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**Boosting Bodily Capital:**

**Maintaining Masculinity, Aesthetic Pleasure and Instrumental Utility  
Through the Consumption of Steroids**

**Justin Kotzé and Georgios A. Antonopoulos**

*Abstract*

Anabolic-androgenic steroid consumption is considered a significant public health issue in a number of countries but particularly in the northeast of England. Informed by ongoing ethnographic work on steroid use, this paper aims to explore two particular dimensions of bodily capital within the overarching context of hyper-masculinity. Towards this end we focus on aesthetic pleasure as the ‘boosted’ body becomes a site of contemporary consumption before taking a look at the instrumental utility derived from a sufficiently primed and tuned body. Accordingly, and with a view towards the changing currency of bodily capital, we explore the contemporary importance attached to both attaining and maintaining both elements of a ‘boosted’ bodily capital. The significant role steroids play in facilitating this is then discussed; yet rather than locating its consumption in the realm of ‘deviancy’, we view it as a means of hyper-conforming to neoliberalism’s cultural norms and values. By drawing upon a range of perspectives, we hope to offer up new insights into the demand for steroids apropos the pursuit for an aesthetically pleasing and instrumentally effective body.

*Key Words:* Steroids; bodily capital; masculinities; consumer culture; aesthetic pleasure

*Introduction*

Recent research suggests that there is a vast and rapidly expanding global online market for *lifestyle drugs* which are consumed largely for cosmetic reasons rather than for health-related matters (Hall and Antonopoulos 2016). A number of European states in particular,

predominantly those with subsidised healthcare systems, have been identified as exhibiting larger illicit markets in such lifestyle drugs than for those of a lifesaving nature. Focussing upon the UK context the same research found that anabolic-androgenic steroids (hereafter, steroids), a prominent lifestyle drug, are among “the principal categories of medicine being falsified and sold via illicit suppliers” (Hall and Antonopoulos 2016:28). Steroids are synthetic substances that augment male sex hormones and affect a number of physiological systems (Amsterdam et al 2010; Kraska et al 2010; Kanayama et al 2010). More specifically, they simultaneously stimulate skeletal muscle growth and the development of masculinising properties associated with male sexual characteristics; the former being the anabolic effect and the latter the androgenic effects (Amsterdam et al 2010; Kanayama et al 2010; Walker and Joubert 2011).

Whilst precise measurements of prevalence are notoriously difficult to secure, there is certainly mounting evidence to suggest that the market for steroids is burgeoning (Ravn and Coffey 2016). In the UK, steroids are among the products that prompt the largest consumer demand from illegitimate online websites (Antonopoulos and Hall 2016). Moreover, beyond the immediate context, Kanayama et al (2006:697) note that “illicit anabolic-androgenic steroid use is a public health problem in many countries”. Accordingly, a noticeable scholarly interest in steroids has developed. Numerous studies have explored the physical, psychological, sociological and, more recently, criminological dimensions of steroid use (Amsterdam et al 2010; Kanayama et al 2010; Murray et al 2016; Walker and Joubert 2011; Ravn and Coffey 2016; Hall and Antonopoulos 2016; Monaghan 2002; van de Ven and Koenraadt 2017). Others still have sought to shed light on the specificities of the illicit trade in steroids (Kraska et al 2010; Antonopoulos and Hall 2016). Collectively, this body of work has provided significant insight into the various effects and potential harms of both occasional and regular use of steroids, the general characteristics and motivation of users, and the increasingly complex nature of its production and distribution.

The emphasis of the current paper is specifically focussed on the demand, rather than the supply, side of the steroids trade. Informed by ongoing ethnographic work on steroid use in a locale situated in the northeast of England, which has one of the highest rates of steroid use in the UK (Antonopoulos and Hall 2016), this work seeks to explore a number of interrelated facets. Principally, this paper aims to contribute to the existing literature by training a theoretical and empirical lens on the consumption of aesthetic pleasure and the instrumental utility of a ‘boosted’ bodily capital. As intimated above, the context of this theoretical analysis is salient; so before we delve into the main thrust of the analysis it is instructive to offer here a

brief account of the seismic shift from heavy industrialism to low-wage service and leisure-based economies (Antonopoulos and Hall 2016; Hobbs et al 2002; Lloyd 2013). As will be shown, these transformations are intimately connected to the changing currency of the male body's capital.

