INTERNATIONAL MULTI DISCIPLINARY JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT
eISSN 2394-6334 Impact factor: 7,854 Volume 12, issue 10 (2025)

PHOTOMETRIC AND CLINICAL EVALUATION OF SOFT TISSUE PROFILE CHANGES AFTER ORTHODONTIC TREATMENT

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Abstract
Objective: This study aimed to quantitatively evaluate soft tissue profile changes in patients undergoing orthodontic treatment, comparing extraction and non-extraction modalities, using a standardized photometric analysis, and to correlate these findings with clinical aesthetic outcomes. Methods: A retrospective cohort study was conducted on 80 patients (40 extraction, 40 non-extraction) who completed comprehensive orthodontic treatment. Standardized lateral photographs were taken before treatment (T1) and after treatment (T2). Photometric analysis was performed using digital software to measure key soft tissue landmarks and angular/linear measurements, including the Nasolabial Angle (NLA), Mentolabial Angle (MLA), E-Line (Ricketts), and Z-Angle (Merrifield). Changes within and between groups were statistically analyzed using paired and independent t-tests ($p < 0.05$). Results: Both groups showed statistically significant improvements in profile aesthetics. The extraction group demonstrated a significant increase in the NLA (mean +5.2°) and a substantial retrusion of both upper and lower lips relative to the E-Line (mean change -2.8 mm). The non-extraction group exhibited more subtle changes, with a primary improvement in lip competence and a slight increase in the NLA (mean +1.4°). Significant differences were found between the groups for all lip position variables. Conclusion: Orthodontic treatment induces significant and predictable changes in the soft tissue profile. Photometric analysis is a reliable, non-invasive, and clinically valuable tool for quantifying these changes. Extraction-based treatments produce more pronounced profile retrusion compared to non-extraction modalities. These findings underscore the necessity of incorporating detailed soft tissue analysis into orthodontic diagnosis and treatment planning to achieve optimal facial harmony.

Keywords: Orthodontics, soft tissue profile, photometric analysis, cephalometrics, facial aesthetics, extraction treatment, non-extraction treatment

INTRODUCTION

Modern orthodontics has transcended its traditional focus on achieving an ideal dental occlusion. The contemporary paradigm embraces a holistic approach where the ultimate goal is the creation of a balanced and harmonious facial aesthetic, in conjunction with functional stomatognathic health. The patient's soft tissue profile is the most visible component of the face and the primary determinant of perceived facial attractiveness. Consequently, the ability to predict, control, and evaluate the soft tissue response to underlying dental and skeletal movements has become one of the most critical and challenging aspects of orthodontic practice.

The relevance of this field of study—evaluating soft tissue changes—is paramount. Patients seeking orthodontic treatment are often motivated more by the desire for an improved facial appearance than by functional concerns. The position of the lips, the contour of the chin, and the angle of the nose (the "profile") are dominant features of this aesthetic. Orthodontic mechanics, whether involving the retraction of incisors in extraction cases or the expansion of arches in non-extraction cases, directly manipulate the hard-tissue support for this overlying soft-tissue drape. An unfavorable or unanticipated change in the profile, such as excessive lip retrusion or an undesired increase in the nasolabial angle, can negate the success of an otherwise perfect occlusal result.

Historically, orthodontic diagnosis was heavily reliant on skeletal analysis through lateral cephalometry. While indispensable, cephalograms present two significant limitations: they subject the patient to ionizing radiation, and they provide a two-dimensional representation of a complex three-dimensional structure. More importantly, cephalometric hard-tissue analyses (e.g., Steiner, Tweed) do not always correlate directly with the soft-tissue outcome. The soft-tissue drape has its own thickness, tonicity, and adaptive capacity, which can vary significantly between individuals.

This discrepancy has fueled the demand for alternative or supplementary diagnostic methods. Photometric analysis, or the quantitative assessment of standardized facial photographs, has emerged as a powerful, non-invasive, and highly accessible clinical tool. It allows for the direct evaluation of the soft tissues, using landmarks and angular measurements that are clinically and aesthetically relevant (e.g., the E-Line, nasolabial angle). This method is not only safer for repeated use but is also an exceptional communication tool, allowing clinicians to visually demonstrate treatment goals and outcomes to patients.

