

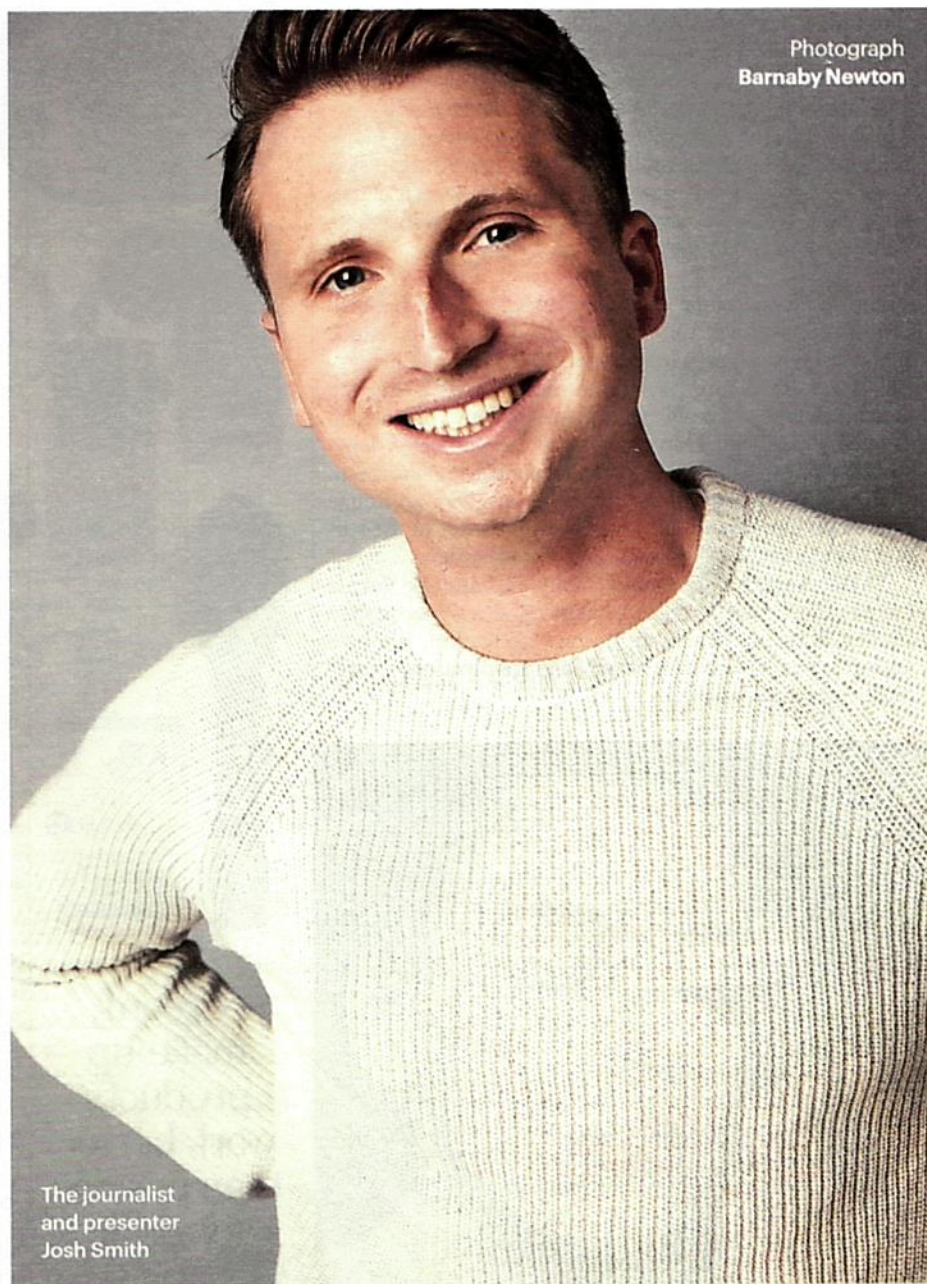
Smile like you mean it

Josh Smith, 33, hated his teeth so much that he covered his mouth when he talked and never smiled in photos. The answer? An £11,000 'teeth-over', a trend that's on the rise for men

Men are flashing refashioned smiles more than ever. And not just reality TV stars like *Love Island's* Luca Bish. "I've seen an increase in male patients in the past five years, and more specifically since the pandemic, because they were spending a lot of time on Zoom," says Dr Rhona Eskander of the Chelsea Dental Clinic, who, as a general dentist with a special interest in cosmetic dentistry, is currently seeing a 30 per cent growth in male patients month on month. "People feel they can't really get away with having bad teeth, because even if you [aren't] an influencer, say, or in the media space, people are always taking photos or looking at themselves on screen."

I am one of these men. My own smile makeover took more than four and a half years — from heavy orthodontist treatment to whitening — and came with a £11,290 bill. But vanity wasn't the main reason I embarked on a long and financially draining teeth-over.

