

THE NEW GENERIC

55% of teenage girls feel at least a fair amount of pressure to look good.

39% of teenage boys feel similar amounts of pressure.

Source: Pew Research Center's 2025 Report on "The Gender Gap in Teen Experiences."

Kailey Fu and Emi Mohanrao/Bear Witness



facing the truth

Students grapple with the troubles of conformity in the modern age

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Scroll long enough on Instagram, and faces begin to blur together into one. Today, more than ever, the pressure to meet idealistic beauty standards presented on an app causes people to turn to plastic surgery.

With the growth of social media, ideal beauty standards have become stricter and more singular. In an article for *The New Yorker*, writer Jia Tolentino dubs this standardized look "Instagram Face," created through the artificial, unrealistic standards produced through procedures, filters and editing on social media. This "single, cyborgian face" consists of features like plump lips, small noses, high cheekbones and slim eyes.

Junior **Naima Chetverykova**, who responded in support of getting cosmetic surgery in a Bear Witness Instagram poll, stated how consistently seeing these standards on social media can normalize the idea of plastic surgery. She mentions how it can make people want certain procedures to look a certain way.

Now, younger generations see the beauty standards on social media. Spanish teacher **Jessica Martinez-Gallardo** comments on how wanting cosmetic procedures has become prevalent in modern media. She believes it can be hard for people not to get caught in the middle of influencer content that can impact how individuals view themselves.

"The most important part is acknowledging that you have to step away from idolizing celebrities. It's hard to do that because with trends, there's going to be a 'leader,'" Martinez said. "But it also gets to a point where you have to be your own person, and I think that doesn't come until you're 18-19 when you have that realization [that] you are an adult, [and] you have a sense of freedom."

When viewers see the same features and similar faces every day, it normalizes the idea that individuals have to look a certain way. Chetverykova says this contributes to the rejection of individuality, since many are used to seeing similar features.

"If you see it that much, and it's pushing [the idea that] 'You have to look this way,' that's a negative because we need to accept the individuality between different people," Chetverykova said.

With this current trend, Martinez thinks society should consider the effects harsh beauty standards have on teens and young adults. According to Pew Research, around 47% of teens stated they feel pressured to "look good," and 41% feel pressured to "fit in socially." Rigid standards can influence young people to get procedures they don't need without being properly educated on them.

"Beauty standards can either serve students with a realization of something that they do want or something that they absolutely don't want," Martinez said. "In both cases, it makes students think about the effect it would have on their own lives. There's a certain power that social media has over students, so it's really hard [to] not

let it influence you."

Like Chetverykova, sophomore **Parker Higley** mentions how frequently seeing social media creators with cosmetic surgeries normalizes the idea of needing to undergo procedures to "fit in."

"[Influencers are] trying to be relatable to people, so when they have plastic surgery, it feels like maybe [viewers] should too," Higley said. "Whenever I talk to people and they've been watching a celebrity or an influencer, it's almost like they pretend they know who they are. I guess you could compare it to your friend getting plastic surgery. It might make you feel more pressured [to do] that too."

Some people also get procedures to improve health, such as to improve breathing with deviated septum surgery or correct minor misalignments with veneers. While these types of procedures address physical health, Chetverykova mentions that general procedures can also impact a person's mental health by improving their self-esteem.

"A lot of times when people choose to do cosmetic surgery when they don't have health problems, they do it for mental health reasons — if they're feeling insecure, [for example]," Chetverykova said. "That's just as big of a health concern as physical health. If [cosmetic surgery] helps your health, whatever kind of health that is, you should do it."

No matter the reasons for a surgery, senior **Chloe Teil** says unnecessary procedures can't always fix a person's body image.

"Doing things purely for aesthetics doesn't necessarily make your life better because you aren't really changing your mindset," Teil said. "You're still the same person, but just with the new something."

Teil notes that this "norm" of Instagram Face is being pushed by popular celebrities and people at the forefront of social media. Often, people who undergo procedures tend to erase ethnic features to fit the Eurocentric beauty standards, which consist of fair skin, double-lid eyes, small noses and a defined facial structure. Multiple members of the Kardashian family have gotten nose jobs in order to change their Armenian noses to a more westernized look.