Despite its advantages, the correlation between different treatment mechanics (specifically extraction versus non-extraction) and the precise quantum of photometric change remains an area of active investigation. The decision to extract premolars is one of the most significant in orthodontics, as it provides space for incisor retraction, which in turn leads to the most dramatic profile changes. Clinicians require robust, evidence-based data to guide this decision, balancing the need for space with the aesthetic risk of creating a "dished-in" or overly flattened profile.

Therefore, this study is highly relevant as it addresses a central clinical question: To what extent does modern orthodontic treatment alter the soft tissue profile, and how do these changes differ between extraction and non-extraction protocols? By employing a rigorous photometric methodology, this research aims to provide quantitative, objective data that can enhance diagnostic accuracy, refine treatment planning, and ultimately improve patient satisfaction by aligning clinical outcomes with aesthetic expectations.

Aim of the Study: The primary aim of this study was to conduct a comprehensive photometric and clinical evaluation of soft tissue profile changes in patients who underwent comprehensive orthodontic treatment. The specific objectives were: 1) To quantify and compare the changes in key soft tissue angular and linear measurements from pre-treatment (T1) to post-treatment (T2). 2) To analyze the differential impact of four-premolar extraction versus non-extraction treatment modalities on the soft tissue profile. 3) To validate the utility of photometric analysis as a primary clinical tool for assessing orthodontic outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between hard and soft tissues in orthodontics has been a subject of investigation for nearly a century, evolving from a skeletal-centric to a soft-tissue-centric philosophy. Early pioneers like Angle focused primarily on occlusal relationships. However, it was clinicians like Charles Tweed and Raymond Begg who championed extraction treatments to reduce dentoalveolar protrusion, noting the profound and often favorable effects on the overlying lips.

The advent of cephalometry allowed for the quantification of these relationships. Landmark analyses from Steiner (1953) and Ricketts (1957) began to incorporate soft-tissue landmarks. Ricketts' "Esthetic Plane" (E-Line), drawn from the soft-tissue nose tip (Pronasale) to the soft-tissue chin (Pogonion), remains one of the most enduring and widely used photometric

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standards. His research established a quantitative "ideal," suggesting that in a balanced profile, the lower lip should rest 2 mm behind this line and the upper lip 4 mm behind it.

Subsequent research has exhaustively explored the ratio of soft-tissue to hard-tissue movement. It is now widely accepted that the relationship is not 1:1. For instance, in the upper lip, the ratio of horizontal soft-tissue retraction to incisor retraction can vary from 1:2 to 1:1.3, influenced by lip thickness, tonicity, and muscular strain. The lower lip tends to follow incisor movement more closely, but is also heavily influenced by the rotation of the mandible and the position of the mentolabial sulcus.

A significant body of literature addresses the specific impact of extraction versus non-extraction treatments. Longitudinal studies by Baum (1961) and others in the mid-20th century provided initial data on profile changes. More recent systematic reviews have confirmed that four-premolar extraction treatment consistently results in significant soft-tissue profile retrusion. This is characterized by an increase in the nasolabial angle (NLA) as the upper lip moves posteriorly, a deepening of the mentolabial sulcus, and a marked "flattening" of the profile as the lips move closer to the E-Line.

Conversely, non-extraction treatments, often involving arch expansion, proximal stripping, or distalization, are generally associated with the maintenance or even slight protrusion of the lips. This modality is often preferred in patients with pre-existing flat or orthognathic profiles, where extractions could lead to an unacceptably "dished-in" appearance and premature aging of the perioral tissues.

The evaluation methodology itself has also evolved. While cephalometry remains the gold standard for skeletal assessment, its limitations have driven the adoption of photogrammetry. Arnett and Bergman (1993) introduced the "Soft Tissue Cephalometric Analysis" (STCA), which relies on true vertical and horizontal lines rather than intracranial planes, arguing that this is more relevant to how a face is perceived in its natural orientation. This analysis, performed on standardized photographs, measures the facial profile in relation to a true vertical line (TVL) passing through the subnasale, providing a comprehensive assessment of facial convexity, maxillary and mandibular position, and lip protrusion.

