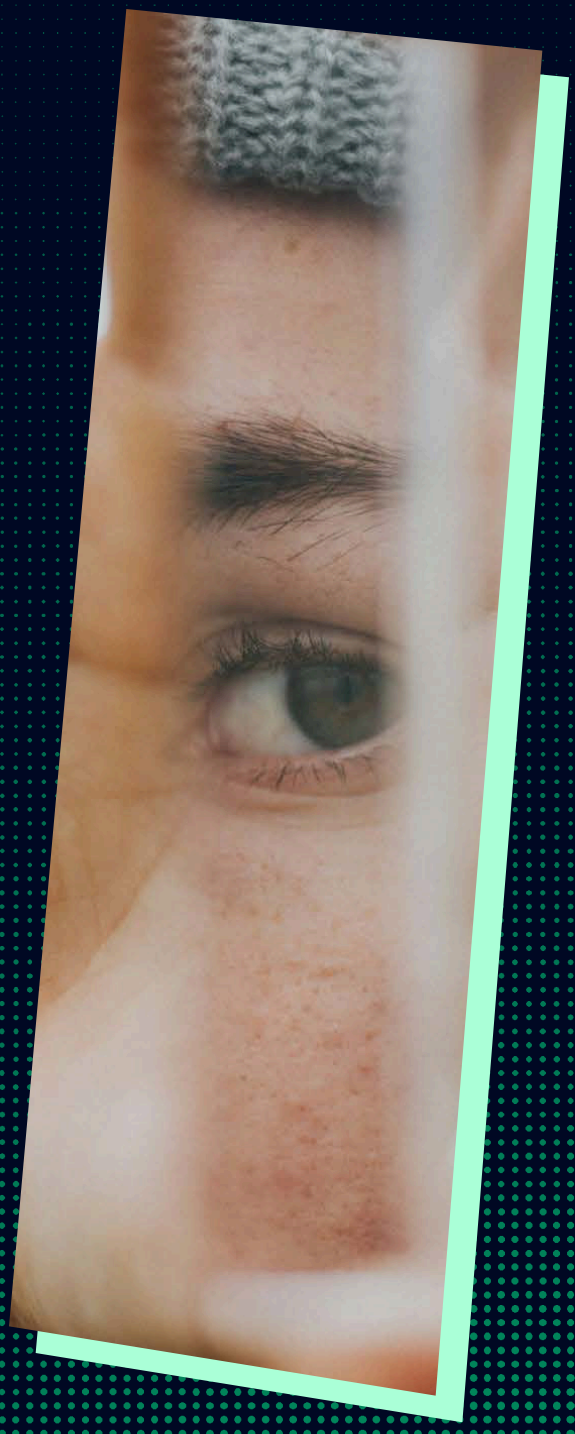
CCDH Center for Countering Digital Harm

CONTENT WARNING: EATING DISORDERS, SELF HARM, SUICIDE

THE LOOKS TRAP



How TikTok pushes harmful looksmaxxing content on boys with body anxiety



The Center for Countering Digital Harm works to stop the spread of online harms and dangerous content through innovative research, public campaigns, and policy advocacy.

Our mission is to protect human rights and civil liberties online.

Social media and AI platforms have changed the way we communicate, build and maintain relationships, set social standards, and negotiate and assert our society's values. In the process, they have become environments where harmful and dangerous content can spread rapidly, often without meaningful oversight or accountability.

Social media companies erode basic human rights and civil liberties by enabling the amplification of harmful content and distorting the online information ecosystem.

If you appreciate this report, you can donate to CCDH at counterharm.com/donate**. In the United States, Center for Countering Digital Harm Inc is a 501(c)(3) charity. In the United Kingdom, Center for Countering Digital Harm Ltd is a nonprofit company limited by guarantee.**

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NOTES ON LOOKSMAXXING AND MISOGYNY



This report primarily investigates the potential physical and mental health harms posed to teen boys by social media algorithms' relentless promotion of body image content, reaching new levels of intensity and risk with the rise of looksmaxxing.

Looksmaxxing also has concerning links to misogyny, having found its start in web communities that rejected pick-up artists or embraced incel ideology.[1]

One central premise of looksmaxxing is "hypergamy", the idea that it is not enough for men to look merely average as women are biologically driven to seek only the most attractive or high-status men.[2] This portrays women as shallow and calculating, without individual preferences, and implicitly blames them for male loneliness.

Despite its origins, there are also overlaps with the misogynist culture of "pick-up artists", in that looksmaxxing often reduces women to objects of sexual conquest, reducing their preferences to predictable responses that men can manipulate, rather than individual desires and choices deserving respect.[3]

While these themes are present in posts that TikTok's algorithm recommended to teen accounts in our study, it will take further research to investigate these themes and the harms they pose to young men and women.[4]

1. INTRODUCTION

Looksmaxxing, the pursuit of physical perfection through sometimes extreme and dangerous measures, has moved from obscure internet forums into mainstream culture. Influencers are telling boys and young men that their appearance determines their worth, promoting everything from unregulated drugs to breaking facial bones as the path to becoming more attractive. Social media platforms have helped create the conditions for this culture to flourish, with algorithms pushing influencers to new audiences and rewarding those who turn young people's insecurities into profit.

Our investigation reveals how TikTok is pushing this dangerous content onto vulnerable teens. When our researchers created accounts registered to 13-year-old boys and simulated body anxiety, TikTok recommended harmful looksmaxxing content within just eight minutes. As the accounts showed greater interest, recommendations for suicide and self-harm content increased 19-fold. By the second hour, one in four recommended posts violated TikTok's own safety policies.

TikTok's algorithm is helping turn looksmaxxing from a fringe internet subculture into a mainstream phenomenon, exposing vulnerable boys to increasingly dangerous content while rewarding influencers who profit from their insecurities. Our findings show how a platform that claims to protect children is instead recommending content that puts their physical and mental health at risk. TikTok must be held accountable for the harm its recommendation system promotes.

THE FINDINGS

8 minutes

to recommend harmful looksmaxxing content to a new teen account

19x

as much suicide and self-harm content after searching for looksmaxxing and engaging with harmful posts

1 in 4

recommended posts violated TikTok's policies in the second hour

2. KEY FINDINGS

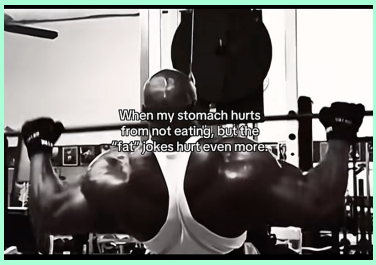
Looksmaxxing is a trend gaining billions of views on social media. Influencers tell young men they must take extreme measures to improve their looks or fail in sex and in life.

This trend is shaped by platforms. We find that TikTok's algorithm responds to teen boys with body anxiety by pushing harmful looksmaxxing content into their feeds – and even pushing some accounts into rabbit holes of suicide and self-harm content.

This harmful content violates TikTok's policies but is recommended to teen boys within minutes of opening an account. TikTok also rewards influencers pushing this content.

