

Maxxing Culture: A Preliminary Conceptual Mapping

Dag Øivind Madsen 

Department of Business, Marketing and Law, USN School of Business, University of South-Eastern Norway,
3511 Hønefoss, Norway; dag.oivind.madsen@usn.no

Abstract

This paper offers a preliminary conceptual mapping of maxxing culture by treating “-maxxing” not as a series of isolated internet trends but as a platform-native grammar of self-optimization. The argument distinguishes three interacting dimensions: linguistic, through a productive suffix that can attach to a wide range of domains; cultural-processual, through an ideal-typical cycle of diagnosis, intervention, evaluation or display, and escalation; and platform-mediated, through systems of visibility, comparison, metrics, recommendation, and monetization. The paper situates maxxing within longer histories of self-help, self-tracking, neoliberal self-management, gaming-derived min-maxing, and platformed language. It develops a typology of maxxing variants, identifies five modes of optimization, and traces the suffix’s movement from subcultural jargon into wellness markets, corporate discourse, policy language, and state communication. The analysis also examines AI face-rating apps as a productized illustration of the maxxing cycle and considers how clinical accounts of body-image harm complement a cultural analysis of the platforms, markets, and norms that can shape and reward such behavior. Particular attention is given to how maxxing can reproduce inequalities of gender, race, and class while presenting optimization as broadly available. Drawing on a conceptual synthesis and critical cultural mapping of academic research, public online discourse, journalism, institutional materials, Google Trends data, and selected platform, app, and commercial materials, the paper argues that maxxing can turn selfhood into a modular, competitive, and perpetually incomplete project.

Keywords: maxxing culture; self-optimization; digital sociology; platform culture; algospeak; memetic linguistics; self-tracking; influencer culture; engineered self

1. Introduction

Across digital culture, a distinctive vocabulary of self-improvement has coalesced around the suffix “-maxxing.” Terms such as looksmaxxing, gymmaxxing, moneymaxxing, sleepmaxxing, healthmaxxing, stylemaxxing, rizzmaxxing, techmaxxing, productivity-maxxing, and statusmaxxing circulate across TikTok, YouTube, Reddit, X, Discord, image boards, lifestyle media, and influencer content [1–3]. At first pass, these terms might appear to be fragmented slang or niche microtrends. This paper argues they are something more coherent: expressions of a grammar. The paper treats these expressions as a generative schema through which selfhood can be organized around a platform-native demand not merely to improve, but to maximize.

The term ‘grammar’ is used deliberately, but the argument involves three analytically distinct dimensions rather than three identical uses of the concept. At the linguistic dimension, ‘-maxxing’ functions relatively literally as a productive word-formation schema: it



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attaches to nouns, adjectives, acronyms, and complex phrases to produce new and readily interpretable optimization terms. This understanding is consistent with work on morphological productivity and construction morphology, in which recurring form–meaning pairings can operate as templates for generating novel expressions [4–7]. At the cultural-processual dimension, grammar is used in the broader sociological sense of an organizing schema that makes some sequences of interpretation and action more intelligible than others. Here, maxxing recurrently links perceived deficiency or improvability to intervention, evaluation or display, and further optimization, resembling sociological uses of ‘cultural grammar’ to describe shared principles that organize sense-making [8]. The third dimension is platform-mediated rather than grammatical in a narrow linguistic sense: visibility, metrics, comparison, recommendation systems, and markets provide infrastructural conditions through which the linguistic and processual dimensions are intensified and circulated [9]. Platform-native maxxing is therefore understood as the interaction of a productive linguistic schema, a recurring cultural-processual logic, and a particular set of platform conditions.

Figure 1 summarizes these dimensions as mutually interacting rather than sequential. The linguistic schema makes new maxxing constructions easy to generate; the cultural-processual dimension gives many of those constructions an optimization logic; and platform conditions amplify, compare, circulate, and monetize them. Evidence for one dimension does not automatically establish the others.

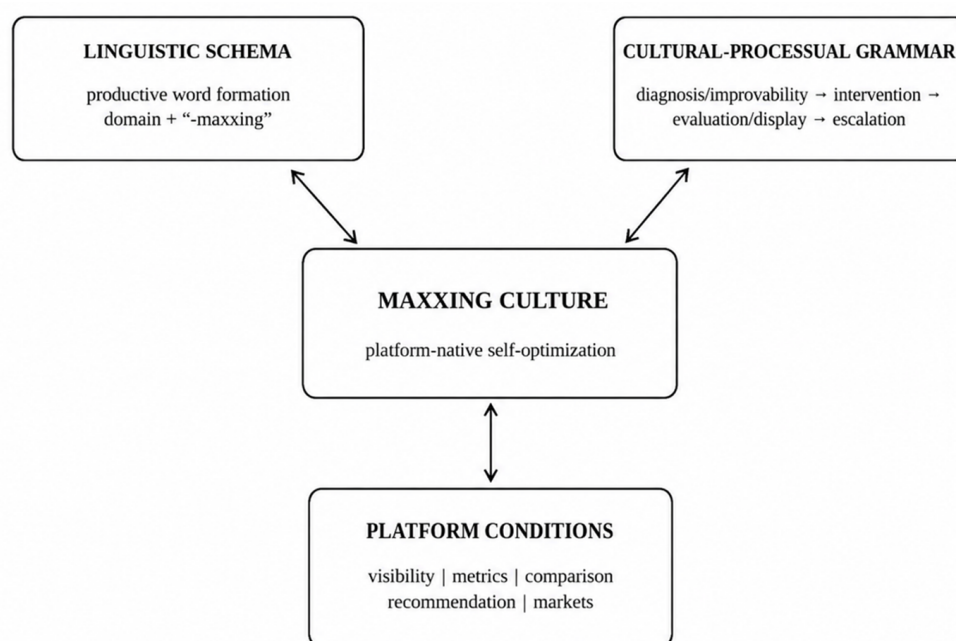


Figure 1. Three interacting dimensions of the maxxing grammar.

Treating these dimensions separately also makes the argument more testable. Evidence of novel and readily intelligible ‘-maxxing’ formations supports the linguistic claim but does not by itself demonstrate a shared optimization process. Extensive ironic, promotional, or metaphorical usage without an associated orientation toward intervention or self-improvement may therefore strengthen the linguistic-productivity claim while weakening the processual one. Likewise, describing maxxing as platform-native does not mean that the vocabulary can exist only on social media. Its migration into journalism, marketing, policy, or everyday speech may instead indicate institutionalization of a form whose contemporary circulation was accelerated by platforms. The broader grammar thesis would be weakened if novel constructions ceased to be readily intelligible, if ‘-maxxing’ became

a largely frozen set of lexical items, or if most uses became detached from any optimization meaning. Durability is therefore treated as an empirical question rather than assumed from the outset.

The case for treating “-maxxing” as a grammar rests on several converging patterns: continuing production of novel and intelligible coinages, diffusion across otherwise unrelated domains, movement into commercial and institutional registers, and formal recognition of the suffix as a productive linguistic element [10]. None of these developments guarantees long-term durability. Together, however, they indicate that “-maxxing” has moved beyond a fixed set of subcultural expressions and now functions as a widely reusable schema. Section 5 examines this trajectory alongside search patterns showing both expanding public attention and continuing uncertainty about what “maxxing” means.

The paper also foregrounds a dimension much commentary on maxxing overlooks: inequality. The grammar presents itself as broadly available—almost any domain can be optimized and almost anyone can adopt the vocabulary. This apparent openness can nevertheless obscure substantial inequalities. In particular variants, standards of optimization are gendered, racialized, and classed; access to optimization resources is uneven; and competitive narratives can translate structural advantages and disadvantages into apparent differences in individual effort. These relationships vary across domains and uses, but they are important to understanding the social conditions within which the grammar operates.

The paper proceeds as follows. Sections 2 and 3 establish the analytical approach and genealogical context. Section 4 maps the major variants. Section 5 examines the grammar’s generativity, mainstreaming, and institutional uptake. Sections 6 and 7 develop the process model—including its productization through AI face-rating apps—and the five modes of optimization. Section 8 analyzes structural drivers. Section 9 develops the inequality argument. Section 10 examines tensions and contradictions, including the relationship between cultural and clinical accounts of maxxing. The conclusion assesses the contribution and outlines future research.

2. Analytical Approach and Scope

2.1. Conceptual Synthesis and Critical Cultural Mapping

This article uses conceptual synthesis and critical cultural mapping to develop and delimit a theoretical account of maxxing culture. It does not seek to estimate the prevalence of maxxing practices or to provide a representative account of platform users. Instead, it brings heterogeneous public materials into dialogue in order to identify recurring linguistic forms, optimization mechanisms, modes of intervention, and patterns of cultural circulation.

The materials serve different analytical purposes. Peer-reviewed research is used primarily to establish theoretical mechanisms and existing empirical findings concerning self-optimization, self-tracking, looksmaxxing, body image, platform visibility, inequality, and related phenomena. Public online discourse and journalism are used to identify emerging vocabulary, cultural framing, and visible examples of circulation. Dictionary and institutional materials provide evidence of lexical and organizational uptake. Google Trends provides an indicator of relative search attention and related-query composition. Primary corporate and app materials document how particular organizations describe products, services, and campaigns. Commercial trend reports provide indicative claims about circulation but are not treated as independent estimates of behavioral prevalence.

The contemporary mapping concentrates on English-language materials available up to August 2026, with particular attention to the period in which maxxing terminology expanded into wider public discourse. Earlier scholarship is used genealogically to situate maxxing within longer histories of self-help, self-tracking, subjectification, quantifi-

cation, and platform culture. Sources were identified iteratively through targeted scholarly and web searches, citation tracing, searches for specific maxx variants, and follow-up searches prompted by emerging cases. Because this is a conceptual mapping rather than a systematic review, no claim of exhaustive coverage is made.

