

Developing a locally grounded definition of *hi-fun* (chemsex) with gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (GBMSM) in Thailand: a qualitative study

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Mahidol University



Locally grounded, transnationally queer

Six-year co-production research programme exploring sexualised drug use (SDU) types among gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (GBMSM) (cis and trans) in Thailand



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UNIVERSITY



Formative
research

Years 1-2

- Systematic map
- Focus groups and interviews

Substantive
enquiry

Years 2-5

- Online cohort
- Nested qualitative sub-study

Synthesis

Years 5-6

- Care framework co-development groups

Sexualised drug use vs *hi-fun*



Sexualised drug use (SDU)

Using one or more of a wide range of drugs before/during sex



Hi-fun (chemsex)

Intentional use of **specific drugs** (methamphetamine, GHB, other stimulants) **to have prolonged sex, often with multiple partners.**

Background

- Substance use is intensely criminalised in Thailand, public health approach allowed for possession of very small amounts of drugs
- Police entrap and extort people who use drugs, including GBMSM
- Associations between SDU and incidence of:
 - HIV (HR=2.7, 95%CI=1.8-4.0)
 - HCV (HR=4.1, 95%CI=2.1-7.1)
- Mental health impacts (anxiety, depression and psychosis)
- Boundaries between *hi-fun* and other SDU are not well defined

Nevendorff et al. 2023. Guadamuz et al 2018, Piyaraj et al 2018, Wansom et al 2020, Witzel et al 2023

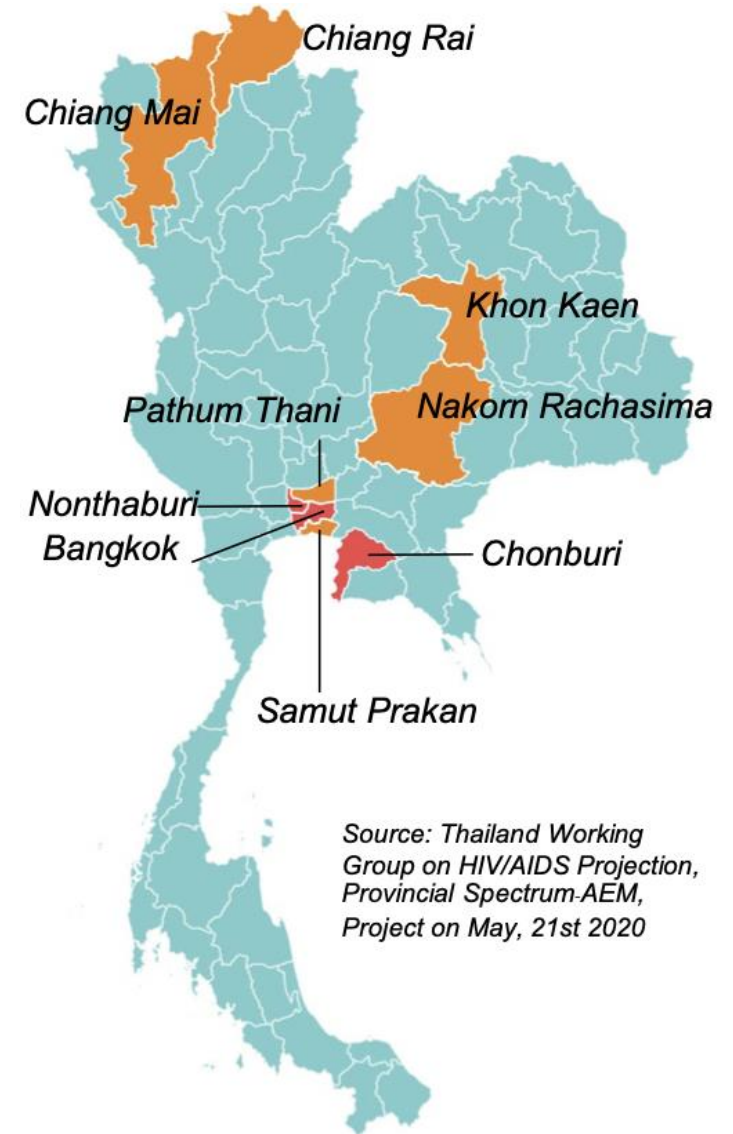
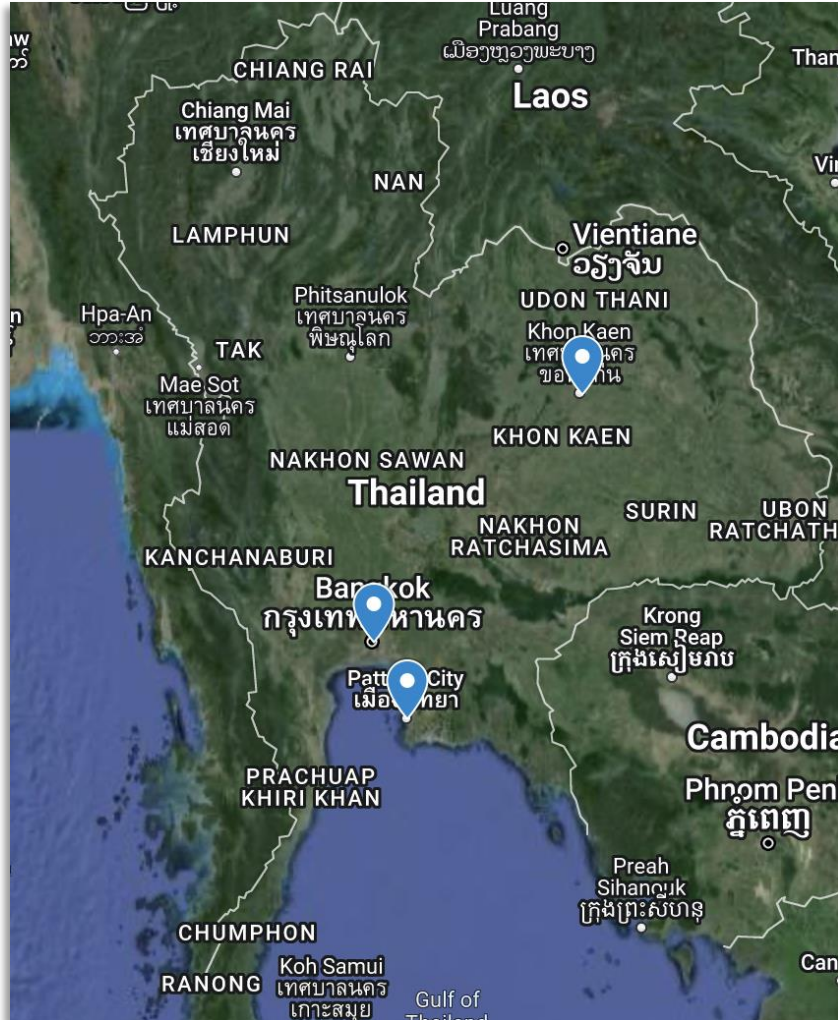


