

**The Rise of Chemsex: queering collective intimacy in neoliberal  
London**

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Abstract: Since 2011, various public health organisations have observed the growth of the sexual practice ‘chemsex’ in the UK, primarily in London. The term chemsex refers to group sexual encounters between gay and bisexual men in which the recreational drugs GHB/GBL, mephedrone and crystallised methamphetamine are consumed. This article uses a conjunctural perspective to make sense of the rise of chemsex within the historical conditions in which it has emerged. Drawing on a document analysis as well as interviews with 15 gay and bisexual men, this article argues that the rise of chemsex can be interpreted as an embodied response to material conditions shaped by neoliberalism: specifically as a desire for an intimate mode of collectivity during an historical moment when collectivity itself is being superseded by competitive individualism as the privileged mode of being in the world (Gilbert 2013). In doing so, this article provides a different account to pathologising media and medical representations of chemsex that appeared in 2015, whilst also contributing to a growing literature that attempts to map the balance of forces of the present conjuncture.

Keywords: chemsex, neoliberalism, gay and bisexual men, intimacy, London, collectivity.

## **Introduction**

‘Chemsex’ is a vernacular term used to describe group sexual encounters between gay and bisexual men in which the recreational drugs GHB/GBL, mephedrone and crystallised methamphetamine are consumed. In 2011, reports of chemsex to Britain’s National Health Service (NHS) reached a sufficiently high number that it began to develop treatment strategies targeted specifically at chemsex related health problems (Hargrave 2015, Stuart 2013, Stuart and Weymann 2015). At the end of 2015 there was what could arguably be seen as a moral panic across Britain’s media about the problems chemsex posed for gay and bisexual men and public health more generally that had a tendency to pathologise both the practice and the reasons why these men engaged in it (ref. excluded for anonymity). This article asks why has chemsex emerged as a distinct cultural practice in the UK, specifically in London, since around 2011? In the cultural studies tradition originally developed at the University of Birmingham’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Hall *et al.*, 1978) it

approaches this question ‘conjuncturally’, i.e. it makes sense of the rise of chemsex as a cultural practice as a response to the specific mix of social contradictions that constitute the historical period (conjuncture) in which it has emerged. Drawing on a document analysis as well as interviews with 15 gay and bisexual men who have practiced chemsex, this article argues that chemsex is an embodied response to a range of material conditions which have been shaped by neoliberalism: a desire for an intimate mode of collectivity during an historical moment when collectivity itself is being superseded by competitive, entrepreneurial individualism as the privileged mode of being in the world (Gilbert 2013). In arguing this, the article provides a different account to both the pathologising media and medical representations of chemsex, whilst also contributing to a growing literature that uses conjunctural analysis in an attempt to map the balance of forces of the present conjuncture.

### **Making sense of chemsex**

Existing attempts to make sense of the rise of chemsex come from three main areas: cultural studies, the field of sexual health and the British media. Kane Race is the leading cultural studies scholar exploring the phenomenon (Race 2009, 2015a, 2015b; Race et. al. 2016). Race uses a Foucauldian framework to de-pathologise chemsex (or party ‘n’ play in the Australian context) and to instead understand it as a practice that multiplies the body’s capacities for pleasure. Whilst this article is very much informed by Race’s attempts to de-pathologise chemsex it is also shaped by slightly different concerns in that it seeks to historicise the emergence of chemsex in a different time and place to Race’s Australian urban centres since the 2000s. In this regard this article is operating in similar empirical context to the recent UK based sexual health literature (Gillbart *et al.* 2015, Hargrave 2015, Phillips 2015, Stuart 2013, Stuart and Weymann 2015). Given the concerns of the field it is no surprise that all of these publications address the health problems that can arise when engaging in chemsex. The only piece of research in the field to extend beyond this concern is *The Chemsex Study* (Bourne *et al.* 2014). The aim of this study is to give an empirical account of London’s chemsex culture so that different services can provide more informed care to their gay and bisexual clients. It does not attempt to theorise why this culture has emerged in the way that it has in the historical moment that it did.

The discourse on chemsex produced in the British media and some of the other sexual health literature arguably amounts to a multi-faceted panic discourse – one in which elements of a moral panic (Cohen 1972), a sex panic (Rubin 1984) and a techno panic (Drotner 1999) have been condensed. This discourse pathologises chemsex as primarily self-destructive for the gay and bisexual men who practice it. For instance in an *Attitude* review of the feature film *Chemsex*: ‘The feral clips of real-time behavior, sourced from within, tell a *nightmarish story of everyday annihilation*’ [emphasis added] (Flynn 2015a, p. 78). It also connects chemsex to a rise in HIV transmission that occurred in London in 2015 – ‘a *British Medical Journal* report suggested that chemsex is leading to an increase in sexually transmitted infections, and particularly HIV’ (Nicholson 2015). This led Dr. Richard Ma from the Royal College of GPs to refer to chemsex as ‘a public health time bomb’ (Cormier 2015) raising the spectre of moral panic media representations of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s (Watney 1987).

With regards to accounting for why chemsex has emerged as a distinct cultural phenomenon in the past few years, the panic discourse locates its origins in two places: i) the individual biographies of gay and bisexual men who have been traumatised in various ways by homophobia and are subsequently unable to form enduring intimate relationships (Stuart in Cash 2015, p.77, Stuart in Flynn 2015a) and ii) the emergence of smartphone hook-up applications (hook up apps) as a way for gay and bisexual men to negotiate sexual encounters and the wider availability of chemsex drugs (Davies in Cash 2015a, Stuart in Cash 2015b). These explanations are inadequate for different reasons. With reference to the first claim: although there is a wide literature on the psycho-social dimensions of homophobia (see Fraisses and Barrientos 2016 for a discussion), there is little evidence to support the notion that gay and bisexual men are uniquely ill equipped to form enduring intimate relationships or that for those who are, their experiences of homophobia are the determining factor. Even if we did accept this claim – one implicitly constructed through a homonormative (Duggan 2003) logic that privileges long-term relationships as a superior form of intimacy – it does not help us understand why chemsex emerged in London as a distinct sexual practice in the historical moment that it did. To do this it would need to account for what had changed about either homophobia or gay men’s capacities for intimacy in this historical period that chemsex had only emerged now

(not before or after) as a plausible response. The media and medical discourses begin to explain this with reference to the second claim – the wider availability of hook up apps and chemsex drugs. There are two problems with this explanation, one empirical and one theoretical. The empirical problem is that the most commonly consumed chemsex drugs in the UK (GHB/GBL and mephedrone) do not automatically produce sexual behavior. Both have frequently been taken in non-sexual settings: GHB/GBL in gay nightclubs in the decade prior to the rise of chemsex (Borria 2013, Bourne *et al.* 2014) and mephedrone amongst young people regardless of sexual orientation in non-sexual capacities (Vardakou, Pistos and Spiliopolou 2011). The theoretical problem is the technological determinism of this claim. Cultural studies has long argued against such accounts of the socio-cultural effects of new technologies (Williams 1990) – both the apps and the drugs in this context. From the conjunctural perspective being used here, all cultural phenomena (sexual or otherwise) emerge at the confluence of a multiplicity of factors – technology being only one. This article is an attempt to map the most salient of these in relation to chemsex and in doing so not only attempts to account for the rise of chemsex, but also uncover conjunctural dynamics that analysing other cultural formations has yet to allow – namely the way practices of intimacy have been transformed during a particular moment in neoliberalism’s struggle for hegemony.

