

Pleasure + safety: Engaging communities to define strategies that promote inclusive, empathetic, and less stigmatizing chemsex-related awareness-raising campaigns in Yangon, Myanmar.

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Background

- Chemsex is increasingly popular in Myanmar, driven by easier access to party drugs and other substances and social pressure to engage in partying, excitement-seeking, and drug use to enhance sexual experiences.
- Those who engage in chemsex, especially youth, are reluctant to discuss sexuality and drug use due to stigma, further limiting awareness-raising of self-care and available services (sexual and mental health, HIV, harm reduction, post-violence care) to safely engage in chemsex.
- PATH, through the USAID-funded HIV/TB Agency, Information, and Services Activity, led an assessment to identify and recommend strategies to ensure critical messaging reach people who are interested or engage in chemsex.

Methodology

Our assessment, conducted in Yangon, comprised:



Four focus group discussions with 24 peer educators and key population community members from gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (gbMSM), transgender women (TGW), female sex workers (FSW), and people who use drugs (PWUD).



Eight key informant interviews with influencers, representatives of media outlets, as well as service providers and communication focal points from HIV implementing partners.

Qualitative discussion/interview information was manually coded and analyzed to extract themes.

Lessons Learned

Feedback gathered during our assessment noted that existing campaigns had limited impact due to intense stigma; lack-of-responsiveness to needs of people engaging in chemsex; and failure to consider motivations for engagement.

Our assessment highlighted inclusive messaging needs to cover the following three target audience categories for sub-segmentation.

- **People who intentionally engage in chemsex** (those facing chemsex-related negative experiences and those practicing chemsex safely with a functional lifestyle)
- **People interested in trying chemsex** (“on their bucket list”)
- **People not interested in Chemsex**

Figure 1 further characterizes people who engage in chemsex in Yangon, and Figure 2 summarizes motivations for engaging in chemsex.

Figure 1: Characteristics of people who engage in chemsex in Yangon.

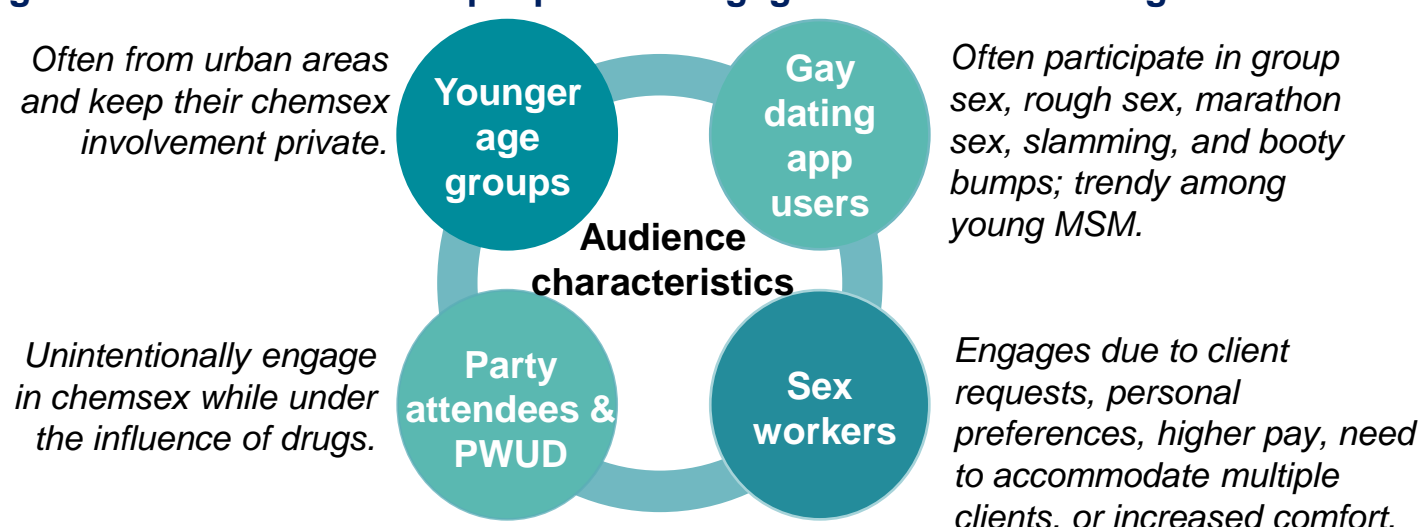
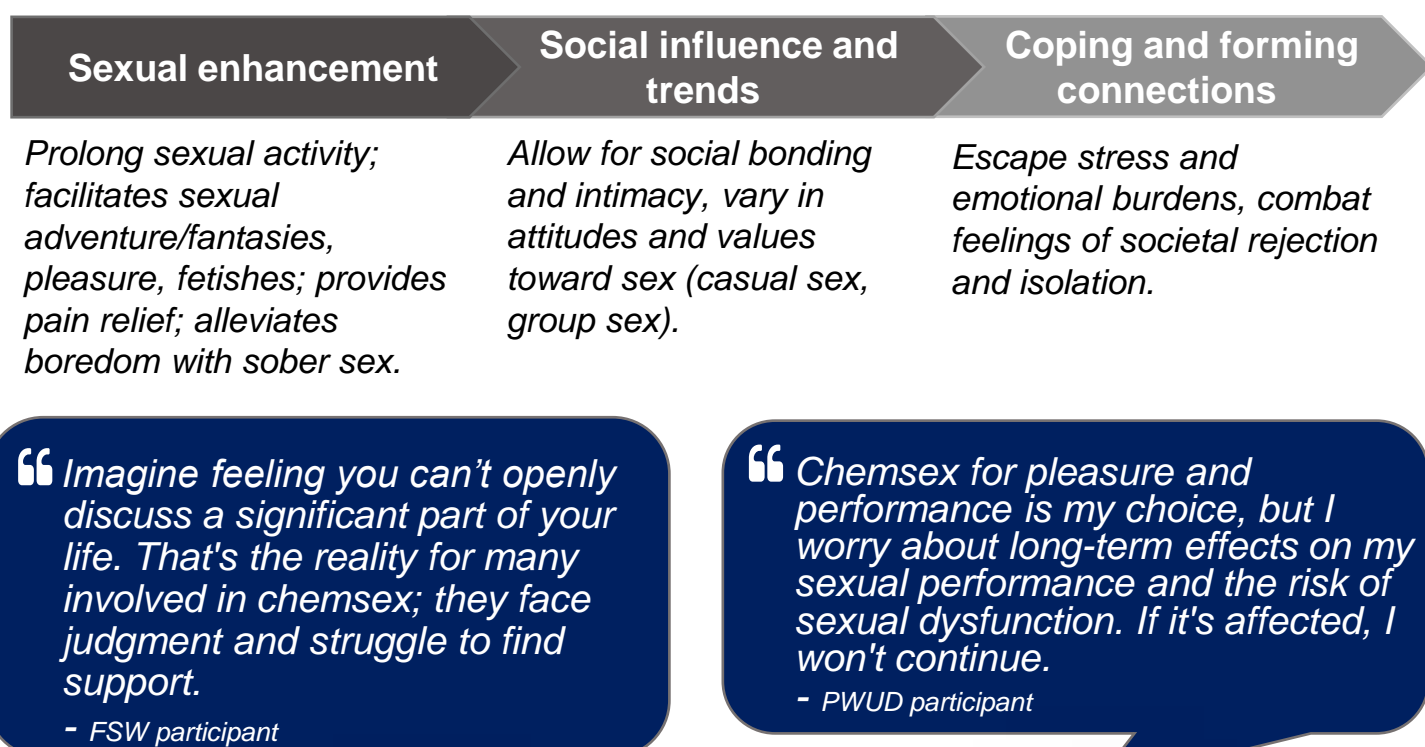


