



POWER DYNAMICS, "HUALOK", AND LOSS OF CONTROL IN *HI-FUN* (CHEMSEX) SETTINGS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY AMONG GAY, BISEXUAL, AND OTHER MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN IN THAILAND

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Background



Hi-fun context in Thailand

Hi-fun (chemsex in Western settings) is a form of sexualized drug use (SDU) among GBMSM, involving methamphetamine. It often includes group sex, extended sexual sessions, and intentional drug use to enhance pleasure and intimacy



Power relations

Hi-fun settings reflect broader social power dynamics, where certain individuals may hold more influence based on sexual position, sexual appearance, confidence, or social class



Financial, social and sexual capital

These forms of capital shape access, desirability, and decision-making power in *hi-fun* spaces, influencing who leads, who follows, and who gets included



Power dynamics

We aim to understand the unique dynamics of, and how norms shift power in, Thai *hi-fun* settings

Methods

1

Recruitment

30 GBMSM in Thailand, engaged in sexualized drug use within the past 12 months, were recruited from community organizations located in Bangkok, Khon Kaen, and Pattaya

2

Data collection

- 5 focus groups
- 6 in-depth interviews
- April – Sept 2024
- All interviews anonymized

3

Data analysis

- Record and transcribe interviews
- Code data using thematic analysis framework



Age	n=30
18-25	1
26-35	16
36-45	12
46+	1
Sexual orientation	
Gay	25
Bisexual	5
HIV status	
Negative	6
Negative taking PrEP	9
Diagnosed with HIV	10
Prefer not to say	5
Educational qualification	
High	18
Medium	3
Low	9
Location	
Bangkok	12
Khon Kaen	9
Pattaya	9

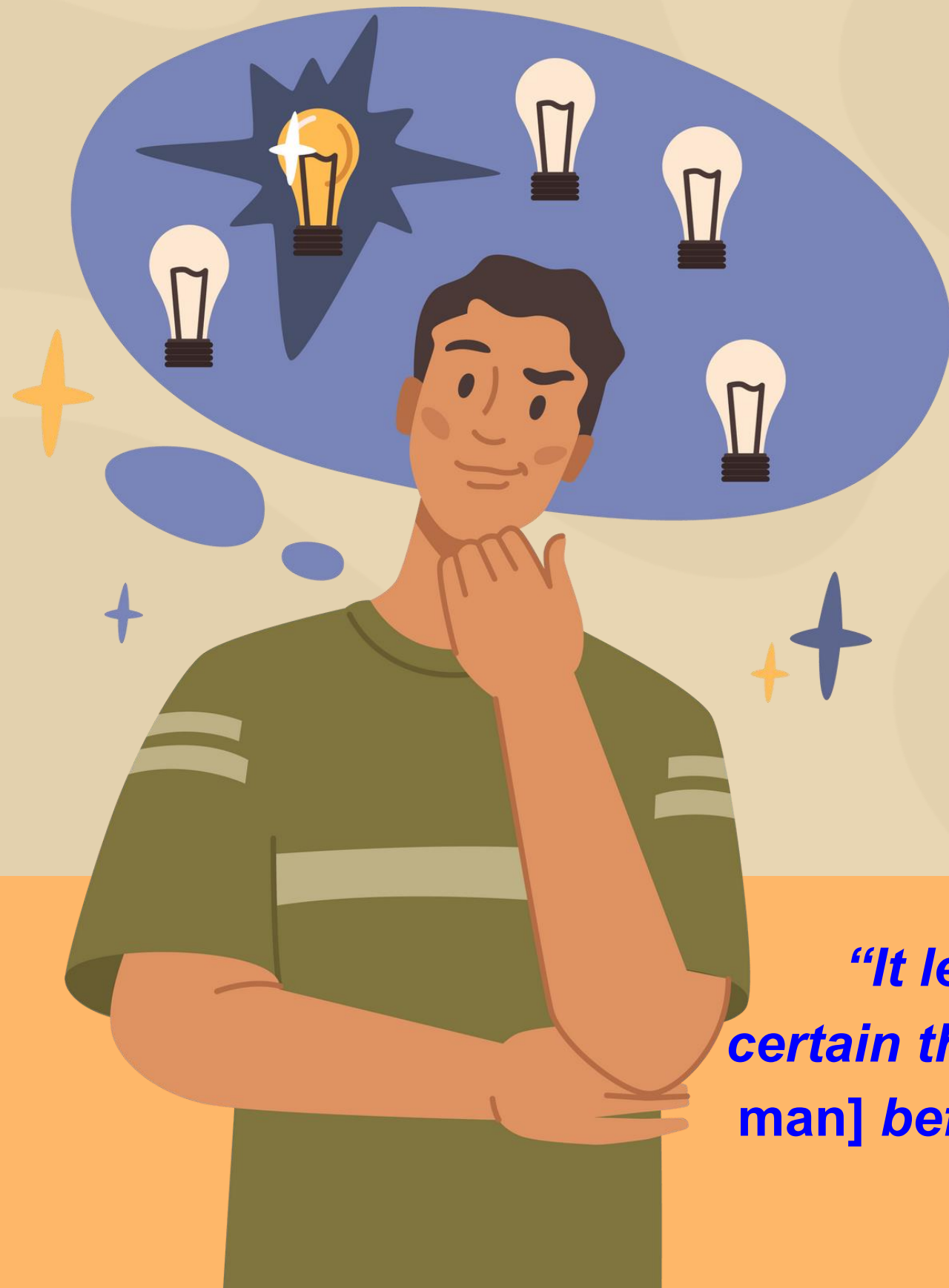
Who Took Part?

