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"Falling down the rabbit fuck hole":

Spectacular masculinities, hyper-sexuality, and the real in an online doping community

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Abstract

Through hegemonic ideas about muscles and extraordinary performances, image and performance enhancing drugs (IPEDs) and their use have been traditionally connected to hypersexualized masculinities. This link has resulted in spectacular ideas and fantasies about what IPEDs can do to/with men regarding bodies and sexual performances. However, these ideas do not always manifest or correspond with daily life. Using a qualitative and case study-based approach, this article investigates the relationship between doped and spectacular masculinities as they are presented and constructed in and through an online doping community, and users' experiences of side effects of the doped body and its social consequences. Analytically, the article draws on Debord's work on the relationship between *the Spectacle* and *the Real*, and the ongoing theoretical debate on different reconfigurations and redefinitions of doped masculinities. The results show that chasing and living out fantasies becomes part of the construction of an IPED masculinity and narrative underpinning a bro-science culture that develops within the community. Fantasies about spectacular and pornified masculinities are idealized on the forum. When this narrative becomes formative for how community members act in daily life, however, it can strain their intimate lives, as when members lose control of situations, are not able to perform, or engage in sexual encounters they later regret. We argue that anticipations of and effects from IPEDs can bring forward alternative ways of enacting doping masculinity and sexuality in the context of online communication, while also blurring the lines between fantasy and lived experience.

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Introduction

In *Testosterone Dreams*, John Hoberman (2005) focuses on the hormone testosterone and its derivatives, known as anabolic-androgenic steroids, to sketch a history of how hormone treatments have been used to form not only lifestyles and identities, but also as a means of producing social and cultural stability (see also van de Ven et al., 2020). Hoberman suggests that image and performance enhancing drugs (IPEDs), through processes of medicalisation of society (Conrad, 2007), historically have served to “reinforce normality” (Hoberman, 2005: 16). IPEDs have aided people in enhancing or restoring human capacities in different social and cultural spheres of society, such as increasing workplace productivity, improving soldiers’ stamina, in sexual encounters, as treatment for frigidity, and more. At the same time, the idea of medically reinforcing normality creates a paradox and an uncertainty about what is “normal” or realistic to expect and what is not. Engaging in IPED use may therefore be understood as a quest of reaching “normality,” as well as an endeavour down a rabbit hole where fantasies of promised sexual energy/stimulation, hyper-masculinity, out-of-this-world performances, and more are sought and possibly met (Herbert, 2017; Hoberman, 2005; Waddington, 2000).

Seemingly, one can never totally escape or eliminate dreams and fantasies, nor prevent them from impacting or cutting into daily life and the formation of lifestyles and cultures. This has been vividly addressed and described by writers such as Lewis Carroll, J.M. Barrie, and C.S. Lewis.

Limitations or hardships in “the real” (Debord, 1967/1995) are often taken as the point of departure in literature where people enter fantasylands to escape their life predicaments, or, to some extent, to reach an imagined normality. For example, in the classic *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, Young Alice is feeling bored and dreamy when she notices a clothed white rabbit, whom she follows down the rabbit hole into a subterranean fantasy world. Initially, she cannot get into this world as she first must pass through a small door. Soon she finds a bottle that says, “Drink me!” and when she follows the advice she shrinks, goes through the door, and her adventure begins. Alice’s undertaking, and the interconnectedness between her dull daily life and what happens in her fantasy, symbolically resonates with how IPED use has been approached and understood: that one has to change the body to experience the fantasy, engage in an adventure, and fulfilling, in the case of IPED use, “testosterone dreams” (Hoberman, 2005).

As a result of technological developments in the past few decades, people’s ways of connecting with one another and dealing with issues concerning IPED use and its relationship with gender, sexuality, and more have reached the virtual arena of online communication (see Underwood, 2017; Bilgri, 2018; Andreasson and Henning, 2021). In different online forums people can discuss and share their experiences of IPEDs (Andreasson and Johansson, 2016) and upload pictures of their results and inspirational images for others (Smith and Stewart, 2012; Underwood, 2017). In the online arena, the separation between a temporarily shredded, masculine-connoted, and sexualized doped body on the one hand, and the construction of the hyper-sexual and -masculine fantasy on the other, becomes anything but clear cut (see Andreasson and Johansson, 2021).

