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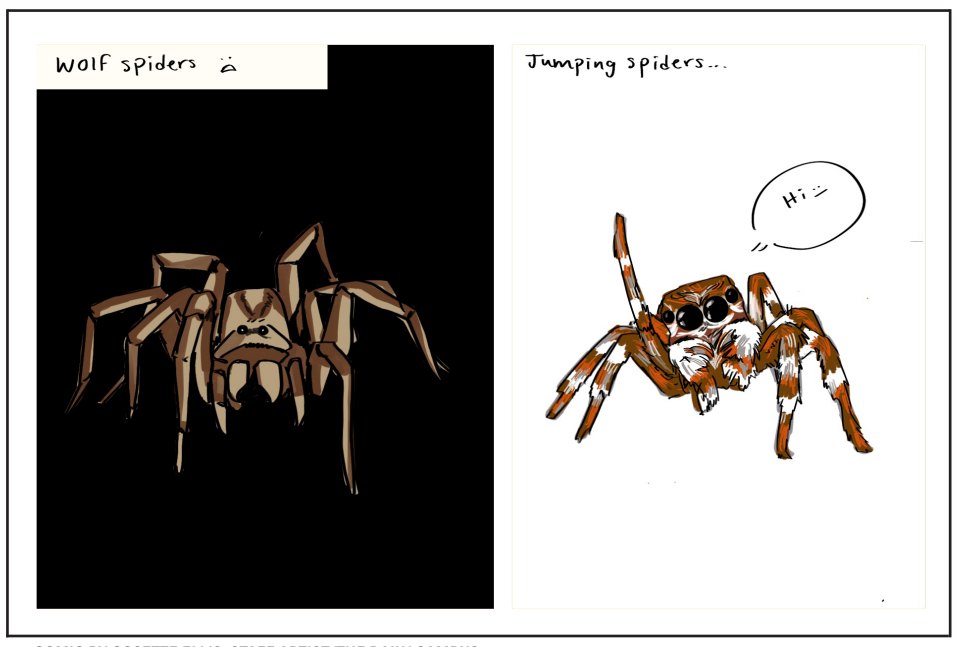

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'LOOKSMAXXING' AND ITS REVEALING SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

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Since the fall of 2025, an eyebrow-raising new trend known as "looksmaxxing" has been making its way into mainstream internet culture, promoting the practice of radical physical self-improvement to maximize one's looks, hence the name. This trend is championed by sensationalist, looks-obsessed internet personalities, such as Clavicular, a TikToker and streamer who has been a guest on The Michael Knowles Show and referenced by SNL.

Clavicular, and "looksmaxxers" generally, have garnered significant criticism for condoning steroids, synthetic peptides and plastic surgery as ways to become more attractive, but just as concerning is the way this trend presents its philosophical perspectives on the world as cold, hard truth. Looksmaxxing is not simply a recommendation that we start putting more effort into our appearances; at the center of this movement is an esoteric ideology that claims physical appearance is the single strongest predictor of success in life. The only logical conclusion, according to the purveyors of this ideology, is to prioritize physical improvement above all else.


Photos of Clavicular, a social media influencer who supports "looksmaxxing." Looksmaxxing is a controversial trend focused on making extreme physical changes in order to "maximize" one's physical appearance. PHOTO COURTESY OF @CLAVICULAR0 ON INSTAGRAM.

Myriad dangers lurk in this trend. For one thing, looksmaxxing will only intensify the self-image issues already plaguing young adults. Audiences of looksmaxxing content are not only urged to compare themselves to others, but to take extreme measures to improve their looks. And on an ideological and philosophical level, additional, more subtle damage is being done. Looksmaxxing presents not just questionable advice but a dangerous mental map of the world, and I believe it's important to seriously challenge the assumptions and conclusions it carries.

It's no secret that looks are highly valued in our society. Using longitudinal data, Scholz and Sicinski (2015) found "a durable, persistent, and economically large correlation between the facial attractiveness of men ... and their earnings in their mid-30s and their early 50s." Other articles have found similar evidence, supporting the notion that our society does indeed harbor superficial attitudes. But does this mean that attractiveness matters more than any other factor? Or that it should be everyone's top priority? At first glance, the success of figures like Clavicular might suggest that there is undeniable truth in the claim that looks matter above all else, and this is likely just the conclusion many of his audience members are reaching. Clavicular has reached hundreds of thousands of followers on multiple social media accounts and gained success along with notoriety very rapidly.

To his fans, Clavicular's fame may be the prime example of the importance of looks in one's life, but there are other ways to explain it, as well as the sudden prominence of looksmaxxing generally. This movement has proliferated on platforms entirely dedicated to the spreading of visual information and visual sensation. One glance at the American red carpet will clue anyone into the fact that attractiveness is almost mandatory in our entertainment industry. Looks are certainly important in spaces such as these, but that's precisely why looksmaxxing as a phenomenon exists and remains mainly in platforms where visual appeal is especially rewarded. Using its online prominence as evidence for a society-spanning maxim is disingenuous.

