IN BRIEF

- Three quarters of magazine images had teeth that were whiter than the shade guide.
- Magazines used only a very narrow range of tooth shades compared to real teenaged teeth.
- The impact of media representation of tooth colour on children's self esteem is unknown.

Tooth colour in teenage magazines

Do teenage magazines give a genuine view of tooth colour? **B. Chadwick,¹ B. Cage² and R. Playle³**

ABSTRACT

Objectives

To compare the colour of incisors depicted in teenage magazines with a sample of Welsh teenagers.

Materials and methods

A representative one month sample of magazines aimed at 9- to 16-year-old girls was obtained from a retail outlet. All images containing photographs of anterior teeth were identified and the colour of the incisor teeth measured using two commercial shade guides. An additional category of 'whiter than shade guide' was introduced. Images were viewed under standardised conditions by the same examiner; 10% were repeated. Clinical measurements under standard conditions were taken, by the same examiner, of 9- to 16-year-old children presenting to the department over a one month period, using the same shade guides; 47% of readings were repeated. Data were entered into SPSS and comparison of proportions used to compare the two groups.

Results

Nineteen magazines containing 268 images and 53 patients were used. Intra-examiner agreement with the two shade guides was 80% or 92% for patients and 93% or 96% for images. 0/53 (0%) clinical compared with 202/268 (75.4%) photographs were found to be whiter than the shade guide.

Conclusions

Teenage magazines do not give an accurate representation of the colour of teenager's teeth. The impact of this on children's self esteem is unknown.

EDITOR'S SUMMARY

Popular magazines are frequently accused of portraying extremely thin models as having the 'ideal' female body shape, thereby giving readers an unrealistic impression of what is normal that may make them feel inadequate about themselves. This may be particularly damaging to teenage girls, who often place huge importance on their physical appearance. In a world where the perfect white 'Hollywood' smile of celebrities is increasingly sought-after and viewed as the ideal, the images of faces and smiles that appear in teenage magazines could also play a role in teenagers' perceptions of themselves and what a 'normal' smile should be.

This paper investigates whether the colour of teeth depicted in teenage magazines compares accurately with tooth colour in a sample of Welsh teenagers. The colours were measured using two commonly-used commercial shade guides and perhaps unsurprisingly, the magazine images showed less variation in shade and in 75% of cases were whiter than the shade guides. In contrast, none of the teenagers sampled showed tooth colour that was off the guides. The authors conclude that the idealised smiles portrayed in the majority of the magazine images cannot be achieved without either cosmetic treatment on the teeth, or digital alteration of the images themselves.

Whether exposure to images of idealised white smiles affects young people, and if so, how, is at present unknown as the authors point out. However, cosmetic treatments and surgery are increasingly acceptable in today's society as a means of perfecting your appearance and the popularity of tooth bleaching in the UK is increasing rapidly. Dentists are likely to see an increasing number of young people requesting or inquiring about cosmetic tooth treatments and may have a role to play in educating their patients about what is natural and what is not.

The full paper can be accessed from the *BDJ* website (www.bdj.co.uk), under 'Research' in the table of contents for Volume 203 issue 5.

Rowena Milan,
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FULL PAPER DETAILS

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AUTHOR QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**1. Why did you undertake this research?**

In recent years a plethora of products and techniques to whiten teeth have become available. Magazines and internet sites are full of adverts offering cosmetic tooth procedures. On the television, make-over programmes frequently include cosmetic dental treatment as part of transformation. Increasingly children with normal coloured teeth present to dentists complaining that their teeth are too dark. To a dentist many 'Hollywood smiles' appear false, but the public perception of how teeth should look is changing. Clearly children are affected by media images. This research was undertaken to see how accurate the portrayal of tooth colour in teenaged magazines was.

2. What would you like to do next in this area to follow on from this work?

It has been shown that some teenaged girls can be affected by constant media portrayal of an ideal body shape that cannot be attained by the majority of the population. The demand for orthodontic treatment suggests that the population of the UK is becoming more interested in the appearance of their teeth. It would be interesting to investigate teenagers' perceptions of acceptable tooth colour, to see if their 'ideal' tooth colour exists in nature or can only be achieved by cosmetic interference.

COMMENT

This interesting article gives an account of a small-scale study which looked at the colour of teeth pictured in magazines aimed at teenaged girls. Shade guides were used to record the colour of incisor teeth in the pictures and then the colour of incisor teeth in a sample of 9- to 16-year-old children. More than 75% of the teeth in the magazine pictures were 'off the shade guide' as being too white, while all of the 'real' children had tooth shades 'on the guide'.

There is some speculation as to how such a difference could have arisen – either the children in the pictures had had their teeth whitened or the magazine editors had edited the digital pictures before they were published. What effect this distortion of reality has on the children reading the magazines is not known, but tooth whitening has become a multi-million pound industry, and the impression conveyed by the magazine pictures is that the exceptionally white teeth are the norm.

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