Substance Use in Sexual
Contexts
(past 12 Months)

- 7 participants were non-Thai born
- Most participants (n = 23) reported using methamphetamine before or during sex
- Other substances reported:
 - Ecstasy/MDMA (n = 14)
 - Ketamine (n = 5)
 - Cocaine (n = 5)
 - GHB/GBL (n = 2)



Exploring Fluid and Free Sexual Identities



- Freedom from social expectations
- Sexual fluidity and experimentation
- Being fully oneself
- Trying new experiences
- No need to “perform” gender or sexuality

“It let me express raw emotions more—like, usually I’d never say or do certain things, but I just did it. I mean, I’d never even been with a tom [trans man] before, and I still went for it... totally changed my sexual preference.”

FGD, Pattaya

Power and Control in Hi-Fun Settings

- Power is shaped by capital (financial / social / sexual)
- GBMSM with more capital (e.g., being attractive or sexually dominant) have greater control over:
 - Partner choice
 - Sexual practices
 - Access to drugs
- Power in *hi-fun* contexts is sometimes linked to race/ethnicity
- Power can exist even without financial resources



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"IF YOU'RE THE HOST [of the hi-fun party], PEOPLE AUTOMATICALLY RESPECT YOU. EVEN IN A GROUP SETTING, THE HOST IS STILL IN CONTROL." FGD KHON KAEN

"GOOD-LOOKING AND FIT GUYS HAVE AN ADVANTAGE, BUT IN THE END, SIZE MATTERS MORE." FGD KHON KAEN

"THOSE WHO JOIN FOR FREE AND ARE BOTTOMS USUALLY HAVE LESS POWER." FGD KHON KAEN

"...IT'S REALLY INTERESTING HOW THIS PERSON WOULD REALLY CHOOSE A PERSON FROM A COUNTRY THAT IS CONSIDERED BE LOWER THAN THAIS, WITH THE INTENTION THAT, WITH THE DRUGS THAT THEY HAVE AND WITH THE MONEY THEY HAVE, HE CAN HAVE MORE CONTROL OVER THE CHEMSEX SITUATION. HE CAN DEMAND MORE. AND HE WOULD ASSUME THAT THE PERSON FROM, LET'S SAY, BURMA OR LAO OR CAMBODIA, WOULD EASILY AGREE TO ANYTHING, COMPARED TO THAIS AGREEING TO ANYTHING THAT HE REQUESTS." FGD ENGLISH IN BKK

Power Loss & Control in Hi-Fun Contexts

Participants with less capital

- Reduced influence in group dynamics
- Limited agency in decision-making

“Hualok” – Losing self-control: Behavior beyond normative limits (e.g., hallucinations, erratic behavior)

Shifts power dynamics resulting in

- Rapid power loss Social exclusion Being blacklisting

Maintaining control = Maintaining power



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(CAN SOMEONE IN POWER CHOOSE TO REMOVE SOMEONE FROM *HI-FUN*?) “USUALLY, NOT REALLY—UNLESS THEY’RE SERIOUSLY OUT OF LINE (*HUALOK*).”

"NO ONE WANTS TO PLAY WITH SOMEONE WHO LOOKS LOST, OUT OF IT, OR CREEPY (*HUALOK*)."

"EVEN IF YOU HAVE MONEY, IF YOU FREAK OUT (*HUALOK*) , NO ONE WILL CARE ABOUT YOU ANYMORE."

"THE ONE WHO KEEPS THEIR COOL AND TAKES CARE OF OTHERS IN THE ROOM HAS THE REAL POWER."

— FGD PATTAYA

discussions



Power and control loss increases risk in *hi-fun*

- Physical, sexual, and legal risks: violent or non-consensual sex, overdose, unsafe mixing of substances, legal consequences, and safety concerns
- Social and psychological risks: social exclusion or blacklisting, exploitation by those with more power, and mental health consequences such as shame and anxiety

Freedom and being fully oneself — is it really true in hi-fun space?

- *Hi-fun* spaces can offer freedom from social control/expectations
- Men in *hi-fun* settings often value self-control and therefore men who lack self-control (*hualok*) are looked down
- Do *hi-fun* spaces (re)produce social hierarchy and internal control through the concept of ‘*hualok*’?

Interventions should empower GBMSM with less capital

- Address unequal power dynamics in *hi-fun* settings
- Promote agency and informed decision-making

Support effective communication

- Support open conversations about drug limits
- Facilitate peer-based dialogue



The concept of *hualok* offers a useful lens to understand power dynamics that is reproduced from Thai society. More research is needed to understand this concept and whether *hualok* translate to other Southeast Asian countries.

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