### *The Changing Currency of Bodily Capital*

Precipitated by significant changes in the global economy, particularly from the late 1970s onwards, a period of rapid deindustrialisation swept across the industrial heartlands of many towns and cities both in the UK and USA (Hobbs et al 2000; Lloyd 2013; Wilcox et al 2018). Numerous areas, particularly those located in the northeast of England, were hit particularly hard by this process as their economic DNA was literally comprised of heavy industry (Beynon et al 1994). Accordingly the somewhat *doxic* understanding that sons would follow with almost preordained success the same clearly marked trajectory into employment their fathers had taken swiftly evaporated (Lloyd 2013; Winlow and Hall 2006; Winlow 2001). In place of the manufacturing 'job for life' widespread unemployment emerged as the defining characteristic of many towns and cities in the region (Brown 1995). The period of post-industrial restructuring that followed did little to ameliorate the precarious position occupied by large numbers of individuals now economically redundant and "incapable of being absorbed by the new global economy" (Bauman 1998:75). Indeed, the leisure and consumer-service economies that grew rapidly to fill the deindustrialised void are far removed from the context that framed industrial employment (Ellis 2016). Characterised by low-pay, precariously 'flexible', insecure and short-term work, the dominating presence of the new leisure and consumer-service economies have thrust ill-prepared contenders into a competitive gladiatorial contest for which the prize is often insecure, unsuitable and tenuous work (Southwood 2011).

Alongside this socio-economic reorganisation masculinities, particularly that of the working-class, have been transformed in an adaptive attempt to reacclimatise to this alien socio-economic and politico-cultural atmosphere (Winlow 2001). Such transformation has undoubtedly taken a variety of shapes, however our focus here is on two interrelated facets. First, the transformation from a masculinity and male identity grounded in production to one based on consumption; a fundamental reorientation that now positions masculinity *as a product for consumption* (Alexander 2003). Second, the transformation of physical attributes commonly associated with working-class masculinities into a marketable asset and commercial resource to be harnessed in the commodity-oriented marketplace (Monaghan 2002; Hobbs et

al 2002). As will be discussed in more detail later, hardened bodies and the potential for violence have become credible sources of capital which one can use to secure a job “in the absence of traditional routes into stable employment that existed under industrial capitalism” (Ellis 2016:31; see also Hall 2002). At first glance these two transformations appear contradictory or mutually exclusive; on the one hand a new focus on consumption, a role traditionally associated with women (Alexander 2003), and on the other an established cultural ideal of hyper-masculinity harnessed for commercial utility (Hall 2002; Kraska et al 2010; Monaghan 2002). However, as we shall go on to demonstrate, they are intimately connected and constitute two main dimensions of bodily capital (Wacquant 2004), the particular currency of value to the postmodern *stylish hard man*.

Before venturing further, however, it is worth acknowledging the work of Bourdieu (1984) in foregrounding discussions of bodily capital. The genesis of this developing concept lay in the embodied state of what Bourdieu (1986 [2011]) calls cultural capital. Imbued with cultural value, embodied competencies in physical comportment and aesthetic qualities secure for the subject relative degrees of social standing within a particular social field (Crossley 2001). These dispositions therefore possess an exchange value and thus “function precisely as capital” (ibid.:107). This ‘physical capital’, or bodily capital, then serves as a valuable currency that can be used to secure employment, symbolic capital and various other rewards and resources (Crossley 2001; Howson 2004). Although space precludes a thorough exposition of this foregrounding, the purpose of this paper is not to expound Bourdieu’s antecedental work. Rather, the task is to put the concept of bodily capital to work in a similar fashion to Wacquant (2004), Winlow (2001), Monaghan (2002), and Ellis (20116). That is, as lens through which to explore and make sense of our participants’ demand for and consumption of steroids.

Let us therefore deal first with the focus on consumption. It is hardly contentious to state that consumer culture is now both pervasive and invasive, seeping into every nook and cranny to the point where *life* is organised around consumption (Bauman 2012; Hall et al 2008). Yet, far from constituting some liberating mecca of freedom or sites from which to structure edgy displays of cultural resistance (Heath and Potter 2006), consumer culture generates an immense amount of pressure and anxiety particularly surrounding the body (Bauman 2005). The perpetual injunction, impressed upon us by ubiquitous reminders, to take command of one’s body, to regulate its health, improve its image, and increase its utility stimulates an inexhaustible source of profit making opportunity (Bauman 2005). Scores of market experts seize the constant opportunities to offer products and ‘treatments’ that promise, yet ultimately fail, to alleviate the consumer’s anxiety.

Yet this has not always necessarily been the case. Here it is useful to refer again to Bauman (2005), who charts the transformation of the body from a site of mere instrumental utility to one of autotelic pleasure, particularly in its aesthetics. This transformation mirrors the global economic changes alluded to above. That is to say that the first kind of body is that associated with *producers* whose physical prowess, toughness and stoicism were forged in “the once economically functional visceral cultures that emerged to service the economic imperatives of the heavy industrial phase of capitalism” (Ellis 2016:28). Conversely, the second kind of body is characterised by what Bauman (2005:91) refers to as “destination value”. Rather than simply carrying instrumental utility the body is now an end-value in itself, it is no longer to be seen as simply ‘fit for purpose’ but as *the* ultimate value in its own right. This is the quintessential body of the *consumer* whose senses are acutely attuned to the frequency of the leisure and consumer-service economies.