Faulty though the assumptions in looksmaxxing ideology are, I find the conclusions it reaches the most deserving of scrutiny. If looks are what is most highly valued by others, why would it ever follow that we should value them most highly ourselves? This movement is spreading an endorsement of total conformity and uniformity, under the pretense of empowering its audience with niche secrets about the way things truly are. Looksmaxxing reckons with the reality of a superficial society, and rather than seeking change, it urges the utter reinforcement of this trend for personal benefit.

These approaches make all the more sense when we consider the origins of looks obsession: in involuntary celibate or "incel" culture. Looksmaxxing originated from within online forums for men unable to find partners, bringing hope of a fix to romantic frustration. From its inception to now, the concept of looksmaxxing has always been not an antidote to superficiality or the insecurities it breeds, but an embrace of them. This is not a movement that reveals a deep secret about the world, nor is it a movement of empowerment or enlightenment, all of which it purports to be. It is rather an operation of surrender to one's own insecurities.

Ultimately, this phenomenon provides us with a lesson about the folly of internalizing societal flaws as individual ones. It is important to recognize openly unwritten societal values such as attractiveness, but it is as important not to internalize these values, else they become defining to our worldviews. Identifying these issues should rather motivate us to be truer to and more appreciative of ourselves.

"I Like Movies" and subverting tropes about growth

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The independent Canadian film "I Like Movies" follows a high school cinephile, Lawrence, played by Isaiah Lehtinen, as he deals with graduating high school and planning his future around wanting to be a filmmaker. This film presents itself as any other indie movie made by a cinephile, using the main character as a self-insert, making the audience of fellow cinephiles feel special by seeing a main character they relate to. However, the film calls out his narcissistic tendencies, self-pity and general selfishness, holds the main character accountable and treats him as though he isn't the main character. This unravels one of arguably the worst features of most films; the very act of centering films around one person deemed more special and important than the other characters can inadvertently encourage selfishness in real life. It can easily give audiences the impression that this is a normal approach to the world outside of films.

We see this selfishness in Lawrence. As a young man obsessed with films, he spends more time watching movies than he does with other people. This harms him and those around him because he seems to have developed a film-esque approach to life, where he views himself as a main character — someone more interesting, special and important than those around him. This is seen clearly with his approach to his best friend Matt, whom he claims is a "placeholder" as Lawrence plans to go to NYU and make all new friends. Similarly, he treats his mother as though she has no life outside of him and his needs, insisting she doesn't mind picking him up from work at two in the morning, because it "makes her feel useful."

Just about everyone in his life allows his behavior to persist, albeit with some limited pushback, until he gets a job at his local video rental store. His boss, Alana, played by Romina D'Ugo, finally holds him accountable. Alana works as an antithesis to Lawrence. She claims to hate movies; meanwhile he's constantly raving about his love for films. Alana is more experienced in the film industry than he is, and her experience is one of being taken advantage of, betrayed and hurt, so much so that her love for films and acting was destroyed. She eventually yells at Lawrence for being as selfish as he is, being brutally honest with him about his behavior and reality. She tells him that the world is made for people like him and he acts like he has it so hard, while someone like her, who had actual promise and talent, is limited because she's a woman. This scene is a microcosm for what makes this film special in that even in her rage and relatively one-sided take on Lawrence, the viewer is made to understand that ultimately there's nuance. It's true that Lawrence wants to wallow in self-pity and excuse his poor behavior and he will have an easier time in the film industry than Alana. At the same time, her limiting his entire existence and all of his feelings to the privilege he has is unfair, as he struggles in other areas, which shouldn't be ignored or erased.


A scene from 'I Like Movies' a Canadian independent film released in 2022. The film follows a high school cinephile.
PHOTO COURTESY OF IMDB

Ultimately, the film is very reasonable about all of its characters. Lawrence and his mom reconcile, focusing on their love despite their many arguments. Lawrence and Matt do not magically become best friends again just because Lawrence apologized (which would have told the audience that a main character can get away with being a jerk as long as they're sorry). Lawrence doesn't end up getting into NYU and he doesn't prove he's better than everybody else.

Lawrence's progress is apparent by the very end of the film, when he unintentionally meets with Alana again and asks for her advice. He has a conversation with her that isn't about him. In the final scene, he's at university and he asks others questions about them, as opposed to gearing conversations only towards himself and his interests. This is crucial for somebody who had been essentially obsessed with himself for most of the film, showing no care or interest in anyone else, just pitying himself for feeling alone.

Lawrence's development is important because it's reminding audiences to do the same, rather than continuing a cycle of film watchers seeing deeply flawed main characters get what they want. Lawrence doesn't have a happy ending because he suddenly becomes perfect. He isn't allowed to continue acting as though he's better than everyone else. Instead, viewers get the message to engage in the world and with others in a new way.