2.2. Analytical Procedure and Evidentiary Hierarchy

The conceptual mapping developed iteratively around two analytical distinctions. One concerns the domain or object being optimized and informs the illustrative typology in Section 4. The other concerns the mechanism through which optimization is pursued and informs the behavioral, symbolic, biological, economic, and algorithmic modes developed in Section 7. Recurring sequences linking perceived deficiency or improvability, intervention, evaluation or display, and renewed optimization also informed the ideal-typical cycle developed in Section 6. These frameworks are interpretive devices for organizing a fast-changing cultural formation rather than categories derived from formal coding or statistical clustering. The distinctions were developed through an iterative movement between the reviewed materials and existing perspectives on self-optimization, platform culture, and self-presentation rather than through a purely inductive or deductive procedure.

The evidentiary status of the materials also differs. Peer-reviewed studies can establish documented associations or practices within the populations examined. Primary corporate, institutional, and app materials can establish what organizations publicly say or offer, but not whether their claims are accurate or representative. Journalism can document cultural visibility, controversy, and mainstream uptake. Google Trends indicates relative search attention rather than behavioral prevalence. Commercial analytics provide proprietary estimates that are treated as indicative rather than independently validated measurements. This hierarchy keeps evidence of circulation separate from evidence of behavior, effects, technological design, and causality. Table 1 summarizes this evidentiary architecture.

Table 1. Evidentiary architecture of the conceptual mapping.

Material	Primary Analytical Use	Can Support	Main Limitation
Peer-reviewed research	Theory and empirical findings	Documented mechanisms, associations, practices and harms	Research remains concentrated on looksmaxxing
Google Trends	Search attention	Relative visibility and query composition	Does not measure participation
Journalism	Public framing and circulation	Mainstreaming, controversies, emerging vocabulary	Not representative
Dictionaries/institutional materials	Formal uptake	Lexical and institutional recognition	Does not establish behavior or effects
Corporate/app materials	Organizational self-description	Campaigns, features, pricing and stated purposes	Promotional claims require independent validation
Commercial analytics	Indicative circulation	Provider-reported search or engagement patterns	Methods may be proprietary
Interpretive examples	Conceptual illustration	Range and portability	Cannot establish frequency

2.3. Analytical Scope and Boundaries

The mapping distinguishes four kinds of material within the wider maxx ecology. The primary analytical object consists of genuine ‘-maxxing’ constructions, such as looksmaxxing, sleepmaxxing, moneymaxxing, fibermaxxing, or context-maxxing. A sec-

ond category consists of semantically adjacent practices and expressions, such as aura farming—the deliberate cultivation of an impressive or seemingly effortless persona—which participate in similar optimization logics without formally employing the suffix. A third category comprises precursor or associated subcultural vocabulary, including terms such as mogging, broadly referring to visibly outclassing another person in appearance or status, and the PSL attractiveness-rating system. Finally, some formations are primarily ironic, promotional, or parodic adaptations, in which the suffix is attached to mundane or commercially convenient activities.

These distinctions matter because linguistic membership and cultural proximity are not the same thing. Adjacent practices can illuminate the cultural ecology within which maxxing operates without themselves constituting evidence of morphological productivity. Likewise, a promotional construction such as “cheesecake-maxxing” demonstrates recognition of the linguistic template without necessarily implying a substantive self-optimization practice. The typology therefore centers on recognizable “-maxxing” formations while drawing selectively on adjacent and promotional vocabulary to clarify genealogy, diffusion, and semantic change.

The mapping focuses primarily on “-maxxing” constructions that are sufficiently visible in public discourse to illustrate how the suffix travels across domains and acquires different meanings and uses. Examples were selected for their conceptual relevance and their ability to illuminate variation in the grammar rather than through a formal sampling or screening procedure. Adjacent expressions such as mogging or aura farming are included selectively where they clarify the genealogy or wider cultural ecology of maxxing, while isolated or idiosyncratic coinages are not treated as equivalent evidence of broader circulation. The resulting map is therefore illustrative rather than exhaustive or frequency-ranked.

2.4. Google Trends

Google Trends was used as a supplementary indicator of public search attention rather than as a measure of maxxing participation. The term “maxxing” was entered as a search term rather than a Google Trends topic, without quotation marks, using the worldwide geographical setting, All categories, and Web Search for the period 10 July 2025 to 10 July 2026. Data were retrieved on 10 July 2026. Figure 2 uses the exported interest-over-time series. Google Trends normalizes search interest relative to the selected geography and period rather than reporting absolute search volume. This descriptive use and reporting strategy follows methodological recommendations to specify the search input, geographical setting, time period, search category, search type, and retrieval date, while avoiding interpretation of normalized Google Trends values as direct measures of population prevalence [11–13].

The related-query analysis used the exported Top related queries for the same search configuration. Spelling variants and colloquial formulations were retained as returned by Google Trends rather than manually consolidated. The fifteen highest-interest related queries were retained together with Google Trends’ separate change indicator where available. The word cloud was generated from the exported query/value pairs using ChatGPT 5.6; generative AI was not used to infer, rescale, supplement, or alter the quantitative values. The leading related queries and their Google Trends values are reproduced, allowing the visual representation to be checked against the underlying values reported by Google Trends.

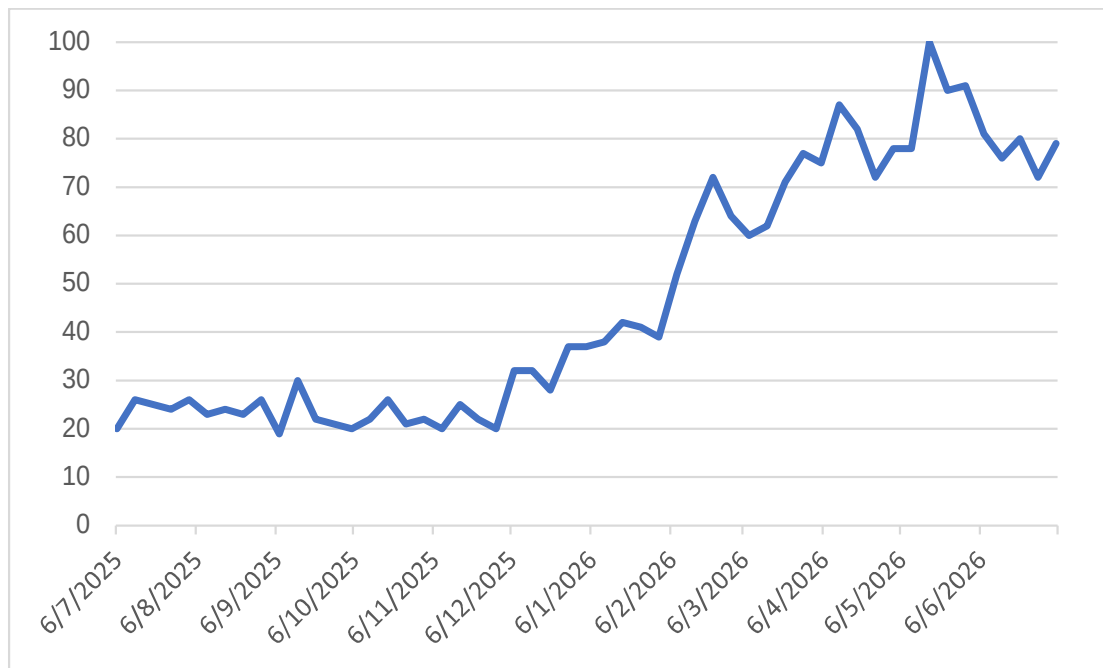


Figure 2. Worldwide Google search interest in “maxxing,” 10 July 2025–10 July 2026. Note: Google Trends reports normalized search interest on a scale from 0 to 100, with 100 representing peak relative search interest within the selected period and geography. Source: Google Trends, worldwide, All categories, Web Search, retrieved 10 July 2026.

3. Genealogies of Optimization

3.1. From Self-Help to Self-Engineering

Maxxing culture belongs to a longer history of self-improvement, but it is not simply old self-help in new packaging. The content of self-improvement changed over time. Nineteenth-century self-help, exemplified by Samuel Smiles’s “Self-Help,” tied advancement to character, conduct, thrift, work, and perseverance [14]. By the early twentieth century, advice literature increasingly emphasized personality, interpersonal effectiveness, and social influence, as illustrated by Dale Carnegie’s “How to Win Friends and Influence People” [15]. Susman [16] describes this wider transformation as a movement from a “culture of character” to a “culture of personality.” Maxxing inherits elements of both traditions: the discipline and effort associated with character culture, and the public performance and strategic self-presentation associated with personality culture. It translates both into modular attributes that can be evaluated through platform metrics.

Self-help traditions have long been linked to the production of governable subjects encouraged to treat social problems as matters of personal conduct [17]. Contemporary confidence culture extends this logic, inviting subjects—particularly women—to cultivate market-compatible self-belief in response to structural disadvantage [18,19]. Earlier makeover and wellbeing cultures also anticipated the modular logic of maxxing, recasting dissatisfaction as a prompt for self-invention and turning wellbeing from a condition to be supported into a project to be pursued and demonstrated [20,21]. Maxxing intensifies that pattern, making reinvention more explicit, more domain-specific, more competitive, and more publicly visible.

Sociological work on self-optimization helps distinguish this formation. Nehring and Röcke [22] define self-optimization as discourses and practices that encourage individuals to pursue the best possible version of their bodies, minds, emotions, and conduct through ongoing self-engagement, rational control, and feedback. Maxxing is a platform-native

and linguistically condensed version of this logic, marked by suffix productivity, memetic circulation, and a strong tendency for improvement to become evaluable, comparable, and, in many platform-mediated forms, publicly displayed. The language of self-optimization has been available for decades; what is distinctive is that a single portable suffix can now perform this work across an unusually wide range of domains.

The key conceptual shift is from self-help to self-engineering. Self-help suggests guidance, motivation, and growth; self-engineering suggests diagnosis, modularity, intervention, measurement, iteration, and display. The self becomes a set of improvable components: face, body, skin, hair, health, finances, style, charisma, productivity, status, and online presence. Each can become a target of intervention, evaluation, tracking, or display. This is why maxxing can usefully be described as self-engineering rather than conventional self-improvement: its characteristic orientation is toward optimizing discrete attributes rather than pursuing holistic personal development.

