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Insta-muscle: Examining online and
offline IPED trade and masculine body
culture

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PhD

2021

Insta-muscle: Examining online and
offline IPED trade and masculine body
culture

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Abstract

Empirical evidence suggests that we are witnessing a rise in the use of image and performance enhancing drugs both nationally and internationally (Sagoe et al., 2014; Mullen et al., 2020) which, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, shows little sign of halting. Set against this context, this thesis interrogates the consumption and supply of IPEDs within the post-industrial city of Stoke-on-Trent, as well as the digitised spaces of the social media sites (SNS) Facebook and Instagram. Underpinned by a twelve-month ‘connective’ ethnography, the work employs cutting-edge criminological theory to identify Stoke’s health and fitness industry as a site of deviant leisure (Smith and Raymen, 2018). Through data precured from enactive fieldwork in two gyms, semi-structured interviews, and digital ethnographic observations, it presents a multi-faceted account of IPED consumption, taking in a psychoanalytic exploration of bodily desire, elements of instrumental and hyper-conformist use, the pleasures of lifestyle enhancement, and the role of SNS as ‘dopogenic environments’ (Backhouse et al., 2018).

Building upon this, the thesis then offers a comprehensive account of IPED supply in the city. First identifying underground laboratories (UGLs) as the most common producers of IPEDs in the UK, the work paints a picture of the local ‘partial’ market (Fincoeur et al., 2015). Within this, the sanctity of bodily and cultural capital is discussed alongside the barriers that preclude external actors from accessing the supply chain. However, the research also identifies a concerted move towards commercialisation and digitisation, wherein the market now caters for less culturally embedded users and has in some respects moved online (Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016). The impact of these shifts is made clear in a discussion of the IPED market on both Facebook and Instagram.

Ultimately, the research offers an original empirical and theoretical account of the image and performance enhancing drugs market. The findings bring us closer to a more theoretically nuanced account of IPED consumption, as well as building on the burgeoning body of work on the marketplace for these substances. This will be of use to academics, practitioners and policymakers.

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Dramatis Personae

Aaron (46 years old) - IPED harm reduction expert from the north of England. Ex-IPED user and plays a vital role in a number of large-scale research projects.

Adam (32 years old) – a regular gym-goer based at Muscle Sanctuary who achieved an impressive transformation with his physique. Adam has never tried any IPEDs but is sympathetic to users and does use a number of supplements. His is good friends and training partners with Will.

Andy (32 years old) – a personal trainer based at Muscle Sanctuary with whom I learned the basic compound lifts in the gym. Andy is also a recent AAS user, starting his first cycle in the summer of 2019. He is well-researched and wants to reach out to other IPED users advocating harm reduction and disclosure of use.

Ben (33 years old) – IFBB professional bodybuilder who trains at Muscle Sanctuary. Perhaps the heaviest IPED user of the sample, Ben sourced pharma-grade IPED through a contact within the bodybuilding community. He also has a large Instagram following and has cultivated a profitable sponsorship deal to supplement his income as a security professional.

Carl (46 years old) – an AAS user from Wales who has been sponsored by a number of underground labs and is candid about his drug use online. Carl is active on Facebook and Instagram and is knowledgeable about the online IPED market.

David (late thirties) – a former amateur bodybuilder and owner of a growing supplement company. David regularly puts on harm reduction seminars and offers a blood testing service from his shop. He is extremely knowledgeable about the supplement industry and IPEDs, and now relies on a TRT dose of testosterone due to his former heavy AAS use.

Dom (early thirties) – a competitive amateur bodybuilder, PT and online coach. Dom is based at Predator gym but also trains at Muscle Sanctuary. He is an experienced and knowledgeable IPED user and helps his clients with their drug use. Dom has connections to a national level supplier, with whom he connected with Jake and Ed. He is also sponsored by David's supplement company.

Ed (early twenties) – a competitive amateur bodybuilder who turned from natural junior competitions to enhanced bodybuilding in late 2019. He also runs an online coaching company and works alongside Dom at Predator gym. Ed is trained by Dom and has his AAS cycle run by Rob.

Harry (early forties) - owner of Muscle Sanctuary. Highly respected in Stoke's hardcore fitness community and highly connected in the bodybuilding and powerlifting world.

Jake (25 years old) - ex-military, Jake now works doing security for a jeweller. He has only relatively recently started bodybuilding but is tipped by Sam to have a successful career given his impressive genetics. He initially sourced his IPEDs from Dom but now deals directly with a UGL owner.

Joe (early twenties) – an aspiring online coach and PT who is currently studying sports nutrition at university. Joe started his online fitness account in 2019 and is hoping to grow his own fitness brand. He is knowledgeable about sport supplements and uses a number of products, although he opposes IPED use.

Johnny (31 years old) – an aspiring powerlifter who, over the course of the project, went from training in Muscle Sanctuary to another local gym. Johnny dabbled in oral AAS but felt no

real benefits and, as a result, does not class himself as ever having used IPEDs. Instead, he uses a few legal ergogenic aids.

Josh (31 years old) – an amateur competitive bodybuilder and IPED user who trains at Muscle Sanctuary. He is an informed AAS user and employs all of the recommended PCT protocols. Josh sources his IPEDs from his friend, who regularly travels abroad to buy AAS over the counter.

Kyle (22 years old) – an ex-services amateur bodybuilder and aspiring personal trainer. Kyle runs classes in a local upmarket franchise gym and trains in Muscle Sanctuary. He started using a modest cycle of AAS in late 2019, which he sourced with the help of a friend. He has an awareness of harm reduction and PCT but is not knowledgeable.

Lee (43 years old) – a professional bodybuilder and PT who owns a supplement brand and shop in the city. Lee is a former MC in the local rave scene who transformed his lifestyle to compete in the over-forties age class. He is an experienced IPED user who regularly gives advice to his customers. According to others, Lee sells AAS from his shop but he denies this.

Luke (45 years old) – a professional natural bodybuilder turned powerlifter who works for the local police. Luke returned to bodybuilding in early 2000s having been initially put off the sport by the widespread IPED use.

Mani (early thirties) – along with his brother, Abbas, Mani owns a small independent supplement shop in the city. Although he advocates for legal and ethical business practices, their shop openly sells SARMs and prohormones. Other sources have indicated that Mani also sells AAS from the shop, although he explicitly denies this.

Neil – well-respected sports psychologists who lives near the city and used to train in Stoke's 'proper' hardcore gyms. Neil has worked with many bodybuilders in a professional capacity and has published research on physiological and psychological aspects of hardcore training.

Paul (late thirties) – a sports rehabilitation professional based in Muscle Sanctuary. Paul has very conflicting views on IPED use and is extremely concerned with the ethics and malpractices of the fitness industry.

Pete (30 years old) – an aspiring strongman based at Muscle Sanctuary. Pete is very anti-IPEDs and denies their existence in the strongman community, although he does use a variety of licit ergogenic aids.

Phillip (67 years old) – affectionately nicknamed 'the Doc' by other gym-users at Muscle Sanctuary, Phillip is a former professor of biochemistry and has amassed a great deal of wealth over his career in academia and property investment. Phillip is a keen proponent of TRT and supplements himself with pharmaceutical-grade testosterone.

Rob (48 years old) – an IPED harm reduction specialist and former heavy AAS user. Similar to David, Rob now relies on a TRT dose of testosterone following his abuse of anabolic steroids. He now trains police, acts as an expert witness in IPED-related cases, and runs a number of harm reduction services from his home.

Sam (24 years old) - online coach and personal trainer based in the north, but originally from Staffordshire. He holds an MSc in Strength and Conditioning and competes in the men's physique category. He is also Jake's coach.

Scott (40 years old) – a regular at Muscle Sanctuary who is very popular in the gym. He invited me to train alongside him following our interview and was helpful in introducing me

to a number of other participants. Whilst he is not against IPED use he only uses legal supplements.

Tim (30 years old) – a personal trainer at P4 Fitness, a local gym that mainly runs classes and on one-on-one sessions. Tim takes a range of health and sports supplements and has impressive knowledge of their effects and potency. He is friends with Andy, having competed in powerlifting competitions alongside him in the past.

Tina (late thirties) - well-respected local nutritionist and commonwealth powerlifter. She does not use IPEDs herself but works closely with Rob to design cycles for her (high-end) clients. Tina trains with Ed at Predator gym and Muscle Sanctuary.

Will (32 years old) – a regular gym-goer based at Muscle Sanctuary who has transformed his body from being overweight to extremely muscular. He holds a professional job with an engineering consultancy company. Will trains with Adam and uses some supplements but no IPEDs.

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I'd first like to thank my supervisor Dr Alex Hall. From day one of this project, you've offered nothing but wholehearted support and read more chapter drafts and extracts than I care to admit. Your concerted efforts to make me write concisely and the war you waged on my overzealous use of 'indeed' really did make all the difference. Secondly, a thank you should go to Professor Simon Winlow and Dr Tom Raymen for your invaluable contributions. Tom, your essay length emails were above and beyond what most second/third supervisors contribute and you have no idea how much I appreciate them. Simon, your encyclopaedic knowledge of literature and theory never fail to astound, and I feel extremely lucky to have been supported by you.

Thank you to Harriet for being an absolute rock and putting up with me blathering on about IPEDs, UGLs and the gym more than anyone ever should. Your wise words, love, and support have meant the absolute world to me, and I wouldn't have got through it without you. Adam and Helen, I also owe you a great deal of gratitude for enduring my presence for at least two lockdowns and showing me a huge amount of warmth and kindness.

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Thank you to my parents, who have supported me throughout this project and put up with my obsession with getting this thing written. Mum, I think you should qualify as an expert on IPEDs by now with all the drafts that you've read and Dad, thank you for building me a bookshelf and desk! Finally, a huge thank you to all those who took part in the research and allowed a skinny PhD researcher into your world. The project would not have got off the ground without your selflessness and candidness and I hope you feel represented in this work.

Declaration

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others. Any ethical clearance for the research presented in this commentary has been approved. Approval has been sought and granted through the Researcher's submission to Northumbria University's Ethics Online System on 24th May 2019.

I declare that the Word Count of this Thesis is 84,474 words.

Name: Nicholas Russell Gibbs

Signature:

Date: 10/09/21

1. Introduction

1.1. Background, rationale and aims

Over the last two decades, the UK's health and fitness industry has experienced a meteoric rise (Smith Maguire, 2008; Sassatelli, 2010; Christiansen, 2020) and the physical and digital spaces of bodily modification have become prime sites of late capitalist leisure. In line with this, interest in hardcore training – be it bodybuilding, powerlifting, or even CrossFit – has steadily increased as evermore primacy is placed on the physical form as a site of identity formation and consumption (Kotzé and Antonopoulos, 2019; Gibbs et al., Forthcoming). Committed bodyworkers are now able to choose from a wide selection of licit sports supplements, from flavoured whey protein powders to potent fat-burning stimulants and pre-workout products (Mooney et al., 2017), which can even be purchased at their local supermarket (Siddique, 2016; Sainsbury's, 2018).

However, the glossy and well-marketed exterior of this lucrative economy belies a darker side to the health and fitness industry, and it is this illicit underbelly that this thesis will primarily address. As such, this research sets out to uncover the use and supply of image and performance enhancing drugs (IPEDs) in the post-industrial Midlands city of Stoke-on-Trent. A growing body of literature documents the increase in IPED consumption domestically (McVeigh and Begley, 2017; Mullen et al., 2020) as well as globally (Sagoe et al., 2014; van de Ven et al., 2018), affording the study of these substances a relatively 'newsy' status (Wacquant, 2008) within contemporary drugs research. Although this context has generated a veritable tsunami of scholarship into both the use and supply of substances like anabolic steroids, illicit fat burners and post-cycle therapy drugs, most research into IPEDs falls within the familiar narratives of anti-doping (see Pineau et al., 2016; Backhouse et al., 2018; Andreasson and Johansson, 2019) or public health (see Van Hout and Kean, 2015; McVeigh and Begley, 2017; Glass et al., 2019) and the field can be characterised by a paucity of theoretical or critical criminological engagement (for exceptions see Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016; Antonopoulos and Hall, 2016; Hall, 2019; Kotzé and Antonopoulos, 2019). With that

said, I do not go as far as denying the very real contribution of scholars working within both of these schools of thought, particularly the input of public health projects like the national IPED survey (Chandler and McVeigh, 2013; Bates and McVeigh, 2016; Begley et al., 2017). It is such work, ultimately, that provides the empirical evidence that grounds this project's rationale (not to mention funding). I simply acknowledge that such research necessarily lacks engagement with innovative social scientific theory due to its perpetual emphasis on policy recommendation and 'solutions' (Stevens, 2011). In response, this thesis sets out the following objectives:

- To investigate the social and cultural practices that have developed around the demand for IPEDs, and to examine consumer motivation and how this intersects with local, national, and global contexts.
- To develop an in-depth knowledge of the IPED market in the city of Stoke-on-Trent.
- To explore the use of social media in the supply and demand of IPEDs, and how the online market intersects with, and diverges from, localised offline supply.
- To use Stoke-on-Trent as a case study to explore how neoliberal culture and political economy interact to set a new adaptive context for users and suppliers of IPEDs.

Over the next seven chapters I intend to critically interrogate my sample's use and supply of IPEDs by drawing on nuanced criminological theory, grounding the analysis in various layers of context, from psychoanalytic accounts of human subjectivity, through to the local post-industrial economy and the global processes of neoliberalism. Further, attending to the third research objective, this thesis aims to provide an account of the impact of digitisation and online prosumption (Toffler, 1980; Yar, 2012) in the IPED market. As will be emphasised throughout, I take a 'connective' approach to this research (Hine, 2000; Leander and McKim, 2003), conducting data collection both online and offline and disregarding the longstanding online/offline dualism in criminology (Gibbs and Hall, 2021). This has allowed me to encompass a multitude of fieldsites and attend to my participants' experience of the digital realm as part of their everyday routine. As such, the thesis simultaneously paints a picture of

the hardcore gym scene in Stoke as well as the ‘glocal’ (Hobbs, 1998) digital platforms of social media and the surface web to offer a comprehensive account of my sample’s involvement in the consumption and supply of IPEDs.

1.2. Structure and content

To achieve these aims, the thesis is divided into eight substantive chapters. In Chapter Two I endeavour to ground what follows in the micro and meso context of the various fieldsites within which my research took place. I first offer a description of Stoke-on-Trent, its industrial history, and its steady slump into post-industrial obscurity. Within this, I pay particular attention to the process of de-industrialisation and Stoke’s contemporary malaise as a city of ‘permanent recession’ (Hall et al., 2008), but also one of historic sporting excellence and hardcore gym work. In Chapter Three I then provide an overview of the current scholarship around the contemporary fitness industry and the muscled male body, before addressing the concept of biomedical enhancement and the use of image and performance enhancing drugs. Following this, I critically present the existing literature on IPED supply, therefore setting out the academic landscape and identifying some crucial gaps within it.

Next, I turn to this project’s methodology, where I advance a case for criminological ‘connective’ ethnography and provide a thoroughgoing account of my data collection as well as the attendant issues of access, ethics, and positionality. This discussion foregrounds my presentation of the ontological and epistemological foundations of this thesis. To challenge the current abject theoretical landscape in the discipline of criminology, I draw upon the burgeoning school of ultra-realism (Hall and Winlow, 2015) and its transcendental materialist ontology to underpin this thesis and broaden the uptake of this fresh approach into the exploration of IPEDs. Similarly, I set out Smith and Raymen’s (2018) school of deviant leisure, which forms the bedrock of this work.

Having established this theoretical grounding, I then turn my attention to data analysis. Chapter Five advances an argument that the gym, and the health and fitness industry more

generally, ought to be understood as a site of deviant leisure (Smith and Raymen, 2018). Placing both physical sites under study firmly within the commodified leisure industry, my analysis addresses the processes of professionalisation and commercialisation that have seeped into even the most ‘spit and sawdust’ gyms and the subsequent ‘gentrification’ of the hardcore fitness environment (Brighton et al., 2020). Within this context, I track the harmful contemporary subjectivities of my fitness-consuming sample and unpack their bodily labour within the context of the post-industrial locale of Stoke-on-Trent (Gibbs et al., Forthcoming). I then explore the ‘demand side’ (Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016) of this project in Chapter Six. Split into four substantive sections, I first provide a psychoanalytic interrogation of bodily desire and dissatisfaction, before addressing the macro and meso context of the men’s IPED use in relation to the concept of instrumentality and the implications of bodily enhancement in sporting and occupational motivation. This discussion pays particular attention to Stoke’s local economy and the injunction to employ IPEDs as a means of mitigating the precarity of many of my sample’s employment. I then turn to the pleasures of illicit ergogenic aid consumption with a case study of this thesis’ oldest participant, Phillip. Following his journey into testosterone supplementation, I attend to Mulrooney et al.’s (2019) call to interrogate the pleasurable, lifestyle-enhancing effects of IPED use by providing an account of Phillip’s age-defying self-administration of testosterone replacement therapy (TRT). Finally, I consider the role of social media sites and digital prosumption on my sample’s motivation to consume IPEDs, exploring their ‘will-to-representation’ (Yar, 2012) and online identities.

The thesis then turns to the supply-side of the project as I trace the IPED market from production to the offline closed market, and ultimately to online social media supply via a discussion of the changing nature of the illicit ergogenic aid economy. Although the centrality of these supply chains for my connected, gym-based sample is emphasised, I track the tides of commercialisation, normalisation, and digitisation that I encountered in the field in order to build a comprehensive account of the IPED marketplace.

I bring the thesis to a close in Chapter Eight, as the main arguments and findings I have advanced are summarised and the research questions that I have posed at the outset of this work are answered. Throughout this thesis, the reader should remain acutely aware that what I present, whilst empirically-robust and extremely timely, is hardly generalisable given my localised focus and relatively modest sample size. For this reason, I also provide a roadmap of future research on the topics I have explored and enjoin other researchers to build upon what I present here so as to work towards a more theoretically-nuanced and culturally aware body of work around IPED consumption and supply.

2. Situating the research

In this chapter I will introduce the city of Stoke-on-Trent, within which this research primarily took place. By offering a description of Stoke's unique physical and social geography, its industrial past, and the contemporary malaise that now pervades the city, I hope to set the context beneath my sample's lives before emphasising the burgeoning health and fitness industry that has swept the area in recent years.

2.1. Introducing Stoke

2.1.1 'Myopic provincialism': The geography of Stoke-on-Trent

Stoke teeters between the Midlands and the North, flanked by the heavily rebranded cities of Birmingham and Manchester (Williams, 2006; Blower, 2019). The area is often misplaced as an outright northern city (see Evans, 2017) due to its heavy industrial heritage and characterisation as the 'most working-class city in England' (Jayne, 2004: 199). However, in reality it lies in the upper midlands. Whilst Stoke-on-Trent is the largest city in Staffordshire with a population of just over 250,000 (ONS, 2017), its industrial past is shared collectively with the 'five towns' of Tunstall, Burslem, Hanley, and Longton (Arnold Bennett Society, 2016)¹, known locally as 'The Potteries' (Ball, 2002). The city's main artery is the A500, which cuts Stoke in two, snaking from leafy south Cheshire all the way through to one of the most dangerous stretches of motorway in the UK (Blower, 2019). Owing to this unique layout, Stoke can be described as a 'linear city' (Stoke-on-Trent Council, 2003) in that it lacks a conventional city centre, instead hosting various localised hubs that service residents of each town in a highly parochial manner. Discussing this, Williams notes that, due to the estrangement of the five towns, Stoke exhibits a sense of 'myopic provincialism' (Williams, 2006: 183), fed by locals' resounding pride in *their* town, which has created an insular inter-

¹ Arnold Bennett, 'Stoke-on-Trent's most famous son' (Williams, 2006: 173) and author of one of the few notable literary works set in the city, *Anna of Five Towns* (Bennett, 1902), overlooked the sixth town of Fenton in his work. A consensus has since been reached by most locals that Stoke in fact comprises of six towns.

Potteries rivalry that undermines the city's motto: *Vis unita fortior* (United strength is stronger).

Beyond its geographical drawbacks, Stoke has been lambasted as a city devoid of any resounding contemporary identity, described as 'lacking in things for people to talk about' (Hansard, 2007: 562) besides its former industrial glory days, and, as Hart (2005) coyly notes, being the birthplace of celebrity Robbie Williams. Instead, The Potteries' five towns (with the exclusion of the largely regenerated area of Hanley) centre around decidedly rundown highstreets (see Figure 1.1.), composed mostly of shabby independent retailers, charity shops and 'booze and fag' stores (Ancrum, 2013: 117).



Figure 1.1. A drizzly Monday afternoon on Tunstall's somewhat dilapidated High Street (17/01/20).

Reflecting this, a raft of scholarship has painted the city's appearance in a decidedly negative light. This is captured in local architect and illustrator Matthew Rice's lament that:

'[Stoke] looks like London in 1950, as if a world war has left huge tracts of it blasted into oblivion and reconstruction is just beginning. The shopping streets make you yearn for the much-hated uniformity of the identikit high streets of the rest of England with those dreary but reliable brands.' (Rice, 2010: 12)

Though this synopsis casts Stoke in a rather dismal light, Rice acknowledges that it has 'the bones of a great city' (Rice, 2010: 13), given The Potteries' rich heritage and once-magnificent factories, halls and public houses that have been left to stare forlornly over its numerous failed regeneration projects. This prevailing optimism was reflected by some of my interviewees, who variously characterised The Potteries as '*as good a place as any other, really*' (Luke) and '*on the up*' (Ed). Such local allegiance was best summed up by Joe, an aspiring fitness influencer, who commented, '*I like [Stoke]. It's like a working-class city, I'd always come back to Stoke even if I was rich and famous, I'd always want to live here.*' Joe's optimistic outlook taps into the provincial pride that quietly exudes from local men and women (see Leach, 2018), who often decried the area's hopelessness, whilst maintaining a steadfast affection and sense of belonging for their home city. Crucially, Joe's valorisation of Stoke's status as a '*working-class city*' also speaks to the area's deep-reaching affinity with industry and the significance of production to The Potteries.

2.1.2. Shaped by clay: a potted history

To suggest that Stoke is *shaped by clay* would certainly not be an understatement. J G Jenkins, chronicling the city's industrial history, concludes that '[t]he story of Stoke is basically that of a community of potters, whose skill and business acumen have in the course of two centuries made Stoke the twelfth largest city in the United Kingdom and extended its reputation in the field of ceramics far beyond the shores of Britain' (Jenkins, 1963: 80). As such, Stoke City football club's nickname, 'The Potters', as well as a multitude of the

conurbation's street names, pubs and buildings, nods to the city's rich industrial heritage as Britain's main producer of ceramicware (Evans, 2017). However, Stoke is historically rooted in not just ceramics, but also the production of iron, steel and coal, and the city therefore harbours a deep-rooted pride in the skilled manual labour through which it earned its moniker (Mahoney, 2015). However, Greenslade (1993: 164) notes that The Potteries is 'unique, in this country at least, in being named after its staple product', a statement that goes some way to describing the sacrosanct nature of clay to the city. As a result, the cityscape still bears the scars of its industrial past, even as various attempts at regeneration and modernisation have sought to manoeuvre it in line with the more stylish English cities. As Figure 1.2. and 1.3. illustrate, when walking around The Potteries one is often faced with the towering bottle kilns which once fired tonnes of pottery, as well as the many ribbon-like stretches of canal, which were used to transport Stoke's exports to the docks of Liverpool.



Figure 1.2. (below) One of the many graffiti-ridden stretches of the Trent and Mersey canal which trickles through the city (02/05/19).



Figure 1.3. (left) Two bottle kilns, protected under Historic England's listed building legislation, at the centre of a new-build housing estate in Hanley (02/05/19).

Stoke's formalised pottery industry can be traced back to the early eighteenth century, when the area's natural abundance of red clay and coal was capitalised upon as part of the industrial revolution in Britain (Hunt, 2013; Brownsword and Mydland, 2017). Early pioneers and factory owners included Josiah Wedgwood, Josiah Spode, and Thomas Minton (Weideger, 1992), whose names can be found alongside other industrialists all across the city (Thomas and Hague, 2000). A boom in Stoke's ceramics production accompanied the creation of the Trent and Mersey canal (Davies, 1980), which allowed the large-scale importation of Cornish china clay and opened up The Potteries to the mass export of various ceramic products. Superseding this, the city's inclusion in the national railway system in 1848 further increased the region's capacity, and The Potteries subsequently became Britain's principal producer of quality ceramicware, reaching an apex in the early twentieth century (Squires, 2020).

By 1938, half of Stoke's working population were employed in pottery production (Buxton, 2017) and the city was home to around two-thousand bottle kilns. During this period of ascendance, the ceramicware industry can be understood as an archetypal example of Fordist production, as products were standardised to produce economies of scale, and labour was highly regimented, with employees working inflexible hours under tight oversight (Imrie, 1989). These conditions saw them become highly specialised in roles like 'Bottom Knocking', 'Clay Blunging' and 'Clay Wedging' (Thepotteries.org, 2011), labouring as part of a collective assembly process to produce a wide variety of ceramic products that were then shipped around the world.

However, though the booming period of local ceramics production is often cited as The Potteries' heyday, with near full employment and high levels of productivity, I am conscious not to present Stoke's industrial heritage through 'rose-tinted spectacles' (Winlow, 2001: 60). The city attracted the moniker '*Smoke-on-Trent*' (Johnson, 2019, italics added) owing to its dangerous levels of air pollution at the height of its ceramic production (Walker Hanlon, 2015) that, despite targeted legislation in the nineteen-fifties, remains an issue to this day

(Brimblecombe, 2006; Ault, 2020). Indeed, half of all deaths in the area at the heaviest time of industrial production were attributable to pulmonary conditions, such as bronchitis, tuberculosis, asthma, and pneumonia (Greenhow, 1861). Early production of ceramics in the area also exposed workers to dangerous levels of lead and, during the ascendant era of manufacture, the life expectancy of male potters was just forty-six (Posner, 1973).

Yet focussing on the ills of this era discounts the sense of stability, comprehensibility, and fixity of this period, and it is this sense of surety that has shaped the area's collective memory of its industrial past (see Kotzé, 2019; Telford, 2021). This is consistent with Bauman's (2015: 188) synopsis of industrial modernity, which he characterises as an era of 'universality, homogeneity, monotony, and clarity', where labour was clearly divided and physical institutions like factories, shipyards and indeed potbanks afforded workers with a stable collective identity (Winlow, 2001; Raymen, 2019). Under these 'solid' Fordist conditions (Bauman, 2012), Stoke's ceramic industry, as well as its lesser documented collieries and steel mills, provided a working-class habitus (Lloyd, 2012; Kotzé, 2019; Gibbs et al., Forthcoming) for residents, who could feel secure in a standardised and comprehensible existence, often simply following the life trajectories of their older relations (Willis, 1977; Raymen, 2019). The notion of *structure* was central to this period in industrial locales like The Potteries, as employees were able to accurately envisage their future, due to it being framed within the inflexible, rigid structures of clearly demarcated work and leisure. A pertinent example of this was the phenomena of the 'Potters' holiday' or 'Wakes week' (Holliday and Jayne, 2000), whereby all factories across the region ceased production for two weeks, allowing workers a window of leisure that inevitably saw them exit the city en masse to various seaside destinations across Wales and the North West (Gratton, 2018).

This sense of stability and communality is further explained by Žižek (2000) in relation to the idea of the coherent *Big Other*. According to Winlow (2019), the Big Other describes the unknown figure for whom we perform by partaking in the collectivising structures, institutions and laws that create meaning and order in our lives. This figure is sustained by one's belief in

its existence (Kotzé, 2019, 2020) and thus the Big Other can be understood as a ‘psychosocial construct without a material reality’ (Winlow and Hall, 2012: 409). Therefore, provided that there is a consensus as to its validity, the Big Other acts as a means of structuring our behaviour and creating a sense of purpose, fixity, and stability in our lives, as we seek verification from it in order to validate our actions (Kotzé, 2019). Crucially, Žižek highlights that, within industrial modernity, faith in the ‘collective fib’ (Kotzé, 2020: 58) of the Big Other was almost ubiquitous, as the institutions of work, community and religion provided subjects with clear, collectivising reference points through which to construct their lives. For example, the rigid structure and routine of labour, within which employees collectively toiled towards a common purpose, afforded Stoke’s potters with a framework through which to make sense of their lives (see Kotzé, 2019 for a discussion of the Big Other in industrial Teesside). This reality is reflected in Mervyn Jones’ ethnographic exploration of Stoke’s pottery industry in the mid-twentieth century, where he discovered a ‘unity and consistency of life’ (Jones, 1961: 9) for workers, who often laboured at the same factory from the day they left formal education up until their retirement. Further, much of the housing in the city was built around its various potbanks and factories (Mahoney, 2015) and, as a result, workers tended to know their neighbours. Therefore, tight-knit, single industry communities emerged within these swathes of terraced homes. Workers’ community bonds, forged through the collective graft and craftsmanship in the workplace (Gibbs et al., Forthcoming), were further strengthened by participation in the factories’ brass bands, sports teams, and workers’ unions (Burchill and Ross, 1977; Holman, 2020). Therefore, the industry played a pivotal role in galvanising local people and providing the essentially homogenous lived experience which was a crucial element of life under industrial modernity (Raymen, 2019).

Further, for men labouring in Stoke’s potbanks, collieries, and steel mills, orthodox understandings of masculinity could be imbued in the hard graft and bodily toil they endured (see Skeggs, 1997; McDowell, 2003; Roberts, 2018), which afforded them breadwinner status as well as a sense of collective purpose (Telford, 2021; Gibbs et al., Forthcoming). The notion

of masculinity, and particularly *working-class* masculinity, has long centred around technical mastery and pride in bodily labour (Morgan, 1992; Bourke, 1994). Therefore, the heavy toil that fuelled Stoke's productive heyday created a localised industrial form of masculinity and skilled physical culture, where men could be secure in their role and place in the strict hierarchical order (see Beck, 1992; Ancrum, 2013).

2.1.3. De-industrialisation and the breakdown of the Big Other

However, this sense of security was shattered for employees of the ceramicware, coal, and steel industries when the region's principal means of employment fell victim to the economic restructuring and de-industrialisation ushered in by the Thatcher administration in the late nineteen-eighties (Imrie, 1989). Though it is beyond this thesis' remit to provide a thoroughgoing account of these seismic macro-economic shifts, it is worth sketching out an overview of the rapid ascendance of neoliberalism and the subsequent breakdown of the Big Other in the UK. Harvey (2007: 2) understands neoliberalism as a 'theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade'. Put more simply, taking their lead from classical liberal economists like Friedrich Hayek, advocates of the neoliberal agenda vehemently oppose any form of state-interventionism and instead contend that the individual ought to be 'set free', resulting in economic deregulation, privatisation and a minimum of state support (Plehwe, 2015). More than this however, neoliberalism – which I will sometimes refer to as late capitalism in this work – represents a realignment of life itself around the imperative to extract value (in the form of capital) from every aspect of our existence, from the systemic level, to personhood itself. Crucially, the globalised nature of contemporary life is intimately tied up with the ascendance of neoliberal dogma (Slobodian, 2018) and the technological and logistical advances within post-modernity have meant that this ideology has been seared into the psyche of citizens across the world.

Steger and Roy (2010) argue that the concept of neoliberalism is three-dimensional, taking in ideology (our surrender to capital), governance (the logic that each actor is competitively self-interested and should be treated as such), and policy (a laissez-faire approach to the market and a subsequent deregulation of industry) to create a totalising system within which our perception of the world is housed. Streek (2014) describes this economic logic as ‘neo-Heyekian’, contoured as it is along the conceptually seductive lines of personal and economic freedom and autonomy which, in actuality, has left us at mercy of capital’s unshackled power (see also Mirowski and Plehwe, 2015). As I make reference to neoliberalism throughout this work then, the reader should understand the concept as fundamentally different from the capitalism of modernity and instead as an epochal shift towards a deference to the power of capital which, as I will go on to make clear, has real implications for contemporary human subjectivity.

The Thatcherite and Reaganite era of economic deregulation, which is widely credited as being the onset of the current regime of neoliberal late capitalism (Tribe, 2015; Slobodian, 2018), therefore saw the post-war economic protectionism of Keynesianism supplanted by a dogged commitment to the free market and the liberation of capital (Winlow and Hall, 2013; Mitchell and Fazi, 2017). Crucially, it also signalled a cessation of the Global North’s economic reliance upon *production*, in line with an emergent focus upon *consumption* as the primary means of capital growth (McGowan, 2003; Harvey, 2010). As a result, like myriad cities of industrial production (see Beynon et al., 1994; Lloyd, 2013; Kotzé, 2019; Telford, 2021) Stoke’s ceramics industry was dismantled in the name of globalised free market capitalism (Imrie, 1989).

Reflecting this macroeconomic shift, over fifty-thousand people in the region were employed in the production of pottery in 1979, compared to just ten thousand in 2008 (Tomlinson, 2015). Within this cull, 10,059 potters were made redundant between 1978 and 1981, with 765 of these resulting from the closure of a single plant in the town of Tunstall (Imrie, 1989). The principal factor in this decline was the overseas outsourcing of the ceramics industry (Leach,

2018), as The Potteries' mantle as a global producer of ceramicware was rendered obsolete by the relocation of several major local employers to production sites in Malaysia and Taiwan (West, 2016; Bartolini et al., 2019). Alongside its inability to compete in the globalised export market, Stoke's producers also suffered from the slump in domestic spending and low-cost foreign importation as British buyers increasingly sought products that undercut the local industry in line with the well-rehearsed neoliberal playbook (Beynon et al., 1994). The final nail in the industry's proverbial coffin was the advancement in production technology, which saw many of the traditional crafts that gave the region its name rendered superfluous (Sekers, 1981). Compounding these factors, Stoke's myopic pride in its three principal industries meant that 'nobody worrie[d] about diversifying the Potteries' (Jones, 1961: 98) and therefore very few alternative means of employment existed in the city.

What remains of Stoke's ceramic production can mostly be described as artisanal, as once mighty brands like Spode now aim to satisfy those customers in search of quaint authenticity and nostalgia. This is a far cry from the industry's heyday of mass global exportation and has left the city with a lingering feel of absence and mourning (Mah, 2013; Strangleman et al., 2013). This is evident in Stoke's architecture and physical spaces, as the city is littered with commanding industrial structures that have been allowed to crumble (see Mahoney, 2015; Gillette, 2017) or, in what is perhaps the perfect metaphor for the city's post-industrial malaise, have been repurposed as large-scale cannabis farms by local drug sellers (see Cullinane, 2018; Jackson, 2020). Indeed, just a short walk from Muscle Sanctuary, the primary gym under study in this project, lies the remains of one of the city's many potbanks (see Figure 1.4.), which now festers behind a large fence, presumably erected to shield the unsightly dereliction from the new-build estate opposite.



Figure 1.4. The remains of a long-derelict potbank in Hanley, near Muscle Sanctuary (02/05/19).

However, it is not the material impact of this ruthless period of de-industrialisation that constitutes the most corrosive legacy of Thatcherite economic restructuring in Stoke-on-Trent. Instead, the collective psyche has been left as derelict as even the most decrepit potbanks and bottle kilns and it is the loss of structure, solidity and surety that has taken the heaviest toll on The Potteries' residents. This sense of ontological uprootedness is captured by Zygmunt Bauman and his notion of 'liquid modernity'. Bauman (2012) contends that, as the era of neoliberalism collided with the former certainties of the past, the structures that once contoured our lives under modernity have been *liquified*, leaving the late capitalist subject without the stability, fixity and sense of community that characterised the past. Crucially,

Bauman suggests that the liquification process has created an altered subjectivity, steeped in reflexivity and cynicism, which is now fundamentally complicit with the innate instability of liquid modernity. As a result, we celebrate having fled the unthinking deference to institutions and authority that characterised industrial modernity and conceptualise such stability as stifling and limiting (Winlow and Hall, 2012). This cynicism is articulated by Žižek (2009), as he describes how subjects no longer accept the meta-narratives and collectivised truth claims of the past, viewing them as ‘dead weights placed on our individuality’ (Winlow and Hall, 2012: 401). Žižek (2000) frames this analysis within the *breakdown of the Big Other*, arguing that the institutions and shared cultural bastions that once provided anchorage to the subject under modernity have been fatally exposed as collective fibs (Winlow and Hall, 2012; Kotzé, 2019, 2020). Therefore, given that the subject is tied to loss, without the efficient symbolic order to fill up the absence that defines us cynicism seeps in. This reality led Žižek to proclaim that the Big Other has always been dead, we just failed to recognise it. Thus, it is our collective belief in concepts like community, faith and collective identity that sustained their existence and, following neoliberalism’s fiscal and psychic restructuring of society, the Big Other has been exposed to the subject as the ‘psychosocial construct’ (Winlow and Hall, 2012: 409) that it is.

Žižek concludes that the contemporary subject experiences a profound sense of ontological loss and absence following the dissolution of the Big Other, as they have become increasingly atomised and insular without the guiding structures and coherence of modernity. Therefore, although it would appear that Stoke-on-Trent’s principal body blow was financial, in actuality the meaninglessness, lack of surety and deep-reaching malaise is the truly corrosive legacy of the neoliberal restructuring of the UK’s economy. The demise of the pottery industry and the city’s former importance in the era of ‘organised’ capitalism (Lash and Urry, 1987) has created a psychic scar that will remain long after the final potbank site is regenerated, as residents no longer have access to the comprehensible life trajectories available to their forefathers (Winlow, 2001; Smith, 2014). Therefore, as the city’s industry liquified alongside every other

aspect of solidity within the transition into neoliberal ‘disorganised’ capitalism (Lash and Urry, 1987), Stoke’s collective identity and main point of community convergence gave way and is yet to be replaced.

2.1.4 ‘It’s nowhere near what it was’: the contemporary context

Rob Imrie, writing in 1989, concluded that ‘the fortunes of [Stoke-on-Trent] are more or less dependent upon the revival of pottery production’ (Imrie, 1989: 23). Regrettably, this prediction appears to have been proven true, although not in the manner Imrie had hoped. Following the decimation of the ceramicware industry, Stoke’s economy is now typical of many post-industrial cities in the UK, with a proliferation of precarious low-income jobs, particularly in warehouses and logistics centres (Southwood, 2011; Lloyd, 2013; Telford and Lloyd, 2020). Indeed, David Johnson, a local author and proud Potter, sardonically suggests that ‘[i]n a few years I imagine we’ll be known as the Call Centres, rather than the Potteries’ (Johnson, 2008: 80). This dour assessment was shared by local PT Tim, who remarked:

‘I think The Potteries things have gone [...] I think it’ll always be remembered for the pottery industry but now warehousing is everywhere. So many warehouses. You go [down] Stanley Mathews Way and it’s warehouses, Screwfix, Amazon, there’s a new one being built and there’s a lot of manufacturing places round here. We’ve got Michelin up here, two Dunelm warehouses, the Sainsbury’s warehouse, then you’ve got Well Pharmacy in Meir Park.’

This was echoed by casual weight trainer Scott, as he explained:

‘There’s no industry, it’s just warehousing [...] There’s not much here anymore it’s just retail and distribution. I think all Stoke’s interest is dwindling away [...] I grew up around Burslem [and] all the old factories were open then, like Dudson and Wedgewood and everything was still open, and it was busy. It was a productive place, and it was bringing people in.’

These accounts are supported by official figures. Only 6% of jobs in Stoke are ‘high income senior management roles’ (Carter and Swinney, 2018), half that of affluent areas like Milton Keynes and Reading. Additionally, Stoke’s residents’ average weekly income is £84 less than

the national average (*ibid.*), whilst job density² is 0.78, 0.4 below the Great Britain average (ONS, 2017). Further, Stoke was the ‘debt capital of England and Wales’ in 2017 (Partington, 2018), as well as having the lowest workforce productivity in the country (Corrigan, 2018). Therefore, owing to the internationally-acclaimed quality of ceramic products once produced by the city’s now-derelict potbanks, Stoke-on-Trent holds a heritage not simply of industrial employment, but of highly skilled and creative jobs in a high-end pottery market that Stoke’s current economy has failed to replicate. Tim’s account also epitomises the drab nostalgia that many interviewees felt towards the city, as he compared his experience of working as a warehouse picker with his mother’s career in the pottery industry:

‘There’s nothing, there’s no skill. Anyone can warehouse pick, I did it for years, there’s no skill anymore. Whereas Potteries and stuff there was so many different roles, and you were paid piece work, you used to get piece work rates there. I know my mum would be on, for eight hours a day she’d be on XY rate and then for every piece she’d do she’d get a bonus. Whereas now you’re lucky to even get a Christmas bonus in most places these days.’

Tim decries the lack of ‘*skill*’ in Stoke’s post-industrial economy compared to the accomplished craft that was central to the city’s past. Therefore, in contradistinction to the pottery industry’s skilled and stable employment, Stoke’s current matrix of menial warehouses and retail jobs have left local men unable to imbue the same orthodox constructions of masculinity in their labour (McDowell, 2003; Roberts, 2018). The current lack of hands-on ‘trades’ (Telford and Lloyd, 2020; Telford, 2021), which previously offered The Potteries’ men with a source of working-class pride and masculine respectability (Morgan, 1992; Bourke, 1994), has therefore ‘displaced’ labour as a form of gender-affirmation for local men (Nayak, 2006; Winlow and Hall, 2006). Stoke’s men, who were traditionally tasked with the more physical and rugged aspects of pottery production (Mahoney, 2015), are therefore now trapped in a double bind, as they lack both the ontological security afforded by a coherent Big

² The number of jobs available per person in the local population.

Other, as well as a stable sense of masculinity given the depleted opportunities for successful ‘breadwinners’ in The Potteries’ job market (Nixon, 2017).

As a result, former Stoke-on-Trent Central MP Tristram Hunt acknowledged that a ‘deep feeling of nostalgia for the lost certainties of the past’ (Hunt, 2016: 13) clouds the city. Like many of my participants, Tim appeared to ‘imbue the past [...] with particular symbolic value’ (Lyon and Colquhoun, 1999: 191) as his words exposed a nostalgia for ‘Fordist forms of feelings of stability and belonging’ (Muehlebach and Shoshan, 2012: 318) rather than merely the pay conditions (Berman, 1983). Read within the context of the breakdown of industrial modernity, this sense of nostalgia and wistfulness is almost entirely abstract in nature. Therefore, the underlying sense of collective loss can be said to be the most galvanising social force at play in the city.

The Potteries retains an ‘obsessive internal focus’ (Jayne, 2004: 200) and, unlike several regenerated post-industrial cities like Liverpool and Glasgow, which have made the commercially successful transition to being hubs of culture and consumable ‘buzz’ (Hollands and Chatterton, 2002), Stoke lacks any true allure for outside visitors. This insularity led the local newspaper, *The Evening Sentinel* (1999: 10), to conclude that, ‘the region has remained entrenched in pottery, railways, Bennett, football and boxing, and while politics, consumerism, and fashion elsewhere have all moved on, they’ve not in Stoke-on-Trent’. Whilst efforts abound to promote creativity and entrepreneurial flair at a local level, Stoke remains fundamentally trapped in a political economy that has reduced it to near obsolescence (Edensor, 2000). West (2016: 161) characterises Stoke as ‘symbolic of a wider malaise across post-industrial communities’, as it has fundamentally failed to adapt to the macro-economic shifts and subsequent reorganisation of cities as places of consumption, and instead represents a site of ‘permanent recession’ (Hall et al., 2008). Scott directly addressed this failure, stating:

‘I don’t know what Stoke can do now to sort of bring itself back. Like Liverpool’s got the docks, it’s got them areas with the posh bars. It’s got the money. Nobody’s round Stoke, what do you go [to] Stoke for? Sit by a canal? You know, you go [to] London you’ve got Canary Wharf and all the posh shops, Manchester is much the same [...] Stoke just hasn’t got that wow factor.’

This lack of ‘wow factor’ can be interpreted as Scott’s dissolution with Stoke’s inability to transition into being a ‘creative city’ (Mould, 2015), as The Potteries’ many canals and former manufacturing spaces have not been transformed into spaces for cultural consumption, despite the efforts of the local council (Stoke-on-Trent City Council, 2003), and instead remain in a state of post-industrial paralysis. Local supplement shop owner Mani discussed this in relation to the local night-time economy:

‘It’s nowhere near what it was. For example, nightlife ten or fifteen years ago was booming, whereas now if you drive past on a Friday or Saturday night you see like one person walking through Hanley.’

The city’s dreary night-time economy exposes Stoke’s superfluity in the late capitalist consumer economy, as residents are not drawn to the city for the hedonistic excesses available in other larger cities. Instead, Mani dolefully acknowledges that Hanley, which plays host to most of the city’s bars and nightclubs, is once again a place to be remembered for its former glories rather than its present sorry state. Importantly however, I do not wish to glorify the late capitalist post-industrial cities of buzz here, as their inherent harms have been well documented throughout the literature (see Winlow and Hall, 2006; Smith, 2004; Ayres, 2019). Instead, Stoke’s dearth of spaces of consumption merely reflects the city’s failure to adjust to an economy aimed at ‘sensation gatherers’ (Bauman, 1997) and the ‘stupid pleasures’ of consumption (Žižek, 2008).

2.1.5. Out with the clay, in with the iron: Stoke-on-Trent’s fitness scene

Given The Potteries’ heavy industrial past, the region retains a strong physical culture that has produced a wealth of sporting figures, from world-renowned footballers, boxers, and strongmen, to professional rugby players and wrestlers. Prior to the technological advances that further decimated Stoke’s principal industry, many roles within ceramic production relied upon heavy physical toil and pragmatic strength. As a result, a localised industrial corporeal habitus (Mauss, 1973; Bourdieu, 1985) exists within the city, which has long valorised

working-class physicality and hard graft as a source of pride (Gibbs et al., Forthcoming). Stoke's long-standing physical culture, carried down the generations through the localised collective social body (Elias, 1991; Beissel et al., 2013), has laid the foundations for high levels of engagement with weight training and strength sports in the city. Consequently, according to Mani, The Potteries plays host to forty-seven active gyms within its thirty-six square mile radius³, and one can hardly walk around the most built-up conurbations without encountering one such establishment. This was supported by Tim, who told me over a coffee in a local supermarket café before his shift, '*especially round here [the fitness industry] has blown up. There seems to be gyms popping up left, right, and centre*'. Similarly, PT and online coach Dom, discussing the competition between local gym owners, stated, '*I mean, within a two to three-mile radius there's four gyms around here, which are all pretty similar. But there's more than enough customers*'. This latter admission speaks to the substantial demand for fitness in the city, which has duly been serviced by the burgeoning gym sector. Though a number of independent gyms inevitably closed following the COVID-19 pandemic, local residents are able to choose between a full complement of low-budget commercial gyms, at least four hardcore bodybuilding gyms, as well as specific circuit training and cross-fit spaces. Evidently, although the city's economy has suffered the descent into post-industrial wilderness, the health and fitness industry has blossomed, with myriad ex-factories and industrial sites being repurposed as spaces of bodily toil.

Therefore, it would not be unsubstantiated to suggest that it is iron, rather than pottery, that provides Stoke's men and women with the most tangible means of graft in the city's current dreary economy (see Gibbs et al., Forthcoming). This reality echoes numerous examples of recent scholarship into post-industrial locales including Middlesbrough and Manchester (see Antonopoulos and Hall, 2016; Kotzé and Antonopoulos, 2019; Salinas et al., 2019), which have all experienced a surge in weight training and IPED consumption following the macro-

³ Unfortunately, I have been unable to verify this claim, although a search on the website Huzzle (2020) located at least thirty-six gyms in the area.

economic restructuring that has similarly afflicted Stoke-on-Trent. This correlation will be unpacked later in this thesis but suffice to say that The Potteries' heritage of heavy labour, coupled with its relatively high proportion of fitness spaces, makes the city a poignant case study within which to trace the links between de-industrialisation, the commodified fitness industry and contemporary subjectivity.

2.2. Chapter summary

This chapter has served to contextualise this project within the post-industrial city of Stoke-on-Trent. Stoke can be seen as emblematic of the myriad post-industrial towns and cities across the UK, governed by a forlorn wistfulness and a nagging discontent with the endless low-paid precarious labour and pervasive sense of loss. The decline of The Potteries' principal industry has decimated the region's sense of surety and ontological stability and as a result Stoke can be characterised as a place of profound nostalgia. However, despite its contemporary malaise, data from interviewees and ethnographic observations point to a myopic pride in the city, whose formerly collectivised working-class communities still harbour a warmth when identifying themselves as *Stokie*, despite the clay lying dormant and the potbanks standing derelict. It is within this post-industrial context that the city's burgeoning health and fitness economy should be viewed, as I have laid the foundations in this chapter for a full understanding of localised hardcore gym use and IPED use and supply in the Potteries.

3. Literature review

Having set the context and parameters of this thesis, it is important to now examine the current literature upon which I will build. As such, this chapter first addresses the significance of the muscled male body and the ascendance of the health and fitness industry, before reviewing the current scholarship on IPED use and supply.

3.1. The contemporary fitness industry and the construction of the male physique

3.1.2. The evolution of the male physique

The male body, alongside the concept of masculinity, has received something of a revival in the academy in the previous three decades (Drummond and Drummond, 2015). However, whilst this canon of literature is distinctly in vogue in the social sciences, masculinity and the male body have always been intimately connected (Christiansen, 2020). General understandings of the contemporary valorisation of the athletic male physique often cite ancient Greek society's artistic depictions of the 'elite adult male' (Lee, 2015: 33), a virile, muscle-bound sportsman represented by the figure of Adonis (Pope et al., 2000), who arguably signifies the foremost male bodily ideal in the public zeitgeist (Osborne, 2011; Haynes, 2015). This is reflected in the global bodybuilding show 'Mr Olympia' (Dutton, 1995), itself a celebration of the aesthetics and art form of bodily perfection that has come to characterise this historical period. Following the Greek reverence of the artistic male form however, Dutton (*ibid.*) notes that the Roman empire largely rejected masculine bodily aesthetics in favour of the functional, strong male physique that is depicted in the images of soldiers and gladiators. This duality of aesthetic beauty and functional utility is central to understanding the origins of male corporeal cultures and the bodily ideals that still prevail today.

Historic representations of the male body highlight the longstanding symbiosis of muscularity and masculinity (Woodward, 2007), a relationship that has been consistently replicated through varying bodily ideals, from da Vinci's Vitruvian Man and Charles Atlas' feats of strength, through to the heavily hypertrophied physiques of Arnold Schwarzenegger and

contemporary masculine figures like Henry Cavill and Zac Efron. Glassner (1988: 114, italics in original) contends that, '[m]uscles are *the* sign of masculinity', and men's physical strength echoes women's ability to give birth as a gender signifier (see also Mills and Giles, 2017; Pope et al., 2000). Orthodox understandings of masculinity tend to revolve around 'toughness in mind and body' (Carrigan et al., 1985: 75) and physical size and strength as a means of evoking the image of men as the 'Sturdy Oak', whose body is both protector and breadwinner (Brannon, 1976; Frosh et al., 2002; Spence, 2012). In this regard, men's bodies have historically been conceived as machines, fine-tuned for productive labour and warfare (Wagner, 2017; Rosenmann et al., 2018) and understood in largely instrumental terms. As a result, though the legacy of ancient Greek male aesthetics lived on through artwork and specific bodily cultures (e.g., bodybuilding), body self-image is largely ignored in the traditional readings of masculinity.

However, the current conception of the ideal male body represents a departure from the rugged, bulky physiques of the past. The contemporary western ideal is epitomised by a V-shaped, mesomorphic physique, with a particular focus on large arms, prominent abdominal muscles, and low body fat (Wagner, 2017; Greenway and Price, 2018). This lean muscular form, evident in the unending stream of Love Island contestants on popular television (Turnock, 2018; Christiansen, 2020), arguably represents a more feminised body, particularly as the contemporary ideal typically promotes little or no body hair as a result of grooming practices like depilation (Mitchell and Lodhia, 2016; Clarke and Braun, 2018). This shift, described as a result of the 'hybridization' (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014) or 'flexibility' (Gee, 2014) of masculinity, is often read within the wider narrative of a 'crisis of masculinity', wherein, following the progress of feminist liberation and altering masculine working practices, the concept of maleness has become highly contested terrain (Hakim, 2018). These very real structural changes, it is argued, have eroded the traditional conceptualisation of the male body as a machine, and have instead lowered its instrumental and productive value (Rosenmann et al., 2018; Smith Maguire, 2008). However, the notion of masculinity in crisis

is a rather reductive reading and, as is evident from the use of such hyperbolic language within historic accounts of gender relations (see for example Hacker, 1957; Goldberg, 1976), is by no means new. As such, masculinity cannot be said to have been in crisis since the 1950s, but is instead just a fluid concept that inevitably shifts alongside the ebbs and flows of culture. The male body, therefore, similarly experiences these shifts in line with prevailing gender ideals.

Simultaneously, the visibility of the male body has increased exponentially to a point where men are experiencing a degree of the scrutiny women have been subjected to for many years (Bordo, 1999; Gill et al., 2005; Barry and Martin, 2016; Christiansen, 2020). As a result, men are increasingly suffering from bodily dissatisfaction whilst attempting to improve their physiques in line with the dominant ideal (De Jesus et al., 2015; Griffiths et al., 2015). Echoing this, Widdows (2018) argues that beauty now exists as a global ethical ideal, whereby a homogenised imperative to be slim, firm, buff and smooth now pervades contemporary subjects regardless of gender, ethnicity, or culture.

Orbach (2009: 134) contends that bodies reflect a ‘specific cultural moment’, and therefore argues that prevailing bodily ideals mirror the political economy within which they are formed (see also Frank, 1991; Maguire, 1993). With this in mind, reflecting the esteem placed upon ‘cool individualism’ within the late capitalist project (Winlow and Hall, 2006), academic interest in the body was revived in the 1980s to reflect what Turner (2002: 12) dubbed the ‘somatic society’, wherein consumer capitalism began to target the body as a site of capital. Analogously, this period, often cited as the beginning of wholesale global neoliberalism, played host to a dramatic shift in male bodily ideals wherein muscularity became increasingly valorised and male bodywork became more widespread as ‘[c]onsumer culture [...] discovered and begun to develop the untapped resources of the male body’ (Bordo, 1999: 18). This period is synonymous with muscular film stars like Sylvester Stallone and Jean-Claude Van Damme, as well as a marked shift in both the popularity and physical size of bodybuilders (see Andreasson and Johansson, 2019; Christiansen, 2020). Further, foregrounding the current

feminised male ideal, the 1980s witnessed an astronomic growth in male grooming products and their attendant marketing campaigns, wherein consumer goods like aftershave and electronic razors capitalised on an increasingly well-maintained and visible male aesthetic to sell to an emerging market of body-conscious men (Patterson and Elliott, 2002; Scheibling and Lafrance, 2019).

Contextualising this within the shift towards consumer capitalism, Featherstone (1991: 177) contends that, ‘within consumer culture, the body is proclaimed as a vehicle for pleasure [...] and the closer the actual body approximates to the idealized images of youth, health, fitness and beauty, the higher its exchange value’. According to this view, the body has increasingly become a site of *consumption* rather than *production*, and a toned physique is now endowed with a symbolic significance beyond its functional capacity (Lasch, 1979; Alexander, 2003; Kotzé and Antonopoulos, 2019). This contemporary role of the ‘worked on’ body is described by Smith Maguire (2008: 3) as becoming ‘fit for consumption’, as she contends that productivity no longer lies in the output of the physical form. Instead, Smith Maguire argues that the body itself has become a site of investment for the late capitalist subject as a means of promoting the best version of oneself for ‘competitive circulation’ (Wernick, 1991: 193). This thread is picked up by Featherstone (1982) as he describes the altering relationship between the inner (health-related) and outer (image-related) body under consumer capitalism. Featherstone contends that consumer-driven bodily commodification relegates the inner body’s importance, and therefore its extrinsic value outweighs its intrinsic health-related worth. Given this project’s focus on potentially harmful IPED use, does Featherstone’s analysis provide the context for growing human enhancement drug consumption, as the *inner* health of the body is neglected in favour of *external* superficial or performative edge? Further, given the historical timing of this transition, to what extent does the enhanced body reflect the underlying values of neoliberal consumer capitalism? This thesis aims to provide a reading of IPED consumption and supply in the context of these macro-economic changes, using the words of those men for whom bodily transformation represents a central pillar in their lives.

Rounding off the existing understanding of the male body in late capitalism, the nexus of masculinity and consumer culture is explored by Rosenmann et al. (2018) within the concept of *consumer masculinity*. Echoing Smith Maguire (2008), the authors contend that production no longer lies at the heart of the masculine subject, and contemporary maleness is instead contingent on gendered consumption and commodity display. Rosenmann et al. (2018) contextualise this account within a breakdown of former collectivising institutions like organised religion and a secure workplace, and suggest that the purchase and subsequent display of the ‘right’ goods and lifestyles has superseded these former bedrocks of masculinity. Contextualising this within Stoke-on-Trent, as was discussed in the previous chapter, the city’s defining institutions and activities have all but disappeared, leaving little for the men under study to hinge their masculine identities upon. As a result, do my participants now premise their masculinity upon consumer goods? And how does this tie into their body modification in the gym?

Consumer masculinity can be traced back to the construction of the ‘metrosexual’ in the 1990s (Simpson, 1994), a simultaneously masculine and feminised figure capable of engaging with beauty and fashion whilst remaining unambiguously heterosexual (Shugart, 2008). Understood in this context, Rosenmann et al. (2018) contend that the feminisation of the male bodily ideal should instead be viewed as a process of heightened consumption, as grooming and beauty products simply represent an increased adherence to the status of commodity symbols rather than aspects of femininity. Given the inherent fluidity and need for constant validation that defines masculinity (Vandello et al., 2008), Rosenmann et al. (2018) argue that gendered male display has been particularly susceptible to the allure of consumer capitalism, and the traditional masculine quest for social status has been co-opted by a host of gender-affirming positional goods. Crucially, consumer masculinity ‘narrows the range of acceptable male bodies’ (Rosenmann et al., 2018: 270) in line with the strict ideals presented in these products’ marketing campaigns. On a deeper level however, as discussed above, the body is constructed as a commodity in itself which defines masculinity in its form rather than its

proWess (Rosenmann and Kaplan, 2014), echoing Featherstone's (1982) analysis of the newfound importance of the *outer* body. Following this, is the chemically enhanced body therefore simply a form of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 2005) that overly conforms to the edicts of consumer masculinity? Or, alternatively, do my participants' hold a more complex relationship with their bodies than this ideologically-driven analysis allows? Indeed, is the concept of consumer masculinity perhaps guilty of presenting late capitalist men as unwitting dupes who have blindly fallen for the lie of consumerism? This will be unpacked as part of this thesis' interrogation of my sample's motivations and corporeal identity.

3.1.3. The health and fitness industry

Just as the first celebrations of the male body originated in ancient Greece, the foremost dedicated fitness sites also appeared around this time (Chaline, 2015). Whilst this tradition was carried forward by the Romans with the adoption of palaestras (combat training arenas), it was not until the sixteenth century that organised physical training, in the form of medical gymnastics, gained popularity (Terrin et al., 2019). As noted by Chaline (2015), these gymnastics movements were premised around nation-building and preparedness for warfare and, far from the contemporary culture of the self, advocated physical enhancement as a collectivising activity.

The mid-nineteenth century saw the first dedicated fitness manuals circulate for Victorian men, which included guides to activities like fencing, callisthenics and using dumbbells (Dutton, 1995). Capitalising on the popularity of these guides, rudimental fitness machines entered the market in the early 1890s (Kershner, 2010), coinciding with the rise of the earliest protagonists of bodybuilding and the popularisation of strength and physique shows across Europe and the USA (Chapman, 2006). Thus, corporeal self-improvement as an individual project was promoted to the masses for the first time (Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 2006). However, illustrating the ever-present connection between the political and the physical, deployment of exercise in Nazi Germany and Fascism in Italy emerged in the mid twentieth-century, which aimed to both assemble a fit army and indoctrinate young men into the political

regime (Sassatelli, 2010). Following the atrocities of World War Two however, such collectivised exercise for civilians largely diminished in the Global North and was instead replaced by an ethic of self-improvement. However, fitness as a leisure pursuit remained a relatively niche pastime, undertaken by serious bodybuilders and athletes up until the late twentieth century, where it experienced a commercial explosion into the mainstream (Millington, 2016; Andreasson and Johansson, 2019).

