

## Article

# 'No one's Going to Buy Steroids for a Home Workout'

The impact of the national lockdown on hardcore gym users, anabolic steroid consumption and the image and performance enhancing drugs market

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## Abstract

How has the COVID-19 pandemic, and the subsequent restrictions upon public life, affected those whose lives are contoured around the gym and bodywork? Utilising data precured through semi-structured interviews with image and performance enhancing drug-using bodybuilders, this article sets out to provide a glimpse into the realities of life in the hardcore fitness community in 2020. The impact of lockdown on the men's training is first explored, and their flouting of the restrictions is described. Following this, the sample's image and performance enhancing drug (IPED) consumption during this period is examined, noting an overall reduction in use and a homogenisation of their favoured substances. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the IPED market itself are then considered, wherein the sample's accounts of panic-buying, supply chain issues and declining demand are presented. Ultimately, it is hoped that this article will serve to paint a picture of life under lockdown for the bodybuilding gym users in the population, and follow the community's challenges during the 'longest year'.



## Introduction

Living in the UK in 2020, with its rolling lockdowns, homeworking and numerous governmental U-turns has been an unprecedented experience for us all. Among the voices clamouring to be heard above the din, however, have been the nation's hardcore fitness enthusiasts, who have proven particularly vocal in their opposition to the closure of their beloved gymnasias. Nowhere was this more apparent than last November's anti-lockdown protests where, cheered on by an unmasked crowd of bodybuilders and powerlifters, supplement company Grenade triumphantly drove a vividly-painted orange tank past the Houses of Parliament (Warrington, 2020). Beyond the deeply commodified nature of this stunt, the support for the anti-lockdown movement within the hardcore fitness community was unwavering as they counted down the days to 'gymdependence day', craving the barbells whilst the rest of us were more concerned with the return of the bar (Salinas, 2019). Alongside this, with most bodybuilding and powerlifting competitions restricted or indefinitely postponed, many trainers found themselves with nothing to train for, leaving their intricate exercise and supplementation schedules redundant and their well-calibrated image and performance enhancing drug (IPED) cycles unneeded.

Set against this context, this article examines the bodybuilding community's experience of 'the longest year', first exploring their disregard for both the law and the 'spirit of lockdown' (Shaw, 2020) before analysing their altered consumption of IPEDs during this unprecedented period. Following this, the IPED market itself will be put under the magnifying glass and the impacts of global supply chain disruption and reduced local demand will be considered.

## A note on the health and fitness industry

Before commencing further, it is first worth briefly laying out the role of leisure in the contemporary economy and the subsequent importance of the gym as a source of identity formation. According to Raymen and Smith (2019), late-capitalism has seen a fundamental alteration of the nature of leisure. Where once organised leisure was viewed as fundamentally antithetical to labour, a means of escaping the Fordist generation of capital, citizens' 'free time' now primarily functions to further the neoliberal drive for capital growth and the stimulation of consumer desire (Winlow and Hall, 2006; McGowan, 2016). In line with the Western economic shift from production to consumption then (Amin, 1994), our economy now relies more upon the insatiable appetite for transient consumer goods and experiences (stimulated within the commodified spaces of leisure) than the traditional bastions of industrial modernity. Nowhere was this more apparent than Rishi Sunak's now infamous 'Eat Out to Help Out' scheme, which essentially tasked customers to consume their way out of economic recession in the form of half price meals.

The subsequent growth of leisure within our society of consumption has proven extremely fertile ground for the UK's health and fitness industry which, prior to the pandemic, was growing exponentially year upon year (Smith Maguire, 2008; Sassatelli, 2010). Contoured along the same lines of capital extraction, the contemporary health and fitness industry encompasses a range of goods and services including gymnasias, health supplements, wearable

fitness monitoring devices and activewear (Andreasson and Johansson, 2014; Cederström and Spicer, 2015). Illustrating the scale of this market, the most recent (pre-pandemic) figures suggest that approximately 6,700 gym facilities exist in the UK, playing host to around 9.7 million members (Lange, 2019). As a result, the gym has become a prime site for identity formation within contemporary society and, for the men under study, formed an epicentral part of their existence. Indeed, in the height of the UK's lockdown we saw home gym equipment and subscriptions to online fitness platforms rocket (Waldmeir and McGee, 2021), signalling the centrality of bodywork for swathes of the population.