Teil believes this norm can pressure people to conform to societal standards. Chetverykova mentions how she's noticed this trend among those who get certain surgeries to appear more westernized.

"It's really unfortunate when that happens because everyone should be happy with how they look and how they are and how they're born," Chetverykova said. "It's upsetting, but again, if that's what is going to make them happy at the end of the day, then who am I to say what they should and shouldn't do?"

As someone of Persian descent, junior **Sevin Sabei** has considered getting a nose job in the future, primarily because she has been mocked for her ethnic features. Growing up, she mentions people have used language with negative undertones such as prominent, to describe

her Middle Eastern features.

"A lot of people, especially from the Middle East, tend to have larger noses, and over the years, people have mocked me for it," Sabei said. "Even in social media or movies, you always see people who are depicted as evil have that type of structure, and that all has fed into that mentality that I don't like my nose and that I want [to change it]."

Higley agrees that it's unfortunate people erase ethnic features to fit the standard beauty norms.

"It is sort of disappointing that we don't have a great representation of all different cultures and features that come with ethnic groups, and we need to shift away from a Eurocentric position to embracing all people," Higley said.

Sabei adds that seeing wider representation can allow people to be more accepting of others and themselves, but it might not solve the problem altogether.

"Insecurities will probably always be there, but more representation — which I have seen popping up more lately — of people accepting different noses, representing their nose, being proud of it and showing that it is beautiful as well as can definitely help minimize the insecurity and make me feel like I can accept my nose more publicly."

Martinez thinks that being more educated on the outcomes associated with surgery can alter people's perspectives about undergoing certain procedures.

"There are, like with any medical procedures, risks, and there's unfortunately some consequences that we can see," Martinez said. "Part of that is the constant feeling of not being satisfied with yourself, and I think that's the most important one — that there's nothing you won't do to look your best by doing medical procedures."

Higley believes every individual deserves to feel pleased with their body and not let beauty standards set by influencers shape the way they view themselves.

"Everybody should feel comfortable with their own body and feel comfortable enough for their self and their personalities that they don't really care as much as trying to look [like other people]," Higley said.

"The most important part is acknowledging that you have to step away from idolizing celebrities. You have to be your own person."

Spanish teacher **Jessica Martinez-Gallardo**

THE NEW GENERIC

Looksmaxxing

An online subculture that promotes maximizing physical attractiveness to improve dating and social success.

Misogynistic values are often heavily promoted within these communities due to the influence of the blackpill ideology. Ideas like female hypergamy promote the theory that women pursue unrealistic standards in men.

Hardmaxxing & Softmaxxing

Extreme procedures known as "hardmaxxing" include bonesmashing, jaw surgery, "starvemaxxing" and more, all aiming to significantly change one's appearance. On the other hand, the supposedly healthier alternative, "softmaxxing," includes procedures like gymmaxxing, groommaxxing and stylemaxxing, which change appearances in less radical ways.

PSL Score

Much of looksmaxxing's culture involves complex rankings of facial and body features to determine sexual attractiveness in a system known as PSL (an acronym denoting the first initial of the first three online looksmaxxing forums). PSL typically runs on a one to eight scale. Rankings can also be influenced by one's ability to attract members of the opposite sex, often dubbed "Sexual Market Value" within the community. Individuals at the bottom of the

PSL spectrum may be deemed as "subhuman," or as having below average physical features. Those who are able to "ascend" above that ranking may become "low-tier normies," "mid-tier normies," "high-tier normies," "Chadites" and finally "Chad." Resting at around seven to eight on the PSL scale, a Chad is someone who has greatly above average physical features.

However, this level of attractiveness is generally unachievable, only applying to a select few people determined to be of peak attractiveness.

at face value

Prevalence of online "looksmaxxing" practices poses possible issues for Branham

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Self improvement may involve beginning a gym routine, reading a book or eating a healthier diet. In online spaces, however, self improvement has morphed into a newer, more extreme and possibly more dangerous practice — looksmaxxing.

