


**Please cite the Published Version**

Di Felicianantonio, Cesare  (2023) Here, there, everywhere: The relational geographies of chemsex. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*. ISSN 0020-2754

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12603>

**Publisher:** Wiley

**Version:** Published Version

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**ARTICLE**

# Here, there, everywhere: The relational geographies of chemsex

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**Funding information**

H2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions,  
Grant/Award Number: 747110

**Abstract**

In recent years sexualised drug use, usually referred to as chemsex, has become the object of intense media health-related panic and increasing academic scrutiny. Critical social scientists have challenged pathologising perspectives, analysing the socio-cultural and political economy dimensions of chemsex. Against the silence of geographers in this emerging field, the paper develops a geographical relational analysis of chemsex, focusing on the experiences of gay men living with HIV in two Italian cities (Bologna; Milan) and Italian gay men living with HIV in three English cities (Leicester; London; Manchester). Demonstrating the constitutive role of place in the practice of chemsex, the paper frames place relationally, that is, as the encounter between here and there, the material and the virtual, imagined geographies and lived spaces. To emphasise the central role of place and geographical knowledge to understand chemsex, the paper builds on 'weak theory', as it conceives things as open, entangled, connected and in flux, while focusing on ordinary practices and heterogeneity in more-than-human worlds. Showing how chemsex represents an embodied, relational geographical encounter among different human and non-human actors, places (both physical and digital), imaginations and desires, the paper highlights the role of sexual practices in the relational construction of place-making, therefore calling for an increased engagement with sex itself within the field of geographies of sexualities.

**KEYWORDS**

drugs, England, gay men, geographies of sexualities, Italy, more-than-human

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

I laugh when guys on Grindr tell me 'I don't do drugs', then we meet and they get high as shit. (Gab, 35–45, London, personal interview)

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you go online at 3 pm on a Wednesday and there is a chemsex party somewhere near you ... it's everywhere now. (Vimi, 35–45, Milan, personal interview)

These quotes from research participants interviewed between 2018 and 2020 echo the increasing perception of sexualised drug use, usually referred to as 'chemsex', as a defining component of contemporary gay sexual life across the minority world and beyond. Chemsex refers to the practice of having sexual encounters under the influence of recreational drugs among men who have sex with men (MSM). In the London context, where the term was supposedly first coined (Stuart, 2013), chemsex has been associated with the use of three drugs: mephedrone often referred to as 'mkat' in England or 'mef' in Italy, GHB/GHL often referred to as 'G', and crystallised methamphetamine often referred to as 'tina' or 'T' (also referred to as 'crystal' in Italy). However, as discussed by Fernández-Dávila (2018), any drug can be sexualised, therefore it is important not to predefine what substances count as chemsex; its definition should be based on people's experiences. For instance, in the Italian context, crystallised methamphetamine seems to be less used than other drugs, such as freebase cocaine, often referred to as 'basata' in Italy, and methylenedioxypyrovalerone, simply referred to as 'MDPV', 'MDPK' or 'peevee'. Also known as 'Party and Play' (PNP), chemsex is usually associated with unprotected sex without condoms—often referred to as 'bareback' ('BB' in slang) or raw sex, with multiple partners. Chemsex usually also involves the use of sexuopharmaceuticals (the most used being Viagra and Cialis in their patented or generic version) to support erection.

Public discourse around chemsex has been mainly characterised by a combination of, among others, moral and health-related panic (Hakim, 2019), as in the case of the monkeypox outbreak in 2022 (e.g., Ramírez De Castro, 2022); homophobic ideas around 'dangerous' gay men (Lovelock, 2018); and pathologising perspectives associating chemsex to internalised homophobia, mental health issues, addiction and HIV-related stigma (e.g., Kirby & Thornbur-Dunwell, 2013; Pollard et al., 2018; Stuart, 2013). Against this tendency towards pathologisation and methodological individualism, scholars across the social sciences have pushed the debate towards 'critical chemsex studies' (Møller & Hakim, 2021). This emerging interdisciplinary field appears to rely on three main lines of enquiry: (1) going beyond the risk paradigm (e.g., Drysdale et al., 2020); (2) the socio-cultural and political economy dimension of chemsex (e.g., Hakim, 2019); and (3) the focus on play and pleasure to understand gay intimacy and sociality (e.g., Pienaar et al., 2020).

Geographers have yet to contribute to this field, despite the frequent association of chemsex with urban/metropolitan areas, 'gayborhoods' and private homes. In order to start filling this gap, the paper develops a geographical relational analysis of the wide-spreading of this sexual practice, focusing on the experiences of gay men living with HIV in two Italian cities (Bologna; Milan) and Italian gay men living with HIV in three English cities (Leicester; London; Manchester). Assigning a central role to place in the analysis of chemsex, the paper frames place *relationally* (e.g., Darling, 2009; Massey, 2005); that is, as the encounter between *here* and *there*, the material and the virtual, imagined geographies and lived spaces. Through these lenses, the geographies of chemsex include, among others, the private home, the digital spaces of hook-up applications, sex on premises venues such as bathhouses and clubs, the city of residence, mobilities towards different places (mostly for leisure) both in Italy and abroad, cultural sexual imageries of places and countries.

To emphasise the central role of place and geographical knowledge to understand chemsex, the paper's theoretical framework builds on 'weak theory' (e.g., Gibson-Graham, 2006; Sedgwick, 1997; Tomkins, 1963) because it conceives things as open, entangled, connected and in flux, while focusing on ordinary practices and heterogeneity in more-than-human worlds. This approach rejects the 'strong theory' perspective—that is, 'powerful discourses that organise events into understandable and seemingly predictable trajectories' (Gibson-Graham, 2014, p. S148)—of those analyses that have framed chemsex as a psychological/medical individual issue of people in need of being 'repaired' and have therefore downplayed its social and cultural character. By developing a 'weak geographical theory' of chemsex, the paper responds to the call formulated more than a decade ago by Del Casino Jr (2007), inviting geographers to engage with the intersection among sexual practices, drug use, sexuopharmaceuticals, sexual health and masculinities. As acknowledged by Davies et al. (2018) in their review on sexuality, space and health, Del Casino Jr's call has remained unanswered both in geographies of sexualities and health geographies.

