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# “Yay, Another Lady Starting a Log!”: Women’s Fitness Doping and the Gendered Space of an Online Doping Forum

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## Abstract

This study aims to investigate and dissect the meanings attached to women’s use of performance and image enhancing drugs (PIEDs), how fitness doping can be understood in terms of gender and spatiality, and what implications this has for women’s communicative engagement with one another within an online forum. The study is based on a netnographic and qualitative methodology. Theoretically, it considers a women’s online forum for PIEDs and analyzes it as a community of practice (CofP) and a spatiality in which gender, bodies, and side effects are discussed and negotiated. The results show that although the women’s forum provides a space for women to share their own unique experiences, there is a limit to the extent to which the discussions mirror the experiences and experimentations of women. Instead, discussions are often dominated by men’s voices/experiences. This has two main implications. Firstly, the prevalence of men’s voices can block the development of a women’s CofP. Symbolically, men engage in a sort of cultural manspreading by encroaching on the women’s forum space. Secondly, it has implications for women’s PIED use and use practices. Women seeking out advice or the experiences of other women must navigate through and around men’s contributions.

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The cultural history of the gym, fitness, and the use of performance and image enhancing drugs (PIEDs) in this context in particular has largely been a story about men and muscular masculinities (Christiansen, 2019; Denham, 2008; Dimeo, 2007; Monaghan, 2001; Thualagant, 2012). In a wider context, muscle building has also been related historically to warfare, violence, and the building of nation-states. Roughly, research on gym and fitness culture began in the early 1990s, and the focus was on (male) bodies, gender, and identity (Dutton, 1995; Johansson, 1996). Klein (1993), for example, conducted a classical field study examining the creation of bodybuilding as a mainly masculine subculture, and the tensions between it and mainstream social norms and conventions. As gyms and fitness centers were perceived as a more or less exclusively male and homosocial space, the few women in these environments were largely overlooked initially (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014; in press; Bunsell, 2013).

Since the turn of the century, the notion of gym and fitness culture has shifted from that of a subcultural and male-dominated space, turning into a more inclusive and gender-neutral conception of exercise, diet, body, and lifestyle (Maguire, 2008; Sassatelli, 2010). Women participated in group fitness, among other things, in the 80s and 90s, performed in spaces separated from the weight lifting areas. Women were gradually included in the muscle-building aspects of gym and fitness culture (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014). During this process, the female body ideal has shifted from slim and skinny to that of a toned, lean, athletic, fit, and strong physique with some traditionally masculine characteristics (Grogan, 2006; Van Hout & Hearne, 2016). Along with these transformations and conceptualizations of female muscularity, there were also gradual changes in who engages in PEID use (Andreasson & Johansson, in press).

Survey research with people who use PIEDs has shown that use has expanded in some areas and includes a range of PIEDs used for gaining muscle as well as for strength and fat loss (Bates & McVeigh, 2016). This in some ways mirrors the mainstreaming and diversification of fitness center memberships and culture. PIEDs have made their way into contemporary fitness centers and the new groups inhabiting them, including women (Hanley Santos & Coomber, 2017). When writing about PIED use in the context of gym and fitness culture, scholars have sometimes used prefixes to doping such as “recreational,” “exercise,” “vanity,” and “fitness” (Christiansen, 2009; Thualagant, 2012). In this text, we sometimes use the term *fitness doping* synonymously with PIED use, mainly to emphasize the cultural context on which we are focusing.

Due to social intolerance of fitness doping, and in some places laws prohibiting use of many PIEDs (Christiansen, 2009), it is not surprising that those seeking information on or to share and discuss their expertise and experiences with PIEDs

turn to online forums (Andreasson & Johansson, 2016). The stigma of doping in sport that athletes seek to avoid can also be attached to fitness doping (Sefiha, 2017). Smith and Stewart (2012) suggest online forums and communities encourage sensitive content to be expressed without compromising confidentiality and facilitate long-term, in-depth discussions. Online spaces, including blogs, forums, and chat rooms, allow people to construct online communities through which they can connect with others who, like themselves, are involved in a practice that may be socially marginalized (Adler & Adler, 2011; Deters & Mehl, 2012) and lead to legal repercussions if recognized (Smith & Stewart, 2012).

