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In Sweden, but also internationally, official regimes and public health organizations conduct fairly comprehensive antidoping measures. As a consequence, numerous ‘new’ ways to learn about and access these types of drugs have emerged. Social media and different internet forums, for example, have become part of a new self-help culture in which people can anonymously approach these substances, discuss their experiences of using them and minimize the possibility of encounters with the police. This article focuses on how the use of performance- and image-enhancing drugs (PED) is perceived and negotiated socially in the context of an internet-mediated and online community called Flashback. The results are in accordance with similar studies on internet bodybuilding communities. That is, even though the participants to a certain degree are aware of the risks and health costs of this kind of physical regime, the gains of using PED clearly dominate the discussions. Adding to this research, this article found that in the imaginary world of online bodybuilding a number of ideas about the ‘genetic max’, as well as the ultimate possibility of exceeding one’s limits, and creating something special and extraordinary, circulate. These stories confirm in many ways the legitimate mission of searching for the ultimate bodybuilding adventure, using different means and methods to transcend the limits of the self/body.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, reports began to surface that performance- and image-enhancing drugs (PED), such as steroids and human growth hormones, had gained popularity among young people for use in increasing muscle size and improving appearance (Buckley et al., 1988). Drug use for performance-enhancing purposes in modern sports was said to have spilled over to the general population, creating a new threat to public health. When it comes to doping in gym and fitness contexts, it has often been suggested that this practice is motivated by the desire to improve appearance, usually meaning that young men want to gain more muscle mass to conform to prevailing norms of masculinity (Denham 2008; Dimeo 2007; Parkinson and Evans 2006; Sas-Nowosielski 2006). Research has also shown that young men are overrepresented when it comes to drug use practices in...
connection with ‘pumping iron’ (Dodge and Jaccard 2006; Simon et al. 2006). Obviously, this does not mean that women or older people, for example, never use PED.

Contemporary gym and fitness culture and the ideal of muscular bodies are usually traced back to what used to be called ‘physical culture’ in the late nineteenth century and to the teachings of the forefathers of bodybuilding (Budd 1997). Originally, bodybuilding was viewed and understood as an almost exclusively male preoccupation and sphere that had certain features, such as liberal attitudes to drug use (Bach 2005; Klein 1993; Monaghan 2001a). This culture has changed, however, and so has the notion of the gym, which over time, beginning in the 1980s, has acquired the status of a mass leisure activity. In this new culture, the highest goals and aspirations are commercialised and framed in terms of health, and the contemporary fitness centre is seen as almost a health clinic for the masses (Sassatelli 2011). Paradoxically, concurrently with the cultural development in fitness and the idealization of a healthy lifestyle, the emphasis on the body and its appearance has contributed to persistent PED use, not only in bodybuilding contexts but also among regular exercisers. Monaghan (2001a) argues that the social influence of the gym surroundings – that is the kind of mentality and approaches to the body that are nourished in this cultural context – are key in understanding drug use outside the sphere of organized sport. Research has also indicated that these new health arenas are, in one way or another, systematically associated with the use of banned substances (Bilard, Ninot, and Hauw 2011; Christiansen 2009; Kanayama and Pope 2012).

Legislation regarding the use of PED varies. Swedish legislation for example does not simply forbid the possession and distribution of doping substances – like many other European countries – but also the presence of these substances in the body (Christiansen 2009; Kryger Pedersen 2010). In addition, in Sweden and internationally, governments and public health organizations conduct fairly comprehensive antidoping campaigns. Consequently, public and governmental representations of PED users often are quite judgmental (Locks and Richardson 2012; Mogensen 2011). This development combined with technological development in recent decades has resulted in the emergence of new ways of learning about and accessing the types of drugs involved. Social media and internet forums, for example, have become a part of a new self-help culture in which people can anonymously approach PED, discuss their experiences, and at the same time minimize the risk of legal repercussions (cf. Hsiung 2000).