Showing how chemsex represents an embodied, relational geographical encounter among different human and non-human actors, places (both physical and digital), imaginations and desires, the paper contributes to research in three ways. First, it brings a relational geographical analysis within the interdisciplinary literature on chemsex, showing the constitutive role of place for chemsex. Against the geographical reductionism of existing analyses of these practices, reducing place to merely a context where acts and encounters take place, the paper demonstrates that place *actively* shapes the different ways people practice chemsex. In doing so, it also rejects the determinism of those analyses circum-

scribing chemsex only to specific metropolitan locations considered in isolation from other places (in the same country and abroad). Second, it highlights the central role of sex and more-than-human elements (notably recreational drugs, sexuopharmaceuticals and antiretroviral therapies [ARTs] taken by people living with HIV to maintain an undetectable viral load and therefore not transmit the virus) in the relational construction of place. Geographers of sexualities (e.g., Binnie, 2014; Di Feliciano & Gadelha, 2017; Gorman-Murray & Nash, 2014; Greene, 2018; Hubbard, 2012) have engaged with the role of sexual imagination and desire in relational place-making, but have overlooked the role of sexual practices. This leads to the third contribution of the paper; that is, bringing back sex itself into the core of the analysis within geographies of sexualities, notably one of the practices that has created most controversial public debates in recent years in many countries around the globe. Geographies of sexualities have increasingly become a legitimate field of studies, but despite its popularity, the engagement with sexual practices has remained limited (Bell, 2007; Binnie, 1997; Brown et al., 2011; Brown & Di Feliciano, 2022; for some exceptions see Bain & Nash, 2006; Bonner-Thompson, 2017, 2021; Brown, 2008a; Di Feliciano, 2019; Gurney, 2000; Langarita, 2019; Misgav & Johnston, 2014; Sanders-McDonagh, 2017), its main focus being on identities (Binnie & Valentine, 1999; Brown, 2012; Browne et al., 2007; Johnston, 2016). Conceptualising spaces and subjectivities as always emerging and provisional (Jones, 2009), the relational understanding of place adopted in the paper allows us to explore *what bodies can do* in the ‘messiness’ of sexual desire (Brown, 2008a; Lim, 2007), reaffirming the spatial character of sexual practices as they are ‘assembled through a myriad of materials (human and non-human, organic and inorganic) and expressive forces (moods, emotions, intensities and affects)’ (Bonner-Thompson, 2021, p. 452). Such a reconceptualisation destabilises the centrality of identity categories—built, among others, around age, body size, gender, sexual orientation and race—to understand sexual encounters in more-than-human worlds (Caluya, 2008; Di Feliciano, 2022b), without denying the persistence of power relations that discipline bodies and societies.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. The next two sections present the theoretical framework of the article, bringing together critical social science perspectives on chemsex, relational geographical perspectives and weak theory. The fourth section discusses the research methodology, followed by two empirical sections. The fifth section focuses on the urban relational character of chemsex, showing how in the participants’ narratives the ‘discovery’ of this practice is associated with cities located *elsewhere*, while Italy and its cities are narrated as ‘backward’. The sixth section analyses the (weak) relation between space, drugs and sexual practices, highlighting the central role of movement in favouring the encounter between different human and non-human actors. Finally, the conclusions emphasise the importance of geographical knowledge for a better understanding of chemsex, while also inviting geographers to engage with the materiality of sex.

## 2 | CONCEPTUALISING CHEMSEX FROM A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Even though the association between gay sex and intoxication has a longstanding history (Race, 2018), what is usually referred to as chemsex (Stuart, 2016) assumes specific contemporary connotations because it includes the use of smartphones and hook-up apps. As discussed by Race (2018), all the elements composing chemsex (internet and hook-up apps; unprotected sex with multiple partners; recreational drug use) have traditionally been seen as pathological by health professionals and scholars because they are connected to rising HIV and sexually transmitted infection rates. Moreover, epidemiological research has found correlations between chemsex and HIV infection on one side, and histories of abuse and mental health issues on the other (Brennan et al., 2007; Stall et al., 2008). While these findings pose troubling questions that cannot be ignored, the problem with relying solely on a medical/psychiatric categorisation to frame a social phenomenon is that it tends to reduce the whole process to individual histories of damage. Against this reductive and pathologising perspective, Race frames chemsex as a sociocultural assemblage:

A collective, evolving scene of practices, affective relations, meanings, objects and devices with their own organizing logics, relative coherence and synergistic dynamics; a material source of pleasure, connection, eroticism, intimacy, experimentation and transformation for many participants, notwithstanding the known dangers. (2018, p. 134)

The dimensions of pleasure, intimacy and experimentation were already highlighted in the study by Hurley and Prestage (2009) where they introduced the concept of ‘intensive sex partying’ (ISP), resulting from the intersection between ‘sex

pigs’—defined by João Florêncio (2020) as those whose bodies become porous and open to semen, piss and the bodily fluids of others—and ‘party boys’, that is, those attending gay parties often under the influence of illicit drugs. This encounter produced ‘frequent partying, frequent sex, higher rates of anal sex than amongst gay men generally, sequential or simultaneous sex partners, specific drug combinations, a broad sexual repertoire with sexual experimentation and unprotected anal intercourse with casual partners’ (2009, pp. 597–8). Hurley and Prestage’s analytical framework accounts for the relation between sex, intensity, pleasure and partying in order to go beyond a pathological reading of these practices. Their analysis also makes a clear mention of spatial elements, ISP occurring ‘in domestic spaces, sex parties, and sex-on-premises venues’ (p. 598).

In a paper published in 2015, Race produced a deep advancement to the current critical understanding of chemsex by approaching it as a ‘culture’, that is, ‘a cluster of activities and practices that are meaningful for participants with their own organizing logics and relative coherence; a significant source of pleasure, connection, eroticism and intimacy—notwithstanding the known dangers’ (p. 256). Following his more general interest in rethinking prevention strategies beyond hegemonic models based on a negative representation of sex, Race emphasises how the sexual spaces produced by chemsex often lead to community formation. This is a well established argument for geographers of sexualities who have highlighted the generative relationship between sex, space and community formation (e.g., McGlynn, 2021; Sibalis, 2004). In Race’s view, chemsex results from considering sex as play within online gay communities, opening new possibilities for pleasure and experimentation. A more recent study (Pienaar et al., 2020), aimed at challenging the view of drugs as inherently harmful and risky without considering the other phenomena composing individual and collective lives, explored how the use of drugs allow research participants to alter their bodily experience (in the case of people who might struggle with their own bodies such as trans people) and experiment with erotic practices that they would have never imagined trying.

