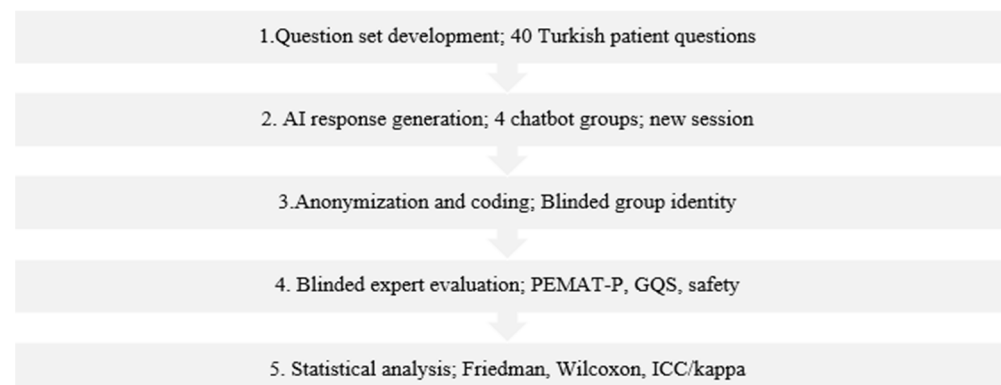


Figure 1. Study workflow for response generation, anonymization, blinded expert evaluation, and statistical analysis.

The methodological structure was aligned with relevant components of observational and LLM health advice reporting, including clear definition of the question set, chatbot groups, response-generation procedure, session independence, response sampling, evaluator blinding, scoring criteria, prespecified outcome hierarchy, statistical analysis, data availability, and safety assessment. According to local regulations, formal ethics approval was not required because the study evaluated publicly accessible chatbot outputs and did not involve human participants, patient data, biological samples, clinical interventions, patient records, or identifiable personal information.

2.2. AI Chatbot Groups

Four user-facing chatbot groups were evaluated: Group A, ChatGPT free version (<https://chatgpt.com>; accessed on 1 May 2026); Group B, ChatGPT Plus; Group C, Gemini free version (<https://gemini.google.com>; accessed on 1 May 2026); and Group D, Gemini Pro. All questions were submitted on 1 May 2026, using the latest available web-based versions of the respective chatbot platforms at the time of data collection. The chatbot groups were defined according to the publicly visible interface or subscription type available to the user. This approach was selected because the exact backend model identity may not always be consistently disclosed to users by commercial chatbot platforms, and commercial systems may be dynamically updated or routed over time. Therefore, the study reports the publicly visible interface/subscription names rather than assuming undisclosed model identities.

2.3. Platform and Response-Generation Transparency

To strengthen reproducibility and interpretation in a rapidly changing commercial AI environment, key platform and response-generation characteristics were documented before evaluation.

A concise LLM health advice reporting checklist was prepared to improve transparency and reproducibility in the context of rapidly changing commercial AI systems. The checklist documents platform identity, access date, country/region of access, language, prompt wording and session handling, response sampling, anonymization, evaluator blinding, outcome hierarchy, scoring instruments, safety classification criteria, inter-rater

reliability, data availability, and limitations related to model updating and undisclosed backend routing. This checklist is intended as a pragmatic transparency aid rather than a claim that the study was designed as a prediction-model development or validation study. These details are summarized in Table 1, and the completed checklist is provided as Supplementary File S4.

Table 1. Platform and response-generation transparency.

Variable	Description
Evaluation date	1 May 2026
Language	Turkish
Platforms evaluated	ChatGPT free version, ChatGPT Plus, Gemini free version, and Gemini Pro
Access mode	Publicly available web-based user-facing interfaces or subscription tiers
Backend model identity	Not consistently disclosed to users; therefore, undisclosed model identities were not assumed
Prompting approach	No prompt engineering, role assignment, additional instruction, follow-up prompt, or correction request
Session handling	Each question was submitted in a newly opened independent chat session
Output handling	Only the first complete response was recorded; no regeneration, manual editing, shortening, translation, or rewriting
Evaluation blinding	Responses were anonymized and randomly coded before assessment
Evaluators	Two specialist dentists independently evaluated the responses
Primary evaluation tools	PEMAT-P understandability and actionability, GQS, and potentially harmful advice classification
Country/region of access	Türkiye
Response capture method	Responses were copied exactly as generated and stored with anonymized random codes
Primary outcome	PEMAT-P actionability
Secondary outcomes	PEMAT-P understandability, GQS, and potentially harmful advice classification
Supplementary Transparency Files	Question set, anonymized response corpus, item-level scoring dataset, question-level clinical key points, and LLM reporting checklist

2.4. Development of the Question Set and Clinical Reference Key Points

A total of 40 patient-oriented orthodontic questions were developed in Turkish. The questions were written in simple lay language to reflect common concerns that patients may express during orthodontic treatment. The initial question pool was generated based on common patient concerns encountered in orthodontic clinical practice and clinically relevant dietary risk domains relevant to fixed orthodontic treatment and clear aligner therapy.

