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Chemsex experiences: narratives of pleasure

Maitena Milhet, Jalpa Shah, Tim Madesclaire and Laurent Gaissad

Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to understand the dynamics of pleasure related to chemsex from the perspective of French gay men and other men who have sex with men (MSM). Recognising that participants in chemsex are social actors, the authors diverge from the prominent “pathology paradigm” used in public health.*

Design/methodology/approach – *In-depth interviews were conducted with gay men and other MSM engaging in chemsex via snowball sampling (n = 33). The authors explored the definitions of pleasure and the role of stimulants, sexual activity, smartphones and partners in chemsex pleasures.*

Findings – *Chemsex pleasures encompass multiple dimensions that go far beyond bodily pleasures, such as love or romantic relationships, socializing with significant others and sexual discovery through disinhibition. Narratives of pleasure were also, simultaneously, stories of suffering and distress. This dissonance can pose challenges to the participants in chemsex, their entourages and care providers.*

Practical implications – *Given that the focus of care for gay men and other MSM is on risk behaviors, the findings of this paper help nurture discussions where pleasure is integrated into a new, value-neutral framework of care that incorporates chemsex pleasures.*

Originality/value – *This study examined the perspectives of those actually participating in chemsex, allowing gay men and other MSM to relate the entirety of their experiences, in which pleasure is often at the forefront, without restriction.*

Keywords *Pleasure, Dating apps, MSM, Gay men, Chemsex, Party and play, Drug*

Paper type *Research paper*

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Introduction

The early 2000s are known for heralding an influx of innovative technologies and practices, such as online dating websites, hook-up apps, new psychoactive substances (NPS) and private house parties. Parallel to these developments, a marked evolution in sexualised drug use, also known as chemsex, was observed among gay men and other men who have sex with men (MSM). As in other countries, individuals participating in chemsex in France increasingly sought treatment for recurrent infections, drug dependency and related harms (i.e. accidents, overdoses, etc.), as well as for the adverse effects these experiences had on their daily lives (Milhet and Néfau, 2017; Batisse *et al.*, 2016; Batisse *et al.*, 2018; Foureux *et al.*, 2013; Gérôme *et al.*, 2018; L’Yavanc *et al.*, 2014). Within this context, a number of studies found that chemsex was associated with a range of high-risk sexual behaviors (i.e. condomless sex and group sex), acquiring sexually transmitted infections and/or blood-borne viruses (i.e. hepatitis C, syphilis, gonorrhoea) and developing drug dependency (Tomkins *et al.*, 2018; Melendez-Torres *et al.*, 2017; Léobon *et al.*, 2012; Lorente *et al.*, 2012; Hoenigl *et al.*, 2016; The EMIS Network, 2013; Drumright *et al.*, 2006; Glynn *et al.*, 2018; Hammoud *et al.*, 2017; Pufall *et al.*, 2018; Frankis *et al.*, 2018; Gonzalez-Baeza *et al.*, 2018; Heiligenberg *et al.*, 2012). Adverse mental health outcomes have also been identified with respect to chemsex (Prestage *et al.*, 2018).

While these studies speak of individual situations of vulnerability and suffering that can have dire consequences, they only present one view of chemsex practices. One that does

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not explore the complex combination of experiences leading an individual to participate in sexualised drug use, nor the positive or pleasurable moments, current or past, of chemsex. Rooted in a public health paradigm, all of these studies examine chemsex through a lens of social and personal problems that arise from these practices. While this framework is integral to the care of individuals seeking assistance, it treats risk behaviors as stemming from a context of individual fragility classed within a “pathology paradigm,” where behaviors are exclusively risky, and the individual is helpless or irrational. Gradually integrated into the collective viewpoint, this view of chemsex is limited as it ignores an individual’s strengths and theoretically a “positive outlook” of experiences of sex and drugs. As with the predominant rationale for the research on drug use (Moore, 2008), this perspective excludes the pleasures linked to substance use and sex, both key motivators for participating in chemsex.

