“Don’t Blame Life, Blame Your Face”:

How online masculinity content and looksmaxxing is pushing some boys and young men to extremes

CENTRE FOR YOUNG LIVES

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Contents

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ABOUT THE CENTRE FOR YOUNG LIVES

The Centre for Young Lives, founded by Baroness Anne Longfield CBE in February 2024, is an independent think tank and delivery unit working to improve the lives of children, young people, and families across the UK – with a particular focus on those facing the greatest challenges.

Our team combines decades of experience in Westminster, Whitehall, and beyond with a relentless commitment and drive to breaking down the barriers that hold back some children, and to ensuring that every child and young person can thrive. We use high quality research and evidence to advocate and campaign for innovate solutions and new models that improve the lives of children, young people and their families.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the National Education Union for their support for this project.

We are immensely grateful to all the young people who participated in our focus groups, as well as the youth workers and teachers who helped to facilitate them. We would also like to thank all the experts from academia, education, and charities, who gave up their time to speak to us. Finally, we are grateful to everyone who submitted to our call for evidence.

CONTENT WARNING

This report contains images, quotations, and detailed descriptions of harmful content, including references to eating disorders, extreme misogyny, and racism. We have endeavoured to treat such topics sensitively. We have linked resources for parents, carers, and young people experiencing any of the themes we raise in this report.

- **Beyond Equality and Movember:** Toolkit for parents and carers to talk to teenage sons about influencers online: https://cdn.sanity.io/files/d6x1mtv1/mo-com-production/b8b9c6c58f49d1cac22b8ed5fce5f81650d58e26.pdf
- **Mind:** Information, support, and helplines for anyone struggling with their mental health: https://www.mind.org.uk/
- **BEAT Eating Disorders:** For information and support about eating disorders, BEAT Eating Disorders have helplines, chatrooms, and online resources: https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/
- **NSPCC:** What to do when you see online abuse or inappropriate content: https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/online-reporting/

Decoding Looksmaxxing

LOOKSMAXXING	The systematic and often obsessive act of physical appearance optimisation – primarily done by young men – driven by the belief that their appearance is the primary determining factor of their social and romantic worth.[1] The term does not encompass all routine self-improvement but refers to actions driven by an ideology that emerged within incel-adjacent and male-dominated online forums, which dictates appearance is the determinant of one's place in a rigidly hierarchical 'looks-based' world.
SOFTMAXXING	A type of looksmaxxing, softmaxxing is the act of someone 'improving' their looks through more benign, non-invasive means in order to 'ascend' in the 'looks-based' worldview they subscribe to. Examples include lifestyle changes such as dieting, exercises, or skincare.
HARDMAXXING	Hardmaxxing is the more extreme end of looksmaxxing, including more invasive, and often irreversible methods – such as steroids, bone-smashing, or surgery – to optimise their appearance for the same reasons as above.
STARVEMAXXING	The practice of cutting food intake to change body and facial shape.
MANOSPHERE / MASCULINITY CONTENT	An online web of content, forums, and websites that promote specific visions of masculinity and men's rights, often framing them in opposition to women's rights and feminism. These spaces commonly share narratives of male grievance, gender hierarchy and hostility towards women, ranging from subtle antifeminism to overt misogyny and extremism. Some believe the term 'manosphere' to be outdated and that the term 'masculinity content' better reflects that views held by those in the 'manosphere' are no longer confined to a niche 'corner' of the internet but rather they are commonplace in everyday content on mainstream social media platforms.
INCEL	Short for 'involuntary celibate', an incel is someone who expresses resentment towards women for denying them relationships and sex.

LOOKISM	A form of prejudice or discrimination toward people who are considered to be physically 'unattractive'.
CLAVICULAR	Widely regarded to be the "internet's most famous looksmaxxer",[2] Braden Peter's social media pseudonym derives from the prestige given to a pronounced clavicle bone within the looksmaxxing community.
RED PILL	In incel communities, where the term originated, someone who has taken the red pill believes that a person's individual attempts to alter their appearance, personality, and wealth may lead to a sexual relationship. This definition is broadly consistent with how the term is also used within the looksmaxxing community.
BLACK PILL	In incel communities, where the term originated, someone who has taken the black pill believes that looks and relationships are pre-determined and that no individual action can change a person's chances of having a sexual relationship. The term is used differently within the looksmaxxing community, where someone who has taken the black pill believes that looks – rather than personality or wealth – are the only factor in determining a man's relationship prospects, and also their broader quality of life.
PSL SCALE	The PSL scale is a scoring system from one to 10 which denotes an 'objective' score to rate a person's attractiveness, taking into account characteristics such as their bone structure and their facial symmetry and features. Scores are used to categorise individuals, ranging from low scores which denote a 'subhuman' or 'severe deformity' to the highest scores reserved for 'Chads' or 'Gigachads'. PSL is an abbreviation for the three looksmaxxing forums credited with creating the scale: pickupartististhate [PUAhate.com], s**thate.com, and lookism.net.
ASCENDING	In the incel community, ascending refers to the act of 'escaping inceldom', so having a sexual partner. In the looksmaxxing community, the term can carry this meaning but is also used more widely to refer to the act of looking 'better' and improving different aspects of your life.

CHAD	A slang term for a stereotypically attractive, usually White, 'alpha' male.
FOID	An abbreviation of femoid, itself a portmanteau of female and humanoid, foid is a derogatory term created in incel communities and popularised by the looksmaxxing community. It refers to the belief within the looksmaxxing and incel communities that women are unintelligent and biologically wired to only be attracted to 'attractive' men.
MEWING	A viral trend which popularised looksmaxxing on mainstream social media. Coined by Dr Mike Mew, mewing is the discredited practice of lodging the tongue against the roof of the mouth, which is claimed to accentuate cheekbones and sharpen the jawline.
MOGGING	Deriving from the incel acronym AMOG – Alpha Male Of the Group – to mog someone is to dominate or 'outrank' someone in terms of their physical looks and stature. Recent evolutions of the word include the trend of 'frame-mogging', which refer to standing next to someone smaller or less muscular, exposing their 'inferiority'.
SMV (SEXUAL MARKET VALUE)	SMV refers to a person's value within the 'marketplace' for sex, determined by how attractive they are. Implicit within this worldview is that someone can appreciate or depreciate in value, making action to 'improve' your looks essential.

Foreword

The constant evolution of our digital world, and each new trend it brings, is gradually reshaping childhood and adolescence. One such trend is 'looksmaxxing', which tells boys and young men that their value, relationships, and life chances all depend on conforming to a rigid, racialised hierarchy of male attractiveness. It is part self-improvement, part pseudoscience, part rebellion, and part radicalisation. And it is now appearing on phone screens through the relentless and addictive algorithms that have become part and parcel of growing up online.

Looksmaxxing did not begin on TikTok or Instagram – it originated in the dark corners of incel and 'Manosphere' forums, steeped in misogyny and biological determinism. But what started out in niche forums has now reached an unprecedented scale thanks to social media, multiplying in reach with every view, like, and share.

Today, millions of boys are encountering looksmaxxing content, ranging from tips, tutorials and life advice to how to sculpt a sharper jawline; how to "fix" their eyes; how to bulk, cut, restrict calories, or reshape themselves into someone more "desirable"; and even how to change their skin colour. They are repeatedly being told what they are not, with harmful consequences for their self-esteem and mental health.

Over the past six months, we have spoken to groups of boys and young men across the country to hear their experiences. We have also carried out our own deep dives on TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Reddit using an alias of a 14-year-old boy.

We have heard about, and seen first-hand, the growth of 'bro science' and the negative influences of the most aggressive and misogynistic aspects of the 'Manosphere'. Many boys and young men are being fed content from an early age that is deeply harmful to their view of themselves, of girls and young women, and of the wider world.

Our research suggests that looksmaxxing is no longer a niche; it has crossed into the mainstream. Boys told us that they see it without searching for it, that it sits beside gym and 'self-improvement' content on their social media feeds, and that it blurs into the language they hear at school. It feeds a growing and unhealthy obsession with ratings, rankings, and a warped vision of masculinity.

This proliferation of content is no accident: it has been driven by social media platforms and the willingness of beauty and fitness industries to profit from body insecurity. A thriving ecosystem of influencers, masculinity coaches, and wellness brands are selling 'solutions' to problems they amplify with the help of social media algorithms. This phenomenon has long been the case for girls and young women; now boys and young men are experiencing it too.

Part of looksmaxxing's power, and why we should be so concerned about it, is that it hides in plain sight. It looks like self-care or fitness, and perhaps feels positive and motivating, but beneath the surface, the message being sent is clear: *your appearance determines everything about you.*

As this report sets out, boys told us how quickly the content can escalate from skincare and gym routines to bone-smashing, 'starvemaxxing', steroid cycles, and unregulated peptide injections. Looksmaxxing influencers dominate their social media feeds, selling courses, products, and a worldview that tells young men they are broken and deficient – yet only one subscription and "ascension" away from the life they want.

Whilst many boys will not follow this 'advice' to its extremes, looksmaxxing can be a gateway into a wider network of online masculinity content that centres dominance, hierarchy, and contempt for women.

When we spoke with boys and young men, we heard them talk about "Chads," "foids," and "sexual market value", terms which used to be confined to incel forums but are now becoming normalised. Looksmaxxing gives boys simple, primal answers to nuanced issues. It provides the diagnosis – *"your face is the problem"* – and then offers the prescription – *"you can fix it by following this lifestyle."* Perhaps its appeal is the sense of agency it offers, in a world where so much feels out of control.

The digital world has been evolving faster than regulation can keep up with over the last decade and a half, and this report shows yet more harms resulting from that. Looksmaxxing content may not be illegal or pornographic – and in many cases will be framed as positive or empowering – but it can pollute boys' senses of themselves and the world around them, as well as their relationships.

Decisive action from Government and from regulators is needed. The temptation is to focus on individual influencers – the Andrew Tates and Claviculars of this world – but it is not a case of a 'few bad apples'. As sure as night follows day, new looksmaxxing content and influencers will land on the social media feeds of boys and young men, pushed by algorithms that put profit and engagement over public health. The business model of social media will do what it was designed to.

SO WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

Education and information, so that young people can talk about these issues – and develop the But behind it all is a rotten system that monetises anxiety, insecurity, and isolation; and where engagement is the barometer of truth, no matter how toxic the message. The algorithm-driven pressures and harms that are now a common feature of childhood are just not damaging young people's mental health – they are also sowing intolerance, antipathy, bigotry, and misogyny. We must tackle them.

Haroon Chowdry

CEO, Centre for Young Lives

Executive Summary

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

In Autumn 2025, the Centre for Young Lives and the NEU sought to understand more about what looksmaxxing is and how it is shaping the views and experiences of boys and young men. We undertook a deep-dive into looksmaxxing content on four prominent social media platforms – TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Reddit – using alias accounts registered as a 14-year-old boy and conducted 11 interviews with experts across social media, the 'manosphere', health and exercise, and education. We also held five focus groups with boys aged between 13 and 18 and re-visited two of these groups to run co-creation workshops. In total, we spoke to 33 boys and young men across these seven sessions.

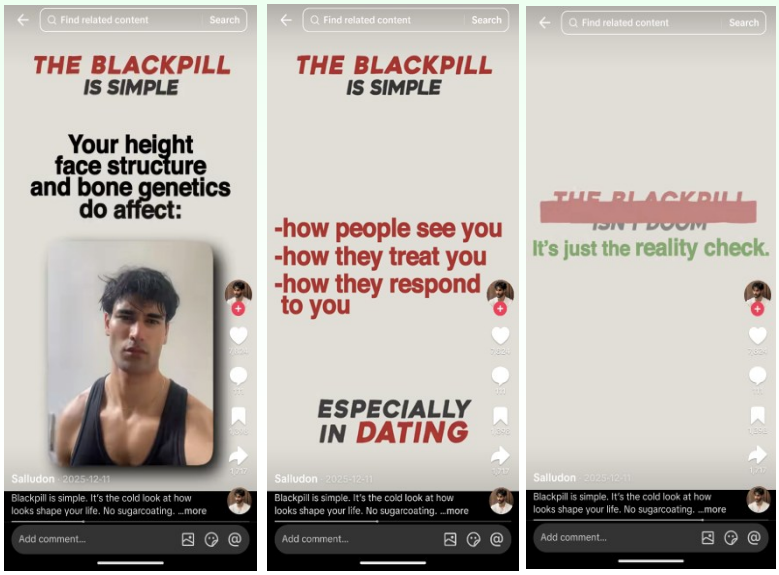
GROWING UP ONLINE

Access to the online world is now almost entirely universal among young people. Older participants in our focus groups, 16-18-year-olds, were some of the most critical about the harmful impact social media can have, explaining how they felt addicted to scrolling, disarming them of agency over their lives.

"I'll just scroll for hours and then realise it's like 12 and I've got a bunch of work to do and I'll regret it every day but I just can't stop it" (focus group participant, age 17)

Social media has long been associated with influencing perceptions of body image, yet research about this relationship is limited and to date has focused primarily on girls and women.[i] It is well documented that restrictive gender norms and the beauty industry create overwhelming pressure on girls and women to conform to unattainable beauty standards. From foot binding, to corsets, to skin bleaching, to extreme diets, there is a long history of harm done to women and girls in the name of "beauty". There is a growing body of evidence that social media is amplifying and policing toxic gendered expectations on girls, to the detriment of their mental health and wellbeing.

The aim of this report is to explore the new phenomenon of looksmaxxing which is leading to some boys experiencing similar pressures to those faced by girls. Some boys in our focus groups described comparing themselves to the bodies they see online, with many feeling social media content sets unattainable standards.



"Before I started going gym I was very self-conscious, I would watch TikToks and think I want this to be me, which motivated me to go to the gym which was a good thing but I didn't have a good mindset because I always wanted to be better and didn't appreciate how far I'd come... I'd seen them and think that's what I want to look like and look in the mirror and that's not what I look like" (focus group participant, age 16)

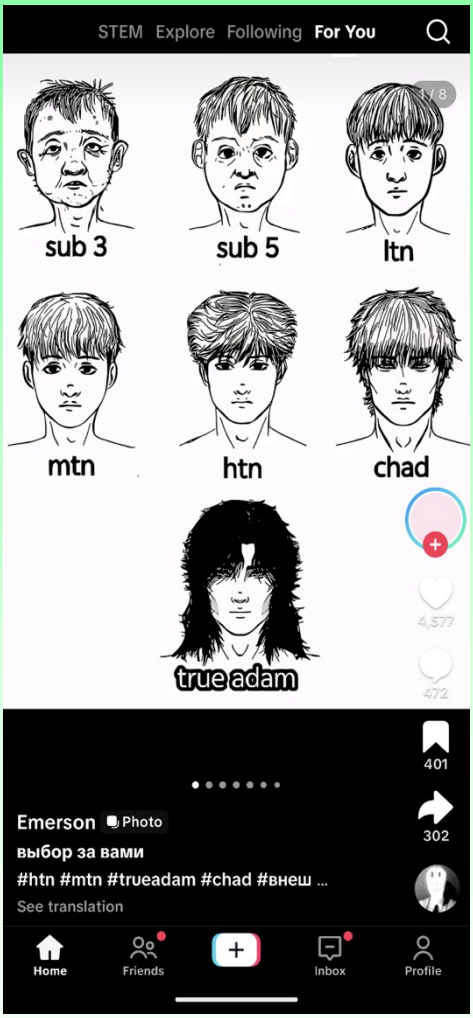
MASCULINITY AND THE 'MANOSPHERE'

Amid a vacuum of role models, trusted adults, and healthy conversations about what it means to be a man, many boys and young men are increasingly turning online for answers about how to behave, how to perform masculinity, and what they should look like. Narrow conceptions of masculinity are finding a new lease of life through social media, ideas which are also being reinforced elsewhere.

"People expect you to be strong, be a man, not cry, basically just be tough" (focus group participant, age 14)

Young people raised how films, fragrance adverts, and rap songs can all contribute to a narrow idea of what a man should look like and how they should act. Girls and young women are also vulnerable to forming a narrow conception of masculinity.