The final question set was reviewed by two specialist dentists for clinical relevance, clarity, redundancy, and patient-oriented wording before data collection. The questions were structured to represent practical eating and drinking issues encountered in daily orthodontic care and were grouped into five predefined categories, with eight questions in

each category: hard foods and bracket/archwire damage; sticky and chewy foods; sugary foods and caries or white spot lesion risk; beverages, including acidic, sugary, hot, and staining drinks; and eating and drinking habits during clear aligner therapy.

No formal a priori sample size calculation was performed because no validated effect-size estimate was available for PEMAT-P actionability comparisons across these specific user-facing chatbot interfaces in Turkish orthodontic dietary counseling. The sample size was pragmatically determined to provide balanced clinical coverage across five predefined dietary domains, with eight questions per category, resulting in 40 paired questions and 160 chatbot responses.

To strengthen clinical interpretability and safety assessment, clinically appropriate reference key points were predefined before scoring. These key points summarized the expected safe advice, such as avoiding biting hard foods directly, avoiding sticky or chewy foods that may damage appliances, limiting frequent sugary or acidic exposures, delaying brushing immediately after acidic beverages while rinsing with water, removing clear aligners before eating or drinking anything other than water, and seeking professional advice when appliance damage or persistent problems occur. These clinical key points are presented at the individual question level, together with the specific omission or advice pattern that justified a potentially harmful classification. The full list of the original Turkish patient-oriented questions, English translations, question-level clinical reference key points, and harmfulness classification rules is provided in Supplementary File S1.

2.5. Response Generation Procedure

Each question was entered separately into each chatbot system. To minimize contextual carryover, every question was asked in a newly opened independent chat session. This procedure was repeated separately for each chatbot group. The same Turkish question wording was used for all four groups.

No prompt engineering, role assignment, additional instruction, follow-up question, correction request, response regeneration, or manual editing was applied. Only the first complete response generated by each chatbot was recorded and included in the analysis. Responses were copied exactly as generated and were not shortened, translated, rewritten, or reformatted before evaluation. In total, 160 chatbot responses were evaluated, consisting of 40 responses from each chatbot group. The anonymized response corpus is reported as Supplementary File S2 to support transparency and independent interpretation of the scoring process.

2.6. Anonymization, Blinding, and Evaluation Procedure

Before evaluation, all chatbot responses were anonymized and randomly coded so that the evaluators were blinded to chatbot group identity. The two specialist dentist evaluators independently assessed each response using predefined scoring criteria. Before formal scoring, the evaluators reviewed the PEMAT-P items, GQS anchors, and potentially harmful response classification rules to support consistent interpretation.

For PEMAT-P and GQS outcomes, the mean score of the two specialist dentist evaluators was used as the final score for statistical analysis. Potentially harmful advice was coded independently by both evaluators and agreement was assessed. The statistical outputs and inter-rater reliability results are summarized in Supplementary File S3.

2.7. PEMAT-P Assessment

The PEMAT-P was used to evaluate the understandability and actionability of chatbot-generated patient education content [20]. Although PEMAT-P was originally developed for printable patient education materials, it was used in the present study as a structured framework for evaluating the understandability and actionability of written, patient-directed

chatbot responses rather than as a chatbot-specific validated measure of overall counseling quality. Therefore, PEMAT-P findings should be interpreted as expert-rated indicators of clarity and practical usability, not as a comprehensive validation of chatbot counseling performance. PEMAT-P was selected because the chatbot outputs in this study were text-based, patient-directed educational responses and were evaluated in written form without interactive follow-up.

PEMAT-P items were scored as “agree,” “disagree,” or “not applicable.” Separate percentage scores were calculated for understandability and actionability according to the standard PEMAT scoring method. Higher scores indicated better understandability or actionability. The understandability domain assessed whether the response was clear, logically organized, easy to read, and free from unnecessary complexity. The actionability domain assessed whether the response provided specific, practical, and manageable recommendations that patients could follow.

2.8. Global Quality Score

Overall quality and usefulness were assessed using the GQS [21]. The five-point ordinal scale was interpreted using predefined anchors: 1, poor quality, inaccurate, incomplete, or potentially misleading; 2, generally poor quality with important omissions and limited clinical usefulness; 3, moderate quality, generally understandable but partially incomplete or nonspecific; 4, good quality, clinically appropriate and useful with minor omissions; and 5, excellent quality, complete, patient-appropriate, actionable, clinically reliable, and safety-conscious.