Figure 2: Motivation for chemsex.



To effectively provide services or messages on this sensitive and highly stigmatized topic, it is crucial to offer diverse options that allow individuals to engage with the content in ways that feel safe and comfortable. Figure 3 outlines messaging strategies, recommended content, and communication channel preferences to better curate awareness-raising to audience needs while building trust, eliciting strong engagement, and addressing intra/inter/self-stigma.

Figure 3: Recommended messaging approach, content and channels.

Messaging approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Promote relatability Through personal testimonies of those with lived experiences of engaging with chemsex; using social media trends and community slang. □ Foster open dialogue on chemsex Through tailored group events and peer-led counseling sessions. □ Allay fears of stigma Emphasize confidentiality and support for healthy and safe while engaging in chemsex.
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Fun, sex-positive, non-judgmental, and inclusive approach Cover pros and cons of chemsex, drawing on individual motivations instead of fear-based, punitive messaging on negative consequences. □ Promotion of self-care and available services to comprehensively address health and well-being needs Enhance knowledge and soft skills to maintain a healthy body and mind, including sexual, harm reduction, and mental health care; drug literacy; overdose and emergency management; and obtaining voluntary consent and establishing respectful boundaries. □ Alternative messaging using softer tone to mitigate stigma Emphasize indirect references to chemsex that are culturally sensitive and focus on how sex and drug use affect personal concerns like appearance, relationships, and work/life balance, rather than just health issues and HIV.
Communication channels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Individual peer-to-peer sessions □ Anonymous channels (secret online chats, hotlines) □ Tailored information materials (self-assessment driven care plans, self-help/self-care digital tools) □ Trusted community leaders/influencers Online group administrators, gatekeepers, boy love writers, health experts, and peer educators to create safe environment □ Recovery group for individuals engaging in chemsex

“In our community, we really look out for each other by sharing tips and advice. When users care for one another, we can help reduce harm at a personal level. It’s all about supporting safer chemsex practices and sticking to some ground rules together—it’s a form of self-care for us too!”
- MSM peer educator

“We need more than just info; we need practical tips on getting consent, setting boundaries, and dealing with emergencies to keep things safe and fun.”
- TGW participant

Conclusions and next steps

Our assessment highlighted the importance of re-framing existing awareness-raising campaigns in Myanmar to ensure that individuals engaging in chemsex are informed of safe practices and available services.