The shift from self-help to self-engineering should not be understood as either purely internal or simply imposed from outside. Standards of improvement are socially supplied through peer communities, influencers, platform metrics, commercial products, professional advice, and wider cultural ideals, but individuals actively interpret and act upon those standards. Foucault's concept of 'technologies of the self' is useful here because it draws attention to practices through which people actively work upon themselves using culturally available techniques rather than treating power as something that acts only from outside [23]. Maxxing intensifies this relationship: externally circulating standards become resources for self-observation, classification, and intervention. Section 8 returns to the question of how such standards become internalized, negotiated, and sometimes resisted.

3.2. Quantified Selfhood and the Datafied Body

Self-tracking technologies have normalized monitoring and adjustment that connect personal wellbeing to datafied self-management. Lupton's [24] account of the quantified self shows how health, fitness, sleep, mood, and productivity are rendered legible through metrics, routines, and feedback loops, turning the body into an object of personal analytics readable through dashboards and algorithmic interpretation [25,26]. In workplaces, quantified-self practices intersect with neoliberal expectations that individuals measure and optimize their own performance [27].

Maxxing can therefore be understood as a vernacular extension of datafication. Ruckenstein and Schüll describe datafication as the conversion of qualitative aspects of health and everyday life into quantified information across clinical, institutional, and self-care settings. Maxxing extends this orientation beyond health: attractiveness, social presence, productivity, and status also become objects of scoring, comparison, and intervention [28].

Maxxing culture carries these tendencies beyond formal tracking devices. Alongside sleep scores and step counts, the relevant metric may be a facial rating, a body measurement, a follower count, or a perceived social response; the recurring orientation is that improvement should become evaluable, comparable, repeatable, and actionable, whether through private metrics, external judgment, or public display. The most literal expression of this datafication has now arrived as AI face-rating applications, which convert a selfie into numerical scores for symmetry, jawline, and overall attractiveness. Section 6 returns to these as a productized illustration of the maxxing cycle.

3.3. From Min-Maxing to Platformed Suffix Culture

The term "-maxxing" also has a gaming-derived genealogy. Commentators link it to "min-maxing," a role-playing-game strategy in which a player maximizes desirable attributes while minimizing weaknesses. The analogy is useful: min-maxing treats a char-

acter as a bundle of attributes to be optimized, and maxxng applies a similar logic to the body, identity, and social life. Platform culture has reinforced this transposition by normalizing game-like systems of scoring, feedback, and comparison [29]. This is a partial genealogy rather than a settled derivation; the exact path from gaming language to internet suffix is not linear.

The more immediate development appears in online subcultures, where the suffix entered wide circulation through manosphere and incel discourse. Prazmo [5] traces “-maxx” as a newly productive derivational element, with “looksmaxxing” as an early prototype. The key development is the suffix’s detachment from any single domain: it attaches to nouns, adjectives, acronyms, and compound phrases, making anything optimizable. The recent appearance of “context-maxxing” in a Brookings Institution working paper on human-AI interaction—describing strategies for maximizing user control over context in generative AI environments [30]—illustrates the portability clearly: the term has moved from youth subculture into policy discourse while retaining the same logic of domain identification and strategic maximization. The mainstreaming of incel-derived terms such as “maxxing” and “mogging” has been documented through irony, meme circulation, and wider uptake [31,32].

Seen through construction morphology, the important feature is not simply the recurrence of the string ‘maxx’ but the emergence of a productive pairing between form and meaning. Productive morphological schemas allow speakers to interpret and generate novel formations beyond a fixed inventory of existing words [4,6,7]. ‘-Maxxing’ increasingly behaves in this manner: a previously unseen formation can often be decoded because the suffix supplies an instruction to maximize, intensify, or strategically privilege the preceding domain. Its circulation also resembles the template-based logic of internet memes, whose cultural power derives partly from recognizable forms that invite imitation, variation, and transformation [33]. This helps explain why serious, commercial, ironic, and parodic forms can coexist without making the suffix unintelligible.

This productivity fits wider patterns of platformed language. Work on platform vernaculars similarly shows how recognizable communicative styles emerge through repeated interaction between platform affordances and user practices [34]. Maxxing differs in being unusually portable across platforms, but its circulation still depends on such platform-shaped conventions of compression, visibility, imitation, and reuse. Aleksic [35] describes algospeak as language shaped by platform pressures, moderation dynamics, virality, and in-group signaling, and Madsen [36] argues that platform-native language circulates as memetic forms: compressed, iterative, optimized for remixing. The “-maxxing” suffix is a clear example. It can attach to sleep, money, skin, gym, AI, aura, or productivity, and the resulting term remains legible because the suffix carries an implicit instruction: optimize this. The form is self-teaching. Where “self-improvement” is broad but not generative as a suffix, “-maxxing” produces new words, jokes, routines, identities, and content categories. Its productivity has since been formally recognized by lexicographers, a development that Section 5 takes as evidence that the suffix functions as a grammar rather than a single coinage.

4. Mapping Maxxing Culture

4.1. An Illustrative Typology of Variants

Table 2 maps maxxng constructions according to the domain or object being optimized. It therefore answers the question what is being maxxng? rather than how is optimization pursued? The mechanism-based modes developed in Section 7 answer the second question. The two frameworks are deliberately non-equivalent: looksmaxxing may combine behavioral, symbolic, biological, and algorithmic modes, while a single mode may

occur across multiple domains. The typology is illustrative rather than exhaustive and is intended to demonstrate cross-domain portability rather than the relative prevalence of individual variants.

Table 2. Illustrative typology of “-maxxing” variants.

Cluster	Examples	What the Cluster Shows
Appearance maxxing	looksmaxxing, skinmaxxing, jawmaxxing, heightmaxxing	The body becomes ranked components
Fitness and physique maxxing	gymmaxxing, leanmaxxing, testosterone-maxxing	Discipline can slide into biological intervention
Style and aura maxxing	stylemaxxing, smellmaxxing, auramaxxing	Status signals become technical work
Health and bio-optimization	sleepmaxxing, fibermaxxing, proteinmaxxing, fertility-maxxing	Wellness becomes maximization
Economic and career maxxing	moneymaxxing, careermaxxing, leadershipmaxxing	Economic position is framed as self-management
Cognitive and technological maxxing	AI-maxxing, context-maxxing, tokenmaxxing	Technical systems become optimization domains
Social and personality maxxing	rizzmaxxing, personalitymaxxing, jestermaxxing	Sociality becomes technique
Ironic and everyday maxxing	cozymaxxing, jazzmaxxing, happy-hour-maxxing	Normalization occurs through parody
Extreme or harmful maxxing	hardmaxxing, surgerymaxxing, tanmaxxing	The grammar’s edge becomes bodily risk

Note: The examples are illustrative rather than exhaustive. Variants differ substantially in their visibility, seriousness, and relationship to harm. Rizzmaxxing refers broadly to efforts to improve charisma or social/romantic appeal, while jestermaxxing refers to cultivating humor or an entertaining persona as a social strategy.

The public circulation of these terms has been noted in lifestyle journalism; Dazed described 2024 as “the year of maxxing,” pointing to sleepmaxxing, smellmaxxing, and potassiummaxxing as markers of a broader self-optimization moment [1]. Such journalism is not prevalence data, but it is evidence of semantic broadening.

4.2. Looksmaxxing as Anchor, Not Boundary

Looksmaxxing deserves special attention because it is highly visible and remains the most extensively researched maxxing variant, and because it makes the grammar unusually clear. The face and body are divided into components (e.g., facial symmetry, jawline definition, skin quality, hair, height) and each is compared to idealized standards, assigned a value, and targeted for intervention. A recent clinical review distinguishes softmaxxing (low-risk lifestyle practices), hardmaxxing (medical or surgical intervention), and extreme practices such as bonesmashing, noting that recurrent psychosocial themes—body dissatisfaction, appearance-based comparison, and traits overlapping with body dysmorphic disorder—run across all three [37]. This clinical taxonomy maps closely onto the modes of optimization developed in Section 7. The most dangerous practices have drawn medical attention in their own right; clinicians have issued urgent warnings about bonesmashing, the repeated application of force to facial bones in pursuit of a sharper jaw [38]. Medical concern is also extending to pharmacological forms of appearance optimization; recent dermatological commentary has highlighted social-media promotion of unregulated Melanotan products in connection with looksmaxxing practices [39].

Recent research treats looksmaxxing as a site where health, lookism, masculine demoralization, self-enhancement, and surgical fantasy converge [40–42]. Recent critical-psychological work has also interpreted looksmaxxing through the mechanization of the body and contemporary ideals of toughness, linking intensive bodily optimization to wider cultural patterns involving masculinity and the management or avoidance of emotion [43]. Sociologists of masculinity situate it within a wider intensification of male appearance work, or aesthetic labor, among young men [44], while the developmental-health literature identifies adolescent boys and young men as an important population for understanding muscle dysmorphia [45]. Fitspiration content, which presents itself as motivational, has likewise been associated with body dissatisfaction and appearance comparison among younger users, with internalization of thin and muscular ideals shaping how exposure translates into dissatisfaction [46,47]. Looksmaxxing is the grammar’s anchor rather than its entire object: it makes the optimization logic maximally visible, but the paper’s focus is the wider portability of the suffix, which, as the next section shows, has carried the grammar well beyond the communities that produced it.

5. Generativity, Mainstreaming, and Institutionalization

At the linguistic dimension, the clearest implication of the grammar thesis is productivity: novel “-maxxing” constructions should remain intelligible as the suffix attaches to new bases. A separate sociological question concerns diffusion: whether those constructions remain confined to their originating subcultures or move into new commercial, institutional, and everyday registers. Both patterns are visible in the materials reviewed here. The suffix continues to generate novel formations, while wellness industries, corporate marketing, lexicographers, journalists, and state institutions increasingly use or recognize the form. This section examines these two processes without treating evidence for one as automatic evidence for the other.

The evidence in this section is documentary rather than causal, and different materials are used for different purposes. Dictionary entries and institutional communications document lexical or organizational uptake; journalism documents public framing and cultural visibility; primary corporate materials document actual promotional uses; Google Trends indicates relative search attention; and commercial trend reports provide proprietary estimates of circulation. None of these sources alone establishes how many people participate in maxxing practices or how they interpret them.