Importantly however, this article focusses upon the so-called hardcore fitness market, characterised by advanced level bodybuilding, 'spit and sawdust' gyms (Brighton, Wellard and Clark, 2020) and a rejection of mainstream health and fitness. Whilst, on first glance, this community seems at odds with the commodified gym chains and glossy fitness influencer market which represent the growth areas of the industry (Deloitte, 2018), further examination reveals the same commodification and consumption in the increasingly 'gentrified' spaces of hardcore strength training (Brighton et al., 2020) as well as the sport of bodybuilding itself (see Andreasson and Johansson, 2019). With that in mind, this article asks the question; *what happens when your primary site of identity formation gets locked down?*

## **IPED consumption and supply**

The meteoric rise of the health and fitness industry has brought with it a shadow in the form of image and performance enhancing drugs that, despite the ever-broadening anti-doping movement (Mulrooney et al., 2019), remain indelibly connected to hardcore gym work. IPEDs, within this article, can be defined as 'substances that enhance muscle growth and reduce body fat' (Underwood, 2017: 78), encompassing drugs like anabolic androgenic steroids (AAS), human growth hormone (hGH) and fat burners like ephedrine (Hope et al., 2013; Sagoe et al., 2014; Begley et al., 2017). By far the most popular IPEDs are AAS, a class of drugs that include the male hormone testosterone, or a synthetic derivative of it, that can be administered either orally or as an intramuscular injection (Begley et al., 2017). AAS 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) 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, Vinther and Liokaftos, 2017).

Across the literature, a consensus has emerged that, prior to the pandemic, the consumption of IPEDs was increasing rapidly both nationally and internationally (McVeigh and Begley, 2017; Mullen et al., 2020), particularly in younger generations and those outside of the hardcore fitness community (Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016). However, the academy is yet to examine the impacts of the pandemic on these previously burgeoning figures of use (for an exception, see Zoob Carter et al., 2021). This article, therefore, aims to shed light upon the

sample's IPED use during the 'longest year' and how the closure of gyms has affected both the compounds that they use and the quantities they consume.

The supply of IPEDs is also of interest to this work. Although Fincoeur, van de Ven and Mulrooney (2015) note that existing literature has somewhat neglected the supply of IPEDs, a growing body of work has addressed the various aspects of the market. According to van de Ven and Mulrooney (2017), most transactions can be described as 'social supply', whereby sellers provide substances to their acquaintances, typically within the hardcore fitness community, for little financial gain (Coomber et al., 2014). However, Fincoeur et al. (2015) contend that, alongside the growing customer base, supply has become increasingly commercialised and less culturally-embedded. This has been exacerbated by the market's online growth (Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016), where substances can be purchased across the globe using online pharmacy websites and social media sites (Mackey and Nayyer, 2016; van de Ven and Koenraadt, 2017; Shukman, 2020). These various means of supply offer a vast range of IPED compounds, which, in the UK, are typically produced by underground laboratories (UGLs) (Fink et al., 2019) which rely upon global supply chains to import raw materials (Turnock, 2019). However, given the globalised nature of the trade and its reliance upon these imports, how has lockdown impacted the market? And, if users have altered their consumption habits given the closure of gyms and cancellations of competitions, what effect has that had on these suppliers? As yet, no literature has tackled these questions and therefore this article aims to fill that gap in knowledge.