I will always remember a potential "suitor" telling 25-year-old me, "You're cute, but when you smile your teeth make you really unattractive," out of nowhere in a gay club in the depths of Clapham. It would have been easy to pass it off as a drink-fuelled piece of post-2am feedback but it played into a deep insecurity I had



Photograph
Barnaby Newton

The journalist
and presenter
Josh Smith



From left Ryan Reynolds, Idris Elba, Ben Affleck, David Beckham, Lucien Laviscount and George Clooney's pearly whites provide lots of inspiration

about my teeth that strangers consistently tapped into.

I'm an entertainment journalist, and at the time I had started hosting YouTube videos, interviewing celebrities from Oprah to Victoria Beckham, and the negative feedback in the comments all focused on my teeth. It ranged from the less inventive — "WTF is wrong with his teeth?" — to the aggressive: "He needs those teeth punching in." I seriously thought if someone *did* punch my teeth in then at least I would have to get replacement teeth.

So why didn't I just get them "fixed"? Mainly the financial implications. In my early twenties I worked at multiple glossy magazines, earning from £19,000 to £25,000 a year, which doesn't allow the funding of the eye-watering costs of dental procedures. Aside from my aforementioned bill, according to the Chelsea Dental Clinic, men are now spending between £5,000 and £10,000 on cosmetic dentistry to fix their teeth, with treatments including Invisalign "invisible" tooth straighteners and bonding (which fills in any gaps and cracks).

The shame I felt about my teeth also played out during the rise of Instagram and the perfectionist culture it brought with it. The daily taking of selfies was a consistent reminder of not only how bad my teeth looked but also how badly I actually felt about them. I adopted a pout to rival Derek Zoolander's and *never* smiled in photos. My friends would say, "Why don't you smile? You're such a fun, happy person but you look like a completely unapproachable person in pictures." Yet it was deeper than that: I could feel my teeth becoming a constant challenge to my mental health, chipping away at my self-confidence. I even started placing my hand over my mouth when I talked.

In 2018 I invested in a "train track" brace followed by an Invisalign brace at the Pall Mall Dental practice, paying in instalments

after ferreting away any freelance money I earned. But after I'd finished I still wasn't happy. My teeth looked dull, my chipped tooth was straight but still chipped, and my two front teeth really insisted on taking centre stage. I hadn't come this far to continue feeling self-conscious. I wanted them to be perfect — but not Hollywood big like Simon Cowell or as bedazzling Essex as Rylan, mind you. So I added the £3,790 cherry on the top of the cake with a course of whitening and bonding, where a tooth-coloured resin material is applied to your natural teeth and hardens under specialist lights to create the desired shape.

Now that we live in a world where we constantly face ourselves on screens, Eskander sees firsthand how much good dental work can affect emotional wellbeing. "I'll give patients the mirror after a smile makeover and they burst into tears. They don't expect to burst into tears because they don't realise how emotional it is and how much they have been holding back in life."

And given the astronomical costs, it's not surprising there has been an increase in men boarding aeroplanes to Turkey — the number one destination for cut-price dentistry — to get "veneers" at a fraction of the fee. The hashtag #turkeyteeth, as the trend has been labelled, has had more than 230 million views on TikTok. Bish did

I remember a potential 'suitor' telling 25-year-old me, 'You're cute, but when you smile your teeth make you really unattractive'

exactly that, but his teeth should come with a warning, Eskander says: "There's been a huge miscommunication with the public. When people are going to Turkey, they're getting crowns done. A veneer is when you shave the front surface of the tooth down by 30 per cent, crowns mean you lose 70 to 80 per cent of your natural tooth surface instead." You only have to spend a few seconds on TikTok to find videos of tiny, stump-like teeth that are left behind on patients who received crowns instead of the veneers they were promised. Due to malpractice many have been plagued by infections, abscesses, nerve sensitivity and even facial paralysis. "They then replace the teeth with porcelain, in a white tone that doesn't even exist in nature. Someone like Luca [may] need dentures by the age of 50," Eskander warns.

She says the majority of her clients say, "I don't want fake-looking teeth." They want teeth that look natural, they don't want anyone to know they've been done."

I actually *wanted* my teeth to be blinding white but was advised otherwise. Anna Middleton, a dental hygienist specialising in teeth cleaning and whitening, also warns about men seeking aggressive dental treatment in the form of full mouth crowns and veneers. "The teeth look unnatural!" she says. "Often a trip to a hygienist and professional tooth whitening can be enough to give a safe and natural look." Her advice? "Teeth should match the whites of your eyes to look natural."

When it came to seeing my "natural" teeth for the first time, Eskander was right — I was handed the mirror after the bonding was complete on six of my teeth and held back my tears. The smile that had held me back for so long was gone.

Was it worth it? Yes! Even though I now have an irrational fear of falling over and seeing £11,290 of dental work staring at me from the pavement... ■