5.1. *The Velocity of Coinage*

At the linguistic dimension, productivity provides the most direct evidence for the grammar claim. Rather than consisting of a fixed vocabulary, “-maxxing” operates as a schema that speakers can extend to new cases. The “-maxxing” suffix now displays exactly this behavior across registers that have nothing in common except the optimization logic the suffix supplies. Recent coinages include fibermaxxing, proteinmaxxing, careermaxxing, leadershipmaxxing, fertility-maxxing, happy-hour-maxxing, and context-maxxing—terms drawn from nutrition, management, reproductive health, leisure, and AI policy. Merriam-Webster’s own usage examples span this range, from happy hour-maxxing to fertility-maxxing to deliberately absurd one-off coinages [10]. The suffix attaches to almost anything and remains legible because it carries its instruction with it.

The growing visibility of the grammar is also evident in search behavior. Figure 2 shows worldwide Google search interest in “maxxing” over the twelve-month period ending in July 2026. Interest remained relatively modest during the second half of 2025, rose sharply from early 2026, and reached its highest point in May. The pattern does not

measure the adoption of maxxng practices, but it does indicate that the term moved rapidly into wider public attention.

Rising attention was accompanied by a heterogeneous related-query field. Table 3 reports the fifteen highest-interest related queries returned by Google Trends, while Figure 3 provides a visual representation of the wider query field. Two of the three leading queries—“maxxing meaning” and “what is maxxng”—are explicitly definitional, indicating that growing circulation of the vocabulary coexists with considerable uncertainty about its meaning. At the same time, looksmaxxing remains highly prominent, while searches involving jester maxxng, friction maxxng, China maxxng, token maxxng, and other variants illustrate the suffix’s movement across increasingly heterogeneous domains. The table therefore captures both the continuing importance of looksmaxxing and the broader generativity of the maxxng grammar.

Table 3. Fifteen highest-interest Top related queries for “maxxing,” worldwide, 10 July 2025–10 July 2026.

Rank	Related Query	Relative Search Interest	Change	Analytical Signal
1	maxxing meaning	100	+10%	Definitional/metalinguistic
2	looks maxxng	72	−20%	Core appearance variant
3	what is maxxng	65	0%	Definitional/metalinguistic
4	jester	30	+1100%	Adjacent query
5	jester maxxng	30	+1350%	Social/personality variant
6	maxng	29	−20%	Spelling/orthographic variant
7	melt maxxng	28	+550%	Emergent maxxng variant
8	maxxing meme	22	−40%	Memetic/metalinguistic
9	look maxxng	20	−30%	Appearance/spelling variant
10	friction maxxng	19	Breakout	Emergent maxxng variant
11	china maxxng	18	+1000%	Cultural/national variant
12	looksmaxxing	17	−20%	Core appearance variant
13	token maxxng	17	Breakout	AI/workplace variant
14	face maxxng	16	−30%	Appearance variant
15	what does maxxng mean	15	+20%	Definitional/metalinguistic

Note: Relative search interest reproduces the normalized values in the Google Trends export, with 100 representing the highest value among the returned related queries. “Change” reproduces the change field in the export; “Breakout” is retained as reported by Google Trends. Spelling variants and adjacent searches are retained rather than consolidated. The “Analytical signal” column is author-coded for interpretive purposes and is not a Google Trends classification. Related-query data indicate patterns of search attention rather than behavioral prevalence. Source: Google Trends, worldwide, All categories, Web Search, retrieved 10 July 2026.

These Google Trends patterns are broadly consistent with proprietary social-listening analyses, although the resulting estimates should be treated as indicative rather than independently validated measurements. For example, one trend-tracking analysis reported looksmaxxing at roughly 301,000 monthly United States searches in March 2026, more than triple the next-largest related term, mewing, at 90,500, and noted that eight related search terms had broken out within the same six-month window [48]. A separate media-intelligence analysis reported a 96% increase in mentions of maxxng terms and a 208% increase in engagement between 1 January and 25 May 2026. In its 4000-post sample, 64% of maxxng uses were unrelated to appearance [49]. These figures should be read cautiously: search volume and mention counts measure attention rather than practice, and

commercial services have incentives to dramatize growth. The simultaneous proliferation of intelligible formations across unrelated domains is nevertheless consistent with productive morphology rather than a fixed lexical inventory [5].



Figure 3. Word cloud of Google Trends Top related queries for “maxxing,” worldwide, 10 July 2025–10 July 2026. Note: Word size reflects the relative values returned for Top related queries in Google Trends. Spelling variants and colloquial formulations are retained as returned. Color is decorative and carries no analytical meaning. Search queries indicate patterns of public attention rather than behavioral prevalence. The word cloud was generated by the author using ChatGPT 5.6 from the exported query/value pairs; generative AI did not infer, rescale, supplement, or alter quantitative values. The fifteen highest-interest queries and their reported values are reproduced in Table 3. Source: Google Trends, worldwide, All categories, Web Search, retrieved 10 July 2026.

The 2026 coinages confirm the range. Chinamaxxing names the wholesale adoption of perceived Chinese lifestyle habits by young Americans, extending the grammar to national and cultural identity [50]. Tokenmaxxing names a corporate practice: ranking employees by their consumption of AI tokens and treating usage volume as a proxy for productivity [51]. The United States Department of Defense has described its own priorities as “lethalitymaxxing” [52,53]. A suffix that attaches to skincare, cultural identity, workplace metrics, and military doctrine within a single year is not merely circulating as a meme; it is also operating as a reusable schema. Tokenmaxxing is especially useful analytically because it illustrates a recurring tension within optimization cultures: a measurable input can become the target of maximization even when its relationship to the desired outcome is uncertain.

An especially revealing boundary case appeared in mainstream business journalism in August 2026. Writing about the convenience economy, a *Fortune* journalist explicitly coined ‘me-maxxing’ to describe maximizing personal time by reducing routine social interactions enabled by delivery apps, self-checkout, and other convenience technologies [54]. Unlike cases in which journalists merely report existing slang, this is an openly announced new coinage. It therefore provides particularly clear evidence of linguistic productivity: the suffix can be recruited spontaneously to name a newly framed phenomenon and remain

immediately intelligible. At the same time, ‘me-maxxing’ does not map neatly onto every stage of the optimization cycle, reinforcing the need to distinguish the linguistic grammar from the stronger processual claim.

5.2. Lexical Legitimation

Further support for the grammar argument comes from lexical recognition of “-maxxing” as a productive suffix. Merriam-Webster carries a slang entry for the suffix, defining it as the practice of optimizing a specific aspect of one’s life, often to an extreme degree, and noting that it can attach to virtually any domain [10]. The entry is notable not for recording a word but for recording a productive derivational element—a schema rather than a term. This formalizes precisely the claim this paper advances: that the analytical object is not any single variant but the generative system that produces them all. Mainstream metalinguistic attention preceded the dictionary; The New York Times Magazine’s language column had already identified “-maxxing” as the suffix that instructs its users to optimize everything [55]. The Merriam-Webster entry also documents a tonal shift, noting that contemporary usage frequently carries a self-aware or tongue-in-cheek quality. Such irony is strong evidence of shared linguistic recognition, although it is not necessarily evidence of substantive optimization practice: one can parody a form only once its meaning has become sufficiently recognizable.

5.3. Commercial Appropriation and Brand Use

Commercial uptake has now moved beyond selling products associated with optimization and into explicit appropriation of the maxxing grammar itself. By August 2026, Coffee [56] reported in *The Wall Street Journal* that Marriott had promoted Labor Day travel as ‘weekend maxxing,’ Harry’s had described a razor through ‘jawmaxxing,’ The Cheesecake Factory had floated ‘cheesecake-maxxing,’ Carl’s Jr. had launched a Spicy Chicken Maxx, and CeraVe had used a parody ‘looksmaxxing protocol’ to advertise skincare [56]. These cases span hospitality, grooming, restaurants, fast food, and skincare. Their importance lies less in any individual campaign than in the fact that marketers assume audiences can decode the suffix without explanation. In these cases, the grammar has become recognizable advertising shorthand.

Primary corporate materials confirm several of the campaign uses identified in this reporting. Carl’s Jr. built an August campaign around the injunction to ‘Raise Your Standards to the MAXX,’ linking its Spicy Chicken Maxx to a broader narrative of refusing to settle. Journelle Skin goes further, defining ‘Dermmaxxing™’ as a portmanteau of dermatology and maxxing and presenting it as the organizing philosophy for an evidence-based skincare and treatment program [57,58]. In such cases, maxxing is no longer simply language attached to products from outside; it has entered brand naming, campaign architecture, and service positioning.

Commercial appropriation can also operate through parody rather than endorsement. Purely Elizabeth’s 2026 national campaign for Protein Ancient Grain Granola explicitly lampooned ‘protein-maxxing’ and the proliferation of protein-enhanced products. The campaign was the company’s largest media investment behind a product launch and ran across television, streaming, paid social, programmatic advertising, and outdoor media [59]. The example is analytically useful because irony does not place the brand outside the grammar: the campaign still depends upon audiences recognizing the maxxing frame in order for the joke to work.

5.4. Semantic Bleaching, Origin Attenuation, and Depoliticization

As the suffix travels, its subcultural provenance can become less salient while its general meaning becomes broader. This process is better described as origin attenuation or

semantic bleaching than as deliberate laundering in every case. A consumer encountering ‘weekend maxxng,’ ‘cheesecake-maxxing,’ or ‘Dermmaxxing’ need not know anything about incel forums or the PSL scale to understand the intended meaning. The suffix can therefore retain an optimization or intensification signal while losing much of its original ideological specificity.

The latest brand uses make this decoupling particularly visible. Some retain a recognizable connection to bodily optimization—Harry’s ‘jawmaxxing’ or CeraVe’s looksmaxxing parody—whereas others use maxxng primarily as a humorous intensifier. This matters for the paper’s three-dimensional argument. Such examples provide strong evidence that the linguistic schema has generalized, but weaker evidence that every new use reproduces the processual cycle associated with looksmaxxing. Mainstreaming therefore involves transformation as well as diffusion.