## **Methodology**

This work draws upon five interviews from members of the hardcore bodybuilding community in an English Midlands city as well as immersive digital ethnographic data, collected as part of the author's PhD fieldwork. The project, which can be described as a 'connective' ethnography (Leander and McKim, 2003), was a year-long study encompassing traditional ethnographic observation, digital ethnography and semi-structured interviews. Reflecting a broader concern with immersive, in-depth criminological and sociological research (see Treadwell, 2020; Matthews, 2021), the study gained significant, original and rigorous insight through access to this hardcore fitness community, which resulted in a rich data set. Crucially, the COVID-19 pandemic, and subsequent national and regional lockdowns, occurred mid-way through data collection, giving unique insight into the sample of twenty-eight hardcore gym users and practitioners during this unprecedented moment in history. After the closure of gymnasia, follow up interviews with the most committed participants were conducted using video conferencing technology in November 2020. This period, for those for whom the myriad iterations of lockdowns have become blurred, coincided with the second national lockdown, wherein all hospitality, leisure and non-essential retailers in England were closed (BBC, 2020). The interviewees, chosen according to their elevated status in the local bodybuilding community and relative openness about their IPED consumption, ranged from twenty-one years old through to thirty-three and all competed in organised open bodybuilding contests. The most successful, Ben, was an International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness Pro (IFBB), whilst Sam, Dom and Ed were well-respected amateur bodybuilders and personal trainers. Finally, Jake, the youngest

of the sample, was a highly thought-of upcoming bodybuilder and semi-professional model. The interviews, which lasted between thirty minutes and an hour, encompassed the men's experiences of training during the pandemic, their views on the lockdown policy and their IPED consumption during this time period. All participants were assigned a pseudonym and any identifiable information has been redacted. Further, each signed a consent form to indicate their informed consent and were afforded the right to withdraw from the research at any time.

## Findings

### **'I am literally just trying to train but it's illegal': rule breaking and the compulsion to lift**

Given the widespread contempt for England's coronavirus restrictions within the hardcore fitness community, it is perhaps unsurprising that all five participants vehemently opposed the government's second national lockdown. During the interviews, the decision to close gymnasia was variously branded '*an absolute farce*' (Jake), '*a bit of a joke*' (Dom) and '*crazy*' (Ed) by the men, particularly given the decision to allow fast food takeaways to remain open. Jake argued:

'Eat Out to Help out was something like thirty percent of all cases and gyms were like three. McDonalds, Burger King, KFC, takeaways are all still open, manufacturers of obesity and fatness and diabetes are all still open, but the gyms where people go to relax and release, and go to get fit and healthy to take strain off the NHS are all closed.'

Alongside this, Ed stressed the importance of the gym as a means of catharsis and mitigation against mental health struggles, and the consequent impacts of their closure:

'I don't think gyms should be closed, they should be essential because I've known gyms whose members have committed suicide with lockdown because of the fact that they don't have their greatest anti-depressant, which is just going to the gym. It's so simple, they go there and they sort themselves out – it requires no government help and that's been taken away from them.'

Here, drawing upon the well of literature linking gym work to improved mental health (see Hefferon et al., 2013; Serra et al., 2017), Ed's words captured wider protestations within the community which underpin the growing calls for the reopening of the health and fitness industry. Whilst these claims are hard to dispute however, a hubris underlay the men's attitude towards the virus as they continually downplayed its severity and perceived themselves to be essentially immune, given their heightened state of fitness. This was epitomised by Ben:

NG: Do you feel vulnerable to the virus yourself?

Ben: No, not one bit. My brother works as a physio over at the hospital and very similar to me he trains every day. They tested him and found out that he had the anti-bodies for it. So he had had it and not realised. He didn't have a day off work and he didn't even miss a training session. So yeah, I don't feel vulnerable to it at all. If someone said to me "I'll give it to you right now and then you've had it and you've not got to worry about it", I'd say go for it."

Responding to this same question, Jake stated, '*I know my body's always fuelled up, my immune system's good, I train hard, so I don't feel vulnerable or threatened*'. As Ben and Jake's accounts illustrate, despite a number of reported cases of deaths and long-term health issues in otherwise young and healthy COVID-19 sufferers (Schraer, 2021), the men assumed that their worked-on bodies would ultimately protect them from the virus and therefore felt unnecessarily constrained by the lockdown. Notably absent from their accounts however, was a regard for the 'duty to the other' (Bauman, 2009) and the notion of collective sacrifice that motivated so much of the population to abide by the restrictions and protect those more vulnerable.