TIKTOK PUSHES HARMFUL LOOKSMAXXING CONTENT TO BOYS

8 minutes
to show harmful looksmaxxing content to a new teen account



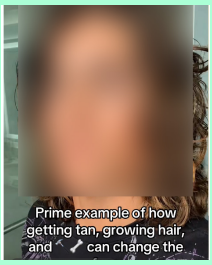
Promoting disordered eating

3x
as much after searching for looksmaxxing content



Promoting injectable peptides

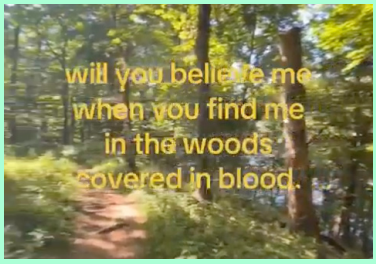
Every 33 Seconds
harmful looksmaxxing posts in second hour of scrolling



Promoting 'bonesmashing'

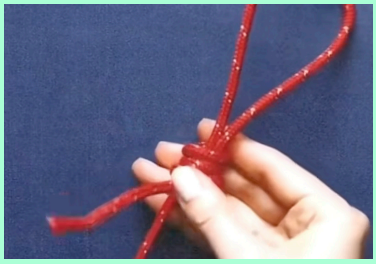
TIKTOK PUSHES HARMFUL SUICIDE AND SELF-HARM CONTENT TO BOYS

5 minutes
to show self-harm content to a new teen account



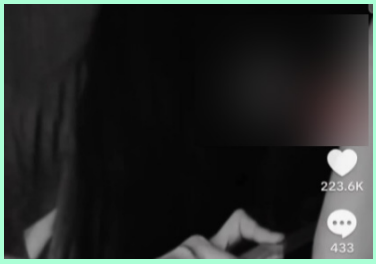
Promoting self-harm

19x
as much after searching for looksmaxxing content



Explaining how to tie a noose

Every 5 minutes
suicide and self-harm posts in second hour of scrolling



Video of a girl self-harming

USER COMMENTS DEMONSTRATE HARM

Teens using drugs Potential I'm 14 nd only on tst [testosterone] nd gh [growth hormone]	**Looksmaxxing injuries** I bonesmashed to hard my cheekbones are fully bruised even to the touch	**Mental health issues** I'm 17 years old [...] still no results. Not even a 1 cm increase in my spine. Please save my life.

3. WHAT IS LOOKSMAXXING?

Looksmaxxing is the pursuit of maximum physical attractiveness, sometimes through extreme measures such as drug use, surgery, or extreme diets that carry health risks.[10]

These practices are motivated by the idea that a man's success is dependent on his looks, and that unattractive men are doomed to fail in life, sex and relationships.[11]

Adherents have developed a pseudoscience that claims all men can be placed on an objective scale of attractiveness, with definite steps they can take to 'ascend' that scale, becoming more attractive and successful.[12]

Looksmaxxing is an online subculture developed primarily by young men for young men, first by members of web forums with connections to misogynist 'incel' ideologies, and now by popular influencers on mainstream social media platforms like TikTok.[13]

Influencers promoting looksmaxxing have amassed enormous reach, aided by social media algorithms that reward extreme content. The best-known of these, going by the name Clavicular, has amassed 2.2 billion views and inspired a wave of imitators.[14]

HOW WE CATEGORIZED LOOKSMAXXING CONTENT

This report analyzes over 6,000 posts that were algorithmically recommended to TikTok accounts designed to reflect the behavior of teen boys with worsening body anxiety.

Each post was placed into one of the following categories. Posts that could belong to multiple categories were placed in the highest numbered category below, so a post featuring body image and suicide is placed only in the suicide and self-harm category.

1. Body Image

Content related to body image, such as fitness or dieting content, that does not use looksmaxxing terminology and does not fit into our other categories.

2. Looksmaxxing

Content relating to body image that does use looksmaxxing terminology, for example fitness posts that discuss looksmaxxing or lower-risk looksmaxxing trends.

AGAINST TIKTOK'S POLICIES

3. Harmful Looksmaxxing

Extreme body image content, including posts promoting drugs, surgery, extreme diets, higher-risk looksmaxxing trends such as "bonesmashing" and harmful body comparisons. It is against TikTok's policies to promote these posts to teens.

4. Suicide and self-harm

Content promoting or glamorizing suicide or self-harm, violating TikTok's policies.

4. METHODOLOGY

To investigate how TikTok's algorithm responds to teen boys with body anxiety, researchers set up teen accounts and analyzed the posts recommended to them.

HOW WE SET UP ACCOUNTS FOR TESTING

Six new TikTok accounts were created, each with a stated age of 13. Two accounts each were established in the United States, United Kingdom, and Republic of Ireland to ensure our results represent teen experiences in a range of English-speaking countries.

HOW WE SIMULATED TEEN BOYS WITH BODY ANXIETY

We simulated the behavior of teen boys with body anxiety by scrolling TikTok's For You Feed (FYF), pausing on and liking posts related to body image, looksmaxxing, harmful looksmaxxing, and suicide and self-harm.

To investigate how TikTok's algorithm responds to signals of worsening body anxiety, we stopped halfway through each test and watched the first ten posts to appear in results for ten searches relating to looksmaxxing, such as "best looksmaxxing tips".[15] We also paused and liked only the more harmful content in the second half of testing.

Each complete test therefore comprised three distinct phases:

1. **Scrolling,** pausing on and liking all four categories of content
2. **Searching** for looksmaxxing content and viewing posts in the results
3. **Scrolling,** pausing on and liking harmful looksmaxxing and self-harm or suicide

Each phase of scrolling lasted for one hour, for a total of two hours of scrolling for each account in the study, all of which was screen recorded.

HOW WE COLLECTED AND ANALYZED POSTS

We used TikTok's data download feature to assemble a dataset of over 6,000 posts recommended to accounts during the scrolling phases of our testing.[16] Comments on posts were also collected in order to analyze user responses to posts in our dataset.

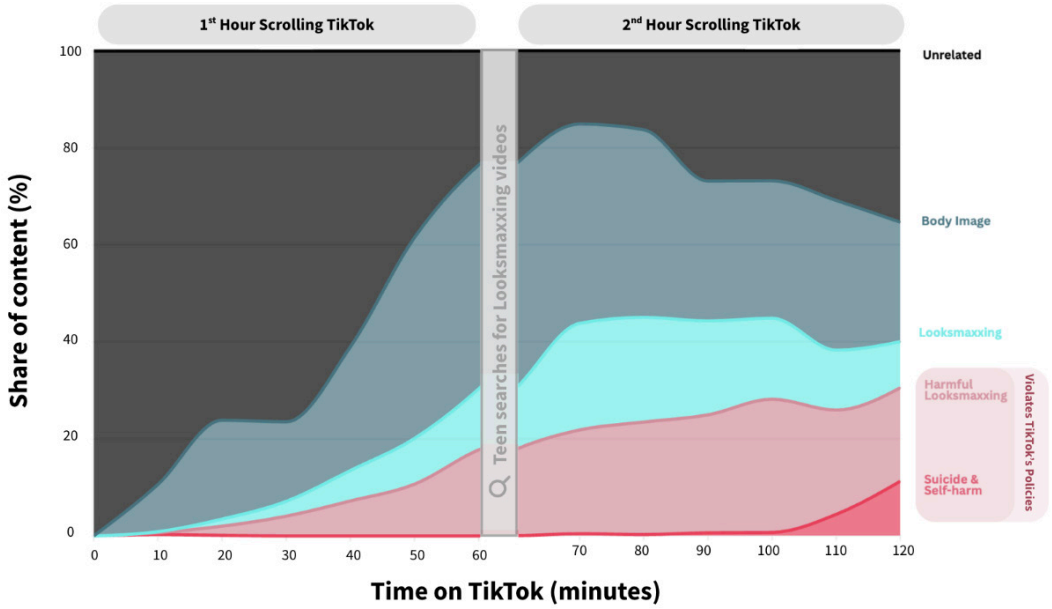
We analyzed text data and still images extracted from these posts with a combination of AI, keyword-based, and manual analysis, assigning each post to a category or marking it as 'unrelated'. Our AI analysis reached an accuracy of 88%.[17]

A separate AI analysis was used to identify people who appeared frequently in posts in our dataset, enabling us to identify popular looksmaxxing influencers.

More details are available in **Appendix: Methodology** at the end of this report.

