

Chemsex among young men who have sex with men in Thailand: Qualitative findings exploring self-perceived pleasures and harms

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Background

- Drug use to enhance sexual activity (chemsex) is associated with health, social, economic, legal and other impacts on young men who have sex with men (MSM).
- A comprehensive understanding of these impacts is pivotal for appropriate harm reduction interventions among young MSM in Thailand; however, little is known about the self-perceived effects of chemsex.
- This cross-sectional analysis under the Comprehensive Assessment in a Longitudinal Study on Young Men who have sex with men Attracted to ChemseX (CLYMAX), aims to assess self-perceived pleasures and harms of chemsex to better tailor healthcare services.

Methods

- Forty MSM engaged in chemsex, aged 16-35, were recruited from the Institute of HIV Research and Innovation (IHRI), Thailand via purposive sampling.
- Interviews were conducted in person, recorded, and transcribed verbatim. A codebook was developed integrating a priori themes from the interview guide and emergent themes identified from transcripts.
- Analyses were conducted using Dedoose software.

Conclusions

- Our findings delineate multifaceted impacts of chemsex among young MSM in Thailand, indicating its complex role in their lives that warrants a nuanced understanding in health interventions.
- Adopting a dual perspective is essential for healthcare professionals in crafting people-centered, pleasure-integrated, comprehensive chemsex care strategies that aim to alleviate harms associated with chemsex, while preserving or substituting the positive experiences of chemsex engagement. Such approaches are essential for enhancing clinical care and effectively guiding public health policies.

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Results

Pleasures

- Heightened sexual pleasure
- Increased social engagement
- Increased sense of belonging within their community



25 years, Employee at a private company

Emotionally, lately, I feel I can't be alone. I have to call friends or dine with them. If I don't indulge in chemsex, my mood becomes unstable, and I experience anxiety, but only during sex.

Harms

Physical Harms:

- Soreness or redness at the injection site and irritation of the upper respiratory tract mucosa due to the chemicals used or their method of administration.
- Non-consensual sex or sexual violence and risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs).



27 years, Freelancer

The first time I used drugs, it was under coercion. I was 18 years old and had just gotten a boyfriend who forced me to inhale poppers. I felt strange and dizzy, and I remember feeling terrible, not happy at all because it wasn't voluntary. I, being the passive partner, was also subjected to physical abuse.

Psychological Impacts:

- Severe psychological effects like anxiety, depression, and even suicidal thoughts.



28 years, Entrepreneur

I feel that my emotions have become more intense and irritable, hotter than usual, and I can't stay calm about certain things. Normally, I am not like this; I am a calm person.

Socio-economic Consequences:

- Disrupt professional and personal relationships, potentially leading to job loss and financial instability.



33 years, Freelancer

I was once fired from a job at an electricity company because someone told my boss about my drug use. It affected my finances at that time, and I had to struggle a lot.

Legal Risks:

- Fear of legal repercussions, including arrest.
- Skepticism towards law enforcement fosters paranoia and hinders individuals from seeking necessary medical care for drug-related issues within a community wary of anti-drug measures.



33 years, Entrepreneur

I am afraid of being caught because I know it's illegal and need to be cautious. I don't want to be caught.