In doing this, this article contributes to a growing literature that has attempted to understand key dynamics within the neoliberal conjuncture. Here, neoliberalism is understood as a set of hegemonic processes that since the 1970s has been struggling to replace the socially democratic principles of collectivity, co-operation and mutuality with the logics of competitive, individualistic, entrepreneurial, free market capitalism to all areas of economic, political, social and cultural life (Hall 2011, Fisher and Gilbert 2013). So successful has this struggle been across contemporary culture that the cultural studies literature on neoliberalism now covers a wide range of topics from food (Potter and Westall 2013), to race (Gilroy 2013) gender relations (Gill and Scharff 2011) and celebrity culture (Cross and Littler 2010). As the research process unfolded for this article the features of the neoliberal conjuncture that appeared most salient to an analysis of chemsex in the UK context were i) how neoliberalism has shaped the materiality of London as a physical space (Massey 2007) and ii) the different ways that neoliberal logics had affected migration patterns

to the UK (Davison and Shire 2014); and how these changed historical conditions had altered the practices of intimacy available to gay and bisexual men.

Much like neoliberalism, contemporary practices of gay and bisexual male intimacy are also defined by the contradiction between individualism and collectivity. As a number of sociologists have argued the dominant modes of intimacy practiced in late modernity are those which are governed by notions of an individual actively pursuing romantic fulfillment and sexual satisfaction, untethered from the pre-modern imperative to reproduce the heterosexual family in order to survive in times of material scarcity (Giddens 1992, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). It was along these lines that lesbian and gay relationships gained their social and cultural legitimacy in liberal democratic societies – as individuals pursuing sexual satisfaction and romantic fulfillment in their private lives. The individualization of intimacy intensifies under neoliberalism where, in different social settings, these practices have acquired a competitive and entrepreneurial orientation (Illouz 2007, Winch 2013, O’Neil 2015). Almost the opposite conception of gay male and bisexual intimacy underpins the radical gay politics of the 1970s onwards, which argued that gay liberation could only be achieved if intimacy (and all other areas of gay social life) was understood as a collective practice. Indeed, a variety of queer theorists (Berlant 1998, Berlant and Warner 1998, Warner 1999, 2002, Delaney 1999) have since mapped the many ways that collective forms of intimacy were practiced, most notably in the public cruising cultures that Michael Warner has referred to as counter-publics.

Chemsex, this article argues can be understood as a conjuncturally specific manifestation of these long-standing historical tensions as they have intensified during neoliberalism’s struggle for hegemony in the UK, specifically London, context. As Jeremy Gilbert (2013) has argued this struggle has been defined precisely by the attempt to foreclose the possibility of any social group experiencing any form of collectivity whatsoever. As is evidenced below, neoliberal approaches to both capital accumulation and migration, have caused a variety of interrelated material changes within London since around 2008 whose result has been the foreclosure of the possibility of gay and bisexual male collectivity in particular. Chemsex, it can be argued, is an attempt to re-establish the potential for this in historical conditions that work against this very thing. What this means in concrete terms is the following:

chemsex is a way for some, largely migrant, gay and bisexual men to experience a sense of collectivity not only in a city where the collective physical spaces they have historically gathered are closing down due to neoliberal approaches to town-planning (Campkin and Marshall 2017), but also in a wider culture in which neoliberalism has been hegemonic and that in multiple ways alienates them from experiencing the possibility of collectivity at all.

## **Methodology**

This argument is made by thinking conjuncturally about chemsex. Conjunctural analysis was introduced by the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies under Stuart Hall (Hall *et al.* 1978) and has subsequently been developed by different scholars in relation to a range of empirical contexts (e.g. Grossberg 2010, 2015, Hall and Massey 2014, Littler 2016, Massey 2007, Srnicek and Williams 2015). Fundamentally Gramscian in orientation, conjunctural analysis is an interdisciplinary approach that attempts to map the balance of social forces that constitute a particular historical conjuncture in order to achieve more successful progressive interventions in contemporary struggles for hegemony. In earlier scholarship, this balance of forces included the economic, the social, the political, the ideological, the cultural and the technological. More recent interventions, most notably from Lawrence Grossberg (1992, 2010), have drawn on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to argue that in order to understand contemporary hegemonic struggles it is essential to also understand the affective dimensions of the conjuncture in which they are taking place. Given how affectively intense chemsex is as a cultural practice, this combination of Gramscian and Deleuzo-Guattarian perspectives is particularly useful if we want to understand not only the conjunctural shifts through which chemsex has emerged, but also what an analysis of the rise of chemsex might reveal about what living in this historical conjuncture feels like more generally and the place this has in contemporary struggles for hegemony.

In adopting this approach, this article seeks to contribute to a number of different intellectual projects. The first is the project of conjunctural analysis itself, which has thus far tended to overlook questions of both sexuality and intimacy in favour of more classically cultural studies questions of politics, economics, ideology,

social issues and pop cultural texts and practices. As this article seeks to show, interrogating practices of intimacy at a particular historical moment is as vital to the understanding of the organisation of historical conjunctures as these more familiar questions. The second field is the cultural studies literature on gay and bisexual men, which, when analysing these social groups tends to focus on their gendered and sexual histories, practices and identities and/or their relationships to structures of homophobia. Building on existing materialist work on gay and bisexual men (Alderson 2016, Maddison 2017, Sinfield 1998), this article uses this approach in an attempt to situate gay and bisexual male lives within the multiplicity of social forces which the cultural practices we engage in are potentially shaped by as much as any other social group. Finally, the article offers an alternative to the medical and media discourses on chemsex, which are organised around the liberal idea that the emergence of cultural practices (sexual or otherwise) can be located in the individual biographies of the people that practice them. It instead looks to the culture (broadly defined) in which they have emerged for some indication of why this particular practice has been taken up by rising numbers of people in a specific place and time.