The focus of this article lies in the intersection of IPED using men's internal discussions and anticipations connected to their drug use practices, and their aspirations for "external" experiences of sexual encounters and intimate relationships. More precisely, using a qualitative and case study-based research approach, the aim of this article is to investigate the relationship between, on the one hand, doped and spectacular masculinities as they are presented and constructed in and through an online doping community, and, on the other, community members' experiences of side effects of the doped body, its social consequences, and "the real." Data was gathered on the website *ThinkSteroids.com*, which consists of a myriad of forums where men (and some women) can learn about and discuss IPEDs (see methodological section for further information regarding sampling). In line with our aim, the following research questions have guided our analysis:

RQ1: How does the community address and talk about IPEDs and their anticipated effects in relation to masculinity and sexuality?

RQ2: How are the doped body and possible side effects understood?

RQ3: How does IPED use and its effects influence intimate partnerships?

We argue that anticipations of and effects from IPEDs can bring forward alternative ways of enacting doping masculinity and sexuality in the context of online communication, while also blurring the lines between fantasies and lived experiences. This includes experiencing side effects of the drugs and their impact on intimate relationships.

Background and literature

Largely in the scholarly debate, fulfilling dreams through IPED use has been connected to thoughts and ideals of bulging muscles, masculinity, and sexual virility (Andreasson, 2015; Christiansen, 2020; Klein, 1993; Monaghan, 2001). Indeed, there is historical continuity in how sociologists and historians have suggested that the desire to improve one's social status is one of the most important factors in men's engagement in IPED use (Waddington, 2000; Guttman, 1978; Mosse, 1996), usually meaning men aim for or fantasize about bigger muscles in line with prevailing norms of heteronormative masculinity (Christiansen, 2020; Andreasson and Johansson, 2016b; Parkinson and Evans, 2006). Through hegemonic ideas/ideals about performing and extraordinary performances, IPEDs and their use have thus been connected to that of muscular and competent male bodies (Holt et al., 2009; see also Connell, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

Although scholars have discussed the interrelatedness of enhanced muscularity, masculinity, and sexual virility through IPED use, this field of knowledge has been largely dominated by the "narrative of harm" in recent decades (Andreasson and Johansson, 2021; Mulrooney et al., 2019). In contrast to historical explorations of how IPEDs could be used for productive purposes (i.e., combat fatigue), contemporary perspectives have zoomed in on and been debated within a pathology paradigm (Moore, 2008) in media and political discourses, as well as by scholars (Gorman, 2017; Soni and Nasrulla, 2018). Indeed, steroid use has often been discussed in terms of hyper-masculine positions and subcultural values including heterosexism, homophobia, and

men exhibiting violent behavior (Bach, 2005; Christiansen, 2020; Denham, 2008; Jordan-Young and Karkazis, 2019). It has also been suggested that IPEDs can lead to serious physical and mental health problems, such as increased irritability, depression, cardiovascular disease, testicular atrophy, acne, and more (ACMD, 2010; Pope et al., 2014; Rasmussen et al., 2016). Following this, IPEDs and their use have been repeatedly problematized and discussed in terms of (hyper-)masculinities (Denham 2008; Jordan-Young and Karkazis, 2019). However, and in contrast to the narrative of harm, other competing perspectives have gradually gained ground within the sociological literature on IPED use (Zahnow et al. 2017).

The interdependent relationship between user experiences and their sometimes vibrant and imaginative anticipation and ways of thinking about IPEDs has been found in the scholarly debate around the narrative of harm, as well as more recently in discussions of IPEDs for pleasure and recreation. In a study on bodybuilding and IPED use in the online context, for example, Underwood (2017) focused on an online community consisting of thousands of recreational muscle builders who idolized the alleged and now deceased IPED user “Zyzz,” who was known for his ability to combine a “shredded” (highly muscular, lean, and vascular) body with a vibrant party lifestyle, always in the limelight for display. Underwood approached IPEDs largely as a social experience (see also Whyte et al., 2002), and showed how community members talked about, idolized, and dreamed of the perfect body and lifestyle, which Zyzz symbolized/embodyed. Closing in on this dream, they hoped to gain social benefits, such as dominance over other men and women (see also Andreasson and Johansson, 2021; Kimergård, 2015). Implicitly, this study

thus addressed the fantasy of getting the shredded body and how it is connected to ideas about reaping social and sexual benefits in daily life, both on- and offline.

Increasingly, scholars have recognized that there is substantial variability in terms of motives and experiences among IPED users, and in the transformative nature of the drugs (Begley et al., 2017; Underwood, 2017). As suggested by Mulrooney et al. (2019: 101) there is a need to not only debate IPED use within the narrative of harm, but also in terms of pleasure and recreation, as “pleasure is an essential part of a coherent and reasoned response to steroid consumption”. Still, scholars’ interest in the pleasures of IPEDs is limited. Pleasure and harm are still discussed as separate, and often conflicting, perspectives or paradigms for understanding IPEDs and their use. However, pleasure and harm are not mutually exclusive. Rather, to begin to implode the distinction between harm and pleasure, we offer a different approach (incorporating the harm/pleasure perspectives) that focuses on the interrelatedness of fantasy and the real. Although scholars have discussed and analysed the relationship between IPED use and masculinity extensively, we still know little about how such gendered understandings of IPED use intersect with anticipations and even fantasies of the drugs, their effects on sexuality, and questions concerning relationships (Andreasson and Johansson, 2021).

