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BEAUTIFUL CRUELTY: LOOKSMAXING MASCULINITY AS A RESPONSE TO NEOLIBERAL CAPITALISM

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that the phenomenon of looksmaxing masculinity is part of a wider neoliberal trend of self-optimisation that is embedded within the marketplace technology of online exchange. Rather than approach this presentation of masculinity from the perspective of an abstract identity, this article unearths the technical milieu that is intrinsically connected to its expression. The looksmaxing phenomenon is approached through the lens of Gilles Deleuze's control society and two of its crises: the danger of becoming stuck within the indefinite flows of data and the danger of ressentiment. This article demonstrates that looksmaxing is a response to the technical conditions of online exchange that function to trap users within unending content consumption that cancels out progress. Looksmaxing provides a pathway towards masculine ideals and bodily augmentation in an effort to restore this lost sense of progress. However, looksmaxing is a poisoned chalice that offers an illusory greener pasture of superiority, but in reality traps users within the sad passions, leaving them feeling inferior, jealous and hostile to one another. The article draws upon research conducted on looksmax.org in 2023 to show that the community is fragmented along the lines of individual projects of self-optimisation, but unified by a ressentiment that causes perpetual conflict between users.

INTRODUCTION

The notion of looksmaxing has been slowly seeping out from various fringe forums for more than a decade and is now circulating widely in the broader online ecosystem. Within the flows of data of online exchange, the language of looksmaxing has quietly dispersed across the social media feeds of many. However, the sudden discovery of looksmaxing by global media has been anything but subtle. Media outlets are quick to capitalise upon the exoticism of a novel masculinity and its worrying representation. One article's title boldly asserts: "Looksmaxing: the new male beauty crisis capturing our kids."[1] These articles are quick to warn parents of the potentially dangerous cosmetic techniques shared among looksmaxing circles.[2] Experts are also chiming in with early judgements. Debra Soh, a sex neuroscientist, argues that we should all be concerned

about Gen Z's alignment with the hypermasculine values of looksmaxing, which, Soh argues, has emerged as young men's reaction to the perceived progressive push to feminise men.[3] Child psychologist Eugene Beresin has published guidelines for parents and caregivers to discuss looksmaxing with their children, and offers advice such as monitoring your child's behaviour and limiting screen time if your child displays too much preoccupation with their image.[4] What these articles demonstrate is that the media panic is in full swing, interpreting looksmaxing within familiar categories of dangerous online misinformation, radicalisation, children's wellbeing and the uncontrollability of social media. Yet, despite preliminary media assertions, looksmaxing is currently an under-researched social phenomenon and the forums that support it are highly fragmented and difficult to parse. Only a small selection of academic articles currently offer a more nuanced analysis of looksmaxing subculture. This article contributes to this growing area of research by offering insight into looksmaxing via a study of online forums, and considering how they can be understood within the broader context of neoliberal capitalism and its connection to the online gender politics of looksmaxing.

This article is primarily informed by my 2024 thesis on incels, which included an empirical analysis of one of the key forums that constitutes the looksmaxing community.[5] The thesis project deployed a rhizo-textual methodology to analyse three important forums that constitute incel communities: incels.is, looksmax.org, and r/incelexit. One hundred and fifty forum posts were collected over the course of three months in 2023. The aim of the project was to challenge the 'echo chamber' theory that is central to much early critical scholarship into online subculture. The concept asserts that the internet medium generates problematic and dangerous effects because it allows for participants to engage in a high level of selection bias towards information, which leads to users surrounding themselves with information that they agree with.[6] Not only is this assumption challenged by empirical evidence,[7] but familiarity with these online spaces reveals that unanimous agreement is scarce. Analysis across the key forums shows that antagonism, not agreement, is the lifeblood of online engagement. Users are constantly exposed to opposing viewpoints and frequently engage by attacking others. In examining forum posts, it was demonstrated that dissent is subject to criteria of acceptability and varying moderation policies that affect the broader constraints of discussion—which can be misunderstood as 'agreement' when looking in from outside. Even within these constraints, users are continually able to challenge one another, express dissatisfaction with the framework itself and sidestep enforcement by going to another space. The project, as reported in a recent book chapter, "Exploring Radical Approaches to Understanding the Internet and Inceldom," rejected the echo chamber characterisation as simply not reflecting what happens in these online spaces and, accordingly, unable to provide a satisfactory explanation of how incel spaces intensify hateful political discourse.[8] Two important theoretical concepts emerged from this research to provide a more flexible understanding of the dynamics of online subculture: Nietzsche's concept of 'ressentiment' and Deleuze's concept of 'societies of control.' This article focuses on one element of the project, the online phenomenon of looksmaxing, and unpacks Nietzsche's and Deleuze's theories to provide insight into the inner workings of an online subculture that is messy and contradictory in nature. The objective is to add nuance to a social theory of looksmaxers, elaborating on the technical procedures of late capitalism that are directly involved in the construction of a problematic masculine subjectivity.