There is no set template for how to conduct a conjunctural analysis (Grossberg 2010, Littler 2016). The methods used depend on both the specificity of the cultural phenomenon being analysed, as well as the historical context in which it has emerged. The research carried out for this article has used two methods of data collection – one-on-one interviews and document analysis.

The intention behind carrying out interviews was to map what actually constitutes chemsex encounters from the perspectives of the people who practice it. The interviews were, therefore, in-depth and semi-structured and lasted between 45 minutes to two hours.<sup>1</sup> They took place between May and June of 2016. 15 gay and bisexual men who have had chemsex at least once were interviewed. The stipulation on having had chemsex at least once was introduced in order to capture a variety of chemsex experiences beyond (but not discounting) the ‘addictive’ encounters so frequently represented in the media. The interviewees were recruited through a Grindr broadcast message. Grindr is the most widely used hook-up app used by gay and

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<sup>1</sup> Ethical approval for the data collection was granted by the University of East Anglia’s General Research Ethics Committee on 26<sup>th</sup> April 2016.



bisexual men in the UK. It is mostly used to organise sexual, and sometimes romantic, encounters. This broadcast message targeted users within a 5-mile radius of Vauxhall in South West London because, as discussed below, it is around this area that chemsex is practiced most frequently and so serves as an exemplary case study.

The men interviewed were aged between 24 and 51. All were asked how they self-identified in relation to commonly used demographic categories, in order to establish whether there was any relationship between these categories (class, ethnicity, national identity etc.) and chemsex practice. All the interviewees identified as male except one who identified as non-binary. 12 identified as gay, one as ‘gay but a bit bi’, one as bisexual and one as queer. Seven identified as middle class; four as working class; two as middle class with a working class background one working class in a middle class profession. One answered, ‘I don’t have a class, I’m not British’. Eight were British. One was Irish, one Italian, one South African, one Slovakian; two were Spanish and one was British Overseas National (born in Hong Kong). In terms of ethnicity, 10 identified as white, one as Irish, one as black/other, one as East Asian, one as Latino and one answered ‘I guess Spanish. I’m definitely not Latin... Mediterranean... whatever.’ Three were HIV positive and the rest were HIV negative at their last HIV test. Four were born in London. The majority had migrated to the capital as adults, either from within or outside of the United Kingdom.<sup>2</sup> Of all these demographic categories this issue of migration, it is argued below, was the most significant to the rise of chemsex.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and anonymised (pseudonyms are used for the interviewees throughout the article). The analysis of the transcripts was largely deductive. The Gramscian/Deleuzo-Guattarian framing of the research process meant that chemsex encounters were approached as ‘assemblages’ meaning the

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<sup>2</sup> The only gap in the sample comes in the form of an absence of South American men. According to the interviews, South American gay and bisexual men were a notable presence at chemsex parties. This is probably related to the fact that South Americans constitute such a large percentage of the migrant population of Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham (McLiwane, Cock, Linneker 2011). This absence is one that repeats itself across sexual health research in the UK. Recent research suggests this might be because much of the South American population in this borough have poor English speaking skills and are not so easily targeted by the methods deployed here (Granada and Paccoud 2014) different approach to sample construction, in further research, is required to fill this gap.

following three things had to be deduced from the interviews: i) what practices constituted a typical chemsex encounter; ii) the social relations produced whilst engaging in these practices; iii) the affectivity generated as a result. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, Ringrose 2011). Organising the interview questions around these three areas produced a variety of accounts of chemsex encounters. These different accounts were then analysed thematically. Two related themes emerged during this analysis. The first was how affectively contradictory chemsex experiences were – including both joyful and sad affects frequently at the same time. The second was how contradictory chemsex relationality was – oscillating between highly collective and highly individual social relations.

The next step in the research process was to identify what conjunctural shifts would a cultural practice defined by these contradictions most usefully be interpreted within. This could only be partially achieved through the interviews – the interviewees, even as a collective, could not be expected to produce a comprehensive enough picture of the broader historical context in which they practiced chemsex. Therefore, to supplement the interview data, I turned to a wide range of documents that would typically be expected to provide the empirical material necessary to reconstruct the aspects of the 2011-2016 conjuncture most relevant to the emergence of chemsex. Following the logics of conjunctural thinking this document search extended beyond factors most immediately present within the practice (e.g. the emergence of hook-up apps, the availability of chemsex drugs) and looked for material relating to every ‘plane’ (Grossberg 1992) of the conjuncture – from the economic, the social, the cultural, the political, the ideological as well as the affective. These documents included academic literature; reports from the UK government and non-governmental organisations (relating to, for example, changes in migration patterns, property prices, demography of London’s gay community); as well as journalism from the British media, relating mainly to changes in the gay commercial scene and community that had yet to be represented by scholarly work.

The analysis below comes from establishing connections between both sets of data – by thinking through how the specificity of chemsex practice revealed by the interviews might make sense within the conjunctural shifts revealed by the document analysis. In the tradition of conjunctural analysis, these connections have been made

by using critical theory to persuasively *interpret* the empirical material as opposed to *prove* a hypothesis by organising evidence in a positivist fashion. This process is informed as much by my training in cultural studies as it is by my experience as a gay man who has both participated in London's gay culture since 2001 as well as writing about it as an editor who worked at British gay culture magazine, *Attitude* between 2002 and 2014. With regards to the interviews this does mean that whilst this article is an attempt to give voice to gay and bisexual men who practice chemsex, the interpretation of their accounts in light of the material collected in the document analysis is very much my own. This does create a power imbalance between the interviewees and myself that is almost impossible to avoid in this sort of research (Hesse-Biber 2014).

Bearing these methodological considerations in mind, this article argues that the emergence of chemsex in London since around 2011 can most persuasively be made sense of as a response to a particular set of material changes that have been occurring during neoliberalism's struggle for hegemony and the impact these have had on the practices of intimacy available to gay and bisexual men to engage in. These changes include: i) the privileging of autonomous competitive individualism, particularly over more collectively experienced forms of subjectivity, as the most desirable mode of being in the world; ii) the deregulation of international flows of capital and the effect this has had on physical spaces that gay and bisexual men have historically gathered in London to engage in practices of intimacy; and iii) the concomitant loosening of border controls so that both cheap and specialized labour can follow these international flows of capital. Based on the evidence here, the rise of chemsex can most plausibly be theorised as a way for gay and bisexual men to use chemsex drugs and hook-up apps to negotiate the various material effects of these different historical processes on the way they can be intimate with each other.