The contemporary fitness industry in the UK was worth around £5 billion in 2019, with over seven thousand facilities serving approximately ten million customers (Sports Think Tank, 2019). The current landscape is dominated by budget gymnasiums like Pure Gym (Deloitte, 2018) as well as a panoply of high-end fitness clubs through to hardcore bodybuilding and CrossFit gyms. Alongside gymnasiums, the industry spans products like health monitoring devices, diet plans, health supplements, home gym equipment and sports kit.

Notably, the health and fitness ‘boom’ (Millington, 2016) has occurred in tandem with the commodification of the body at the outset of the neoliberal project, and arguably began to resemble its current iteration in the 1990s, as *wellness* became a mainstream concern (Cederström and Spicer, 2015; Andreasson and Johansson, 2019). Unlike the early fitness institutions, the vast wellbeing industry has been rearranged as an individualistic duty to regulate one’s health and fine-tune the body as a productive and competitive unit under the guise of ‘fun’ self-directed leisure. According to Sassatelli (2010), this is characterised by a shift from traditional gyms to ‘health clubs’, which aimed to sell wellbeing and enjoyment by including facilities like spas and massage treatment rooms, alongside a reimagined fitness ‘experience’. As a result, a blurring of gym work and pleasurable consumption has occurred in the increasingly sanitised spaces of health and fitness, where the competitive individual works on the self, whilst simultaneously consuming a host of pleasurable experiences.

Cederström and Spicer (2015) brand the mindset of self-responsibility that accompanies this shift the ‘wellness syndrome’, wherein individuals feel increasingly compelled to work on their physical and mental functioning under the banner of holistic wellbeing. The authors note

the intimate connection between wellness and productivity, exemplified by the ‘corporate athlete’ (Loehr and Schwartz, 2011), for whom a fit body is an extension of, and an accompaniment to, a life of maximised capitalist output. Understood this way, the rise in fitness consumption can be read as an embodied response to the neoliberal injunction to maximise productivity, couched as a well-meaning concern for health and wellbeing. However, whilst it is crucial to situate the mass uptake of fitness against the incumbent socio-political reality, can building the body truly be understood as a mere means of increasing productivity? Indeed, when a body is engorged with the aid of IPEDs to levels where health is in fact worsened, can it be said to make the subject more employable or productive? Just as the notion of consumer masculinity presents as a little one-dimensional, Cederström and Spicer’s thesis lacks exploratory depth, particularly when applied to this project’s IPED-consuming sample. Therefore, whilst beneficial in tracking the growth of the health and fitness industry, I seek to go beyond the authors’ analysis and unpack my sample’s multifaceted relationship to both the gym and IPED use within this thesis.

Further, although Cederström and Spicer’s (2015) analysis is valuable in capturing the experiences of commercial and high-end gym users, it is less helpful in unpacking the ‘hardcore’ fitness space within which this project is situated. Indeed, this thesis’ offline fieldsites market themselves in opposition to the ‘health clubs’ described above, instead positioning themselves as spaces of ‘extreme body culture’ (Andrews et al., 2005), wherein the notions of wellbeing and consumer enjoyment are largely rejected in favour of hard graft and performance. Brighton et al. (2020) contend that such spaces have largely become extinct or, more appropriately, experienced a process of ‘gentrification’ in line with the pervasive commercialisation of the gym sector. Therefore, I did not set out to examine commercial gym use, and instead focus on the hardcore, IPED-using gym population rather than the ‘mainstream’ gym-goers described by Smith Maguire (2008) and Sassatelli (2010). However, to what extent have these hardcore spaces become gentrified and commercialised? And how

do places of seeming authenticity and ‘old school’ status experience the ripples of the mainstream wellness syndrome? These are important questions to address.

3.1.4. The digitisation of the fitness industry

There have been various shifts in the health and fitness industry in light of technological advancement, including the growth of workout apps, wearable fitness-trackers, and self-service gymnasias. However, above all else, this development has manifested most keenly in the rise of SNS and the subsequent digitisation of fitness culture. Social media and the burgeoning market for health and fitness coalesce in the form of ‘fitspiration’, which includes ‘fitness-related images and/or text intended to inspire people to pursue a lifestyle of fitness and health’ (Fatt et al., 2019: 1313). This typically involves users documenting their workouts alongside motivational quotations and training advice (Boepple and Thompson, 2016). Commonly hashtagged #fitspo, this movement was born from a rejection of the hashtag thread ‘thinspiration’ (Ghaznavi and Taylor, 2015) and purportedly advocates for healthy eating, self-care, self-love, and a philosophy of corporeal empowerment (Tiggemann and Zaccardo, 2015).

Whilst a number of authors have explored fitspiration in relation to female users, Fatt et al. (2019) focus on #malefitspo, which constitutes around 30% of all fitspiration content on Instagram (Carrotte et al., 2017). According to Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2018), these posts conform to male beauty ideals, with high levels of musculature and low body fat percentages. Further, Fatt et al. (2019: 1320) contend that increased exposure to #fitspo posts is ‘associated with greater internalisation of the muscular ideal’, whilst Boepple et al. (2016) suggest that fitspiration posts tend to feature self-objectifying images and appearance-related captions as a means of presenting the body as a commodity under the guise of fitness (Marshall et al., 2020).

The above critiques of fitspiration support a wealth of literature concerning the negative effect of SNS on users’ body image. Kim and Chock (2015) contend that, as SNS users can actively

search for the content they desire, they engage in a process of ‘social grooming’, whereby validation is offered and received through liking and commenting on others’ posts. As noted by Fardouly and Vartanian (2016), this is coupled with a discernible shift towards ocular SNS, whereby images constitute the main currency online, and thus the importance placed upon users’ aesthetics is heightened to unprecedented levels (Gupta, 2013). As a result, they selectively portray favourable images of themselves in their posts to create an online space in which edited, well-lit, idealised images dominate (Kleemans et al., 2018; Brown and Tiggemann, 2016). Given this project’s focus on IPED consumption, could the calculated use of filters and favourable lighting constitute an electronically-facilitated form of enhancement? Subsequently, is this process driven by the same underlying motivation demonstrated in IPED users? Beyond a basic acknowledgement of their existence, the use of such techniques has yet to be explored in the academy in relation to contemporary subjectivity. Therefore, this project, and its emphasis on enhancement, is well-positioned to shed light upon this seemingly innocuous practice.

Fitspiration content, alongside other forms of fitness posts on SNS, are examples of digital ‘prosumption’ (Toffler, 1980; Yar, 2012; Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016), a concept that I will lean heavily upon within this thesis. Prosumption, a portmanteau of production and consumption, describes the simultaneous process of cultivating, spreading, and consuming digital content which is emblematic of what O’Reilly (2009) terms Web 2.0, the second phase of the internet’s development which increasingly relies upon user-generated content and active online participation (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Thomas and Sheth, 2011). Instead of simply consuming content, as was the case with traditional media and the first phase of the internet, digital prosumers actively shape their environment (Jenkins et al., 2013) and therefore practices like fitspiration posting are essentially collaborative and, to an extent, organic. This begs the question: to what extent is IPED use impacted by these digital presumptive practices? And therefore, if the digital SNS environment is co-created by its users, what effect might the popularity of fitspiration content have on one’s proclivity to train and consume IPEDs?

3.2. Refitting the Self: Biomedical enhancement and image and performance enhancing drugs

3.2.1. Lifestyle drugs, biomedical enhancement, and the medicalisation of society

The increased significance played upon the body as well as the rapid growth of the health and fitness industry have been accompanied by a rise in the use of image and performance enhancing drugs. IPEDs can be placed within the remit of lifestyle drugs, defined as substances ‘consumed through personal choice rather than illness, and often used for non-health matters or matters lying at the margins of health and wellbeing’ (Hall, 2019: 1). This expansive remit of one’s ‘appearance and ability’ (McVeigh et al., 2012: 186) includes any substances intended to enhance: the structure and function of muscle, weight loss, cosmetic appearance of skin and hair, sexual behaviour and function, cognitive function, and mood and social behaviours (Evans-Brown et al., 2012). Examples of drugs under this umbrella include substances beyond traditional understandings of IPEDs, for example cognitive enhancers and sexual stimulants. Evans-Brown et al. (2012: 20) define enhancement in this context as ‘something that improves an attribute or ability beyond what is necessary to sustain or restore good health’, and therefore lifestyle drugs extend or enhance what is possible naturally.

More broadly, lifestyle drugs fall under the auspices of biomedical enhancement, a concept that has been a mainstay in the field of medical ethics for some time. Biomedical enhancement encapsulates any ‘drugs, surgery and other medical interventions aimed at improving mind, body or performance’ (Conrad and Potter, 2004: 185), and therefore covers any non-essential human action to enhance the self, including cosmetic surgery and even genetic engineering (Mehlman, 2009). The term *enhancement* represents something of a provocative concept in scholarly debate however, wherein contention fundamentally surrounds the status of enhancements as either *advancing* the natural capabilities of the human condition or crossing an ethical line to *override* nature.

Arguing the former, liberal position, Buchanan (2011) contends that the crux of human evolution is our ability to advance and improve, and thus biomedical enhancement merely

represents a technologically-driven form of the evolutionary process. Buchanan opposes a notion of ‘the natural’ as a form of stasis and repudiates the view that biomedical enhancement somehow corrupts or violates nature. Following this, he challenges conceptions of ‘enhancement’ as being in opposition to myriad other activities that humans do to better their functioning or appearance, including the use of computer technology and even arithmetic. Opposing arguments in this debate cite a hubris underlying the compulsion to enhance ourselves beyond what is natural. Notably, Sandel (2007: 5), critiques the morality of ‘manipulat[ing] our own nature’, as he rejects the notion that individual bodily sovereignty should supersede natural processes. However, whilst these are important philosophical positions, both fail to interrogate *why* the compulsion to enhance the self exists at a fundamental subjective level beyond Buchanan’s (2011) reductive Darwinist assertion. What is the deficit within the subject that biomedical enhancement aims to address? And how does the wider political economy interact with such a drive to fuel the desire to enhance the self? These are pivotal questions that shape my analysis.

Further debate surrounds the blurred lines between enhancement, healthcare, and cosmetics. Conrad and Potter (2004) acknowledge that the definition of health is socially situated, as medicine is inherently tied to what a society constructs as a malady. They refer to these contingent perceptions of substances as the ‘faces of biomedical enhancement’, which account for: normalisation (bringing the body in line with societal norms); repair (restoring the body to its full potential); and performance edge (maximising the function of the body) (Conrad and Potter, 2004: 200). These classifications inevitably overlap depending on the specific context of use, and one particularly interesting overlap here is the nexus of normalisation and repair. This debate is expertly navigated by Alexander Edmonds in relation to the ethics of aesthetic medicine, which he frames as the ‘fusing of health and beauty [whereby] beautification becomes a means of healing, and conversely, ugliness a form of disease’ (Edmonds, 2013: 233). In light of this, should IPED use be perceived as a medicinal process whereby a lack or perceived ugliness is treated as if it were an illness or condition? If so, how do the societal

pressures that adjudicate what constitutes an aesthetic physique present as a disease in themselves? And why do users resort to biomedical enhancement strategies to chase these standards?

Underpinning this debate, Hall and Antonopoulos (2016) allude to the process of medicalisation that is increasingly prevalent in the Global North. Medicalisation, which describes the treatment of traditionally non-medical conditions with medicinal ‘cures’ (Gilbert et al., 2000), has been particularly noticeable in the markets to treat sexual dysfunction and cosmetic issues, within which patients are perceived as ‘health consumers’ (Nettleton, 2013: 45). The ubiquity of contemporary medicalisation is noted by Evans-Brown et al. (2012) as, beyond the above issues of sexual performance and beauty, inevitabilities like hair loss, ageing and height have become ‘treatable’ (Christiansen, 2020). Further, scholars have noted that the perception of health under late capitalism has somewhat shifted from merely the absence of illness or disease to subjects feeling they have the right to be ‘better than well’ (McVeigh et al., 2012: 186) in line with a ‘widespread consumerist ethic of immediate gratification to fulfil every perceived need and desire’ (Kraska et al., 2010: 181). This is contextualised by Smith Maguire (2008), as she describes a move from a neutral state of health to a ‘process of risk management’ (Smith Maguire, 2008: 47) where one must be aware of the possible failings of the body even before they occur. As a result, the neutral state is replaced with the constant status of being ‘at-risk’ (*ibid.*) and therefore the remit of health is dramatically expanded. According to Cederström and Spicer (2015), this perpetual need to assess one’s health is reflected in the uptake of wearable health monitoring technologies like the Fitbit and apps like MyFitnessPal, which transform the subject into their own health attendant with the ability to scrutinise their vital signs, nutritional intake, and daily exercise levels (Millington, 2016). Following this, the onus of diagnosis and treatment of medical ailments has shifted to the consumer, as the upkeep of the body’s health has become a ‘crucial personal responsibility’ (Orbach, 2009: 136). Within this medicalised framework, wellbeing is ultimately bound up in a rhetoric of self-improvement, by-passing the suggestion that health is affected by any

structural realities outside of the individual's control (Smith Maguire, 2008) and instead placing sole responsibility on the consumer.

3.2.2. Historical context and the contemporary landscape of human enhancement drugs

The consumption of ergogenic aids can be traced back as far as the Ancient Greeks, Roman Gladiators and Medieval Knights (Holt et al., 2009) where various animal and plant-based substances were consumed to bolster appearance and athletic ability (Pope et al., 2014). In the UK, Evans-Brown et al. (2012) track the commercialisation of human enhancement drugs back to the 1880s, where an unregulated and highly normalised market emerged for treating excess weight and erectile dysfunction, as well as increasing wellbeing and quality of life. These products were advertised in newspapers, magazines and even in the British Medical Journal, and were available over the counter in most chemists. Mirroring this illegitimate market, mainstream products including milk powders like Plasmon and the beef-based drink Bovril also gained commercial ascendance in the late nineteenth century (Steinitz, 2014), marketed on their merit as health tonics. Around the same time, Cadbury's premised their advertisements for their Cocoa Essence product on its purportedly high levels of protein (*ibid.*), resulting in the weightlifting community using the powder as an early training aid in the 1930s (Heffernan, 2019). These products constituted the extent of the market until the early 1950s, where specific protein powders and vitamin supplements became available (Applegate and Grivetti, 1997).

It should be noted here that licit sports supplements, which after all can be characterised as ergogenic aids in that they enhance performance or wellbeing, share this history with illicit IPEDs as the same fundamental motive of enhancement underpins both. Coinciding with the production of these early dedicated sports supplements, the use of anabolic steroids emerged in various professional strength sports communities in the mid-1950s (Andreasson and Johansson, 2019). Early use was accepted unquestionably as 'part and parcel of the general seeking of sporting advantages' (Coomber, 1999: 104), and was not initially subject to the

contemporary narratives around doping (Waddington, 2005). However, following the 1956 Olympic games, where the Soviet weightlifting team won seven medals due to their administration of AAS, the USA's physician Dr John Ziegler created the synthetic steroid Dianabol⁴ (Kremenik et al., 2006), widely considered the first IPED compound to be synthetically produced (Toohey and Veal, 2000).

Following this breakthrough, the IPED market has steadily grown and diversified, particularly in the UK (Begley et al., 2017; Mullen et al., 2020). Moving away from AAS' beginnings in professional sport, Sagoe et al. (2014: 393) report a 3.3% global lifetime prevalence of consumption, whilst, in the UK, the Crime Survey for England and Wales shows 0.2% of the population aged 16 to 59 reported AAS use in 2017/18 (Home Office, 2018). Further, McVeigh and Begley (2017) demonstrate that between 1995 and 2015 in Merseyside and Cheshire anabolic steroid consumption increased by 342%, with users accounting for 54.9% of local needle exchange services. Similarly, testament to the diversity of contemporary IPED use, Hope et al. (2013) found that 32% of their IPED-using sample used human growth hormone, whilst Graham et al. (2007) reported analogous findings in a Welsh context. Begley et al. (2017: 17) found that ephedrine, an illicit fat burner, was used by 21% of their sample of IPED users. As these figures demonstrate, though the consumption of ergogenic aids is certainly not a contemporary phenomenon, demand for a wide range of enhancement substances has increased substantially compared with the initial AAS use in the 1950s. It is against this context that I will examine the question of *why* IPED consumption has grown so exponentially, both at a micro, meso, and macro level. Indeed, is the use of ergogenic aids linked to the above discussions of biomedical enhancement and health as an individual responsibility? And how does the increased diversity of substances mirror the processes of globalisation and neoliberalism? These questions will be unpacked later in this thesis.

⁴ It should be noted that the objectivity of this account is questioned by Dimeo (2007), who provides anecdotal evidence that Ziegler was in fact pioneering synthetic testosterone and AAS prior to the Soviet success.

3.2.3. Gym-related image and performance enhancing drugs

Having explored the historic context behind IPED use, it is crucial to offer a working, contextualised definition of the substances under study in this project. As such, this thesis will employ a *gym-based* understanding of image and performance enhancing drugs. Underwood's (2017: 78) description of IPEDs as 'substances that enhance muscle growth and reduce body fat' is the most suitable, as it provides a basic remit within which to focus. By refining the typology of the IPEDs under study, I follow the Human Enhancement Drugs Network's (HEDN) (2019) framework, wherein a focus on the categories of 'Muscle Drugs' and 'Weight-loss drugs' will be undertaken. HEDN (*ibid.*) identify the most common muscle drugs as AAS and human growth hormone (hGH) and highlight the polypharmacy undertaken by most muscle drug users with, amongst other types of enhancers, weight-loss drugs like clenbuterol and human chorionic gonadotropin (HCG) consumed alongside the muscle-drugs themselves.

The most prevalent group of muscle-building IPEDs are anabolic androgenic steroids. AAS are a class of drugs that include the male hormone testosterone, or a synthetic derivative of it, that are commonly employed to bolster muscular performance and strength, improve athletic ability, and achieve a lean muscular appearance (McVeigh and Begley, 2017; Sagoe et al. 2014; Christiansen, 2020). Clinically, AAS are used to treat male reproductive dysfunction, some forms of anaemia, and breast cancer (Sagoe et al., 2014: 383; Macmillan, 2019), although they are predominantly associated with performance enhancement in public discourse (Morris, 2018). AAS are the most commonly used IPEDs with both injecting and non-injecting populations (Begley et al., 2017), with methandrostenolone (brand name Dianabol) representing the most common oral steroid, and testosterone enanthate (Test E) being the most prevalent injectable. Steroids are commonly used as part of a 'cycle', whereby a course is taken in a set period (typically eight to twelve weeks) before the user is 'off-cycle', where they assume a period of abstinence (Evans-Brown et al, 2012: 132) and post-cycle therapy (PCT). PCT describes taking drugs and supplements to mitigate or reverse negative side effects of AAS and restore natural hormone levels in the body (Christiansen et al., 2017;

Christiansen, 2020). Examples of substances employed as part of PCT include Clomiphene citrate (used to re-stimulate the production of testosterone) and Tamoxifen (which inhibits the production of excess oestrogen) (Miklos et al., 2018).

The adverse effects of steroid consumption have been well-documented and can be split into serious and superficial harms. Firstly, anabolic steroid use leads to a number of minor aesthetic ailments, including: acne; itchy skin; hair loss; loss of sex drive; gynecomastia (the development of breast tissue in men); and fluid retention (Hanley Santos and Coomber, 2017; Mulrooney et al., 2019). More severely, long-term use can lead to kidney and liver damage as well as heart conditions (Grogan et al., 2006; Angell et al., 2012; Mullen et al., 2019). Alongside this, public health research has highlighted the dangers of HIV and other blood borne viruses (ACMD, 2010) as well as psychological side effects like ‘roid rage’, addiction and anxiety (Evans-Brown et al., 2012; Christiansen, 2020).

Before examining the current scholarship around IPED consumption however, it should be noted that the majority of this research falls foul of a number of methodological weaknesses. Firstly, the main body of available data is drawn from self-reported questionnaires. As this is mediated through the participant, any frailty of memory or wilful withholding of the truth will inevitably compromise the data. As a result, some researchers have attempted to circumnavigate this issue by drawing on data from needle exchanges (see Iversen et al., 2013; McVeigh and Begley, 2017) to provide a more empirically robust picture. However, as this excludes the swathes of users who do not engage in these services, these data are not necessarily accurate (Walker, 2015; Brennan et al., 2017). Nevertheless, due to IPEDs’ relatively ‘newsy’ status (Wacquant, 2008), the substances have enjoyed a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years (McVeigh et al., 2017), and consequently a rich pool of data has emerged. Therefore, whilst the above methodological flaws do inevitably impact the available studies, the recent flurry of academic interest has shed considerable light upon the topic, affording this project a firm empirical base.

3.2.4. Demographics of IPED use

Although Zahnnow et al. (2018) acknowledge that drawing a neat typology of any IPED user is virtually impossible, it remains prudent to note the demographics of IPED use and the norms and behaviours in the consuming population. Firstly, across the literature, a consensus can be met that IPED consumption is a predominantly male activity (Brennen et al., 2017; Svedsater et al., 2021), as Begley et al. (2017) found that 94% of their National IPED Survey participants were male. Keane (2005) notes, however, that IPED use has historically been reported in line with a highly gendered narrative and therefore the number of female users may be underreported (see also Kotzé et al., 2020; Thiblin and Petersson, 2005). Further, Begley et al. (2017) and Pope et al. (2014) suggest that the median age of the IPED-using population is thirty-years-old, although the use of less common IPEDs like hGH appear to be more common in those over thirty-five (Cohen et al., 2007; Hope et al., 2013; Chandler and McVeigh, 2013). This group is reflected in Christiansen et al.'s (2017: 296) IPED typology within the 'Expert' and 'Athlete' types (see also Christiansen, 2020). Conversely, younger users commonly appear to fall under the authors' 'Well-being' and 'YOLO' heuristics (Zahnnow et al., 2018). Finally, UK studies have predominantly looked at 'white British' participants (Begley et al., 2017). Whether this is truly representative is uncertain, yet no studies exist that specifically examine race in this context. In light of this, Begley et al. (2017) conclude that the average UK user is 'likely to be a white British male, in their 30s; [who uses] a mixture of injectable and oral anabolic steroids and typically inject their IPEDs intramuscularly' (Begley et al. 2017: 14).

3.2.5. Motivations behind IPED use

Brennan et al. (2017: 1493) cite the following broad motivations for IPED consumption; appearance enhancement; athletic performance; the appearance of health; and body image disturbance. Firstly, appearance enhancement presents as the most common motive behind IPED use, as Begley et al. (2017: 10) found that over half of their participants cited 'aesthetic reasons' as the purpose for their consumption. This motivation is understood in relation to gendered bodily ideals, wherein users are better characterised as 'aesthetes' than athletes

(Underwood, 2017: 84). Concern with appearance in this context is also related to sexual attractiveness (Bolding et al., 2002) and attempts to replicate masculine bodily ideals (Dunne et al., 2006). Further, Kimergård (2015) challenges the assumption that AAS users only perceive the short-term aesthetic effects of their IPED use. Instead, he suggests that consumption is partly associated with ‘maintain[ing] appearance when getting older’ (Kimergård, 2015: 289). In light of this, is the use of IPEDs as an anti-ageing strategy related to the increasing medicalisation of society? Further, does this aesthetic focus somewhat dispel any notion of users forming a subculture or deviant group, given their adherence to widespread bodily ideals?

Second, the existing literature suggests that sportspeople constitute a considerable proportion of the IPED-using population (Zahnow et al., 2018), and therefore consumption is commonly motivated by a desire to compete and achieve athletic success. This is reflected in Sagoe et al.’s (2014) finding that involvement in at least one sport increases the likelihood of AAS use by 91%. Within the bodybuilding community, Grogan et al. (2006) identify competitors’ acceptance that their rivals all use IPEDs, leaving them resigned to use as the sole means of sporting success. Further, IPEDs can be used to bolster occupational performance for those who work in professions where muscularity and fitness are a form of capital (Evans-Brown et al., 2012). Examples of such roles include personal trainers, manual workers, and security staff (Monaghan, 2003; DEA, 2004).

The third motivation noted by Brennan et al. (2017) is the appearance and experience of health. This links to a desire to look and feel fit, and nods to a more nuanced account of motivation, whereby users’ perceived health and subjective wellbeing affects their usage. This is echoed in Mulrooney et al.’s (2019) contention that pleasure constitutes ‘an essential part of a coherent and reasoned response to steroid consumption’ (Mulrooney et al., 2019: 3). According to the authors, users may be motivated by the increased libido, confidence and wellbeing resulting from IPED consumption, alongside the superficial and athletic benefits. Further, Greenway and Price (2018) note that pleasure is experienced in the recognition of the constructive efforts

of users' muscular growth. This is described in Monaghan's (2002: 700) study as a 'self-achieved buzz', as, unlike conventional recreational drugs, the user is required to train and adhere to a strict lifestyle to unlock gratification. According to Monaghan (2001: 448), this viscerality is manifested most potently in the 'steroid pump', which describes an accentuated muscle burn following an enhanced lift (Fussell, 1991; Andreasson, 2014; Christiansen, 2020). Such phenomenological pleasure can be situated within the 'erotics of the gym' (Mansfield and McGinn, 1993), wherein trainers derive satisfaction from strenuous, exhausting workouts (Monaghan, 2002). In light of this, can gym-related IPEDs be conceptualised as psychoactive recreational drugs? Further, what is the role of pleasure and suffering in the gym and IPED consumption? Given the relatively undeveloped nature of research into this area, such questions constitute important areas of analysis in this thesis.

Lastly, Brennan et al. (2017) note that excessive gym attendance and the associated use of IPEDs has been heavily linked to feelings of insecurity, appearance dissatisfaction and low self-confidence. Klein (1993) suggests that, within the bodybuilding community, IPED use functions to disguise an 'insecurity at least as large as the posturing' (Klein, 1993: 3), a view that is supported in Fussell's (1991) autobiography, in which his hardcore training and subsequent IPED consumption is admonished as merely a means of escaping his crippling self-doubts. Whilst this body of literature, which arguably precipitated the focus upon 'muscle dysmorphia' (Pope et al., 1997), is a mainstay in the academy, such characterisations are challenged by Christiansen et al. (2017: 296) for their willingness to oversimplify users as 'neurotic males dealing with their insecurities by building overly muscular physiques'. Despite this, Klein's view is important in highlighting the seemingly joyless, deficit-fuelled compulsion that lies behind IPED use. Whilst muscle dysmorphia views the unhealthy drive for larger musculature in purely psychological terms, the school of thought pushes researchers to acknowledge the need to view IPED consumption as a result of the interlinking pressures including the psychological, cultural, economic, and social factors underpinning use. Therefore, at a subjective level, what are the motivating processes at play here? And what role

does lack, insecurity and dissatisfaction play in users' lives? If removed from the nomenclature of psychological diagnosis, does this literature highlight a deeper drive behind IPED use than simply wishing for improved image or performance? Further, Greenway and Price (2018) note that some of their sample only demonstrated behaviours consistent with muscle dysmorphia following AAS use, thus implying that IPEDs are ineffective in ameliorating this condition and may actually stimulate poor self-image. As a result, questions arise as to what role IPEDs' play in stimulating dissatisfaction and, more generally, whether 'enhancement' actually works to worsen, rather than assuage, a sense of lack in users.

Alongside Brennan et al.'s (2017) categories of motivations, the intersections between the growth of social media platforms, the digitisation of the fitness industry and body dissatisfaction discussed above also ought to be considered. Troublingly, this area represents something of a gap in the current literature which, although sparingly referred to in general discussion of IPED use (see Van Hout and Kean, 2015; Richardson et al., 2019), lacks any dedicated scholarly engagement. However, Kotzé et al. (2020) note that the ubiquity of idealised bodies on Instagram stimulated their sole female participant's IPED consumption, alongside the panoply of filters and editing options that constitute digital enhancement strategies. In light of this, what precisely is the relationship between SNS, the burgeoning culture of fitspiration and IPED consumption? Is there a causative link between the ocular, body-centred online platforms and a desire to use enhancement drugs? Given the dearth of literature around this, coupled with my focus on the impact of technological advancement upon both consumers and the market, these are pivotal enquiries which I will address in this work.

Importantly, the above motivations are not standalone and therefore interact with one another in practice. This intersection is present in various pathway models (see Greenway and Price, 2018; Coquet, et al., 2018; Bates et al., 2018), which go some way in highlighting the multifaceted nature of user motivation. However, whilst the role of surface level motivations like appearance enhancement and improved athletic performance are rightly identified, the

existing literature lacks any real engagement with the deeper, more fundamental drivers beneath IPED consumption. Although accounts of body dissatisfaction and muscle dysmorphia hint at the role of lack in guiding the subject towards enhancement, further interrogation of use at the level of human subjectivity is required.

3.3. Supply-side: The illicit ergogenic aids marketplace

3.3.1. Social supply and minimally commercial supply

Empirical evidence indicates that the bulk of IPED transactions occur between peers operating within sporting or fitness-related contexts (van de Ven and Mulrooney, 2017; Sagoe et al., 2014). Referencing the rise in studies focusing on internet-based IPED trade, Salinas et al. (2019: 50) contend that ‘scholars should resist the temptation to concentrate the empirical lens solely on the new and novel’, as the bulk of available data highlights the significance of social supply networks as the principal means of IPED trade (Coomber et al., 2014; Begley et al., 2017). Social supply, according to Moyle et al. (2013: 554) refers to ‘an act of supply or facilitation of supply for little or no gain to friends and acquaintances’, and therefore social suppliers facilitate their immediate network’s drug taking with no great commercial imperative (Potter, 2009). Accordingly, literature around IPED supply tends to ascribe a pivotal role to one’s social network or community (Bates et al., 2018; Greenway and Price, 2018).

Coomber et al. (2014) note that their participants overwhelmingly sourced IPEDs from ‘connected friends’, whilst Fincoeur et al. (2015: 241) suggest that suppliers are subject to a process of normalisation due to their IPED-using peers, and thus do not view themselves as ‘real dealers’. In this sense, they conceptualise the suppliers in their sample as ‘cultural products’ who engage in a process of ‘cultural reciprocity’ in consumer-supplier interactions, whereby financial gain is less important than other benefits (e.g., respect, reputation, or acknowledgement of expertise) within an ‘enduring relationship’ between the two parties (Fincoeur et al., 2015: 242). In practice, Antonopoulos and Hall (2016: 707) note that social supply tends to occur in ‘discreet places’ in gyms, such as toilets and changing rooms, and

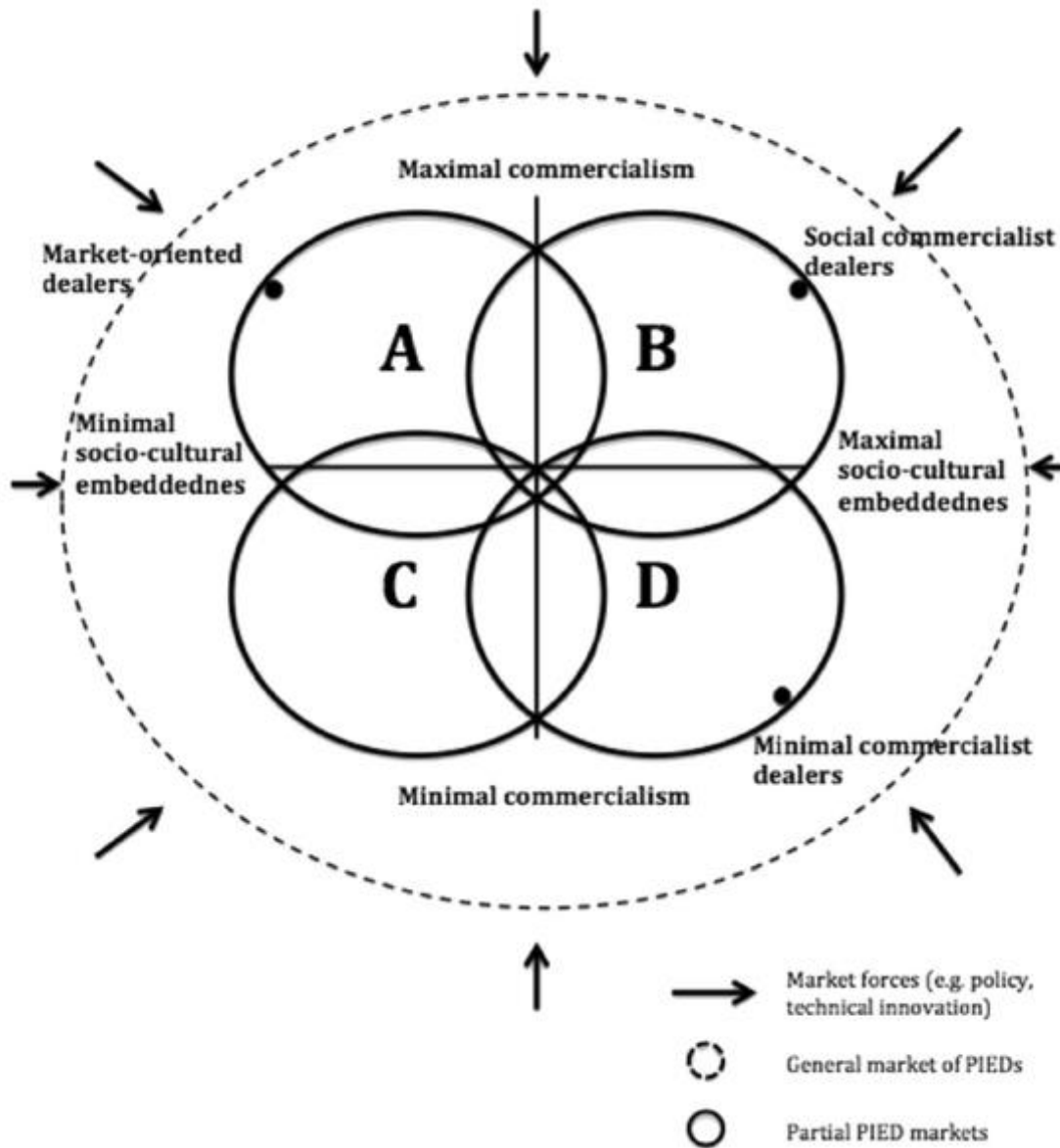
sellers rarely approach prospective customers, relying instead on their personal network of trusted users. Further, Coomber et al. (2014) found that IPED users commonly participate in ‘group purchasing’, whereby one ‘designated buyer’ (Moyle and Coomber, 2015) purchases in bulk before distributing the products within their group in order to minimise risk.

However, Coomber and Moyle (2014) critique the concept of social supply on account of its dismissal of the fundamentally economic nature of drug transactions. Addressing this, they coined the term ‘minimally commercial suppliers’ to acknowledge the inevitable economic exchange taking place. However, whilst the concept of minimally commercial suppliers is helpful in this regard, its origins as a means of theorising heroin and crack users is problematic when applied to the somewhat unique demographic of IPED users (Monaghan, 2002). However, as Fincoeur et al. (2015) note, due to the embedded nature of supply evident across a number of studies, the IPED market certainly seems to have a less commercial focus in some settings, and therefore Coomber and Moyle’s (2014) term can perhaps be applied if divorced from these problematic roots.

3.3.2. Shifting patterns in IPED supply and the role of the internet

Whilst the notion of social and minimally commercial supply is undoubtedly helpful, a raft of literature points to a discernible professionalisation of the IPED market, however. In an attempt to capture this, Fincoeur et al. (2015) present a pictorial overview of the entire IPED market (see Figure 2.1.), drawing upon the axes of commercialisation and cultural embeddedness (the degree to which one can be said to be involved in the fitness community). Within this, they describe the general market (represented by the dotted line) as the market as a whole (including private, semi-open and open markets), whereas the solid lines represent partial IPED markets which are open to only those within certain groups. Within this framework, ‘minimally commercial dealers’ (Coomber and Moyle, 2014) appear at the bottom right of the diagram, whereas the top left features ‘market-oriented dealers’ (Fincoeur et al., 2015: 244), who hold no cultural connections and are instead wholly motivated by commercial gain.

Figure 2.1. An overview of IPED market sellers (Fincoeur et al., 2015: 243).



Fincoeur et al. (2015) contend that the IPED market has become increasingly commercialised and decreasingly socio-culturally embedded. This is supported by Salinas et al. (2019), who found that their sample’s consumption ‘transcended IPEDs to encompass a much broader cocktail of substances’ (Salinas et al., 2019: 49) including recreational drugs like cannabis and cocaine. As such, this polydrug use is facilitated by increasingly ‘market-oriented dealers’ (Fincoeur et al., 2015: 244), with fewer ties to the fitness community. Again, this brings the

supposed subcultural nature of IPED supply into question and suggests that IPEDs are increasingly perceived as tantamount to recreational psychoactive drugs. However, the question of *why* this shift has occurred is conspicuously absent from this research and, again, illustrates the need for this project to interrogate the mainstreaming of use and subsequent supply. Further, what is the role of technology in broadening the marketplace and facilitating this commercial shift?

Addressing this latter question, Hall and Antonopoulos note that, for the increasing number of recreational IPED users not embedded in hardcore fitness groups, access to the offline IPED market is restricted and therefore the market ‘has in some respects moved online’ (Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016: 64). Such customers, termed ‘occasional users’ (Antonopoulos and Hall, 2016: 702), are the principal target for online sellers, who can offer a ‘virtual relationship’ to those who lack bodily or cultural capital. As a result, the authors describe the online IPED market as ‘decentralized, highly flexible with no hierarchies, and open to anyone’ (Antonopoulos and Hall, 2016: 708). This lends weight to Fincoeur et al.’s (2015) assertion that supply is becoming increasingly commercialised as, given that the internet provides opportunities for ‘virtually anyone to become a steroid distributor’ (Antonopoulos and Hall, 2016: 704), the notion of subculture or community membership carries less importance online and therefore IPEDs have become available to a far wider demographic. However, is this the sole reason for this mainstreaming of IPED use? Does the heightened availability simply reflect increased demand or, as Fincoeur et al. (2015) seem to suggest, is the broadening marketplace in fact generative in that it encourages mainstream consumption?

Antonopoulos and Hall (2016) make clear that the internet and digitised technology is not just present in ‘online’ supply, but in fact affects the marketplace at most levels. Supporting this, Moyle et al. (2019) highlight the use of encrypted messaging services like Whatsapp and Wikr in illicit drug supply, wherein offline dealers commonly conduct business over the platforms given their discreet and effective nature. Similarly, Choo and Smith (2008) note how money

transfer services like Paypal and Western Union are exploited as a means of facilitating substantial drug transactions.

3.3.3. The online marketplace

3.3.4. Online pharmacies

Given the intrinsic role that networked technologies play in facilitating the increasingly commercialised IPED market, it is important to examine the current literature around exclusively online supply. First, Antonopoulos and Hall identify the presence of ‘online pharmacies’ (OPs). OPs can be divided into those that are either *legitimate* or *rogue* (Monteigh et al., 2016), however the distinction between the two is decidedly blurred. Mackey and Nayyer (2016) define rogue OPs as ‘pharmacies that either fail to meet national or international pharmacy regulations or have not been subjected to requisite regulatory review, licensure and/or certification’ (Mackey and Nayyer, 2016: 116). Cordaro et al. (2011) highlight the poly-pharmaceutical nature of OPs as PCT drugs like AIs, anti-acne products and sexual stimulants are available alongside the IPEDs themselves. Further, van de Ven and Koenraadt (2017) contend that the majority of online sellers operate quality websites, building trust with customers through ‘responsible vending’ practices (Van Hout and Bigham, 2014). Examples of this behaviour include providing information about responsible AAS use as well as clear channels of communication. However, Brennan et al (2013) found that, whilst medical information was offered by OPs, the websites selected studies with a ‘pro-drug bias’ (Brennan et al., 2013: 159). van de Ven and Koenraadt (2017: 52) also note that online suppliers adopt ‘behaviours and characteristics’ of the gym community in order to understand customers’ motivations and build trust with them. This is described as online suppliers adopting ‘social supply business models’ (*ibid.*), whereby online spaces are essentially an extension of the offline market, relying on trust and recommendation from their customers.

3.3.5. Social media supply

Scholarly research into social media drug supply is relatively scant (Bakken and Demant, 2019). However, an abundance of news outlets have reported cases of illicit recreational drug sales on SNS (Hamill, 2018; White, 2019; ITV, 2019), signifying the recent growth of this practice. Examining the social media market for cannabis, cocaine and prescription medications, Demant et al. (2019) found that sellers advertised on open platforms like Facebook, before negotiating deals via encrypted apps like Wikr (*ibid.*). Further, the researchers identified that the Facebook groups through which sellers advertised their products tended to be closed to the public and therefore sellers were, on the whole, overt about their enterprise. In relation to IPEDs, Mackey and Nayyar (2016) highlight the use of social media marketing on SNS like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter by rogue OPs as a means of mirroring consumer patterns. Further, Shukman (2020) notes that, on Instagram, sellers employ hashtags including #anabolic and #performanceenhancement to increase the searchability of their marketing posts, therefore allowing consumers to simply search for their desired product in much the same way as conventional online retail websites. This ease of access reflects Hall and Antonopoulos' (2016) contention that barriers of entry into the IPED market have been lowered, as users simply require an account and some basic ICT skills in order to acquire a host of potent ergogenic aids. Despite these studies however, the relative lack of literature around the SNS IPED market is striking. Furthermore, though invaluable in highlighting the illicit market for IPEDs on social media, the current scholarship fails to capture users' relationship with SNS in terms of cultivating and sharing their physiques. Indeed, should an analysis of social media IPED markets not be inextricably tied to patterns of aesthetic display and consumption on these platforms? Again, I hope to offer some insight through this project's dual focus on both SNS-mediated subjectivities as well as the market itself.

3.3.6. Production

Relatively little scholarship has focussed on the actual production of IPEDs, although from the limited empirical available work two main forms of manufacture emerge: pharmaceutical

production and underground laboratories (UGLs). The first of these, licenced pharmaceutical companies, or laboratories, have received the least academic attention. According to Fink et al. (2019), legitimate labs can be divided into two types; pharmaceutical grade products imported from countries with lax or no laws around IPED sale; and local pharmaceutical products reaching the black market via illegal routes. For the former, Antonopoulos and Hall (2016) note that legal pharmacies tend to be based in countries like Bulgaria, Greece, Poland, and India. Alternatively, Fink et al. (2019) describe local pharmaceutical products that are illegally removed from the legitimate pharmaceutical market and sold to high end IPED users. Due to the risk involved for health professionals, the authors note that these sources often charge ‘several times the retail price’ for their products (Fink et al., 2019: 7). However, these substances are guaranteed to be correctly dosed and contain only the ingredients advertised on the label. Therefore, users can reduce the risks of consumption and use lower doses due to the increased potency of the drugs. Finally, IPED users can also purchase products from individuals that hold prescriptions for substances like hGH as a result of HIV, cancer, or chronic kidney disease (Fink et al., 2019).

Alongside legitimately produced IPEDs, a raft of scholarship has identified the presence of unlicensed, or underground laboratories. UGLs are illegal production sites where AAS and other IPEDs are manufactured using raw ingredients. These can range from small-scale localised operations through to major international producers (Fink et al., 2019). According to recent assessment, ‘most users are likely buying UGL, whether they know it or not’ (Turnock, 2020: 2) as some products that claim to be pharmaceutical grade are in fact counterfeited. Antonopoulos and Hall (2016) found that UGLs operate globally, with illicit manufacturing sites in countries like Thailand, China, and Cyprus, as well as in the UK. However, Turnock (2020) contends that ‘intermediate’ countries that used to contain most UGLs are no longer required. Instead, barriers to the production process have been lowered (Llewellyn and Tober, 2010) as raw powders from countries like China can be purchased at

low cost online and instructions for manufacture can be found on myriad surface web IPED forums (Brennan et al., 2018).

Contrary to common depictions of recreational drugs markets being regulated by violence and gang warfare (Treadwell et al., 2018; Reuter, 2009), Turnock (2020) found that supposedly ‘rival’ UGLs demonstrated an amicable and even pro-social relationship with one another. Due to issues of access, few studies have been able to portray currently operational UGLs, however a number of large-scale prosecutions shed light on the size of some underground labs. Whilst some media attention has fallen on small-scale operations, mainly by local news outlets (see Evans, 2019), due to the relative lack of regulatory enforcement only major cases of UGL activity tend to be reported nationally. The most notable of these has been the prosecution of five key players in the running of Alpha Pharma, a transnational UGL based in India and the UK, in 2019 (OCCRP, 2019; CPS, 2019). Alpha Pharma, which was dubbed the ‘world’s biggest ever illegal anabolic steroid distribution network’ (NCA, 2019), operated as both a licensed laboratory in India as well as a number of UGLs in the UK. When raided by the NCA in 2015, these localised UGLs contained enough packaging and labelling for approximately £43 million of AAS (*ibid.*). This major prosecution emphasises the wide-ranging levels of supply and production present within the market and the transnational nature of both large and small-scale UGL operations.

3.4. Chapter summary

In this chapter I have provided a review of the existing literature that underpins this thesis, first emphasising the significance of the male body throughout history and its altered role under late capitalism, before tying this into the burgeoning health and fitness industry. As has been demonstrated, the use and supply of IPEDs is intimately bound up in this context as well as being heavily linked to sporting and lifestyle factors. However, I have identified a paucity of critical and theoretical engagement with the motivation for IPED supply, with little explanatory depth present in the current literature beyond accounts of aesthetic reasons, body image dissatisfaction and instrumental consumption. Similarly, although I have presented a

growing body of work addressing IPED supply, much of this scholarship demonstrates limited engagement with the macro-economic context of the market and the role of digitisation and globalisation. As such, though a great deal of commendable work has been conducted in this area, within this thesis I am well-placed to flesh out the current blind spots and provide a more theoretically-nuanced and contextually grounded account of IPED use and supply.

4. Methodology

In this chapter I will provide an account of the methodological decisions that I made as part of this project, positioning my research in relation to the surrounding literature and describing and justifying my approach to data collection. In essence, I will describe my ‘connective’ ethnographic methodology before addressing the challenges of ethical propriety, access, and positionality in the field. This will then lead into a discussion of my ontological and epistemological commitments, where I will provide a comprehensive account of ultra-realism, transcendental materialism, and deviant leisure.

4.1. The current landscape

Whilst I do not intend to rehearse the tired debates around qualitative and quantitative methods (see Jacques, 2014), my fieldwork ought to be situated in relation to the current, largely quantitative, IPED scholarship. Importantly, I do not wish to deride the utility of quantitative studies in this field as, without the statistical basis that has substantiated the rise in IPED use in the UK (see Mullen et al., 2020), more thoroughgoing analyses like my own would lack a statistical justification. Indeed, alongside extensive media coverage and anecdotal evidence, projects such as Begley et al.’s (2017) National IPED survey have somewhat cemented the topic of enhancement drugs in the public zeitgeist. Therefore, undeniably, quantitative studies have distinct value in capturing the scale of IPED consumption and supply that simply cannot be replicated by small-scale qualitative work like my own (Robson and McCartan, 2016).

However, much of the current literature around IPEDs is statistically-led and public health-focussed, privileging large-scale numerical data over qualitative insight. Hall and Winlow (2015) note that such research is typical of large swathes of criminological enquiry, having gained hegemony at the expense of truly critical exploration marrying analyses of the political economy and the experiences of those under study. This issue is unpacked by Young as he lambasts the ‘abstract empiricism’ (Young, 2011: 11) that runs throughout the criminological canon. Young argues that ‘the confetti of Greek letters’ (*ibid.*) that are so valorised by

quantitative scholars create a detachment from the reality of crime. As a result, the large-scale statistical analysis that dominates the IPED field may appear to be enlightening, but ultimately tells us little about the *stories* of users and suppliers in situ.

Disregarding the current scholarship entirely as abstract empiricism would be somewhat unfair, however. Instead, Coquet et al. (2018) advocate for a mixed method approach in order to marry the vital context of the gym and wider health and fitness ethic to illicit drug use. This is reflected in Coomber et al.'s (2014) case study of the IPED trade in a city in South West England, which should be commended for its utilisation of semi-structured interviewing and forensic drugs testing, in conjunction with local drug and alcohol services. The superlative example of this mixed methods approach, however, can be found in Hall and Antonopoulos' (2016) exploration of illicit medicines supply and consumption. Hall and Antonopoulos flesh out quantitative data with both online and offline ethnographic study. In light of this, I followed Hall and Antonopoulos' (2016) lead in employing a qualitative mixed methods ethnographic approach to amplify the experiences of my participants in their 'natural setting' (Brewer, 2000). Thus, by following Robert Park's famed counsel to 'go get the seats of your pants dirty in real research' (Park, quoted in Treadwell, 2020), I occupied the spaces in which IPED users gather, and experienced the sensations of exertion, pleasure and soreness that cannot be portrayed through numbers and graphs (Tewksbury, 2009). Short of using IPEDs myself, I set out to simultaneously play the role of 'true participant' and 'researcher participant' (Gans, 1967), wherein I trained in two serious gyms in Stoke-on-Trent, visited supplement shops and logged my bodily progression on a research Instagram account, known to some as a researcher and others as simply another gym user. Further, my focus on the urban locale of Stoke-on-Trent demanded an immersive fieldwork approach centred in the community and the physical spaces of post-industrialism that are inextricable from my participants' lived reality. Similarly, an exploration of the localised market for IPEDs within The Potteries, with its numerous social and logistical layers, would not be feasible for the quantitative researcher without the tools of ethnography and the relationships cultivated in the

field. Finally, the thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) and rambling interview data which I gained have provided this thesis with a much-needed means of IPED theory generation that could not have been achieved from surveys or questionnaires alone.

4.2. Towards a criminological connective ethnography

The use of ethnography represents a mainstay in the discipline of criminology, with a multitude of classical texts benefitting from the inherently messy, hands-on approach (Liebling, 2001). Beyond seminal texts like Thrasher's *'The Gang'* (1927), Becker's *'Outsiders'* (1963) and Cohen's *'Folk Devils and Moral Panics'* (1972) however, criminological ethnography is now enjoying something of a revival, having transcended the 'Dark Ages' of the late 1990s (Ferrell and Hamm, 1998). Despite such esteem however, reaching a consensus on the definition of ethnography remains a challenge (Gobo, 2008). Perhaps the most comprehensive definition is offered by Hammersley and Atkinson, whose synopsis includes:

'... studying people and their actions in their everyday environments and contexts; gathering data from a range of sources, but principally through observation and informal conversations; collecting data in a relatively unstructured and emergent way; focusing on a small number of cases to permit in-depth exploration; and generating verbal descriptions, explanations and theories from analysis.' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019: 3)

This catch-all definition illustrates the broad ranging nature of ethnography and its utility for projects that seek to look beyond the official statistics of a criminological phenomenon (Hobbs and Wright, 2006). Importantly, ethnographic research is the foundation upon which the school of ultra-realism was created due to its deep-reaching, contextualised interrogation of the world (see Hall et al., 2013). Indeed, without the valuable ethnographic insights he gained from his immersion in Newcastle's traceur community, Raymen's (2019) discerning analysis

of parkour would not have been possible. Similarly, had Treadwell et al. (2013) not been out amongst the commodity-hungry looters during the 2011 English riots, their penetrating evaluation could not have come to fruition. This project, therefore, continues a proud tradition of ethnographic ultra-realist study in order to go beneath and beyond the current IPED literature.

Opposing Collison's contention that 'enough has been said about ethnographic research' (Collinson, 1995: 83), the approach is constantly evolving and has spawned a number of contemporary mutations. Whilst retaining aspects of the classic criminological ethnographies mentioned above, the discipline has ushered in iterations like auto-ethnography, visual ethnography, and digital ethnography to reflect a diversifying research landscape, and the need to access our increasingly ocular and digitised society (Treadwell, 2020; Gibbs and Hall, 2021). Importantly, my project represents a further advancement in the form of *connective ethnography*. Put simply, connective ethnography describes an ethnographic study that is conducted both online and offline (Leander and McKim, 2003). I therefore simultaneously utilised elements of classical offline observation, alongside the relatively contemporary practice of digital ethnography (Gibbs and Hall, 2021). Before exploring the minutiae of this approach however, it is worth acknowledging that the dual use of digital and traditional ethnography is not unprecedented within the discipline (for example see Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016; Antonopoulos and Hall, 2016; Hall et al., 2017). As a result, I am aware that my identification with the term 'connective' ethnography may appear to fall foul of Abidin and de Seta's (2020) critique of 'buzzword ethnography', wherein different aspects of the method are simply repackaged in the name of appearing unique and novel. However, as will be explored below, connective ethnography's concerns with the interconnections between online and offline spaces make the approach a little more nuanced, and fundamentally tie into this thesis' argument that digitisation cannot simply be disregarded as a separate or discreet realm in contemporary society. Therefore, whilst I am conscious not to reinvent the

criminological wheel, I believe this methodological approach has the potential to freshen up the discipline's engagement with the ubiquity of online spaces that now surround us.

Despite being coined by Hine (2000), this approach has its roots in education studies, where Leander and McKim (2003) first mobilised dual online/offline observation of adolescent teens in a learning environment. Connective ethnography, as originally conceived, disputes the notion that space is 'static' (Leander and McKim, 2003: 217) and instead views the internet as part of one's journey through the world. Importantly, practices can still be said to be 'online' or 'offline', however Leander and McKim accept that these realms are 'blended' and inevitably impact on one another. Prince (2019) highlights the employment of the terms 'influence' and 'flow' in connective ethnography to describe the continuum of complete separation of the online and offline through to a state of 'oneness', whereby no divide exists between the two. Here, *influence* describes the impact that one realm has on another, for example offline behaviours being replicated online. *Flow*, on the other hand, describes 'the continuous back and forth movement between realms, making the boundaries between one realm and another progressively indistinguishable' (Prince, 2019: 47). More simply, the concept of flow acts as the crux of connective ethnography, acknowledging that we drift between online and offline spaces, thus advocating that researchers must do the same. Crucially, in distinction to preceding internet-based research, even from its inception connective ethnography has acknowledged that 'experiences in cyberspace are often not seen as exceptional by participants' (Leander and McKim, 2003: 218). Therefore, scholars ought to integrate online or digital ethnography due to it being an accepted and mundane reality for most of the Global North (Hine, 2013). Whilst advances in ethnographic methodologies have been plentiful in recent years, connective ethnography has not been employed in a criminological setting prior to this project, despite the very real need for scholars to go beyond traditional conceptions of internet-mediated crimes. Therefore, I hope that this thesis will play some part in bringing criminology in line with other disciplines' progressive approaches to combining online and offline research.

The guiding principle behind my multi-sited approach was the need to disregard the academy's tendency to view online and offline realms as discreet and dichotomous entities (Burrell, 2009), which characterised early internet-based research in the social sciences (see Taylor, 1999; Sunden, 2002). Instead, I contend that, as digital platforms are so ubiquitous and integral to our everyday lived experience, they should not be conceived as different or separate from the 'offline' world. Therefore, traditional online criminological studies examining computer integrity crime, computer-assisted crime, and computer content crime (Wall, 2007), whilst enlightening in their analysis of issues like hacking and online scamming, are guilty of conceptualising the internet as a standalone area of study and not, as I argue, an undergirding generative force in global post-modernity.

Linguistically, the spectre of this virtual/real divide can be found in the multiple online ethnographic methods that fall within the label of connective ethnography (Abidin and de Seta, 2020). Indeed, Hine's (2000) coinage of the term connective ethnography follows her former convictions to '*virtual* ethnography'. The term 'virtual' here is indelibly connected to the historic moment of its inception, when the 'virtual' world was viewed in opposition to the offline experience and therefore, even in its most recent iteration, a hangover from this dichotomous view remains. Following Abidin and de Seta (2020), I have instead chosen to employ the term *digital* ethnography to describe the online elements of my research as this less constrictive label simply refers to any ethnographic study undertaken on platforms using binary code (Horst and Miller, 2012). However, other scholars have critiqued this term for its all-encompassing nature, and instead used more specified descriptors including 'social media ethnography' (Postill and Pink, 2012), 'trace ethnography' (Geiger and Ribes, 2011) and 'networked anthropology' (Collins and Durington, 2014). Whilst my interactions and observations with IPED suppliers on Facebook and Instagram certainly constituted social media ethnography, my forays onto bodybuilding forums and online supplement retailer's pages could not be labelled as such. Neither could my active solicitation of data from online suppliers be considered trace ethnography as, again, this would have constrained the

information I was able to elicit. Instead, by labelling the online element of my connective ethnography as *digital* I have been able to trace the paths of IPED consumption and supply across a multitude of online platforms and mobilise a versatile, unencumbered data collection strategy.

4.3. The offline element

4.3.1. Gym ethnography

My fieldwork first involved an immersive offline ethnography in two gymnasiums and a number of supplement shops, as well as in-depth semi-structured interviews with members of the local gym community. Following Wacquant (2015), the offline ethnographic approach I undertook can best be described as ‘enactive ethnography’, whereby I engaged in gym work alongside my sample, subjecting my body to the pummelling effects of regular heavy weight training. This approach addresses criminology’s historical failure to incorporate the affective, bodily experience into its research practices (Wakeman, 2014) through bringing my body ‘back onto the stage as a carnal and suffering being’ (Wacquant, 2009: 511). By putting myself through the pain entailed by serious gym work I was better able to understand the sacrifices of an ascetic gym routine, and therefore I was also more equipped to interrogate the powerful driving forces compelling the men under study to train and use IPEDs.

In practice, this approach saw me training at two gyms across Stoke-on-Trent four to five times a week over a ten-month period, adopting a strict diet and using a personal trainer, as well as working out with several participants. Whilst simply observing and interviewing my sample may have gone some way to illustrating the bodily effort required to carve a desirable physique, my experience of the viscosity of aching calves, pumped up pectorals and cramping biceps afforded me unparalleled insight into the world of the gym. Unlike Woodward (2008), whose observation of a boxing gym in northern England was entirely passive, I wanted to feel my body grow during the fieldwork process, not only as a means of building rapport with my participants, but also as a site of self-reflexivity, upon which the conceptual analysis of this project could be applied. To this end, I adopted a perpetual ‘sports

casual' wardrobe, echoing the workout fashions of my participants, and even buying some branded t-shirts and training shorts from both gyms under study. I also visited all of Stoke's dedicated sports supplement shops, buying a range of products in line with the advice of the owners⁵, and used these products religiously during this period in order to play the role of the biomedically enhanced subject. Data produced from this element of the project initially took the form of shorthand ethnographic fieldnotes captured on my phone in convenient moments between sets or interactions, before they were fleshed out into fluid prose.

4.3.2. Offline fieldsites

4.3.3. Muscle Sanctuary

This project, by virtue of its focus upon IPED use and supply, holds little interest in the multitude of commercial budget gyms that have materialised within Stoke. Instead, my focus was upon the city's hardcore gymnasias which attracted The Potteries' most serious and committed bodybuilders, powerlifters, and strongmen. Given my status as an outsider to the local hardcore fitness community, my initial search for an appropriate fitness space was conducted entirely through Google, where a string of keywords led me to the homepage of *Muscle Sanctuary* – the principal site of my offline ethnography, where I spent around ten months training upwards of five days a week.

Muscle Sanctuary is housed within a former retail unit on a non-descript sideroad not far from the city's 'cultural' quarter. The specific area, known locally as the Docklands, like much of Hanley, was historically a heavy industrial space given its proximity to the Caudon canal - the artery for several large potbanks as they shipped their produce towards the docks of Liverpool. However, air pollution reached dangerous levels in the area in the 1970s, resulting in its near total abandonment before a half-hearted attempt at regeneration in the early 2000s. Now, Muscle Sanctuary occupies a large unit on an ageing industrial park located right by the canal. Flanked by two of the only ceramics manufacturers left clinging onto life in Stoke, the

⁵ This resulted in me securing two valuable interviews with supplement shop owners.

gym would appear relatively unassuming on the trading park were it not for its imposing tarpaulin sign, which spans its grubby brick exterior. Looking out menacingly onto the newly-developed houses across the road, its imposing letters are flanked by the gym's logo – a chain-adorned set of muscular arms proudly showcasing the mantra '*Strength and Honour*'. This slogan, which appears to have been reappropriated from Ridley Scott's epic *Gladiator*, speaks to Muscle Sanctuary's marketing as a place of authenticity and technical repute, where strength training is the moral duty of its members and form and precision are paramount.

