Short report

Body conceptions and virtual ethnopharmacology in an online bodybuilding community

Aaron C.T. Smith [a,*], Bob Stewart [b]

[a] College of Business, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT University), 239 Bourke St., Melbourne, VIC 3000, Australia
[b] School of Sport and Exercise Science, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC 3000, Australia

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to establish the common body conceptions of a serious online bodybuilding community and determine the role of the online forum in 'virtual ethnopharmacology': the word of 'mouse' sharing of drug protocols. Data were obtained from an online discussion forum dedicated to muscular development, and evaluated using a narrative-based analytical method. Forum postings were collected over a period of 36 months, transposed to software, and thematically coded. The results expose extreme, and sometimes contradictory, body-image constructs held by a devoted muscle-building community obsessed with muscular hypertrophy. Preoccupations with associated accoutrements were also identified, including nutrition and supplements, training regimes and anabolic androgenic substances. This study provides insight into the extreme body conceptions of bodybuilders normally restricted to gym insiders. It also reveals the significance of online platforms in the distribution of pharmacological knowledge and practice.

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1. Introduction

This study undertook a qualitative analysis of an online discussion forum dedicated to muscular development. It examined the personal body representations of serious bodybuilders and powerlifters, and reports on the forum's role in virtual 'ethnopharmacology'. Forum postings revealed a community entrenched in extreme conceptions of masculinity correlated to muscular size and strength. At the same time, participants in the forum expressed radical views on nutrition, training and drugs, which often incorporated health-compromising behaviours.

Although a non-traditional form of ethnography, which normally involves live observation and inter-personal contact, collecting data via online communities, forums and message boards offers some unique benefits. First, online forums expose asynchronous interactions between participants who can communicate and connect without the need for real time participation or geographic proximity. This means that conversations between individuals and groups can play out at length and in depth, without the forced closure with the end of face-to-face contact. Furthermore, conversation threads can diverge tangentially, taken up by interested parties without the original discussion losing momentum

or being diverted artificially. Online forums facilitate long-term, exhaustive discussions, often over several years.

Second, from a research perspective, asynchronous online forums offer easy and safe access for observers (Hsiung, 2000). For example, the study of extreme health behaviours such as those recorded in this brief report, typically occur behind closed doors or within groups requiring privileged admission. Online forums also reveal sensitive, personal and specific content without compromising confidentiality. In fact, online forum participants blog and brag in volumes, expressing their daily views and practices in meticulous detail. Sometimes, as with this case, the practices discussed are illegal and would be less likely to be shared through conventional face-to-face ethnographic techniques. Gaining access to normally concealed, longitudinal data make the study of online forums especially compelling (Kramish et al., 2001; Saba & McCormick, 2001).

Third, not only do online forums encourage the expression of opinions, they also provide an insight into the mechanisms of group opinion transformation. Forums organize networks of unconnected individuals emergently into communities communicating about issues of substantial personal importance. With the aid of longitudinal forum data, researchers can track and map the exposure of ideas, concepts and opinions in order to identify the critical incidents and turning points that aroused collective interest. At the same time, online forums generate diverse opinions (Day & Keys, 2008). Despite being 'virtual communities' (Rheingold, 1993), online forums instantiate real and consequential effects on participants' behaviours (Kozinets, 1998). Online forums often stimulate

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 03 9925 5564.
E-mail addresses: aaron.smith@rmit.edu.au (A.C.T. Smith),
bob.stewart@vu.edu.au (B. Stewart).

disputes and abuse, although for the researcher, tension, conflict or uncertainty can be illuminating (Price, 1988).

Fourth, while online forums distribute information, they also galvanize meaning (Williams, 2007). In this respect, virtual space possesses similar properties to physical space in terms of its ability to establish psychological connections (Benedikt, 1991). Some commentators like Bornholt, Piccolo, and O'Loughlin (2004) claim that every online space forges its own indigenous identity by locating and channelling personal and social experiences. Of course, the online identities employed in virtual spaces may not reflect actual identities due to pseudo-anonymity, identity-theft, fabrication and anti-social behaviour. Online forums create arenas where the self can expand beyond physical limitations (Robinson, 2007), allowing participants to imagine and sustain new identities (Turkle, 1995).

For some, online research has yielded a new form of 'virtual' ethnographies investigating an unexplored cultural context (Markham, 2005; Wittel, 2000), employing modified anthropological techniques (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001; Wilson & Peterson, 2002). Virtual ethnographies examine culturally embedded, multi-level, multi-sited phenomena and excel as a method for studying live constructions of individual and collective identity. For example, Munt, Bassett, and O'Riordan (2002) showed how gay and lesbian participants used an online forum for "coming out". The most lauded participants were also the most aggressive. Similarly, Giles (2006) studied an online eating disorder website where a 'purist' in-group supported anorexic activity. Our interests revolve around another form of body perception, where muscle and masculinity intersect to produce body perceptions leading to extreme health beliefs and practices.

