

# A Values & Preference Study among MSM who engage in chemsex in South Africa

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**OUT WELLBEING**

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The term 'chemsex' broadly defined in the academic literature as “the voluntary intake of certain psychoactive and non-psychoactive drugs in the context of sex parties and sexual intercourse”.

**Types of drugs** commonly used during chemsex – Referred to as chems.

Chemsex first appeared in the London gay scene towards the end of the 20th century and swiftly became popular in other larger cities across the world, including South Africa.

The term 'Chems' came into use as a discreet way of referring to crystal meth and GHB when communicating by phone or text with drug dealers.

Methamphetamine was initially hard to come by and prohibitively expensive in London; as a result, the drug was only used by a small subset of who were able to obtain it through airline stewards who travelled internationally and brought it back from cities such as San Francisco, New York, and Cape Town, where it was more easily accessible.

Chemsex has since gain popularity among **MSM** across the world.

## **Primary Objective:**

The primary objective aimed at gathering values and preferences data to formulate evidence-based recommendations for local and international chemsex harm reduction guidelines.

## **Secondary Objective:**

To identify and analyse various settings and contexts where MSM engage in chemsex, documenting the specific substances used, methods of administration and the related health risks associated with chemsex.

Examine the motivation for chemsex

Assess the knowledge, attitudes, values, and preferences of MSM who engage in chemsex towards harm reduction strategies, sexual health, and aspects related to HIV and drug use.

Although international academic literature on chemsex is available, there is limited research about chemsex in South Africa.

A qualitative approach was used, based on interviews with **10 Key informant interviews (KIIs)** and **30 participants** across 3 focus groups (FGs) in two South African cities, Cape Town & Johannesburg.

A semi structured face to face interviewed where conducted to gain insights on the research aim and objectives. The transcripts where coded and themed using atlas.ti and the data analysis was done using narrative analysis and thematic analysis.