During my time at Muscle Sanctuary, it featured six rooms, each devoted to the cultivation of a different muscle group. Entering the bustling gym through its notoriously stiff front door, a modest set of stairs leads to the front desk, its shelves piled high with branded merchandise and sports supplements. Immediately a tsunami of noise rebounds from each white painted wall, hurtling towards you – '*I'M A MOTHERFUCKING BEAST*'⁶ – each ear-shattering syllable compounded by the pained shouts of heavy lifting and the unmistakable thud of weighty dumbbells hitting the springy black matt floor. This flooring, produced by the high-end gym wholesaler Hammer Strength, emits a rubbery smell that consumes the entire gym and, mixed with the sweat, chalk and potent stimulants used by most customers, gives the place an almost indescribable odour. Rounding the corner, past the socialising area where I conducted a number of my interviews, the infamous legs room becomes visible past the under-used cardio machines. This space features a wealth of specialist contraptions with detachable plates that aim to batter member's legs into submission. Supervised by an arresting image of bodybuilder Tom Platz' engorged quadriceps, this room plays host to a large proportion of the bellowing cries of exertion in the gym, as men succumb to the ravages of weighty iron and muscular exhaustion. A short passage then leads to Muscle Sanctuary's modest changing rooms. With its oak-coloured lockers and threadbare greying carpet, this space would be reminiscent of a school or leisure centre locker room, were it not for the well-built men

⁶ This is the rather full-throttle chorus of former AC/DC guitarist Rob Bailey's song 'BEAST'. This tune was a regular fixture at Muscle Sanctuary and could be heard at around 6pm each night.

flamboyantly posing and posturing in the full body mirror by the shower cubicles. Given its position tucked away from the gym's matted floors, the smell of rubber subsides somewhat in here, replaced instead by a concoction of stale sweat, heavy-duty cleaning chemicals and musky deodorant. When changing before a session, this compact room is chillingly cold, as if Harry, the owner, has deliberately kept the tiny windows ajar to beckon the icy Potteries air onto members' bare skin. However, this is immediately justified as bodybuilder after bodybuilder limps into the room, having subjected their exhausted bodies to a non-stop pummelling of iron to the point where a halo of steam emanates from their bulbous heads as they bask in the red-hot pump brought on by their heavy session.

Back out into the legs room and through a stooped door, a low-ceilinged room emerges that is dedicated entirely to fashioning a bulging set of arms. Widely considered the most rewarding and pump-inducing workout area, this relatively modest room is often packed with groups of sweat-covered lads intent on blowing their arms up before a Saturday night out in the local bars. Slightly further in, the strongman area is visible with its atlas stones, yokes, and logs. Here, the unmistakable roar of the gym's resident strongmen can be felt, even from the boxing and PT area immediately above. Travelling back out through the arm worshippers' area, the main room meets the eye in all its metallic glory, with heavy duty machines towards the back, squat racks neatly lined up against one wall, and benches positioned overlooking the large mirrors on the other. This substantially sized room which, during busy times, becomes a writhing mass of vest-wearing, grunting toilers, is the heartbeat of the gym. The racing rock and dance music that beats out in the smaller spaces is amplified five-fold in here, providing a fitting soundtrack to the remarkable feats of strength happening all around. Its movements feel almost systematic, with users darting purposely between machines like cogs in the highly efficient corporeal exothermic system. They stop only to spot for friends or to banter with the main faces in the gym. A reinforced shelf holds most of the dumbbells, however the heavier of these (which range from 50kg through to 100kg) are stored on the matted floor. The air is thick with groans, snorts, and audible exertion, only broken up by the occasional gauffering

groups of men bantering between sets. Well-polished mirrors stare back at straining triceps, shuddering pectorals and weary traps, as members gaze upon their efforts, mesmerised by the ceiling-high reflections that make the gym appear almost interminable.

On a typical visit I would run into a dozen or so regulars. Perhaps the most frequent face I encountered was resident PT Andy, with whom I learned the basic compound lifts and was taught the foundations of form and technique. Casual trainers Adam, Joe, Pete, and Will would come in like clockwork after work, shortly followed by Scott, who routinely made the rounds joking gregariously with the burly old school trainers in the main room. Weekday mornings saw the bodybuilders pile in, taking advantage of the casual trainers' constrictive work schedules to fiercely labour without an audience of ogling onlookers. These stern-faced trainers included Ben, a respected IFBB Pro and Jake, a twenty-five-year-old aspiring bodybuilder and jewellery shop security guard. The only woman I spoke to during the course of this project also falls within this category. Tina, a well-respected nutritionist, and commonwealth powerlifter split her time between Muscle Sanctuary and Predator, taking immense joy in outcompeting her male equivalents lift for lift. Another regular face was Paul, a well-qualified rehabilitation coach who prowled the gym's labyrinthine interior with a look of perpetual judgement, evaluating the shoddy technique of many of the gym's egotistic lifters.

Alongside these faces, who were the backdrop to my time training in Muscle Sanctuary, a steady flow of more casual trainers passed through the gym, flocking in after work on a Monday or Tuesday on the promise of a week of self-improvement, only to remain absent until the following week's renewed resolve. Similarly, weekends can be described as riotous compared with the ascetic hard work of the serious mid-week trainers, as members enjoy a catch up with their friends and exercise their jaws as much as their biceps.

Ultimately, Muscle Sanctuary was described by my participants as a hardcore, specialist gym, as the wealth and quality of the highly specified training equipment attracted many men away from the identikit commercial gyms in the city. A ubiquitous rejection of 'generic' chains was palpable in my interviews, and the attraction of Muscle Sanctuary's status as an independent

fitness space was often cited as a factor in their decision to sign up. Muscle Sanctuary's other significant pull factor is its association with Danny, a former World's Strongest Man and eminent local celebrity. Just under the gym's unmistakable banner, Harry has emblazoned the words '*HOME OF THE WORLD'S STRONGEST MAN*'. Though I only met Danny twice during my fieldwork due to his hectic television and commercial schedule, his spectre looms large over the gym, with most participants possessing a personal anecdote about the unfathomable feats of strength they witnessed during his heyday. Clearly, Harry is aware of the seduction of Danny's image, as well as the professional connections that accompany the mountainous strongman, and Muscle Sanctuary regularly hosts seminars with high-end bodybuilders and strength athletes, giving the place a status as a *destination* as well as just a local gym. Tina acknowledged that '*people travel from miles around to go to Muscle Sanctuary*', as a simple search of the gym on YouTube illustrates. These '*day passers*' (Adam), who typically visit on a weekend, spending five pounds for one session, are a crucial asset to Harry's business and serve to give the gym the feel of a tourist hub at times.

4.3.4. Predator Gym

Having trained at Muscle Sanctuary for around seven months, I made the decision to widen my offline fieldsite to include Predator Gym early in 2020. I first came across this gym, which is situated just off the main road of one of the city's smaller towns, when arranging to meet bodybuilder and personal trainer Dom. Having contacted him on Instagram, he agreed to speak to me whilst he covered Predator's front desk on a drizzly January afternoon. Once parked in the nearby dreary retail park, I trudged down the litter-strewn high street past a forlorn Sure Start centre and shabby carpet shop. Scanning the street, I could make out the glossy frontage of Dom's place of work nestled just past the peeling white paint of a pub. Predator is a relatively new player in Stoke-on-Trent's fitness market, having opened its doors in 2019 in this rather unstylish part of the city. Feeling the inevitable jangle of nerves and clamminess, I crossed the road, catching a glimpse of my tracksuit bottoms and sports jacket in the gym's sparkling windows. Pleased at the ease with which the main door swung open (having been

unsuccessfully barging through Muscle Sanctuary's doors for around seven months by then), I strolled in to be greeted by Dom, who ushered me to sit down on one of the plush chairs next to the front desk.

Commercial R&B is pumped around the spacious, mirror-lined interior of Predator, accompanied by the whir of treadmills and cross-trainers. Barking masculine shouts are interspersed with female voices in here as groups of women squat, lift and jog amongst the male members. Unlike Muscle Sanctuary's intricate layout, Predator is one open-plan space stretching in a U-shape around the front desk. To the left, a substantial cardio zone overlooks the grubby street outside. Behind this, the subtly-patterned carpet gives way to a state-of-the-art matted free weights area, which attracts eager groups of Gymshark-wearing young men, determined to outlift one another, and capturing each dramatized lift with their state-of-the-art iPhones. Though the 100kg dumbbells sitting proudly in Muscle Sanctuary are unavailable in Predator, the weight selection is sufficient for the gym to attract a number of bodybuilders and powerlifters, alongside a wider array of casual fitness consumers, ranging from middle-aged women hoping to tone up, to virile groups of young men working on their deadlifts and bench press. Circling back around the front desk, the metallic squat racks come into view alongside a crimson hanging punching bag and strip of vibrant AstroTurf, where Dom can frequently be found bellowing at wide-eyed personal trainees as they perform weighted lunges and crab walks at his command. Just off this, a cool faux-granite passage leads off to the minimalist changing rooms, where users often take advantage of the '*anabolic lighting*' (Ed) for their Instagram selfies, engulfed by a potent mixture of Lynx deodorant and mid-range aftershave.

As this description illustrates, whilst Predator also markets itself as a hardcore, bodybuilder-friendly gym, it lacks the grit and ferocity of Muscle Sanctuary. With its up-beat chart music, sparkling machines and smooth lighting, Predator is far more akin to a health club or leisure centre. With that said, the gym's independent status again attracted those who held commercial gyms in contempt. Predator was home to both Dom and Jack. Dom, with whom I chatted at

the gym's front desk, is a six-foot-three ultra-heavyweight bodybuilder who is well-known in Stoke's fitness scene. Coach to a number of other interviewees, his encyclopaedic knowledge of IPED compounds was vital in bolstering my cultural capital and awareness of the various nomenclature I needed to truly press participants on their substance use. Similarly, Dom's understudy Ed, a former natural bodybuilder who started his first cycle of IPEDs around a week before I met him, worked and trained at Predator. Dom and Ed introduced me to Lee, the owner of an independent supplement shop and personal training gym on the same dilapidated street. Lee, a former rave MC turned entrepreneur, provided insight not only into the IPED industry but also its licit counterpart.

4.3.5. Semi-structured interviews

Alongside enactive ethnography in Muscle Sanctuary and Predator Gym, I conducted twenty-one face-to-face interviews with local men (and one woman) who attended them or were employed in Stoke-on-Trent's fitness industry. Those who worked in the local fitness economy ranged from personal trainers and online coaches, through to supplement shop owners and fitness expo organisers. The interviews lasted between thirty minutes and two hours and took place in a variety of locations, including gyms, local coffee shops, and participants' homes. They were semi-structured in nature and were recorded using a Dictaphone. Following data collection, I transcribed the interviews verbatim before thematically analysing them alongside the fieldnotes of both the online and offline elements of the study.

Following Northumbria University's curtailment of all face-to-face research on 20th March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was unable to conduct any offline interviews after this date. As a result, interviews that would originally have been conducted in person were carried out over the phone or via video calling software (n=5). Finally, I conducted follow up interviews with five participants in November 2020 in order to gain insight into their experience of the various nationwide COVID-19 lockdowns.

4.4. The online element

4.4.1. Digital ethnography

Alongside the offline element, I undertook digital ethnography across various online platforms including Instagram, Facebook, and numerous IPED-related websites. I first focussed on the social media site Instagram (see section 4.4.3.), as this SNS appeared to be the most fruitful following some basic preliminary keyword searches across various platforms. Despite Pineau et al.'s (2016) emphasis on the importance of using the correct keywords when searching, this initial multi-platform sweep was sufficient to illustrate the wealth of data available on this site. Following this, I set up my research Instagram account in May 2019. However, during an interview in January 2020 with IPED harm reduction specialist Rob, he urged me to turn my attention towards Facebook. Combined with the closure of gyms and the subsequent need for my research to move entirely online, I made the decision to create my Facebook research account in April 2020 (see section 4.4.4.).

Unlike Demant et al. (2019), I used my genuine name and image on both my Facebook and Instagram profiles and both also identified my intent and institutional affiliation (see Figure 3.1.). The choice to not use a 'pseudonym profile' (*ibid.*) was two-fold. Firstly, given this project's dual use of the SNS accounts for both participant sampling and digital ethnography, it was important that the profile presented my authentic self. Secondly, throughout the research process I frequently posted gym progression updates as well as posing technical questions about the research topic (see Figure 3.2.). As a result, I needed to remain transparent so as not to deceive my sample, particularly given that a great number of them went on to interact with me face-to-face. However, in order to elicit rich data during interactions with online IPED suppliers, I did employ an element of covert ethnography, despite my authentic profile representation. This involved posing as a prospective customer in order to receive valuable data like price lists, as well as enquire about the seller's operations.

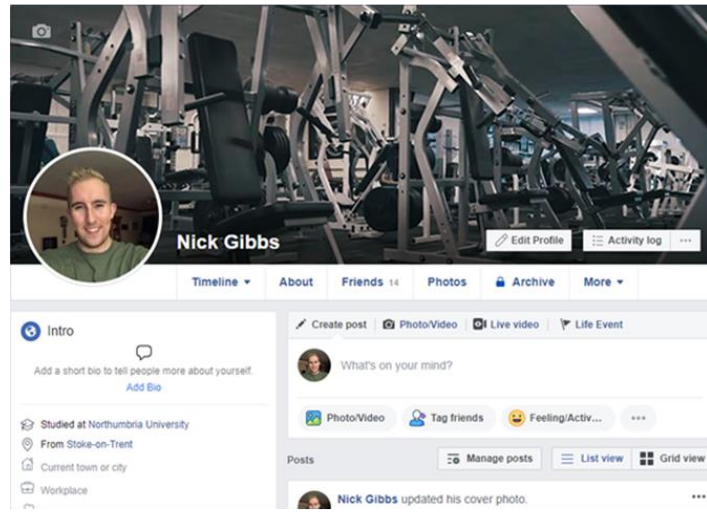
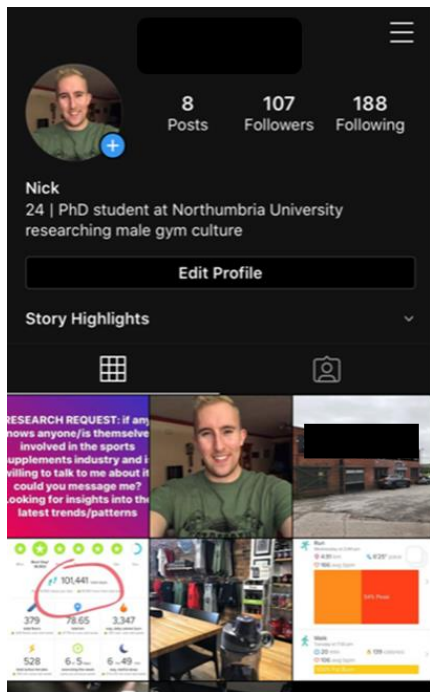


Figure 3.1. Researcher social media profiles used during fieldwork.

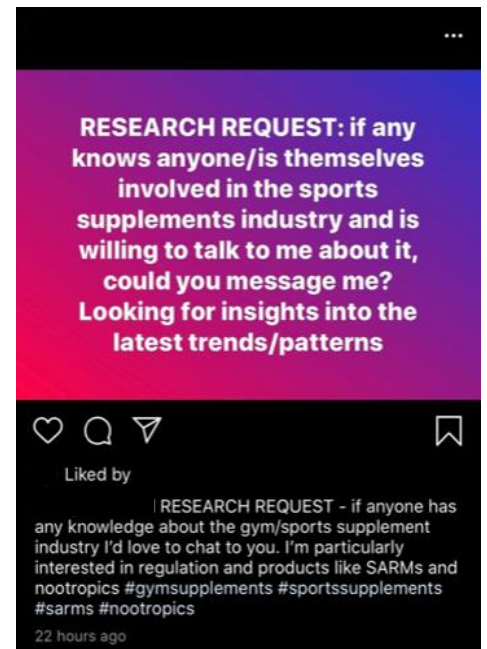


Figure 3.2. Research questions posed on the research Instagram story. 27/03/20, 20/12/19 and 14/01/20.

Initial digital ethnographic enquiry involved ‘lurking’ (Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016; Gibbs and Hall, 2021), whereby I passively observed users’ posts, stories, and interactions without actively shaping the field. This formed the online element of the project for approximately two months on each platform. This period not only allowed me to immerse myself wholeheartedly in the online space and its specific modes of interaction, but also ensured that a number of my online sample followed my account back. Instagram, unlike Facebook is an asymmetric platform, meaning that if ‘user A follows B, B need not follow A back’ (Hu et al. 2014: 596) and, problematically, any messages sent from an account which a user does not follow may not reach them. Therefore, to successfully contact my participants, I was initially reliant upon a number of users following me back. Similarly, on Facebook, this period of lurking was focussed on gaining access to IPED-specific groups and actors, before active solicitation of data began. Alongside Instagram and Facebook, I also used the surface web to observe forums, IPED-selling websites, and other related online sites (e.g., IPED review sites and UGL equipment manufacturers). Data was generated using screenshots of relevant activity. In total, I amassed one hundred and sixty pages of screenshots over the duration of the project.

In contrast to the lurking phase, the active phase of data collection first entailed populating my researcher accounts on both platforms to appear as genuine as possible to prospective participants. This included producing fitness-related content and liking other users’ posts, replicating the common practices and norms of the sites under study. Having established genuine-looking accounts on Instagram and Facebook, the latter part of the active phase involved conducting online interviews with both customers and sellers. Given the asynchronous nature of online messaging services, these interviews lasted between thirty minutes and three days. However, as the interviews were not subject to the vagueness that can surround post-hoc transcription (Lapadat and Lindsay, 1999), participants’ voices were unmediated and perhaps more representative than the offline semi-structured interviews. Reflecting the multi-sited nature of this project, these interviews frequently switched between

Instagram or Facebook Messenger to encrypted mediums like Wikr and Whatsapp. This again illustrates the beneficial fluidity of connective ethnography, as I was able to flexibly adopt numerous platforms in order to ‘follow’ the data, rather than being limited to a singular SNS or physical location. As I was ultimately unable to arrange a face-to-face interview with an IPED supplier during my fieldwork, data from these interactions proved vital to paint a picture of the online IPED market alongside the screenshots taken during the lurking phase.

4.4.2. Online fieldsites

As I stated above, the principal platforms upon which this project’s online data collection took place were the SNS Instagram and Facebook. Both owned by digital tycoon Mark Zuckerberg, these are amongst the most used social networking platforms globally (Alhabash and Ma, 2017) with one billion and 2.7 billion monthly users respectively (Clement, 2020a; Clement, 2020b). Importantly, far from being liminal or transitory spaces that I simply travelled through, both platforms can be firmly conceptualised as fieldsites in their own right (see Dalsgaard, 2016). Therefore, Instagram’s infinitely scrollable interface (Kim and Kim, 2019), though accessed through my mobile phone, was just as tangible as Muscle Sanctuary’s cacophonous main room, and Facebook’s private groups and messaging service facilitated conversations were just as real as my interviews with Dom and Ed in Predator.

4.4.3. Instagram

Instagram is designed exclusively for sharing images and videos (Tiggemann and Zaccardo, 2015), which are often accompanied by captions featuring hashtags that aim to increase a post’s visibility and interactivity (Giannoulakis and Tsapatsoulis, 2016; Marshall et al., 2020). Therefore, an ‘image first, text second’ rule is imposed (Lee et al., 2015), whereby prosumers can utilise a three-in-one package of taking, editing, and posting their content within the confines of the platform. As part of the editing process, Instagram offers a variety of ‘filters’ which allow users to alter the colours and resolutions of images before posting, resulting in a high percentage of posts being doctored to present their creators in an aesthetically favourable

light (Ridgway and Clayton, 2016; Sheldon and Bryant, 2016). Lee et al. (2015: 552) note that this creates a ‘strong visually-oriented culture’, where text is ultimately subordinate to the aesthetic quality of the poster’s visual content. Users ‘follow’ other accounts, whose content is then shown in their ‘stream’ in chronological order (Hu et al., 2014). They can then ‘like’ and ‘comment’ below photos to signal their affirmation, and track ‘likes’ on their own posts via notifications (Santarossa et al., 2016). In 2016, Instagram introduced ‘stories’, which allow users to share ‘24-hour ephemeral photo and video slideshows’ (Constine, 2016). These act to document users’ daily activities that do not warrant a post in and of themselves. Further, users have been able to send one another direct messages on the platform since 2013, meaning that Instagram also acts as a more conventional online space to privately chat. This effectively gives the SNS a front and backstage (Goffman, 1959), where users can post their preened and perfected images as a ‘presentational front’, whilst conversing with contacts away from public view.

Posts can be geotagged to certain locations (displayed above the image) using the ‘Photo map’ feature (Lee et al., 2015) and therefore content can be assigned to certain locations as a means of increasing visibility and signalling membership to various groups or cultures. Pertinently, this afforded me a means of observing the physical world through the digital traces shared by users. Thus, Instagram can be understood as akin to a looking glass, peering into the physical spaces under study and embellishing them with a curated gloss. Towards the end of my online data collection, I captured a typical Instagram ‘session’, featuring a number of the most prolific posters I encountered:

Logging into my Instagram account, I am greeted with a polished image of Ed as he poses in Predator’s sparkling changing rooms, with a caption that reads ‘*Be yourself, fuck anyone that won’t let you*’ (Figure 1.5.). Somewhat at odds with his genial personality, Ed stares determinedly from my screen as his text espouses the symbolically violent vocabulary of bodybuilding that most of my participants share on a daily basis. Below, around fifty commenters - ranging from experienced IFBB

Pros to young gym members that are in awe of Ed's majestic physique - appraise his 'unreal', 'massive' and 'fucking huge' body composition as Ed tags '#instafit #motivation #fit #dedication #shredded' in a seemingly unending stream of self-promotion. The homosocial support offered by Ed's followers is typical within Instagram's bodybuilding community, as the scantily clad men flatter one another's pecs, quads, and abs in a fraternal expression of affection that I can't help feeling would be admonished without the thin veil of gym work that acts to legitimise it (Marshall et al., 2020). Each comment is accompanied by a variety of gym-based and aspirational emojis, as Ed's well-wishers exude a warmth that would validate even the most insecure bodybuilder.

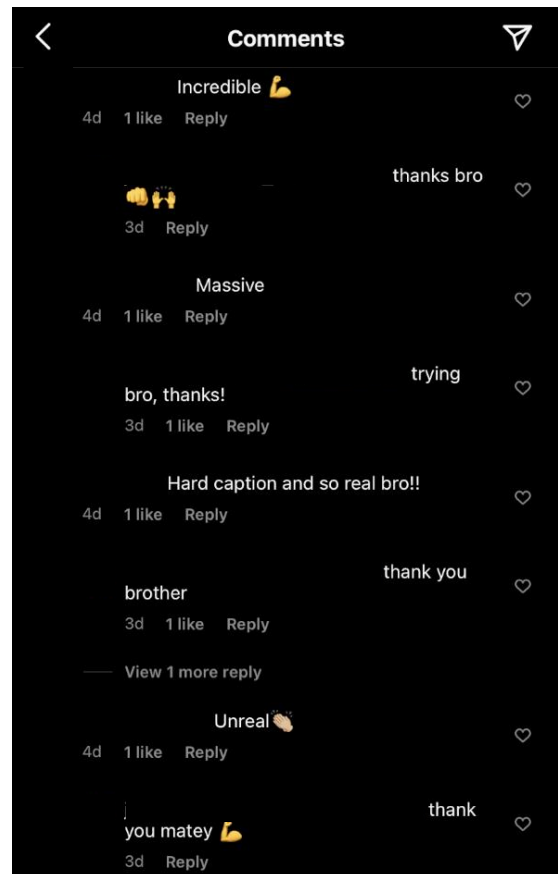
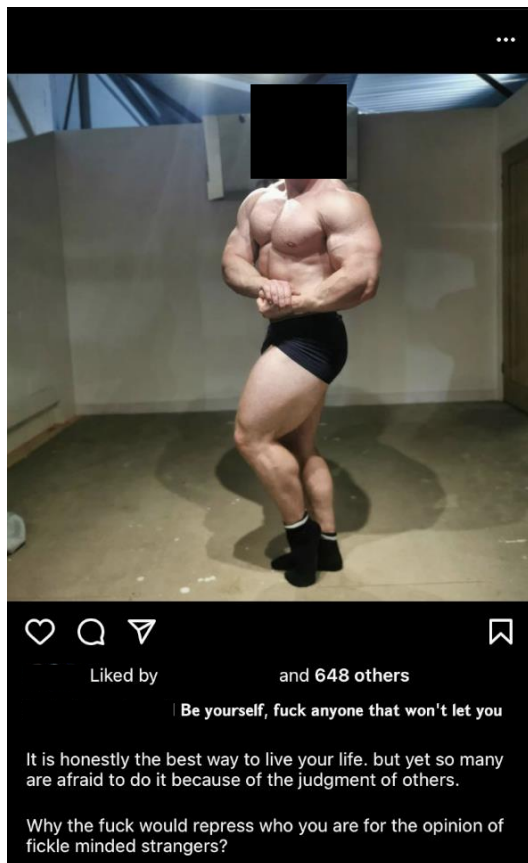


Figure 3.3. Ed's post documenting his latest corporeal progression, much to the delight of his fellow community members (02/09/20).

I then scroll down to see an image of two purposely positioned vials of 'Ultima-Tren' (a brand name for the potent anabolic steroid trenbolone acetate), accompanied by a caption declaring a '*DECEMBER SALE! DM FOR INFO*'. As with many of the sellers I follow, the post shows little external engagement, with a meagre five likes from unashamed IPED users. Tapping the seller, @anabolics2u's, icon however (which depicts a muscled bodybuilder grappling with a weighty chain), I am transported to his profile which belies his true reach. @anabolics2u has an impressive 2,161 followers, many of whom are presumably unwilling to engage with the account on the 'frontstage' (Goffman, 1959) public post. Back on my homepage, I tap through my contacts' stories. First up, Muscle Sanctuary PT Andy's gruff Northern Irish accent discusses the intricacies of macronutrient intake. Skipping this, casual weight trainer Will shares a motivational quote that reads, '*We believe we don't have enough time, when really we don't have enough focus*'. Up next, IFBB Pro Ben slides into view, his veins popping out of his mountainous biceps as he hauls two enormous dumbbells above him into the air in the unmistakable Muscle Sanctuary free weights area. Ben has embedded a heavy rock song to his story, which blasts the lyrics '*HAIL TO THE KING*' as his straining arms labour closer to the camera. After Ben's snippet has elapsed, IPED seller @suppspharm's content appears. This story showcases a client's 'transformation', facilitated by @suppspharm's product, overlaid with the text '*100% gains, message me or add on Whatsapp*'. This fleeting content is then replaced by aspiring bodybuilder Jake, who shares a meme championing the effectiveness of AAS as a sexual stimulant. Growing tired of the ceaseless flow of stories, I absent-mindedly continue scrolling down my homepage, where physique after physique engulf my feed, only broken up by some sporadic adverts for gym wear and sports supplements or vials of IPEDs for sale. I glance up, twenty minutes has passed whilst I have been

engrossed on Instagram. ‘I was just doing research’, I reassure myself, before begrudgingly returning to my laptop.

(Fieldnote, 02/09/20)

This extract describes the typical landscape that awaited me when I tapped the enticing Instagram icon on my phone screen. As well as allowing me a glimpse into Muscle Sanctuary, Predator and Stoke’s other sites of hardcore fitness from the comfort of my sofa, the digital geography of the platform transported me to a globalised network of IPED suppliers and users as I glided seamlessly through the glossy, sleek infrastructure of the app. As was evidenced through my total engrossment with the platform, despite not physically inhabiting the space as I did in the gyms under study, I was very much *in* the field and its layout, affordances and flows contoured my experience when using the platform.

4.4.4. Facebook

Compared with Instagram, Facebook is a more general, multi-purpose platform with a dual emphasis upon image and text content creation. In line with its self-confessed aim to create and bolster meaningful online communities (Facebook, 2020), Facebook allows users to add friends, create multi-user chats, open and closed groups and share pages with other users (Fox and Moreland, 2015). The SNS provides users with a profile, through which they can create and share content with others on the homepage. Facebook has a slightly older user base than Instagram (Social Films, 2020), with proportionally more male users and those over sixty-five (Clement, 2020c). The below fieldnote recalls a typical visit to my research Facebook fieldsite, jotted down early in the first COVID-19 national lockdown:

Facebook’s distinctive blue colour scheme bursts into life as soon as I input my login details. Batting off the dizzying cacophony of notifications that ambush me as I click on my homepage, I notice one of the groups I have been granted access to, ‘Steroid Chat’, has a number of new posts. Clicking on the group, which is closed to users who have not been ‘approved’ by its admin, I can see that a user by the name of Travis

Allen has shared a question, ‘*Just starting out what do you suggest for test c how much per week?*’. Travis’ post, which refers to the common AAS testosterone cypionate, is duly answered by nineteen group members, who suggest a range of potential beginner cycles as well as advice about appropriate post-cycle therapy options. From what I can make out, most users appear to be from the United States, alongside a smattering of British users and some Eastern European contributors. Joining this conversation thread, admin Rowdy Rob shares his email address and a link to his website which, according to him, ‘*has test cyp for a good price*’. The others, seemingly cognisant that Rob holds the power to expel them from the group, do not question his claim and Travis is encouraged to click on the link. This is just one of many similar groups I have been accepted into, and Rob’s blatant agenda is typical across most. Directly below, another American user named Bobby has shared his bloodwork, which shows an alarmingly elevated white blood cell count. Attaching a breakdown of his substantial IPED consumption, Bobby asks the group for possible causes for his malady. His post is met with numerous derisive comments that are quite unlike the usual good-natured, helpful exchanges on the page, as it is quickly established that Bobby must simply have an injection site infection. I hastily screenshot this interaction.

Manoeuvring back to my homepage, I see Luke, a natural powerlifter and local police officer based in Muscle Sanctuary, sharing an impressive lift in his home gym. A stream of uplifting comments append Luke’s video and I drop him a like for good measure. Directly under Luke’s status is a promotional post by underground laboratory EU Pharma, which highlights the supposed positive impact their products have on users’ immune systems amid the current health pandemic. On any given day, my homepage is littered with similar adverts shepherding users to webpages or enjoining them to contact the seller for a discounted price. Finally, adding to the digital din, a multitude of posters have shared videos of them and their gym partners

working out in the various open access bodybuilding groups that I am part of. These range from lads of around seventeen, who look dwarfed by their baggy designer vests and chunky trainers, through to professional bodybuilders and strongmen from across the globe, who are keen to build their following. Satisfied that I have viewed the day's new content, I log out, leaving Rowdy Rob to continue pushing his products, Bobby to lament his post and Luke to feel gratified that his lift has been sufficiently well-received.

(Fieldnote, 22/04/20)

As demonstrated above, Facebook, much like Instagram, is an immersive digital world that brings Stoke's gyms and their users into contact with a global network. Again, its structures – most notably the closed groups I was allowed into – were crucial in shaping users' behaviours and providing a front and backstage view (Goffman, 1959) that reflects the offline environment. Similarly, users like Luke, that I knew both in person and online, illustrate the need to incorporate an online element, as they flitted between the physical spaces of the gym and the online platforms, providing a bridge between the two.

4.5. Participant sampling

My initial sampling process was undertaken on the SNS Instagram and, to a lesser extent, Facebook. Whilst this again represents a relatively novel approach, Gelinas et al. (2017) emphasise the utility of SNS as sampling tools, given their ability to target specific hard to reach populations and search against certain purposive criteria (see also O'Connor et al., 2008; Marshall et al., 2020). Further, echoing my rejection of an online/offline divide, using the platforms ought to be treated no differently than offline forms of sampling. Instead, using SNS for this purpose was merely an extension of traditional methods into a more fruitful medium, as social media represented the simplest means of communication.

Initially, I identified the two gyms under study and followed fifty male Instagram users who had ‘geo-tagged’⁷ their posts in these locations. By doing this, I was able to cultivate a purposive sample within the geographical boundaries of my fieldsites. At first, only seven of the fifty accounts under study followed my research account back, however I was able to arrange my first interview on 10th June 2019 with Muscle Sanctuary PT, Andy. As more users followed my account, I secured further interviews as well as relying on snowball sampling within the gyms themselves to recruit new participants. This again emphasises the *connective* element of the research process, and the deliberately blurred lines between the online and offline. Although most of this project’s interviewees were approached via Instagram, I utilised Facebook to contact participants like Phillip and Luke who did not follow my Instagram account back. This method proved successful to counteract Instagram’s shortfall as a recruitment tool.

Alongside soliciting gym users for interviews via social media, I also employed Facebook and Instagram to approach IPED suppliers, both overtly and covertly. Part of the modus operandi of many sellers involves messaging prospective customers soon after following them, therefore I was initially contacted by a supplier in July 2019. During this interaction I was open about my status as a researcher, which ultimately resulted in the supplier prematurely terminating the interaction. As a result, I adopted a covert approach in the following interactions (which began again in October 2019).

As the project commenced, I made the decision to broaden the sampling criteria to include professionals working in the fitness industry and harm reduction services. This allowed the project to benefit from a number of alternative perspectives, including academics, harm reduction experts and specialist personal trainers. Further, as discussed by Muskat et al. (2012), integrating expert interviews into my research also helped to guide the direction of my project in line with current professional needs. I hope that this co-production will increase the

⁷ This term refers to Instagram users tagging their posts to a certain location, for example a landmark or business premises.

impact of my research, as I have addressed several areas that were identified by practitioners within my analysis. These participants were contacted via email, and interviews were carried out in person, over the phone or over video calling technology.

Though I encountered many faces in the gym during my time in the field, my core sample (those with whom I conducted interviews) consisted of twenty-six participants. All interviewees were male besides one (Tina), and sixty-five percent described themselves as working-class (n=17). Employment patterns in the sample – though heavily weighted towards the health and fitness industry – broadly reflected Stoke-on-Trent’s local economy, as participants variously worked in retail, customer service and skilled manual roles, or within the notoriously precarious professions of personal training and online coaching. However, notable anomalies existed within the sample that could certainly not be described as typical of The Potteries. Perhaps the best example of this was Phillip, a sixty-seven-year-old retired university professor, who held a high degree of economic and cultural capital. Further, exactly half of my sample grew up in The Potteries, with an additional three residing in the area for over ten years. Participants’ ages ranged from twenty-two to sixty-seven and, reflecting Stoke’s population, 92% of the sample identified as white British (n=24). Crucially, 54% of the sample (n=14) used some form of IPED (ranging from experimentation with oral steroids through to heavy polydrug cycles) and all were involved in regular weight training. Whilst I acknowledge that this figure is less than ideal for a thesis explicitly examining the consumption and supply of IPEDs, the diversity of views afforded by this heterogeneity ultimately served to illuminate the differences and, overwhelmingly, the similarities between users and non-users.

It should also be noted that the sample included an overrepresentation of elite bodybuilders and strength sport athletes as half of interviewees had competed in a bodybuilding or powerlifting competition prior to data collection. Levels of competition ranged from amateur shows through to Ben’s successful attainment of an IFBB pro card. The reason for this overrepresentation was three-fold. Firstly, both Muscle Sanctuary and Predator attract a highly

committed and hardcore clientele relative to most commercial fitness spaces. Secondly, given this thesis' focus on IPEDs as well as my status as an outsider, I was somewhat restricted to the most outspoken and unashamed IPED users in the locale. As a result, due to the relative normalisation of IPED consumption within the elite fitness community (Turnock, 2018), this population was the most forthcoming in terms of both access and knowledge of local supply chains. Had I begun research as an insider, my reach may have extended to more YOLO and Wellbeing type users (Christiansen et al., 2017), however the stigma surrounding use in these populations somewhat precluded their engagement with this study, despite my attempts at recruitment. Finally, the role of snowball sampling following the initial SNS recruitment led me deeper into Stoke's elite fitness community, as participants' contacted their friends and training partners in order to expand the sample size and build a robust set of data.

4.6. Data analysis

Connective ethnographic data collection inevitably produces vast swathes of data in the form of digital ethnographic screenshots, interview transcription, and fieldnotes from the various offline contexts within which I placed myself. As such, I was left with a voluminous data set through which to weave a narrative of my sample's experiences of IPED consumption and supply. Given the expansive nature of the data, I opted to utilise thematic analysis to tease out distinct findings and build a coherent picture (David and Sutton, 2011). Cognisant of my role as arbiter of this coding process – wherein the themes that emanated from the data were inevitably coloured by my own positionality and ontology – I adopted what Clark et al. (2015) term a 'big Q' approach to acknowledge that the subsequent codes had a relationship with the existing literature as well as my interpretation of the various fieldsites.

Following Braun and Clarke (2006), I undertook the six phases of thematic analysis, whereby I; familiarised myself with the various forms of data; generated initial 'open' codes (Chamberlain, 2013); searched for themes; reviewed these themes; defined and named the themes; and finally employed these as the basis for my findings and discussion. Though presented as entirely sequential and linear, this process was more akin to a negotiation in

practice, as themes were discarded and altered throughout in a fluid fashion. Ultimately, this is in-keeping with the more generally messy data collection of ethnographic enquiry (Liebling, 2001) and this project's multi-faceted approach.

4.7. From the weights room to the chatroom: Constructing the fieldsite

Since its inception, ethnographic enquiry has been premised upon the idea of a spatially-defined fieldsite within which data collection takes place (LeComte and Schensul, 1999). For traditional ethnographers, this typically meant a lone researcher travelling to a remote location and immersing themselves in local customs in order to *discover* an alien way of life and subsequently enlightening the academy of this exotic culture (Delamont, 2012). Beyond the problematic undercurrent of colonial exceptionalism that runs throughout these studies (see Pels and Salemink, 1994), the utility of viewing the fieldsite as a discreet, well-defined spatial area has been increasingly questioned by scholars in the contemporary academic landscape (Hine, 2007; Burrell, 2009). Given my decision to employ connective ethnography then, constructing and accounting for my fieldsite was of paramount importance.

Firstly, the above mention of *constructing* my fieldsite was vital to this project. As connective ethnography relies upon 'tracing the flows of objects, texts and bodies' (Leander and McKim, 2003: 211), my role as the researcher became more about tracking the connections between my participants and the physical and virtual spaces in which they inhabited, rather than studying one single platform or location. In this sense, my fieldsite is best conceptualised according to Burrell's (2009) idea of a network. Burrell's understanding is underpinned by her acknowledgement that culture is, by nature, perpetually in flow rather than constituting a static presence. Particularly given the socio-economic backdrop of digitised globalisation, following the movement of culture over various sites (digital and physical) therefore represents a far superior means of unlocking data than limiting collection to a number of predefined spaces. Thus, the fieldsite is viewed as a series of connections that are actively sought out by the researcher.

Crucially, connective ethnography ‘accommodates that online practices are increasingly embedded in offline practices and vice versa’ (Dirksen et al., 2010: 1046), and thus privileges neither digital nor offline methods. Instead, the fieldsite was situated across a range of physical locations and virtual platforms, which represent my own journey of investigation. In practice, this saw my fieldsite grow from the men at Muscle Sanctuary, to those at Predator Gym and the various local supplement shops, to Instagram users and Facebook suppliers as far away as China and the USA. Far from being constricted to the locale, my sample has benefitted from multiple ‘layers of understanding’ (Strathern, 2002: 303) which I hope to have convincingly weaved into a cohesive account of IPED supply and demand. Further, the online element of my fieldwork fleshed out the data I collected in Stoke-on-Trent and vice versa. Therefore, my experiences of sharing a sweaty, bustling gym with my sample undoubtedly brought me far nearer to a state of *verstehen* (Ferrell, 1997) than any amount of time spent scouring Facebook or Instagram could have (see Potter, 2017).

Alongside this triangulation, the freedom to use both online and offline spaces afforded me a great deal of flexibility during the COVID-19 pandemic that unfolded mid-way through my data collection. The subsequent lockdown of public space left me unable to carry out the offline elements of the project. However, due to the malleability of connective ethnography, I was able to shift my focus to the online elements of IPED supply as well as keeping up with my user sample via SNS. The pandemic brought participants’ home gyms, gardens, and local parks into play, as their broadcasted fitness activities shifted from public to private. A more restrictive, location-based method would have failed to capture these changes and thus overlooked the gym community’s reaction to the temporary closure of public life.

The open-endedness of my fieldsite does, however, present a raft of issues. de Seta (2020) notes that his employment of Burrell’s (2009) networked fieldsite was perhaps too ‘productively open-ended’, as its expansive nature left him able to ‘cherry-pick’ data that fit his intellectual leanings (de Seta, 2020: 83). Given the potentially unending remit of the fieldsite if theorised this way, it is crucial to accept that how I demarcated my site was

inevitably entangled with the points I intended to argue. However, this need not invalidate the approach, given that all ethnographic enquiry is inevitably shaped by the connections built by the researcher in the field. Alongside the self-defined nature of the fieldsite, the temporality of the data collection itself was affected by my adoption of connective ethnography. Whilst physical ethnographic enquiry in gyms, supplement shops and other leisure spaces is simply quantified, online observation frequently involved me absent-mindedly browsing Instagram and Facebook, engaging with posts, and sharing my own workouts, alongside the structured interviews and screenshotting which constituted the bulk of my online data. As a result, a temporal dichotomy of research and leisure could not easily be drawn. A strength of this near-constant engagement with the fieldsite however, was that, through Instagram's 'story' feature, I was able to attain twenty-four-hour access to both gyms – a feat that would have been beyond the reach of even the most committed offline ethnographer.

The researcher SNS accounts that facilitated large swathes of my data collection also posed an unexpected issue when it became time for me to withdraw from the field. Whilst a number of ethnographers have addressed the challenges of leaving the field in offline study (see Snow, 1980; Iversen, 2009; Tickle, 2017), relatively little has been written around the unique struggles of disengagement from *digital* ethnography (for an exception see Gibbs and Hall, 2021). As I elected to delete my profiles upon submission of this thesis, the network and all of the associated data stored on the platforms inevitably had to be lost in the name of ethical propriety. For this reason, I was unable to perform what Lofland and Lofland (1995) term the 'etiquette of departures' in the traditional sense. Instead, prior to deleting both accounts, I posted a message of gratitude to my participants alongside a short explanation of my withdrawal from the field. However, not all of the digital sample were necessarily privy to this post and would therefore have been unaware of my withdrawal. As a result, to some it would have appeared that I simply vanished into thin air. This poses some ethical concerns, particularly in regard to the assurances that were given to participants around their right to withdraw and, more broadly, their ability to contact me after the completion of data collection.

This issue was partly mitigated against through my prior dissemination of consent forms to all active participants (Appendix 1), as my contact details were included within these documents. This means of communication was deliberately left open to ensure the interviewees' sustained informed consent.

Despite this resolute exit, the question of whether I ever truly left the fieldsite does not have as clear-cut an answer as one would assume (see Stebbins, 1991). Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) note that ethnographers inevitably retain certain key relationships and friendships even after data collection is complete. This is particularly apt within the discipline of criminology, as insider ethnographers like Ancrum (2013), Winlow (2001) and Treadwell (2012) cannot be said to have truly exited the field due to their key contacts and locations being a mainstay in their lives long before the fieldwork itself. Similarly, Smith (2014) notes that, despite his formal disengagement from the field, his forays in the local night-time economy inevitably saw him interact with former participants in the bars and pubs of his research site. Therefore, given my local biography, I cannot say with any surety that my relationship with my participants has ceased. Further, given my ongoing scholarly interest in gym culture and IPEDs, it would be both a personal loss and an act of academic self-sabotage to erase all contact with my SNS-based sample. With this in mind, I exchanged additional contact details with a number of participants prior to formally withdrawing from the online fieldsite. Ultimately, just as I was able to build a robust sample through the tools of SNS, the men under study remain just a simple search away and therefore I cannot be said to have truly *left* the field as much as stepped away from the screen.

4.8. Positionality, issues of access, and research ethics

In response to Ferrell and Hamm's (1998) call for a 'reversal of the ethnographic gaze', it is crucial that I acknowledge my positionality and how my biography impacted the project. This work represents a departure from previous gym-related ethnographies in regard to my status as an outsider to the norms of hardcore weight training, and my consequent lack of bodily capital. Previous ethnographic work examining IPED use and gym culture has tended to be

conducted from an insider perspective (see Monaghan, 2001; Turnock, 2019; Bunsell, 2013), wherein the researcher is already embedded in the gym community. Unlike Tanya Bunsell, herself a committed bodybuilder when she studied her fellow female competitors, I began this project with a remarkably average, lean physique and looked at odds with the well-built men under study. Although I had a degree of ‘prior cultural knowledge’ (Winlow et al., 2001: 542) from my semi-frequent use of gyms and sustained involvement in competitive sport, this did not extend to serious weight training. Thus, my lack of ‘biographical congruence’ (Wakeman, 2014) meant that I often felt conspicuous in the hardcore gyms. As discussed by Coquet et al. (2018) however, this outsider status allowed me to retain a certain detachment from the processes of the gym and, as I learned the correct bodily techniques, I was able to perhaps elicit more data from those with whom I trained, as they had to explain concepts and movements more fully than they would to an experienced weight trainer. Similarly, during the interviewing phase of the fieldwork I deliberately pled ignorance at times in order to allow my participants to play the role of ‘interviewee-as-educator’ (Williams and Treadwell, 2008). In doing this, I purposely deferred to their superior knowledge and allowed them to feel as though they were inducting me into their world (see Christiansen, 2020).

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of my outsider status related to my dearth of scientific knowledge. Though I soon learned about testosterone esters, relative doses of millilitres or milligrams and the multitude of chemical compounds in the IPED industry, the barrage of nomenclature was initially baffling. Unlike Coquet et al. (2018) however, I was treated with warmth by gym users and experienced few of the ‘symbolic barriers’ described in their work. This openness was perhaps due to my local biography, which inevitably aided me in building rapport with participants. Despite this, my outsider status inevitably limited my access to IPED suppliers in this project. The inherent difficulty of accessing the supply chain was summarised by Carl, a UGL-sponsored amateur bodybuilder, as he pessimistically informed me:

‘You’d have to speak directly to a seller and you’re gonna struggle mate – people don’t wanna talk about this because it carries a five-year sentence. So you’re gonna really struggle with anybody who’s really putting themselves at risk [...] your sellers

are very close-knit, you're gonna find it really hard to find one that will open up [...] for all they know you're accumulating evidence to take it to the police.'

Just as Carl warned, I was ultimately unable to arrange an interview with any local sellers, meaning that the data around supply in this project emanates from users, online sellers, and practitioners, not those embedded in Stoke's supply chain. Though this is a weakness of the project, my experience illustrates the clandestine nature of IPED supply as well as highlighting the worth of insider status in this market. A further challenge was the lack of a gatekeeper figure in my research. Unlike Salinas et al. (2019), who were granted a wealth of access to their fieldsite by an existing relationship with the gym owner, I entered the field with no pre-existing connections in Stoke-on-Trent's fitness scene, which inevitably put me at an initial disadvantage.

Ultimately, the above issues of positionality were partially resolved by my employment of connective ethnography, and subsequent embrace of the online realm to supplement my offline ethnography and interviews. Just as this methodological choice proved successful during the COVID-19 pandemic, having an online dimension to the fieldwork also afforded me greater access to suppliers, given the internet's democratised IPED market (Antonopoulos and Hall, 2016) and inherent anonymity. Able to shield behind de-personalised profiles, online suppliers spoke candidly about their operations as they marketed them on SNS. This reflects Potter's (2017) suggestion that some participants feel more comfortable online, given their heightened control and perceived anonymity.

4.8.1. Field ethics in practice

Due to this project's dual use of online and offline research methods, the ethical considerations constitute a somewhat unique amalgam of well-rehearsed offline concerns and contemporary online issues. This section, therefore, will first address the offline challenges faced during fieldwork, before examining the relatively unexplored territory of digital research ethics.

The current research was granted formal ethical approval by Northumbria University's Arts, Design and Social Sciences ethics committee. However, it must be acknowledged that this committee is simply an example of a 'little other' (Winlow and Hall, 2012), operating as a bureaucratic instrument in the neoliberal university, rather than a true gauge of ethical competency. Therefore, conscious not just to be 'ethical because the little other of the Ethics Committee has determined that it is so' (Winlow and Hall, 2012: 411), I wish to go beyond this empty performance and instead present the myriad moral debates that underpinned my decision making in the field. Thus, particularly in discussions of the relatively uncharted territory of social media research, the following account of the ethical challenges and safeguards employed by this project is aimed not to appease the little other, but instead to spark moral debate and challenge the reader.

4.8.2. Offline ethical safeguards

First, I issued all interviewees with a participant information sheet and a consent form (see Appendix 1), which detailed their role in the research, the project's aims and objectives and the ethical guarantees that were put in place. Each interviewee read, signed, and returned this document as well as giving verbal consent for their data to be recorded. Further, I sought permission to carry out the offline elements of this project's ethnography from the gym and supplement shop owners prior to commencing. Full anonymity was provided to all participants through the use of pseudonyms in place of any names or identifying features (e.g., locations, brand names or social media personas). This included the names of the gyms under study. I made the decision prior to beginning the project that the city of Stoke-on-Trent would not be anonymised however, contra to other localised drug studies (see Salinas et al., 2019; Turnock, 2020). The impetus behind this inclusion was the desire to tie both individual narratives and macro socio-economic realities to the unique local context.

In terms of data storage and protection, I kept all hard copies of the data (including typed up interview transcripts and signed consent forms) in locked storage, whilst electronic data were stored on the University's password-protected U-drive and an encrypted external hard drive

device. Identifiable data will be kept for a maximum of three years in accordance with the university's retention schedule for research with a moderate risk rating.

4.8.3. Moving online: Social media ethics

As noted by Golder et al. (2017), whilst the growth of SNS has opened up numerous easily accessible avenues of data collection, social media also entails a number of unprecedented ethical challenges. As with traditional offline research, McKee and Porter (2009) suggest that a single 'one size fits all' approach is ill-equipped to safeguard against the vast range of potential issues. Instead, each project ought to tailor the nascent guidelines and debates in order to cultivate an appropriate ethical framework. More specifically, following Gatson's (2011: 253) advice that we must 'remake our guidelines for each online ethnography that we decide to do', this project's ethical safeguards were informed by a combination of other researchers' work and my own situational decision making (see Mahoney and Kearon, 2018). Crucially, such an approach necessitates constant self-reflexivity given the 'shifting grounds' (Baym and Markham, 2009: viii) of the fieldsite, and the relatively untested methodological approach that I employed. As such, it is hoped that this candid evaluation of the ethical challenges I faced can advance discussions and stimulate debate, rather than becoming just another turgid account of standardised methodological best practice.

Due to its relative infancy, online research ethics is a highly contested, ambiguous field that is very much in the process of becoming (Abidin and de Seta, 2020). Therefore, in this section I will attempt to navigate this abstruse terrain in relation to my own research practice. The first divisive issue in social media ethics centres on informed consent. These challenges cohere around the degree to which data on the internet is considered public or private (Woodfield and Iphofen, 2018). This overarching tension, which spans the following discussions of anonymity, data ownership and deception, begs the question: is user-generated content on SNS public (due to its universal accessibility) or private (given that the user has produced it)? Debates on issues of informed consent tend to either advocate for the need of consent regardless of context or platform (see Petersen, 2003; Bond et al., 2013; Michaelidou et al.,

2016), or suggest that data constitutes public property, particularly when anonymised (see Beninger et al., 2014; Alim, 2014). This division is, to some extent, premised on the degree to which an average SNS user is understood to be aware of their platform's data usage policy, which often contain clauses about third party data use (Townsend and Wallace, 2016). However, SNS' terms and conditions go unread by most users (Denecke, 2014) and, even if one wishes to access them, they are constantly being updated (Beninger et al., 2014). The ethical quagmire of public versus private was played out in my Facebook data collection, as I was accepted into IPED-related 'groups' having requested to join after searching for popular UGL brand names on the platform. These technically *public* platforms are perhaps best described as *semi-public* (Irwin-Rogers, 2019) given that one needs to be accepted by their admin in order to join. As a result, ambiguity surrounds the availability of data on these pages, particularly as the users' intended audience was presumably those in the group rather than the public at large.

To reconcile this dilemma, I drew upon Nissenbaum's (2010) notion of 'contextual integrity', wherein the need to receive informed consent was calculated on a case-by-case basis, regardless of the publicly-available nature of the data under study. Thus, I gathered data that I deemed to be in the public realm (including posts in these semi-public groups) on condition that the user was anonymised, and the post did not include any indicators of their location or other personal information. Whilst critique could be levelled at such an approach due to its convenience, it allowed me to successfully balance the ethical interests of my participants with the research imperative to gain valuable data. Furthermore, as will be discussed throughout this thesis, IPEDs, and particularly AAS, are unlike other restricted substances in both their legality and normalisation. Whilst legislation differs internationally, the UK's policy of legal personal use means that AAS are spoken about relatively freely on SNS and therefore users seem to have little regard for the negative implications that could result from posting about their consumption online. For this reason, I deemed the context to be public rather than private and therefore treated the data accordingly.

A further justification for capturing relevant data that I considered to be in the public realm was its ‘unsolicited’ nature (Robinson, 2001). As noted by Enghoff and Aldridge (2019), this term describes content that has not been created specifically for the researcher, and therefore represents the most natural and authentic source of data. By lurking unannounced to participants, I was able to map their ‘digital traces’ (*ibid.*) without imposing my presence on them or their interactions. I therefore avoided falling foul of the ‘Hawthorn effect’ (Van Deventer, 2007), wherein the researcher’s input colours the data that is produced, as the participant alters their behaviour or admissions. Ultimately, the swathes of screenshots produced using this technique provided the project with an empirically rich body of data that is arguably more authentic than the interview and offline ethnographic data that I solicited, and, by installing appropriate anonymisation, the possibility of participant harm was minimised.

A further example of this ‘judgement call’ approach was my selective dissemination of consent forms during my online fieldwork. Here, I sought and received permission to use my interviewees’ data in my thesis, however screenshots of IPED suppliers’ posts and conversations were taken without consent. The rationalisation behind this approach was two-fold. Firstly, it was not feasible to individually message and ask permission from the multitude of online IPED sellers encountered during fieldwork given that they frequently changed their identities and deleted their accounts. Secondly, had I disclosed my identity to each supplier during the lurking phase, valuable data that has shaped this thesis’ analysis of the market may have been denied. Working under Nissenbaum’s (2010) principal, I deemed sellers’ public posts serviceable and in the interests of publicly beneficial research, provided the necessary anonymisation was in place to protect the subjects.

Within the public versus private debate, the traceability of posts, and the subsequent ethical issue of compromised anonymisation, represents a further area of contention. Bond et al. (2013) note that researchers should refrain from using verbatim quotations that have been published online, as a simple internet search could risk compromising participant identity.

Importantly, whilst Instagram only allows users to search using hashtags, searching a direct quotation of a Facebook user or forum contributor would lead to their post, nullifying any anonymisation that has been put in place (Townsend and Wallace, 2018). Cognisant of this, I followed Markham's (2012) process of 'fabrication as an ethical practice', whereby searchable direct quotations that appear in this thesis have been superficially altered. A further, less-discussed dimension of this searchability is demonstrated in the below field note from early on in the research, where a close friend exposed the in-built barriers to anonymity on Instagram:

I logged onto my research instagram account to be greeted by a notification telling me that my friend, Tommy⁸, had somehow found and started to follow me. Clearly this is a concern as, due to my sample hopefully following me back soon, he could easily find out who my participants are if he wanted to. When setting up the account I was careful to untick the options to link the profile to my phone number or personal email address, so I am unsure as to how he found it. I sent him a message and he duly unfollowed me, apologising and saying that the account had come up as a recommended follow. (Fieldnote, 26/06/19)

This highlights the tension between SNS' insatiable drive for connectivity and the ethical guarantees that social research demands. The ethical infraction presumably occurred due to my phone hosting both my personal and research Instagram accounts and therefore, in line with the platform's goal of maximal connectedness, its algorithms offered up the supposedly discreet profile to any number of my personal contacts. Interestingly however, although my research was hampered by Instagram's algorithms in the case of Tommy, the same feature also benefitted my fieldwork as, once I had followed a large number of online IPED suppliers, my profile was recommended to numerous other sellers, who consequently followed me.

Just like the offline element of this project's fieldwork, data in the form of unsolicited screenshots, online interview transcripts and video/phone interview recordings were stored on Northumbria University's U-drive as well as my own encrypted external hard drive. However, as some interviews were conducted via social media, secure storage of data was potentially

⁸ As with this project's participants, this is a pseudonym.

problematic. Whilst I was unable to protect this data from the platforms themselves (see Facebook, 2018; Instagram, 2018), I attempted to secure the researcher accounts as fully as possible. Finally, after data collection and analysis was complete both accounts were deleted, effectively leaving the data permanently secure from sabotage or exposure.

4.9. Theoretical underpinnings: ultra-realism, transcendental materialism and deviant leisure

As I alluded to in Chapter Three, gym use, IPED consumption and supply remain chronically under-theorised within current scholarship (van de Ven et al., 2020). This section, therefore, serves to problematise the current theoretical landscape and make the case for an ultra-realist account of IPED supply and consumption. In doing so, predominant assumptions around agency, structure and motivation that have hamstrung IPED scholarship will be exposed and ultra-realism's potential to uncover the true motivation for consumption will be demonstrated. Following this, the deviant leisure framework, which forms the backbone of this thesis' understanding of the various fieldsites under study, will be introduced.

4.9.1. Deaptation, theoretical stagnation and the need for revitalisation

Before shedding light on the ontological underpinnings of this thesis, it is important to present the abject philosophical landscape which precipitated the conception of ultra-realism, as well as the politico-economic backdrop which plays a fundamental role in contemporary subjectivity. Hall and Winlow (2015) propose that the criminological canon is not simply deficient at the level of analysis, but instead the discipline is fundamentally premised upon a number of problematic conceptions of human nature, which fail to capture the essence of the subject in contemporary society (Kotzé, 2019; Hall, 2020). They evoke Johnston's (2008) concept of deaptation to describe how the same paradigms are continuously lent upon by scholars, despite the dramatically altered socio-political backdrop of contemporary crime. Many of the theoretical bastions of criminology were conceived in the 1960s or earlier, and therefore continuing to rely upon such explanations in the globalised age of late capitalism

has created something of a slow puncture in the criminological canon, whereby a constant repurposing of the ‘tried and tested’ theories is deflating the discipline’s analytical potential. This state of affairs is surmised by Hall and Winlow, as they state:

‘We no longer live in the 1960s, and whilst we should respect some of the major theoretical accomplishments of the past, we should not slavishly regard this particular period as the pinnacle of human thought and attempt to make its theories fit into a very different political, economic, cultural and ideological climate. Instead, we should, in an exercise shorn of sentimental attachment and vested interests, take from those theories what remains vital and pertinent before redoubling our efforts to make sense of the world as it is and as it could be.’ (Hall and Winlow, 2012: 9)

Hall and Winlow (2015) contend that current criminological theory can best be characterised as a dualism of classical liberalism (currently manifested as right realism) versus left liberalism. The former of these paints the subject as always capable of deviance and in need of control (see for example Clarke and Cornish, 1985; Hirschi, 1998), whilst the latter understands them as oppressed but innately good, valorising the concept of resistance and transgressive agency (see Ferrell, 1999; Young, 1975). This duality is exclusively situated within the hegemonic liberal paradigm, whereby agency and rational choice are positioned as sacrosanct, and any acknowledgement of the unconscious, underlying drives shaping human behaviour are dismissed out of hand (Hall and Winlow, 2015; Kotzé, 2019). Raymen (2019) therefore attributes the dearth of psychoanalytical criminological engagement to the fundamentally antithetical nature of unconscious motivation and repressed trauma to the liberal perspective, which cannot accommodate the suggestion that human behaviour may be driven by pre-symbolic processes. Instead, Hall and Winlow (2015) assert that current criminological theory privileges ‘controlology’ (Dutton, 1979) over any meaningful interrogation of the aetiology of crime, and therefore call for a ‘return to motivation’ within the discipline (Hall et al., 2008).

Hall and Winlow (2015) highlight the centrality of the incumbent politico-economic system of wholesale neoliberalism, and its fundamental role in shaping contemporary subjectivity and criminality. Describing this, the authors invoke Fisher's (2009) concept of capitalist realism, wherein capitalism now inhabits the 'horizon of the thinkable' for the neoliberal citizen, and any alternative value system exists beyond the limits of our comprehension. Applying this sense of resignation to the liberal-pluralist accounts of subjectivity that abound within the discipline, Hall (2012a) contends that a profound fear of systemic restructuring, described as political catastrophism, exists wherein any fundamental change is treated with extreme cynicism and trepidation for fear that it may equate to repressive totalitarianism. As a result, whilst the systemic harms of neoliberalism are well-versed within the discipline, its impacts on the level of subjectivity are largely overlooked.

