

The Mirror That Never Turns Off

When Daniel was fifteen, he started lifting weights after school. The goal was simple: feel stronger, look better, keep up with friends who were already hitting the gym. Then he stumbled into a different corner of the internet, one where the subject was not fitness but faces.

On these forums, users uploaded photographs of themselves and invited strangers to judge them. Commenters measured jawlines, debated the spacing between eyes, and discussed the angle at which the outer corners tilted up or down. Advice ranged from haircut suggestions to surgical referrals. The community called what they were doing looksmaxxing, and the premise was direct: physical attractiveness is not a matter of luck but a system that can be learned, measured, and improved.

The vocabulary alone signals how seriously members take the project. Practitioners talk about canthal tilt, the angle of the outer corners of the eyes, and interpupillary distance, the gap between the pupils. Facial symmetry is scored, jawlines rated, and men slotted into a ranking hierarchy with labels ranging from the aspirational to the genuinely unkind. The goal of all this measurement is what the community calls ascending, a word choice that reveals more than its users probably intend.

Methods fall into two categories. Softmaxxing covers the lower-risk end: better posture, skincare routines, flattering haircuts, and an exercise called mewing, which involves pressing the tongue against the roof of the mouth in hopes of gradually sharpening the jaw. Hardmaxxing is more serious. It includes cosmetic surgery, unregulated hormone use, and in extreme cases a practice called bone smashing, where users strike their cheekbones with hard objects in the belief that the bones will heal back denser and more defined. Plastic surgeons in multiple countries have reported a rise in young male patients requesting jawline procedures and chin implants, many arriving with reference images pulled directly from social media.

The movement did not start on TikTok. Its roots lie in incel communities of the early 2010s, where men processed romantic failure through a belief known as biological fatalism, the idea that attractiveness is a fixed hierarchy and no amount of effort changes where you were born in it. Looksmaxxers rejected that resignation while keeping the ranking systems and pseudoscientific vocabulary, adding an activist edge instead. If looks determine your fate, then changing your looks changes your future.

Short video platforms proved to be an ideal delivery system for this message. A single clip showing a teenager at sixteen and then again at twenty, framing the difference as proof the method works, can reach millions of viewers within hours. What began as a niche pursuit on obscure forums became, within a few years, a recognizable feature of mainstream youth culture.

Psychologists who study the trend have raised specific concerns. The emphasis on numerical targets, the cycles of comparison, and the relentless self-evaluation against external standards

resemble patterns associated with body dysmorphia and disordered eating. Researchers who specialize in male eating disorders note that muscle dysmorphia, which drives men to obsess over physical inadequacy regardless of actual appearance, is frequently missed in clinical settings because it presents as dedication rather than disorder. Looksmaxxing provides both the framework for that obsession and a community to sustain it.

Daniel noticed this pull himself. Even as he spent less time on the forums, the habit of self-scrutiny proved harder to quit than the forums themselves.

Understanding why the movement has found such a wide audience requires looking beyond the content. Traditional markers of masculine status such as stable employment, homeownership, and long-term partnership are delayed or out of reach for a growing share of young men. When conventional routes to adult identity feel blocked, the body becomes one of the few things that still responds to effort. The beauty industry has not been slow to recognize this, moving aggressively into the male market and framing grooming products and cosmetic procedures as investments in social and professional performance. Industry research projects the global men's grooming sector will surpass five billion dollars within the next few years, a market built in no small part on manufactured insecurity.

The deeper irony is that the whole enterprise tends to work against the outcomes it promises. Relationships built on lasting attraction depend on warmth, humor, and shared experience, none of which improve by tracking macros at dinner or obsessing over a jawline angle. Extreme focus on physical optimization has a way of making people exhausting to be around long before it makes them irresistible.

Daniel still exercises and pays attention to his skin. By most measures, those habits have served him well. But he admits the constant analysis has been hard to shake. Even after stepping back from the forums, he still sometimes catches himself studying his reflection and wondering how strangers online might rate what he sees.

"The good part is that I started taking care of myself," he says. "The bad part is that once you learn to look for flaws, it's hard to stop noticing them."

The mirror has always been there. What changed is that it now has an audience, and the audience never quite stops talking.

- 1) Do you think it is possible to improve your confidence by improving your appearance, or does it work the other way around?
- 2) Have you ever changed something about your appearance because of pressure from other people or social media?
- 3) Where do you think the line is between healthy self-improvement and unhealthy obsession?
- 4) Can obsessing too much over physical perfection actually make someone a less attractive romantic partner in the long run?

