Check for updates

Special Issue Article: Play

SEXUALITIES

Sexualities
0(0) 1–17
© The Author(s) 2020
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/1363460720964100
journals.sagepub.com/home/sex

Hanging, blowing, slamming and playing: Erotic control and overflow in a digital chemsex scene

Kristian Møller
IT University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Abstract

Based on participant observation, this article details the use of methamphetamine (crystal meth) in a social scene mediated by a video conferencing service similar to Zoom. Taking an affective-materialist approach and applying concepts from play theory, it describes the visual erotic culture that emerges in the 100 simultaneous videos of drug-using people, mostly men. It details the scene's modulation of temporality, how drug use is performed in relationship to numerous screens and the way ceremonialization counters the platformed deintensification. Finally, it discusses how digital chemsex encounters might overflow categories of gender and sexuality, and how the article may enrich the study of drugged sexual play.

Keywords

Chemsex, play, ceremony, video conferencing, Zoom

Introduction: chemsex beyond risk

In a Google+ forum dedicated to chemsex, that is, sexual encounters among men enhanced by drug use, an embedded YouTube video announces a methamphetamine (crystal meth) smoking event. After downloading the required video

Corresponding author:
Kristian Møller, IT University of Copenhagen, København, Denmark.
Email: krimo@itu.dk

conferencing app,[1] I type in the link address and click 'attend'. While the digital service is marketed to facilitate large groups, much like traditional landline call-in services, this event leverages the privacy and relative inaccessibility of the infrastructure to facilitate a kind of 'hangout' that for legal and social reasons is hard to sustain in other, more open, infrastructures.

When I enter, generic house music is pumping, and my screen is filled with small, grainy video streams of naked, male torsos lit up by the blue light of computer screens. Swiping presents me with even more videos. Browsing through the video feeds, I am met with men sometimes typing, sometimes masturbating, but mostly just staring blankly at the screen. They stare past me at something or someone else. I feel overwhelmed: where do I start and what do I look for? After a while I come across a guy dancing jaggedly. I think he just did some sort of show with a glowstick. He sits down and looks at a computer screen. I think he is very high, moving at any given moment.

A bit later, in the open chat, a user writes 'clouds now'. Knowing that this vernacular term describes the smoking of crystal meth, I scan the video grid to find his stream. As he artfully blows clouds of smoke into the air the chat erupts in appreciative comments.

The above description, and the article as such, is based on my participant observation in a week-long event on a well-known video conferencing service during which crystal meth was both smoked and injected (or 'slammed' as is its vernacular term). Interestingly, most current research on drugged sexual engagement between men focuses on non-mediated encounters between men in private apartments, at sex-on-premise venues and in dance club back rooms. While this makes sense from an epidemiological perspective, mediated forms of engagement should not be neglected. In fact, as the body of work on digital sex culture documents (see for example Attwood, 2017; Campbell, 2004; Paasonen, 2011), mediated sexual expression and practice is key to understanding much of contemporary sexuality. Therefore, it is misleading to consider these digitally mediated encounters between gay men using crystal meth and *gamma*-hydroxybutyric acid (GHB) as extraordinary versions of the 'typical' somatic encounter. Rather, they are sites that might draw on similar chemical–sexual repertoires but, due to their sociomaterial configuration, may configure the chemsex encounter differently.

This article focuses on sexualized drug practice as it emerges in a video conferencing service. Of the many competing video conferencing services on the market, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Ringcentral and TeamViewer are some of the better known. They all offer ways to organize video meetings for large groups and include tools for chatting, presentations and user management. Two key ways in which these platforms differ from other chat services that often are often bundled together with social media features and platforms, are that the meetings they facilitate are not easily publicly available or visible, and that they are seemingly unmoderated. This sustains a much more private and localized experience which in turn might explain why such services are used for non-normative and socially marginalized sex and drug practice.

Beyond expanding the range of socio-material practices that are recognized as chemsex, this article, in choosing to remove itself from the somatic encounter, intervenes into particularly limiting ways of knowing chemsex that, if not addressed, produce socially problematic outcomes. Often, research and public outreach materials describe chemsex as entailing 'extreme sexual disinhibition' and 'extreme sexual focus' (Stuart, 2015), setting chemsex as intrinsically out of the ordinary. Such framing draws from a normalized understanding of sex that chemsex extends and arguably transgresses. Further, the literature distinguishes between 'problematic' and 'unproblematic' (Stuart and Collins, 2015) and almost universally turning to the former. In this way, health-oriented analyses of chemsex tend to 'rush to risk' (Bryant et al., 2018), which in turn contributes to an activation of moral panic scripts in popular media discourse (Hakim, 2018: 1–2). This too readily establishes a script for normative sexual intimacy in order to then define chemsex as outside this charmed circle (Rubin, 2012) of healthy sexual sociability. Such hegemonic production of risk populations paints a skewed picture that fails to imagine the inclusion of, and even actively excludes, certain bodies, identities and practices. By offering deeper inquiry, this article seeks to provide a corrective to this framework.