Figure: New HIV diagnoses in Thailand, 2019/2020.

Aim: to develop a locally grounded definition of *hi-fun* among GBMSM in Thailand.

Formative research methods



Focus groups and in-depth interviews with GBMSM engaged in SDU in prior 12-months

- Data collection in Bangkok, Khon Kaen and Pattaya
- Sites selected based on diversity of gay scene, tourism density and HIV prevalence
- Recruitment through community organisations
- Thematic framework analysis informed by transnational queer sociology

Transnational queer sociology

- Post-colonial theory and method
- Draws on queer theory and sociology to highlight how identity is formed among LGBTQ+ populations in Asia
- Centres on experience of queer people in Asia, and sees Western influence as secondary
- Uses comparative analysis across settings

Transnational queer sociological analysis of sexual identity and civic-political activism in Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China¹

Travis S.K. Kong 

Abstract

The sociology of homosexuality lacks engagement with queer theory and post-colonialism and focuses primarily on the global metropolises, thus failing to provide a plausible account of non-Western non-normative sexual identities. This research adopts the author's newly proposed transnational queer sociology to address these deficiencies. First, it critiques the Western model of sexual identity predominantly employed to elucidate non-Western, non-normative sexualities. It does so by examining not only the queer flows between West and non-West but also those among and within non-Western contexts to produce translocally shared and mutually referenced experiences. Second, the proposed approach combines sociology with queer theory by emphasizing the significant role of material, as well as discursive, analyses in shaping queer identities, desires and practices. This article employs the approach to examine young gay male identities, as revealed in 90 in-depth interviews conducted in Hong Kong ($n = 30$), Taiwan (Taipei, $n = 30$) and mainland China (Shanghai, $n = 30$) between 2017 and 2019. More specifically, it highlights the interplay between the state and identity by investigating the intersection and intertwining effects of these young men's sexual and cultural/national identities, revealing three different forms of civic-political activism. The article both demonstrates the way in which sexuality and the state are mutually constituted and provides nuanced analysis of the heterogeneity of contemporary homosexualities in Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China. In applying a new sociological approach to understanding sexuality, this research joins the growing body of scholarship within sociology that is decentring the Western formation of universal knowledge.