Obviously, online forums and communities encourage sensitive content to be expressed without compromising confidentiality, and facilitate long-term in-depth discussions (Smith and Stewart 2012). Online communities may also be particularly attractive as they facilitate access to information and discussions that are normally hidden from the general public and the authorities (Saba and McCormick 2001). This has been shown in several studies (See for example Adler and Adler 2005, 2011; Lynch 2010; Monaghan 2012). Smith and Stewart (2012) conducted a study on an online bodybuilding community hosted in the USA, which shows how, on the one hand, this community appears to strengthen the self-perception of its members, while on the other hand, the drug use promoted in the community sometimes leads to identity conflict and self-doubt. Common to these studies is that, in different ways and to different extents, they raise the question of how online communications and online identity constructions can contribute to users’ becoming aware of and learning more about particular practices.
This article focuses on how the use of PED is perceived and negotiated socially in the context of the open online community, Flashback. This community describes itself as Sweden's largest forum for freedom of expression, opinion and independent thinking (Flashback n.d.), and may therefore be considered a highly open-minded forum as regards prohibited activities such as the use of PED. We are interested in how the use of PED is discussed on Flashback and how participants learn about this practice in the community. These objectives will be addressed with the help of the following research questions:

RQ 1: What kind of discussions regarding PED use appear on Flashback, and how do these discussions relate to Swedish official policy?

RQ 2: In what ways do community members develop their self-understanding and identity in relation to the social diffusion of knowledge on the forum?

RQ 3: How are drug-use practices related to conceptions of the ideal body and the ‘genetic max’ within the community?

Firstly, by analysing how members of this community approach PED and discussing the effects of the drugs, we suggest that it is possible to capture the gradual process by which the practice transforms the users’ perception of body and self. Secondly, we suggest that it is possible to connect these narratives to the creation of a certain doping trajectory situated within fitness culture. Although previous research suggests that gender is significant in understanding drug use practices, such an analysis will be only briefly touched upon here and will be further developed in another article. This article pursues a different analytical path, aiming to explore the ways in which the PED user learns, by internalizing particular values, practices and communications online, how to understand the practice and consequently how to understand the self.

**Theoretical framework**

Using a social constructionist approach (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Hacking 2000), we have investigated how particular subject positions (identities) and drug use strategies are created within a specific ‘community of practice’ (CofP), defined as follows:

An aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices – emerge in the course of this mutual endeavour. As a social construct, a CofP is different from the traditional community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages. (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992)

Becoming a member of a CofP – joining an internet community – inevitably involves aspects of both learning and identity construction (Wenger 1998). Learning processes regarding drug use and the physical experiences resulting from this practice, for example, are intersubjective. Following Becker (1953) we suggest that: ‘a given kind of behavior is the result of a sequence of social experiences during which the person acquires a conception of the meaning of the behavior’. A disposition to engage in PED use is thus seen as something the individual acquire during the process of learning about the actual activity, resulting from the changes this process has on the users’ perception of the activity. Consequently, the learning process involved in becoming a PED user is not only intersubjective but also transformative in nature, meaning that the experience of drug use practices varies within the individual over time and space, as the individual learns how to understand and experience the practice. In sum, when people decide to join an online community and perhaps
also to use PED in their training, they learn from others’ experience, which changes their conception of the practice and, consequently, their understanding of themselves, what they can do and how they perceive others (Andreasson 2014; Monaghan 2001b). The ways in which people use and understand their bodies are an expression of the integration of learning processes and the ongoing process of continuous identity performance and construction (Biesta 2006).

As individuals gain experience, articulate and discuss theories as to how to reach their desired goals, they also become increasingly involved in a particular CofP. Some people in the community will choose to take drugs, and will consequently deviate from mainstream society. Others in the community will try hard to stay within the bounds of the dominant order. A CofP does not assume role homogeneity, but rather focuses on the ways in which people speak of and engage in different kinds of practices. Consequently, on the one hand, within a specific CofP members must adopt appropriate behaviours, symbolically at least, in order to function (Smith and Stewart 2012). On the other hand, however, the nature of online interaction enables members to make their ‘virtual identity’ independent of their physical one, to some extent at least. In our understanding of the concept of identity in the context of online communities, we have been inspired by Turkle (1995), who suggests that the use of internet communications brings not only the opportunity to perform an alternative identity, but also to create the basis for an alternative lifestyle. In this respect, we employ a multidimensional interpretation of the identity concept. We suggest that the narratives presented are to be understood as markers of identity, but we also recognize that, due to their pseudo-anonymity, participants may assume a specially devised identity, perhaps designed to bring social recognition and status within the community (Giles, 2006).

The process of learning how to become a PED user is inevitably interwoven with a larger system of relationships with others, such as gym owners, law-makers, media reporters and of course, internet contacts (Sassatelli 2011). Hence, the education of a PED user implies that the individual becomes part of a process by which relationships are reshaped, which provides new opportunities and enables the individual to assume new positions in the larger relational systems in which the individual participates. In a CofP such as the one studied in this article, the goal of transforming the body into something else, something perfect, could take precedence over other goals. In this process of transformation of the body through drug use practices, the distinctions between safe and unsafe, legal and illegal, healthy and unhealthy, and shameless and shameful can be partially destabilised or renegotiated. One of the aims of this article is to analyse how the individual learns how to transform the self through the use of drugs and how this practice is rationalized within a specific online community.

