



Research paper

Exploring the social lives of image and performance enhancing drugs: An online ethnography of the Zyzz fandom of recreational bodybuilders



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ABSTRACT

Background: As a result of the mainstreaming of bodybuilding, the majority of image and performance enhancing drug (IPED) users are now not athletes or competitive bodybuilders, but recreational bodybuilders. Previous approaches provide little insight into how the shift from competitive to recreational contexts impacts the use of IPEDs.

Methods: In this study an online ethnographic approach is used to explore the social lives of IPEDs in a recreational context. The study focusses on the Zyzz fandom, an international online community of thousands of recreational bodybuilders who idolise the alleged IPED user Zyzz.

Results: Zyzz fans see IPED prohibition as failing, as causing harm to users, and as sexist. Their IPED use is informed by not only instrumental benefits, but social benefits such as altering gendered power relations. IPEDs have been normalised in this community, and new patterns of use are emerging.

Conclusion: IPEDs have moved through different hands, contexts and uses, and in so doing the values, norms and meanings attached to IPEDs have changed. The results suggest that intervention efforts may be best directed towards harm minimisation, and in particular towards bridging the divides between the medical and bodybuilding communities.

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Introduction

The term ‘image and performance enhancing drugs’ (IPEDs) is used to refer to substances that enhance muscle growth and reduce body fat, such as anabolic-androgenic steroids (AAS) human growth hormone (hGH), insulin and Beta2-agonists (e.g. clenbuterol). Today most IPED users are not competitive athletes, but non-athlete weightlifters, or recreational bodybuilders (Cohen, Collins, Darkes, & Gwartney, 2007; Pope et al., 2014). However, we know little about how the shift from competitive contexts to recreational contexts has changed motivations, use, and the experience of IPED policies. In this, the first ethnography of an international recreational bodybuilding community, I begin to redress this neglect.

There are two main approaches to understanding IPED use: the illicit drug framework, and the body image disorder framework (Keane, 2005). While some IPED use may be due to underlying clinical problems, and some use may fit our understanding of illicit drug use and dependence, not all IPED use can be understood in these ways (Larance, Degenhardt, Dillon, & Copeland, 2005). IPED use demands a more nuanced and contextualised analysis than these approaches allow (Keane, 2005). Drug use never occurs

outside of culture, nor is it simply located within cultural contexts, rather drugs ‘are significant players in the formation of cultural and political landscapes as well as being formed by their involvement in the social world’ (Keane, 2005).

One way to understand the complex interplay of drugs and culture is to approach drugs as having ‘social lives’: as taking on meaning through common social experience in the context of social relations, and as having implications for these relations (Whyte, van der Geest, & Hardon, 2002). The ‘social life of things’ is an approach developed within material culture studies that challenges dichotomies such as person/thing, animate/inanimate, and subject/object (Miller, 2010), dichotomies that impede, rather than facilitate, the production of empirically nuanced accounts of drug use (Duff, 2013). To approach things, such as IPEDs, as having social lives is to see them as not only signifying or representing us, but as actually helping to create us, as it is through our interaction with things that we assume the norms we call culture (Miller, 2010).

Before we can make things, we are ourselves grown up and matured in the light of things that come down to us from the previous generations. We walk around the rice terraces or road systems, the housing and gardens that are effectively ancestral. These unconsciously direct our footsteps, and are the landscapes of our imagination, as well as the cultural environment

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to which we adapt. ... Things ... make us the people we are (Miller, 2010, p. 53).

We tend to take the guidance provided by things for granted, and it is precisely because of this failure to notice what things do (the 'humility of things') that they have mastery over us (Miller, 2010). Things act much more commonly as analogous to the frames rather than the paintings themselves (Miller, 2010).

Appadurai (1986, p.5) argues that 'even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context'. Therefore, we have to follow the things themselves, through different hands, contexts and uses in order to understand the meanings that enliven things (Appadurai, 1986).

A social life approach can produce nuanced and contextualised perspectives that position IPEDs not as outside culture, nor merely within culture, by overcoming the dichotomies that have impeded previous accounts of IPED use. Such an approach can place drugs in the lifeworlds of situated actors, examining how drugs objectify meanings and how they empower by transforming users (Whyte et al., 2002). Social life approaches investigate the efficacy of drugs: the perceptions of the powers of substances not just in terms of physicality but also in social situations (Whyte et al., 2002). The recent movement of IPEDs from a competitive to a recreational context, through different hands, contexts and uses, provides an opportunity to employ a social life perspective to understand the meanings that enliven IPEDs, and to illuminate the social contexts of IPED use.

