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# Negotiating female fitness doping: gender, identity and transgressions

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## ABSTRACT

On the basis of qualitatively gathered interview material and data from various postings on a pro-doping online community called *Flashback*, the aim of this article is to describe and analyse how female users of performance and image enhancing drugs (PIED) understand and negotiate their use in relation to gender and the body. Positioned within post-structural feminism, the results show that there is an increasing amount of knowledge that not only targets but is also developed by and for women concerning PIED use. Traditionally scholars have connected female PIED use more or less exclusively to female bodybuilders, but as new body and femininity ideals develop the demographics of female fitness doping are widening. Although PIED use in the context of gym and fitness culture remains primarily a masculine domain, the results point towards a development in which women are increasingly becoming more integrated into a fitness community of PIED users.

## KEYWORDS

Female bodybuilding;  
fitness doping; body;  
transgression; narrative;  
netnography

## Introduction

Scholars interest in women's use of performance and image enhancing drugs (PIED) in the context of gym and fitness culture has come to focus mainly on female bodybuilders (Roussel and Griffet 2000; McGrath and Chananie-Hill 2009). Female bodybuilding essentially began in the late 1970s (Fair 1999). In the 1980s and 1990s the highly muscular and defined female bodies gradually gained recognition, both within bodybuilding and in the public discourse (Liokaftos 2018). As these women's bodies steadily grew in mass and vascularity, discussions on PIEDs soon emerged (Andreasson and Johansson 2014). Little by little, then, women entered the subculture of male bodybuilding, including adopting the drug-use practices associated with this culture (Liokaftos 2018). Interestingly, this development occurred parallel to a growing interest among researchers in body and gender studies in general, and to the development of feminist perspectives and theory in particular. Scholars such as Judith Butler (1990, 1993) and Donna Haraway (1990) fuelled the intellectual discussion and

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problematization of gender and gendered bodies through their contributions. People started to talk about ways of extending/exceeding the limits of the human body. In this context, female bodybuilders (or, more broadly, muscle-building women) were thought to represent something unique – something subversive, transgressional (Aoki 1996; see also Evans-Brown and McVeigh 2009), and a vibrant challenge to hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995). The imagery of these women, however, was not unambiguous. McGrath and Chanie-Hill (2009) explain:

Despite increased empowerment, the prominent theme of female bodybuilders' experience is one of contradiction, often leading to attempts to 'balance' popular notions of femininity and muscularity. Critical feminists, postmodernists, and sport sociologists describe how female bodybuilders balance contradictory demands of muscular development versus expectations of normative femininity. These include regulating muscular size to avoid being labelled as 'too big', 'mannish', or lesbian/.../using body technologies such as breast enlargements, plastic surgeries, and feminizing hairstyles, outfits, and accessories to counteract 'masculinizing' effects of steroid use or loss of breast tissue (237).

Gender transgressions rarely stay unnoticed. Women's muscle-building has therefore often been considered a threat to the 'natural' gender order (Washington and Economides 2016; Jong 2017). This applies particularly to women's gender border-crossing into the realm of muscular masculinity, through drug-use practices (Aoki 1996; Wesely 2001; McGrath and Chanie-Hill 2009; Jespersen 2012; McVeigh, Bates, and Chandler 2015). As regards women's use of prohibited substances and muscle-building practices scholars have also debated whether they are to be understood as gender transgressions or if they merely reinforce already existing polarized understandings of gender. As suggested by McGrath and Chanie-Hill (2009, 236), the answer to this complex question resists definitive analysis, and require 'both/and' discourses, rather than 'either/or' binaries. The initial answer to this question has thus been that women's muscle-building practices, in particular through drug-use practices, act as a subversive and empowering force, and reinforce normative gender configurations (Hill Collins 2000; Boyle 2005).

Continuing this line of discussion, we will look at Swedish female PIED users' narratives. Using qualitative interview material gathered in the context of gym and fitness culture and data from various postings on a pro-doping online community called *Flashback*, the aim has been to describe and analyse how female PIED users understand and negotiate their use of PIEDs. Studies on women's PIED use in the context of gym and fitness culture have focused largely on female bodybuilders. While this study, too, includes narratives from bodybuilders, the sampling also includes narratives from fitness competitors and temporary female users (see Methods and Methodology section for further information). The study has been guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What reactions regarding female muscularity in general and women's PIED use in particular do the informants meet in their everyday life?

RQ2: What meanings do the users ascribe to the drugs in relation to their own understanding of gender and the body?

The paper is structured as follows: In the next section, we describe the general background of the study. Next follows a section in which we present our theoretical considerations, followed by a discussion on method and methodology. In the results section, excerpts

from interviews and online postings are presented and analysed, addressing the aims of the study. Finally, in the concluding section, we provide a condensed and more theoretical summary of the main outcomes of the study.