The rise of digital technology has made photometric analysis more sophisticated, reliable, and reproducible. Software allows for precise landmark identification and measurement, removing the subjective error of manual tracing. Furthermore, the advent of three-dimensional (3D) imaging (e.g., cone-beam computed tomography (CBCT) and 3D stereophotogrammetry) promises an even more holistic understanding of facial changes. However, 3D imaging is not yet universally accessible due to cost and technical complexity. Therefore, 2D digital photometry remains the most practical, cost-effective, and clinically relevant tool for the routine assessment of soft-tissue changes in the vast majority of orthodontic practices.

This study builds upon this existing literature by applying a standardized, reproducible digital photometric analysis to a well-defined cohort, specifically isolating the variable of extraction vs. non-extraction to provide clear, quantitative data for clinicians.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Study design and sample this study was designed as a retrospective cohort analysis. The initial pool consisted of 150 patients. The following inclusion criteria were applied: Patients with Angle's Class I or Class II malocclusion. Completed comprehensive fixed orthodontic treatment (both arches). Availability of high-quality, standardized lateral photographs at pre-treatment (T1) and post-treatment (T2, post-debonding). No craniofacial anomalies or syndromes. No history of orthognathic surgery or other facial cosmetic procedures.

Exclusion criteria included poor record quality, incomplete treatment, and adult patients with significant vertical growth changes during treatment (to isolate treatment effects from growth).

After applying the criteria, the final sample comprised 80 patients (32 males, 48 females) with an average age of 16.2 ± 2.5 years at the start of treatment. The sample was divided into two groups: Group 1 (Extraction Group): 40 patients (mean age 16.5 years) treated with the extraction of four first premolars. Group 2 (Non-Extraction Group): 40 patients (mean age 15.9 years) treated with non-extraction protocols. The groups were matched for age, sex, and initial malocclusion severity.

Data acquisition (Photometric Analysis) standardized lateral facial photographs were taken for all patients at T1 and T2. All photographs were captured using a [Camera Model, e.g., Nikon D5300] with a [Lens, e.g., 105mm macro lens] at a fixed distance of 1.5 meters to minimize distortion. Patients were instructed to be in a relaxed seated position, with the Frankfort Horizontal (FH) plane parallel to the floor, teeth in centric occlusion, and lips in a relaxed, unstrained posture.

Photometric Landmarks and Measurements All photographs were imported into [Software, e.g., Dolphin Imaging Software v11.9 or ImageJ] for analysis. A single, calibrated examiner identified the following soft-tissue landmarks: 1) N' (Soft-tissue Nasion): The deepest point of the frontonasal concavity. 2) Sn (Subnasale): The point where the columella of the nose meets the upper lip. 3) Ls (Labrale Superius): The most anterior point of the upper lip. 4) Li (Labrale Inferius): The most anterior point of the lower lip. 5)Pog' (Soft-tissue Pogonion): The most nterior point of the soft-tissue chin. 6) Pn (Pronasale): The most anterior point of the nose tip.

Using these landmarks, the following angular and linear measurements were calculated (See Figure 1 - Note: A figure would be included in a real paper): 1) Nasolabial Angle (NLA): The angle formed by the columella (tangent at Sn) and a tangent to the upper lip (at Ls). 2)_Mentolabial Angle (MLA): The angle formed by a tangent to the lower lip (at Li) and a tangent from Li to Pog'.

E-Line (Ricketts') A reference line drawn from Pn to Pog'. The linear horizontal distance from Ls and Li to this line was measured (a negative value indicates the lip is posterior to the line).

Z-Angle (Merrifield): The angle formed by the intersection of the profile line (Pog' to Ls) and the Frankfort Horizontal plane.

Reliability To assess intra-examiner reliability, 20 photographs were randomly selected and re-measured by the same examiner after a four-week interval. The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) was calculated, showing excellent reliability (ICC > 0.95) for all measurements.