4.9.2. Transcendental materialism and ultra-realist criminology

Set against this landscape, ultra-realism has emerged as a means of overcoming the current stagnation of criminological theory. Though the perspective has roots in the schools of Left Realism, victimology, and feminist criminology (Raymen, 2019), Roy Bhaskar's (1997) critical realist framework is widely credited as the principal criminological influence on the approach (see Kotzë, 2019). Importantly, in line with its 'realist' roots, ultra-realism accepts that the harms resulting from criminal and deviant practices are extremely tangible and *real* for victims. Therefore, going beyond the tired debates around the socially constructed nature of the law, the approach dovetails with the growing zemiological turn within criminology (Kotzë, 2018), aiming to cut to the heart of harmful subjectivity in the late capitalist era. As a result, the perspective advocates for the use of in-depth qualitative research that goes beneath the easily manipulated crime statistics, and instead interrogates the lived reality of crime and harm (Treadwell et al., 2013; Hall and Winlow, 2018; Kotzë, 2019). Furthermore, unlike the swell of ascendant criminological theory, ultra-realism acknowledges that human beings are not merely reducible to a biological or neurological essence, and nor should we be viewed as 'free-floating' social subjects divorced from natural drives or impulses (Raymen, 2019).

Rather, we are ‘hardwired for plasticity’ (Winlow, 2019: 59) and therefore our subjectivity inevitably reflects the socio-economic environment in which we live. This crucial insight stems from the perspective’s engagement with transcendental materialism, a Žižekian repurposing of Lacanian psychoanalysis reappropriated by Adrian Johnston (2008), which allows for a more nuanced account of contemporary subjectivity and our relationship with the political economy.

Transcendental materialism, which interrogates the subject in the ‘intransitive realm’ (Hall and Winlow, 2015: 110), aims to explore subjectivity in a far more thorough and basal manner than the aforementioned liberal-pluralist perspectives that dominate the social sciences. At the heart of this ontological position lies Lacan’s triad of the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic, psychic realms, or *orders*, which interconnect to make up human subjectivity (Lacan, 1974). Crucially, for Žižek (2000), at the core of human subjectivity lies a pre-symbolic void, a nothingness that must be ‘filled up’ through the solicitation of coherence and meaning (Ellis et al., 2018). This lack is conceptualised as the Real, a traumatising state of primal needs and disorienting drives that resist comprehension (Eagleton, 2008; Hall et al., 2008; Hall, 2012a; Winlow and Hall, 2012). Due to the phantasmagoric terror of this realm, the subject seeks a coherent Symbolic order, a realm of anchoring symbols, customs, and laws through which to make sense of the world. As such, subjectivity can be viewed as a process of active solicitation (Hall, 2012b), whereby the underlying void at the heart of the subject generates the perpetual desire for order and a sense of fixity. However, it must pass through the Imaginary realm in order to reach this satiation. The Imaginary realm sees the ego rupture and misidentify with spectral objects in the external world in the mirror phase (Raymen, 2019), yet it cannot obtain a coherent and stable self through these objects. It is at this stage that Žižek’s (1997) reappropriation of the transcendental materialist framework offers its unique insight into the neoliberal consumer capitalist epoch, and its effects on human subjectivity.

In the current political economy, characterised by a breakdown of the Big Other and a transition into post-Fordist consumption, the trappings of the Imaginary are actively thrust

upon the subject through consumerism's barrage of unattainable lifestyles, and the cultivation of desire for consumer goods (McGowan, 2016). Enabled by the system's sophisticated advertising industry, ephemeral goods and images manipulate the underlying lack at the heart of the Lacanian subject with a promise of fulfilment that can never be fulfilled, thus leaving them to perpetually solicit the Imaginary order of consumer capitalism and the never-ending supply of 'trendy' products (Hall, 2012b). Put more simply, desperate to attach themselves to some structure of meaning, and unable to see beyond the ubiquity of neoliberalism (Fisher, 2009), the subject reaches for the Imaginary order of consumer capitalism and commodity fetishization. However, the transient, fleeting nature of material consumption is ultimately unable to satiate their thirst for coherence and anchorage, given the fundamentally *dissatisfying* nature of consumer capitalism. This inevitably leaves them with a cloying 'objectless anxiety' and sense of misdirection (Hall, 2012a), as no real point of fixity can be reached. Though never quite making the leap into psychoanalysis, Zygmunt Bauman captures this reality through his metaphor of the consumer race, wherein 'the finishing line [the satisfaction of consumer desire] always moves faster than the fastest runners' (Bauman, 2012: 72), and therefore it is staying in the race of perpetual dissatisfaction that constitutes the true motivation for the subject. Understood this way, commodity consumption is premised more upon the symbolic *process* or 'promise' of acquisition (McGowan, 2016: 11), rather than the product itself, which is divested of its value once purchased. Therefore, our constant desire sustains neoliberalism's insatiable thirst for perpetual growth, whilst offering us an unstable meaning system upon which to hinge our identity.

Having explored the transcendental materialist underpinnings of Hall and Winlow's (2015) perspective, I will now broach some recent critiques of ultra-realism's relationship to the political economy. Firstly, opposing Wood et al.'s (2020) indignant suggestions, ultra-realism is *not* a crime causation theory. Instead, Raymen and Kuldova (2020: 13, italics in original), paraphrasing Winlow and Hall (2015), advise that ultra-realism 'offers a *probabilistic* theoretical framework founded on the principle of conditionality and tendencies, rather than

direct causation'. Put simply, the approach is better conceptualised as a means of shedding light upon the contemporary context of criminogenic behaviour and its relationship to harmful subjectivities, rather than identifying one particular causative influence on crime. Wood (2019) also brands ultra-realism a 'totalizing discourse' (Sayer, 2010) wherein, according to the author, a reductionist view of the political economy as the root of all deviance is leant upon as a form of 'downward conflationism' (Archer, 1995). In actuality, ultra-realism simply accommodates for the capitalist realism of contemporary life (Fisher, 2009) and, far from indolently conflating neoliberalism and criminality, goes far beyond other paradigms in exploring the unconscious drives and desires motivating human behaviour. As such, ultra-realism allows this thesis to explore the nuanced motivations for IPED use and obsessive physical training, as well as addressing the question of *why* an increasing number of young men have begun enhancing their physiques in this specific cultural moment. Ultimately, ultra-realism's fresh approach, embracing both neuroscientific, psychoanalytic, and critical theory (Hall, 2019), allows this project to interrogate the topic of IPEDs, as well as the wider culture of fitness, afresh and offer much-needed nuance and critical insight into the field.

4.9.3. Deviant leisure

Having set out this thesis' theoretical foundation, I will now examine the contemporary role of leisure in line with the nascent school of deviant leisure (Smith and Raymen, 2018). Sharing ultra-realism's ontological roots, deviant leisure follows the growing zemiological turn in the discipline of criminology (Pemberton, 2015) by setting out to uncover the inherent harms within normalised commodified leisure practices in the late capitalist epoch (Winlow, 2019). The approach, therefore, constitutes the cornerstone to this thesis' engagement with the commercialised health and fitness industry.

Deviant leisure is premised upon a fundamental reimagining of the concept of leisure away from its traditional conception as simply time spent away from work (Kelly, 1990; Roberts, 1978) or as a politically emancipatory space, within which the subject can forgo the repression and tedium of an overbearing political economy (Lyng, 1990; Riley et al., 2013). Instead, the

perspective illuminates contemporary leisure's role in both generating and perpetuating the demise of what Bauman (2009) describes as the 'duty to the other', as it functions to promote the sacrosanct nature of individual freedom in the wake of any coherent symbols through which the subject can understand their lives (Hall et al., 2013). As a result, Raymen (2019) notes that our identities are increasingly constructed through our leisure pursuits in post-Fordist, 'liquified' society (Bauman, 2012), and therefore leisure has been constructed as an inalienable right in the liberalised Global North (Raymen and Smith, 2019a). Due to this valorisation, deviant leisure scholars argue that the inherent harms within its practices have been overlooked. As such, criminology, and the social sciences more generally, have tended to neglect this arena, with the exception of a handful of studies into 'extreme' forms of edgework, such as graffitiing or street racing, that romanticise deviance in this context as a means of political resistance and radical identity construction (see Ferrell, 1996; Vaaranen, 2004).

However, following Smith and Raymen's (2018) seminal article, criminological understandings of the function of leisure have advanced, and a growing body of literature has been drawn together under the auspices of deviant leisure to interrogate the intimate relationship between consumer capitalism, normalised leisure practices and harmful contemporary subjectivities. Deviant leisure aims to illuminate the function of contemporary leisure in embodying the current hegemony of neoliberal capitalism and uncover the *harms* inherent within accepted leisure practices (Raymen and Smith, 2019b). Thus, set against a backdrop of rampant consumer capitalism, the perspective provides a means of problematising the ascendance of 'cool individualism' and leisure-based identity formation, where the subject is faced with a directive to stand out from the herd, whilst simultaneously following mass consumer trends and styles (Raymen, 2019).

Central to understanding the role of leisure in late capitalism is Žižek's (2008) identification of the cultural 'injunction to enjoy', which describes a reorientation of the superego whereby the subject is compelled to seek maximal enjoyment, even at the cost of the collective good.

This concept is situated in a shift from a society oriented around prohibition, to one centred around unrestrained individual enjoyment and consumption (Bauman, 1997; McGowan, 2003). Winlow (2019) contends that this command is duly stimulated by the leisure economy in the form of commodified, pseudo-transgressive activities characterised by hedonism and excess, where the subject can experience the ‘stupid pleasures’ of consumption (Žižek, 2008). Importantly however, Žižek stresses the inherent irony of the injunction to enjoy, which ‘sabotages enjoyment, so that, paradoxically, the more one obeys the superego command, the more one feels guilty’ (Žižek, 2008: 30). Therefore, this reimagination of enjoyment, driven by a profound fear of missing out (Raymen, 2019), fails to deliver true satisfaction and instead can lead to a state of *jouissance* – a Lacanian term describing the excessive, painful pleasure derived from an overexposure to the barrage of ‘enjoyment’ (Žižek, 2006) generated by the economy of commodified leisure. Acknowledging this, deviant leisure drives at the heart of the late capitalist subject, for whom identity is premised upon an ever-mutating set of consumer products and trends, having been untethered from a stable Big Other as a result of the West’s immersion into wholesale neoliberalism and the attendant culture of the individual (Lasch, 1979; Hall and Winlow, 2015). As a result, far from utilising leisure as a space for transgression and resistance, the subject actively solicits its consumerist trappings (Hall, 2012b), be it through hedonistic alcohol consumption, displays of conspicuous consumer spending or blind adherence to ‘expressive’ fashion or bodily trends. In light of this, deviance in this context is understood as ‘steadfastly conformist’ (Raymen and Smith, 2019a: 19) as the subject’s energies are channelled into the desire and acquisition of commodities that are essential to perpetual capital growth, rather than offering any true form of resistance to the system.

This is contextualised within the historical process of pseudo-pacification (Hall, 2012a) wherein arbitrary interpersonal violence has steadily declined from the late-fourteenth century to be replaced by a symbolic violence that is harnessed by the economy in order to promote intersubjective competition and inflate capital growth (Hall and Winlow, 2015; Hall, 2020).

This symbolic violence is manifested as ‘special liberty’ (Hall, 2012a), wherein subjects are able to transcend ethical and moral codes in adherence with the underlying value of competitive individualism. Therefore, as a consequence of the pseudo-pacification process, the subject’s energy is repackaged into the constant desire for, and subsequent dissatisfaction of, consumer goods (McGowan, 2016), which is played out within the leisure market and its unending conveyor belt of commodities and consumable aesthetics. Read in light of this, previously overlooked harms within normalised leisure practices such as gambling (Raymen and Smith, 2017), the night-time economy (Smith, 2014) and tourism (Large, 2019) can be understood in relation to contemporary subjectivity, and the all-encompassing grip of consumer capitalism. This framework therefore allows me to conduct a thorough analysis of hardcore gym use and IPED consumption and supply in relation to the incumbent political economy and provides me with a platform upon which to interrogate how such behaviour interacts with these macro dynamics as well as micro and meso factors.

In practice, Smith and Raymen (2018) divide these embedded harms into four categories. First, subjective harms describe harm inflicted by an identifiable perpetrator, for example violence in the night-time economy. Following this, environmental harms capture both consumer capitalism’s deleterious effects on the planet, as well as the subject’s role in fetishistically disavowing (Žižek, 2008) knowledge of the realities of systemic destruction of the ecosystem. Thirdly, Smith and Raymen (2018) identify socially corrosive harms, which include leisure practices that further decimate collectivism and promote isolating individualism. This includes the retreatism of online platforms like asocial video games alongside the synthetic mediums of social media sites (*ibid.*). Finally, embedded harms can be understood as highly normalised harms inherent within practices like gambling and the attendant ‘culture of indebtedness’ (Horsley, 2015). In line with this, as many of my forthcoming discussions fall outside of codified criminality, deviant leisure’s zemiological approach allows a more complete analysis of IPED consumption and supply and the role of harmful contemporary subjectivity within these practices.

4.9.4. Chapter summary

This chapter has served to provide an overview of the various methodological approaches undertaken during this project, which can be broadly conceptualised as connective ethnography. Overall, this novel approach has proven to be a robust and versatile means of data collection although, as has been explicated, the methodology is not without its own raft of ethical challenges. With that said, I hope to have adequately mitigated and traversed these quandaries, reliant as I was upon Burrell's (2009) notion of a networked fieldsite and Nissenbaum's (2010) concept of contextual integrity. Similarly, the above discussions of my positionality have located my biography within the research and provided a reflexive glimpse as to how my identity has impacted upon what will follow in this thesis.

I have devoted the latter part of this chapter to setting out the thesis' ontological and epistemological basis, and I hope to have put forth a compelling argument for the need to move beyond the current deaptive (Johnston, 2008) theoretical landscape and towards a greater appreciation of late capitalist subjectivity and the nature of contemporary leisure by employing the burgeoning schools of ultra-realism and deviant leisure within this work. Indeed, I will lean heavily upon the above discussions of transcendental materialism, Žižek's superego injunction to enjoy, and the Lacanian notion of *jouissance* throughout this work and therefore this chapter ought to be conceptualised as a grounding both in the methods I used and the theoretical position from which I argue.

5. Reimagining the health and fitness industry as a site of deviant leisure

Introduction

Following the introduction of my theoretical frameworks, this chapter will explore the health and fitness industry as a site of deviant leisure. Shining a spotlight on the economy that has built up around the concept of keeping oneself fit, I will examine the tide of commercialisation and professionalisation that has engulfed the industry in line with Smith and Raymen's (2018) school of thought. Within this discussion, I will consider how the gym as both a social arena and a space of labour intersects with the notion of fraternity and collective masculinity in the post-industrial locale of Stoke-on-Trent, and interrogate how genuine these bonds are in the pseudo-pacified leisure environment (Hall, 2012a).

5.1. Consuming health and fitness

In line with the wider economic shift in the Global North from production to consumption (Amin, 1994), my sample can best be described as health and fitness *consumers* (Nettleton, 2013; Millington, 2016). However, echoing Andreasson and Johansson (2019), the older interviewees made it clear that the commercialisation of the fitness arenas under study is a relatively recent occurrence that has, in the space of a generation, swept the community. This perspective was sentimentally shared by forty-five-year-old professional natural bodybuilder and police officer Luke, as he sat across from me shouting over the pulsating rock music at Muscle Sanctuary, remonstrating animatedly as he described his first experiences of '*learning the trade*':

'When I first started training in the nineties, people didn't have coaches and there were very few personal trainers about. If you wanted to get into bodybuilding, you just spoke to a bloke in your gym who'd already done it and they would take you under their wing and help you out. That's just what I was used to, and so this idea of paying somebody a load of money to do a diet for you or put you on a training programme - I've never paid anyone for a diet in my life, I learned from other people, and I've retained it and used it.'

This old-school mentality was shared by IFBB Pro Ben who, whilst over a decade younger than Luke, fondly recalled his formative experiences of the gym as recently as the early 2000s, where he was unofficially mentored by a local gym owner:

‘The way that I describe it is that when I started there was no fitness industry, it wasn’t an industry it was just what people did, it was a hobby. There never used to be any PTs, I had no idea what a PT was and there were certainly no online coaches. I had some good guidance starting off though. The guy [the owner of a gym in nearby Cheshire] he worked with me every day, gave me my diet, looked at me, gave me my adjustments – I had really good advice right from the word go. He did it because he loved it, he wasn’t like those guys who do online coaching now and PTs, where it’s important to them only as long as they’re getting paid for it. This guy was training me for free and I wasn’t even paying a gym membership. There’s just not people like that now.’

Both of these accounts reflect a sense of lament for the more genuine, authentic fitness spaces that, according to Luke and Ben, existed free from the myriad professionals that I encountered during my time training. Situating this within the macro-economic shifts that have swept Stoke-on-Trent, whereby service sector and customer-facing roles have metastasised in the wake of traditional skilled industry (Lloyd, 2013; Nixon, 2017; Winlow, 2017), the professionalisation and monetisation of fitness need hardly come as a surprise. Indeed, locals working within post-industrial economies like Stoke’s now increasingly rely upon precarious, leisure sector employment given the dearth of meaningful and stable occupations in the city (Standing, 2011; West, 2016). As a result, given the health and fitness industry’s ascendance within the leisure economy, many of my sample opted to work as personal trainers, online coaches, and gym staff rather than labour in the myriad warehouses and distribution centres that surround the city. Thus, given late capitalism’s invasion of these leisure spaces (Raymen and Smith, 2019a), to older gym users like Luke and Ben, a degree of authenticity and community has been lost due to many relationships in the health and fitness industry being wholly premised upon financial exchange, rather than true mutual support and kinship. This is demonstrative of the wider marketisation of health and wellness (Smith Maguire, 2008; Cederström and Spicer, 2015), wherein the contemporary injunction to look after the physical self has been manipulated to generate highly profitable enterprises, which rely upon numerous

fitness professionals in order to function. Following legislative changes under the New Labour government, the number of personal trainers and fitness instructors grew exponentially in the early 2000s (Lloyd, 2007), resulting in a wealth of consumer opportunities within the gym environment. Paul, a sports rehabilitation practitioner with a string of professional qualifications after his name, spoke scornfully about this development, diagnosing the marketisation of fitness as a result of what he termed ‘*the Heat Generation*’, but what can better be described as the infiltration of consumer capitalism into the leisure arena:

‘I think it links to the whole Heat generation thing. Heat magazine, the only magazine to be about celebrity for celebrity’s sake. Now all of a sudden nobody drives a Ford anymore, they drive some German car on PCP, nobody does their own eyebrows anymore, girls go and pay someone else to do them. All this stuff’s new. PT is part of that, the teeth whitening, all that.’

Read within the context of consumer capitalism’s injunction for the subject to define themselves through a perpetual stream of transient consumer goods and experiences (McGowan, 2016; Raymen, 2019), Paul’s positioning of the personal training market within a move towards beauty treatments and credit-financed luxury cars is salient. In light of this, the gyms under study can best be described as *commodified leisure destinations* which, contra to Luke and Ben’s formative experiences, fundamentally exist as sites of consumption and capital generation.

5.2. Commodified authenticity and gym gentrification

It is at this juncture that both Muscle Sanctuary and Predator’s status as hardcore, authentic gyms ought to be re-examined. As I laid out in Chapter Four, both fitness premises market themselves as places of serious leisure (Stebbins, 2007), in contradistinction from the low-end budget gym chains that constitute a large part of the UK’s fitness landscape (Deloitte, 2018). However, there exists a fundamental tension between my sample’s experiences of the gyms as sites of commodified consumption and the gyms’ self-identification as spaces of gritty, extreme authenticity. To unpack this incongruence, it is vital to understand both gyms’ place in the health and fitness industry and the undergirding processes of commercialisation at play.

Whilst Predator was described by my sample as a ‘*modernised gym*’ (Dom), newly refurbished and immaculately laid out, my initial impression of Muscle Sanctuary rather echoed Brighton et al.’s (2020) description of a ‘spit and sawdust’ venue given it’s highly masculine aesthetic and initially intimidating atmosphere. However, over my months of attendance, parallels between Muscle Sanctuary and Predator began to emerge, and the former’s initially foreboding atmosphere faded somewhat. This is evident in a brief fieldnote I wrote in August 2019, having been training regularly at the gym since early June:

Muscle Sanctuary is starting to feel more like home now that I’m going most days. My first impression of the place may have been wrong and, since becoming a card-carrying member, I’m starting to appreciate how well-kept and professional the set-up is. Harry’s staff are constantly cleaning and updating the equipment and, if I am ever struggling to structure my sessions, they are happy to give me some pointers. Having gone in focussing on the ‘meatheads’, I seem to have overlooked the ordinariness of many of the customers like Adam and Will. Maybe Muscle Sanctuary is not as hardcore as it first seemed... (Fieldnote, 22/08/20)

Here, I reflected upon Muscle Sanctuary’s fundamental adherence to the health and fitness industry’s marketisation of exercise, and the focus on *customer experience*. This sentiment was echoed by Andy, the personal trainer with whom I learned the basics of gym work, during our initial ‘client consultation’, where he breezily informed me that ‘*there’s plenty of people in here who aren’t strongmen, aren’t bodybuilders, aren’t powerlifters [...] it’s a gym for everyone really*’. This view was reinforced by Ben, who acknowledged that ‘*it’s not quite as hardcore as it used to be in here*’. Ben’s confession hints at what Brighton et al. (2020: 71) term the ‘gentrification’ of hardcore gyms, whereby former ‘spit and sawdust’ spaces have been repackaged as consumer-friendly venues in line with the industry’s increased commercialisation. Crucially however, Brighton et al. note that, despite their newfound customer focus, these gentrified gyms attempt to retain a veneer of their authenticity and grittiness for users to consume. Their description perfectly describes Muscle Sanctuary as, beneath its lurid music and gruff aesthetic, the gym provides a high standard of hygiene, as well as hosting a lucrative sales area where members can buy sports supplements and branded clothing. Pertinently however, users like Pete, an aspiring strongman, are attracted to the

gym's faux spit and sawdust image due to Muscle Sanctuary having 'a bit more Stoke to it' than the generic chains and leisure centres. Muscle Sanctuary's 'commodified authenticity' (Outka, 2009: 13) therefore created a *hyper-real* environment within which members could consume fitness, feeling assured in the knowledge that they were not part of the generic mainstream. This was put into perspective by local sports psychologist Neil, as he regaled his experiences of training in Warrior, one of Stoke's former spit and sawdust venues, to me as we sat in his generous garden drinking earl grey tea early in my data collection:

'I mean when Warrior was at its peak you ought to have seen it, the facilities were good, nice heavy weights and some real heavy-duty machines, but the toilet was really grotty. At one point it didn't even have any running water, which I'm sure was completely illegal [laughs] apparently someone had left the tap on all night, and he had a strop and said, 'that's it', and shut the water off. People wouldn't put up with that to the same extent now. I think [real spit and sawdust gyms are] on the decline, a lot of people are gonna say why should I go somewhere with a manky toilet, no running water, nothing nice, when I can pay a little more and I can go to this nice plush health club?'

Neil's recollection, which dated back to the nineteen-eighties, sheds light upon Muscle Sanctuary's comparative adherence to the values of the late capitalist health and fitness industry as, according to him, consumers 'wouldn't put up with' the truly hardcore facilities of his youth. Again, this speaks to the gym's role as a site of commodified consumption, where the 'authentic' aesthetic is enjoyed within the strict consumer-friendly parameters of comfort and hygiene. Therefore, far from rejecting the sweeping commercialisation of the health and fitness industry, both Muscle Sanctuary and Predator fundamentally adhere to this ascendant culture of commodification that has swept the UK in the last two decades.

5.3. 'My main social life is in here': the gym as a social arena

Following their relatively newfound status as sites of commodified consumption, both gyms represented spaces within which to socialise and conspicuously consume for my sample (Veblen, 2005). As a result, the vast majority of my participants acknowledged that the gym was their primary means of building friendships and participating in the leisure economy. Sam, a well-respected bodybuilding coach and amateur Men's Physique competitor, noted

that he has met around ‘*ninety percent of [his] friends*’ through the gym because, for him, it was a space for interaction as well as bodywork. This was summed up by Scott:

N: so how much of a role does the gym play in your life? Is it your social time as well or is it like work?

S: Massive. It has become that, it's become my social time. I've gained a lot of friends in the gym now over a couple of years, talked to a lot of people, there's always someone you know and say hiya too. [...] Weekends I'll go in and spend a couple of hours in there. I'll have a coffee, a bit of something to eat and there'll be someone there to chat to.'

Scott describes the gym in line with Sassatelli's (2010) notion of the ‘health club’, whereby one's overall wellbeing and a sense of enjoyment are valued alongside physical fitness. Scott's assessment hints at Muscle Sanctuary's gentrified nature (Brighton et al., 2020), as his acknowledgement that the gym is a social destination speaks to the burgeoning role of the health and fitness industry as a mainstream form of leisure and identity formation, not simply just a place to exercise. Similarly, Pete conceded that, ‘*my main social life is coming here [...] I don't drink anymore, I don't smoke, so yeah this is going to the pub on a Friday night for me*’. This admission is particularly striking, as Pete effectively places Muscle Sanctuary as tantamount to a night-time economy venue, as it facilitates his social life and constitutes his primary arena of consumption. Adam supported this sentiment, likening the gym to a ‘*social event*’ where, ‘*it's like going out on the town [and] having a few beers*’. Further, during my time in the field I was constantly surrounded by men sporting high-end gym clothing, as well as the gyms' own clothing lines. For these customers, the gym seems to have become a space to forge an identity of cool individualism by exhibiting one's fluency in mass consumer trends (Raymen, 2019) just like a trendy bar or club. Crucially however, their consumption of such fashion items sits comfortably alongside their health-focussed lifestyle, allowing the gym to become a site of consumption divorced from what they see as the ills of hedonistic drinking culture (see Smith, 2014). This perfectly captures the commodified nature of the health and fitness industry and how the gym has been constructed as a consumption destination where the subject can practise self-maintenance, echo bodily and material trends, and share the

experience of fitness with their peers (Andreasson and Johansson, 2019). This idea was furthered by IFBB Pro Ben, as he discussed his female friend's experiences of fielding advances from male gym users after training:

'I think for a lot of people that go now it's a social thing. There's a girl that I train with and she trains harder than most lads. She's not a regular there, so people only see her there on like a Saturday or a Sunday, and the amount of lads who've seen her training and they're found her on Insta and added her and like tried to speak to her. It's absolutely nuts. But then everyone's lifting weights and they're all on testosterone, they're all horny, it's bound to happen.'

Muscle Sanctuary's likeness to the night-time economy is strengthened as Ben contends that the commodified space of the gym can also act as a means of seeking sexual or romantic opportunities. Whilst Ben simply attributes this behaviour to the virile effects of the men's enhanced testosterone levels (discussed in Chapter Six), read in the context of the gym's burgeoning role as a commodified leisure space, this sexual element supports the view that Muscle Sanctuary and Predator are arenas of competitive consumption, which ultimately do not present as largely different to the sites of the night-time economy (see Winlow and Hall, 2006; Smith, 2014).

Furthermore, Ben's admission that the 'lads' located his friend on Instagram following her session sheds light upon the entanglement of the physical gym space and the virtual social media platforms under study. Though Instagram's role in shaping gym and IPED motivation will be discussed at length in Chapter Six, it is worth emphasising how the platform impacts upon the gym as a site of consumption here. This was discussed in rather derogatory terms by thirty-nine-year-old high-end sports supplement company owner and former competitive bodybuilder David, as he critiqued young gym users' infatuation with social media:

'I first went to a gym in Lincolnshire, I used to push weight there every night. I was fifteen but I lied and said I was eighteen to get in [...] But you didn't have camera phones and all that. I realise I sound old as fuck, but you would get mates to come to the gym and they'd come once and they'd never come back. Whereas now everyone in that age group goes to the gym because they need to check in on Facebook and Instagram and post photos. If you made it so you couldn't post about what you were doing in the gym, you would probably have a third or less of the people who go, still going. You see people setting up tripods and stuff to film their sets, it all becomes very self-indulgent, and ultimately nobody cares.'

According to David, younger gym users' attraction to the gym is almost entirely premised on seeking the rewards attached to conspicuously prosuming fitness online (Millington, 2016), rather than using the gym as a means to improve their *inner* health (Featherstone, 1982). Therefore, SNS simply extend the gym's reach as a commodified site of consumption and, just as night-time economy venues and tourist spots become immortalised in the Instagram posts of digital prosumers, the gym can be consumed twice over: once by the user and then again by their following.

Muscle Sanctuary and Predator's online presence also impacts the friendships that are cultivated in the spaces of fitness, as both gyms' social networks spill over onto social media. I encountered this with Will, an affable casual Muscle Sanctuary member, who complimented me after I posted an update on my gym progress to my research Instagram account (Figure 4.). This altruistic gesture paints the online fitness space as one of socialising and mutual consumption, as members of Muscle Sanctuary and Predator frequently liked and commented on each other's SNS content, providing similar encouragement to that shown in the physical spaces of the gyms themselves. Will particularly noted how his supportive relationship with Adam (another casual weight trainer) played out on Instagram, where '*he'll share my pictures and give me a confidence boost*'. Clearly, the online and offline spaces under study are inherently connected as social arenas and the communal element of fitness consumption reaches beyond the mirrored walls of Muscle Sanctuary and Predator (see Marshall et al., 2020).



Figure 4. Will sharing some words of encouragement in response to my Instagram ‘story’ update (22/10/10).

Will’s complimentary message speaks to a far more profound and wholesome aspect of gym culture that I encountered during my time in the field. Opposing the transient, individualistic friendships typical of late capitalist sites of commodified leisure (see Hall et al., 2008; Smith, 2014), the gyms, and to an extent the SNS, frequented by my sample provided a much-needed network of mutual support and kinship. Read in the context of Stoke’s post-industrial economic decline and the dearth of meaningful, collectivising toil in the city, the gym appears to offer a sense of shared purpose and fraternity that is otherwise absent in The Potteries (see Salinas, 2019; Gibbs et al., Forthcoming). Male friendships are traditionally premised upon shared experiences and activities (Sprangler, 1992; Hanna et al., 2020), and therefore the demise of Stoke’s homogenised industry, which facilitated thousands of fraternal relationships centred around the region’s principal export, has left a lacuna that the gyms partially redress. The comradeship and fraternal warmth of the gym was reflected in the numerous times that strangers approached me with advice or offered to spot⁹ me, altruistically extending their cultural and bodily capital to enhance my gym knowledge. This was echoed in Scott’s experience of seeking help in Muscle Sanctuary from retired bodybuilder, Alan:

I’ll even ask people [for advice] in the gym. There’s people in the gym like Alan who used to be a professional bodybuilder. So I’ll be working next to Alan and I’ll ask him,

⁹ ‘Spotting’ refers to the act of supporting another gym user as they perform a strenuous resistance lift. This occurs when a member wants to safely push their muscles to the point of failure or when they are attempting a substantial lift.

'have you got anything to do for rear delts?'. Anything like that, and he'll show you, he'll show you what he does, and so will the next person and the person after that.'

As demonstrated in Scott's willingness to seek help from Alan, Muscle Sanctuary offered him a means of collaborating with other like-minded men and building fraternal relationships based upon shared endeavour. Therefore, by aiding one another towards the mutual goal of muscular hypertrophy and enhanced fitness, members replicated the labour-based friendships that existed in the era of industrial modernity, within the commodified leisure environment (Gibbs et al., Forthcoming).

Importantly however, The Potteries' transition into post-industrial late capitalism signalled not only the loss of employment, but also the sense of community, stability, and fixity that my sample spoke so fondly of. Therefore, beyond members like Alan's *instrumental* role in helping other less experienced trainers, the men in both gyms under study provided one another with a supportive space where a genuine sense of community and anchorage could be found. Will's compliment (Figure 4.) was typical of the affirming acknowledgments of size, definition and form shared between members in the gym and across SNS. These commendations represent a means for men – who traditionally struggle to express homosocial affection (see Robinson et al., 2018) – to support one another. This is reminiscent of Greif's (2008) concept of 'shoulder-to-shoulder' friendships, whereby men tend to premise their homosocial relationships around the participation of an activity rather than traditionally female 'face-to-face' communication. Thus, bodywork can be seen as a proxy in some sense, presenting as a medium through which men can act out their friendships.

Further, Kimmel's (1996: 7) declaration that 'men define their masculinity, not as much in relation to women, but in relation to each other' is salient here, as a consensus emerged across my sample that, despite their initial motivations frequently involving a desire to become sexually attractive, as their physique progressed it was their fellow male gym members from whom they sought validation (see Christiansen, 2020). I broached this topic with Sam:

S: '[What got me into the gym was] *one of my best mates, he was into weight training and was really big, and if I'm being honest, he seemed to do quite well with the girls. So I thought 'I'm going to go into that' [...] So I just started training with him and ever since then I just continued from there. Then quite soon it became less and less about girls and more about getting on stage.*

N: *In a weird way, does it go from impressing women to impressing guys?*

S: *That's it, you don't do it to impress women because really they don't like really big muscly guys, generally. Then you get a lot of attention from lads, especially when you're around show day and building up to a show. So when you're in the gym you'll be chatting to lads all the time about your preps and stuff. It's definitely that, don't think that if you're gonna get massive it will get you girls [laughs].'*

Here, what is sometimes referred to as the homoerotic aspect of male weight training and bodybuilding (see Klein, 1993; Denham, 2008) is evident, as Sam concedes that the initial pull of bolstering his erotic capital was surpassed by a desire for fraternal validation (see Christiansen, 2020). Similarly, Ben, who was first drawn towards the idea of '*get[ting] loads of girls*', was resolute that his physique did not function to '*impress women anymore, I'm more bothered about what the lads think*'. Clearly, in contradistinction to the ephemeral friendships that typify many sites of late capitalist leisure, the gyms and their digital counterparts function on some level to create meaningful fraternal bonds between members in the absence of a collectivising industry in the city. An acknowledgement of this nuance is vital given the deviant leisure framework's proclivity to, by its nature, focus entirely upon the pejorative and harmful aspects of such spaces of consumption (see Raymen and Smith, 2019b). Indeed, having experienced numerous acts of genuine altruism, fraternal kinship, and meaningful friendship, it would be misleading not to portray these layers. However, a recognition of the genuine bonds formed within the fitness arena need not contradict the ontological basis of this thesis. Arguably, aspects of fraternity exist *in spite* of the commodified nature of the fitness industry, and sites of consumption like the gym are simply the only remaining space for men to bond over common practices and shared endeavour.

5.4. False sociality, competition, and amour-propre

Despite some of the genuine friendships and fraternal elements that I encountered during my time at the two gyms however, an undertone of instrumentality always seemed to bubble away

below the enthusiastic handshakes, profane shouts of encouragement and laddish banter. The nature of such leisure-based friendships under late capitalism is discussed by Winlow and Hall in relation to the night-time economy, as they assert that, in place of the meaningful altruistic relationships described above, the current epoch of transient leisure-based identities produces ‘superficial, temporary and fragile alliances’ (Winlow and Hall, 2006: 91) that are largely divested of true kinship outside of the leisure market. This should be understood in line with Hall’s (2012a) identification of the pseudo-pacification process, as the self-serving relationships simply facilitate the symbolically violent spirit of competitive individualism promoted within the leisure market. Though few of my sample candidly spoke about this, a narrative of competitive individualism was rife in both gyms. This was reflected by Ben, who acknowledged that the gym is an ‘*outlet for me to be competitive. I can scratch that itch, that competitive side of me*’. Similarly, Dom proudly declared, ‘*I have an athlete’s mindset, a competitive mindset and that’s why I do everything really*’. The effects of this combative ethos were felt across both gyms, as users were constantly comparing their physiques and performance with others. Recounting his experience of a significant injury as we sat in Muscle Sanctuary’s merchandise-lined socialising area late on a Tuesday evening, aspiring bodybuilder Josh agonisingly recalled his first session back with his training partners:

‘Normally when you walk in people are like, ‘yeah you’re looking big’, but when I broke my elbow when I first got back in the gym again, because I thought ‘I’ve got to get back training’, the first four or five people who I hadn’t seen for a while were like ‘what’s happened to you? You look so skinny’ and I was like ‘wow, cheers’. Not exactly what you want to hear. You’re always conscious of [how you look compared to others].’

This recollection, delivered with a grimace as Josh reflected on his muscular atrophy, drives at the heart of many of the sample’s relationships with their training partners and gym acquaintances. Here, following a pressure to return to the gym, Josh’s declined bodily capital was judged harshly by his peers, whose valuation of him seemingly relied upon him ‘*looking big*’ and competently consuming fitness alongside them. From this, it can be deduced that those with whom Josh formed a fragile alliance rely upon what Hall et al. (2008) term ‘amour-

propre', wherein they elevate themselves through the denigration of others. This concept explains their readiness to admonish Josh's newfound 'skinny' frame, which suddenly paled in comparison to their own. This precarious, contingent set of social relations speaks to late capitalism's effect on the subject, as Josh hinged his identity on the fleeting appraisal of others in the wake of a symbolically efficient point of anchorage. Therefore, whilst Adam, Scott, and Will's accounts present the gym as a fundamentally pro-social environment, this undertow of insecure self-centredness paints a decidedly more cynical picture of intra-member competition and individualism alongside the fraternal aspects of the gym. This underlying tension was brought starkly into focus for me during one PT session, where a fracas broke out after Andy supposedly pushed into an aggressive customer behind us:

'I was just finishing up my last set on the lat pulldown machine when a wave of raised voices and jostling bodies engulfed me. Swiftly returning the handle to its stand, I turned to see a vest-wearing gym-goer, no older than twenty, swearing furiously at Andy for apparently nudging him mid-set. The altercation soon calmed down when the user's friends, presumably aware of Andy's influence in the gym, pulled him away towards the legs room as he branded Andy an 'Irish cunt' from the free weights area. Bizarrely, as quickly as it happened, the gym fell back into its usual clinking and clanging rhythm, seemingly having forgotten the incident already.' (Fieldnote, 06/02/20)

This altercation, to which Andy steadfastly proclaimed his innocence, was one of the few times that the civilised, pseudo-pacified symbolic violence (Hall, 2012a) of the gym was ruptured, laying bare the undercurrent of competitive individualism and aggression at play. Despite the gentrified polish of Muscle Sanctuary (Brighton et al., 2020), the libidinal forces pulsating below the commercialised skin of the gym were momentarily exposed, and the violence usually masked by the symbolic practices of lifting and posing were revealed. This was, on reflection, perhaps the most telling and authentic insight I gained during the entirety of my fieldwork and represented a glimpse of the underlying forces that are repressed and repackaged within the hyper-real spaces of Muscle Sanctuary and Predator.

5.5. 'It's like a full-time job': the gym as a site of labour

5.5.1. Ascetic hedonism and individualised graft

Despite the fundamentally communal nature of both gyms under study and the men's consumption of fitness as a site of leisure and sociability, commitment to the gym and a lifestyle premised on fitness seemingly challenges the Žižekian injunction to enjoy, given the inevitable need for deferred gratification and corporeal labour. The hedonism inherent within commodified practices like excessive drinking or Black Friday shopping (see Smith, 2014; Raymen and Smith, 2016) is, on some level, absent in the asceticism and routine of the gym. However, Žižek (2006) proposes the concept of 'hedonistic asceticism' to address such a paradox. Here, premised on the inevitable feelings of guilt experienced by the subject following the injunction to enjoy, he describes a dualism whereby hedonism is simultaneously counteracted by a guilt-induced restraint. Examples of this include alcohol-free beer and decaffeinated coffee, where the indulgent ingredient is stripped from the product, rendering it both a 'treat' and a means of assuaging the guilt of such enjoyment (*ibid.*). Žižek applies this concept to the jogger who combines a life of narcissistic self-fulfilment with the punishing routine of exercise and healthy eating. In line with this, a number of participants conceptualised the gym as a means of '*working off the weekend*' (Scott) and counteracting other health-damaging activities. On this, Will explained:

'[The] busiest [time] is Monday at five o'clock, you can't get in the car park. I think it's because everyone binges on the weekend and feels guilty on a Monday, so the rest of the week isn't so bad. Like most of the people I've spoken to they go out on a Friday so, on Monday, they feel bad and can't get in the car park. Then [on] Tuesday they don't come in again [laughs].'

I experienced this Monday post-work stampede myself on numerous occasions, where I frequently performed several loops around the gym's poorly tarmacked car park, before pouncing on a vacant spot between the flashy four-by-fours and sports cars outside Muscle Sanctuary. The guilt experienced by the hordes of Monday evening customers speaks directly to the narratives of personal responsibility and autonomy within Cederström and Spicer's (2015) notion of the wellness syndrome, and late capitalism's hollow emphasis on personal wellbeing (see Davies, 2015). Here, members' weekends of jouissance and 'stupid pleasures' (Žižek, 2008), driven by the guilt-inducing injunction to enjoy, are effectively cancelled out

within the parallel consumptive process of corporeal repair and improvement. As such, far from contradicting the injunction, the gym, on some level facilitates the hedonistic excesses of the leisure market, whilst also serving as a form of consumption in and of itself. Thus, as much as Muscle Sanctuary and Predator are spaces of commodified leisure, representing destinations to socialise and even flirt, for my sample they were also places of graft and labour (Gibbs et al., Forthcoming). This is perhaps the underlying paradox of the gym as a site of consumption, as Paul explained:

'People who like sport don't like the gym, because people who like team sports like to turn up at a place, have some camaraderie with their mates, do something together and bugger off again. People who don't like that like to turn up on their own, put their earphones in and do it on their own. So the gym doesn't actually appeal generally to people who like organised sports – that's my opinion.'

Paul touches upon a common thread within my participants' reporting of their gym routines: working out as an individualised form of discipline or labour. Muscle Sanctuary and Predator's status as 'hardcore' gyms inevitably made them places of 'serious leisure' (Stebbins, 2007) and an ethic of discipline and individualism underlay even my least committed participants' workouts. Although he was perhaps the most sociable gym goer I met, to my surprise Adam summed this mindset up, stating *'I just see it as a job really, if you don't come here, you don't get paid, if I don't come, I'm gonna end up losing what I've got so it's always fixated in my head. I'm not here to look pretty or anything I'm just here to get it done and go home'*. A far cry from his previous assertions, Adam captures the gym's instrumental nature, where bodily capital is topped up through hard graft (Hutson, 2013; Gibbs et al., Forthcoming). Similarly, Pete conceded that for him gym work felt like *'a full-time job'*, due to the ascetic routine and accompanying injunction to eat and live well.

Unsurprisingly, this introspective attitude was most prevalent within the more serious trainers and competitive athletes that I met, as aspiring bodybuilder Josh attested to with his matter-of-fact conclusion that, *'you go to the gym to train, at the end of the day'*. For these men, whose training went beyond recreational leisure, their experience of the gym was certainly not

one of hedonism, as Jake, a promising amateur bodybuilder and security guard, summed up when discussing his experiences of prep:

'When I'm on prep I'm in there with minimal chat. If I'm training, I want to focus on me and not be side-tracked or whatever. Also, I've got a time limit about how long I can be in the gym for because I have to get home, get washed, changed and I've got to eat another two meals and prep meals for the next day. Any chatting I'm doing is just adding to that, and I've already got up at 5am to do cardio. So any chatting is just an extension of my already long day that I don't need. So you just have to become very selfish for those weeks.'

Here, the regimented nature of the extreme end of the health and fitness industry is laid bare, as the run up to Jake's competition was almost mechanistic in structure and rejected all unnecessary social interaction. This is clearly a departure from the conventionally enjoyable forms of leisure discussed within Smith and Raymen's (2018) school of thought (see for example Hayward and Turner, 2019; Ayres, 2019), and instead reflects a deep-reaching desire for bodily attainment. This idea of leisure as labour was supported by Ben, who told me:

'When I'm training, I'm pretty switched off from everything else. I'll train with the usual guy I train with and we kind of just keep ourselves to ourselves. There's not a lot of chit-chat between us while we're training, a bit of banter maybe but nothing massively sociable. [...] There is definitely a social side to it, but a lot of the people know me at the gym know not to come over to me while I'm training.'

Although Ben hints to there being a sociable aspect to his gym work, he ultimately trains in the individualistic, anti-social manner described by Paul. This is at odds with his gregarious and highly likeable personality, and it is clear that this earphone-wearing persona is simply an instrumental necessity employed in order to work on his physique most effectively. Similarly, during a follow up interview with Dom, who was able to access the gym during lockdown under the guise of being an 'elite athlete', he spoke glowingly of his altered training environment:

'N: What do you miss about a busy gym?

D: Now this is where you'll get the difference between someone who trains at a higher level and an amateur. The answer is nothing for me. I am happy to go in there and just train on my own or just with a spotter or whatever. Just get it done and get out. Whereas your guys who don't compete, you'll tend to find that they go for a social, so they'll miss their mate, or for example they might even miss looking at the hottest girl

in the gym. Guys on a lower level would miss things like that, the community aspect of it, whereas me, I'm just happy I get to train and use the kit. I don't have to wait for kit, I can use what I want, when I want. Then get out and get home, eat, sleep, repeat.'

Ironically, for Dom, the unique opportunity to train in an isolated, community-free environment satisfied his desire to simply '*get out and get home, eat, sleep, repeat*', avoiding all unnecessary social contact and the distractions which, for him, afflict less committed trainers. Dom demonstrates an almost snobbish attitude to his bodywork, drawing distinction between '*someone who trains at a higher level and an amateur*' and insinuating that the gym as a site of graft (see Gibbs et al., Forthcoming) is exclusively the reserve of competitors and professionals, rather than the '*[g]uys on a lower level*'. However, despite his aspersions, these '*guys who don't compete*' in fact shared the same myopic focus upon the self, despite their sociability in the gym. Again, Adam articulated this most accurately, as he acknowledged:

'I'm here for myself, nobody in here or anybody you interview can say they're not in here for vanity or they're not here for social acceptance, because they are. If people are in here standing by the mirror, it's because they want to look good and that's why mirrors are there, you walk in and it's there for a reason.'

In line with the ascendent culture of medicalisation and health as an individual duty (see Orbach, 2009; Smith Maguire, 2008), Adam cuts through the narratives of camaraderie and kinship, and drives at the heart of the health and fitness industry. This obsessive internal focus reflects the inherent narcissism that is so celebrated in contemporary leisure (Lasch, 1979; Davies, 2011) and again speaks to Cederström and Spicer's (2015) concept of the wellness syndrome. Adam's acknowledgement that '*vanity*' plays an epicentral role in gym work was echoed by Ben who, discussing my initial concerns about being judged for not being muscular, counselled that '*everyone's so wrapped up in themselves and so bothered about what they look like that no one will even notice you*'. Thus, whilst the men in my sample trained alongside me for the duration of my fieldwork, they presumably would not have even noticed my relatively lean frame. However, according to David, this has not always been the case:

'I remember growing up, people who worked out being almost looked down on like they were vain and self-obsessed. Well they are [laughs] we all still are, but it's more socially acceptable now and why that is I don't know.'

Again, David illustrates the centrality of the self in the contemporary health and fitness industry and how this culture of individualism has grown to become mainstream, having been the subject of derision during his bodybuilding career in the nineties. Though David was at a loss to explain this development, this rise of individualism can be contoured perfectly alongside the growth of the health and fitness industry, the commodification of leisure and the neoliberal promotion of self-interest. This culture therefore appears to fall within Smith and Raymen's (2018) categorisation of *socially corrosive harm*, given its solipsistic focus upon self-improvement and mindset of amour-propre. As a result, through their competitive individualistic focus on self-improvement and exhibits of amour-propre, my sample's gym use hyper-conformed (Raymen and Smith, 2016) to the edicts of neoliberalism and ultimately reflected the contemporary rejection of the 'duty to the other' (Bauman, 2009). Importantly, this conclusion does not invalidate the genuine displays of fraternal affection that occurred in spite of the commodification of health and fitness. Rather, it highlights the effects of the neoliberal leisure environment on the subject and how this new ethic has extended into the world of fitness.

5.6. Chapter summary

This chapter has served to discuss the health and fitness industry within the context of late capitalist consumption and the framework of deviant leisure. The gyms under study, alongside the wider health and fitness industry, can best be described as commodified sites of consumption that present as 'steadfastly conformist' to the edicts of neoliberalism (Raymen and Smith, 2019a). This was first reflected in the increasing professionalisation and commercialisation of the gym environment, wherein the former sense of community and kinship has become somewhat overshadowed by the influx of fitness professionals soliciting their services. Further, whilst an aspect of communality and fraternity was identified in both

Muscle Sanctuary and Predator, the genuine masculine bonds I observed in the field have been impinged upon by the late capitalist subjectivity of competitive individualism and amour-propre (Hall et al., 2008). Finally, I have presented the gym as a site of labour which should be viewed as fundamentally different from other forms of commodified leisure on account of the aspects of graft demonstrated by committed trainers. This discussion has illustrated the solipsistic nature of labour in the gym, and the inevitable focus upon the self promoted by the health and fitness industry.

Ultimately, through my engagement with the school of deviant leisure, I have been able to situate my fieldsites not only within the burgeoning health and fitness industry, but also within the wider commodified leisure spaces of late capitalism. This allows my forthcoming exploration of IPED use and supply to be contextualised within the theoretical frameworks of ultra-realism and deviant leisure, and therefore builds a platform upon which a thorough analysis of IPED consumption can take place.

6. Consumption

Having explored my fieldsites through the lens of deviant leisure, attention can now be turned to my participants' motivation to consume IPEDs. This analysis is divided into four sections, and each has been conducted on a number of levels; from a psychoanalytic account of lack and bodily dissatisfaction, through to a broader recognition of the meso and macro cultural and technological contexts that have shaped my fieldsites.

6.1. An account of desire and dissatisfaction in the gym

This section aims to address the current lacuna of deep theoretical engagement with the phenomenon of gym work and the motivation to consume IPEDs that exists within the academy (van de Ven et al., 2020). The following analysis therefore answers Kotzé et al.'s (2020) call for a psychoanalytic engagement with the concept of lack within the spaces of hardcore bodywork, as well as an acknowledgement of the politico-economic backdrop to IPED use and gym culture in the Global North.

6.1.1. Lack, desire and the *objet petit a*

Central to this analysis is Lacan's contention that the subject is fundamentally governed by a sense of lack and deficit (Žižek, 2000; Hall and Winlow, 2015). As such, all human behaviour can be understood to be motivated by an attempt to overcome this innate lack and reach a state of satisfaction that never, *and can never*, truly exist (Gammon and Palan, 2006; Raymen and Smith, 2017). This imagined sense of satiation is understood by Lacan as the *objet petit a*, or the lost object, and describes an intangible *thing* that 'orients the subject's desire even though the subject has never had it' (McGowan, 2016: 26). This perpetually out-of-reach object therefore represents a means of overcoming the lack at the heart of human subjectivity, and thus exerts a force that can ultimately be understood to drive all human action (Raymen and Smith, 2017; Hall, 2019).

Crucially, however, the subject does not wish to ever truly locate the *objet petit a*, and instead derives satisfaction from their continual, unsuccessful search (Raymen and Smith, 2019; Hall,

2019). This reality is articulated by McGowan, who contends that ‘the subject finds satisfaction in repeating loss’ (McGowan, 2016: 28). Therefore, what we desire most is *desire itself*. This is summed up by Smith and Raymen (2017: 13), as they contend that, ‘it is our dissatisfaction – our constant quest to find this Object – that we find deeply satisfying’. To this end, in order to preserve a state of continuous desire, we deliberately sabotage the satiation of our dissatisfaction by erecting barriers to its accomplishment (McGowan, 2016). This understanding of the true nature of desire forms the bedrock of McGowan’s account of consumer capitalism’s stranglehold over the contemporary subject. McGowan argues that capitalism’s enduring ascendance hinges upon its successful capture – and subsequent suspension - of human desire as, aware that there can be no ultimate resolution to the subject’s dissatisfaction, the system provides us with a limitless supply of commodities that we gladly substitute as the *objet petit a*. Thus, we articulate our desire of the lost object by expressing the need to buy the plethora of novel commodities that are advertised to us each day (Ayres, 2019). However, following the acquisition of the longed-for commodity, these stand-ins – be it the latest fashion trend, the newest model of luxury car or technological gadget – are ultimately revealed to be devoid of the significance formerly bestowed upon them by the consumer (McGowan, 2004; McGowan, 2016; Raymen and Smith, 2017).

This explains, for example, why the apex of Christmas day is the anticipation of receiving the enticingly wrapped up gifts under the tree as, crucially, their desirability drastically reduces upon being opened. The myriad consumable commodities and aesthetics that the late capitalist system sells us therefore act as a proxy to the *objet petit a* as consumerism preys upon our psychic make-up, keeping us suspended in the race for consumption where there exists no actual finishing line (Bauman, 2012). If this dissatisfaction were to ever cease, neoliberalism would be unable to sustain the insatiable growth that underpins it, and the very fabric of our economy would crumble (Hall, 2019).

6.1.2. The body as the object of desire

But what relevance does this analysis bear to the study of bodywork and IPED consumption? And how can an understanding of desire illuminate my sample's relationship with their corporeal development? To answer these questions, it is first worth recapping the literature around the commodification of the body under consumer capitalism. In line with Featherstone's (1982) suggestion that the *outer*, aesthetic body has become a positional good that subjects strive to attain, the physique – and its inherent bodily capital (Wacquant, 1995; Hutson, 2013) – can be viewed akin to the commodities described by McGowan above. As such, given the symbolic value attached to a worked-on body as a site of consumption (Rosenmann et al., 2018; Kotzé and Antonopoulos, 2019), this corporeal commodity has become just another object of desire mobilised as a means of generating capital within gym users' struggle to navigate the Imaginary realm of consumer capitalism (Hall, 2012b; Raymen, 2019).

This is where existing scholarship on the body, dissatisfaction and beauty ideals can benefit. Current literature concerning the unattainability of hegemonic bodily ideals and the subsequent harms around bodily dissatisfaction (see for example Galioto and Crowther, 2013; Mills and Giles, 2017; Greenway and Price, 2018; Christiansen, 2020) fails to appreciate the nature of the subject's relationship with desire and dissatisfaction. Whilst these accounts correctly identify the ever-changing nature of bodily 'perfection' for committed gym users, they labour under the impression that the subject is driven by the realisation of these ideals and the satiation of their dissatisfaction. These scholars therefore document the sense of lack and deficit as a harmful imposition upon gym users and suggest that, if they could somehow feel entirely contented and secure in their body, their issues would be resolved. This cultural analysis, of course, ties into the studies' aims to provide 'solutions' to this issue in the form of policy or safeguards, which somewhat explains why psychoanalytic approaches of bodily dissatisfaction are few and far between. Instead, if we accept Lacan's account of desire and McGowan's subsequent interpretation, it is not displeasure that we derive from our failure to

attain the prevailing body ideals, but psychic *pleasure*, a reality that holds starkly different ‘solution’ outcomes than the above cultural analyses.

Therefore, the ever smoother, harder, more defined bodily features that goad the committed gym user to persist in their training represent the self-erected barriers that suspend the subject in a state of permanent desire. Understood this way, the body becomes a stand-in for the *objet petit a*, feeding upon the lack at the heart of the subject to keep us striving to achieve increasingly minuscule enhancement. This reality was reflected in many of my sample’s acknowledgement that, for them, bodywork had become something of a rabbit hole, as their corporeal goals and ideals had steadily shifted as their physiques developed. This was summed up by Ben:

‘N: Was there a point where what you wanted to look like became a bodybuilder rather than just someone in decent shape?’

B: For me, I never really saw it. I obviously saw that I looked better, I had a bit of a chest and arms and a bit of a six pack, but I’d never have thought that I had the potential to go and do something with it. But my goals just kept getting bigger and bigger and now [gestures to his physique] here we are.’

Similarly, Andy acknowledged that, ‘a lot of people say, ‘oh I don’t want to get too big’ but I think that changes as you get bigger’, whilst Scott, discussing his evolving bodily aims, remarked:

‘I didn’t care [about chasing bodily ideals] before but now I do, and I think that’s just got worse and worse. Like the better I started looking, the worse I got. I think you start off like eighteen stone like I was, then I’ve been sub-fourteen stone and think, ‘oh I look really good’. It gets in your head, and you want to look better.’

More broadly, during my time in the field, I became well-versed in the rhetoric of goals and the *journey* of bodywork as I logged my progression, scrutinised the drawn-out changes in my body and, crucially, identified how best to advance my physique. As such, my mind was constantly envisioning what I *could* look like or how many plates I *might* be able to lift given more hours under the bar, rather than the material changes that I had already achieved.

The perpetuity of this mindset was echoed in amateur strongman Pete's admission that, 'I've always got something to aim for. Whether it's a personal goal or a competition goal. Say I'm aiming to deadlift 250kg, or if it's just a personal best, there's always something in my head that I'm trying to work for'. Pete's statement epitomises McGowan's (2016) claim that it is dissatisfaction that drives action as, with the proverbial goalposts continually moving further from their grasp, the gym user is placed in a state of unending desire. Were Pete to reach a point of corporeal satisfaction, having achieved his lifting goals, his motivation would be immediately extinguished. In this sense, bodywork becomes the proverbial hamster wheel, with the trainer's exertion ultimately driving the process onwards *ad infinitum* in order to ensure that their desire does not 'meet its object and die' (Hall, 2019: 170). Participants also often shared images of their past physical condition - be it from a bodybuilding show or a holiday several years prior - on both Instagram and Facebook. Invariably accompanied by captions describing their journey to reclaim these past bodies, they mobilised their own historic physiques – which previously failed to bring them satisfaction – as ideals that sat tantalisingly out of reach.

6.1.3. Suffering and bodily *jouissance*

In Lacanian terms, the production of an engorged or enhanced body can ultimately be said to be the result of the subject desiring too intensely and finding not only pleasure in their dissatisfaction, but also *jouissance*. As was explored in Chapter Four, Žižek (2008) highlights the nature of enjoyment under late capitalism, describing how the subject's overexposure to pleasure can drive them towards the excessive, painful form of enjoyment that Lacan termed *jouissance* (Lacan, 2013). This concept is particularly apt when interrogating the compulsive, hardcore gym work undertaken by my sample and their consumption of IPEDs.

My foray into the world of hardcore fitness saw me wake up each morning with a different ache or pain, and frequently sporting a limp after a heavy legs session. Further, my previously soft hands were mutated by welts and toughened skin after a few months of committed training, caused by repeated leverage of barbells, exercise machines and dumbbells. However,

my discomforts, which were soon reversed upon my withdrawal from the physical fieldsite, paled in comparison to my sample's. Gym users frequently spoke light-heartedly of the 'twisted mind' (Tina) of the bodybuilder and their experiences of near-constant pain. On this, Ben admitted:

'My knees and my elbows are excruciating [...] I saw a meme the other day, it was a doctor saying to a bodybuilder, 'are you in any pain?', and he says, 'just the normal amount'. Then he says, 'the normal amount is nothing', you know? That's how it is, constantly something's aching or hurting when you train like I do.'

Far from decrying this state of perpetual suffering however, Ben delivered the revelation with a broad smile, coyly cursing himself for his affliction. Mystified, I probed further:

'N: So, do you enjoy the whole being tired at the end of [working out]? Is there some pleasure to be had in aching and suffering?'

B: Yeah definitely. It's a bit weird and not everyone gets it, it's almost a bit sadistic when you get the enjoyment of walking out and it hurts or waking up the next morning and you've got DOMS [delayed-onset muscle soreness] in your legs or your arms hurt, because you know that you've been in there and you've given it everything. There's definitely a sense of satisfaction with it all.'

Ben's contention that there exists a 'sense of satisfaction' in the aching muscles and inability to walk after a laborious gym session speaks to the fetishization of the body as an object of desire for my sample, and how this frequently leads them into a state of *jouissance*. This was reflected in aspiring bodybuilder Jake's assertion that:

'If you ask people whether pain the day after a big session feels good, I reckon 99% would say yes because you know you have actually worked and you have actually achieved something. Like if your legs or shoulders are hurting, it's like, 'yeah, that feels good' because you know you've actually done something. Then if you're not hurting the day after, it's 'like maybe I didn't work that hard then'. The burn definitely can drive you sometimes, you can have a bit of a second wind if you're doing something and it's burning and you're just in that zone like, 'right, I'm just going to get through this now.'

