What Are Perfect Teeth?

By James Hamblin
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Having a couple wayward misaligned teeth is a trend in Japan, where cosmetic dentists are making that dream come true. Reminding us that beauty is everything and nothing.

Last spring, the world's first "snaggletooth girl group" gave their debut concert. They weren't called that by some execrable critic; the women's teeth are actually their sell. The title of their album is Mind If I Bite?

The Tokyo-based group is called TYB48, and their Lou Pearlman-esque founder, Taro Masuoka, is actually a dentist in an upscale part of Tokyo. Masuoka runs a practice called Pure Cure, where they perform a lucrative cosmetic procedure called tsuke-yaeba that purposely gives people crooked teeth. So it works out nicely that he's also promoting the look in pop culture.

As Japan Today put it, yaeba means "'multilayered' or 'double' tooth, and describes the fanged look achieved when molars crowd the canines and push them forward." They report it as a uniquely feminine trend: "Japanese women of all ages [are] flocking to dental clinics to have temporary or permanent artificial canines ... glued to their teeth." It's been gaining in popularity over the past few years.
Masuoka's dental practice made a commercial to sell the experience. (Heads up, the pace makes it almost unwatchable. It really starts to test you at the 2:10 mark when they spend 20 full seconds reclining her dental chair. And then zero seconds showing what they actually do to her teeth.)

So, why is this happening?

Masuoka has said the look "gives girls an impish cuteness." Emile Zaslow, an associate professor at Pace University, explained it more malignantly to The New York Times: "The naturally occurring yaeba is because of delayed baby teeth, or a mouth that's too small ... It's this kind of emphasis on youth and the sexualization of young girls."

That notion would make it only more terrible that Masuoka gives "half-price discount ... for middle school and high school students."
But at the same time it's sensational and xenophobic to imply that a country is full of pedophilic men and aggressively submissive women "flocking" to gratify their deviance, right? We should also question the basic biology behind widespread assertions that yaeba are a "young girls" appearance. Overcrowded teeth should become most prominent late in development, when the third and fourth molars come in and really push things together (late teens, early twenties). It's also not like protuberant teeth spontaneously dissolve in adulthood -- see the ageless appeal of Avril Lavigne, Jewel, Joe DiMaggio, and Kirsten Dunst. And of course, Steve Buscemi.

Explaining trends in beauty is equal parts fascinating and frustrating, and rarely logical. As Verena Delle Donne at the University of Madrid wrote in "How Can We Explain Beauty?" -- beauty is "what we like, what is fascinating, interesting, great, maybe funny or inspiring to us."

So a good thing about yaeba, if you're not into them, is that they let us consider how easy it can be to dismiss aesthetic trends that don't strike us as beautiful -- which puts insecurities about our own appearances into perspective.

Wanting artificially misaligned teeth sounds absurd to most, but then, maybe coveting Kate Middleton's perfect nose is more plausible? Widening our frame of reference is much cheaper and easier than surgically altering (or generally failing to appreciate) our teeth and noses and other parts. There is probably someone somewhere in the world who would go to lengths to get the very feature you dislike most about yourself. That person finds it fascinating and beautiful and inspiring, and they maybe even dislike like themselves a little for not having it. They might even want you to sing in a synthpop harmony group. So, find them and hang out.