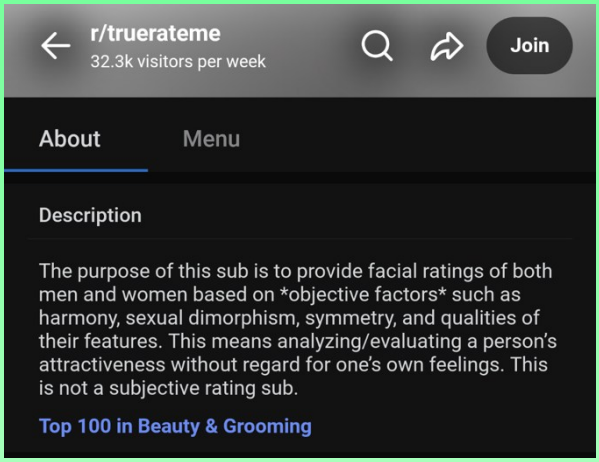
"Everywhere you go, you watch a Netflix series, and it might be in a 19th century, 18th century period drama and you see the guys all have six packs and big biceps, Superman as well, these unattainable standards" (Will Adolphy, MBACP Psychotherapist and Managing Director, M-Path)



Ideas from the 'Manosphere' – a web of online communities and content promoting regressive ideas about masculinity and women – are no longer found within a niche enclave on the internet but instead within mainstream 'masculinity content'.

Fuelled by social media algorithms that reward extreme material, this content now reaches millions of young men, with 61% following at least one masculinity influencer.[ii] Exposure to such content is linked to stronger endorsement of traditional gender roles and distrust of women, and teachers report that these attitudes increasingly shape behaviour in schools. Research shows that harmful and misogynistic posts appear quickly and frequently on boys' feeds, especially for those already struggling with mental health or insecurity,[iii] meaning that many encounter influencers, such as Joe Rogan or Andrew Tate, even without following them.[iv]

WHAT IS LOOKSMAXXING?



Looksmaxxing emerged from the comparatively niche incel-adjacent forums where it was first conceived onto mainstream social media. It is usually done by boys and young men to 'improve' their appearance to conform with a narrow, 'objective' conception of physical attractiveness, driven by a viral, online belief system that says doing so will elevate their romantic and social worth. While body image pressures are often framed as affecting girls, boys and young men are increasingly being targeted by content that links self-worth to physical transformation and may be less likely than girls or young women to recognise or seek support for the associated harms.

"[Looksmaxxing is] improving your looks, trying to look as best as possible, whether it be facially or body wise" (focus group participant, age 17)

Looksmaxxing rose to prominence on mainstream social media with the viral trend of 'mewing', which boys in our focus groups told us was popular around the time of the pandemic and which has become a prominent feature on social media feeds.

The looksmaxxing community encourages boys and men to take the 'black pill' – a term co-opted from incel communities and the 'Manosphere'. This means to wake up from 'the simulation' and realise that their appearance dictates every facet of their life, such as their employment prospects, quality of life, and 'Sexual Market Value'.

In tying a man's appearance to their self-worth and quality of life, looksmaxxing weaponises the anxieties and uncertainties of many boys and young men by promising them that 'ascending' their looks will solve their problems. In the context of cuts to youth provision,[v] evidence of a lack of trusted adults in the lives of boys and young men,[vi] and what many boys describe as an absence of positive conversations about masculinity,[vii] many are left vulnerable to these simplistic diagnoses of and prescriptions for challenges like loneliness, educational disengagement, and economic insecurity.

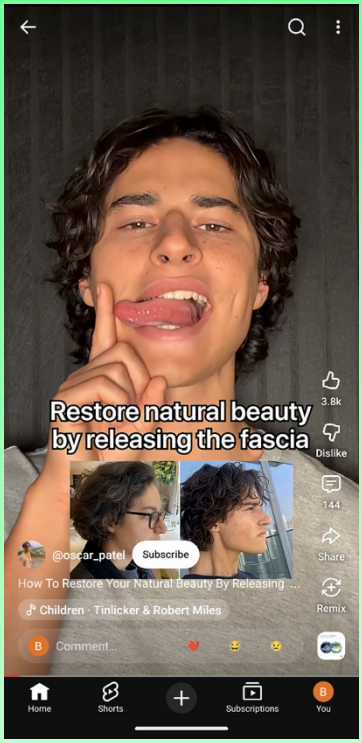
"... With looksmaxxing going mainstream, what we did was we linked certain traits to a better quality of life, like having a stronger jawline, being taller, having better hunter eye shapes" (K. Shami, YouTube)[viii]

HOW POPULAR IS LOOKSMAXXING CONTENT?

Although it is not possible to quantify the reach of looksmaxxing content, it is being consumed by a growing number of boys and young men.

"Some people in our year are so interested. A few people in my classes live for it and an entire personality becomes around looksmaxxing" (focus group participant, age 16)

Notable looksmaxxing influencers, such as Clavicular, attract huge audiences. At the time of writing, his 47 most recent TikToks have all received over one million views, with one video peaking at 12 million views and over 500,000 likes. K. Shami has 1.9 million TikTok followers and 135 million likes across his posts. Reddit communities are also active, with r/LooksmaxingAdvice drawing 67,500 weekly visitors, while the major looksmaxxing forum, looksmax.org, where users share selfies, ratings, and advice, has grown from 60,000 to 144,000 members in the past year.



FROM SELF-IMPROVEMENT TO HARDMAXXING: THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

"It's a slippery slope, the gym, that's where it starts, you start with wanting to look better. Some of the self-improvement stuff is good on the surface, like taking care of your skin, wanting to smell better, starting to have a routine but then slowly you'll end up in a rabbit hole where you're seeing people who look completely different to the way you do and the differences are structural things you can't change like your face" (focus group participant, age 17)

Many young people regularly consume 'self-improvement' content, with countless influencers offering advice and tips to improve their health, mindset, and wellbeing. Boys in our focus group said it can set unrealistic body or lifestyle standards, but some said that it can also be motivational, citing it as a reason for their own gym attendance.

Softmaxxing

Looksmaxxing content can often appear the same as self-improvement content, encouraging boys and young men to exercise more frequently or to begin skincare routines. However, looksmaxxing promotes these practices – which the looksmaxxing community would refer to as 'softmaxxing' given their non-invasive, relatively benign nature – specifically as a stepping stone to 'ascending', and the benefits that this brings. Academics have also identified a distinction between the two, stating that looksmaxxing content is "inherently" harmful as it subjugates most men to "masculine demoralisation", whereby they are led to believe their masculinity is inadequate.[ix]

Other viral softmaxxing practices include mewing and "thumb-pulling" – applying pressure to the roof of the mouth with the thumbs to change the facial structure – which, despite lacking scientific basis, were referenced by the boys in our focus groups. Boys told us, and research highlights, how the constant barrage of looksmaxxing content can turn these routines into unhealthy obsessions.[x]

"Repetitive exposure to complex social media algorithms showing "attractive" individuals endorsing these practices promotes an almost pathological obsession" (Konig, D. et. al.)[xi]

Hardmaxxing

Extreme practices – known as "hardmaxxing" – include bone-smashing, surgery, and fat-dissolving injections, some of which are grounded in 'bro science', anecdotal fitness and bodybuilding advice which have no scientific basis. Coupled with the trend of 'starvemaxxing' – the practice of cutting food intake to change body and facial shape – this extreme content fuels unrealistic appearance expectations which lead to body dysmorphia and disordered eating among boys, with algorithms intensifying these risks for those already vulnerable.

Hardmaxxing also includes taking steroids and peptides. Risks associated with steroids include cardiovascular problems, low mood, and infertility, while peptides are a newer trend which are less well understood.[xii] Peptides are a collection of unregulated, untested drugs linked to weight loss and muscle enhancement, widely promoted and sold online: 5% of young people report seeing ads for peptides every day, while one-in-five at least several times a week.[xiii]

"He [Clavicular] created a course for it and I don't even know how that's legal, like imagine you're just giving out fake scientific information and this course costs like £70 and you're just told stuff like inject yourself with lip drainage fillers or how to make your cheek bones more prominent, stuff like that" (focus group participant, age 16)

Boys told us that looksmaxxing influencers are motivated more by profit than principle, using extreme, pseudoscientific claims and deficit-based messaging to sell courses and products that promise 'ascension', all the while exploiting boys' insecurities. Clavicular's course promises to help subscribers "surpass genetic potential", while Hamza97's modules include *"**** like an alpha male"* and *"Build a 10/10 physique that gets 100 to 200 matches a day on dating apps"*.

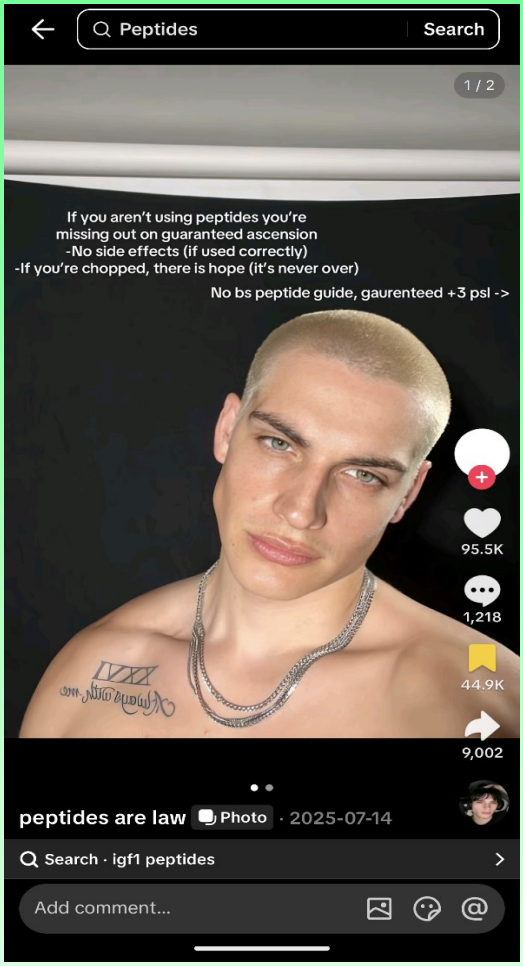
MISOGYNY, EXTREMISM, AND THE FAR-RIGHT

The looksmaxxing community not only pushes boys toward ever more extreme practices, it can also expose them to openly misogynistic and racist messages.

"There's a word going round – 'foid' – which refers to women as like an android, disregarding their feelings, identifying them as an android or object" (focus group participant, age 16)

Implicit within black pill ideology is biological determinism, the idea that women will inevitably be attracted to the most 'attractive' men, who in turn are entitled to any women of their choosing. This framing reinforces harmful gender norms and contributes to the dehumanisation of women.

Misogynistic online content also provides a gateway to other, far-right content. Research shows that users who frequently engage with misogynistic content are more likely over time to be recommended and encounter far-right material, highlighting a concerning algorithmic reinforcement loop.[xiv]



Harms associated with looksmaxxing are also racialised: one young person in our focus groups shared their experience on a popular looksmaxxing forum. They explained how the 'criteria' to be attractive within the looksmaxxing community is predicated on a "Eurocentric" conception of masculinity, which disregards diverse cultural and ethnic expressions of attractiveness that exist beyond Western beauty standards:

"Stereotypically, the vision of an attractive man in this sphere is someone who's white … the advice I got was you're pretty good looking but you're brown, so start skin bleaching" (focus group participant, age 17)

Major looksmaxxing influencers, such as Clavicular, openly use racist slurs and promote white supremacy, degrading non-white men and reinforcing racist beauty hierarchies to millions of viewers. Research also shows that looksmaxxing content uses hashtags to associate itself with white nationalist and neo-Nazi communities – for example, the hashtag #EliotMoggerEdit was found on looksmaxxing content, glorifying a mass shooter and circumnavigating moderation by deliberately misspelling their name.[xv]

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Looksmaxxing content sits at the intersection of body stigma, harmful substances, and hateful content – all of which are identified as harmful by Ofcom and the Online Safety Act. Through our fake accounts created as a 14-year-old boy, we saw looksmaxxing content which falls into all of these. Protecting boys and young men from looksmaxxing content requires us to strengthen our response to social media further, limiting exposure to harmful platforms and strengthening positive offline support in tandem.

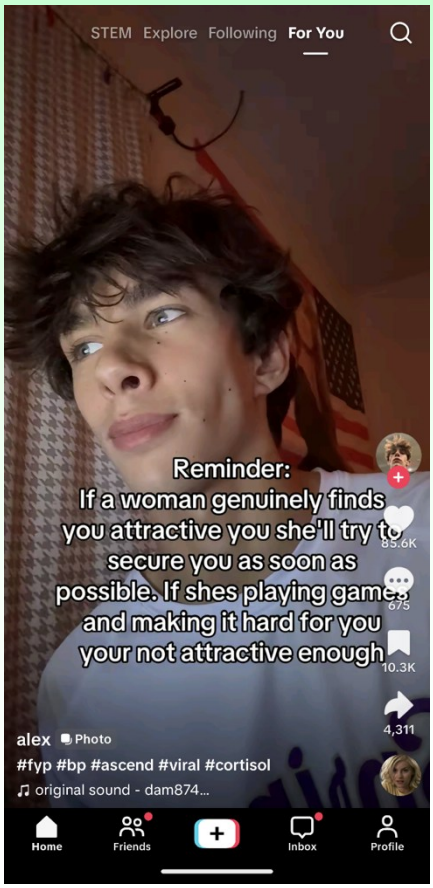
1. **Stop children being harmed by social media, and make it safe for those who do use it**

Given the scale of harm caused by unregulated online environments, we welcome the government's decision to introduce a minimum age requirement of 16 to access social media. This alone is not a silver bullet, so the ban must be supported by:

- The government requiring platforms to redesign systems to limit addictive and harmful features, including algorithmic recommendations and endless scroll feeds.
- Shifting the burden of proof onto social media platforms to prove that they are safe to use.
- Ofcom formally recognising looksmaxxing and harmful masculinity content as an online harm and classifying all body stigma content as Primary Priority Content.

2. **Support schools to deliver the new RSHE curriculum through funding for masculinity, gender norms, and body image workshops in school**

Upcoming changes to the RSHE curriculum are welcome but schools often lack the time, resources, and expertise to tackle rapidly evolving online trends relating to masculinity and body image. We believe schools should be supported to utilise expert external providers to deliver high-quality workshops on masculinity, body image, and online influences.



3. **Support schools to adopt a more holistic, whole-school approach to teaching positive masculinity, gender norms, and healthy body image**

A cross-school approach would ensure that discussions about respect, identity, appearance pressure, and emotional wellbeing are embedded throughout the school day, rather than siloed into the occasional PSHE lesson. This could include integrating conversations about healthy body image into PE lessons to tackle narratives about specific body types being more attractive, and to educate young people about healthy exercise habits.

4. **Strengthen the evidence base around the harms of looksmaxxing, boys' and young men's experiences of body stigma and eating disorders, and what works to support them. Improve access to services for all young people affected by body image issues and eating disorders**

Boys' experiences of body image struggles – especially compulsive exercise, steroid or peptide use, and muscle dysmorphia – are under researched and poorly recognised. We recommend the Department for Health & Social Care strengthens the evidence base on prevalence, risk factors, and clinical presentation of eating disorders and steroid and peptide use among boys and young men.

5. **Improve access to mental health services for all young people, including those affected by body image issues and eating disorders, by expanding community-based early intervention and strengthening specialist mental health services**

The government should expand community-based mental health support including open-access hubs while strengthening NHS provision through a broader range of therapies and embedding children and young people's mental health as a priority within multidisciplinary neighbourhood health services.

6. **Strengthen understanding and regulation of the peptide market and understanding of the impacts of exercise supplements on young people**

Clear guidance and robust oversight are required to address the widespread advertising and sale of peptides to young people, often without safeguards, accurate information, or medical supervision.

7. **Training and guidance for parents, youth workers, and gym staff**

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Health & Social Care should co-produce guidance should provide support to recognise unhealthy patterns of exercise, restrictive dieting, and the differing motivations for 'body transformation', and equip them to offer safe, nonjudgemental support.

8. **Youth workers to partner with gyms to offer advice and support to boys and young men who are working out**

Youth workers and gym staff should work in partnership to deliver sessions on healthy exercise, realistic expectations about body change, and safe approaches to gym and supplement use.

9. **More offline spaces, providing alternatives to addictive-screens and doomscrolling**

Young people need more positive alternatives to social media. Young people need free, accessible youth-led spaces to develop offline relationships with their peers and with trusted adults.

Introduction

The reach and appeal of the 'Manosphere' is growing, reshaping the attitudes and identities of some boys and young men. Since the pandemic, a new genre of masculinity content has been growing in prominence on the social media feeds of boys and young men: looksmaxxing.