Though Jake predominantly views the feeling of exertion as evidence of his hard work, he also describes 'the burn' as a means of motivation in and of itself. The pain brought on by hardcore, excessive bodywork is therefore the inevitable result of trainers like Jake's over-

identification of the physique as a stand-in for the *objet petit a*. Thus, transfixed by the perpetually self-sabotaged quest for bodily progression, pain and suffering are simply viewed as a necessary evil or, more poignantly, a tangible manifestation of the men's constant, pleasurable state of dissatisfaction. In line with this compulsion, my sample frequently admitted that their training directly flouted their friends' and families' concerns and even medical advice. This was epitomised by Adam:

'I'll be honest with you, the gym's that fixated in my mind that in the middle of August last year I woke up in the middle of the night and did my lower back, so I probably shouldn't even be training, but it hasn't stopped me. So I now have a bulge in my lower back that presses against my spinal chord, which even now affects my legs. Like if I train legs it goes numb. [...] It took me three hours [to] get to work once because I couldn't walk. I had people telling me [to] rest but I was that fixated that if I rest I'm gonna lose what I've done. So I was still coming in [to the gym], and now obviously I can squat 120[kgs] again and train legs again. [...] There was a day, I was walking bad for about four months, and there was one time as a man, you talk about masculinity, I was nearly in tears like, 'am I ever gonna fucking walk properly again?' But then I carried on going [to] the gym and I was like 'I don't give a shit'. Why should I stop going?'

Here, Adam's training took ultimate precedence despite numerous suggestions that he seek medical consultation and rest. To Adam, his fixation on continually, and unsuccessfully, striving for an idealised physique was such that he willingly risked his long-term health for the continuation of his desire and, even as he neared tears through the pain, it was not enough to dissuade his lack-fuelled drive. Adam's extreme example of his physically harmful determination to train also alludes to bodywork's status as what Jacques Derrida (1998) calls 'pharmakon', an ancient Greek term for 'drug' that simultaneously describes both a remedy and a poison (Stiegler, 2012; Piehl and Austin, 2013). Wiens and MacDonald (2020: 2) explain that pharmakon 'encapsulates both cure and toxin, positive and negative, possibility and constraint' and is therefore a phenomenon that sustains an affliction whilst masquerading as a solution. The 2020 Netflix production *Run* for example, a film that documents a mother's Munchausen syndrome by proxy as she simultaneously poisons and treats her daughter's disabilities, captures this perpetual cycle as the caregiver is both the source and the reliever of the malady throughout. Applying this to Adam's above account of his serious injury, gym

work can be read as a form of pharmakon as he further contended ‘*I think it’s like when you stop [training] I think your body knows it. I genuinely think your body knows when your time is up and it starts degrading*’. Therefore, according to Adam, if he were to submit to injury and cease his bodywork he would simply ‘degrade’ and therefore the only option he has is to persist despite potentially causing himself more harm as part of his solution.

6.1.4. Why the body? Fitness as a never-ending journey

It is at this juncture that a vital question emerges; why the body? Why, of the myriad leisure activities, commodities, religions, and political ideologies available to them, does my sample’s desire centre around the cultivation of their physiques? The partial answer to these critical questions is the innate suitability of the concept of fitness to our unending pursuit of desire. To unpack this, it is first worth considering the paradox that lies at the heart of the *health* and *fitness* industry. According to Bauman (2012), though commonly cited as symbiotic, the terms health and fitness belong to two paradoxical discourses. Health, on one hand, describes the ‘proper and desirable state of human body and spirit’ (Bauman, 2012: 77), measurable by both medical apparatus and one’s ability to function. Alternatively, fitness lacks any tenure to the present and instead is defined by a constant state of readiness for an unclear future task. Thus, fitness provides no natural end or sense of completion for the subject, who may reach milestones or targets, yet these only represent a respite on the journey towards an ultimately unattainable state. Therefore, we can forever be stronger, faster, lighter, more balanced, more powerful, and more agile, regardless of the training we complete or the state of optimal *health* we find ourselves in. Bauman sums this up:

‘The pursuit of fitness is a chase after a quarry which one cannot describe until it is reached; however, one has no means to decide that the quarry has indeed been reached, but every reason to suspect that it has not. Life organized around the pursuit of fitness promises a lot of victorious skirmishes, but *never the final triumph.*’ (Bauman, 2012: 78, italics added)

Bauman identifies the never-ending nature of fitness and how, even through an existence devoted to optimising one’s body, a state of completeness (or the satiation of desire) can never

be achieved (Millington, 2016; Christiansen, 2020). As such, the corporeal form can be conceptualised as an ‘unfinished entity’ (Shilling, 2003: 138), and therefore constitutes extremely fertile ground into which the seeds of desire can be sown. Regrettably however, Bauman’s account of fitness ultimately falls foul of the misapprehension that gym users are duped into following a damaging life of fitness and wish to reach a level of bodily satisfaction. In reality, it is the multitude of barriers, constantly evolving ideals and out-of-reach goals that constitute the true psychic appeal of bodywork. Therefore, whilst Boer (2007: 42) concludes that the ‘ideal built body is ultimately unattainable’, it is this unattainability that makes the physique such a potent stand-in for the *objet petit a*. This was echoed by veteran bodybuilder and retired academic Phillip, as he recounted his initial attraction to the sport of bodybuilding:

‘What I liked about bodybuilding was to be successful it’s 100% training, 100% nutrition, 100% mental focus, so it sets you on this path of compliance which is absolute. When I was a runner there came a point where I couldn’t do any more, I couldn’t run any faster and nothing I could do would allow me to beat my fastest time. Whereas with bodybuilding, because there’s the potential to improve in so many different ways – you can improve your technique, or your diet, or your consistency, or your sleep, or your mental focus stepping into the gym. It’s a sport you can do and not get bored after a few years and go, ‘well I’ve done bodybuilding, I’ve completed it’.

The allure of building the body therefore lies in its incompleteness and the multitude of potential self-erected barriers by which gym users can shield themselves from a state of satisfaction. Whether it is one’s diet, exercise regime, technique, or sleep that can be improved, a state of absolute accomplishment is inevitably elusive. Similarly, Luke, discussing the uniqueness of bodybuilding as a sport, alluded to his drive for bodily dissatisfaction through an admission that it was the training, rather than the actual competitions, that held the appeal:

‘Bodybuilding is more like a beauty contest than a sport when you think about it. But the training and the nutrition and the gym work, all that stuff that goes into it, there’s where the sport is for me. The preparation that’s required to look like that in the first place, that’s my favourite part of it.’

Again, this demonstrates the psychic appeal of building the body, as for Luke it is the process of continual striving, rather than the achievements and accolades, that constitutes the pleasure

of the sport. Further, Scott epitomised the lack-fuelled energy that propelled him to train, admitting '*I do look in the mirror and think, 'bloody hell I look crap today', then I'll go [to] the gym and get the pump and think 'yeah, I look good'. Then the next morning it's the same again because you haven't got the pump, everything settles back down'*'. The illusory role of the pump was also discussed by Will, as he complained, '*in [the gym] I just feel pumped up, I feel good and happy or whatever, but when I leave I just deflate. It's mad'*'. Here, the emptiness experienced by the consumer upon acquiring their desired commodity that McGowan (2016) describes is played out in the body as, no sooner as Scott and Will attain a level of bodily *satisfaction*, they subconsciously erect further barriers in the form of bodily *dissatisfaction*. Despite Will's superficial dejection at his enduring bodily lack, he possessed no inclination to disturb the cycle of perpetual desire, stating '*I don't think I could ever quit; I'll just have to carry on.'* This resignation perfectly captures my sample's inability to cease the excruciating state of *jouissance* brought on by their carnal manifestation of desire and how, long after their fleeting conversations with me have dissolved from their memories, their bodies will remain a necessarily unfinished project.

6.1.5. The role of IPEDs

Given the body's potency as an object of desire, what role do IPEDs play in my sample's pursuit of bodily goals? And why has their use increased so dramatically both in a national and international context? These questions are addressed by Hall (2019) in one of the few examples of sophisticated theoretical engagement in this field. Sharing this project's transcendental materialist ontology, Hall similarly invokes McGowan's (2016) understanding of desire under consumer capitalism to conceptualise IPEDs as chemical products that stimulate dissatisfaction in the user. She contends that:

'Lifestyle drugs promise to enhance the subject's body and mind in its continuous search for satisfaction through dissatisfaction but can never fully satisfy the underlying sense of lack. This process reproduces the need to continuously search for

newer and better products that promise faster and longer-lasting effects.’ (Hall, 2019: 170)

Hall makes clear that the same energies of continuous desire and dissatisfaction that perpetuate late capitalism’s insatiable appetite for economic growth also drive the consumption of IPEDs. Therefore, following my above identification of the body as a stand-in for the lost object, the attraction of IPEDs lies in their ultimately false *promise* of satiation. Just as McGowan describes the emptiness of the latest consumer objects of desire once they are acquired, the desired corporeal changes brought about by the consumption of AAS, fat burners or hGH inevitably fail to satisfy the subject’s underlying lack once they are reached (Kotzé et al., 2020). Therefore, IPED consumption can be conceptualised as a means of intensifying the dissatisfying state of bodily desire, pushing the physique beyond its natural limits in order to sustain its status as the substituted *objet petit a*. In short, IPED consumption is the result of the subject desiring too strongly and becoming consumed in the never-ending building of the body as a means of addressing the lack at the heart of their subjectivity. Thus, their consumption is an inevitability for many committed gym users, whose need for constant desire mandates them to perpetually look beyond their current physical condition.

Phillip explained this to me when I enquired about his decision to start using AAS, stating ‘*I reached a ceiling where I felt that I knew everything that I needed to know about my training and my diet, my mental state and my ability to sleep. [...] I felt having accumulated all that, now was the time to put in a supplement*’. Similar narratives of reaching a natural limit or ‘*ceiling*’ were common within my sample, as aspiring powerlifter Johnny, when asked about the likelihood of IPED consumption in the near future, concluded ‘*I think long-term definitely, but naturally I haven’t exhausted a good diet and good training protocols yet*’. This again speaks to my sample’s compulsion to continually erect barriers to their satisfaction as, when the natural ‘limit’ is attained, its hollowness as a means of addressing subjective lack is revealed. Thus, IPEDs must be introduced in order to prolong the state of dissatisfaction and direct the subject’s desire towards further enhancement.

Crucially, Hall (2019: 170) also explains the potent psychic appeal of IPEDs, arguing that, ‘when this commodity has a corporeal effect— such as that provided by lifestyle drugs—its function of bringing about a sense of growth, of enhancement, of accumulation, is [...] further intensified’ (see also Macho et al., 2021). This differentiation is crucial in addressing the potency and widespread appeal of IPEDs. As discussed earlier, the biomedical enhancement literature offers a dichotomy of natural versus unnatural (see for example Buchanan, 2011), which disregards key concepts from psychoanalytic theory. Following Hall’s (2019) above contention however, it is now worth extending that appraisal in line with this chapter’s central argument. Whilst Buchanan is correct in his contention that the subject is *naturally* drawn towards enhancement, he fails to grasp the role of dissatisfaction and desire in fuelling and perpetuating this need to progress. Instead, biomedical enhancement should be seen as the subject’s fruitless attempt to address and overcome the lack that underlies the human condition (Žižek, 2000), as we strive to recover from a place of deficit rather than travel to a place of enhancement. As such, ‘enhancement’ ought to be read more accurately as compensation, as any improvement brought about by drugs, training or technologies fundamentally fails to bring the subject closer to a state of satisfaction and instead leads to excess and bodily *jouissance*. This was expressed by my sample within their numerous acknowledgements that consumption constitutes ‘*a treadmill*’ (Neil) that ultimately results in long-term medicalisation and negative health implications. Leaning again upon the concept of *jouissance*, though careful to distance themselves from notions of drug abuse and misuse (see Monaghan, 2002), most users were keen to regale an anecdote of a friend or acquaintance whose IPED consumption embodied the damagingly perpetual nature of enhancement. Once such example was supplement brand owner and former bodybuilder David, who spoke gravely about his client, John:

‘John’s coming down later, he’s had a kidney transplant, cancer, heart issues, he’s now diabetic. He used to be one of the UK’s strongest men, he used to take 500mg of Anadrol [brand name for the AAS oxymetholone], he used to use 5mg barrels - normal people use two. He used to use a lot. The reality is that he has spent a good year in hospital, he’s had a kidney transplant, he’s now diabetic and is extremely depressed because his whole identity was around being a strongman. Now he’s probably got another three or four years to live and he’s in his mid-forties.’

David's account of John, whose unending quest to enhance his strength had left him with life-threatening health issues, speaks to the potency of IPEDs as a means of perpetuating dissatisfaction and the resultant state of corporeal *jouissance*. Similarly, Ben told me:

'I don't just want to have a house full of trophies and nothing else. I know guys who've had good competitive careers but got nothing and their bodies are all used up from all the gear. They've got a shitty little flat with a load of trophies, no wife, no kids – nothing to show for it other than when they go in the gym people say, 'he used to be massive'. That's no good to anyone.'

Ben's description captures the inevitable long-term effects of constant bodily desire and how a misrepresentation of the *objet petit a*, fuelled by IPED consumption, can ultimately result in a life devoid of any true substance. Though less extreme than David's client or Ben's fictitious example, within my IPED-using sample the normalisation of significantly harmful side effects of consumption was commonplace. Just as easily as the men could list the various compounds and quantities of drugs they consumed, they could also catalogue the multitude of physical and mental ailments they experienced as a result. Dom, for example, spoke candidly about his experience of AAS compound trenbolone during our lengthy interview in Predator:

'The insomnia that comes with trenbolone, that can be a real fucking battle. That really grinds you, and that's from personal experience as well. Paranoia comes with trenbolone, mixed with insomnia and high levels of test[osterone], that's not something to be frowned upon for mental health. That's for example what pushes people to suicide.'

Despite this troubling admission however, Dom expressed no inclination to cease his consumption, instead viewing the extreme impact of the drug upon his mental health as a necessary evil given its efficaciousness. This was also reflected in David's experiences of the compound, which had left him with enduring psychological impairments. Speaking at his supplement company's headquarters on a drab industrial estate, he told me, *'I don't get anxiety attacks, I get- I believe the medical term is manic spells - where I become very erratic and I have to be busy doing things. So it kinda looks like an anxiety attack but it's not [...] I never had that before I used trenbolone.'* Both of these serious repercussions, alongside a multitude

of physical impacts ranging from ‘*acne and bad spots*’ (Sam) through to David being ‘*convinced that [he] was gonna die*’ from excessive DNP¹⁰ use, illustrate the extreme levels of *jouissance* that result from the perpetuity of bodily dissatisfaction and the ceaseless reproduction of IPED-fuelled desire. Whilst previous scholarship has documented the serious financial and psychological harms caused by the suspension of desire in commodified practices like gambling and excessive retail consumption (see Hall et al., 2008; Smith and Raymen, 2017), the lasting bodily damage caused by the physical manifestation of this lack in the enhanced body takes a more noticeable and, arguably, more dangerous form. Thus, by directing the subject’s desire to the carnal being itself, IPEDs provide an endless cycle of dissatisfaction and, ultimately, irreversible health implications.

6.1.6. Addiction and desire

Given the role of IPEDs in fuelling the subject’s desire for bodily progression, it is now worth examining the topic of addiction and dependence. Although calls for IPEDs, particularly anabolic steroids, to be conceptualised as addictive substances date back to the late 1980s (see Kashkin and Kleber, 1989; Brower et al., 1991), users’ dependence has only relatively recently received any robust academic scrutiny (see Quaglio et al., 2009; Tan and Scally, 2009; Kanayama et al., 2009).

Both the IPED-using and non-using populations within my sample acknowledged the psychologically addictive nature of IPEDs, in line with the orthodox view that the substances ultimately exacerbate users’ underlying bodily insecurity and create a cycle of dependence (see Greenway and Price, 2018). The narrative of psychological addiction provides an important frame within which to highlight the necessarily unending nature of bodily enhancement. IPED harm reduction specialist Rob, speaking in relation to his own long-term AAS use, addressed this:

¹⁰ DNP, short for 2,4-Dinitrophenol, is an extremely efficacious fat burner (Grundlingh et al., 2011) and one of the most dangerous IPEDs on the illicit market.

'There is a huge psychological dependency [to IPED use] where people feel that they're not a man anymore and there's a paranoia of losing size if they don't take the gear [...] In essence our vanity increases, and it increases at the cost of other aspects of our personality. The physical becomes so important to you that any damage to that is much more damaging to you as an individual, so you feel like you're losing who you are. So there's a big driver right there to stay on chemicals, because if I don't then I can't retain this physique and I'm no longer anybody. It's something I've been through, going from benching 220kg for reps and being an absolute monster and every time you walk into a room everyone going, 'what the fuck has just walked in here?', to now just being a fat middle-aged bloke who's as weak as a kitten.'

Rob's candid admission that the '*physical becomes so much more important to you*' is telling, as having substituted the body as the *objet petit a*, his desire was entirely bound up within its perpetual dissatisfaction, to the detriment of '*other aspects of [his] personality*'. However, his obvious distress at having transitioned from being a formidable member of the hardcore fitness community to being '*as weak as a kitten*' appears to contradict my contention that the subject is wilfully drawn towards bodily dissatisfaction. Whilst, on the face of it, this is a valid critique, the apparent paradox actually illustrates the wretched nature of subjective lack and the need to differentiate between *happiness* and *desire*. Hall (2012a) describes how the constant state of dissatisfaction - brought about by the system's conveyor belt of commodified items promising to appease our innate lack - leaves the subject with an insecure feeling of objectless anxiety. From this, it is clear that a life of perpetual dissatisfaction and suspended desire, whilst psychically appealing, inevitably leaves the true *objet petit a* unresolved and therefore the subject must continue to live with a gnawing anxiety. Therefore, although Rob's significantly decreased bodily capital represents a further source of desire, it simultaneously characterises a loss of identity that he struggles to grapple with. More interestingly, Rob's experience of corporeal *loss* ultimately captures the long-term emptiness of the physique as a stand-in for the lost object and the inherent issue of attaching such meaning to a biological, fallible entity. The inevitable decay of age and wear that it is subject to means that, unlike other objects of desire, it is forever moving away from the subject's efforts of enhancement. However, as was made clear earlier, it is this flawed, incomplete nature that endears the body so effectively to the subject's innate sense of lack, and therefore Rob's nostalgia for the period

where he was an *'absolute monster'* simply reflects his continuing misidentification of the physique as the *objet petit a*.

Atop this psychological dependence however, a chemical element of addiction acts to increase IPEDs' potency in accelerating bodily desire. An awareness of this biological dependency was evident in many of my sample's acknowledgement that their bodies had ceased the natural production of testosterone (in line with the body's imperative of hormonal homeostasis) and therefore, even if their inclination to enhance their physiques were to subside, they would remain reliant upon synthetic hormones. Lee explained this to me:

'I don't think I'd ever be able to drop gear completely, at my age and the amount of time I've been using it I'll probably have to stay on a low dose just to maintain libido and keep clarity in my day-to-day functions. I'd need TRT [testosterone replacement therapy]. I think if I dropped it out I would probably end up being not in the best shape and possibly mental state as well. If my test levels are low that's going to lead to all sorts of issues.'

This acknowledgement was common across my IPED-using sample and the necessity of self-administered TRT is consistent with the existing literature on this population (see Underwood et al., 2020; Christiansen, 2020). Sam conceded, *'You'll rarely get a retired bodybuilder who's competed over a number of years that won't have to use TRT. Especially if they're using at an older age [...] Me at the age of sixty, I'll definitely be on a TRT dosage'*. Though presented as an easily remedied inconvenience by users like Sam and Lee, the severity of the IPED-consuming population's chemical dependence was emphasised by Rob, as he compared users' reliance upon synthetic hormones to recreational drugs like heroin:

'N: You mentioned earlier about an addictive quality to steroids – is that more chemical or psychological?'

R: It's both, but I'd say more of a chemical dependency. If you're not producing hormones anymore you haven't got a choice – you need gear otherwise you feel like shit. So if you think about that when it comes to describing addiction, like when I take heroin I don't want to stop because I feel like shit when I don't. If I've got no test production then I'm gonna feel like shit, and I'd gonna feel ill and I'm not gonna sleep and feel depressed and emotional – so here's a drug that chemically fixes me.'

Here, the severity of users' reliance upon AAS from a chemical, as well as psychological, perspective is striking as, unlike the objects of desire described by McGowan, long-term IPED use also adds a biological component which inevitably increases their potency as stand-in lost objects. It is here again that Derrida's (1998) understanding of pharmakon can be applied as the synthetic testosterone in AAS, given its exogenous nature, acts both to 'cure' the users lack of natural testosterone, whilst simultaneously being the cause of the hormonal deficit in the first instance. This demonstrates the unique nature of IPEDs compared to traditional recreational drugs and how the long-term harms play out in the using population. Ultimately, this illustrates the suffering that users are willing to endure in order to perpetuate their bodily desire and how, given IPEDs' role in perpetuating a state of bodily dissatisfaction, human enhancement so successfully captures the lack at the heart of the subject.

6.2. Instrumentality, competitiveness, and hyper-conformity

Building out from this psychoanalytic foundation, we can now turn to the more conscious instrumental motivations as well as the immediate environmental and social influences that drive the men's drug use. Whilst I have argued that the need for perpetual dissatisfaction is universal, this analysis looks at the specific contexts in which the motivation to enhance the physique is played out and magnified.

6.2.1. Sporting success and the need to win

The most common instrumental motivation behind IPED consumption cited by my sample was a will to win in their sporting endeavours, coupled with the acknowledgement that '*everybody else is going to be doing it*' (Ben). Involvement in competitive sport increases the likelihood of IPED consumption by 91% (Sagoe et al., 2014) and therefore the instrumental use of drugs for athletic success constitutes a mainstay in the existing literature. A typical example of this can be found in my interview with amateur bodybuilder and online coach Sam, when I asked him about his decision to initiate drug use:

N: So when was the moment that you chose to go on cycle for the first time? What drove you to that?

S: Basically, I wanted to win. I wanted to become a pro, but with my genetic makeup if I didn't push onto that next level then it would have taken me a very long time to get there. In competitive bodybuilding it's not illegal, it's not like you're a professional footballer where you'll fail a doping test. So for me it wasn't a decision that I'll cheat, it was just part of the sport.'

This excerpt epitomises the dual themes discussed within this section. Firstly, Sam's privileging of his comparative performance over his long-term health illustrates his deep commitment to the competitive individualistic values of the bodybuilding community (see Kotzé et al., 2020). This dogma was echoed by Dom, who told me '*I have an athlete's mindset, a competitive mindset and that's why I do everything that I do*'. This '*athlete's mindset*' works in concert with a resignation that '*everyone you're up against will be taking gear*' (Kyle) to create something of a perfect storm for competitors, who feel a pressure to use IPEDs in order to avoid being cut adrift from their fellow contenders (see Grogan et al., 2006). Therefore, driven by hardcore gym culture's injunction to excel and avoid the dishonour of defeat, IPEDs become a mandatory part of '*hold[ing] your own on stage*' (Josh). Competitive bodybuilder Josh spoke of his consumption in strictly instrumental terms, expressing his disdain for non-competitive users when he argued, '*it's pointless screwing your body when you're not competing. [...] If it was a level playing field, if it was all completely taken out, then I don't think there'd be anyone using it. But it's not a level playing field so you're going to have to [use IPEDs] really*'. Clearly, were it not for the instrumental gain that results from '*screwing your body*', Josh would prefer not to use enhancement drugs. However, he feels that the burden of sporting performance outweighs his long-term health. Thus, as the proverbial genie has been out of the bottle within competitive bodybuilding and other strength sports for over six decades (Toohey and Veal, 2000; Kremenik et al., 2006) the competitive athletes in my sample unanimously conceded that '*you'd be stupid not to [use IPEDs]*' (Tim) within untested events, where consumption is fundamentally '*part of the sport*' (Sam) (see Morgan, 2006). This was echoed by David, who described the moment he first discovered the ubiquity of IPED use in competitive strongman events:

'I started in strongman at twenty-one. I did my first competition and turned up and everyone was like, 'what have you had?'. I was like, 'I had two coffees and like four flapjacks'. And they were like, 'what are you talking about? We meant gear'. That was 2009 and they were all talking about what steroids they were taking, and I remember being annoyed that I believed all the bullshit [about natural athletes] and within four weeks I was on my first ever cycle.'

As epitomised by David's account, his naivety was soon dispelled as his competitors revealed their universal use of 'gear', leaving him at a significant disadvantage. His recollection captures the reality that, far from perceiving themselves as deviant, the use of IPEDs in the context of competitive strength sports in fact echoes the prevailing values of individual attainment and amour propre (Hall et al., 2008) within the hardcore fitness community. For this reason, users like Dom, Sam and Josh's consumption ought not to be castigated as inherently deviant, transgressive behaviour, but instead understood to reflect the values of their peers and the commercial interests of competition organisers (Hughes and Coakley, 1991; Waddington and Smith, 2009; Matthews and Jordan, 2019). This speaks to the complete acceptance of IPED consumption within the bodybuilding community (see Parker et al., 1998; Turnock, 2018) and how this cultural context is crucial to consider in relation to my sample's use (van de Ven and Mulrooney, 2017; Turnock, 2021a).

This unashamed normalisation of IPED use somewhat throws into question the actual *enhancement* offered by the substances themselves. Drug use in this context more closely echoes Conrad and Potter's (2004) notion of biomedically-enhanced normalisation. Conrad and Potter assert that normalisation, in this sense, refers to users bringing the body in line with prevailing norms or standards, and therefore, as Josh's consumption functions to level the playing field, it creates a measure of fairness rather than advantage. As a result, sporting arenas like bodybuilding shows and powerlifting competitions can be described as 'dopogenic environments' (Backhouse et al., 2018), as they foster a sense of legitimacy and acceptance of use as well as connecting competitors with like-minded bodyworkers to whom they can assimilate their drug use. However, looking beyond this basic definition, the events can also be described as dopogenic due to their efficiency in perpetuating athletes' bodily desire. My

sporting participants' constant concern for their fellow competitors' physiques – under the guise of '*checking out the opposition*' (Luke) – illustrates the impact of the physical environment on the stimulation of desire, as the multitude of built bodies provides the men with a means of advancing their bodily ideals whilst erecting yet more barriers to their satisfaction. As such, Backhouse et al.'s (*ibid.*) concept fits alongside an understanding of bodily desire to uncover the impacts of these environments on my sample's drive to enhance their physiques.

6.2.2. '*My physique [...] is my advertisement for my business*': the importance of enhanced bodily capital for health and fitness professionals

Throughout my time in the field, it became evident that a range of employment opportunities availed themselves to those with 'boosted' bodily capital (Kotzé and Antonopoulos, 2019). In particular, these roles centred on the precarious health and fitness industry, which many of my IPED-using sample worked in as personal trainers, online coaches, and gym staff. As was noted in Chapter Two, the health and fitness industry has '*blown up*' (Tim) within Stoke-on-Trent and, given the collapse of the city's hubs of production, constitutes a seductive avenue of employment for the city's many bodyworkers. Within this context, and particularly given the ocular nature of the sector, my sample continually stressed the importance of their bolstered bodily capital as a means of attracting and retaining clients. On this, aspiring bodybuilder Josh conceded '*when it comes down to it, you need the look*'. According to Ed, this '*look*', which is broadly in line with the prevailing masculine body ideals (see Wagner, 2017), has grown increasingly important in marketing online coaching and PT services, as '*potential clients will look to people who are in good shape to help them, because it shows that they know what they're talking about*'. Ed's chemically-enhanced bodily capital therefore functions as proof that he is capable of enacting similar corporeal development in his clients, despite the fact that a layperson, even with the aid of IPEDs, could not realistically achieve his physique without years of sustained bodywork and ascetic dieting. Therefore, in the words of Sam, '*my physique, in effect, is my advertisement for my business*'. This striking statement

echoes Hutson's (2013) finding that health and fitness professionals' built bodies constitute their 'business card', fostering trust and respect from their clients and offering a physical depiction of their qualification.

Delving deeper however, Sam's corporeal '*advertisement*' arguably functions as the object of desire for his customers, as they purchase his expertise on the promise of similar bodily growth. The coach-client relationship is therefore, to some extent, premised on what René Girard (1979) terms 'mimetic desire', the suggestion that desire is stimulated not from within but instead is best understood as coveting others' looks or possessions (Hall et al., 2008; Smith, 2014). As such, the PTs and online coaches I encountered marketed themselves as manifestations of the desirable and largely unattainable ideals discussed earlier and their services therefore fed upon their clients' perpetual need to desire. Many of the PTs and coaches to whom I spoke described the cyclical nature of their relationship with their clients, whose motivation to train inevitably waxed and waned throughout the year, rendering their long-term progress minimal. However, if the clients ultimately did not desire the attainment of their bodily goals, working under a coach with an idealised physique was perhaps more of an attraction than bodily progression itself. Therefore, the professionals whose physiques most closely echo these bodily ideals are more attractive to prospective customers. Bemoaning this, sports rehabilitation practitioner Paul told me, '*it used to be your client's change in appearance that led to them coming to see you, so they wouldn't necessarily give a shit how you looked. But now it's your body that attracts the clients, you can't separate the two*'. Paul's resentment was mirrored by Dom, who admitted:

'I've had people come up to me and say 'I wouldn't go to so and so for PT because they look like this' or they're not in shape. By all means you don't have to be in shape to know what you're talking about, and anybody in shape doesn't necessarily know what they're talking about, but that's the perception [...] But it's a complete assumption that they come to me rather than the overweight or the skinny guy in the corner, who might have a PhD in sports science or mobility or whatever. But because they don't look the part not everybody will go to them. That puts a lot of pressure on you, so you have to train and stay in shape yourself. Even as small a pressure as that might be, it's still a pressure in the back of your mind thinking, 'if I get fat or out of shape am I gonna get as many clients?'

Dom's acknowledgement epitomises the sacrosanct role of the body as a means of attracting business, as well as the superficiality of the health and fitness market. In this context, the worked-on body can be read as a means of self-branding (Lair et al., 2005; Khamis et al., 2017), wherein the PTs and online coaches treat their physiques as products that can be sold to their customer base (Marwick, 2015). As such, they are in a constant state of bodily self-promotion, as Sam explained:

'That's my bug bear about the industry. You get a lot of guys who might not know a lot, but they'll be in awesome shape and get a load of clients because of that, but they're rubbish coaches. Then on the other hand I've worked with world-class strength and conditioning coaches and if they were on social media they just wouldn't get the clients because they don't come across as marketable. So it's having to play that game of marketing yourself and doing what you think is right to draw people in.'

Here, Sam acknowledges that fitness professionals have to '*play that game of marketing yourself*' in order to solicit business and, for coaches who lack the nous of producing self-branded content, attracting new customers is inevitably more challenging. For my sample this bodily self-branding was largely played out on SNS, as Ed explained that to be successful in the industry, one has to have a '*nice physique and be good at marketing [oneself] on social media*'. Echoing this, Sam continued, '*it frustrates a lot of people who are qualified and have gone through degrees and all that, who can't get a good following because they don't look the part. Then someone who's got one hundred thousand followers and posts photos of themselves looking ripped, they can create a client base in a day*'. This again demonstrates the privileging of image over ability, which led Paul to conclude that '*we now live in a world where posting pictures of yourself cooking in your underpants will get you clients and referrals*', as he grumbled about another local PT's recent Instagram activity. But how does the importance of a self-branded physique relate to my sample's IPED consumption? And why is marketing the corporeal self such a pressing concern?

The answer to both of these important questions concerns the precarity of many roles within the health and fitness industry and the subsequent anxiety experienced by this predominantly self-employed population. In his earlier admission, Dom describes the '*pressure*' brought

about by a reliance upon the biological form as a basis for one's branding and how, if he were to become *'fat or out of shape'*, his income may be negatively affected. By nature, the body is a highly unstable entity through which to market oneself (Shilling, 2003), as the unenhanced physique inevitably fluctuates depending on the season, whether one is bulking or cutting, and even what time of the day its presented. As a result, for men whose branded identity is premised on *'the look'*, a constant, cloying anxiety underpins their marketing strategy. This pressure is compounded by the precarious nature of many roles within the health and fitness industry, particularly within post-industrial locales like Stoke-on-Trent. On this, Ed acknowledged, *'it can be terrifying if the work isn't there. Especially in the winter months when everything fitness takes a dip'*. Ed's words speak to the seasonal nature of the health and fitness market and the reality that, during the dreaded pre-Christmas period, attracting and retaining clients is particularly challenging. Most notably, the series of national and local lockdowns during the latter part of my fieldwork exposed the true job instability and precarity in the lives of men like Ed and Dom. Discussing this in our follow up interview in November 2020, Ed admitted:

'The first lockdown was tricky, and I did take a bullet where I lost a few clients. The focus became trying to survive and just retain the clients I had. Then after that, because I haven't really had access to anything in regard to self-employment support from the government, I knew I just had to try and get as many clients as possible. I think where some coaches have gone wrong has been that they've treated it as a time to slack off, when in fact it's a time where you have to be as on it as ever.'

Ed's unenviable predicament demonstrates the lack of financial support available to this cohort throughout the pandemic. More interestingly however, Ed retained an upbeat, self-justifying positivity whilst discussing this, particularly as he emphasised the importance of not *'slack[ing] off'*. In line with his self-branded persona, it appeared that the injunction to perpetually sell himself (Bandinelli and Arvidsson, 2012) even bled into our interview, as he enthusiastically repeated the symbolically violent language of neoliberalism, wilfully ignorant of the structural factors that had left him in a position of extreme occupational precarity. Set against this, the use of IPEDs represents a means of bolstering job security and successfully

competing in a highly saturated, unsparing market. Therefore, to some extent, the drugs counteract the inherent instability of the body as a basis for a brand, and give the men heightened control over their commodified image.

It is here that we must address another fundamental question; what exactly is *performance enhancement* within this context? Unlike conventional conceptualisations of increased capability in the sporting arena and the well-versed narratives of ‘doping’, for health and fitness professionals, their enhancement was predominantly carried out in order to stay afloat and compete within the saturated health and fitness market. As such, IPED consumption in this context can be seen as fundamentally in line with the prevailing values of neoliberal capital accumulation. This is discussed by Kotzé and Antonopoulos (2019) in terms of *hyper-conformity*, as they extend the notion of instrumental use to encompass the advantages of an enhanced physique as a means of competing in the late capitalist system. Therefore, users like Ed, Dom and Sam illustrate a deep commitment to the values of neoliberal capitalism (Raymen and Smith, 2016) and, quite literally, embody this in their marketable frames (Marshall et al., 2020). However, whilst Kotzé and Antonopoulos (2019) present this hyper-conformity entirely through the lens of *consumption*, within my sample, the enhanced physique operated as a means of *production*, or more accurately *prosumption*, enabling them to instrumentally market their services like a curriculum vitae. As such, their hyper-conformity can best be understood as reflecting the ‘entrepreneurial ethic’ (Kotzé and Antonopoulos, 2019: 9) of late capitalism, and their IPED consumption can be read as a means of adding value to their corporeal asset.

This is supported by Hall (2019), as she critiques the suggestion that consumption is a subcultural activity. Hall argues that, on the level of values, users are essentially aligned with the dominant edicts of late capitalism that structure our lives and therefore cannot be said to offer any resistance or deviance. This is not to say that the hardcore fitness community do not constitute a group with their own norms and cultural practices. Rather, the core ethos of perpetual self-promotion and the monetisation of the self within this population precludes any

suggestion that IPED consumption contradicts the values of late capitalism. Digging deeper, if men like Ed feel a reliance upon their enhanced bodies to solicit business, could the cut-throat health and fitness industry, and the broader local economy of Stoke-on-Trent, be considered a dopogenic environment (Backhouse et al., 2018) itself? If one must rely upon one's bodily capital to stay afloat and remain at all times 'on it' (Ed), does this economic backdrop not encourage IPED use? For my sample, the precarity of their employment was an important factor in their consumption and therefore any advantage which allowed them to better build their brand was potentially the difference between relative prosperity and struggling to stay afloat. This illuminates the relationship between performance enhancement and late capitalism as, it can be concluded, the enhanced self is better equipped to compete in the 24/7 show of self-promotion and rugged individualism that is demanded (Crary, 2014). Ultimately, this speaks to the instrumentality of human enhancement in a far broader sense than simply the professions under study in this section.

6.3. The pleasures of consumption: the curious case of Phillip

This section turns to Mulrooney et al.'s (2019: 3) contention that an acknowledgement of pleasure constitutes 'an essential part of a coherent and reasoned response to steroid consumption'. As such, the following analysis will examine the chemical, symbolic and psychic pleasures of IPED use through the case study of Phillip, the project's oldest participant and ardent 'lifestyle' IPED consumer.

6.3.1. Introducing Phillip

Arriving uncharacteristically early to the retail park which housed the Costa Coffee I was to meet Phillip at, I turned off the car engine and instinctively checked my phone. As the drone of BBC Radio Stoke's daily phone-in was cut short, I messaged Phillip on Facebook to let him know of my arrival. No sooner had I sent the message, Phillip had replied to say that he was sat inside by the window, having still managed to beat

me there. At this, I swiftly picked up my Dictaphone and other essentials and rushed through the icy air into the refuge of the coffee shop.

Phillip waived me down immediately, his dyed black hair shimmering under the glow of a nearby lamp as he sipped his coffee. Broad-shouldered and immaculately dressed, he clasped my hand in a firm handshake and, once I'd ordered and received my drink, broke energetically into a sweeping monologue about his enthusiasm for my area of research, before grilling me on my methodological approach and academic career plans. Initially rather taken aback by this beguiling start, we soon settled into the well-versed debate around the relative worth of qualitative and quantitative research and my rather messy approach to data collection. Dictaphone set to record and settled into my rather flimsy metallic chair, it was time to interview this man who Paul had assured me would add something 'different' to my data.

(Extract from fieldnotes, 11/03/20)

The first point to mention about Phillip was his choice of career, which immediately explains his fascination with the minutiae of my methodology. Nicknamed 'The Doc' in Muscle Sanctuary, Phillip is a retired biology professor whose illustrious academic career has seen him employed by a number of prestigious universities in the UK. During his preamble to our interview, he ran me through his career trajectory:

'I have a BSc in plant biology and genetics, I did my PhD in virology and I was working in [retracted¹¹] and I then had an academic career with the research council. I worked with them for about twenty-one years in different research institutions [...] I became head of department and managed a large team of people and then moved to [a well-respected red brick university]. [...] I retired last summer. I published a lot of papers in my thirties and forties and I travelled the world, and that was one of the most enjoyable times of my life. Then later on in my career I managed people and taught hundreds and hundreds of students.'

¹¹ I have decided to omit Phillip's area of academic expertise in order to protect his anonymity.

However, it was not Phillip's enviable academic career that had motivated me to reach out to him, but his decision to enter the world of competitive bodybuilding in his early sixties. It was here that our interview began in earnest, as I asked him, brow furrowed, what had led a successful scientist into the typically anti-intellectual pursuit of building the body:

'I've always been interested in sport. I've been a surfer and a kite surfer all my life and when I was a teenager I was a rock climber and climbed many places in the world. Then in my late-thirties and forties I became a fell runner and I was an over-forty and over-fifty world champion. But I got to a point where I had run enough, I ran a million miles and I thought, 'that's it, I'm gonna give up running'. I remember I was competing in an ultra-distance event and we'd been racing against these guys from North Wales who were old but were very hard to beat. But they were like a bag of bones, like wiry old guys and I remember saying, 'I don't want to look like that.'

Following this glimpse of the long-term aesthetics of ultra-distance running, Phillip subsequently changed tack:

'After that I used to train in gyms just to keep up my fitness and people would come up to me and go, 'excuse me sir, do you mind me asking how old you are?', and they'd make a comment about how good my body was for an old guy. Eventually, a couple of guys came up to me and said, 'have you ever thought of competing as a bodybuilder?'. I looked online, went and did my first competition and won it [...] I won [retracted] in 2014, I've been on television and radio and the newspapers and I enjoyed it. I felt like at that stage in my life I was living a very healthy lifestyle, I was a WADA-compliant natural and felt like the lifestyle I decided to lead for a guy in his early sixties was a sensible way of approaching those years. I was retaining lean muscle at a time where I should have been losing it, I felt like I could either drink and not do much like a lot of old guys do and become miserable like a grumpy old man, or I could achieve something. When I won that first title it was such a fantastic feeling and I just felt like this is the right thing to do. It gives you a huge emotional boost as an over-sixty male who's approaching retirement. I followed that path religiously as a natural athlete for that time and I was very successful.'

Phillip's initial forays into competitive bodybuilding stemmed from a number of chance encounters in the gym where he received praise for his age-defying appearance and, appealing to his long-standing competitive sporting mindset, was encouraged to enter a local contest. Phillip's meteoric rise as a natural competitor, motivated by his determination to 'achieve something' as an older man, can be interpreted in line with his long-standing aspiration to excellence, and illustrates his focus on personal attainment. Beyond this instrumentality however, during this period Phillip took great pleasure in feeling 'healthy and strong'

alongside the psychological benefits that accompanied this as an older man, and this appeared to be his principal motivation to compete. However, this rather idyllic picture was ultimately unable to satisfy his bodily desire and, from this straightforward narrative of bodybuilding as a ‘*sensible*’ form of leisure, Phillip’s exposure to the bodybuilding community, coupled with his long-standing competitive individualist world view (Raymen and Smith, 2016) soon led him, in his rather coy words, to ‘*taking gear just like all the other meatheads are*’.

6.3.2. ‘*I saw what happens when you compete in your seventies*’: enhancing the aging body on stage and ‘responsible’ consumption

On first glance, Phillip’s reasons for chemical enhancement appear misplaced in this section, as the same steely, ultra-competitive instrumentality that dominated Ben, Dom and Ed’s motivations were evident in his initial decision to use:

‘What happened was, I got to know all of the over-seventies athletes who compete in the natural federations, the best of them in the world. I had been on stage with most of them and I saw what happens when you compete in your seventies. An over-seventies athlete who’s trying to strike a pose would do that [half-heartedly lifts arms above head] and would struggle to get their arm all the way up. I saw, in the over-seventy athletes, that they couldn’t do it any longer. [...] Anyway, I looked at my genetics and my physiology and had medical tests done, and [...] after my final [drugs-tested competition] in 2016, I decided to start self-administering testosterone, which I have now been doing since then. But I did it from a very informed basis, I did it with sports scientists at the university and my personal goal was to get into my seventies but still be able to have that mobility.’

Phillip placed his initial decision to consume testosterone firmly within the realm of enhanced performance, as his repudiation of the idea that he may be unable to perform basic bodybuilding poses was motivation enough to seek chemical assistance. His formative use in 2016 can be seen to be essentially goal-oriented (William and Taylor, 2002), allowing him to maintain the suppleness that his comparatively younger physique afforded him, and achieve the ‘*personal goal*’ of ‘*get[ting] into my seventies but still be[ing] able to have that mobility*’. In this regard, Phillip instrumentally set his sights on beating ‘*the best of them in the world*’ and viewed chemical enhancement as a means to an end in this pursuit.

Opposing the other sporting motivations discussed earlier however, Phillip concertedly framed his use within a narrative of expertise and academic rigour, taking great care to emphasise the ‘*medical tests*’ that ensured that he consumed IPEDs from a ‘*very informed basis*’ under the supervision of qualified ‘*sports scientists*’. In doing this, Phillip conceptualised himself as an ‘expert’ user (Christiansen et al., 2017; Macho et al., 2021), which was demonstrable in his eagerness to inform me, ‘*I’m doing it for a very different reason to all of the other people who you’ve spoken to*’. This self-identification as a fundamentally ‘*different*’ IPED consumer was evident too in his linguistic choices, as he opted to describe his drug taking as ‘*self-administering testosterone*’ in order to overlay the medicalisation of the consumption process, portraying the act not as one of ‘*taking gear*’ (Ben), but as a clinical procedure. In line with Christiansen et al.’s (*ibid.*) classification, Philip made clear that his consumption was ‘*informed through reading all the scientific literature*’ as, unlike swathes of the bodybuilding community (see Monaghan, 1999; Underwood, 2017), he held faith in medical and scientific institutions and advocated for a controlled, low-risk approach to use (Zahnow et al., 2018). He furthered his self-identification with the expert type through a continual denigration of other less responsible users, as he put himself in contradistinction from many nameless ill-informed drug takers:

‘I’ve had many conversations with men who’ve taken drugs in gyms, and I’ve often said to them, ‘what was your testosterone level before you started?’ They look at me blankly and I say to them, ‘so you won’t ever know if you come off the gear whether you’re going back to how you were before you started then?’ [...] they’re so clueless about it that they didn’t even think to measure everything before they made that first injection.’

Phillip’s assessment of other users as ‘*clueless*’ compared to his regimented consumption is reminiscent of Monaghan’s (2002) finding that IPED users develop a specific vocabulary in order to play down the harm or severity of their actions. In-keeping with this, Phillip painted himself as a responsible and informed user compared to the unidentified reckless other. This ultimately speaks to his self-perception as an expert and his conception of IPED use in this context as an academic exercise in performance enhancement, that he alone was qualified to

undertake. Admittedly however, considering Phillip's elite academic background and understanding of human physiology, the risk attached to his enhancement was limited (Christiansen et al., 2017), as was confirmed in a later interview by IPED harm reduction specialist Aaron, who conceded, '*If you're just doing relatively small doses, it's not going to do a great deal of harm and the long-term effects don't really matter at that age*'. This was reflected in Phillip's offhand remark that, '*If it ultimately means that I pick up an issue in my eighties, who cares?*' as, following his typically scientific mindset, he had calculated that the relative risk of harm was offset by the pleasurable benefits.

6.3.3. 'I am my own living experiment': the medicalisation of old age and mastery of nature

Although Phillip's initial motivation to enhance his testosterone levels can be understood as a form of sports performance, the subsequent effects he experienced led his consumption away from the instrumentality of bodybuilding and into the realm of medicalisation and pleasurable lifestyle enhancement (see Macho et al., 2021). Central to Phillip's thesis was his argument that, for healthy older men, enhancing one's testosterone levels can not only boost mobility and muscle mass, but also reverse the decline of libido and energy levels brought about by waning natural testosterone:

'We all reach this point when we go downhill, and the downward graph is strength, speed, intelligence, fitness, power, muscle mass – we're on a slippery slope. Some years ago, when I was married to my wife, who was a consultant, a gynaecologist, she used to talk about getting her HRT [hormone replacement therapy] when she was fifty-five. I talked with my fellow scientists at [retracted] and we discussed why it is that our wives are on HRT when they reach the menopause, and yet men who are post-menopausal and are beginning this slippery slope can't access TRT because it's not recommended by the NICE guidelines. The reason they don't is because many of them have got cardiovascular disease and diabetes, so the recommendation for the population as a whole is no TRT. Yes, if you've had testicular cancer you get TRT, but we recognise that in the UK there is a group of over thirty/forty/fifty men, and I was an over-sixty example, who've looked after themselves all their lives – who've never been overweight or smoked or drunk excessively - but can't get TRT. I knew when I won my title there was only one way I was going to go, and it wasn't to go and join the over-seventy old guys. So we decided that we would kind of use me as a case study and then try and present an argument that if you are a fit and healthy over-fifty or sixty year-old male and your wife is getting HRT, and she says let's go to the Caribbean for three weeks and do a windsurfing holiday and you say, 'no no, why don't we just stay at home and potter round the garden?' because your testosterone

levels are bottoming out – why shouldn't you get some testosterone as well and say, 'yeah, and we'll do some motocross as well or we'll get some mountain bikes'? Why shouldn't you be able to live your life to the full as an older man if you're fit and healthy? [...] If we do manage to publish a paper on it, our paper will say, how is it that the NICE guidelines for women say that unless you're at risk of oestrogen-dependant breast cancer HRT is on the cards for you, whereas for a man you will be told by your GP, 'yes but those things happen to you, this is all part of getting old Phillip'?

Importantly, it is first worth stressing that the current scientific literature supports Phillip's contention that men experience a natural reduction in their testosterone levels as they age (Andersson et al., 2007; Travison et al., 2009) and a nascent body of work now exists to examine this relatively newfound phenomena of self-medicated TRT (see Christiansen, 2020; Underwood et al., 2020; Dunn et al., 2021; Harvey et al., 2021). Begley et al.'s (2017) UK National IPED survey found that 7.8% of male users employed drugs as a means of hormone replacement. Although it is important to acknowledge that a diversity of motivations may lie behind this use, this data suggests that Phillip is not alone in employing IPEDs as a means of remedying declining testosterone levels or 'low-T' (Dunn et al., 2021: 2). However, unlike Underwood et al.'s (2020) sample of online forum and SNS users, who sought AAS to remedy their self-diagnosed low-T as young men, Phillip situated his advocacy for self-administered TRT firmly within the discourse of anti-aging. This is discussed by Kimergård (2015: 289), as he notes that one of his AAS-using sample's auxiliary motivations for consumption was 'maintain[ing] appearance when getting older', given the potency of substances like testosterone and hGH in combatting the natural degradation of users' muscle mass and resisting the depletion of energy and drive that occur during the aging process (Perls, 2009; Evans-Brown and McVeigh, 2009; Sattler, 2013).

Within this discourse, Phillip highlighted what he perceived as the gendered hormonal health inequality between aging men and women. This discord led him to advance an argument for the *medicalisation* of the male aging process, as he volunteered his body as '*a case study*' through which to combat the natural degradation of the corporeal self and set a scientific precedent for other '*fit and healthy*' older men. Whilst Gruman (2003) notes that anti-aging is

far from a contemporary phenomenon, Dunn et al. (2021) contend that contemporary society somewhat conflates the natural physiological decline of the body with the discourses of disease and infirmity (see also Fleming, 2019; McGee, 2020). Within the medical community, de Grey (2005: S49) pejoratively conceptualises the aging process as ‘the lifelong accumulation of various intrinsic side effects of normal metabolic processes, which ultimately [...] disrupts metabolism and causes severe dysfunction of tissues and the whole organism’. Viewed this way, *natural* aging is seen as something of a contradiction in terms and thus becomes a malady to be overcome and mitigated against (Dunn et al., 2021). It is this perspective that Phillip can be seen to be wholeheartedly adhering to in his central argument for regenerative TRT. This is evident throughout his account, as he painted the natural process of bodily aging as a ‘*slippery slope*’, where one’s ‘*strength, speed, intelligence, fitness, power* [and] *muscle mass*’ are steadily eroded and replaced by the symbolic death of withdrawing from public life and ‘*potter[ing] round the garden*’. Before unpacking this however, it should be stressed that this analysis does not set out to deride Phillip’s displeasure at the realities of aging, particularly given the existing raft of scholarship around the challenges of age-related deterioration and older adults’ life stage crises (see Lieberman and Peskin, 2013; Segal et al., 2018). Instead, it is Phillip’s refusal to accept this natural decline and subsequent motivation to prolong a youthful, efficient physique through medicalised means that is of interest here.

Importantly, Phillip acknowledged that his natural testosterone levels for a man of his age ‘*were not low or anything*’ prior to his IPED consumption and therefore, he told me, there was ‘*no doubt whatsoever in my mind, it is performance enhancement*’. This statement, as well as reflecting his fixation with competitive attainment, placed Phillip’s use within the realm of medicalisation as he problematised the natural, ostensibly healthy, bodily decline and instead sought to feel ‘better than well’ (McVeigh et al., 2012: 186). This mindset was reflected in his above question, ‘*Why shouldn’t you be able to live your life to the full as an older man if you’re fit and healthy?*’. In line with the medicalised intolerance of natural decline (Gilbert et al., 2000), Phillip viewed enhancement as a means of corporeal ‘repair’ (Conrad and Potter,

2004), as it enabled him to stave off the ‘*slippery slope*’ of old age and maximise the pleasures and prestige attached to his physique. This is reflective of Christiansen et al.’s (2017) ‘wellbeing’ type IPED user as, although he demonstrates ‘expert’ type qualities, Phillip’s motivations are fundamentally in line with an ethic of enhanced lifestyle. Alongside his IPED consumption, this medicalised ethos extended to other, licit means of anti-aging:

‘Do I look sixty-seven? There’s a good reason for that, I go to a cosmetic surgeon and he takes the clock back twenty years by treating my face. [...] In all honesty if you were to say to me, do you bother with moisturiser? Nah, Botox works mate. Also, things like general sports supplements, I take a few of them. But stuff like BCAAs [Branched-chain amino acids¹²]? No. Dianabol, because that actually does something.’

Here, Phillip’s conviction to medicalised anti-aging was particularly evident as, reflecting Kraska et al.’s (2010: 181) contention that biomedical enhancement reflects an ethic of ‘immediate gratification’, he jettisoned what he perceived as ineffective substances in favour of more potent alternatives. This, again, speaks to Phillip’s medicalised *lifestyle* enhancement, as he sought out a ‘pill for every ill’ (McVeigh et al., 2012: 186), extending his concern beyond his muscles to encompass his skin, hair, and teeth.

Within my sample, this mindset was certainly not unique to Phillip. Ben told me that, following his competing years, his ‘*priority will be trying to de-age*’ using a combination of AAS and hGH. Phillip was, however, unique in his self-perception as a medicalised specimen or, in his words, ‘*my own living experiment*’. This approach to biomedical enhancement speaks to Phillip’s unwavering commitment to the medicalisation of old age, which was captured in his candid self-analysis at the close of our interview:

‘I’m doing it because I can and I can’t help myself [...] that’s my personality. I’m a scientist, I’m doing an experiment on myself like I have been doing for years and this is definitely an extension of that. When I was a kid, I had two laboratories in my attic, I was either going to be an electronic engineer or a biologist. So from a very early age I was a scientist and I was doing experiments in my own little way, I don’t see this as much different.’

¹² BCAAs are a popular sports supplement that claims to boost muscular growth and reduce fatigue in users.

Phillip therefore placed his penchant for enhancement within his wider identity as a scientist and conceptualised his IPED consumption as an extension of his academic career. Beyond the immediate conclusion that his latest project simply represented a means of combatting the perceived obsolescence of retirement however, Phillip's experimentation with the natural aging process speaks to a far more deep-rooted discourse of human mastery over natural, previously unassailable processes that is fundamental to this epoch of liberalism. Deneen (2018: 35, italics added) notes that a cornerstone of the current hegemonic ideology of liberalism is the injunction that 'man should employ natural science and a transformed economic system to seek *mastery over nature*'. This is in line with the contemporary privileging of selfhood over all other aspects of life (Milbank and Pabst, 2016), wherein individual sovereignty is understood as epicentral and inalienable. Thinking back to the debate around biomedical enhancement presented in Chapter Three then, Phillip adhered to Buchanan's (2011) deeply liberal notion that scientifically-led intervention in natural processes is a human inevitability (see also de Grey, 2005). As such, his substantial efforts to reverse the aging process and subvert his body's natural degradation represented his concerted attempt to declare 'war on nature' (Deneen, 2018: 26). Thus, Phillip's steadfast refusal to '*go grey, retire and mow the grass*' speaks to an underlying liberal hubris that humans singlehandedly have agency over their existence (Sandel, 2007). Therefore, Phillip's statement that '*I don't want to get old just yet because I've had a great life so far and I want to keep going whilst I can*' fundamentally illustrates a disregard for everything but his personal wellbeing because, after all, why should a minor inconvenience like aging get in the way of his enjoyment?

6.3.4. Testosterone as a gateway to the good life of 'perma-adolescence'

Having unpacked Phillip's antagonistic relationship to his body's natural decline, it is now crucial to answer some pivotal questions about his relationship to the drugs he injected and

interrogate his underlying motivations for use. In short, what pleasure did he derive from self-administering testosterone and attempting to overcome the aging process?

Before exploring this pivotal question however, it is worth painting a fuller picture of Phillip's lifestyle and, more importantly, the image he liked to broadcast to his 416 Instagram followers. Following his retirement, Phillip's attentions were myopically focussed upon the upkeep of his chiselled physique and his even more chiselled sports car, and it was these two objects that constituted the main themes of his SNS posts. Devoid of any close family and long-since divorced, he wholeheartedly carried his professional focus upon attainment and perpetual betterment into these pursuits and, drawing on a seemingly endless reserve of capital, lived his life in transit between gyms, airports, and his towering rural home. Phillip perhaps summed himself up most accurately when he told me, *'To put me into context, it was my sixty-seventh birthday recently and I spend the morning driving an E-type Jaguar around the Warwickshire countryside and then in the evening I went to a lecture about George Mallory and the Everest expedition of 1920'*. This recollection of his *'perfect day'*, as he described it, illustrates Phillip's yearning to feel his experiences intensely (see Greif, 2017) and, to draw upon popular Instagram parlance, to *live his best life*.

Given this context, Phillip's motivation to chemically enhance his body can be understood as the epitome of lifestyle drug use (Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016). His consumption therefore represented an enhancement of *existence itself*. This sentiment was captured perfectly in his above fictitious example of a holiday in the Caribbean, where he placed his testosterone level as the fundamental difference between *'potter[ing] around the garden'* and engaging in extreme sports. This is reminiscent of Macho et al.'s (2021) conceptualisation of IPEDs as a means of unlocking the *'extraordinary self'*, which they juxtapose with the *'ordinary'* unenhanced experiences of users prior to consumption. Throughout Phillip's account, enhanced testosterone was bestowed with the status of an elixir of youth, providing him with the drive and lust for life that he perceived the aging process to be gradually stealing away from him. Acknowledging his status as a divorced man in his late-sixties, he continued:

‘I’m [taking AAS] partly because I’m interested in competing again, but to a greater extent I’m more interested in the quality of my life and being able to do things. I live on my own, if I do something, I’m doing it on my own. If you’re on your own and you are going to go on holiday, it’s very easy to talk yourself out of it and not do it, and you can just get very down in the dumps. But one of the benefits of having elevated testosterone is having more get up and go. I think when I started out doing it, I was thinking about bodybuilding, but the result for me has been that it has improved my ability to just go and do stuff.’

Here, Phillip’s description of AAS’ significance in encouraging him ‘to just go and do stuff’ speaks to his conceptualisation of IPEDs as broader lifestyle-enhancing substances. Considering his esteemed career and the attendant opportunities to travel and impact the world he was privy to as a younger man, Phillip viewed his enhanced testosterone as a means of reclaiming these past victories and constructing (or extending) the good life in spite of his old age. Phillip appeared to imbue his youthful past with an intense desire, as it sat (dis)satisfyingly out of his reach despite his efforts to chemically recreate it. The pleasure he derived from his, quite literally, testosterone-fuelled lifestyle was captured in his recollection of his most recent trip abroad, as he told me:

‘If you look back through my Instagram, you’ll see that I went to Miami for a month and had a fantastic time. If it weren’t for coronavirus, I would be shipping my [sports car] out to the States in June, driving across America in it and then going to Pebble Beach. Then I’d go and have a coaching session with my driving coach. [...] I am certain that if I had let my testosterone levels be normal, and they were not low or anything, I would probably not bother to do that. It makes me more likely to do something rather than not do something, it livens you up.’

This excerpt perfectly captures the status that Phillip afforded his elevated testosterone in his self-constructed good life. It is immediately clear that his ego ideal (Lacan, 1997), that is to say Phillip’s idealised conception of himself in society’s eyes, revolves around this description of taking in the vistas of Miami through his high-performance sports car’s windscreen, evoking the culturally ascendent ideals of liberty and youthful wanderlust. Crucially, Phillip positioned his chemical assistance as the object through which his ego ideal could be realised, imbuing the synthetic testosterone he injected into his body with a great significance. In his eyes therefore, without the ‘get up and go’ that lay within the vial of testosterone he consumed

each week, his ego ideal would remain an abstraction, or a fleeting, soon-dismissed thought that fluttered dimly through his mind as he ‘*clean[ed] the garage then [had] a sit down*’. Instead, with the aid of his enhanced testosterone (and despite governmental advice), Phillip spent the Christmas of 2020 in a luxury apartment in Dubai, triumphantly posting photo and video content of his lifestyle of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 2005) for his followers. Thus, his enhanced testosterone levels, as he saw it, set him in distinction from the ‘*miserable [...] grumpy old*’ men sheltering from the virus in their prison-like sheds and garages, and instead delivered him to a life of unencumbered sensation gathering (Bauman, 1997; Greif, 2017) and high-end commodified leisure (Raymen and Smith, 2019b).

This fantasy state was also intimately tied to his sensuality, whereby Phillip’s heightened testosterone levels further recreated the experiential aspects of his youth through an adolescent-like libido:

I remember when I first started using testosterone, sex was all I was thinking about all the time- I was like, ‘switch this off’ [laughs]. There was a significant sexual improvement when I took testosterone, to the extent that I honestly could have done with a couple of nice twenty-year-old girls who would pop round and see me every night.’

