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BRIDGING VIRTUAL AND CLINICAL WORKFLOWS WITH DIGITAL ARTICULATORS: A NARRATIVE REVIEW

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Abstract:

Traditional mechanical articulators have long been used in prosthodontics to simulate mandibular movement, yet they are limited in reproducing patient-specific occlusal dynamics. The emergence of digital articulators addresses these limitations through virtual, real-time simulations integrated within the digital dentistry ecosystem.

Digital articulators replicate mandibular movements using patient-specific data derived from intraoral scans, CBCT imaging, facial scans, and jaw tracking devices. They are classified as mathematically simulated (MS) or completely adjustable (CA), with CA systems offering six degrees of freedom for individualized motion replication. When integrated with CAD/CAM platforms and motion capture systems, digital articulators enhance the accuracy and efficiency of diagnosis and prosthesis fabrication. Clinical applications include full-mouth rehabilitation, implant prosthodontics, occlusal splint design, esthetic restorations, and TMD management. Studies confirm their high trueness (≤100 μm deviation) and reproducibility, while reducing chairside occlusal adjustments. Integration with systems like Exocad, 3Shape, MODJAW, and Zebris allows dynamic occlusion visualization and interdisciplinary collaboration. However, challenges persist, including high initial costs, limited tactile feedback, proprietary software constraints, and lack of standardization. Advancements in AI, real-time jaw tracking, cloud-based simulation, digital twin models, and 4D articulation are progressively overcoming these limitations, moving prosthodontics toward predictive, personalized care.

Digital articulators are redefining occlusal analysis and prosthetic workflows. Their integration into clinical practice enhances functional accuracy, esthetics, and interdisciplinary communication. With continued technological refinement, training, and standardization, digital articulators are poised to become essential tools in routine prosthodontic care.

Keywords: Virtual articulator, CAD/CAM integration, mandibular movement simulation, 4D occlusion

Introduction

The art and science of prosthodontics have long relied on replicating mandibular movements to restore function, esthetics, and comfort in patients requiring prostheses. Articulators—mechanical devices designed to simulate the temporomandibular joint and mandibular dynamics—have historically played a central role in achieving these goals. From rudimentary beginnings to modern digital innovations, the articulator has undergone significant evolution, culminating in the advent of digital articulators (DAs), which represent a landmark development in contemporary prosthodontics[1].

Historically, articulators began as simple hinge mechanisms. Early contributors like Phillip Pfaff and Jean Baptiste Gariot introduced plaster-based systems to preserve jaw relations[1]. By the mid-19th century, innovations such as Snow's facebow, Walker's condylar guides, and Christensen's bite registration advanced mechanical articulators (MAs)[2]. However, MAs posed challenges like operator-dependent errors, lack of patient-specific replication, and limited reproducibility[2,3].

Digital dentistry in the 2000s introduced CAD/CAM, 3D scanning, and occlusal analysis, catalyzing the development of DAs[4]. Pioneered by Szentpetery and later enhanced by Bisler's DentCAM system, these virtual tools simulate mandibular dynamics in 3D[4]. DAs are categorized as completely adjustable (e.g., Jaw Motion Analyzer) or mathematically simulated systems[4]. They use direct (intraoral scanning) or indirect (scanned impressions) workflows for virtual mounting[4,5].

Digital articulators offer sub-millimeter occlusal simulation accuracy[6]. Integration with CAD/CAM enhances prosthetic fabrication[5], while interdisciplinary communication, patient education, and reduced chairside adjustments add clinical value[5,6]. In education and research, they provide standardized, reproducible simulations of complex conditions[3,4].

Despite advantages, high-quality comparative studies remain limited[7]. Usability, clinician training, and software compatibility also affect adoption[7]. Still, with ongoing innovation, DAs are poised to become essential in prosthodontic care—improving diagnostics, workflow efficiency, and patient outcomes.

Concept of Digital Articulators

Digital articulators have evolved to overcome the mechanical limitations of conventional articulators in replicating the biological complexity of mandibular movements. Traditional articulators offer only static occlusal representation[8], failing to simulate elastic mandibular deformation, soft tissue resilience, and muscle-driven functional movements[8]. In contrast, virtual articulators (VAs) utilize patient-specific data through advanced motion tracking and imaging to provide real-time, 3D simulations of mandibular dynamics[9], including jaw deformation, joint dynamics, and occlusal interactions[10].

Programming and Data Acquisition

Programming begins with 3D scanning of arches and occlusal records using structured light or laser scanners[11]. Mandibular kinematics are captured via ultrasonic (Zebris), optical (MODJAW), or electromagnetic systems (CADIAX)[11]. These synchronize with 3D scans in platforms like DentCAM or Exocad[8]. Defining hinge axis, reference planes, and joint parameters like Bennett angle enables real-time simulation of mandibular movements[10].