This article responds to the call to *destabilize* the study of chemsex (Drysdale et al., 2020), doing so in two ways: by de-emphasizing the otherwise dominant perspectives of *risk*, and by expanding and decentring what is considered chemsex altogether. I deem both approaches necessary in order to deepen our understanding of the phenomenon of chemsex, as well as to understand the ways in which it is rooted in gay sexual cultural history more generally. In order to do so, theories of play are utilized. Thinking with play opens up the analysis to reflect not only on the bodies that register excitement, but on pleasure as emerging in assemblages of a range (play)things and bodies. The focus on the material multiplicity of the digital chemsex phenomenon is inspired by Race's study of gay life as emerging in digital, chemical and communal infrastructures (Race, 2018: 19). Via this framework, I investigate chemsex as a mediated socio-affective space. I ask what it looks and feels like, and how its pleasures flow through, are blocked by, and in any case changed by, social dynamics or leadership and rules, the effects of crystal meth and GHB and the affordances of the video conferencing service. By way of this, I insist on the digital as a site of cultural production in and of itself, while of course remaining well aware that these sites slot into larger assemblages of drugged sociabilities that take personal, historical and social dependencies into account. In order to trace and move between these different infrastructures and scales, the article takes an ethnographical, situated approach.

The article is structured around six sections. First, I present literature on sex, media and play that are key to understanding my analytical approach, as well as the article's particular contribution to the study of chemsex, and sex and media studies more broadly. Then, after presenting my methodological approach alongside ethical considerations around gender and race, four analytical focal points follow: the first describing the general intensity and temporal modulation of the

scene; the second dealing with the performance of drug use as a key driver of pleasure; the third the social organization and intensification of pleasure through ceremonial control; and the fourth discussing the ways in which digital chemsex encounters might overflow categories of gender and sexuality. In the conclusion, I offer remarks on the kinds of further research this study invites.

Sex, media and play

Digital chemsex is a social and material phenomenon consisting of a recognizable string of events that are digitally mediated, in this case through a video conferencing service. As the body is central to chemsex practice, and as it can be said to multiply with media use, a clear definition is called for. Here, I find Campbell's (2004) autoethnography on early internet gay chat rooms instructive. Campbell shows how textual bodies are as much objects to which desire attaches as somatic bodies are. However, as real-time video streams represent bodies in ways that much more closely resemble and invoke its referent, thinking about digital chemsex bodies should also pay attention to their somatic realities in some sense. In the literature, Hillis (2009) addresses this tension between the textual and somatic in their construct of the 'sign/body' operating within the case study of Second Life. Based on these notions, I conceive of the digital chemsex body as a textual signifier within a digital space, but one that nevertheless carries notions of somatic sensation in that it so closely represents the somatic body (Hillis, 2009: loc. 244).

The sign/body is a key site at which the erotic thrust of digital chemsex emerges through playful experimentation. Central to contemporary theories of play are that they provide an autotelic perspective, allowing pleasure to be understood as an end in itself. Thus, the concept of play can foreground more unstable and less regulated modes of engaging. Play is somewhat related to performance, as something unfinished and more than the sum of its parts: an open-ended, creative assemblage of things and ideas. Through the concept of 'resonance', Paasonen explores the affective production of porn as it emerges in social, visual media, pointing 'to the material factors of porn – the fleshy substance of the human body; the texture of images, screens, and signals; the technologies of transmission and the materialities ties of hardware, cables, and modems' (Paasonen, 2011: 258–263). Recently, in *Many Splendored Things* (2018), Paasonen develops this thinking about sex more broadly through play theory. Thinking sex with play, Paasonen argues, creates openings that 'highlight improvisation driven by curiosity, desire for variation and openness towards surprise as things that greatly matter' (Paasonen, 2018: 109). Informed by this theoretical framework, I explore how chemsex might contribute to affective charges that overflow sexual identity categories and transcend notions of chemsex as always already trauma-based or trauma-inducing. Further, as play is concerned with the social and imaginative, yet controlled, assemblage of things and ideas into practice, the category is useful for understanding the *materiality* of the chemsex scene: the chemical materiality of

the drugs used, the media platforms used to take part and the configuration of bodies and objects to which desire may attach.

Extending from this approach, I consider how drugs (in this case mostly crystal meth and GHB), platforms (Google+ and the video conferencing service) and various objects or playthings all frame the scene body's capacities to affect and be affected. Pleasure is thus something that in moving through these infrastructures might change, accumulate or dissipate. Such a conceptualization enables a broader examination of the pleasures of digital chemsex, attending to how affective capacities may exceed and overflow their normative organization. The playful configuration of erotic flows is not only dependent on people's interactions with their own and other bodies, but also on a number of other *things*. Sexual play as a continuous and messy assemblage of mediating technologies has been shown to be part of drugged sex parties among gay men; Race details that 'group play [...] comprises a number of linked activities, including chatting and chilling, filming sex, watching porn, collective browsing, various forms of consumption and the exchange of information about other individuals and encounters' (Race, 2015: 506). Here, Race foregrounds the social and collective production of pleasure as intertwined with numerous non-human entities that may channel, intensify, change and archive pleasure. Such a networked approach allows us a plastic understanding of pleasure, one that operates across and works on technologies and drugged bodies.