Health is no longer the benchmark against which the reconstituted body of the consumer is measured. Instead, the amorphous ideal of *fitness* is lauded as the standard to be met (Bauman 2012). Whereas health denotes a measurable physical condition amenable to productive employment, fitness pertains to an ill-defined future state of readiness, a preparatory malleability that prepares the body to be absorptive, adjustable and ready for anything (Bauman 2012). The former is more durable, its demands predictable, steady and constant much like the labour conditions of industrialism. The latter by contrast is more fleeting, insecure and requires significant mobility if one is to retain its benefits; mirroring the conditions that characterise the post-industrial landscape. Bauman (2005:93) makes the point well by noting that “‘fitness’ is to a consumer in the society of consumers what ‘health’ was to the producer in the society of producers”.

The currency of bodily capital has evidently changed as the consumable aesthetic dimension of bodily capital is elevated to a more salient position in a society of consumers. As we shall go on to argue, the body itself *becomes a site of consumption*. However, unlike other commodities available for pleasurable consumption, the body must first be primed and tuned in order to render the otherwise latent pleasurable potential ‘fit’ for consumption. But herein lies the rub. The process of aesthetically priming and fine-tuning the body requires subjecting oneself to a far from pleasurable regime that requires considerable commitment and deferred gratification (Bauman 2005). These are not attributes commonly associated with the ethos of neoliberal consumer culture which enjoins poly-pleasure seeking and immediate gratification. Surely there has to be a way of speeding this process up, a way of considerably boosting one’s bodily capital now. As it happens there is, and our participants have found it.

### *Methodology*

Data and accounts presented in this article are the product of ongoing research on steroid use and trade. The bulk of the data was obtained primarily via an ethnography conducted for 14 months (2014/2015) in a locale in the northeast of England with one of the highest rates of steroid use in the UK. The primary research site was a gym in which the use (and trade) of steroids is widespread. Data were also collected at four fighting events, four bodybuilding competitions and two product promotion events in the area from 2014 to 2018. Within the context of this ongoing research, we have interviewed – among others - 22 steroid users. Steroid users (and dealers) attend specific venues - most notably gyms - regularly and in a disciplined fashion as part of their training regime and consumption patterns. Having joined the gym, we began regularly attending and, over time, formed relationships with fellow gym attendees who were steroid users and/or dealers. This made access particularly straightforward during the ethnography, where in many cases our initial participants introduced us to other users (Atkinson and Flint 2004).

Interviews were conducted as free-flowing conversations with participants on a series of occasions. For some of the interviews tape-recording was possible, but for the vast majority this was impractical. This largely depended on the time/hour of the interview, the space in which the interview took place and the mood of the interviewee. We were also cautious because our past experiences conducting empirical criminological research have led us to believe that the interviewer-interviewee relationship, the interviewing process, and the breadth and quality of data collected, can significantly improve if a tape/digital recorder is avoided (see Rapley, 2001). Instead we used notebooks either during or immediately after the interview had finished. A memorised interview guide was used during all of the interviews conducted as part of this research. Transcripts and fieldnotes related to the interviews (i.e. notes taken during and after the interviews in those cases in which recording was not possible) were analysed using thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach involved open coding, clustering and theme formation. After familiarising ourselves with the available data, an initial coding framework was developed. Findings were compared and the initial coding framework was refined to its final version through discussion and consensus between us. The final coding framework comprising two main themes ('steroid consumption and image/aesthetics' and 'steroid consumption and performance/utility') was approved by both of us. Naturally, themes were induced from the information the participants disclosed. The 'interview-data-as-a-resource' tradition was used to reflect the interviewees' reality (Seale, 1998; Ryan and Bernard,

2000) about the topic. The final framework was applied to all data, and the contents of each transcript as well as the notes taken in the field were coded under the appropriate themes. Data were inserted into an excel spreadsheet providing a visual summary of the dataset and facilitating the identification of patterns. Finally, powerful and vivid extract examples from the data were selected to highlight accounts put forward.

Our study presents some limitations, which should be acknowledged at this stage. Firstly, during ethnographic research there can be no guarantee that the information given is a wholly neutral representation of the activities and actors; one needs to remember that accounts offered in an ethnographic study are consciously or unconsciously interpreted by the researcher. Moreover, the data are limited to what the participants have provided and what the researcher has observed, and perhaps they cannot easily be generalised to the broader steroid use scene. In relation to the interviews with the informed actors one can never be absolutely certain about validity, although ‘member checking’ – the “process in which collected data is ‘played back’ to the informant to check for perceived accuracy and reactions” (Cho and Trent 2006:322) – significantly contributed towards eliminating untruthful accounts. In addition, there is also the issue of representativeness of the sample. We used a method of snowball sampling to identify participants, thus possibly limiting the sample to the researcher’s own personal network and their potential biases.