Analytical Framework

Aiming to explore the ambivalent and sometimes contradictory aspects of IPED use in relation to masculinity and sexuality, we draw on the thoughts and theories of Debord (1967/1995) and his Situationist work on the relationship between *the Spectacle* and *the Real* as an initial and coarse-

grained framework. Debord used these concepts to develop his critique of contemporary consumer culture and commodity fetishism, dealing with issues such as media representations, alienation, and mass communication. According to Debord, the Spectacle can be understood not so much as a collection of images, but rather how social relationships between people are mediated or formed by images or even imageries (Debord, 1967/1995). The Spectacle represents, in a way, the unreality of life, and tends to monopolize truth. Accordingly, individuals, in this case IPED users, may sometimes find themselves more in tune with the spectacular and hyper-real world than with the physicality of daily life. Such a condition, however, tends to produce a longing for the “real”. The Spectacle can to some extent be understood as temporal.

Here, we are interested in the conflation of the *Spectacle* with *the Real* as IPED users discuss drugs, masculinity, sexuality, social relationships, and more in an online forum. To produce a more fine-grained framework, we situate the tools provided by Debord within an analytical discussion on masculinity and heteronormativity, and how stability and change has been theorized by gender scholars. There is, of course, an ongoing debate about reconfigurations and redefinitions of masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), although seemingly there is agreement that there are different ways of doing masculinity (Haywood et al., 2018). We focus on how dynamic relationships, and gendered understandings in particular, are played out in the intersection between the Spectacle and the Real. These may be expressed in such forms as “accepted” and legitimate identities or alternative and even “deviant” identities (cf., Cheng, 1999; Dahl-Michelsen and Nyheim Solbrække, 2014). IPED communities may, for example, foster a form of hyper-masculinity and -sexuality, where certain stereotypical masculine (and anti-

social) qualities are exaggerated, such as the emphasis on aggression, sexual virility, misogyny, and dominance over women and other subordinate men (DeReef, 2006; Mosher and Sirkin, 1984; Underwood, 2017). At the same time, such identities or cultural narratives of masculinity can in fact be combined with a desire to fit into dominant gender configurations (McDowell et al., 2014).

In our analysis, we operate on two levels. On a symbolic and cultural level, we focus on how IPED users discuss and produce images of spectacular masculinities and hyper-sexualities in the context of the subcultural space of online communication and bodybuilding. We argue that this space facilitates the possibility of articulating ideals and desires of perfect and potent domineering masculinities, absorbing, for example, imaginaries from the porn industry (see Andreasson and Johansson, 2021, on pornification; see also Kammeyer, 2008). On a relational and subjective level, however, hyper-sexual and hardcore hyper-masculinities may lead to challenges in social life when the individual fails to achieve such imageries or follows fantasies that are unacceptable outside the doping community. This may lead to stress, anxiety, and challenges in intimate social relationships. Here, we focus on how such negotiations are played out, creating a complex web of relationships between desires, potency, and the fantasy of self-control. We analyze how IPED users present and debate their bodily surfaces and “unpack” their experiences, to situate these diverse masculinity configurations in the intersection between the Spectacle and the Real. In doing so, we contribute to the wider discussion on diverse masculinity configurations.

Research Design

This article draws on written accounts presented in different online forums found on the website *Thinksteroids.com*. This website contains a multitude of forums where a community of people can anonymously discuss and debate issues that concern doping and doping use. Anyone with an internet connection can gain access to the discussions taking place here and post their own thoughts and experiences of doping. Roughly, the forums found on the website are organized around broad topics or themes, such as “Steroid Underground,” “Human growth hormones and peptides,” “Men’s health forum,” and more. These broad topics are then further subdivided into different threads or ongoing discussions on specific issues (e.g., “Erectile (dys)function” in Men’s health forum). While the personal information presented by community members is somewhat limited, clearly the majority of the posts are by men. Perhaps unsurprisingly, and as shown in previous research (Christiansen, 2020), the male user largely constitutes the norm regarding doping practices, which here seemingly also stretches into the context and textuality of online doping forums (see Background section). Building on previous research that largely has focused on men’s doping use and ambitions of constructing a masculine identity with the help of IPEDs, in this article we zoom in on how male community members discuss masculinity both in terms of the body and its capability, and in terms of fantasies and imaginaries of masculinity. The contribution thus lies in offering insights and access to how fantasies are constructed/reinforced in the discussions on the forum and how those then bump up against lived experiences.