- 5) Do you think men and women face different kinds of pressure when it comes to their appearance?
- 6) To what extent do you think social media platforms are responsible for the mental health consequences of trends like looksmaxxing?
- 7) Do you think the pressure to look a certain way is getting stronger or weaker in Korean society?
- 8) Why do you think this specific generation has turned to physical appearance as their ultimate measure of control?

Hit the gym	(idm)	to go to a fitness center regularly to exercise	After failing his first job interview, Marcus decided to hit the gym and work on his confidence.
Stumble into	(phr v)	to find or discover something by chance, without looking for it	She stumbled into a career in finance after a colleague recommended her for a temporary position.
Referral	(n)	a recommendation to see a specialist or expert for further help	The doctor gave her a referral to a specialist after the initial examination raised some concerns.
Premise	(n)	a basic idea or assumption on which an argument or theory is based	The entire business plan rested on the premise that consumers would pay more for sustainable packaging.
Signal	(v)	to indicate or show something clearly	Arriving early to every meeting signals that you take your responsibilities seriously.
Practitioner	(n)	a person who regularly engages in a particular activity or profession	Experienced practitioners in the field warned that the new policy would have unintended consequences.
Symmetry	(n)	the quality of having two sides or parts that match each other exactly	The architect praised the symmetry of the building's facade, noting how each window perfectly mirrored the one opposite it.
Slot	(v)	to place or assign someone or something into a particular category or position	New employees are typically slotted into a training program for their first two weeks.
Aspirational	(adj)	relating to a strong desire to achieve a higher status or a better life	The advertisement used aspirational imagery of luxury travel to appeal to young professionals.

Ascend	(v)	to rise to a higher level, position, or status	She worked quietly for years before ascending to the role of regional director.
Unregulated	(adj)	not controlled or supervised by official rules or laws	The unregulated market for dietary supplements has made it difficult for consumers to know what they are actually buying.
Incel	(n)	a member of an online community of men who blame others for their inability to form romantic relationships	Researchers studying incel communities note that feelings of social exclusion often precede radicalization.
Fatalism	(n)	the belief that events are determined in advance and that people are powerless to change them	A sense of fatalism spread through the town after the factory announced it would close regardless of the union's response.
Resignation	(n)	calm acceptance of something unpleasant or difficult that cannot be changed	There was a tone of resignation in his voice when he admitted that the project would probably miss its deadline.
Pseudoscientific	(adj)	claiming to be based on science but lacking genuine scientific evidence or method	The company faced criticism for making pseudoscientific claims about the health benefits of its products.
Framing	(n)	the way in which something is presented or described so as to influence how it is understood	The framing of the report as a public safety issue helped secure government funding for the project.
Obscure	(adj)	not well known or difficult to find	The professor cited an obscure study from the 1970s that most of her colleagues had never encountered.
Numerical	(adj)	expressed in or relating to numbers	The manager asked the team to back up their claims with numerical evidence rather than general impressions.
Body dysmorphia	(n)	a mental condition in which a person is obsessively preoccupied with perceived flaws in their physical appearance	Therapists working with athletes note that body dysmorphia is often overlooked because extreme focus on appearance can appear to be simple dedication.

Framework	(n)	a basic structure or set of ideas used to understand or approach a subject	The training program gives new managers a framework for handling difficult conversations with their teams.
Scrutiny	(n)	careful and detailed examination or observation	The company's accounting practices came under intense scrutiny after a whistleblower raised concerns.
Manufactured	(adj)	artificially created, especially to produce a particular emotional or commercial effect	Critics argued that the sense of urgency around the product launch was entirely manufactured by the marketing team.
Irony	(n)	a situation in which the opposite of what is expected actually occurs	The irony of the situation was not lost on anyone: the campaign designed to reduce stress had become the main source of it.
Enterprise	(n)	a project or undertaking, especially one that requires considerable effort or involves risk	Starting a restaurant is a risky enterprise, particularly in a city where competition is fierce and rents are high.
Shake	(v)	to free oneself from something difficult or persistent	Even after the project ended, she found it hard to shake the habit of checking her emails every ten minutes.
Catch oneself	(v)	to suddenly become aware that one is doing or thinking something, often without having intended to	He caught himself rehearsing the presentation out loud on the train and quickly lowered his voice.