Results

Five focus groups (3 Thai, 2 English) and six in-depth interviews (4 Thai, 2 English) with 30 GBMSM in Bangkok, Khon Kaen and Pattaya

- Seven participants non-Thai born
- Most (n=23) used crystal methamphetamine (*ice*) with fewer taking other drugs (ecstasy/MDMA=14, ketamine=12, cocaine=10, GHB/GBL=5)

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

Three main types of sexualised drug use

Hi-fun

- Sexualised methamphetamine use, often in a group context
- Main goal to enhance intimacy and pleasure while extending the sexual session
- Common in all 3 cities

Sex at homepas

- Large parties involving wide range of drugs including MDMA/ecstasy, cocaine, ketamine and GHB/GBL
- Sex not primary activity but can and does occur
- More common in Bangkok and Pattaya

Incidental sex and drugs

- Incidental and situational combining of sex and drugs
- Often spontaneous and unplanned
- Includes a similar range of drugs to *homepas*
- Common in all 3 cities

Key criteria of *hi-fun*

1. Intentionality and motivations
2. Drug choice and consumption methods
3. Technology and organisation
4. Setting choice

Criteria 1: Intentionality and motivations

Motivations

- **Purposefully** combining sex and drugs with one or more other man
- Other types of SDU not considered *hi-fun* partly because of differing motivations