**Research design and methodology**

Internet research methods mainly began to develop as a field with the development of the internet as a mass medium in the mid- to late 1990s. (Hine 2000; Hooley, Marriott, and Wellens 2012). Due to the nature of the online social environment, this kind of research also seems to be continuously shifting. The focus of this article is ‘written accounts resulting from fieldwork studying the cultures and communities that emerge from online computer-mediated or internet-based communications’ (Kozinets 2010). We have looked into the ways in which PED are perceived and negotiated socially in the sociocultural context
of the internet-mediated, open online community, Flashback. On this platform, anybody with an internet connection can read, learn about and comment on their experience and knowledge of PED. Basically, discussions on Flashback may concern 'just about anything', but due to the fact that the forum facilitates the expression of opinions anonymously there are many threads that concern prohibited activities. One popular theme is doping. There is also a thematic subcategory to the doping theme called 'Course reports', in which people present biographical reports on their first involvement with PED and also upload pictures of their results. The information given in this section gives us an idea of the demographics of the members of this community. While the personal information presented is limited, it would appear that many of the postings are by young males. The age of the person behind a posting is however seldom stated, but rather understood indirectly from the postings – for example, when a member discusses how to make time for daily training while still performing well in high school. At the same time, it is possible for anyone, regardless of gender and age to create an account and ask others questions on how to set up a course of treatment, get advice regarding different substances, and learn about legislation and ways to avoid contact with the police.

When conducting the study we employed the method of netnography, which was specifically designed for studying online communities. Developed by Kozinets (2010), netnography is methodologically indebted to the traditions and practices of ethnography and cultural anthropology (Hine 2000). We will focus on texts and images on Flashback, taking the perspective that these internet communications and communities can, in one way or another, be viewed as cultural manifestations (Kozinets 2010; Porter 1997). Although the method differs to some extent from conventional ethnographies in its use of internet communications, it has many similarities with traditional methods (Fleischmann 2004; Sheehan 2010). Social media, such as online communities, Facebook, and Twitter, are usually thematized in ways likely to attract and target-specific audiences and lifestyle groups (Orgad 2006). They can therefore be viewed as embedded in specific sociocultural and/or national contexts. Kozinets (2010) states:

The way in which technology and culture interact is a complex dance – an interweaving and intertwining. This element of technocultural change is present in our public spaces, our workplaces, our homes, our relationships, and our bodies – each institutional element intermixed with every other one. Technology constantly shapes and reshapes our bodies, our places, and our identities, and is shaped to our needs as well. (22)

Using postings from 2010 to 2014, we will look at how members of the Flashback community conceptualize and understand the use of PED as an integral part of their everyday lives. As suggested by Kozinets (2010), data collection in netnography does not occur in isolation from data analysis. Postings and discussions have been selected in accordance with their relevance to the research questions, as well as the richness, heterogeneity and interactivity characterizing the statements and postings in question.

There are ethical issues associated with the study of online communities. For instance, members may not expect that their comments will be discussed and analysed by researchers outside their community, which raises questions about consent and degrees of publicity (Walther 2002). At the same time, however, it is reasonable to assume that any ‘person who uses publicly available communication systems on the internet must be aware that these systems are, at their foundation and by definition, mechanisms for the storage, transmission, and retrieval of comments’ (Walther 2002). The current status of Flashback is that
the discussions presented are accessible to anyone with an internet connection. Based on this and on the fact that the members use fictitious names in the community, one could argue that their personal privacy is not violated when they are quoted (Grodzinsky and Tavani 2010; Rosenberg 2010). There are, however, some aspects of this study that call for an extended ethical concern towards the community members quoted. For example, we know that the participants are engaged in a community in which a criminalised activity is discussed and often promoted. This means that the use of quotations could have legal repercussions, if the authorities were to locate the IP address of a particular member. Moreover, it is not always possible to find information regarding the age of a particular member, meaning that we do not know if participants are minors or adults.

In order to protect the identity of the community members quoted, we have taken certain measures to protect their anonymity. Firstly, the members have been given fictitious user names. Secondly, the original postings are in Swedish and have consequently been translated into English, which makes it harder for anyone to use available search engine technology to trace a particular posting. Thirdly, when selecting quotations, we have been careful not to focus on the most sensitive information given, and have restricted our use of quotations to those that promote relevant analysis (Hsiung 2000). Omitted postings of relevance are discussed in the running text.

