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Chemsex at home: Homonormative aspirations and the blurring of the private/public space divide

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A B S T R A C T

Sexualised drug use -usually referred to as chemsex- represents an established cultural practice among gay men in contemporary societies, mostly associated with home settings in urban areas. Against the reductionism of existing studies that conceptualize home as merely the location where chemsex occurs, the paper explores the ways in which the multidimensional character of home shapes chemsex experiences and cultures. Drawing on 25 interviews with gay men living with HIV who practice chemsex in England and Italy, the paper's analytical effort is organised around three points. The first concerns the pleasures and affects generated by practicing chemsex at home, blurring the private/public space divide. The second regards the specific (material) configurations of home spaces that enhance the experience of chemsex. The last sheds lights on the possibilities offered by chemsex parties in private homes, for some gay men, to spend time in types of housing that they aspire to but cannot realistically achieve, while encountering men who embody homonormative ideals.

1. Introduction

In the last decades sexualised drug use- generally known as chemsex- has become an established practice among gay and bisexual men, often causing alarm because of its association with unprotected sex without condoms ('bareback', 'BB', 'raw' in slang) with multiple partners, and increased rates of sexually transmitted infections (e.g., Maxwell et al., 2019). In London, where the term has supposedly been coined (Stuart, 2019), chemsex is mostly associated to the use of three drugs: mephedrone (known also as M-kat in England or 'mef' in Italy); GHB/GHL ('G'); and crystallized methamphetamine ('tina' or 'T', but also as 'crystal' in Italy). In line with social science scholarship (e.g., Møller and Hakim, 2021; Race, 2018), the paper considers chemsex as a specific subcultural practice amongst gay men that has developed over the last couple of decades, focusing on the ambivalent relations between chemsex and home settings.

The literature usually associates chemsex with urban home spaces (e. g., Race, 2015), where 'home' is reduced to simply a location where the practice occurs. Against such a reductionist framing of home, the paper aims at exploring the ways in which the multidimensional (material and symbolic) character of home shapes chemsex experiences and cultures.

Our analytical effort is built around three arguments. First, we argue that private homes are preferred for chemsex parties because they enhance pleasure and sexual experimentation, this preference blurring the private/public space divide through the relocation of its threshold to *both* specific rooms/areas within the house (where guests are not allowed) *and* outside (online through the mediation of digital applications). Second, we show how specific (material) configurations of home spaces (including large screens, comfortable sofas, playrooms and slings) enhance the experience of chemsex. Third, we argue that the preference for particular types of homes for chemsex reveals something more about the pleasures enjoyed by some men, notably the possibility to spend time in types of housing that they aspire to but cannot realistically achieve, while encountering men who embody homonormative ideals.

Empirically, the paper draws on discussions of chemsex that arose during biographical interviews with gay men living with HIV in England and Italy as part of a transnational research project (2018–20) regarding the life trajectories of different generations of gay men living with HIV in these countries (Di Feliciantonio, 2022a). The countries were chosen for the different configuration of welfare systems, differences in unemployment and economic attractiveness, emigration rates, perceived

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homophobia and lack of protection against discrimination (the UK ranks 17th in the latest ILGA-Europe country ranking, Italy 34th).[1] The theme of sex on drugs arose, unsolicited, in more than 40 % of the wider set of interviews (25/59). Research participants lived in Bologna and Milan in Italy; and Leicester, London and Manchester in England. Most studies on chemsex have been conducted in 'world cities' or gay resort destinations (e.g. Hakim, 2019; Møller and Hakim, 2021; Santoro et al., 2020), so the inclusion of Bologna and Leicester contributes to thinking about the reach of chemsex cultures (and gay cultures more generally) lower down the urban hierarchy, in mid-sized regional cities, with smaller and less dense gay populations. The results of the analysis reveal the importance of place in shaping chemsex experiences and cultures, and the formation of homonormative ideals and aspirations.

The rest of the paper proceeds through six sections. We begin by presenting the theoretical framework of the analysis, bringing together "critical chemsex studies", feminist and queer geographies of home, and the interdisciplinary literature on homonormativity. In the third section, we discuss the research methodology. Three empirical sections follow, each centred on one of the three arguments anticipated above. Finally, in the conclusions we discuss the paper's threefold contribution to the literature, calling for an increased awareness around the relationship between place, space and sexualities.

2. Geographies of chemsex, home and homonormativity

To analyse the ambivalent relationship between home and chemsex, the paper builds on three strands of literature that have not been brought together yet: "critical chemsex studies" (Møller and Hakim, 2021); feminist and queer geographies of home; the interdisciplinary literature on homonormativity, notably human geography critiques of the concept.

2.1. Critical chemsex studies

Against the medical framing of chemsex as an individual journey through trauma and destructive behaviours (e.g., Brennan et al., 2007), critical scholars across the social sciences have produced a more complex, relational and social understanding of this practice. Møller and Hakim (2021) have named this growing field "critical chemsex studies", defined along three main lines of enquiry: i) going beyond the risk paradigm (e.g., Drysdale et al., 2020); ii) the socio-cultural and political economy dimension of chemsex (e.g., Hakim, 2019); iii) the focus on play and pleasure to understand gay intimacy and sociality (e.g., Pienaar et al., 2020).