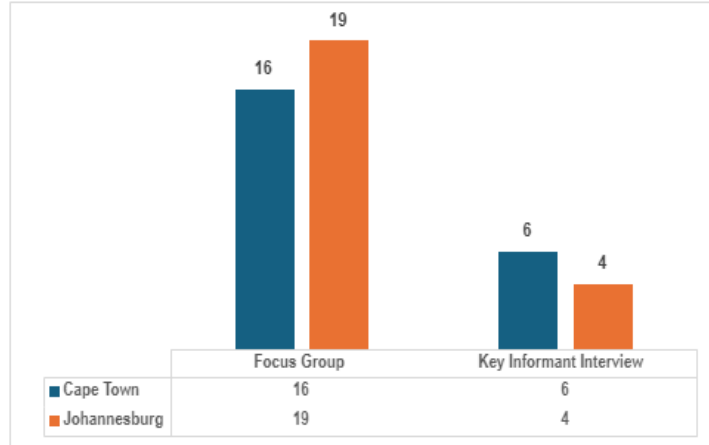


Figure 1: FGs and KIIs

# Participants Demographics

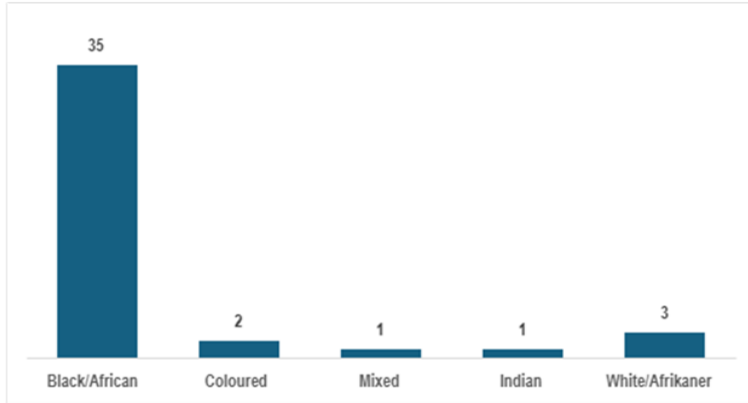


Figure 2: Race

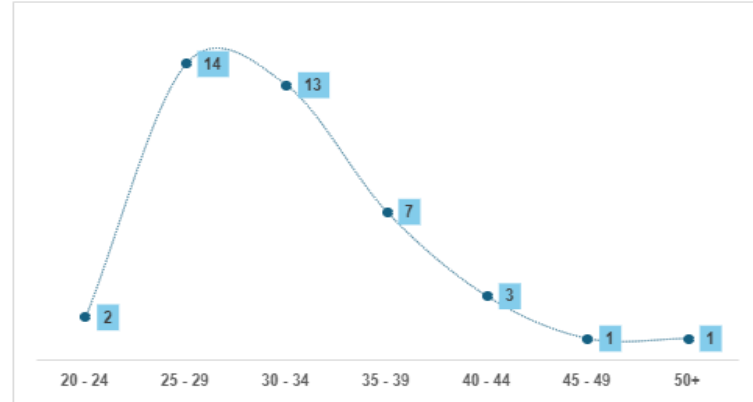
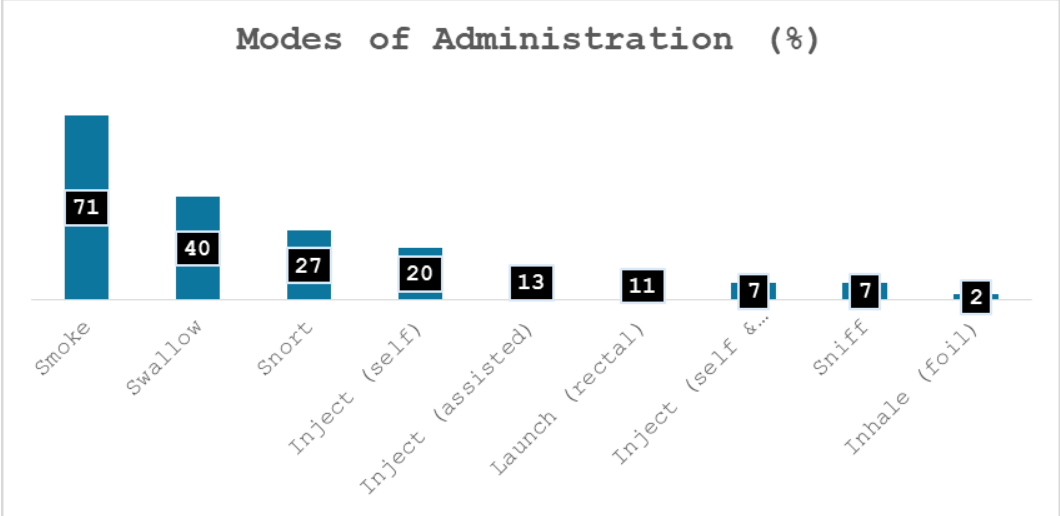


Figure 3: Age



## Two drugs commonly used for chemsex

### CRYSTAL METH



STREET NAMES: CRYSTAL, TINA, METH, ICE, T

EFFECTS: Euphoria, increased energy during sex, confidence, feelings of invincibility and impulsivity, intense sexual stimulation and lowered inhibitions.

SOME SIDE-EFFECTS: Sleep disruption, lack of appetite, convulsions. Depression, exhaustion and paranoia.

### GHB



*Gamma hydroxybutyrate*

STREET NAMES: G, GINA, LIQUID ECSTASY

EFFECTS: Euphoria, lowered inhibitions, increased sex drive. Often used to boost the effect of other drugs. Relaxant.

SOME SIDE-EFFECTS: Memory lapses, drowsiness, tremors, agitation. Very risky used with alcohol or amphetamines.

**M&G**



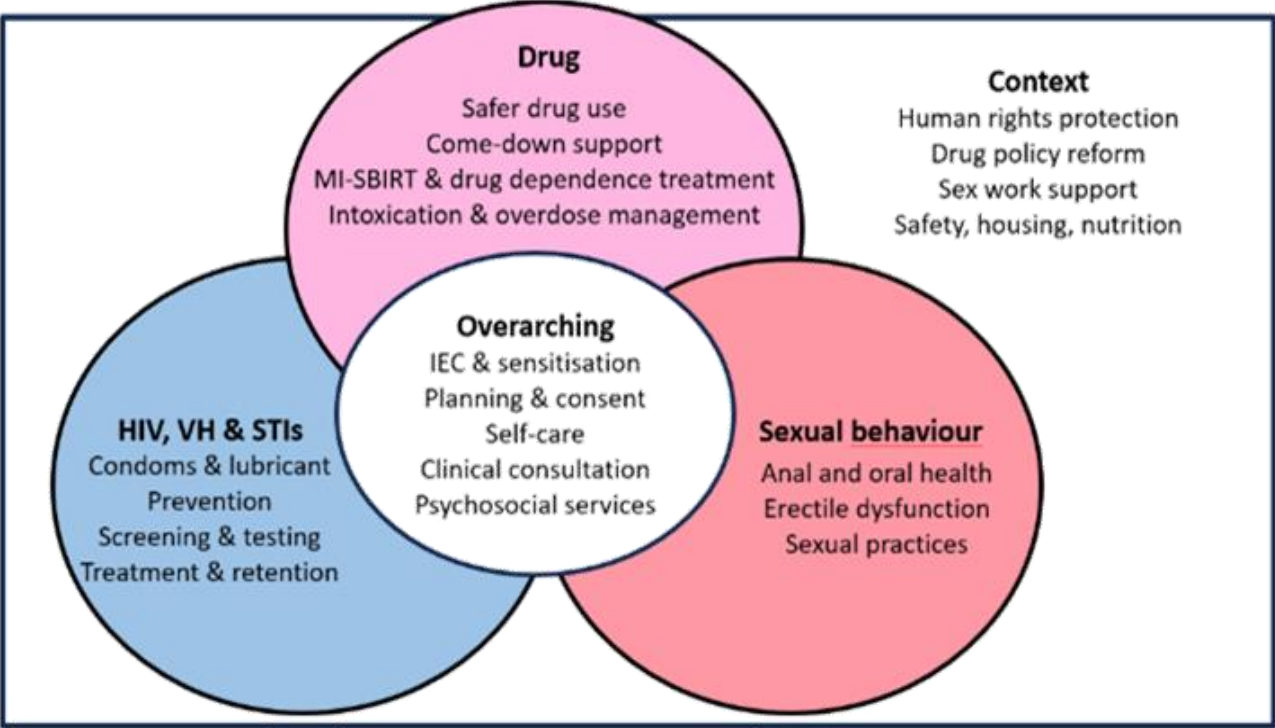
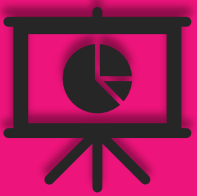