**Results**

**Resisting the law**

The reasons for becoming a member of an internet community certainly may differ. Logically, a membership is also preceded by a curiosity for the particular activity being discussed on the forum. On Flashback, there are many seemingly novices that express a will to learn and asks advice regarding the use of PED. In contrast to the supportive attitudes often expressed by other members of the community, when answering such questions, Swedish official policy and the attitude of the Swedish public toward PED is coloured by distrust and dislike. PED is often associated with crime and abuse of other drugs, and is described in terms of deviance (DuRant, Escobedo, and Heath 1995; Moberg and Hermansson 2006; Skarberg and Engström 2007). As earlier stated, in Sweden, it is not only the possession of doping substances that is prohibited, but also the presence of these substances in the body (Kryger Pedersen 2010). As PED can usually be traced in the human body for quite some time, depending on the substance involved, the decision to begin using also entails possible encounters with the authorities (Christiansen and Bojsen-Møller 2012). This is an issue that is widely questioned in the internet community.

Why do the police want to stop us? There's something fishy going on. That's clear. Results that you could get from AAS within a year now take 3–5 years instead. Why? Is it a conspiracy against ripped guys? There aren't many people who have the patience to get there, and if there were a short-cut, surely loads of people would train to get in shape. (NoPolice)

In the above thread and subsequent postings by other members, there is a certain degree of understanding for the legislation against PED, or as referred to above, anabolic–androgenic steroids (AAS). Opinions supportive of the legislation revolve mainly around the potential side effects of PED as well as the societal costs that the substances may involve. These arguments, however, are usually countered with postings in which the prohibition is questioned,
as in the posting quoted above, and explained as the result of, say, ‘media propaganda,’ the decision-making of ‘ignorant politicians,’ or the ‘envy’ of ordinary people. Responses like these can be compared to what Sykes and Matza (1957) call the ‘techniques of neutralization, here meaning that community members try to shift the focus of attention and deflect the negative sanctions attached to PED use, by condemning the condemners. In a similar way, Monaghan (2012), who studied both pro-steroid internet bodybuilding forums and ethnographically followed PED users, shows that one of the strategies used to justify PED use is bolster condemnation of what is thought to be other people’s unfounded and unreflective criticism. Although some of the threads deal with the contradictory emotions involved in this activity, using steroids is not significantly problematized here. Rather, the discussions seem to be characterised mainly by a pragmatic approach and perspective, and would therefore tend to lessen the effectiveness of the social control represented by the authorities. In this way, the learning of the trade, the trajectory to drug use follows a familiar path found in the deviant careers literature (see for example Becker 1953; Monaghan 2012; Myers 1992). Firstly, community members formulate arguments through which the threats from authorities are limited (like above), and secondly, like below, an interdependence are created among the members to ensure that supplies can be distributed.

In the following posting, one community member presents a checklist regarding how to stay invisible to the police.

We start with the bank transfer. Do not use your internet bank. If your providers get caught and the police go through their accounts, they’ll easily find your transaction. […] Ok, so the question is how to send money. By mail. Preferably use a padded envelope. Fold the money in something before placing it in the envelope – for example, stiff paper or foil or the like, so that no one can see what the envelope contains. (Mailman)

These instructions are followed by hundreds of related postings. This would seem to be a theme that many members find relevant. After giving step-by-step instructions regarding where and how to order and how to pay, Mailman present a checklist containing several points. For example, readers are instructed to use encrypted e-mail, to constantly delete e-mail correspondence, to erase notes containing names and to throw away receipts received from the post office. Altogether this thread amasses some fairly comprehensive instructional content on how to behave when dealing with steroids on the internet and how to minimize the risk of legal repercussions. In this way, new members are gradually guided into the CoP and supported through the different and mostly encouraging arguments, considerations and attitude displayed adjacent to the instructions.

What is taking place here is a social diffusion of knowledge, through which the legislation against PED is questioned and the curiosity of the individual is boosted. Consequently, within a specific community, like the one analysed in this article, members find ways to justify and rationalize their practice. The trajectory leading to PED use starts when the individual learn about the practice and become interested and willing to engage in the activity (cf., Becker 1953). In the community, members then find support to help them construct an understanding of the practice that in this case serves to challenge the logic of the Swedish legislation. In this process, therefore, it is not only physiological boundaries that are challenged through actual or intended drug use, but also the social control exerted by Swedish legislation.