A growing body of work criticizes the “problem-focused” perspective of sexualized drug use and distances itself from “normative assumptions” that contribute to a pathology-oriented view of individuals who participate in chemsex (Pienaar *et al.*, 2018; Bryant *et al.*, 2018; Race, 2009). Instead it focuses on emerging cultural practices and the psychosocial context that structures sex parties, as well as individuals perspectives and experiences of chemsex (Hickson, 2018; Race, 2015; Westhaver, 2005; Halkitis *et al.*, 2005; Smith and Tasker, 2018; Pollard *et al.*, 2018; Lim *et al.*, 2018; Guadamuz and Boonmongkon, 2018; O’Byrne and Holmes, 2011). Results from studies oriented away from a problem-focused perspective have brought to light that there can in fact be “happy users” in chemsex, and that every use of a product in a sexual context does not lead to the development of an associated harm, as previously observed among gay men and other MSM using crystal meth (Hopwood *et al.*, 2016).

Following the classical teachings of socio-ethnology dedicated to drug use, there is not a “single” use of substances but rather “multiple” uses of drugs by “individuals” (Ahmed *et al.*, 2016). Within this framework, individual experiences are significantly impacted by users’ knowledge and expectations (set), and the context of sex parties (setting) (Zinberg, 1984). Moreover, the consequences linked to each act of chemsex, or even each moment during chemsex, are not the same from person-to-person or for the same individual. To understand chemsex and its associated harms, one must consider the substance(s) used, but also how they were used, the specific sexual context in which they were consumed, and the outlook, attitudes and mindset of the participants during use.

Far from being an impulsive decision made under an altered state of consciousness, chemsex and related risky practices are also related to subjective “good reasons” and rationalizations that do not align with the medical, prevention-oriented reasoning intrinsic to public health. In addition to imparting feelings of pleasure, drugs are also social resources. For example, they can be used as a medium for social or sexual exchange, as well as to foster relations and acceptance by “the group” at a sex party (Bryant *et al.*, 2018).

Even among individuals who adopt risky practices, the motivation to participate in chemsex is generally not a result of being “conditioned” by their personal fragility. Nor is it an impulsive decision that ignores the associated consequences. Instead, the joyful dimension of chemsex can carry a pivotal appeal for participants. For some individuals, risk taking can be part of a game that they play, while simultaneously putting in place strategies that “measure the risks taken” to avoid “falling into practices” that they cannot condone (O’Byrne and Holmes, 2011).

While approaches that diverge from the prominent public health model provide a rich array of findings, the rarity of literature focused on the subjective rationales and the pleasures of sexualized drug use continues to limit our understanding of individual chemsex practices. This paper aims to explore chemsex from a “pleasurable” frame of reference among gay men and other MSM in France. Specifically, we hope to expand our understanding of the dynamics of pleasure in the individual experience of chemsex, recognizing that participants are social actors with their own reasoning and thoughts.

Methodology

The data used for this study come from in-depth interviews conducted with 33 gay men and other MSM engaging in chemsex aged 22–61 years. Participants were recruited across France using snowball sampling via key informants. Factors such as age, socioeconomic status, urban vs rural residence, current or former participant in chemsex, living with HIV or not, and being in contact with a care provider or not, contributed to the selection of a diverse array of profiles (see Table I).

On average, interviews lasted 90 min and were digitally recorded with the consent of participants. These were then transcribed verbatim, anonymized (using pseudonyms) and examined through content analysis. Using a comprehensive sociological approach that focuses on the view of the individual, we explored the definitions of pleasure as well as the role of stimulants, sexual activity, smartphones and partners within the context of chemsex.

Results

Incommunicable bodily pleasures

While our goal is to recount the pleasures associated with chemsex among gay men and other MSM, we must cover the challenges underlying this task. In the simplest of terms, chemsex is the combined use of drugs and sex and the fusion of two sources of pleasure. At the heart of the matter, both drugs and sex are activities driven at least partly by the pursuit of pleasure. And yet there is a silence surrounding the bodily pleasures linked to these experiences. A silence that is rooted in the lack of words to express these pleasures because they are a set of sensations experienced by the physical body. The narratives captured through this study show that participants struggled to provide concrete explanations or descriptions of chemsex pleasures. They alluded to pleasures using short, sweeping statements that evoke the “wow” factor of their experience, but hardly expand on details regarding the pleasure that they felt (“It does something,” “You’re hot, it makes you hot,” “I had fun with it”).