## **Chemsex and collective intimacy**

### ***Chemsex encounters***

When asked to describe a typical chemsex session, interviewee Ben answered 'they are all very different'. Indeed, a multiplicity of experiences (practices, social relations and affects) were described by the interviewees. In fact, even the use of the term

chemsex was contested as a way to describe these encounters. As interviewee Michael says, ‘I don’t know anyone that says chemsex. Chemsex sounds a bit more... In the media they use that word.’ The use of the term chemsex has been retained here not only for clarity but also because all the other interviewees both recognised and used the term. Despite these differences and variations, certain experiences were described repeatedly throughout the interviews that give chemsex its specificity as a cultural practice.

The majority of chemsex sessions described by the interviewees were organised through hook-up apps, Grindr being the app mentioned most frequently.<sup>3</sup> The majority took place in a private residence somewhere in London and lasted between one night and four days. The consensus amongst the interviewees was that the term chemsex designated groups of men ranging in size from around five to 15 people; though some used the term in reference to two men having sex whilst using chemsex drugs. One interviewee described a session that approximately 50 people attended. The men attending were always (semi-) naked. The practice common to all the sessions described, irrespective of size, was the consumption of recreational drugs with GHB/GBL and mephedrone being consumed far more frequently than crystallised methamphetamine. By far the most common effect of these drugs, taken alone or in combination, described in the interviews, was the lowering of inhibitions – ‘It makes you feel great. It makes you feel horny. It lowers your inhibitions’ (Matthew). The lowering of inhibitions had two effects in this context: i) an intensified desire to engage in sexual activity – ‘it’s a huge intensity of sexual energy I think... Sexually you feel on top of the world’ (Andrew); and ii) an intensified desire to engage in various acts of intensely felt, collectively experienced, intimacy (evidence detailed below). Whether these acts were sexual or non-sexual in nature; whether the affective intensities generating in participating in them were joyful or sad (often both at the same time), chemsex’s specificity is precisely the way it assembles gay and bisexual men into an affectively charged collective – if only in relatively small numbers for short periods of time.

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<sup>3</sup> One interviewee talked about a distinctive chemsex culture in London’s gay saunas and two talked about meeting other men at nightclubs and having chemsex with them at the end of the night.

*Chemsex relationality*

This assembling of gay and bisexual men into an affectively charged collective was explicitly articulated by many of the interviewees. For instance:

‘It’s all to do with the drugs to be honest. Whenever you go you feel a certain way and you assume that everyone is on the same level as you. In a way, you’re enjoying a private club. You’re going to a club where you know everyone thinks the same as you think. Drugs loses all inhibitions [sic]. There are bad things of course, but at the moment, you don’t have to worry about anything because you’re going to be in an environment where you feel safe, and whatever you do, whatever you think, whatever you say you’ll be very much accepted.’

(Antonio)

Antonio is explicit in this quote about the sense of togetherness generated in chemsex encounters. He likens attending chemsex sessions to ‘enjoying a private club’ where ‘you don’t have worry about anything’ because ‘you assume that everyone is on the same level as you’. This sense of collectivity is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that sex was only one of many group activities that occurred during chemsex sessions, many of which were non-sexual in nature. Antonio estimated that the ratio of sexual to non-sexual activities was ‘70/30’, Daniel at ‘50/50’. Johann claimed to have gone to two parties ‘and no-one was having sex’. Dennis liked to go to chemsex sessions and not have sex, though he did say he would not be invited back, giving an indication of the importance of sex to chemsex culture even if individual sessions involved other activities. One of the key activities that took place was ‘a lot of deep emotional talk’ (Michael). Daniel explained that ‘some of our discussions got stupidly deep’. Lynn Jamieson’s ‘disclosive intimacy’ (1998) could be usefully deployed here to make sense of the sorts of non-sexual intimacies generated within chemsex sessions. Interviewee, Ben’s account of one chemsex session that he attended was quite rich in terms of non-sexual activities that could take place within them.

‘I’ve been at parties before where all I’ve done is talk and dance. The mood just went that way for me.... One of my friends, we had been having sex for a couple of hours and then all of sudden I spotted this Kylie book... I said “Oh my God, you like Kylie!” and he was like [affects camp demeanour, sharp in take of breath] “she

signed this!” And then all of sudden we took some G and some meph and then it turned into watching YouTube Kylie videos. Instead of having sex we ended up dancing round his living room.’

This quote points to not only the many other activities aside from sex that took place in the accounts of chemsex given by the interviewees – talking, dancing, discussing well-liked pop icons, browsing YouTube – but also the way that the joyful affect generated within them could bond the participants. The joy of chemsex is discussed in greater detail below.

Of these activities, digital media use appeared most prominently. A more frequently used form of digital media than YouTube was the browsing of Grindr or what Michael called ‘a Grindr break’. Broadly there were two different types of Grindr breaks: i) the type where men would stop whatever it was that they were doing and collectively browse Grindr and ii) the type where an individual would sit in the corner of a room and become absorbed by browsing Grindr for considerable periods of time. Interviewee Antonio describes the first:

‘The idea of chemsex is not just to meet people where you are but also going online with other people. That’s your opportunity to chat to as many people as you want to... being in a situation and everyone thinking exactly the same as you’re thinking.’

This quote was typical of other descriptions of the collective Grindr break and straightforwardly contradicts the panic discourse, demonstrating another way that moments of collectivity were achieved at chemsex encounters. The second type of Grindr break is described by interviewee Matthew:

‘Drugs make you very opportunistic... If you’re on that level where all you want to find is more you can find yourself sitting in the corner and tap, tap, tapping away. You can be doing it for hours... It makes you very anti-social. That’s a combination of drugs and Grindr.’

Here, Matthew describes this break as ‘anti-social’ drawing on the same discourses of non-intimacy as the media panic. However what Matthew has not considered in this quote is that this apparently anti-social type of Grindr break is always happening at a chemsex session, surrounded by a group of men frequently engaged in collective activities and not, for example, completely alone in a bedroom. The contradiction between engaging in a highly individualizing act in a highly collective setting is important in terms of the argument being advanced here. It might be argued that this act, so emblematic of the chemsex experience, can be interpreted as embodying the not quite achieved desire for experiences of collectivity within a wider set of historical conditions that work to constrain this very thing.