Higher GQS values indicated more complete, reliable, clinically useful, and patient-appropriate responses. Because GQS is ordinal, median and interquartile range values were emphasized in addition to mean and standard deviation for descriptive reporting.

2.9. Potentially Harmful Advice Classification

Each response was also evaluated for potentially harmful advice. A response was classified as potentially harmful if it included advice or omissions that could reasonably increase the risk of bracket debonding, archwire distortion, enamel demineralization, dental caries, poor oral hygiene, inappropriate clear aligner use, delayed professional consultation, or unsafe patient behavior.

Potential harmfulness was coded as 0 when no potentially harmful advice was identified and 1 when potentially harmful advice was present. The safety classification was intentionally conservative and focused on the potential clinical consequences of advice given to a lay orthodontic patient.

2.10. Statistical Analysis

Statistical analyses were performed using the final dataset of 40 paired questions across four chatbot groups. Statistical analyses were performed using Python version 3.13.5 with the SciPy statistical package version 1.17.0. The primary outcome was PEMAT-P actionability. PEMAT-P understandability, GQS, and potentially harmful advice classification were secondary outcomes. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all outcome variables. Continuous and ordinal outcomes were presented as mean $\pm$ standard deviation and median with interquartile range. Categorical variables were presented as frequency and percentage.

Because the same 40 questions were submitted to all four chatbot groups, repeated-measures group comparisons were performed using the Friedman test. When a statistically significant difference was detected, pairwise comparisons were conducted using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test with Bonferroni correction. Kendall's W was calculated to determine the effect size for Friedman analyses. The primary interpretation focused on

PEMAT-P actionability, while statistically significant differences in secondary outcomes were interpreted cautiously in light of the outcome hierarchy and the observed ceiling effect for understandability.

Inter-rater reliability was assessed using intraclass correlation coefficients for PEMAT-P understandability, PEMAT-P actionability, and GQS scores. Cohen's kappa was used for binary potentially harmful advice classification, and weighted kappa was used as an additional reliability index for ordinal GQS ratings. Because potentially harmful responses were infrequent, agreement for harmfulness was interpreted together with raw agreement and category-level distributions. Category-based comparisons were considered descriptive because each category contained only eight questions. A *p* value of <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

3. Results

3.1. Overall Performance of Chatbot Groups

A total of 160 chatbot responses were evaluated, including 40 responses from each chatbot group. The same 40 patient-oriented orthodontic eating and drinking questions were submitted to all four chatbot groups. Final analyses were performed using the mean scores of two specialist dentist evaluators.

Overall descriptive results are presented in Table 2. PEMAT-P understandability scores were high in all groups, with median values of 100.0 in every group. Greater differences were observed in the primary outcome, PEMAT-P actionability, and in GQS scores. Group B showed the highest PEMAT-P actionability and GQS scores and generated no responses classified as potentially harmful.

Table 2. Overall performance of chatbot groups.

Outcome	Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D
Number of responses	40	40	40	40
PEMAT-U, mean $\pm$ SD	96.25 $\pm$ 9.46	100.00 $\pm$ 0.00	99.77 $\pm$ 1.44	98.52 $\pm$ 6.59
PEMAT-U, median [IQR]	100.0 [100.0–100.0]	100.0 [100.0–100.0]	100.0 [100.0–100.0]	100.0 [100.0–100.0]
PEMAT-A, mean $\pm$ SD	77.92 $\pm$ 34.26	99.58 $\pm$ 2.64	71.25 $\pm$ 39.58	65.83 $\pm$ 39.76
PEMAT-A, median [IQR]	100.0 [50.0–100.0]	100.0 [100.0–100.0]	100.0 [33.3–100.0]	100.0 [33.3–100.0]
GQS, mean $\pm$ SD	3.79 $\pm$ 0.72	4.88 $\pm$ 0.32	3.98 $\pm$ 0.80	4.05 $\pm$ 0.93
GQS, median [IQR]	4.0 [3.0–4.0]	5.0 [5.0–5.0]	4.0 [3.0–5.0]	4.0 [3.0–5.0]
Potentially harmful responses, <i>n</i> (%)	3 (7.5)	0 (0.0)	2 (5.0)	1 (2.5)

PEMAT-U: PEMAT-P understandability; PEMAT-A: PEMAT-P actionability; GQS: Global Quality Score; IQR: interquartile range. Group A: ChatGPT free version; Group B: ChatGPT Plus; Group C: Gemini free version; Group D: Gemini Pro.

3.2. Repeated-Measures Group Comparisons

Friedman test results are shown in Table 3. Statistically significant differences were found among the four groups for PEMAT-P understandability, PEMAT-P actionability, and GQS. For the primary outcome, PEMAT-P actionability, the overall group difference was statistically significant. Although the PEMAT-P understandability difference also reached statistical significance, its clinical magnitude appeared limited because median scores were 100.0 across all groups and Kendall's W indicated a small effect size. Differences in actionability and especially GQS were more clinically meaningful.

