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From Tom Cruise to Kate Middleton, adults are turning to braces

By Nicole Mowbray

Retailers call it “the Mark Zuckerberg paradox”: how do you know whether a consumer who enters a store in scruffy jeans and a hooded sweatshirt is actually worth £11.8bn?

“In these days of understated wealth and ever-available credit, high-end retailers find it increasingly difficult to know which shoppers are the ones with serious ‘spending power’”, an influential fashion publicist said recently (distasteful as this stereotyping is, there’s no question managers identify potentially lucrative customers via their “look”). As a result, she added: “Shop assistants are now told to look for a new clue to identify people with serious cash: their teeth. Put simply, people with good dentistry are also often the ones with healthy bank balances.”

Not only will a perfect smile make you look richer but it will also help you look younger too. “Having good teeth and a well-aligned jaw really is the secret to looking youthful,” says cosmetic doctor Mica Engel of the Waterhouse Young Clinic near Harley Street in London. “The teeth and jaw are the foundations of the whole lower half of the face. They’re the framework to support all the muscles and the skin. You can have the best skin in the world but it’s your smile that can really give the game away.”

Put these two factors together and the equation is simple: we are in the era of status teeth. Forget Tod’s loafers or that much-coveted calfskin Louis Vuitton Capucine; it’s a great set of gnashers that are the most wanted accessory in 2013. Little wonder so many adults are turning to that traditionally teenage solution: braces.

It wasn’t until he turned 40, in 2002, that Tom Cruise decided to fix his teeth. Actress Faye Dunaway got a set of train tracks at the age of 61, while singer Gwen Stefani, Nadja Swarovski, of the eponymous crystal business, actress Katherine Heigl and the Duchess of Cambridge all underwent orthodontic work as adults. Sylvia Mathews Burwell, director of the Office of Management and Budget in the Obama administration, had her braces fitted when she was Robert Rubin’s chief of staff at the Treasury department in the Clinton administration.

Exact numbers of adults undergoing cosmetic dentistry are not available but Dr Preet Bhogal, an orthodontist at London Smile Clinic and Birmingham’s Signature Orthodontics, says he and his colleagues have seen a big rise in the number of grown-ups seeking to right their wonky smiles in the past five years – and using braces, as opposed to veneers, the cosmetic solution favoured before that. “We’re certainly seeing people wanting to correct and preserve their own natural teeth rather than having big crowns,” he says.

“Advances in orthodontics mean there’s a huge variety of different appliances available now,” adds Bhogal, “from traditional train tracks, to less visible retainers and sophisticated hidden options – so-called lingual braces, which are fixed to the teeth on the inside rather than the outside. They enable people to have great teeth in a record time with minimal discomfort and social stigma.”

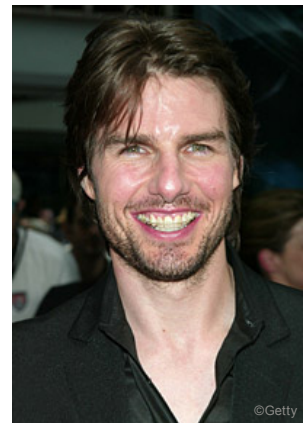
Writer Nicole Jackson, 34, who had braces as a teenager, but whose teeth became uneven as an adult, says: “Over time, my slightly crooked teeth began to really bother me, to the point where I started to become self conscious about my smile. When I got married, vanity kicked in.”

Jackson invested in Invisalign, a series of removable “gumshield-style” clear trays moulded to her teeth. Trays are changed every few weeks to move the teeth into their desired position. “I wore the appliance for about a year,” she says. “And while it’s probably the vainest thing I’ve ever done, it was worth it, even at £3,000. I am now slightly obsessed with my teeth.”

But treating an adult mouth is not without its challenges. “Working on adults is more challenging than working with children,” says Bhogal. “As the mouth isn’t actively growing, teeth don’t move as fast at the beginning. Adults tend to have pre-existing dental work too, so you’re often not starting with a complete set of healthy teeth. Any problems must be rectified before treatment begins.”



Katherine Heigl had orthodontic treatment as an adult



Tom Cruise

Indeed, Julia Hill, 36, an accountant from Sussex, had to go through months of hygienist appointments before she was ready for her “Clarity braces – basically tooth-coloured train tracks on the front of my teeth. You can hardly see them. Cleaning my teeth three or four times a day is time-consuming and I have to be careful with what I eat – nothing hard or chewy – plus there’s the inevitable rubbing and soreness but, within a month, my teeth had noticeably improved.”

Dr Chaw Su Kyi specialises in so-called rapid braces at her practice in west London, where two-thirds of her patients are adults (the oldest is 72), but she says: “It normally takes between 15 and 18 months to complete orthodontic work. When treatment is finished, patients are given a night retainer to wear in bed, and we bond a retaining wire to the teeth to keep them in position. Patients come back for check-ups every three months for the first year.”

City analyst Suzanne Smith, 44, invested in braces two years ago after years being unhappy with her smile. “I always felt embarrassed to show my teeth,” she says. “They were very crooked and crowded. I felt people – clients and colleagues namely – judged me on them, and so I subconsciously developed a smile that didn’t show them.

“Then one day I just decided to use some of my bonus on braces – despite a husband and friends who insisted there was ‘nothing wrong’ with my teeth. I saw an orthodontist who recommended ‘Incognito’ braces – a train-track style appliance worn on the back of the teeth, meaning people can’t really see it. It was on for 18 months and, factoring in all the X-rays, appointments, cleaning and the appliance itself, it cost in the region of £9,000. I don’t begrudge a penny.”

www.ft.com/stylestockists

www.waterhouseyoung.com

Preet Bhogal, www.londonmileortho.com

Chaw Su Kyi, westlondonorthodontist.co.uk

www.cqc.org.uk

www.invisalign.co.uk/



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