Types of Digital Articulators

1. *Simulative Digital Articulators* mimic mechanical devices using preset data, mainly for basic applications[10].
2. *Kinematic (Individualized) Digital Articulators* use patient-specific movements for dynamic occlusal analysis. Systems like DentCAM and PN-300 offer high-accuracy simulations[11], while MODJAW and Zebris enhance patient communication through real-time feedback[10].

Comparison of Mechanical articulators and Digital articulators

Mechanical articulators show inaccuracies up to 27%[12]. Digital systems like PN-300 have $<100\,\mu$m deviation[11], offering superior precision, workflow efficiency, and CAD/CAM integration[9,10]. Despite high costs and learning curves, advances in AI and motion capture continue to improve outcomes[13].

Integration of Digital Articulators with the Digital Dentistry Ecosystem

Digital articulators have become integral to the digital dentistry ecosystem, interacting with CAD/CAM, IOS, CBCT, and facial scanning.

1. CAD/CAM Integration

CAD/CAM systems like Exocad and 3Shape embed virtual articulators to simulate mandibular movements. Lepidi et al. showed how IOS and CBCT data enable full digital workflows with enhanced occlusal accuracy and reduced manual errors[14]. Solaberrieta et al. demonstrated functional modeling of occlusion, enabling accurate and repeatable schemes[21].

2. Intraoral and Laboratory Scanners

IOS improve precision and patient comfort but lack cranial orientation. Anes et al. proposed a simplified mounting using 2D facial photos and IOS data[15]. Lab scanners remain useful in hybrid workflows, preserving occlusal vertical dimensions[17].

3. CBCT and 3D Facial Scanning

CBCT identifies hinge axis points and reference planes for virtual mounting[14]. Facial scans merged with IOS and CBCT data provide a virtual patient, enhancing communication and esthetics[18].

4. Virtual Facebow Technologies

Yang et al. introduced a scanner-based method for digital facebow simulation, simplifying chairside workflows[20]. Maheshwari et al.'s MGT classification reflects the need for updated integration models[16].

5. Hybrid Intraoral–Extraoral Scanning

Salloum's ASD method involved a custom anterior scanning device (ASD) attached to two anterior implants intraorally, which is then transferred to a verified model and scanned extraorally which enables precise articulation in full-arch implant cases with rapid fabrication[19].

6. Functional Programming and Motion Capture

Röhrle et al. employed motion-capture systems to simulate real chewing dynamics, enhancing posterior occlusal accuracy[22].

7. Toward a Fully Digital Occlusion Philosophy

Anes et al. and Yang et al. have demonstrated scalable models for digital articulation.[15,20].

Digital articulators now serve as central tools in efficient, data-driven prosthodontic workflows.

Virtual Articulation and Occlusal Simulation

Digital articulators enable detailed simulation of mandibular dynamics and occlusion, revolutionizing prosthodontic design through motion capture and software integration[23].

Kinematics and Dynamic Mandibular Movements

Virtual articulation replicates mandibular function using digitally programmable condylar paths. Čimić et al. emphasized the need for individualized SCI and Bennett angle inputs due to interindividual variation, which influence prosthetic morphology and stability[23].

Simulation Software: Exocad, 3Shape, and Artex Virtual Tools

Platforms like Exocad, 3Shape, and Artex allow input of patient-specific parameters to simulate dynamic occlusion[24]. Peng et al. found that while average-value and JMA-based designs yielded similar adjustments, JMA enhanced fidelity and minimized interferences[24]. These tools enable 3D visualization of occlusal schemes and centric slides.

Digital Jaw Tracking Devices: Modjaw, Zebris, and JMA

Tracking systems like Modjaw, Zebris, and ARCUSdigma capture real-time mandibular motion and feed it into digital articulators[25]. Lepidi et al. described the "4D virtual patient" using CBCT, IOS, and motion analyzers, enhancing real-time occlusal simulation[26]. Nagy et al. validated Modjaw's accuracy within 11 μm[25].

Comparative Kinematic Analysis Between Articulators

Maltauro et al. utilized MATLAB-based tools to demonstrate that digital articulators can accurately replicate mechanical condylar path elements when patient-specific data are incorporated.[28]

Accuracy and Occlusal Outcomes

Lee et al. demonstrated that crowns fabricated using PSM tracking required significantly less occlusal adjustment compared with static methods[27].

