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OPINION

# What are the consequences of being a 'wifey' or 'unrapable'. I hope those girls never find out

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When news broke last week that a group of high school boys created a spreadsheet to rank their female classmates in categories that ranged from "wifey" to "unrapable", I felt an instantaneous, unbridled rage.

The kind that springs to life within microseconds when women are forced to accept that this behaviour just won't cease. Different day, different institution, perhaps slightly different categories, but the same common denominators.

Boys from Yarra Valley Grammar have been expelled for ranking girls in categories on a chat group. EDDIE JIM

I knew we'd be forced to listen to the same old arguments – on the one side, they're just boys mucking around, boys will be boys, they didn't mean any harm. On the other side, their age doesn't matter, this kind of behaviour is toxic masculinity with training wheels, seeing girls as rankable objects puts these boys in the express lane to a lifetime of misogynist behaviour.

Past the rage, though, or perhaps at the root of it, I can't stop thinking about how those girls will feel if they ever find out which column those boys put them into.

When I was in high school, about the same age as the Yarra Valley Grammar students who wrote their list, friends and I spent a Saturday night playing a game. Sitting around at one of their houses, the boys decided it was time for an unofficial reboot of '80s cult classic *Weird Science*. But instead of using celebrity body parts to build their perfect girl, they used us. Some of the decisions were immediate and unanimous – who had the best boobs or the best bum. But other decisions required debate – the best legs and the prettiest face.

Once consensus had been reached, the boys looked around to see if we were pleased with their Frankensteinian creation, and for the praise they had bestowed upon us without invitation. The girl whose face was chosen beamed. The girl with the best boobs was entirely indifferent, and the girl whose legs made the cut was clearly uncomfortable with what had just happened.

Trying to quell the burning in my chest. "You guys didn't choose anything from me," I said.

Two of them must have felt bad and tried to rectify their oversight. "She'd have your teeth!" one said, before the other said that no, it would be my personality. One of them just laughed, probably because he knew as well as I did that "good personality" was just another way of saying a girl was ugly.

These boys were from a respectable private school where nice middle-class parents sent their nice sons. We girls were from a similarly respectable school for nice daughters. At the time, I thought our friendships were proof that girls and boys really could be just friends. We went to school dances together, wrote each other inane notes about our days and traded them after school in the food court. We'd make each other laugh and drink Midori stolen from our parents' liquor cabinets and not make out. It all felt so innocent and so fun, until it didn't.

I knew that if I got upset or, worse, got mad, it would only further reduce my chances that one day – assuming I would be lucky enough to have the kind of ugly duckling glow-up that was the plot line for most teen movies of the era – one of them might see me as something more than just the ugly friend with straight teeth. So, instead of telling them where to go, I did what most girls do. I turned inwards, made a mental list of all the categories I didn't make the cut in and got to work punishing myself for my deficits.

And that's the problem. That's what these seemingly unintentionally brutal games and lists do to girls. They create burning shame and hurt that festers. They make them believe that when someone does actually think they're beautiful, they're being set up to be the butt of another cruel joke.

Two decades on, even when all of that has been unlearned, and you realise that what a couple of teenagers with developing prefrontal cortices thought of you isn't true and doesn't matter, it's still there. All that hurt and shame and uncertainty has metastasised and evolved.

But now it's an instantaneous, unbridled rage that breaks through to the surface when we find out that another generation of girls are being labelled "mid" or "get out" or "unrapable". Twenty years of social change, conversations and what feels like real progress. Yet somehow, after all that, teenage boys can still crush girls' self-esteem with a single list.

**Katy Hall is deputy opinion editor.**

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