Regarding epistemology, the study was based on a qualitative case study approach. As we see it, the case study approach has the advantage of allowing rich and nuanced portraits (Pearson and Hobbs, 2003; Yin, 2014). Thus, we connect subjective experiences of IPEDs and masculinity as an

emotion/experience that changes over time with different conceptualizations and contextualizations of this experience. In this sense, this study can be read as portraits of and an archaeology of online doped masculinities and sexualities. What we are trying to do is to build a mosaic through men's experiences as presented on *Thinksteroids* about how masculinity and sexuality are experienced in the context of online interactions and in the in-betweens of thoughts and imaginaries of spectacular masculinities on one hand, and daily life and lived experiences on the other. We are not primarily interested in what individuals express in their posts per se, and will not analyze these in detail, such as in terms of the diverse identity claims and masculinities being pursued. Rather, we view the community of men that engage in discussions on our selected forums as our main object of study (c.f. Bilgri, 2018). We direct our attention to the textuality of the forum and how cultural formations and structures of masculinity are expressed and debated among community members (Henning and Andreasson, 2021). We view the discussions as cultural manifestations taking place within a particular (and gendered) spatiality and community (see Kozinets, 2010). In our analysis, following our theoretical framework, we approach the online community found on *Thinksteroids* as a platform designed to attract specific lifestyles and groups of people, with the perspective that there are no impenetrable lines between online communication and cultural practices away from keyboard (see Anderson-Levitt, 2006; Pink, 2009). Rather, following Kozinets (2010, p. 22), technology and culture are to be understood as intertwined.

When conducting the study, in the sampling process we initially read the ongoing discussions on the general Steroid Forum, which at the time consisted of more than 46,000 unique threads. For

this article, we drew a sample of approximately 700 threads that were broadly related to topics of masculinity and sexuality, including user-posted links to older threads that were relevant to the theoretically informed purpose of the article. At this point, data saturation was reached as the topics and themes were repeated across threads. These threads varied in length and number of posts, stretching from one to more than 130 comments. From these, approximately 50 threads were included for further analysis and copied into a word document. The transcripts of these threads were then read repeatedly by both authors and, in dialogue between authors, were coded into themes that both responded to the study's more theoretically imbued purpose and at the same time could capture the empirical meanings being expressed, as manifested in the development/emergence in our research questions (Aspers, 2007; Bowler, 2010; Fangen, 2005; Kozinets, 2010). Through constant movement between empirical data and theoretical and analytical tools, we sampled excerpts that, in a nuanced way, responded to the purpose of the study. Analytically this meant that we opted to construct a creative research environment, by experimenting with writing, collecting data, and theoretical influences early in the process (Back, 2007; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). In the presentation of our findings we have, however, chosen an empirically driven approach and included posts that were representative of forum discussions. This has not been done with the intent to separate the empirical material from the theoretical ideas and conceptual framework that initiated the study, but with the intent to center the men's posts and how these can be read not only in terms of individual experiences but also as cultural manifestations of IPED use, a highly gendered practice. Thus, excerpts from community members have been understood as theoretically impregnated (Gomm et al., 2000).

Certainly, engaging in studies of online communication raises questions regarding research ethics. For example, using this kind of material may blur the distinction between public and private. **Because forums** on *ThinkSteroids* are not password protected and anyone with an internet connection can view the discussions, we have concluded that the members have no reasonable expectation of their personal privacy needing to be normatively protected (Grodzinsky and Tavani, 2010; Walther 2002). Adding to this, members do not use their real names on the forum. Consequently, we do not know who they are and (if not explicitly addressed) we could not discern age, ethnicity/race, sexuality, geographic location, or other characteristics. This fact, however, does not give us the right to use material as we please. When selecting excerpts, we have limited our analysis to focus on those that facilitated relevant analyses of the construction of masculinity, sexuality, and IPED use, and refrained from using any particularly sensitive or personal information (Franzke et al., 2020; King, 1996;). We have also chosen to construct new usernames and restricted our use of quotations to those that promote relevant analysis in our presentation (Andreasson and Johansson, 2016a). Formal ethical approval to carry out this study was secured from the Regional Ethical Review Board of Linköping University, Sweden (Ref. No. 2017/469-31).