In this article, we focus on how fitness doping is perceived and discussed socially among users frequenting an open online community called *ThinkSteroids.com*. The more specific aim of the study is to investigate and dissect the meanings attached to women's use of PIEDs, how fitness doping can be understood in terms of gender and spatiality, and what implications this has for women's communicative engagement with one another within the online forum. The aim of the article will be addressed using the following research questions:

**Research Question 1:** How do women describe their engagement in discussions on fitness doping on the forum?

**Research Question 2:** How is experimentation with different substances approached and negotiated among women forum users?

**Research Question 3:** In what ways can the discussions presented on the forum be understood in relation to masculine online spaces and fitness doping practices?

## Background

Fitness dopers, and especially steroid users, tend to be male and younger (Christiansen, 2018; Simon et al., 2006), despite women and older people using PIEDs as well. Recent research has attempted to understand categories of men who use PIEDs (Christiansen et al., 2017; Zahnow et al., 2018), though such attempts made regarding women and fitness doping are limited (Andreasson & Johansson, in press; Van Hout & Hearne, 2016). Adding to this, Monaghan (2001, 2012) has argued that PIED use in bodybuilding contexts is best understood as a part of gym culture in which bodybuilding and drug use were rationalized in the pursuit of physical goals, almost exclusively men's. Fitness doping, then, can be understood as a gendered practice in a gendered space, where women must negotiate perceptions of gender in order to take part (Fisher et al., 2018).

Potentially related to the perceived links between bodybuilding culture and PIEDs, most focus on women's fitness doping has been on women bodybuilders rather than more general fitness users (McGrath & Chananie-Hill, 2009). For example, research has considered the gendered moral dilemmas over steroid use among women bodybuilders (Fisher & Brademeier, 2000) but overlooked women's fitness

doping more broadly (McGrath & Chanie-Hill, 2009). As women's PIED use is often bound up with gender and ideas around gender norms, previous research has linked it most closely with anabolic steroid use (McGrath & Chanie-Hill, 2009). Unlike men bodybuilders' perceptions of fitness doping that can be biased in favor of use, women themselves have been found to hold gendered, negative views of women's steroid use (Jespersen, 2012). They tend to view women's use as a "masculine" or "unnatural" practice, even within bodybuilding groups (McGrath & Chanie-Hill, 2009; Shilling & Bunsell, 2009), where it might be expected to be more acceptable. This gendered anxiety of transgressing gender norms through PIED use may be related to women's fear of hitting the "glass ceiling" of muscularity (Dworkin, 2001). Despite the notion of "strong is the new skinny" prevalent in fitness culture and marketed on various *fitspiration webpages*, which suggests a shift in the acceptance of women's muscle-building practices (Van Hout & Hearne, 2016; Washington & Economides, 2016), there is a point where the limits of muscular femininity are reached, with or without the help of PIEDs (Boepple et al., 2016; Tajrobehkar, 2016).

Women's motivations for fitness doping outside of bodybuilding are given less attention still, despite indications that women and girls seeking a specific physique are willing to use PIEDs to achieve it (O'Dea & Cinelli, 2016; Van Hout & Hearne, 2016). Indeed, there is some evidence that use of a range of PIEDs is rising among young women (Andreasson & Johansson, in press; Christiansen, 2018; Eisenberg et al., 2012), which is in line with increasing use of PIEDs generally (Bates & McVeigh, 2016). Weight and fat loss remain commonly cited reasons for women using PIEDs, rather than for reasons of athletic performance or for gaining large amounts of muscle (Weaving & Teetzel, 2014; Weber et al., 2016). Drugs used differ as well, with women more likely to report use of ephedrine, human growth hormone, and clenbuterol, as opposed to male connoted muscle enhancing supplements (Jespersen, 2012; Van Hout & Hearne, 2016). Although women report different motivations and substances used, these are still in line with the goals of achieve a fit, lean body.

Despite the lack of research on women's fitness doping, women are engaging in the practice. In seeking out advice and expertise on the topic, women may use online forums for many of the same reasons as men. This presents a new gendered space to negotiate as online forums on doping are dominated by men and largely conceptualized as a male preserve (Smith & Stewart, 2012). Members are often supportive of PIED use, especially those situated within bodybuilding communities (Andreasson & Johansson, 2016; Monaghan, 2012). Because they are a place to discuss and exchange ideas on stigmatizing practices, normalization and legitimization of drug use is common within these online subcultures (Keane, 2005; Smith & Stewart, 2012). Different online doping forums can be situated within a wider context of global fitness communities, in which aesthetic ideals, training methods, and substance use practices (licit and illicit) are discussed

(Andreasson & Henning, 2019). PIED use is broadly accepted as part of gym and fitness culture, though views and use are likely to vary.