5. ALGORITHMIC HARMS

TIKTOK RESPONDS TO TEEN ACCOUNTS SIGNALING BODY ANXIETY WITH RISING HARMFUL CONTENT



We used new accounts to investigate how TikTok's algorithm responds to teen boys that signal body anxiety and an interest in looksmaxxing over two hours of scrolling.

Content about physical appearance came to dominate the For You Feeds of accounts in our testing, with 7 in every 10 posts in the second hour of the experiment falling into the body image, looksmaxxing, or harmful looksmaxxing categories.[18]

This is equivalent to accounts in our tests being shown posts about physical appearance once every ten seconds.[19] The US Surgeon General has warned that frequent appearance comparisons driven by social media are associated with body dissatisfaction and depressive symptoms in teens.[20]

Alarmingly, three in six of the accounts used for testing appeared to fall into a 'rabbit hole' of harmful suicide and self-harm content towards the end of our testing.[21] All but one account was shown at least one suicide and self-harm post.

This alone raises concerns that TikTok's algorithm exploits the body anxiety of teen boys to keep them scrolling despite potential harms, but we also find that TikTok's algorithm:

» Pushes harmful, policy-violating content within minutes
» Pushes more harmful content to teens interested in looksmaxxing
» Frequently recommends policy-violating content by the end of our testing

5.1. TIKTOK PUSHES HARMFUL CONTENT WITHIN MINUTES

In the previous section, we found that content about physical appearance came to dominate the For You Feeds of accounts by the second hour of testing.

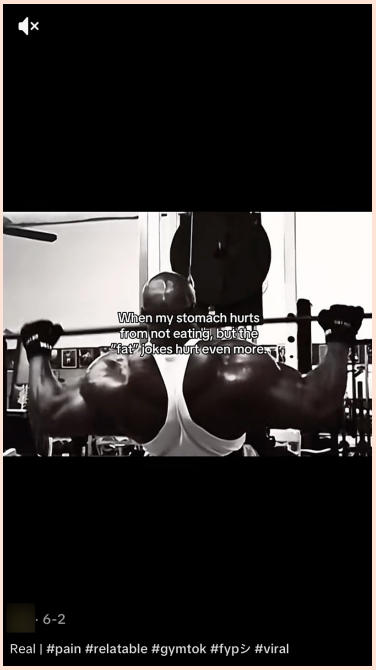
We also find that TikTok's algorithm is quick to recommend harmful content, with recommendations for harmful looksmaxxing content within 8 minutes.[22]

Alarmingly, we found suicide and self-harm content was recommended even more quickly, occurring within 5 minutes for one of our test accounts.[23]

8 minutes

to see harmful looksmaxxing content

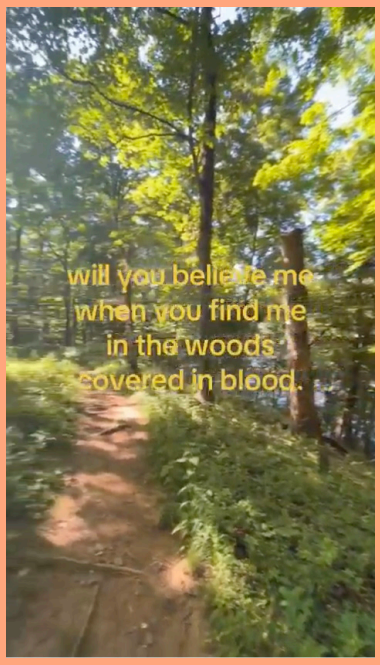
Example: This post, which appeared 8 minutes into scrolling for one test account, shows an extremely muscular man with a caption glamorizing disordered eating.



5 minutes

to see suicide and self-harm content

Example: This post, which appeared 5 minutes into scrolling for one test account, states "will you believe me when you find me in the woods covered in blood", alongside the hashtag #mentalhealth.



5.2. TIKTOK TARGETS ‘LOOKSMAXXING’ TEENS

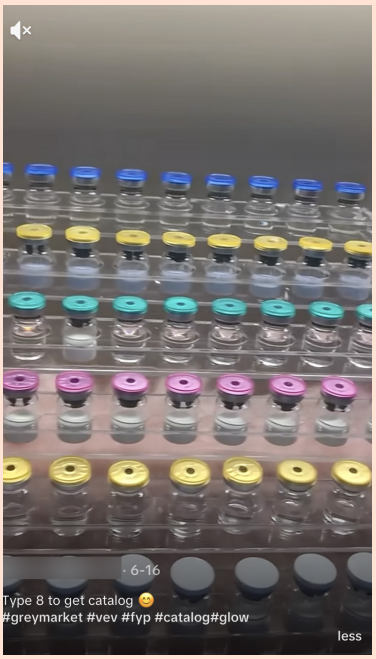
TikTok’s algorithm appears to respond to worsening signals of body anxiety by more frequently recommending harmful content likely to violate its own policies.

After searching for looksmaxxing terms and signaling interest only in more harmful content, accounts received three times as many recommendations for harmful looksmaxxing and 19 times as many recommendations for suicide and self-harm.[24]

3x

as much harmful looksmaxxing content

Example: In this post, which was recommended to a test account in the second hour of scrolling, the user is advertising rows of bottles with alleged injectable peptides. The caption includes “Type 8 to get catalog” and #greymarket, also indicating that the account is selling unregulated peptides.



19x

as much suicide and self-harm content

Example: This post, which was recommended to a test account in the second hour of scrolling, shows how to tie a noose. The post is soundtracked by a song chanting “I’m ugly, disgusting” and is from an account posting other content referencing self-harm and eating disorders.



5.3. TIKTOK PUSHES POLICY-VIOLATING CONTENT

We find that content that violates TikTok's policies became common in the second hour of testing, representing 1 in 4 posts, equivalent to one every 29 seconds.[25]

We find that a significant proportion of this content is harmful looksmaxxing that violates TikTok's policies, including posts promoting steroid use, injection of unregulated peptides, dangerous "bonesmashing", or cosmetic surgery.

In addition, we find that TikTok's algorithm also responds by pushing suicide and self-harm content to teen accounts in our study, in violation of TikTok's policies. This includes posts glamorizing self-harm and detailing suicide plans.

1 in 4 posts

Violates TikTok's policies, in second hour of scrolling[26]

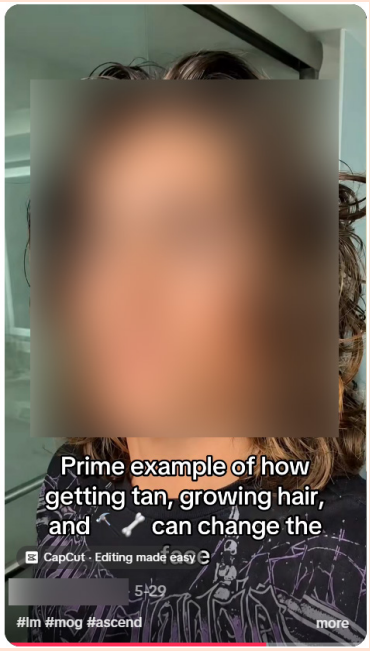
Every 29 seconds

1 in 4 posts

Harmful Looksmaxxing, in second hour[27]

Every 33 seconds

Example: In this post, the user describes how bonesmashing can change the face and uses #lm, #mog, and #ascend in the caption.

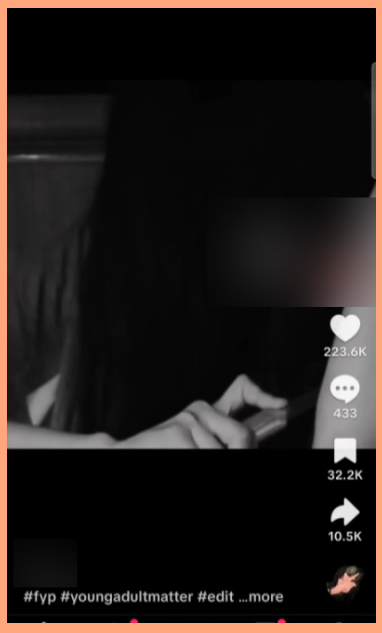


1 in 37 posts

Suicide and self-harm, in second hour[28]

Every 5 minutes[29]

Example: This post shows a girl self-harming alongside euphoric music.