As a result of these interlinking justifications, each of the men opted to continue attending the gym throughout the second national lockdown. The most common strategy employed by the sample to this end was to travel across the border to Wales (which had just emerged from its own national lockdown just as England tightened restrictions). Of the five interviewees, both Ben and Jake opted for this approach, as Ben explained:

Ben: I mean with this latest one, for the last two weeks I've been driving to Wales every day to train because they came out of their lockdown as we came into ours. So I've been driving down to [retracted], it's about fifty minutes, so yeah I've been doing that basically every day to go and train. I think if the desire to train and improve is there then you'll find a way to do it.

NG: Didn't a lot of the Welsh guys come over here during their lockdown as well? So there's been like a bodybuilders' exchange programme.

Ben: Yeah [laughs] I didn't realise at the time but since we've been down there, we've been chatting away and they've said that they travelled over.

Similarly, Jake smiled wryly as he admitted:

'I am going over to Wales and training there. It's a hundred-mile round trip so I can't do it every single day, but minimum of three/four times a week I'm going over there. Speaking to the gym owners, they were doing the same, they were coming over here. [...] I think everyone's just got on the whole 'we'll go to Wales' thing. If you put a fifty-mile ring into Wales, you'd find quite a few gyms with English lads in. They're not really that fussed because we were doing it for them. Everyone was doing it. I've bought a membership for the month because I'm going to be going lots of times.'

Despite the overt illegality of crossing the border in order to train, Jake acknowledged that '[e]veryone was doing it', both within the Welsh bodybuilding community and the 'English lads'. Evident within both of these accounts is the sentiment that those with the requisite commitment to lifting will '*find a way*', elevating their desire to train above the collective health of the nation and the law itself. Therefore, such was the significance of gym work as a means of identity formation in Ben and Jake's lives, they were willing to make the '*fifty-five mile*' journey to the nearest legally open gym in order to retain their physical conditioning.

Ed, however, opted to remain in England during this period and, at great personal risk, covertly attended a bodybuilding gym in the North West (which has since been raided by police):

Ed: This lockdown I am going to a gym in [retracted] that is open. Basically, how they do it is, their doors are locked from the inside so the police can't come in. You have to wait outside and they're constantly checking cameras, and then they'll come and let you in if there are no police about. If there are police around, they won't come and get you, so that stops you from getting fined as well as them. And all the windows are blocked out as well and nobody parks in the car park so it's kind of crazy. But I am doing it so I can train, it's my only way of training properly. I made myself a promise that I want to be an IFBB Pro and at the start of this year I decided I'm gonna do whatever it takes. I didn't know it was gonna be as hard as this to stay on track, I didn't know I'd need to sneak into a gym [laughs].

NG: How did you hear about this gym?

Ed: So on social media the guy said he's going to stay open but then when I was enquiring to the guys about whether they were still open they weren't replying. Then I was ringing up and they weren't answering. So my friend actually drove down not knowing if it'd be open when he got there, and there was no cars in the carpark and it was completely blacked out. But then he just walked up to the door and they let him in. So that was a massive risk but I'm glad he took it because obviously that confirmed I was able to train. So it's not advertised, it's more of like an underground type of thing.

Going beyond Ben and Jake's illicit border crossing, Ed performed something of a covert mission in order to continue to train in a specialist bodybuilding gym in England. Although he admitted that *'I do feel a little bit like a criminal'*, he accepted the high likelihood of being caught and fined (which he eventually was in February 2021) due to this absolute commitment to becoming an IFBB Pro athlete. This *'underground'* gym operation therefore speaks to the community's compulsion to build their bodies and their single-minded focus on *'training properly'* to achieve their bodily goals.

Finally, given their occupations as high-end personal trainers, both Dom and Sam were able to *'blag it'* (Dom) by invoking the government's guidance that *'elite athletes'* and their coaches could use specialist facilities (Gov.uk, 2021). Dom explained, *'I've kind of blagged this with my boss, because I'm semi-professional/professional with the level I coach and compete at, legally he's allowed to let me use the gym. Because elite athletes who earn their living through sport can use the facilities'*. Similarly, the owner at Sam's bodybuilding gym allowed his staff to continue to train in the facilities as *'a bit of a treat'*, meaning that both of these users were spared the extreme lengths that Ben, Jake and Ed needed to go to in order to keep up their training schedules. The participants also spoke of members of the community *'bending the rules'* (Dom) by taking advantage of the government's hesitancy to close England's borders in order to fly to countries where gyms remained open, chiefly Dubai. Indeed, discussing this, Ed conceded:

*'A lot of people have been going to Dubai. There have been a number of online coaches and bodybuilders who've gone there, which is kinda crazy but it does make sense because that way they get a nice holiday in the sun, they're able to still work and the gyms are open so they can then create content and they're not*

putting themselves at risk by showing everyone that they're breaking the rules here.'