In conceptualising chemsex as culture, Race (2015, 2018) also makes another major contribution to the debate by analysing the specific role of what he defines as ‘infrastructures of the sexual encounter’; that is, 3G, Wi-Fi, hook-up devices, seen as *mediators* of the sexual encounter, ‘making certain activities, relations, and practices possible while obviating others’ (2015, p. 254). According to Race, access to these devices is key in defining chemsex together with the possibility of having access to private accommodation in urban centres, ‘something that depends in the contemporary metropolis on economic affluence and/or cultural capital to an unprecedented degree’ (2015, p. 254).

Building on the work of Race, Hakim (2019) analyses the rise of chemsex in London as part of a series of conjunctural dynamics, digital technologies being only one of them. For Hakim, chemsex highlights changes in practices of intimacy available to gay and bisexual men under the current configuration of neoliberalism in Britain, analysed through the lenses of the city of London as materially shaped by neoliberalism, and the ways migration patterns have also been reconfigured by the neoliberal logic. Opposing the panic behind chemsex in public discourse in Britain, Hakim defines chemsex in London as ‘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 & 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’ (2019, p. 253).

By acknowledging the cultural and social dimension of chemsex, the works discussed in this section represent key references for the analytical effort of the paper. However, what is missing in these analyses is the spatial nature of chemsex; that is, how specific spatialities (and situations) shape chemsex (for an exception, even though not focused on chemsex, but on drug consumption and clubbing, see Slavin, 2004). I am not arguing that these contributions do not engage with space; as seen, Hurley and Prestage (2009) acknowledge the central role of domestic spaces and sex-on-premises venues, while Race and Hakim define chemsex as an urban phenomenon. From a geographer’s perspective, there are two main problems with this sort of engagement with space. First, assuming that chemsex occurs only in large urban centres results from the high visibility of gay spaces and services (including sexual health and NGOs) there, reifying the erasure of homosexual lives and experiences in ‘ordinary’, small towns and less densely inhabited areas (Brown, 2008b; Myrdahl, 2013). In times of housing unaffordability and gentrification well beyond central metropolitan locations (Lees et al., 2016), the residential locations of gay and bisexual men have become more diverse (Di Felicianonio & Dagkouly-Kyriakoglou, 2022; Gorman-Murray & Waitt, 2009; Whittemore & Smart, 2016), and so erasing their experiences is problematic. Second, the spatialities of chemsex cannot be considered in isolation, the risk being of ‘isolating’ phenomena, erasing their multiscalar and complex character. To overcome these limitations, in the next section I propose a geographical relational reading of chemsex based on ‘weak theory’.

### 3 | RELATIONAL GEOGRAPHIES AND WEAK THEORY

The conception of place in this paper is relational, this being a well established approach in human geography (Jones, 2009; Pierce et al., 2011). Framing the geographies of chemsex as relational means acknowledging that spaces result from the interactions with other spaces, individuals and non-human elements but they also concur to reshape them; this co-construction is ever-changing and open. According to Massey (2004, 2005) the local (place) is not less abstract than the global, flows and connections making places for what they are. So 'a real recognition of the relationality of space points to a politics of connectivity' (Massey, 2005, p. 17). In a similar vein, Amin defines place

as a site of intersection between network topologies and territorial legacies. The result is no simple displacement of the local by the global, of place by space, of history by simultaneity and flow, of small by big scale, or of the proximate by the remote. Instead, it is a subtle folding together of the distant and the proximate, the virtual and the material, presence and absence, flow and stasis, into a single ontological plane upon which location—a place on the map—has come to be relationally and topologically defined. (2007, p. 103)

The relational approach has also been adopted within geographies of sexualities. In their analyses of the changes of LGBT neighbourhoods in Sydney, Gorman-Murray and Nash (2014) have suggested to frame them 'as mobile and relational spaces—mutable assemblages, repeatedly (re)constructed from flows of people, knowledge and capital. These mobile practices and representations both constitute and connect places, symbolically and materially, in geographically and historically contextual ways' (p. 624). The paper extends Gorman-Murray and Nash's analysis to the spaces of chemsex, showing how they are (re)made by different actors (both human and non-human) through different mobile practices (and encounters) that connect different places.

Binnie (2014) has called for a relational comparative perspective (on relational comparison see, among others, Robinson, 2011; Ward, 2010) to the study of sexuality and desire and the making of 'world cities'. According to Binnie, a relational comparative perspective challenges 'narratives about the relative "backwardness" or "progressiveness" of cities with regard to the regulation of sexualities that has been used to mark some cities as more tolerant, cosmopolitan and entrepreneurially creative than others' (2014, p. 596). As it will be shown in the analysis, narratives of 'backwardness' and 'progressiveness' (but also 'sexiness' or 'pigginess') are central in the research participants' depictions of places and sexual encounters.

How do we theorise the coming together of different spaces, places, human actors and non-human elements (such as drugs and sexuopharmaceuticals), mediators (in Race's conceptualisation) and knowledges in shaping the practice of chemsex? Rather than looking for socio-spatial relations of causality and closed, all-encompassing readings of chemsex, I here propose to look at weak theory. Originally introduced by Tomkins (1963) in his work on affect, weak theory has been advocated by Sedgwick (e.g., Sedgwick, 1997, 2003) as a response to the comprehensiveness and grand claims of 'strong theory'. Discussing Tomkins' work in a co-authored paper, she argues that 'the measure of a theory's strength is not how well it avoid negative affect or finds positive affect, but the size and topology of the domain it organises and its methods of determining that domain' (1995, p. 519). In human geography, weak theory is at the core of Gibson-Graham's project (e.g., Gibson-Graham, 2006, 2008) against capitalocentrism, exemplified by strong theory's reductionist view of the world as organised only by capitalism and neoliberalism (for a recent critique of this approach in a decolonial perspective, see Naylor & Thayer, 2022). For Gibson-Graham, adopting weak theory is a way to think and explore different possibilities beyond 'what we already know' (2008, p. 619):

the practice of weak theory involves refusing to extend explanation too widely or deeply, refusing to know too much ... Weak theory could be undertaken with a reparative motive that welcomes surprise, tolerates coexistence, and cares for the new, providing a welcoming environment for the objects of our thoughts. (2008, p. 619)

Following Gibson-Graham, Wright has recently proposed a weak theory of belonging because it 'promotes attention to affective assemblages, to the ways things, people, affects and places, with different trajectories, may come together, albeit in often tentative, inconclusive or evolving ways' (2015, p. 392).