WHAT IS LOOKSMAXING?

The practice of looksmaxing is a form of aesthetic self-improvement that predominantly involves an enhancement of masculine features.[9] Looksmaxing techniques comprise a range of methods for achieving masculine beauty, including exercise, skincare, dieting and cosmetic surgery. What has particularly made looksmaxing notorious is its association with a growing trend of masculine beauty metrics based upon facial symmetry and ratios. However, recent media attention considerably overstates the levels of consensus present within the looksmaxing community. Looksmaxers seldom agree on the methods and aesthetics that are shared within their forum.[5]

Online discourse within the looksmaxing community often revolves around facial features such as the jawline, cheekbones and brow ridge. Looksmaxers also discuss many potential methods for chiselling the face into a more masculine appearance: cosmetic procedures such as bimaxillary osteotomies or dermal filler, or at-home exercises such as jaw pumps, mewing or bonesmashing. These latter two techniques have been the source of much media attention due to their novelty.[2] Mewing is a tongue exercise developed by Dr John Mew, a former orthodontist who lost his license after the General Dental Council found that his practice was pseudoscientific and harmful to the reputation of orthodontics.[10] Looksmaxers have appropriated the tongue exercise, which supposedly helps realign the jaw, for the purpose of trying to achieve a sharper jawline. The act of bonesmashing involves hitting the brow or cheek bones with a hard object such as a fist or hammer, with the intention to cause small fractures in the bone and for the bone to heal thicker and create more protrusion.[11] Like mewing, there is also no scientific basis to this technique. Regardless, these types of techniques relentlessly circulate within online media, tempting the insecure and confusing the out-of-touch.

Initially, the term looksmaxing originated from incel subculture and was one of a range of remedial strategies for dealing with involuntary celibacy, which subsequently became characterised slang terms using the '-maxing' suffix.[12] Some popular strategies are 'escortmaxing,' which involves purchasing sex work, and 'geomaxing,' which entails travelling to the global south to try to date women in precarious circumstances by leveraging higher social standing and income.[5] However, looksmaxing has become a particularly divisive topic among incels, and within the largest incel forum, incels.is, it is currently a banned topic that is only allowed to be discussed in the context of opposition to the idea or within certain threads where some banned topics are allowed.[13] As Björn Pelzer et al.[14] point out, however, the relationship is only rhetorically distanced: the most popular looksmaxing forum, looksmax.org, shares the same owner as incels.is. Therefore, even though they are differentiated topics by forum rule, they remain intertwined. More recently, looksmaxing has become popularised by TikTok, which has dissociated it from its forum-based origins.[15] Incels have noticed this trend and lament that looksmax.org has been 'normified' and overtaken by young people from TikTok.[16] Therefore, mainstream interest in the community is not always welcomed as it poses a risk for the content to drift further from its incel roots.

While there are only a few initial scholarly studies of looksmaxing to draw upon, it is worth exploring the initial emergence of critical theoretical frameworks in the looksmaxing literature. Anda Solea and Lisa Sugiura argue that looksmaxing is a more mainstream form of incel rhetoric that has cloaked itself in a neutral tone to obscure its misogyny and