## Background

Research on the use of PIEDs has focused mainly on two arenas: formally governed competitions in (elite) sports (i.e., ‘sport doping’), and doping in society, which has usually meant doping in the context of gym and fitness culture (often referred to as ‘fitness doping’ or ‘recreational doping’) (Dimeo 2007). Although scholars have focused mainly on sport doping, the use of PIED in society and doping as a societal problem have been increasingly recognized in the last decades (Van Hout and Hearne 2016; Christiansen 2018). With little hope of fame or financial gain (non-) competitive bodybuilders as well as regular gym-goers have engaged in fitness doping (Locks and Richardson 2012). Doping practices in this context is largely connected to male bodybuilding. The fitness geography is changing, and so is the doping demography, however (Van Hout and Kean 2015; Coomber et al. 2014). Women have, for example, increasingly entered into the realm of fitness doping (McGrath and Chananie-Hill 2009; Jespersen 2012; Van Hout and Hearne 2016). Thus, boosted by an increasing focus and preoccupation on body image issues, among both men and women (Cash and Pruzinsky 2002; Andreasson and Johansson 2014), and the widespread availability of PIED and their growing prevalence among mainstream fitness groups internationally, PIED use is increasingly considered an emergent public health issue (Van Hout and Hearne 2016; Christiansen 2018).

In gym and fitness culture the relationship between gender and strength training and PIED use has largely been a story about male bodybuilders, their muscles and masculinity (Klein 1993; Monaghan 2001, 2012; Denham 2008; Liokaftos 2018; Christiansen 2018). Scholars have also concluded that in the Western world the use of PIEDs by those who practise strength training is more common among men than women (Breivik, Hanstad, and Loland 2009; Sagoe, Andreassen, and Pallesen 2014; Christiansen 2018). Furthermore, in response of women’s increasing muscularity in bodybuilding, the International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness (IFBB) – the governing body of the sport of bodybuilding and fitness – insisted that women should maintain their ‘female forms’ and femininity. In line with this, the concept and discipline of *women’s fitness* was introduced in 1996, paving the way for a ‘less muscular and aesthetically pleasing physique’ as an ideal for female bodybuilders (IFBB 2018). Other disciplines, such as *women’s body fitness* and *women’s bikini-fitness*, were added later. This development can thus be understood as a means by which major stakeholders in bodybuilding and gym and fitness culture have sought to influence the development of women’s muscle-building (and fitness doping). Nevertheless, female bodybuilders of the 1990s have brought new ideals forward. This is abundantly clear in the highly promoted notion of ‘strong is the new skinny’ that is prevalent in popular media and heavily marketed on various *fitspiration webpages* (Boepple et al. 2016; see also Sassatelli 2010; Washington and Economides 2016).

Although there is increasing social acceptance in society generally, and in fitness culture particularly, as regards women’s muscle-building practices, women’s engagement in fitness doping has largely escaped scholarly attention (Evans-Brown and McVeigh 2009; Van Hout

and Hearne 2016). Research also shows that drug supplementation (PIED use) differs per gender (Klein 1993; Andreasson and Johansson 2018b; Sagoe, Andreassen, and Pallesen 2014; Brennan, Wells, and Van Hout 2017). Whereas men have had access to online forums and subcultural settings in which PIED use is discussed (Smith and Stewart 2012; Monaghan 2012), women have largely been left out of the equation regarding such supportive and social communities (Roussel and Griffet 2000; Thualagant 2012; Van Hout and Hearne 2016). Bunsell (2013) discusses this in terms of a veil of secrecy and a taboo, through which women have often come to underplay their use of PIEDs and are often bound to trust others (read: men) to guide them in their fitness doping practices. Due to the historical association between muscles and masculinity women are also more likely to use supplements considered 'less masculine', such as human growth hormones (HGH), ephedrine and clenbuterol, as opposed to muscle-enhancing supplements such as anabolic androgenic steroids (ASS) (Jespersen 2012). Of course, this also corresponds to the (gendered) side-effects associated with the various substances.

### **Analytical framework: gender in transformation**

Theoretically, we position our study within post-structural feminism (Butler 1990, 1993; Johansson 2007). This strand of theory deals not exclusively with the description and analysis of contemporary structures of oppression; there is also a utopian striving inherent in this literature. The discussion on how the body is socially constructed and how power relations are inscribed on the body also suggests that the flesh is the starting point of a discussion on how to counteract and eventually change social representations (Blackman 2008). Poststructuralist feminism has been successful in bringing forward theoretical tools and conceptual frameworks that can be used to bring forward and analyse alternative representations and images of gender and identity (Butler 1993). The desire to influence, change and possibly even revolutionize gender relations and society is eminently present in the writings of many contemporary feminist writers, such as the American feminist and historian Donna Haraway's science and technology studies, especially her now classical writings from the 1990s on the 'cyborg'. Cyborgs are portrayed as a complex synthesis of organic and synthetic parts. These fictional figures are often used to pose the question of the difference between human and machine as being one concerned with morality, free will, and emotions. The cyborg has become something of the admiss society's root metaphor, that is, a metaphor that comprises several key aspects of contemporary society. This metaphor functions as a tight composite picture of the extended and nearly extinguished self. It blurs the boundaries between nature and culture, man/woman and machine, reality and illusion.