Device-Specific Applications and Clinical Relevance

Modjaw and Zebris improve occlusal modeling accuracy[25,24,] while Artex Virtual supports analog-to-digital transitions and education[29]. Virtual articulation fosters dynamic, patient-specific prosthodontics[26].

Accuracy and Reliability of Digital Articulators

Comparison Between Mechanical and Virtual Articulators for Accuracy

Digital articulators replicate mandibular movements with high trueness. Hsu et al. found no significant trueness difference between mechanical and virtual Artex-CR systems, with deviations below 100 μm[30]. Solaberrieta et al. reported a 0.069 mm mean deviation in occlusal contact positioning[31]. Úry et al. found 93% of analog contacts replicated virtually with 0.55 ± 0.31 mm trueness[32]. Yee et al. confirmed all scanner-CAD systems tested showed trueness within clinical limits (13–117 μm)[33].

Error Sources and Influencing Variables

Yee et al. demonstrated that scanner type and mesh resolution significantly influence occlusal

contact accuracy, with deviations ranging from 47 to 207 μm[33]. Solaberrieta et al. highlighted alignment algorithms as critical[31]. Úry et al. noted minor errors in hybrid workflows, yet 96% of first contacts matched[32].

Validation of Virtual Articulators Clinical Planning

VRMesh-based studies in orthognathic planning showed angular errors <1.83° and translational deviations <0.76 mm[34]. Digital occlusion was generated in under 10 minutes with minimal operator variability. Across studies[30-34], digital articulators match mechanical systems in accuracy and reliability while offering faster workflows, preserved VDO, dynamic morphology, and future AI-driven integration.

Application of Digital Articulators in Clinical Prosthodontics

Digital articulators enhance accuracy, reproducibility, and predictability in prosthodontic workflows. By simulating mandibular movements virtually, they aid in treatment planning for full-mouth rehabilitation, implants, occlusal splints, esthetics, TMD, and interdisciplinary cases.

1. Full Mouth Rehabilitation

Park et al. employed facial scans, jaw motion, and IOS to create a virtual patient for full-mouth reconstruction, enabling precise occlusal plane alignment[35]. Li et al. digitally transferred CR and VDO into a virtual articulator for guided implant placement[36].

2. Implant Prosthodontics

Li et al. outlined a six-visit workflow for complete arch rehabilitation using a dynamic virtual articulator[39]. Lepidi et al. used CBCT with facial landmarks to mount scans virtually, ensuring accurate occlusal simulation[41].

3. Fabrication of Occlusal Splints

Lauren and McIntyre's digital method produced splints with individualized condylar settings, reducing intraoral adjustments and technician variability[40].

4. Smile Designing and Esthetic Restorations

Yue et al. used digital smile design integrated with virtual articulation to ensure stable occlusion and esthetics[37]. Stanley et al. combined DSD and articulator simulation to treat TMJ pain and restore vertical dimension[42].

5. TMD and Mandibular Movement Analysis

Lee et al. combined CBCT, IOS, and MPI to fabricate digital splints that minimized interferences and muscle strain[38].

6. Interdisciplinary and Orthognathic Applications

Lepidi et al. documented post-surgical prosthetic planning using virtual articulation to optimize occlusal harmony[41].

Digital articulators now serve as patient-specific, dynamic tools, reducing errors and enhancing outcomes across prosthodontic and interdisciplinary care.

Limitations and Challenges of Digital Articulators

Despite their advantages, digital articulators face clinical, technical, and economic limitations hindering broad adoption.

1. Cost and Accessibility

High costs for systems like DentCAM and supporting tools (IOS, CAD/CAM) limit use in private practice[43]. MS articulators offer affordability but lack customization for complex cases[43].

2. Steep Learning Curve and Training Requirements

Digital articulators demand technical skill for accurate programming and CAD integration. Systems like DentCAM require navigating complex interfaces[43]. Lack of standardized training worsens accessibility[44].

3. Limited Tactile and Haptic Feedback

Unlike mechanical systems, digital articulators lack physical feedback during simulations, reducing intuitive perception of occlusal forces and interferences[43,7].

4. Interoperability and Compatibility Issues

Proprietary ecosystems restrict third-party tool integration due to inconsistent file formats and algorithms, reducing workflow efficiency[44,7].

5. Inaccurate or Average-Value Simulations in MS Systems

MS articulators use predefined parameters, limiting accuracy in patient-specific restorations and cases involving TMJ disorders[43,44].

6. **Data Acquisition and Integration Errors**

Errors during scanning or digital facebow transfer may skew mandibular positioning and compromise prosthetic accuracy[44].

7. Lack of Universal Standardization

Inconsistent protocols and algorithmic variations affect reliability, even with identical data[7,45].