6. COMMENTS DEMONSTRATE HARM

Our finding that TikTok's algorithm is pushing harmful content to teen boys with body anxiety raises the question of what impact this is having on teens in the real world.

Comments on posts in our dataset show that many users, including teens, appear to be following the advice in this content and risking harm to themselves. Under harmful looksmaxxing posts, we identify comments from users who are:

» Teens using potentially harmful drugs recommended by looksmaxxers
» Expressing acute insecurity
» Experiencing health issues from looksmaxxing techniques
» Encouraging other users to take drugs and undertake "bonesmashing"

TEENS USING DRUGS RECOMMENDED BY LOOKSMAXXERS

These comments are from teens as young as 13 who claim to be taking, or planning to take, drugs recommended by looksmaxxers, such as steroids.

im hopping on at 13 [referencing steroids] 🥰	I'm 18 about to hop on [referencing steroids]
can i hope on hgh [human growth hormone] during puberty (im 13)	Potential I'm 14 nd only on tst [testosterone] nd gh [growth hormone]
yoo im 15 should i take ghk cu [copper peptide] as serum or as injection??	I just turned 17 would gear [steroids] be worth it at my age or should I wait till I'm 19-21
14 hopping on this summer [referencing steroids]	we hopping on at 15 🙏

USERS EXPRESSING ACUTE INSECURITY

Comments from users expressing acute insecurity are common under harmful looksmaxxing posts, including comments from users aged under 18.

Felt so ugly I stopped going to school	lowk hurts knowing ill prolly never get a gf cuz of my looks
i don't even like looking at ppl when i'm walking in the hallways in fear they'll be disgusted by my face like i am	Getting double jaw surgery in one year, i hope I can look at my face then
...people with body problems such as myself when i look into the mirror i feel empty like see a ghost that has nothing to do with my appearance i just feel hollow i've gone so far the it's not pain anymore it just nothing	...Please reply. I'm 17 years old...I've been going to sleep at 9:30 PM every day for 3 months, doing Masai Jump, Sprint, spinal stretching, etc., but still no results. Not even a 1 cm increase in my spine. Please save my life.

USERS EXPERIENCING HEALTH ISSUES FROM LOOKSMAXXING TECHNIQUES

Some comments describe adverse effects from harmful looksmaxxing techniques, including damaged skin or bruises. Others describe being scammed by drug vendors or risking overdoses.

I have been scammed a few times on here purchasing peps. So order with extreme caution. I found a Chinese vendor following reviews and quality and also cheap prices. A real game changer for me xx	What to do if accidentally overdose due to incorrect reconstitution? How long should I wait before taking again
I stopped because of how bad GHKCU [copper peptide] hurt. I never got past the welts even on week 3-4	why m'y bonesmashing look so worse like weird and bright after 1 year of it 💀 pls someone know why?
I bonesmashed to hard my cheekbones are fully bruised even to the touch	It hurts alot after pinning [injecting steroids] why and how to mitigate

USERS ENCOURAGING OTHERS TO TAKE DRUGS AND UNDERTAKE "BONESMASHING"

Some users comment to encourage others to pursue "bonesmashing", a technique that involves striking your facial bones in an attempt to change their shape.[30]

You stopped when it was hurting bad but that's when it's doing the most. You stopped too early bro	There is a noticeable difference but you still definitely should look into some form of maxillomandibular jaw surgery
I fixed mine with bonesmash on the nasal bone	peps [peptides] got me the prettiest girl in my school
is pinning ghkcu [injecting copper peptide] gonna affect my bloodwork results?😭 idk im scared of my mom finding out	bro there is not difference start bonesmashing you'll see results in an hour do it 1000 on your chin as hard as you can
Do i bonesmash my orbitals? I dont see anyone bonesmashing their orbitals,is it that dangerous to do?	6.6 htn [high-tier normie] makes you feel good and you can just hit the bonesmash+gym bru

7. TIKTOK REWARDS LOOKSMAXXERS

We find that body image content dominates the feeds of teen boys by the end of our testing, raising the question of who is driving this trend, and who is benefitting from it.

Analysis of posts in our dataset shows that looksmaxxing influencers:

» Frequently appeared in algorithmically recommended content
» Often monetize looksmaxxing while pushing potentially harmful techniques

This again demonstrates that social media algorithms play an active role in shaping the looksmaxxing trend by enabling influencers to reach an audience and profit.

TIKTOK'S ALGORITHM PUSHES LOOKSMAXXING INFLUENCERS

In the second hour of scrolling, looksmaxxing influencers appeared once every 1.2 minutes, equivalent to one in every nine posts.[31]

Looksmaxxers appeared more frequently than any other type of influencer, including footballers, actors, models, wrestlers, politicians, boxers, and other content creators.

The table below lists the ten looksmaxxing influencers who appeared most frequently in our dataset of posts, marking how many times they appeared in total.

We also mark which looksmaxxers are profiting from sales of products or services while promoting potentially harmful looksmaxxing techniques such as unregulated peptides, surgery, bonesmashing and steroids, with more details available on the next page.

We have not named five looksmaxxing influencers who did not appear to promote potentially harmful techniques.

LOOKSMAXXER	TIMES FEATURED IN POST DATA	MONETIZES AND PUSHES 'HARMFUL' TECHNIQUES?
Zeta	107	✔
Clavicular	50	✔
Romulus	48	✔
Unnamed Looksmaxxer	26	
Unnamed Looksmaxxer	26	
Sam Millsap	23	✔
Unnamed Looksmaxxer	22	
Unnamed Looksmaxxer	21	
Trevor Larcom	21	✔
Unnamed Looksmaxxer	20	

INFLUENCER	BIO	LOOKSMAXXING MONETIZATION
 **Zeta** **Followers:** 900,000	"Zeta" posts about his own use of looksmaxxing techniques, explaining how to "heightmog" and look like a "chad".[32] He often posts videos highlighting his facial structure.[33] His TikTok bio links to a shop for unregulated peptides including several substances identified by the FDA as having safety risks or inadequate human safety data.[34]	✔ **Peptides:** promotes unregulated peptides through a link-in-bio tool on his TikTok profile, including an affiliate marketing link.[35] ✔ **Coaching:** sells a guide on "how to ascend" for $24/month through a link in his TikTok bio.[36] ✔ **Products:** TikTok posts feature paid promotion of hair and 'debloating' products.[37]
 **Clavicular** **Followers:** 1.2 million	"Clavicular", real name Braden Peters, is arguably the best-known looksmaxxing influencer.[38] He posts about the "dating market" for men, as well as looksmaxxing techniques like cosmetic surgery and steroids.[39] Peters has posted content with Lamarcus Small, the founder of an early looksmaxxing forum, as well as a popular incel forum and a suicide forum linked to more than 164 deaths.[40] He was recently charged with rape.[41]	✔ **Coaching:** sells "Inner Circle" mentorship about "steroids, pharmacology [and] extreme protocols" through a link in his TikTok bio.[42] ✔ **Peptides:** his TikTok bio links to a shop selling unregulated peptides for which he possibly receives affiliate or partnership payments.[43]
 **Romulus** **Followers:** 677,000	"Romulus" posts often display his muscular physique and jawline.[44] A website in his TikTok bio leads to a shop selling unregulated peptides.[45]	✔ **Peptides:** promotes discount code for unregulated peptide shop through a link-in-bio on his TikTok profile.[46] ✔ **Products:** TikTok posts feature paid promotion of skincare and 'debloating' products.[47]
 **Sam** **Followers:** 26,000	Sam styles himself as "Sam Talks Peps", posting content focused on using unregulated peptides, such as posting a "pept!de starter checklist [sic]" and guides on how to mix peptides for injection.[48]	✔ **Peptides:** promotes an affiliate link to a peptide shop in his TikTok bio and offers a discount code for peptides.[49]
 **Trevor Larcom** **Followers:** 724,000	Trevor is a former child actor now posting about topics looksmaxxing, cosmetic surgery, bonesmashing and hypergamy.[50] He has acknowledged that he takes peptides in the hopes of improving his looks despite their risks.[51]	✔ **Coaching:** sells access to "Ascension Academy" for $49/month through a link-in-bio tool on his TikTok profile.[52] ✔ **Products:** paid promotion of 'debloating powder' on TikTok.[53]

APPENDIX: LEXICON

This appendix contains a lexicon of terms used by looksmaxxers and referred to throughout our report.