## Analytical Framework

Taking a social constructionist approach as our point of departure, we investigate how women PIED users negotiate their use within a specific “community of practice” (CofP). We understand a CofP as a group of people or collective who come together due to their engagement in a particular endeavor (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992, p. 64). As with other qualitative researchers who have done work with online communities, we understand that communities and individuals can exist simultaneously in both the online and offline worlds (Bundon, 2018). While what we can see online is only a part of a CofP, a forum can be a place where women share experiences, and research in these sites can “contribute to collective understandings of how gender relations operate” (Bundon, 2018, p. 279). A CofP does not assume role homogeneity. Rather, it focuses on the ways in which people speak of and negotiate the meanings of their different practices and how these practices are understood/negotiated by themselves as well as others. One aspect of an analysis of the practices being negotiated within the context of an online drug forum concerns gender.

One way to theoretically approach muscle-building practices in general and fitness doping in particular is to try to dissect the whole phenomenon in relation to the concept of *hegemonic masculinity*. This concept was introduced by Connell (1987, 1995) and has since been taken up as a central component of gender theory and scholarship (Schippers, 2007). Hegemony points at the different ways men’s dominance over women—and subordinated men—is legitimized and upheld in different communities or spheres in society (see also Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemony can be understood as a dynamic structure through which historically mobile relationships between different groups of men and women are played out. Particular gender relations and the gendering of certain practices are always situated in arenas of tensions and conflicts (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemony does not mean the total oppression of women, however. On the contrary, women may understand hegemonic patterns as natural. Due to this, there may be, at times, a more or less perfect match or alliance between hegemonic masculinity and *emphasized femininity*, which refers to the ways in which some women quite willingly accommodate the interests and desires of men. This strategy of conformity to heterosexual norms of attraction, however, stands in stark contrast to different subversive forms of resistance towards hegemonic masculinity. The structure of gender as a binary relation has also been fundamental to feminist critique (Budgeon, 2014). Taking recent developments and critiques of Connells’ theory of gender and the concept of hegemony into consideration (Demetriou, 2001; Hearn, 2004; Howson, 2006; Johansson & Ottemo, 2015), one can also look at Butler’s work on performativity.

According to Butler (2004), terms such as masculine and feminine are historical constructs and thereby notoriously changeable categories always in a process of being made, remade, and redefined. And as noted by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p. 848), although the concept of emphasized femininity is still highly relevant in contemporary mass culture, gender hierarchies are “also impacted by new configurations of women’s identity and practice.” Yet challenging or transgressing norms is seldom easy and often regulated through social stigmatization (Schippers, 2007). We are interested in the adaptation to gendered norms and categories of doing and negotiating fitness doping but also the possibility of transgressing such norms/structures through agency/performativity, imagining things in different ways (see Butler, 1990, p. 29). Through analyzing women’s fitness doping, we explore the dynamic relationship between how women dopers navigate a cultural space painted in masculine ideals and practices, and how their negotiations both reshape the content of the online doping forum and hook into more general cultural and social structures of gender and gender hierarchies.

## Methodology and Research Design

Focusing “on written accounts resulting from fieldwork studying the cultures and communities that emerge from online, computer mediated, or internet-based communications,” this study has taken a qualitative case study approach and netnographic methodology (Kozinets, 2010, p. 58). The advantage of using a qualitative case study method is that it allows rich and often nuanced portraits of rare cases (Yin, 2014). Contextualized within the realm of muscular masculinities (as touched upon previously), we direct our attention to the ways a few women engage in a designated online space when discussing the use of doping. In this sense, this article can be read as an archeology of women’s online fitness doping. The contribution of the case study approach lies in connecting subjective experiences of women’s fitness doping as emotions and experiences that change over time with different (gendered) conceptualizations of these experiences in the context of online communication.

