

'Looksmaxxing' is the disturbing TikTok trend turning young men into incels

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A new trend [taking over TikTok](#) is targeting vulnerable young men. The "looksmaxxing" phenomenon—to maximize one's looks—is aimed at young men and boys who want to change their appearance to become

more attractive and gain social acceptance.

Unhappy with their appearance, [teenage boys](#) and young men scrolling the app are directed to chat rooms where they're instructed to upload photos in exchange for advice.

It begins with "[softmaxxing](#)." This includes basic hygiene such as teeth brushing and whitening, removal of face and body hair, and "[mewing](#)" (tongue exercises that supposedly help tone facial muscles).

This progresses to "[hardmaxxing](#)," which is to improve one's appearance by any means necessary. More extreme measures include:

- steroid use
- hair transplants and plastic surgery
- using pumps for penis stretching
- removing ribs for a sculpted waist
- "[bone-smashing](#)," which involves using hammers to break bones in the face to look more masculine
- "starvemaxxing," which encourages extreme dieting and eating disorders
- "whitemaxxing," which involves using creams to present as more White
- and "edgemaxxing," which is [described as](#) "withholding climaxing in order to boost testosterone to improve appearance."

Looksmaxxing may appear harmless, encouraging [self-care](#), exercise and healthy eating. But at its core it has ties to [violence](#), [suicide](#) and [incels](#) (involuntary celibates)—men who blame women for their struggles with establishing romantic or sexual relationships.

A click away from the incel rabbit hole

Looksmaxxing [videos on TikTok](#) have amassed many millions of views.

They pull young boys and men into a dark subculture of incels. Incel and extremist content is suggested to users on multiple platforms including [TikTok](#) Instagram and Youtube.

Within minutes, TikTok users may be bombarded with [videos that promote](#) suicide and gendered hate speech. One 2021 research report found young [YouTube users](#) will sometimes be suggested incel-related videos by YouTube's algorithm within just five hops when starting from a non incel-related video.

'Hunter' versus 'prey' eyes

Male model [Jordan Barrett](#) has become an envied idol for men and boys following the looksmaxxing trend.

Many looksmaxxers believe having his "hunter eyes" with a positive canthal tilt (the canthal is the angle between the inner and outer corner of the eye), along with pursed lips and hollow cheeks, translates to a dominating stare women can't possibly resist.

On anonymous incel forums, young men are trained to calculate their "sexual market value." If they're deemed below average, they're bullied, accused of being "bitches who are feminine, weak and submissive, too ugly to live" and told to take their own lives.

The Bateman effect

At the apex of the incel beauty tower is the character [Patrick Bateman](#) from the 2000 satire-thriller American Psycho. [Bateman](#) is known by incels as a superior "[sigma](#)" male: a lone wolf and capitalist hustler who

attracts money-hungry women.

In fact, he is shallow, manipulative, misogynistic and extremely violent. This sociopathic ideal resonates with many incels. Other characters idolized by incels include [Tyler Durden](#) from Fight Club and Joaquin Phoenix's [Joker](#).

Incels who feel they are misunderstood and demoralized by women also look to self-proclaimed powerful male influencers with perceived "social status," such as [Andrew Tate](#), for solace. Alongside messages about fitness, financial gain and self-improvement, Tate is [openly misogynistic](#) and suggests it's socially acceptable to indulge in violent desires against women.

This false representation of [masculinity](#) creates a sense of entitlement in men who believe they are repressed. This can then be used as fuel for [gender-based violence](#), [femicide](#), [copycat crimes](#) and [mass killings](#).

Bateman and incel ideology influenced self-proclaimed incel and mass shooter Elliot Rodger. In 2014, Rodger carried out a deadly mass shooting and stabbing spree in Isla Vista, California, killing six people. He blamed women for his celibacy and wanted to seek revenge by killing them.

Many misogynist incels now hail him as a [hero](#). Some men [use his initials claiming](#) they want to "go ER" or "be a hERo," implying they're ready to commit mass murder.

A [2023 report](#) from the Australia Strategic Policy Center highlights concerning incel content online. One user says "women should be stripped of their rights because they still have primitive minds that need to be tamed." Another says "I might start a political movement. "BRING BACK RAPE' [...] "WANNA STOP BEING INCEL, TIME TO

START RAPING."

Young people are under pressure

Our preoccupation with having a [perfect appearance](#) is an [obsessive social disease](#) alienating us from ourselves and others.

[Researchers](#) point to a link between trends such as looksmaxxing and the broader cultural pressures young people face. They're growing up in an increasingly precarious world with war, post-pandemic anxiety, environmental degradation, unaffordable living and unstable employment. This is juxtaposed with [neoliberal hyper-individualism](#), hypersexuality and consumer capitalism.

Where young people feel like they can't control their environment, they may turn to trends such as looksmaxxing as something they *can* control.

In recent years, former members of the [manosphere](#) have started producing their own counter-forums that challenge the beliefs they once held.

[Studies](#) highlight young men and boys are beginning to recognize misogynistic ideology and restrictive performances of masculinity. These studies also argue these forums can offer alternative perspectives, with information that emphasizes the importance of healthy socializing, consent and respectful relationships.

In the age of TikTok algorithms, schools and communities must do more to educate on masculinity, what it means to be a "man" and the dangers of incel culture, extremism, [gendered hate speech](#) and [sexual violence](#).

Celebrities and influencers also have a role to play. Actors such as [Mark Ruffalo](#) and [Ryan Gosling](#) have helped foster positive ideas about what it

means to be a man. Real, positive change can come from instilling the belief that collectively we can create a more equal and empathetic world.

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