Table 3. Friedman test results for repeated-measures group comparisons.

Outcome	χ^2	df	p Value	Kendall's W
PEMAT-U (%)	16.600	3	<0.001	0.138
PEMAT-A (%)	20.527	3	<0.001	0.171
GQS	46.520	3	<0.001	0.388

All analyses were based on the same 40 questions evaluated across four chatbot groups.

Bonferroni-adjusted post hoc comparisons are summarized in Table 4. For the primary outcome, PEMAT-P actionability, Group B had significantly higher scores than Group A ($p = 0.005$), Group C ($p = 0.002$), and Group D ($p < 0.001$). No statistically significant differences were observed among Groups A, C, and D after Bonferroni correction. For GQS, Group B also scored significantly higher than Groups A, C, and D (all $p < 0.001$). Although PEMAT-P understandability differed significantly between Groups A and B ($p = 0.040$), the clinical relevance of this difference was limited because median understandability scores were 100.0 in all groups.

Table 4. Bonferroni-adjusted post hoc comparisons.

Pairwise Comparison	PEMAT-U	PEMAT-A	GQS
Group A vs. Group B	0.040	0.005	<0.001
Group A vs. Group C	0.051 ns	1.000 ns	1.000 ns
Group A vs. Group D	0.636 ns	0.282 ns	1.000 ns
Group B vs. Group C	1.000 ns	0.002	<0.001
Group B vs. Group D	0.653 ns	<0.001	<0.001
Group C vs. Group D	1.000 ns	1.000 ns	1.000 ns

ns: not statistically significant after Bonferroni correction.

3.3. Category-Based Descriptive Findings

Category-based descriptive results for PEMAT-P actionability are presented in Table 5, and category-based GQS results are presented in Table 6. Group B showed consistently high actionability and quality scores across all categories. The largest descriptive differences among groups were observed in the sticky and chewy foods category and in the beverages category.

Table 5. Category-based descriptive PEMAT-P actionability scores.

Category	Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D
Hard foods and bracket/wire damage	83.33	100.00	85.42	91.67
Sticky and chewy foods	43.75	100.00	62.50	47.92
Sugary foods and caries/white spot risk	77.08	100.00	81.25	52.08
Beverages	89.58	97.92	54.17	58.33
Clear aligner eating/drinking habits	95.83	100.00	72.92	79.17

Values are presented as category mean PEMAT-P actionability scores (%). Category-based analyses were descriptive because each category included eight questions.

Table 6. Category-based descriptive Global Quality Score results.

Category	Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D
Hard foods and bracket/wire damage	3.69	4.88	4.12	4.62
Sticky and chewy foods	3.38	4.81	4.00	3.62
Sugary foods and caries/white spot risk	3.75	5.00	3.88	3.75
Beverages	4.12	4.69	3.75	3.88
Clear aligner eating/drinking habits	4.00	5.00	4.12	4.38

Values are presented as category mean GQS values. Category-based analyses were descriptive because each category included eight questions.

3.4. Potentially Harmful Advice

Potentially harmful responses were observed in Groups A, C, and D, but not in Group B. The distribution of potentially harmful responses by category is shown in Table 7. Potentially harmful responses were most frequently observed in the sticky and chewy foods category for Group A. Because the absolute number of potentially harmful responses was low, these findings should be interpreted descriptively rather than as evidence of definitive statistical differences in safety across systems. Nevertheless, the identified safety concerns were clinically relevant because they involved advice or omissions that could plausibly increase appliance damage, cariogenic or erosive risk, inappropriate aligner use, or delayed professional consultation.

Table 7. Distribution of potentially harmful responses by category.

Category	Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D
Hard foods and bracket/wire damage	0	0	1	0
Sticky and chewy foods	2	0	0	0
Sugary foods and caries/white spot risk	0	0	0	1
Beverages	0	0	0	0
Clear aligner eating/drinking habits	1	0	1	0
Total, <i>n</i> (%)	3 (7.5)	0 (0.0)	2 (5.0)	1 (2.5)

Values indicate the number of responses classified as containing potentially harmful advice. Harmfulness was defined as advice or omissions that could plausibly increase appliance damage, cariogenic or erosive risk, inappropriate aligner use, poor oral hygiene, unsafe behavior, or delayed professional consultation.

To further illustrate how potentially harmful and non-harmful responses were differentiated, representative examples are presented in Table 8. These examples were selected by comparing chatbot response patterns with the predefined clinical key points and harmfulness indicators.

Table 8. Representative examples of responses classified as potentially harmful or non-harmful.