The attenuation of origin is also contested. Beauty-industry commentary has explicitly criticized the adoption of maxxng vocabulary while documenting commercial uses including scentmaxxing, tanmaxxing, and the trademarked Dermmaxxing label [60]. Commercial appropriation and critical remembrance can therefore coexist: the vocabulary can become ordinary marketing language at the same moment that journalists and researchers draw renewed attention to its provenance.

5.5. *The Trajectory as Evidence*

Taken together, these developments describe a trajectory from subcultural formation through platform diffusion into lexical recognition, commercial appropriation, institutional use, and increasingly self-conscious parody and backlash. The trajectory strengthens—but does not settle—the case for treating ‘-maxxing’ as more than a short-lived lexical fashion. What is especially notable by August 2026 is that the suffix no longer merely appears in reporting about internet culture: journalists coin new formations with it, companies use it as advertising copy and product naming, and institutions deploy it in public communication.

Commercial uptake is particularly revealing because it shows that organizations now treat the suffix as a reusable cultural resource. A hotel can advertise ‘weekend maxxng,’ a dermatology business can formalize ‘Dermmaxxing™,’ and a fast-food chain can build a product campaign around ‘MAXX’ without explaining the genealogy from looksmaxxing. These developments strengthen the linguistic and mainstreaming claims while simultaneously showing why linguistic diffusion should not be equated automatically with continued adherence to the original processual or ideological logic.

None of this guarantees durability. Commercial adoption may signal cultural saturation as much as institutionalization, and calls to retire the suffix suggest that overexposure is already producing fatigue. The trajectory therefore demonstrates unusually broad diffusion, not permanence.

Table 4 summarizes this mainstreaming trajectory as an analytical rather than strictly sequential sequence. The earlier diffusion of looksmaxxing provides one intermediate example: Madsen [61] shows how the livestreamer Clavicular’s appearance-focused self-analysis moved beyond its original niche through clipping, parody, commentary, and algorithmic redistribution. Such cases illustrate platform diffusion, while the later commercial and institutional examples document uptake in substantially different registers.

Backlash provides a different kind of evidence. Essayistic treatment in outlets such as *The New Yorker* and explicit calls to retire the suffix indicate high metalinguistic visibility, but they should not be interpreted as evidence of durability in themselves [62,63]. Indeed, fatigue may signal saturation and precede decline. What matters for the present argument is that “-maxxing” has become sufficiently recognizable to be debated, parodied, commercialized, and criticized outside the communities in which it first circulated.

Table 4. The mainstreaming trajectory of the “-maxxing” grammar.

Stage	Logic	Examples	Marker
Subcultural origin	In-group optimization jargon	looksmaxxing, jawmaxxing	Manosphere/ incel circulation
Platform diffusion	Softened and ironized spread	sleepmaxxing, cozymaxxing	Viral content and parody
Commercial appropriation	Grammar becomes advertising, naming, and product strategy	Dermmaxxing™, weekend maxxing, jawmaxxing, Spicy Chicken Maxx, protein-maxxing parody	Brands assume cultural intelligibility
Institutional legitimization	Suffix enters formal registers	context-maxxing, lethalitymaxxing	Dictionary, policy, state usage

Note: The stages are analytical rather than strictly sequential. Commercial absorption, institutional legitimization, parody, and backlash may coexist.

5.6. The Governance and Classification Gap

Governance has not simply failed to recognize the underlying harms associated with maxxing. Major platforms already prohibit or restrict categories that overlap with more dangerous forms of maxxing. TikTok, for example, addresses disordered eating, risky weight or muscle management, harmful body comparisons, and some cosmetic-surgery content, while YouTube prohibits content promoting self-harm or eating disorders [64,65]. The difficulty is classificatory. “Looksmaxxing” itself spans ordinary grooming, fitness and skincare, appearance comparison, commercial advice, cosmetic intervention, and potentially harmful practices. The same linguistic label can therefore cover content that is permitted, restricted, or prohibited depending on the behavior being shown. The governance gap lies less in the total absence of relevant rules than in the difficulty of governing a flexible optimization grammar whose harmful and benign forms are linguistically continuous.

Regulatory research also suggests that looksmaxxing is entering the online environments of minors. Ofcom’s [66] *Children’s Online Insights Panel* reported that body-image content reached most of its qualitative panel in some form and that some older participants encountered more extreme material including looksmaxxing. One 16-year-old participant described algorithmically served TikTok content involving bone smashing, “hunter eyes,” a looksmaxxing label for a preferred eye shape, and injecting fat-dissolving peptides [66]. The panel was small and deliberately qualitative, so it cannot establish prevalence; its significance here is that an online-safety regulator has begun to identify looksmaxxing explicitly within the emerging landscape of body-image content.

Professional attention is beginning to catch up with cultural diffusion. In 2026, the *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology* [67] published a dedicated discussion of the ethical challenges that looksmaxxing poses for dermatologic practice, including questions surrounding body dysmorphic disorder, cosmetic techniques, patient expectations, and social media [67]. This does not amount to a comprehensive governance framework, but it suggests that maxxing is beginning to enter professional ethical discourse as well as popular culture.

6. The Maxxing Cycle

6.1. Diagnosis, Intervention, Evaluation, and Display

The process associated with many maxxing practices can be represented as a four-stage analytical ideal type: diagnosis of deficiency or improvability, optimization intervention, evaluation or display of progress, and escalation. The model does not claim that every use of maxxing necessarily passes through all four stages or that the stages always occur

in a fixed order. Public display in particular is a frequent platform-mediated tendency rather than a definitional requirement. Some forms of sleepmaxxing, moneymaxxing, or productivitymaxxing may remain largely private, while purely promotional or parodic uses may involve little substantive optimization at all.

The first stage is diagnosis of deficiency. The self is interpreted through a framework of lack: a face is not symmetrical enough, a body not lean enough, income not high enough, routines not disciplined enough. This transforms the self into a problem to be solved. Social comparison theory provides the mechanism [68], but platform environments amplify it by making idealized bodies, lifestyles, and achievements continuously and algorithmically visible. Meta-analytic evidence supports this: online social comparison is consistently associated with body image concerns and eating disorder symptoms, making comparison a plausible structural driver of appearance- and fitness-oriented maxxing cultures [69]. The diagnosis is also frequently communal and harsh. In a study of 8072 comments across two discussion boards on a major looksmaxxing site, Halpin, Gosse, Yeo, Handlovsky and Maguire [40] report that every rating thread they analyzed included insults, unfavorable comparison to other men, and/or encouragement of self-harm from at least one other participant. Peer diagnosis is not neutral feedback; in such environments it can function as a shame mechanism that reinforces continued self-scrutiny.

The second stage is optimization intervention. Once a domain is diagnosed as deficient, it becomes actionable through routines, purchases, diets, supplements, training programs, productivity systems, coaching, cosmetic procedures, AI tools, or adjustments in self-presentation. The intervention translates insecurity into technique, positioning individuals as responsible agents who must actively manage their own capacities, risks, and futures [70], so that inaction can come to appear as failure rather than contentment.

The third stage is evaluation or display of progress. Improvement is assessed against some reference point: a numerical score, body measurement, routine, financial outcome, perceived social response, or before-and-after comparison. In many platform-mediated forms, this evaluation is also made public through physique updates, skincare results, routine videos, income claims, or wearable metrics. Public display can create social proof, invite comparison, and encourage imitation, but it is not required in every maxxing practice. What matters for the ideal type is that the intervention becomes assessable against a standard and can therefore feed into further comparison or adjustment [71,72].

6.2. Feedback and Escalation

The fourth stage is escalation. Evaluation or recognition of improvement may end a particular optimization project, but in many maxxing contexts it also generates new comparisons, standards, or domains of attention. Improved fitness may redirect attention toward style; style toward skin or hair; and increased productivity toward sleep or cognitive performance. The process can therefore move laterally across domains as well as upward within one domain. The grammar contains no inherent stopping rule: sufficiency must be supplied by the user or context rather than by the optimization logic itself. Figure 4 represents this sequence as an ideal-typical feedback loop rather than a universal behavioral pathway. Platform mediation sits at the center because visibility, metrics, comparison, recommendation, and markets can influence each stage without being required in every individual instance.

The feedback loop is not only social but algorithmic. Users rarely understand exactly how platform algorithms work, but they develop working theories—what Cotter [72] calls “playing the visibility game”—about what platforms reward and penalize, and these algorithmic imaginaries shape how people post, adjust, and evaluate themselves [73]. Barta and Andalibi’s [74] work on self-visibility supports this: users interpret algorithmic

feedback as information about how they are perceived, so that platform visibility becomes a sign that the self has been correctly optimized. The escalation loop is not only social but platform-structural.

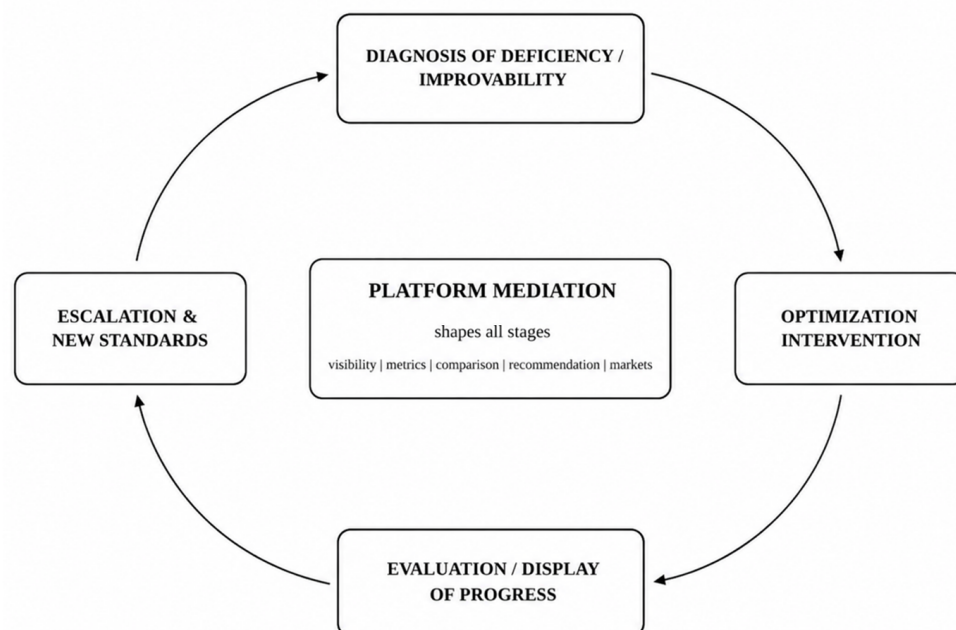


Figure 4. Ideal-typical maxxng cycle and its platform mediation.

