# Selling Products: An Advertising Response to Entrenched Dental Poverty in the UK

## BSA Annual Conference 2025: Social Transformations

Methodological Innovations Stream

**April 2025**

**Jay Dunstan**
**ORCID iD**: Jay Dunstan  https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5665-757X
PhD/Doctoral Researcher
University of East London
School of Arts & Creative Industries (ACI)

**Abstract**

Relationships in society are increasingly mediated by images and imagery communication (Grady, 1996; O'Halloran, 2023). This intricate relationship of representation and meaning making is known in visual sociology as iconic communication (Grady, 1996; Mullen, 2024). Reductive technologies of iconic communication are employed by advertisers to simplify this composite relationship to succinctly convey social messages and meanings (Deacon, *et al.,* 1999).

This paper employs analytical tools afforded by the visual sociology framework to examine complex relationships amongst images and society. It seeks to explore neoliberal social stresses impacting on the lives of children through their dental care and oral hygiene opportunities. Wherein, decoding socially located images affords the possibility to empirically investigate formative social structure, social organisation and cultural meaning. Achieved through a visual analysis of a mass-consumer toothpaste brand, advertised on a billboard sited in an unremarkable 'everyday' part of Greater London. Positing that the image forms part of an advertising campaign which seeks to discursively reverse normative assumptions of oral health for children. Thereby, the advertisement represents a communicative vehicle to transform long-standing health discourses in response to sociocultural changes affecting vulnerable populations (BMA, 2016; Dorling, 2024).

Interpreted as a 'visual commons' resource, the image utilises contemporary societal discourses, particularly those related to iconic/symbolic racialised notions of deprivation. In turn, realised through the use of dualisms and explicit/implicit binary framing techniques. Visually, the communication simultaneously reinforces established notions of aesthetic beauty (Eagleton, 1990) while offering the possibility of idiosyncratic transformation (Kieran, 1997).

In providing a detailed analysis of the image and interpreting its social meaning, this study illuminates the broader social context that produced this advertisement.

**Keywords:** Social Inquiry, Poverty, Dualisms, Racialisation, Neoliberalism, State Regression, Childhood Poverty

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**Introduction**

In inquiring about the social world, researchers have several tools – specifically as sociologists, at our disposal. A powerful component of the arsenal resides in the recursive praxis of visual sociology, to be methodologically employed as a manner of investigation (Grady, 1996; O'Halloran, 2023; Mullen, 2024). As a mode of inquiry, visual sociology sits alongside sociology, visual anthropology, communications, cultural geography, cultural studies and semiology, to name but a few of its related domains (Harper, 2012). The visual dimensions of social life and equally, those dimensions being reflected and fixed in a visual text are the disciplines principal concerns (Grady, 1996). Indeed, at present, the interest is in the world of the visual, the reality represented by visual communications existing in a complex and inherently problematical way. The preoccupation of this paper is with a construction of reality, dependent upon a world that has never been so visually aware, proselytised upon and empirically engaged with (Ciampi, 2023).

**Choices: Behind an Image**

In broad methodological terms it can be potentially overlooked or underappreciated for us to conceive and consider the vast array of choices that inform and lay behind a compositional final product. What we see – as in this case study, an advertisement – did not impartially spring up on its billboard without substantive socio-cultural-economic investment involved. As a final disseminated communication, there would exist layer, upon layer, upon layer of professionals who reside within distinct corporate entities instrumental in conceptualising and creating the advertisement under discussion (Boyd-Barrett, 1995). Exemplifying some aspects of this often-obscured relationship is the aim of this next section.

First, embedded in this structure is the client, in this instance Haleon plc[1], however, the commissioning body would be the sub-division of Aquafresh and specifically the marketing department residing within the brand. The second tier – to describe it thus, is the advertising agency, in this case Grey London,[2] which self-describes as a full-service agency (see, Na, Marshall, & Son, 2003). Operatively, the agency provides creative, experiential, social, digital, commerce and health & wellness as part of its strategic client service offering (Grey London, 2025). Without question the relationship between client and advertising agency is a notoriously complex and opaque one, both in terms of outside perceptions and internal dynamics (Lury, & Warde, 1997). It is through this relationship that the final product (the advertisement), would have enjoyed many thousands upon thousands of human hours put into its end, final manufacture – the part disseminated. In briefly providing an illuminative window into that obtuse world, the jobs, roles and order involved in the production of the Aquafresh communication would be something along the lines of: VP of Marketing, Director of Marketing, Marketing Manager (outbound), Marketing Technical Leads, Head of Creative, Creatives, Art Director, Account Managers, Photographer, Graphic Designers, Master Printer, Buyer and so forth.