This first empirical section of the article provides a foretaste of the attitudes, the strategies and the ethos that develop within this particular kind of internet community. In the next two
sections, we will look more closely at how the members of this particular CofP develop their arguments, and consequently, their understanding of how to talk about, relate to and use PED. We focus particularly on how community members develop their self-understanding and identity in relation to the social diffusion of knowledge about PED.

**Transcending identities and potential health costs**

Studies on people’s attempts to attain the ‘perfect’ body using legal or illegal means are quite common (Monaghan 1999b; Thualagant 2012). In an ethnographic study, Atkinson (2007) showed how young men used different kinds of legal supplements not only to control their bodies, but also as a means of winning social recognition, and as part of a more general self-presentation. In the story below, a community member describes his first use of PED and in so doing provides an illustration of how the use of prohibited substances relates to self-understanding.

So after much consideration, it’s finally time to take the plunge, take the final step, and run a course (of steroids) to see what it can bring. I’ve been wanting to do this since I started going to the gym, but for various reasons always changed my mind at the last minute. Now that I’m older, I’ve got a little more meat on my bones and have learned how to acquire knowledge and make my own decisions. So I’ve decided to run a course of Dianabol, which seems to suit my goals best. Whether this is true or not, time will tell. [...] Below, I will sum up the first week and as briefly as possible describe my progress and my thoughts about the experience. Initially I didn’t plan to write a report but then I thought it might be kind of therapeutic, and might also encourage others to give me good advice. (MeatOnBone)

This description can be read as an ongoing construction of feelings, expectations and attitudes, and as such a marker of identity. The poster using the handle MeatOnBone describes the outcome of his first experience of steroids in detail. On the seventh day of the drug regime, readers learn that after a back session MeatOnBone ‘got so pumped up on the lats [he] almost thought [he] could fly’. This empowering narrative is constructed in such a way that it can be used to set the course for future accomplishments and physical results. At the same time, however the narrative also contains descriptions of different side effects, such as headaches, dizziness and nausea, and periodically a constant erection, resulting in a ‘need to jerk off at least a couple of times a day’. Although the seriousness of the different and unwanted side effects, MeatOnBone did not, however, lose his motivation and dedication. Rather, he used Flashback to discuss his experiences. Consequently, MeatOnBone expresses an awareness of the inherent risks accompanying PED use practice. At the same time, the knowledge seeking, the process of ‘practical familiarities’ and the membership of this CofP seem to work as a reassurance that keeps such worries at bay.

In addition, there are situations when the risks of the drug regime present themselves in unexpected ways. For example, as MeatOnBone’s body quickly responded to the drug regime, a fellow employee at work confronted him with questions regarding PED. Initially he felt proud, but then he became worried as he realized that the questions were condemning rather than encouraging. In one posting, he describes how he denied having anything to do with PED, and that he made up a story about a new workout routine and diet. Adjacent to this comment, other community members provided supporting comments and presented alternative inspirational arguments that could be used in similar situations. It is thus not only a fear of getting caught breaking the law that is implicitly being negotiated here, but also the
potential shame of taking a short-cut in the quest for a desired physicality. Consequently, within the supportive context of the community, it becomes obvious how pride in one's physical transformation can rapidly turn into shame about the body (Sparkes, Batey, and Owen 2012). This also shows how the potential pride in and/or shame about oneself and one's body are clearly to be viewed as interdependent. The following further develops the theme of the limit-pushing potential of PED in relation to users' regular jobs.

I'm about to start this thread because I'm incredibly fascinated by the effects that steroids have on the human psyche. I would like to hear about other users' experiences and how steroids have affected their working lives. For example, say you're an ordinary employee at a company. Coincidentally, after your first course of steroids, you want to advance to a management position and you succeed in doing so. Or you're a student who experiences a change in your academic performance from mediocre to highly motivated and higher-achieving. You see where I'm going with this thread. AAS is so much more than bulk muscles. (HighAchiever)

The comments in this thread, which number in the hundreds, describe a process of transformation, mainly building on adjectives describing the self as becoming more of something, such as ambitious, motivated, aggressive, focused and attractive. The development of these qualities is frequently described in positive terms, but negative consequences, such as getting into fights, are occasionally mentioned. Nevertheless, it is obvious that in this context the use of PED works as a powerful symbol of an expected transformation and construction of the body and the self. It is a symbol of what could be described as a rite of passage (Gennep 2004). Below, a community member describes the expectations generated by the use of PED. The first injection is here seen as something of a milestone – a mark of an important and decisive stage in a physical transition. The header of the thread is 'No Guts, No Glory'.