An alien concept to most adults, including policymakers, the term is now widely understood by teenagers across the country, and its associated terminology is deeply embedded in the everyday language of school corridors and social media group chats.

The term looksmaxxing is now widely used to describe the broad practice of someone changing their appearance to conform with societal beauty standards. However, its original meaning described the act of a man changing their appearance in order to 'ascend' along an 'objective', racialised hierarchical scale of male attractiveness. Looksmaxxing influencers encourage boys to take the 'black pill', an idea in the 'Manosphere' which means to accept that their appearance dictates everything – their self-worth, their social status, and their 'Sexual Market Value' – making it essential to be a 'Chad' rather than a 'subhuman'.

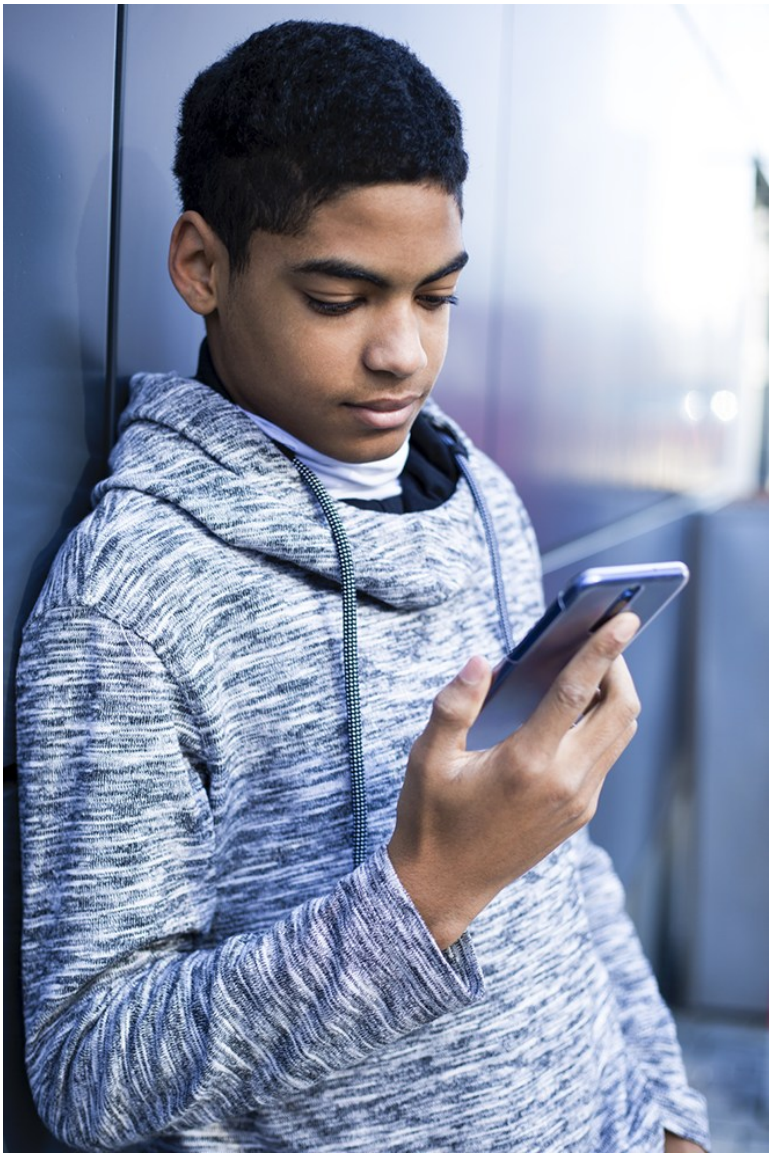
Looksmaxxing originated in incel and incel-adjacent forums – online communities steeped in misogyny and resentment towards women – before spilling out into the social media feeds of millions of boys and young men, in content telling them that their value and life chances depends entirely on how they look. This worldview, and associated content, is of course highly heteronormative, and places pressure on boys and young men which has long existed for women and gay men to meet exacting beauty standards, particularly because men prioritise physical appearance in a partner more than women do.[xvi]

As with other harmful online trends, its journey from niche ideology to mainstream visibility has been accelerated by algorithms that reward extreme content, pushing boys – particularly those who are already vulnerable – towards influencers who promote increasingly radical appearance-altering practices and hateful beliefs. We explore how social media companies, influencers, and online coaches are profiting from the insecurities that looksmaxxing content foments, from 'de-bloating powders' to life coaching.

Throughout this report we provide a snapshot of just some of the content that is widely circulating on social media, content which we viewed through the alias accounts we set up as a 14-year-old boy, and content and influencers which young people told us they have encountered, often without recognising its underpinning ideology.

This is content which promotes unproven methods to change the appearance which some boys and young men may replicate. Even more far-reaching is the narrow conception of masculinity, and the associated importance of looks, dominance, and wealth, shaping expectations not only for boys and young men, but also for the girls and young women they interact with.

Many boys and young men encounter this sort of content daily – sometimes knowingly but often without realisingits ideological foundations. Many of the young people we spoke to could describe looksmaxxing in detail, and almost all had come across related techniques or influencers on social media, particularly TikTok.



The growing appeal of the 'Manosphere' has gone largely unnoticed by policymakers, other than recent spikes in interest following the TV show Adolescence or Louis Theroux's documentary. This illustrates not only a failure to protect children from online harms but also to address the underlying factors making boys vulnerable to the 'Manosphere's' simplistic diagnoses of and prescriptions for the challenges in their lives: the loneliness, the educational disengagement, and the uncertainty about what it means to be 'a man'.

Looksmaxxing, a rapidly growing strand of this ecosystem, has gone entirely unnoticed in Parliament and unregulated by the Online Safety Act, even as boys describe seeing it daily on their social media feeds. This report seeks to close this gap, a chasm between the lived realities of boys and young men in an online world shaping their identities, and the systems supposed to keep them safe.

What Boys Told Us

Over the past six months, we have spoken to 23 boys across the Midlands and North of England, ten of whom we spoke to twice to test our findings and recommendations based on what they had already told us. They gave us invaluable insights into their online lives and helped to shape our recommendations. Their voices are embedded throughout this report but we have also compiled their quotes here, as they paint a stark and powerful picture of the lived reality of boys online who are consistently encountering the world of looksmaxxing and the 'Manosphere'.

WHAT, WHERE, AND WHY?

"[Looksmaxxing is] improving your looks, trying to look as best as possible, whether it be facially or body wise" (Age 17)

"... people are harming themselves just to look good" (Age 14)

"... it's almost like self-hate towards yourself ..." (Age 17)

"... reddit was the first place I saw it, you don't have to search for it, it's just there" (Age 16)

"Young people feel like the world is moving without them, there's so much uncertainty... the only thing you can have control over is yourself which might be why it's as prevalent as it is" (Age 16)

"Wanting to look better is just a want for validation and, especially for young men, they feel they don't have that validation. People might have a glow-up and feel more validated, the world is a bit shallow in that way and you think people will like you more" (Age 17)

"There's this trend called black pill, if you're not genetically gifted then you should just like quit, if you have, let's say, an abnormal facial or body feature like a big nose or something then you should just give up and have no chance of finding a partner" (Age 16)

EXPECTATIONS THAT BOYS AND YOUNG MEN FACE

"People expect you to be strong, be a man, not cry, basically just be tough" (Age 14)

"... people will say it's ok to be whatever you want but, in reality, when you come to school you're expected to be strong or tall" (Age 16)

"... as a man, there are certain minimums, certain criteria. You have to have a good personality, be 6 foot tall" (Age 16)

SELF-IMPROVEMENT AND THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

"... before I started going gym I was very self-conscious, I would watch TikToks and think I want this to be me, which motivated me to go to the gym which was a good thing but I didn't have a good mindset because I always wanted to be better and didn't appreciate how far I'd come ... I'd seen them and think that's what I want to look like, and look in the mirror and that's not what I look like" (Age 16)

"It's a slippery slope, the gym, that's where it starts, you start with wanting to look better ... but then slowly you'll end up in a rabbit hole where you're seeing people who look completely different to the way you do and the differences are structural things you can't change like your face" (Age 17)

PUSHED TO THE EXTREME

"Sometimes it can be taken to extreme lengths, where people are using performance enhancing drugs which affect their health and are bad for them or people might starve themselves to lose a bit of weight" (Age 16)

"...peptides are a trending drug that people are taking. It's the most popularised one right now. People are saying it improves your looks and body. It reduces fat, makes you look skinnier and more 'conventionally attractive'" (Age 16)

"He [Clavicular] created a course for it and I don't even know how that's legal, like imagine you're just giving out fake scientific information and this course costs like £70 and you're just giving up stuff like inject yourself with lip drainage fillers or how to make your cheek bones more prominent, stuff like that" (Age 16)

RATINGS, PSL SCORES, AND LOOKSMAXXING ADVICE

"People post their face and ask for ratings all the time" (Age 16)

"PSL scores ... looksmaxxing has a norm, you have to have a long ramus, forward maxilla growth, they take all that and give you a score"

"...it goes from subhuman, which is like the bottom 5% to low-tier normie, mid-tier normie, high-tier normie, then Chad, then Adam" (Age 16)

"...you don't see people as equal ... if you rate people by how they look, you're saying that they're worth more because of how they look, which blurs into racism and everything" (Age 17)

"...the advice I got was you're pretty good looking but you're Brown, so start skin bleaching ..." (Age 17)

MISOGYNY

"They're trying to improve how they look to attract more women ... they view women as something that can be won" (Age 14)

"There's a word going round – 'foid' – which refers to women as like an android, disregarding their feelings, identifying them as an android or object" (Age 16)

SOLUTIONS

"it's got to a point where you can't fix it, it's too in the cultural identity" (Age 17)

"...if I owned TikTok I would be stopping people putting a ban on it ... These companies only lose from unhealthy people quitting their addiction" (Age 16)

"back in Year 9, people came into school and talked to us about real world problems, like gender or gang violence... people come in, they're cool people, they're like 19 or 20 and they'd be interactive, you'd look up to someone like that... those topics I still remember them now" (Age 16)

"there's a massive lack [of spaces], back in the day I remember my parents talking about youth clubs and stuff, places to be" (Age 16)

Methodology

It was a group of young people who generated the idea for a deep-dive into looksmaxxing, and throughout this project our methods have sought to centre the views and experiences of boys and young men.

To do this, we used a range of methods:

- An anonymous questionnaire for young people.
- A call for evidence which invited individuals and organisations with personal or professional experience of masculinity, the manosphere, and looksmaxxing to share their views with us.
- Five focus groups across the Midlands and North of England, involving 23 boys and young men aged between 13 and 18. We then re-visited two of these groups to deliver co-creation workshops to support the development of our recommendations. We spoke to 33 boys and young men in total across all of these focus groups and workshops.
- Interviews with 11 experts across social media, the 'Manosphere', health and exercise, and education to gather evidence and develop our recommendations. A full list of experts we interviewed is available in Annex A.

We also conducted a deep-dive into the content available on social media relating to masculinity and looksmaxxing. This was not intended to be an algorithmic analysis – there is already strong evidence to show the propensity of social media algorithms to immediately promote increasingly harmful content to young people[xvii] – but rather to provide a snapshot of the content and influencers that is being shared online, despite the Online Safety Act passing in 2023.

For this study, we created alias accounts on TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Reddit, pretending to be a 14-year-old boy. From December 2025 to February 2026, we watched and read content across the four apps, capturing examples of content relating to masculinity and looksmaxxing. We did not interact with any content other than viewing it. In the second half of the study, we were guided by search terms and the names of influencers provided to us during our focus groups to find specific content which participants told us they had seen.

Policy Landscape

The prominence of looksmaxxing and masculinity content is a symptom of the design and regulation of social media platforms. Its appeal to some boys and young men reflects the uncertainty that many feel about their masculinity, leaving them vulnerable to the simplified messages of the 'Manosphere' and looksmaxxing content. In this context, the role of policy is threefold:

1. To keep children and young people safe online by protecting them from harmful content and addictive-by-design social media platforms.
2. To educate boys and young men to be critical thinkers and to support them to have positive conversations about masculinity.
3. To equip parents and professionals with the tools to tackle the impact of harmful content.

Despite the Online Safety Act of 2023, there is "growing agreement that more needs to be done" to keep children safe.[xviii] As a result, the government's consultation on measures to protect children on social media, gaming platforms, and AI chatbots was opened in March 2026.

ONLINE HARM

The Online Safety Act empowers Ofcom to identify further content which "presents a material risk of significant harm to an appreciable number of children".[xix] Ofcom has identified body stigma content as doing exactly this.

Harm is defined as physical or psychological harm arising from online content, including "cumulative harm", where content of a particular kind is repeatedly encountered by a user.

Body stigma content is particularly likely to cause harm because it is often consumed in high volumes, especially by children with existing body dissatisfaction, body image-related concerns, or experience of an eating disorder. It is linked to both physical and psychological harm, including low self-esteem, distress and disordered eating.

Despite Ofcom's findings and its new enforcement powers, young people have told us – and we have seen – how there is still looksmaxxing content which promotes body stigma, hateful beliefs, and harmful substances, circulating at scale across social media.

POSITIVE MASCULINITY AND CRITICAL THINKING

The specific content that schools must cover in Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education guidance, which has been updated to apply to teaching from September 2026. These welcome changes place greater emphasis on Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG), including how attitudes towards women and girls can be shaped by online content, as well as covering the dangers of unrealistic expectations for body image arising from online content and understanding the prevalence of mis- and disinformation.

The Government's VAWG strategy also commits to ensuring that, by the end of the parliament, every secondary school in England has a "credible offer" to educate every student about healthy relationships. The strategy committed £3 million for teacher training, as well as £5 million to pilot external providers delivering healthy relationships training.

We welcome the pilot for external providers in particular: boys in our co-creation workshops explained that teachers can feel difficult to relate to and hard to open up to about sensitive issues such as masculinity, identity, or insecurity. Many said they felt more comfortable engaging with external facilitators – people who they feel understand their online world, have lived experience closer to their own, and can relate in a way that makes discussions feel more genuine and less judgemental.

Growing Up Online

Access to the online world is now almost entirely universal among young people, exposing them to many of its perceived benefits, as well as a litany of dangers. The risks, challenges, and new experiences that have always existed as children go through adolescence – who you are, what boys/girls think about you, what you look like – are happening alongside 'filters', 'likes', and platforms offering extreme and troubling content. Almost all the young people we spoke with during the writing of this report used a combination of TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat, with some also using Reddit.

In our focus groups, young people often cited messaging friends or family, keeping up to date with news, and finding out how to do things as their reasons for going online. Many spoke about how they use the search functions of social media, particularly TikTok, in a similar way to search engines: to find answers to specific questions, whether that be practical tips or wellbeing guidance. Several participants also told us that they turn to Artificial Intelligence (AI) chatbots for answers.

However, some young people believed that that only reason so many use social media is because everyone else is on there too; whether it be keeping up with the latest trends or news, social media is perceived as the place to be. Over 40% of young people say that they feel left out if they don't spend time on their phones.[xx]

"If you're not using social media, you're kind of falling behind because everyone's on there" (focus group participant, age 16)

There was also a clear consensus among the participants in our focus groups that social media is often the "default" activity during periods of boredom.

"I'm just bored. It's not a conscious decision, I've just got nothing else to do" (focus group participant, age 17)

There was also a strong sense from our focus groups that most time spent on social media apps is spent scrolling content on the For You Page, rather than seeking out specific information or messaging friends and family.

"I'll just scroll for hours and then realise it's like 12 and I've got a bunch of work to do and I'll regret it every day but I just can't stop it" (focus group participant, age 17)

Many of the boys we spoke to alluded to the addictive nature of social media, describing behaviour consistent with addiction. More than one-in-ten adolescents across Europe display social media habits characterised by "addiction-like symptoms",[xxi] and more than a third of young people in the UK report wanting to leave social media sites at least once a week but feel like they can't.[xxii]

Some of the older participants in our focus groups – 16- and 17-year-olds – were some of the most critical about the impact of social media on their lives.