This subversive tradition is also well represented by the American feminist Judith Butler, who claims that the notion that masculinity and femininity, indeed the heterosexual order, are social and cultural constructions (Butler 1990, 2004). Such an assumption constitutes a starting point from which to question the prevailing outlook on gender, sexuality and identity. In order to theorize about sexuality and gender, Butler uses several examples and case studies about people who have broken with the predominant gender and sexuality order. She claims that these cases show how fragile and unstable the gender order is. Transvestites, female bodybuilders, bisexuals and other positions viewed as 'deviant' in public discourse reveal the extent to which gender is a game, an act, and how everything is

based on a well-developed dramaturgy. According to Butler, however, it is extremely difficult to change people's conceptions of gender and sexuality. These conceptions are inscribed in the body and deeply rooted in the society and in the individual psyche. The discovery that gender is not an essential feature, therefore, constitutes merely the first step toward real change. When people dare to violate the gender order, the boundaries suddenly become visible. Sometimes we convince ourselves that we are freer than we actually are. Such an illusion is shattered, however, when we suddenly see how the system both produces and punishes deviants.

Listening to the stories of the women interviewed in this article, and to the postings on Flashback, we are taking part in a *silent revolution*. Female bodies are moulded and shaped in new ways, through muscle-building practices and fitness doping. Through new body techniques and refined training schedules, extreme bodies are made and the limits of the flesh perforated (Sassatelli 2010). In many respects, women who started doing bodybuilding in the late twentieth century paved the way for contemporary women to pursue strength training and other activities aimed at changing the constitution of the body. The negative reactions in the 1990s towards female bodybuilders were ruthless (Richardson 2008). Crossing a boundary is never easy. Looking at the bigger picture, however, we can establish that the majority of individuals doing bodybuilding, and having the time to build extreme bodies through drug using practices are still men (Christiansen 2018). Still, we argue that it is important to try to discern and interpret signs of ongoing socio-cultural changes and transformations of the gender balance in society, by studying female fitness dopers.

## Methods and methodology

This article derives from fieldwork conducted as part of a larger umbrella project in which the authors spent several years analysing and writing about gym and fitness culture in general and fitness doping in particular (Andreasson and Johansson 2014). The overall methodology of the umbrella project was based on an ethnographic approach. By conducting interviews, engaging in informal conversations, making observations, analysing online communications and face-to-face communities, the authors took part in the everyday life of gym-goers, fitness dopers, personal trainers, bodybuilders, and gym owners. Methodologically, we agree with the view of Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) of ethnography as an inclusive collection of methods through which researchers use various means to try to participate in the everyday lives of others. Consequently, we have considered it counterproductive to try to define boundaries between ethnography and other qualitative, empirically intimate, research methods. Instead, ethnography has primarily been understood not as a method, but rather epistemologically approached as a philosophy of research (Anderson-Levitt 2006). Our belief is that when the aim is to investigate and understand human settings and bodies, a relational epistemology is preferable (Andreasson and Johansson 2018b). In the context of this umbrella project, for the present paper we have used two sets of data:

*Firstly*, we used rich qualitative data generated through in-depth interviews. Being part of the larger umbrella project, a total of thirty-two (26 men, 6 women) bodybuilders and dedicated gym-goers with fitness doping experiences were interviewed on at least two occasions. In this paper we focus on the data gathered from the interviews with the six

female participants, as the interview material concerning male experiences has been analysed elsewhere (Andreasson and Johansson 2014; Andreasson 2015). The oldest woman interviewed was 47, the youngest 21. The interviews were of varying duration, most being around 90 minutes or more in length. The women also represented a range of doping experience, as did their articulation of their reasons for starting to use the drugs. Some of the interviewees have competed in bodybuilding and/or body-fitness, and been engaged in drug use practices, using injectable for several years. Some had no interest in competing at all, and had engaged in PIED use for other purposes. The first set of interviews with these women was semi-structured in the sense that the questions dealt with specific themes (such as perception of body, gender, commencement of doping and the women's experiences of the drugs, and so on). The follow-up interviews were less structured and made it possible to clarify any ambiguities that may have existed, and to obtain more detailed descriptions. We asked the participants questions on how they, for example, looked upon their lifestyle and how their lifestyle choices were met by others. We also asked the participant to explain their view on gender and the doped body among other things. Our methodological ambition was both to capture subjective experiences and to place these experiences within an ideological and gendered context. During the interviews our ambition was to support each participant in constructing a chronological narrative (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009), although at the same time we are aware that, to some extent, such a narrative always needs to be understood as sanitized (Pink 2009). Put differently, we did not interrupt the participating women in order to direct the conversation toward our themes; we considered the personal narrative as superordinate during fieldwork (Andreasson and Johansson 2017). All interviews were made individually, recorded and transcribed verbatim.