### *Chemsex affects*

The affectivity of chemsex described by the interviewees was even more contradictory than the social relations they outlined. The definition of affect being used here is Brian Massumi’s interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptualization of the term in his translation of *Capitalism & Schizophrenia: A Thousand Plateaus*: ‘a pre-personal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act’ (1980, p.xvi). In the context of chemsex, affect as a pre-personal intensity refers not simply to emotional states but also to the shared atmospheres of chemsex encounters, feelings and bodily sensations experienced during them and longer term changes in a body’s capacity to act. Drawing on the Spinozan roots of this concept the term ‘joy’ will be used when referring to an augmentation in a body’s capacity to act, and ‘sadness’ to its diminution (1994). ‘Capacity to act’ can refer here to something as abstract as a person’s increased or decreased sense of possibility as they live their everyday lives. It can also refer to more concrete phenomena such as, in this context, drug highs, sexual pleasure and long and short-term mental or physical health conditions contracted in relation to chemsex. For Spinoza joy and sadness combine in different ways, with different intensities for different durations to produce multiple types of affectivity. The point of this sort of affective analysis is to determine precisely what combination of joy and sadness this is and with what consequences this has for pursuing an ethical life – one in which joyful affects can be consciously created between bodies.

The one aspect of chemsex affectivity in which there was no contradiction was in the degree of intensity with which the interviewees claimed to experience it. Daniel's description is typical:

'It's different to normal sex in that it's a lot more intense... It's complete release: a lowering of inhibitions... It turns you into this feral creature – very primal.'

However, whereas the degree of intensity that was experienced was relatively uniform, as the ambivalence in the language Daniel uses suggests (feral, primal), its nature varied from encounter to encounter. Some interviewees described experiences of intense joy:

'Sex can become so passionate. You nearly want to rip someone's skin off that's how passionate it can be. You just can't get close enough. That's how intense it can be.'

(Ben)

We can also turn to the previous section for evidence of joyfully experienced chemsex encounters beyond Ben's passionate sex. There is also Ben's description of dancing to YouTube videos, Antonio's uninhibited sense of acceptance or the joys of Daniel and Michael's disclosive intimacy.

However some interviewees had a more joyless experience of chemsex's feral intensity. Robert said, 'I don't know if I enjoyed it. It was just animalistic sex.' Dennis felt shame about regularly consuming recreational drugs. The following quote from Matthew summarises the sad affects sometimes produced by consuming GHB/GBL and crystallised methamphetamine, commonly described by other interviewees too:

'First of all there's G. You take too much and you temporarily comatose yourself. If you take too much G and you're with other people it's OK. If you're by yourself it's actually very, very dangerous. If you take too much G you're normally monging out



all over the floor, you're generally naked... you're twatted.<sup>4</sup> You're absolutely twatted; monged and twatted. You make a complete fool of yourself. Tina is known for making one paranoid. Edgy, sketchy... Turns people into quite unpleasant people if you take too much. I think the key here is to know your limits.'

It is important to say here, that in line with Race's findings in the Australian context (Race 2015b), the men involved in these parties in London had developed elaborate regimes of care to ensure people did not 'mong out' in 'very dangerous ways'. Several of the interviewees said that many of the sessions they attended had highly codified rules about drug taking including drawing up what interviewee Dennis called a 'nightmap' - a printed excel spreadsheet that noted participants' names, the time at which they had taken chemsex drugs (particularly GHB/GBL) and the dose they had consumed. Nevertheless, these sad affects are a contributing thread to the experiential fabric of chemsex encounters, as are the 'come-downs' associated with chemsex drugs, described by a majority of interviewees.

There were also more serious long-term sad affects associated with chemsex. Four of the fifteen men that were interviewed had sought help from mental or sexual health professionals because of their problematic engagements with chemsex. One interviewee described 'psychotic episodes' after participating in a series of different chemsex sessions that lasted a week in total. One sought dramatic changes in his life because his engagement with chemsex had become too much of a problem, migrating to China to remove himself from London's chemsex culture. Another interviewee regularly attended Narcotics Anonymous meetings for his chemsex 'addiction'.

Looking at the sum of the interviews, what appeared to characterize the interviewees' descriptions of the affective dimensions of their chemsex experiences was just how contradictory they were. Many of the interviewees described experiencing these contradictory affects at the same time. For example:

**'Can you describe the atmosphere of a chemsex session?'**

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<sup>4</sup> The words 'monged' and 'twatted' are British slang terms that are both used to refer to the experience of consuming alcohol or recreational drugs to the point where a person begins to lose control over what they are doing.

I have tendency of after being awake for so long of being paranoid. That's obviously an uncomfortable atmosphere but an atmosphere that's created in my head. Specifically, it's quite exciting and sexually charged and energetic but then eventually the atmosphere sort of changes a bit...'

(Daniel)

The affective contradictions of chemsex described by the interviewees are significant for the argument being made here in two ways. The first is in the differences between the interviewees' accounts of the affects they experienced during chemsex compared to the account given in the panic discourse. This discourse focuses almost exclusively on chemsex's sad affects. Whilst sad affects of varying duration and intensity were clearly produced within the chemsex encounters described by the interviewees, it would be partial and distorting to conclude that these were more significant than the other affects described; like reducing, for example, British pub culture to alcoholism and pub fights. One of the interviewees reflected on this aspect of the panic discourse saying of the Vice film *Chemsex*: 'it shows the seedier side of it, not the fun side.'

The other way that these contradictions are significant is in how they chime with recent cultural studies scholarship that has attempted to identify what the prevailing 'structure of feeling' (Williams 1965) of the neoliberal historical conjuncture might be. Each of these interventions speak to different geographical locations as well as slightly different historical periods but what they share in common is their identification of the mixture of, what is being termed here, joy and sadness that they all argue necessarily occurs within material conditions produced during neoliberalism's struggle for hegemony. Lauren Berlant (2011) calls this structure of feeling 'cruel optimism', arguing that, in the North American context, neoliberalism entices its subjects to strive for things which its erosion on social democracy's wealth redistribution strategies make it all but impossible to achieve. Jeremy Gilbert (2015) calls it 'disaffected consent' in which significant Western European electoral constituencies reluctantly consent to neoliberal governments because there had yet to be a persuasive counter-hegemonic project to take its place. Phil Cohen refers to neoliberalism's 'high and low culture' 'which oscillates between states of manic excitement and chronic depression' (2015, p. 43). The affective

contradictions produced by engaging in chemsex encounters can similarly be made sense of in the context of material changes that have occurred in London during neoliberalism's continued struggle for hegemony.

### **Thinking conjuncturally about chemsex**

What these material changes are and how they might provide a context through which the rise of chemsex (its practices and affective and relational contradictions) can be interpreted will be the focus of the remainder of the article. This section begins by providing an account of, what I see, as being the most relevant conjunctural shifts to the rise of chemsex and ends by theorizing the relationship between practice and context.