Question Topic	Chatbot Group	Classification	Response Pattern or Short Excerpt	Clinical Concern	Expected Safer Advice
Sugar-free gum with fixed appliances	ChatGPT free version	Potentially harmful	“Sugar-free gum does not damage braces, but there is still a risk of sticking.”	May imply that sugar-free gum is appliance-safe, although chewing forces and stickiness can still loosen brackets or distort wires.	Clarify that sugar-free does not mean appliance-safe; gum should generally be avoided unless specifically permitted by the treating orthodontist.

Table 8. Cont.

Question Topic	Chatbot Group	Classification	Response Pattern or Short Excerpt	Clinical Concern	Expected Safer Advice
Small amount of gum with braces	ChatGPT free version	Potentially harmful	"A small amount of gum can be chewed, but caution is needed."	Frames limited gum chewing as acceptable despite persistent risk of sticking, wire deformation, or bracket debonding.	Advise avoidance of gum during fixed orthodontic treatment and recommend consulting the orthodontist before chewing any gum.
Hard foods cut into small pieces	Gemini free version	Potentially harmful	"Yes, eating hard foods by cutting them into small pieces is safer."	May suggest that cutting hard foods makes them generally safe, while very hard foods can still damage brackets or archwires.	State that small pieces reduce but do not eliminate risk; very hard foods should still be avoided and chewing should be done carefully with posterior teeth.
Sweets after brushing	Gemini Pro	Potentially harmful	"No problem; this is exactly what you should do."	May imply that brushing fully neutralizes frequent sugar exposure; does not address sugar frequency, interdental cleaning, or white spot lesion risk.	Explain that brushing helps but does not fully offset frequent sugar intake; recommend limiting frequency, preferably consuming sweets with meals, and cleaning carefully around brackets.
Rewearing aligners when brushing is not possible outside	Gemini free version	Potentially harmful	"Brush as soon as possible, preferably within 30 min, and then wear the aligner."	Could lead patients to leave aligners out for extended periods, reducing prescribed wear time.	If brushing is not possible, rinse the mouth and aligner with water, reinsert the aligner to maintain wear time, and brush as soon as feasible.
Brushing after cola	ChatGPT Plus	Non-harmful	"Rinse with water first; wait about 30 min before brushing with fluoride toothpaste."	Appropriately avoids immediate brushing after acidic exposure, reducing potential enamel abrasion risk.	Rinse after acidic drinks, wait approximately 30 min before brushing, and limit acidic/sugary beverage intake.
Eating with clear aligners	ChatGPT Plus	Non-harmful	"No. Remove the aligner while eating."	Correctly identifies risks of aligner distortion, staining, food entrapment, and caries.	Remove aligners before meals, store them safely, and clean teeth/aligners before reinsertion when possible.
Sticky food residue with braces	ChatGPT Plus	Non-harmful	"Water rinsing helps but is not enough; use a toothbrush, interdental brush, and floss/superfloss if needed."	Provides actionable hygiene advice and does not minimize plaque-retention risk.	Water rinsing alone is insufficient after sticky foods; brush and use interdental cleaning as soon as possible.
Cola during fixed orthodontic treatment	ChatGPT Plus	Non-harmful	"Cola is acidic and often sugary; avoid if possible, rinse with water, and brush after about 30 min."	Correctly addresses sugar, acidity, enamel risk, and delayed brushing.	Limit or avoid frequent cola intake; rinse with water after consumption and delay brushing after acidic exposure.

Table 8. Cont.

Question Topic	Chatbot Group	Classification	Response Pattern or Short Excerpt	Clinical Concern	Expected Safer Advice
White spot prevention with braces	ChatGPT Plus	Non-harmful	“Brush twice daily with fluoride toothpaste; clean around brackets and limit sugary/acidic drinks.”	Covers the main preventive elements for white spot lesions during fixed orthodontic treatment.	Emphasize fluoride toothpaste, interdental cleaning, reduced sugary/acidic exposure, and regular orthodontic checks.

Potentially harmful responses were generally characterized by incomplete safety warnings, overgeneralized reassurance, or advice that could lead to appliance damage, increased caries risk, reduced aligner wear time, or inappropriate oral hygiene behavior. In contrast, non-harmful responses provided more balanced, actionable, and clinically safer guidance.

3.5. Inter-Rater Reliability

Inter-rater reliability results are shown in Table 9. Agreement between the two specialist dentist evaluators was high for PEMAT-P understandability and GQS, and acceptable for PEMAT-P actionability. Complete raw agreement was observed for potentially harmful advice classification; however, because harmful responses were infrequent, the kappa value should be interpreted together with the low event frequency and raw agreement.

Table 9. Inter-rater reliability.

