



# Why have straight, white teeth become a beauty ideal in North American Society?

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Perceptions about dental appearance form one component of body image. Similar to the development of body image, dental aesthetic tendencies are influenced by ideal representations that are in turn determined by various socio-cultural and individual factors. These ideals are disseminated via socialisation agents, of which mass media plays a significant role. On a daily basis, the media is flooded with advertisements and messages that capitalise on the body image-related insecurities of the masses. The ideal of straight, white teeth in North America is one among many beauty ideals that are propagated by media using celebrities as spokespeople. However, although the media influence on society is indisputable, it can be argued that, mostly, it only serves to perpetuate existing social norms, ideals and stereotypes. So then, what makes white teeth so desirable?

Perhaps some explanation can be found in the symbolic meaning attached to the colour white. In Western cultures, white has traditionally been associated with purity, cleanliness, goodness and perfection. It is the colour of peace as symbolised by the white dove. The white coat worn by doctors has long signified healing. During the Victorian era (1837–1901), the white 'royal icing' on wedding cakes was highly prized as it symbolised 'purity and virginal attributes' (Wilson 2005). A pure white wedding cake was also a display of wealth and status since the finest of sugars used for making white icing was exclusive and expensive (Wilson 2005). White became a symbol of affluence during the



Victorian period when wealthy women started wearing white dresses to emulate Queen Victoria who wore an all-white dress for her wedding.

Besides the symbolic connotations of the colour white, there is another logic to this preference. Various factors, including metabolic diseases, systemic conditions, tooth decay, medications, ageing and staining, result in the discolouration of teeth. In ageing, for example, teeth gradually darken; therefore, whiter teeth could signify youthfulness. Misaligned teeth are also harder to clean, which can lead to dental caries, swollen gums, and periodontal disease. This may lead to the tendency of associating straight, white teeth with good health.

However, North American society seemingly takes this association to an extreme level. Even the slightest imperfections may be abhorrent and the driving force for achieving perfect smiles. This pursuit is initiated in childhood by parents concerned with correcting their children's misaligned teeth, then complemented by individually pursued cosmetic procedures later on in life. For equally wealthy nations like the UK and Japan, where natural teeth are appreciated and imperfect smiles may even be intentionally sought, this North American fascination can sometimes be perplexing.



Japanese men consider Yaeba, commonly known as “snaggletooth” in North America, endearing and youthful in women. Meanwhile, the British generally prefer a more natural smile with imperfections than the “perfect” American smile. They view the American smile as unnaturally uniform, artificial, and often vain. One possible explanation of this divergence is that North American society is deeply attached to the idea of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” In its relentless pursuit of happiness, it is fixated on attaining the romanticized notion of perfection through conspicuous consumption to express self-image. Investing in teeth is just another step on the road to happiness that many believe is guaranteed by looking flawless. The role of another socialisation agent – the dentist – must be pointed out. Hunt (1998) argues that the ‘distinctive’ American teeth are a ‘by-product’ of the growth of dentistry, and particularly, the rise of orthodontics during the twentieth century, which set the standards for ‘normal’ and ‘ideal’ dental appearance. This, she reasons, corresponded with the increasing ‘social value of children’ that warranted greater care of children in all aspects and led to reform efforts that focused on child health and maternal education.

From a socio-historic perspective, the growth of dentistry and the propagation of the culture of straight, white teeth can be linked to the rise of the middle class post-Second World War. What started as an effort of organised dentistry to make draftees with poor oral health dentally fit for war service, resulted in bringing prestige to dentists as medical practitioners and a boom in dentistry like never before. Not only did the US dental industry experience growth at a rate faster than the US economy in the 1950s, it also saw an increase in the proportion of schoolchildren receiving private dental care. It can further be argued that private dental practices flourished thanks to a postwar prosperity that created a larger middle class with more disposable income that could be spent on



improving their social status. In Canada, for instance, the total expenditures on dental services in constant 2010 dollars increased from \$373.6 million in 1945 to \$1.1 billion in 1965, hitting \$13.6 billion by 2010 (CIHI 2013). In the US, about \$2.0 billion (in current dollars) was spent on dental services in 1960, increasing to \$105.3 billion by 2010 (CMS 2013).