Several other studies have interrogated sexual performance as mediated by video. Ray (2019) at the time of writing stands as the only other study on chemsex mediated by video conferencing services. Looking at Zoom, Ray uses a Freudian approach to argue for the surveillance mechanism of Zoom as a continuation of the self-governance installed in gay men during and after the 1980s and 1990s HIV/AIDS crisis in the Global North. He thus examines the platform as a site for historically contingent subjectification processes. My study takes a decidedly different approach by turning to the playful aspects of digital chemsex. Psychoanalysis aside, I do not wish to minimize the role of gay sexual history in the formation of chemsex. However, I believe a closer examination of its affective-material processes is needed.

Mercer's close reading of 'poppers training' (Mercer, 2017), that is, expertly assembled porn clips set to techno music, is more instructive to my study. While not focused on live-streaming, Mercer makes it clear that the videos' aesthetic produces sexual scripts for how to take pleasure in using amyl nitrate in ways that are socially valued. While Mercer is oriented towards the vernacular creativity of the phenomenon, Martins (2019), in their study of the sexually explicit webcam platform Chaturbate, takes a decidedly more affective-material approach. Martins finds that 'orgasmic moments' emerge in the assemblage of a range of objects and infrastructures: the communicative space of the Chaturbate interface, its payment system that allows for dildo vibrations to be sold and the web-connected dildo that allows for such vibrations to be felt. Like Martins' study, the erotics of the digital chemsex event in this article is an ongoing process of producing and accessing

sexual intensities that flow through the consumed drugs, the video conferencing service, the various objects/things/technologies that are played with and the social infrastructures of rule setting and enforcement.

Even more so than Martins, this study highlights the laborious aspects of digital sexual practice. Erotic affective flows do not merely appear but require certain kinds of expertise and work in order to flow properly, and always entail the risk of collapsing or deterritorializing, softening or blocking the erotic affective thrust. Thus, investigating digital chemsex as play requires attention to the generative potential of the orgasmic moment, as well as the ways in which this moment is socially governed and organized. To this end, Drysdale's work on 'scene' is useful (2018, 2019). Writing on the intimacies and affects felt among participants in a series of lesbian drag king events in Sydney, Drysdale suggests that we think of scene as:

> Imbued with forms of intimacy that reference their communitarian dimensions and coalescence of cultural energies that constitute collective identities, scenes also signal their cultural dynamism where expansive sociability fuels ongoing cultural innovation and experimentation. (Drysdale, 2019: 10)

The intensity and coherency of public intimacies live in the movements between feeling oneself and expressions that perform a collective desire. These movements can be stronger or weaker, and the rhythm of these movements can vary, together outlining what public intimacy looks and feels like in the given scene. The pleasures of this digital chemsex scene then are interrogated in analyses of what constitutes the right kinds of pleasure, its experimentations with the capacities of bodies, drugs and digital media, as well as the rules and norms that govern them and make them somewhat coherent.

Methodological approach and ethical concerns

This article is based on a researcher diary (Zimmerman and Wieder, 1977) from a week-long participatory observation in a chemsex session in March 2019. As a historical note, while video conferencing services were well known and widely adopted when I was doing my fieldwork in 2019, the worldwide outbreak of covid-19 and the following national lockdown, resulting in increased remote work and digital socializing, have made services such as Zoom, RingCentral, Microsoft Teams and TeamViewer key infrastructures for social life in 2020.

Based on information from previous interviews, I knew that these chemsex scenes existed, and that Google+ at the time was one way to announce and find active sessions. Identifying a couple of Google+ fora that seemed to do exactly this, I would surveille them for any active links to digital chemsex sessions. After trying several dead links to expired sessions I came upon a post that advertized the session that this article describes.

When sitting in I soon realized that the session was organized not unlike a clubbing or BDSM event, which meant that an organized effort was made to keep it running for a longer time, enabling a continuous flow of change in participants. In light of this I designed my participation to consist of blocks of several hour-long participant observations but spread out in time so as observe different crowds. With this design, I was able to collect fieldnotes covering a high number of participants and scene 'moments'. This would in turn contribute to reaching observational saturation, in that many types of individual and social behaviour and presentation would reoccur and emerge as typical in this particular scene.