Findings

Hyper-sexual bodies and spectacular masculinities

Although most understand steroids in terms of muscle building, there are other effects of these drugs that have become intertwined with both muscles and masculinity (Mulrooney et al., 2019).

The link between steroids and sex is often understood and debated in terms of hyper-sexuality and performance-oriented masculinities: that adding steroids results in an unusually high sex drive and ability to perform (Hoberman, 2005). This belief also has roots in the experiences and anticipations reported by men within this subculture (see for example Andreasson and Johansson, 2016b; Christiansen, 2020; Klein, 1993). On the *Thinksteroids* forums, users engaged in discussions about which substances boost sex drive. One member, *HyenaSlayer*, began a thread detailing his current course and how it was impacting his sex drive. He explained:

Currently running 1.5ml mk677 [promotes production of growth hormone], 500 test e [testosterone enanthate] a week, 1mg arimidex ed [aromatase inhibitor], .25 caber [cabergoline, used to offset some side effects] 3 times a week and tribulus [Tribulus terrestris, supplement for improving sex drive] sexdrive is wild. Bruh y'll need to try it out! I could slay the ass off a raw hyena right now. (HyenaSlayer)

In response to this excerpt, other community members commented on their own experiences of steroids and sex drive. *TheRock*, for example noted how a lower dose could lead to similar effects as above described, noting “damn that's a lot of Arimidex. I'm taking .5 e every 3rd day on test e 500. Wake up every morning dick hard as a rock. Giving the old lady hell.” This description by *TheRock* of his erections as “hard as a rock” echoes how the built male body and musculature fueled with IPEDs may be described. Part of this description can be situated in the realm of an *ethnopharmacological subculture* where different substances, their doses, effects, and more are debated (Monaghan, 2001). Through the formation of what Bilgri (2018) describes as *bro-*

science – a portmanteau of “brother” and “science” – ideas about IPEDs are maintained, contested, and passed on by users in discussions. Another part of this description also concerns the social construction of anticipations related to the drugs. The language used is colorful and symbolically soaked in a masculine-connoted, heteronormative, and misogynistic discourse. Achieving solid, visible muscles – a hard body – is presented as a goal in itself (Denham, 2008; Underwood, 2017), but there are goals related to the sexual effects of these drugs as well, becoming “hard as rock” and “giving the old lady hell.”

Descriptions of sexual experiences can become spectacles in themselves, with users describing scenarios bordering on pornographic fantasy. These are still linked directly to steroid use, further affirming the relationship between hyper-sexuality and IPEDs. Indeed, some users sought out compounds or polypharmacy recommendations aimed at enhancing sexual performance. This form of cultural structuration was evident when one community member, *Fantastic4*, described an upcoming scenario, seeking information on drugs to help improve sexual stamina:

I know this is a weird question. But i recently just became single and I've been fucking anything that moves. One of my regulars set me up with her and 3 of her friends. So we're all gonna fuck in a pile, lol. My question is could I pin some tne before we fuck just to help keep my dick up and running strong? 4 chicks is a lot to handle at once and I wanna be able to perform, haha. (Fantastic4)

Fantastic4 highlighted the fantasy-reality divide. On one hand, he is describing a highly sexualized encounter, while on the other he is unsure and hesitant about his ability to perform or enjoy the pleasure of having sex with four women simultaneously without the aid of drugs. Besides the misogynistic discourse, *Fantastic4* is acknowledging that the anticipated encounter is not the norm, while still linking IPEDs with hyper-sexual performance and feeding the imagery in his description. Indeed, he is seemingly also somewhat anxious about being able to live up to the fantasy in terms of his performance. He needs the substances to enter the fantasy. Another community member, *NonStop* responded with a description of his experiences of TNE, short for Testosterone No Ester, an oil-based testosterone:

I have used it several times and every time it was very good. Especially for porn star sex. I discovered I had to take it 4-6 hours before, so you have to plan it out a bit. I always sport the rock for 6 hrs from when it kicks in. Literally non-stop fucking. This stuff is meant for orgies and group sex and porn stars... I initially tried it for a threesome (similar situation you have, but sounds like yours is better), and holy shit it works. (NonStop)

This response distinguished between extreme sex, “porn star sex,” and other types of presumably more routine sex. Exchanges like these on the forum further normalize the relationship between steroids and hyper-sexuality. Spectacular sex or sexual scenarios are simultaneously abnormal and common, fantasy and reality. What we see here is how sexual imaginaries, inspired by images from the porn industry, are absorbed and made part of the drug using repertoires of the men, as well as of daily life, a process Mullholland (2013) discussed in terms of *pornification*.

