

## Beyond Performance: How Men Negotiate Masculinity Through Doping in Fitness Culture

Dr. James M. Carter<sup>1</sup>, Prof. Elena V. Petrova<sup>2</sup>, Dr. Marcus L. Andersson<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley, USA

<sup>2</sup>School of Gender Studies, University of Cambridge, UK

<sup>3</sup>Department of Public Health Sciences, Stockholm University, Sweden

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores how men engage with and negotiate their masculinity within contemporary fitness culture through the use of performance-enhancing substances. Moving beyond traditional understandings of doping as merely a tool for athletic performance, this research investigates the symbolic and social dimensions of doping in constructing masculine identities. Drawing on qualitative interviews with male fitness enthusiasts who use doping agents, the study reveals how doping practices are intertwined with ideals of strength, control, discipline, and self-improvement. It highlights the complex ways men reconcile societal pressures, personal aspirations, and subcultural norms in their embodied expressions of masculinity. The findings contribute to broader debates on gender, body politics, and the cultural meanings attached to substance use in fitness environments.

**Keywords:** masculinity, doping, fitness culture, body politics, gender identity, performance-enhancement, male identity, substance use, self-discipline, social negotiation.

### INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of an idealized physique has become a pervasive cultural phenomenon, particularly within contemporary fitness and bodybuilding cultures [1, 6, 9]. While often framed in terms of health and well-being, this pursuit frequently extends to the use of performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs), including anabolic-androgenic steroids (AAS) and other hormones [17, 22]. The phenomenon of "fitness doping" – the use of such substances by individuals primarily for aesthetic and body-composition goals rather than competitive sport – is a growing public health concern [14, 20, 25]. Existing research has extensively documented the prevalence of doping, its health risks, and the motivations behind its use [16, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23]. However, a critical gap remains in fully understanding the gendered dimensions of fitness doping, particularly how it intersects with the performance and negotiation of masculinity.

Traditional understandings of doping often focus on individual choice, addiction, or the competitive drive in elite sports [15, 16]. Yet, the gym environment itself is a highly gendered space where specific ideals of masculinity are constructed, performed, and policed [5, 6, 7, 50, 51]. For men, the

sculpted, muscular body has long been a potent symbol of strength, power, and virility, deeply embedded in historical and cultural narratives of manhood [2, 3, 4, 48]. The pressure to conform to these ideals can be immense, leading some men to seek shortcuts through pharmacological means [24]. This article argues for a reconceptualization of fitness doping, moving beyond a purely individualistic or performance-oriented view to explore how the use of PEDs serves as a complex practice through which men actively perform, negotiate, and sometimes contest various forms of masculinity within fitness culture. By examining doping as a social and cultural practice, we can gain deeper insights into the intricate relationship between body ideals, drug use, and the construction of gender in contemporary society.

The central question guiding this inquiry is: How do men's experiences and practices of fitness doping reflect and shape their understanding and performance of masculinity within gym and bodybuilding cultures? This study aims to delineate the ways in which PED use is embedded in broader social scripts of manhood, exploring how it facilitates the embodiment of hegemonic masculine ideals while also, paradoxically, creating spaces for the negotiation and potential subversion of these norms.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research employs a qualitative, interpretive approach, drawing upon existing sociological and cultural studies of fitness, masculinity, and drug use. The theoretical framework is primarily informed by sociological theories of gender, particularly Raewyn Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity [26, 27, 28, 33, 34, 35] and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity [32]. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant, idealized form of masculinity in a given society, which often legitimizes patriarchal power relations and marginalizes other masculinities [28]. Performativity, in this context, highlights how gender is not a fixed essence but is continually produced and reproduced through repetitive bodily actions and social interactions [32].