"… You've got stuff to do or places to be and you look at the time and think there was so much other stuff I could have done, I can't remember half the TikToks I watched" (focus group participant, age 17)

"It's ruined my attention span to be honest, mainly TikTok. I feel like doing certain things takes a lot of effort and I'm not sure if it comes from TikTok and doomscrolling but I definitely feel lazier and that might be from social media" (focus group participant, age 16)

SOCIAL MEDIA AND BODY IMAGE

80% of 16-to-17-year-olds say that their appearance is very important to them.[xxiii] Social media has long been associated with influencing perceptions of body image, yet research about this relationship is limited and to date has focused primarily on girls and women, given the prevalence of challenges around body image girls and young women describe facing.[xxiv]

Research that does exist presents a mixed picture about whether the overall impact of social media is positive or negative, particularly when it comes to individuals assessing the impact of social media on their own body image.[xxv] During our focus groups, most boys said that they did not compare themselves to people online, but they thought that other children and young people do.

One study found that 44% of Gen Z agree that seeing body positivity images on social media has helped them to accept their body as it is.[xxvi] Yet other studies conclude that the impact of social media on body image is overwhelmingly negative. A recent review of 35 studies found that problematic smartphone use and greater daily screen time to be associated with a higher likelihood of experiencing eating disorder symptoms and body image dissatisfaction.[xxvii]

This correlation is consistent across different social media platforms, one survey asked 14–24-year-olds to rank various social media platforms from -2 (worse) to +2 (better) in terms of how they make them feel about certain health-related factors. All of Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube ranked negatively relating to their impact on body image.[xxviii]

"Before I started going gym I was very self-conscious, I would watch TikTok's and think I want this to be me, which motivated me to go to the gym which was a good thing but I didn't have a good mindset because I always wanted to be better and didn't appreciate how far I'd come… I'd seen them and think that's what I want to look like and look in the mirror and that's not what I look like" (focus group participant, age 16)

There was agreement within our focus groups that children and young people experiencing mental health challenges or existing problems with their body image are particularly vulnerable to comparing themselves and their lives to what they see online.

"When I had worse mental health I compared myself to others because they seemed happy all the time" (focus group participant, age 15)

Masculinity and the 'Manosphere'

Amid a vacuum of role models, trusted adults, and healthy conversations about what it means to be a man, boys and young men are increasingly turning online for answers about how to behave, how to perform masculinity, and what they should look like. For vulnerable boys and young men who lack supportive networks, they may be disproportionately exposed to harmful and restrictive norms about gender, success, and identity. As a result, narrow conceptions of masculinity are finding a new lease of life through social media, ideas which are also being reinforced elsewhere in popular culture.

While ideas about what it means to be 'a man' are generally expanding, some "restrictive ideas of masculinity are alive and well".[xxix] The Young Men and Media Collective (YMMC) – convened by Equimundo and Movember has identified two, dominant perceived determinants of young men's success: that they must be "relentlessly rich and ripped".[xxx] These pressures are therefore not experienced equally, and can disproportionately affect boys who are already marginalised or struggling with identity, belonging, or socioeconomic disadvantage.

This dual expectation of financial success and physical perfection was also widely recognised in our focus groups, where young people described feeling growing pressure both to be financially successful and to meet a specific aesthetic ideal.

"People expect you to be strong, be a man, not cry, basically just be tough" (focus group participant, age 14)

We also heard how masculinity is also often framed negatively, as something to apologise for, to correct, or to avoid. Both young people and experts reflected on how masculine identity is increasingly associated with harmful stereotypes.

"I very rarely hear the word masculinity without the word toxic attached" (Mike Nicholson, Director and Founder of Progressive Masculinity)

"[We hear] bad stuff, men are manipulative, controlling, abusive, all of that stuff" (focus group participant, age 15)

This combination of heightened expectations and heightened criticism leaves many boys and young men struggling to understand what masculinity is meant to look like today.

"What it means to be a man has never felt more uncertain" (Will Adolphy, MBACP Psychotherapist and Managing Director, M-Path)

POP CULTURE AND MASCULINITY

We heard from several young people and experts that there is little diversity in male body types presented in popular culture – on multiple occasions, superheroes were mentioned as examples of the muscular bodies that are always on screen.

"Everywhere you go, you watch a Netflix series, and it might be in a 19th century, 18th century period drama and you see the guys all have six packs and big biceps, Superman as well, these unattainable standards" (Will Adolphy)

One young person explained how narrow representations of masculinity and the male body are not just limited to films but also adverts.

"Look at fragrance adverts, they often promote qualities that make a man, and they're qualities that this fragrance will give you and make you successful… it's so mainstream, these ideas are forced down your throat as stuff that's important to be as a man" (focus group participant, age 16)

Narrow representations of masculinity are evident in popular culture off-screen as well, and not only relating to male body image. In one focus group, we heard how rap music often promotes certain negative ideas about wealth and women.

"Rappers influence it, you listen to them 24/7, they're talking about how much money or how many girls he has" (focus group participant, age 16)

One young person highlighted the song *BAND4BAND* by Central Cee, popularising the phrase 'to go band for band', meaning to compare wealth with someone.

"This influences people and makes them think they need to make money, if you're not a millionaire by 22/23 then you've already failed but that's so unrealistic" (focus group participant, age 16)

In several interviews with experts, we heard how some aspects of popular culture can reinforce boys and young men's ideas about what it means to be a man, but also those of girls and young women. Dr Orlanda Harvey is a Senior Lecturer at Bournemouth University, who has published doctoral research on men's recreational use of Androgenic Anabolic Steroids and works with woman who have experienced intimate partner violence and abuse. She told us:.

"Ken got ripped for Barbie, so we're telling girls that boys should look like this …"

It was also troubling to hear some of the boys in our focus groups seek to blame girls and young women for some of the harmful ideas about masculinity they have developed.

"If you're with a girl, they might say why you acting like a baby, you should be protecting me" (focus group participant, age 15)

While some of the young men we spoke to believed that narrow conceptions of masculinity are being reinforced by girls, others disagreed.

"I don't think girls actually care that much in real life, young men just overthink about it. There's not as much emphasis on how they look or how much money they have as they think there is" (focus group participant, age 16)

From our conversations with boys, it is clear digital spaces can reinforce and deepen existing gender inequalities, while also creating new forms of harm.

THE 'MANOSPHERE'

While popular culture was often cited as a source of 'traditional' ideas about masculinity, there is little doubt that the internet and social media is just as liable for propagating harmful ideas about what it means to be 'a man'.

This is largely a result of what has come to be widely known as the 'manosphere'. The term can be traced back to a 2009 post on Blogspot, titled *The Manosphere*, and was popularised by Ian Ironwood's 2013 self-published book, *The Manosphere: a New Hope for Masculinity*.[xxxi] The 'manosphere' refers to "a network of online communities that focus on issues relating to men and masculinity".[xxxii] This includes topics such as fitness, dating and relationships, and money and wealth, and often contains misogyny, transphobia, gendered disinformation, and conspiracy theories, such as the notion that feminism has contributed to the erosion of men's rights.[xxxiii]

Many of these ideas that may previously have been shared and promoted within relatively niche corners of the internet have been able to seep into mainstream social media and content viewed by millions of young men. This sort of content is now so popular that a majority (61%) of young men watch at least one 'men and masculinity influencer'.[xxxiv]

Young men who consume masculinity content are more likely to agree that men should be providers, leaders, and heads of their families. Almost two-thirds of these men would agree that "women should fulfil their traditional roles as wives and mothers", and more than half believe that "women don't care about men."[xxxv]

These increasingly common views are not confined to anonymous online forums or social media group chats, they are seeping into everyday life, with real consequences for young men and women, as well as their teachers. Increasingly extreme views are becoming more common in the classroom, with more than two thirds of teachers (70 per cent) report that pupils' behaviour, attitudes or language are frequently shaped by social media content they would characterise as extreme or harmful.[xxxvi]

ALGORITHMS

The common consensus among our focus groups, and among the experts we spoke to, was that algorithms reward extremism. It gets more interactions and more views, increasing ad revenue and rewarding social media companies. The result is that the most egregious content and influencers garner the most attention.

Big Tech Little Victims' study found that one piece of harmful or inappropriate content appears on the For You Page of a 13-year-old every minute, with this harmful content appearing within three minutes of logging on for the first time, and accounts which were set up as boys were pushed misogynistic content.[xxxvii]

Another study found that after only five days of TikTok usage, misogynistic content became four times more common on the 'For You' page of a teenage boy. After the five days, misogynistic content made up 56% of the 'For You' page, up from 13% at the start. The research also concluded that boys who are suffering from poor mental health, bullying, or anxieties about their future are even more likely to be targeted by this content.[xxxviii]

The rapid availability of masculinity content on boys' and young men's social media feeds means that they do not even have to follow someone to regularly see their content: two-thirds of men recognise influencers such as Joe Rogan or Andrew Tate, even though a far smaller percentage say they follow them.[xxxix]

Looksmaxxxing

Looksmaxxxing is a relatively new term which – although still relatively unknown among adults – is widely recognised among young people. In our focus groups, almost all of the young people told us that they had at least heard of the term, with most able to describe it in detail.

"[Looksmaxxxing is] improving your looks, trying to look as best as possible, whether it be facially or body wise" (focus group participant, age 17)

This common understanding among young people has been developed by the influx of looksmaxxxing content onto mainstream social media from the comparatively niche incel and incel-adjacent online forums where the practice was first conceived. Within these communities, looksmaxxxing is an effort to increase your physical attractiveness in line with an 'objective', racialised conception of male attractiveness, fuelled by the belief that this 'ascension' will lead to more romantic partners and improve every aspect of their life.

Height and a muscular physique are viewed favourably – traditional ideas about men's bodies which aren't unique to the looksmaxxxing community – but looksmaxxxing content goes further, encouraging men to 'perfect' everything from their skin tone to the shape of their jaw. One boy in a focus group explained just some of the features which are the focus of looksmaxxxing content:

"High cheek bones, being tall, strong jawline, white, blue eyes, small nose, positive canthal tilt, small waist" (focus group participant, age 16)

INCEL 2.0 – WHEN AND WHERE DID LOOKSMAXXXING ORIGINATE?

Looksmaxxxing, according to Michael Halpin, an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology at Dalhousie University in Canada, "emerged in the manosphere around the same time as incel sub-culture and as men got more interested in their outcomes vis a vis online dating".[xl] The rise of looksmaxxxing coincided with growing use of and interest in online dating because it is frequently cited within the looksmaxxxing community as evidence that people are only judged on their looks and little else.

The perceived role of online dating as a factor in the rise of looksmaxxxing is clear in several videos we viewed: Kareem Shami – the self-anointed "GODFATHER of LOOKSMAXXXING"[xli] – explains on his YouTube channel how many men 'take the black pill' after realising that dating apps require lots of pictures of themselves but very little information about them, such as their job, personality, or interests. A failure to then have a sexual relationship as a result leads many to the conclusion that this must be because they are only being judged by their looks, and that looksmaxxxing is therefore the answer to their problems.[xlii]

While this worldview was initially cultivated on looksmaxxing forums, the looksmaxxing practices to change someone's appearance, as well as the underlying ideology, have begun to appear on mainstream social media in the last decade; a result of profit-driven algorithms and an increasing number of avenues to profit from boys and young men's insecurities, such as new cosmetic products or online courses.

Mewing – a tongue exercise to sharpen the jawline which involves repeatedly flattening the tongue against the roof of the mouth – was the first looksmaxxing technique to go viral. Despite being discredited by orthodontists, nearly every participant across our focus groups was aware of the term, with several explaining they had first heard it when they were on social media during the Covid-19 lockdowns.

"Reddit was the first place I saw it, you don't have to search for it, it's just there" (focus group participant, age 16)

Subsequent looksmaxxing trends, such as bone-smashing or leg lengthening, have gone viral via the For You Pages of TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and other social media sites, where users come into contact with the individual techniques, without necessarily knowing or engaging with the wider ideology. This popularisation of incel-adjacent culture on mainstream social media apps like TikTok has been labelled "Incel 2.0".[xliii]

"You're just seeing one practice which will make you more attractive. It can be replicated outside of the community without necessarily all the commitments of the community, so it's much easier to spread" (Professor Michael Halpin, Professor of Sociology, Dalhousie University)

While scrolling through short-form content may mean that young people see looksmaxxing techniques in isolation from the accompanying ideology, we have found that encountering misogynistic and racist beliefs alongside extreme looksmaxxing techniques is inevitable for a teenage boy on YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Reddit.

BLACK PILL VS RED PILL – WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

Looksmaxxing communities are incel-adjacent: they adopt many of the terms and beliefs about women and the world which are rife within incel spheres, but without being incels. Whereas incels have given up on their romantic prospects (decided to be "involuntary celibates") – 'looksmaxxers' believe they have the power to 'ascend' their looks and secure a romantic partner.

Concepts like the red pill or the black pill – originally from the incel community – have been co-opted and adapted by the looksmaxxing community. In 'traditional' incel communities, the idea of taking the red pill was inspired by the film *The Matrix* and includes the belief that men are undermined and sexually oppressed by women and other progressive groups. The black pill is synonymous with an entirely fatalistic world view which stipulates a man's chances of having a relationship are entirely pre-determined by their looks and genetics, with no individual actions having an impact. This, however, is the antithesis of the looksmaxxing community which has built

its core message – and profits – around telling boys and young men that looks are the only thing they need to change to have a relationship.

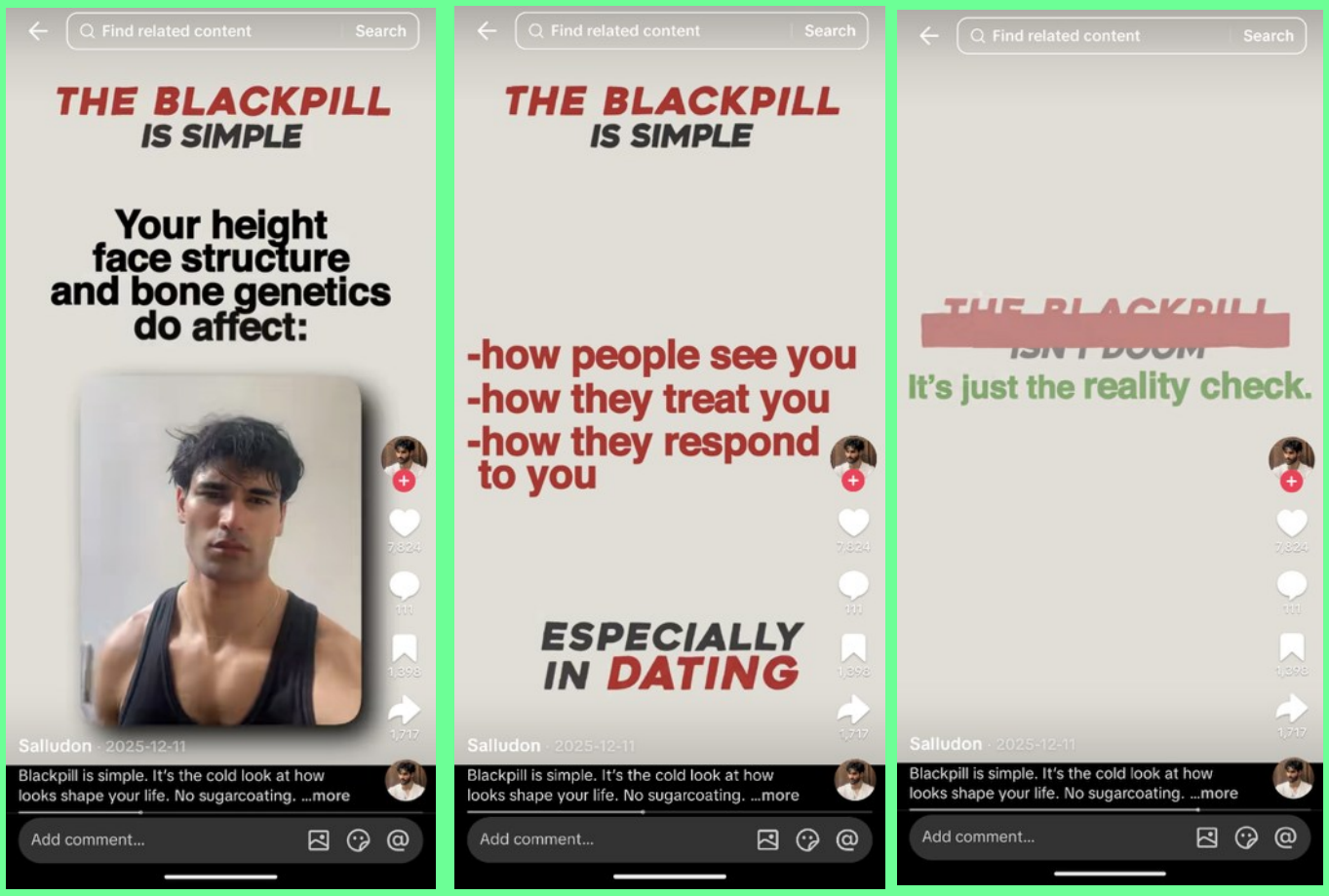
In a YouTube video published in June 2025,[xliv] Kareem Shami explains what it means to take the black pill within the looksmaxxing community. He begins by explaining the blue pill – the 'default position' which everyone has had "spoon fed" to them. Everyone consumed by this blue cloud believes that "love is blind, it doesn't matter what you look like or how tall you are… as long as you're a kind-hearted person, you've got a great shot at life".[xlv] This, according to Shami, is an irrational and emotional position which can be disproved by dating apps.[xlvi]