Phillip sought to transcend the natural decline in sex drive that accompanies the aging process and instead positioned his lifestyle as more akin to the hedonistic exploits of younger men, capable of pleasing ‘*a couple of nice twenty-year-old girls*’ each night (see Macho et al., 2021). Again, this illustrates his valorisation of youth and the indulgent, excessive physicality that he found lacking without the aid of IPEDs (see Christiansen, 2020). Ultimately, the object that lay between the decrepit, sexless wastefulness of old age and the prolongation of the good life of youth and virility for Phillip was the testosterone that he used, and it was this commodity that in effect protected his ego ideal from irretrievable obscurity.

However, Phillip’s consumption not only allowed him to enact his version of the good life, but also afforded him an enhanced experiential viscerality in the form of heightened confidence and assertiveness. Existing literature suggests that AAS consumption can provide

users with a ‘confidence boost’ (Hanley Santos and Coomber, 2017: 37) wherein, as well as the pleasurable sensation of feeling attractive and revered, they experience a fundamental shift in their outlook and self-concept. This experience of heightened self-confidence and forthrightness was present across my IPED-using sample, as Dom asserted, ‘*testosterone will give you the [...] confidence to do things you never thought you’d be able to do*’, whilst Sam noted ‘*You feel better when you’re on cycle [...] there’s definitely that psychological boost*’. More pertinently, Philip enthused, ‘*my view of the world changes when I take testosterone [...] Take, for example, this conversation that I’m having with you now, [enhanced testosterone] makes me more assertive and full of ideas [...] it makes me want to go and make the most of life*’. This admission again emphasises the role of testosterone in facilitating Phillip’s concept of the good life, as the pleasurable effects of increased assertiveness and confidence underpinned his drive to reject the passivity expected of him as an older man and instead, as he told me with a flash of his whitened teeth, inspired him to behave like he did when he ‘*was in [his] thirties*’. Clearly, this enhanced ‘*view [of] the world*’ was the platform upon which Phillip could live out his ego ideal and his Dorian Gray-esque rejection of the aging process.

But why did Phillip long for a youthful body so intensely? And more poignantly, why did he pathologise the aging process and subsequently construct his version of the good life around these symbols of youth and virility? From his account, it is clear that Phillip ultimately sought a state of ‘perma-adolescence’ (Greif, 2017: 84), wherein the experiences of youth could be replicated ‘ad infinitum’. As such, his artificially youthful body, hedonistic, jet-setting lifestyle, and love for fast cars reflects Hockey et al.’s (2010) assertion that youth is no longer defined by age, but through *lifestyle* (Barber, 2007; Brisman and South, 2015). Discussing this, Smith (2014: 93) concludes that ‘to be ‘middle aged’ or ‘old’ is not so much defined by years and months, but by ‘staying in’ and succumbing to the more traditional concepts of ‘adulthood’’. Therefore, under this liberal discourse of *choosing* youth, Phillip elected to deny the biological markers of late adulthood and instead opted for a ‘good life’ of rekindled

adolescence. Smith's (2014) statement can be placed within the process of lifestage dissolution (Hayward, 2013: 531), wherein previously delineated stages of maturation have merged to create a homogenous 'cult of youth'. This 'generational mulch' (Hayward, 2012: 215) has seen adults, who would have previously settled into lives of coherence and responsibility, become *infantilised*, whilst simultaneously, childhood has been cut short in favour of an elongated adolescence.

The reason for this is quite simple; *youth sells* (Danesi, 2003; Hayward, 2012). Therefore, the advertising instruments of late capitalism have deliberately cultivated an infantilised state of immaturity in order to maximise the flow of capital (Hayward, 2013). As such, Phillip's disregard of old age as simply a period of lack speaks to his infatuation with the late capitalist system, as he jettisoned all traditionally valuable aspects of older adulthood, like presiding over multiple generations of family, sustaining a long-term marriage, and reflecting upon cherished memories, in favour of the prolongation of youthful consumption. This depreciation of mature adulthood (Hayward, 2012) was present throughout Phillip's construction of the good life, from his rapturous relationship with his sports car, to his smoothed-out face and artificially firm musculature. Crucially therefore, for Phillip, IPEDs constituted the ultimate youth-affirming commodity, as he effectively purchased the means to unlock the virility and pleasures of youth that are widely advertised under consumer capitalism.

Although he was careful to present his IPED-enhanced perma-adolescence as enviable and idealised, a melancholy ultimately underlay Phillip's description, as what he constructed as the good life was essentially bereft of genuine, fulfilling human relationships. Whilst Phillip's endless stream of youth-affirming products and aesthetics presumably fostered dissatisfaction and consumer desire in his acquaintances (McGowan, 2016), his attempts to enhance his later years left him with an objectless anxiety (Hall, 2012a) and a dejected acceptance that he was alone in the world. This captures the fundamentally unfulfilling nature of consumer capitalism and a life of perpetual youth, contoured entirely along the lines of capital extraction and superficial value.

6.4.#Ripped: social media, prosumption and bodily desire

6.4.1. Will-to-recognition and performing for the Big Other online

Having explored the lifestyle aspects of IPED consumption, this section sets out to examine the role of SNS in perpetuating bodily desire and, by extension, my sample's use of illicit ergogenic aids. Before exploring the SNS under study and my sample's digitally-mediated content production however, it is first crucial to map their relationship with Facebook and Instagram and what role these platforms play in their cultivation of selfhood. Crucially, given my sampling process, each participant was active on SNS during the study and most interviewees (besides one) indicated to me that they simultaneously owned a Facebook and Instagram account. They typically spent between two to three hours on the SNS and most tended to post content - in the form of stories, posts, or status updates - at least every other day. As such, through my own researcher Facebook and Instagram profiles, new digitally-mediated data was only ever a swipe away and users' content perpetually littered both sites. Given the inherently ocular nature of my participants' posts (Fatt et al., 2019), it seems futile to rely upon the written word to capture the nature of their content. Instead, towards the close of data collection I contacted the participants with whom I built the most rapport to ask for their most liked images, which are displayed in Figure 5. as a photomontage (Goopy and Lloyd, 2005).

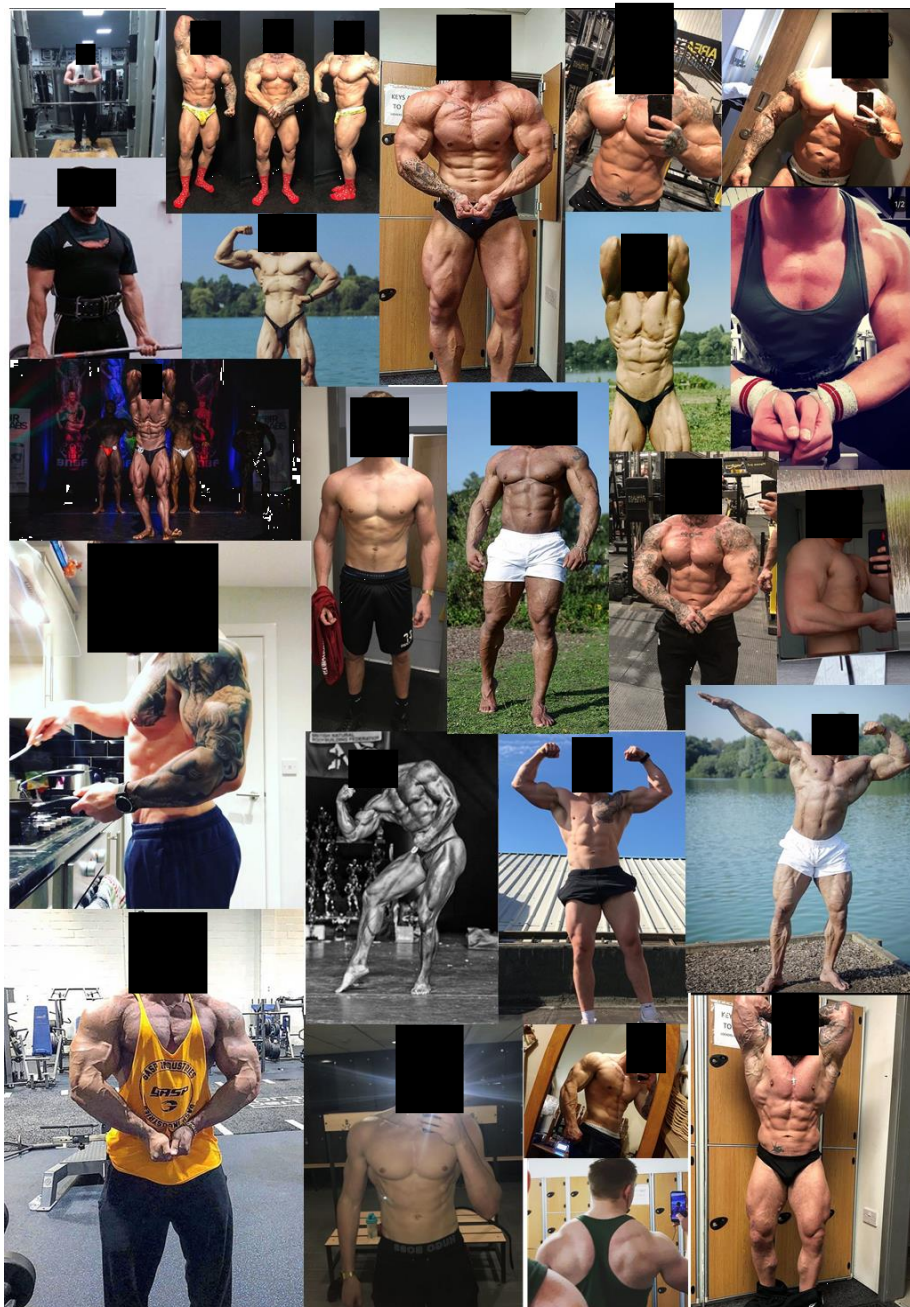


Figure 5. Photomontage of a selection of users' most liked Instagram and Facebook posts.

My sample's posts almost exclusively consisted of their sculpted physiques, as they posed for 'mirror selfies' (Abidin, 2016) and shared images of their competition triumphs, all the while tensing every sinew under the 'anabolic lighting' (Ed) of the gym or a natural beauty spot. Consistent with Tiggemann and Zaccardo's (2018) description of male fitspiration content, the men's posts showcase an over-identification with the male muscular ideal as well as a concerted attempt to self-objectify their physiques (Hakim, 2015). But why do they use SNS in this way?

In answer to this question, it is first prudent to unpack the ubiquity of SNS use on contemporary subjectivity and how selfhood, for my sample, is indelibly bound up in the content they *prosume* (Toffler, 1980; Fuchs, 2014). Yar (2012: 251) explores this within the notion of ‘will-to-representation’, which describes the ‘imperative to represent the self via electronic mediation’ and have one’s actions observed and validated by others. He contextualises this within digitised society, where “to be’ is ‘to be seen’ (Yar, 2012: 250), arguing that, by sharing self-curated content with one’s followers, we demand appraisal in the form of evermore likes and a perpetually increasing friends list. As such, whilst it may be their deep bodily desire that drives my sample towards bodywork, it is the need to have this recognised and *seen* that motivates their incessant posting (Millington, 2016). Yar, however, fails to address to *whom* this digital visibility is directed. Indeed, given the significant effort the men go to in order to produce regular, likable content, who is their intended audience, and why is this validation so significant?

In answer to this, Kotzé et al. (2020: 4) suggest that ‘social media operates as a surrogate [B]ig Other’ (see also Raymen, 2019; Kotzé, 2020). Utilising their participant’s rhetorical question, “‘If you didn’t take a selfie, did you even train?’” (Kotzé et al., 2020: 4), they contend that it is the act of sharing the workout that makes it real in the Big Other’s eyes. However, this position requires a little more nuance if it is to be applied to my participants. Whilst the premise of posting content on SNS for the Big Other’s verification is sound, Kotzé et al.’s (2020) claim that social media constitutes the Big Other in and of itself is problematic. Instead, are SNS not simply a means through which the subject seeks verification for their actions (or indeed physiques) from the Big Other? After all, the Big Other has no material reality and is instead the psychosocial construct for which we perform and structure our behaviour (Žižek, 2000; Winlow and Hall, 2012; Kotzé, 2019). It is my contention therefore that these social media *platforms* are just that; platforms through which we create ‘content’ for the Big Other’s verification.

Notably, although Chapter Two documented the breakdown of (belief in) the Big Other in Stoke-on-Trent following the collapse of the ‘solid’ bastions of industrial modernity, the Big Other cannot be said to be ‘dead’, given that it never truly existed in the first place (Winlow, 2019). Instead, whilst the particular institutions and cultures of the past, which formed a stable symbolic order for the subject under industrial modernity, have fallen victim to the onset of globalised neoliberalism, the contemporary subject still requires verification from the Big Other in order to validate their acts and escape the Real (Smith, 2014; Winlow, 2019; Kotzé, 2020). In line with the digitisation of contemporary society, posting on social media therefore represents a means of digitally performing for the Big Other. Whilst acts under industrial modernity were verified by the Big Other in terms of one being *known* and respected in the community, its validation now comes in the slew of supportive comments, likes and messages attached to successful SNS posts. This was reflected in David’s complaint in Chapter Five, where he contended, ‘*I think that there are a lot of people in the gym now who wouldn’t be if they couldn’t show everyone on social media*’. Speaking more broadly, Ed noted that ‘*people’s happiness and social standing is dictated by likes and following*’, perfectly capturing the relationship between SNS and the Big Other as, using their likes and number of followers as a metric, users can ascertain their ‘*social standing*’ (as determined by the Big Other) and feel accepted as part of the contemporary symbolic order. This was elaborated upon in relation to hardcore bodywork by Luke:

‘Years ago, you had to compete if you wanted to show off what you’d done because otherwise no one else is going to see it. Now you can just post a load of pictures on Instagram and say this is what I’ve achieved, and people will tell you that you look great and what have you, and you’re getting the accolade just by doing that.’

Compared to Luke’s experiences of bodybuilding in the 1990s, SNS provide a far more immediate form of gratification, more attuned to the hurtling pace of late capitalism (Crary, 2014). The immediacy of SNS as a means of proving one’s fidelity to the Big Other was also addressed by Ben, as he reflected:

'I think with things like Insta[gram], especially the stories that you have now, it's like instant gratification. You can show that you're at the gym at that moment and someone can comment on it like a second later. So you can put something on as you're doing your first couple of sets at the gym and then by the end of it you've got ten DMs [direct messages] with people saying you look really good [...] we don't have to wait for it now. It's almost like me going to the gym and then my trophy's there waiting for me when I get home, you know?'

The 'instant gratification' Ben describes illustrates the potency of this technologically-mediated means of broadcasting the act for verification as, in place of the long-term accolades and lifetime achievements we once based our selfhood upon, 'we don't have to wait for it now'. As such, immediate appraisal is offered in the form of complimentary 'DMs', which Ben viewed as akin to virtual trophies. However, unlike the solid silver awards that line athletes like Ben's shelves, the gratification offered by social media is inherently ephemeral and melts into air as quickly as it appears. True to the epoch of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2012), the hundreds of likes and tens of swooning messages soon disappear, driving the men to perpetually create bodily content. Further, given the ultra-competitive and atomising nature of social media, where users clamour to display their cultural and consumer capital (Smith and Raymen, 2016), this transformed means of seeking approval lacks the collectiveness and coherence described in Chapter Two. Instead, my sample were perpetually aware of other users 'doing bigger numbers' (Sam) than them, as they were forced to *compete* for the Big Other's approval. This led to some users developing 'tactics' to maximise their exposure, as Scott explained:

'You are always fishing for more likes, and then you start thinking, 'what gets me the likes then? This picture got likes, why? What was I doing?'. I can't work it out because one picture gets like 150 likes but this one's better, why's that? You can't figure it out.

N: How do you try to make sure you get the most likes?

S: The later at night [you post] the less people see, because by the time anyone gets up in the morning it's already down a lot of people's feeds. So what I would do is, most people are on it at night-time between probably six o'clock and nine o'clock when they're sat at home, so that's when I'll post. I said to Pete the other day as well, because he said his following's gone down, I said share your post on your story. That way you'll get more people seeing it and more people will click on your profile. It's all tactics.'

Scott's admission speaks to the pivotal role of social media in facilitating the Big Other's validation of the act. He experienced confusion and anxiety around the apparent disparity between the likes different posts received and, desperately attempting to overcome this, adapted his posting timing and patterns in line with the Big Other's command. Alongside this, Rob noted that the content of posts, as well as its delivery, is impacted by the need to maximise validation:

'I've gone through points where I've put pictures up and I've not got the recognition I expected to get and it's bothered me [...] It's bothered me to a point where I've created a more extreme picture and I've been there taking twenty photos from different angles until I got the one that made me look the biggest. [...] I've been down that rabbit hole of craving likes, been there and got the t-shirt.'

Confronted by a lack of verification from the Big Other, Rob felt forced to accentuate his physical size and the 'extreme' nature of his image. Similarly, Ben, bemoaning the numerous female influencers online, reflected:

'You go on any one of a hundred girls' Instas and there will be a picture of her having a meal with her boyfriend that gets thirty likes, then the next one is her stood in the mirror taking a selfie with her arse out and it's got five-hundred likes. You've only got to look at that to know which one gets more likes and ups their engagement and therefore sells their training plans better. So it suddenly goes from a personal account where they're putting snapshots of their daily life, to being a hundred pictures of their arse, one after another because they know that's what gets the likes.'

Just as Rob was compelled to post a more extreme image to successfully perform for the Big Other, Ben described how increasingly sexualised, self-objectifying posts elicit greater verification (see Marshall et al., 2020). As such, users seeking approval are compelled to share what the Big Other wants, rather than what they necessarily feel comfortable posting. Also noticeable here is the commercial aspects of maximising one's 'engagement', which creates a further dimension as, just like Ed described, posting desirable content on SNS increases financial returns as well as the Big Other's approval.

Finally, it is worth acknowledging the impact upon my sample of conceptualising likes as their primary means of illustrating their fidelity to the Big Other. Neuroscientific literature has

evidenced claims that SNS' quantifiable validation can become addictive to committed users (see Fabris et al., 2020; Priyadarshini et al., 2020; Marengo et al., 2021) and it is important to unpack the psychic implications of being able to numerically measure the Big Other's approval. Scott noted that his perpetual quest for likes '*takes it out of you [...] I was posting almost every time I went [to] the gym and I actually told myself to stop*'. His admission speaks to the infinitude of likes as a means of approval, as the dopamine released upon getting a notification (Burhan and Moradzadeh, 2020) makes receiving the Big Other's verification '*just a little bit addictive*' (Scott). Therefore, given that SNS are engineered to hold the user in a constant state of expectation and desire so as to maximise advertising revenues (Reisach, 2021), likes as a reflection of the Big Other's approval leave my sample in a perpetual state of seeking, and therefore posting, more.

It is at this juncture that we may apply a more critical eye to Yar's concept of will-to-representation and, more specifically, his ascription of the term 'representation' to describe these digitally-mediated subjectivities. Indeed, if 'to be' is 'to be seen' (Yar, 2012: 250), ought we not to re-term my sample's compulsion to perform on SNS as a will-to-*recognition*, given that it is the Big Other's validation that constitutes the end-point rather than the act of representation itself? Just as a well-trained animal abides their owner in the knowledge that their behaviour will be rewarded then, so too do the men create content for the Big Other via SNS, craving the recognition as a means of affirming their symbolic order. Thus, SNS, within as well as beyond the hardcore fitness community, are essentially platforms of recognition and any analysis should take this reality as its starting point.

6.4.2. The digital Lacanian mirror

Understood through the lens of recognition, there was an acknowledgement throughout my sample that, far from providing an accurate portrayal of their lives, the men's use of SNS was analogous to a '*highlight reel*' (Ed, Ben) where users '*only post photos looking their best*' (Joe). Bemoaning this, Ben noted, '*you see two percent of people's days [...] You don't see the day-to-day reality of it, all the boring bits*'. In line with this, most of my interviewees

admitted to doctoring their images, using various strategies to maximise their bodily and cultural capital (Wacquant, 1995; Barry and Martin, 2016; Smith and Raymen, 2016).

Principal amongst these was the practice of taking multiple photos and selecting the image that most captures their ideal self (see Lamp et al., 2019). On this, Ben conceded, *'you end up taking twenty selfies and only posting one that you've played around with'*, whilst Adam ruefully told me, *'I take a load of pictures and I end up only being happy with one, or sometimes none of them, even though I've not really changed'*. The minuscule differences in images largely depend on *'angles and filters and lighting'* (Will), as Adam noted *'on Instagram you can get a bit of good lighting and take a picture and be like, 'fucking hell, I look decent there'*. My sample also spoke in derogatory tones of gym members misrepresenting themselves by posting images of their physiques in a desirable condition, even if this did not reflect their bodies at the time of the upload. Ben explained, *'they'll diet and do a show or a couple of photoshoots and then they just rehash their pictures throughout the year. So they maintain that they're four percent body fat all year round because that's what gets likes, that's what people like to see'*. Similarly, Adam described knowing *'people who haven't trained for weeks but they say they're in the gym, looking great on social media. Then the next time you see them they're coming in saying that they've got a gut because they've been eating shit for three weeks'*. Here, their posts go beyond the misrepresentation of favourable angles and lighting, into the realm of downright deception.

The *'playing around'* with selfies hinted at by Ben refers to photo editing, using software like Photoshop and Facetune (Kleemans et al., 2018; Brown and Tiggemann, 2016). My sample commonly doctored their posts to ensure that their images contained *'no marks and no blemishes'* (Adam), leading Dom to conclude that *'you can see so much perfection on Instagram and so much photoshop, to an untrained eye you don't know what's real and what's not'*. As such, SNS become spaces of fantasy, where users post enhanced digital versions of themselves to appeal to the Big Other. With this in mind, can the various post-perfecting strategies described above be considered a digitised form of image enhancement? Certainly,

the use of platforms like Photoshop and the built-in filters on Instagram promote the ‘excessive naturality’ described by Kotzé and Antonopoulos (2019), whereby the natural markers of bodily attractiveness are accentuated, as blemishes are erased and muscle tone is more sharply defined (see also Kotzé et al., 2020). Though it is beyond the remit of this chapter to address such a claim, it is important to acknowledge the inherently *enhanced* nature of SNS, particularly within the hardcore fitness community.

But what is the impact of sharing these idealised images of the self on SNS? First, we must examine what my sample’s posts represent to their selfhood. As touched upon earlier in relation to Phillip, these edited and perfected posts constitute the subject’s ego ideal, the ‘wish to become like an admired other driven by an ego and super-ego that have matured as they enter the Symbolic Order’ (Hall et al., 2008: 180). Notably, the ego ideal is inherently unattainable and therefore represents the perfect image of oneself in the Big Other’s eyes (Žižek, 2006; Hall, 2019). However, by being able to manipulate and perfect their digital representation, my sample were able to somewhat attain the unattainable and, in their eyes, meet this ideal. It is here that we can introduce the concept of the *ideal ego* which, although sometimes used interchangeably with the ego ideal, in fact describes the subject’s identification with the ‘specular other’ (Hall et al., 2008: 180) and self-conception as the ideal image. This distinction is pivotal in unpacking the nature of SNS, as the ability to digitally enhance the self enables users to *become* their ideal ego, conflating the formerly unattainable ego ideal with the perfected image they post online for the Big Other to verify.

However, my sample’s identification of their digital image as the ideal ego left them with a feeling of discord, as their refined physique stared back at them from their phone screen, undeniably a reflection of themselves, and yet the same image of perfection could not be replicated in their offline self-image. Just like a child traversing a distorting mirror maze where a different contorted image leers at them from every wall then, what can be recognised as the self becomes blurred and obfuscated. On this, Adam confessed:

'If someone told me to take my top off, I'd be a bit nervous about doing it, but I do it like every day on social media. But I can control Instagram, if that makes sense. I can control it cus I've taken the picture, but I can't control it if somebody's looking at me from a bad angle or whatever. It's all control. What you're showing people is up to you.'

Adam's emphasis on the locus of control is telling, as he is painfully aware that his ego ideal is only achievable through the lens of social media and therefore, to the unfiltered and non-complimentary eye, he feels exposed and self-conscious. His admission evokes Hall's (2019: 171) question, 'Is Facebook or Instagram not the twenty-first-century version of the mirror in which the Lacanian subject sees their idealised image through the eyes of the other, feeling both recognition of it and alienation from it?'. Unpacking this, Hall is essentially questioning whether the user truly recognises their digital 'best self', or if they instead feel estranged from their own manipulated image. Similarly, Penney (2013: 2), describing the effects of digital mediation on users of dating apps, states that '[b]odies as presented under glass surfaces become manipulatable, non-visceral, gaze-oriented visual bodies, for consumption as objects', rather than the fleshy reality that exist offline. This sense of misrecognition was evident in my sample, as Adam noted that he '*put a false persona on*' when posting, whilst Will told me that he felt as though he '*catfished a lot of people, I just think I look a lot better online than I do in person*'. Referring to the act of catfishing, whereby fake online personas are used as a means of attracting romantic partners (Smith et al., 2017), Will viewed his digital self as a separate, idealised entity that was quite alien to his conventional experience of being in the world. Similarly, Dom's earlier admission that '*you don't know what's real and what's not*' on SNS is doubly significant here given that every user only posts an idealised version of themselves, and therefore trying to disentangle the real physique from the layers of editing and mediation leaves the subject unable to discern reality from fantasy. Given the lengthy periods of time that my sample spent prosuming on SNS then, how did this fantasy world impact on their bodily desire?

6.4.3. Are SNS dopogenic environments?

Whilst the relationship between SNS and bodily dissatisfaction is well-established within the media studies literature (see Kim and Chock, 2015; Fardouly and Vartanian, 2016; Kleemans et al., 2018), an application of the true nature of bodily desire is notably lacking in relation to the landscape of idealised images online. The crux of the following argument therefore is this: if my sample's bodies represent the *objet petit a*, and their unending journey of bodily dissatisfaction is perpetuated by a fixation on a necessarily unattainable ideal, surely the wash of perfected bodies they see each day on SNS function to exacerbate their desire and increase their drive to enhance their physiques. This contention ties back to Girard's (1979) notion of mimetic desire as these physiques exist externally to the user and therefore cultivate and mould their notions of bodily perfection. Therefore, the men under study can not only mimetically identify others' idealised physiques as the *objet petit a* (effectively the ego ideal), but also view their own edited and digitally-mediated body (their ideal ego) as an object of bodily desire that they also can (fail to) attain. Indeed, Dom noted that clients routinely presented him with images of their '*dream body*' that they encountered on SNS. However, these venerated physiques were essentially unattainable:

'You can't look like everybody on Instagram, for the simple fact of; a.) enhancement, whether that be anabolic or surgical; b.) photoshop; or even c.) say it is achievable to look like them without enhancements or photoshop, the dedication that person has shown over, not twelve weeks, but twelve months and maybe even years to get to the level they're at and to look the way they look.'

Dom captures the potency of SNS as a means of displaying the *objet petit a* given the ubiquitous chemical, surgical and digital enhancement on display, as well as the sense of instantaneousness that the format promotes. It is no coincidence that the primary platform under study is named *Instagram*, as the '*highlight reel*' (Ed, Ben) of physiques present themselves as within immediate reach and yet are ultimately unattainable without long-term commitment. It is this context that generally frames the existing literature's examination of IPED use and SNS-driven bodily dissatisfaction, as illicit ergogenic aids are commonly seen as a means of overcoming the disparity between one's fleshy reality and the fantasy ideals the subject sees on social media (see Melki et al., 2015; Griffiths et al., 2018; Kotzé and

Antonopoulos, 2019). This view was echoed by Ed as he stated, ‘*on social media you’ve got people saying, ‘oh yeah I want that physique’, but the only way I can get that physique is if I go on steroids. So I think social media has a massive part to play in [the increased use of AAS]’*. However, if we understand the subject as perpetually seeking to prolong their dissatisfaction and sabotage any attempts at satiating their desire (McGowan, 2016), Ed’s statement is problematic.

Whilst the cacophony of desirable physiques on Instagram and Facebook do ultimately push the subject towards enhancement through the stimulation of bodily dissatisfaction, users actively seek out these images as a means of impairing their sense of completion and keeping their body projects unfinished. Thus, as SNS are designed as echo chambers (Garrett, 2009), reflecting back what users wish to see, they represent the ultimate dopogenic environments (Backhouse et al., 2018), as they perpetuate bodily desire through an inexhaustible array of physiques through which to negatively compare oneself to. The platforms allow users to access bodies from across the world in order to cultivate corporeal desire, unshackling their comparisons from the local bodybuilding scene to encompass a global peer network (Turnock, 2018). Atop this, given users’ alienation from their own digitally-mediated selves (Hall, 2019), their edited bodies further represent objects of desire which advance the unending cultivation of their fitness (Bauman, 2012). Ultimately, this infinite suspension of desire acts as a ‘*vicious cycle*’ (Neil) which drives users towards unending bodily enhancement and therefore to the consumption of IPEDs.

6.5. Chapter summary

This chapter set out to interrogate what drives my sample to consume IPEDs, aiming to move beyond the existing literature and explore the issue of motivation on a psychoanalytic, cultural and economic level. I opted to undertake a bottom-up approach whereby analysis was underpinned by an investigation of the lack that lies at the heart of the subject. From this foundation, I have argued that a thorough understanding of IPED consumption ought to be grounded in the Lacanian notion of desire, where the subject is drawn towards dissatisfaction

and consequently erects barriers to its satiation (McGowan, 2016; Raymen and Smith, 2017). As a result, the body is employed by my sample as a substitute for the *objet petit a*, allowing them to perpetually strive to improve their physiques in place of addressing the lack that underlies their subjectivity. Therefore, my sample continually erect new barriers to their bodily satisfaction – in the form of ever-mutating ideals or increasingly challenging strength goals – as a means of suspending themselves in a constant cycle of desire. In line with this, IPEDs can be understood as a means of perpetuating bodily dissatisfaction, as users are able to desire the increasingly minuscule corporeal improvements promised by chemical enhancement, only to be left seeking further growth when these gains are achieved. This explains the ever-growing cocktail of substances they seek, as well as the *jouissance* (in the form of various deleterious side effects) they underwent as a result of their suspended desire.

Building out from this foundation, I have also examined the importance of place and context in my sample's consumption. Highlighting the instrumental use of IPEDs, it is clear that involvement in competitive strength sports directly drives consumption and that, as Backhouse et al. (2018) conclude, spaces of hardcore fitness constitute 'dopogenic environments'. Beyond this however, a number of my sample used IPEDs to gain enhanced bodily capital that worked instrumentally to increase their occupational marketability. Focussing specifically on personal trainers and online coaches, I have demonstrated the sacrosanct nature of the self-branded body within this highly ocular market and the subsequent draw of illicit enhancement. Ultimately, IPED consumption as a means of better marketing the self and competing in the health and fitness industry demonstrates a hyper-conformity to the values of competitive individualism and maximal capital accumulation that characterise neoliberalism (Raymen and Smith, 2016; Kotzé and Antonopoulos, 2019). However, beyond these instrumental motivations, I have also shown the importance of pleasure. Phillip's consumption encompassed the broader themes of self-medicalisation, the liberal discourse of human mastery of nature, and the contemporary constructions of youth, and has therefore functioned

as a lens through which to examine these lesser discussed aspects of use (Mulrooney et al., 2019).

Finally, the digital landscape of SNS has been shown to stimulate IPED consumption through my sample's compulsion to offer ever more 'likeable' content to the Big Other via their social media posts. This injunction to share one's '*highlight reel*' (Ed, Ben) makes SNS something of a fantasy space where my sample's ego ideal and ideal ego are conflated and they are ultimately estranged from their own images (Hall, 2019). The subsequent wash of edited, idealised bodies on social media makes the sites the most compelling dopogenic environments in contemporary life, given that my sample are offered a global peer network of unattainable physiques which stimulate their corporeal dissatisfaction and drive their desire to enhance the body onwards. Ultimately, this chapter illustrates the multi-faceted motivations that drive my sample towards illicit enhancement and how these various layers of influence afford IPEDs a potent appeal.

7. Supply

This chapter, which consists of four substantive sections, provides an analysis of the supply chain of IPEDs through the voices of IPED users, sellers, and industry professionals. Various elements of the market – from local gym-based supply chains to online SNS sellers – will be explored, and the interconnections between each highlighted. Starting with an examination of the production, the following explores my participants’ experiences of ‘traditional’ offline closed market supply before tracking the currents of digitisation and commercialisation that have accompanied the ascension of the online market (Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016; Turnock, 2021a).

7.1. Production

Before a picture of the distribution of IPEDs can be painted, it is vital to interrogate how and where the compounds are produced. This section will therefore examine the dual means by which illicit ergogenic aids are made, first unpacking underground laboratory (UGL) operations before turning its attention to licit pharmaceutical production.

7.1.1. Underground laboratories

7.1.2. Operation and market share

Consistent with Turnock’s (2020: 2) contention that ‘most users are likely buying UGL’, 77% (n=10) of my IPED-using sample acknowledged that most of their substances were manufactured in underground laboratories. According to Rob, *‘eighty to ninety percent of steroids [in the UK] are UGL- produced’* as well as a selection of fat burners like T5 and DNP. In relation to AAS, Carl told me that although *‘tablets can be made at home [...]* *Anything oil-based needs to be done properly in a lab. So most of the [UGL owners] buy their raws from China and then they produce them in the labs’* (see Llewellyn and Tober 2010; Denham 2019; Turnock, 2021a). Therefore, in the words of Aaron, *‘ingredients are being imported, but production is predominantly over here’*. This was reflected in my sample, as 90% (n=9) of UGL-consuming interviewees stated that their producer was located in the UK.

Throughout data collection, the domestic nature of UGL production was commonly attributed to ‘*the change of law a few years ago*’ (Aaron), wherein anabolic steroids were stripped of their status as ‘medicinal products’ in 2012 (Brunsdon, 2012; Hanley Santos and Coomber, 2017). As a result, importing AAS became a criminal offence, punishable with up to fourteen years in prison (Home Office, 2020). Crucially however, importing raw powders (often sold under the guise of veterinary supplies or agricultural compounds) remains a legal grey area. Therefore, this legislative change allowed domestic UGLs to gain ascendance in the IPED market as, in Aaron’s words, ‘*when you weren’t allowed to order it in for yourself from abroad, the British labs really took off*’. However, despite being concentrated in the UK, UGLs cannot be said to be territorial, and may, unbeknownst to one another, operate in the same locality. This was addressed by Rob:

N: How spaced out are labs would you say?

R: It varies. They don’t put ‘made in 27 Oxford Street’ on the bloody packaging. They’re all over the place. Because labs don’t sell geographically there is no boundary there. You might have a lab that produces in Bristol that shifts to a wholesaler in Manchester, who then sells back to somebody that lives in Bristol. That happens all the time. A1 were up in Scotland, Energise is based in Bolton but one of their labs was in Birmingham, so it varies massively. There’s no real ‘you can’t have two labs next door to each other’, because the labs probably won’t even know they’re next door to each other.’

Unlike other illicit drugs markets, UGLs do not cover a specific geographic area and do not, as it were, serve their local community (Antonopoulos and Hall, 2016). In terms of scale, operations range from ‘*people making stuff up in their garage*’ (Aaron) through to the most sophisticated outfits ‘*produc[ing] PCT tab[lets] which include proviron [Mesterolone], clomid [Clomifene] [and] arimidex [Anastrozole]*’ (Rob) with high-specification pharmaceutical equipment. Therefore, underground labs should not be conceptualised as homogenous in their set-ups, as scale, profitability and risk-averseness vary from one UGL to the next. Rob, for example, demonstrated the relative ease and affordability of setting up a small-scale UGL operation:

N: Do people need a lot of investment to start a UGL?

R: No not necessarily, because to set up a lab it's probably a couple of grand. That would be raw materials, then equipment-wise they only really need a hot plate, an infiltration system, a couple of conical flasks and some scales – I don't really need much else. I buy my vials, I'll buy one thousand or five thousand from China, and if I buy my vials they'll also send me the labels free of charge to my design with the caps. So all I need then is the capping clamps – it's a bit labour intensive that way but it gets me going. I can create a real fancy label design, all I need is photoshop or a mate who's in graphic design, bung him £200 to do me a website and I'd be all set up for trading.'

Here, Rob showcases the initial steps required to set up a viable UGL, which would operate at the most basic end of the market. Conversely, during our phone interview, Aaron captured the scope of the larger-scale operations as he described an anonymous UGL he was in regular contact with:

A: I've actually got an invite to go to a UG lab, like a big producer have said they'll let me go along and have a look at the actual lab and look at the manufacturing stuff [...] I'm hoping once [lockdown] is all over I can still go and have a look at all that. Some of these huge labs are built out in the middle of nowhere and the numbers that they're producing daily are just phenomenal.

N: In terms of size of the units and stuff, how big are the bigger labs?

A: He was telling me how much they produce in a day, and I'm sure he said that they were pressing 100,000 tablets a day. I think they were doing runs of like a million tablets at a time. Then they would wipe down and reset the lab for whatever they were producing next. They have incredibly proficient, highly-skilled chemists working for them – these aren't just Mickey Mouse labs, these are proper people who are very highly-qualified. Some of them have spent hundreds of thousands of pounds on the equipment to do it, that's the level we're talking.'

Aaron shed light upon the vast scale of the largest UGLs, which possess the intellectual and practical means of producing '100,000 tablets a day'. Notably, opposing the narratives of AAS being 'cooked up like Super Noodles in the microwave' (Ben), Aaron notes the legitimacy of 'proper people' with skills mirroring those of the licit pharmaceutical industry. This influx of such 'highly-skilled chemists' appears to have bolstered the quality of products on the market, as Aaron explained in relation to his work as a harm reduction practitioner, 'Some of the stuff we were interested in ten years ago, we don't focus on too much now. You used to have to really look at your gear and make sure it didn't have bits floating around in it and check if the viscosity is right [...] but these days they're made pretty well'. The professionalisation of

UGLs has also seen a diversification of products, which rely upon the specialist practitioners' aptitude and access to sophisticated facilities. Rob explained:

'Some labs have branched into creating generic ancillaries and others have started buying unlabelled kits and putting labels on them selling growth hormone too. Some labs have moved into fat burners as well, particularly stuff like injectable clenbuterol, that have been illicitly manufactured.'

As demonstrated here, the enhanced capability of these UGLs has meant that, for the largest operations, substances that have traditionally been beyond the remit of UGLs like hGH (see Turnock, 2020) can now be manufactured. Similarly, discussing his involvement in UGL Inception's operations, Carl described how, *'we have our own blends [of steroid compounds]. One of those is superb, it's called One Rip. So you get 100mg of test prop, masteron and tren ace all in one ml jabs'*. These fusions again illustrate the diversification of UGL products and the sophistication of some labs' production process. However, Rob noted that UGLs' growth was dependant on a number of internal and external factors and reaching the levels described by Aaron thus represent something of an anomaly:

'Some grow naturally and some don't as well because of fear of detection – the larger amounts that you have to import means the greater risk of discovery. Like anything, they develop based on what's going on around them and what resources they have available, and often the supply chains that they have available. Quite often supply chains will limit a lab's development, like what they can get.'

Rob illustrates the barriers UGLs face in their growth and the importance of resources (be it cash flow, storage space or available expertise) and connections. Given these challenges, Tina noted the turbulence of the UGL landscape, where there is *'a new [UGL] coming up every bloody day. One gets shut down and another one will come back as a phoenix company – but they're exactly the same people'*. Alongside this, UGL owners' level of risk-averseness affects their earning potential, as Rob cautioned that *'the larger amounts that you have to import means the greater risk of discovery'*. For this reason, some labs opt to remain modest in size, operating out of *'shipping container[s]'* (Rob) or *'garages'* (Aaron) and selling relatively meagre batches of products.

Having manufactured their products, differences once again emerge between the various UGLs. Some labs act as traditional wholesalers, selling large batches of their products to local resellers (see Turnock, 2020) and online suppliers. These are then sold by ‘retail sellers’ (Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016) in spaces like gyms, supplement shops, houses, OPs and social media sites. More recently however, Rob noted a shift in many UGLs’ business models, whereby they have begun to sell directly to the IPED-using population:

‘They never used to sell direct to end users. They used to go through a reseller before the end user. But they realised that the police aren’t particularly active on pursuing them and they can sell their product to end users. What they don’t do is undercut their resellers, so the end price is still the same price but obviously their profit margin jumps through the roof.’

Rob’s description of UGLs selling ‘*direct to end users*’ is significant as he echoes Laing and Mackey’s (2011) findings that illicit pharmaceutical suppliers employ electronic direct-to-consumer advertising (eDTCA) in order to circumnavigate regulatory authorities. Therefore, given the challenges inherent in overseeing platforms like SNS and online forums, UGLs similarly appear to have discovered the utility of eDTCA as a sales strategy. Supporting Laing and Mackey (2011), Rob attributes this lucrative development to the apathy shown by the authorities in regulating the IPED market (demonstrated in Appendix 2). This was supported by my sample, as Sam contended ‘*I just honestly don’t think that [the police] care about it*’, whilst serving police officer Luke stated, ‘*I’ve never seen anybody get done for steroid use or even steroid dealing*’ (see also Kotzé, 2019). Therefore, where once underground labs could be described entirely in terms of production, some now simultaneously operate as producer-sellers, playing a far more active role in the IPED market.

In light of this, it is worth mapping the main brands encountered during this project’s fieldwork. Though by no means exhaustive, Table 1. illustrates the UGL ‘brands’ that dominated the IPED market during data collection.

UGL brand ¹³	Location
Phoenix Labs	Yorkshire
Energise	Bolton/Birmingham
Inception	Not known
Victory Labs	Not known
EU Pharma	Sheffield
KSI Labs	Not known
King Pharma	Not known
Galactic Pharma	Not known
Astra	Birmingham/Liverpool

Table 1. Prominent UGL brands encountered during fieldwork.

7.1.3. Brand recognition and the need to appear legitimate

In order to appeal to end-users, UGLs must ‘*build a reputation*’ (Rob) for their products’ potency and the operation’s legitimacy. Within this, they face two pressing issues, namely, the necessity to build a distinctive brand and the need to present as trustworthy to their customers. The first of these imperatives was discussed by Rob as he stated, ‘*[t]he thing is with steroid users, what you’ll find is they’ll go to a lab because it’s got a good reputation and it produces good quality drugs*’, therefore, ‘*UGLs, unlike any other drug, and the closest similarity would be ecstasy, rely on brand recognition*’. By cultivating a recognisable brand, UGLs can communicate their legitimacy and trustworthiness, and therefore maximise the sales of the substances they produce. Basic UGL branding first involves creating a distinctive brand name, typically consisting of an abstract noun or corporate-sounding term, followed by a pharmaceutical or medical descriptor, which functions to both clarify the otherwise obscure lexical item as well as enhancing the legitimacy of their products.

¹³ In line with this project’s research ethics, true brand names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

This is furthered by the utilisation of polished but intentionally non-descript brand logos, which function on a number of levels. First, contradicting Rob’s earlier comparison to the ecstasy market, UGL logos do not generally betray the nature of the laboratory’s products or mirror the colourful and wacky brands that typify other recreational drug packaging (see Duterte et al., 2009). Instead, they present as more akin to the unremarkable logos of the corporate world and, without insider knowledge, appear entirely legitimate. Though this was not confirmed by the sellers under study, it can be theorised that these muted designs are selected to minimise exposure and attention from the regulatory authorities. Alongside this, they again function to increase the perceived legitimacy of the UGL, allowing prospective customers to conceptualise the laboratory as a licit trader rather than an illegal enterprise where substances are ‘cooked [...] up in a bathtub’ (Ben). This is furthered by the use of high-quality packaging, as the more successful laboratories replicate licit pharmaceutical products’ design and safety features. Carl discussed this in relation to his choice of brand:

‘That’s how I ended up going with Energise initially, because I was looking at another one called British Street Gear but their stuff all comes in bags. Like little zippy bags and you think, ‘nah that’s not very good. That seems a little bit thrown together, not very professionally done’. Whereas Inception, Phoenix, Energise they use proper labelling and the units come sealed and capped off – you know that no one’s tampered with it since it’s left the lab.’

Carl’s choice of UGL brand was therefore directly affected by Energise’s packaging and a subsequent assumption of quality. Similar features can be found in Victory Labs’ ‘new and improved’ packaging which they advertised on their Facebook group (Figure 6.1).

Figure 6.1. Victory Labs’ new and improved packaging – a glass vial with a sealed cap and professional-looking branding (13/07/2019).



A further dimension to UGLs' product packaging is the use of anti-counterfeiting measures, whereby features like *'security imprints'* are added to make their product more challenging to replicate. KSI labs, a large-scale UGL, boast on their website that their products include, *'hot-stamped multiple layer holographic strips and a hidden ultraviolet design'*. This high specification packaging demonstrates the sophistication of UGL production, as increasingly professionalised packaging leaves products like KSI's virtually indistinguishable from those of many major pharmaceutical companies. The dedication of the lab suggests that their products, which appear well regarded on the market, have been subject to counterfeiting which has negatively affected the operation. However, it is unclear whether this is truly a reaction to their brand being faked, or if the motivation for such tactics is more insidious. On this, Rob suggested, *'a lot of this is just marketing ploys as well, it's not necessarily that they're actually getting faked – people think if something's getting faked it must be good'*. With this in mind, the brands' decision to emphasise this 'issue' could be an example of what Rob referred to as *'subversive marketing'*, whereby they are seeking to bolster their reputation as a product worth faking, utilising the spectre of counterfeiting to promote their legitimacy.

Underpinning these attempts to boost legitimacy and trustworthiness is the fundamental synergy between the licit and illicit economy. Drawing on a long tradition of literature exploring this licit/illicit continuum (see for example, Smith, Jr., 1980; Ruggiero and Vass, 1992; Hobbs, 2013), UGLs' imperative to bolster consumer engagement and faith demonstrates the IPED market's affinity with other traditional legitimate economies and the broader practice of product marketing. This will represent a mainstay within this chapter and should be foregrounded throughout.

7.1.4. Pharmaceutical production

Although UGLs constitute the foremost producers of AAS domestically, manufacturing other more complex IPEDs require facilities that even the most sophisticated underground lab cannot assemble. Therefore, although UGLs are beginning to manufacture their own AIs like Mesterolone and Anastrozole, Rob stated that ancillary drugs are ‘*probably 70% pharma*’ whilst the fat burner T3 is ‘*99% pharma-produced*’. As such, these products are manufactured in licenced pharmacies and then either purchased from countries where their sale is legal or siphoned from the licit supply chain in the UK (Fink et al., 2019).

In-keeping with Hall and Antonopoulos (2016), Rob advised that these pharmacies are ‘*generally European. So Romanian and Turkish, that sort of thing*’, whilst Lee told me that his pharma products were produced in Moldova, given the lax medicinal regulations there. The range of AAS available through these channels are more limited than UGLs’ wide selection, given that substances like the blends described by Carl are not approved by regulatory agencies. Similarly, compounds like trenbolone are not legal for human consumption and therefore are not produced in licensed medicinal pharmacies. However, users can source these substances through legitimate pharmacies that manufacture products for veterinary use, as was the case with Ben. The import of pharmaceutical substances, provided that they are licensed as medicinal products (MHRA, 2014), is legal in the UK and therefore users face no risk through using these channels for most ancillary drugs. However, pharmaceutically-produced substances like hGH fall under the Misuse of Drugs Act (1971) alongside AAS as ‘related drugs’ (ACMD, 2010). To mitigate this, many users like Ben embark on ‘steroid vacations’ (Duff, 2012; Dunn et al., 2020; Gibbs, Forthcoming), taking advantage of a loophole where users can carry a quantity of AAS for personal use into the UK to buy pharmaceutical-grade products in-person and transport them into the country. On this, Ben recalled ‘*I’ve been abroad to Cyprus and Egypt and things like that, and you can just buy it over the counter, you can go to a chemist and just buy it*’. Similarly, Josh told me:

I’ve got a friend who sells, and he knows the guy who owns one of the pharmacies and he goes to Turkey and Egypt a lot, so he brings a lot of the over-the-counter stuff back from there, like your clen[buteral], T3, Arimidex [Anastrozole], Winstrol

[Stanozolol] as well. You can get all that over the counter over there [...] he'll ring them up two weeks before and they'll set stock aside for when he's coming.'

Domestic pharmaceutical-grade products on the other hand, rely on licensed medicinal products being siphoned from licit medical stock. On this, Ben admitted, '*I have all my growth hormone from a supplier at the local hospital, obviously I'm not supposed to have it, but they've sourced it somehow. The stuff that I have is really good, the growth hormone that I have is proper somatropin pens, the nandrolone I use is proper NHS*'. Ben's IPEDs were originally destined to treat patients suffering from maladies including growth hormone deficiency and breast cancer (Hintz, 2004), but were removed from the supply chain. Though I was ultimately unable to locate the source of Ben's NHS supplier, Lee also hinted at the prevalence of this aspect of the market:

'There's always going to be someone in the chain that gets to stuff before it gets where it's going. I know a lot of people who are buying large quantities of pharmaceutical grade AIs and they're paying less than pharmacists pay for it. So that must come straight from source, that's the only way I can imagine you'd be able to do it and make a profit.'

According to Lee, these products are siphoned off at a wholesale level, rather than, as Fink et al. (2019) suggest, by individual health practitioners. Unlike the concerns some of my participants raised over the perceived quality of UGL products, Ben told me, '*the thing with your pharma stuff, it's made to a certain grade and it's tested because it's used by the NHS, so it has to be a certain standard. I wouldn't just get it from someone's mate who's just cooked it up in a bathtub*'. This perceived disparity in quality leads users to pay 'several times the retail price' (Fink et al., 2019: 7) for domestic pharmaceutical substances:

'B: Obviously what I buy is gonna cost a little bit more than the other lads you've spoken to who buy UGL. But these underground labs, if [the vial of AAS] says it's got 50mg in it you don't know if that's actually the case. It could have 25mg, but there's people [who are] gonna buy it because it costs five pound less than the pharma stuff.'

Ben captures the sense that pharmaceutically-produced IPEDs are inherently more trustworthy than UGL products and attributes underground laboratories' popularity to users' frugality.

Ultimately, although relatively few AAS compounds on the UK market are manufactured in licensed facilities, pharmaceutically-produced substances are commonplace within most committed IPED user's stack in the form of PCT and ancillary drugs. Thus, alongside UGLs, licit pharmaceutical production forms the basis of the UK IPED market. Again, the legal and grey market aspects of pharmaceutical production speak to a continuum of the licit and illicit and support Smith Jr.'s (1980) reimagining of the relationship between these spaces of commerce.

7.2. The Offline IPED marketplace

We can now turn to the localised, offline supply chains that exist within Stoke-on-Trent. Importantly, this section does not claim to provide a definitive account of all the various supply networks in Stoke's fitness scene. Instead, it serves as a glimpse into the different means by which my sample leant upon their gym-based community to source IPEDs, highlighting the significance of peer networks and unpacking the most prominent features of offline supply.

7.2.1. *'It's always people you know'*: the importance of community and peer networks

In line with the existing literature on offline IPED supply (see Coomber et al., 2014; Antonopoulos and Hall, 2016), the significance of peer networks in Stoke's local fitness scene played a substantial role in facilitating my sample's IPED acquisition. 77% of my IPED-using sample relied upon their contacts in the hardcore fitness scene – be it fellow bodybuilders, coaches, or close friends – to access the market, whilst 62% collected their IPEDs in person, either from a UGL-supplier or from a friend who was also a reseller. As such, many of their primary experiences of the market physically occurred in the dopogenic spaces of the gyms under study (Backhouse et al., 2018). It is crucial here, once again, to note the normalisation of IPED consumption within these sites (see Monaghan, 2001; Turnock, 2021a) and how the widespread acceptance of illicit enhancement in both gyms facilitated their centrality in the

supply chain. Scott, although not an IPED user himself, captured the ubiquity of consumption in Muscle Sanctuary:

'Ninety percent of people in [Muscle Sanctuary] I would say use some sort of gear, and they're very open about it. I was actually working out once in front of the mirrors on the dumbbells and I got talking to a lad next to me. He was saying, 'how long [have] you been training?', I told him I used to be eighteen stone and I'd been training about a year and a half, he said 'you'd do it much quicker with some steroids in you'. That open. I just said, 'I'm alright ta mate', honestly it was that open.'

Scott's experience speaks to the openness of both gyms' members and the perception that the sites of bodily labour were safe spaces within which the men could discuss and, crucially, source their drugs (van de Ven and Mulrooney, 2017). Given this culture of normalisation, I encountered something of a 'closed market' (Coomber and Turnbull, 2007) during my offline fieldwork, wherein supply was premised upon a number of exclusive peer relationships. Turnock (2021a) describes how, in the gyms he studied, the local closed IPED market relied upon tight-knit peer networks, mutual trust and informal 'introductions' to facilitate supply. Operating within the broader illicit IPED market, Stoke's hardcore fitness scene somewhat resembles a 'partial' supply chain (Fincoeur et al., 2015), wherein only those with the prerequisite bodily and cultural capital can enter, and transactions heavily depend on sustained trust. This was reflected in Andy's account of first accessing IPEDs in Muscle Sanctuary:

'N: So in terms of acquisition, how did you source [your IPEDs]? Online or the gym?

A: Through personal contacts. [...] I trust my source who I get my stuff from, more so I think because I'm in here ten/twelve hours a day and everyone knows me. If someone was to give me some stuff that was rubbish, they'd have to face up to me in here.'

As demonstrated in Andy's veiled threat, his supply is premised on trust and familiarity (Coomber, 2003) as, in place of any regulatory oversight, the informal social bonds act as a guarantor of quality. This reflects Fincoeur et al.'s (2015: 242) finding that these culturally embedded IPED markets rely upon an 'enduring relationship' between the buyer and seller, and therefore suppliers must cultivate a long-term affinity with their customers by sharing the same spaces and cultural practices of consumption. Salinas et al. (2019) capture this in their

characterisation of their main fieldsite, a hardcore ‘spit and sawdust’ gym (Brighton et al., 2020), which they describe as simultaneously being a space of communality and commerce, in which supply occurred alongside users’ bodywork and peer networks. Therefore, particularly as Muscle Sanctuary also constituted Andy’s place of work, his cultural embeddedness in the gym was indelibly tied to both his consumption and his means of supply (Turnock, 2021a). This was supported by Phillip, who emphasised the significance of the gym in the closed IPED market when recounting his initial experiences of sourcing his IPEDs:

P: It was a matter of having a word with someone at the gym. At other gyms that I have trained in, if you want to get hold of gear, they’ll say to you, ‘oh it’s so and so who does the gear in this gym’. It’s not necessarily the owner of the gym, it’s one of the guys in the gym and everybody knows who that person is.

N: Is that the case with Muscle Sanctuary?

P: I don’t know who the supplier is in Muscle Sanctuary, I’ve never enquired. But clearly in Muscle Sanctuary there is a lot of it going on, so there must be sellers in the gym. I don’t know, so I’ve stuck with the person I started with.’

Phillip captures the ubiquity of gym-based culturally embedded supply beyond the context of Stoke-on-Trent (see Coomber et al., 2014; Antonopoulos and Hall, 2016; Coomber and Salinas, 2019) and contends that prominent ‘faces’ hold a monopoly over certain gym-based supply chains. This was supported by Josh, who, talking generally about IPED suppliers in gyms, told me, ‘it’s always people you know that have used and train for a long time that are involved in getting gear for other people’. However, Phillip’s estimate that a single actor ‘does the gear’ in Muscle Sanctuary was inconsistent with my findings, which indicate that, although certain networks surrounded prominent ‘faces’ like Dom (see below), both gyms under study more closely represented IPED ‘trading bazaars’ (Salinas et al., 2019: 48), wherein various subgroups and loyalties meant that they each hosted a number of illicit supply networks. Indeed, Phillip’s admission that ‘I stuck with the person I started with’ despite having moved regions speaks to this factional loyalty where, once a level of trust and custom is established, users remain bound to their suppliers beyond simple market forces or geographic convenience. Phillip’s longstanding relationship with his supplier is consistent with Coomber et al.’s (2014) emphasis on peer-to-peer relationships within local supply

chains and the literature on social and minimally-commercial supply. Moyle et al.'s (2013) contention that such community-based drug supply privileges aspects of communality and respect over any great financial imperative was also evident in Ben's relationship with his supplier:

N: So supply-wise, how do you source your stuff?

B: I have a guy that I have it off and I've used him for years. He's a close personal friend, I'd probably say he's one of my best friends.

[...]

N: Do you get that delivered by post then?

B: Nah I just go round to his house; he doesn't live far away. I just go and grab it. I think he generally supplies a lot of the bigger guys that are competitive bodybuilders.

N: Is he in the bodybuilding community himself then?

B: Yeah he is, he uses and competes just like I do. That's why everyone trusts him I think.'

Ben's admission that his supplier is 'one of [his] best friends' illustrates the centrality of his peer network and the local bodybuilding community in his experiences of supply. The seller's dual status as someone who 'uses [IPEDs] and competes' speaks to the cultural proximity between both parties which affords him a degree of trust within the bodybuilding community that would be otherwise unattainable (see van de Ven and Mulrooney, 2017). Also notable is Ben's statement that he physically collects his IPEDs from the seller's home. Although this is unsurprising given the geographic proximity of Stoke's hardcore fitness community, Ben's act of 'just go[ing] round to [his supplier's] house' again demonstrates how embedded such sellers are within their customers lives. This was further exemplified in Ed's relationship with the UGL producer from whom he purchased his IPEDs:

N: Do you know the supply chain of what you're buying? Do you know where it's made?

E: Like I say I've met the guy and I've been to his house loads of times, I don't think he makes it at his house, I think he has some kind of workshop for that. But it is quite a small lab and he does have a pharmaceutical license so he is obviously able to make it correctly and reliably. But there isn't a lot of people in the operation so that's why it's quite a small-town thing.'

Echoing Ben, Ed's knowledge of his UGL producer's home, operation and background illustrates the accountability that users can expect in the closed, local market. Unlike the accounts of scamming and counterfeit products in the wider, open market (Graham et al., 2009), the personal connection and level of access to their suppliers afforded by the closed market set-up allows users to feel secure that their products are high quality and that they are safe from any bad faith actors. Thus, through being culturally embedded and highly accessible to their customers, culturally embedded sellers demonstrate 'responsible vending' strategies (Van Hout and Bigham, 2014), investing in genuine relationships with their clients rather than being wholly motivated by short-term sales (see also van de Ven and Mulrooney, 2017; Turnock, 2020).

7.2.2. Barriers to entry

The closed nature of the localised, offline market and its reliance upon peer network created certain barriers to entry however (Coomber and Turnbull, 2007; Fincoeur et al., 2015). Simply put, if a potential customer does not hold the prerequisite social ties or bodily capital then they are essentially precluded from the partial markets described above (Coomber and Turnbull, 2007; Fincoeur et al., 2015). This is discussed by Maycock and Howat (2005) in their study into the initial barriers to AAS use. They found that access to the localised market was contingent on 'making the right contacts' (Maycock and Howat, 2005: 321), as prospective consumers were indoctrinated into a mindset of IPED normalisation and schooled in how to address the stigma of AAS use in wider society (see also Coquet et al., 2018; Svedsater et al., 2021). More poignantly, Maycock and Howat (2005) note that culturally embedded suppliers perform a risk assessment on potential users prior to extending their custom to them in order to minimise the risk of regulation. This was reflected in Rob's comment on the influence of my bodily capital on my potential to engage in this closed market:

'If you are a face-to-face seller, you wouldn't sell your drugs to someone you thought would fuck up because it would come back to you. No disrespect, but if I was a seller and you came to me wanting steroids [I'd say], 'piss off, I don't have none of them, I don't sell them – don't know what you're on about'. Because you're a risk, you're too

normal. It's like Freemasons, steroid users always know another one and you don't fit the profile so you're not getting anything because you might be old Bill.'