6.3. The Cycle Productized: AI Face-Rating Apps

The productization of looksmaxxing provides an unusually concrete illustration of the cycle. Contemporary looksmaxxing and face-rating applications describe workflows in which users upload photographs, receive scores or evaluations of facial features, obtain personalized recommendations, and in some cases track scores, habits, or progress over time [75]. These descriptions are product or developer claims rather than independent evidence that the evaluations are accurate. Their analytical significance lies instead in the architecture of the service: diagnosis, intervention, evaluation, and repetition can be packaged within a single interface.

These applications matter in three respects. First, they make algorithmic evaluation literal. In much platform culture, users infer what audiences or algorithms value through visibility and engagement; face-rating software instead assigns an evaluative score directly to the body. Second, these systems extend quantified-self practices from health and performance into attractiveness, rendering facial features as comparable numerical outputs. Third, subscriptions, in-app purchases, personalized recommendations, and progress-tracking functions create commercial incentives around continued optimization. The cycle therefore becomes not simply a cultural orientation but a product design. Adjacent research on facial technologies provides empirical context for these concerns. Appearance-enhancing TikTok filter use has been associated with facial dissatisfaction and body-image concern, while recent research on AI beauty-filter applications links their use with lower appearance self-esteem and more negative body-image states [76,77]. These findings concern filtering rather than automated attractiveness scoring, but they help situate face-rating applications within a wider ecology of digitally mediated appearance evaluation.

Similar diagnostic logics have also appeared in conversational AI. Ferguson [78] discusses a “Looksmaxxing GPT” that rated users’ appearances and recommended cosmetic procedures, using the case to illustrate wider ethical problems arising when AI-mediated aesthetic evaluation intersects with body dysmorphia and cosmetic medicine. The example

suggests that productization is not confined to dedicated face-rating apps: the maxxing schema can also be embedded within more general conversational interfaces.

The racial and gender implications require particular caution. Research on commercial facial-analysis systems has demonstrated substantial intersectional performance disparities, including poorer classification performance for darker-skinned women in some systems [79]. Beauty-rating applications perform a different task, however, and this adjacent literature does not establish that particular looksmaxxing applications reproduce the same disparities or employ specific Eurocentric training standards. It instead provides grounds for independent examination of their datasets, evaluative criteria, and outputs. In the absence of technical documentation or independent audits, app-specific claims about training data or aesthetic calibration should be treated as questions for future research rather than established findings.

The commercial ecology is also expanding beyond explicitly male looksmaxxing spaces. Recent reporting describes women purchasing facial-analysis services that score individual features and recommend cosmetic procedures or products, illustrating how the diagnostic logic can migrate into more mainstream beauty markets [80].

7. Modes of Optimization

7.1. Five Modes

The maxxing cycle operates through different modes of optimization, summarized in Table 5. These are not mutually exclusive: many maxxing projects can combine several simultaneously. The characteristic tension column captures the risk or contradiction specific to each mode, showing that the grammar’s problems are not uniform but mode-specific.

Table 5. Modes of optimization in maxxing culture.

Mode	Object	Examples	Core Tension
Behavioral	Habits and routines	gym, skincare, sleep, productivity	Discipline can become compulsion
Symbolic	Social signals	clothing, grooming, scent, posture	Appearance can substitute for substance
Biological	The body	supplements, hormones, surgery	Self-care can slide into harm
Economic	Resources and status	investing, careermaxxing, side hustles	Class inequality is reframed as discipline
Algorithmic	Digital visibility and informational environments	filters, posting strategy, AI scoring, context-maxxing	Technical proxies and systems shape evaluation and agency

Note: The modes are analytically distinct but frequently overlap within individual maxxing practices.

The domain typology and the five modes answer different questions. The domain typology identifies what is being optimized; the modes identify how optimization is pursued. There is therefore no expected one-to-one correspondence between them. Looksmaxxing can involve behavioral, symbolic, biological, and algorithmic modes simultaneously, while moneymaxxing may combine behavioral and economic modes. The five modes are mechanism-based ideal types that can intersect within a single project.

Behavioral optimization involves routines, repetition, and discipline. Within maxxing, it is framed not as personal wellbeing but as competitive technique: training, skincare, sleep, and nutrition become tools for gaining an edge. Digital wellness cultures individualize responsibility for wellbeing [81]; maxxing can intensify this by adding competitive stakes and, particularly in platform-mediated forms, comparison and display.

Symbolic optimization modifies how the self is read by others. Clothing, grooming, posture, taste, and scent function as social signals; symbolic optimization converts distinction into technique and gives those signals platform-mediated visibility at scale [71,82]. In maxxing culture, aura farming and statusmaxxing make explicit what symbolic optimization requires: not simply having good taste, but being seen to have it by the right audience.

Biological optimization treats the body as a technical object. Supplements, cosmetic procedures, hormones, surgery, orthodontics, and experimental interventions overlap with ordinary healthcare in some cases and with risky lay experimentation in others. Biohacking provides a related terrain: self-tracking and bodily intervention outside formal medical contexts [83,84]. The boundary between self-care and self-harm can become unstable, partly because the grammar itself provides no clear criterion for sufficient improvement.

Economic optimization treats money as both an end and an enabling resource for other optimization. Financial self-improvement becomes a means of gaining autonomy, attractiveness, status, and access to biological and symbolic maxxing, fitting the neoliberal model in which people treat themselves as flexible projects of value creation [85].

Algorithmic optimization adjusts the self for platform conditions. Users optimize the visibility and legibility of their mediated selves through camera angles, lighting, filters, posting schedules, and AI-assisted production. Its most literal form is the AI face-rating app examined in Section 6, where an algorithm scores the body itself; more commonly it is the continuous adjustment of self-presentation to imagined platform rewards. Cultural labor under platform capitalism increasingly takes the form of self-optimization [86], shaped by imagined affordances—users' beliefs about what a platform enables and rewards [87]. The imagined algorithm becomes part of the optimization environment; the rating algorithm makes it concrete.

Context-maxxing offers a different technological example. Taylor and Krishna [30] use the term for practices intended to increase user control over the informational context surrounding generative-AI interaction. Unlike appearance-oriented forms, this usage is explicitly framed around cognitive agency rather than bodily deficiency. Its inclusion illustrates how the suffix can travel into a new domain while the practices and normative stakes attached to it change substantially.

7.2. Modes in Combination: A Worked Example

To illustrate why the distinction among modes matters, consider a composite example drawn from recurring patterns in looksmaxxing and gym-culture discourse. A young man encounters looksmaxxing content on TikTok. He begins with behavioral optimization: a structured skincare routine, a revised diet, a hypertrophy-focused gym program. He adds symbolic optimization: clothing that emphasizes a developing physique, a haircut coded for masculine status in the communities he follows. He incorporates biological optimization: creatine and protein supplementation, and later—as community norms escalate—hormonal or other performance-enhancing interventions. He tracks outcomes through a wearable and posts before-and-after content captioned with metrics. The posting is itself algorithmic optimization, calibrated to platform conventions for reach. Each mode reinforces the others: behavioral changes produce visible results; symbolic adjustments make results legible as status; biological interventions accelerate outcomes; algorithmic packaging ensures visibility and social proof.

The example shows two things. First, the modes are analytically distinct but practically entangled: behavioral discipline enables biological intervention; biological results enable symbolic display; symbolic display requires algorithmic packaging. Second, escalation operates across modes as well as within them. A behavioral plateau may be overcome

by a biological intervention, which opens new standards, generates new diagnoses of deficiency in previously unexamined domains, and restarts the cycle.

7.3. *Why the Distinction Matters*

The distinction among modes prevents treating maxxng as either trivial self-care or uniform extremism. A sleep routine, a wardrobe upgrade, a financial strategy, and a cosmetic procedure may all be described through maxxng language. Still, they operate through different mechanisms and carry different risk profiles. The distinction also clarifies why the grammar travels so easily: it is not attached to one kind of practice but is a general optimization frame that can absorb routines, commodities, body modifications, and platform tactics indifferently.

The modes also reveal where becoming better and appearing better collapse into each other. Behavioral and biological modes involve substantive changes in habits, bodies, or capacities; symbolic and algorithmic modes focus on signals, presentation, and visibility. In platform culture, these distinctions often dissolve: an improvement matters not only because it changes the person but also because it can be displayed and recognized as an improvement by an audience, real or imagined. The self is not only worked on; it is rendered as evidence of work. This rendering of improvement as evidence is a recurring tendency in platform-mediated forms of maxxng.

8. Structural Drivers

8.1. *Platform Visuality and Algorithmic Imaginaries*

Maxxing culture has expanded because it fits the current digital environment. Social media platforms privilege faces, bodies, rooms, routines, meals, and clothing, making social media particularly well suited to optimization practices whose results can be visually demonstrated. Influencer self-presentation operates as cultural labor, and platform visibility is actively pursued through strategic adaptation to algorithmic systems [72,88]; maxxng also intersects with micro-celebrity practices, where users manage personas, cultivate parasocial intimacy, and present themselves as objects of attention [89]. Much appearance-oriented maxxng content can function both as evidence of self-improvement and as audience-oriented persona work: substantive self-work and performance can become difficult to separate. Because users adapt self-presentation to perceived affordances across platforms [90], the same grammar takes different forms—short visual transformations on TikTok, peer diagnosis on Reddit, long-form tutorials on YouTube, real-time spectacle on livestreaming platforms, as the Clavicular case illustrates [61]—while retaining its core logic.

8.2. *Metric Culture*

Metric culture makes the self countable. Likes, views, followers, body measurements, sleep scores, income screenshots, and productivity streaks give self-improvement a numerical vocabulary. In maxxng culture, metrics are not merely tools of assessment; they become objects of aspiration. Social life is increasingly organized through measurement, comparison, and quantification [91]; the individual is encouraged to improve because the numbers can always be better. Many such metrics provide no obvious internal threshold for satisfaction, leaving the next increment readily available as a new target.