The ability to over-perform sexually is also seen as a characteristic of hyper-masculinity, which is a controlling and (over)confident gender configuration that seems to underpin many of the shared experiences. Hyper-masculinity is represented by confidence and pride in controlling a sexual situation, setting the tone for women to follow (cf., Underwood, 2017). This, of course, underscores some of the performative nature of masculinity – no matter how one feels, they must still act in prescribed ways to maintain the façade (Johansson, 2003). In this way, sex also becomes a heterosexist masculine performance and, in scenarios such as the one described above by *NonStop*, a spectacle in its own right. Further, by using phrases such as “hard as rock” and “porn star sex,” some of the community members inscribe themselves as part of this cultural narrative and phenomenon. IPEDs are constructed as a vibrant ingredient in the formation of (fantasies about) spectacular hyper-masculinities and hyper-sexual, domineering bodies. In the next section, we look at how reality can remind the individual of its presence through steroid-induced dysfunction.

Doping reality: Inability and restored capacities

The counterpoint to the spectacularization of steroid-induced masculinities and sexual performances is the lived reality of being unable to perform, either at all or with some kind of limitation (Andreasson and Johansson, 2021; Haywood et al. 2018). Discussions of sexual dysfunction were not uncommon on the forums and there were numerous threads devoted to this steroid side effect. This inability was particularly discussed on threads by men dealing with so-called *Deca-dick* – not being able to get an erection as a result of using Decaduranibol – who

are often looking for advice for counteracting this effect. One user, *JustHanging*, opened his post with “I’ve gotten Deca dick” and asked about using other compounds or erectile dysfunction drugs for a quick solution. He later added a bit of context for the urgency of his situation, noting how “it’s just stressful like I’ve met this girl that I really like and she likes me and I went soft on her the first time we tried stuff like it’s that stressful just please pray for my dick to work, lol.” The anxiety around the failure to perform in this post demonstrates the importance of sexual performance both symbolically and relationally. Using Deca to improve one’s body has led to a dysfunction of that body – this is not the ideal body or lifestyle sought through enhancement drugs, neither is it the spectacular and hyper-sexual imaginary brought forward in other threads. It was also a problem for *JustHanging*, as he was concerned about the status of his relationship with a potential partner due to his inability to perform sexually. Like Alice in Wonderland, *JustHanging* sought a “Drink me” solution that would change the (reality of the) body. In response to this post, some users offered advice on how to solve the problem or advised him to be upfront about the issue with his partner. Others, however, made fun of or chastised the original poster for not anticipating this well-known effect.

Lmfao. The Ole Deca Dick Scenario. Sucks for You Bro. You should have had EVERYTHING needed before starting your Cycle. Some may disagree, but when I run Tren [Trenbolone] or Deca, I use Caber E3D. Never had a Problem. Now, you should try Tren, and get the Ole Tren Dick. You’ll Fuck anything in sight!!! (CaberMan)

This ethnopharmacologically-informed response is really addressing the loss of control *JustHanging* experienced. Masculinity in this subculture is directly related to controlling the body and its performance through training, diet, and drugs. Loss of control here signaled that one's masculinity is flawed or weak/soft, but also highlighted the temporality of IPED infused hyper-masculinities. *CaberMAN* was disappointed that someone would not take the proper precautions to prevent the loss of this crucial marker of masculinity. Indeed, *CaberMan* presented the ability to "fuck anything" as the preferred state, underscoring the way hyper-sexuality as a result of these drugs underpins this version of masculinity. The interconnectedness between ethnopharmacological knowledge, masculinity, and sexuality was abundantly clear when *CabeMan* clarified that one should pursue a Tren-dick instead of a Deca-dick.

Other issues related to drug-induced sexual performance also came up for discussion on the forums. Another community member described an issue of failing to climax during sex:

so I'm running into a problem. I can't cum. I'd be fucking the girl for over an hour and no happy ending for me. I just finished a 6 week tren a test p cycle. Now I'm doing 250 of sust EOD [250 mg of the injectable testosterone blend Sustanon, every other day]. And also 20mg nova ed [tamoxifen, every day] for a bit to clear up some left over gyn [gynecomastia]. My boner is good. I don't lose it. She's cumming multiple times so I'm satisfying her which is great, I love it. What can I do for myself? (HappyEndings?)