racism.[17] They state that looksmaxing shares with inceldom a concept called the 'PSL scale,' an acronym that represents three older incel forums: Puahate.com, Sluthate.com, and Lookism.net. This scale purports to measure objective beauty based upon a ranking system of one to ten, but it also generates a racialised and gendered hierarchy that naturalises beauty standards as innate genetic values. Michael Halpin et al. argue that the ranking system fails to deliver on its promise of objective beauty standards, but serves rather as a conduit for competition between looksmaxers.[9] They identify that the dynamics of the PSL scale repeat the tropes of hegemonic masculinity—a concept created by Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell.[18] Connell demonstrated that institutions naturalise a masculine practice that splits individuals into a binary of superior/inferior, resulting in an atmosphere of competition and status-seeking that subordinates the feminine and other non-hegemonic masculinities. Halpin et al. show that users reproduce hegemonic masculinity through the various ways that they dehumanise one another under the guise of objective masculine advice.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity is valuable to this area of scholarship because it reveals that looksmaxing masculinity is not a simple repetition of the long-established feminine beauty culture; it is an emerging project of masculine dominance that has adapted to seek the subordination of others through ideals of beauty. However, the concept of hegemonic masculinity has a tendency to drift towards theorising online subculture as a site of abstract identity, without much consideration for the mechanisms that desires filter through to reach an identity. Connell and Messerschmidt's revision of the concept acknowledges that it has led to rigid typologies of masculinity, and in retrospect much of the research on masculinities that uses the concept reveals a context specificity relating to geographical and cultural formations that mutate over time.[19] It is therefore vital that scholarship on online masculinities does not neglect the online component, but instead offers a robust explanation of the technical milieu that is increasingly mediating social life. The present article provides context to looksmaxing masculinity by connecting it to neoliberal self-optimisation and Deleuze's control society. It is worth mentioning that this article uses ressentiment to explain the problematic nature of looksmaxing masculinity rather than hegemonic masculinity, and this is due to its closer connection to Deleuze's work. In combination, these concepts help explain the technical milieu of neoliberal capitalism that is intrinsically connected to expressions of looksmaxing masculinity.

LOOKSMAXING AND SELF-OPTIMISATION

To understand looksmaxing masculinity, it is important to first situate it within a broader culture of self-optimisation that is prevalent across the online subculture. This is a vital context for untangling the fragmented nature of online exchange that makes researching the looksmaxing community difficult. Every forum post within looksmax.org contains contradictions that thwart attempts to generate cogent analysis. However, self-optimisation offers an avenue of understanding that accounts for such inconsistency, while still remaining coherent by situating looksmaxing within the broader context of neoliberal capitalism. German sociologists Daniel Nehring and Anja Röcke describe self-optimisation as an effect of the recent conditions of neoliberal capitalism.[20] The idea of self-improvement is not new, with examples dating back to the Stoics' understanding of life as a continual training process.[21] The particular idea of self-optimisation presented

by Nehring and Röcke refers to a broader social shift towards decentralisation and the subsequent rise in self-governance through the logics of market economics. According to French theorists Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, the neoliberal project requires the individual to be understood as an entrepreneur, which is a separate category to other subjectivities such as the capitalist, innovator or producer.[22] They argue that the entrepreneur is distinct in that they are not initially situated in a fortunate social position but are guided by an inner savvy that allows them to capitalise upon opportunities that arise. This entrepreneurial subject combines risk and anticipation to engage in an active pursuit of self-formation and maximisation. As a result, Dardot and Laval argue, human activity is reduced to relating to the self and for the self, which renders the social field a solipsistic mutual elaboration of personal plans. Situating looksmaxing within this theoretical interpretation of neoliberalism helps explain the diversity of the group, as they are pursuing personal projects of self-optimisation, but it also shows that they are united by a desire to maximise the self within those projects.

The neoliberal notion of self as entrepreneur also extends to the sphere of sexuality. Sociologists Dana Kaplan and Eva Illouz[23] argue that, within the politics of sexual capital, a new form of neoliberal sexual politics has emerged that connects feelings of sexual competency to a type of self-efficacy that mimics the subjectivity an employer seeks. Scholars have noticed that incel discourse, for example, revolves around understanding dating as a sexual marketplace.[24] Lauren Menzie's analysis of incels finds that the worldview is divided by a vertical hierarchy of who possesses the most erotic capital, which splits men and women into categories of sexual privilege; incels use this concept to place themselves in the underprivileged category.[25] Menzie reveals that incels understand romantic relationships through the lens of gaining an attractive partner to display competency, but also see women as an object that signals wealth and success. Although the communities of inceldom and looksmaxing overlap, what distinguishes them is a matter of where responsibility is placed. Inceldom externalises blame towards women and feminism, whereas looksmaxing embraces self-optimisation.[5] However, both masculinities are entrenched within a broader context of marketplace exchange that is influencing their conceptualisation of sexual politics.