In both countries, nearly all dental care is privately financed, either through employer-based insurance and/or out-of-pocket payments.

While oral hygiene practices became part of the daily lives of the masses during the postwar years, the idea of white teeth was already being promoted through advertisements since the early twentieth century. In her analysis of over 150 advertisements of dental products from 1911 to 1954, Grumsen (2009) explores the public image of dentistry through advertisements over time. From the 1918 S.S. White toothpaste advertisement 'American Teeth Impress Our British Allies', the 1924 Pepsodent advertisement 'The Era of Whiter Teeth', the 1932 Dr. West's toothpaste advertisement 'On a cold, money-earning basis, your teeth are worth \$3,200 (his), \$1,600 (hers)', to the 1949 Pepsodent advertisement 'Dorothy Hart's smile wins six offers from Hollywood', she finds one thing in common – all contained messages that echoed the American dream in some way. In these advertisements, white teeth are linked to bringing glory in times of war, acceptance into high society, improving employment prospects, and ensuring success in career and love.

In connection to this are other socialisation agents, including family, peers and institutions. These ensured that the ideas being projected by media were reiterated in a manner (e.g. through social judgement) such that they were internalised in an individual to be taken up seriously. Social judgement is influenced by physical appearance, of which the face is the most visible part, thus being a significant contributor. A well-documented concept in social psychology is the 'what is beautiful is good' concept. In a classic study, Dion et al. (1972) demonstrated that regardless of sex, individuals tend to assign more favourable personal qualities and positive life outcomes (e.g. marital competence, professional success) to those they perceive as physically attractive. The effect of the physical attractiveness stereotype has been found in various areas. For example, in general, studies suggest that attractive patients are initially perceived as good patients (Nordholm 1980), attractive individuals earn relatively higher salaries than unattractive individuals (Roszell et al. 1989; Hamermesh and Biddle 1994), and attractive defendants may receive less severe punishments compared to unattractive defendants for some but not all crimes.

Numerous studies demonstrate that this stereotype also extends to dental appearance. Individuals who do not conform to the ideal of perfect teeth encounter prejudice as early as in their childhood years. This prejudice is evident in some orthodontic studies that link severe untreated malocclusion with increased peer victimisation, low self-esteem and reduced oral health-related quality of life (OHRQoL) in children. Dental appearance has



also been shown to impact perceptions of personality traits. In a consumer study of 528 Americans, Beall (2007) found significant differences in snap judgments of photographed individuals before and after undergoing cosmetic dental treatment. Notwithstanding the fact that none of the subjects had decayed, or missing teeth prior to the treatment, more favourable traits were assigned to those that had undergone cosmetic procedures. A significant increase in ratings of attractiveness, career success, and popularity was observed. Moreover, these individuals were also perceived as being more intelligent, friendly, interesting and kind. This was also demonstrated by Kershaw et al. (2008) in a cross-sectional survey of 180 females using digitally altered images representing one of the three dental conditions with standardised facial features: unmodified, decayed or whitened. The findings indicated negative stereotyping of individuals with decayed teeth. Furthermore, individuals with whitened teeth received greater positive appraisal than those with their original tooth colour for four personality characteristics: social competence, intellectual ability, psychological adjustment and relationship satisfaction. This tendency to link smile attractiveness with positive personal attributes has similarly been documented in studies using various measures such as abnormal tooth colour, dental caries, dental fluorosis and occlusal conditions in comparison with 'ideal' teeth.

# Vocabulary:

**Why have straight, white teeth become a beauty ideal in North American Society?**

**Straight:** recto/derecho

**Wealth:** acaudalado

**Affluence:** riqueza/prosperidad

**Treatment:** tratamiento

**Staining:** mancha/coloración

**Snaggle:** chueco

**flawless:** impecable