### ***Vauxhall in the Great Recession***

As has already been mentioned, reports of chemsex first emerged in sufficient numbers to warrant an official NHS response in 2011, though there is evidence to suggest that it was being practiced in London a little earlier than this (Borria, 2013). Temporally, this puts the emergence of chemsex within the post-2008 period, or the period sometimes referred to as the Great Recession. In spatial terms: although there is evidence that chemsex has been practiced in different parts of the UK, by far the greatest concentration of chemsex activity would appear to be taking place in London, specifically in the boroughs of Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham (Bourne *et al.* 2014). One of the main reasons for this, is that these boroughs contain the highest population of gay and bisexual men in London in part because they contain one of the densest concentrations of the city's gay nightlife – the bars, clubs and sex-on-premises venues of Vauxhall. This part of London has been transformed by a range of different material processes during the Great Recession whose interrelations, it is argued here, provide the context for the rise of chemsex. The first of these processes operates on a relatively micro-scale: the emergence of chemsex drugs and their replacement of other recreational drugs that have historically been consumed on Vauxhall gay scene during this period. The next two material processes have global dimensions and have been at the heart of the neoliberal project since the late 1970s: the intensification of flows of inequitably distributed global capital and the related

increase in flows of global migration. Connected to the last two is the rise of certain networked mobile technologies that have been used in particular ways by gay and bisexual migrants to navigate the material changes these wider flows have precipitated. Each of these have come together in a way that have transformed the types of intimacies practicable by the gay and bisexual men living in this area. Specifically, gay and bisexual male migrants feel alienated when they move to a part of the city whose gay collective spaces have been closing as a result of neoliberal approaches to town planning. Chemsex, organised through hook-up apps and fueled by cheap recreational drugs which foster an intense sense of togetherness, becomes a way of mitigating the alienation experienced moving into this city, so transformed by neoliberalism.

### *Flows of recreational drugs*

One of the things that has made Vauxhall distinct within the ecology of London's gay nightlife in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been the higher consumption of recreational drugs taken on its dance-floors, much more so than either the Soho or East London gay scenes. In the 2000s ecstasy, cocaine and MDMA were the most widely consumed recreational drugs in Vauxhall (Bourne *et al.* 2014). Ketamine and, what are now understood to be chemsex drugs, crystal methamphetamine and GHB/GBL were also being consumed in this period but in notably less quantities (Bolding *et al.* 2006, Hickson *et al.* 2010). This shifts in the 2010s, partly because the quality of ecstasy, cocaine and MDMA lessens and partly because GHB/GBL and mephedrone are cheaper and relatively easier to purchase (Bourne *et al.* 2014). In 2009 mephedrone (legal in the UK until April 2010) 'emerges from near obscurity' to become one of the most popular recreational drugs on Vauxhall's gay scene (Measham *et al.* 2011) and amongst young people in Britain more generally (Vardakou, Pistos and Spiliopolou 2011). The use of crystal methamphetamine, not as a cheap or as easy to purchase, does not noticeably increase in this period, and according to the public health research (and corroborated by the interviews here) is the least frequently consumed of the chemsex drugs in the UK (Bourne *et al.* 2014; Hickson *et al.* 2014). The comparatively reasonable cost of mephedrone and GHB/GBL, especially during a moment of recession, and the affects they generate in the particular historical conditions in which they are being consumed (outlined above)

are what connects them to the other flows which produce the context in which chemsex has emerged.

### *Flows of capital*

One of the other great causes of Vauxhall's post-2008 transformation are the increased flows of global capital into the area and the inequitable spatial transformations that these have caused in relation to its gay scene. Vauxhall's proximity to both the River Thames as well as the centre of London have made what has historically been an economically depressed area ripe for the sort of gentrification that has intensified across London during the period under discussion. Large amounts of global capital have flowed into the area largely through property development and facilitated by neoliberal local and national governments. For example, by 2020 there are plans for 13 developments of luxury flats to be built in Vauxhall, many around 50 stories high, with a studio flat priced at around £630,000 (Docx 2015), indicating the sort of inflated property prices that are becoming the norm across all three boroughs (and the city more widely). These sorts of luxury developments coupled with the fact that the American Embassy is moving from its historic central London location to Vauxhall, has meant Lambeth council are actively trying to make Vauxhall more attractive to luxury investment. One of the effects of this has been the dwindling of the hedonistic gay cultural spaces that gave Vauxhall its identity in the previous decade (Andersson 2011) – either through the now unaffordable rents, or the changed attitude of the council towards the gay nightclubs, who at first encouraged them to rent out Vauxhall's railway arches but who would now prefer for them to be handed over to more respectable businesses (Bychawski 2015). For example, Crash, Area and the Hoist, key Vauxhall nightlife spaces, have recently closed and luxury private members club Soho House has opened up a restaurant in a railway arch next door their old sites. Interviewee Juan, a resident of the area, reflected on what the gentrification of Vauxhall meant for the gay commercial scene in the area:

‘Vauxhall is dead, gone... London has changed so much.

#### **When did you see it change?**

2 years... I used to go to Bar Code and take pills and have a bit of ketamine and go home and be happy... It was more about being there. Then something happened. They started closing... Something happened. Call it gentrification. I don't know what

happened... When gay companies can't afford rent that's through the roof and then that place will go to Wagamama or Wahaca.<sup>5</sup> In a way I get it. You don't want people going to work, to MI6<sup>6</sup> or the American Embassy, and have the walking dead leaving Fire at 6 o'clock in the morning when they have been partying for 2 days. No it's not pretty. I get that.'

These closures are part of a wider trend in London where LGBTQI night life spaces have been closing during this period – reducing in number by 58% between 2006 and 2017 (Campkin and Marshall 2017). Some of this is reminiscent of the accounts given by queer writers of the effects of Mayor Giuliani's so-called 'cleaning-up' of New York at the end of the 1990s where queer cultural spaces (sexual and otherwise) in Lower Manhattan were either closed down or moved to other parts of the city (DeLaney 1999, Warner 1999). The result in Lower Manhattan, as it has also been in Vauxhall and other parts of London, is the diminishing of the sort of gay collective space where differentially socially located gay and bisexual men have historically gathered to socialise, dance and initiate or engage in sexual encounters. Two of my interviewees talked about the rise of chemsex in relation to Vauxhall nightclubs closing. Though in the quote above Juan is aware of the effect of gentrification on Vauxhall's gay scene, in this quote he is tentative about the precise relationship it has to chemsex:

'The whole thing with the scene... what's first the chicken or the egg... I don't know whether it was because there weren't places to go, people started to go home or people started to go home then there weren't places to go... Definitely something changed. Places are closing down and nothing is replacing them. London used to be, I think it still is – I used to go to [nightclub] Beyond all the time and the energy there just used to be *amazing*. I don't know if it still is.... For whatever reason people now prefer to be in someone's house and carry on the party there.