CONTROL SOCIETY AND THE CANCELLATION OF PROGRESS

Deleuze's later work provides not only an excellent theorisation of neoliberal capitalism, but also a warning of crises that emerge under these conditions that are particularly relevant to the study of looksmaxing masculinity.[26] Despite writing prior to the full flourishing of online worlds, Deleuze presciently identified a series of problems within the transition to computing and the expansion of marketplace logics that inevitably results in an intensification of reactionary politics. Deleuze provides a framework for understanding computer networks as enacting a form of permissive control that continually fragments its users while at the same time repeating a consistent method of control through marketplace logics. What he establishes is a clear line of departure from the familiar mode of society that Michel Foucault identified, and an ubiquitous movement towards a new mode that mediates social life through technical machinery to a greater extent. As suggested earlier, it would be a mistake to conflate contemporary looksmaxing masculinity as a simple repetition of past forms, and Deleuze's control society offers a compelling account of a distinct social mode. It is crucial to consider

this social context because it locates a set of crises within neoliberalism that agitate and propel looksmaxing masculinity.

Within his text, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," Deleuze argues that we are departing from what Foucault calls 'disciplinary society' and heading towards 'control society.'[26] Deleuze details the way in which Foucault mapped the modern institution to reveal a repeated pattern of control through interiors: each institution follows a logic of prison-like enclosure that draws boundaries that individuals traverse. One exits one kind of prison, such as a school, to find oneself in another, such as a workplace. Within these prisons, the individual is subject to regulatory powers that channel them into an ideal subjectivity through discipline. However, Deleuze argued that we have been trending away from this style of control since the Second World War and are now heading towards a new method. The older regime's discipline was associated with training and was long-term, infinite and discontinuous. Our current regime of control, on the other hand, is concerned with amassing power within the marketplace, which is short-term, continuous and thus without limit. Deleuze argues that within disciplinary societies, individuals are always starting again as they move between enclosures such as the school, factory, hospital or barracks. In control societies, the journey is never finished in that they are in a perpetual state of being unable to complete training. In both forms of capitalism, completion and progress are illusory, but disciplinary society attempts to provide a vertical hierarchy to sustain progress through graduating steps, whereas control society forgoes this type of progress in favour of the indefinite conditions of marketplace expansion. The enclosures of disciplinary society act as moulds that contain and restrict, but the modulations of control societies act as a mould that transforms continually.

Deleuze states that the sovereign of this control society is the corporation.[26] Capitalism has moved away from production with raw materials, which is more frequently shifted offshore, and is now more intensely invested in buying finished products and assembly as well as higher-order production such as marketing, stocks and services. The older enclosures of disciplinary society, such as the factory, operated with private or state ownership as a convergence point. However, within a control society, the corporation exposes the factory to an indefinite flux of stocks. To further elaborate on control society's distinct nature, Deleuze provides the example of changes in wages. Under previous regimes of discipline, the capitalist would maximise production and minimise the proletariat's wages, potentially causing mass outrage, whereas control society results from the rise in corporate power and its logic of competitive wages. Deleuze notes that the factory has always understood meritocracy and bonuses, but the corporation massively expands this dimension of wages to create perpetual modulation that formalises competition between workers as a healthy expression. Such expansion of competition fragments the workforce and disarms potential mass resistance through the destruction of unions and prioritisation of individual excellence. But this logic is not contained within enclosure, it expands hungrily beyond to be replicated across other areas of society, hijacking desires to replace discipline with control via gaining power within a marketplace.

Elements of Deleuze's theory of control societies align with contemporary research that has identified an increase in corporate self-regulation across society. For example, Kaplan and Illouz's historical account of the intermingling of sexual desirability and

capitalism indicates distinct differences between past and contemporary formations.[23] Within the Victorian era of religious asceticism, bourgeois marriage markets would leverage a young woman's sexual purity as a form of value for the economic exchange of marriage. In light of Deleuze's theory, this could be seen as disciplinary society's discontinuous training of a woman, and movement between enclosures, as a woman is sold from one family to another. Such social transitions would entail a completion and starting again on each side of enclosure boundaries. But within Kaplan and Illouz's analysis of our contemporary period, sex and desirability have become disassociated from religion and thus have become an independent sphere of consumption. Desirability now resides in the qualities of employability, in the form of personal achievement and advantageous skills, thus mimicking the dynamics of a job market. From a control society perspective, this would suggest that a collapse of the boundaries around sex and the insertion of corporate competitive norms into sexual desires has created an indefinite state of being unable to complete training. What this combination of research and theory shows is that sex and desirability are connected to capitalism, and we cannot assume that we are dealing with the same abstract identities across history.