In looksmaxxing culture, physical looks are the exclusive source of success in dating, relationships and career opportunities. Due to the creation of the looksmaxxing.com forum in 2019 and more recently the propulsion of looksmaxxing culture in social media apps like TikTok, looksmaxxing has been experiencing a resurgence of interest among millions of young, impressionable teens.

Branham's Self-Improvement Club, run by sophomore **Kibum Park**, aims to disseminate advice focused on improving health and looks to Branham's community. Park does not see the club as a looksmaxxing group, but believes that some aspects of the club align with some of the healthier and less drastic forms of looksmaxxing. Lunchtime discussions revolve around improving confidence, nutrition, style and socializing in an effort to achieve a better lifestyle.

"It's first impressions: better socializing with people, knowing how to live your life better with more purpose and maybe even getting better grades," Park said.

Park finds that though looksmaxxing carries a negative connotation today, its rise in popularity has increased awareness about self-care practices and how they can improve a person's self image.

"I always used to be insecure about how I looked," Park said. "Going on this journey helped me a lot in building my social life, my confidence and trust in my everyday life as a human being."

In particular, Park values those who spread positive advice but places special emphasis on making sure people are wary about the media they consume. Though a follower of looksmaxxing, Park has spent little to no time on the online forums, denouncing the harmful hardmaxxing procedures the sites promote.

"It's just a term I use to better myself — how you look and the way you come across to people," Park said. "I wouldn't recommend anything like surgeries, but scientifically, [self-care] has [been] proven to improve on how you look."

On the "healthier" side of looksmaxxing, ideas such as "gymmaxxing" promote exercising to improve one's physique. Though junior **Jonathan Barrientos** does not subscribe to the looksmaxxing ideology, he has become a long-time fan of the content creator Santa Cruz Medicinals, also known as Brendan Ruh. Barrientos recognizes that content like Ruh's can be beneficial so long as a person is able to find balance between focusing on appearance and managing mental health.

"The content from Santa Cruz [Medicinals] is mainly just health and caring about the body and what you eat and consume," Barrientos said. "I like how he cares for the youth's health and reveals the true harm that some common foods bring."

Overall however, Barrientos finds that the overarching message behind looksmaxxing content promotes ideas that can damage people's self-image and make them overly hateful. Specifically, the PSL scale can bolster the idea that people's appearance is more important than their personality.

"I feel like it makes people overly observant about others' appearances," Barrientos said. "Truthfully, you never know what other people are going through, and it definitely promotes outside appearance over inner personality."

In fact, Barrientos has found that this toxic looksmaxxing culture has seeped its way into the social media feeds of teenagers, impacting the health of his friends. In particular, Barrientos has a friend from Leigh High School who is taking peptides, most commonly injected for skin, muscle and hormonal health, at the age of 17.

"I think that's a bit extreme because you're underage still," Barrientos said. "To be taking stuff like that where

you don't even know the true long-term effects. The way that they're promoting it as something just to look better, it makes it seem so normalized to do these things. He only speaks on the positives, but there's definitely going to be some sort of negative."

Though doctors never recommend performing risky procedures at home, looksmaxxing influencers, such as the controversial Clavicular, have created content operating on themselves and others in the name of self-improvement. In addition, there is an abundance of videos online explaining the best ways to bone smash, providing guides as to areas to hit and damage to reshape your face. On the extreme side, Clavicular recently livestreamed a video in which he injected a 17-year-old girl with Aqualyx, a fat dissolver, by himself. Reflecting on this, Barrientos wants people to consider the long term effects these practices can have on one's health and safety.

Looksmaxxing culture has not only infiltrated Leigh, however, Barrientos explains that these practices are also becoming familiar talk amongst students on Branham's campus.

"There's kids in my physics class, math class, tutorial, and you hear it around when you're just going about your day," Barrientos said.