Netnography is often described as online ethnography and is methodologically indebted to the traditions and practices of ethnography (Hine, 2000). Regarding epistemology, netnography is understood as an inclusive collection of online methods through which researchers try to capture the thoughts, experiences, and everyday lives of others. Netnography differs from conventional ethnographies that usually include face-to-face interaction (Sheehan, 2010), but it shares many similarities with ethnography and anthropology (Hooley et al., 2012). Online spaces, including Internet forums, are commonly designed to attract specific groups of people, though there are no impenetrable lines between online communication and cultural practices away from keyboard. Netnography, then, is not understood primarily as a method but as a methodological position and philosophy of research (Anderson-Levitt, 2006; Pink et al., 2016).

We are interested in how community members on *ThinkSteroids* discuss fitness doping and the meanings attached to this practice. We have presented these discussions as cultural manifestations that have taken place within a particular (and gendered) spatiality. On *ThinkSteroids.com*, anybody with an Internet connection can gain access to information and post about their own experiences of doping. The user side of *ThinkSteroids* is divided into different forums around broad topics (e.g., Steroid News Forum, Steroid Legal Forum) that are then subdivided into discussions or threads on specific forum (e.g., “Steroids Did Not Make London Bridge Terrorists Act Aggressively” in Steroid News Forum). While the personal information presented about users is somewhat limited, seemingly, the majority of the postings are by men. Forum discussions range in topics from a general “Steroid Forum” to a focused “Steroid Homebrew” forum for users making their own anabolic–androgenic steroid (AAS) products, but only one is focused on women. The “Women and Steroids” forum, the focus of this study, is the dedicated space for issues and topics related to women and their use of various steroid products. *ThinkSteroids* is one of several websites where steroid use is discussed (e.g., *T-Nation.com*, *Bodybuilding.com*), but unlike others, this site is overtly focused on PIED use. We chose to concentrate on the Women and Steroids forum as it was the one explicitly directed at steroid use specifically rather than “training” or “supplements” as on other sites. It is included under the forum group “Anabolic Steroids,” and discussion threads focused on a wide range of topics related to women’s use. The other forums are not indicated as men only, and women do sometimes post in the non-specifically gendered forums. However, we chose to analyze the ways women engaged in forum because it had been specifically carved out to focus on women’s steroid practices. The Women and Steroids forum is dynamic with new posts in discussion threads daily. At the time of data collection, the forum included 340 discussion topics and more than 16,000 individual posts. The pseudo-anonymity in the forum meant we were unable to gather demographic data beyond sex, which was often inferred from the context of the discussion or content of specific posts.

Analyzing an online space dedicated to discussions on women and doping does not mean that only women are actively engaging in these discussions. However, we predominantly utilize posts from members identifying themselves as women. In order to contextualize the discussions around women’s fitness doping experiences, it was necessary to also include a limited number of posts from male-identified members. This was necessary in the third part of the results to discuss the gendering of the forum. Such posts have not been analyzed in detail but instead used as a means to exemplify the kind of gendered perspectives and discussions that women find and respond to on the forum. In our understanding of gender and identity in the context of online communities, we have been inspired by Turkle (1995) who suggests that the use of Internet communication brings the opportunity to perform an alternative identity. We suggest that the narratives presented in the findings are to be understood as markers of identity, but we also recognize that due to the participants’ pseudo-



anonymity, some members may assume a specially devised identity perhaps designed to gain credit and social recognition on the forum.

Similar to ethnography (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995), netnographic data collection does not happen in isolation from data analysis (Kozinets, 2010). Our analysis derived from verbatim transcripts and readings of the posts presented on the Women and Steroids forum. The transcripts were reread and coded into themes that both related to the theoretically informed aim of the study and at the same time were able to describe/explain subjective meanings being expressed regarding women's fitness doping. The themes that emerged in the coding process concerned (1) descriptions of triggers and motivation to engage in doping use, (2) thoughts about experimentation with doping (including possible side effects), (3) the gendered dimensions of women's doping. Initially, the coding process and analysis were conducted manually and inductively. Three separate word documents were created, in which we compiled excerpts that addressed our different themes. Gradually developing our understanding of the data and the narrowing focus of our themes, we could refine our research questions (Kozinets, 2010, p. 119). In this process, we made theoretically imbued notes, with the ambition to identify shared understandings and similar phrases, abstracting their meanings in order to be able to contextualize the excerpts in each theme and further develop our theoretical toolbox (Aspers, 2007; Bowler, 2010; Kozinets, 2010).