Gibson-Graham's work has also inspired Del Casino Jr's (2007) call to think the geographical relation between sex and drugs through 'flaccid theory', a form of weak theory, because it allows us to understand the complex geographies of drug use and sex. Writing about the absence of studies on the sexualised geographies of drugs, Del Casino Jr refers primarily to Viagra, but in the paper he discusses different uses of the drug beyond its original scope (and promotional message),

mentioning the example of gay men using Viagra in combination with recreational drugs to experiment with new forms of sexual pleasure. Del Casino Jr's paper ends with a call for analyses of 'the networked relations of drugs and sex, the reorganization of space in relation to the use of drugs and practices of sex, and the performances of place through the use of drugs. These analyses need not exclude complexity, difference, and diversity' (2007, p. 910). While the focus of this paper is on the geographies of sex and multiple forms of drugs (recreational; sexuopharmaceuticals; ARTs) rather than just sexuopharmaceuticals, it responds to Del Casino's call by analysing the central role of the relational construction of place in the experience of chemsex for gay men living with HIV.

#### 4 | METHODOLOGY

The article draws on research conducted as part of a comparative transnational project (2018–20) about the lives of different generations of gay men living with HIV in England and Italy. Beyond my familiarity with the Italian case, the countries were mainly chosen for the different configuration of their welfare systems, the main hypothesis of the project being that the configuration of welfare systems impacts on the living choices of gay men living with HIV (Di Felicianonio, 2020). Moreover, their differences in terms of unemployment and economic attractiveness, emigration rates, perceived homophobia and lack of protection against discrimination (the UK ranks 14th in the latest ILGA-Europe country ranking, Italy 33rd) allowed me to explore the role of different factors in driving the life choices of gay men living with HIV.

The project relied on different methods (an online survey; biographic interviews; interviews with service providers; media discourse analysis), but the present article has been mainly informed by biographic interviews with gay men living with HIV (for an overall presentation of the project, see Di Felicianonio, 2022a). Fifty-nine biographic interviews have been conducted across the two countries, the analysis included in the paper focusing only on those who made reference to practicing chemsex (25 out of 59 participants). In order to emphasise the relational geographical perspective of the paper, the paper focuses on 19 out of the 25 narratives about chemsex; that is, those of participants living in Italy and those of Italians living in England. Interviews were conducted in person by the author across two Italian cities (Bologna, three interviews; Milan, eight interviews) and three English ones (London, five interviews; Manchester, two interviews; Leicester, one interview). The original project did not include London, but I decided to include it for two main reasons: the struggle to find research participants in Leicester; and to better emphasise the relational geographical perspective of the project by interviewing Italians who previously lived in one of the major Italian cities (including Bologna and Milan). The relevance of the cities where the research has been conducted in relation to chemsex is proven by the increasing presence of specialised community services and programmes around chemsex in all of them. Moreover, panic discourse (Hakim, 2019) around chemsex has emerged in both countries, with a myriad of sensationalist pieces published across the media.

Participants were recruited through ads in online hook-up apps and websites (Grindr, Bareback Real Time), attendance to dozens of meetings and events destined for gay men living with HIV, and snowballing. The age range of the 19 participants whose narratives informed this paper ranges from the age group 18–25 to 55–65. One participant belongs to the group 18–25; four to the group 25–35; eight to the group 35–45; five to the group 45–55; and one to the group 55–65. Among the 11 living in Italy, eight of them hold an Italian passport, one holds an EU passport, and two a non-EU passport; three out of the 11 are non-white. Among the eight Italians living in England, none of them holds a British passport; one out of the eight is non-white.

The study has received ethical approval from both the University of Leicester and the funder (European Commission) through two separate review processes. All participants provided informed written consent and their participation was voluntary without remuneration. Whenever possible, interviews were based on the guidelines of the biographic narrative interpretive method (BNIM; see Wengraf, 2001); that is, the interview was conducted in two parts. In the first, the participant was only asked a very broad question about his life, so he was actually free to talk about whatever he wanted, for as long as he wanted; there was no moderation from my part. The second part followed the more traditional model of the semi-structured interview, whereas the questions were based on what was (not) said in the first interview. As expected, the interviews diverged greatly in length (from 62 to 341 min in total) and topics covered. Participants were free to use objects or pictures that they felt the need for. In the case of participants struggling with the chronological sequence of the events they discussed, we used mental maps of time and space. To make the space of the interview more comfortable, before recording, participants were given the opportunity to chat and ask any question they wanted. The interviews were conducted in places chosen by participants to make them feel more comfortable. All the interviews considered for this article were in Italian, the quotes included were translated by the author. Transcriptions were coded through a three-stage

process. The first stage was based on a lifecourse perspective, thus turning points were highlighted (e.g., ‘moving for university’, ‘migration abroad’, ‘new job’); the second stage was based on topics (e.g., ‘sexual life’, ‘love life’, ‘healthcare’); the third one on ‘emotional codes’ (e.g., ‘distress’, ‘happiness’, ‘enjoyment’) associated with each life transition and topic.

In line with ethical guidelines, the interviews were fully anonymous (i.e., any personal information making them identifiable was removed; other characteristics, such as age and occupation, were classified under general categories) and the participants were given the opportunity to choose a pseudonym or code. However, as I have discussed in-depth elsewhere (Di Felicianonio, 2021), the principle of anonymity has not remained uncontested by research participants who somehow felt it was a paternalistic way to hide who they are, this (i.e., being open about their HIV status) being something that took them a long time to accept and practice. Although a detailed analysis of the ethical implications of the research project goes beyond the scope and possibilities of this paper, it is important to acknowledge that research on these topics (living with HIV; drug consumption; ‘kinky’ sexual practices) poses troubling questions for the institutional and bureaucratic processes currently used by university and funders ethical committees, mainly built around biomedical research (Dyer & Demeritt, 2009). My approach is rather driven by the principles of the ‘ethics of care’ (Lawson, 2007) that has come to inspire an increasing number of studies in human geography and across the social sciences (e.g., Askins & Blazek, 2017; Power, 2019).