Outcome	Reliability Measure	Value
PEMAT-U (%)	ICC(2,1), absolute agreement	0.982
PEMAT-A (%)	ICC(2,1), absolute agreement	0.797
GQS	ICC(2,1), absolute agreement	0.987
GQS	Quadratic weighted Cohen’s kappa	0.987
Potentially harmful advice classification	Cohen’s kappa	1.000
PEMAT item-level binary ratings	Cohen’s kappa	0.774

ICC: intraclass correlation coefficient.

4. Discussion

4.1. Principal Findings

This study evaluated the understandability, actionability, overall quality, and potential harmfulness of responses generated by free and paid user-facing versions of ChatGPT and Gemini to patient-oriented orthodontic eating and drinking questions. The primary outcome was PEMAT-P actionability. The main finding was that all chatbot groups produced highly understandable responses, whereas clinically relevant differences were observed in actionability, overall quality, and safety. Within this single-date Turkish-language evaluation of publicly accessible user-facing interfaces, ChatGPT Plus showed the strongest overall performance in this dataset, with the highest PEMAT-P actionability and GQS scores and no responses classified as potentially harmful.

The findings also demonstrate that high understandability should not be interpreted as evidence of high actionability or clinical safety. Although median understandability was 100.0 across all groups, actionability scores varied substantially and potentially harmful responses were identified in three of the four chatbot groups. Although actionability differed significantly among chatbot groups, median actionability values were also high in several groups, indicating a compressed upper-end distribution. Therefore, differences in actionability should be interpreted together with interquartile ranges, category-level patterns, and qualitative safety findings rather than relying only on median values. High

understandability may create a false sense of reliability when responses are incomplete, nonspecific, or unsafe. This distinction is important for patient-facing digital health information because fluent and readable content may still fail to provide specific, practical, and safe instructions.

4.2. Patient-Facing AI as a Digital Health Education Tool

From a digital health perspective, LLM-based chatbots are increasingly functioning as easily accessible patient education tools outside the direct clinical encounter. This accessibility may support patient empowerment and timely information seeking, particularly when patients have immediate practical questions. However, the same accessibility also increases the importance of evaluating whether chatbot outputs are sufficiently specific, actionable, and safe for lay users to follow.

The present study suggests that patient-facing AI systems may provide useful supplementary educational content in orthodontics, but their performance should not be evaluated solely by fluency or readability. For behavior-dependent topics such as eating and drinking during orthodontic treatment, a clinically useful response must explain what the patient should do, what should be avoided, when professional advice is required, and how risks such as appliance damage, enamel demineralization, caries, staining, or inappropriate aligner use can be minimized.

4.3. Medical Informatics Implications

From a medical informatics perspective, the results highlight the need for structured evaluation frameworks for LLM-generated patient education. Patients may interact with commercial chatbots outside clinical supervision, and the outputs may influence self-management behaviors during active treatment. Therefore, evaluation should include not only readability or surface-level fluency but also actionability, clinical usefulness, and safety.

The model-dependent variability observed in this study is also relevant to digital health communication. Commercial chatbot systems may differ according to subscription tier, interface, backend model routing, system updates, and safety tuning. Consequently, performance measured at a single time point should be interpreted as a time-specific benchmark rather than a permanent ranking of model quality. Future studies should document platform, date, language, prompt procedure, interface context, response sampling, and evaluation criteria as transparently as possible.

4.4. Digital Health Equity and Accessibility Considerations

The observed performance gap between free and paid user-facing systems may have implications for digital health equity. If subscription-based interfaces provide more actionable or clinically complete information than free interfaces, patients with different levels of digital access, financial resources, language proficiency, or AI literacy may receive advice that differs in practical usefulness and potential safety. In patient education, such variability is important because eating and drinking advice can influence immediate self-management behaviors during active orthodontic treatment.

For this reason, implementation of patient-facing AI in digital health education should not focus only on average model performance. Developers, clinicians, and health systems should consider whether educational safeguards, clinician-reviewed templates, clear escalation prompts, and accessible patient-facing materials can reduce unequal exposure to incomplete or unsafe advice across different user groups. In the present context, AI-generated orthodontic dietary advice should be viewed as a supplementary educational resource rather than a substitute for individualized professional guidance, regardless of subscription tier.

4.5. Safety, Ethical, and Implementation Considerations

The presence of potentially harmful advice, even at low frequency, has important implications for ethical and safe implementation of patient-facing AI in health education. Chatbots do not automatically know the patient's age, caries risk, appliance type, oral hygiene level, dietary habits, socioeconomic context, health literacy, or treatment stage. Therefore, responses that appear generally reasonable may still be incomplete for an individual patient. In clinical implementation, AI-generated advice should be framed as supplementary and should encourage patients to consult their orthodontic professional when advice is uncertain, symptoms persist, or appliance damage occurs.