This rather staggering admission speaks not only to the UK government's ineptitude in locking down the borders during the height of the pandemic, but reflects what Yar (2012) describes as the 'will-to-representation', whereby the contemporary subject requires their actions to be validated through online dissemination, leading to the phenomena of social media influencer culture (Abidin, 2020). Therefore, the lengths these online coaches went to in order to 'create content' illustrates the centrality of digital prosumption (Yar, 2012) in their lives and the attendant harms of these online fitness practices (Smith and Raymen, 2018; Gibbs, Forthcoming). Ultimately, this further illustrates the hardcore fitness community's myopic focus upon their own corporeal development, even at the expense of the 'spirit of lockdown' (Shaw, 2020). But why, besides the auxiliary benefits of *'get[ting] a nice holiday in the sun'*, does the community feel so compelled to continue their bodywork? Whilst this is a deep-reaching question that is beyond the scope of this article (see instead Gibbs, Forthcoming), what is immediately striking is the men's loss of identity without the commodified leisure environment of the gym. Jake admitted that he *'fell apart'* during the first national lockdown without access to the gym, whilst Ben conceded that, faced with the prospect of home workouts, he would *'go for a drive around for fifteen/twenty minutes, you know sort of listen to some music and get in the right headspace for it, and then just pull up back at home and train'* as a means of replicating his pre-lockdown routine. These admissions, alongside the extreme lengths the men went to in order to further their bodywork, illustrate the fundamental role of the gym in their lives and how their selfhood is entirely bound up in these spaces of fitness.

### **'I basically treated it as a prolonged time off any chemicals': IPED consumption under lockdown**

Whilst the hardcore gym community's opposition to the government's COVID-19 restrictions has been widely reported on (see Richardson, 2020; Blackall, 2020; BBC, 2021), trainers' IPED consumption during this period remains relatively undocumented. Having been purposively sampled due to their openness regarding their extensive IPED use, the men therefore represent a glimpse into the community's drug use under lockdown. Dom, who was well-connected within the local IPED scene, first provided an overview of his contacts' consumption:

NG: Are most users off-cycle at the moment or have people tended to stay on?

Dom: completely fifty/fifty. For example, myself because I was still able to train nothing really changed for me, so I continued with my cycle and now I've come off. Out of the people that I know, some of them have stayed on because of their mental health. I personally from knowing them, I don't think they could have coped with coming off and not training, because they would have lost size obviously. But on the other hand, some of them came off completely because they just didn't see the point in running anything for the time when they weren't training.



Due to his training remaining unaffected by lockdown, Dom was able to continue his full cycle. However, for users without access to a high-quality training facility, he concluded that they either remained on-cycle due to their chemical and mental dependency upon AAS (Kanayama et al., 2009), or simply ceased consumption. Notably, during the first national lockdown, when Ben did not have access to a gym, he opted for the latter:

'I basically treated it as a prolonged time off any chemicals. It was a period of fourteen weeks or whatever where I wouldn't have necessarily been taking the time off. Normally, I'll do my cycle, my PCT, I'll do my bloodwork and get everything back to normal and then it'll be straight back onto cycle again. But there wasn't the urgency that there would be normally because the training wasn't there, the stimulus wasn't there. I knew that if I was just maintaining then I could do that through diet and the basics of training, so there wasn't really the need for it.'