## 5 | RELATIONAL URBAN GEOGRAPHIES OF CHEMSEX

Existing scholarship on chemsex tends to frame it mainly as an urban phenomenon. The aim of this section is to show the relational construction of the urban in the ‘discovery’ and practice of chemsex among my research participants, some cities *elsewhere* narrated as ‘progressive’, ‘modern’ and ‘European’, while Italian cities (*here*) are framed as ‘backward’. However, the section complicates this dualism by discussing the ongoing changes in the Italian chemsex culture as resulting from mobilities.

The analysis of the narratives of my research participants seems to confirm the idea that the discovery of, and the following engagement with, chemsex are unambiguously associated with cities. However, an important element emerges from the analysis when compared with existing studies: chemsex is associated with specific cities (or prime gay holiday locations such as Gran Canaria) *elsewhere*, not the city of residence. The following quote from the interview with Madox (35–45, Milan) highlights this:

**Madox:** If I’m not wrong, it was 2013 when I had my first chemsex session. I was on holidays in Berlin with a friend of mine, we went to Berghain and we met these guys, very very cute, we ended up at their place, I think we were like seven and they offered us Tina, which I had never tried it before ...

**Interviewer:** So it was the first time you were doing sex with multiple partners under the influence of drugs?

**Madox:** Not exactly, I had been to some orgies and been using coke or MD, but that was different.

**Interviewer:** How?

**Madox:** We went on for like 36 hours, I had never had sex for so long before that, ... the main thing was the atmosphere, everyone was so chilled and relaxed, but also so pig [*maiale*], I felt like everything was possible, I could do whatever, I did whatever [laughs] ... I had never experienced this in Milan.

In the prosecution of the interview, Madox said that he usually goes to Berlin at least once a year (please bear in mind the interviews with him were conducted before COVID-19), sometimes even four, this being very easy thanks to low-cost flights (Madox is low/middle class, he works as a shop assistant in a retail store and shares his flat with another person in order to be able to afford to live in Milan). When asked about what makes him go back to Berlin so often, he said that ‘it’s the spirit of the city, you can be whoever you want and do whatever you want’. According to him, this is prevented in Milan by ‘the attitude of people ... if you do something, the next day half Grindr knows what you did and you are labelled as a dirty pig’. For Madox, this symbolises the persisting hypocrisy of Italian society around sex despite the increasing acceptance and visibility of gay men in the country, especially in Milan. In his words: ‘Milan is the only place I can live in Italy, the rest is just provincial culture ... but at the end of the day Milan is still in Italy’.

Madox’s interview highlights several common themes that emerged throughout the research. The first is the association with the discovery of chemsex with a city located *elsewhere*. The most cited cities are Amsterdam, Barcelona, Berlin, Brussels and Madrid, all well known main gay destinations attracting gay visitors and migrants from Europe and the rest of the world thanks to the presence of established parties (e.g., *La Demence* in Brussels), clubs (e.g., Berghain in Berlin,



see Andersson, 2022b), festivals (Circuit in Barcelona, see Di Felicianonio, 2019) and 'gayborhoods' (e.g., Chueca in Madrid). Likewise other world cities, these are diverse in terms of population (including high queer visibility); however, they can be defined as prime examples of 'erotic cities' according to the analysis of Hubbard (2012, p. 186): 'while all world cities are seductive, some cities are decidedly more seductive than others, becoming de facto *erotic cities*'. While Hubbard's analysis of cities such as Bangkok, Havana and Las Vegas is mainly centred around heterosexual desire, his definition can be extended to different cities, such as the abovementioned ones, in order to address homosexual desire.

The second theme highlighted in Madox's words and that emerged in several interviews represents a sort of paradox; that is, the narrated 'discovery' of chemsex does not necessarily mark the first encounter with sex under the influence of drugs, several narratives describing an established frequency of having sex when clubbing (and consuming mainly MDMA, coke or ketamine) or right after the end of the party. However, participants do not frame those encounters as chemsex. From the analysis of narratives, the 'discovery of chemsex' is in fact associated to three elements: (1) the encounter with a new drug ('tina' in the case of Madox, 'mef' or 'G' in other cases); (2) a longer duration of the sexual encounter (that can be connected to the use of 'tina' and 'mef'); and (3) being on holiday or, more generally, away from home, because in Italy 'chemsex was not a thing' (Alpe, 35–45, Bologna). The discovery of chemsex abroad meant that when re-engaging with this practice once back home they became some sort of 'pioneers' importing the practice. As argued by MrP (45–55, Milan), 'in 2011, 2012, there was no profile on Grindr with a pill or indicating "chems", you wrote "chems" in your messages and nobody understood what it was about ... now it is everywhere on Grindr, you can easily find chemsex orgies on a Tuesday afternoon, the city has changed, it has become more European, even though there is still a lot of blame discourse around chemsex, it is unbearable'.

The third theme refers to a full discovery of sexual pleasure and 'pigginess' associated with chemsex (Florêncio, 2020). As a matter of fact, Madox's words, 'I felt like everything was possible, I could do whatever, I did whatever', echo the words of several participants, including older ones (Di Felicianonio, 2022b), for whom chemsex has represented an important step forward in their experience of sexual pleasure. This confirms what has already been discussed in multiple studies (e.g., Hurley & Prestage, 2009; Race, 2015); that is, chemsex is usually associated with *enhanced* sexual pleasure. However, I here want to stress the specific spatial relational construction of sexual pleasure: the maximisation of pleasure is associated with the construction of spaces that resemble what can be found abroad. While MrP's words quoted above associate the wide-spreading of chemsex with Milan becoming more 'European', other participants made reference to specific cities. For instance, Gianluca (45–55, Milan) describes how 'Milan has become like London, you can find chill-outs [English word used] whenever you want, you don't need to rely on few clubs open for few hours at night ... For someone like me who loves long sessions with fisting, this is fantastic ... my sexual life has really improved'. This narrative also emerges among research participants living in England, such as Lorenzo (35–45, Leicester) who, in relation to a recent trip to Milan and Rome, discusses: 'Things are changing! ... I really had the impression of being in Europe, especially in Milan, guys were more open than what I remembered, it was a lot of fun'.