Several responses noted similar issues. *FeelYaBrah* for example commented:

I have had the same issue since I started running Tbol [Turaniabol], Test and proviron [Mesterolone]. Not sure what the issue is. Some days are better than others but it still takes forever. (FeelYaBrah)

Both of the above posts indicated contradictory feelings – and the line between the spectacle and the real. Sexual stamina, virility, and ability to satisfy partners “multiple times” are important and visible components of a spectacular hyper masculinity. However, this extreme version has become problematic, as these men were unable to achieve orgasm. Sex was described as chore-like, mechanic, something that took great effort and results in little (or greatly reduced) satisfaction. This sits in opposition to expectations of the easy and heightened sexual experiences prized and described within this subculture in previous section. The subversive and vulnerable nature of this discussion was captured by *EnduranceMan* who noted, “Just on test, I can still finish but I last way way longer and I gotta really focus. Funny thread, at least we all know we arn't the only ones now.”

Although the discussions on *ThinkSteroids* feed into a hegemonic cultural narrative of spectacular masculinities and hyper-sexualities in diverse ways, this section has shown the temporality of such imaginaries. We showed how physical limitations and inabilities occurred and revealed the reality amidst the sexual spectacle among IPED using men. Consequently, what we see is an ambivalent construction of heteronormative masculinity (Garlick, 2016). A fair share of the discussions taking place on the forums are directed towards possible side effects and how these

are understood. In debating the doped body and lived experiences, however, we can also see how advice given to worried individuals in this ethnopharmacological culture tends to be directed to restoring the imaginary of a hyper-sexual masculinity ready to perform. In the next section, we consider how the sexual spectacle and the sexual real are negotiated within intimate relationships.

Sex and relationships

Balancing sex drive, pornographic fantasy, and lived reality can be challenging within a relationship. Men using IPEDs often must negotiate their use alongside their intimate relationships, which can lead to some problems. Some men may seek out additional relationships or partners to satisfy their increased sexual appetites. *WhatToDo* noted his own struggle and wondered how others coped:

Maybe I have a disorder and just don't know it yet, but I have been on test (and other shit) for 15 years and am constantly wanting sex. My wife isn't going to put out anymore than once-twice per week, and I don't want to get into a long discussion about that: she's a good woman but she's tired as fuck. She's fat, we have kids, it'll get better but it'll be a year or two. My question is have any of you turned to hookers, massage parlors, or escorts? Or is your sex drive under control? (WhatToDo)

WhatToDo seemed to understand that his heightened sex drive was the core issue, to the point of questioning if he may have a disorder, but also positioned his wife as the limiting factor who

does not “put out” as often as he would like. Again, he presented conflicting masculinities. On the one hand, he was empathetic to her views and understands her reasoning, considering himself almost out of control (see Mark, 2015; Murray and Milhausen, 2012). On the other, he considered additional partners or arrangements simply to satiate himself. This sets up pleasure (for him) leading to potential harm (for his relationship), a difficult balance that others acknowledged (Davies, Katz, and Jackson, 1999). The responses to this question varied, with some disclosing strategies for finding additional partners.

Several discouraged this route though, and instead encouraged *WhatToDo* to try to improve his sexual relationship with his partner. For example, *ListMan* argued for more empathy and ways to make sex more convenient and desirable for her:

I'm not trying to turn the thread into a "fix your broken marriage" thing either when I say the following, this is just something that's helped me sync up sex drives - give her a helping hand sometimes. Doing a load of laundry, or dishes, etc can make a huge difference. I've noticed my ladies have always had a to do list and sex is rarely at the top because they don't think of it as often as we do. You knock some of those things off that to do list for her, sex moves up the list by default and it makes for a good emotional bond for her. (ListMan)

While this is ultimately a tactic for extracting more sex from one's partner, *ListMan* was also highlighting that a caring and more gender equal masculinity can be attractive to women (see Bjornholt, 2011; Johansson and Andreasson, 2017). This challenges the pornographic fantasy of

easy sex-on-demand often linked to hyper-masculine and sexualized imaginaries, but does reflect the day-to-day reality men experience within intimate relationships.

Beyond physical effects of IPEDs, some forum users described social and relationship effects stemming from their use that highlight the tension between the spectacle and the real. For example, *TrenDude* described his feelings about a sexual experience involving his wife:

Tren makes you cool with some weird shit. I convinced my wife to bang her little Asian friend together. It's hot, but honestly not what it's cracked up to be. Plus neither wanted to do anything together which is like half the fantasy. So, she gets the idea me and a friend should double team her. We start a group chat and sext. I'm on tren so it's all gravy. Then you actually do it. And it's literally just having to watch some dude get serviced by your wife while you try to stay hard enough to also service her. Once you cum it's like pure post-fap-shame and you want to punch something, or somebody. Maybe even yourself. Just... don't do it. I feel like I need to keep taking showers. (TrenDude)