It is difficult to contextualise recreational IPED use as recreational bodybuilders are not often organised into distinct communities. Recreational bodybuilders do not belong to federations like competitive bodybuilders. To the best of my knowledge there are no online bodybuilding forums in which only recreational bodybuilders gather, rather forums contain a mix of recreational and competitive bodybuilders. While communities of recreational bodybuilders may exist online or offline (e.g. within a particular gym), there are (to the best of my knowledge) no communities of recreational bodybuilders that have the size and reach of the Zyzz fandom. The Zyzz fandom is an international online community of thousands (precise numbers are difficult to gauge) of recreational bodybuilders who idolise the deceased recreational bodybuilder Aziz Shavershian (known by his internet handle 'Zyzz'). The Zyzz fandom describe themselves as a group, defend the boundaries of the group against attacks from outsiders, and police the boundaries of the group through community-specific language and humour. They are to the best of my knowledge the only international recreational bodybuilding community. They share a focus not only on recreational bodybuilding but on the culturally exalted alleged IPED user Zyzz. Therefore, the Zyzz fandom provides an opportunity to investigate (1) how IPEDs are experienced and acquire meaning within a community of recreational bodybuilders, and (as Zyzz's status is in large part due to his allegedly IPED fuelled bodily transformation), (2) how recreational IPED use transforms users both physically and socially. IPED use is contextualised within this community through an online ethnography that investigates norms, values, meanings and perceived efficacies.

Methods

Arguably the best way to contextualise IPED use and examine the social lives of IPEDs is to take an ethnographic approach. Ethnography allows a grasp of everyday perspectives by participating in daily life, and contextualises drug use by examining the whole community (not just users). A focus on users alone can blind

us to how drug users' lives are entwined with the lives of non-users. Community-based studies draw attention to how drug use may be normalised in the community as a whole, which is significant as the 'community's opposition to or complicity with the drug use can be crucial to eventual efforts to intervene on behalf of harm reduction, mitigation or prevention' (Page & Singer, 2010, p. 180).

Multi-sited ethnographic approaches allow us to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects and identities in diffuse time-space (Marcus, 1995). There are many ways to conduct such a study, such as following the people, thing, life or biography, metaphor, plot, or conflict (Marcus, 1995). This study focusses on the first three: it follows IPEDs in order to understand the thing-in-motion (Appadurai, 1986); it follows the life of Zyzz across the multiple sites of its construction (e.g. videos, websites, and social media); and it follows the Zyzz fans across the various online sites in which they congregate.

An online approach was taken for numerous reasons, not least because the Zyzz fandom was formed online, and because this community primarily communicates and dwells online (Pink et al., 2016). While Zyzz fans may on occasion be physically 'co-present' with each other, it is online sites that allow the international community to be 'co-present' (Pink et al., 2016). Thus it is only through online approaches that I could investigate the Zyzz community (rather than small subsections of it).

Online approaches provide a way to overcome the difficulties of obtaining information on IPED use as they allow 'lurking' (observing while remaining invisible) and provide individuals with anonymity if desired. The primarily text based communications of online environments facilitate the exact recording of interactions without the interpretation of transcription of oral statements. Those for whom English is not their first language (e.g. many participants in this study) may also feel more comfortable interacting through text (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012). In addition, online approaches allow for the recording of non-textual data such as photos and videos which are extremely important when examining a group focused on the cultivation of a particular aesthetic such as the Zyzz fandom. The ability to take screen-shots allowed the recording of interactions in context and provided extremely rich data points.

There are of course, limitations to online research; however, these, I suggest, are far outweighed by the benefits described above. The cue-reduced environment of the internet has an impact on interactions (although I became familiar with the methods participants used to overcome this such as efforts to convey emotion and bring their bodies with them online). Online communities are transient which also impacts on research. Several of the participants with whom I engaged in in-depth conversations deactivated their accounts during the research period preventing further contact and follow-up questions.

In order to participate in the group under study I created a Facebook profile (Facebook was one of the primary sites used by Zyzz to amass his fans and is the primary site fans congregate today). Using this profile, I participated in the Zyzz fandom by authoring and responding to posts (about Zyzz and bodybuilding in general) on my wall, the walls of participants and of the 115 Zyzz Facebook fan pages identified. I immersed my embodied self (Boellstorff et al., 2012) by posting selfies (a particular kind of self-portrait in which the photographer is the subject of the image usually taken in the mirror or at arm's length) of me flexing my muscles and posing in the gym (as is the norm among Zyzz fans). Through my Facebook interactions I became visible in the field and as I learnt the nuance and etiquette of the group I began to acquire 'friends' (n = 59), some of whom became key cultural consultants (n = 20) with whom I had in-depth interactions both on public sites and through Messenger and email (hereafter I refer to these

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