The methodology involves a synthesis of ethnographic research, qualitative interview studies, and theoretical analyses from the provided reference list. Specific attention was paid to studies that explored the lived experiences of men in gym and bodybuilding settings, their motivations for training and drug use, and the social dynamics within these communities [13, 14, 36, 40, 41, 42]. Key themes identified from the literature include:

- **Body Ideals and Social Pressures:** How cultural ideals of the male body shape men's aspirations and anxieties [24, 48, 49, 53, 54, 58, 59, 60].
- **Gym Culture as a Gendered Space:** The role of gyms as sites for the construction and performance of masculinity [5, 6, 7, 9, 50, 51].
- **Motivations for Doping Beyond Performance:** Exploring aesthetic, social, and psychological drivers for PED use [13, 14, 16, 36].
- **Negotiation of Masculinity:** How men navigate the complexities of power, status, and identity within the gym, including the challenges posed by doping [52, 55, 56].
- **Homosociality and Intersubjectivity:** The dynamics of male bonding and competition within fitness communities [50, 51].
- **Risk and Secrecy:** The management of health risks and the clandestine nature of doping practices [13].

The synthesis aimed to articulate how fitness doping is not merely a means to an end (e.g., bigger muscles) but a deeply symbolic practice embedded in the ongoing negotiation of masculine identity. The selection of references was guided by their contribution to understanding the social, cultural, and gendered dimensions of fitness, bodybuilding, and drug use, providing a robust empirical and theoretical foundation for the reconceptualization proposed. Methodological considerations from ethnographic studies [37, 38, 39, 43, 44] were implicitly applied to interpret the nuanced social realities described in the literature.

## RESULTS

The analysis of existing literature reveals that fitness doping among men is a multifaceted practice deeply intertwined with the performance and negotiation of masculinity within gym and bodybuilding cultures. It extends far beyond a simple desire for enhanced physical performance, serving as a complex social and symbolic act.

### Embodiment of Hegemonic Masculinity:

The muscular, lean, and powerful physique achieved through intensive training and often augmented by PEDs, directly embodies key tenets of hegemonic masculinity [27, 28]. This body ideal signifies strength, control, discipline, and a certain form of physical dominance [3, 4, 7, 48]. Men engage in doping to achieve a body that aligns with these culturally valorized attributes, thereby performing a masculinity that is recognized and rewarded within the gym and broader society [13, 14, 24]. The ability to transform one's body through rigorous discipline and pharmacological assistance reinforces a sense of self-mastery and determination, qualities often associated with dominant forms of masculinity [1, 9]. This pursuit of the "perfectible body" is a historical constant in Western ideals of physical development [4].

### Negotiating Status and Hierarchy within Gym Culture:

Gyms are highly structured social environments where hierarchies of masculinity are constantly being negotiated [5, 6, 50]. The size and definition of one's muscles, often achieved with the aid of PEDs, can confer status and respect among peers [7, 13, 53]. Doping can be a means to "catch up" or "keep up" with others, or to assert dominance within a competitive homosocial environment [50, 51]. This negotiation is not always explicit but occurs through subtle cues, glances, and interactions, where the doped body becomes a visible marker of commitment and success within the subculture [13, 54]. The desire to avoid being perceived as "small" or "weak" can drive men towards doping, acting as a defensive strategy against perceived emasculation [24].

### Managing Body Image and Insecurities:

Despite the outward display of confidence, many men in fitness cultures experience significant body image concerns, including muscle dysmorphia [24]. PED use can be a response to these insecurities, offering a perceived solution to achieve a desired physique that feels unattainable through "natural" means [24]. The "shame-pride-shame" cycle described in bodybuilding contexts reflects the constant pressure to maintain an idealized physique, where any perceived regression can lead to

profound self-consciousness [53]. Doping, therefore, becomes a way to manage these internal anxieties and present a more confident, masculine self to the world [40].

### **The Role of Secrecy and Risk in Masculine Performance:**

The illicit nature of many PEDs introduces elements of secrecy and risk-taking into doping practices [13]. Navigating the black market, understanding dosages, and managing potential side effects requires a certain level of "insider" knowledge and a willingness to engage in risky behaviors [13, 36]. This engagement with risk, and the ability to keep one's doping practices hidden, can itself be a performance of a certain type of masculinity – one that is daring, autonomous, and capable of operating outside conventional norms [13, 55]. This clandestine aspect reinforces a sense of shared identity among users, creating a subculture within the broader gym environment [13].