The next step is for men to take the 'red pill', which means they are "waking up from the simulation… accepting that the world isn't equal". To take the red pill, to the looksmaxxing community, is to believe that appearance is important, but not just physical appearance – 'red pillers' also care about their fashion, hygiene, wealth, and personality. However, this position is rejected by the looksmaxxing community, which sees these additional factors as irrelevant "when it comes to your SMV [sexual market value]".[xlvii] When a man realises that only looks matter, they enter "the black void" and take the black pill, whereby they accept that "looks are going to dictate every other facet, every other feature, every other trait in your life".[xlviii]

A YouTube video posted in November 2025 by Myron Gaines, titled *Redpill vs Blackpill: Looks, Money, Status Debate with Clavicular!* captures the 'nuance' between red pill ideology and the black pill position of the looksmaxxing community, although more revealing is the brazen misogyny embedded throughout.[xlix]

Myron sets out his red pill position, stating, "I think the 35-year-old guy that makes $300,000 per year that's a 7 [on a rating of attractiveness] is gonna do a lot better in the sexual marketplace than a guy that's 25 years-old, making $100k per year, but an 8".[l]

Clavicular, an ardent 'black piller', replies "that's just not what we're seeing according to the dating app statistics, according to self-report studies… going from a seven to an eight, you're going from 1% of the population to 0.001%… you're certainly more rare adding up your looks, money, status percentiles".[li]



"DON'T BLAME LIFE, BLAME YOUR FACE"

"... With looksmaxxing going mainstream, what we did was we linked certain traits to a better quality of life, like having a stronger jawline, being taller, having better hunter eye shapes" (Kareem Shami, YouTube)[ii]

While the importance of 'improving' your looks in the looksmaxxing community is often framed in the context of securing a sexual partner, Shami reveals how the community has co-opted the meaning of black pill in order to reach a far wider constituency of boys and young men, to include those concerned about other aspects of their life beyond their relationships with women.

"Looksmaxxing is the effort you can undergo to maximise your physical appearance so you can enjoy those benefits of being an 'attractive' person, in the manosphere those benefits are predominantly having heterosexual relationships with women but there's other benefits as well, they feel that attractive people are treated better in employment contexts, they they're treated better in educational contexts" (Professor Michael Halpin)

A recurring message from our interviews throughout this project was that a large part of the appeal of masculinity content and the 'manosphere' is that it presents easy answers – primarily getting ripped and getting rich – to complex challenges facing a generation of young men.

Looksmaxxing is a microcosm of this wider trend: looksmaxxing content provides a definitive diagnosis of a generation's problems and a clear prescription – in this case, improve your appearance – for what the Centre for Social Justice found to be an "overwhelming sense of hopelessness" among a generation of "Lost Boys" who are more likely to be unemployed, out of school, and involved in crime than young women.[liii]

"Comparisons can absolutely be made between the Manosphere and broader populist movements. These online spaces often display characteristics of populism: they identify real issues affecting young men, such as loneliness, economic uncertainty, lack of role models, and educational disengagement, before channelling those frustrations toward simplified explanations or scapegoats. The specific target varies between different strands of content, whether that's institutions, elites, feminism, or women themselves." (Josh Sargent, student and masculinity commentator)

Lookism is a form of discrimination identified and recognised within the social sciences. As a concept it is not exclusive to looksmaxxing or masculinity content; the concept of 'pretty privilege' has long existed to describe the belief that people who are more 'attractive' receive better treatment. The difference is that this is a term used to describe some people's experiences, whereas lookism has been weaponised as a tool to tell boys and young that they must look a certain way to get anywhere in life.

"Looksmaxxing is partly a response to young men and boys picking up that there is lookism in society… and manosphere communities have weaponised lookism in many ways to advance a male supremacist and misogynistic agenda" (Professor Michael Halpin)

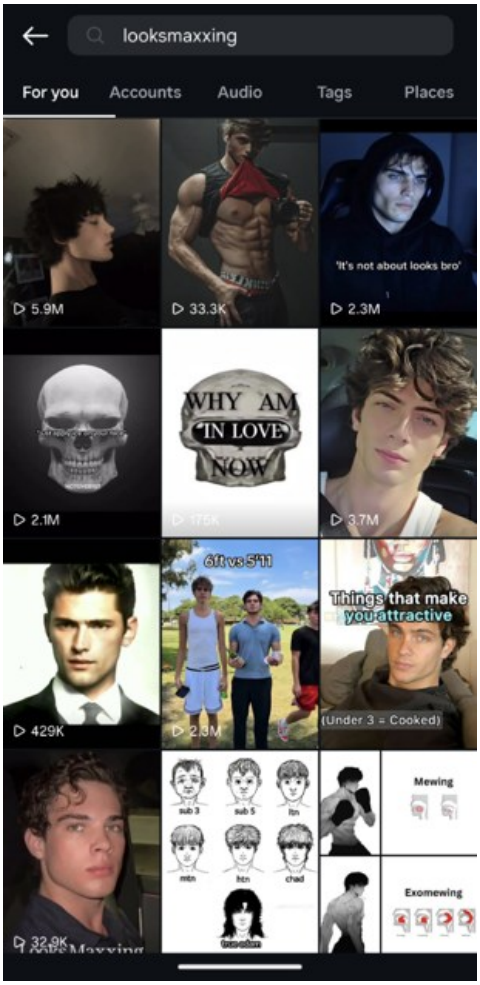
The young people in our focus groups had mixed views on the prevalence of 'lookism' in society – while some were convinced that it's "100% true, you're more likely to succeed if you're better looking", others disagreed and felt that, while looks may have an influence on a person's success in pursuits such as getting a job, other factors are more important like qualifications and "brains". However, there was a sense that, regardless of the importance of looks, young people have diminishing agency over their lives, making them more concerned about the aspects of the life that they can control.

"Young people feel like the world is moving without them, there's so much uncertainty… the only thing you can have control over is yourself which might be why it's as prevalent as it is" (focus group participant, age 16)

HOW MANY BOYS AND YOUNG MEN ARE ENGAGING WITH LOOKSMAXXING CONTENT?

While it is impossible to accurately quantify the scale or reach of looksmaxxing content, it is undoubtedly growing in popularity, evidenced by the millions of views it receives on mainstream social media, the proliferation of incel and looksmaxxing terminology in everyday conversations, and the growth of online forums dedicated to looksmaxxing. This increase in scale is an inevitable result of an algorithmic system which returns significant profits from extreme, divisive content, as well as a wider market for cosmetic and fitness products which are thriving on boys' and young men's insecurities.

The influencer with the most attention and controversy at the time of writing is Clavicular, who has over 800,000 followers on TikTok and 510,000 on Instagram.[iv] Clavicular also regularly livestreams to his 269,000 followers on the Kick streaming platform, which is often then clipped up and posted across TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and other sites by other accounts, receiving countless more views, shares, and likes. The 47 most recent TikToks posted by Clavicular have all received over 1 million views, with many receiving significantly more, peaking at 12 million views and over 500,000 likes on one video.



K. Shami similarly has 1.9 million TikTok followers and has received 135 million likes across his TikTok content, and again the number of people he has reached is almost certainly even higher given the number of accounts which clip and re-post his content across social media.

A search on Instagram for looksmaxxing reveals posts with millions of views, many from anonymous accounts such as 'Moggmaaxing', 'looksmogger', and 'mogwartzz_'.

On Reddit, the r/LooksmaxingAdvice subreddit has 67,500 visitors and 10,800 contributions every week, while the r/Rateme subreddit has 50,600 weekly visitors and 5,000 weekly contributions.

Away from mainstream social media, the popularity of looksmaxxing forums are also growing. One of the most popular, which several participants in our focus groups could name, is looksmax.org, which has seen its membership more than double in size over the past year, from approximately 60,000 members to 144,000.

This snapshot in time of the number of followers and views that accounts associated with looksmaxxing receive is not a comprehensive finding as to the number of boys and young men who meaningfully engaging in this type of content. However, from our conversations with young people, it is clear that the reach of this content does indeed go far and wide – almost all of the boys and young men we spoke with during our focus groups had previously come across some of it during time spent on social media.

There has also been a spike in incel terminology related to looksmaxxing in everyday use,[lv] reflected in the wider trend of 'maxxing' different traits or practices, such as gymmaxxing, jestermaxxing – using humour to get more attention from women – and even starvemaxxing, usually with the aim of achieving a more refined facial structure. Beyond looks, 'maxxing' has also been used as a suffix by the Pentagon to refer to the US military 'lethalitymaxxing', reflecting the growing audience of young people in particular with whom this language resonates.[lvi]

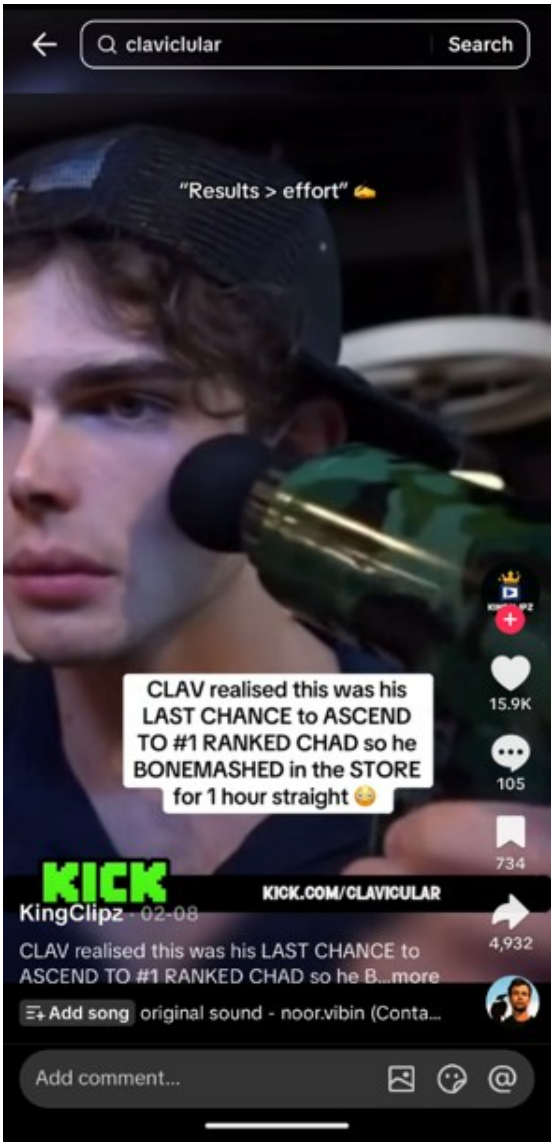
CLAVICULAR

With 786,000 and 414,000 followers on TikTok and Instagram respectively, Clavicular is a highly controversial figure who is widely considered the face of the looksmaxxing community.

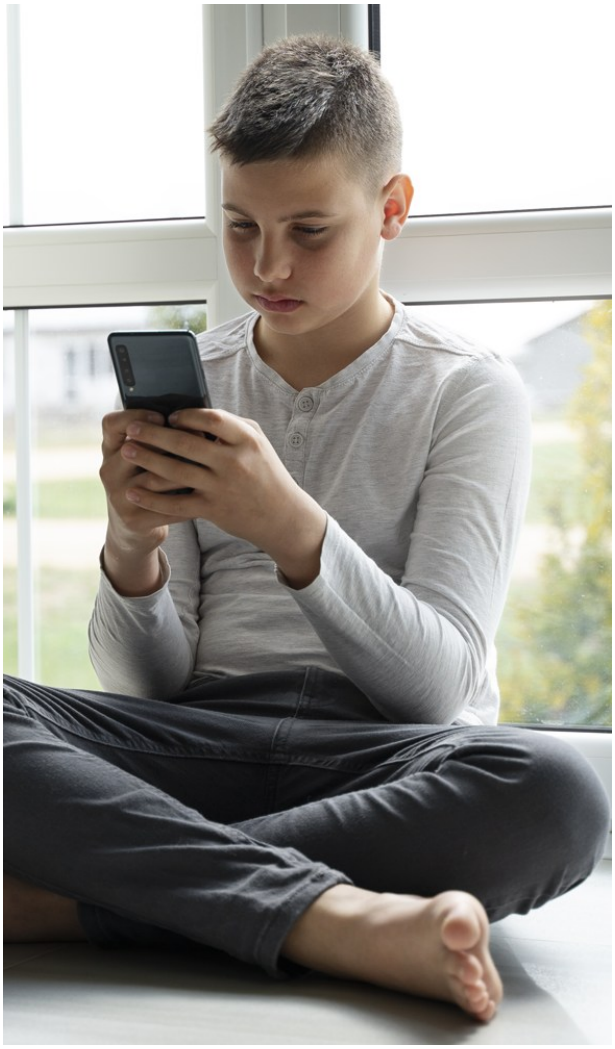
Clavicular has seen his fame grow off the back of stunts like running a man over in Tesla Cybertruck and dancing to Ye's song, "Heil Hitler", in a Miami nightclub with other manosphere influencers like Andrew Tate. His has also become synonymous with his extreme views on women, referring to them as "foids" and "slayables", as well as undertaking extreme surgeries and other looksmaxxing practices in pursuit of 'attractiveness'. In March 2026, while this report was being written, Clavicular was arrested on a battery charge, accused of instigating a fight between two women and then posting a video of it on social media.[lvii]

Clavicular is also widely followed on the streaming platform *Kick*, with clips from his livestreams being widely shared on TikTok and other social media platforms.

"There's definitely people, especially if they're younger and less mature, they could see him as a role model" (focus group participant, age 16)



Many of our focus group members were aware that Clavicular "gets way too many operations on himself to look perfect", including his upcoming $35,000 double jaw surgery which he claims will reposition his jaws to change his facial structure. The aim of the surgery, in Clavicular's view, will be to gain 1.5 points on the 10-point scale of attractiveness.



"[Clavicular] should be locked up but instead he's seen as a God just because he's clouted right now but eventually he's going to fall off and there's going to be a next Clavicular. Two years ago nobody knew who he was and everyone knew Andrew Tate... two years from now it's going to be the next person on the next trend and it's going to carry on forever, it's never going to stop unless there's action put in place to stop it" (focus group participant, age 17)

The spotlight we shine in this report on content and influencers we have seen is merely a snapshot of a constantly evolving social media landscape accessible to young people. What remains constant is the rewarding of the extreme, of the content which creates the most controversy and, by extension, the most views. As a result, there is a sad inevitability that the demise of one influencer will only see the rise of another, equally extreme and harmful creator to fill the void in 'rage-bait' content which drives interactions and revenue.

Andrew Tate has long been the face of the manosphere and the lightning rod for its criticism, but the harm derived from provocative, extreme masculinity content will far outlast Tate's own popularity. He was just one, particularly prominent example of a conveyor belt of influencers who are a symptom of an algorithmic system which consistently prioritises profit over public health.

From Self-Improvement to Hardmaxxxing: The Slippery Slope

"It's a slippery slope, the gym, that's where it starts, you start with wanting to look better. Some of the self-improvement stuff is good on the surface, like taking care of your skin, wanting to smell better, starting to have a routine but then slowly you'll end up in a rabbit hole where you're seeing people who look completely different to the way you do and the differences are structural things you can't change like your face" (focus group, age 17)

Distinct from looksmaxxing and masculinity content is self-improvement content, which young people describe as "audio, video, and pictures that helped them improve different aspects of their lives".[lviii] It is widely viewed by children and young people, with over half of 11-17 year-olds watching health and fitness self-improvement content, with this content especially popular among boys and older boys in particular.[lix]

Self-improvement content relating to body image has helped drive a significant surge in interest among young people in their health and wellbeing. While this has manifested itself in a number of trends, such as greater interest among boys in skincare and their diets, one of the most notable impact has been on the number of teenage boys attending the gym.