**So these parties have replaced the culture of going out in Vauxhall?**

Yeah... I suppose. Now because there are fewer places or because the music is not as good, or whatever reason then yeah people prefer going home. Or it could also be that people are so high on G that everyone is so horny they think lets go home now. I'm not sure.'

Similarly Matthew sees a connection but does not precisely theorise what it might be:

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<sup>5</sup> Large British restaurant chains.

<sup>6</sup> The British government's foreign intelligence agency, which is based in Vauxhall.

‘London’s nightlife ground to a halt with sex parties. There’s not a lot going on any more. I used to be a clubbing person. And then sex parties started happening. Chemsex started. Instead of a going to a party meeting them and then going to a party afterwards, people, I think... People stopped going out clubbing and just went straight to the parties.’

Understood in the light of the broader material processes that have been brought to bear on Vauxhall since around 2008, it is in quotes like these that we see the rise of chemsex beginning to make sense – as a way for gay and bisexual men to commune with each other in private accommodation, when there is much less publicly available space to do so.

### *Flows of migration*

This desire to commune with others, within the shifting spatial conditions of neoliberal London is arguably exacerbated by the great flows of migration that have been so essential to the organisation of different bodies in space under neoliberalism. Lambeth, where Vauxhall is located, has a particularly high migrant population. In 2011, 38% were born outside the UK and between 22-24% of the overall population move in and out of the borough each year (Lambeth Council 2014). There are no specific figures for gay or bisexual migration to and from Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham. Nor are figures kept for migration to these boroughs from within the rest of the UK. (Only four of the interviewees were born in London). There is evidence that shows that migration comes from across the global class structure (ibid.) – with the more affluent buying and renting the newly built luxury properties in the boroughs, and others (especially from Latin America), becoming downwardly mobile when they move into them, for a range of different reasons (McLiwane, Cock and Linneker 2011).

There is significant literature on the disorientating effects of migration generally, and complementary work on these effects on gay and bisexual men in particular (e.g. Cant 1997, Fortier 2003, Gorman-Murray 2009, Luibheid 2008). There is also an emerging body of literature that explores that ways that different gay and bisexual male migrants have used networked technologies to manage their alienating migrant experiences not only to remain in touch with their home culture (Dhoest 2016) but also to acculturate to the environments to which they have moved

(McPhail and Fisher 2015). Interestingly, in the context of chemsex, Shield found that migrants use gay dating platforms in particular against their intended purpose (to ‘hook-up’) and instead swap information about, for example, housing in ways that ‘help potential immigrants worldwide build social networks to assist with international migration and adaptation processes abroad’ (2017, p. 252). Combining aspects of McPhail and Fisher with Shield’s findings, some of my interviewees talked about how they used hook-up apps to find or organise chemsex encounters in direct response to the alienation they experienced on migrating to London. This quote from Johann who migrated to London from Slovakia via Cardiff is typical:

‘I was really depressed living in London when I moved. I thought it was just me but then I was talking to guys and they felt the same thing. You don’t have friends, you don’t have family, you’re living in a big city you do your job Monday to Friday and you have the weekend to yourself and you don’t know what to do... I was looking for company... I was feeling really lonely. I couldn’t make friends in clubs and bars... I couldn’t make friends on gay apps. Many of my friends now are guys that I met at those parties. It’s just easy when you go to parties. Even if it wasn’t sex ...’

In Johann’s quote we begin to see why chemsex sessions become appealing to a cohort of people who have historically relied on bars and clubs to establish both strong and weak communal bonds when they move to a new city with a large gay community and commercial scene – adding qualitative insight to survey data which found that migrants across Europe were more likely to engage in chemsex than non-migrants (The Emis Network 2013). Gay and bisexual men in Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham, significant numbers of whom are migrants, and who are seeking connection used to be able to find them in Vauxhall’s nightlife. But as these collective spaces slowly shut or become prohibitively expensive to enjoy, this desire to commune is, by necessity, moving into private accommodation. For some gay and bisexual men, the dancefloor and the darkroom are being replaced by the chemsex session which has no prohibitive entry fee, no over-priced alcoholic drinks and no kicking out time.<sup>7</sup> It is as the desire for collectivity within the specific conditions of neoliberal London, that the rise of chemsex can most usefully be interpreted and not

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<sup>7</sup> Something else that has diminished with the closure of these spaces is the on-site paramedics and recovery rooms that were made available for people having bad, if not potentially fatal, reactions to the drugs that they had consumed at these nightclubs (Borria, 2013). It is safe to speculate that the disappearance of these has had a significant impact on the number of chemsex-related morbidities now that these drugs are being consumed in private accommodation, away from this rapid response attention.



in the pathologised biographies of ‘vulnerable’ gay men: where the great neoliberal flows of capital crash into the great flows of migration and the forms of intimacy that are potentiated and constrained therein.

### **Queering collectivity in neoliberal times**

This desire for collectivity in historical conditions that work to prohibit this is, Jeremy Gilbert has argued, one of the defining aspects of neoliberalism’s struggle for hegemony: ‘[Neoliberalism’s] mechanisms and processes of individualization and privatization ultimately work against the formation of *any* form of potent collectivity whatsoever’ (Gilbert 2013 p. 47). In his book *Common Ground* Gilbert sets out a relational ontology in which collectivity – specifically ‘*feeling together*’ – is the basis for all effective political action; hence ‘collectivity’ itself becoming the explicit target of various neoliberal agents in their struggle for hegemony. Gilbert’s work is concerned with the political field but his ideas can be usefully adapted to consider questions of intimacy. As discussed, the prohibition of the formation of a potent collectivity has been a significant effect of the shifting spatiality of Vauxhall’s gay scene since 2008.

What the contradictions of chemsex culture, outlined above, arguably demonstrate is precisely the desire for gay and bisexual men to feel together in material conditions that have been organised through neoliberalising norms that work against this very thing. Sometimes the consumption of chemsex drugs, and the assembling of bodies into groups, successfully achieves Gilbert’s ‘*feeling together*’. The interviews show that it is this and not necessarily the sexual activity that is significant about chemsex. In Antonio’s words from above, ‘whenever you go you feel a certain way and you assume everyone is on the same level as you [...] you’re going to be in an environment where you feel safe, and whatever you do, whatever you think, whatever you say you’ll be very much accepted.’ Sometimes chemsex encounters do not produce this sense of feeling together quite as successfully e.g. the lone individual obsessively scrolling through a digital device. Though, as argued above, the fact these men choose to do this in the corner of a room filled with group activity goes some way in demonstrating that even when neoliberal ideals are being so

fully embodied in typical chemsex activity, they cannot entirely separate bodies from this desire to feel together.