The use of online communication as data raises ethical questions. For example, they may blur the distinction between public and private, bringing forward questions about consent and confidentiality. The *ThinkSteroids* forums are not password protected. Anyone with an Internet connection can view the discussions. Based on this, we have concluded that the members have no reasonable expectation of their personal privacy needing to be normatively protected (Grodzinsky & Tavani, 2010, p. 45). This does not give us free rein to use the material in any way, however. We have taken measures to protect the anonymity of those quoted. Firstly, we have generally used pseudonyms for the presented excerpts. Secondly, we have restricted our use of quotations to those that promote relevant analysis and not selected excerpts containing the most sensitive information (Andreasson & Johansson, 2016; Hsiung, 2000). Relevant posts containing sensitive personal information are discussed in the running text.

## Results

### *Motivations for Engaging in the Forum*

Perhaps unsurprisingly, women posting on *ThinkSteroids* were generally giving and/or requesting information on steroid use. The first group, those providing information, sometimes engaged by responding to questions posed directly to women. Frequently, though, women also proactively posted information about their experiences, aiming to share their knowledge and perceptions of different drugs. These women

indicated they were motivated to do so by the desire to help other women who are considering steroid use, as exemplified below:

Excited to announce that I'll be starting my first AAS cycle tomorrow, and since I learned so much from reading about other girls' var cycles on Meso, I thought it would only be fair to share my own experience on this journey as well. (FirstTry)

I've been torn about whether or not to start a cycle log. I'm so busy and I'm worried that it won't be as detailed as the last one. I've decided to give it a go anyway. I have benefited tremendously from reading other women's logs. So here goes. (BusyBuilder)

Expressed here are two women community members' motives for engaging in detailed descriptions of their steroid use experiences and motives. These two members point directly to the utility of being able to access other women's recollections, advice, and cycle logs in their own use practices. The forum and its threads act as a repository that participants can turn to for information they may not easily find elsewhere. This sharing of experiences and knowledge is important in a context where most of the participants on the site are men. Because women's experiences can differ from men in terms of dosages, experiences, possible side effects, pursued goals, and more, these accounts become a useful resource for other women beginning their steroid careers, changing the products they use, or for comparing side effects and other symptoms (cf., Monaghan, 2001, 2012). Engaging in the forum thus involves intersubjective aspects of learning and legitimizing the use of the drugs among women, as well as negotiating aspects of identity. This engagement can be likened to a process through which a women's CofP is gradually taking form (Wenger, 1998).

The importance of the information shared on the forum as a resource becomes clear in the posts from the second group of participants, those seeking advice or information on steroid use specifically for women. Usually, these discussions started from queries concerning how one can improve on some aspect of her physique with minimum negative side effects. This was often done with a stated motivation or goal, including life events such as weddings or vacations (cf., Monaghan, 2001; Smith & Stewart, 2012). In the below excerpt, TheNovice explains her rationale for PIED use:

I am starting my cut in a week. I'm not competing, just cutting for summer. I do like being rather lean during summer... this time around I am considering some extra "help" so that I can at least stay functional during my cut and maybe get bit leaner than last time... I know absolutely nobody in the "business," so I don't really have anyone to get tips from other than reading through the forum here and googling till my fingers are sore. (TheNovice)

Whereas some women present themselves as novices within the business of PIEDs and eager to learn from scratch (as above), others situate themselves as more

experienced and seeking advanced advice concerning courses and drugs. Another woman (FemaleFitness) who is interested in participating in a bikini competition situates herself as quite knowledgeable when she seeks advice and explains her motives for using PIEDs:

Just looking to get some advice from users with more experience. I've done a ton of research and I know that I do want to use Anavar to prep for my next NPC bikini competition. I have a legit source and will be testing my var since I know it is often faked. (FemaleFitness)

Both community members indicated they were seeking expertise and information on using various steroid products. The content of knowledge-seeking posts was similar across various motivations, with differentiation within this CofP marked out along lines of experience between those who were only beginning use and those who had some experience with steroids already. As TheNovice said, she does not know anyone off-line who has used steroids before to help and has to turn to online resources for her information. As they may find some general tips for steroid use elsewhere—such as testing products to confirm the contents—it is likely that much information on dosing and side effects is directed at male steroid users. Therefore, both women were interested in first-hand experiences from other women.