CONTROL SOCIETY'S MACHINERY AND THE INTENSIFICATION OF RESSENTIMENT

Centring Deleuze's control society theory allows us to connect a rise in reactionary politics to the machinery of neoliberal capitalism. Deleuze[26] argues that the particular machinery of control societies is computers, and within these machines are three potential crises: jamming, piracy and virus. The first and third of these are particularly relevant to this article's argument. Deleuze understood machinery throughout history as cumulative in that contemporary machinery builds upon the machinery of previous regimes. While he did not believe that machines are determinative of desires, they still require a certain logic for their use. He foresaw computing as an avenue for control society to enshrine a state of continual modulation. His account of how control society would thrive within computing is remarkably relevant to our current online social order of corporate-owned search engines and algorithms, big data, infinite scrolling and endless AI interventionism. The first crisis of jamming denotes the fact that continual variation of the mould does not create a sense of constant progression; it does the complete opposite in that it creates a sense of immobility and becoming stuck. Within disciplinary society, one experiences progress through 'apparent acquittal,' seemingly deemed not guilty as one moves between various societal prisons and receives recognition for one's effort. Within control society, one is subject to 'limitless postponement,' operating within the conditions of continual variation as moulds are constantly changing to fit the desire. For example, infinite scrolling does not allow one to move on and start again. Rather, it staves off any finality in favour of continual transition and modulation. To scroll is to experience stagnation as the mould for the desire continually morphs into something else to maintain capture over the desire.

Deleuze's third crisis of control society is the introduction of viruses. It is at this point in his theorisation that the door opens for consideration of how control society intensifies and spreads reactionary politics. In Deleuze and Félix Guattari's work, the term 'virus' is used to describe the situated production of fascistic desire, which is heavily influenced by Nietzsche's concept of ressentiment, as well as his theoretical

predecessor, Spinoza, and his theory on morality and the sad passions.[27] For Deleuze, Spinoza identifies a problematic transcendent morality of good and evil that reduces our power for existence, which is found within joy, and traps us within the sad passions.[28] This morality disassociates us from our immediate life and the conditions that create us, as well as the good and bad that is imbedded within that life. Instead, we are invested in a separate abstract theatre of morality that makes us suffer. Nietzsche takes Spinoza's theorisation on abstract morality's capacity to entrench suffering and names the phenomenon 'ressentiment.' Nietzsche uses this concept of ressentiment to criticise a style of thought that he deemed to be life-denying due to its pursuit of perfection, beauty and virtue, rendering the human condition incomplete, broken and in need of redemption.[29] Nietzsche argues that these ideals make us live a suffering life of comparison, inadequacy and jealousy, which lead to hatred, spite and vengeance against those who are determined to cause the suffering. However, Nietzsche believed that ressentiment is an act of self-poisoning that directs us towards scapegoats, but it is the conditions of ressentiment that make one suffer. This style of suffering is particularly relevant to the landscape of online grievance politics, deeply imbedded within a morality that is self-advancing because it is not connected to any immediate harms. Instead, the aggrieved are paranoid over abstract moral harms that continually haunt them, thus trapping them within the sad passions.

However, ressentiment is an ancient problem, so a question returns regarding how ressentiment is revitalised by computer networking in our contemporary time. German philosopher Joseph Vogl argues that corporate expansion into online data markets significantly increases the potential surpluses of ressentiment by creating commercialised opinion markets.[30] Therefore, capitalism's mutation through computing has enabled market forces to capitalise upon a sector of abstract morality to a much more intense degree. Contemporary thinkers often understand the problematic nature of online discourse through a lens of 'misinformation.'[31] When working with a subject area such as masculinity, however, this is not a particularly helpful framing, as it requires a tracing back to fact when masculinity is an abstract system of representation. Instead, by using Deleuze's critique of representation, we can locate a risk of ressentiment with an economy of representation that would be considerably expanded by market forces within control society.[32]

Within *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze outlines the way in which signs risk producing ressentiment when they become detached from the movements that cause the sign to emerge in the first place.[32] For Deleuze, signs are deceptive, but necessary for communicating and learning. Within life, we are constantly experiencing shifts and movements in the world around us that cause sensory emissions. Signs are the human response to these shifts, but they function to obscure the movements that initially caused the sensory emission. For example, the sun rising is witnessed as a flash of light, producing the notion of the sun as an abstract sign. But that sign possesses none of the initial flash that produces the sign in the first place. Deleuze argues that this process of cancellation poses a risk of blinding, in that the abstract sign can become detached from its movements and create a disconnected image. Deleuze states that the image becomes blinding when it appears from either too close or too far away. The sign from too close blinds because it is visceral and invokes strong affects such as fear or anger that are short-sighted. The sign from too far away is vague and confusing, unable to be connected to anything or anywhere specific. In the context of computer networks and

their economies of representation, we are constantly blinded by signs that appear from up close and too far away as online exchange has conjured away the movements that produce signs. As we browse the online medium, we are struck by affect inducing signs and signs which offer no immediate connection to offline movements. The technology of online communication may not always produce ressentiment, but it ensures that the economy of signs is always at risk of leading to ressentiment as it has mechanised the blinding conditions that lead to it, and it will inevitably capitalise upon the ressentiment once it is expressed.