Digital health literacy is another important consideration. Patients with limited health literacy may place excessive trust in fluent chatbot responses, especially when the response is confident and easy to read. For this reason, AI-generated patient education should include clear warning signs, practical steps, and professional consultation prompts. Healthcare systems and clinicians should avoid presenting patient-facing AI tools as substitutes for individualized advice unless the tools have been prospectively validated and integrated with appropriate clinical safeguards.

4.6. Importance of Actionability and Safety in Orthodontic Dietary Advice

Orthodontic dietary advice is clinically meaningful because patient behavior can directly influence treatment complications. Patients require practical guidance such as avoiding direct biting into hard foods, avoiding sticky or chewy foods that can dislodge brackets or distort wires, limiting frequent sugar and acid exposure, rinsing after acidic beverages, avoiding immediate brushing after acid exposure, removing clear aligners before eating or drinking anything other than water, and cleaning teeth or rinsing when brushing is not immediately possible before reinserting aligners.

A response that simply states that a food or beverage is “generally acceptable” may be understandable but insufficient if it omits conditions, frequency limits, hygiene instructions, or warning signs requiring professional consultation. The lower and more variable actionability scores observed in Groups A, C, and D indicate that some chatbot outputs may not consistently translate general information into patient-manageable steps. The category-based descriptive findings provide further clinical context for these differences. Lower actionability was particularly evident in the sticky and chewy foods category and in the beverages category. These lower scores appeared to reflect response patterns such as overly permissive statements that certain foods or drinks were “generally acceptable,” insufficient emphasis on frequency or mode of consumption, failure to clearly warn against sticky or chewy foods that may debond brackets or distort archwires, and incomplete distinction between water and other beverages during clear aligner use. In these situations, a response may remain understandable but may not provide the level of specificity needed for safe patient self-management.

Although the number of potentially harmful responses was limited, the presence of any unsafe advice is important in a patient-facing context. Even infrequent unsafe recommendations may increase bracket debonding, archwire distortion, enamel demineralization, caries development, aligner staining or deformation, poor oral hygiene, or delayed professional consultation. Therefore, LLM-generated orthodontic dietary advice should be framed as supplementary and should include clear advice to consult the treating orthodontic professional for individualized recommendations.

4.7. Comparison with Previous Studies

The present findings are consistent with previous studies showing that LLMs may provide useful orthodontic information but their performance varies according to model

type, language, topic, and evaluation criteria. Abu Arqub et al. reported that ChatGPT responses concerning clear aligners were not uniformly accurate [11], while Alkhamees found that ChatGPT-4 provided generally good orthodontic information but should not be considered a substitute for professional opinion [22]. Similarly, Dursun and Bilici Geçer concluded that AI models may serve as supportive patient information tools in orthodontics, although their responses require professional verification [23].

The most directly comparable evidence is the study by Sökmen et al., who evaluated nutritional advice generated by LLMs for orthodontic patients and compared it with professional recommendations [24]. They reported that AI-generated responses were generally understandable and broadly compatible with recommendations but often lacked sufficient detail regarding tooth decay, plaque accumulation, and acidic environments. The present study expands this evidence by showing that, even when responses are highly understandable, actionability and safety may differ substantially across user-facing chatbot systems.

Model-dependent variability has also been reported in other orthodontic AI studies. Naureen and Kiani found that ChatGPT-4 outperformed Google Bard in orthodontic knowledge questions [13]. Chen et al. compared orthodontic pre-treatment information generated by ChatGPT, Gemini, and Ernie Bot and reported that LLMs could answer patient questions to some extent, but professional guidance remained necessary [12]. Salmanpour et al. showed that expert responses were generally rated higher than ChatGPT-4.0 and Microsoft Copilot responses by both patients and orthodontists [14]. Erdem et al. reported performance differences among ChatGPT-3.5, ChatGPT-4.0, Copilot, and Gemini in orthodontic emergency scenarios [15], while Fan et al. emphasized cautious use of chatbots for orthodontic risk information [16]. Together, these studies support the conclusion that LLM-generated orthodontic information may be useful in some contexts but remains variable and requires professional oversight. The present findings are also consistent with emerging evidence from other dental disciplines. Chau et al. evaluated GPT-4.0, Claude-2, and Llama-2 using text-based multiple-choice questions in prosthodontic and restorative dentistry and reported model-dependent differences in response accuracy and reasoning quality [25]. Similarly, Rokhshad et al. assessed the efficacy and empathy of five AI chatbots in answering frequently asked questions on oral oncology and found that GPT-4 produced the highest overall-quality responses, although limitations remained in empathy and citation accuracy [26]. These studies support the broader interpretation that AI chatbot performance in dentistry is domain-specific, model-dependent, and sensitive to the evaluation criteria used. Therefore, favorable performance in one dental context or one chatbot interface should not be generalized uncritically to other clinical topics, languages, patient populations, or outcome domains.