The practices of sharing expertise and peer-to-peer knowledge exchange in the women's forum mirror practices documented among male bodybuilders both online (Andreasson & Johansson, 2016; Monaghan, 2012; Smith & Stewart, 2012) and in the gym (Andreasson & Johansson, in press; Christiansen, 2009, 2018; Salinas et al., 2019). Due to the illegality and taboo nature of steroids in many places, the best available source of information on use and supply is often a fellow user of personal acquaintance (Van de Ven & Mulrooney, 2017). In the absence of medical advice, these sources become important for health and risk management (Smith & Stewart, 2012). The women's networks seem to be newer and smaller compared with the men's, but the women on this forum were following a similar path for acquiring knowledge about PIEDs. They explain their motives for engaging in drug use practices while creating a forum that centers the particularity of women's experiences (Van Hout & Hearne, 2016).

### *Experimenting*

Besides discussing their motives, plans, and goals, several women on the forum were also open to experimenting with new substances—a trait that has been found among male anabolic user groups (Andreasson & Johansson, 2016; Smith & Stewart, 2012). BusyBuilder, for example, writes about her approach to the drugs and her thoughts about experimenting with different substances:

My plan is another primo and var cycle but I believe I'm going to kick start it with the little bit of NPP I have left. Primo was such a fun compound to run. The gains come on slow and steady so I think the NPP will come in handy in the beginning because I am such an impatient person. Primo was amazing. My mood on primo was so good. I heard it referred to as a "feel good" compound and I have to agree with this. I just felt happy while running it. I love how hard it makes me look. It has to be my favorite so far. Now I have read that folks want to see more Anadrol cycles and I have considered this as a possibility in the future but I have found in my reading mixed views on this for females. I'll be honest, I'm not in a huge hurry to try every compound out there. I feel I've found what I like and what I'm comfortable with and I think I'm going to stick to these for now. Who knows what the future holds though. (BusyBuilder)

BusyBuilder expressed her desire to try something new in order to get the results she was after. However, she was unwilling to simply try anything and took a more measured cost/benefit approach. She noted that she prefers to stick to those products she already has experience with rather than venture outside of her comfort zone just because something is available. This line of reasoning corresponds with *the expert type* of user who seeks results with minimum risk, identified in Christiansen et al.'s (2017) typology of men who use steroids. Involvement with steroids could be viewed as an applied science project that includes medical monitoring of the body project and a willingness to consult others (Christiansen et al., 2017, pp. 3–4). Some of BusyBuilders's reluctance to experiment may be due to the lack of women-specific resources and first-hand experiences of the effects and utility of some of these compounds, leading to a more calculated approach. The gendered dimensions of her approach to controlled risk-taking are also implied here.

Similarly, MissPrimo noted that though she wants to try something new and stronger, she preferred to use something with a proven track record among women.

I've been trying to find female logs or experiences with Anadrol but haven't found anything too convincing. . . . I'm still kinda leaning towards a primo run this fall. I'm super excited to get this pinning science down lol Anavar has been amazing, but I want a little more. (MissPrimo)

Like BusyBuilder, MissPrimo was having trouble sourcing women's experiences with some substances. Despite wanting to experiment with a more effective substance and a willingness to inject herself—"pinning"—she was hesitant to try something that a woman peer had not recommended. Even in this Women and Steroids forum, there was a limit to the information available on women's experiences and experimentations. While there was a vast amount of information on women's drug using practices, facilitating advice, and recommendations within the Women and Steroids forum, this information mainly came from men. As such, knowledge about different PIEDs and how to use them in a proper way is partly bound to the voices of men, reinforcing fitness doping as a male phenomenon embedded in hegemonic

conceptualizations of masculinity. Thus, the gendered dimensions of this online CofP and spatiality did not fully match the intended habitants, which will be further discussed in the next section.

### *Renegotiating a Gendered Space and Practice*

One phenomenon throughout the threads in the women's forum was the presence of men's voices. Men regularly posted in the women's forum in several different capacities. Some answered questions posed by women, especially when no women offered a response. This did include some mansplaining (i.e., condescending attitude towards women's knowledge of a topic) rather than giving a straightforward response. Some men posted in the women's forum regularly, whether in response to women's technical questions or to engage in general chat, and some posted only on specific topics or questions. *ThinkSteroids* has a Notable Members list that ranks members on quantity and quality (i.e., number of likes) of use, which is a way of differentiating between members of the broader CofP by conferring status, as well as a form of power, onto some members. The highest ranked members are almost exclusively men, indirectly constituting them as a type of expert, while newer or lower ranked members—including many of the women members—are situated as laypersons.

