

Critical chemsex studies: Interrogating cultures of sexualized drug use beyond the risk paradigm

Sexualities

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sex**Kristian Møller** 

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Abstract

This article proposes and outlines a critical approach to the study of chemsex. The vast majority of chemsex research takes place within the broad field of health, particularly LGBTQ+ health, which ultimately frames such work using a paradigm of risk. This article follows previous research that calls attention to the limitations of this perspective, and suggests the value in formalising more generative, explorative and critical approaches to the phenomenon. Based on this previous scholarship and the contributions to the special issue, we propose that ‘critical chemsex studies’ operates along three axes: one working within public health that attempts to move beyond the risk paradigm; another which attempts to understand its cultural dimensions as it interrogates the discursive, socio-political, technological and economic landscapes in which chemsex has materialised, and finally; a third centering pleasure and its organisation of gay identity, intimacy, and sociability. Finally, we look to the future of critical chemsex studies, calling for more diverse works on national and regional differences in chemsex culture, as well as how the framework can be adapted in order to leverage its capacities for the women, trans and non-binary people who are under-represented in the current literature.

Keywords

Chemsex, pleasure, gay men, homonormativity, neoliberalism

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The term ‘chemsex’ was coined relatively recently by professionals operating within the UK’s National Health Service as a device to describe and respond to individual and social harms experienced by some gay male users of the drugs crystal methamphetamine, cathinones like mephedrone, and GHB/GBL (Stuart, 2019: 3). While these drugs are used by many different people in different social settings, Stuart argues that it is the drugs’ interaction with the ‘uniqueness of gay sex and gay culture’ (2019: 3) that produces its particular effects. Such uniqueness, he contends, emerges from the trauma and stigma originating in the AIDS crisis, different forms of societal and institutional homophobia, and the gay tribal ‘rejection culture’ of hook-up apps (2019: 4). Others have argued that contemporary gay life is marked by the effects of ‘adverse childhood events’ and particular forms of ‘loneliness and emptiness’ (Platteau et al., 2019: 51). While this literature allows that chemsex can be a site of joy and pleasure, by foregrounding stigma, trauma and abuse, most chemsex research has unsurprisingly focused on what is being labelled ‘problematic use’ (Platteau et al., 2019: 51).

Sexualized drug use of course preceded the coinage of the term ‘chemsex’, usually going by the names ‘party and play’ (PNP), ‘chillouts’ or ‘wired play’ in different anglophone contexts. However, it is ‘chemsex’ that has precipitated a particularly potent discursive explosion not only in popular culture – the Vice documentary *Chemsex* (2015) being a prime example – but in academic scholarship too. Diverging from the hegemonic biomedical and psychological understandings of sexualized drug use, this scholarship has emerged at the interstices of the sociology of health, drugs studies, cultural studies and media studies and is drawn together by feminist and queer theoretical orientations towards power, identity and affect. It not only attempts to provide ethnographic accounts of what happens during chemsex but also make sense of the underlying anxieties revealed by gay culture’s current preoccupation with it. Much of the scholarship is concerned with gay and bisexual men who practice chemsex, something we address below. We might call this scholarship ‘critical chemsex studies’, and this special issue is an attempt to both take stock of and advance this emerging field.

One of the key ways this special issue does this is by rethinking how we might define the term itself. In an interview with one of the Special Issue’s editors, Kane Race describes chemsex as ‘refer[ing] to a very particular sexual setting and set of arrangements that came together at a particular moment in the history of urban gay communities to constitute a recognisable sexual scenario that involves particular drug practices’ (Hakim and Race, 2020: 3). Chemsex then, is a type of event, assemblage or conjunction of, ‘...a particular constellation of technologies, material settings, modes of consumption and sexual vernaculars’ (Hakim and Race 2020: 3). Thus, while neither crystal meth, GHB/GBL nor mephedrone is wholly new to the gay experience, and the modulating effects of drugs like alcohol, Viagra, cigarettes and PrEP have long been considered culturally acceptable to consume before, during or after sex, it is in the novel assembling of drugs, bodies, media, places, language and theory, at a particular historical moment, that chemsex produces its specific modes of sociability and experience.