### *Aesthetic Pleasure*

Murray et al (2016) very aptly caution against conflating the *image* and *performance enhancing* elements of steroid use as a catch-all term, particularly when exploring motivations for use. This caution is reflected in our decision to deal with the two dimensions of bodily capital explored above in separate detail before pulling salient cross-threads together. Here we continue our focus on consuming the aesthetic pleasure of a primed and tuned body. Contrary to what Ravn and Coffey (2016) claim, the ‘natural body’ does *not* retain a contemporary position of privilege. Such a position is now reserved for a new *excessive naturality*; that is to a supra-natural aesthetic unobtainable without various external aids which by definition renders this revered bodily form pre-eminently *unnatural*. A general example is illustrative here. A TV commercial which aired in 2015 promoted hair colour products from the popular brand Nice ‘n Easy© with the following message: “in a world that’s trying to turn you into something new, one hair colour wants to *help* you keep on being you. Nice ‘n Easy©, we only make the most real, natural looking colour”. The tacit subtext here is that blondes, brunettes, red-heads and so

on are *not natural enough* by themselves; the recourse to aesthetic excess is imbedded within the injunction to be *radiantly* blonde, be more *deeply* brown and ensure that black hair is *glossy* and *silky*. Importantly, ‘natural beauty’ is underscored by a need for enhancement in order to render it *truly* beautiful. The advertisement, therefore, emphasises a pre-eminent *unnaturalness* encapsulated well, and with more than a hint of irony, in the end caption: “Nice ‘n Easy©, colour as real as you are”.

The literature is replete with other often cited examples of the “gap between the reality seen in the mirror” and the ‘ideal’ images portrayed throughout popular culture (Alexander 2003:539). For instance, it has been suggested that the hyper-muscular image of various action figures has been absorbed by young men as the typical standard to be met. A standard seemingly reinforced by an array of video games, comic books and television shows (Dunne et al 2006). The implication is that internalisation of unrealistic standards of a muscularity unobtainable by natural means may drive some men to use steroids to acquire the desired aesthetic (Dunne et al 2006; Murray et al 2016). Indeed, Walker and Joubert (2011) argue that the hyper-muscularity proffered by hyper-masculine images is unobtainable for most people without recourse to steroids. This was echoed by one of our participants who stated that:

*No matter how much you train, how long you train, how hard you train, how many supplements you take or how much beef and tuna you eat, you cannot build this body without ‘juice’... You may be the strongest person in this gym but you don’t get big muscles and definition without steroids. Steroids will help you progress after a point (‘Gabriel’, powerlifter)*

Gabriel went on to note that “*you cannot go further without steroids. And Steroids work! There is absolutely no doubt about the effectiveness of steroids. They definitely work*”. There is now wide recognition that steroids are consumed to boost aesthetic appeal in accordance with what has become a “pervasive commodification of the ideal body-image” (Kraska et al 2010:180). But rather than the body being prepared as an appropriate receptacle of external pleasurable sensations, as Bauman (2005) seems to imply, it is our contention that the body is prepared *as the site of pleasure itself*. It becomes the aesthetically pleasing commodity to be consumed and enjoyed. Preparatory work invested in fine-tuning the body is thus not necessarily undertaken solely in advance of anticipated external sensations but as a necessary means of preparing tacit potential for pleasurable, if only fleeting, consumption. This desire to consume, and have consumed, the hyper-muscular body-aesthetic was particularly well-demonstrated by ‘Leo’ who expressed that:

*I want to stand out. I want to be the biggest man you’ll see... I want everyone in this gym, in this town, to be jealous of me. I want women to think ‘hmmm, I want some of*



*that'. And I want all men to look up to me. [While lifting his t-shirt and looking at his well-defined abdominal muscles in one of the posing room's mirrors, he shouts] ...yeah, baby!*

For our participants, the commodified hyper-masculine body thus possesses destination value *and*, as we shall go on to demonstrate, instrumental utility. In other words, it contains both elements of the bodily capital so contemporarily valorised in the visceral cultures that occupy significant space “in the discarded zones of contemporary society” (Ellis 2016:141; see also Hall 2002).

