CULTURE

# How ‘looksmaxxing’ became a powerful punchline

// BY PETER BURNS

Are you ready to ascend, bro? Are you prepared to take any means necessary to maximize your sexual market value and optimize your canthal tilt and bizygomatic width? If not, you will wither.

This is the language of “looksmaxxing,” the internet movement that preaches an objective standard of physical beauty for men and offers strategies to achieve it, many of which are strange and clearly unhealthy.

The recent cultural proliferation of “looksmaxxing” did not come out of nowhere. It is the convergence of internet culture, online memes and the ever-present danger of toxic masculinity. At its core lies a recognizable, yet questionable, anxiety: Where can young men locate objective standards in a world that they perceive to be discounting them in all respects?

Stable and infallible criteria for success and self-worth become paramount, especially within incel culture and the manosphere — a space dedicated to the narrative of male victimhood at the hands of women who do not want to go out with them. Looksmaxxing offers a way out, a way to ascend and embody the ultimate form of beauty.

Internet “gym bro” culture is woven into the fabric of looksmaxxing. I want to preface my argument by saying that there are many positive aspects of gym culture that I celebrate and believe others should, too, but in this current moment, it is impossible and dangerous to ignore the vices. The “gym bro” ecosystem plagues social media with heavy lifts and sculpted physiques that align closely with traditional visions of masculinity.

The message is consistent: You have the power to transform your body and look like these people, but you fail to make it a reality. What could be empowerment to make a change is instead antagonism. To become something that you are not, you must recognize that you are less than — worse than — the ideal.

In this way, self-optimization has been politicized. Physical insecurity is a proxy for broader grievances propagated by the manosphere. Feminism and shifting gender norms allegedly eroded the natural advantages of the male sex, and so, by investing in male physical appearance, adherents to looksmaxxing reclaim a supposedly lost glory. This language of “ascending” and “maxxing” is a therapeutic fantasy.

Kick streamer and internet personality Clavicular, whose real name is Braden Peterson, is responsible for the recent attention to looksmaxxing. According to an article by Joseph Bernstein in The New York Times, Peterson uses drugs, cosmetic surgery and hormone therapy to optimize the features that he and other looksmaxxers value. A viral tweet posted by the account @chromheart600 also helped catalyze the looksmaxxing movement, using language that can only be described as opaque nonsense: “jestergooning,” “foids,” “chadfishing,” “SMV.” Packed into this comical jargon is a dog whistle to members of an in-group coded by shared ideology.

That very nonsense drives the movement’s virality because it is so overtly ridiculous. Like the “6-7” meme of 2025, the joke is that there is no intended joke. There is no satire or angle that produces humor. Mere repetition manufactures meaning out of the meaningless.

Online linguist Adam Aleksic, with the handle @etymologynerd, has argued that Clavicular embodies this pattern: Looksmaxxing presents itself in an overwrought, self-serious manner, turning its inherent emptiness into a punchline.

The very fact that this language is meaningful to some people only serves to underscore the absurdity of it all. “Mogging,” which means defeating someone in a battle of looks, maps victory, already an abstract and context-bound concept, onto beauty, itself a culturally contingent notion.

This fad is just “Zoolander” in real life.

I am fascinated by the reaction to looksmaxxing’s newfound prominence. I think that the internet’s tongue-in-cheek tolerance of it on account of its ridiculousness arises because of the aesthetics of common sense. Our shared yet tacit linguistic norms and narrative expectations govern ordinary discourse.

When looksmaxxing hit the scene with its shock factor, laughs and finger-pointing abounded. That reception is precisely why it gains traction. Looksmaxxing exists in a dialectical relationship with mockery. It exists to be made fun of, clinging like a parasite to internet discourse. As a result, everyone who engages with this content is ultimately furthering it, which is the ultimate goal of the incel ideology in the first place: to be recognized as a force in the world, despite the feeling that the world is working against them.

*Contact* **PETER BURNS** *at peter.burns@yale.edu.*




# HOROSCOPES

// BY KIVA BANK

A lone sunbeam gleams through the stained glass of Sterling, gracing seasonally depressed Yalies with the barest hint of warmth. Temperatures — and spirits — are slowly rising. Conditions are ripe for the mayhem that is to ensue during the spring break “Euro” trip that’s really just Greece, Italy and one night in Paris.