Here, Ben's description of the lack of '*stimulus*' to justify his habitual use points to a more general reduction in consumption throughout the community because, in Jake's words, '*No one's going to buy steroids for a home workout*'. Following this period of abstinence, Ben completed a full cycle following the reopening of the gyms, before dropping down to a testosterone replacement therapy (TRT) dose of '*350mg of testosterone every ten days*' at the time of the interview. This was echoed by Jake who, given that his upcoming bodybuilding shows had been indefinitely postponed, stated, '*I went TRT for the [first national lockdown] because if I had just come off having been on prep then my body would have just shut down. This time I'm on TRT anyway because that's what we were going to do, then once January hits we're going onto a proper cycle*'. Again, given the unprecedented lack of events to train for, Jake took the opportunity to scale back his consumption, although his lack of natural testosterone production precluded his complete withdrawal (see Underwood et al., 2020; Dunn et al., 2021).

In terms of compounds, unsurprisingly shorter ester AAS (which are typically taken as part of the '*cutting*' phase immediately prior to a competition) were abandoned in favour of longer esters, and IPEDs like hGH and the various fat burners that the men ordinarily took were also neglected. Dom explained:

'The people who've stayed on, unless you're an idiot, will have dropped down to test retention or test therapy. Somebody smart during the lockdown period would stay on TRT rather than running a full cycle, especially if you're a young guy. And with your test retention you're going to go through about one tenth of the gear in a month than what you'd use in a full cycle anyway.'

As is evident here, with most users either ceasing their use or dropping down to a TRT dose, Dom estimated that demand would have substantially dropped within the community during lockdown. Finally, Ben emphasised the unique level of forethought demanded by the cyclical nature of IPED consumption compared to recreational drugs, and the subsequent difficulties of rolling lockdowns and cancelled contests for high-level users:

'It's not like when people are trying to sort out some cocaine or something, I need to know that my cycle and PCT are in place for that twelve-week period or

whatever, because I don't want to just be stopping midway and my body crashing because I've stopped putting test into my system.'

Therefore, hampered by the Conservative government's U-turns and repeated misdirection, Ben was conscious that improper use or the unavailability of certain PCT compounds would impact negatively upon his body. This was supported by Ed, who also chose to remain on a TRT dose of AAS during the first lockdown and was off-cycle during the interview:

'For people who haven't been as lucky [at purchasing their full cycle], I can see how it would bring up anxiety if you're mid-course and then there's uncertainty about whether you can follow all your protocols properly. I know for a fact I didn't have a plan in place when this second lockdown was announced because obviously it was quite sudden.'

As Ed's acknowledgement illustrates, despite a general reduction in variety and quantity of IPEDs, the issue of procuring a full cycle represented a great stressor to the community, given the uncertainty of the various lockdowns and users' inability to envisage the near future. This therefore represents yet another challenge during this unprecedented period.

### **Impacts on the IPED market**

Given the reduction in IPED consumption and the reduced range of products used by the community, 2020 was a turbulent year for the IPED market. Before exploring this however, it is worth providing a brief account of the participants' means of supply. Importantly, Ed, Jake and Sam sourced their IPEDs through Dom, who was something of a local name in the market. Although he did not personally profit from their purchasing (van de Ven and Mulrooney, 2017), Dom acted as the primary means of contact for these men to order their products from the same UGL. As such, their accounts refer to a specific segment of the local supply chain. Ben, on the other hand, used pharmaceutical-grade IPEDs (including AAS and hGH) sourced through a contact within the pharmaceutical industry. As such, Ben's experience of the market was markedly different to the others.

Firstly, Ed recalled the panic buying that occurred at the onset of the first national lockdown as, whilst others were stockpiling toilet roll and hand soap (Briggs et al., 2020), the hardcore fitness community were bulk buying their AAS cycles:

'People have definitely panic bought their gear at the start of lockdown. I have a friend who bought his whole course beforehand because when [March's] lockdown was announced there was talk that suppliers might struggle to get the ingredients to actually make the compounds. That made people nervous and I think some people panic bought because of that.'

This was supported by Ben who, despite sourcing his IPEDs through different channels, admitted '*pretty much at the start of [the second national lockdown] I got everything that I needed to do with my PCT because I didn't want to get caught out*'. Aware of their customers' mindset, many UGLs advertised discounts and special 'pandemic offers' during March and April 2020 (see Figure 1.) in order to bolster sales and mitigate against the market's uncertainty. As Figure 1 and 2

demonstrate, UGLs also diversified their product range to include COVID-19 related items like facemasks and licit immune system supplementation.