Within this economically scarred and visually displeasing landscape that is the locale of our research, our participants have little to no control over anything else other than their objectified bodies. The physical sculpting of the body, if not the ideal template to which one need adhere, becomes the focal point for some sense of control in lieu of the capacity to control crucial socio-economic and politico-cultural externalities (Walker and Joubert 2011). This replacement of uncontrollable externalities, ascribed with diminished value, with the perceived controllability of the body emerged frequently among our participants. For instance, ‘Ryan’ stressed that:

*My body is all I have! My arms, my legs, my abs, my chest is everything and the only thing I have. I have no job, I have no money in the bank, I have no car and I live with my mum and dad. Are things going to change for me? Probably not in this shithole. BUT at least I have my body and no fucker can take this from me.*

Similarly, ‘Nathan’ declared:

*I wouldn't mind having a Ferrari, a yacht and a villa in the 'Costa del Whatever' but I don't. So what can you do really? You can only have a nice, muscular, ripped body and perhaps wear a 3-piece suit sometimes. That will make you look good to everyone else.*

To a slightly lesser extent the same theme is visible in ‘Moe’s’ narrative:

*I was crap at school. No college, no job, no girlfriend. Everyone called me the 'bra boy' for 10 years because I was a bit fat and I had 'man boobs' that others pinched. That was so annoying... Not to mention slaps at the back of my head...One year of weights and a couple of cycles [of steroids taking] and this [showing his own body] is what happens. I have never achieved anything in my life, really, but I am proud of my body: my biggest achievement... thanks to weights and steroids, steroids and weights.*

Steroid use thus becomes a means through which the individual can assert partial command over the self, retain an element of control and maintain what is now a heavily commodified masculinity (Alexander 2003). Shorn of the opportunity to demonstrate masculinity via traditional male roles in production, the maintenance of “branded masculinity rooted in consumer capitalism” takes on a new salience (Alexander 2003:551). At its most basic, we now occupy a cultural terrain obsessed with the hyper-masculine body aesthetic and the widespread

consumerist ethic of immediate gratification that accompanies it (Kraska et al 2010). ‘Leo’ and ‘Jacob’s’ narratives are indicative here:

*“If others don’t look at you when you lift, you’re nobody”.*

*Some people are genetically gifted. They are already muscular, they have a good frame. They spend a couple of months in the gym and they’re OK. For others, myself, it’s more difficult... it’s not certain you will get the result you want. And you’re definitely going to reach a plateau, where there will be no progress. But you want to be stronger and bigger quick! You want to be stronger and bigger NOW! ‘Juice’ is your best friend, mate.*

There is clear association here with the excess, individualism and immediate gratification that characterise contemporary neoliberal consumer culture. Accordingly, it is necessary to conceptualise our participants not in possession of some “disordered masculinity” (Keane 2005:191), or indeed even ‘deviating’ from society’s norms and values. Rather, they should be viewed as *over-identifying* with and *hyper-conforming* to commodified gender norms and the cultural values of neoliberalism (Dunne et al 2006; see also Raymen 2016). Indeed, if we conceptualise our participants’ steroid use as a form of *deviant leisure*, then we can just as easily argue that steroids are used not in an attempt to deviate or resist cultural convention but precisely to aid in conforming to them (Raymen and Smith 2016). More specifically, to hyper-conform to the cultural values and central tenets of neoliberalism: competitive individualism, cultivation of envy, the aggressive display of consumer items, which in this case is the commodified body itself, and the egoistic elevation of the self above others (Raymen and Smith 2016; Raymen 2016). The use of steroids to physically advance the self above the herd of ‘others’ is concomitant rather than contrary to the risk-taking and entrepreneurial ethic so fervently cultivated by neoliberalism (Kindynis 2017). Whilst those on the outside might view the use of steroids as ‘cheating’ and consider the aesthetic excess to be distasteful (Ravn and Coffey 2016), these men are in fact exhibiting precisely the attitudes, norms, values, drives and desires coveted by market capitalism. Indeed, the classic capitalist mantra of ‘success by any means necessary’ underscored participants’ narratives, particularly those of ‘Hugo’ and ‘Nathan’ respectively:

*It’s ‘cheating’ but who cares? It’s not like you’re competing in the Olympic Games and someone is going to test you for substances. If you’re going to have the perfect body and quick, you need ‘roids’. There is no other way... ‘Cheating’? Yes! But who gives a toss? When you get the body of your dreams, they will envy you for it... no one is going to say “they’re on steroids”. If they do, it’s because they are jealous. They can be injected [with steroids] too, if they want. What is ‘cheating’ anyway? Who doesn’t cheat here? If it’s not steroids, it’s something else... protein, creatine, amino*

*acids, thermobolic pills, you know these pills that burn your fat... everyone cheats one way or another.*

*Being big and ripped is the new rich. If steroids give you this, who gives a fuck? Do you care if you know that a lass' tits are fake? What matters is that she has nice tits. That's all that matters...*

Evidently, the desire to boost the aesthetic component of bodily capital is significant for our participants. The primed and fine-tuned body remains for them one of their last controllable assets in a socio-economic landscape now reorganised around consumption rather than production. Moreover, it now constitutes the very site of pleasurable consumption however fleeting or short-lived it may be. However, as previously mentioned, this is not the only, nor necessarily the most important dimension of bodily capital. For our participants the sufficiently boosted body also possesses significant instrumental utility.

