

Balancing Acts: Women's performance and image-enhancing drug (PIED) use through a social identity lens

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Introduction: The use of performance and image-enhancing drugs (PIEDs) among women has seen a notable increase in recent years, yet research centred on lived experience has remained limited. Research has indicated that women are often introduced to PIEDs through male counterparts and that their PIEDs use often involves navigating complex intersections of femininity and substance use. Employing a social identity theory approach, this study explores these dynamics in depth.

Methods: We conducted an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to investigate how women who weight-train make sense of their PIED use, employing a social identity theory lens. Nine women engaged in weight-training and PIED use participated in semi-structured interviews, with results analysed thematically according to IPA guidelines.

Results: Three key themes were identified: the perceived necessity of PIEDs for athletic pursuits, experiences and renegotiation of feminine identity, and the concept of 'responsible' PIED use. The findings suggested that decisions around PIED use often involved participants navigating complex intersections between their identities as athletes, women, and 'responsible' PIED users.

Conclusions: A significant insight from the study is the nuanced relationship between being 'responsible' in PIED use and social expectations of women to engage in rule-abiding and morally justifiable behavior. This connection underscores the additional pressures that women who use PIEDs face to conform to both competitive and gender norms, often leading to a delicate balancing act. The study highlights how participants manage stigma and develop unique risk management strategies to align with these intersecting identities. By employing IPA, the research provides a deep, nuanced understanding of the personal and social dimensions of women's PIED use.

Implications for Practice or Policy: These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of women's PIED use and underscore the need for tailored education and healthcare resources that address the specific challenges faced by women in this context.

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