Some participants seemed to find it difficult to provide details about the pleasures they experienced through drugs, while others used brief metaphors. For instance, when asked about what they felt when using cathinones such as 3MMC, 4MEC or mephedrone, Tristan, David and Julien spoke of distinct sensations of their experience with these NPS, focusing on warmth, heat or greediness:

For me it’s a heat in my mouth and in my whole body. Above all, I was uninhibited. I really can’t explain it more than that. (Tristan, 53 years)

Table I Participant profiles at the time of the interview

Criteria	Interviewee profiles (n = 33)			
Age	6 participants (22–28)	12 (31–39)	8 (40–49)	7 (50–61)
Education/professional sector	12 participants (masters, doctoral and post-doctoral degrees): researcher, programmer, architect, working in commercial sale, finance, or unemployed			
	21 participants (middle school or college diplomas, undergraduate degree): bartender, mason, costume designer, nurse’s assistant, nurse, social educator, catering sector, fine arts			
Chemsex	21 active participants	7 former participants (having stopped a few months ago)	5 former participants (having stopped 2–5 years ago)	
Length of engagement in chemsex	9 participants (8 months to 2 years)	12 (3–6 years)	7 (7–8 years)	5 (> 10 years)
Inject during chemsex	15 participants			
Not in contact with a care provider for chemsex problems	17 participants			
HIV Status	17 participants living with HIV			

These drugs burn you up from the inside, they ratchet your desire. (David, 53)

Bliss (mephedrone) puts me in such a state of greediness that it's irrelevant if I'm not erect. (Julien, 35)

At the same time, these narratives were far more nuanced than they appear at first glance. Upon analysis, it quickly became clear that inexpressible bodily pleasure(s) play a decisive role in chemsex experiences, one that cannot be ignored. Through the interviews we also learned that bodily pleasures were not the only pleasure that can be derived from sexualized drug use. Rather, participants associated at least three additional dimensions of pleasure with their chemsex experiences.

Toward love and romantic relationships

Part of what makes chemsex pleasurable is that it can facilitate access to the intense feelings of intimacy and connection with another individual. In that moment, a person can become a "special someone," temporarily or more permanently.

A number of respondents spoke feelingly about having met someone special during chemsex, or of a particularly cherished interaction. Despite the group context of chemsex, here interviewees were referring to one person that they had met during a sex party, and how, with this individual, chemsex became a romantic moment or gave them hope for a romantic relationship:

I felt like I really gave myself to him. That the experience, but also my participation in it was a gift that I presented to him, and vice versa [...]. In that moment, I saw him and he was even more beautiful to me, we kissed, and well, there was something. (Flynn, 37)

Having him in my arms, suddenly I was comforted and I felt so light. It was a feeling of complete well-being. He was cute, and thoughtful. I was too. We pleased each other and we only wanted the best for one another. It was a special moment [...] We've been seeing each other occasionally since [...]. It could become more serious, who knows. (John, 25)

In some cases, chemsex is about more than a romantic exchange, and can represent an act of love driven by deep feelings for another individual. For example, Aiden only takes drugs during sex to be on the same level as his live-in partner who cannot enjoy sex without them. This is something that Aiden does for his partner when he "makes love" to him. Outside of this relationship, he only has sober sex:

I don't take them except when I'm with Nicholas because he can't fuck without drugs. With everyone else I don't take chems. Other guys at sex parties take them, I have a fuck buddy who takes chems. He takes them, but I don't [...]. I don't need drugs to get excited. For me, my sexual fantasies are enough. (Aiden, 52)

When individuals engage in chemsex because they are looking for love and romance, the use of drugs seems to help create a sense of connection with others, be it physical or spiritual:

The thing is, it's immediate. It's "ahhhh." You just want to be pressed up against someone. It heightens all of your senses, and it makes you want to be cuddled. You want to be with someone [...] (Nabil, 35)

If you want to lose your inhibitions, you have to take GHB. If you just want more touching, it's MDMA. It makes you really loving, [...]. it's orgasmic! I'm not exaggerating, it's really remarkable. It's a multiplier of [...] (Hyppolyte, 31 ans).