#### *Instrumental Utility*

Many of our participants stressed the importance of investing in and maintaining the physical dimension of bodily capital. Importantly, steroids boost both the attainment and maintenance of a 'normalised' physique unobtainable without chemical augmentation (Kraska et al 2010). In contrast to the patient, deferred gratification Wacquant (2004) talks about in his study of boxers – where bodily capital is gained and maintained in precise concomitance to the natural durability of the body – our participants use steroids to exceed the natural limits of the body in a bid to acquire the 'correct' physique as soon as possible. The milieu in which our participants find themselves arguably drives and reinforces their impatient pursuit of bodily perfection. Certainly, the particularities surrounding the need to acquire and maintain 'effective' bodies were borne out in a number of different ways. However, many of them orbit a central tenet succinctly articulated by 'Jacob' as "*I am so big that others think twice before they do anything stupid*".

As previously alluded to, a competent potential for violence is now a highly marketable asset in a post-industrial marketplace where the boundaries between licit and illicit work are not only blurred but often intertwined (Hall 2002). For those appropriately primed and tuned, violence constitutes a viable career path so long as one can both effectively establish and maintain a credible threat of violence and a reputation for formidability (Winlow 2001; Ellis 2016). Crucially these credentials can be both developed and displayed in gyms; sites from which "brokers of 'masculinity'" can facilitate in boosting bodily capital (Antonopoulos and Hall 2016), and where informal recruitment for legitimate and illegitimate employment takes

place (Monaghan 2002). ‘George’, a ‘minder’ for a criminal entrepreneur who also escorts money couriers in trips mostly to London, is indicative of this:

*You don't always have to use the 'extra' that steroids give you. But it's good to know that you can take any cunt that comes your way... and it makes you look reliable to your boss too. No one likes to have a 'minder' who cannot kick the shit out of others... You have to look like a hard bastard.*

This quote from ‘George’ is illustrative of the importance of maintaining both dimensions of the bodily capital discussed by Monaghan (2002); fighting potential, alongside other ‘techniques of the body’, and the general appearance of a physique associated with the ‘correct’ body build. Yet our conceptualisation of bodily capital differs from Monaghan’s in one crucial respect. For us the dual dimensions of bodily capital comprise a consumable aesthetic element and an instrumental element. The first, already explored in the previous section, pertains to the creation and subsequent autotelic consumption of the ‘fit’ body; a commodity purchased with the only capital still widely available to those who occupy the barren landscapes of deindustrialised zones in states of permanent recession (Hall et al 2008). The second pertains to the instrumental utility offered by a primed and tuned body, which yields both the physical potential for violence *and* a credible threat of force conveyed via various bodily cues, gestures and overall appearance. From this perspective then, the two dimensions identified by Monaghan (2002) are purely *instrumental* and, therefore, represent only one, albeit important, part of the bodily capital equation.

Both components of bodily capital’s instrumental utility occupy salient positions in our participants’ narratives. The stock placed on the ability to look, act, and *be* ‘hard’ is high and reflects the equally important emphasis placed upon preparation, and anticipatory readiness to respond appropriately to external threats (Ellis 2016). Steroids play a crucial role here in that their consumption facilitates the development and sharpening of the appropriate defensive mechanisms or ‘tools of the trade’; not to mention adding a couple of layers of symbolic credibility to that section of the illicit post-industrial C.V. marked ‘readiness to fuck someone up’ (see for example, Antonopoulos and Hall 2016). Thus violence, as Winlow (2012) aptly notes, *works*. It possesses a disturbingly practical functionality, the chemical augmentation of which is not only expedient but expected of those whose occupation is predicated upon an ability to foster reputations of formidability and successfully employ violence where necessary. ‘Roman’, makes the point well: “*If you are a professional and your job is highly competitive, no one objects to you using steroids. It is expected*”.

Far from being confined to the realm of bodybuilders or bouncers, this sentiment is held by those in a range of other professions, some firmly located within the legitimate economy. For example ‘Oliver’, who works as a forensic nurse, justified his steroid use on these practical grounds:

*Listen, mate. My jobs demands that I take ‘roids’. I have to deal with big fuckers, big crazy fuckers, to be honest with you. They do not care about anything and anyone. My job involves restraining big, fucking crazy criminals who have killed people with a punch in the face over a misunderstanding. You know, like this... what’s the film? ‘Silence of the Lambs’ guy [Dr. Hannibal Lecter]... ‘Roids’ are essential for the job... without them I’d stand no chance in there. I could not do the job without ‘roids’ and it’s not like I am small.*

Similarly, a police officer who we have called ‘Harry’ expressed an equally pragmatic view:

*Now imagine this: Saturday night at [name of town] centre. Two o’clock in the morning. Everyone is drunk and for no apparent reason, two lads, both of them ‘beasts’, get into a fight. Their mates are involved. What do you do? You have to be big, and you have to look a bit intimidating. Not only to do the job! Others will think twice before they throw a punch... Unless they are really, really drunk and stupid.*

