

It's now so cool to wear braces that you can buy fake ones. KAREN KAY investigates why the in-crowd is going orthodontic

SO YOU thought the must-have accessory this season was the waist-cinching belt à la Victoria Beckham? Well, you're right to a point. But if you really want to be in with the in-crowd, get braces on our teeth.

Yes, the most glamorous mouths in town are happily flaunting a set of train-track in the pursuit of the perfect smile. In fact, the fashion for a mouthful of metal is so popular among trend-conscious teens that, earlier this year, authorities in Thailand had to clamp down on an influx of 'fake braces' that had flooded the market, catering to those youngsters who wanted to sport the latest hip accessory. Needless to say, these could have done more harm than good to the wearers: a race is a bespoke product which requires extensive consultation with a qualified orthodontist.)

As everyone from Hollywood to Borehamwood is recognising the benefits of a race, forget Botox; the latest craze to drop is definitely your orthodontist's.

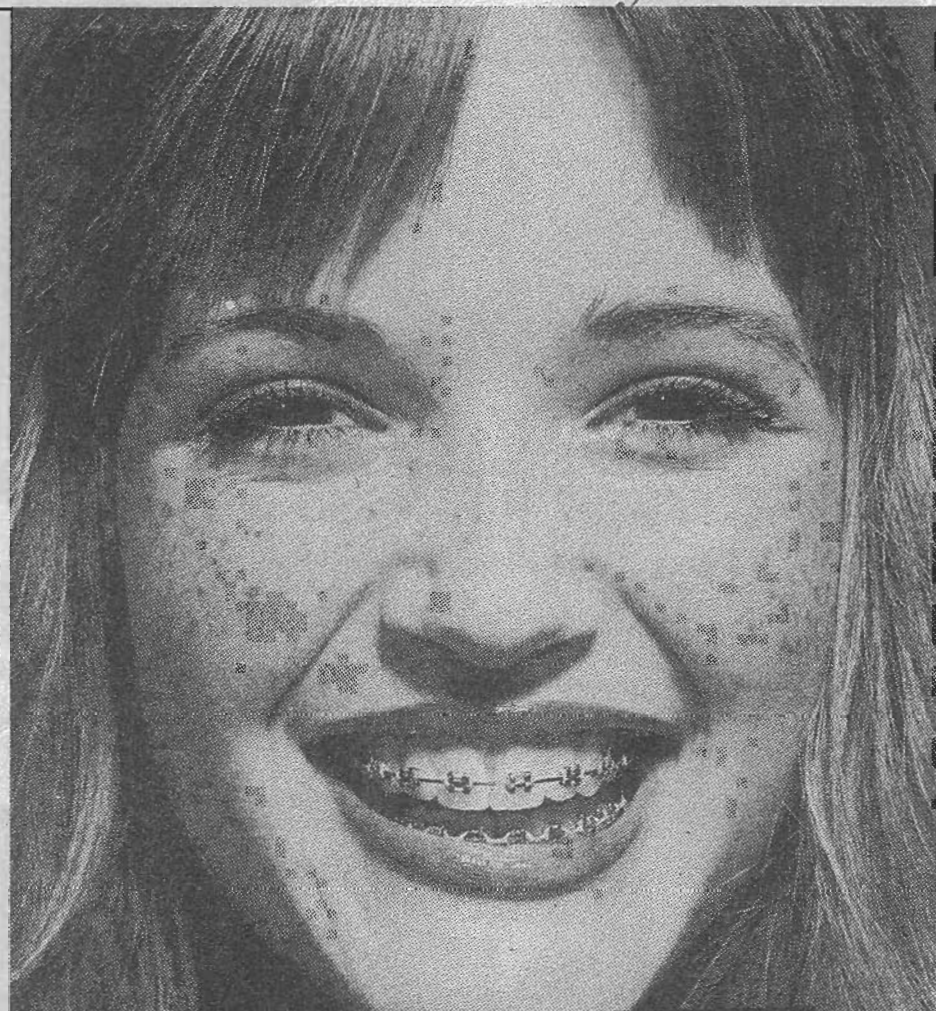
With a growing number of public figures sporting braces (Gwen Stefani, Tom Cruise, rap star Nelly and Princess Beatrice), it's hardly surprising the social stigma is long gone.

'In the past couple of years, we have seen a huge upsurge in the number of adults — mainly females — who are coming in for treatment,' comments Rod Ferguson, a partner in Total Orthodontics, a leading UK chain of practices.

'There is a "lost generation" who didn't have access to orthodontists as youngsters and are witnessing the benefits of today's teens. About 50 per cent of my patients are now adults.'

It used to be deemed geeky to wear braces here in the UK. I know, I was the only one in my class to accessorise my early whites with a full metal jacket thanks to a mother who'd spent two years living in the land of the perfect smile: California. But who's laughing now? I'm the one with a constant smile, while my contemporaries clamp their jaws together in a surly bid to conceal crooked teeth.

Thankfully, methods have improved tremendously in the 25 years since I went through what felt like primitive torture, and today there's a variety of less obtrusive, less painful options available. Savvy patients are even beginning to request brand names. Damon braces are the choice for many.



PICTURES: GETTY/REUTERS/LFI

BRACE YOURSELF

These are a new generation of 'self-ligating' braces that feature a sliding mechanism to reduce the friction (and, therefore, potential discomfort) as teeth move. It also reduces treatment time.

Others — including a young Prince William — opt for ceramic braces, which are less obvious than the traditional metal train-tracks.

However, not everyone wants the world to know they have an ongoing relationship with their orthodontist, which is where the innovative Invisalign clear versions and 'lingual' braces come in.

Invisalign treatment involves a series of 25-50 custom-made removable aligners (a bit like transparent gum shields), worn day and night for a period of about two weeks each, gradually moving the teeth.

Lingual braces are worn on the back of the teeth. Fashion entrepreneur Karen Millen, 45, has recently completed a 15-month period of wearing linguals on her upper teeth. 'They do impact on your

speech when you first wear them and they take some getting used to, but I am really pleased with the results,' she says. 'My 14-year-old daughter, Jordan, has great teeth but she wants braces because they are trendy.'

Orthodontist Dr Ferguson says: 'We get very impressive results with lingual braces in just nine months in some cases, though very complex treatments might last a couple of years.'

Though many children qualify for orthodontic treatment under the NHS, adults in the UK have to pay for themselves. With fees ranging from around £450 to £4,000 for traditional braces and £3,000 to £8,000 for a course of Invisalign aligners or lingual braces, it's not to be frowned at.

But, what price is a smile? After all, it is for ever, unlike this season's over-priced corset belt.

■ **British Orthodontic Society,**
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