Being in good company

Sex parties can also be pleasurable because they are moments of socialization and communal enjoyment that are facilitated by being in a welcoming space or, through more intense experiences, such as the formation of transient bonds with a diverse group of individuals.

For some participants, chemsex is an opportunity to interact with individuals from an array of diverse social classes who would not otherwise meet in a group setting. During chemsex, each of

these seemingly incompatible individuals temporarily becomes a “significant other” for the members of the group, and vice versa.

While recounting his experiences of chemsex, Vassili focused on the pleasure he derives from the social context of a well-organized sex party where everyone is at ease. As an organizer, he described the pleasure of coordinating the minutia of the event and his continued investment in this role throughout the actual get together:

I mostly go to sex parties for the social side of things. When I organize sex parties or when I go to them, I'm not really someone who fucks a lot. But I like the social network I access through it, I also like taking chems. (Vassili, 32)

Similarly, Jonas explained that an important dimension of what he enjoys through chemsex is the unique social experience of the “exchange.” Sometimes, it is exhilarating to participate in this social group as an observer, without necessarily engaging in sexual intercourse. Jonas appreciates simply “watching” a diverse group of people interacting outside their day-to-day lives and the “beauty” of seeing people of different social statuses, ages and ethnicities blending together:

Honestly, you felt like there was a business man with a young university student and also a waiter, and it was such a mix. Black guys, Arab guys, white guys like me, and honestly all I could think was “Wow, this is just so beautiful.” (Jonas, 25)

Body and soul

Respondents found that completely letting one's body go and feeling physical sensations that they had not previously felt was also synonymous with pleasure. This can be extremely exciting because it allows participants to enhance their sexual exploration, while also partaking in adventurous experiences. For example, participants may simply feel comfortable engaging in activities that they had not previously imagined doing, such as group sex and fist fucking. In a more complex sense, this can also involve losing all physical inhibitions so that one's body feels sexual exchanges more deeply. Ultimately, this experience consists of letting the physical body's pleasures guide one's actions in the excitement of the moment:

Honestly, it helped me completely lose control. Chems let me live out my hottest fantasies that were a little “Dom,” especially with fisting, and things like that. (Frank, 37)

I think that I do the same things with and without chems, but it's the act of letting go that isn't the same. The drugs really help me completely let go and be in a really intense exchange, it's animalistic [...] I lose my inhibitions so intensely. Intensity is the right word to describe it. (Christopher, 61)

Another form of losing inhibition through chemsex is by freely expressing one's sexual identity, which can also deepen the pleasure felt during new experiences. For instance, Tom explained that doing drugs during sexual interactions, especially injecting, helped him discover his “sexual liberation.” When Tom came out to his parents, his father had kicked him out of their house saying “Either stop being gay or I'll kill you.” Tom discovered chemsex when he was only 18, a particularly challenging and painful time in his life when his sexual identity was still “stifled.” “I had a really hard time in high school because I was gay. Actually I was shunned. [Using drugs during sex helped me] release a pressure valve that was waiting to explode [...]. Slamming was the start of my sexual liberation” (Tom, 22).

The ambiguity of pleasure [...]

Each of the pleasurable dimensions sought through chemsex can also have a “dark side,” ranging from sexual frustration to harmful and traumatic experiences. Invited to talk about his best and worst chemsex experiences, Etienne succinctly expresses the transition between the two when he said, “What's crazy is that each time the best chemsex experience turns into the worst” (Etienne, 37).