Most common, however, were men posting on behalf of women who were usually their girlfriends or wives. For example, this exchange between two men conversing about their partners:

Okay so my chick is gonna do a cycle, and I was wondering, what would be more effective, and also SAFE? (In terms of sides, virilization, etc.)

Our options are injectable Primobolan Acetate and nandrolone phenyl propionate. Maybe test prop but I'm leaning toward the others instead. I have a large amount of lab grade MCT oil to cut the primo (bad PIP). But any input is appreciated. She's trying to get stronger and build muscle, while minimizing fat/burning fat. (MRmyChick)

Addressing the above excerpt, MRmyChick gets the following answer:

My girl has done both plus Anavar. This her first cycle? I actually think 20 mg of Anavar a day for 6 weeks is a great first or repeat cycle for ladies. (AnavarCycle)

MRmyChick posted a question seemingly on behalf of his partner—his “chick”—who wanted to try steroids. Besides the fact that this discussion can be situated within a misogynistic discourse and a cultural landscape of dominant masculinity, the excerpts indicate that MRmyChick had some knowledge about cycling and products but was seeking out woman-specific information. He uses the phrase “our options” to discuss potential products, intimating that the use and decisions around it are a joint effort and endeavor. He described the goals of getting stronger

and reducing fat as belonging solely to her, but that the means were shared. While the goal was hers, they will achieve it together or perhaps she will achieve it (only) through his guidance and support. The received response was similar, exemplifying the split between the man posting and the woman's experience he discussed. It is unclear where the line of experience lies, as AnavarCycle notes his "girl" has used several products but then pivoted to his view of what was best without indicating on what this opinion was based. That he referenced a woman's experience is almost a way of legitimizing his occupancy of this nominally woman's space. Her voice and experience were present but backgrounded relative to his views of what works best for women in general.

Men generally appeared to want to be helpful and encouraging to women in the forum. At the same time, men monopolized the threads and took over this online space initiated for and dedicated to women. This engagement between men on discussion threads within the women's forum was not uncommon, and the majority of threads had more posts from men than women. We do not know why the women MRmyChick and AnavarCycle discussed did not engage directly with one another, but the result was that the experiences of these women and others were present only through their partners (men's voices). Their first-hand capabilities and expertise were then filtered through those of men who have their own views and opinions based on their own experiences of drug use and of their experience of a woman's use.

This pattern of men speaking for women or engaging in their place is highlighted in this thread on menstruation:

Hey guys, my girlfriend started her first cycle of Anavar 7 weeks ago. After about 2 weeks, she had her first period which she said was light but lasted about a week and a half. A couple days ago she began her period again and says it's very light.

Were wondering if this is normal or should we be concerned if this is actually Anavar. It did come from a source on here that seems to be very trusted and has been for a few years now. So any feedback and or advice would be greatly appreciated. (PeriodConcerns)

PeriodConcerns soon received responses from two other community members:

First time on Var? I've had friends completely miss theirs for months on and after Anavar. The level of interference with the estrogen/progesterone cycles, I assume, would vary person to person like the responses to other drugs. (LightORnot)

Anavar has given my wife the full range of periods. No periods, frequent light periods and even occasional heavy periods with no specific patterns of occurrence. (MrPill)

Incredibly, this entire thread contained no posts from women or anyone claiming to have experienced menstruation. The men described their partners' experiences but were limited in what they could describe and relay: "heavy" and "light" had no

relative context here, and the men were unable to supply it. While men may indeed be knowledgeable about topics like menstruation, women's hormones, and reactions to anabolic substances, these men were claiming no expertise on the topic apart from their proximity to women who use or have used this particular substance. Women's voices were missing from this thread, having been supplanted by male users, seemingly without the men noting that women were absent.

This absence did not always go unnoticed however, as in this case where user MyFriend referred a woman user to another woman he knew had experience and could give good advice on anabolic use:

@Barbara I am so glad you posted this question! My friend @Lisa may be able to help you with this. She has been very helpful with my wife's AAS usage. Lots of experience on her end with PEDS. Good luck to you. (MyFriend)

MyFriend's referring a woman user to a knowledgeable woman rather than responding himself maintained the online space for women. It also reinforced that women can be and are experienced, knowledgeable sources of information regarding anabolic use. There was still an element of male centrism and hegemony, as MyFriend seemed to vouch for Lisa's expertise in a way that suggests if Barbara had just replied directly she may not have been viewed as credible.