Practically I would twice a day, in the mornings and afternoons, log in to the ongoing session. These times were chosen for practical reasons on my part. I would comb through the video streams, moving from one to the next, describing what I saw, what I felt and what seemed to be felt by the other participants. I would pay particular attention to affective intensities, how objects were part of practices and what sense of temporality would be generated in these moments. To get a better sense of the socio-material organization of the scene I would, for one session, systematically go through each stream and categorize user activity, as well as the types of media, drugs and objects for sexual play that were present. The user activity would focus on sexualized behaviour but was adapted to span the wide range of (non) activity that I found, namely: looking, sleeping, masturbating, fucking, putting on a show/performance, anal play, chatting via phone or laptop, DJ'ing, doing something else or not being visually present at all. The categories are not equally knowable, with chat being the category requiring the most interpretation of body language and visual cues, and thus also the most imprecise. As chatting was clearly one of the main activities of the scene, its inclusion in the categorical survey was necessary. I would also log the types of drugs that seemed to be present (crystal meth, GHB and the delivery systems water bottles, pipes and storm lighters), devices (smartphone, laptop, accessories, tablet and projector), the technical setup for communicating and video streaming (overlay, external webcam), sex toys (dildo, cock ring, lube, harness and sling) and lighting design (Christmas lights, lasers and coloured lights). Furthermore, I would try to log all the users that were granted administration rights (called 'hosts'), thus getting a sense of who were central to the scene and what their participation patterns were.

For ethical reasons, the diary is the only way I have collected and processed observational data. To further hinder the ability for leaked research data to identify people, I do not write verbatim transcripts of chats that mention usernames or other identifiers, and in this article I obscure audio-textual elements through the method of 'fabrication' (Markham, 2012). This 'manual' strategy decreases the amount of data I can collect, the accountability of the data's validity and makes visual analysis hard. On the other hand, this process deidentifies the data to such a degree that it can be considered not personal anymore. Even the common chat was not recorded and saved. I find this is an important corrective to the fact that the scene's participants were not informed of my research purposes and thus not able

to withdraw consent. It can be argued that because it could be cleaned of usernames and other potentially identifying information, recording the common chat would be a sustainable way to produce an even richer data set. Not doing this systematically then reflects my wariness of lurking on this public in the first place, which lead to this very risk averse decision.

The fact of the matter is that informing every newcomer of my presence would severely disrupt the flow of shared pleasure-making and feeling. Through trial and error, I would learn that presenting topless aligned me with the vast majority of the participants: I became one of the many topless men whose participation in the visual culture amounts to our still bodies. In this way, I posed as a full participant while retaining relative anonymity by going 'under-the-radar'. This privilege was not just afforded and utilized by me, to the contrary, most users would take on a visually more passive role. Initially, I even opted to leave my cam turned off, reflecting how uncomfortable I was with the thought of visually being part of the video grid. Within feminist ethics of care, interrogating the affects that drive our decisions is crucial for evaluating the ethical consequences of the work they inevitably do in shaping the research encounter (Jørgensen, 2017). If the researcher chooses to remain unseen because they fear emerging as an 'intruder', this should prompt questions of whether one is able to properly protect and care for the observed people and the community at large? Am I the right person to be doing this type of research? On the other hand, does the discomfort felt stem as much from an inflated sense of being a virtuous researcher, as from a sense of care for others?

Finally, it must be noted that the specific configuration of participation combined with my pre-existing knowledge of the field and the social and racial signifiers of my body created a particular situated knowledge of the scene. Because most participants read as gay, cis and male, I fit right in, which eases the research process but is less sensitive to the experience of being unwanted. Mapping the racism and misogyny in the gamified video-chat system Chatroulette, Korn finds that the way it enables anonymity for sexual play also sustains 'untraceable enactments of racism' (Korn, 2017: 99). As a femme woman of colour, Korn's situated knowledge of Chatroulette is marked, among other things, by her assumed sexual availability. In my study, I am also often found to be sexually available. However, because of the gendered and sexual dynamics in the scene, and the way my body is socially marked, this has vastly different knowledge effects; in the gay, male-dominated digital chemsex space, the visual presence of my white, conventionally attractive body does not engender any abusive comments. In fact, it is the subject of several sexual advances, and when I politely deflect, I am not subjected to any abuse. Thus, I can embed myself in a way that requires much less self-care work, but that might obscure the insidious ways in which racism operates on bodies that do not read as white.

Modulating intensity and temporality

In a systematic review over a period of one hour, I found that out of 131 video streams,[2] only 10 had more than one person in the frame, creating few

opportunities for typical forms of sexual play. Further, I found 28 of the participants to be masturbating, and 68 to be merely looking or chatting. Eight were smoking (presumably crystal meth) in more or less performative ways, and only four streams showed people having sex or somehow performing more spectacularly than masturbation. Thus, the chemsex scene gathers high numbers of participants compared to a typical chemsex session and facilitates expansive but relatively low-intensity affective relations, punctuated by displays of bodies using drugs in spectacular ways.

The way in which the scene was not visually dominated by highly intense acts of sexualized drug use might disturb notions of chemsex as a chemical intensification of sexual pleasure. However, turning the question of drug effects on its head, we are able to see why this particular chemical and digital infrastructural combination maintains erotic flows that territorialize or sustain the chemsex event. Critical drug studies scholars have pointed to how drugs affect bodily capacities to feel and act. Pienaar et al. (2020: 5) argue that crystal meth may ‘dilate temporality’, meaning the experience of time and the ability to sustain attention and practice. Similarly, some academic and popular news discourse has addressed the different temporalities of chemsex: how ‘downtime’ can be more prevalent than sex (Hakim, 2018), and how the amount of conventional small talk can make the events teeter on feeling boring (Myers, 2016). Correspondingly, two dominant terms for describing chemsex, the US American and Australian ‘Party’n’Play’ and the British ‘chillout’, gesture towards the temporal variability that chemsex signifies. Low-intensity moments of hanging out are thus not failures of chemsex but a key aspect of drugged sexual encounters.