[...] *the elusive orgasm*. Sometimes there are no sexual exchanges during a sex party due to the use of certain drugs and/or apps. Some drugs stimulate consumers to such an

extent that they cannot ejaculate. Their sex drive becomes insatiable, resulting in a prolonged feeling of sexual and mental frustration that can go on for hours. Physically, this can be very challenging. It can also be extremely difficult to talk about. For example, Jason was embarrassed to recount his experience of sexual insatiability following a night at a sex party:

They're dangerous drugs [...] I'm embarrassed to say it but they turn you into a nymphomaniac. I didn't sleep at all last night, I went to sex parties and I couldn't climax. I still want sex now and I'm tired, but I know that I'll definitely have sex again before I sleep. I can't think of anything else until I come. (Jason, 43)

You always want it, regardless of whether you're the top or the bottom nothing satisfies you. It's crazy! You can fuck for hours and hours and you will still want to fuck after, or you're going to want to be fucked all the time and you always want more. You don't have any limits. (Aiden, 52)

[...] *selfish pleasure*. Sometimes, respondents referred to chemsex experiences that were driven purely by what they called "consumerism," where one is no longer interacting with another individual, but rather a part of his body. Here, the body is seen as serviceable parts that are to be used individually. In such cases, participants criticized chemsex for lacking human connection as well as mutual enjoyment and stressed that this makes it a potentially dangerous practice.

Reflections surrounding selfish pleasure were especially ambiguous. While participants denounced the entirely selfish aspect of pursuing pleasure through an experience that no longer involved "human" interaction, they simultaneously contributed to it by being active participants:

Yes it's definitely consumerism. I criticize this side of chemsex after the party, but at the same time I take advantage of it [...] Even if I enjoy surfing on hook-up Apps because it's nice to find a guy in 30 min when you want to fuck, I still think that it's pathetic because having sex becomes completely dehumanized. And so, it can lead to other forms of consumerism, like taking drugs. (Christopher, 61)

Some respondents shared that they take specific combinations and doses of drugs because they smooth the way for more pleasure. In cases where they surpass their personal limits, these same drugs and mixes are seen as having redirected shared pleasures toward a more negative experience of consumerism:

Every time I go to a sex party that didn't go well or where I didn't enjoy the sex, it's usually because of taking too much drugs. We lose our sexuality and our moment of pleasure. Instead we embark on an experience driven by consumerism: consuming guys, consuming drugs, it's really about quantity over quality. (George, 25)

This "absence of humanity" can become so extreme that some respondents recount feeling a lack of respect and even experiencing sexual assault:

I fell asleep and when I woke up it was because a guy was fisting me and it hurt [...] I never said he could do that to me! (Alban, 36)

[...] *in seclusion*. Instead of socializing, which can be at the heart of chemsex pleasures, participants can also find themselves in a situation where there are no interactions at a sex party. Preoccupied with their own cell phones, each participant searches for new people to invite instead of communicating or having sex with the guys who are already there. Here, the same apps that facilitate sexualized drug use and meet ups can become a cause for isolation:

I looked around and I saw the saddest thing: everyone was on their phones, on Grinder, and on Scruff, and no one was talking. They were all rubbing their own cocks, desperately trying to get erect. (Nabil, 35)

I thought to myself "This is really weird, why are they all on their phones when there are enough cocks and asses right here." (Jonas, 25)

Sometimes, drugs and not apps act as an obstacle to sexual interactions due to the subtle shift from substance use to abuse. In this case, drug dependency and/or abuse ruptures

contact with others and inhibits relationships because the quest for pleasure from drug(s) obscures all other forms of pleasure. In some cases, users gradually close themselves off from those around them as they become involved in a unique relationship with a specific substance(s) and/or the gesture of injecting. This solitary search for pleasure is often a very painful experience:

I slammed at home by myself just to get high, and I jerked off for hours. It was incredible [...] At the end it wasn't really even about sex anymore, it was all about chasing an insatiable high. (Jeremy, 37)

Discussion

A complex array of pleasures

The role of sexual pleasure as a central motivation for participating in chemsex is well described in the current literature through a focus on maximizing corporeal pleasures (Halkitis *et al.*, 2005; Weatherburn *et al.*, 2017; Gaissad, 2013). By placing the notion of pleasure at the heart of our analysis, our findings reinforce these results while also providing a deeper understanding of existing research. The findings from the present study suggest that the pleasures tied to chemsex are simultaneously plural, dynamic and ambiguous. Participants' narratives go far beyond bodily pleasures, encompassing other equally important dimensions of pleasure, and the role that drugs play in accessing and/or inhibiting pleasure. They also stress the presence of tension(s) between these dimensions.