Critical chemsex studies operates at a nexus of cultural anxieties around drugs, sexuality, queerness and media. In order to produce knowledge beyond the often overdetermined categories it addresses, critical chemsex studies must lean into what it

might mean to ‘think with pleasure’ (Race, 2017). Such pleasures can be traced along at least two lines of queer inquiry and cultural production: how it produces ‘counterpublic’ registers (Warner, 2002) for pleasure and intimacy and how chemsex may be understood in a sprawling genealogy of, if not queer kinship, then at least modes of feeling and doing that organize identity.

The contributions to this special issue draw from and operate in many different academic fields: queer history, feminist theory, health, cultural studies, drug studies and porn studies. This variety not only offers multiple pathways into the critical study of chemsex but it also reveals chemsex to be a particularly powerful prism for examining contemporary gay life, a potentiality previously not fully realized, or even formulated, due the dominance of risk-oriented perspectives in the literature. Thus, in this special issue, Florêncio (2021) writes chemsex into *histories* of gay sex and drug use. Hakim and Race (2020), following Race (2018), argue for infrastructuring as an *epistemological* approach, while Mowlabocus (2021) interrogates the intimacy *politics* of chemsex. Drysdale (2021) provides a *methodological* framework, Race et al. (2021) offer an *analytical* reorientation towards drug administration and finally, Mahawatte (2021) examines the *aesthetics* of whiteness in chemsex porn.

Based on previous research and the contributions to this special issue, we propose that critical chemsex studies operates along three axes: one working within public health that attempts to move beyond the *risk paradigm*; another which attempts to understand its *cultural dimensions* as it interrogates the discursive, sociopolitical and economic landscapes in which chemsex has materialized and finally, a third centring *pleasure* and its organization of gay identity, intimacy and sociability.

Health beyond the risk paradigm

Stuart and Chislett describe chemsex as an ‘epidemic’ (2016) or even a ‘syndemic’ (Stuart, 2019) producing risks of harm to gay men. As AIDS legacies are made, the central underlying factor for this, LGBTQ+ health organizations emerge as particularly adept at responding to this ‘crisis’. With the quick adoption of the ‘chemsex as risk’ paradigm by these organizations around the world, particularly in Europe, Australia and the United States, its problematizations and suggested analyses have become dominant.

Critical chemsex studies points out that this paradigmatic orientation towards risk desensitizes health research in counterproductive ways. Bryant and colleagues argue that the ‘rush to risk’ (2018) in effect overlooks the inventions and experimentations, as well as the multiplicity and importance, of socio-material contexts that chemsex emerges in relation to. This, in turn, creates a lack of understanding of the real-life scenarios in which drug use emerges. Mapping contexts of use has been one important critical intervention (Drysdale et al., 2020; Hopwood et al., 2018). Another related approach is to map how – in the absence of institutional resources or interventions – personal and communal health is negotiated. This aligns with what Race calls ‘counterpublic health’, that is:

...the cultivation of viable ethics and modes of embodiment that contend not only with the challenges of HIV infection, but also the mass mediation and medico-moralization of pleasure and health (Race, 2009: 110).

Using this approach, Drysdale et al. (2021) document how gay men have practiced techniques of chemsex harm reduction beyond the (limited) guidelines available from public health authorities and organizations. In this special issue, Drysdale (2021) argues that the methodological and analytical device of ‘scene’ enables a construction of chemsex as a site of social, material and affective flows in which risk assessment is just one aspect.

Cultural transformations

Then, there is the strand of critical chemsex studies interested in its cultural dimensions. This continues the work of further decentering questions of health and risk, by understanding chemsex as a cultural formation that not only has its own internal logics but that also has emerged in response to different cultural contexts. A significant aspect of this strand is to unpick the representational politics of chemsex.