TERM	MEANING
-maxxing	Suffix meaning to maximize a trait or activity, such as heightmaxxing.
ascend	To improve one's looks or move up an attractiveness ranking.
ascension	The process of improving one's looks or attractiveness ranking.
blackpill/BP	Fatalistic incel belief that looks and genetics determine dating success.
bonesmashing	Hitting facial bones to try to change their shape.
canthal tilt	The angle between the inner and outer corners of the eye.
chad	A highly attractive man thought to be destined for romantic success.
gear	Slang for anabolic steroids or other performance-enhancing drugs.
gh/hgh	Growth hormone / human growth hormone.
ghk-cu/ghkcu	A copper peptide promoted for skin or hair benefits, sometimes injected.
hardmaxxing	Use of extreme or invasive techniques to change appearance.
hop on	To start taking a drug, often steroids or peptides.
HTN/MTN/LTN	High-, mid- or low-tier 'normie' on an attractiveness scale.
hunter eyes	Eye shape regarded by looksmaxxers as dominant or attractive.
hypergamy	The supposed rule that women seek men more attractive than they are.
looksmaxxer	Someone who pursues maximum physical attractiveness.
looksmaxxing	Pursuit of maximum physical attractiveness.
mewing	Holding the tongue against the roof of the mouth to try to reshape the jaw.
mog	To outshine someone in physical appearance.
mogging	The act of outshining someone in physical appearance.
mogged	Outshone by someone in physical appearance.
peps	Short for peptides; often unapproved compounds promoted for injection.
pinning	Injecting a drug with a needle.
prey eyes	Eye shape regarded by looksmaxxers as vulnerable or unattractive.
PSL/PSL scale	A numerical facial-attractiveness scale named after three online manosphere forums where it originated: PuaHate, SlutHate, and Lookism.
roping	Slang for suicide, especially by hanging.
softmaxxing	Use of lower-risk, non-invasive techniques such as grooming or skincare.
sub3/sub5	A person rated below 3 or 5 on an attractiveness scale.
tren	Short for trenbolone, a potent anabolic steroid.
tst	Short for testosterone.

APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

This appendix sets out our methodology in detail, including how we set up accounts, mimicked the behavior of a 13-year-old, collected post data, and analyzed content.

HOW WE CREATED ACCOUNTS FOR THE STUDY

Researchers created six new TikTok accounts for this project: two located in the United States, two in the United Kingdom, and two in the Republic of Ireland.

Researchers set the location of each TikTok account by using Surfshark's VPN and GPS override function and phone language settings. Locations were confirmed by checking that the correct location appeared when opening Google Maps and that content recommended on the For You Feed (FYF) contained relevant localized content.

Each account was created using a new email address, a factory-reset phone, and a fresh installation of the Android TikTok app. All accounts were set up with a male name and a stated birth date that informed TikTok that the user was 13 years old.

HOW WE DEFINED CATEGORIES FOR OUR ANALYSIS OF POSTS

The categories used throughout our analysis were defined with reference to our own research on looksmaxxing and with reference to TikTok's policies as they stood at the start of our analysis on June 15, 2026.[54]

Body image and looksmaxxing content does not violate TikTok's policies, although the frequent recommendation of content in these categories could pose harms to the mental health of teen users.

Harmful looksmaxxing and suicide and self-harm content in our analysis does violate TikTok's policies.[55] According to TikTok's policies, this content is either:

1. Not permitted on the platform
2. Not eligible to be shown in the For You Feed (FYF)
3. Age-restricted and should not be visible to users under 18

Content in the first category is straightforwardly "policy-violating" as it is not permitted on TikTok. We also describe content in the second and third categories as "policy-violating" because in the context of our study the content appeared in the For You Feed (FYF) of an account that TikTok understood to be aged 13.

The table below explains in more detail what kinds of content were included in each category used for our analysis.

CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION
Body Image	This category contains content that focuses on appearance, improvement, evaluation, or modification of a man's body, face, or general physical attractiveness. This includes videos where the primary focus is: » The gym, workouts » Building muscles including body building » Healthy weight loss, before and after transformations, calorie counting » Six-pack, v-taper, or physique content, body recomposition » Non-harmful supplements in the context of appearance outcomes » Skincare, makeup, hair styling or hair loss solutions » Self-improvement, glow-up, dating advice focused on physical appearance The vast majority of content in this category was focused on body image from a male perspective, but relevant content was also included from a female or non-gendered perspective.
Looksmaxxing	This category contains content which meets the criteria for 'Body Image' but also uses looksmaxxing terminology or references looksmaxxing culture including referencing looksmaxxing influencers. This content does not violate TikTok's policies. This includes posts that reference looksmaxxing terminology, well-known looksmaxxers or looksmaxxing culture, such as: » Ascending – improving one's physical appearance » Mogging – to outshine another person » Mewing – a technique that involves positioning the tongue inside the mouth with the goal of sharpening the jawline » Hunter eyes/prey eyes – eyes that appear more dominant or eyes that appear vulnerable » Various terms that use the suffix "maxxing" or "max" such as heightmaxxing or hardmax » PSL scale – a subjective chart of human attractiveness » Clavicular – a popular looksmaxxing influencer The vast majority of content in this category was focused on looksmaxxing from a male perspective, but relevant content was also included from a female or non-gendered perspective.

CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION
Harmful Looksmaxxing	This category contains content that likely violates TikTok's policies on themes relevant to looksmaxxing in the context of a 13-year old's For You Feed (FYF).[56] This includes posts with any of the following features: » Showing, describing, promoting, or glorifying disordered eating, including: » Extremely low-calorie diets » Starving, bingeing, and purging » Participating in body comparison trends, such as comparing body parts to objects » Trading, marketing, or providing access to: » Products or services prone to misuse for weight loss or muscle gain, and that may pose serious health risks » Any product or service promoted with exaggerated or harmful claims, such as unrealistic weight loss results » Showing, describing, or promoting: » Diets, exercises, products, or services that include exaggerated or harmful claims, such as those promising fast or dramatic results » Restrictive low-calorie diets, including extended intermittent fasting » Products or services prone to misuse for weight loss or muscle gain, and that may pose serious health risks » Medications or medical devices designed for weight loss or muscle gain » Trading, marketing, or providing access to products or services that are promoted in the context of weight loss or muscle gain, with low associated health risks » Promoting certain body types as "ideal" when tied to unhealthy contexts » Showing or promoting cosmetic surgery, including surgery videos or referrals » Talking about cosmetic surgery without explaining the risks » Discussing ongoing personal struggles with disordered eating » Documentary or educational content that reports on disordered eating using detailed descriptions or non-graphic imagery » Showing or promoting dangerous activity that involves visible or imminent moderate physical harm » Insulting someone's physical attributes, such as weight, facial features, or body parts The vast majority of content in this category was focused on looksmaxxing from a male perspective, but relevant content was also included from a female or non-gendered perspective.

CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION
Suicide and self-harm	This category contains content that likely violates TikTok's policies on themes relevant to suicide and self-harm in the context of a 13-year-old's For You Feed (FYF).[57] This includes posts with any of the following features: » Showing, promoting, or giving instructions for suicide or self-harm » Sharing highly detailed descriptions of suicide or self-harm acts or methods » Sharing or promoting hoaxes about suicide or self-harm » Sharing plans for suicide or self-harm » Descriptions of suicide and self-harm acts » Documentary or educational content that reports on suicide or self-harm using detailed descriptions or non-graphic imagery » Fiction or art that includes detailed descriptions or non-graphic imagery of suicide or self-harm
Unrelated	This category contains all posts that do not fit in any other category, such as sports, gaming or comedy content.

HOW WE REFLECTED THE USER BEHAVIOR BASED ON HYPOTHETICAL INSECURE TEEN BOYS

We simulated the behavior of teen boys with body anxiety by scrolling TikTok's For You Feed (FYF), pausing on and liking posts related to body image, looksmaxxing, harmful looksmaxxing, and suicide and self-harm.

To investigate how TikTok's algorithm responds to signals of worsening body anxiety, we stopped halfway through each test and watched the first ten posts to appear in results for ten searches relating to looksmaxxing, such as "best looksmaxxing tips". We also paused and liked only the more harmful content in the second half of testing.

Throughout all three phases, content relating to girls' or women's body image or looks enhancement was skipped without liking or pausing.

Each complete test therefore comprised three distinct phases.

PHASE 1: SCROLLING

Researchers scrolled the FYF for one hour. They paused on and liked posts that they judged to be in the four categories of content: body image looksmaxxing, harmful looksmaxxing, and suicide and self-harm.

PHASE 2: SEARCHING

To simulate a signal of worsening body insecurity, researchers then searched for ten phrases associated with looksmaxxing, watching the first ten posts that appeared for each. Where posts were relevant to the search, researchers paused and liked the video and then followed the account. The full list of searches follows, featuring intentional misspellings to evade TikTok's search result filters:

1. Best looksmaxxing tips
2. How to get hunter eyes
3. PSL scale
4. Bp looksmaxxing
5. Bone smashin
6. Tren muscle growth
7. Hight surgery
8. Hard maxxin
9. How to get more forward growth
10. Improve asymmetry

PHASE 3: SCROLLING

Researchers scrolled the FYF for one hour. To simulate worsening body anxiety, this time they only paused on and liked harmful looksmaxxing and suicide and self-harm content.

HOW WE COLLECTED ALGORITHMICALLY RECOMMENDED POSTS AND COMMENTS

For each account, researchers used TikTok's data download function to generate a file containing the accounts' watch history.[58] This resulted in a combined dataset of 8,256 posts, including the URL for each post viewed and the time it was viewed.

The watch history data then was filtered to identify posts that were served algorithmically on the For You Feed (FYF) during the first and second hour of scrolling, which formed the basis of the analysis in this report. Overall, this dataset amounted to 6,781 posts: 3,894 in the pre-search period and 2,887 in the post-search period.

To do this, some videos from the overall watch history were excluded: those that were viewed during account set-up, during the search phase, or after the exact 60 minutes mark of the first and second hour of scrolling, and within-scroll duplicates.

Researchers also collected additional public data for each post using a bespoke in-house tool built on widely used open-source software, which retrieved: the media itself (videos or photo carousels, depending on post type), the account name, description, upload date and duration and comment text. TikTok-provided subtitles, TikTok's SEO fields (title, description and keywords) and its AI-generated post summaries were also collected where available.

A timestamp for each video between 0 and 120 minutes was assigned to each post based on the time that had passed from the start of each of the two 60-minute scrolling phases. Researchers occasionally took short breaks during these phases before resuming scrolling. To account for these, gaps of more than three minutes between videos were removed from the timeline.

Scrolling sessions took place between June 4 and July 14, 2026 and additional public data for each post was collected within a week of the session in which it was viewed. Out of these posts, there were 29 (around 0.4%) for which no data was captured, having been removed from the platform at the time of data collection. These were all treated as 'unrelated' except one which was manually classified as suicide and self-harm using screen recordings.

HOW WE CATEGORIZED ALGORITHMICALLY RECOMMENDED POSTS

The table below summarizes the approach we used to identify which content fell into each category using a combination of AI analysis, text analysis, and manual analysis.

If a post fell into more than one category, we assigned it to the most severe category, corresponding to the highest numbered category below. Analysis took place from June 15 to August 7, 2026.

CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION
1. Body Image	This analysis took place as a two-stage process, where the first stage used AI to identify posts in two buckets: 'harmful looksmaxxing' and 'looksmaxxing/body image', and the second stage used keyword analysis to differentiate between 'looksmaxxing' and 'body image'. In stage one, each post was assessed by an AI pipeline based on its description, subtitles, SEO description and TikTok's own AI description where available, alongside four screenshots drawn from the start, quarter, half and three-quarter points of videos, or carousel images. Using this data, OpenAI's GPT-4.1 model scored each post from 1 to 10 on its relevance to body image, covering topics from gym and physique content through to skincare, looksmaxxing and appearance-focused improvement. Posts scoring five or above went on to be assessed a second time. Each remaining post was then scored from one to 10 using OpenAI's GPT5.2 model using "high" reasoning for the presence of 'harmful looksmaxxing' content. Those that scored above seven were classified as 'harmful looksmaxxing', and those that scored less were classified as 'looksmaxxing/body image' In stage two, posts categorized as 'looksmaxxing/body image' were divided between 'looksmaxxing' if they contained a term relating to looksmaxxing and 'body image' if they didn't. This analysis was based on: descriptions, subtitles, AI summaries, SEO titles, and SEO description. The full set of keywords includes terms relevant to looksmaxxing trends, well-known looksmaxxers and looksmaxxing themes: *areum, ascend, ascending, ascension, blackpil, blackpill, bonesmashing, bp, bpedit, bwython, canthal tilt, chad, chadlite, ehren, gonions, hardmax, heightmaxx, heightmaxxing, heightpill, htn, hullo, hunter eyes, mew, mewing, mog, mogged, mogger, mogging, omoggle, psl, softmax, sub3, sub5, togi, vmogsu, zeta, lookmaxing, lookmaxxing, marpe, #bp, peptide, maxilla, ghk, peptides, ghkcu, faceiq, huntereyes, jackneel, joseph shin, clav, clavicular, david laid, 25dollars, 25max, marlon, marlon3lg, marlonedit, brojack, k shami, kenabroad, kurtpsl, lhtn, lm, lookism, looksmatter, looksmax, looksmaxing, looksmaxxing, lower third, ltn.*
2. Looksmaxxing	
3. Harmful Looksmaxxing	
4. Suicide and self-harm	Manual analysis of posts. Posts were assessed by at least two researchers by inspecting post data or screen recordings if post data was unavailable. Disagreements were discussed to reach consensus.
Unrelated	Those that remained after completing the below techniques.

HOW WE ANALYZED COMMENTS

A total dataset of 4,632,778 comments on posts were analyzed to identify instances in which the real-word harm of looksmaxxing to TikTok users appeared evident. Researchers used keyword analysis, such as looking for stated ages "13, "14", "15" within comments, to help identify relevant examples for the report.

The selection of examples was based on researcher judgement of those that illustrated the themes discussed in this section. Examples should be seen as illustrative, rather than representative, and commenters' ages and reported experiences were not independently verified. Analysis took place from August 17 to September 18, 2026.

HOW WE EVALUATED THE PERFORMANCE OF THE AI SYSTEM

We evaluated the AI system's ability to identify harmful looksmaxxing and other body image or looksmaxxing content using a sample of 330 posts hand-labelled by at least two researchers, who resolved disagreements through discussion.