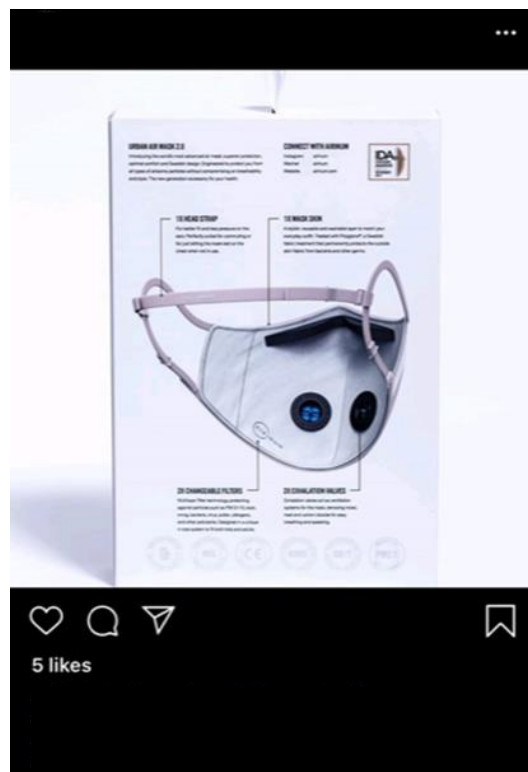


Figure 1. UGL supplier @goodtimesgear offering a one-off sale using Instagram's story feature in order to 'help out the community' at the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown (08/04/20).

Figure 2. Instagram supplier @raginroids advertising a range of pharmaceutical-grade facemasks (22/04/20).

Following this initial surge in demand however, the market appeared to wane somewhat as lockdown progressed, as Dom stated, 'speaking to a couple of people I know, they said it was dead, it had really dried up. With gyms being closed, even your regular users, they're not going to be using and even if they are, they're going to be using a lot less'. Similarly, Jake opined, 'I think that purchasing will have gone down anyway because nobody will have bought anything over lockdown, so there's nothing really coming through'. Thus, as the previous section made clear, the closure of gyms and postponement of competitions negatively impacted the previously lucrative IPED market. Compounding this,

although the sample themselves did not experience any issues in receiving their orders, Ben stated:

'I imagine that things are harder to get hold of, a lot of the stuff that's imported has probably been held up at the moment. Even ordering something from Amazon and eBay is taking like double the time to get to people, so I imagine ordering things overseas has been difficult. Saying that, I've not heard of a massive shortage of anything, but I do imagine there's been problems around getting PEDs if you're relying on UGLs.'

Here, Ben implicitly acknowledges UGL suppliers' reliance upon importing raws from countries like China (Turnock, 2019) and, given the impact of COVID-19 on exports and licit global supply chains, assumes that powder form AAS have been similarly '*held up*' alongside the billions of consumer products in transit. However, despite Ben's postulations, all five men reported that their purchasing and subsequent acquisition of IPEDs was '*as easy as it was before*' (Ed) during both lockdowns. Indeed, Ben, recounting his experience of purchasing AAS following his off-cycle period, stated '*I asked about it and picked it up later that day. For me, there was no difference*'. This encapsulates the inherent short-sightedness of panic buying more generally as, just like the ransacked supermarket shelves of the licit economy, IPED suppliers ultimately had adequate provision and it was only the perceived scarcity of products and supply chains that led to the initial consumer anxiety (Arafat et al., 2020). From these accounts, it would appear that the market remained functional during 2020, albeit with lower levels of consumer demand.

