

Terrifying Trends

All over TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and other popular platforms, men and women are engaging in the process of looksmaxxing, a viral phenomenon centered around physical enhancement. Millions of individuals have contributed to the trend by consuming, posting, and sharing content. Looksmaxxing does not only shape cultural standards of beauty, it also threatens democratic health as it perpetuates manosphere and incel ideology, showcasing how modern media environments enable undemocratic values to survive even after their origins have faded from public view.

The ideological foundation of looksmaxxing can be traced back to online manosphere collectives like the Red Pill Reddit forum, which formed in 2012 as a space for male “enlightenment” rooted in grievance and control (Halpin et al.). The forum’s rhetoric was explicitly misogynistic, depicting women as deceitful and men as victims of feminism while glorifying dominance, sexual entitlement, and the subjugation of women (Dignam and Rohlinger). Within this environment, the physical transformation from “beta” to “alpha” male, the origin of looksmaxxing, was framed as a path to reclaiming sexual and social power. The Red Pill anonymous Reddit forum functioned as a private public sphere, allowing users to publicly engage with others while maintaining anonymity and avoiding accountability. This structure allowed individuals to adopt and circulate extremist ideas without fear of social repercussion, creating what one study on the German manosphere called “safe havens for extremist content” (Çağlar et al. 5). The fusion of anonymity and community enabled misogynistic ideologies to thrive, forming the cultural and rhetorical foundation from which looksmaxxing evolved.

Social media platforms such as TikTok and YouTube transformed looksmaxxing from an insular ideology into a widespread cultural trend.

Unlike earlier manosphere communities, looksmaxxing operates without traditional surrogate organizations. It exists as a digital network sustained by influencers, online forums, and consumers who either knowingly or unknowingly promote looksmaxxing and its hidden manosphere ideologies. Websites like Looksmax.org promote the movement explicitly. The website has nearly 2.8 million viewers a month and countless posts that replicate the Red Pill forum's structure (Semrush). On the other hand, influencers like Kareem Shami, who has over 1.9 million TikTok followers, promote content without understanding the origin. Shami said he "hadn't known of the term 'looksmaxxing' until (he) was posted on their forums," yet his content embodies the very aesthetic and behavioral standards rooted in the manosphere ("Inside Looksmaxxing"). Together, these actors, deliberate and inadvertent, sustain a digital ecosystem that relies on emotion as its organizing force.

This emotional infrastructure bridges structure and participation. Similar to the emotions present in the Red Pill forum, looksmaxxing content elicits feelings of insecurity, yearning, and inadequacy ("Inside Looksmaxxing"). This shared affect fosters what Bennett and Segerberg describe as connective action, participation driven less by collective identity than by individualized emotional expression. Users engage by posting, liking, and sharing, transforming personal emotion into collective visibility. Individuals remain invested because the content produces feelings of validation and belonging, creating a digital affective public united by emotion rather than ideology.

This emotional infrastructure makes looksmaxxing particularly dangerous. While the movement may not appear political now, neither did the Red Pill forum, which remained apolitical until the 2016 election (Dignam and Rohlinger). Emotion plays a crucial role in politicization, as fear, anger, and insecurity can easily drive connective action and affective

polarization (Dignam and Rohlinger). The Red Pill forum provides a clear precedent: it became deeply political when moderators framed Donald Trump's candidacy as a defense of masculinity against feminism. Users linked gender grievance to political participation, viewing voting as part of their "sexual strategy." Through this emotional reframing, Trump became the embodiment of the "alpha male" ideal, while Hillary Clinton symbolized feminist oppression (Dignam and Rohlinger).

Although looksmaxxing disguises itself as a self-improvement trend, it sustains the same emotional infrastructure that once politicized the Red Pill community. Within digital culture, fear, anger, and insecurity function as mechanisms of normalization, allowing misogynistic hierarchies to persist beneath the surface. When audiences engage with looksmaxxing without recognizing its origins, they absorb values that privilege dominance over empathy and individual gain over collective responsibility, eroding democratic health and fostering the potential for reactionary politicization.

Looksmaxxing as the offspring of the Red Pill forum and broader manosphere collectives is evidence of the dangers of digitally enabled social movements. Even as society condemns the incel and Red Pill communities, looksmaxxing continues to influence discourse and propagate on popular media platforms. Looksmaxxing demonstrates how, in the age of connective media, ideology endures through shared emotion that binds participants who may not recognize the larger system they sustain. Its success marks a new phase in digital politics, one in which emotional resonance organizes collective identity and ideology can persist implicitly. The TikTok feeds and YouTube "watch next" panels of beautiful men and women promoting looksmaxxing show that dangerous ideologies no longer linger on the fringes of society, they trend.

Works Cited

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- Finding areas to cut down on word count
- Creating MLA citations

- Helping to create an outline out of my own ideas