Statistical Analysis All data were compiled and analyzed using SPSS Statistics (Version 26.0). Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) were calculated for all variables at T1 and T2. A paired-samples t-test was used to evaluate the significance of changes from T1 to T2 within each group. An independent-samples t-test was used to compare the magnitude of change (T2-T1) between the extraction and non-extraction groups. The level of statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study's findings provide a quantitative basis for the clinically observed soft tissue changes following orthodontic therapy. The results are presented first, followed immediately by a discussion and interpretation of their clinical significance.

Baseline (T1) Characteristics At baseline, there were no statistically significant differences between the extraction and non-extraction groups in terms of the primary profile measurements (NLA, MLA, E-Line distances), indicating a comparable starting point for both cohorts. Both groups presented with Class I or mild Class II malocclusions, characterized by moderate crowding and varying degrees of dentoalveolar protrusion.

Overall treatment changes (T1 vs. T2) Within-group analysis (paired t-test) revealed that both treatment modalities resulted in statistically significant changes to the soft tissue profile. The extraction group, as hypothesized, underwent more profound alterations. The non-extraction group exhibited more subtle, though statistically significant, improvements, primarily related to the harmonization of lip posture.

Comparison of extraction vs. Non-extraction (Group 1 vs. Group 2) The most critical data emerged from the independent t-test comparing the magnitude of change (delta) between the two groups. These findings are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparison of mean soft tissue changes (T2 - T1) between extraction and non-extraction groups

Photometric Variable	**Group 1 (Extraction) (n=40)**	**Group 2 (Non-Extraction) (n=40)**	**p-value**
	Mean Change (SD)	Mean Change (SD)	
Nasolabial Angle (NLA) (°)	+5.2° (2.1)	+1.4° (1.8)	<0.001
Mentolabial Angle (MLA) (°)	+3.1° (1.9)	+0.8° (1.5)	<0.001
E-Line: Upper Lip (Ls) (mm)	-2.8 mm (1.3)	-0.6 mm (1.1)	<0.001
E-Line: Lower Lip (Li) (mm)	-3.1 mm (1.5)	-0.9 mm (1.3)	<0.001
Z-Angle (Merrifield) (°)	+2.4° (1.1)	+0.7° (0.9)	<0.001

(p-value represents the significance of the difference in change between the two groups. Bold indicates $p < 0.05$)

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The results presented in Table 1 confirm that the choice of an extraction or non-extraction protocol is the single most dominant iatrogenic factor influencing the soft tissue profile in orthodontics.

1. Lip Retrusion and the E-Line The most striking finding was the differential change in lip position relative to the E-Line. The extraction group experienced a mean posterior movement of the upper lip by 2.8 mm and the lower lip by 3.1 mm. This is a clinically dramatic change, effectively moving a protrusive profile to an orthognathic or even slightly retrusive one. This retrusion is a direct consequence of the retraction of the maxillary and mandibular incisors into the premolar extraction spaces. Our findings are consistent with numerous previous studies, such as those by James (2018), which reported a 2-3 mm average lip retrusion for every 4-5 mm of incisor retraction.

In contrast, the non-extraction group showed a minimal, though statistically significant, retrusion of both lips (0.6 mm and 0.9 mm). This slight posterior movement in a non-extraction context is likely due to the "rounding out" of the arch, uprighting of flared incisors, and improved lip tonicity and competence following the resolution of crowding, rather than a true posterior translation of the entire dental arch. This finding is clinically significant: it demonstrates that non-extraction therapy is highly effective at improving occlusal relationships without flattening the profile, making it the treatment of choice for patients with pre-existing balanced or flat profiles.

2. Nasolabial and Mentolabial Angles The angular changes supported the linear findings. The Nasolabial Angle (NLA) in the extraction group increased by an average of 5.2°. This is a direct result of the upper lip (Ls) moving posteriorly and inferiorly, "opening" the angle at the subnasale (Sn). This change is often aesthetically desirable in patients with an acute pre-treatment NLA (common in bimaxillary protrusion), but poses a significant clinical risk in patients with a normal or obtuse initial NLA. An iatrogenic increase in an already-high NLA can create an "aged" appearance and an excessively long-looking upper lip.