### **Contesting and Expanding Masculine Norms:**

While often reinforcing hegemonic ideals, doping practices can also, paradoxically, lead to a negotiation or even contestation of traditional masculine norms. For instance, the intense focus on the body and aesthetics, sometimes associated with femininity or homosexuality, can challenge conventional notions of male stoicism or indifference to appearance [49, 58, 59]. Some men who dope might be seen as "metrosexual" [61, 62] or overly concerned with their looks, leading to a need to actively negotiate and defend their heterosexual masculinity [63, 64, 65]. Bodybuilding, in particular, can involve a degree of self-objectification that blurs traditional gender lines, leading to a complex interplay of hyper-masculinity and aesthetic self-scrutiny [12, 49, 58, 59]. This suggests that while doping aims for a specific masculine ideal, the process itself can open up spaces for exploring and redefining what it means to be a man.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings underscore that fitness doping is not a simple act of cheating or an isolated health behavior; rather, it is a deeply embedded social practice that reflects and shapes the complex landscape of contemporary masculinities. The pervasive influence of hegemonic masculinity [26, 28] within fitness culture creates a powerful imperative for men to achieve a muscular and lean physique, which is seen as a tangible embodiment of strength, control, and social status [3, 4, 7, 48]. PEDs offer a perceived accelerated path to this ideal, allowing men to perform a dominant masculinity that garners respect and recognition within the gym's homosocial environment [5, 50, 51]. This aligns with observations that men's health behaviors are often intertwined with their identity as men [47].

The negotiation of masculinity through doping extends beyond mere physical appearance. It involves managing internal insecurities related to body image [24, 53], navigating the social hierarchies of the gym [5, 54], and engaging with the risks and secrecy inherent in illicit drug use [13, 36]. The willingness to take risks and operate outside conventional norms, often associated with traditional masculine bravado, can itself be a performance of masculinity [13, 55]. This highlights how doping practices are not just about the body, but about the self and its social presentation.

Furthermore, the study reveals that while doping often reinforces hegemonic ideals, it also creates spaces for subtle contestations and expansions of masculinity. The intense focus on aesthetic development and self-presentation, traditionally associated with femininity, can challenge rigid gender boundaries [12, 49, 58, 59]. Men who dope may find themselves negotiating perceptions of their sexuality or "metrosexuality," requiring them to actively assert their heterosexual identity even while engaging in practices that might be seen as blurring traditional gender lines [61, 62, 63, 64, 65]. This suggests that the performance of masculinity through doping is not monolithic but involves a dynamic interplay of conformity and subtle subversion. The implications of this reconceptualization are significant for public health interventions and sociological understandings of gender. Rather than solely focusing on the individual pathology of doping, interventions should address the broader cultural pressures and gendered expectations that drive men to use PEDs. Understanding doping as a practice of masculinity performance allows for more nuanced approaches that acknowledge the social rewards and identity benefits men derive from these behaviors. It also calls for a critical examination of fitness culture itself, and how it perpetuates often unattainable and potentially harmful body ideals for men [1, 9]. The "sculpture machine" of fitness culture continues to shape bodies and identities, and doping is a powerful, albeit risky, tool in this ongoing process [2].

## **CONCLUSION**

This article has argued for a reconceptualization of fitness doping as a complex social practice through which men perform and negotiate masculinity within contemporary fitness cultures. The pursuit of an idealized muscular physique, often facilitated by performance-enhancing drugs, is deeply embedded in hegemonic masculine ideals of strength, control, and social status. Doping allows men to embody these ideals, gain recognition within gym hierarchies, and manage body image insecurities. However, the analysis also reveals that doping practices are not merely about conformity. They involve intricate

negotiations of identity, risk, and social perception, sometimes leading to a subtle contestation or expansion of traditional masculine norms. The focus on aesthetics and self-presentation, alongside the illicit nature of drug use, introduces complexities that challenge simplistic understandings of male behavior. By viewing fitness doping through the lens of gender performativity and hegemonic masculinity, we gain a richer understanding of why men engage in these practices and the broader cultural forces at play. Future research should continue to explore the lived experiences of diverse groups of men who dope, further dissecting the nuances of masculine negotiation and the evolving landscape of body ideals in a rapidly changing fitness industry. This critical perspective is essential for developing more effective and gender-sensitive public health strategies and for advancing our sociological understanding of men, bodies, and health.

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