Hakim (2018a) and Lovelock (2018) both detail how the UK media’s response to chemsex has taken the form of a sex panic. Related to this is Kagan’s (2015) looking at Australian media coverage of ‘barebacking’ which argues that the media ‘re-crisis’, that is, reactivate and reapply, scripts of responsible and healthy sexuality that were built in response to the AIDS crisis in the Global North. Similarly, ‘problematic’ chemsex thus becomes the dominant representation by mainstream media and is framed as an irresponsible, individual reaction to a set of communal problems. Hakim (2018b, 2019) counters this by arguing that chemsex can instead be understood as a collective practice of care and intimacy that has emerged as a way of negotiating living through the transformations of cities and subjectivities under neoliberalism.

In ‘Fucking with homonormativity: The ambiguous politics of chemsex’, Mowlabocus (2021), much like Hakim, asks why chemsex exists *now*. By turning to the fraught relationship between gay identity and homonormative politics, he understands chemsex to be a ‘technology of the self’ (Foucault, 1988) or a type of ‘self-enterprise’ (Rose, 1996). It is against the backdrop of respectability politics that dominates contemporary gay culture, that chemsex can operate as a “‘queer rem(a)inder’: an opportunity to (temporarily) become ‘evil queers’ engaged in practices that are ‘beyond the pale’ and (in terms of the drugs consumed) illegal” (Mowlabocus, 2021: 11). This reading identifies chemsex’s counterpolitical potentials while acknowledging the possibility of these having more sexually performative rather than traditionally political effects.

In ‘Chemsex cultures: Subcultural reproduction and queer survival’, Florêncio (2021) also folds chemsex into a politics of desire but does so via an even deeper historical cut. He argues that in the context of various drug wars’ attempts ‘...to control subordinated groups perceived to pose a threat to the order of the body politic’ (Florêncio, 2021: 6), chemsex works as a life-affirming practice, a ‘...mutation of sexualised drug cultures and of their imaginaries that indeed ensures their replication and survival through time’ (Florêncio, 2021: 10).

While Florencio gestures towards drug use as a site of control of racialized others, in ‘The involuntary confession of euphoria: ‘Chemsex’ porn and the paradox of embodiment’, Mahawatte (2021) directly interrogates how whiteness organizes chemsex aesthetics. Looking at porn specifically, he uses the figure of the ‘euphoric body’ to analyse how visual tropes of chemsex pleasure intersect with whiteness. In the studio porn that evokes chemsex in particular, Mahawatte identifies fantasies of frictionless erotic mobility in and out of the chemsex scene and argues that ‘mobility through euphoria’ is associated with ‘white-raced hegemonies’ (Mahawatte, 2021: 8). As such, this chemsex porn is organized by whiteness not only in the bodies that it displays but also through the fantasies of possibility that it constructs.

Transformations in gay pleasure

The critique of risk-oriented chemsex analysis can, in part, be framed by the conceptual interrogation of addiction discourse so central to critical drug studies. In the introduction to ‘Injecting in More-Than-Human Worlds’ (2019), Fay Dennis details how, in drug research and public imaginaries more generally, an addiction-pleasure dichotomy organizes and, in the process of doing so, narrows how drug use can be made sense of. ‘Problematic’ use then gestures towards addiction and its consequences, with the understudied ‘unproblematic’ use operating as an unmarked counterpoint that assumes pleasure is everything addiction is not: sustainable, valuable and virtuous. Careful analysis and speculation then is needed to intervene in this conceptual reproduction. Instructively, Kane Race asks us to consider ‘[w]hat, in a given encounter, is a drug-using body capable of?’ (Race, 2009).

This final strand of critical chemsex studies approaches chemsex as a pleasurable site of transformative potential. Within the risk paradigm, chemsex is often made to be either purely cause or effect, operating as a start or endpoint to an unsustainable mode of feeling, communicating and/or existing. Intervening in this closed loop of interpretation, critical chemsex research is able to trace the ‘...affective charges that overflow sexual identity categories...’, an analysis which ultimately transcends ‘...notions of chemsex as always already trauma-based or trauma-inducing’ (Møller, 2020: 4). In this way, the approach is indebted to feminist and queer theories of sexuality that consider the generative, unruly aspects of sexuality as they transcend and disturb otherwise stabilized relationships between affect, power and identity (see Berlant, 1998; Berlant and Warner, 1998; Bersani, 1987; Paasonen, 2018; Sedgwick, 1990).