In my observations, I found a wide variety of drugged intensities, from hyperactive to slow and unfocused. This can partially be explained by the use of GHB which can work as a ‘downer’. Beyond this however, it is important to note that crystal meth’s temporal modulation is not uniform but depends on factors such as the amount consumed and whether it is smoked or injected, with the latter producing a much ‘sharper’ high. Furthermore, if the person has been hanging out for many hours the drug effects are different than if they had just taken their first dose.

From my position as a non-drug-affected participant, this temporal modulation was noticeable in an inverse way. What the drug-affected bodies were able to sustain attention to and take pleasure in were often things that I as a non-affected participant found to be quite boring. To me, most of the time, especially in the beginning when I had little sense of the scene, the grid of video streams were confusing and almost dull to look at. Most videos depicted little more than men staring, masturbating and perhaps some chatting. Many bodies were framed awkwardly, giving off the impression that most attendees paid less attention to their own presentation than to others’.

While the practicalities of gathering people in a physical space is overcome by the use of the video conferencing service, what contributes to deintensification in this digital encounter is that larger scale mediated encounters rely on a relatively small subset of highly engaged users or content producers. At the same time, the

presentation of all videos in a grid, with no computationally assisted ways of producing attention hierarchies according to relevance of activity, creates a visual landscape where audiencing at first glance seems to ‘drown out’ the performative aspect central to the scene’s affective economy. However, the experience that performative affectivity is ‘drowned out’ is not distributed evenly and registered in the same way across all bodies. Crucially, participants who use substances such as crystal meth and GHB change their bodies’ capacities for erotic attunement in ways that make better use of the mediated visual landscape of the digital chemsex scene. As such, the circulation of pleasure in this scene hinges on the use and performance of drug effects, the ability of the onlooker to navigate the video conference software and for users to perform in ways that work in this mediated environment.

Performing drug use

In the scene, I find that the mediated performance of, and access to, pleasure by assumedly drug-affected bodies ranges from expansive, dilated, distributed and disengaged to more intense and uniformly directed. Consider the following examples:

> Mid 20s-looking guy sitting on bed in shorts. He has a heat blower lying next to him, a Bluetooth keyboard on his one leg, and holding a smartphone close to his face, bend over it staring only occasionally looks up at an off-screen screen. His fingers hover over the screen. His head seems to turn much more than is typically needed, why did he just move his eyes? Sometimes he absentmindedly touches his nipple or his crotch.

> A guy in a sling, inserting a sort of dildo/butt plug. Leather chaps, belts and a red cap. Hanging in the sling. Now he uses a keyboard on his belly, over his semi-hard dick. The cam is above him. He is looking straight forward on a screen. Now he takes out his meth(?) pipe and lights it. Now he smokes a bit, and then grabs his keyboard and types.

Reading to me as drug affected, the guy in the latter quote does not seem interested in or able to perform erotically for the camera. He is hanging out and relaxing with erotic pleasure seeming to be a downplayed potential kept alive by gently touching himself. Thus, it can be said that chemsex pleasure ranges from the quiet, personal pleasures of being high and mildly sexually aroused while using media technology to look at and connect with other users, to more intense drugged sexual pleasures performed for the viewing audience. It is the participant’s ability to find pleasure in hanging out that makes them available for those rarer, high-intensity performances that mark successful participation in the scene. As such, it is clear that the visual and temporal culture of the scene depends on the abilities of orienting and sustaining erotic attention to a space in which waiting and hanging out is the primary modus.

While the media materiality and chemical intervention in the body's faculties are able to sustain a temporally dilated sexual orientation, more intense assemblages of pleasure also flow through these infrastructures. As an example of how such intensity is produced, consider this performative moment:

> Two 20-something guys fucking on a bed. Taking a break, smiling, kissing. Now close to the camera with a big book, white powder and a credit card. Both snort it. Close up to the computer screen, navigating. Now one licks the other one's nipple, still closeup. It's a show for us on the line for sure.

The ethnographic encounter above can be understood in relation to crystal meth's ability to produce capacities to quickly shift focus. Race notes that 'crystal would seem to be much better suited to Internet use than other drugs such as ecstasy' (Race, 2009: loc. 3441). Administering drugs performatively for the camera thus both offers its audience an alluring show, while heightening the performer's ability to perform in physical and mediated space at the same time. From this perspective, the media use that punctuates sexual activity does not deintensify or block the flow of pleasure but operates as a point of diffraction sustaining the scene's various modes of socio-sexual play. Such processes of diffraction are intensified by the material multiplicity of the scene, sustaining complex, playful performances like this one:

> Guy with some sort of 'gay sexy' underwear that is mostly straps saying 'suck fuck lick' [...] now I see a syringe in his hand. He holds his arm out ceremoniously, so that we clearly see the syringe hit the skin. He injects, I notice his breath becoming deep and slow. When he is done he composes himself, removes the syringe and starts doing a sexy dance, leaning on the chair, turning his ass towards the camera. He looks over his shoulder towards the cam, probably looking at himself [...], fishes out a phone from under the chair [...] his butt is toward the cam moving side to side seductively, him on his knees leaning on the chair looking at the smartphone screen.