TrenDude's description of and feelings towards sex with multiple partners was vastly different from that of *NonStop* above. Rather than excitement at living out a sexual fantasy, *TrenDude* was regretful of the decision and cautioned other men not to do the same. Now that his own sexual relationship with his wife had been pornified, the reality of his own feelings during and after the encounter were not what he imagined. What this excerpt illustrates is not only an example of how *TrenDude* is engaging in the pornification of his relationship and a sort of exoticism towards

his wife's female friend to further enhance claims of virility. It also shows how a masculine sex fantasy clashes against the reality, as others have spoken about. Rather than responding to the fantasy positively or discussing it mechanically, he expressed negative feelings about the decision. Yet, despite accepting he made a bad decision, he also pointed to his use of drugs as the source of the decision itself, exemplifying how powerful IPEDs are seen in terms of fueling the spectacle of hyper-sexual and -masculine imaginaries. Seemingly, *TrenDude* became more in tune with the spectacle and the unreality of life (Debord, 1967/1995) that monopolized his thoughts and fantasies, leading him to engage in new forms of sex. Following this, however, the "awakening" when the physicality of daily life reminded him of its presence, served to produce a nostalgic longing for the real (an authentic relationship with his wife). That IPEDs can be responsible for poor sexual decisions was accepted to some extent by the other users, some who acknowledged their own or near mistakes as a result of the drugs and offered support for *TrenDude's* feelings. One community member, *CloseCall*, for example provided the following supportive comment: "I appreciate the honesty big dog. I'm a tren whore so I can't feel ya enough on falling down the rabbit fuck hole. Come close but never executed. Hang in there." Again, this underscored the way sexual control is inextricably linked to hyper-masculinity. "Falling down the rabbit fuck hole" as *TrenDude* did is both success and failure: living out one's fantasy is a success, part of the structure and narrative of the bro-science culture mediated on this forum and analyzed here, but the regret represents the loss of control of one's judgement – falling down the rabbit hole rather than choosing to go. *TrenDude* became a victim of his steroid-induced desire, exemplifying the interrelatedness between the narrative of harm and perspectives on IPED use as pleasure.

Conclusions

In this article, we focused on the relationship between the spectacle and the lived reality of IPEDs, specifically the tension and gap between doped masculinities as a spectacle and the lived experience of IPEDs. Although there is a degree of correspondence between how IPEDs are debated and discussed symbolically on a cultural level on the one hand, and on a subjective and relational level on the other, there is also tension between these levels. We first drew specifically on the imaginary and spectacular aspects of the drugs and the cultural structures produced through images of IPEDs, their use, and effects on *Thinksteroids*. Zooming in on how community members addressed IPEDs and how they talked about masculinity and sexuality, it is clear that the online arena can serve as a vibrant spatiality for producing quite powerful imaginaries. This was highlighted in the sexualized and hyper-masculine vocabulary through which men are positioned as being in control and doped bodies are described as being “hard as rock” with “porn star” capacities. This heteronormative hyper-sexualization was fully expected as part of IPED masculinity, as was the pornification of daily IPED life. Consequently, the imaginary of the IPED user was normalized within the community and made into an enjoyable contemporary spectacle.

At the same time, the spectacle is temporal, and although community members tend to search for dramatized effects – dreaming testosterone dreams – it is also clear that the real does not always match or live up to the fantasy. Rather, there are quite a few narratives in which the real reminds of its presence in the form of failed accomplishments, as when community members are unable to perform sexually or struggle to negotiate relationships when going down “the rabbit

hole.” Some also described anxiety about being able to perform in hyper-sexual situations, again highlighting the interrelatedness between the spectacle and the real (see Baudrillard, 1983). This can lead to a disconnect between the muscular bodies these men dream of and the performances those bodies are capable of – dueling spectacles of success and failure. But there is also a disconnect between what is possible in terms of performance and what decisions and behaviors are possible/acceptable within intimate relationships. This has implications for these relationships, as allowing oneself to give into IPED-fueled sexual desires may result in fleeting pleasure but can damage authentic relationships.

By interrogating this clash of the fantasy and the real – and of pleasure and harm – we showed that these are not dichotomous but are inextricably linked. As both are present in the construction and experience of each, both make up daily life for men who use IPEDs. As a result, their daily lives begin to implode these distinctions. This was revealed in the men's discussions of what they want/expect/fantasize about and what they live/experience. But it also reveals a more complex masculinity taking shape in the overlap between the two: excitement, expectation, and control tempered by vulnerability, frustration, and the fear of failure and loss of control. Together these make up an IPED masculinity that sometimes chooses to go down the rabbit hole for excitement, chasing a fantasy, and sometimes instead falls into the very same hole, then finding it difficult to make one's way back to the real.

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