People came back from winter vacation with new hair cuts, glasses and trench coats worthy of the Yale mantle. What will they return with from spring break? Probably nipple piercings, a botched butterfly tattoo and hazy memories of a drunken make-out session.

Go forth, and make ol’ Elihu proud. Here’s what your spring break horoscope says about you:

**Aries**

You are stuck on vacation with your ex-situationship because you are both in the same a cappella group. As if singing together wasn’t bad enough, you now have to share the same hotel in Jamaica. You can’t enjoy the scenic beaches without evil lurking in the background of every Instagram photo. Take this as a personal lesson to never again engage in a cappella-cest.

**Taurus**

The prospect of sunny weather in a Puerto Vallarta resort is the only thing that has gotten you through the dreary winter nights in the stacks. Unfortunately, your flight got cancelled at the last minute and thanks to the cartel violence, so did all the others for the foreseeable future. Looks like the beach bod you’ve been working on will have to wait until the summer. At least you can enjoy spending hours on the phone with the airline company trying to get a refund.

**Gemini**

You’re sad you have to go home and won’t be able to gossip with your friends in the dining hall during break. The dining hall workers need a respite from all the overheard conversations about blowjobs and post-naked party threesomes. And you need to hide from the opps for two weeks.

**Cancer**

You thought everyone goes home for spring break, but you’ve just realized that everyone has plans to travel to Puerto Rico or Miami or Daytona Beach for the millionth time. Oh dear. You’ve suddenly become aware that Yale is an elitist institution and class distinctions are real. You sweet, sweet summer child — literally. Time to wake up and smell the trust fund-scented roses!

**Leo**

Everybody is getting cuffed to cope with cabin fever, and you’ve been caught up in the couple craze. You’ve been seeing someone and aren’t sure whether the relationship will last over spring break. You’ve never been good at long distance ... or sharing your feelings, but things are getting serious. You can close the distance — emotionally — but not physically. Let’s hope that exclusivity crosses state lines.

**Virgo**

You made plans for spring break. Then rescheduled, dealt with people flaking left and right, booked the flights and made the reservations. With your travel dates fast approaching, you thought you could finally rest. Despite all your carefully laid plans, you forgot your passport back in your hometown: Nowhere, USA. Good luck making it to Guatemala.

**Libra**

You just found out that your friends have ditched you for a trip to Japan. Turns out they’ve been planning this “last-minute” vacation all along with your spit sister. They’ve clearly chosen sides in the war for a mediocre douchebro. You’ll have a hard time beating her targeted Kyoto thirst traps while you’re stuck in New Haven.

**Scorpio**

At this point, all of your New Year’s goals have been completely abandoned. No amount of blocker apps can stop your phone addiction. Enjoy the next two weeks of doomscrolling and living vicariously through the Instagram stories of your Type A vacation planner friends.

**Sagittarius**

You’ve been slacking this semester and can’t answer the ever-present question asked in all superficial encounters: What are your plans for the summer? You will spend the next two weeks scrambling to find an internship or a fellowship or an externship while your classmates are on cruise ships through the Caribbean, sponsored by the J.P. Morgan internship they secured last year.

**Capricorn**

You already had a two-week internship lined up for spring break months ago. Unfortunately, your pride will quickly fade once you realize you’ve committed to crunching numbers for 80 hours a week when you could’ve been spending your parents’ money on piña coladas in Bermuda. Sigh. Nepotism just isn’t the same anymore. You have to actually work these days.

**Aquarius**

Your epic spring break plans involve binge drinking on St. Patty’s Day. With the luck of the Irish, you’ll find your way to a frat at a random state school so you can enjoy a real party. Not like these lame functions the nerds at AEPi throw. The jello shots were a nice try, although Guinness would have been a better choice — not that they know how to split the G or find the G-spot.

**Pisces**

You matched on date drop with your TF. Yikes! You’ve been avoiding them in lecture lately, but fortunately you’ll be in a different country for the next two weeks forgetting that they exist. Just don’t check your Canvas notifications.

*Contact* **KIVA BANK** *at kiva.bank@yale.edu.*

WEEKEND RECOMMENDS:

## GOING TO DOG PARKS (EVEN IF YOU DON’T HAVE A DOG)