*Secondly*, we have utilized 'written accounts resulting from fieldwork studying the cultures and communities that emerge from online computer-mediated or Internet-based communications' (Kozinets 2010, 197). We have employed a netnographic approach, developed by Kozinets (2010), when studying an online community in which doping users can discuss and negotiate their experiences with other users. Netnography is often described as online ethnography, and is thus methodologically indebted to the traditions and practices of ethnography (Hine 2000). We have focused on texts and images on an online Swedish forum called Flashback. On this platform, anybody with an Internet connection can read, and comment on different subjects. Discussions on Flashback may concern just about anything, but because the forum facilitates the expression of opinions anonymously there are many threads that concern prohibited activities (Andreasson and Johansson 2016; Flashback n.d.). One popular theme is doping. While the personal information presented is limited, it would appear that many of the postings under this theme are by young males. In order to deal with this 'bias' and staying true to the aim of the study, we restricted our selection of postings to those in which it was explicitly stated that poster was female. Guided by the aim of the study, we have used postings from 2014 to 2018, and analysed how female members of the Flashback community conceptualize and understand the use of PED as an integral part of their everyday lives.

In the Results section, when referring to our empirical material we use the concepts of *narrative*, and *narrative studies* (Smith and Sparkes 2009). For us, this is a way to mark the importance of every single narrative and understanding of PIEDs, as well as a way to indicate how we use the different stories and postings. As we see it, narratives constitute human

realities and our mode of being, so they help guide action and are socio-culturally shared resources that give substance and texture to people's lives (Sparkes and Smith 2007, 296; see also Smith and Sparkes 2016). Put differently, storytelling is an important aspect of people's efforts to make sense of their lives, and we are trying to create a mosaic of on- and offline voices that can say something relevant concerning female fitness doping experiences and understandings (cf. Freeman 2001). Arguably this mosaic, together with the analytical tools developed in the analysis, can then function as fuel for further studies on female fitness experiences in general and the gendered dimensions of doping use in particular (Smith 2018).

As suggested by Kozinets (2010), in neither netnography nor ethnography (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995) does data collection occur in isolation from data analysis. Our analysis and interpretation of data were derived from verbatim transcripts of interviews and postings presented on Flashback. These transcripts were read repeatedly and coded into themes that both responded to the more theoretical imbued purpose of the study and could capture the subjective empirical meanings being expressed regarding female fitness doping (cf., Aspers 2007). The coding analysis was conducted manually and initiated inductively. Gradually developing our understanding of the data and the emerging focus of attention in our themes, we have successively refined our research focus (Kozinets 2010, 119). We made theoretically imbued notes during this process. In order to be able to contextualize the excerpts, we identified shared understandings and similar phrases (Aspers 2007). Through this process, and movements between empirical data and theoretical and analytical tools, we sought for narratives that – in a nuanced way – could respond to the purpose of the study (Kozinets 2010; see also Bowler 2010; Fangen 2005). Interview material and postings on Flashback were thus selected in accordance with their relevance to the research questions, as well as the richness, heterogeneity and interactivity characterizing the narratives and postings in question. To address the purpose of the paper in a nuanced manner, the selection of excerpts was guided by the aim of representing diverse features of female fitness doping.

In presenting our empirical material we have generally used pseudonyms. Formal ethical approval has been secured from the Regional Ethical Review Board of the University of Linköping in Sweden (Ref. No. 2017/468-31; 46-09).

## Results

The results section is divided into three parts. Following our different sets of data, studying female fitness dopers in different arenas and contexts, in the first two sections we will look more closely at how a small number of women negotiate and develop their understanding of everyday practices, training regimes, and the use of PIEDs. This will be followed by one section in which we zoom in on the context of online communication and the ways in which female community members approach and negotiate the meanings of PIEDs.

### ***PIED use, the law and the other gender***

Unlike many other countries, Swedish law does not just prohibit the possession and selling of doping substances but also the presence of these substances in the human body. The Swedish Doping Act (1991:1969), which was adopted by the Riksdag and brought into

effect in 1992, made it possible to intensify Swedish anti-doping work by criminalizing the use and possession of doping substances and by implementing stricter criminal penalties. Therefore, we can safely say that in a Swedish context since the 1990s PIED use has been viewed as a public health issue and societal problem. As such, doping has primarily been discussed in relation to young men's muscular masculinities, particularly in public discourse (Andreasson 2015). Although acceptance of extreme bodies and different ways of 'doing gender' are more common in public discourse today, women's fitness doping practices have been marginalized not only due to effects of the Swedish Doping Act but to gendered expectations attached to the practice. This, of course, also influences users' understandings of PIEDs and the ways in which their lifestyle is negotiated.