For some gay men and other MSM, the pleasures related to chemsex are entangled with the experience of love or a romantic relationship, be it with one's live-in partner or with a "fuck buddy" who, momentarily, becomes "a special person" (Amaro, 2016). In these situations, neither the enjoyment of taking drugs nor participating in sexual intercourse was at the forefront of narratives. Instead, chemsex appeared to be a love story in which excitement was fueled by the deep feelings of affection for another. In narratives where love was a pleasure associated with chemsex, individuals were most concerned with maintaining and intensifying feelings of mutual connection, be it through shared risky behaviors or caring attention.

Another key dimension of chemsex pleasure covered by participants was socializing with a group of individuals who temporarily provide a sense of belonging to a "community" or a "tribe." Doing drugs at a sex party outside the framework of one's everyday life was seen as a transient experience that, in its temporality, facilitated a unique series of connections and erotic feelings. Melendez-Torres aptly summarizes this as a "littoral space of performance" associated with unusual sensory experiences, where the "dissolution of social divisions between persons forms a socially homogeneous group sharing strong affective bonds" (Melendez-Torres and Bonell, 2017).

Disinhibition is also a central dimension of the pleasures of chemsex that is linked to self-expression and identity development via the act of letting oneself go. While providing new bodily pleasures, chemsex can also deepen one's sense of "belonging" and contribute to defining oneself as a gay man (Smith and Tasker, 2018). Here, sexual disinhibition is not necessarily associated with "extreme" and "hard" sexual practices. For some gay men and other MSM, disinhibition means the pleasure of relieving the tension and emotional distress created by internalized homophobia. In turn, this allows them to access the pleasures of sexual intimacy that were previously impeded by their inability to let go and truly experience their sexual identity.

This array of pleasures, specifically romantic love, socializing within a littoral space and disinhibition, is not experienced in equal parts by every chemsex participant. Some only experience one of these four dimensions of pleasure, while others feel varying combinations of the different dimensions. Nor is each chemsex experience necessarily static in its combination of dimensions. Instead, experiences tend to be fluid from moment to moment, and can also be ambiguous, leading to negative experiences of frustration and trauma.

Handling dissonant pleasures

The narratives of pleasure shared by most participants were also, simultaneously, stories of suffering and distress. This dissonance within each pleasurable dimension of chemsex can pose considerable challenges to gay men and other MSM, their entourages and care providers.

With respect to sexual and corporeal experiences, chemsex embraces a prism of pleasures ranging from complete fulfillment to traumas such as drug dependency and sexual violence. Emotionally, chemsex can involve joyful as well as frustrating and/or painful relationships. Interactions through sexualized drug use can also be contradictory, oscillating between highly collective and highly solitary (Hakim, 2018). While chemsex may help gay men and other MSM achieve self-expression, it can also increase the internal tensions linked to competing identities. Indeed, through sexualised drug use, participants are able to overcome inhibitions to sexual fulfillment and express a part of themselves that they had learned to suppress in the face of homophobia in an effort to protect themselves from suffering. For some, accepting this identity that they have been forced to reject can be difficult and creating a new equilibrium takes times.

The contradictions rooted in the pleasures of chemsex can make participants who are not “happy users” feel disoriented, alone, nervous and/or distressed. What meaning should you attach to such an ambivalent experience? How do you talk about a complex, contradictory and difficult to understand experience with an “outsider”? How does decision making operate when you need to respond to difficulties during chemsex? How do you construct a balance between pleasures experienced and the fear of suffering and/or the pressure to maintain your sex drive? These are all possible questions that chemsex participants may directly and/or indirectly pose.

The false promise of drugs and technology

Drugs and hook-up devices play a role in the shift in pleasure from a sought-after experience to one that is unintended or problematic. While participants often take drugs during chemsex so that they can feel more physical pleasure, they can also have perverse effects, such as the inability to climax, the failure to engage sexually with others despite being surrounded by numerous available partners, and staying in seclusion without any sex due to drug dependency.

For some gay men and other MSM, the pleasure of drugs progressively takes precedence over the pleasures of chemsex. This drift toward drug dependency is often related to pain and torment. Sometimes, apps can also contribute to the experiences of loneliness instead of engagement in relationships and interactions with others. In such cases, the very substances and tools used to search for pleasure become the obstacle to attaining it.