The Turkish-language design of this study is also important. Boztaş Demir and Görgülü reported that ChatGPT and Gemini differed in Turkish orthodontic responses, with ChatGPT performing better in completeness and Gemini showing better readability [18]. This supports the view that LLM performance should be assessed separately for each language and outcome domain. Fluency, readability, and consistency should not be interpreted as equivalent to clinical correctness or safety.

4.8. Strengths

This study has several strengths. First, it evaluated patient-oriented questions that reflect practical daily-life concerns during orthodontic treatment. Second, the same 40 questions were submitted to all chatbot groups using independent chat sessions, supporting paired repeated-measures comparisons. Third, the evaluators were blinded to chatbot identity after anonymization and random coding. Fourth, the study combined PEMAT-P, GQS, and potentially harmful advice classification, allowing simultaneous assessment

of understandability, actionability, overall quality, and safety. Fifth, inter-rater reliability was assessed and showed high or acceptable agreement across outcomes. Sixth, the study documented platform and response-generation conditions to improve transparency in a rapidly evolving AI environment. Seventh, the revised Supplementary Data Structure, including the response corpus, item-level scoring dataset, question-level clinical reference key points, and LLM reporting checklist, strengthens reproducibility and interpretability without changing the reference flow of the manuscript.

4.9. Limitations

This study also has limitations. First, chatbot responses were generated on a single date, 1 May 2026, and outputs may change over time because of system updates, model routing, or changes in safety tuning. Second, chatbot groups were defined according to publicly visible interface or subscription type because exact backend model identities may not always be consistently disclosed by commercial platforms. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as a time-specific benchmark of user-facing interface and subscription conditions rather than a permanent ranking of model quality. Third, the study evaluated Turkish patient-oriented questions, which may limit generalizability to other languages and cultural contexts.

Fourth, although responses were independently evaluated by two specialist dentists using predefined criteria, expert-based scoring inevitably includes some degree of subjective judgment. In addition, both evaluators were also study authors, which may introduce a potential risk of assessment bias despite anonymization, random coding, predefined scoring criteria, and blinded evaluation of chatbot group identity. In addition, PEMAT-P was adapted beyond its original purpose as a tool for evaluating printable patient education materials; therefore, its construct validity for short, conversational, AI-generated responses may be limited.

Fifth, the study focused only on eating- and drinking-related orthodontic questions; other domains such as pain, emergencies, oral hygiene, retention, treatment duration, radiology, or treatment planning may yield different results. Sixth, the study assessed quality, actionability, and safety of text outputs but did not measure actual patient comprehension, trust, intention to follow advice, behavioral change, or clinical outcomes.

Seventh, the study evaluated only the first complete response to each question and did not simulate interactive patient-chatbot conversations. In real-world use, patients may ask follow-up questions, provide additional context, or receive different responses after clarification. Eighth, the chatbot prompts did not include individualized patient factors such as age, caries risk, appliance type, oral hygiene status, diet, or treatment stage. Finally, although reference key points were predefined to support clinical interpretation, the study did not perform a full guideline-concordance analysis for every individual response.

4.10. Future Research

Future studies should include larger and more diverse question sets, multiple languages, repeated testing over time, and direct comparison with clinician-authored responses. Studies should also evaluate patient comprehension, trust, intention to follow advice, real-world behavioral effects, and whether free and paid AI interfaces produce systematically different patient education quality over time. In addition, future research should develop standardized reporting frameworks for LLM health information studies, including documentation of platform, date, language, prompt procedure, response sampling, evaluator blinding, reference standards, raw response availability, safety assessment, and digital health equity considerations.

5. Conclusions

In this single-date Turkish-language evaluation, all tested chatbot groups generated highly understandable responses to patient-oriented orthodontic eating and drinking questions. However, differences were more pronounced in the primary outcome, PEMAT-P actionability, as well as in overall quality and potentially harmful advice. ChatGPT Plus demonstrated the strongest overall performance under the tested interface and subscription conditions, with the highest PEMAT-P actionability and GQS scores and no responses classified as potentially harmful. Nevertheless, this finding should be interpreted as a time-specific benchmark rather than a permanent ranking of chatbot systems, and potentially harmful advice was identified in the other chatbot groups. These findings indicate that understandable AI-generated orthodontic dietary information is not necessarily actionable or safe. Patient-facing AI chatbots may have a supplementary role in orthodontic dietary counseling and patient education; however, structured evaluation, transparent reporting, attention to digital health equity, and professional oversight remain necessary before such tools can be integrated into routine patient education.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/healthcare14142192/s1>, File S1: Patient-Oriented Question Set and Predefined Clinical Key Points; File S2: Full Chatbot Response Corpus; File S3: Statistical Outputs and Inter-Rater Reliability; File S4: Adapted LLM Health Advice Reporting Checklist.

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