My first injection accomplished. Start gentle. My opinion is that you should not accelerate like an idiot the first time you try a new and unfamiliar vehicle! The virgin cost me two needles and an office chair, but I have now faced fucking 500 mg of Testo C! Mission accomplished! It's time to get real! Be great or be nothing! I am so fucking powered up now. It will surely be interesting to see how things turn out at the gym. While working out clean, I have already managed to increase the number of reps on some exercises, despite my diet, so there will probably be like a swelling explosion with the juice in my system! (FirstInjection)

The narrative of FirstInjection's rite of passage is clearly dominated by dramatic expectation, confidence and an imagery of explosive bursting of bodily limits. It also contains aspects of fear and the need to manage risk, as when the reader learns that the first needle got broken when FirstInjection passed out during the injection and fell out of the chair. This did not stop FirstInjection, however, so when he came to, the anticipated rapid effect of PED still felt appealing enough. On the second try, the drugs where successfully injected in the thigh.

An approach in which PED is viewed as something of a miracle cure, expected to give visible results in a matter of days, is expressed in a number of threads. Usually, an apparent novice asks others for advice regarding how to organize a drug course. In the posting below, one participant answers the question of another member regarding potential risks and health costs involved in drug use practices. The question answered is 'How dangerous are steroids, and could you die?'

Answer: One thing is that you're supposed to not overdo it and dribble too much with doses. The risks become far higher then. For a while I was completely wild, and mixed loads of different steroids. Today I only do testo, that's all, and I feel pretty good about it. The only thing I'm not so happy with is the hair on the back and a few other things. (Don'tOverdo)
The above quotation provides significant clues regarding how the process of learning to be a PED user may be manifested as a personal doping trajectory. The user Don'tOverdo used to go ‘wild’ but has, through experience, learned how to run courses in a safer and more controlled manner and still get results. Don'tOverdo then continues the posting by presenting a complete chart over the personal course of treatment followed. Thus, Don'tOverdo adopts the role of the teacher, explaining to the novice how to proceed and what to expect. In addition, in the same thread there are also postings made by other members that mention side-effects such as acne, ‘bitch tits’ (gynecomastia), and even death as possible health costs associated with PED use, when managed poorly. Many of these postings also provide advice regarding how to recognize signs of risk and how to deal with unwanted side effects should they occur. In some of these discussions, considerable attention is paid to particular substances and what to expect with various types of steroids.

I don’t want to go on any mega bulk. I just want to try and see what happens, and what I want to test with is Wintablets (Winstrol). Anyway, this is my first posting here as well. I did some research regarding where to get the stuff, but I haven’t found anything ‘new’ for 2014. So I was wondering where I can get it? I’d also like to know what course you guys would recommend? (Wintab)

Answer: I have never taken wins (Winstrol), but it’s definitely something I want to try when I get a little more weight on. But I have a friend who chewed wins – good stuff. Otherwise, you could take a course of Anavar. You can buy wins from Madman – a quick and green supplier. Always maintain a good standard! (GoodStuff)

In the community, there are many threads in which different steroids are discussed and given various meanings in relation to bodily ambitions and pursued goals. In this way, the choice of a particular drug also becomes an expression of identity. If you want to get a supple, vascular body, certain steroids are said to be suitable, whereas if you want to build up mass and gain weight, others might be more relevant. Monaghan (2002) suggests that this increasing experimentation with different substances – supplements and drugs – is part of a new ethno-pharmacology that has become entrenched and ritualised in gym and fitness culture. This bodybuilding ethno-pharmacological stock of knowledge is identifiable within bodybuilding subculture, comprising: a taxonomy of different steroids, theories of usage, methods of administration and awareness of effects, possible side effects, and strategies to avoid or attenuate these (Monaghan 2012). As an example of this ethno-pharmacology, many postings analysed also implies that experienced bodybuilders are to be understood as more educated on PED-use than doctors. Monaghan (1999b) also suggests that bodybuilding, perhaps more than any other athletic pursuit, is a sociocultural environment that normalizes the instrumental use of steroids. In striving to create the perfect body, many muscle enthusiasts view drug-taking as a legitimate means of attaining a subculturally prescribed goal (Monaghan 1999b). It is important to keep in mind, however, that although the individuals who give others advice in the community analysed in this article appear to be knowledgeable and well-informed, information regarding where and how these people obtained their knowledge is limited. The ideas that develop in this CoP can therefore be understood as a mixture of medical pronouncements and expertise, ethno-scientific knowledge, personal experience and lay theories of how to achieve the perfect body, as it is expressed by different members. Deciding whose advice to follow in the postings can thus be a hazardous game of negotiating and managing the risks inherent in this scenario.
On Flashback, there are basically no limits as to what subjects may be discussed, and steroids are widely promoted as a part of a new self-help culture of ethno-pharmacology (see also Berns 2011; Monaghan 2012). As such, the use of different steroids can be seen as constructed within a neoliberal, do-it-yourself method of ‘getting fit’ or becoming ‘healthy’, a means of attaining social authority, and of course a way to ensure continuous bodily development at the gym (Atkinson 2007; Glasner 1990). Furthermore, by discussing and developing theories of how to set up different courses, the practice can also be constructed as being performed within a health agenda (Monaghan 1999b).