Several studies on drug experimentation and enhancement have explored how drugs modify and extend sexual pleasure, how they can loosen strict masculine behavioural expectations and how forms of playfulness otherwise not afforded can be explored (Pienaar et al., 2020a, 2020b). In this special issue, Race et al. (2021) explore sexual orientation in chemsex not solely towards other bodies but also towards the means of administration such as pipe smoking or syringe injecting (‘slamsex’). They read these routes of administration as key to the scripting and particular pleasure of sex, rather than merely practical precursors. Considering this particular form of chemical-material ‘infrastructuring’, the analysis is able to move beyond sexual and gender categories as

uniformly organizing social encounters, but as objects of modulation and experimentation themselves.

Like drugs and their delivery systems, digital media also work to infrastructure chemsex: both the organization of chemsex encounters and its social imaginaries are thoroughly entwined with media technologies. Recent research has shown that chemsex encounters are not only organized in shared space but also operate digitally by leveraging video conferencing software and smartphones (Møller, 2020). These platforms, along with sex toys, colourful lighting and drug paraphernalia and fumes are then assembled and eroticized in ways that overflow gender and sexual categories that otherwise work to contain pleasure. Further, news media are not the only site at which chemsex imaginaries are produced, circulated and become manifold. Porn and porn platforms are also crucial sites for this. In studying Pornhub, Møller (2021, forthcoming) finds the formation of explicit and implicit chemsex genres and argues that their fear-desire configurations depend on whether they are assembled by the algorithmic intervention of the search interface. Thus, computational interventions in the platform economy drive the production of relatively respectable publics, calling attention to how digital-sexual infrastructures subtly work to mainstream drugged pleasures otherwise marked as 'transgressive'.

Critical chemsex studies onwards

This special issue offers a broad range of research interventions deriving from very different academic fields. There are, however, gaps and shortcomings. Thus, further work could more directly engage with national and regional differences in chemsex culture. Despite the call for papers inviting consideration of geographical diversity, this issue only presents research carried out in Britain and Australia. Critical chemsex studies, therefore, has a long way to go in order to catch up with the rest of the field in related medical and health contexts. What role does chemsex play within regional conjunctions of economies, politics and cultures of gender and sexuality? How does chemsex pleasure take shape in these contexts and what generative potential do they have? The answers to such questions would help qualify national debates about chemsex in ways that do not merely reproduce imaginaries based on findings from London and Sydney.

Another important area ripe for exploration is that of gender diversity. The field's current focus on MSM (men who have sex with men) has meant that women, trans and non-binary people are under-represented if represented at all; an erasure that repeats tendencies in queer research and history that privilege cis gay men. For critical chemsex studies, the cultural setting and use of chemsex may look very different for these populations. Further, the chemical modulation of pleasure might engage with other gendered and sexual hierarchies and thus make their bodies able to do other things. The Pharmacosexuality project has begun the important work of exploring women's and non-binary people's historical and contemporary experiences of sexualized drug use (Moyle et al., 2020). It is significant that they have deliberately chosen not to use the term 'chemsex' in their research. This prompts some interesting questions for critical chemsex studies. Perhaps the term 'chemsex' comes undone when it moves across different social locations. Perhaps it can only be used to describe a specific kind of sexualized drug use by

gay men using particular kinds of technologies living in the urban centres of the Global North. This may be true, but by not including women and gender diverse people's sexualized drug use under the rubric of chemsex, access to the funding and health initiatives that the term has been so successful in securing for gay men, remains out of reach. It is precisely these tensions that we believe the 'critical chemsex studies' framework invites nuanced consideration of whether the sexualized drug use being researched is called chemsex or not. Our hope for this special issue is that it does just that and sparks new interrogations of sexualized drug cultures that deconstruct and move beyond the risk paradigm that remains hegemonic in the field.

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