

# The real cost of perfect teeth

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Teeth are often one of the first things we notice in people. Sparkling white and perfectly aligned teeth are synonymous with excellent oral health and hygiene. Something as trivial as teeth often impact important aspects of one's life such as college admissions and employment prospects. Poor oral health is often seen as a failure of individual responsibility despite those in desperate need of dental care often being priced out. Yet, somehow these are the people unjustifiably held accountable for not conforming to standards that have been imposed on them.

Teeth are meant to be functional. Smiles were genuine expressions of joy. So, when did we transition from functionality and emotional expression to commodification? Dentist Charles Pincus and actresses Joan Crawford and Judy Garland introduced and popularised the "Hollywood Smile" which was created with tooth caps. The standard for movie stars was set and as is with everything the rich and famous do, these standards trickled down to lead to the formation of a 33-billion-dollar cosmetic dentistry industry.

The dentistry industry has seen a shift from preventative and health care measures like fillings, extractions and cleanings to veneers, invisible aligners and whitening. The expenses of braces and



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other forms of dental care are often justified as investments in the personal and academic futures of the patients. Under the pressure to conform, many people, especially adolescents, lose confidence.

I have had braces for four years now and am aware of the privilege that enables me to grow up with aligned teeth. Someone I knew had mentioned that their teeth had been ridiculed in a college in-

terview. The indignities and absurdities of our contemporary economy are highlighted by the state of our dental system. Medical procedures are purchased as a product instead of being carried out as a necessity. Most people cannot afford the most basic of dental care and it is often viewed as a privilege and not a right.

The perfect smile is far from affordable and the class implications that follow it

are severe. They hold social capital and give the owner a sense of superiority. They are luxuries reserved for the wealthy. The successful body is not the most functional or healthy one but one that is suited to the most capitalistic ideals. The 18-step skincare routine, the filler and the BBLs are all part of the bourgeois body standard. The deceit of the "successful body" lies in its impermanence. Whether it's lifelong retainers or constant fillers, maintaining your perceived class comes with cosmetic costs.

The penalty for stopping the procedures is slipping down the social hierarchy. You no longer physically demonstrate that you're a part of the upper echelon of society. One of the first indicators of class mobility is fitting into the standards of the bourgeois body type. The increasing commercialisation of dentistry means the lines between healthy teeth and "conventionally attractive" teeth are blurred. Despite the overlap, it is the distinction between the two that divides them into healthcare and cosmetic work. This capitalism-coerced rise of cosmetic work and healthcare, in essence, means that the real importance of oral health is overlooked and devalued by consumers.

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## All the wrong reasons to get into a relationship

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In my early teen years, one of my closest friends got into a relationship. It was the first official relationship in our class and it received its deserved hype. We were all very excited for him, but I couldn't help but feel a bit jealous and insecure about it.

As I grew up, my cravings for affection grew more and more. For many others like me, it wasn't suddenly about falling in love with someone or the sweet gesture of having a high school crush. It was simply about being in a relationship for the sake of it.

Can there truly be reasons to be in a relationship other than love?

In our teenage years, it's about peer pressure. When the people around you start getting into a relationship, not being in one feels wrong. You start to feel left out and insecure. You may even start questioning your worth. The idea of being someone's partner occupies your mind, so you take the first opportunity you get. The need for a relationship becomes less about love and more about the concept of it.

But soon, the infatuation dies and what is left in the relationship are two people who are tired of each other. The cloak of desire wears off and the two people start seeing through each other. The frustrated, insecure, stressed-out, sensitive, and vulnerable sides of your partner start rip through the shell of perfection your mind created. You may start hating each other and before you know it, you loathe the person you thought you loved. Not only is it harmful to you, but it is unfair to the other person as well.

As we enter adulthood, our schedules become more hectic, leaving barely enough time for ourselves. The desperation for being in a relationship is not driven by peer pressure anymore, rather it may be the despondency we are left with. We want someone to talk to on a cold winter night, or someone to cry to when we are on the verge of a breakdown. Like a drowning man trying to clutch at straws, we hold onto the first responder to our desperation.

As we grow more comfortable, we start dumping our emotional baggage on them, leading the other person to

feel responsible for our unhappiness. We crave solutions from each other instead of figuring out the root of the problem and when we fail to do so, we give up on that person.

But is it wrong to look for affection in a world that is so stoneheartedly cruel to us?

It is not. However, it is unfair to look for affection in the wrong place, which can lead to unjustly putting labels on each other while playing house. But when you pierce through the shell of the other person, truly get to know each other's vulnerabilities, and hold on to each other, something beautiful happens.

You get accepted for who you are. The emotional baggage, the vulnerabilities, mood swings and insecurities – you feel accepted and loved in your entirety. The relationship grows into something beautiful that you cherish.

For it wasn't affection or fulfilment, but rather acceptance, that we craved all along.

*Remind Ifti to be quieter at hasiburrashidifti@gmail.com*