Despite the description of more (and better) opportunities, the majority of participants continue to perceive and represent Italy (and its cities) as 'backward', this being the fourth theme highlighted by Madox's words ('but at the end of the day Milan is still in Italy'). The idea of living in a 'backward' country or city is inherently related to other places seen as 'forward' (*stanno avanti*) is one of the most common Italian expressions used in the interviews to refer to places like London or Madrid, while they refer to Italy as *stare indietro*). In particular, the being 'forward' of other places appears to be mainly based on three considerations. First, more 'freedom', that is, nobody cares about what you do, those cities and countries being perceived as less homophobic than Italy (and its cities, including Milan). Interestingly, these considerations seem to also include healthcare institutions and medical professionals. Gab (35–45, London) describes the English sexual healthcare system as 'very open', giving patients the possibility 'to speak without brakes' of sexual practices and prevention, while in the Italian cities where he lived before (Rome and Milan), he encountered mainly prudery, 'the doctor does not even look into your eyes if the conversation is about sex'. Second, more relaxedness around drug consumption and less police controls abroad. In one of the most detailed accounts of drug access shared during the interviews, Gab explains how easy it is to buy drugs in London, 'the dealer comes to your place ... you can text him on WhatsApp, you get a full menu of what is available including prices'. Similar descriptions have been provided by the interviewees in Manchester as well as by other research participants in relation to other European cities (the most cited about this being Amsterdam, Barcelona and Madrid). On the contrary, dealers in Italy are described as extremely cautious because of the heavy regime of police control. Participants associate the relaxedness abroad with an increased availability of a wider set of drugs, especially 'tina', which in Italy seems to still be rare (and extremely expensive). The unavailability of the drug makes the narrative of the interviewees around 'tina' semi-romantic, some of the descriptions for the experience of using 'tina' being 'incredible', 'beyond what you can dream' and 'unforgettable'. Third, gay guys in those erotic cities

are 'piggier', that is, more open towards experimenting with different sexual practices (e.g., fisting, double penetrations, role playing, sex in public space) and exchanging bodily fluids (for a discussion on the role of bodily fluids in the sexual practices of gay men living with HIV, see Brown & Di Felicianonio, 2022). Several participants associate this openness with an increased use of 'tina' abroad (in Bologna and Milan the drug most used for chemsex parties seems to be 'basata'). However, the situation appears to be changing in Italy thanks to transnational tourism and mobilities, several participants acknowledging how gay guys seem to have become more available to experimentation (and how the use of 'tina' seems to have increased over the years, as previously occurred with 'mef'). Taken together, these considerations reveal that the experience and the perception of place are always built in relation to other places (experienced and/or imagined) increasingly connected through the circulation of people, practices, information, goods (including different types of drugs) and cultural references (Massey, 2005).

This discussion echoes Binnie's point (Binnie, 2014) about the relational construction of 'backwardness' and 'forwardness': the symbolic construction of specific places as 'progressive' and more sexually open and tolerant, established through specific events (festivals, parties) and spatial configurations (the 'gayborhood'), still shapes gay men's narratives of sexual practices and place imageries, attracting them for leisure (or migration). This process reproduces specific urban inequalities, with some cities (in a very limited range of countries) represented as more 'tolerant' and 'open' than others in the regulation of sexualities. On a related note, Szulc (2022) has recently analysed the narratives of Polish queer migrants living in the UK in relation to a 'European identity' ideal, highlighting how research participants tend to consider Europe positively, as it stands for modernity, openness and diversity, including LGBTQ rights. However, his analysis reveals how this representation seems to be mostly associated with Western Europe, the 'real' Europe, while its peripheries, defined by Szulc as 'internal Others' (p. 389), are constructed on a temporal scale as "not European yet" with a (rather bleak) potential of becoming "European enough" (p. 389). In line with Binnie and Szulc's analyses, my research shows how ideas, practices and knowledge around sexualised drug use, and gay sex more generally, circulate, their circulation making Italy and some of its cities more 'European' and 'forward' (*avanti*). In the narratives of research participants, cities are therefore constructed and defined in light of their relationship with an imagined 'progressive' Europe characterised by openness, sexual experimentation and tolerance towards sexualised drug use. The relational opposition between 'here' and 'there' appears to reinforce the view of 'Europe' as a beacon for progressive sexual politics leading change in its 'backward' peripheries (Colpani & Hated, 2014).

## 6 | SPACE, DRUGS AND SEX: A 'WEAK' RELATIONSHIP

Together with the urban, the private home is portrayed as the most meaningful spatial context in existing scholarship on chemsex. The aim of this section is not to rebut this claim, but to consider how the private home is just one of the multiple spatial components of the 'socio-cultural assemblage' (Race, 2018, p. 134) of chemsex; these spatial components (e.g., home, the city, the bathhouse, the club, the hook-up app) are not just the 'contexts' where chemsex takes place but they actively shape the practice. Each spatial component cannot be considered in isolation from the others, but they are connected through mobilities. Movement favours encounter with different human actors and non-human elements (e.g., different kinds of drugs, not just recreational, but also sexuopharmaceuticals and ARTs) through the 'infrastructures of the sexual encounter' (Race, 2015, 2018), such as mobile devices, 3G and Wi-Fi.

The analysis of the participants' narratives reveals two main spatial and temporal configurations of the practice of chemsex. The first is what can be defined as a 'short' version because it lasts around 12h. It often represents the 'happy ending' of a night out; for several participants this often involves clubbing, possibly in a place where there is a dark room or the chance to hook-up. At the club (or before entering), various drugs can be used (cocaine, MDMA, mephedrone or ketamine in some cases; several participants have also pointed out the increasing use of 'G' in clubs, see Andersson, 2022a) to better enjoy the situation; while clubbing, participants often meet (new or known) people, hooking-up (one-to-one or in group). This type of night out and encounter(s) at the club is the kind analysed by Slavin (2004) in Sydney. He defines it as 'tribal space', where 'individual integrity recedes in relation to collective becoming. The drugs, proximity of bodies, and sexual energy within the space make it Dionysian in form—a powerful mode for expressing the vitality of the tribe' (2004, p. 284). From the club, the newly formed duo or group decides to continue to play either at someone's place or at the bathhouse. According to Kiram (25–35, Milan), the choice of where to go is fundamental: 'if I don't want to go too crazy I suggest the bathhouse, it is fun, there are hot guys and I know it is not going to last for one full day'. On the contrary, going to someone else's place, opens the way to the possibility to go on for much longer, 'if you are having fun, it becomes difficult to leave' (Kiram). If you end up at someone else's place, changing plans, or sticking