In their landmark work, Tajfel and Turner (1979) explained the paradox of social personality as the simultaneous pursuit of belonging/identification and individuality/uniqueness. Online forum participants are attracted to virtual communities through the desire for connection, but also use forums for social advancement. This tension ensures that forum activity remains dynamic, driven by the meaning constructed by social actors (Fernback, 2007). It also ensures that the virtual world delivers more than a commoditized experience by channelling a large number of individuals through a socially relative focal point (Bromberg, 1996). In this case, the social focal point reflects a commitment to a physical ideal so desirable that severely deleterious health implications can result. In fact, participants use the negative health consequences of their bodybuilding practices as a form of social demonstration signalling commitment to the hyper-masculine fantasy.

The social desire for a heroic, muscular physique has its origins in the ancient Grecian tradition (Dutton, 1995). According to Jefferson (1998), representations of the masculine body are connected to certain psychological underpinnings residing deep within the masculine psyche and exemplified by 'hardness'; a combination of mental and physical toughness encouraging 'cult fantasies' of bodily perfection (Connell, 1983). This study fits comfortably with previous work in which 'hardness' manifested in mental resilience and physical toughness especially under high risk conditions (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Wacquant, 1995a, 1995b; Westwood, 1990).

2. Data collection and analysis

One of the world's largest online discussion forums dedicated to muscular development was purposefully sampled in this 36 month online ethnography comprising 34 threads, 2894 posts, and titles such as "brotherhood of iron". The most popular thread consisted of 976 posts with 125,332 page visits. Sample selection was driven by Kozinet's (2010) criteria emphasizing scale, interactivity and heterogeneity (Chenail, 2011). Consistent with university ethics protocols, the researchers did not make personal contact

with participants, but maintained observational status as a specialized 'lurker' (Kozinets, 2010). All posts were transcribed and managed using the software program QSR NVivo 8.0 (QSR, 2008). Major codes were used to structure the data into macro groupings subsequently allocated according to common themes (Crossley, 2007). The second stage of analysis used Gee's (1986) units-of-discourse model to generate thematic groupings around stanzas where paragraphs and sentences were broken down into short blocks signalling key concepts, incidents and turning points (Elliott, 2006). Significant links and relationships throughout each of the codes were identified (Riessman, 2008).

3. Results and discussion

Results indicated that participants perceived muscular size and strength to be the embodiment of masculinity. Bicep size and bench-presses were the currencies of respect. One participant observed, "I've put on 60lbs in the past year, I have some small love handles but i don't care, since I've gone from benching 135 to 315, and im not cutting [fat] until I can do 405!". Being big was more important than work, money or mainstream sports: "Why do I want to be bigger anyway? . . . I also enjoy a certain sense of satisfaction just from being big."

The exaggerated commitment to size and strength was evidenced in the rejection of 'weakness'. One participant recounted a conversation with his daughter about his reasons for injecting steroids: "'What's that, Daddy?', 'Uh, this is medicine for daddy's small arm disease'." The online muscular meritocracy was characterised by shared beliefs about heroic effort, physical injury, gender contradictions, and knowledge dominance and transfer, as the following themes reveal.

3.1. Heroic powers

Forum participants perceived their activities in heroic terms where physical power was measured against the capabilities of 'ordinary' men: "Is what I'm doing awesome? If I ask myself that and the answer is no, then I don't do it." Hero status is paved with punishing challenges that demand extraordinary performance: "You have to expose yourself to whatever scares you till it becomes normal." Indeed, the euphoria that accompanied a steroid-assisted "pump" was evidently addictive: "'IT' is an almost indescribable feeling. I have an increasingly growing sense of mild euphoria and physical power." In this often masochistic world participants revelled in the heroism of the "path not taken" by mainstream society. Power corresponded to personal fortitude and the capacity to endure pain. Valiant dietary efforts were also lauded: ". . . anyone who can drink down a dozen (or whatever) raw eggs in the morning deserves a thread of his own . . ."

3.2. At any cost

Pushing physical limits despite the health cost was essential. The most acclaimed posts claimed a high tolerance for physical pain and mental resolution. As Monaghan (2001) reported in his bodybuilding ethnography, health risks were framed by an exaggerated gender perception. In this study, a hyper-masculine ethos was illustrated through reference to training injuries. Participants posted confronting photographs of calluses, abrasions, stretch marks, torn muscles, damaged ligaments and dislocated joints. One post praised a bench-press video: ". . . [X] was benching, stood up, and had a nice puddle of blood around his eye. All I did was smile, because I 'got it'." Another participant described his decision to sacrifice health for muscular gains in mythic proportions: "So when I weigh the difficulties of breathing against feeling almost immortal, the rational, logical, safe choice is clear—yet I don't want to make it! I don't