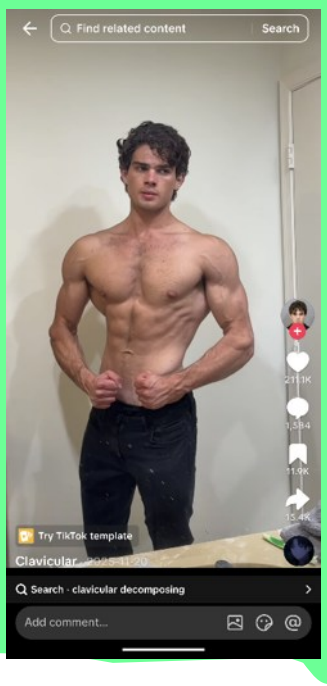
Sport England's Active Lives Survey reveals the extent of this explosion in popularity: gym attendance among boys of secondary school age increased from 22.8% of the population in 2017/18 to 35.6% in 2024/25, equivalent to more than 200,000 people.[lx] Girl's attendance has also increased by a smaller degree over the same period, from 26.7% to 30.9%.[lxi]

Several shifts are behind the growing popularity of gyms, with "improving overall confidence" the biggest motivator for 16-24-year-olds, as well as improving mental and physical health. Gyms are also increasingly providing a source of social connection and community, which is particularly attractive to younger users.[lxii]

This creates difficulty in defining the benefits and harms of self-improvement content. Some can share messages about healthy lifestyles and mindsets which would not be out of place in a school assembly, and several boys credited it with motivating them to go to the gym. However, a recent study found that 43% of girls and 37% of boys said self-improvement content could make them feel bad about themselves, feel pressured, and make them overthink or be obsessive.[lxiii]

For boys and young men, this is because self-improvement content aimed at them often focusses on "mastery of the body", typically lacking emphasis on sustainable wellbeing or mental health. Instead, it "promotes a binary narrative that validates muscular and able bodies while marginalising others".[lxiv]

"A lot of the time it shows unrealistic progress, they'll say in one year they've got insanely hench [muscular and defined physique] and it gives people false hope almost, it's not achievable" (focus group participant, age 17)



Screenshot: Taken from Hamza97. How To Looksmax (With 3 Additional FAST Tactics To Get Hotter Girls). YouTube

SELF-IMPROVEMENT VS LOOKSMAXXING

While self-improvement content presents its own harms to boys, and young people more generally, looksmaxxing content presents its own unique risks, even if it can look the same.

"It all just depends on your motives and why you decided to take that fitness journey in the first place. If you're doing it from the aspect where you think I want girls, you might go down the starving yourself route or taking performance enhancing drugs because its quicker and you're not doing it for the right reasons" (focus group participant, age 16)

In its more subtle manifestations, looksmaxxing content disguises itself as self-improvement content, encouraging the same sensible habits such as eating healthily or going to the gym. Looksmaxxing content specifically frames these activities as a means to 'ascending', and the benefits that doing so brings.

For Halpin et. al., the difference between self-improvement and looksmaxxing is that the latter is intrinsically harmful to men. While self-improvement content can (although often does not) boost self-esteem, looksmaxxing content inherently "negatively impacts men's and boys' health and self-worth" because approval within the looksmaxxing community is only given to the few men who conform with narrow masculine ideals, while the majority of men are the subject of "masculine demoralisation".[lxv]

"All men are judged in relation to masculine ideals, with most men found to be painfully inadequate and excluded from masculinity" (Halpin et.al.)[lxvi]

This constant barrage of messaging telling boys and young men how they should look, and that they need to look that way in order to be a 'man', can put them on a path to more extreme content, showing both more extreme methods, as well as even more extreme ideological beliefs.

"Repetitive exposure to complex social media algorithms showing "attractive" individuals endorsing these practices promotes an almost pathological obsession" (Konig, D. et. al.)[lxvii]

SOFTMAXXING

When regular activities like exercise or skincare are done by the looksmaxxing community as a means to 'ascend', they are considered to be a type of 'softmaxxing', which refers to non-invasive, often benign appearance-altering methods. While these appearance-altering methods discussed so far are not unique to the looksmaxxing community, there are types of 'softmaxxing' which are immediately associated with 'looksmaxxers'; few others would endorse them given their often-weak foundations in medical science.

For example, 'mewing' was popularised by Mike Mew and involves lodging your tongue in the roof of your mouth to "align the teeth, accentuate your cheekbones, sharpen your jawline and even straighten your nose naturally".[lxviii]

Mew promises that by mewing, "not only will you look more attractive, but by adapting a better posture you will look more confident, people will notice the presence you have in your room".[lxix] In November 2024, Mew was struck from the register of the General Dental Council (GDC) following complaints of unnecessary and harrowing treatment of two children in his clinic, and for claiming in a YouTube video that encouraging growth in craniofacial structure could lead to "expansion of the brain".[lxx]

Despite no robust scientific evidence to show the effectiveness of mewing,[lxxi] the practice has been widely adopted among the looksmaxxing community as an 'entry-level' practice to market to beginners. Hamza97 describes mewing as "fundamental" to improving your face. In his video, *How to Looksmax (With 3 Additional FAST Tactics To Get Hotter Girls)* he explains that it is a way to ensure that you breathe through the nose rather than the mouth, which is important because "being a mouth breather makes you uglier".[lxxii]

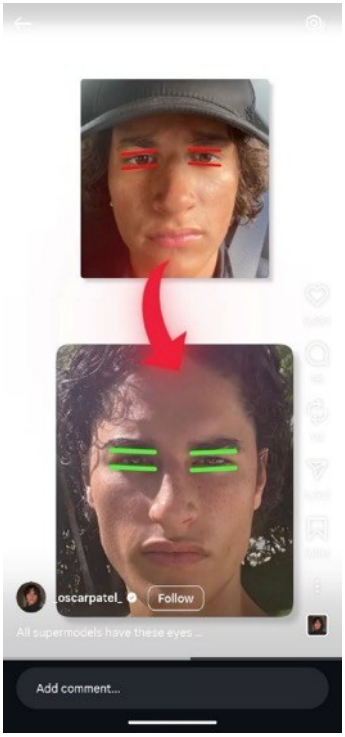
Screenshot: Taken from Hamza97. How To Looksmax (With 3 Additional FAST Tactics To Get Hotter Girls). YouTube

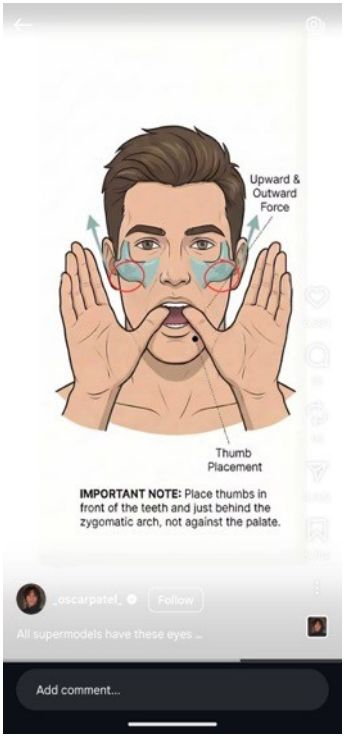
Others, like Oscar Patel, promote better posture and 'thumb-pulling' to create a positive canthal tilt, where the outer corner of the eyes is slightly higher than the inner corner.

"There is one feature that no normal person has which nearly every single supermodel does - positively tilted eyes, and this isn't luck or genetics, it's determined by structure and habits" (Oscar Patel, 618,000 followers on Instagram)

Patel encourages 'thumb-pulling', which entails putting the thumbs inside the mouth, under the cheek bone. According to Patel, massaging upwards and outwards with the thumbs will, over time, shift the outer corners of the eyes upwards.

While some of these techniques may be physically inconsequential at best, they still reveal the pressure that boys and young men are under to look a certain way, and the extent to which it can become an obsession. One study of looksmaxxing forums found a user who reported sleeping on his side, wearing a backpack, and with his bed tipped at an angle so that he could mew while he slept.[lxxiii]





"Some people in our year are so interested. A few people in my classes live for it and an entire personality becomes around looksmaxxing" (focus group participant, age 16)

HARDMAXXING

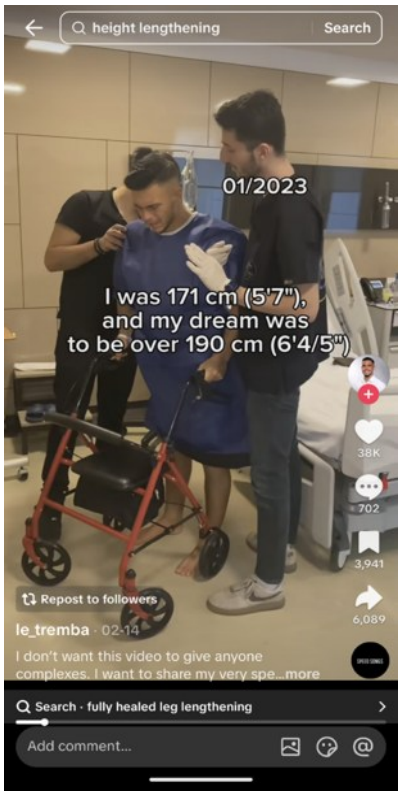
More extreme looksmaxxing practices also draw heavily on 'bro science' – anecdotal tips and advice to 'improve' a person's looks, which are not grounded in any medical science or evidence. As with individual influencers, specific looksmaxxing practices are often trends which rise and fall in popularity. This is not to say that they are not still immensely harmful, but that the looksmaxxing ecosystem is constantly evolving and action must address the underlying factors which enable new trends to grow.

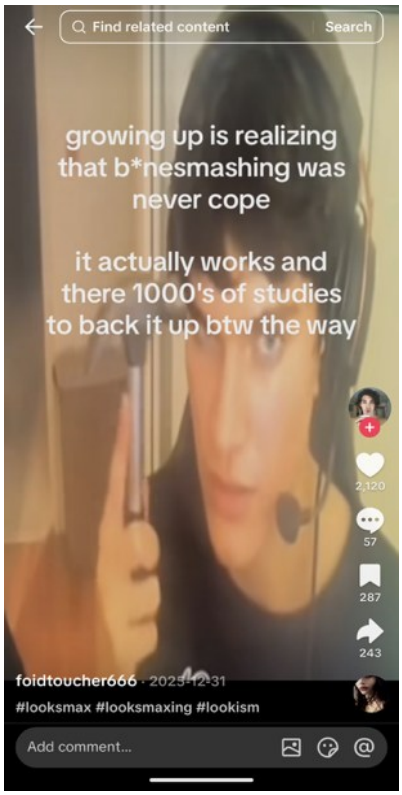
In our focus groups, the majority of participants were aware of more extreme looksmaxxing techniques, such as bone-smashing, leg-lengthening, or starvemaxxing.

"... People are harming themselves just to look good" (focus group participant, age 14)

While everyone we spoke to in focus groups rejected these ideas as being completely unreasonable, seeing other people go to such extreme lengths to change how they look nonetheless reinforces the view that young men should at least do something to conform to this narrow conception of attractiveness. As a result, over half of boys say that influencers on social media create pressure to undergo cosmetic procedures to change their appearance.[lxxiv]

"So many people are so affected by it, imagine you're not 'conventionally' attractive, you become so obsessed with the term looksmaxxing, you're trying to change your features, go against what God gave you to the point you're changing yourself or doing certain things that aren't even scientifically proven, you're just hoping that it changes you" (focus group participant, age 16)





SUPPLEMENTS, STEROIDS, AND PEPTIDES

In much of the content we saw online, it was evident that many content creators are glorifying physiques which are not attainable naturally, especially to teenage boys who are still growing and developing. Young people told us that in many videos it was obvious that influencers were using steroids to enhance their physique, something which was reflected in the content we viewed across different social media sites.

While there is little quantitative evidence about the rate of steroid usage among young men, Professor Ian Boardley, a Professor in Sport and Exercise Psychology at the University of Birmingham, told us how there is a broader trend of young men turning to legal supplements as part of their gym routine, which can put them on a path towards using illicit substances in the future. While a significant number of young people use gym supplements – and many would not consider themselves to be looksmaxxing – we would again draw on the views of young men in our focus groups, who identified the motivation behind their use as the defining factor.

Boys are more likely than girls to have come across supplements online, and over a third of all children seeing muscle-building supplements online, and half seeing protein powders.[lxxv] Creatine – which several young people told us is proven to be harmless and effective – does present health risks in higher doses, and there is little research specifically about its safety or efficacy for children.[lxxvi]

"Creatine, I swear it's like the most researched product in the world so kids know there's nothing bad with it. Some people say liver problems or stuff like that but it's not really true, every big influencer is saying you can take it and you're going to be ok" (focus group participant, age 16)

While there is no proven, causal link between supplement use and the use of anabolic steroids, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that supplement users can turn to steroids once the gains they see from taking supplements begin to plateau.[lxxvii]

This is not to say that supplements themselves are directly causing harm, but that it is indicative of a narrative which tells young men there is a constant need to improve and become even stronger.

"It is possible that muscle dysmorphia becomes worse as people become more and more embedded within this community… they think that once I get to this size or once I look like that, I'll feel happier. There's no evidence that that's actually the case" (Professor Ian Boardley, Professor in Sport and Exercise Psychology, University of Birmingham)

Professor Ian Boardley and Dr Orlanda Harvey – a Senior Lecturer at Bournemouth University – both told us about the four typologies of steroid user, first identified by Christiansen et. al. in 2016, which identify younger users as more likely to be using steroids in a riskier way.[lxxviii]

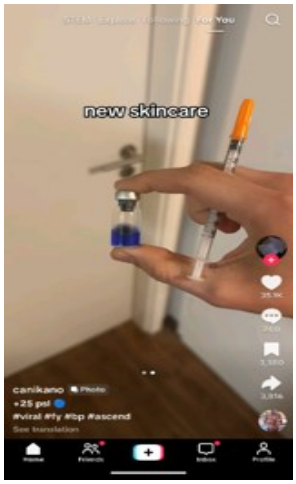
The YOLO user – an acronym for You Only Live Once – was identified by Christiansen et. al. as the highest-risk user of steroids, with lower levels of effectiveness.[lxxix] They are more likely to be experimental with substance combinations and duration of time that they use them for, and less likely to use them in way that could mitigate the risk of use.[lxxx]

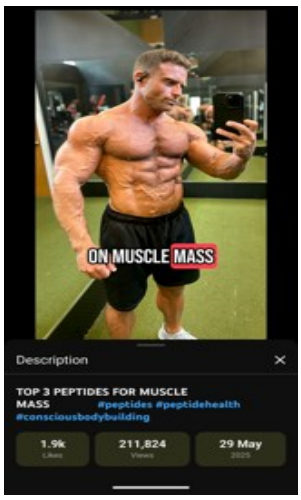
"AAS [Anabolic Androgenic Steroids] feature as a quick fix in a poorly understood and defined endeavour" (Christiansen et.al.)[lxxxi]

For younger, male YOLO users, steroids serve as just another example of the 'easy answers' that masculinity content promises, attaching success and happiness to attaining an ever-stronger physique. This comes with significant risks for their health, with anabolic steroid misuse linked to infertility, low mood, and cardiovascular complications, such as heart attacks and strokes.[lxxxii]

"Physically it's not unhealthy like taking steroids, it's what effect it has on the mental state of somebody, I think if someone's doing it for the wrong reasons to impress other people and it doesn't work then they'll be left feeling even more hopeless" (focus group participant, age 15)

This obsession with getting ripped is now leading to an emerging trend highlighted by young people in our focus groups, which is the injection of 'peptides' to rapidly change the physique. Professor Ian Boardley explained how this booming market initially emerged out of increased demand for illicit Glucagon-Like Peptide-1 (GLP-1) drugs[lxxxiii] – weight loss jabs which mimic the natural hormone that regulates blood sugar, appetite and digestion.[lxxxiv] The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) seized 5,851 falsified or unlicensed weight loss injections in 2025, a 1,338% increase from the 407 seizures in 2023.[lxxxv]





"Peptides are a trending drug that people are taking. It's the most popularised one right now. People are saying it improves your looks and body. It reduces fat, makes you look skinnier and more conventionally attractive" (focus group participant, age 16)

We found TikTok in particular to be rife with content promoting the use of peptides, with videos of young men injecting their abdomen with captions often recommending different types for different purposes. Over 40% of young people report seeing 'superhuman' or 'shortcut results' content on social media at least once a week in the past 30 days, while one-in-five see it several times per week or every day.[lxxxvi] Regarding ads for peptides, 5% of young people report seeing these every day, with 6% seeing ads for anabolic steroids.[lxxxvii]

This booming popularity and shortage of GLP-1 drugs has led to a proliferation of illegal online sellers and counterfeit products, many of which are marketed as 'peptides' to people seeking rapid body-composition change, a demographic which significantly overlaps with steroid users.[lxxxviii]

The market is evolving so quickly that research around the particular harms of peptide is still to catch-up, but the current trend is highly worrying.