One of the informants, Mathilda, is 33 and works as a housing agent. Her interest in strength training has developed over a long period. Initially she did mostly group fitness activities, but after a couple of years of going to her local gym, her interest in strength training grew. She was fascinated by how her body and its constitution changed, how body fat gradually disappeared and was replaced with muscles. She wanted to create a lean, slim and muscular physique, but this gradually changed into a desire to compete in bodybuilding. In the following excerpt, she describes how this desire was fulfilled, and her feeling of being constantly scrutinized at the gym, due to her muscular body:

People think you are stupid, doing bodybuilding. Even at SATS, which is a regular gym, you are doomed. When they see that you lift a little heavier than a regular person might do in a gym, they just stare at you. I used to train at World Class gym before. When we met and had a chat a month ago, that was actually one of the first times I was here that week. Usually I'm only here on weekends, with Chris. However, you know, I got such strange stares at the end of the week, from the regulars who work out here. Also, I try to dress as femininely as possible at my job. I usually wear a dress or a skirt. I think I try to hide myself a bit, to make it less confrontational. So they won't think, 'Oh my God – she looks like a transvestite'. Or, 'Damn she has really been working out and used drugs and all that'.

Mathilda describes feelings of being *otherized* and gazed at, not only when working out at the gym, but also at work. To avoid being treated as an outsider, she tries to adjust the way she presents herself to fit into the general perceptions of how women should dress and act. The 'uncanny Other' is present here as a 'steroid-filled transvestite' understood as a subversive gender bending body. Clearly this experience of being perceived as deviant in public discourse exemplifies Butler's perspective on gender as a game and act, and how the individual develops a dramaturgy to deal with a narrowly defined gender order (Butler 1990).

The feeling of being misunderstood and gazed at is quite common among the women interviewed. Whereas the fitness-doping men and their muscles are understood as being somewhat in sync with idealized notions of muscular masculinities, there are no obvious cultural alliances between femininity and muscles (cf., Jong and Drummond 2016; Washington and Economides 2016; Andreasson and Johansson 2018a). This kind of narrative also resonates well with research on female athletes, and how they are socially excluded or framed within polarized gender configurations and discourses of emphasized femininities (Malcolm 2000; Bolin and Granskog 2003; Jong 2017).

Although the women interviewed are highly aware that their bodies and drug use practices can be seen as extreme, not only in terms of flouting Swedish law but also in terms of gender transgression, they also yearn for recognition and being treated as normal/ordinary. Another informant explains:

Well, there are people who are impressed and think it is fun, but that is a small crowd. One also gets many negative reactions, draining your energy levels. I just want people to realize that I am only a human, as if I could explain: ‘Yeah, I can see it in your eyes, what you think of me.’ I mean, it’s not as if I’m this unbelievable robot, just because I’m really pumped up and defined in my workout. I’m just struggling so hard. And actually, what you want is just to have some rewards, instead of all these negative reactions. It’s a pity because I don’t think people really understand the amount of hard work that lies behind this body. But, they just see the freak working out in the gym. When you are working out, your muscles are veined and strained. It looks extreme. (Liz)

The experience of being treated differently and potentially seen as somehow deviant – in this case ‘a robot’ or perhaps a cyborg (Haraway 1990) – is present in several narratives. Following the thoughts of Haraway (1990), Liz and others interviewed can be said to reject rigid societal and cultural boundaries, separating human from machine, and the real from illusion. Narratives of these extreme and boundary transgressive bodies are also intertwined with narratives of drug use. In a way, as implied above, the use of PIEDs is thought to colonize other people’s opinions about femininity and muscles, concealing the tremendous effort and time invested in training and diet (Monaghan 2001). Another informant, Catherine, has been involved professionally in bodybuilding for many years. She also talks about regular checks as a form of harassment.

I do not care that much, but the thing is that they take the driving license from you. Some of my friends were harassed one morning. They had this ‘Operation Liquid’ at six o’clock in the morning. One of my friends was asleep in Gothenburg when they attacked. They were looking for her boyfriend. She was asleep, and he was not even there, but they kicked in the door – six cops with their weapons drawn. She was about to pee herself! I just say, if you are active in an organization and competing, they will have drug tests, and that is fine. You will not get a fine if you test positive at a competition, but if they pass on that information, you will lose your driver’s licence. Why involve the police? (Catherine)

The above narrative obviously needs to be understood in relation to the national context. In Sweden, strong preventative measures have for been implemented to stop both trafficking of PIEDs and the use of these drugs. In this context, Catherine, like others, expresses feelings of humiliation and being otherized in daily life. However, this is not only connected to the fact that when engaging in drug using practices they are breaking and questioning the law, but also to their understanding of gender and femininity. Exemplified is how power relations are inscribed into and unto their bodies, making their flesh a point of departure for discussing and possibly challenging gendered social representations (Haraway 1990). When talking about it, they envision the female PIED user as a ‘gender bender’ and a transgressive gestalt. At the same time, they also express a desire to fit in, be seen as ordinary (read normal) and be a part of society. What the women describe is how their lifestyle choices are received by others, and they also touch upon their experiences of being seen as outsiders. Through their practices, they are apparently breaking boundaries and contributing to challenging gender norms and performative codes in society (as well as the law). In one sense this can be seen as a semi-rebellious act empowering female muscularity as a cultural ideal (Grogan et al 2004; McGrath and Chananie-Hill 2009; Washington and Economides 2016). At the same time, this is more an effect of their presence in mainstream gym and fitness culture and society, as these women do not seem to aspire to transgress gender or confront stereotypical gender ideals. Instead their wish is be respected/accepted when trying to

maintain a certain lifestyle, including the use of PIEDs and developing bulk muscles on a female body.