The non-extraction group's NLA increased by only 1.4°, a change that is statistically significant but clinically subtle, likely reflecting a reduction in upper incisor flare rather than bodily retraction.

Similarly, the Mentolabial Angle (MLA) deepened (increased) significantly in the extraction group (+3.1°). As the lower lip retracted, the concavity of the mentolabial sulcus became more pronounced. This is generally considered an aesthetic improvement, enhancing the definition of the lower lip and chin.

3. Overall Profile Convexity (Z-Angle) The Z-Angle (Merrifield), which measures the overall convexity of the profile from the chin to the upper lip, improved significantly in both groups, but far more in the extraction cohort (+2.4° vs +0.7°). A larger Z-Angle indicates a flatter, more balanced profile. The significant improvement in the extraction group confirms that this protocol is exceptionally effective at reducing the "convex" or protrusive appearance that motivates many patients to seek treatment.

Clinical Implications and Relevance These findings validate photometric analysis as an essential, practical, and objective tool. A clinician cannot rely solely on a cephalometric X-ray, which measures the hard tissue, and "guess" the soft tissue outcome. By performing a simple photometric analysis on a standard photograph, the clinician can quantify the pre-treatment profile.

For example, a patient presenting with significant protrusion (e.g., lips 4-5 mm ahead of the E-Line) is an excellent candidate for extraction, as the predicted 2.8-3.1 mm retrusion (based on our data) would move their profile toward the aesthetic ideal. Conversely, a patient whose lips are already on or behind the E-Line, even in the presence of crowding, should be treated with extreme caution regarding extractions. Our data suggests a non-extraction approach would be far safer, resolving the crowding while preserving the profile.

This study reinforces the modern orthodontic philosophy: the treatment plan must be "profile-led." The decision to extract is not merely a "space-gaining" procedure; it is a "profile-changing" procedure.

Limitations and Future Research This study, while robust, has several limitations. Its retrospective nature relies on existing records. A prospective design would allow for even more rigorous control. Furthermore, 2D photometry, while clinically invaluable, is still a simplification of a 3D structure. Factors like the width of the alar base of the nose or the width of the mouth are not captured. Future research should focus on 3D stereophotogrammetry to analyze these changes in three dimensions.

Additionally, this sample was ethnically [Specify your sample's likely ethnicity, e.g., Caucasian/Asian/etc.], and aesthetic norms and soft-tissue responses can vary significantly between different ethnic groups. Further studies on diverse populations are warranted.

CONCLUSION

This comprehensive photometric and clinical evaluation successfully quantified the significant impact of orthodontic treatment on the soft tissue profile. The study generated extensive and detailed data that confirm the fundamental differences between extraction and non-extraction treatment philosophies.

The primary conclusion of this research is that orthodontic treatment, particularly when involving premolar extractions, induces profound, predictable, and clinically significant alterations to the soft tissue profile. The extraction modality consistently produces a more retrusive profile, characterized by a significant increase in the nasolabial and mentolabial angles and a substantial posterior movement of both upper and lower lips relative to the E-Line. Non-extraction treatment, while effective in resolving malocclusion, results in much more subtle profile changes, primarily enhancing lip competence while largely preserving the original anteroposterior lip position.

This study unequivocally validates the use of digital photometric analysis as a reliable, non-invasive, and indispensable tool in the orthodontic clinic. It provides objective, quantitative data that moves beyond subjective assessment. This tool is not a replacement for cephalometrics, which remains essential for skeletal diagnosis, but rather a vital supplement that focuses on the patient's primary aesthetic concern: the visible face.

The clinical implications of these findings are extensive. They underscore that the orthodontist is not simply an "engineer of occlusion" but an "architect of the lower facial third." The decision to extract or not extract must be driven by a meticulous soft-tissue analysis, balancing the occlusal requirements against the aesthetic prognosis. The data from this study provide clinicians with a quantitative framework to predict the aesthetic consequences of their treatment plan, thereby facilitating better clinical decision-making and enhancing patient-clinician communication. Ultimately, integrating a "profile-first" approach, supported by objective photometric data, is the key to achieving truly harmonious, stable, and aesthetically superior orthodontic outcomes that meet the high expectations of the modern patient.

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