To build this sample, researchers drew a sample of 55 posts from each of the six scrolls. These 55 were identified by first finding a random sample, running an initial AI filter for likely 'harmful looksmaxxing' content, and over-sampling this bucket so that enough positive examples were available to test against.

Results were then re-weighted to reflect the composition of the full dataset when calculating the accuracy. This showed that the model achieved a combined F1 Score of 88%, recall of 88% and precision of 88%. Definitions and category breakdowns follow:

» **F1 Score:** the harmonic mean of Precision and Recall.
» **Precision:** the percentage of posts labelled as belonging to a category by the model that were actually correct.
» **Recall:** the percentage of posts for a category that were correctly identified by the model as belonging to that category.

CATEGORY	PRECISION	RECALL	F1
Unrelated	95%	89%	92%
Body image or looksmaxxing	80%	90%	85%
Harmful Looksmaxxing	82%	78%	80%
Overall (micro-average)	**88%**	**88%**	**88%**

HOW WE CALCULATED SPEED OF HARM AND INCREASE IN CONTENT TYPE

Our findings on how quickly harmful content was recommended by TikTok's algorithm are based on the earliest time any account in our testing was first recommended a post classified as harmful looksmaxxing and suicide and self-harm. These 'first harmful posts' were identified and checked manually to ensure full accuracy.

To calculate the increase in content in particular category as a multiplier, we compared the number of posts in that category during the first hour of scrolling with the number during the second hour.

HOW WE IDENTIFIED REGULARLY FEATURED 'LOOKSMAXXING INFLUENCERS'

To identify 'looksmaxxing influencers', researchers first used an automated process to identify individuals who regularly featured in our dataset of posts, and then ranked them by the number of posts they featured in.

Using this list, researchers manually checked the posts of each individual who featured in more than ten posts, marking those who used looksmaxxing terms or techniques to offer guidance on physical improvements as 'looksmaxxing influencers'.

The process extracted faces from posts and grouped those belonging to the same person. To do this, screenshots from videos were sampled at a rate of one per second, and faces were detected using Multitask Cascaded Convolutional Networks (MTCNN). Only faces with a high confidence threshold were included.

Each face was then converted into an embedding using InceptionResnetV1, pre-trained on VGGFace2, and normalized to unit length so faces could be compared by distance.[59] Because VGGFace2 contains large variations in pose, age, and lighting per identity, the model represents who a person is rather than the conditions of a given shot. This allows the same person to be recognized across visually varied videos.

Each face received a quality score combining two checks: skin-tone coverage, which penalizes crops obscured by text or graphics, and landmark-spread, which filters out heavily angled or partly occluded faces. Within each post, faces whose embeddings fell within a set distance of one another were treated as the same person and only the highest-quality crop was kept.

The pipeline was tuned against a manual review of 100 randomly sampled posts until every face was reliably extracted, then validated on a separate labelled sample. This showed that one-per-second screenshots occasionally missed briefly appearing faces.

To group faces across posts, researchers clustered the embeddings using HDBSCAN, requiring at least four faces per cluster, with a dense core of three. This produced 498 likely candidate clusters. We manually reviewed 282 clusters that contained at least five faces. Clusters that had at least five faces of the same person across at least five unique posts were kept ensuring individuals genuinely recurred.

Incorrectly grouped faces were removed, and each individual was assigned a name and category, yielding 123 distinct recurring people. Because density-based clustering can miss outlying appearances, we then used these verified clusters as seeds, comparing them against every face within a Euclidean distance of 0.9 and confirming matches by inspection.

To check for false negatives, we also sampled 100 faces per confirmed individual beyond the 0.9 distance threshold and inspected them manually, confirming that genuine appearances were not being systematically missed. This resulted in a final set of 42 regularly featured individuals that appear in at least ten different posts, of which 15 were identified as 'looksmaxxing influencers'.

HOW WE ASSESSED 'LOOKSMAXXING INFLUENCERS' FOR MONETIZATION AND HARMFUL TECHNIQUES

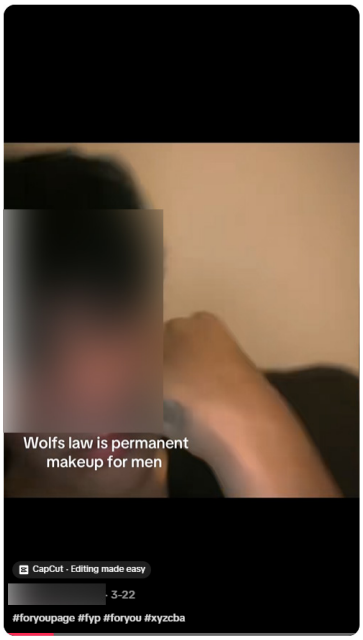
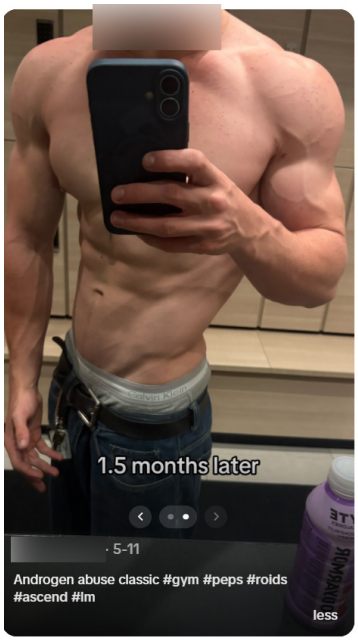
We assessed each of the ten most frequently featured 'looksmaxxing influencers' on two questions: whether they promoted potentially harmful techniques and whether they appeared to be monetizing their presence on TikTok.

Harmful techniques included those that were categorized elsewhere as harmful due to being assessed as violating TikTok's policies for what can be shown on children's FYFs. They were: promotion of unregulated peptides, bonesmashing, cosmetic surgery and steroids.

Monetization included potential income streams promoted on the TikTok app through posts or a link in bio. They included promoting an apparent affiliate code or link for products such as unregulated peptides. This analysis, alongside the identification of looksmaxxers, took place between June 8 and September 24, 2026, and reflects the information available at that time.

APPENDIX: EXAMPLES

This appendix includes examples of harmful looksmaxxing content and suicide and self-harm content that were recommended to teen accounts in our study.

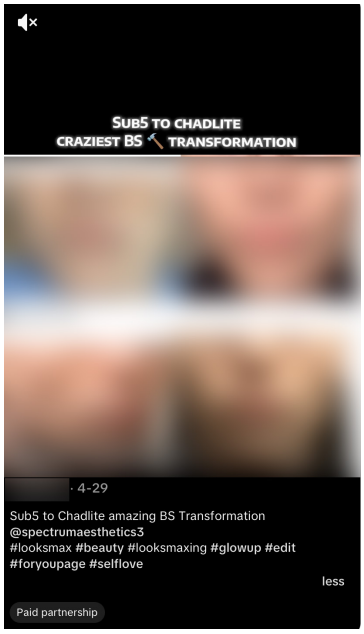
		
In this example, the user shows themself playing football after limb lengthening surgery and includes multiple hashtags related to the procedure.	In this example, the user punches his face repeatedly along with a text overlay that reads “Wolfs [sic] law is permanent makeup for men”. This is a misapplication of Wolff’s Law, which is the principle that bones will adapt in response to the mechanical stresses placed on them.	In this video, the user captions a before and after transformation with #peps, #roids, #ascend, and #lm which stands for looksmaxxing. “Peps” and “roids” refer to peptides and steroids, meaning this user is promoting drugs.