### **Accepting the rules of the game**

Since the 1990s, women have had difficulty being accepted in the realm of competitive and male-dominated bodybuilding. While female bodybuilding is still largely marginalised, new forms of female body ideals have evolved that are more open to (moderate) muscular femininities. This is exemplified in the narrative of Erika, below. She is 20 years old, and has gradually become seriously involved in strength training and *Women's Body Fitness*. Although this competitive discipline includes femininity-connoted assessments of women's self-presentation, grace, hair, makeup and personal confidence, it also bears many resemblances to traditional bodybuilding, in which overall athletic appearance of the physique is evaluated in terms of muscle tone/development, body fat, and symmetry (IFBB 2018). Additionally, questions that concern the shaping of a body-fitness body are evidently also questions about PIED use. Erika describes how her image of the fitness culture gradually changed, especially concerning the use of drugs.

Therefore, because I am so fresh, I have been naive from the start. I have to admit that. Now I have a completely different view, compared to what I had a year ago. I know how it works, and it is a bit more like if you are in the game, then you also have to play and endure the game. So, if you look at sports or if we talk about drugs and sport, then I seriously thought that people who competed and won were clean. I thought you could do that. However, I have been told that it is just rumours. You get a different view when talking to people now. There is a completely different attitude towards drugs among people, but now I also know more about how it works. (Erika)

Although Erika is not involved in bodybuilding, she is partaking of the same cultural space as male and female bodybuilders and is thus drawn into the discussion on PIEDs. When she talks about 'people' it is her training friends and fellow competitors she has in mind. Aiming to become a fitness competitor she gradually realizes what she needs to be prepared to do in order to reach this goal. She also admits that her attitude towards PIEDs has recently changed and she has become more accepting. Another informant continues:

I believe there are PIEDs that work better, causing no direct harm, helping the individual to progress. I also understand that one needs to use extra facilitators to reach higher levels. When you reach a certain level, or a plateau, where your training and results stagnate, you just feel restless. You want to reach higher levels more rapidly. Well, it is simpler then, and you still love it. (Ruth)

Exemplified by Ruth above, is a habituation process through which growing ambition and training schedules gradually comes to include the use of PIEDs. The training repertoire is in a way intact but new 'formulas' are added. Another woman, Mathilda, has a similar opinion. She is trying to soften the image of the 'PIED-using lazy bodybuilder'. Although not trying to downplay the role of PIEDs in the culture and bodily projects, she wants to put forward a more complex image of the/her lifestyle. The ethos she puts forward is characterized primarily by discipline, diet, asceticism and a lifestyle in which people are ready to sacrifice everything in order to reach their goals.

Well, it is just a myth that muscles pop up by themselves and that you are ready in one month's time, just because you use many different drugs. People are actually sacrificing their social life. If you are in a relationship, for example, you have to sacrifice a lot of the usual everyday life, you know. Therefore, you put a lot of energy on it, both mentally and physically. I think it is important to get the whole picture – that there is a lot of work behind progress made: one is not just sitting there and getting stronger and stronger by stuffing oneself with drugs. (Mathilda)

What we notice here is a gradual acceptance of PIEDs – a growing inclination to justify and rationalize its use. Different motivations are expressed and physiological and psychological boundaries are challenged, as are hegemonic conceptions of gender and sexuality (which will be touched upon in the next section). This can also be interpreted as an effect of women's being more tightly drawn into and made parts of the inner circle of the fitness community, in which PIED use is more broadly tolerated, if not entirely accepted (Andreasson and Henning 2018). No longer at the margins of bodybuilding and fitness culture, the women interviewed have a partly strained, but also partly relaxed, view of PIEDs. They share a widespread acceptance to use PIEDs to reach higher performance levels and win competitions. They also defend the subcultural ethos of bodybuilding. At the same time the PIEDs are seen as just one part of a larger picture in which discipline and hard training are the most important parts. Further, in terms of gender and femininity, the use and the effects of the drugs are often understood as being complicated and complex. Breaking with the predominant gender and sexuality order these women challenges normative conceptions and boundaries between not only men and women but also between nature/culture and reality/illusion (Butler 1990; Haraway 1990). As shown above, this game act of gender and drug use practices seldom comes for free and remains unnoticed in public discourse, however.

### **Negotiating PEID and gender in the context of online communication**

Based on the experiences described in the narratives above, in this section we will approach how female PIED users talk about their drug use practices in the context of online communication. We will initiate the discussion by addressing how the women describe their commencements to the drugs, and then focus on how they negotiate and contextualize their use.