Deleuze's dangers of jamming and virus within control society set up an important context for the analysis of looksmaxing masculinity. Jamming helps us understand that marketplace expansion has created a unique form of stagnation—one that operates through indefinite conditions to trap desires within constantly shifting platforms, cancelling out any progress in favour of marketplace expansion without limit. Virus also shows us that the economies of representation within online networks are a fertile ground for ressentiment as they obscure the movements that produce signs, leaving us blinded by signs that appear from up close and far away—and they capitalise upon this blindness. As the next section will show, looksmaxing masculinity is both stuck within the indefinite postponements of online media and also embraces a ressentiment of a superior masculinity to attempt to reinstate progress. However, the pursuit of ressentiment as a form of redemption only leads to suffering, jealousy and hatred, which ultimately proliferates dynamics of cruelty and mutual hostility throughout the looksmaxing community.

ANALYSIS OF THE LOOKSMAXING COMMUNITY

The looksmax.org community provides an excellent example of a ressentiment that thrives within the conditions of Deleuze's control society. Looksmaxing masculinity embodies a ressentiment of self-optimisation that pursues a potential self that is more beautiful, and it promises that this version of the body will alleviate insecurity and suffering. In terms of Kaplan and Illouz's theory of sexual capital, looksmaxers replicate a notion of employability and personal excellence within how they understand their desirability, and they compete with others akin to how one might compete within a job market. The abstract morality of looksmaxing promises redemption if users exercise restraint and discipline through dieting and frequenting the gym, but also by way of intelligence, critical thought and self-efficacy while navigating the market of various cosmetic techniques. A large part of the emphasis upon intelligence is derived from the acknowledged risks of looksmaxing, which aligns with Dardot and Laval's description of the inherently savvy entrepreneur who assesses risks and notices opportunities to capitalise upon.[22] But the looksmaxing ressentiment is not purely a case of economic calculation as it is still embedded within a hope of salvation. Some of the language looksmaxers use takes on heavenly qualities; they describe the looksmaxing process as 'ascension' towards a better self. In combination, the ideas of looksmaxing masculinity intertwine the mechanisms of a marketplace with a grandiose moral notion of redemption found within beauty.

Looksmaxer masculinity exemplifies the tendency of Nietzsche's ressentiment to become vengeful against a perceived immorality that contradicts their principles. Looksmaxing's embrace of self-optimisation generates a desire for revenge against

a bad type of person that is ugly, stupid and unproductive. But this bad person is not necessarily just an exterior group, it is also a dynamic that strongly shapes actions inside looksmaxing subculture as well. At any moment, a slip-up can cause any member to fall into this derisory category. The 'immorality' of ugliness and stupidity also creates harsh self-reflection, and consequently the looksmaxer cannot escape the sad passions and remains stuck within the habits of self-loathing. This dynamic manifests within the written evisceration of other users; looksmaxers revel in the opportunity to cut one another down and dish out criticism as a form of justice against those who do not fulfil elite self-optimisation. Looksmaxers will often post pictures of post-op cosmetic surgeries of people who they believe have 'botched' their looks. The receptions range from cruel laughter and insults about lack of intellect to pity. This type of communally determined failure is sobering for some looksmaxers, who reflect upon the unintelligence of those undertaking the surgery. But for others, there is a perverse enjoyment in witnessing the downfall of the inadequate.