"This apparent normalisation and proliferation of unregulated peptide use is deeply concerning given the use of illicit supply chains and the majority of these substances are not approved for human use" (Professor Ian Boardley)

STARVEMAXXING AND BIGOREXIA

"People with the best lighting, an insane pump, they've been blasting steroids, they see progression and they compare themselves to that and then they have unrealistic expectations for themselves, so when they don't see success in their own physique they'll have insecurities and develop body dysmorphia" (focus group participant, age 16)

However, content about restricted eating can be triggering for social media users who are already experiencing eating disorders, and this trend is indicative of an entire community which is putting increasingly more young men at risk of eating disorders. In particular, there is growing awareness of the risks and prevalence of muscle dysmorphia, or "bigorexia"[lxxxix] – a mental health condition which can in some cases be attributed to a persistent comparison with highly curated, hyper muscular, or hyper lean bodies online. In this case, we are no longer talking about a looksmaxxing 'practice' but a serious symptom of exposure to unrealistic appearance standards, often reinforced by algorithmic content that encourages users to pursue unattainable and extreme physiques.

There are an estimated 1.25 million people with an eating disorder in the UK, with males accounting for approximately one in four cases. While girls and women are still at a disproportionately greater risk of experiencing eating disorders, they have become increasingly common among young men. Among 17-19 year-old men, the rates of eating disorders rose to 5.1% from 0% between 2017 to 2023.[xc] While understanding of boy's experiences of eating disorders is limited, this could also be a consequence of more boys consuming content promoting dangerous eating habits, such as bulking, which Internet Matters found increased from 6% of boys in November 2024 to 11% in November 2025.[xci] As of 2024, harmful eating disorder videos on YouTube averaged more than 388,000 views, revealing the reach of these videos.[xcii]

The harm of eating disorder-related content is compounded by algorithms which target harmful eating disorder videos towards the social media of feeds of users with existing eating disorders. On TikTok, users with eating disorders are more likely to see appearance-related, dieting, exercise, and toxic eating-disorder content compared to other users. The likelihood of seeing this type of content increases further for users with more severe eating disorders.[xciii]

While there is a growing appreciation of the diversity of individuals affected by eating disorders, Jonathan Kelly, a Policy Manager at Beat Eating Disorders, told us that that there is still a long way to go to understand the unique experiences of boys and young men, and how certain disorders may present differently. He told us how diagnostic criteria and the majority of formal assessment measures for eating disorders have been developed predominantly from research involving exclusively female samples. As a result, there is a critical need for further research to enhance understanding of boys' and men's experiences and to inform more inclusive prevention and treatment approaches.

Kelly shared the example of bulimia nervosa, noting that while it is often associated with self-induced vomiting, diagnosis requires the presence of recurrent episodes of binge eating alongside 'compensatory behaviours', which can instead or also include over-exercising or the use of laxatives, diuretics or diet pills. Social media has been directly linked to a greater risk of someone engaging in these risky, compensatory behaviours, and almost a third of boys globally say they have stopped themselves from eating, binge ate, or skipped meals to achieve their appearance ideals. A similar rate (27%) of boys say that they have adopted unsafe exercise behaviours, such as doing more exercise than their body can handle.[xciv]

"Each additional hour of total screen time and social media use was associated with higher odds of fear of weight gain, self-worth tied to weight, compensatory behaviors to prevent weight gain, binge eating, and distress with binge eating two years later" [Chu, J. et.al.][xcv]

While there is growing understanding of boys' experiences of eating disorders, far greater understanding is needed of the extent of the challenge, as well as about how to identify disorders which may present differently among boys and men.

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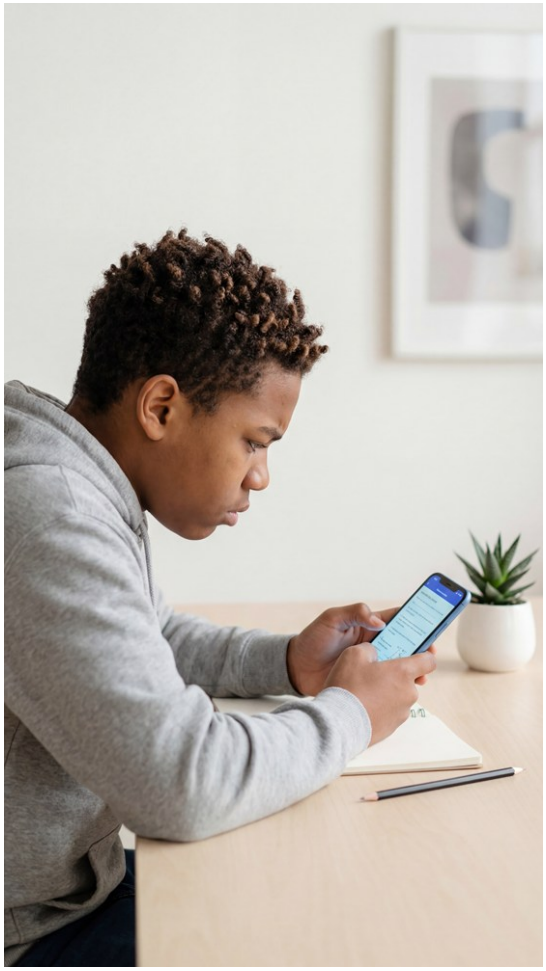
TRUE BELIEVERS OR PROFIT PURSUERS?



Young people were sceptical about the commitment many looksmaxxing influencers have towards their beliefs about many of these extreme looksmaxxing practices which they say will guarantee a young man's 'ascension'.

While many influencers we have seen do seem steadfast in their commitment to the worldview of the red or black pill, many appear to have weaponised this worldview in their pursuit of profit. For some it is a lucrative endeavour, a result of a social media ecosystem that thrives on the views and interactions that the egregious and extreme content of the looksmaxxing community lends itself to.

The deficit-framing of looksmaxxing also creates new avenues for money-making. We have seen several examples of influencers capitalising on the fatalistic, deficit-framing of black pill ideology – that men will never be successful if they aren't 'attractive' – to promote their own products or courses, which they promise will help users to "ascend".

The Clavicular System is a tiered subscription service which claims to be a "data-driven framework to surpass genetic potential". Young men are encouraged to join to "Unlock The Ascension Method" and are given access to an online forum populated exclusively by men, predominantly in their late teens or early twenties.[xcvi]

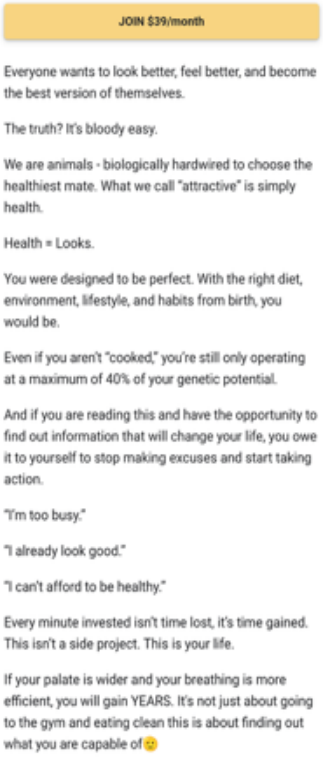
"He [Clavicular] created a course for it and I don't even know how that's legal, like imagine you're just giving out fake scientific information and this course costs like £70 and you're just told stuff like inject yourself with lip drainage fillers or how to make your cheek bones more prominent, stuff like that" (focus group participant, age 16)

Posts on the messaging board include requests for a rating and advice, accompanied by selfies. Replies include instructions to bone-smash or to fake ADHD in order to access prescriptions for certain medication. Beyond physical advice, the course encompasses tips to find a sexual partner, with universities identified as a key location to find "dozens of slayables in a five-minute radius, zero real world consequences".[xcvii]

Paid memberships to masculinity communities, such as those promoted by Clavicular or Baby Stickley, are not limited to the looksmaxxing community, they were already a source of income for more general, masculinity influencers offering advice about personality and mentality beyond just looks.

The unique opportunity of looksmaxxing is the scope it provides to not only sell advice, but actual products which they say will change how someone looks. Kareem Shami, for example, recently launched a de-bloating powder under the brand name "Ascend Labs".

The YouTuber Hamza97 offers a similar subscription programme, costing $37 a month, with new 'modules' becoming available at certain milestones. For example, the aesthetic body module teaches subscribers how to "build a 10/10 physique that gets 100 to 200 matches a day on dating apps". After three months, they can unlock the "**** like an alpha male" and "hyper masculinity identity" courses. Hamza also offers a course on becoming a fighter – "the ultimate masculine competition" – and, after four months, members can learn how to "level up" their social life and become a "social Chad".[xcviii]



Misogyny, extremism, and the far-right

The slippery slope described by boys in our focus groups does not only refer to the increasingly extreme appearance-altering practices that some boys are exposed to on social media. It also captures how the ideology and messaging underpinning these practices can become increasingly extreme.

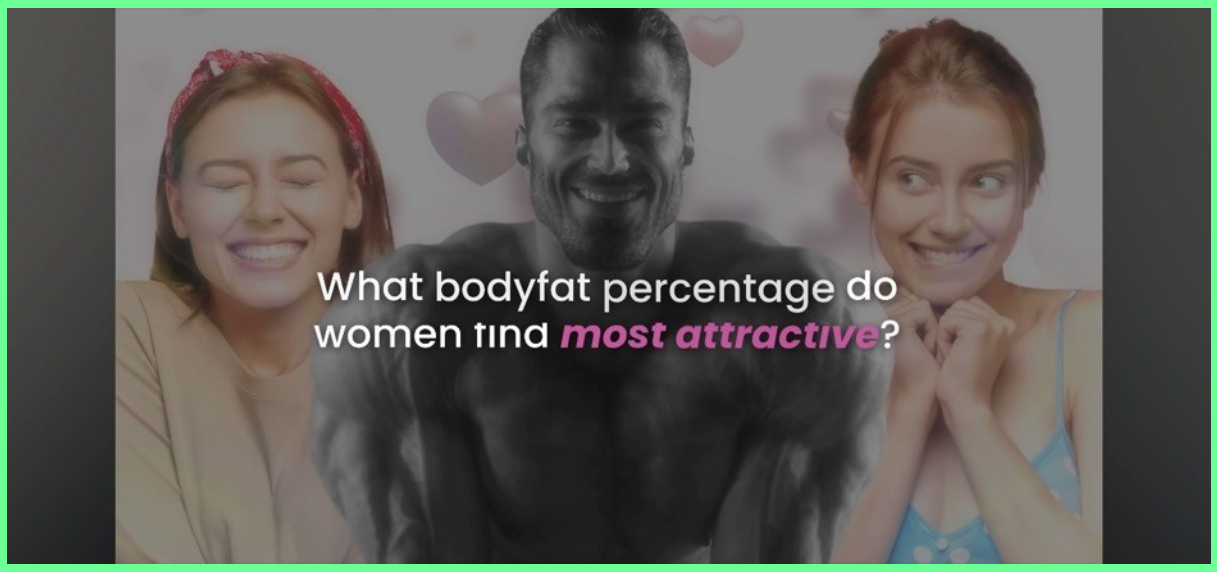
In our expert interviews and focus groups, concerns emerged about the misogynistic and racist ideas embedded within the online looksmaxxing community, and how these ideas can be initially hidden by a façade of helpful, self-improvement content. While many young men initially engage with looksmaxxing content in search of self-improvement or fitness advice, they can quickly be exposed to a worldview grounded in gender hierarchy, biological determinism, and racialised beauty standards.

A central concept shaping this worldview is "hypergamy," a belief widely promoted by influencers aligned with the red pill and black pill worldviews. This is the view that the majority of women – Kareem Shami suggests 90% of women – are only attracted to a small group of highly attractive, usually White men – "Chads" – while the remaining minority of women are "passed around with the guys that are below Chad".[xcix] Hamza97 echoes this idea, explicitly linking physical self-optimisation to gaining sexual access to women.

> ***"I hate when guys say I'm not doing it for women, I'm doing it for myself – yeah, but the women are for you though" (Hamza97)***

In another video, he rejects "the studies" in which most women say they aren't only attracted to a particular, muscular body type, asserting that:

> ***"In the real world being leaner makes you more attractive, so closer to 10% body fat, when your face starts to look like a model, when you have a full-on picturesque six-pack… when we're talking about primal sexual attraction, being more fitness model lean will boost how many women want to f*** you" (Hamza97)***



Screenshot: Taken from Hamza97. Lean Is Law. YouTube

Such messages encourage young men to view women as prizes to be won – an attitude recognised by participants in our youth focus groups: "they're trying to improve how they look to attract more women, they view women as something that can be won." Not only are women positioned as objects, they are also often portrayed as animals that make simplistic decisions which are pre-determined by their biology.

Within these communities, misogynistic language normalises dehumanisation. One young person raised the spread of the term 'foid', used to describe women as android-like beings devoid of emotion.

"There's a word going round – 'foid' – which refers to women as like an android, disregarding their feelings, identifying them as an android or object" (focus group participant, age 16)

This ideology is inextricable from looksmaxxing and is indicative of the incel-adjacent forums from which it emanates, where extreme misogyny is commonplace. Within incel forums, the Center for Countering Digital Hate found that the word "rape" or variations of it were used once every 29 minutes in the posts they collected, with their analysis finding 89% of users who commented on the posts were supportive of the original poster.[c]

Misogynistic online content also provides a gateway to other far-right content. Research shows that users who frequently engage with misogynistic content are more likely over time to be recommended and encounter far-right material, highlighting a concerning algorithmic reinforcement loop.[ci]

"When men start believing the misogynistic views about women, so when they start saying that women are biologically hardwired to only go after the most attractive men… the looksmaxxing community can be a gateway into these other communities, whether it's the incel community or white nationalist communities" (Professor Michael Halpin)

One young person in our focus groups shared their experience when they ventured onto a popular looksmaxxing forum. They explained how the 'criteria' to be attractive within the looksmaxxing community is predicated on a "Eurocentric" conception of masculinity, which disregards diverse cultural and ethnic expressions of attractiveness that exist beyond Western beauty standards.