Rob's statement captures the barriers discussed by Maycock and Howat (2005), as he branded my physique '*too normal*' and therefore a risk to any culturally embedded supplier's operation (Antonopoulos and Hall, 2016). Therefore, to have access to community-embedded sellers, one must '*fit the profile*' (Carl), both physically and culturally. This ties into the narrative around users reaching their natural limit before initiating use as access to the closed market required, as it were, the potential user to have graduated from an apprenticeship of unassisted gym work to a threshold where they could be said to need IPEDs to perpetuate their state of bodily desire. This was true in the case of Ed, who was widely praised for his approach within the community and, as will be discussed in the next section, relied upon his bodily and cultural capital to be introduced to his coach's supply chain. Further, Jake, discussing his involvement in the same social supply network as Ed, emphasised these barriers through his acknowledgement that he need not look beyond the community-based offline market due to his localised cultural capital:

'I've got no reason to [engage in the online market] now, I've got enough contacts to never have to go online for things. What usually happens in person is that someone sparks up a conversation and you just go from there. I suppose the only reason why I'd go online is if I was frightened of asking someone, because it is a taboo subject. It takes bollocks to walk up to someone in the gym and say, 'do you know where I can get this?', because you're making the assumption that they use something and they know [where to buy IPEDs]. But I'm at a point now where people know me and ask me about gear and I even get people trying to sell me stuff in the gym that I've not even asked for [laughs].'

Jake's words are extremely telling, as he rejected the need to engage in the online market given his contacts and standing in the local bodybuilding community and was in fact involuntarily solicited in Muscle Sanctuary. His account illustrates how his physique and popularity in the community delivered him to a position where he was considered worth approaching by users looking to establish market connections. He effectively became a gatekeeper for the partial market in Stoke's hardcore fitness scene, capable of ushering in those who enquired about supply chains or leaving them unconnected. He also noted that '[i]t

takes bollocks to walk up to someone in the gym' to make the initial enquiries without having built up a relationship with other community members. I encountered this same trepidation when enquiring about my sample's consumption and subsequent involvement in the market as an outsider as, lacking bodily capital or any meaningful gatekeeper in the community, I was aware that some users may feel wary of judgement or stigma as a result of my questions (see Van Hout and Kean, 2015). It was only after I was known by a number of influential 'faces' in Stoke's hardcore fitness scene that I was able to uncover a number of my sample's principal UGL supply chain. This again illustrates the in-built barriers that inhibit non-community members from accessing the IPED market and insiders' deliberate efforts to obscure such partial markets from the wider population (Fincoeur et al., 2015).

7.2.3. The case of Dom and Astra

Late-on in my offline fieldwork, immediately prior to the first national coronavirus lockdown, I stumbled upon the most coherent example of a 'local' IPED supply chain within Stoke-on-Trent, which encompassed both gyms under study and was built around Dom, a PT and prominent community member. Dom, whose decade of high-end personal training experience and IPED-related expertise made him a well-known figure in Stoke's hardcore fitness scene, can be described as a 'steroid mentor' (van de Ven and Mulrooney, 2017: 11) as well as a health and fitness professional. van de Ven and Mulrooney (2017) describe steroid mentors as experienced IPED users who voluntarily help novice consumers with injecting techniques, dosing, and harm reduction (see also Maycock and Howat, 2005; Kimergård, 2015). As such, Sam described how Dom, who coached him as a young trainer, *'has come out with stuff that I never think about, he's obviously not university educated but he's that level, he'd definitely get a masters [degree] in anabolics [laughs]'*. Dom, therefore, was a figure who enjoyed substantial cultural capital within the hardcore fitness community and acted as something of an authority figure in Predator.

Dom's IPEDs, typifying the UK marketplace, were produced in a domestic UGL (Turnock, 2020) which he had used for a number of years prior to our interview. He had built up an

‘enduring relationship’ (Fincoeur et al., 2015: 242) with the UGL owner and was exceedingly complimentary of the lab’s legitimacy:

N: So from your personal perspective, how do you go about getting [your IPEDs]?

D: for me, I’m gonna be honest, I only use one person, because I know exactly where it comes from and exactly what’s in it. That’s a health thing for me, I don’t want to buy something that somebody’s made in a bathtub in a shed in their garden. I specifically use this guy for a reason. I will pay more than probably a couple of lads do to get it off the street but for me I like it to be pure if that makes sense, even though I’m taking drugs.

N: Is that local to here then? Staffordshire area?

D: No [pauses for a couple of seconds] West Midlands. Well I’ve got one in the West Mids and one up in Liverpool.’

Illustrating Rob’s assertion at the outset of this chapter in regard to the geographic location of UGLs, Dom locates his supplier’s facilities in the West Midlands and the North West, both of which he regularly visited to collect his orders in person. He noted that, alongside meeting the UGL owner in person, their relationship was mainly carried out on Whatsapp, through which he would request his order and arrange pick up. Though Dom was reticent to name this UGL, Sam identified them as Astra, a relatively small-scale but well-established operation who, according to a number of online forums, ‘*have been around a while. Heard nothing bad but also never heard glowing praises*’ (anonymous contributor to a popular UK-based bodybuilding forum). Thus far, Dom’s involvement appears highly typical, however it is his role in facilitating his clients and fellow gym users’ consumption that elevates his significance in this research. In line with his role as a steroid mentor, Dom acted as a focal point in allowing Astra to sell to Sam, Ed, and Jake, who he respectively introduced to the UGL owner and even acted as a social supplier or user-seller (Coomber et al., 2014; Antonopoulos and Hall, 2016; Begley et al., 2017), functioning as an intermediary between the lab and his clients by picking up on their behalf and storing the products at his home. He conceptualised this behaviour as simply part of his coaching service:

N: Say if you’ve got a client who’s clean and reached their natural potential, would you carry out a consultation with them before advising them on performance enhancers? What’s your process?

D: So nine out of ten times they'll train for a period of however many months and then I'll get a message through, 'Dave down the gym said I should take this, I don't know what it is, do you?'. Then I'll explain it's this compound and it does X,Y and Z. Then it'll either go 'I don't think you're at a point where you need to take them' or 'where do you want to go with your fitness goals?' is my question. And then they tell me and it's either 'you don't need steroids to get there' or 'over time you may need steroids to get there but it's your choice'. Then if they come back to me like, 'I've thought about it for a few days or a few weeks, I've done my research or I've read this' or whatever then I will point them in the direction of my guys because it's what I use and I'd recommend it compared to other stuff on the market. But obviously I don't sell them anything or make any money from it, it's their choice where they go at the end of the day.'

Dom's informal role as a steroid mentor allows him to 'drift' into the role of a social supplier (Turnock, 2020), as his advice about compounds and suitability soon blurs with the recommendation of his UGL brand. Fincoeur et al. (2015) note that social suppliers typically do not envision themselves as 'real dealers' and often substitute economic benefits for more intangible gains like reputation or an acknowledgement of expertise. As such, when Dom stresses that he holds no financial stake in his clients' choice of supplier, this does not necessarily mean that he does not benefit from their loyalty to his brand. Further, given that Dom is paid by these clients for his licit services, he may reap a financial reward in the longer term through their continued custom and willingness to maintain their contact with him as a personal trainer. Importantly, given Chapter Six's identification of the precarity of the health and fitness economy, this enduring custom takes on some significance, particularly as Sam and Ed are some of his long-term clients. Thus, something of a hazy distinction emerges between Dom's role as a coach, a steroid mentor, and a social supplier.

After speaking to a number of Dom's clients during the course of my fieldwork, the significance of his involvement in their access to his supply chain became increasingly clear.

Sam, for example, recalled Dom's role in his initiation into IPED use:

'S: Then in terms of sourcing [my IPEDs] and finding information about them, I was training at Muscle Sanctuary at the time under the coach who I've been with now ever since my second ever show. He was one of the top trainers at that gym, a guy called Dom, I went through him. I trusted him. He was a relatively young guy at the time, but going back to image, he was the biggest guy in Muscle Sanctuary. He was sponsored by the gym and was with Muscle Future [a well-known supplement

company] at the time so I thought he was the guy to go to. So I contacted him, went from there and I managed to source them through one of his contacts.

N: How did that work with logistics? Did you drive to a house and meet someone or a postal order? What did you do?

S: I basically just went to Dom's [house] and he gave them [to] me there and then. Obviously I wasn't going to reveal to anybody that he's breaking the law, but yeah. It's just the way things are done as well in terms of how readily available they are. I trusted the source though, trusted the lab, researched the lab and asked Dom as many questions as I could. It's always a risk, you've got to trust the source and the guy you're working with [...] with Dom I knew he had my best interests at heart and I've been working with him ever since and I've never had any bad side effects besides what I was telling you about before.'

Sam's recollection captures Dom's influential role in granting his clients access to the partial market, as he sought his counsel and recommendation after making the decision to graduate on to using IPEDs. Sam cites Dom's enhanced bodily and cultural capital as a compelling factor in his decision to enquire about IPED supply through him, as his status as *'the biggest guy in Muscle Sanctuary'* alongside his sponsorship deals positioned Dom as a prominent 'face' in the gym. Linking this to my earlier analysis about PT's physiques' role as the object of desire for their clients, clearly Sam had identified that to emulate Dom's desirable physique he needed to begin using IPEDs, and Dom was therefore simultaneously part of the drive to use the substances as well as the practical means of supply. Also notable is Sam's emphasis on Dom's altruistic motivation for assisting him, as he acknowledges that *'I knew he had my best interests at heart'*, buttressing Dom's own claims that he does not benefit financially from such relationships. This again speaks to Moyle et al.'s (2013) conceptualisation of social supply within the IPED-using community, as Sam suggests that Dom simply wanted to share his source as a means of ensuring that Sam was taking reputable substances from a trusted source.

More practically, Dom physically facilitated Sam's engagement with his Astra's supply chain by holding the products at his private residence, presumably having picked up Sam's order alongside his own. In this sense, he could be conceptualised as a 'designated buyer' (Moyle and Coomber, 2015), given that he absorbed the risk of meeting the supplier on behalf of Sam as well as making the novice user's initial experiences of purchase as uncomplicated as

possible. Both Ed and Jake also relied upon Dom to make the initial ‘introduction’ (Turnock, 2021a). Ed, who had been a long-term client of Dom’s when I met him, explained this stating, ‘*Dom put me in touch [with Astra]. He’s the guy to know in terms of that because he knows the person who runs the lab, which again was my incentive to trust where the source was from.*’ Ed’s trust in Dom’s recommendation illustrates the influence such actors have in the closed market as, were Dom to have endorsed a different brand, his clients would have inevitably followed his lead. Therefore, from Astra’s perspective, maintaining a long-term relationship with Dom appears to be a vital part of their business model.

Finally, Jake, although not one of Dom’s clients, entered the Astra supply chain on account of the PT’s connections and community standing, as he explained when I enquired about his involvement in the IPED market:

N: So in terms of how you source [your IPEDs] now, is that through your coach or through a friend or what?

J: I speak directly to the people; I get it myself. I’ve built up a relationship over time with them so I source it all myself, I don’t go through people.

N: How did you go about making that contact?

J: So one of the guys in Muscle Sanctuary [Dom] knows the main proprietor of the brand and he’s quite in with him, been to see it all. That’s how I know all about it, he’s been and had a tour and all that. So he put me onto these guys and then subsequently I dropped off to one of my friends.’

Although Jake was initially adamant that he did not rely on resellers or middlemen, he acknowledged Dom’s instrumental role in establishing his long-standing relationship with Astra’s owner. Again, this speaks to the importance of having a ‘face’ like Dom within Stoke’s hardcore fitness community for Astra and, it can be assumed, the effort the lab went to in giving Dom a trust-building ‘tour’ of their facilities has paid off. Jake further admits that, as a result of his enduring relationship with Astra’s owner, he ‘*dropped off to one of [his] friends*’. This demonstrates how such community-based supply chains can grow organically by word-of-mouth and, by extension, how pivotal Dom’s role in bringing Jake in was to Astra’s continuing success.

Ultimately, although Astra was just one of a number of brands consumed by those of my sample who used UGLs, this supply chain is demonstrative of the wider workings of the offline, community-based market, with its reliance upon trust, cultural embeddedness, and peer networks. As such, the importance of community ‘faces’ like Dom cannot be overstated in these partial markets and, more poignantly, to UGL brands like Astra.

7.3. The IPED market in transition: commercialisation, normalisation, and digitisation

Turning to recent developments in the broader illicit ergogenic aids market, this section follows Fincoeur et al.’s (2015) contention that the IPED market is experiencing a number of significant shifts, and cannot now exclusively be understood in line with the notion of offline minimally-commercial and social supply.

7.3.1. Commercialisation and community breakdown

Despite the culturally embedded supply chains employed by most of my community-based sample, I became increasingly aware of a number of simmering tensions in the broader IPED market as I spent longer in the field. Even those who engaged in Stoke’s local closed market expressed a perception that the ‘good old days’ of IPED supply as a community enterprise were numbered and appeared resigned to the fact that increased profitability and scale of production were fundamentally altering the market. This sentiment was voiced by non-IPED user Scott who, deriding the notion of social supply, scoffed:

‘Why would you sell anything just for a social benefit? [...] If you’re selling anything there’s always money in it, not just because you feel like it, it’s money. [...] Nah I can’t see the social side of it, it’s not like they’re going round with an ice cream cart [saying], ‘come and get your steroids.’

Scott captures the general cynicism that my sample expressed regarding the motivations of most actors in the market, despite the fact that many of them used the minimally-commercial or social supply chains that he critiques. Fincoeur et al. (2015) echo this in their finding that the market for recreational weight trainers and bodybuilders in the Netherlands and Belgium

has experienced a move away from minimally-commercial and social-commercialist supply, towards what they call ‘market-oriented dealers’. They describe how these actors lack the community ties that underlie closed markets and are instead entirely motivated by maximising their revenues. However, Fincoeur et al. (2015) attribute this to growing regulatory oversight and the associated increase of risk for sellers, arguing that the otherwise law-abiding culturally embedded suppliers (Potter, 2009) have essentially been forced out of the market as a result of the ‘war on doping’ (see also Mulrooney et al., 2019). However, I found the IPED market to be extremely poorly regulated. Why then, if it is not the risk of prosecution that has deterred community-based suppliers, has this shift towards commercialisation and away from cultural embeddedness occurred? This troubling direction, I argue, is largely rooted in the increased profitability of the UGL market, resulting from labs’ newfound direct-to-consumer approach. UGLs’ realisation that they could effectively cut out the middleman has seen ‘*their profit margin jump through the roof*’ (Rob), flooding the underground lab operations with finance that would otherwise be siphoned off by various middlemen and resellers (see Antonopoulos and Hall, 2016). Rob elaborated:

N: Does that make it a decent industry to be in if you own a UGL and sell direct [to end users]?

R: Oh yeah mega money, mega money. I’ll give you an example, he’s a knobhead and I can’t stand him, but a gentleman I know started selling, set up his own lab and within eighteen months he had three hundred and fifty grand going through his bank account and at least £100,000 in cash, but I suspect it might be more, and he was a one-man operation. Mega bucks.’

Similarly, Aaron commented that the larger UGLs ‘*make an absolute fucking killing*’. Whereas labs have traditionally been run by culturally embedded figures given their relatively meagre profit margins, following the increased market share of domestic UGLs, running an underground lab now represents a potentially lucrative enterprise. This is not to say that all UGL actors are not culturally embedded, a point Aaron hastened to make clear when he discussed his relationship with the UGL owner who had promised him a guided tour. Neither does it discount the reality that lab operations take dedicated time and expertise to run with

any sustained success. However, the increased potential for profitability appears to have attracted a wave of market-oriented dealers and drastically altered the communal atmosphere of the wider market (Turnock, 2021b).

An effect of this has been a newfound disharmony between the UGL suppliers themselves. Whereas existing literature paints the UGL market as essentially amicable (see Turnock, 2020; Turnock, 2021a), with ‘rival’ brands sharing knowledge and even facilities, an undercurrent of one-upmanship and competitiveness was evident as I delved deeper into these supply chains. Capturing this, Rob spoke candidly about what he saw as a sea change in the atmosphere of the UGL landscape:

‘Generally speaking, the steroid market has always been very placid, so labs have never really bashed each other, they’ve all got along. In fact, there was a period of time where a lot of labs were sharing information and helping each other out when they were struggling. UGLs like Galactic Pharma and A1 all worked within each other as well. Then Phoenix came along and they’ve been very stand-alone, very loud, very aggressive and as a result there’s been some disharmony within the other labs. We’ve never seen this, generally speaking the community will police itself so if a lab’s shit it’ll soon get called out. Now Energise tried this years ago but they were a couple of jumped up fucking knobheads from over Bolton way and no one ever really listened to them and as a result they settled down. [...] But Phoenix have marketed [themselves] in such a big and aggressive way that it’s sort of caught everybody’s attention. So I don’t know if we’re gonna see, for the first time, a little bit of a doping war almost where other labs might start getting aggressive back in their marketing or they might start mudslinging, or they might start just ringing the Old Bill and reporting them. So it’s unusual, I’m interested to see how it goes.’

Rob demonstrates the ill-feeling that a newly ascendant UGL, Phoenix, has brought to the market. He describes Phoenix as antithetical to the ‘placid’ mutually-respectful UGL landscape described in the current literature and, in line with Fincoeur et al. (2015), suggests that the previous culturally embedded pro-social ethos of the labs is being undermined by this new actor. Although acknowledging that ‘Energise tried this years ago’, Rob presents Phoenix’s impact as something of a watershed moment which, according to him, could result in pronounced infighting and even UGLs informing on one another (see Dickinson, 2017). Turnock (2021a), in his exploration of IPED supply on a prominent internet forum, similarly found that the two main suppliers on the platform, having been mutually-respectful at the

outset of his work, were ultimately involved in a highly public dispute which resulted in the protagonist being reported to the Drug Enforcement Agency by his rival. As such, it appears that Rob's suggestion that other UGLs '*might start ringing the Old Bill*' would not be unprecedented if the informal self-policing efforts continue to be unsuccessful. UGL infighting was also discussed by Carl when I brought up Rob's comments to him:

N: I've spoken to quite a few people around this topic, and they've said that UGLs as a marketplace were quite amicable, they all got on with each other, but in recent times it's become a lot more competitive and petty. Does that echo your experience?

C: Yes, absolutely yeah. That's exactly how it is. They no longer ask guys who are bodybuilders to sell for them they simply ask anybody who's interested in making money – they don't respect the community and actually try and upset the other labs. Phoenix in particular have not made many friends with the way they've gone about it, but give them some credit, it's worked.'

As Carl alludes to, despite Phoenix Labs' poor social standing in the UGL community, they appeared to be one of the most overtly profitable operations during my time in the field. Therefore, they seem to hold little regard for the norms of IPED supply and simply wish to assert their dominance in the marketplace. Carl further noted that '*Phoenix is just based on sales, you could contact them and say, 'I'm not interested in diet, I'm not interested in training, what can I take to get big?'. And they'll send you stuff*'. This, again, speaks to the UGL's disregard for the sanctity of 'graduating' onto IPEDs that was central to Stoke's partial market. Discussing the impacts of an increase in the impersonal, culturally distant sellers described by Carl, Luke stated '*if you actually know the person who's supplying you personally and they can see you progress and you can go to them for advice, that's got to be better than somebody on the end of a phone that you've never met*'. Luke's words speak to the potential harms of a move towards market-oriented dealers as the pastoral aspect of steroid mentorship and social suppliers appears to be seeping away from the community in favour of unfettered capital gain. This influx of market-oriented dealers also appears to have brought about a reconceptualisation of the IPED market itself, from something of a standalone niche economy (see Coomber et al., 2014) to being part of the broader illicit drugs market. Salinas et al. (2019)

observed that IPEDs are commonly sold alongside conventional recreational drugs like cocaine and cannabis in the gym they studied. Echoing this, Aaron remarked:

'Back in the day you used to have like a crack dealer, a heroin dealer, a cannabis dealer, a coke dealer and a steroid dealer. But now it's a fucking one-stop shop. It's like the old cliché of somebody opening up their big coat and saying, 'what do you want?'. You get your cocaine for the weekend, then your cannabis to come down, you get your steroids to get big and your Viagra to help you with the Mrs [laughs] all in one place.'

Although the suppliers Aaron describes here are clearly resellers not UGLs, his comments are nonetheless telling of the general market's trajectory and, as will be explored in the next section, the mainstreaming of the consumer base following the broader logic of commercial markets (Smith, Jr, 1980). Aaron's description of a '*one-stop shop*' demonstrates an acute versatility in a market that was once highly specialised and community-centred (Antonopoulos and Hall, 2016), where IPEDs can be positioned akin to a host of other recreational drugs. Lee similarly expressed this sentiment as he gloomily shared his prediction for the longevity of the market with me:

'I can't see it slowing down with so many more people getting into fitness, more people wanna look good, you know? The younger generation, most of them are out there banging god knows what into their systems over the weekend anyway with pills and coke, so putting in a bit of gear as well, I don't think they see it as being much different.'

Lee's assertions again speak to both the normalisation of IPEDs as illicit lifestyle substances and the illicit ergogenic aids market's amalgamation with the broader supply chains of '*pills and coke*'. The engulfment of the IPED market into these wider illicit drug economies again illustrates their profitability and a move away from the community supply model, in line with other drugs markets (Ruggiero and Vass, 1992). Turnock (2021b: 6) however contends that the contemporary IPED economy in fact ought to be conceptualised as 'two markets', where localised supply chains have seen an influx of market-oriented polydrug dealers. This two-pronged picture of the market is helpful in reconciling my offline culturally embedded sample's experience of supply and this newfound evidence of animosity and

commercialisation in the UGL economy. Therefore, whilst polydrug suppliers have entered the market in pursuit of commercial gain, this does not mean that the community-embedded suppliers no longer function in the offline spaces of hardcore fitness. Instead, what I have observed is a general shift away from these traditional forms of supply as the market has grown and mainstreamed. This can be seen to broadly echo IPEDs' changing conception as normalised lifestyle drugs and the broader trends of medicalisation and human enhancement described in the previous chapter.

Though this general transition appears entirely negative, a number of my participants suggested that the increased profitability of the market has in fact necessitated an improvement in the quality of the products. Aaron, for example, told me '*[g]enerally speaking, underground labs are pretty bloody good these days*'. As was explored earlier in this chapter, the sophistication of UGL production has dramatically improved at the upper end of the market and therefore, provided they are committed to producing a well-dosed product, suppliers can offer substances of a higher quality than ever before. Alongside this, reminiscent of the well-worn myth that privatisation and free-market economics ultimately benefits the consumer (Letza et al., 2004), Lee argued that UGLs have been compelled to improve their substances:

'I think the quality of gear has improved massively over the last few years. The old trick was they'd dose it up nicely to start with then after a few months they'd drop it right down just to make a shit load of money on it. Then it would generally just disappear and a different brand would come back again at a later date, again fully dosed. I think that sort of era's gone, with social media now they can't get away with that. People are lab-testing gear as well, that's a lot more available. So I think now what a lot of the labs are doing is they're trying to emphasise and put out quality gear and go off the back of having good continued sales rather than making a quick buck. It's easy enough to get and quality-wise there's a lot of good gear out there at the moment because it's in their best interest to keep it good and keep making money.'

Lee contends that the increased financial imperative has encouraged labs to create consistently well-dosed products, altering their business models from short to long-termist so as to maximise their profits. Though he also attributes this to suppliers not being '*able to get away with*' poor service in the wake of SNS reviews and private testing, a free-market logic underpins his statement, perhaps reflecting his own positionality as a supplement shop owner

and, according to Rob, IPED supplier¹⁴. Similarly, Carl decried the popular assumption that UGL-produced IPEDs are under-dosed:

‘There’s still a massive problem in the market where people think they need to take a fuck-tonne of gear but they don’t, not with the quality of stuff on the market these days. I’ve had some of my stuff tested and found it to be overdosed and that’s because the labs know they’ll make more money if they offer a decent product, just like any other industry.’

Carl’s argument explicitly attributes this apparent improvement in product quality to the increased profit motive of the influx of market-oriented dealers (Fincoeur et al., 2015) as, following the libertarian free-market logic described by Turnock (2021a) in his sample of illicit ergogenic aid users, he characterises the IPED market as *‘just like any other industry’*. However, it should be noted that, like Lee, Carl was himself involved in the IPED supply chain as a sponsored athlete (discussed in section 7.5.1.) and therefore would be unlikely to criticise the products he otherwise promoted. Ultimately, without the ability to quantitatively test the quality of products on the market, Aaron, Lee, and Carl’s claims are mere anecdotal speculation. What is most striking in the men’s assertions however is that the apparent increase in quality is a result of the commercialisation of the market. Could it be that, despite the ostensibly harmful direction that increased profitability and commercialisation has steered the market in, products are better quality?

7.3.2. Mainstreaming and digitisation

The commercialisation of the IPED market is intimately bound up with the swell of new users looking to purchase illicit ergogenic aids and the subsequent growth in demand that I unpacked in the previous chapter. Chapter Six argued that IPEDs can now be more readily conceptualised as lifestyle drugs (Hall, 2019), having transcended their formerly exclusive presence in hardcore fitness and sporting contexts to become unequivocally mainstream and hyper-conformist (see Kotzé and Antonopoulos, 2019). This is reflected empirically in

¹⁴ During our two interviews Lee did not indicate any involvement in the supply of IPEDs, however Rob informed me that he was in fact a small-scale reseller and, given my outsider status, was unwilling to share this information with me.

Zahnow et al.'s (2018) finding that Christiansen et al.'s (2017) 'Well-being' and 'YOLO' user types constitute 38.6% and 11.1% of the IPED-consuming population respectively. Antonopoulos and Hall (2016: 702) term this burgeoning population 'occasional users' and note that they exist outside the hardcore fitness community (and presumably its partial market). Therefore, according to this literature just under half of all users lack the cultural status that was once a prerequisite to gaining access into the IPED market. This transition was articulated by Carl as he compared attitudes around IPEDs in his early years in the gym (in the late 1990s) to the present day:

'Back in the day it was very hush hush, very quiet. People didn't speak about it. Someone would come up in the gym and give your vest a tug [and say], 'come and have a chat with me over here, mate'. But nowadays people are walking into the gym and they're asking what gear they should be on. It's a different ball game now. I know there are natural competitions and that's fine, but otherwise, everybody's on it.'

The general market has adapted to facilitate this newfound normalisation by lowering its barriers of entry and ushering in a broader demographic of users (Antonopoulos and Hall, 2016). However, is this a fair statement or, on the other hand, has the market in fact encouraged more gym-users to consume IPEDs? Considering the former contention that the market has adapted to an expanded user base following the normalisation of IPEDs, Chapter Six's finding that enhancement drugs function to prolong bodily desire seems to suggest that, as the health and fitness industry has grown, consumer demand has reached unprecedented levels. Similarly, the earlier exploration of IPEDs as pleasurable drugs for lifestyle enhancement and elixirs of youth would suggest that the market has seen an increase in its user base in line with the broader trends of medicalisation and the repudiation of old age. However, situating the shifting user demographics entirely within the demand-side omits any discussion of the role of the altering nature of the market in allowing less culturally embedded consumers to purchase and use IPEDs, and it is to this that we must now turn.

According to Antonopoulos and Hall (2016: 704), the global process of digitisation allows 'virtually anyone to become a steroid distributor' and, more poignantly, allows anyone with

access to the internet to become a customer. The online IPED market, which will be unpacked in the next section, therefore undermines the barriers erected by the various geographically-centred partial markets and allows culturally alienated prospective consumers to enter the supply chain. Rob put forward this argument in characteristically robust tones:

'Steroids would never have boomed the way they have if it wasn't for the internet, because people wouldn't have had access to the information and they wouldn't have had access to the drugs because [culturally embedded suppliers] wouldn't have sold it to them [...] There were a few unscrupulous dealers [before the online market existed] but a lot of dealers wouldn't sell them to you unless you knew what you were doing in the sense of training and diet. So unless you were training hard you didn't ask for them, which is why all steroid users back then looked like steroid users [...] Fifty percent of steroid users now don't even look like they've seen the inside of a gym, they look like they've been to Greggs. I have fucking clients galore who look like that because they haven't got a clue how to train, and that's one of the problems that the exposure to the internet has caused is that it's given access to these people who really don't deserve them. That's probably a little bit snobby to say, but the point is that half the people involved in weight training and gyms today that use steroids would not go to the gym if steroids didn't exist, because it's the steroids that keep them there and allow them to make progress. [...] Now people get their drugs before they even get their memberships, people go to the gym because they have to get the drugs to work. That's the big change and it is genuinely like that.'

Rob perfectly captures the sense of resentment that I encountered throughout the 'old school' hardcore fitness population as he derided the online market for allowing an influx of IPED users who are not deserving of access to enhancement substances. He situates the rise in these outsider users wholly within the digitisation of the market, arguing that '*people get their drugs before they even get their memberships*' rather than needing to graduate onto IPED consumption like those discussed earlier. Supporting Rob's claim, Dom stated, '*[IPEDs are] so accessible and the simple reason for that is the internet*', whilst Lee conceded that '*[y]ou only have to jump on Facebook or Instagram or whatever at the moment and you'll get friend requests pop up off people wanting to sell you stuff or you'll get added to groups – access to gear is fucking easy*'. Thinking back to Jake's description of '*[i]t tak[ing] bollocks to walk up to someone in the gym*', for those who are not culturally embedded the impediments that hamper their supply can therefore be bypassed by moving online. This was further discussed by Luke:

'Back in the day you just basically spoke to somebody at the gym and they'd be able [to] get it for you. But I think nowadays, I've had people add me on Facebook and send me friend requests and I've accepted them because they look like they're involved in the fitness industry. Then as soon as I've accepted them it's immediately followed by a private message saying, 'I sell good quality gear', with a price list asking me if I'm interested. So I think people are selling it like that now, online. The capacity to be able to sell it like that's grown, whereas at one time I think you had to know somebody. You couldn't really just walk into a gym if you didn't know the guy who ran the gym, or you didn't know people in there. You couldn't just walk up to somebody in there and say, 'I wanna buy some steroids'. You'd probably get your head punched in – it was very much being in the circle. Whereas now a complete stranger will sell it to you over the internet.'

Instead of *'get[ting] your head punched in'*, the digitisation of the market has allowed those for whom supply was previously out of reach to make contact with *'a complete stranger'* despite their lack of bodily or cultural capital. This was also discussed by Carl as he complained about the uptake in IPED use within the non-hardcore training community:

'There's always been a culture within gyms of, if you're there long enough, if you know a few faces, if people see you regularly, if you look like you train hard and you're taking it seriously – you only have to wait a few months and someone will approach you. But these people who come in and fanny about for a couple of hours they probably wouldn't get approached, so [the online market] is their avenue in. There used to be an ethos of 'if you don't compete you shouldn't be on gear', but nowadays everybody's taking it just to look better.'

Carl's words capture the reality that this broader demographic of lifestyle users who train *'just to look better'* have been allowed a means of accessing the otherwise obscure and network-reliant supply chain. His comments again speak to a sense of nostalgia for the previous era of cultural embeddedness, as Carl heavily judges those who *'come in and fanny about for a couple of hours'*, inferring that they have not earned their IPEDs in the same *'snobby'* (Rob) manner as Luke and Rob. However, it is still unclear whether these users – who are reminiscent of Turnock's (2018a) characterisation of *'hedonic'* IPED consumers – would have used illicit ergogenic aids regardless of the market's accessibility, or whether their consumption only occurs as a result of the availability of IPEDs online. What is important however is that a discernible shift appears to have occurred in the general market towards digitisation and the associated increase in accessibility for those outside of the *'traditional'* IPED-using population. Therefore, as the market *'has in some respects moved online'* (Hall

and Antonopoulos, 2016: 64), it appears that, although minimally-commercial and social supply is rife in the partial offline market in Stoke, the broader trajectory of supply is moving towards this culturally estranged customer base.

7.4. The online IPED market

It is now we can turn to the online supply chains that have played a role in allowing a host of less culturally embedded actors to enter the illicit IPED economy. Signalling the prominence of this market, Rob concluded our interview by stating *‘the marketplace for steroids is probably more so internet-based and social media-based than anything. That’s the way it’s gone’*. While the operation of online pharmacies, sales forums and dark net sites has been expertly navigated within the current literature (Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016; Antonopoulos and Hall, 2016; Moore and Rid, 2016; Turnock, 2021a), during my time in the field it became increasingly obvious that the surface web online IPED market is mainly concentrated on SNS. As such, although I acknowledge the heterogeneity of online supply and its numerous messy intersections with different platforms, the following analysis will principally focus on ‘retail’ selling (Antonopoulos and Hall, 2016) on Facebook and Instagram as a burgeoning part of the online IPED ecosystem.

7.4.1. Mapping the SNS market

7.4.2. Customer base

Before outlining the structure of Facebook and Instagram as sites of IPED supply, it is worth noting the widespread derision and mistrust of both platforms’ sellers by my offline sample. Understood within the context of their reliance upon community-embedded closed market supply, most of my gym-based participants were highly sceptical of utilising these platforms as spaces of illicit commerce. This was summed up by Johnny as we discussed what he saw as the inevitability that he would begin using IPEDs as his lifting journey progressed:

‘N: [If you were to begin using IPEDs], would you look in the gym or would you look online, what would be your way of sourcing them?’

J: I wouldn't look online. There's lots of people that I know of, none personally, but there's people that I would approach who have helped other people I know, so yeah I wouldn't go online. It's a science at the end of the day and it is incredible how many people are taking performance enhancing drugs that have no idea what they're taking. They'll go on a forum, look at what doses other people are taking, then they'll buy it off somebody on Facebook that they don't know and they'll just start doing it. Why would you not go through someone you know, who can actually give you a bit of guidance rather than ghosting you once they've sold you some shit gear?'

Johnny's words demonstrate how the SNS marketplace is essentially superfluous for my culturally embedded sample. This captures the reality that the supply chains described in this section do not serve these 'traditional' IPED-using communities, but instead provide a means of accessing the general market for culturally distant would-be consumers. It is this population of 'occasional users' (Antonopoulos and Hall, 2016: 702), therefore, on whom the SNS market is mainly reliant. This was summed up by Carl who, although being a long-standing weight trainer, was drawn to the SNS IPED market after having been 'out of the steroids game' for a number of years:

'So [upon my return to the gym] after about three or four months of clean training I was approached. A guy in the gym said, 'wow mate, you've got a great frame, you could be really big, have you ever thought about taking gear?'. I said, 'well I've tried it before but I really wouldn't know the way in now. Normally people come up to you in the gym and offer it to you, you know?'. So this guy said, 'well you need to check out Facebook, it's all over Facebook. Just search for groups on Facebook'. Wow, I mean I just didn't realise it was such a big thing – I searched on there and put an order in within about a week'.

Carl's astonishment at the accessibility of the online IPED market here is telling as, although he 'wouldn't know the way in' to the offline closed market that he previously engaged in, his fellow gym user's advice led him to the Facebook market as a means of easily re-entering the supply chain without the need for existing contacts. Although Carl could not be described as a typical 'occasional' or YOLO user (Antonopoulos and Hall, 2016; Christiansen et al., 2017), the effortlessness at which he was able to contact a supplier and place an order starkly contrasts with the long-term nature of Dom's closed market network. Buttressing this, David shrugged as he told me, 'I could probably get 150 bottles of [AAS] here by tomorrow just by going through a few Facebook groups'. However, aside from the accessibility of SNS for non-

connected users, why have these platforms become so popular as a means of purchasing IPEDs? Addressing this, Turnock (2021a) highlights the significance of SNS ‘aesthetic culture’, contending that because so much of the fitness industry’s content is presumed online (Toffler, 1980; Yar, 2012), it is unsurprising that online sellers seeking custom should be drawn to these sites of digital fitness. Therefore, as SNS constitute some of the most dopogenic environments (Backhouse et al., 2018) in contemporary society, it follows that they double up as a means of commerce for their users.

7.4.3. SNS sellers

Before unpacking the structure of the SNS IPED market, the two types of retail SNS IPED sellers that I encountered during my fieldwork – ‘UGL representatives’ and ‘independent resellers’ – ought to be explored. Whilst I acknowledge that this unsubtle typology does not necessarily capture the heterogeneity of actors involved in the SNS supply chain, it represents the most straightforward means of capturing the operations I observed and interacted with online. Firstly, underground laboratory representatives – who exist most prevalently on Facebook - sell exclusively on behalf of the UGL they are affiliated with, acting to promote a specific brand and foster a sense of familiarity within the consumer. In reward, they are offered commission for their sales. Certain brands opt to be more visible than others on SNS and therefore, during my time in the field, the underground lab representatives I encountered were mainly from Phoenix Labs, Energise, Victory Labs, and KSI. Further, unlike the actors that Hall and Antonopoulos (2016) identified in the illicit medicines trade, these representatives tend to be British as a result of the domestic nature of the UGL economy (see Demant et al., 2018 for a discussion of local buyer preference in online drugs markets). Unlike most recreational drug sellers on social media (see Demant et al., 2019), they are open about their identity within the groups they operate, commonly using what appear to be their genuine photographs and names as a means of building familiarity and trust. However, their affiliation to their brand is often subtle, as is evident in Figure 6.2. where UGL representative Pete Simms describes himself as a ‘supplement’ seller despite identifying his relationship with Phoenix in

his Facebook bio. Without my situated knowledge of the UGL market, I would have been unaware of his illicit status, therefore allowing him to somewhat hide in plain sight from those lacking the prerequisite cultural capital.

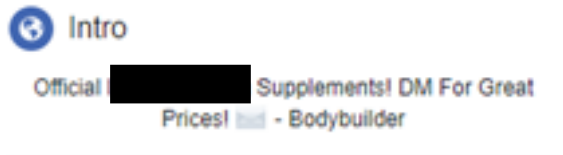


Figure 6.2. UGL representative Pete Simms' Facebook bio which nods to his illicit role but is also subtle enough to be overlooked by those unaware of Phoenix Labs (27/02/21).

Unlike UGL representatives, independent IPED resellers may carry various different UGL brands and therefore do not necessarily represent a specific producer. This is demonstrable in Figure 6.3. where @paul_greaves's bio boasts that he stocks '[d]ifferent steroids labs' as well as growth hormone. With that said, most of these suppliers appeared to have long-standing relationships with certain OPs or UGLs and (although not exclusively) stocked and advertised their products. From my observations, these actors appear more drawn to Instagram as a platform rather than the largely UGL-operated Facebook groups described below. Further, in distinction to the UGL representatives' apparent disregard for their anonymity, independent resellers typically conceal their identity with generic profile pictures of bodybuilders or pharmaceutical imagery and employ IPED-related pseudonyms. For this reason, their nationality is unclear from their profiles. However, following numerous interactions with such sellers, my data suggest that most operate from nations like China, Pakistan, Turkey, and Ukraine (see Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016). The differences between these two types of sellers are summed up in Table 2. for further clarity.

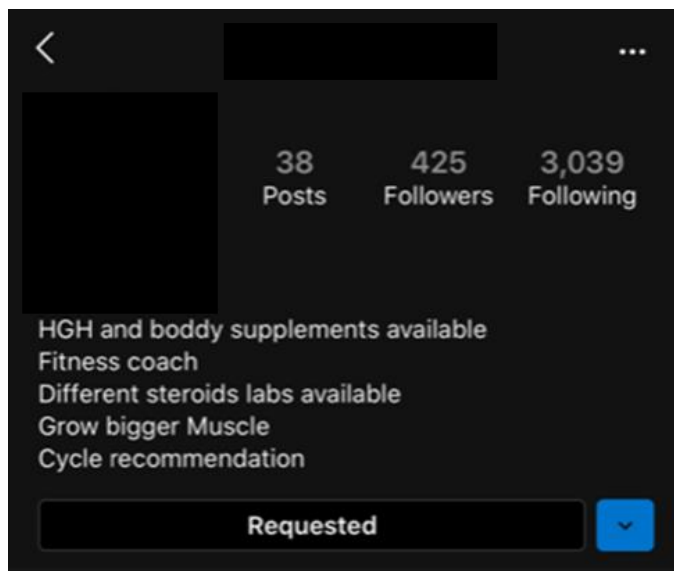


Figure 6.3. Instagram reseller @paul_greaves' profile advertising the range of products and brands that he sells (12/08/20).

Seller type	Preferred platform	Anonymity	Products sold	Geographic location
Underground lab representative	Facebook (specifically the Groups feature)	Typically use authentic images and names	One specific UGL brand	Britain
Independent reseller	Instagram	Typically anonymise images and names	Range of UGL brands and (counterfeit or genuine) pharmaceutical-grade products	Large variance, typically Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe

Table 2. Types of SNS IPED sellers and their characteristics.

7.4.4. Market structure

Unlike the OPs described by Hall and Antonopoulos (2016) and Mackey and Nayyar (2016), with their 'direct-order' structure, SNS are best understood as 'peer-to-peer' platforms (Turnock, 2021a) wherein sales are negotiated and non-standardised. As such, whereas OPs use infrastructures reminiscent of major online retailers like Amazon (*ibid.*), SNS transactions more closely resemble that of an online haggle (Terwiesch et al., 2005). Turnock (2021a)

further draws distinction between what he terms ‘open’ and ‘closed’ sellers online, the former of which are indiscriminate in their operation and advertise publicly in the hope of attracting a broad range of customers, whilst the latter – echoing the closed offline market – sell only to those with whom they have cultivated a trusting relationship. This dualism can crudely be applied to illustrate the differences between the Facebook IPED market and Instagram’s role in the supply chain. As will be demonstrated below, the Facebook IPED market occurs mainly within private or semi-private groups, hidden from view and dependent on customers being ‘accepted’ by the UGL representative. Instagram, on the other hand, plays host to extremely open, public IPED solicitation more in line with the general perception that the online market is ‘open to anyone’ (Antonopoulos and Hall, 2016: 708).

7.4.5. Facebook

A consensus was apparent within my sample that Facebook constitutes the main arena of IPED commerce on social media. Summing this up, Aaron told me, ‘*yeah I think Facebook [is the most prominent SNS for IPED supply]. I think because you can add people to groups without needing to invite them. Instagram’s the same, I could probably scroll down five times and I’ll come across someone selling gear on there. But Facebook has more*’. Therefore, although I will present Facebook and Instagram side-by-side during later analysis, the former is widely regarded as the host of SNS supply in the UK.

Facebook’s role in the SNS IPED market is predominantly played out on the platform’s private or semi-private groups, which users can request to join, and either be accepted or denied access by the admin. These admins, far from the community moderators described by Turnock (2021a) on bodybuilding forums, are UGL representatives who use these ‘backstage’ (Goffman, 1959) digital spaces away from the site’s general traffic to advertise and solicit their operations. Therefore, although Hall and Antonopoulos (2016: 39), in their description of the illicit pharmaceutical trade on SNS, note that, ‘Friends tend to post stock available directly on their walls or on the page of a group, often with photographic evidence of the product alongside their names and the date’, my data points to more of a top-down dynamic,

where groups are created and moderated by sellers, who subsequently hold a monopoly over these micro closed markets. This is evident in Figure 6.4., where Phoenix representative Danny Knowles sets out some ‘community rules’ for his public (soon to be private) group.

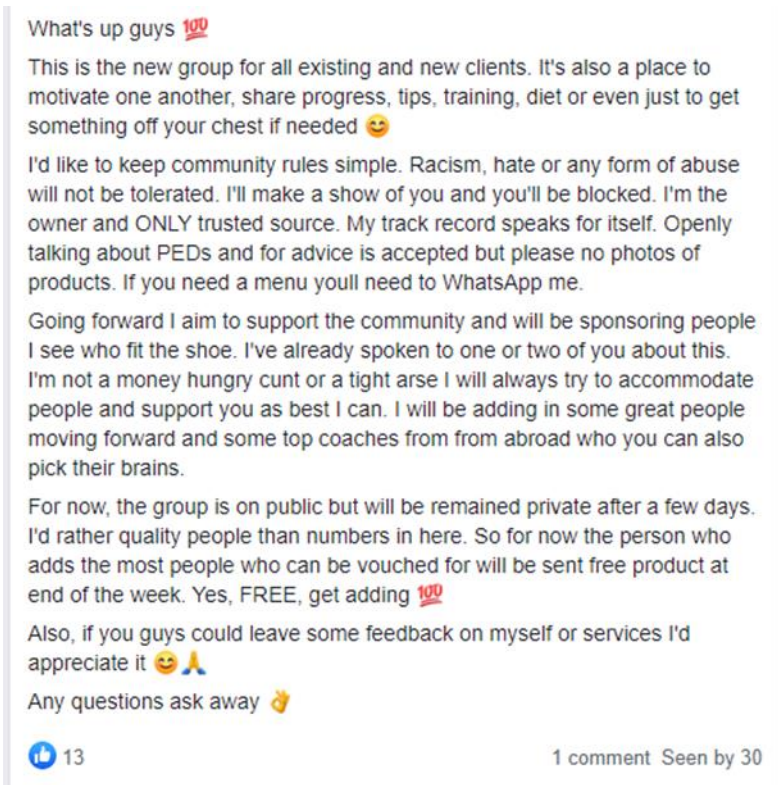


Figure 6.4. Phoenix representative Danny Knowles welcoming message to members of a newly-created Facebook IPED selling group (17/06/20).

As demonstrated in Danny’s introductory post, UGL representatives claim to cultivate a ‘community’ space, wherein members can ‘*motivate one another, share progress, tips, training [and] diet*’. Supporting this seemingly virtuous undertaking, Danny makes clear that he is not a ‘*money hungry cunt*’ and presents his role as something of a community leader, aiding consumers in their perpetuation of bodily desire by providing them access to ‘*top coaches*’ and other resources. His focus on community here is important as, given the widespread mistrust of the online market and its lack of cultural embeddedness (Fincoeur et al., 2015; van de Ven and Koenraadt, 2017), Danny’s efforts mitigate the inherent untrustworthiness of the space. In doing this, he somewhat emulates Dom’s role as a steroid mentor (van de Ven and Mulrooney, 2017) within his group, replicating the offline closed market’s appeal as a site of support and communality. Whilst this is perhaps an example of genuinely well-intentioned customer service like the responsible vending strategies described

by van de Ven and Mulrooney (2017) in the OP market, the impersonality of Facebook and openness of the market (demonstrated by my access to his post) belies this communal presentation's true motive. Unlike the culturally embedded offline closed market actors, Carl also noted that Phoenix are indiscriminate when recruiting their representatives, stating:

'The lads who sell for Phoenix aren't like your old school lifters in the gym. Phoenix basically say, 'If you want to set up a Facebook group to sell this stuff and make some money, then get in touch', and they're not interested if you've ever lifted a weight before, they're just interested in whether you can manage the job.'

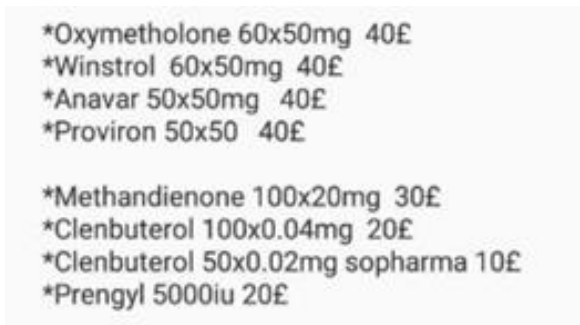
According to Carl, although a façade of mentorship and communality is present, these actors need not be culturally embedded in any true sense. Instead, this superficial proximity is recreated in line with the market-oriented ethos of the UGL economy (Fincoeur et al., 2015) and UGL representatives are ultimately recruited by virtue of their ability to '*manage the job*'. Demonstrating this, Danny's categorical statement '*I'm the owner and ONLY trusted source [of IPEDs]*', coupled with an express ban on product photos (presumably either to prevent negative reviews or simply to mitigate the risk of being shut down), exposes his commercial intentions. This is compounded by his determination to rapidly populate the group and build a substantial prospective client base before taking the community private. Motivated by this need to transition the group 'backstage' (Goffman, 1959), Danny promises to send free IPEDs to the most prolific community-builder (see Turnock, 2020). This speaks to another important aspect of the SNS market for suppliers – the need to remain vigilant of law enforcement. Indeed, Carl stated that, '*the only risk in terms of jail time and criminal record is if you're a seller*'. Therefore, whilst group members face little to no risk in being part of a public community on Facebook, as a seller Danny is conscious to protect himself by moving the group into a more private space.

Following the establishment of these groups, users message the UGL representative on an encrypted platform like Whatsapp, Kik or Wikr (Moyle et al., 2019) to request a 'price list' and, if necessary, haggle to negotiate a favourable deal. Demant et al. (2019) describe a similar pattern in the SNS recreational drugs market wherein encrypted messaging services are

employed for conversations concerning financial transactions and logistical information. Whatsapp appears to be the most popular platform through which UGL representatives converse with customers from their Facebook groups, as Rob explained:

‘Wikr and Whatsapp are probably the most commonly used [...] but Wikr is a pain in the arse. So Whatsapp is the more common one, and Whatsapp isn’t easy for the police to get into once a phone’s been shut. If the police pay more interest, then you’ll see encryption become more important but because police involvement and investigation is minimal – generally they only investigate it if they fall over it – then there’s not really been the need.’

Following a peer-to-peer negotiation of the price list (see Figure 6.5.), the customer’s order is placed. Payment, depending on the buyer and seller’s preference, is generally made through Paypal, MoneyGram or direct bank transfer (see Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016) and orders are posted domestically to the user.



*Oxymetholone 60x50mg 40£
*Winstrol 60x50mg 40£
*Anavar 50x50mg 40£
*Proviron 50x50 40£

*Methandienone 100x20mg 30£
*Clenbuterol 100x0.04mg 20£
*Clenbuterol 50x0.02mg sopharma 10£
*Prengyl 5000iu 20£

Figure 6.5. Part of Galactic Pharma’s price list (07/04/20).

7.4.6. Instagram

Unlike Facebook’s relatively closed infrastructure, Instagram encapsulates the more common perception of the open-to-all online market (Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016; Antonopoulos and Hall, 2016; Turnock, 2021a). For this reason, I was able to gain a substantial data set from numerous interactions with independent resellers on the platform, commonly not even needing to initiate the conversation. Without the ‘Group’ feature available to UGL representatives on Facebook, resellers’ Instagram profiles constitute their primary advertising spaces and therefore particular attention is paid to cultivating a polished, pharmaceutical-looking page. As is demonstrated in Figure 6.6., this typically involves ‘post[ing] pictures of gear’ (Carl) to

exemplify the range and legitimacy of the products on offer or sharing pseudo-scientific or fitness-related content with a ‘pro-drug bias’ (Brennan et al., 2013: 159).

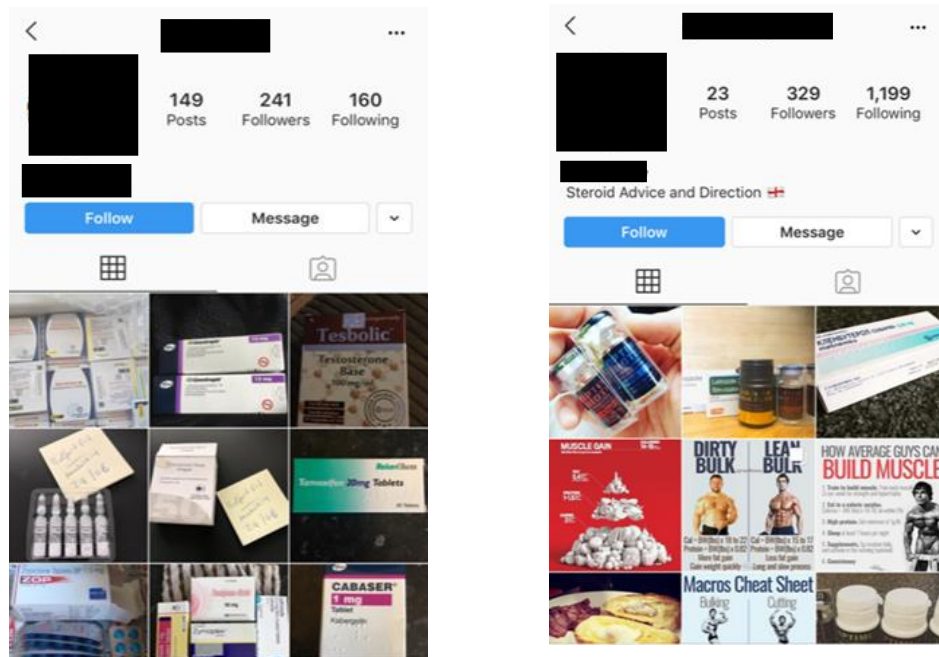


Figure 6.6. Two examples of typical independent reseller Instagram profiles showing the products on offer as well as pro-IPED advice and marketing (02/07/19).

Given the platform’s asymmetric nature (Hu et al. 2014), resellers must rely on prospective customers following them before they can initiate contact. As a result, these accounts appear to search specific gym and fitness-related hashtags and subsequently follow a large volume of accounts in hope that some will follow them back. As my fieldwork progressed, I was frequently followed by such sellers without needing to search them out due to the ‘Recommended follow’ feature on the app. Cognisant of the relative sanctity of being followed back, Instagram independent resellers typically made contact with me almost immediately, as demonstrated in Figure 7. 7..

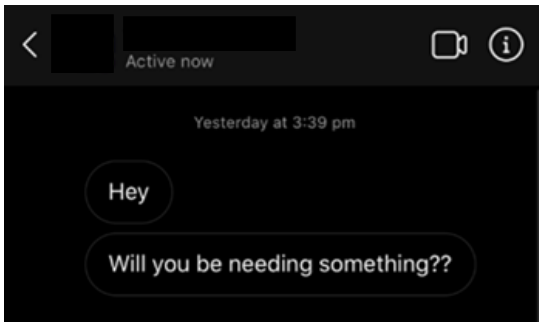


Figure 6.7. An example of an independent reseller making first contact immediately after I followed his account back (04/02/20).

Echoing this, Carl described the strategies of flattery and ingratiation that often accompany such messages, where ‘[Instagram resellers] will friend you and then they’ll contact you and say, ‘oh you look great, your physique’s fantastic. How long have you been training? Where are you based?’. Then you know what’s coming, it always comes back to, ‘I’ve got stuff that will make you bigger’’. This speaks to the need to immediately built rapport and overcome the innate mistrust that SNS sellers are subject to (Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016). Therefore, just like UGL representatives attempt to foster a sense of mutuality and community, Instagram resellers must endeavour to come across as personable and legitimate despite the platform’s limited affordances. This mandate was further evident in the practice of ‘prescription’ by some sellers, where independent resellers typically enquired about my goals (often reduced to ‘bulking’ or ‘cutting’), height, and weight before counselling me on the most effective and (in their eyes) safe cycle (see Figure 6.8.).

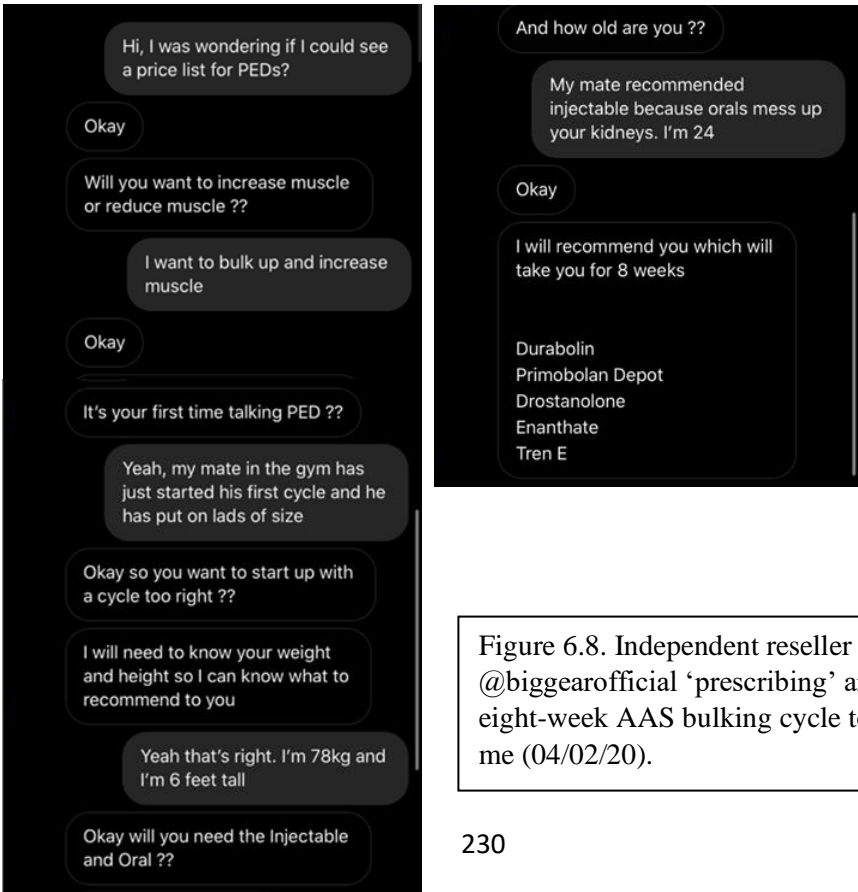


Figure 6.8. Independent reseller @biggearofficial ‘prescribing’ an eight-week AAS bulking cycle to me (04/02/20).

This is just one example of many similar interactions I had during my time in the field, where I was ‘prescribed’ compounds that a first-time user would be extremely unlikely to purchase under the supervision of an offline mentor like Dom. Therefore, it appears that these faux-mentor relationships are simply a tool through which to maximise sales to unsuspecting (less culturally embedded) novice consumers. Supporting this, independent reseller @supplementsandmore (Figure 6.9.) candidly stated ‘*I sell to anyone*’, regardless of their level of experience or apparent suitability. This opposes the offline closed market’s emphasis on ‘graduating’ onto IPEDs and again illustrates the lack of barriers present to entering the SNS market (Antonopoulos and Hall, 2016). However, attempting to mitigate this, the seller claims that, as ‘*amateurs need a lot of coaching*’, they receive a ‘*manual booklet and video CD*’ alongside their cycle. Though I never saw proof of such products, @supplementsandmore’s willingness to provide these services again speaks to an attempt to play the role of an online steroid mentor (van de Ven and Mulrooney, 2017).

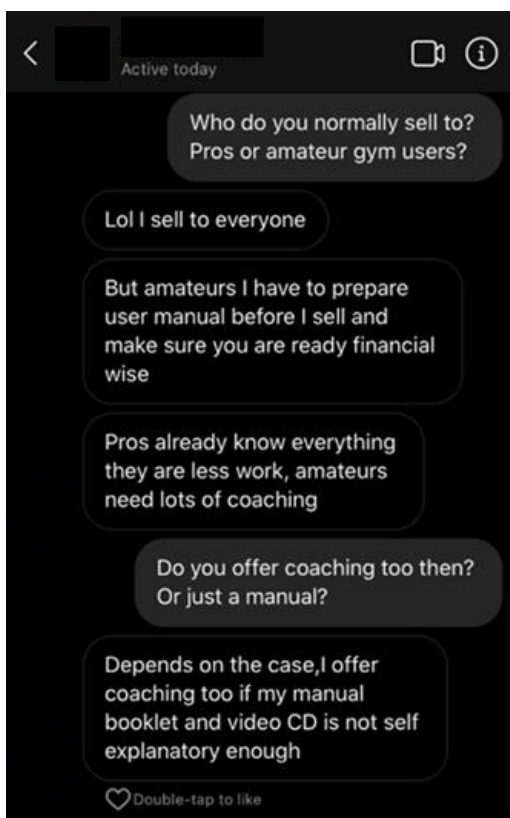
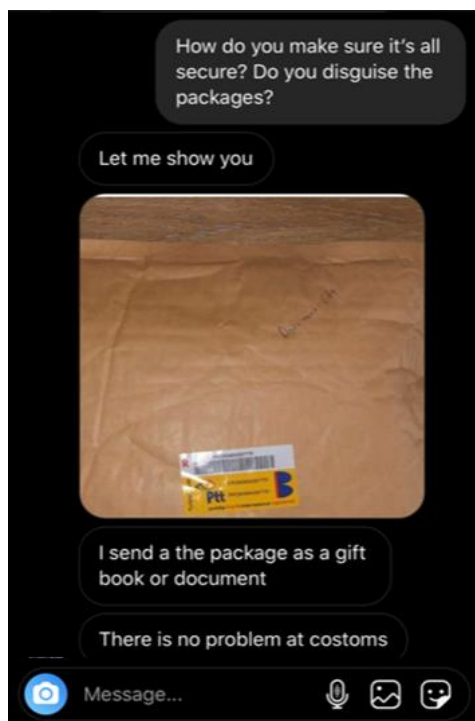


Figure 6.9. Independent reseller @supplementsandmore discussing his differing strategies for selling to novice and long-term customers (11/10/19).

Following this, resellers typically offer a pricelist detailing their brands and products before engaging in the same electronic haggling process described above. Whilst some were swift to transfer this more sensitive part of the interaction onto an encrypted platform like Whatsapp or Telegram (Moyle et al., 2019), most of these discussions were situated within Instagram's in-built messaging feature. These suppliers also generally accept most third-party payment methods as well as bank transfer (Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016).