The unification of looksmaxers under an entrepreneurial rationale does not lead to a unity of perspectives between users. The marketplace structure of the forum fragments the userbase in a way that causes the looksmaxing community to continually aggravate and attack itself. Dardot and Laval's notion of the social field of self-interested entrepreneurs reveals a subtle market logic that generates competition between users. This logic undermines any shared vision of a looksmaxing aesthetic, and instead users are interlocked within a continual state of conflict regarding aesthetic superiority. Halpin et al. also notice looksmaxers' propensity for competition within their application of hegemonic masculinity, where they find that the objective beauty standards of the PSL scale cannot deliver on its promise of a shared metric, but instead act as a conduit for competition.[9] Within looksmax.org, the impasse of the marketplace in delivering a shared system of standards does not liberate the space, but only emboldens the masculinity that operates with entrepreneurial rationale to attack and punish what it deems inferior. The lifeblood of looksmax.org is not a harmonious vision of aesthetic perfection; it is a continually renewed state of antagonism as users inflict suffering via derision and denigration. In the research findings informing this argument, users shared their own desired horizons: Richard Ramirez's cheekbones; Emma Stone's sanpaku eyes; a 'slutty' feminine waist. But these personal projects for looksmaxing were continually attacked and indignantly defended: the user wanting Stone's eyes was mocked by other users who believed they were ugly; the user wanting a feminine waist was met with homophobic slurs. What these examples show is that the forum's marketplace structure maintains a field of personal projects, which renders the overall community aesthetically incompatible. The dynamics of posting, however, still follow a distinct pattern of ressentiment, and conflict between users is due to sad passions that are generated by striving for superiority under the ideals of beauty.

The division of looksmaxers as competitors is reinforced further by hostilities that constantly undermine the potential for collaboration between users. Whenever users post that they have made a personal breakthrough, commenters are quick to demand evidence via before and after photographs. Looksmaxers leap at the opportunity to scrutinise and criticise, leading to off-topic commentary on bodies and their inadequacy. At times the criticism is welcomed, as users want to know the truth of where they stand. But the enthusiasm that users express in attacking one another

also creates reluctance in sharing. In one instance where a user provided pictures, he received racist insults, was described as bloated and told he had asymmetrical lips, while one user said that his eye width was so ugly it was 'brutal.' However, this undermining of collaboration due to a preference for criticism extends to posts that are considered truthful. In cases where forum posters provided information that was widely accepted as truthful, they were met with criticism for stating information that was so obvious that it was insulting. These types of posts are referred to as 'water posts,' an abbreviation of the saying 'water is wet.' Posts that are considered 'water' reinforce a notion of masculine superiority in that they are technically considered truthful, but do not display looksmaxing excellence. Furthermore, on occasions where users express joy from their breakthroughs, few within the comment sections are happy to see them succeed. The revenge of Nietzsche's ressentiment resurfaces again as disgruntled commenters' hostility is motivated by jealousy and loathing. Upset by the success of other looksmaxers, these commenters leverage criticism as a form of 'justice.' They call into question legitimacy and try to poke holes in the logic of the poster's practice.

Deleuze's concept of continual modulation is present within the mechanical function of the forum. The forum is not an infinite scroll per se; it is a more rudimentary format that allows one to indefinitely browse older posts, but it mainly circulates new posts that are made each day. This flow of online content still functions through limitless deferral in that the horizon has no point of completion, and it also embodies the shifting mould of control society insofar as it is flexible and allows multiple forms of content to enter into the forum from other online spaces. The structural features of limitless deferral and shifting moulds create a constant churn within the space; the forum is constantly being connected to other areas of the internet to help achieve indefinite conditions. This structure gives rise to clashes as knowledge enters from the science of cosmetic surgery, the world of YouTube content creators and personal theories. The byproduct of this ephemeral nature of continual modulation is that the authority of the forum is continually undermined. The dynamics of the forum instead rely upon ressentiment to police boundaries and maintain consistency over the shifting sands of online content. Users swarm to attack content on the forum that they feel does not meet their own personal standards. Moderation is the only formal role that can have any definitive authority over what can and cannot be said, but looksmax.org's moderators are somewhat relaxed about their own rules. Although the forum rules specifically forbid Queer content, users who describe themselves as femboys and non-binary do occasionally make their way into the forum to discuss their own techniques of bodily augmentation. These users are subject to Queerphobia, which strangely does not stand out in terms of its brutality as the intensity of this style of reaction is a normative standard between looksmaxers across a wide range of disgusts and hatreds.

Hostility between looksmaxers is not only promoted by the conditions of masculine competition and the moving ground of continual modulation; it is also exacerbated by the blinding signs that looksmaxers consume as online content. Deleuze's critique of representation, for its risks of becoming detached and thus producing ressentiment, plays out in the forum within its economy of representation. Users are blinded by their ideal looksmaxing goals—signs that appear from too far away and detached from the body. The ideal notions of beauty render the current body inadequate, while the belief that the body can fulfil the ideal leads the looksmaxer down a pathway of sad passions;