Summarily, the end result of what we see is an entirely encoded device where the negotiated readings are minimalised and the potential oppositional readings are divested sufficiently to contain; and at best, eliminate alternatives altogether. Moreover, time, financial and communicative resource on an immense scale has been invested into the final 'product' for our consumption (Simon, 1984). Indeed, this frequently veiled and obfuscated nature of communicative resource creation often remains hidden to the end consumer and to the casually engaged citizenry as they happenstance the campaign, either in print, online, or plastered across a billboard, as has been encountered for our discussion here.

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[1] See, https://www.haleon.com/.
[2] See, https://www.grey.com/locations/united-kingdom.

In terms of a timeframe, the Aquafresh campaign went live on the 11 April 2024 across its various platforms, the primary communicative vehicle being billboards. In advertising parlance this practice is known as 'across out of home', which refers to the sub-field of Out-of-Home (OOH) advertising. The operations describe advertising to encompass communications which takes place outside of the home, to include billboards, bus shelter ads and digital screens in public spaces (Wilson, 2023). The communication is concerned with marketing toothpaste; the relationship is singularly denoted – there being no dispute regarding this outcome. What follows is characterised as the *preferential reading* of this unusual piece of mass communications. Scholastically, one would usually expect an oppositional reading of the Aquafresh communication, however, this text adequately connotes a substantive view into our contemporary society via its preferential reading alone and for this principal reason it is quite exceptional.

**Methodology: Employing Visual Sociology**
The various methodologies and techniques of visual sociology can effectively be employed by researchers to accurately reflect and interrogate the triumvirate of: societal values, social behaviours, and sociological interactions (Harper, 2012; Wagner, 2023). The objective of this paper is to concentrate on the latter two of these aspects, regarding societal behaviours and the closely related conceptualisation of societal values which underpin interaction (Durlauf, & Peyton Young, 2001). Thus isolated, the communication becomes a vehicle for us to discern the hitherto fixed communicative aspects of aesthetics through childhood dentistry, following through to discern how those behaviours and values have transfigured over a recent period, able to accommodate new economic landscapes brought about by our increasingly structuralising relationship with neoliberalism. The communication can help us to understand a rapidly changing world, to uncover social constructs that define our contemporary experience. The intention now is to accomplish three points: (i) to establish our common sense understanding of dental health, a relationship (re)forged with the consumer since post-1945; (ii) to offer some salient readings of the text in order to establish its preferential reading; (iii) to use this reading as a mode able to demonstrate fundamental changes to society that have made the text possible, leading to the deviations around discourses of childhood personal oral hygiene practices.

**Common Sense Discourses of Childhood Dental Health**
Deeply embedded into our Western cannon is the idea of aesthetic beauty (Eagleton, 1990), traditionally considered *the* paradigmatic aesthetic quality (Kieran, 1997). Furthermore, this definitive quality has a genealogy with foundational historical roots, stretching far into antiquity, back to the period of Plato through to Aquinas and of course Kant (Kieran, 1997). Eagleton (1990: 2) characterises the aesthetic as a, 'thought to retain a charge of the irreducible.' Moreover, the aesthetic – and its inherent value – is argued to be firmly located on the planes of the body (Reischer, & Koo, 2004). Further, the value(s) of aesthetics both resides and includes several features of the body. Such residuals firmly comprise our mouths (Turner, 1996) and includes depictions of teeth (Paulson, 2008). However, the physicality of anatomical teeth is not stable, as embedded appendages they are in a constant process of morphing and change, subject to environmental and external stimuli (Rathjen, 2007). This is an acute aspect of children's teeth, which they outgrow and discard as deciduous teeth, also informally known as milk teeth or temporary teeth, to be replaced by primary teeth (O'Sullivan, & Milosevic, 2008). Milk teeth are the first set of teeth in the growth and development of humans and other diphyodonts, which include most mammals. The transition to permanent teeth is a haphazard one, taking place over an extended duration, the process lasting from six to twelve years of age (O'Sullivan, & Milosevic, 2008) and impacting the dental aesthetics, and/or the appearance of the teeth (Rathjen, 2007).

Body essentialists would argue humanities social perception of teeth is 'hard-wired' into processes of mate selection, themselves related to health and the ability to conceive children (Rathjen, 2007).