7.4.7. Shipping and discreet packaging

Though the Facebook and Instagram market are distinct in their set-up, both UGL representatives and independent resellers share a reliance on postal services to deliver their products (Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016). Given the domestic nature of most UGLs, products procured through lab representatives are typically delivered using Royal Mail. Independent resellers, on the other hand, rely on services like FedEx (see Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016; Pergolizzi et al., 2017) to ship their products internationally. Particularly within this latter practice, sellers frequently employ risk-mitigation tactics whereby packages are disguised to avoid detection and confiscation (see Turnock, 2021a). As demonstrated in Figure 7.1., independent resellers on Instagram repeatedly vied for consumer trust by presenting their products as books or Amazon packages to ensure their safe passage through customs.



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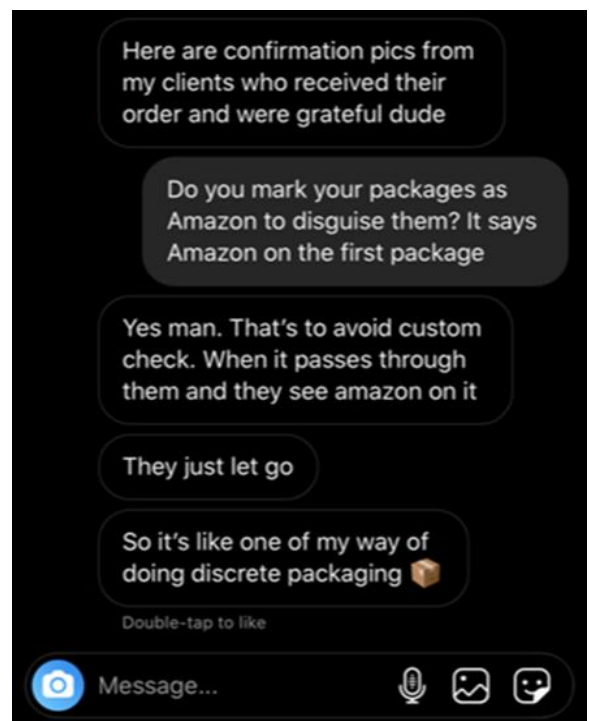


Figure 7.1. Examples of two Instagram independent resellers discussing the discrete nature of their packaging (11/10/19).

Similarly, for bulk orders @ragin_roids (Figure 7.2.) described how they insert ‘*thin aluminium sheets to prevent any x-ray from getting to the parcel*’ as well as placing the products in air-sealed bags to lessen the risk from sniffer dog detection. Ultimately covering the items in a further layer of disguise, @ragin_roids’ triple-protected system functions not only to lessen the likelihood of detection, but also as a means of reassurance for the consumer. Though this is a relatively extreme example, it illustrates the added considerations in the online market compared with many of my offline sample’s experiences of simply picking up their IPEDs off friends or culturally embedded contacts. Ultimately, this represents the final, and most high-risk, hurdle for suppliers, who must deliver the products if they wish to gain repeat-business (see Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016).

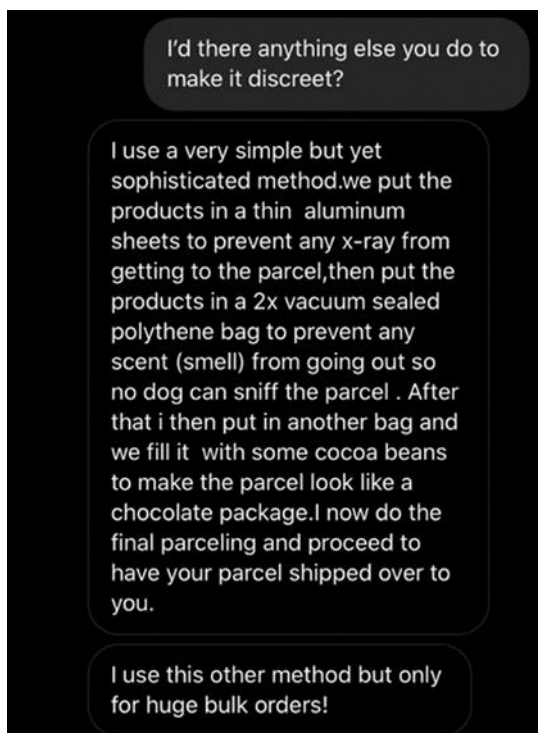


Figure 7.2. @ragin_roids describing the lengths they got to in order to protect bulk orders from detection (11/10/19).

7.5. Marketing strategies

Although scholarly attention has been paid to illicit drug transactions on social media (see Bakken and Demant, 2019; Demant et al., 2019; Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016), SNS marketing strategies have thus far been widely overlooked (for an exception, see Mackey and Nayyar's (2016) discussion of rogue OPs). Echoing licit sports supplement brands like Grenade, social media marketing allows online suppliers to cheaply advertise directly to users and place their products alongside the abundance of fitspiration content that stimulates bodily desire. Again, this kinship with licit commercial trade is telling, and speaks to Smith, Jr.'s (1980) enterprise perspective, wherein illicit markets need not be conceived of as necessarily divergent from their legal counterparts. However, in line with the IPED market's increasing depersonalisation, social media also presents a raft of challenges in relation to authenticity and trust (Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016; Turnock, 2021a). As such, successful SNS marketing can bolster consumer trust and allay this inevitable suspicion within the online market.

7.5.1. UGL SNS marketing strategies

Hall and Antonopoulos (2016: 39) note that '[v]irtual 'word of mouth' can play an important role in terms of establishing, assuring, and circulating the legitimacy of a seller and quality of the service on offer'. As such, UGL representatives are aware of the sanctity of creating promotional networks that can vouch for their trustworthiness. The most striking means of achieving this is the use of athlete sponsorships. This arrangement echoes the licit phenomena of the SNS influencer (Marwick, 2015) wherein prominent users are selected as brand ambassadors, promoting certain brands in exchange for 'freebies' (Turnock, 2020). It should be noted here that sponsored athletes are distinct from UGL representatives as, whilst both of these actors operate on behalf of their underground labs, brand ambassadors are not involved in the actual sale of illicit products and instead function to offer advice, guidance, and promotion. Therefore, UGLs select influential figures in the fitness community and remunerate them for showing public affiliation to the lab. This was explained by Sam in relation to his recent appointment as a Phoenix Labs 'brand ambassador':

‘S: A lot of the labs have sponsored athletes now [...] the guy who owns the lab basically got in contact with me saying, ‘I know you’ve got a large client base, do you want to be a sponsored athlete?’ Then obviously in turn my clients use the brand.

N: do you get any sort of financial discount for doing that?

S: yeah, he’ll do me my cycles essentially for no cost. It is a good deal, but then obviously I’ve got to get them customers. It’s not a certain amount of clients or anything but I’ll need to refer any of my clients who are on cycle or going into a prep to him. That’s basically the deal, which works pretty well.’

As Sam demonstrated, Phoenix Labs replicate well-known fitness brands like Gymshark, gifting free products to users with a substantial ‘client base’. The UGL are clearly aware of their target market and therefore judge Sam’s personal consumption to be less costly to finance than the potential benefits of his extensive coaching clientele. Beyond this however, the paramount importance of brand identity is reflected in Phoenix’ strategy, as they strive to foster a symbolic attachment with Sam’s clients, whilst also utilising his reputation as a coach to promote their own legitimacy and sporting affiliation.

Although I observed this behaviour in other UGLs, Phoenix dominated the SNS market with their sponsorship efforts, as Carl explained, *‘[s]o if you have a big name in the industry and people know you, [Phoenix] will sponsor you. That is across the board, I mean they must sponsor twenty or thirty athletes that I know in one Facebook group’*. This claim was supported by Rob, who asserted that *‘they sponsor about fifty athletes’* in total, ranging from IFBB Pro bodybuilders to amateur gym users with a sizable social media following. The latter of these categories is epitomised by Carl, an amateur forty-six-year-old bodybuilder from Wales, who held a number of UGL sponsorships, including Phoenix, during my data collection period. Despite Phoenix’ reputation as a *‘very elitist group’* in Carl’s eyes, he explained his worth to the UGL:

‘So the guy sitting on the sofa weighing eighteen stone who needs to get in shape, I’m more appealing to him because that’s what I did. The huge bodybuilders who compete every year, their physiques, although everyone fantasises about having them, they’re reasonably unattainable. So to give people some perspective and some actual ‘I went from this to this in nine months using this product and this training programme and this diet’, people just want those items that you’ve been using.’

Though Phoenix Labs are primarily concerned with elite competitors, Carl's sponsorship functioned to mainstream the brand. This again speaks to the democratisation of the IPED market (Fincoeur et al., 2015), as the *'guy sitting on the sofa weighing eighteen stone'*, who presumably lacks personal connections in the industry, is able to use Carl as a proxy and, in turn, is more inclined to purchase IPEDs in order to make a similar transformation. Digging deeper, Carl's physique is employed as the *objet petit a* for these prospective customers, just as the PTs in my sample utilised their bodily capital to attract and retain clients. Identifying Phoenix Labs' products as the chemical agent that made his physique possible therefore stimulates dissatisfaction in his target market and leaves them desiring AAS as a means of chasing his ideal. Carl's fitness journey, which was meticulously tracked through his Instagram account, therefore represents his brand (Khamis et al., 2017) which he mobilises in order to receive *'five percent off the price list'*. Further, referencing several famed bodybuilders that were continually linked with Phoenix throughout my fieldwork, Carl noted that *'[t]he problem with those guys is [that] they come and go very quickly and of course when they leave, they leave with massive amounts of people'*. Lesser-known brand ambassadors like Carl thus represent a safe bet for UGLs in the increasingly competitive online IPED market. Most brand ambassadors appear to be approached by their sponsors. This is particularly true of participants with a high degree of influence in the IPED community like Rob, who incredulously recounted his experiences of being solicited by Phoenix:

'I've been approached numerous times by labs saying, 'if you say we're good we'll give you loads of free gifts', but I'm not interested. If I know a lab's good then I'll say it's good. Phoenix sent me fifty vials of their gear for no apparent reason whatsoever. I phoned them up like, 'what have you sent me this fucking shit for? I won't use it'. They said, 'nah we just wanted to show you how good it is'. [...] They've done that a lot and it's odd, it's just odd behaviour.'

Although Rob turned down Phoenix' offer, the UGL's unsolicited delivery illustrates the importance placed on brand ambassador marketing by Phoenix and their astonishingly overt approach. The significant expense undertaken for such a gesture speaks to the value of

onboarding well-respected industry professionals like Rob, whose endorsement would dramatically bolster Phoenix' brand integrity and signal their legitimacy.

Sponsored athletes perform a number of roles depending on the UGL's brazenness and their own willingness to engage in the IPED market. The most overt of these methods are exemplified by Carl, who stated that, '*my form of promotion is hashtagging in posts, bigging up the lab, speaking to people who message me privately who ask me what I take. And I then push them towards the lab that way*'. For Carl, the UGL brand name is included in his Instagram and Facebook content, typically in the format #teamphoenix. This highly public advertising, operationalised by various UGLs (see Figure 7.3. and 7.4.), again illustrates the lack of regulatory oversight on SNS, as Sam mused that Phoenix are '*playing a very fine line with getting caught, but at the same time do law enforcement really care about it?*'. Whilst the inclusion of brand names in public posts may appear reckless, unlike general drug hashtags like #buysteroidsUK, UGL brand names require a degree of cultural embeddedness to access. For this reason, as long as IPED regulation remains '*way down the pecking order*' (Luke), law enforcement agencies lack the community-specific knowledge necessary to successfully locate the posts.

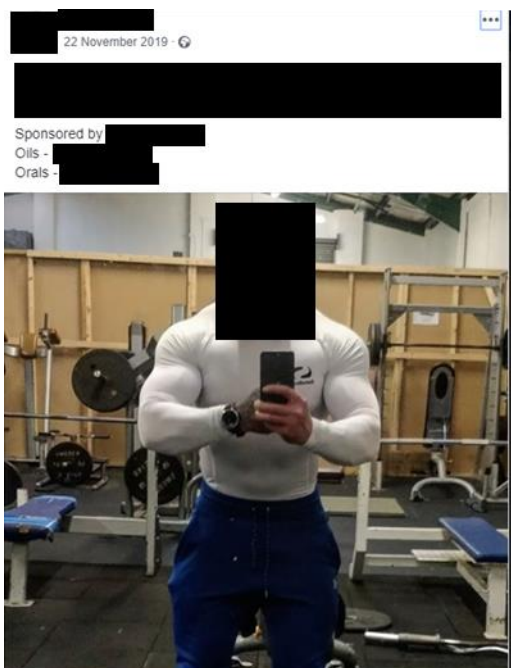


Figure 7.3. An amateur Facebook bodybuilder publicly showing his affiliation with UGL Energise (22/11/19).

Figure 7.4. Victory Labs celebrating the achievements of one of their sponsored athletes via their official Facebook page (25/06/19).

Publicly available hashtagging appears to be more prevalent in amateur brand ambassadors, compared to IFBB Pros or other elite athletes. This is perhaps due to ambassadors like Carl's relatively modest platform (under a thousand followers on Instagram) compared to Sam's more than three thousand followers, coupled with his reputation in the licit fitness industry. This was addressed by Jake during a follow up interview in late 2020, where he was adamant that, *'you would never be asked to put it on social media. Like I would never put on Instagram like, go and buy this'*. Clearly, Jake's burgeoning reputation as a bodybuilder, alongside his employment as a security guard and model would, in his mind, preclude him from undertaking the public marketing demonstrated by Carl and, just like Sam, overt sponsorship would represent a far greater professional risk for him.

Despite his unexceptional following however, Carl compensated for his limited reach with his trust-building potential. On this, he contended that *'it's all done by trust really, which is where we come in, us sponsored athletes'*. Here, Carl functions as a guarantor of quality and legitimacy as his bodily progression is testament to his successful IPED use, facilitated by the UGL. Therefore, by acting as the public face of the lab, brand ambassadors afford the operation a heightened level of cultural embeddedness (Fincoeur et al., 2015), attempting to replicate the offline models of social supply (van de Ven and Koenraadt, 2017) and community membership in that sales are based on tailored, holistic consultation rather than faceless online interaction. Whilst such tactics can be interpreted as a mere profit maximisation exercise, this is perhaps a reductive reading. Having since moved away from Phoenix Labs, Carl represented

Inception, a smaller British UGL, at the close of the data collection period¹⁵, and was keen to portray their genuine, well-intentioned marketing approach:

‘Their attitude and their business plan is far more my way of thinking. Less pressure, if you want to buy you can buy but a lot of advice is offered, free advice. They asked for their sponsored athletes to offer free advice on the [closed Facebook] group, you know, not to charge for things because they’re paying you to do it. They’re far more my way.’

Echoing the manner taken by many online IPED sellers in their ‘consultation’ services, Inception demonstrate a responsible vending approach (Van Hout and Bigham, 2014), encouraging their brand ambassadors to offer free advice around nutrition, training and safe IPED use (see Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016). Alongside overt brand affiliation signifiers like hashtagging, UGLs also utilise brand ambassadors in a more subtle, community-embedded manner. This is portrayed in Sam’s experience of working with Phoenix:

‘N: does [your sponsorship] involve you posting promo stuff or wearing branded gear or anything?’

S: It’s not about wearing anything or stuff like that, which is what I find quite strange. It’s more like people in the gym will ask you, and then you’ll point them in the direction of Phoenix. It is quite a common thing, like if Phil Heath [a well-known American bodybuilder] was training in your gym you’d want to know what brand he uses, because then you know that one works. So yeah, that’s what he [Phoenix’ owner] goes off, people openly talking in gyms about it, because they do.’

As demonstrated, although SNS were used to recruit Sam initially, the bulk of his referrals occurred offline in the gym setting. This view was reflected by Rob, as he contended, ‘sponsorship has always gone on, but it’s definitely more blatant now with social media’. Thus, capitalising both upon the gradual normalisation of IPED use in the gym and the burgeoning SNS market, Phoenix effectively have a footing in both spaces, in many ways reflecting the contemporary IPED market. However, whilst UGLs’ employment of brand ambassadors appears to offer the athletes a healthy income supplement, a degree of

¹⁵ In total, Carl was sponsored by three UGLs during this project’s fieldwork: Energise, Phoenix Labs and Inception.

exploitation is also present. This is exemplified by Carl's experiences with Energise prior to his affiliation with Phoenix and Inception:

'What happened was, I found out that Energise had earned a small fortune off of my back. Basically, I came off the sofa and got into shape, logged a lot of it and they approached me and said 'we'd like to sponsor you if you promote our products'. They said, 'we'll send you free stuff every month, whatever you require, up to a limit of course. Then you need to tag us in every post that you have. Anyone who asks you where you get your products from, push them our way'. Anyway, I found out through a friend that they'd earned in excess of ten thousand pounds from me last summer, and they didn't pass a penny of it on. I received free stuff every month, it probably cost them about twenty months' worth of gear and they earned all that off me, if not more. They came back to me and said, 'we'll sort you out, we'll help you out, we'll give you this or that', but it never appeared.'

Carl's experiences demonstrate the unregulated nature of the IPED market as, unlike the licit economy's marketing oversight (see ASA, 2020), his exploitation could not be reported or investigated. Therefore, having no legally-binding contract in place, his relationship to the UGL was entirely based upon trust, which is problematic given the power differential at play. This same disparity can lead to brand ambassadors being suddenly excommunicated, as Carl explained when discussing his later experience with Phoenix, *'I went to put my third or fourth order in and I was told that I'd been cut off. I was no longer sponsored, I was not promoting the company enough in the way they wanted me to'*. Further, Carl complained, *'[t]hey basically wanted everybody to be a seller, and I'm not prepared to sell things. I can promote things but I'm not happy to sell them, I don't want to risk a jail sentence'*. Carl faced an ultimatum to either risk prosecution or be cut adrift, which ultimately led to him working with Inception in a more advisory role. This commercial underbelly was further demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic. During a follow up interview with Sam, I enquired about his sponsorship with Phoenix and whether the arrangement was still in place:

'N: How's it all going with Phoenix? You said last time that you'd recently become sponsored by them. Have you made many referrals?'

S: It's funny you've said that cus I was telling Jake the other day, it all seems to have changed at Phoenix. Obviously last time I said to you about getting my cycles essentially for free and all that, well now they've got really tight with what they're giving out. So before I got my whole lot, prep and all, but now I'm lucky to even get the basic compounds. Also, before they just wanted to know that you were passing their details on if anyone asked about becoming enhanced, whereas now they've put

in a new referral system, which is more trouble than it's worth in my opinion. So to actually get the products I have to refer X amount of clients, which is just pressure for me as I don't want to start my lads on anything that I don't think is necessary or safe. The [Phoenix] group chat's gone a bit quite too if I'm honest and they seem to have changed ownership - it's just not the same. Where the lad before would ask us how we're doing and what we need and all that, it's a foreign man who runs it now and he doesn't speak much English. So anyway, I have ended up just going through Dom instead.'

Phoenix appear to have been negatively affected by the fall in demand that occurred over the nationwide lockdown (see Gibbs, 2021; Zoob Carter et al., 2021) and therefore became less generous with their 'freebies'. The disparity between Sam's experience as a newly sponsored athlete and this period (which was around six months later) was striking, as the liberal delivery of products he initially received was replaced by a more tightly-regulated ration, contingent on an arbitrary number of referrals. Acknowledging the context of this change, Sam concluded, *'I reckon they've really struggled with the gyms being closed and all the [competitions] being cancelled, so I'm not really surprised'*. Ultimately, it appears that the pandemic weakened the 'responsible vending' practices (Van Hout and Bigham, 2014) previously demonstrated by Phoenix and, as their bottom line was compromised, the lavish giveaways were curtailed in line with the fundamental injunction to turn a profit.

UGLs also employ the more insidious tactic of creating fake profiles and constructing fictitious conversations in order to subversively market their operations. This strategy was summed up by Rob, as he laid out a hypothetical marketing plan that he would follow if he were to set up a lab:

'So first I open twenty fake profiles on Facebook or Instagram, join all these bodybuilding pages and I ask a question on my genuine profile or another profile, 'is this gear any good?'. I then put a picture up of it with it looking all fancy, then within that conversation nineteen people that appear to have no association with each other post how they've used it and they find it absolutely fucking brilliant. Straight away I've got people wanting to buy that lab because they've been on a thread where twenty people have now said, 'yeah I've used it, it's fucking shit hot'. Bear in mind I'm a UGL owner so I have all day to be on Facebook, [I would] do that for a couple of months and everyone believes this is a huge lab with a great reputation, producing a great product. No one knows if I am actually producing a good product, but I'm flying. I've seen whole fucking conversations and arguments on Facebook between the same fucking person, long convoluted stories about how a mate got ripped off over a bad

lab and he's now using this and it's so much better. Not even direct marketing, very very subversive, you know? 'I bought this', and it might be a lab that we all know to be a bag of shit like KSI or something, but now he's got a better lab. But it just comes across as a conversation, to someone reading that, they're thinking 'well I've used KSI and they're alright but not great, but with this stuff his gains have massively improved'. It's all marketing to get people to start seeing this lab's name popping up again and again.'

UGLs can exploit the relative anonymity of SNS, taking on multiple identities to weave intricate narratives of the legitimacy and quality of their lab. This exposes the hypocrisy at the heart of many UGLs' marketing strategies, as this deception is utilised as a means of encouraging trust in prospective customers, who are, ironically, untrusting due to previous accounts of such trickery. Hall and Antonopoulos (2016: 40) note that 'customers tend to be more interested in a product if it is perceived as 'authentically' endorsed, rather than a product purposefully promoted by marketer-generated sources'. Therefore, this underhand marketing technique provides what appears to be organic electronic word of mouth advertising (eWOM) (Phua and Ahn, 2016) to unknowing SNS users. The presence of fake profiles and interactions casts doubt upon the true size of many popular UGLs, as Rob noted that Phoenix Labs' '*social media and online presence would make them appear to be absolutely enormous*' yet given his above comments, this conclusion may be premature.

7.5.2. Independent resellers' marketing tactics

Just like UGLs, independent resellers have developed a number of techniques designed to emphasise their congruence with the hardcore fitness community. The most striking means of achieving this is the utilisation of their own bodily transformations. This practice is exemplified by Turkish supplier @gear4u66 (Figure 7.5.), whose Instagram story shows his '*after pic while on cycle*', in order to simultaneously promote himself as a genuine member of the fitness community and highlight the potency of his products. If the image is his physique, @gear4u66 is employing his 'boosted' bodily capital (Kotzé and Antonopoulos, 2019) to lessen the proximity between him and his client base, and, as discussed above, present more like '*the guy in the gym*' (Rob) that typifies offline supply. More pertinently, the seller states,

'I dont [sic] sell what I dont [sic] use my friends', vouching for both the safety and effectiveness of his IPEDs. This brings a new dimension to the concept of digital prosumption (Yar, 2012), as he leverages his consumption within his marketing strategy in an effort to mirror his customers' behaviour as well as posing as the *objet petit a* just like Carl. @gear4u66's choice to address his 'friends' is particularly telling, as it alludes to his constructed identity as a peer from whom users can not only purchase IPEDs, but also share a journey of bodily enhancement.

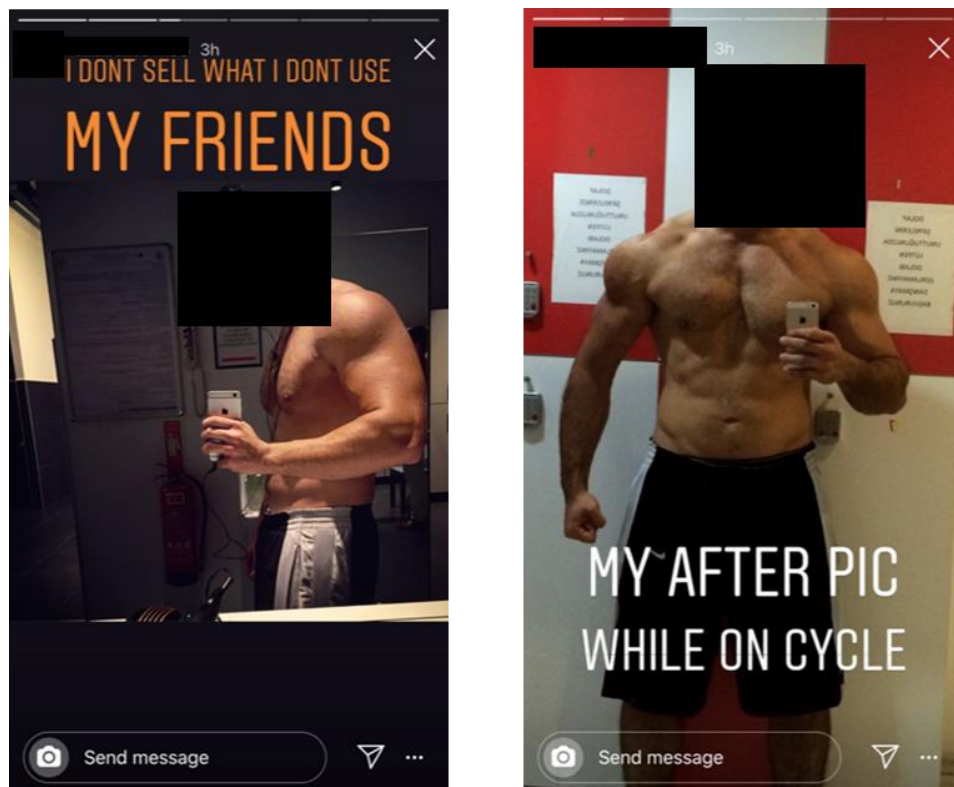


Figure 7.5. Turkish IPED seller @gear4u66 posting pictures of his physique in order to market his products (13/11/19).

A further interesting crossover between the licit and illicit market apparent in Figure 7.5. is the seller's self-objectification, whereby @gear4u66's bodily capital is, in theory, being translated into economic capital just like the sponsored athletes employed by UGLs. This mirrors the self-objectification experienced by PTs Sam, Dom, and Tim, as they sold their services based on their muscular aesthetics (Hutson, 2013). However, this development

contradicts van de Ven and Koenraad's (2017) contention that online IPED sellers tend not to partake in drug consumption or training. With that said, given the similarity of the licit and illicit ergogenic aids markets online, it is unsurprising that this practice has bled from PTs and other fitness professionals into the illicit IPED market.

An additional practice borrowed from the PT industry is the customer transformation, or 'before and after', picture (Parasecoli, 2005; Turnock, 2021 a). The below posts by Roids Asia, @big_dog02 and @legalisesteds (Figure 7.6. and Figure 7.7.) emphasise these parallels. Users' physiques are employed here not only to illustrate the transformative effect of the substances, but also to give the impression that the seller has established a substantial and engaged customer base. This is particularly evident in my interaction with @strong_supps, who shares an image of one of their '*clients from Russia*', showcasing both their globalised operation and the apparent efficaciousness of their products.

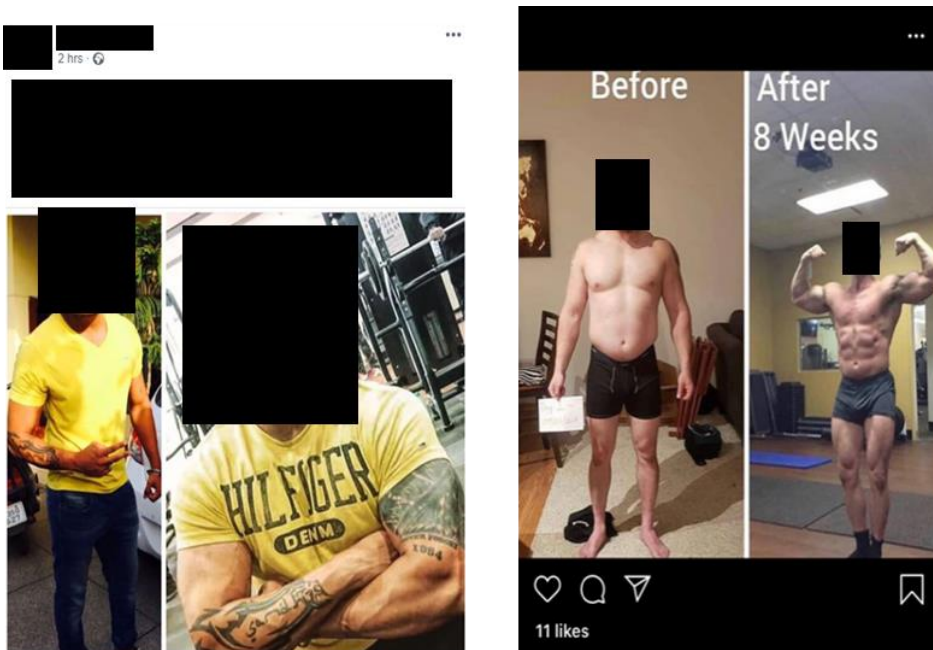


Figure 7.6. Roids Asia (left) (17/06/20), @big_dog02 (right) (07/07/20) posting transformation pictures of their clients to promote their products.

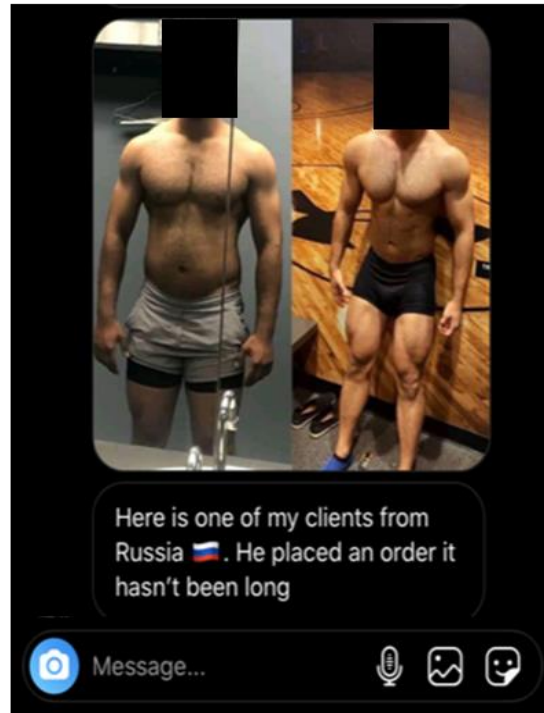


Figure 7.7. @legalisesteds (left) (22/06/20) showcasing their customer's purported five-year transformation. @strong_supps (right) sending an image of his Russian client in a covert customer interaction (21/05/20).

However, as was noted by Will in Chapter Six, ‘you can look different on pictures, like angles and filters’, therefore sellers are able to manipulate their customers’ ‘after’ photos in accordance with the SNS’ injunction of maximal aesthetic attractiveness. Further, due to the lack of regulation, the legitimacy of the images in Figure 7.6. and 7.7. cannot be confirmed and therefore the ‘transformations’ may in fact not be the sellers’ customers at all.

Finally, resellers often share positive customer feedback as a means of marketing their products (see Figure 7.8. and 7.9.). Reminiscent of Mackey and Nayyar’s (2016) finding that rogue OPs draw upon customer testimonials to promote their services, @UKanaboliord’s screenshot of a customer’s positive feedback aims to signal the supplier’s legitimacy and authenticity to prospective customers (Koenraadt, 2018). The client’s review betrays the seller’s target market, as he references his ‘naturally low testosterone’ which has, prior to

starting his cycle, inhibited the man from successfully growing a beard. This, again, speaks to a mainstreaming of the IPED market, where products are being advertised beyond the hardcore fitness population and instead targeted at laypeople seeking to improve their overall wellbeing (Kimergård, 2015; Underwood et al., 2021).

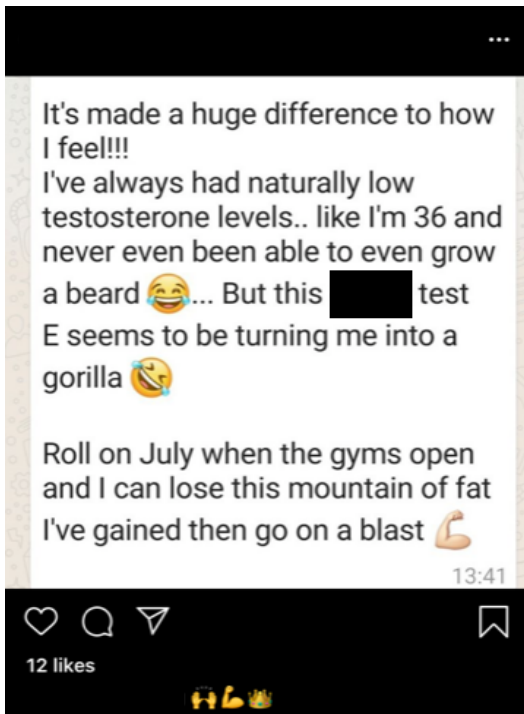


Figure 7.8. Online seller @UKanaboliclord showcasing a client's positive review of their products via an Instagram post (23/06/20).

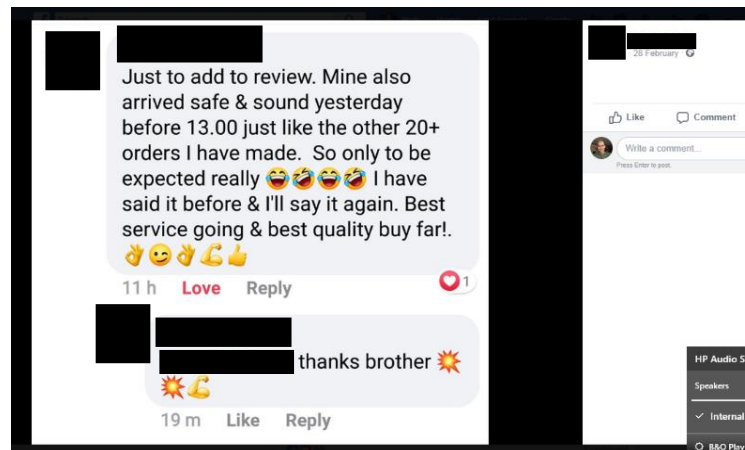


Figure 7.9. Facebook seller Bobby Apex sharing a repeat client's review (08/04/20).

7.6. Chapter summary

This chapter has provided an overview of the supply of IPEDs, taking in production, the 'traditional' offline closed supply chains and the fundamental transformations that have occurred, before finally exploring the online market on Facebook and Instagram. The general market trajectory that I uncovered builds upon the current literature on IPED supply and therefore goes some way to bolstering knowledge around both the offline and online marketplaces, and the interconnection between the two.

Supporting Turnock's (2020) claim that the UK IPED economy is principally UGL-based, the scale and profitability of such operations ought to be noted as well as their newfound eDTCA sales tactics (Laing and Mackey, 2011). It is this profitability, in concert with a mainstreaming and digitisation of the market, that I have argued has fundamentally shifted the supply of IPEDs away from the culturally embedded model described in the second section of this chapter and towards the increasingly impersonal online marketplace (Antonopoulos and Hall, 2016). This is not to say that offline partial networks are obsolete or indeed that all online supply is inherently impersonal. Dom's relationship with Astra and the numerous examples of culturally embedded, gym-based supply attest to the fact that this communal market is as prevalent as ever within the localised hardcore fitness community (Coomber et al., 2014). However, the influx of less culturally embedded consumers into the once guarded market has significantly extended the illicit economy in line with IPEDs' status as lifestyle drugs (Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016). Although it is unclear whether the market's digitised accessibility has driven the growth of IPED consumption or simply reflects this uptake, what is evident is that the broad trends of commercialisation, normalisation and digitisation have altered the marketplace and the push towards SNS supply.

8. Conclusion

This final chapter aims to summarise this thesis' findings and answer the research aims set out in Chapter One. First however, it is worth recapping these aims before each can be unpacked and satisfied in light of previous analysis chapters. As such, this work has set out to:

- Investigate the social and cultural practices that have developed around the demand for IPEDs, and to examine consumer motivation and how this intersects with local, national and global contexts.
- Develop an in-depth knowledge of the IPED market in the city of Stoke-on-Trent.
- Explore the use of social media in the supply and demand of IPEDs, and how the online market intersects with, and diverges from, localised offline supply.
- Use Stoke-on-Trent as a case study to explore how neoliberal culture and political economy interact to set a new adaptive context for users and suppliers of IPEDs.

8.1. Why use IPEDs?

A primary focus of this thesis has been to address the widely-circulated question of what motivates IPED users to consume substances that are often accompanied by a panoply of harms, expenses, and ascetic protocols. Aiming to move beyond accounts of aesthetic motivation, sporting attainment and deficient body image (see Brennan et al., 2017), this thesis has, to paraphrase Winlow (2019), examined what lies beneath my sample's compulsion to chemically-enhance their physiques. I have argued that the fundamental drive to consume IPEDs lies within the Lacanian notion of desire, wherein the subject is psychically compelled to prolong a state of dissatisfaction and lack by perpetually striving for, but never attaining, the *objet petit a* (Lacan, 1958; McGowan, 2016; Raymen and Smith, 2017). For my sample, this relentless search for the lost object is manifested in fitness and muscular growth as a result of the inherently unending nature of bodywork (Bauman, 2012). As such, the physical form becomes the *objet petit a* and corporeal improvement is the ultimately unattainable promise

that the subject can aim for. Therefore, the orthodox accounts of bodily dissatisfaction fuelling IPED consumption ought to be reinterpreted in light of the reality that the subject fundamentally seeks to perpetuate a state of bodily desire in order to address the sense of lack inherent within the human condition and, by extension, IPEDs function to provide users with a means of erecting further barriers to their corporeal satisfaction, so that the *objet petit a* remains tantalisingly out of grasp. From this, we can better understand the acts of bodily *jouissance* that accompany IPED consumption as well as the addictive nature of substances like AAS, whose illusory promise draws the subject to continually seek chemical enhancement, potentially to the point of abuse.

I have also sought to ground my analysis in the meso and macro politico-economic context of this thesis, and therefore, sitting atop this psychic draw to bodily enhancement, I contend that a host of external factors have contributed to the recent swell in IPED consumption. Although Brennan et al.'s (2017) contention that sporting motivation plays a pivotal role in many athletes' compulsion to use IPEDs is correct, following Kotzé and Antonopoulos (2019) this thesis has uncovered broader instrumental drives that promote IPED use amongst Stoke's health and fitness professionals. For participants like Ed, Sam, and Dom, using substances like anabolic steroids and the attendant PCT drugs is necessitated by their physical embodiment of their fitness 'brand' (Khamis et al., 2017), and the potential financial consequences of losing their 'boosted' bodily capital (Kotzé and Antonopoulos, 2019). In post-industrial towns and cities like Stoke, where the burgeoning health and fitness industry provides a more rewarding alternative to the low-paid menial labour that has come to characterise the local economy (Mahoney, 2015), I have therefore argued that this state of 'permanent recession' (Hall et al., 2008) acts as a 'dopogenic environment' (Backhouse et al., 2018), pushing those for whom physical size and strength function as marketable assets towards illicit enhancement.

Another key finding has been the conceptualisation of IPEDs as lifestyle drugs (Hall, 2019), which was explored in the case study of Phillip. Following Mulrooney et al. (2019), this thesis has concluded that the question of why users consume IPEDs cannot be divorced from an

exploration of the pleasurable effects they provide. Therefore, although my sample were captivated by IPEDs' role in prolonging the body as the *objet petit a*, they also enjoyed the anti-aging, confidence-boosting, and wellbeing-bolstering aspects of drug use (Christiansen, 2020). For Phillip, injecting testosterone was akin to an elixir of youth and represented a means of prolonging the good life of travel, sports cars, and masculine virility. As such, motivation to consume IPEDs can be understood as much in relation to the enhancement of one's life – particularly in old age – as one's performance or image in the gym. This ultimately supports the literature that demonstrates that such substances need not be used exclusively for their intended purpose but may be employed for their auxiliary benefits (see Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016).

Finally, given the increasingly digitised nature of contemporary global society and the attendant practice of digital prosumption (Fuchs, 2014), the role of SNS should not be overlooked when addressing the question of motivation. I have argued that social media sites like Facebook and Instagram allow users to perform for the Big Other by sharing their physiques and receiving validation in the form of likes, comments, and messages (Kotzé et al., 2020). In this pursuit of verification, they inevitably employ exposure-maximising tactics, which create a landscape of idealised and perfected bodies akin to a Lacanian mirror (Hall, 2019), wherein users ultimately feel alienated from their own image as their ideal ego and ego ideal (Žižek, 2006; Hall et al., 2008) become subverted to present a hyper-real fantasy space. This digital landscape, as I have argued, is indelibly impacted by the technological platforms that hosts it, as the architecture of the SNS push users to post more and more often and decree the success of content according to their metrics. As such, users are propelled into a frenzy of self-promotion and aesthetic representation that is often termed 'selfie' culture (Eler, 2017).

This wash of perfected bodies therefore acts as a digital dopogenic environment (Backhouse et al., 2018) given that the global peer network that users' are exposed to further fuels their bodily desire, with each chiselled physique constituting the *objet petit a* that they can (unsuccessfully) attempt to emulate. As such, scrolling past a multitude of semi-nude,

idealised physiques, the lack that drives the subject is stimulated and the likelihood of IPED consumption increases.

As the multi-faceted nature of this response illustrates, the motivation to consume IPEDs, far from being reducible to a standardised set of risk factors (see Brennan et al., 2017), is informed by a number of highly contextual, interconnected layers of influence. As I have shown, my sample's motivation to engorge their physiques and use illicit ergogenic aids should therefore be understood from a number of psychoanalytic, instrumental, and experiential positions, and embedded in the meso and macro processes of digitisation and post-industrial decline.

8.2. The Potteries' local closed market structure

Attending to this thesis' second objective, Stoke-on-Trent's local IPED market was explored at length in Chapter Seven and, although users were aware of the growing online marketplace, supply was shown to mostly occur within community-embedded peer groups where consumers' bodily and cultural capital facilitated access to IPEDs through a number of connected actors. Underlying this was a normalisation of drug consumption in the local sites of hardcore fitness (Monaghan, 2001; Turnock, 2021a), which facilitated a 'partial' market (Fincoeur et al., 2015) where trust and peer network played a substantial role. This echoes previous scholarship on similar 'traditional' offline supply chains, where enduring relationships with UGL suppliers – supported by long-term responsible vending relationships (Van Hout and Bigham, 2014) – are premised on an enduring affinity and brand loyalty, alongside a commercial imperative. On a practical level, this involved users like Ben and Sam collecting products from their suppliers' home addresses, as a hybrid model of social supply and minimally-commercialist supply operated within these well-connected networks.

However, as a result of the culturally embedded nature of localised supply, Stoke's offline market can also be characterised as fundamentally 'closed' (Coomber and Turnbull, 2007) in nature as certain barriers precluded non-community members from entering. Principal amongst these are bodily capital and community connections, as users like Ed and Jake were

expected to undergo an apprenticeship in hardcore training before being permitted to progress onto IPEDs (in order to perpetuate their quest for the *objet petit a* through corporeal progression). The parameters of this closed market were policed by community gatekeepers like Dom who, in his role as a ‘steroid mentor’ (van de Ven and Mulrooney, 2017), was able to grant or deny access to the guarded supply chain and, as was demonstrated in the case study of his relationship with UGL Astra, make introductions to his brand as a middleman or social supplier (Coomber et al., 2014; Antonopoulos and Hall, 2016). Above all else, Dom’s mutually beneficial relationship with Astra illustrates the importance of building localised community connections for UGLs who can benefit from informal word-of-mouth marketing and introductions, which establish them as a trusted source within these partial markets.

8.3. Market trajectory: commercialisation and SNS supply

This thesis has identified a number of processes that are fundamentally altering the nature of IPED supply and ushering in a less culturally embedded user base. Chapter Seven followed Fincoeur et al. (2015) in noting a general shift towards ‘market-oriented’ dealers entering the IPED market, who hold far less regard for the notions of communality and cultural embeddedness than those operating in Stoke’s closed supply chains and are instead primarily driven by commercial gain. Opposing Fincoeur et al. (*ibid.*) however, I have argued that this concerning transition can be explained by the increased profitability of the marketplace and UGLs’ tactic of electronic direct-to-consumer advertising (Laing and Mackey, 2011). Given the lucrative nature of IPED supply, I have also shown how newer market-oriented actors like Phoenix Labs have eroded the formerly amicable relationships between the various UGLs (Turnock, 2020; Turnock, 2021a) and created a sense of disharmony. In turn, this shift appears to have pushed the market closer to other ‘mainstream’ poly drug economies (Salinas et al., 2019) as these new actors, in line with their commercial imperative, are not limited to IPEDs but instead also offer a ‘one-stop shop’ (Aaron) of recreational drugs.

The digitisation of the market and its subsequent accessibility has further widened the user base to include those who are precluded from the local partial market due to their lack of

bodily or cultural capital. This, I have argued, somewhat explains the burgeoning number of IPED users nationally (McVeigh and Begley, 2017; Mullen et al., 2020) alongside the multi-faceted drivers to consumption described above. The question of causation – that is, whether the increased accessibility has led to more use or vice versa – is unclear however, and appears symbiotic in nature, with consumption being both facilitated and driven by this digitised accessibility. This reality does however support the notion of lifestyle or ‘occasional’ use (Antonopoulos and Hall, 2016), with ‘YOLO’ and ‘Well-being’ types (Christiansen, 2020) who exist beyond the traditional dopogenic spaces of hardcore fitness, being offered a means of sourcing IPEDs away from the localised partial market. As such, trainers need not graduate onto IPEDs in the wake of these shifts and may, as Rob suggested, ‘*get their drugs before they even get their memberships*’. It should be emphasised however that this transition is not universal and, as my analysis of Stoke’s partial market demonstrates, culturally embedded use and supply still predominate in many sites of hardcore fitness despite the general market’s impersonal trajectory (Fincoeur et al., 2015). Additionally, I noted a widespread derision from my offline sample towards the SNS market, which further emphasises the disconnect between the traditional user base and the newfound digital means of supply.

Addressing the social media market itself, this thesis focused on Facebook and Instagram and found two types of SNS seller: underground laboratory representatives and independent resellers. Operating mainly on Facebook semi-private groups, UGL representatives sell on behalf of a specific (usually UK) producer and tend to be relatively open about their identity. Independent resellers, on the other hand, carry various brands and advertise their products more overtly, mainly on Instagram. Overall, SNS supply can be described as peer-to-peer in nature (Turnock, 2021a), opposing online pharmacies and instead representing more of an online haggle (Terwiesch et al., 2005). On Facebook, prospective customers are added to specific groups before being solicited by UGL reps who hold a monopoly over the digital space. Lacking such an affordance, Instagram resellers generally approach members of the digital fitness community specifically and offer their services via the messaging feature. Both

types of sellers rely on price lists to display their range of products and conversation is generally moved onto a more secure encrypted platform like Whatsapp or Telegram at the point of order (Moyle et al., 2019). Unlike the partial market, orders are sent out via the postal service or courier, and risk mitigation strategies are employed to reduce the likelihood of regulatory interception.

Although the digital landscape is dramatically different to Stoke's offline closed market, I found certain parallels between the two. Most notable was the attempt by numerous SNS suppliers to play the role of online steroid mentor (van de Ven and Mulrooney, 2017), wherein marketing strategies like athlete sponsorship, customer feedback and transformation pictures are utilised to signal the trustworthiness and authenticity of their operations. However, whilst such tactics perhaps represent a responsible vending approach (Van Hout and Bigham, 2014) and a genuine attempt to echo the offline market's cultural embeddedness, Rob's description of UGL representatives' fakery speaks to the issues of deception and exploitation in the SNS landscape. Ultimately though, whilst the social media market should be conceptualised as a discreet entity in some respects, it forms part of a broader context of digital fitness culture, lifestyle IPED use and general market supply that makes it more proximate than many in Stoke's partial market would like to admit.

8.4. Recommendations for future research and conclusion

Whilst this thesis has endeavoured to make a unique and timely contribution to the existing literature on image and performance enhancing drugs, a great deal more scholarship is required. Following the efficacy of my connective ethnographic approach (Hine, 2000; Leander and McKim, 2003), I encourage scholars seeking to further map the interconnections between the processes of 'traditional' offline supply, digital prosumption and the online IPED market to similarly reject the online/offline dualism. With some notable exceptions (see Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016; Antonopoulos and Hall, 2016; Demant et al., 2020; Turnock, 2021a), IPED research has tended to overlook the utility of digital ethnography and the value of researchers immersing themselves in sites like Facebook, Instagram, and online forums.

Therefore, research into digital spaces beyond Facebook and Instagram would be a welcome addition to the literature, perhaps focussing on platforms like Snapchat, Telegram and Wikr, which were frequently indexed by digital suppliers as well as my IPED-consuming sample during my fieldwork.

In terms of the IPED market more generally, although this work has established the primacy of domestic UGL production and sales, further exploration is required into the scale of UGL production and how the trends of commercialisation and the influx of market-oriented dealers (Fincoeur et al., 2015) has shaped UK IPED supply. Ultimately, although access into a small-scale UGL operation has been achieved elsewhere (see Turnock, 2020), research conducted inside a large-scale commercial lab would shed light upon the nascent trends that have been uncovered in this thesis. Similarly, whilst pharmaceutical-grade production was briefly explored in Chapter Seven, future scholarship should, drawing on Hall and Antonopoulos (2016) and Hall et al. (2017), aim to interrogate this supply chain more rigorously and identify how the substances that Ben and Josh consumed were siphoned off licit supply chains or legally imported via ‘steroid holidays’ (Dunn et al., 2020; Gibbs, 2021).

In terms of user motivation and the ‘demand side’ (Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016), future research should advance this thesis’ interrogation of Lacanian desire and bodily dissatisfaction and apply the concept of the physical form as the *objet petit a* to other gym-using populations. For example, given my exclusive focus on hardcore and competitive users, further work should address the burgeoning IPED-consuming population who do not necessarily commence use when they reach a natural plateau, as well as female users. Finally, Chapter Six’s analysis of my sample’s relationship with SNS led me to ask the question: can the various like-increasing strategies like filters, photo editing and deliberately angled images be considered a digitised form of enhancement? This is an area ripe for future scholarship, particularly given the ubiquity of digital prosumption and online bodily culture on social media (Hakim, 2015, 2018; Richardson et al., 2019).

Ultimately, this thesis can draw three overarching conclusions. Firstly, in the words of Rob, *'steroid use isn't going away'*. Broadening Rob's supposition to include the other IPEDs explored in this work, it can be surmised that the macro, meso and micro contexts that lead to consumption are unlikely to alter any time soon. With the inevitable post-lockdown surge in the health and fitness industry (Briggs, 2021), the body looks set to remain a central object of desire for gym-goers across the country. Similarly, given the all-encompassing sense of capitalist realism (Fisher, 2009) that has weathered even the ravages of the COVID-19 global pandemic (Briggs et al., 2020), IPEDs' status as a form of hyper-conformity to the incumbent political system and a means to compete in the post-industrial spaces of towns and cities like Stoke looks set to continue unabated. Neither is the mass use of social media showing any signs of halting as Western society becomes ever more digitised and our identities are played out more fully online (Gündüz, 2017; Fatt et al., 2019), maintaining SNS' potency as globalised dopogenic environments. As such, we must look to transcend the 'narrative of harm' (Mulrooney et al., 2019) inherent in the anti-doping research and instead foster an honest dialogue about IPED consumption.

Secondly, we must acknowledge that IPEDs, far from representing subcultural, niche substances, can now best be conceptualised as 'lifestyle' drugs (Hall, 2019) given their availability and normalisation. Exemplified through my case study of Phillip, although substances like AAS still predominate in spaces of fitness, their pleasurable, lifestyle-enhancing effects are now experienced far beyond the traditional milieus of the hardcore bodybuilding gym. As such, the IPED-using population is fundamentally altering from a culturally embedded sub-group to a far broader and less knowledgeable consumer base. This represents a substantial challenge for harm reduction practitioners given the long-term health consequences of IPED use (Pope et al., 2014; Griffiths et al., 2016; Christiansen, 2020) and how to best target this increasingly disparate population.

Finally, I have presented something of a causality dilemma in relation to the mainstreaming of the IPED market, where it is not obvious whether the rise in lifestyle IPED use has been

driven by, or simply accommodated by, the market. What is clear however is that the IPED market has experienced a profound shift from an amicable, predominantly offline closed space (Coomber et al., 2014; Begley et al., 2017; Turnock, 2021a) to a hybrid model where ‘traditional’ community-based supply like that demonstrated by Dom and Astra now sits alongside a highly accessible online market that is largely played out on SNS. This process appears to have been accelerated by the increased profitability of the illicit economy and the poor regulation of these new spaces of commerce that exist beyond regulatory oversight (Kotzé, 2019). Though I can offer no great counsel as to how to better regulate this mutation in IPED supply, such a development echoes the wider challenges facing the policing of illicit drug markets on SNS (Moyle et al., 2019). On a more intellectual level, in this thesis I hope to have made a convincing case that the topic of IPEDs ought to be addressed with the theoretical and political rigour that it demands. Ultimately, far from simply representing a means of ‘getting ripped’ in the gym, the substances, as well as the market infrastructure that facilitates their use, evoke a multitude of profound criminological and philosophical debates that can serve as a lens to examine far larger shifts and trends within contemporary society.

Insta-muscle: Examining performance enhancing substance trade and male gym culture

Participant Information Sheet

You are being invited to take part in this research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to read this leaflet so you understand why the study is being carried out and what it will involve.

Reading this leaflet, discussing it with others or asking any questions you might have will help you decide whether or not you would like to take part.

What is the Purpose of the Study?

The aim of this study is to explore the legal and illegal market for image and performance enhancing drugs (IPEDs) and sports supplementation in the Stoke area. Additionally, the project aims understand men in Stoke-on-Trent's relationship to their bodies, and how they present themselves in the gym and on the social media site Instagram. The project is being undertaken as my PhD research.

Why have I been invited?

Because you are a man who uses Instagram to share your physique, and your engagement with gym and fitness online. Additionally, you have been selected because you regularly attend one of the gyms under study.

Do I have to take part?

No, participation is voluntary so it is up to you if you would like to take part in the study. I am giving you this information sheet to help you make that decision. If you do decide to take part, remember that you can stop being involved in the study whenever you choose, without telling me why. You are completely free to decide whether or not to take part, or to take part and then leave the study before completion.

What will happen if I take part?

You will be asked to complete an interview regarding your perception of male gym and fitness culture in the Staffordshire area and/or IPED and sports supplement regulation/harm reduction. The interview will last for approximately thirty minutes to an hour.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

Taking part in the study may cause you inconvenience through the time taken to complete the data collection. Please be assured that the project will ensure your; complete confidentiality; anonymity throughout; and, your right to withdraw at any point in the project.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Taking part will encourage you think critically about the subject under examination, which could benefit your professional practice. It also gives you the chance to participate in shaping academic literature around gym culture/enhancement drugs.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential and anonymous?

Yes. Your name will not be written on any of the data I collect; the written information you provide will have a pseudonym, not your real name. Your name will not be written on the recorded interviews, or on the typed-up versions of your discussions from the interview, and your name will not appear in any reports or documents resulting from this study. The consent form you have signed will be stored separately from your other data. The data collected from you in this study will be confidential. The only exception to this confidentiality is if the researcher feels that you or others may be harmed if information is not shared.

How will my data be stored, and how long will it be stored for?

All paper data, including the typed-up transcripts from your interview and your consent forms will be kept in locked storage. All electronic data; including the recordings from your interview, will be stored on the University U drive, which is password protected. All data will be stored in accordance with University guidelines and the Data Protection Act (2018).

Your identifiable data will be stored for three years in accordance with Northumbria University's retention schedule for moderate risk projects. After this time has elapsed your data will be destroyed. Please note that non-identifiable data may be kept for a longer period, however this will always be anonymised.

What categories of personal data will be collected and processed in this study?

The personal data collected in this study will include your name, your approximate location, your online identity (social media identities, posts and images) and your cultural or social practices.

What is the legal basis for processing personal data?

In line with GDPR, the legal basis for undertaking this research is Article 6(1) (e)... “processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest”.

Who are the recipients or categories of recipients of personal data, if any?

The personal data collected during the project will not be shared outside of the research team at Northumbria University.

What will happen to the results of the study and could personal data collected be used in future research?

The general findings will be included in the researcher’s PhD thesis, and also might be reported in a research journal or presented at a research conference, however the data will be anonymised and you or the data you have provided will not be personally identifiable. I can provide you with a summary of the findings from the study if you email me at the address listed below. The data might be used for further research following completion of the PhD thesis. This data will remain anonymised.

Who is Organising and Funding the Study?

This study has been organised by Northumbria University as part of the researcher’s PhD qualification.

Who has reviewed this study?

The Faculty of Arts, Design and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at Northumbria University have reviewed the study in order to safeguard your interests and have granted approval to conduct the study.

What are my rights as a participant in this study?

Under GDPR legislation you have the right to the following: a right of access to a copy of the information comprised in their personal data (to do so individuals should submit a [Subject Access Request](#)); a right in certain circumstances to have inaccurate personal data rectified. Participants should also be informed that if they are dissatisfied with the University’s processing of personal data, they have the right to complain to the Information Commissioner’s Office. For more information see [the ICO website](#).

Contact for further information:

Researcher email: Nicholas.gibbs@northumbria.ac.uk

Name another person who can provide independent information or advice about the project: Dr Alexandra Hall (Project Supervisor) (alex.hall@northumbria.ac.uk)

Name and contact details of the Data Protection Officer at Northumbria University: Duncan James (dp.officer@northumbria.ac.uk).



**Northumbria
University**
NEWCASTLE

CONSENT FORM

Project Title: Insta-muscle: Insta-muscle: Examining performance enhancing substance trade and male gym culture

Principal Investigator: Nick Gibbs

*please tick or initial
where applicable*

I have carefully read and understood the Participant Information Sheet.

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study and I have received satisfactory answers.

I understand I am free to withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason for withdrawing, and without prejudice.

I agree to take part in this study.


I also consent to the retention of this data under the condition that any subsequent use also be restricted to research projects that have gained ethical approval from Northumbria University.

Signature of participant..... Date.....

(NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS).....

Signature of Parent / Guardian in the case of a minor

.....

Signature of researcher:  Date:

(NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS): NICHOLAS GIBBS

Appendix 2: Freedom of Information request to Staffordshire Police, 23rd March 2020



FOI ref no: 11963

23 March 2020

Nick Gibbs

Dear Mr Gibbs

Freedom of Information request: reference 11963, first notified to us by email on 3 March 2020

Thank you for your recent request under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, as detailed below:

I would like to make a Freedom of Information Request to obtain the following data:

- 1.) The number of seizures of anabolic steroids and other performance enhancing drugs under the Misuse of Drugs Act in the last 10 years, on a year by year basis.*
- 2.) The number of arrests as a result of supplying anabolic steroids or other performance enhancing drugs (e.g. ephedrine or human growth hormone) in the last 10 years, on a year by year basis.*

CLARIFICATION RECEIVED 11/03/20:

Please could I request both if possible. It would be beneficial to see if the Stoke-on-Trent area has made up a big proportion of seizures. If that is not possible then just seizures in Stoke would also be valuable.

Staffordshire Police's response to your enquiry is as follows:

In accordance with Section 17(1) of the Freedom of Information Act, this letter represents a refusal notice for this particular request.

On behalf of Staffordshire Police I wish to advise you that whilst I can confirm that Staffordshire Police does hold the information requested, the force claims the provision under Section 12(1) of the Act (where the cost of compliance exceeds the appropriate limit). 'Section 1(1) does not oblige a public authority to comply with a request for information if the authority estimates that the cost of complying with the request would exceed the prescribed limit'.



This is because there is no easily retrievable method to extract the requested data from the property and custody systems.

These systems do not have a category to search for anabolic steroids or performance enhancing drugs. For 2019 alone there are in excess of 6,000 records which would need to be trawled through to establish if any fitted the criteria of the request. This would exceed the time and cost threshold.

Unfortunately, I am unable to assist in refining your request.

If you are dissatisfied with the handling of your request, you have the right to ask for an internal review. Internal review requests should be submitted within two months of the date of receipt of this email and should be addressed to:

Central Disclosure Unit
Staffordshire Police HQ
PO Box 3167
Stafford
ST16 9JZ
E: foi@staffordshire.pnn.police.uk

Please remember to quote the reference number in any future communications.

Yours sincerely

Freedom of Information
Central Disclosure Unit

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