"Stereotypically, the vision of an attractive man in this sphere is someone who's white … the advice I got was you're pretty good looking but you're brown, so start skin bleaching" (focus group participant, age 17)

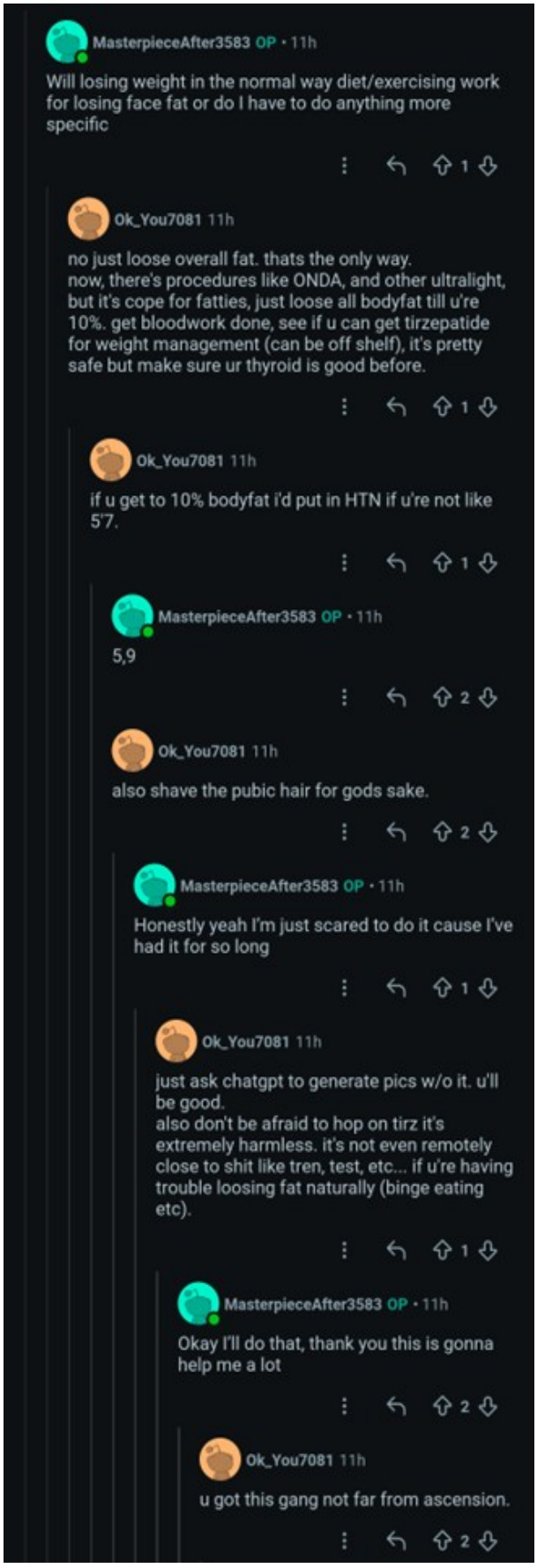
Some prominent looksmaxxing influencers openly use slurs and promote the physical superiority of white men. Clavicular in particular repeatedly uses the N-word, and suggests a "godly colouring" regime for non-white looksmaxxers who got the "short end of the phenotype stick". One clip from a live stream with Clavicular with two other men which we saw on TikTok has accrued 18.9 million views and features Clavicular replying to a comment stating that Marlon – a Twitch streamer and social media personality – "mogs" all of the group on stream. His reply states "yeah, but he's black", implying that even if he meets the 'objective' criteria set within the looksmaxxing community, he is by default unable to meet the highest standards because of his race.[cii]

A recent study found that popular hashtags associated with looksmaxxing content – which are used to associate videos with particular words or phrases and therefore reveal how creators themselves perceive their content to link to neighbouring content – include #EliotMoggerEdit. This hashtag is used to share 'edits' of Elliot Rodger, the incel perpetrator of a 2014 mass shooting and stabbing attack in Isla Vista, California.[ciii] These videos often use music, filters, and transitions to glorify or adulate their subject. Redmond et. al., who conducted the study, explain how EliotMogger is an intentional alternative spelling of Elliot Rodger to avoid moderation, and that the content links to a wider community of users who share content that also glorifies other mass shooters and that incorporates neo-Nazi phrases and symbology.[civ]

THE MALE GAZE

There was a common consensus among the experts we interviewed that boys' and young men's motivations for changing their appearance have moved on from just wanting to 'impress' girls.

"I've been delivering these workshops for just over five years … and I've seen a particular increase in the amount of weight that boys give to other boys' opinions when it comes to their physical appearance" (Jamie Bale, Schools Facilitator Coordinator, Beyond Equality)



Several young people we spoke with also shared this view. This is not to say that wanting to start a relationship is not a factor – some young men we spoke to maintained that this was still the most important reason – but there was a definite sense that it is certainly not the only consideration. Several focus group participants told us how they believe that boys and young men change their looks in the pursuit of validation from their male peers, in-person and on social media.

"People look for validation in other men as much as other women, they want to feel respected" (focus group participant, age 17)

Indicative of this pursuit of validation is the significant appeal of online forums dedicated to rating pictures that people post of themselves. As a practice, this is not exclusive to young men or looksmaxxing communities; young people told us how it is widely done by all genders at school, and we have seen reddit forums dedicated to rating pictures of people of all genders as well.

"People post their face and ask for ratings all the time" (focus group participant, age 16)

In these online spaces however, the worldview of the looksmaxxing community and its associated terminology have crept into these mainstream public forums. In one Reddit thread a looksmaxxing advice subreddit page, a young man shares a picture of himself and asks for a rating and any advice to improve his looks.

"You don't see people as equal... if you rate people by how they look, you're saying that they're worth more because of how they look, which blurs into racism and everything" (focus group participant, age 17)

"I wanted to look better, everyone was hitting puberty and looking better and I was thinking why isn't that me so I posted photos on looksmax.org" (focus group participant, age 17)

There are also dedicated looksmaxxing forums where boys and young men post pictures of themselves, asking other members to rate their appearance and give advice about how they can 'ascend'.

"[Rating forums are] degradation ceremonies… users have their bodies and ability to perform masculinity publicly critiqued by dozens or hundreds of other men" (Halpin et. al.)[cv]

Users frequently rate each other using the PSL scale, which gives a score which determines what category of man or woman they fall into, several of which were identified and explained by members of our focus groups.

"…It goes from subhuman, which is like the bottom 5% to low-tier normie, mid-tier normie, high-tier normie, then Chad, then Adam" (focus group participant, age 16)

Halpin et. al.'s analysis of dedicated looksmaxxing forums reveals the extent of the harm that this "masculine demoralisation" can have; they highlight how men's self-worth is "eviscerated" and even suicide is encouraged for boys and men who are made to believe that they fail to be 'real men'.[cvi]

Conclusion

The ever-evolving landscape of social media and online trends is constantly shaping young people's behaviour, as well as how they understand themselves and their place in the world. In recent years, 'trad-wife' content has promoted regressive gender norms, while the 'blackout challenge' has led to a lawsuit after the deaths of several children. These viral trends show how quickly harmful ideas can spread, mutate, and embed themselves in young people's online environments long before adults are even aware of them.

For many young people and their body image in particular, social media is driving insecurities, low self-esteem, and even eating disordered behaviours, while generating enormous profits. This is often associated with girls and young women, given the widespread challenges that they describe facing, but the harms inevitably exist for boys and young men as well, even if they are poorly understood.

Looksmaxxing content is just some of the content which impacts boys and young men and how they feel about their bodies. Its harm lies not just in the unrealistic standards it sets, but in the 'black pilled' worldview it promotes, which explicitly links their body to their self-worth, their masculinity, and their status in the world.

In our focus groups, young people made it clear that this content is not hidden in a niche corner of the internet but woven into their daily lives, from the growing popularity of the gym among boys and young men, to the offline use of terms such as 'mogged' or 'foid' reflecting their trending status on social media.

The result is a burgeoning market for content, advice, and products which promise to help boys and young men 'ascend'. Influencers encourage boys and young men to take the black pill, congratulating them on finally awakening and accepting the harsh reality they face – namely, that women are biologically hardwired to only be attracted to the top 20% of men; so men must do all they can to 'ascend' their looks and progress from a 'subhuman' to a 'Chad'.

A few boys and young men may act on this advice, religiously following ascension programmes. For the majority, the harm lies in the message that this sends, the idea that they must be doing something to change how they look, that it must be important if some people are willing to go to extreme lengths.

This content normalises misogyny, foments sexual entitlement, and increases the risk of gender-based harassment, abuse, and violence. It is also grounded in a racialised, Eurocentric view of male beauty, casting race and skin tone as a barrier to masculinity itself. It then acts as a gateway to other extreme ideology, with ties to neo-Nazi and white nationalist online communities.

The looksmaxxing content we have described in this report was all viewed in the past six months. Despite presenting both physical and psychological harm to many boys and young men – as well as girls and women by extension – it is still readily available on social media.

Looksmaxxing is just one element of the untold harm children are being exposed to online. Social media is an untested experiment which has been unleashed on an entire generation without any requirement to prove safety and suitability for young people. For all children on these platforms, this includes exposure to extreme violence, distressing material, and harmful content that they would never encounter in any regulated offline space. For many boys and young men, the result is endless waves of masculinity content telling them they must be tougher, stronger, and more dominant, which escalates into looksmaxxing, misogyny, and other extreme and radicalising narratives.

We cannot regulate this content once it is trending or ban influencers once they have become mainstream because, by that point, a new, more extreme version is already on the horizon. Clavicular has become the poster boy of looksmaxxing, and the subject of much of the growing outrage at the looksmaxxing community. But, just like Andrew Tate, he is a symptom rather than the cause of a social media system that thrives on extremism and outrage. Clavicular's popularity will wane, just as Tate's did, and another ugly head of the manosphere will inevitably grow to take his place.

Protecting boys and young men from the harmful impacts of content like looksmaxxing requires both reducing exposure to harmful online environments and strengthening the positive, offline opportunities and support systems around them. This includes creating safe alternatives to social media, ensuring platforms are genuinely safe for those who use them, equipping schools to deliver engaging and relevant education on masculinity and body image, and improving early identification and support for body image related health issues.

Recommendations

1. Stop children being harmed by social media, and make it safe for those who do use it

"TikTok, Snapchat, YouTube, they're not gaining anything from putting a limit on the amount of time people can scroll in a day... These companies only lose from unhealthy people quitting their addiction" (focus group participant, age 16)

We welcome the government's decision to introduce a minimum age requirement of 16 to access social media. This is a significant and necessary step towards reducing the harms that many children and young people are currently exposed to online.

However, the effectiveness of this policy will depend on how it is implemented. We are not under any illusion that this is a silver bullet. Young people told us how they thought they would not find it difficult to circumnavigate, which may well be true. This alone is not a reason to *not* introduce a social media ban, as **reduced usage would still constitute an improvement from the current status quo**.

Introducing this requirement will not introduce a 'cliff-edge' when children suddenly become old enough to access social media for the first time. Instead, it will move this cliff-edge from 13 – and often even younger – to an age when they are better equipped to navigate social media for the first time.

As well as the requirement, social media must be far safer for those who do use it, making this cliff-edge far less severe when someone turns 16. This includes far more rigorous platform design to limit the "addictive and harmful features" of social media content,[cvii] including controlling how content is recommended to users, as well as regulating how content is accessed, such as through endless scroll For You Page.

Specifically in the context of looksmaxxing, **Ofcom should explicitly define looksmaxxing and masculinity content as a recognised harm**, and upgrade all body stigma content to Primary Priority Content, recognising the significant harm that it causes.

Once these regulations have been implemented, **the burden must be on social media companies to prove their services are safe**. As a condition of offering services to children, they must be required to provide an independently auditable demonstration of: the potential risks associated with their product mechanisms and functionalities; the mitigations and design choices used to reduce or eliminate those risks; and evidence of safety or absence of harm in relation to these risks, with monitoring over time.

2. Support schools to deliver the new RSHE curriculum through funding for masculinity, gender norms, and body image workshops in school

"Back in Year 9, people came into school and talked to us about real world problems, like gender or gang violence… people come in, they're cool people, they're like 19 or 20 and they'd be interactive, you'd look up to someone like that… those topics I still remember them now" (focus group participant, age 16)

The revisions to the RSHE guidance are welcome and represent an important step towards ensuring children and young people receive clearer, earlier and more consistent education about healthy relationships, online harms, and gender norms. However, schools face significant barriers in delivering high-quality, relevant and engaging content on these issues. Teachers are under substantial pressure to keep up with rapidly shifting online cultures, and many report lacking the time, confidence and specialist knowledge to facilitate nuanced conversations about masculinity, body image and social media.

We welcome the Government's recognition of the importance of enrichment as part of the school day and its commitment of £88 million to deliver enrichment opportunities. This funding should, in part, be used to strengthen the delivery workshops about masculinity, body image, and online influences, delivered in partnership with trusted, external, expert organisations.

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3. Support schools to deliver adopt a more holistic, whole-school approach to teaching positive masculinity and healthy body image

This begins by developing a stronger understanding of what works when talking to boys and young men about masculinity: how can conversations be framed positively while still acknowledging the harm to women and girls that some masculinity content causes?

A whole-school approach would ensure that discussions about respect, identity, appearance pressure, and emotional wellbeing are embedded throughout the school day, rather than siloed into the occasional PSHE lesson. This could include integrating conversations about healthy body image into PE lessons to tackle narratives about specific body types being more attractive, and to education young people about healthy exercise habits.

4. **Strengthen the evidence base around the harms of looksmaxxing, boys' and young men's experiences of body stigma and eating disorders, and what works to support them. Improve access to services for all young people affected by body image issues and eating disorders**

How boys and young men experience doubts or insecurities about their body image is poorly understood, particularly when they present with compulsive behaviours such as overexercising or steroid and peptide use.

The government and the academic community should support the building of a stronger evidence base on boys' experiences of eating disorders, muscle dysmorphia, and appearance related mental health difficulties is required, including evidence about prevalence and risk factors.

This should be paired with improved access support services for all young people experiencing eating disorders.

5. **Improve access to mental health services for all young people, including those affected by body image issues and eating disorders, by expanding community-based early intervention and strengthening specialist mental health services.**

The government should embed mental health support into community and youth settings, such as embedding wellbeing workers in youth clubs to support boys and girls, including being able to understand and identify warning signs of young people consuming extreme online content. The government should also scale-up Young Futures Hubs to deliver the Government's manifesto commitment to open access mental health support in every community.

It should also expand access to a wider range of therapeutic interventions within NHS services, including talking therapies and other evidence informed approaches such as art therapy, play therapy, family and systemic therapy, and integrative psychotherapy. Mental health should be a central component of multidisciplinary neighbourhood health offerings. Sufficient funding for mental health is also essential, as mental health represents 20% of the NHS morbidity burden but receives only 10% of NHS spending, with only 1% allocated to children and young people's mental health services.

6. **Strengthen understanding and regulation of the peptide market and understanding of the impacts of exercise supplements on young people**

There is also an urgent need to understand and regulate the peptide market which is proliferating across the internet. Clear guidance and robust oversight are required to address the widespread advertising and sale of peptides to young people, often without safeguards, accurate information, or medical supervision.

7. Training and guidance for parents, youth workers, and gym staff

There is urgent need for clear training and guidance for those who are best placed to spot early signs of harm, such as parents, youth workers, and staff working in gyms or fitness settings. Guidance should provide support to recognise unhealthy patterns of exercise, restrictive dieting, and the differing motivations for 'body transformation', and equip them to offer safe, nonjudgemental support.

8. Youth workers to partner with gyms to offer advice and support to boys and young men who are working out

Youth workers and gym staff could work in partnership to deliver sessions on healthy exercise, realistic expectations about body change, and safe approaches to gym use. These sessions should also raise awareness of the potential harms linked to supplements commonly marketed to young men, such as creatine and similar products, ensuring that young people and the adults around them are informed about risks, misconceptions, and safer alternatives.

9. More offline spaces, providing alternatives to addictive-screens and doomscrolling

"There's a massive lack [of spaces], back in the day I remember my parents talking about youth clubs and stuff, places to be" (focus group participant, age 16)

Children and young people need positive alternatives to harmful social media platforms. They have repeatedly told us how, if given the choice, they would prefer to be playing or hanging out with their friends in-person, rather than being indoors on social media all the time.[cviii]

We welcome this governments commitment to supporting young people and its pledges to create a network of Young Futures Hubs and support more youth spaces through the Better Youth Spaces fund and Pride in Place programmes. It is vital that these spaces are created with youth voice at their core, making them accessible and engaging for the young people who need them most.

If additional funding is required, Government should explore a Play and Recreation Levy on major social media platforms to pay for investment in alternative infrastructure.

Annex A – Experts

During our research, we spoke to experts on a diverse range of subjects, including social media, masculinity and the manosphere, and exercise and steroid use.

- Professor Ian Boardley – Professor in Sport and Exercise Psychology, University of Birmingham
- Holly Green – Head of Quality, Learning and Impact, Beyond Equality
- Jamie Bale – Schools Facilitator Coordinator, Beyond Equality
- Josh Sargent – Student and masculinity commentator
- Jonathan Kelly – Policy Manager, Beat Eating Disorders
- Professor Michael Halpin – Professor of Sociology, Dalhousie University
- Mike Nicholson – Director & Founder, Progressive Masculinity
- Dr Orlanda Harvey – Senior Lecturer, Bournemouth University
- Professor Ruth Page – Professor of Applied Linguistics, University of Birmingham
- Professor Victoria Goodyear – Professor of Physical Activity, Health and Wellbeing, University of Birmingham
- Will Adolphy – MBACP Psychotherapist and Managing Director, M-Path

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[iv] Equimundo (2025) State of UK Men
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