Alongside the importance ascribed to the potential for physical aggression, the salience attached to what Ellis (2016:88) calls “symbolic weaponry” is telling here. Such weaponry is used not only during the immediacy of confrontation but as a means of negating the need for physical violence. Indeed, as Ellis (2016) points out, bodily comportment and demeanour harbour signs capable of either precipitating or negating conflict. Following this line of thought it can be argued that the primed and tuned *body* is capable of ‘retaliating first’ (Winlow and Hall 2009). In this respect the metaphorical first strike, perceived to have been landed by direct or indirect insult, is not necessarily responded to by recourse to immediate physical violence. Instead the symbolic weaponry, deployed via the mechanisms of bodily capital’s instrumental utility, is mobilised in the process of ‘squaring up’ to one’s opponent in a bid to nullify the threat without recourse to subjective violence whilst simultaneously retaining one’s reputation and self-dignity (Ellis 2016; see also Winlow 2001). This is undoubtedly a complex exchange to negotiate and whilst violence is not always inevitable, it is often highly likely.

The importance of being able to successfully display what amounts to an *instrumental threat of action* was conveyed well by ‘Jack’ who understood this to be a necessary requirement for his desired career. ‘Jack’ aspired to work in the security industry and had attended multiple interviews for a job as a security officer but was unsuccessful in all. Following this he started going to the gym and taking steroids to help him ‘bulk up’:

*You could see it on their face... they were thinking 'he is just a boy... he can't do it...' ... [After taking steroids] Boom! First interview, job in the bag. Steroids are great, man. The best thing in the world since sliced bread.*

This is also emblematic of the aforementioned demand for an anticipatory readiness to respond to anything. The importance attached to steroids as a *facilitator of readiness* is significant and reflects broader feelings of anxiety, insecurity and the ever-present threat of humiliation (Ellis 2016; Winlow and Hall 2009). 'Henry' illustrates this point well:

*In this shithole of a town, it's 'dog-eat-dog' ... if you are not ready for violence, you're fucked. You need to be ready to beat the shit out of someone before he does... or at least try. This is the only way you'll get respect. Steroids make sure that you'll never be the laughing stock in your neighbourhood or next time some cunts mess about in a club.*

'Henry's' narrative is symptomatic of his current milieu and certainly resonates with similar accounts offered in previous research (Winlow 2001; Winlow and Hall 2009; Ellis 2016). The ubiquitous presence of threats, both real and perceived, and the routinisation of violence as common constituents of everyday life have elevated the need to embody 'toughness' and maintain an obsessive hypervigilance (Ellis 2016; Winlow 2012). Aggressive and often violent responses to even the slightest transgression conceals a deep fear of further humiliation precipitated by yet another failure to act appropriately (Winlow and Hall 2009). This *ameliorative* readiness to use violence is illustrated in 'Ricky's' response to being told his rights as a research participant before the interview, particularly his right to withdraw: "*Do you think I need this nonsense? Of course, I can quit whenever I want...I don't need your permission, mate. I can punch you in the face and leave*".

Overall, there is a clear sense that steroids function as a facilitator of readiness; the drive for which often finds its locus within a sense of *objectless anxiety* (Hall and Winlow 2015). At its most basic this constitutes an irrevocable feeling of impending loss that must be guarded against. Devoid of a recognised object, a number of surrogate subjects emerge upon which the cause of anxiety can be successfully pinned (Hall and Winlow 2015). Crucially, within what has become "a fractious society of enemies" (Hall 2012a:161), these surrogate forms are made up of equally anxious and competitive-individualist 'others' who pose a real threat to the dignity and identity of the self (Hall and Winlow 2015; Winlow and Hall 2009). Recourse to augmented comportment and physical violence is thus not only expected, but required if one is to retain their identity steeped in class-based masculine concerns (Winlow 2012).

### *Hyper-Conformity towards Hyper-Masculinity*

Whilst the structural conditions within which a visceral habitus was originally forged and employed have largely disappeared, the reproduction of its masculine ideals have not dissipated entirely (Ellis 2016). Alongside the socio-economic transformations identified earlier, masculine identities and ideologies have tended towards change (Winlow 2001). A change that has positioned a highly commodified hyper-masculinity as the norm to which the men in this study are driven to aspire. An aspiration not only directed by the pursuit of an aesthetically ‘perfect’ body, but also by the functional instrumental utility one can extract from a primed and tuned body (Kraska et al 2010). There is nothing ‘disordered’ about the masculinity to which our participants ascribe. Their deep commitment to competitive individualism, the cultivation of envy and the aggressive display of consumer items – the commodified body itself in this case – mirrors rather than contradicts the cultural norms and values of neoliberalism (Raymen and Smith 2016). As previously mentioned, steroid use in this context can be seen as a means of hyper-conforming rather than as a source of deviance. Whilst they may transgress the technical law, depending on how they source their steroids, – using postal, courier or freight services to import steroids for personal use is illegal – they most certainly are not deviating from liberal-capitalism’s symbolic law (Hall and Winlow 2015).