Notwithstanding, these perceptions are not incumbent upon children in the same regard as they are invariably applied to mature adults (Rathjen, 2007). Nonetheless the teeth of children are not free from base judgements about the amounts of derivation from the aesthetic norm of healthy adult teeth (Rathjen, 2007). Indeed, scholars working in this area of interest have noted how, 'beautiful teeth have been a most essential desire at all times of all human beings' (Rathjen, 2007: 106). It is clear, depictions of children's teeth for a major part of the part of the 20th Century in the Western tradition – meaning through interlacing mediums of mass communications – have presented childhood teeth as aesthetically pleasing within the parameters of their childhood. Parameters demarcated by the transitional progression of teeth from deciduous to primary.

**Interpreting the Communication**
In terms of interpretation and visual aesthetic reading, it is instructive to preface the work of Hall (1973), as his approach introduces the encoding/decoding model, which is of relevance to the Aquafresh communication. Hall's model of communication gives rise to the procedural specificities of meaning making, understood as a polysemic approach, robust enough to incorporate a plethora of potentialised preferential readings, oppositional or indeed a 'half-way-house' negotiated readings (Hall, 1973). It is the assertion of this paper that the Aquafresh billboard has efficaciously narrowed multiple meanings to almost exclusively communicate a preferential and therefore principal reading. In semiology this narrowing of alternatives is presented as a given texts primary meaning; meaning which can exist on at least two planes:

> the party making an image understands both what the audiences will take from it and what they intend by sending it out. (Harper, 2012)

In reflexively implanting an initial critique, questions of determinism in processes of reading and interpretation are certainly present, this does not exclude the following discussion. Moreover, not all of the elements within the communication are reviewed and interpreted, only what is deemed of import to the aspects of societal change and morphology agued to be present and working their way through systems of culture. However, what follows is not a second order meaning, I propose the communication is exclusively operating at the preferential first order meaning. Purposefully encoded at multifarious symbolic levels by the communications producers and disseminators. Notwithstanding, the analysis now progresses to consider the principal characteristics of this novel communication, which when presented together are able to inform the argumentation raised.

*Copy Elements*
The advertisements copy text is presented in a bespoke font which playfully mimics to caricature human teeth in terms of form and shape. In continuance of the rudiments of playfulness, the mid-tone blue of the san-serifed font signifies water, an essential element vital to the practice of teeth brushing with toothpaste. Further, the lettering occupies the dominant golden section of the advertisement and comprises over ~30% of the communicative estate. The substantive aspect of this compositional arrangement is the word 'just', which breaks with the conventions of leading in typeset text, with its ascenders and descenders purposefully misaligned from the continuity of the base sentence. The placement of the word also functions as a graphical device to both disrupt and misalign the social concept of aesthetically perfect teeth. The creators employ this technique to ensure key elements align with the intended message, providing a visual cue of disruption. The idea of disruption is profoundly synonymous to the overall communication, wherein the typeset device aligns, working in conjunction with other substantive visual elements to transform the established societal discourse of dental perfection. As noted, prior, the popularisation of perfection through aesthetics of dental beauty having been historically linked at least by the post-WWII period of mass consumption (Rathjen, 2007).

*Hypothetical: (Re)touching*

This next assertion remains in the domain of the highly speculative, for there is no foreseeable mechanism – without a direct request to the creators – of evidencing the veracity of it.[3] The claim here is that the depicted child's visible gum line has been artificially emphasised in post-production. Through various image manipulation techniques supplementary gradated luminosity has been added to specific parts. Principally to enhance acuity to the two top incisors by artificially increasing reflections and by simultaneously applying dense additional shading to the surrounding gum line above the pre-molars and molars respectively. Therefore, the protrusions of his front two incisors either through a combination of natural physiological processes or through direct surreptitious trans-manipulation are disproportionately emphasised. Indeed, this aesthetic disproportionality is the salient primary purpose of the image in its aim to communicate the widening parameters of dental normativity. The 'exaggerated' – conversely, presented as naturalistic – protruding two upper incisors communicate preferentially deliberate deviation into the abnormal of dental aesthetics – even in the context of belonging to a child.