with them, depends on whom and what you encounter. As explained by Kiram, 'many times I go there with the idea of going home by 2 pm but then more drugs appear, there is someone I like so I end up staying'. This second part of the night (now become morning) at home or the bathhouse can also include the encounter with others up for the 'short' version of chemsex. These might be guys who did not go out at night (or did not go clubbing), went to bed and then wake up in the morning and look for a chemsex encounter. If chemsex occurs at the bathhouse, the role of mobile devices is usually quite limited (unless there are not many people at the venue), while at home their use depends on the subject's willingness to play for long or the use of specific drugs (several participants narrating how one of the main effects of 'tina' is the obsessive scrolling on hook-up apps). Most participants explain indeed that once someone in the group starts to use Grindr or more generally their mobile devices, they expect the action to last for a very long time (not necessarily in the same place). In Kiram's case, if he's not willing to play for long, he usually suggests his own place; that way, he can tell the others he does not want more people to join and when he is tired he asks them to leave. Clearly this situation of control relies on Kiram's possibility to host others at his place because he lives alone; in a city expensive like Milan, this is not so common, so income availability and/or homeownership play an important role.

The second form of the chemsex encounter is the 'long' one, lasting one day or more. Here mobility plays a much more substantial role than in the 'short' version. The way the 'long' chemsex session starts is very variable; like the previous form, it can start as a night out (as seen with Kiram) in a club, a cruising bar or the bathhouse; or it can start with a prearranged chemsex group party at someone's home. In the case of prearranged big group parties, multiple participants (both in England and Italy) describe how they often take place outside the city centre. This is because big houses are often preferred for this kind of event, and they tend to be more common outside city centre locations. Attendants to a prearranged chemsex group party are often some people already known by the organiser as well as new people invited through hook-up apps (both on the day of the event and on previous days). As analysed by Miles (2017), the encounter between the private home and the digital space of the app creates a hybrid space, home becoming a semi-public space because it is open to anyone connected to the app who wants to 'play' (Race, 2015) in a specific way (i.e., bareback and assuming drugs). This hybridisation of space for a long period of time opens different possibilities for each participant, creating mobile assemblages. As explained by Red80 (35–45, Manchester), 'someone stays two hours, someone stays two days, it depends on how you feel, how you enjoy the situation, what you were doing before the party, how many drugs are available there, how sexy the guys are, how nice the house space is'. Leaving a house party does not mean the end of playing; participants describe how they go somewhere else to continue to play, this being either someone else's place or a commercial venue, such as a bathhouse or a party (possibly in sex on premises venues). Mobilities across different places and encounters appear therefore as the central elements of 'long' chemsex. Participants describe how they start the 'party' with some drugs but then other drugs might appear, changing the course of events. As already anticipated, in Bologna and Milan the most used drug for chemsex appears to be 'basata'. Its use presents some issues, notably its high cost and its short effect, that is, a great amount is needed to make the party last; therefore other drugs are also frequently used in combination with 'basata'. The choice to move across different places is often related to drugs' availability. The interactions between drugs, places and other actors (human and non-human) are extremely variable; there is no 'strong' relation of causation but a 'weak' one shaped by the coming together of different actors at a very specific time. The 'weak' character of this relation emerges clearly from the following words of Gab:

You can be super excited and vigorous because of T, then maybe G or K kicks in and you don't realise what is going on, then there might be some MD and you feel happy, get in the chatty mood and hug people, but then maybe T makes you paranoid and you just want to leave.

While Gab's words highlight the role of recreational drugs as actants in chemsex, the following words from Lorenzo highlight the active role of place in shaping the experience:

Saunas make me very horny but I need to be careful when I'm high, especially with G, MD, the humidity, the heat, I can't breathe so if I'm really high I stay in a cubicle or one of the sofas until I feel better ... I have the same problem when I'm at some guy's place and it's small you know, I can't breathe if I'm very high and it's a small room, I need to take a break often, once, twice per hour.

These examples show how actors, drugs and places interact in many different, sometimes unpredictable, ways, so the conceptual, methodological and theoretical openness of weak theory, with its emphasis on connections, heterogeneity and unpredictability, appears appropriate to frame the practice of chemsex.

When considering the role of drugs in chemsex, it is important to consider not just recreational ones, but also sexuo-pharmaceuticals and antiretrovirals. Viagra/Cialis and their generics give chemsex practitioners the possibility to be 'hard' despite the influence of recreational drugs; however, it might be the case that at a party the number of attendants and recreational drugs available is much higher than the amount of sexuo-pharmaceuticals needed to keep everyone 'hard' (or, more simply, not many attendants can keep it 'hard'). In his interview, Kiram names this situation as 'chasing the top' (*caccia all'attivo*); that is, those who can maintain the erection become wanted by everyone else. For Kiram, these situations are somehow the most enjoyable because people are pushed to chat more:

You get to share many things, talk about yourself, laugh, watching videos ... these are the situations where I usually stay for longer, there is a very good vibe if people just chill and enjoy the moment even without a hard cock.

Kiram's words echo the analysis of Hakim (2019) and Race (2015) on chemsex creating a sense of collectivity and community. This is a very important point to reassert for geographers of sexualities: sex (in combination with drugs) can be an important vehicle for socialisation, kinship and community formation (Parker & Aggleton, 2007), so understanding sexual practices, and the role of specific non-human actors within them, is fundamental for the analysis of contemporary gay life.

When chemsex lasts for more than one day, one of the main considerations to be made concerns ARTs. Medical guidelines prescribe to be regular with ARTs, taking them daily around the same time to avoid forgetting them. All research participants said they were on therapies, taking them regularly. Asked about how they manage the use of ARTs (often requiring the consumption of a meal, even if only a small amount) during long chemsex sessions, most participants explained they have specific strategies. If invited to a party somewhere outside the city, they usually take ARTs with them; this way, they do not have to worry about returning home by a specific time. In case they go out but they stay within the city, ARTs get to shape the course of the action, most of them describing that they go back home to get their pills (not necessarily alone, they might invite someone along with them). According to Red80, this makes the chemsex session more 'sustainable': 'you get some time off, you breathe fresh air, walk a bit, try to eat something, get your pills, if you are with someone you have a nice chat and relax'. In other situations, participants describe how they ask the host or other participants whether they are on the same drug therapies; if so, there might be the opportunity to share the drug and not leave the party. For Madox, these situations lead to important conversations:

You talk about HIV, everything is much easier in that moment and you get to share the drug ... you can make very good connections, you often get to meet again the guy who lent you the pill to give him back one of yours.