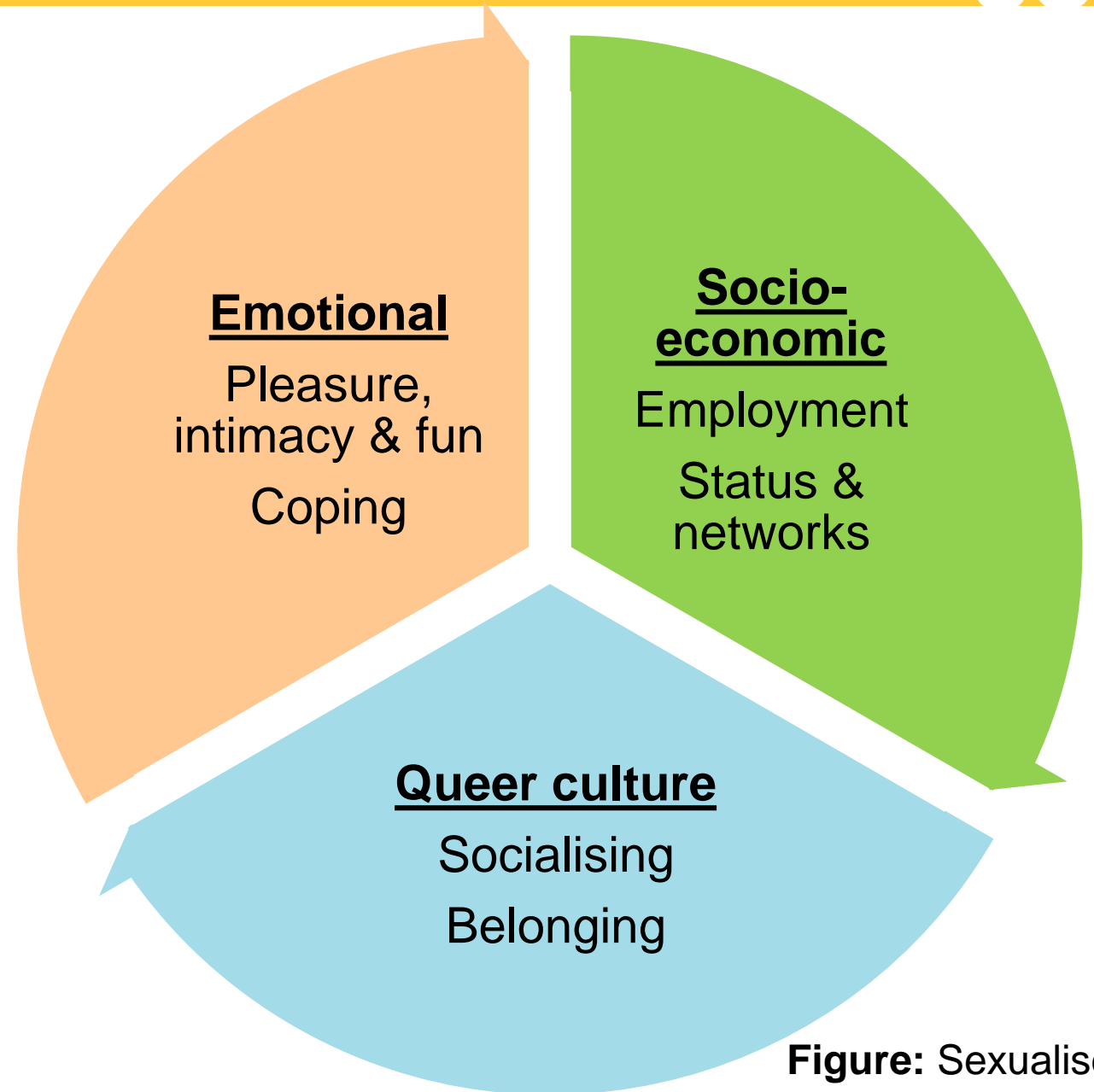


Figure: Sexualised drug use motivations

Criteria 2: Drug choice and consumption methods

Drugs and *hi-fun*



Ketamine



Ecstasy
& MDMA



Cocaine

Hi-fun

All types

Homepas & other SDU



Ice (crystal
methamphetamine)



GHB/GBL

Situationally useful

- Poppers
- Viagra
- Cannabis
- Sedatives

Market and legislative drivers of *ice* injection

- COVID-19 drug market disruption and differing degrees of government intervention led to variations in quality of *ice*, increasing injection
- Laws allowing a public health approach for possession of very small amounts of substances further incentivises injection
- Injection equipment easier to hide and/or dispose of

But about a year or years ago, more people started to use injections. [...] What I've heard is that there's also the issue of equipment. Storage and disposal of things like this will be easier. [...] it will also be a matter of [police] checkpoints here and there. There are several factors.

Focus group, Bangkok

Shifts in drug consumption norms

- Strong sense that injecting is becoming more normative, especially among Thai GBMSM
- Perceived as beginning in Bangkok and then spreading to other regions.
- Shift to injecting underpinned by the influence of Twitter and OnlyFans
- People from other East Asian countries and *falang* assumed to inject less, fracturing *hi-fun* scenes by ethnicity in Bangkok

I would just say that it's more... like more friends that I know are doing it [injection], it is becoming a bit more normalised whereas perhaps five years ago that it wasn't so common, but I definitely notice there's more friends doing it.

Focus group, Bangkok

I think maybe this [trend] came from Bangkok. It got the influence from Bangkok and Twitter. On Twitter, there is content using injection method.

Focus group, Khon Kaen

Criteria 3: Technology and organisation

Technology

- *Hi-fun* is facilitated by, and organised through, online platforms.
- Twitter and closed groups on social messaging platforms key sites for cultural expression.



Hi fun.   



Hi ชอบฉีด กอด จูบ ดูด ไชร์

📍 Bang Na, Bangkok 🌐 Born

1,551 Following **14K** Followers

Networks (open and closed)

- Criminalisation risks leads to establishment of closed networks rooted from apps/social media.
- Networks are often mixed in Pattaya, separated by ethnicity in Bangkok and by class in Khon Kaen

I don't look for people on dating apps anymore because you never know if they might be scammers or undercover police. I feel it's better to stick with the same people within my circle. [...] I'm pretty sure they're not going to turn out to be undercover cops or anything like that.

In-depth interview, Bangkok

There is no mixing of groups. Why? Because it risks their careers. They already have safe sex practices like using condoms, right? But career and reputation are beyond control. There's no vaccine or protection for that.

In-depth interview, Khon Kaen

Criteria 4: Setting choice

Hi-fun setting choice

- Nearly universally takes place in private setting
- Informed by balancing realities of built environment with risks of criminalisation and violence from other men

Private homes

- Condos most preferred location in Bangkok despite risks of violence from other men
- Private homes less popular in Khon Kaen and Pattaya where individuals are more likely live in shophouses

Hotels

- Minimises risks of gossip from neighbours and violence from other men, increases risk of discovery from staff
- Most common setting in Khon Kaen and Pattaya

Mostly, it would be at home, or in a hotel. But it's usually more in a condo because it's safer. Also, in hotels where it's harder to get in, like those that require a keycard to use the elevator.

In-depth interview, Bangkok

Participant 2: The sauna in Khon Kaen is not suitable. It's a small space, and people there often know each other. Doing that might be...

Participant 6: Dangerous.

Participant 2: I and the sauna owner also know each other. So people hardly do that.

Focus group, Khon Kaen

Public settings

- Very rarely used because of high risk of discovery and interpersonal violence

Proposed updated definition



Hi-fun

Intentionally combining sex and methamphetamine to enhance intimacy and pleasure with one or more other man/men, facilitated by technology and usually in a private setting.

Conclusions

- The legislative environment has an outsized impact on *hi-fun* drug consumption modes and organisation
- Injection of *ice* is increasing due to recent legislative change; providing safe injection support and access to clean needles is a critical priority
- Decriminalisation can reduce harms related to police violence and, potentially, from injection



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Locally grounded, transnational queer team

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