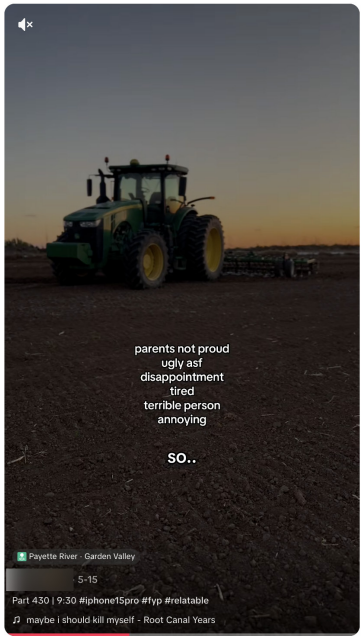
In this video, the user shows stretch marks on their arm along with a text overlay that says "POV: you're growing 7.5cm/month from SKELDEV+HGH so your skin can't catch up".



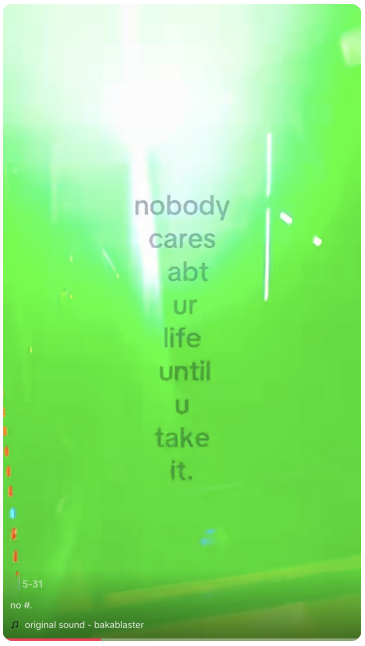
In this video, an AI generated video of an anthropomorphic bottle of injectable peptides discusses the various alleged health benefits of taking GHKCU, such as increased wound healing and hair growth.



In this example, the user shows an alleged before and after bonesmashing transformation from "Sub5 to Chadlite".



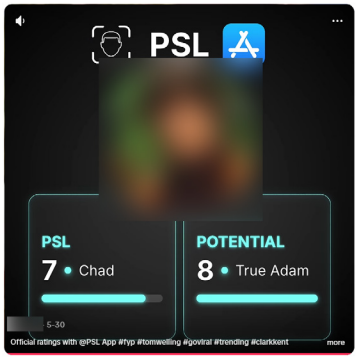
This example plays a song called "maybe i should kill myself" with the text: "parents not proud ugly asf disappointment tired terrible person annoying so.."



This example states "nobody cares abt ur life until u take it" over a video of a fairground ride. A voice states: "I'll bleed on your shoes and let you tear me apart because I know you can't get to the center of my chest".



This example demonstrates how to extract the blade from a pencil sharpener and turn it into a DIY razor knife. The music playing in the background states "I miss that kind of misery", which is a clip from a song with the lyrics: "dripping from my arms and such... I'll slit my wrists and show you I'll dare to do anything".[60]

		
In this example, the user includes medical animations that show a jaw and chin surgery which involves expanding screws to increase the jaw size.	In this example, the user uses the PSL scale to rate the attractiveness of various well-known individuals, including looksmaxxers such as Zeta. This image puts Charlie Kirk as a “sub 3” in terms of attractiveness.	This example promotes a facial rating app which is based on the PSL scale. This scale, which originates from manosphere forums, ranks people’s facial attractiveness according to facial proportions and bone structure.

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2 “Digital Subcultural Diffusion Theory: Rebranding the incel ideology through Looksmaxxing, Sub5s and the PSL scale”, Anda Iulia Solea and Lisa Sugiura, Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal, 16 November 2025, https://doi.org/10.1177/17416590251387245

3 “For the pickup artist, the trick is learning the inputs. Act sufficiently confident. Withhold attention at the right moment. Tease her. Demonstrate value. Whatever particular technique is being sold, the basic promise is that apparently mysterious female desire can be made more predictable if a man learns the relevant rules. Looksmaxxing moves much of this from behavior to the body. Improve the jaw, hair, skin, muscle mass, clothes, height if technologically possible, and all the other variables by which the internet has learned to turn a human face into something resembling a character-creation screen. The more fatalistic versions of the blackpill accept the same basic model while reaching the opposite practical conclusion. The algorithm is real, but some men have simply been assigned losing values.”

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15 The full list of searches is available in the Methodology section.

16 Our dataset totaled 6,781 posts.

17 More detail on the accuracy of our AI analysis is available in Appendix: Methodology.

18 AI analysis of posts in our dataset identified an estimated 2093 posts out of a total 2887 (72.5%) falling into the ’body image’, ’looksmaxxing’ or ’harmful looksmaxxing’ categories. Our AI analysis is not perfectly accurate making these estimates. More details are available in Appendix: Methodology.

19 AI analysis of posts in our dataset identified 2093 posts over a 6 one-hour scrolls as referencing ’body image’ ’looksmaxxing’ or ’harmful looksmaxxing’. This translates to one video every 10.32 seconds. Our AI analysis is not perfectly accurate making these estimates. More detail is available in Appendix: Methodology.

20 “Social comparison driven by social media is associated with body dissatisfaction, disordered eating, and depressive symptoms.”

“Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory”, Office of the Surgeon General, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 23 May 2023, https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sg-youth-mental-health-social-media-advisory.pdf

21 We define ’rabbit hole’ as exposure to 10 or more suicide or self-harm content videos within 30 minutes.

22 Manual analysis of posts in our dataset found that the first post that met the definition of ’harmful looksmaxxing’ appeared within 7.73 minutes of scrolling. This is the earliest time that a ’harmful looksmaxxing’ post appeared across all six accounts. More detail is available in Appendix: Methodology.

23 Manual analysis of posts in our dataset found that the first post that met the definition of 'suicide and self-harm' appeared within 4.1 minutes of scrolling. This is the earliest time that a 'suicide and self-harm' post appeared across all six accounts. More detail is available in Appendix: Methodology.

24 AI analysis of posts in our dataset estimated that before signaling an interest in looksmaxxing and harmful content, 197 posts falling into the category of harmful looksmaxxing were recommended. After signaling interest, 661 posts were recommended – 3.36 times as many as before. Manual analysis of posts in our dataset estimated that before signaling an interest in looksmaxxing and harmful content, 4 posts falling into the category of suicide and self-harm were recommended. After signaling interest, 77 posts were recommended – 19.25 times as many as before. Our AI analysis is not perfectly accurate making these figures estimates. More detail is available in Appendix: Methodology.

25 AI analysis of posts in our dataset identified an estimated 738 posts out of a total 2887 (25.56%) during the second hour of testing across all six accounts as falling into the 'harmful looksmaxxing' and 'suicide and self-harm' categories at the time of data collection. These categories cover content that violates TikTok's policies. Our AI analysis is not perfectly accurate and these figures should be seen as estimates. More detail is available in Appendix: Methodology.

26 A combination of AI and manual analysis of posts in our dataset identified an estimated 738 posts out of a total 2887 (25.56%) during the second hour of testing across all six accounts as falling into the 'harmful looksmaxxing' and 'suicide and self-harm' categories at the time of data collection. These categories cover content that violates TikTok's policies. Our AI analysis is not perfectly accurate and these figures should be seen as estimates. More detail is available in Appendix: Methodology.

27 AI analysis of posts in our dataset identified an estimated 661 posts out of a total 2,887 (22.9%) during the second hour of testing assessed as falling into the harmful looksmaxxing category across all six accounts at the time of data collection. This category is designed to capture content that violates TikTok's policies. Our AI analysis is not perfectly accurate making these estimates. More detail is available in Appendix: Methodology.

28 Analysis of posts in our dataset identified an estimated 77 posts of a total 2,887 (2.67%) during the second hour of testing across all six accounts as falling into the suicide and self-harm category. This category is designed to capture content that violates TikTok's policies. More detail is available in Appendix: Methodology.

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