Figure 4: Harm reduction interventions for chemsex. Adapted from Strong et al. 2022

- MSM involved commercial sex work used chems for sexual arousal before meeting clients.  
Demands from clients
- Blessee/Blesser relations: younger MSM were lured by older more affluent men for chemsex.  
Blessers help power dominance in exchange for money.
- Some MSM used chemsex to escape from struggles with internalised homophobia, minority stress, and conforming to a heteronormative hegemony.
- Poorer MSM used transactional chemsex to earn a living

# Results

1. Chemsex was described as intensely pleasurable and meaningful and allowed some participants to explore fantasies that they would not otherwise have ventured into.
2. Ongoing participation in chemsex resulted in harms such as:
  - Increased exposure to HIV and other STIs
  - Mental health conditions
  - Social problems such as loss of family, friends
  - Financial issues, such as unemployment and homelessness.



## Results: Motivations of Chemsex

- More intense sexual experiences (high) compared to other substances (alcohol and marijuana). GHB was often used with crystal meth
- Decreased inhibitions
- Short-term euphoria or well-being
- Longer lasting and more sensual sexual experiences
- Exploring sexual boundaries, BDSM, cruising and other hedonistic pleasures. i.e. scatter, golden showers etc.
- Feelings of confidence, reduced shame and escape from body dysmorphia

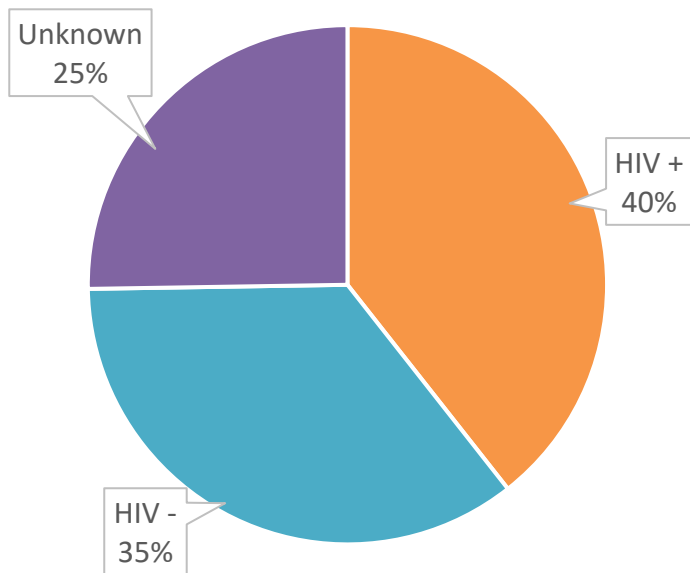


Figure 5: HIV Results

Nearly all participants stated they never used condoms during chemsex.

All the participants received medical support from NGOs rather than public health facilities.

Half of the participants (23/45) reported mental health symptoms, (depression, anxiety, and “paranoia”) which they attributed to chemsex.

It is unclear how many participants sought help for their mental health conditions.



Chemsex is used to create social networks that is negotiated and maintained through various digital platforms and physical venues.

## Hookups

- Three quarters (32/45) of the participants used Grindr to hook up with chemsex partners.
- In conjunction with Grindr, Ads for Africa, BBRTs and manhunt were some of the other frequently used **web and** App based social platforms used to find MSM specifically for chemsex.



- Expand access to PrEP and PEP.
- Promote safer injection practices.
- Promote safer sex practices.
- Integrate mental health services.
- Address psychosocial barriers, i.e. Internalised homophobia, family rejection etc.
- Increase awareness and education of chemsex.
- Access to health services – beyond parallel MSM services.



Inform harm reduction **guidelines** for chemsex in South Africa to:

- Knowledge, resources and tools to both Government and NGOs to better assist person who are struggling with sexualized drug use within the LGBTIQAI+ community, including transactional sex.
- Developing tailored harm reduction guidelines for chemsex: Specific guidelines that address the unique contexts and needs of MSM who engage in chemsex in South Africa.
- Access to psychosocial support for mental health conditions.

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Q&A

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**Thank you!**