*PeptideJudy* has been a member of Flashback since 2014. In one of her initial postings connected with the theme of *Training*, she asks for advice on how to gain muscle mass and about others' experiences of different personal trainers. At this point she has no particular interest in PIED use (not on Flashback at least). About a year later, however, we can read that she has still not found a personal trainer and has therefore decided to 'try the chemical way' to reach her goals. She initiates a new discussion, this time on the theme of *Doping*:

I am going to start a new course of peptides on Monday. This is my plan, please comment☺. I will go for HGH, 176-191, comes from Gen-Shi Labs. I've got some other stuff too, but I'm not gonna do that now. My goal is to lose weight and simultaneously build/keep some muscles./.../I went through a period in my life (not gonna tell you what) that made me gain weight. I've tried almost everything to lose weight. I'm an all-or-nothing girl, so starting Monday I'm gonna give it everything I've got. (PeptideJudy)

A few days after the above excerpt we read how PeptideJudy informs her readers that she has now 'taken HGH every morning for three days' and although she has felt a little light-headed she is mainly positive about her partly new-found routine. Moving on, after another three months PeptideJudy evaluates her development concluding that her course of HGH helped her tighten her body, but due to financial constraints she has decided to try to focus exclusively on training and diet. What this narrative/case shows is that the process of engaging in PIED use cannot always be neatly attached to prolonged strategies to reach competitive bodily levels in bodybuilding or body fitness. Rather, for PeptideJudy the engagement in PIED use was seemingly triggered when other means (such as, using a personal trainer) failed. Further, at a certain point, after achieving a certain level of success, she could not find sufficiently strong financial arguments to rationalize her continued use. What is exemplified here, then, is a temporary and recreational meaning-making strategy and doping trajectory (Christiansen 2018).

Below, another female community member, called *the Winstrol-lady*, explains her rationale for engaging in a course of AAS (Winstrol). She explains that she used to have a rather unhealthy lifestyle, including using both alcohol and pot, but she has now decided that she wants to turn her life around. After one week on steroids, she explains the following regarding her use, the meanings attached to it and how it affects her:

Is it possible to feel results already? I woke up this morning and felt that I had to rape the first man I would meet. Luckily, there was one lying right next to me/.../I felt happy and comfortable in my body the whole day. I don't know if it's a placebo effect, or the lovely weather, being spring and all that. Anyhow, I feel like a new human being and kind of have restless legs. However, there are no obvious improvements in my training. Maybe I should add, though that I start to feel that the body is firmer, especially the ass and thighs. Overall, I am happy, horny and hungry, on exercise and good food.

As exemplified above, one tendency regarding the use is that the reports from different women are quite optimistic. The narratives express joy, happiness and encouraging testimonies regarding the effects of the drugs. It also becomes clear that the female users are becoming more a part of, and used to the rationales of, the fitness doping community on Flashback. Although it still seems to be the case that men support and to a certain degree teach women about how to approach and use the different drugs, they are also becoming gradually more independent about how to combine training schedules and the use of PIEDs. *MissAnavar*, for example, describes how her partner led the way to fitness doping, and how she is somewhat of a novice in the gym. At the same time she is evidently clear about what she wants to accomplish:

Of course, my partner helps me there but his advice is, of course, welcome. My partner has developed a schedule for the diet. I know what I want, at least. I do not want the body of a 12-year-old. But, sure, weight training is new to me. But I will learn, you will see. I am 37 years old. I am not a teenager who wants to be cool, with lots of muscles. I want a body I can enjoy. In addition, if I need to cheat to get there, I will do it. (*MissAnavar*)

In contrast to parts of the interview material presented earlier, we also find narratives from occasional PIED-using women here. The postings on Flashback show that these women are prepared to use PIEDs to achieve a more well-defined and strong body, but they are not talking about becoming female bodybuilders or, as another community member expressed it, a 'stereotypical fitness nerd'. Instead, these women mainly want to improve their bodies to a certain extent, to reach a certain level. Exemplified here is thus not the

search for a gender-bending body, but instead a longing for a healthy looking, and moderately muscular female body; a body that serves to reinforce rather than challenge the gender order (cf., Butler 1990; Mcgrath and Chananie-Hill 2009). For some women a single course proves sufficient. For others, of course, the levels are ever shifting. Below, one woman who initially wanted to lose weight but after her first course also wanted to compete, talks about the role of PIEDs when aiming to become a *Bikini-fitness* competitor:

The results came relatively fast. The star of this development is mainly Anavar. I have become a lot harder during these past few weeks – my upper body is almost finished. My lower body takes a bit longer because that's where most of my fat is, but the fronts of my thighs and my butt are really shaping up. The downside of having introduced clenbuterol a little late is that I collected some fluids on Anavar, especially after I raised it from 20 to 40 per day. So it got a little confused for a while, as the scale suddenly showed a couple of extra hectograms. Now, when the clenbuterol has kicked in, I have begun to release some fluid. I have added ephedrine to the course and combine these three. But, at the same time, I've been on and off the clenbuterol to avoid damaging my heart (3 days on, 3 days off). (TheProfessor)