The blue light design, the 'stripper chair', and the chat messages guiding our attention to it all code this video stream as a very deliberate performative space, and the brand of 'sexy underwear' indicates to me that his body is made available for gay visual erotic consumption. Weaving the injection of crystal meth into erotic dance, such administration is not only done for his immediate pleasure, but is an erotic performative gesture offered to the viewers. However, by turning away from the camera and towards the smartphone, the generation of social pleasure is terminated for seemingly more private pleasures found in scrolling and chatting. As these shifting orientations to a range of audiences, immediate or mediated, were recurring in my observations, the scene is marked by performative drug use that is oriented to dispersed and, to the viewer, often invisible audiences. In this way, the intensification of pleasure does not flow through and territorialize a stable set of elements in which the performer and the audience are easily recognizable and

distinguishable. Rather, the chemsex event routinely reassembles at the hand of the people performatively using drugs.

Ceremonial control

As has already been shown, the digital chemsex event is marked by mediated and chemical processes of (dis)intensification. While their configuration is practised at the site of the performing body, I find that these bodily performances operate in relationship to socially negotiated scripts. In literature on play, the presence of scripts, rules and boundaries delineates open-ended, non-committal play from more complex engagements within a gamespace, or, as Huizinga writes: ‘Only when play is a recognized social function – a rite, a ceremony – is it bound up with notions of obligation and duty’ (Huizinga, 1950: 8). Smoking or injecting crystal meth is the principal social function of this scene. The very act of administering drugs can be a source of fetishized pleasure, something I elsewhere find to inform the production and consumption of chemsex porn (Møller, in review). Thus, chemsex pleasure, whether mediated or not, may be bound up with ceremonial practice already.

Scene leaders do emotional labour to animate the participatory culture that gives the scene its affective thrust. The emotional work emerges in the chats, where scene leaders (or ‘hosts’ as the video conferencing service designates them) tend to be very active in providing commentaries that promote sociability and a feeling of mutuality. Their privileged social position is not merely used to control and exclude, but also to give credence to statements like this one:

> We would like to thank each of You Hot/Cool Men, and gorgeous Women of the [event name], for choosing to parTy with us here in the [event name]. We provide the space, but You hot Men and Women make the room what it is, so You’re greatly appreciated.

Here, the authority of the host is used to bestow the participants with a sense of importance, of communal spirit, of creating the scene together. Participants ‘make the room what it is’ by offering their sexiness. Moreover, hosts outline rules, obligations or duties put in place to secure the integrity of the ceremonial aspects of smoking or ‘slamming’ crystal meth:

> Please follow these rules. Cams ON at ALL times, in a well LIT room and you MUST be in the Cams Frame. Need a break BRB holds your spot! Failure to comply to these suggestions will have you removed!!!
> Do not write you will smoke/slam and then do it off camera.

Not being visible, and not making others aware of impending drug use is problematized and outlawed. The duty of performing drug use according to strict scripts should be understood in relationship to the media infrastructure. The scene

standards are put in place to control practice and direct its users' attentions in a way that intensifies the visual culture of sexualized drug use. Such intensification is needed in the conferencing service's cluttered visual landscape. Consequently, in the common chat, participants will write 'clouds on the last page' in order to help direct attention to the video streams that provide affectively saturated focal points for the scene. In other words, because this central erotic mode of the scene is made relatively scarce, it becomes subject to organizational work done by scene leaders. Such minimum standards for presence and engagements make sense because the drug-taking ceremony needs an attentive crowd that can judge its merits and exchange pleasure for social recognition. In other words, the ceremony needs an audience in order to become spectacular, and the minimum standards for presence and engagements bolster this.

Spectacular assemblage, categorical overflow

> A couple is playing with anal beads, one's butt facing the camera, the other guy inserting. He smokes a cigarette and talks to the camera. The talking guy has wide open eyes looking to me like he's high on crystal meth. In the window behind them I see the tv in front of them. It streams porn, a woman sucking a dick. Now they switch, he uses a smartphone, it seems it is duplicating the screen.

> 3 guys on a bed. Blue and pink lights. Wearing masks. A red robber mask and a pup mask, the third out of frame. Dildos on the tables. Starts a fuck train lying on the side. After a while the guy in the back grabs his smartphone from the bed and starts fiddling with it. He's clearly filming, moves the camera around to the penetration of the other guy.