Here, gay men and other MSM who are not familiar with drug use may benefit from mastering harm reduction rules practices. For those who are familiar with harm reduction, the challenge is to not exceed one’s limits regarding acceptable or unacceptable risk behaviors in the context of a sex party. Making a good use of apps when there are no rules for “properly using” these devices can pose a key challenge for participant in chemsex.

Facing the “great unmentionable”

The lack of language to express bodily pleasures is a major obstacle to understanding a primary component of chemsex (Westhaver, 2005). The pleasure derived from sexual relations, especially between men, and the pleasure of taking drugs are shrouded in silence because they are widely seen as taboo subjects. Not surprisingly, individuals participating in chemsex find themselves facing multiple stigmas. Namely, struggling to live with the contradiction of the positive bodily pleasures they experience through chemsex within a mainstream culture that condemns drug use and stigmatizes sex between men.

When stigmas against homosexuality and taking drugs are internalized, chemsex creates considerable stress for participants. Facing the great unmentionable involves

facing the perceptions of others concerning socially rejected behaviors, but also dealing with one's own internalized homophobia and/or conflicting views about one's sexualised drug use practices.

When they meet with health workers or specialists, individuals engaging in chemsex must face another dimension of difficulty. How can they talk about the bodily pleasures of chemsex when the words to describe these experiences do not exist, and even if they did, they would not be understood by a non-practicer (Pennant *et al.*, 2009)?

These findings emphasize key dimensions at stake for dialogue with individuals involved in chemsex that are especially pertinent for "outsiders" and professionals seeking to assist gay men and other MSM. Listening to first-hand accounts of the plurality and depth of experiences accessed through positive chemsex encounters, pleasure clearly holds a central place in the perceptions of chemsex. It is crucial to recognize that gay men and other MSM who choose to engage in high-risk practices during chemsex do so because the associated gains outweigh the risks taken. Thus, pleasure remains at the core of motivations to participate in risky behaviors through chemsex. Whether it is by making love, socializing in a welcoming environment, as opposed to in a world that remains hostile toward homosexuality and/or being able to lift off a weight that has been crippling one's identity and sexual fulfillment, these pleasures surpass the associated health risks for some gay men and other MSM, or at some time during their chemsex journey.

Study limitations

We would like to stress that the results from a qualitative study neither aim to nor explain the experiences of all gay men and other MSM using drugs in a sexual context. While the sampling process encompassed diverse user profiles and life trajectories, ultimately broadening the pleasurable experiences observed, they are not representative of all chemsex participants.

Further research is needed to explore how individuals involved in chemsex handle the ambivalence of experiences of pleasures, and to what extent the choices they make during and surrounding chemsex influence their trajectory of sexualized drug use. To improve the dialogue between gay men and other MSM and professionals, these results should also consider the way professionals understand and/or see themselves in relation to chemsex pleasures.

Conclusion

By exploring chemsex through the lens of narratives of pleasures, our goal was to correct a research imbalance that focuses on the dangers associated with individual practices. Despite the integral role of pleasure in chemsex, made apparent through dialogue with gay men and other MSM, the notion of pleasure is wholly absent from the problem-focused approach to chemsex that is integral to public health. Although it is perfectly rational for public health professionals to focus on social and personal problems, the element of pleasure must not be excluded in an individual's trajectory of sexualised drug use. In fact, welcoming and accepting the pleasures of chemsex are preliminary conditions to developing a dialogue with gay men and other MSM who engage in sexualised drug use.

Given the conflicting dimensions of chemsex experiences identified through the present narrative analysis, it is fair to hypothesize that some participants seek assistance during their chemsex trajectory, while others who engage in equivalent or more harmful risky behaviors and facing equivalent or elevated suffering may not seek assistance. Our findings emphasize the need to promote a value-neutral approach to chemsex that is free of associated, negative judgments to make access to care appealing and/or accessible to more gay men and other MSM. We conclude that a comprehensive approach to the individual experience is necessary to address its inherent complexity, but also to develop approaches that account for the fine line between stigma and care.

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