Exemplified here are not only rigorous experiences of how one can combine different forms of substances, but also – in the subsequent postings in this thread – detailed advice regarding how other women can learn from the courses described (Andreasson and Johansson 2016). Flashback thus makes it possible for presumptive female users to find advice regarding how to approach PIEDs (see also, Monaghan 2012). There is serious expertise and advice to be found on Flashback, although the question of just how sound this advice is not always considered. Nevertheless, whereas women in the 1980s and 90s were marginalised and had difficulty finding advice through different course reports related to their needs (Roussel and Griffet 2000), today there is a vast amount of information (Van Hout and Hearne 2016). This also points to an increased integration of women into the communities, as well as the gradually more advanced use of PIEDs to promote 'better bodies' and to reach higher levels of female achievement. This development of female expertise and advice is exemplified in the excerpt below, in which one community member initiates a thread encouraging other women to ask her advice regarding PIED use and 'women's issues':

Do you have any 'sensitive' questions about the use of doping and being a woman? Feel free to send me questions. I have a medical background and I plan my own courses, so I should be able to answer most things, if you want to know. I was thinking about initiating a new course on Monday, as it seems now. It will be a little different from last time, 24 weeks total. (WomensIssuesMD)

While the excerpt above indicates that there is a gradual shift towards more gender-neutral communities in which men and women can discuss their similar as well as different experiences/effects of PIED use, this is still a world dominated by men (cf. background section). To this end, and although there is a large amount of threads concerning drug using practises on Flashback, it is most often taken for granted that the advice and course reports are written for and by men. Many of the female users identified also point out that they have found it troublesome to find course reports from other women. However, this sub-field of drug-use practices is gradually changing how PEID use is understood and negotiated in relation to gender and the body. Taking part of different narratives, we can thus see how women gradually, are gaining ground, creating a space within the realm of muscle-building practices and fitness doping. Limits of the flesh are perforated and so are gendered expectations put on the female body (Butler 1990).

## Conclusions and discussion

As there still is a shame threshold for women using PIEDs, gaining access to personal narratives proved difficult. For this study, combining empirical material from different sources – both interviews and an Internet forum – was seen as a possible solution for studying practices that have largely been understudied in the existing literature (Jespersen 2012; Van Hout and Hearne 2016). Through biographical narratives and online postings, the study has focused on female PIED users and how they understand and negotiate their use of PIEDs in relation to female muscularity and gender (cf., Jong 2017). The analysis reveals that in their daily lives the female users' initiation of use of PIEDs is largely connected to the cultural framing of gym and fitness. This use is connected particularly to the women's developing thoughts about muscular femininities and a possibly (un)intended challenge of normative structures of hegemonic masculinities that such positions bring.

The face of gym and fitness has changed in recent decades, and it is possible to talk about a globalized fitness revolution (Andreasson and Johansson 2014). One fascinating part of this cultural transformation concerns the strained but also independent relationship that has developed between bodybuilding and fitness. Whereas bodybuilding has often come to be connoted with things such as steroids, vanity, hyper-masculinity, and violence, fitness has come to be constructed in alliance with values such as health, youth and beauty (Sassatelli 2010). Efforts to deal with the 'black sheep' stigma and bad reputation associated with bodybuilding can also be found in the development of natural bodybuilding (Liokaftos 2018). This study, however, shows that the lines between (male-connoted) bodybuilding and bodyfitness/wellness have become less clear. Although bodybuilding is largely marginalised in contemporary fitness culture, competitive bodies, associated with drug-use practices, are cherished at the same, in terms of lifestyle-forming practices (Sassatelli 2010; Andreasson and Johansson 2014).

The gender of muscularity is gradually changing and idealised notions of female muscularities are becoming more acceptable. In this sense, strong really is becoming the new skinny (Washington and Economides 2016). Although not uncontested, traditional standards of femininity are thus being challenged and the narratives in this study exemplify a slow but growing acceptance of muscular female bodies constituted within the 'normal' range of femininity (cf., McGrath and Chananie-Hill 2009). Seemingly, this also paves the way for more liberal and accepting attitudes towards the use of PIEDs among women. In this respect our female PIED users are in a unique position. On the one hand, their narratives on muscular femininities exemplify freedom of gender expression and transgression. On the other hand, the women are also finding that their PIED-use practices are questioned not only in terms of breaking the law but also in terms of a fairly robust gender order. In this respect, our study corresponds to and can thus be situated in relation to research done mainly in the 1990s and early 2000s on female bodybuilders, although the doping demography represented here is somewhat broader. To this end, future research would benefit from a more in-depth investigation into the effects this development has on the gendered dimensions of fitness doping demographics in general, and female fitness-doping trajectories in particular.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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