Madox's words highlight a very important point that goes beyond community formation and socialisation: for some people chemsex might offer the possibility to talk about their HIV status more freely and without fear, this being a meaningful and empowering step given the persistence of stigma around HIV that leads several people to be in the 'second closet', that is, they do not disclose their HIV status (Di Felicianonio, 2020).

These examples highlight the complexity of the practice of chemsex as resulting from the encounter with different places, human actors and non-human elements, especially recreational drugs, sexuo-pharmaceuticals and ARTs. All-encompassing and closed analyses are inadequate to understand the diversity, multiplicity and openness of the situations that emerge from these encounters. On the contrary, a 'weak' relational geographical approach, built around 'attention to the ordinary, to more-than-humans, to practice and to radical heterogeneity' (Wright, 2015, p. 392), might better address these encounters in more-than-human worlds. Acknowledging the agency of different types of drugs and places over sexual practices can push the field of geographies of sexualities to shift the focus away from human identity and engage with encounters and relationships that exceed the human.

## 7 | CONCLUSIONS

Chemsex has become a widespread sexual practice among gay and bisexual men in the minority world and beyond, often leading to paranoid and panic-fuelling discourse among mainstream media, while most academic analyses have adopted a psychological/medical perspective focused on individual histories of damage, abuse, self-hate and stigma. Against these trends, critical social scientists have started to address the cultural and social character of chemsex, while geographers have remained silent, perpetuating the longstanding silence around sex in the discipline. Opposing this silence, the paper

has developed a relational geographical analysis of chemsex, highlighting the central role of place as resulting from the encounter between *here* and *there*, the material and the virtual, imagined geographies and lived spaces. In so doing, the paper has complicated the analysis around the two main spatial components in the chemsex literature: the urban and the private home.

While the narratives of the research participants emphasise the importance of the urban in the 'discovery' of chemsex, they also point out cities located *elsewhere*, notably some of the most popular *erotic* gay cities in Europe (e.g., Barcelona, Berlin, Brussels, Madrid). In the participants' narratives, these cities come to symbolise a more progressive, open and tolerant sexual life (and its public acceptance), while Italy and its cities are portrayed as 'backward', even though they acknowledge that the situation has changed thanks to mobilities, Italy becoming more 'modern' and 'European'.

The paper has also deepened the analysis of the importance of home for chemsex by showing how it is not isolated from other places; that is, chemsex, especially in its 'long' version, is mainly based on mobilities across different places which shape the situation and the practices of pleasure and sociality in different ways. Mobilities offer indeed the possibility to encounter human and non-human actors according to a logic of openness; there is no 'strong', fixed relationship between place, drugs and sexual practices, but a 'weak' one determined by the coming together of all these elements. As discussed through different examples, no factor can be isolated as being the determinant of the chemsex experience, making weak theory the most suitable to account for the heterogeneity of a practice based on the encounter between multiple human and non-human actors. Because it emphasises heterogeneity, encounters and connections (beyond the human), weak theory requires 'thick description', defined by Gibson-Graham (2014, p. S148) 'as a method that directs interpretive attention not only to material practices but to the nuances, affects, multiple codes of meaning, silences, jokes, parodies, and so on, that accompany them'. This awareness has driven the paper's engagement with the participants' ambivalent narratives and practices.

The geographical contribution of the paper to the emerging field of 'critical chemsex studies' (Møller & Hakim, 2021) has not been limited to highlighting the central role of place in the practice of chemsex. By focusing on the narratives of gay men living with HIV in Italy who practice chemsex and those of Italians in the same population group who live in England, the paper has expanded the geographical focus of social science chemsex research, which has predominantly been limited to the main metropolitan areas of Australia, the UK and the USA. Expanding the geographical focus of the analysis is fundamental to understanding how different drugs might be more popular than others in different places, pushing some people not to identify as chemsex practitioners because of the limitations of some definitions that reduce chemsex to specific recreational drugs ('tina', 'mkat' and 'G'), or how the relationships of anonymity that characterise large metropolitan areas are questioned in smaller cities such as Bologna or Leicester. These are key elements to consider in the analysis of chemsex. Therefore, more comparative (and transnational) geographical research is needed within social science chemsex research in order to understand the different forms of chemsex in small/ordinary towns or in the majority world. All these places are deeply connected through flows of people, ideas, knowledge and cultural products, so the relational approach proposed in the paper might be useful in developing future comparative analyses.

Finally, the analytical effort of the paper can represent a call for geographers of sexualities to go back to engaging with the 'dirty' work of researching sex (De Craene, 2020), thus challenging the persisting squeamishness of academic geographical knowledge (Binnie, 1997) that has led geographies of sexualities as a field of study to increasingly disengage with the materiality of sex. A central component of people's lives, shaping their relationship to places and communities (physical or virtual), sex remains the object of contentious public discourse generating moral and health-related panic; like other social scientists, geographers of sexualities cannot respond to this hostile situation by remaining silent about sexual acts and hiding behind more 'respectable' and 'relevant' topics. There is still a lot of work to be done around 'immoral' sexual practices and their relationship with place, space and non-human actors seen as actants through a relational ontology. While the focus of the paper has been on different types of drugs (recreational; sexuopharmaceuticals; ARTs), a similar relational approach centred on weak theory can be applied to other biomedical technologies, such as hormones, impacting on sexual practices, or to the analysis of sexualised drug use (or intoxication more generally) among heterosexual people. These might be preliminary steps to renew the commitment of the subdiscipline of geographies of sexualities with challenging not just the heteronormative assumptions of geographical knowledge, but also its squeamishness and rejection of the materiality of sexual practices as a legitimate topic of enquiry.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: the research was generously supported by the European Commission (Horizon 2020 Framework Programme; H2020 Excellent Science), MSCA-IF-EF-ST Action, grant number: 747110.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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**How to cite this article:** Di Felicianonio, C., (2023) Here, there, everywhere: The relational geographies of chemsex. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 00, 1–15. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12603>