they feel inferior and fail in the impossible venture of achieving ideal beauty. But looksmaxing discussion also blinds because it is vague, and users are trapped grasping at descriptions of off-screen activity. Users frequently demand evidence, but the vague nature of the forum's distant signs and their detachment from the movements that produce them ensure that such conditions are a non-starter. However, the looksmaxer's difficulty in searching for the movements that produce signs is not simply a case of misinformation. Authority, for the looksmaxer, is not about scientific rigour, but about whether the proposed techniques advance the looksmaxer's personal plan, which has already been structured by an ideal. Looksmaxing concepts such as mewing and bonesmashing are contentious, and while dispute occurs across perceived lines of objectivity, users are actually evaluating the methods' effectiveness in the venture of achieving ideal masculine beauty. This style of conflict combines both a blindness from afar, in terms of the ideal but also the obfuscation inherent to online exchange.

Interestingly, a great deal of engagement in the looksmaxing forum is derived from the blindness that signs from far away can produce. The forum capitalises on obfuscation rather than on precision. For the mechanisms of the forum, it is not important if the user achieves their looksmaxing objectives, so long as their ressentiment animates the forum with activity, which vague signs effectively promote. But it is not just the signs from far away; the signs from up close also goad people into contributing. Those who comment are typically not drawn in because they witness an exemplary post on effective looksmaxing practice, but provoked through a viscerally close sign that they simply cannot look past. In one case, a poster reported that he was in the early stages of liver failure due to the combination of hormones that he was experimenting with. Users are drawn in by the strong affects such a post creates, and they flood the comments with insults directed at the poster for his lack of intelligence in taking a nonsensical combination of hormones. In another case, a user lamented that his use of jawline sharpening gum had left him with an abnormally square face. Commenters both piled in to mock him, attacking him for falling for an 'obvious scam,' while some users criticised others for not understanding that it takes time and rest for the muscles to settle into a more normal shape. What these posts demonstrate is that the discussion is frequently reacting from signs up close that draw users in to participate. Whether signs induces disgust, anger or laughter, they contribute to the overall activity of the forum and generate engagement.

Deleuze's warning that control society will create a problem of becoming stuck and spread ressentiment is particularly compelling in the context of the looksmaxing forum. The forum is a quagmire that cancels out progress with its continual modulation and limitless deferral. But content within the forum is still engrossing to many for its signs and ressentiment that pertain to masculine ideals and entrepreneurial rationale. There is always something more to react to, something to pull one in to comment—a pointless capitalisation on ressentiment that has no off-ramp. While it would be foolish to presume that no one leaves the community, there is certainly no common theme of people reporting that their looksmaxing has been sufficiently achieved and they are now no longer in need of it. The only case in this research referencing an exit was a user asking to be banned because he was so addicted to looksmaxing content that he felt that he needed to be cut off by a moderator. When users recounted looksmaxing successes, it generated more looksmaxing investment as users became excited

about how much they could push looksmaxing further. While users undergo bodily changes and see this as transformational and celebrate their acquisition of status, there is nothing enduring about this newly gained confidence. Once the feelings of joy dissipate, the ressentiment returns to focus on inadequacy. Users remain trapped within the limitless deferral of online content consumption, and within this continual modulation, looksmaxing exposes the desires for bodily augmentation to these same indefinite conditions.

CONCLUSION

The study of looksmaxing is in its infancy, but this article as sought to offer insight into the broader contexts of self-optimisation, marketplace logic and employability that underpin looksmaxing masculinity. Deleuze's control society thesis and two of its crises clarify how marketplace logic is creating both stagnation, through continual modulation within computer networks, and conditions that are fertile for the spread of ressentiment. The intention behind this theoretical perspective is to help explain why computer networking has revitalised and popularised the pursuit of masculine ideals in a way that is undoubtedly shaped by the emergent conditions of neoliberal capitalism. This article's analysis shows that looksmaxing is deeply embedded within a neoliberal culture of self-optimisation that divides up social practice into a mutual state of elaborating personal plans. Such fragmentation generates fierce competition and hostility between users. Continual modulation within the mechanisms of the forum removes any possibility of completion. It also introduces a flexibility that allows outside content to penetrate the forum, placing the userbase in the position of needing to police the boundaries of looksmaxing content. These forms of hostility are exacerbated by the blinding abstract signs that they are constantly exposed to within the medium of online exchange. Signs presented to looksmaxers appear either too far away—vague and detached from the movements that create them—or they appear from too close and provoke passionate reactions. In response to these conditions of stagnation, looksmaxing masculinity reinstates direction through ressentiment and ideal masculine beauty, but in actuality traps users within the sad passions and suspends them within the indefinite content cycle of control society.

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