

Looksmaxxing: When the quest for masculine perfection goes awry

What is it that drives men to extremes in search of physical perfection?



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What price physical perfection? Would you use a hammer to rap your cheek bones into shape, devour half a kilo of sugar every day, dope yourself with testosterone and a concoction of off-label and illicit drugs just to look good?

While much has been made of the extreme cosmetic measures undertaken by women for beauty's sake, including rib removal for a slimmer waist, the recent trend of "looksmaxxing" is a male preoccupation. It has emerged from an obscure corner of the internet and has since spilled into mainstream youth culture, going viral across platforms such as TikTok, YouTube and Instagram.

The measures advised and taken by looksmaxxers range from the mundane and sensible – going to the gym and paying more attention to skincare – to the extreme and bizarre. Some advocate "mewing", pressing one's tongue to the roof of the mouth in the hope of having a more chiselled jawline; others endorse taking methamphetamine to suppress appetite; injecting steroids including testosterone to bulk up; undergoing surgery to lengthen their legs; "bonesmashing", which involves hitting the facial bones with a hammer on the unfounded theory that damage to the bones will stimulate further growth and produce a more manly visage; and ingesting a plethora of experimental chemicals.

One of its biggest stars – and an indefatigable presence online – is a 20-year-old white American influencer, streamer and TikTok star called Braden Peters, who has given himself the moniker "Clavicular" – an overt reference to the disproportionate importance looksmaxxers place on the span of the collarbones, seen as a signifier of masculinity and dominance.

He has gained notoriety for the extraordinary lengths to which he goes in pursuit of his idea of physical perfection. Through his videos, he has promulgated the idea that underpins this movement: That physical appearance is not merely a form of social capital determining success in relationships, status and personal worth, but also something that can be engineered, ranked and competed over.

And in his online realm of looksmaxxing, men are sorted into three tiers: from the lowest, the "subhuman", to the middling "normie", and finally the highest,

the "Chad" – looksmaxxing's ideal man, endowed with the right height, pleasing facial symmetry and a hypermasculine presence. Those who manage, by dint of strenuous effort, to climb this hierarchy and attain some measure of beauty are said to have "ascended", as if moving a step closer to this supposed ideal were a form of revered spiritual attainment.

What is one to make of this phenomenon? People have a natural tendency to compare themselves with others, and looksmaxxing intensifies this instinct. With social media, the scale of comparison has become virtually infinite. Anyone scrolling through a phone can be exposed to an endless stream of faces and bodies, each one becoming yet another point of reference.

What we are seeing, however, is not a reflection of real life. Social media platforms are designed to push forward images that attract attention. Influencers often rely on professional lighting, filters and editing tools, while faces and bodies sculpted and altered by cosmetic procedures and aesthetic treatments have created a distorted visual universe in which exceptional physical beauty appears to be the norm.

FROM COMPARISON TO COMPULSION

In its more extreme forms, this preoccupation of trying to measure up to some idealised notion of physical attractiveness can take on a pathological intensity. I recall a young man who felt himself insufficiently muscular, distressed by what was, by most measures, an otherwise ordinary frame. He aspired, with obsessive intensity, to a Schwarzenegger-like physique. Long hours were spent in the gym, often at the expense of his job and social life. Rigid dieting and copious protein supplementation accompanied a punishing routine of weightlifting. He was seeking not only a transformation of the body, but also a deeper need for validation that remained beyond reach, no matter how hard he tried.

This is characteristic of muscle dysmorphia, a condition in which a person – most often a man – becomes convinced that he is too small or not sufficiently muscular, even when this is not the case, and may relentlessly pursue further bulking.