For many of those with whom we spoke, steroids are employed as a means of defending the self from both real and perceived threats in an angst ridden milieu and/or to inspire envy in others. For some, however, it is simply used to embolden the self. The case of ‘Christoph’ and ‘Piotr’ is particularly indicative of this. Both ‘Christoph’ and ‘Piotr’ are avid supporters of Legia Warsaw Football/Soccer Club and formidable ‘football/soccer hooligans’. In deliberate preparatory cycles, they use steroids to prepare for and facilitate their hooliganism activities when returning to Warsaw. Here, and perhaps for others presented in this paper, steroids function as the fuel source driving the motor of *special liberty*; a general cultural current that allows the individual to act with impunity (Hall 2015; see also Kotzé 2019). Convinced of their self-affirmed fantasised state of exception, subjective permission is granted to inflict harms upon others in the name of determined self-interest and as a means of assuaging anxiety. Successfully intimidating and dominating others yields both symbolic comfort and status, crucial currency that must be earned through competent displays of aggression and violence (Hall 2012b).

In short, special liberty is employed to ‘simply get things done’ by any means necessary. In broad terms, this ‘getting things done’ pertains to the numerous defensive,

pragmatic, competitive individualist and envy producing components discussed above and it is within this context that we venture the following. Far from constituting “a flawed subject in late modern society” (Ravn and Coffey 2016:97), our participants’ use of steroids to fuel their desire to ‘get things done’ reflects individuals deeply “embedded within the socio-symbolic structures of neoliberal ideology...fuelling consumer capitalism” (Lloyd 2018:256-257). Clearly, over-identification with what Winlow and Hall (2009:291) refer to as the “brutal excess of social competition” plays a significant part in solidifying a commitment to the ideals of hyper-masculinity and the associated drive to attain the bodily capital required to successfully compete against ‘others’ (Ellis 2016).

### *Conclusion*

Analysis of the burgeoning steroids market and its lucrative consumer demand must be located within the changing currency of bodily capital rooted in the global economic transformations of the late 1970s. As masculinities and identities once grounded in production give way to those based on consumption, a new salience is ascribed to bodily capital. Rather than pertaining to a purely instrumental function, we have argued that contemporary bodily capital possesses both a consumable aesthetic dimension and an instrumental dimension. In the visibly hollowed-out landscapes that characterise the barren deindustrialised zones of northeast England, the ‘fit’ body itself becomes a site of pleasurable aesthetic consumption. The same social context credits the second, instrumental utility, dimension of bodily capital with significant importance. In what is now largely a post-industrial marketplace, a credible threat and competent potential for violence are highly marketable assets which can secure a viable career path so long as they can be maintained. Herein lies the crucial point. Steroids both facilitate the acquisition and maintenance of both dimensions of the contemporary bodily capital so valorised in society’s shadow worlds.

For those who occupy the social terrain outlined above, the significant role played by steroids in ‘boosting’ bodily capital and maintaining hyper-masculinity is difficult to overstate. The narratives offered here are steeped in admiration for the aesthetic and instrumental efficacy that steroids offer. Yet, far from constituting some ascription to a ‘disordered masculinity’, our participants’ deep commitment to competitive individualism, excess, the cultivation of envy and the aggressive display of a consumable body mirrors rather than contradicts the cultural norms and values of neoliberalism. This constitutes an important refinement to some of the



existing literature for in this context then, steroids are used as a means of hyper-conforming to, rather than deviating from, the neoliberal tenets driving consumer capitalism.

Here we have offered a more focussed analysis of the dual dimensions of contemporary bodily capital. Indeed, by training a theoretical and empirical lens on both the aesthetic and instrumental dimensions we have continued to expand upon and advance important lines of inquiry pertinent to the growing body of work in this field. Certainly, if we are to fully grasp the contemporary demand for steroids we must consider *both* dimensions of the bodily capital it helps augment and the cultural context within which this takes place. The pervasive presence of consumer capitalism and our participants' deep commitment to its tenets undoubtedly stimulate both their desire and need for a suitably 'branded' and appropriately functional body. That is to say, a hyper-masculine body in possession of both destination value from which aesthetic pleasure can be derived and instrumental utility through which special liberty can be enacted. By framing the demand for steroids within the broader socio-economic and cultural context outlined here, we have teased out the complex interplays between the drive for both the instrumental utility and the autotelic consumption of aesthetic pleasure associated with a 'boosted' bodily capital. In doing so we have offered up new insights into the burgeoning demand for steroids apropos the pursuit for an aesthetically pleasing and instrumentally effective body. Ultimately such insights can, we argue, be put to work to help enhance our understanding of the logic behind contemporary steroid consumption.

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