It also becomes possible to interpret the contradictory affective intensities present in chemsex encounters as displaying a similar dynamic, demonstrating the force of this desire to feel together. Using a Deleuzo-Guattarian perspective to think through the relationship between chemsex's affectivity and the context in which it takes place we can argue that it is because the desire to 'feel together' becomes so strong within material arrangements organized through neoliberal norms, that this desire burns so intensely within the chemsex encounter. Conversely we could say that because neoliberalism has been so successful at diminishing the cultural spaces where potent collectivities can endure, that the 'lines of flight' generated within the chemsex encounter – the transformative capacities of its joyful affects – can so easily mutate into 'lines of death' – the psychosis, addiction or to a lesser a degree the strangeness or discomfort that frequently mingle with its more joyful affects.

Theorising chemsex's affectively charged collective intimacies within material conditions shaped by neoliberalism's struggle for hegemony is an alternative interpretation of the rise of chemsex in London in recent years to those advanced across the existing literature. This interpretation is however supported by the interviews. Two of my interviewees connected the rise of chemsex to historical processes that are widely understood to be responses to neoliberalism's individualizing and privatizing tendencies:

'It makes you really loved up and connected and really horny. So it's this perfect storm of 'why not?' On top of that because the gay community is so... I mean look at the whole Brexit thing for example, which just symbolizes that we are not tolerant of each other, we all just want to be separate... as a gay community, we're not completely included, because we're constantly getting it from all sides. We're not accepted. We're not included so let's numb the pain for a night.

**What does chemsex do in that situation?**

OK, I think, even within the gay community we're not very unified, and chemsex lubricates it so we feel connected to somebody and that's what we want don't we?

We all want to a bit of connection. That's why we're here as human beings. Sex is in some way the ultimate connection and chems make it much more intense. Its really int... because you're high... what we all want is human connection but building proper human connection takes time. It takes these little moments of connection with people until you build a relationship of any kind. With chems you streamline that process. You don't need those little moments. You have that intense connection that takes a year or years to build up immediately and that makes it OK. You have that connection.'

(Daniel)

'I think in the wider population there's more a focus on the individual... I'd probably draw comparisons with what's happening with the far right at the moment and Donald Trump, populist campaigns... Brexit. I think people are looking for places where they fit in. And there's less of a gay culture now. There's more equality so there's less of a reason to go to a gay bar. They can go to a straight bar and not hide who they are in public. So they don't go to the gay villages, or Soho.

#### **How do the chill-outs fit into that?**

They give you a sense of belonging. You find yourself in a situation where you suddenly love everyone and everyone loves you and you tell each other everything, you tell each other your secrets. You have this enormous rush of drugs and the rush of sex and everything... It's intoxicating.'

(Michael)

Here both Daniel and Michael describe a culture lacking in connection and a sense of belonging. Both attempt to link this culture of diminished collectivity to wider geopolitical events, particularly Brexit, but also Trump and the rise of political populism (they were both interviewed in June 2016). These are phenomena widely interpreted as responses to historical processes generated by the hegemony of neoliberalism, although whether they indicate its end, its intensification or another of its crises remains up for debate.<sup>8</sup> Daniel and Michael each give a different account of the way these processes have affected gay and bisexual men in particular. Daniel argues that it

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<sup>8</sup> On 15 December 2016 an academic conference was held in London posing the question 'The End of Neoliberalism?', inviting participants to debate these issues. See: <https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/event/the-end-of-neoliberalism-0> [Accessed 12 April 2017].

has generated increased homophobia whilst Michael argues precisely the opposite and that this has coincided with an increase in equality for gay and bisexual men. Either way both agree that what chemsex does in this wider historical context is provide ‘instant... intense connection’ and an ‘intoxicating... sense of belonging’.

## **Conclusion**

Different social groups have been consuming recreational drugs in sexual settings for millennia (Race *et al.* 2016). Nevertheless, this research suggests that chemsex has its specificities that gives it a distinctiveness as a cultural practice: i) the types of drugs taken, ii) the use of hook up apps to organise them, iii) the spatial and temporal specificities of its emergence and iv) the particular contradictions of the relationalities and affects it produces. Given these specificities it then becomes meaningful to think through chemsex in relation to the conjuncture in which it has emerged. This conjunctural approach has served a double purpose: i) to complicate the dominant account of its emergence in the UK’s media and medical discourses and counteract the problematic implications of these discourses and ii) to illuminate aspects of the present conjuncture that an analysis of other cultural practices might not. Intimacy has been thus far under-theorised by scholars who engage in conjunctural analysis. The organisation of different forms of intimate relations – how they are constructed, which are and are not legitimate, the affective intensities of their practice – reveals as much about an historical moment as the social, economic and political relations that these moments produce. What this analysis of chemsex has shown is the both life sustaining and life deforming ways that practices of intimacy have been constrained and potentiated during neoliberalism’s struggle for hegemony in the UK, specifically, the London context. As Melissa Greg has argued of conjunctural analysis, “the inevitable local frame of reference it demands can seriously limit the international and national purchase of even the most exemplary cultural studies work” (Gregg 2006, p.80). So although variations of chemsex are practiced in both the US and Australia (and no doubt elsewhere), they would have emerged in relation to a set of different, though not necessarily unrelated, historical processes as those described here. Further conjunctural analysis would be required in these settings to discover what precisely these processes are.

If this is the function of chemsex during this particular historical moment – providing intense connection for groups of gay and bisexual men, when the material conditions for this to flourish have been diminished for everyone – what might be its political consequences? It might be a stretch to argue that chemsex is a counter-hegemonic practice, one that constitutes resistance to the hegemony of neoliberalism in contemporary British culture. There was no evidence in the interviews that gay and bisexual men were consciously developing this practice in any explicit political sense. Nevertheless, the above quotes do show that chemsex, at least in part, reminded gay and bisexual men of the joys of collectively feeling together in ways that demonstrate that the hegemony of neoliberalism is not quite as totalizing as some accounts might suggest. It is the cultivation of the joys of this, what might be called, queer sense of collectivity and its articulation to other practices that generate similar affects and relationalities, both within and outside gay culture, where resistance to neoliberalism might be effectively constructed.

**Word Count:** 12, 250

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