The digital chemsex event is saturated, almost littered, with things: in beds and on bedside tables, meth pipes and storm lighters lay ready, as do bottles that might contain refreshments or water mixed with GHB. The pipe and the syringe are central 'playthings', as their use, whether being smoked or penetrating skin, creates a chemsex spectacle. Other such playthings that I have encountered include: smartphones; hook-up apps; porn sites and videos; external monitors; wireless keyboards; gaming devices; coloured light; strobing light; music; slings; jockstraps; harnesses; leather or rubber underwear; dildos; butt plugs; anal beads; and cock rings. They are all there to be played with: to be held or squeezed, to be smoked and injected, to be swiped, glanced at, typed on, listened to, etc. All these playful encounters contribute to the production of affect that in turn has performative effects that may ripple through the video stream to the viewing audience.

On drug effects, Pienaar et al. (2020: 2) write that they 'are brought into being and changed in their relations with other (human and non-human) phenomena'. Likewise, the effects and roles of these playthings are not stable and inherent to the

objects, but emerging and inseparable from the assemblages and temporalities they take part in. Consider the following ethnographical moment:

> Dark, blue lit room, mid/late thirties white muscly guy, neon yellow cap and shorts, big tattoo on one arm. He has that party laser light on that creates a grid of green dots over his body. Lights go out and the dots are even clearer, moving as he moves his body. He then smokes a meth pipe and blows smoke out, creating a beautiful effect of laser stripes becoming almost solid for a brief moment.

Like Martins' examination of teledildonics on the Chaturbate platform (2019), this event amounts to a spectacle that climaxes in a visually 'orgasmic moment'. Here too, the pleasures are materially distributed, and it is in their skilful configuration that the affective flow intensifies. The assemblage is driven by the skilful use of the body as a canvas, and to follow Paasonen's generative approach to play, we may read the event as a site where his body and its gay coding is present but where identity cannot fully account for the spectacle. Thus, as the smoke is hit by the laser lights, the body is backgrounded for a moment in favour of the spectacular moving patterns of light-and-smoke. This fleeting moment is a spectacular performance of enhancement, but what is enhanced is not entirely clear. Is it the skin-caressing light that enhances the gay erotics of the muscled body? Does the glowing smoke celebrate the rush that crystal meth generates? Or are there other affective-material assemblages I have yet to imagine? The moment indicates that a wealth of playthings, including drugs, are used to configure and enhance more-than-erotic affective possibilities that subsequently become subject to individual and social consumption. This reflects findings from a recent study of LGBTQ people's use of drugs. Some respondents described using medical and illicit drugs to playfully subvert ways of performing gay masculinity that they had adopted but found insufficient (Pienaar et al., 2020). Arguably, the above encounter shows that this can be the case for digital chemsex as well, and that such categorical overflow emerges as invisible workings of drugs that animate more or less spectacular assemblages of bodies, lights and objects.

Conclusion

As already noted, critical health scholars have pointed out how chemsex research mostly approaches the phenomenon from the perspective of health, focusing on 'problematic' aspects that tend to overstate risks and obscure the complicated role that drugs play in people's lives. This article has intervened in this tendency within chemsex studies in two ways: first, by focusing exclusively on what emerges visually and socially in encounters fully mediated by a video conferencing service, it broadens our understanding of where chemsex practice occurs, and what kinds of activities it includes. Second, by applying an affective-material analytical strategy, it surfaces knowledge about the scene's social production that goes beyond the parameters of risk and health.

On a practical level, the digital chemsex scene is made possible by the availability of video conferencing software and the various social media used to announce

sessions. The drugged affects that are produced and shared digitally are not simply pre-existing orientations channelled through passive digital and chemical infrastructures but emerge in infrastructural engagements.

The intensity of the scene encounters is marked both by the affordances of the video conferencing service and the capacities of bodies using crystal meth and GHB. Thus, it gathers high numbers of participants compared to a typical chemsex session and facilitates expansive but relatively low-intensity affective relations, punctuated by displays of bodies using drugs in spectacular ways. To increase intensity and sense of togetherness, a small but very active group produces more or less spectacular performances. This ranges from expansive, dilated, distributed and disengaged to more intense and uniformly directed. Media devices and communication services are integral to this performance. To the participants expansive media use does not seem to deintensify or block the flow of pleasure but rather, operates as a point of diffraction sustaining the scene's various modes of socio-sexual play. Drugged performance is further enabled and encouraged through the ceremonial control of scene hosts. Using both encouragement and punishment they enact behavioural scripts that increase the visibility of bodies and the awareness of drug use. Finally, I find that digital chemsex is saturated with technologies and 'playthings'. These things are more or less performatively assembled, creating spectacle that may read as mostly homoerotic enhancements of male bodies or as enhancements and celebration of drugged pleasure in itself. The very wealth of materials assembled on screen invites the reading that the pleasures that they enhance, while often relating to gay male sex culture, may overflow this category, going beyond its categorical vocabulary of gendered pleasure.