8.3. *Influencer Markets*

Influencer markets make optimization profitable. Creators, coaches, wellness figures, finance and fitness personalities, and aesthetic consultants operate in markets where advice, insecurity, and transformation narratives are monetized [92]. Insecurity and transformation

narratives can be converted into content, products, subscriptions, and coaching. Brand culture invites individuals to treat themselves as marketable identities, and aspirational labor makes visibility and authenticity part of platform work [93–97]. Maxxing culture provides a ready-made content format for this economy—the before-and-after narrative, the routine reveal, the progress update—and, as Section 5 showed, this market logic now extends beyond individual creators to corporate product strategy and paid rating software.

8.4. Competitive Individualism and Status Anxiety

Competitive individualism gives maxxing its moral urgency. Under neoliberal conditions, structural pressures are reframed as personal optimization problems: health, attractiveness, employability, and productivity become individual responsibilities, and to be insufficiently optimized is to have failed to act properly upon the self [70,85]. Status anxiety provides a more specific mechanism: concerns about relative social position drive self-optimizing behavior, especially where people experience status competition or fear downward comparison [98]. This explains why maxxing frequently carries an urgent tone. In more competitive forms of maxxing, optimization is framed less as optional self-care than as a defense against falling behind.

8.5. Internalization, Shame, and Negotiated Agency

Platform structures and market incentives do not become culturally consequential simply because they exist. They matter when people interpret, negotiate, and sometimes internalize them as standards for evaluating themselves. No single actor determines the optimization standard. Standards emerge through a distributed ecology of peer communities, influencers, platform metrics, subcultural taxonomies, commercial products, professional advice, and broader cultural ideals of attractiveness, success, health, and status. Repetition can turn these external evaluations into criteria of self-observation: users learn not only what others may regard as deficient but how to inspect themselves through those categories.

Foucault's account of technologies of the self is useful here because it avoids treating individuals as passive recipients of power. Subjects act upon themselves through historically and culturally available techniques, even when the standards and categories through which they do so are socially organized [23]. Maxxing can be understood in this sense as a vernacular technology of the self: users adopt routines, measurements, classifications, and interventions through which they attempt to reshape particular components of themselves. The important sociological question is therefore not simply who imposes optimization, but how external standards become desirable, actionable, and capable of organizing voluntary self-work.

Shame helps explain part of this internalization. Tyler's analysis of stigma emphasizes that devaluation is socially produced and connected to wider hierarchies of worth rather than reducible to an individual psychological state [99]. In more punitive looksmaxxing environments, peer ratings, deficit labels, unfavorable comparisons, and aesthetic hierarchies can give perceived shortcomings affective force. A weak jawline, low rating, poor physique, or low-status presentation becomes not simply a characteristic but evidence of falling short. Shame can therefore help convert external judgment into self-surveillance and make intervention feel necessary rather than merely available.

Internalization is neither uniform nor complete. Users can selectively appropriate, negotiate, parody, reinterpret, or reject maxxing discourse. Some employ the suffix humorously; others use it to organize relatively ordinary health, financial, or productivity routines; still others accept 'soft' forms while rejecting surgery, hormones, or other high-risk interventions. Tyler's work on resistance to stigmatizing subject positions is useful here because it reminds us that subjectification never eliminates agency [100]. The proliferation

of ironic and commercial maxxng provides a particularly visible example: users and organizations can appropriate the linguistic form while substantially altering the practices or meanings attached to it.

Maxxing should therefore be understood as negotiated rather than simply imposed. Platform architectures structure visibility and comparison, markets supply products and incentives, and communities circulate standards, but individuals remain active interpreters of those pressures. This tension between structural influence and self-directed agency is central to the appeal—and instability—of maxxng culture.

9. Inequality, Access, and the Politics of Optimization

The grammar of maxxng presents itself as universally available. Any domain can be named with the suffix; anyone can decide to maxx. This apparent openness is one of the formation's most significant ideological features—and one of its most misleading. The optimization ideals embedded in particular maxxng variants are socially situated: they can reflect and reproduce gendered, racialized, and classed norms. Access to optimization resources is also uneven, while competitive narratives can make existing advantages appear to result from differential effort.

The evidentiary basis for these claims varies. Some gendered and racialized hierarchies are directly documented in research on looksmaxxing and incel communities; other arguments developed below are theoretical inferences from adjacent scholarship on colorism, distinction, platform visibility, and structural inequality. The latter identify mechanisms and research questions rather than establishing that every maxxng community, application, or commercial use reproduces them in the same way.

9.1. Gender

Maxxing culture has clear and heavily gendered origins. The contemporary looksmaxxing vocabulary gained early prominence in manosphere and incel communities whose organizing logic was explicitly male and whose central preoccupation was male sexual disadvantage, organized around a competitive model in which appearance, status, and dominance determined social value [3,5,101]. Looksmaxxing, in its original formulation, was structured around male attractiveness assessed through community-developed metrics such as the PSL scale—an online system ranking facial aesthetics—which positioned male value as derivable from bodily characteristics that could be diagnosed, ranked, and targeted [3]. This origin is not incidental; it shaped the dominant logic of competitive, hierarchical, appearance-centered self-assessment in which the body is primarily legible as a competitive asset.

As the suffix diffused into mainstream culture, some appearance-oriented uses continued to carry elements of this gendered substrate even as the vocabulary was adapted for new audiences. Female-facing looksmaxxing discourse has also become increasingly visible, with dedicated online spaces and recent media coverage documenting women's adoption of looksmaxxing terminology and diagnostic beauty practices [80,102]. Sociologists of masculinity situate it within a wider intensification of male appearance work, or aesthetic labor, among young men [44], while the developmental-health literature identifies adolescent boys and young men as an important population for understanding muscle dysmorphia [45]. Recent research also links greater social-media engagement, exposure to muscularity-oriented content, and frequent body comparison with stronger intentions to use anabolic-androgenic steroids among boys and men, providing a further bridge between platformed appearance pressures and potentially risky biological optimization [103]. The extension of maxxng language to women does not necessarily disrupt the diagnostic and

objectifying tendencies associated with earlier appearance-oriented forms; in some contexts, it may instead reproduce them for different audiences and markets.

The confidence culture literature is instructive: where confidence culture interprets women's disadvantage as a problem of inner deficiency corrected through self-belief, maxxing frames it as a problem of outer deficiency corrected through technique [18,19]. Both individualize structural problems; maxxing simply makes the body the primary site of intervention. Gender also inflects which modes are culturally available and how they are received: gymmaxxing and testosterone-maxxing are coded masculine, skinmaxxing and smellmaxxing more feminine, and women who post appearance-transformation content face different expectations—and different risks of harassment and sexualization—than men posting comparable material [94]. The grammar is formally gender-neutral; its deployment is not.

9.2. Race

Racialization is most firmly documented in some of the subcultural spaces from which looksmaxxing emerged. Solea and Sugiura [3], for example, show how looksmaxxing and PSL discourse can repackage misogynistic and racialized hierarchies through an apparently technical language of attractiveness, self-improvement, and ranking. Concepts such as the 'Chad'—an idealized, highly attractive and high-status masculine figure—and specialized categories for facial structure can present historically and culturally specific ideals as if they were neutral measurements. This provides direct grounds for treating race as relevant to the genealogy of some looksmaxxing discourse without assuming that every contemporary maxxing variant carries an identical racial politics.

Broader scholarship on colorism provides additional context. Lighter skin and proximity to dominant beauty standards have historically been associated with social advantage within and across racialized groups [104]. Research on TikTok face filters provides an adjacent digital example. Survey research among college students found that participants perceived face-filter cultures as reinforcing idealized appearance standards associated with Eurocentric features [105]. This does not establish the calibration of particular looksmaxxing applications, but it illustrates how racialized beauty standards can be experienced within digital appearance technologies. Maxxing does not create these hierarchies, and the existence of colorism does not demonstrate that every maxxing practice reproduces them. The conceptual concern is that an optimization grammar can translate existing hierarchies into apparently technical problems of self-modification.

Similar caution is required when discussing AI face-rating applications. Research on algorithmic facial analysis demonstrates that apparently neutral technical systems can generate unequal performance across demographic groups [79], but this does not establish the outputs of particular beauty-rating applications. Whether contemporary looksmaxxing apps systematically encode particular racialized aesthetic standards requires direct technical documentation and independent auditing.

9.3. Class

Class is a pervasive but often less explicit dimension of maxxing's inequality structure. The grammar presents itself as democratizing, yet optimization is resource-intensive. Biological maxxing—supplements, cosmetic procedures, surgery, orthodontics, hormone therapy—requires disposable income. Gymmaxxing requires time and often membership costs; skinmaxxing at its more intensive levels requires effective products and dermatological care; moneymaxxing assumes a financial baseline; productivitymaxxing may presuppose a degree of control over one's time that is less available in many low-wage and tightly scheduled forms of work.

Bourdieu's [82] analysis of distinction applies directly: cultural and economic capital determine what forms of optimization are available to whom. The person with disposable income for procedures, premium supplements, memberships, and content-production equipment occupies a fundamentally different optimization landscape from the person without these resources. The grammar is portable; the material conditions for effective optimization are not. This produces a situation in which the language of maxxing is democratically available while the resources for meaningful maxxing remain stratified by class, and the self that is already better optimized by virtue of its class starting point is positioned, within the grammar, as having simply tried harder. Commercial absorption, examined in Section 5, deepens this: as brands and apps attach the vocabulary to purchasable products, more forms of maxxing become tied to consumption, and consumption tracks class.

This connects to broader critiques of neoliberal self-management, in which structural disadvantage is translated into personal deficit: the unemployed lack the right skills, the unhealthy the right habits, the unsuccessful the right mindset [70,85]. Maxxing can extend this logic across multiple domains, so that financial, physical, social, cognitive, or aesthetic deficiencies can in principle be reframed as correctable through technique. Class position, racial constraint, and gendered disadvantage can consequently be reframed as starting-point deficiencies to be diagnosed and addressed. The structural is made personal; the political is made technical.

