

The art of a smile

By **Marian Scaife** -



*The rise of the tooth tockers has increased our awareness of cosmetic dental procedures and what is available to us.
Photo credit: Adobe Stock Image*

A smile is a variable and instantly recognisable facial expression. The rise in popularity of cosmetic dentistry has altered the appearance of the smile but is this simply a response to consumer demand?

Every human has a superpower in their smile. Glance through photographs of gowned and suited celebrities posing at a red carpet event and you'll see a range of smiles conveying different messages to a gang of photographers. It is this "celebrity smile" that has contributed to the growth of Britain's cosmetic dentistry.

The cosmetic smile

Research reported by [Dentistry.co.uk](https://www.dentistry.co.uk) published in July 2023 found that one third of people under 35 in the UK had undergone a cosmetic dental procedure in the previous 12 months. Individuals in this age group spent an average of £3,677 on these procedures with 10% of 24-34 year olds spending over £25,000. This is in comparison to an average of £417 spent by the same age group on oral health dental services.

Teeth straightening, whitening and veneers are all popular procedures in creating the "celebrity smile". The rise of the 'tooth tockers' such as Dr Rhona Eskander and

@theLondondentist educate in seconds what is needed along with building their brand.



Jane Cashmore, 58, Treatment Coordinator at Cosmetic White Smiles in Derby, has worked in dentistry since 2008 and witnessed the increased demand for cosmetic procedures. Cashmore says young people are not requesting a particular celebrity smile but “know in their own head how they want their teeth to look”.

It is not just young people who are smile centric. There has been a change in the older generation who used to be more concerned with the functionality of their teeth than how they looked. The attitude used to be “Just take the tooth out, I’m not bothered.” says Cashmore but now “older people are taking more pride in their smile.” Cashmore noted in a recent tooth whitening offer the uptake was greater from older people.

Real or fake

A smile, it seems is commercially important. But what about that immediately recognizable moment of connection? How do we tell the difference between a genuine smile and a posed smile?

Portrait photographer Jamie Beeden knows instantly when a smile is real or false, “I can spot them a mile away, but that doesn’t necessarily mean others will, when photographing actors for example they can certainly turn it on if needed but I’d rather get something genuine then not.”

Beeden photographs bands and musicians for magazines. He aims to give editors a “mix of serious, moodier shots along with some lighter smiling ones”. Beeden doesn’t request a smile of the sitter. “I find the best way to elicit a smiling portrait is just to be friendly and chatty and help the subject relax, get a good conversation going and let them ease into the shoot” says Beeden.

Jennifer Clare, a portrait photographer from Derby, also doesn’t ask her subjects to smile. She tries to entice genuine reactions which she says is easier if their family is around. When asked about distinguishing a posed from a genuine smile she says: “It is difficult to define as I can just tell somehow, I think it’s in the eyes.”

So how do Beeden, Clare and the rest of us recognise the smile that conveys a moment of connection and expression of joy? A genuine smile, one that is underwritten by a positive emotion, was first scientifically described in 1862 by a French anatomist, Duchenne de Boulogne.

All smiles involve muscle contractions that lift the corners of the mouth. A genuine smile includes the upturned mouth and creasing, crows-feet, around the eyes. The

phrase “Duchenne smile”, was coined by American psychologist Paul Ekman. Ekman developed the Facial Action Coding System discovering human beings are able to create in excess of 10,000 facial expressions, only 3,000 of which are caused by emotion.



This explains how an actor can “turn it on” as Breeden describes. Clare remarks when photographing business clients: “I try to get them to ‘smile with their eyes’ as you don’t necessarily want a cheesy grin as a profile picture.” This type of smile is the ‘smize’, a term bought into the public domain by supermodel Tyra Banks on the American television show “America’s Top Model” in 2009.

Duchenne or genuine smile underpinned by positive emotion (left) is distinguished from a fake smile (right) due to more creasing around the eyes. Photo credit: Marian Mackinnon

Innate smiling

Our ability to offer up spontaneous facial expressions is not dependant on learning or copying them. In 2004 scientists photographed the faces of blind athletes competing in judo during the Paralympic Games. The researchers, using Ekman’s framework, found no difference in facial expressions between blind and sighted athletes. Those who won a gold medal produced Duchenne smiles upon completion of their match and during the award ceremony.

Prunes to cheese

One of the most famous smiles in the world hangs in the Louvre, Paris. In the early 16th Century Leonardo Da Vinci cunningly painted the Mona Lisa with a smile that is said to convey melancholy and contentment depending from which angle you view the portrait. Mona Lisa’s modest smile was typical of the time, closed mouth, no teeth on display.

In his book, historian Colin Jones charts the slow progress of the smile in 18th Century France which was not tolerated in art or polite society. Jones cites poor oral

health and a pervasive disdain of the smile resulting in portraits of closed mouths.



Restrictions of the smile continued into the early 19th century and into early photography. Due to long exposure times sitters were unable to sustain a smile and instructed to say “prunes” allowing them to hold the pose for longer.

The advent of the smiling portraits we see today are largely down to Kodak and amateur photography. A study of American high school year books between 1905 to 2005 found smiles became wider and more frequent over this period.

So maybe we shouldn't be surprised that dentistry has once again caught up with demands of society as it did slowly in 18th Century France.

Looking through Breeden's images it is apparent that musicians and rock stars don't go in for the 'celebrity smile'. There is one image that is an exception, Lemmy from Motorhead, who as Breeden says: “spent a fortune on getting his rotten teeth fixed and wanted to show them off!”