**Steroids and the genetic maximum**

The global community that is fitness and bodybuilding culture has developed its own symbolic language and way of talking about different aspects of this form of physical culture. One term often used in relation to the use of steroids to boost muscles is the ‘genetic maximum’, the ‘genetic max’.

The relationship between steroids and a person’s genetic max is complex. Often steroids are used to exceed one’s genetic max, but sometimes the talk is about how to use steroids in order to reach that ‘max’. The conceptual discussions about the genetic max can consequently be understood as a mixture of conceptions of physical potential and fantasies, sometimes dramatic, about what is humanly possible to achieve (Locks and Richardson 2012). Most participants in this culture would probably agree that it is almost impossible to determine a person’s genetic max. Basically, most members agree that steroids improve results and help increase the muscle builder’s body mass.

Steroids are a short-cut to fast development of muscle mass and strength. Results can be achieved in a short time. But how difficult is it to maintain these results? Now we’re not referring to IFBB builders on 120 kg, who will of course lose muscle mass quickly if they stop using steroids … However, when a man decides to stop using the drugs, but continues to exercise frequently and intensively, will he be able to keep his muscle mass and strength while staying clean? (StillMuscular?)

Answer: If we’re talking about a single cure, it’s easy. The closer you are to your potential, the harder it’ll be. If you’ve added 15 kg of quality muscle (not fluid) you’ll have to work hard, but it’s not totally impossible. (HardWork)

Many of the comments in this thread on how to keep muscle mass without using steroids are pessimistic regarding the possibility of remaining ‘clean’ and maintaining a certain muscle mass and strength. Building muscles without steroids is also often described in terms such as stagnation, regression and futility. Below, one member reflects on what happens when someone becomes clean.

I believe you lose more than you imagine. As for me, I’m far above my genetic max. The effects of stopping consuming the steroids will be remarkable. On the last occasion I lost a lot of my body mass in just the first two weeks. If I step off the steroids, I’ll probably look the same as I did before starting with AAS, because at that time I had already reached my genetic maximum. (GoBefore)

For many practitioners, the goal is not to become yourself and strengthen your ‘old’ identity, but rather to become someone else, to become a significant bodybuilder, and possibly also to exceed your genetic maximum. Developing and nourishing this perspective also accommodates the inherent difficulty of disengaging with drug-use practices, as it suggests
a return to your previous identity, which you had left behind. The anticipated effects of PED and the process of transformation is, of course, also largely connected to the issue of gender and most often to the construction of a dominant, muscular and self-assured masculinity.

Even though most of the participants in the discussion are engaged in the quest to find ways to increase their body mass and strength, there is also a certain awareness of the problematic side of this quest. This is expressed in the form of counter-ideals, discussions about people who have succeeded in keeping themselves clean. While most of these discussions end up in a position of defeat, and an affirmation of the importance of the steroids, there are exceptions.

Here is a guy who is clean: Aaron Curtis. He only participates in the natural bodybuilding competitions. He has really good sponsors, because he is clean. He has 250,000 followers on Facebook. Check him out. He seems to be an honest person, seems to have good self-knowledge, and also shows extreme self-discipline. (Natural)

Aaron Curtis is a relatively well-known name in bodybuilding circles, particularly through his express aim of becoming the best natural bodybuilder that he possibly can. Regarding the use of PED, Curtis is quite condemning. On his Facebook page he states: 'In my opinion, people should have to earn the right to enhance, not just use performance-enhancing drugs as short-cuts to a physique that could have been attained naturally if they had just learned the basics first'. On Flashback and other bodybuilding sites, there is an ongoing discussion about how ‘natural’ Aaron Curtis’s body really is, and if it is possible to reach body goals even without drugs.

On Flashback, there seems to be a need for stories affirming that the use of steroids is a fully sound and rational practice. There is also a constant demand for new ways of transforming and sculpting the body to perfection. Body-enhancement drugs are an intrinsic part of this online culture, and there are even people who speculate on how to influence and change the basic conditions of one's physical manifestation. In this sense, we are witnessing the development of ideas about scientifically engineered ‘cyborg bodies’ (Pitts 2003). The following comment speculates on the consequences of this development, which is partly understood as a process of approaching science fiction and ‘space facts’.