Junior **Winston Middlebrook**, who considers himself very familiar with the looksmaxxing community, acknowledges social media's role in turning the concept into a less serious and trendy topic.

"I think its popularity is due to its meme-ability," Middlebrook said. "There's more people involved now more than ever in the actual community, but there's also exponentially more memes about it. It is growing, but it's also becoming a joke."

While looksmaxxing culture has become a joke among Branham students who casually poke fun at the extreme ideas and measures people go to, Barrientos emphasizes how these jokes only fuel the fire and spread it onto more and more social media feeds.

"I think it's one of those things where people take it as a joke, but underlying, they take it seriously, and they're interested," Barrientos said. "All jokes have meaning because it comes from somewhere. It's not just coming from nowhere."

After considering how the spread of looksmaxxing culture as a joke can conversely keep it trending on social media, Barrientos recognizes that the content can warp the minds of not just teenagers, but children. Specifically, Barrientos is concerned about the long term effects consuming looksmaxxing content can have on younger generations.

"It's not just high schoolers on TikTok," Barrientos said. "There's fifth graders, elementary, middle schoolers, and if they're seeing it at such a young age — let's say there's an elementary kid that wants to start smashing their face with a hammer — that's really bad, especially because they're still developing."

Barrientos posits that looksmaxxing ideals are easy to fall into at young ages due to higher rates of insecurity and mental health issues. In fact, he finds this content prays on younger audiences, abusing their consumption to promote beauty standards.

Due to its birth in the depths of incel culture, many of looksmaxxing's principals of attractiveness promote Eurocentric beauty standards. These ideals have become so extreme in fact that Barrientos believes they borderline on eugenics.

"[Looksmaxxers will] compare natural characteristics for ethnic groups and your stereotypical European and say [Europeans] look better," Barrientos said. "I feel like that's more of a personal standpoint of what you like and what you don't like, so it could be some underlying racism. It promotes this one idea, and if you don't fit that one idea, it says you have to change yourself."



Emi Mohanrao and Kailey Fu/Bear Witness

Nevertheless, Middlebrook finds that only a minority of people involve themselves with looksmaxxing ideologies.

"I think for most, it is genuinely just trying to look better, and that's often just hygiene and becoming the best version of yourself," Middlebrook said. "But there is a group of people who are taking it too far, like bone smashing and then also singling out black people or just latching on to ideologies that are harmful."

As the looksmaxxing community continues to grow in popularity, physical education teacher **Greg Stefani** believes it becomes difficult to distinguish between personal goals and the expectations of the group.

"You're kind of chasing somebody else's approval, and I don't think that's always the best solution to things," Stefani said. "If that's something you want for yourself, I don't think there's anything wrong with that, but if you are just doing something to please another group, then that's not the best option."

Many use looksmaxxing as a tool for social and romantic connection. However, Stefani emphasizes that looks are not as important as they may seem. Stefani adds that having a sense of compatibility with a partner and shared interests may in fact play a much larger role in sustaining a healthy relationship than just appearance alone.

"Who do you get along with? What do you guys have in common? Just things that come naturally," Stefani said. "Looks are very superficial things. Looks will come and go. People that might be insecure — your body will change so much naturally, so I don't think that [looksmaxxing] should be our main focus."

Additionally, Middlebrook believes that rather than focusing on regulation, looksmaxxing must be addressed at the root of the issue. Many young men face pressure from peers or families to meet the traditional ideas of masculinity, and some may also have limited spaces to talk openly about their own insecurity or self worth.

Skeptical of the entire looksmaxxing industry, Middlebrook suggests never taking any information at face value. "What you're seeing on social media, it's all a product and you can't believe anything you see," Middlebrook said. "You have to think, how is this benefiting the person who's making it? How is my attention being sold right now? Be aware."

#looksmaxxing

343,000 posts on TikTok
444,000 posts on Instagram

#bbl
3.1 million posts on Instagram
851,000 posts on TikTok

#kimkardashian
14 million posts on Instagram
1.2 million posts on TikTok

#instaface
1.1 million posts on Instagram