8. Limited Clinical Validation and Comparative Studies

Most studies are technical; few patient-centered trials assess long-term clinical outcomes[43,44].

9. Absence of Real-Time Occlusal Force Simulation

Current systems lack functional load simulation during mastication, limiting stress analysis[7].

10. Infrastructure and Technical Support

Digital systems require high-end infrastructure, regular updates, and cybersecurity, burdening smaller clinics[44].

11. Limitations in Replicating Soft Tissue Influence

Digital systems overlook soft tissue dynamics, affecting functional accuracy[44].

Future Trends and Innovations in Digital Articulators

Digital articulators are advancing through integration with AI, real-time jaw tracking, cloud computing, and digital twin technology, enhancing personalization and diagnostic precision.

1. Real-Time Jaw Tracking Systems

Modern systems replace facebows with CT-derived anatomical references like the Frankfurt or Camper's plane[46]. Dual-marker optical setups track mandibular motion in six degrees of freedom, enabling accurate dynamic simulations via transformation matrices and inverse kinematics[46].

2. Artificial Intelligence and Predictive Modeling

AI technologies (ML, DL, ANN) process large datasets of occlusal and mandibular patterns to detect interferences and optimize prosthetic design[47]. AI-enhanced digital articulators predict dynamic contacts and functional pathways from scan and TMJ inputs[47].

3. Cloud-Based Simulation and Remote Collaboration

Cloud platforms centralize scans, CBCT, and jaw motion data for remote access,

enabling synchronous treatment planning and interdisciplinary collaboration. Despite cybersecurity demands, they improve workflow efficiency and communication[47].

4. Digital Twin Technology

Digital twin virtual replicas of a patient's stomatognathic system—allow treatment simulations using updated motion records. These facilitate adaptive, predictive prosthodontics by monitoring TMJ function and occlusal change over time[47].

5. Fully Adjustable Virtual Articulators and 4D Occlusion

Advanced systems like JMA and Planmeca 4D register jaw trajectories in 3D[48]. Kinematic data (e.g., Bennett angle, SCI) is exported into CAD workflows, streamlining diagnosis to prosthesis design[48].

6. Enhanced Visualization with VR and AR

AR/VR technologies improve occlusal analysis and prosthodontic education, offering real-time simulation of mandibular dynamics and interactive learning environments[48].

Discussion

Digital articulators have redefined the functional, diagnostic, and restorative workflows in contemporary prosthodontics. By simulating mandibular dynamics within virtual environments, they surpass the limitations of traditional mechanical articulators in accuracy, reproducibility, and customization. These systems enable three-dimensional occlusal analysis by integrating intraoral scans, jaw tracking data, and CBCT imaging, resulting in a patient-specific, dynamic articulation that significantly improves clinical outcomes[7].

From single crowns to full-mouth rehabilitations and implant-supported prostheses, digital articulators have demonstrated their value in optimizing occlusal schemes, minimizing interferences, and reducing chairside adjustments[21]. Their seamless integration with CAD/CAM platforms allows clinicians to plan, simulate, and fabricate restorations in a virtual environment with sub-millimeter precision, ultimately enhancing both esthetics and function[36]. Furthermore, these tools have proven instrumental in managing temporomandibular disorders (TMD), occlusal splint fabrication, and interdisciplinary treatment planning by visualizing functional movements and occlusal contacts in real time[40]. Digital articulators also improve communication between clinicians, laboratories, and patients. The ability to visualize and share dynamic occlusion simulations facilitates collaborative decision-making and increases patient understanding of treatment plans. In academic and research contexts, they offer a standardized, replicable method for teaching occlusal concepts and assessing mandibular kinematics, which is difficult to achieve with analog systems[46]. Despite their transformative potential, the widespread clinical adoption of digital articulators remains limited by high initial costs, the need for specialized training, lack of universal standardization, and limited tactile feedback[16]. However, ongoing innovations in artificial intelligence, cloud computing, digital twin technologies, and motion-capture systems are steadily overcoming these barriers. The emergence of 4D virtual patient simulations and real-time occlusal tracking is indicative of a future where digital articulation will be an integral part of everyday prosthodontic workflows[48].

Conclusion

In light of the current evidence and technological trajectory, digital articulators should be embraced not as a replacement, but as an

essential evolution of occlusal management in prosthodontics. Clinicians are encouraged to adopt hybrid workflows, pursue targeted training, and remain engaged with emerging technologies to fully harness the diagnostic and therapeutic precision these systems offer. As the dental profession continues to move toward data-driven and patient-specific care, the digital articulator will serve as a cornerstone in achieving predictable, functional, and esthetically harmonious prosthetic outcomes.

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