Women expressed a desire for more women to take part in the Women's Forum. User NewGoals posted this message in response to a woman participant posting that she was going to share her use and training log:

yay, another lady starting a log! welcome!

you look fantastic! I'm currently dieting down for a show in 8 weeks and am going through what you mentioned above (massive hunger, low energy and brain fog...). I think this will be my last show, and then I will switch to something like you're doing now (building in the winter & cutting in the spring). (NewGoals)

The excitement in this post underscores the lack of women using the dedicated forum space. Similar comments were not found in the general forums often dominated by men, as men sharing their logs was routine (see Andreasson & Johansson, 2017). Similarly, one woman user, Sam, posted this into a thread in which another new woman had received some sexually suggestive comments from men on the site: "It would be [*sic*] nice to keep some women here..." Sam was concerned the aggressive messages would cause the new woman to leave the forum altogether after the men's comments had begun to take over the thread. To this end, and seemingly paradoxically to its intent of creating a space for female users, the Women and Steroids forum was largely a forum in which knowledge, experience, and the ability to talk and discuss doping was filtered through hegemonic conceptualizations of masculinity and men's experiences and knowledge.

## Conclusions

In this article, we analyzed the ways women engage in a forum, both directly with one another and indirectly through via postings on their behalf by men, that has been nominally carved out for them from a larger male-dominated website. The posts on the Women and Steroids forum provide insights into the ways women are motivated to engage in fitness doping, their willingness to experiment with new substances, and the ways they negotiate this male-dominated space. In many ways, women use this forum for reasons similar to men, such as for information on use and risk reduction information (Andreasson & Johansson, 2016; Monaghan, 2012; Smith & Stewart, 2012) and are open to some limited experimentation with new substances (Andreasson & Johansson, 2016; Smith & Stewart, 2012). The meanings and motives within the women's posts demonstrate a lack of, and search for, information about women's experiences. Women engaging in this forum want to give voice to their experiences of PIED use and give and receive practical knowledge and feedback. We can see how a women's CofP (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992) is evolving in which knowledge about various substances is shared, as well as personal use experiences.

Although the Women and Steroids forum provided a space within the larger male-dominated platform for women, it was often still dominated by men's voices as the majority of threads had more posts from men than from women regardless of topic. For example, although women-specific issues such as menstruation, gender-specific side effects, and more were discussed, seemingly well-intentioned men engaged in these discussions to talk about women's experiences. This dominance has two main implications for the development of the women's CofP. Firstly, the prevalence of men's voices can act as a roadblock to the development of a women's CofP as their voices and particular experiences are constantly obscured by or filtered through men's own contributions. As a result, this is a community developing only in relation to, and as a result of, the already established men's CofP. The space may be made for women, but it is men who continue to fill it. Symbolically, men are effectively engaging in a sort of cultural manspreading by encroaching on women's forum space and causing the women's voices to shrink in response. The woman's space becomes a quasi-masculine/men's space in which women are the topic rather than the contributors. Secondly, it has implications for women's use and use practices. Women seeking advice or the experiences of other women must navigate through men's contributions. In a similar way, women who wanted to share their own experiences, knowledge, and expertise were drowned out by the comparatively larger number of men's contributions. Obscuring women's voices makes it difficult for women to come together around their shared practice, further stunting the development of a stand-alone women's CofP. This reinforces the notion that these discussions are taking place within a male/masculine preserve, and women's voices are backgrounded. These gendered patterns do not always go unnoticed, as there were examples of women challenging such a narrative structure. Women members responded to men on this forum in various ways—accepting information they found



useful, engaging in banter, and pushing back against dismissive or misogynistic comments.

That women engaged with one another and with men on this forum indicates a change in the fitness doping demography and how this practice is conceptualized. Women were actively engaging in fitness doping practices and with one another in distinct ways. They were creating and sharing a knowledge base within this forum around PIED use built on their own experiences as women with specific aesthetic goals, motivations, and (side) effects. These divergent goals and physiological realities further challenge traditional masculine views of the role PIEDs play in women's lives and gradually make it possible to divorce PIEDs from previous, more or less exclusively masculine connotations both online and off. In terms of harm reduction and prevention, the possible impact these changes have on women's fitness doping practices and a changing doping demography is yet to be explored.


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