9.4. Intersectionality and the Naturalization of Hierarchy

Gender, race, and class should not be treated simply as three additive dimensions of maxxing. Intersectional analysis emphasizes that social categories are experienced through their interaction rather than as independent layers [106]. Optimization standards, resources, and forms of judgment may therefore be simultaneously gendered, racialized, and classed. These interactions matter because the grammar presents improvement as broadly available even where the material and cultural conditions for pursuing it are highly unequal.

The interaction of gender, race, and class can produce a specific ideological effect: it naturalizes social hierarchy as the product of differential optimization effort. If the grammar is available to all but some are more optimized than others, the implication is that the less optimized have not tried hard enough or applied the right techniques. The grammar can recode social stratification as a personal performance gap.

This is not only a political critique but a structural feature of the optimization schema. The grammar itself contains few resources for asking whether the standards against which one is evaluated are fair, accessible, or worth pursuing; its default orientation is toward improving performance relative to the standard rather than questioning the standard itself. Individual users can and do resist, parody, or reject those expectations, as Section 8.5 emphasized. Yet the more neutral, commercial, and technically framed the vocabulary becomes, the easier it is for existing standards to appear as ordinary optimization targets rather than socially situated judgments.

10. Tensions and Contradictions

10.1. The Agency Paradox

Maxxing culture is compelling partly because it offers a language of agency. It tells users that traits and circumstances are not necessarily fixed, breaks broad anxieties into actionable domains, and supplies routines, tools, scripts, and examples for intervention. This appeal should not be dismissed as false consciousness or reduced to pathology. Some users adopt maxxing language to organize exercise, sleep, nutrition, learning, financial planning, or other relatively ordinary forms of self-improvement. Others employ it primarily as humor or parody. Still others selectively adopt some recommendations while rejecting more

competitive, commercial, or invasive forms. These appropriations can provide motivation, social connection, or a sense of control even when they remain embedded in wider cultures of comparison.

The paradox is that this agency is structured rather than unlimited. Users act within evaluative environments shaped by communities, platforms, markets, and wider cultural norms, but they do not simply reproduce those environments. They can internalize, reinterpret, commercialize, parody, or resist the standards they encounter.

This tension helps explain the grammar's affective ambivalence. Maxxing can offer agency and practical direction while also multiplying objects of evaluation and creating new opportunities for comparison. Its use can generate hope, humor, aspiration, anxiety, or fear of falling behind, depending on the practice and context. The central paradox is therefore not that maxxing necessarily creates the inadequacy it claims to solve, but that a language of self-directed improvement can simultaneously increase the number of domains in which the self becomes open to judgment.

10.2. *Permanent Incompletion*

A central contradiction of maxxing is that successful optimization can generate rather than eliminate further optimization. Better fitness may make style more salient; improved style may redirect attention to skin or hair; greater productivity may produce new concern with sleep or cognitive performance. This incompletion can be culturally and commercially useful because it sustains progress narratives, repeat engagement, and markets for optimization products. Yet it is an ideal-typical tendency rather than an inevitable outcome: users can stop, disengage, or treat the language playfully. The conceptual point is that the grammar itself supplies no obvious internal criterion for declaring the self sufficiently optimized. Related critiques of hustle culture and digital self-control similarly show how expectations of continual achievement can make falling short appear as an individual failure rather than a problem with the standards themselves.

10.3. *Substance and Display*

A third tension concerns the relationship between becoming better and appearing better. Some maxxing practices involve genuine improvements in health, confidence, skill, income, or social capacity; others involve strategic presentation, selective display, or optimization of algorithmic legibility with minimal underlying change. In practice these cannot always be separated: in platform culture, appearing improved can have real social and material consequences. Within maxxing communities, the display of progress serves as evidence of progress—the before-and-after photograph is both documentation and performance; the income screenshot is both claim and social proof. When substance and display become entangled, the grammar produces a feedback loop in which the appearance of optimization can generate real social consequences within the platform's evaluative framework.

This collapse between being and appearing also recalls objectification theory. Although developed primarily to explain women's experiences of sexual objectification, the framework identifies a broader mechanism through which individuals internalize an external observer's perspective on their bodies. Maxxing gives this observer perspective a platformed and technical form: the body is decomposed, rated, modified, and displayed as evidence of successful self-management [107].

10.4. *The Cultural and the Clinical*

An emerging clinical literature situates some forms of looksmaxxing alongside established concerns about body dissatisfaction, body dysmorphic disorder, muscle dysmorphia, compulsive comparison, and risky bodily intervention. Practices involving intense fixa-

tion on perceived flaws, ritualized measurement, restrictive eating, or escalating attempts to alter the body can overlap with clinically recognized patterns of distress and impairment [37,45,108]. These overlaps are clinically important, particularly among younger users, but they do not imply that participation in looksmaxxing discourse is itself evidence of psychopathology. Broader research on social-media use likewise suggests associations between particular platform environments, body dysmorphic symptoms, and cosmetic-surgery interest, although such relationships vary by platform and should not be interpreted as simple causal effects [109].

Clinical attention to looksmaxxing is also broadening. Alongside research on facial aesthetics, body dissatisfaction, and muscle dysmorphia, dermatologists have begun explicitly discussing the ethical implications of looksmaxxing for patient expectations and cosmetic practice [67]. This emerging clinical concern should not be interpreted to mean that participation in maxxing discourse is itself pathological. The same vocabulary can encompass irony, routine self-care, commercial consumption, and substantially higher-risk behaviors.

Cultural and clinical accounts therefore operate at different but interacting levels of analysis. A cultural account examines how evaluative standards, comparison opportunities, peer norms, commercial incentives, and platform architectures are organized and circulated. Clinical research examines when and how such pressures become associated with persistent distress, behavioral impairment, or diagnosable symptoms in particular individuals. The relationship is mediated rather than automatic: exposure to an optimization culture does not straightforwardly produce psychopathology, and individuals differ in susceptibility, prior vulnerabilities, interpretation, patterns of participation, and social support.

The contribution of the grammar perspective is consequently environmental rather than diagnostic. It asks how particular ways of identifying deficiency and acting upon the self become culturally available, repeatable, and sometimes rewarding. Clinical research can investigate the conditions under which these environments contribute to harmful outcomes. Keeping these levels distinct avoids both reducing a cultural formation to individual pathology and implying a simple causal pathway from maxxing discourse to psychiatric disorder.

11. Conclusions

This paper has conceptualized maxxing culture through three interacting dimensions: a linguistic schema in which “-maxxing” functions as a productive form for generating new optimization terms; a cultural-processual grammar in which domains can be rendered improvable and subjected to intervention, evaluation, and renewed optimization; and platform conditions that intensify these processes through visibility, metrics, comparison, recommendation, and markets. The contribution lies in treating these as analytically related but non-equivalent claims. Linguistic productivity does not prove that every maxxing construction follows the same optimization cycle, and platform origins do not require every later use to remain platform-bound. Together, however, the three dimensions explain why the suffix has proved unusually portable across practices, institutions, commercial settings, and forms of everyday language.

A second contribution is documentary and analytical. By tracing ‘-maxxing’ across subcultural discourse, platform circulation, lexical recognition, commercial appropriation, and institutional use, the paper identifies a pattern consistent with a highly productive and portable cultural form. By August 2026, the suffix was being used not only to describe internet practices but to coin new concepts in mainstream business journalism and to name or frame campaigns in hospitality, grooming, skincare, restaurants, and fast food [54,56,110]. This trajectory supports but does not prove long-term durability. A linguistic form may become highly generative and commercially saturated and still be displaced by another fashion. The

contribution is therefore not the prediction that ‘-maxxing’ will persist indefinitely, but the demonstration that its current productivity reveals an unusually clear intersection between digital language, self-optimization, platform infrastructures, and markets.

The paper further contributes to the analysis of inequality in digital self-optimization. The grammar presents optimization as broadly available, but standards of improvement and access to the resources required to pursue them are socially uneven. Research on looksmaxxing documents gendered and racialized hierarchies in some of the communities from which the vocabulary emerged, while broader work on colorism, class, visibility, and algorithmic bias identifies mechanisms through which optimization practices may reproduce existing inequalities. These relationships should not be assumed to operate identically across all variants or technologies. The analytical point is that a formally portable grammar—almost anyone can describe almost anything as something to be maxxed—can operate within highly unequal material and cultural conditions.

These claims should be read within the paper’s methodological limits. The analysis is a conceptual synthesis and critical cultural mapping rather than a representative, formally sampled, corpus-based, or systematic review. It cannot determine how widespread particular variants are, how different demographic groups interpret the suffix in practice, or whether serious, ironic, commercial, and harmful uses are increasing or stabilizing. Google Trends and commercial analytics indicate patterns of attention and claimed circulation rather than behavioral prevalence, while app and corporate materials document public-facing features and representations rather than independently validated effects. These remain important questions for systematic empirical research.

Future research could examine how variants circulate and mutate across specific platform environments; whether and how AI face-rating apps affect body image, self-evaluation, and cosmetic intentions among younger users; how brands, professional bodies, lexicographers, and states reshape optimization vocabulary as they adopt it, and whether institutional uptake blunts the grammar’s competitive logic or merely relocates it; and how platforms might classify and govern a formation that cuts across existing safety categories while also encompassing benign and commercially normalized practices. Comparative work across national and cultural contexts could examine how the grammar interfaces with local beauty norms, economic structures, and gender regimes.

Maxxing is particularly legible within the current platform-cultural moment. Oxford’s recent selections of ‘brain rot’ and ‘rage bait’ [111,112], alongside Merriam-Webster’s ‘slop’ [113] capture anxieties about deterioration, manipulation, and low-quality abundance in digital environments. Maxxing points in a different direction: toward the fantasy of regaining control by optimizing the self for those environments. Whether ‘-maxxing’ itself proves durable is uncertain; online language changes quickly, and commercialization and backlash may indicate saturation as much as permanence. Its present significance lies in how efficiently the suffix condenses a wider cultural demand to diagnose, improve, measure, compare—and increasingly market—the self. The grammar does not simply ask people to become better. It makes more and more aspects of life available for maximization.

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