*Core Communication*

The second and twin principal aspect of the communication is the minority status of the child, his embodied minoritised liminality. There are three (3) children employed within the Aquafresh campaign; however, the hero prominence of the campaign is led by this minority child, the other two children being non-minority. Necessarily, we must ask why is this the case, what informed the decision to lead with a child from a social group that is historically and disproportionately excluded from children's toothpaste advertising (Whittler, 1991), and children's advertising (Seiter, 1993) more generally? The contention here is that employing, deploying and using the minority body brings with it a series of 'ready-made' free-floating socio-cultural signifiers (van Dijk, 1991). Signifiers that are representative of discursive societal knowledge, pre-established and available to be freely re-encoded into the communication (Kellner, 1995). What can be clearly seen is such embodied discourse is mobilised within the advertisement to minimise alternate readings that could potentially deviate from the preferential ones required for the communication to fulfil its brief. Notwithstanding, a communication such as the Aquafresh advertisement does nothing to moderate contentious discourses, on the contrary, it actively employs and disseminates these. Indeed, racialised discursive assumptions are vital to the campaign's success or failure in the neoliberal marketplace. The racialised child's teeth and by extension their embodiment is discursively fixed to buttress and reinforce the notion of the absence of conventional normative aesthetics. Far from liberating, the depicted subject becomes immovable, tethered to reciprocally strengthen their exoticness, dental (at least) malformation, deviation from aesthetic dental normativity – indeed, their 'otherness' is discursively reinforced.

**Changing Society – Evidenced Through Mass Communications**

Therefore, in lieu of the discussed arguments mounted, what does this campaign, the communication, the advertisement and the image assemblage tell us about the society that it was constructed to communicate to? The piece preferentially communicates to us about the growing poverty in society (Dorling, 2024), a prevalent and multi-dimensional poverty that is so acute that it can affect the dental outcomes of children (BMA, 2016; Dorling, 2024). Children are a universally recognised protected group who are amongst the *de facto* vulnerable groups comprising our society (Masten, 2014). Indeed, the poverty of an opportunity to rectify dental deviations is so contemporaneously pervasive, that society – through vast global corporations – is transforming the language of children's dental health to accommodate the structural changes running throughout contemporary Britain. This accommodation of material reality is evidenced in children's dental health and the communications fielded to accompany them.

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[3] Certainly, verifying such a striking claim would be entirely dependent upon the creators being both willing and able to disclose potentially contentious aspects of the communications creation aesthetics.

This image, the advertising example and the campaign underpinning it are representative of a paradigmatic social shift operative on two levels. First, social distribution of health for – in this case children – has regressed to the extent that for a communication to fulfil its commercial brief it endeavours to accommodate profoundly fundamental changes in social relations. Second, in lieu of the above, the communication *must* work counter to long established conventions, ideas, expectations and common-sense established prior discourses to reach its audience(s). Further, the communication labours to transform and supersede entrenched knowledge to efficaciously engage an ever-expanding new reality of precarious sociality.

**Conclusion**
The product that would become Aquafresh toothpaste was developed by Smith Kline & French Laboratories (who later became SmithKline Beecham and then GlaxoSmithKline), in 1973, that is 52 years ago. Indeed, exploring the archives of their marketing communications output this advertisement and the campaign of which it is a part, is to my knowledge, the first instance where the communication is not in alignment. A decades long alignment that unquestionably positions the primacy of healthy white structurally aligned teeth being synonymous with aesthetically beautiful teeth. Further, this purposive misalignment through the communication works counter to societal historically long embedded discourses which equate healthy teeth to aesthetically pleasing ones. Moreover, this is a societal wider discursive framework that Aquafresh and indeed every other toothpaste manufacturer has spent decades and considerable marketing spend to convince the public of. Seen through the problematising lens offered via this paper, the communication is indeed unprecedented. In exploring considerations beyond the limitations of its potentiality to communicate, the communication informs us of the changing social dynamics of the UK. It speaks of the rise in precaritisation and poverty, a profound and entrenched poverty manifesting enduring effects on our nations children's teeth. This forms a relationship intimately linked to the contemporary neoliberal rolling back of the state and the Welfare State in particular, wherein, problems of dental aesthetics must now be resolved by our reconceptualising them as the apostate to what they once were. Societal understandings of the aesthetically deviant is not negated, hidden or mitigated, it is repurposed as no economic remedy is available to be mobilised and employed by the citizenry, the individual, families, toothpaste manufacturers or indeed the state. Unfortunately, society can expect to see increased dissemination of this type of preferentially read, socially discursive and profoundly transformative communication as we evolve further into economically uncertain times.

**Figure: 1.** Aquafresh Billboard Advertisement: '*Perfect teeth are just healthy teeth.*'
**Location:** Worcester Park, South London.
**Advertising Agency:** Grey London.
**Campaign:** Perfect teeth are just healthy teeth.
**Manufacturer:** Haleon plc.

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