Looking forward, there was a consensus that the illicit IPED economy will '*pick back up*' (Sam) following the opening of gyms and subsequent spike in demand. Indeed, Ed described how, in his view, the market will experience a dramatic increase in custom as '*people try and gain back what they have lost*'. As such, Jake attributed the slump under lockdown as a '*plateau*', which will soon be stimulated given that, in his words, '*the demand's not going anywhere, and lads are desperate to get back in and put their size back on*'.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This article has provided insight into a sample of five English bodybuilders' experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, encompassing their disregard for the national lockdown(s), their altered consumption of image and performance enhancing drugs and their reading of the pandemic on the IPED market. Clearly, the hardcore fitness community, with the sanctity it places upon the gym as a site of identity formation and meaning making, has been severely affected by the closure of the sites of leisure which form the backbone of the contemporary consumption-driven economy. Combined with an underlying hubris that their enhanced physiques would protect them from the virus, the sample's compulsion to train inevitably led them to flout the lockdown rules, variously travelling across the border to Wales, attending a covert '*underground*' (Ed) gym in the North West, and manipulating their special dispensation to use their employers' training facilities. Looking deeper, whilst this behaviour is widely considered deviant by the population at large, within the hardcore fitness community, with their mantra that those most committed

to gym work will '*find a way*' to train, the men's actions are essentially hyper-conformist (Kotzé and Antonopoulos, 2019). Indeed, Jake's perception that '*Everyone was doing it*' as he discussed his regular trips into Wales, speaks to a complete acceptance that the rules need not apply to his bodybuilding peer group. Therefore, disregarding any sense of 'duty to the other' (Bauman, 2009), the sample prioritised their own corporeal development over the health of the wider population and somewhat undermined the collective effort to 'stop the spread of coronavirus' (NHS, 2021). As such, their transgressions represent a symptom of the wider (global) hardcore fitness community's anti-lockdown sentiment and distrust of governmental intervention.

Although the sample were all able to train during the time of the interviews (November 2020), they had no such avenue in the initial national lockdown (March to July 2020 (when gyms were first permitted to reopen)). As a result, their IPED consumption over 2020 as a whole was dramatically reduced, with fewer compounds used and more time spent off-cycle. Indeed, the men reported the use of longer ester AAS and a disregard for substances typically used in the cutting phase of bodybuilding show preparation. Instead, those who did remain on-cycle opted for TRT doses of testosterone in order to retain their muscle mass and avoid their bodies '*shut[ting] down*' (Jake) as a result of withdrawal. This dramatic reduction in consumption was reflected in the IPED market's decline after a period of panic-induced stimulation, wherein hardcore trainers stockpiled AAS, PCT drugs and hGH as the wider population hauled three-kilogram bags of pasta and twenty-four packs of toilet roll to the supermarket checkouts. However, despite the sample's concerns that their IPED supply chains, which mostly relied upon the importation of raw AAS powders from China, would be compromised, ultimately the market appeared to prevail in delivering their products. More than anything, the clear parallels between the illicit IPED market and the licit consumer economy under lockdown illustrate the core neoliberal logic behind each, as UGL suppliers utilise the same globalised supply chains and commerce platforms as licit businesses in order to continually stimulate their customers' desire and perpetuate capital growth (McGowan, 2016; Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016). To this end, when the global economy initiates its inevitable post-pandemic resurgence and the UK's sites of commodified leisure are able to welcome back their devoted consumers, Ed and Jake predicted that the IPED market will also continue its rapid expansion (Mullen et al., 2020). We may, perhaps, even see the popularity of IPEDs grow to unprecedented levels as '*people try and gain back what they have lost*' (Ed) and the health and fitness industry begins its perpetual cultivation of bodily dissatisfaction once again (Gibbs, Forthcoming).

The insight here into some of the hardcore fitness community's experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and their reactions to it adds richer detail to our understanding of the impacts of the 'longest year' of 2020. By holding a magnifying glass over this specific population's flouting of the lockdown rules, we are better able to add texture to the emerging picture of normalised deviance that occurred during the pandemic and how this unprecedented global event sent reverberations through many more localised communities. Testament to the immersive methodology of this study (Matthews, 2021), these wider issues have been brought to the fore in a style, it is hoped, that will long be continued. Ultimately, whilst the closure of the

gyms, the cancellation of bodybuilding and powerlifting events and the subsequent effort of retaining muscle mass has been an unprecedented challenge for community members, 2020 will most likely be remembered as an unfortunate blip in the men's unending cultivation of their physiques and, although the IPED market can be assumed to have generated far lower revenues than its previous lucrative levels (Fincoeur et al., 2015), it too will return to service the inevitable post-pandemic appetite for enhanced health and fitness.

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