The condition is a subtype of body dysmorphic disorder, characterised by a persistent preoccupation with perceived flaws in appearance that are either minor or not apparent to others. This is typically accompanied by repetitive behaviours – mirror checking, excessive grooming, photographing oneself, and constant comparison with others. Over time, ordinary insecurity



American influencer, streamer and TikTok star Braden Peters, also known as "Clavicular", is one of the biggest stars of the recent trend of "looksmaxxing". His moniker is an overt reference to the disproportionate importance looksmaxxers place on the span of the collarbones, seen as a signifier of masculinity and dominance. PHOTO: CASSIDY ARELA/NYTIMES

can harden into an obsessive cycle of self-surveillance, anxiety and despair.

Research has shown that repeated comparison with curated and often doctored images is associated with lower body satisfaction, heightened anxiety about appearance, poorer self-esteem, and an increased risk of depression.

What psychiatry would recognise as a pathological pattern is, in looksmaxxing forums, normalised. Users rate themselves and others numerically, facial features are dissected with forensic intensity, and individuals are assigned scores that determine their perceived worth. Someone may be elevated to a "seven" or to a "sub-five" relegating the person to the status of "subhuman".

Trolling in these forums is rife and it is often callous, brutal and at times sadistic. Michael Halpin, a sociologist at Dalhousie University, describes how these communities subject young men

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to what he terms "masculine demoralisation" – a toxic mixture of humiliation, fatalism and self-loathing, in which they are made to feel that their lives are effectively over because they will never "ascend".

Writing in *Sociology of Health & Illness*, he notes that "users (of these forums) who fail to meet these ideals... are told to give up on their chances for happiness and success... men and boys are insulted, encouraged to self-harm, or told to pursue substantive medical interventions".

IMPERFECTIONS

The subculture of looksmaxxing reflects a broader shift in how physical appearance is understood. Rather than being one aspect of identity, it becomes a consuming project. Once self-worth is tied so closely to appearance, psychological stability becomes fragile: a single image, comment or comparison can feel like confirmation of

inadequacy, and push a vulnerable youth over the edge.

The phrase "if looks could kill" takes on darker dimensions in the world of looksmaxxing, and not simply because of the doping and drug use that had Clavicular collapsing during a live stream in April, the result of a suspected overdose. A commentator in *The Atlantic* magazine has described the movement as "narcissistic, cruel, racist, shot through with social Darwinism, and proudly anti-compassion".

It is easy to agree with that assessment, and just as easy to judge, mock or ridicule the absurdities of these self-professed looksmaxxers. But if we stop there, we risk missing the more important question: What has given this movement such currency among young men today?

The looksmaxxing movement tends to draw in those already uneasy about their appearance – often young men in the turbulent and formative years of adolescence, when identity is still taking shape and self-esteem is particularly vulnerable to comparison, a tendency greatly amplified by social media.

Its roots in online forums for "incels" – involuntary celibates united in blaming women for their misery – and association with the manosphere as defined by misogynist influencer Andrew Tate lend a hard-edged distorted view of masculinity and a crushing disdain for "losers" in their world.

I grew up in a time before the internet and, looking back, admittedly through a somewhat rose-tinted lens, it felt like a more innocent age, largely untouched by the more malevolent aspects of online life. Neither I nor anyone I knew then experienced these kinds of discontents, anxieties and miseries.

But those who came of age in the digital era and the explosive rise of social media exist in a virtual environment where comparison is constant and public. They passed through the social upheavals of the Covid-19 pandemic, often during their formative years marked by isolation, disrupted schooling and diminished opportunities for real-world connection.

Overlaying this are broader anxieties about the future: economic uncertainty and a growing sense that the traditional routes to material success, fulfilment, recognition and status are increasingly out of reach. In this context, one's appearance can come to seem like one of the few things that remain improvable and controllable, and therefore within reach.

But this all-consuming quest to enhance one's physical appearance takes away time, emotional energy and psychological space – especially at a crucial stage in a young person's life – that might otherwise be devoted to developing more enduring capacities: resilience, kindness, humility, humour, empathy and forgiveness. And these are the very things that enable us to form deep and sustaining relationships, a foundational source of meaning for most of us, and which often reveal something more fundamental: that it is often in the acceptance of our imperfections by those who love us that grace and beauty are found.

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