So, genetic max? Maybe it is possible to influence and improve on your genetic max. People using growth hormones, who let their body grow (the skeleton and the number of muscle cells), also have to influence and change their genetic max, I guess. Or is this just about how much testosterone the body is producing? Cause, I've heard that, if you reach your genetic max, and start using growth hormones to increase your muscle cells and skeleton you can push your genetic max forward and reach another limit. After doing this, you can start to build 'clean'. This is maybe just 'space facts', I don't know. (The Engineer)

Young men and women building their bodies seem to be looking for different ways of enhancing volume and strength. Even though the claims-making of, for example, Curtis tells us that it should be possible to reach one's goals in 'natural ways', most practitioners seem to be convinced that this is more or less an illusion. Therefore, although the above quotations to some extent indicate a trend toward natural bodybuilding, there seems to be no easy way out of the shortcut that PED represents.

**Conclusions**

Our investigation gave us insight into certain of the characteristic dynamics of a symbolic community, and how the relationship between bodies, self-understanding and PED
is discussed in this forum. In this sense, we obtained access to an extreme social and cultural reality, defined by a strong interest in muscular development and size. In this respect, our results are in line with similar studies on internet bodybuilding communities (see, for example, Smith and Stewart 2012). Even though the participants are to a certain degree aware of the risks and health costs of this kind of bodily regime, the potential benefits of using PED clearly dominate the discussions (see also Monaghan 2001a).

Reading different postings on Flashback takes us into a specific symbolic and social community. A particular language game is developed, and the discussions about PED often incorporate esoteric ethno-medical terminology. Nutrition, supplements, training regimes and PED are all part of a highly rationalized, means-to-an-end lifestyle within the CoP. Pushing the physical limits and creating an impressively muscular body is here seen as a core value, and part of a successful self-presentation.

In the community, ideas about the genetic max, as well as the ultimate possibility of exceeding one's limits and creating something beautiful, special and extraordinary, circulate. The stories on Flashback often affirm the legitimate search for the perfect bodybuilding adventure, as well as the perfect body, using any and all means and methods necessary to construct the ultimate strong body. The ‘natural’ and ‘clean’ bodybuilder is constructed as a product of a moral phantasy, and attempts to put forward this approach to bodybuilding are discouraged and put down by a majority of the postings presented in this CoP. The master or teacher of this particular culture is not a ‘natural bodybuilder’, but rather a person who is apparently prepared to acquire and use all knowledge available to construct the perfect body. This does not, however, imply that there is a universal representation of a specific physicality being idealized in the community (Monaghan 1999a). There are of course heterogeneous body projects and diverse ways to create the personal picture of a perfect body.

The main finding in this article is that the online community contributes to specific learning processes. Looking at this as a rite of passage, helps us to discern how different relations between ‘teachers’ and ‘pupils’ are developed, how expert knowledge is diffused and transferred, and how personal doping trajectories gradually develop over time. The first injection, for example, is seen as a milestone. The members of the community function as advisers and supporters of the individual’s transformational identity processes. These learning processes include both detailed advice on how to understand and use PED, and how to manage risk. Subsequently, these processes also involve a reflexive attitude towards PED use. Learning how to become a user consequently involves a certain degree of risk-taking and a willingness to use various means to obtain the idealized body, as well as the acquisition of ethno-scientific knowledge through which the user can construct the practice as performed within a health agenda.

The internet community studied can be read as an example of a transformational process in which ordinary rules and regulations are questioned and put out of play. What is studied here is a process of deregulation and a de-normalization, in which the acceptance of certain kinds of drug use is extended and expanded. This process of normalization and acceptance of drug use within the community is constructed in an alliance with neoliberal attitudes and the cult of the individual, making it possible to transgress and challenge norms and regulations (see also Miller and Rose 2008). These processes are of course connected to a general discussion of how neoliberal discourses have penetrated our thinking about individual freedom and health (Rich and Evans 2013). Certainly, the gym and fitness industry, and the practices carried out in these contexts, fit nicely into a neoliberal world view, in
which people are considered individually responsible for their own body and health. In some ways, the striving for the perfect body even makes it logically necessary, for instance, to challenge legislation on PED and to develop subcultural norms and values. And in the internet community studied in this article, people can find extensive knowledge and substantial support for the necessity of using certain means, and illicit drugs, to achieve their goals.

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**References**