Since this study is based on a single event/session, its findings should not be taken to describe all digital chemsex encounters, let alone chemsex that operates on other material bases, such as in private apartments or sex-on-premise venues. However, while other sessions mediated by the same or similar technologies might centre different things and people, and have other performative focal points and ceremonial qualities, the proposed conceptual attentions should be useful starting points for mapping out the qualities of such local scenes. For example, the use of crystal meth might have different bodily, temporal and social effects in scenes where injection is even more central. Another question beyond the scope of the article is how a chemsex scene participates in a person's drugged sexual culture at large: what role does it play, how is it valued in relationship to 'physical' encounters and are there any overlaps between such a scene and others? Unpacking these questions for different populations would be important for understanding of the role drugged play in contemporary sexual life that goes beyond questions of risk.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work has been made possible by the financial support of the AIDS Foundation Denmark and The Independent Research Fund Denmark.

ORCID iD

Kristian Møller https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0056-3471

Notes

1. To decrease searchability, the service is not identified by name. This is out of consideration for scene participants. Thus, digital chemsex practice depends on finding unmoderated spaces, or 'going under the radar', which the naming of the platform would work against. The ethical implications of the research are considered later in the article.
2. New people would log in during the observation, which explains why the number exceeds the maximum of 100 simultaneous streams.

References

Attwood F (2017) *Sex Media*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Bryant J, Hopwood M, Dowsett GW, et al. (2018) The rush to risk when interrogating the relationship between methamphetamine use and sexual practice among gay and bisexual men. *International Journal of Drug Policy* 55: 242–248.

Campbell JE (2004) *Getting It on Digital. Cyberspace, Gay Male Sexuality, and Embodied Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Drysdale K (2019) *Intimate Investments in Drag King Cultures*. New York: Springer International Publishing.

Drysdale K, Bryant J, Holt M, et al. (2020) Destabilising the 'problem' of chemsex: Diversity in settings, relations and practices revealed in Australian gay and bisexual men's crystal methamphetamine use. *International Journal of Drug Policy* 78: 102697.

Hakim J (2018) The rise of chemsex: Queering collective intimacy in neoliberal London. *Cultural Studies* 33(2): 1–27.

Hillis K (2009) *Digital a Lot of the Time: Ritual, Fetish, Sign*. London/Durham: Duke University Press.

Huizinga J (1950) *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Jørgensen KM (2017) "Grænsekrydser, backstabber og opportunist": Praksisbaseret etik som intimt grænsearbejde. *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning* 25(2–3): 85–96.

Korn JU (2017) Expecting penises in Chatroulette: Race, gender, and sexuality in anonymous digital spaces. *Popular Communication* 15(2): 95–109.

Markham A (2012) Fabrication as ethical practice. *Information, Communication & Society* 15(3): 334–353.

Martins EEB (2019) I'm the operator with my pocket vibrator: Collective intimate relations on Chaturbate. *Social Media + Society* 5(4): 1–10.
Mercer J (2017) Popperbate: video collage, vernacular creativity and the scripting of the gay pornographic body. *Porn Studies* 4(2): 242–256.
Møller K (in review) *Chemsex publics on Pornhub*. European Journal of Cultural Studies.
Myers J (2016) Chemsex is actually 'a bit boring'. Available at: https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/sex-chemsex-chillouts-the-truth (accessed 26 February 2020).
Paasonen S (2011) *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Digital Pornography*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Paasonen S (2018) *Many Splendored Things: Thinking Sex and Play*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Kindle e-book version.
Pienaar K, Murphy DA, Race K, et al. (2020) Drugs as technologies of the self: Enhancement and transformation in LGBTQ cultures. *International Journal of Drug Policy* 78: 1–9.
Race K (2009) *Pleasure Consuming Medicine: The Queer Politics of Drugs*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Race K (2015) Speculative pragmatism and intimate arrangements: Online hook-up devices in gay life. *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 17(4): 496–511.
Race K (2018) *The Gay Science: Intimate Experiments with the Problem of HIV*. London/New York: Routledge.
Ray D (2019) Subject, object, agent, other: Zoom, PNP and crystal methamphetamine. *Somatechnics* 9(2–3): 330–352.
Rubin GS (2012) *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Stuart D (2015) Methmephangee – ChemSex vs recreational drug use: A proposed definition for health workers. Available at: http://i-base.info/htb/28229 (accessed 19 January 2017).
Stuart D, Collins S (2015) Chemsex: Origins of the word, a history of the phenomenon and a respect to the culture [WWW Document]. *Drugs and Alcohol Today*.
Zimmerman DH and Wieder DL (1977) The diary: Diary-interview method. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 5(4): 479–498.

Kristian Møller is a postdoc at the IT University of Copenhagen studying the intersection of media technology and LGBTQ sexuality and culture. His PhD *The Mediatization of Intimacy* details the role of dating/hook-up apps in gay men's everyday lives, intertwining media theory with critical concepts of affect and intimacy. In the methodological strand of his work, he contributes to the development of a digital ethnography and ethics attuned to the many kinds of mobility occurring in, on and around digital media. Current work centres on drug and media use in queer male sex practices typically referred to as 'chemsex'. Through new materialist and assemblage theories, he approaches the complex circulation and modulation of action and affect in the chemsex event, specifically in regards to HIV/AIDS virality, medicine and imaginaries.