A key-contribution to this critical scholarship comes from Kane Race (e.g., 2014, 2015, 2017, 2018) who theorizes chemsex as "culture", i.e., "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" (2015: 256). For Race, the sexual spaces produced by chemsex often lead to community formation, opening new possibilities for pleasure and experimentation. Building on Race's work to analyse the rise of chemsex in London, where gentrification has caused the disappearance of several spaces of queer sociality (a process apparently intensified by the Covid-19 pandemic, see McCormack and Measham, 2022), Jamie Hakim (2019: 250) defines chemsex as.

> 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.

Drawing on the narratives of 15 men practicing chemsex, Hakim (2019) highlights the contradictory affects- i.e., emotional states, the atmospheres of chemsex encounters, feelings and bodily sensations-generated by chemsex encounters: joyful for some, sad for others (including references to addiction and psychotic episodes), and a combination of the two for many (pp. 259–62).

Contributions within "critical chemsex studies" often include references to space and place. In an early study on chemsex, Hurley and Prestage (2009) acknowledge the central role of domestic spaces and sex-on-premises venues, while Race (2015) and Hakim (2019) define chemsex as an urban phenomenon. However, as recently discussed by Di Feliciantonio (2023), their engagement with space is problematic from a human geographer's perspective because they i) reify the erasure of homo/bi-sexual lives and experiences in 'ordinary' cities; and ii) consider the spatialities of chemsex in isolation, erasing its multi-scalar character. Against these shortcomings, Di Feliciantonio proposes a relational geographical framework based on 'weak theory' (e.g., Gibson-Graham, 2014) that considers place (like a private home) "as the encounter between *here* and *there*, the material and the virtual, imagined geographies and lived spaces" (2023: 2, emphasis in original) and the practice of chemsex heterogeneous, open, in flux, and entangled with a multiplicity of actors in more-than-human worlds (see also Brown and Di Feliciantonio, 2022).

2.2. Feminist and queer geographies of home

Traditionally seen as the 'private' space par excellence, home tended to be associated with the unpaid reproductive labour of women, therefore conceived as less relevant for politics and academic research than 'public' spaces, associated with men and their economic, political and social power (e.g., Staeheli, 1996). Opposing this divide, feminist geographers have highlighted the ambiguity and vagueness of the concepts of 'private' and 'public' spaces, as well as their fluid, porous character, with the domestic and the outside imbricate into each other (e.g., Domosh, 1998). Home, it has been shown (e.g., Hubbard and Prior, 2013; Johnston and Valentine, 1995), represents a site of both privacy and publicity, a refuge from state and societal oppression and surveillance, as well as a resource to be used to gain financial autonomy and publicity (as in the case of sex workers).

Our analysis follows on these contributions to complicate the separation between public and private spaces in the exploration of a controversial sexual practice that has generated attention internationally. Of particular influence for our framework is the work of Andrew Gorman-Murray (e.g., 2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2007b), who has analysed gay men and lesbians' use of domestic spaces and their articulation with public ones to reveal their central role in the formation of social identities and emotional and embodied well-being. In his view, for queer people home represents.

> a space that palpably situates politics and social change in people's everyday lives- where they can grasp, see and experience politics in action. The home brings together the personal and political, the individual and societal, (…). (2017: 158)

In the case of gay men, Gorman-Murray (2006a) contests the possibility to create a rigid distinction between public and private spaces as gay men often invite 'external' bodies, discourses and practices within their domestic spaces, their use of home resulting, therefore, "*unhomely*" (p. 54). Through these practices,

> 'private' homes are made to interact closely with, and reach into, 'public' sites of belonging, such as bars and cruising sites, stretching home, and rendering these public sites home-like. Consequently, (…) there is an imbrication of unhomely domestic spaces with homelike non-domestic environments. (*ibid*)

The blurring of the private–public space divide for gay men's homes seems to have furthered in the last decade, following the increasing

popularity of digital technologies, including 'hook up' location-based applications such as Grindr, possibly the most popular among men seeking encounters with other men (e.g., Ahlm, 2017). In an early study of Grindr's impact on gay men's use of space, Van De Wiele and Tong (2014: 627) show how Grindr's use has changed "the meaning, structure, and functions of the gay community by shifting parts of the physical 'gayborhood' to online space". Investigating the impact of Grindr on non-heterosexual men's everyday sexual and social lives in London, Sam Miles (2017: 1605) argues that "[R]ather than a simplistic trade-off between public and private, we see a reconfiguration of sex at home as a new imbrication between domestic and public spheres rather than just an expression of, or retreat into, private space". Although encounters appear to increasingly occur in domestic spaces - a trend reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic (Miles et al., 2021) -, the use of apps blurs some of the key-characteristics usually associated with private spaces, e.g., their inaccessibility to strangers, new sexual partners being "de-strangered in order to justify entry to the home" (Miles, 2017: 1606).

2.3. Homonormativity, chemsex and home

Queer people's increasing access to institutions like marriage has been defined by queer critics as "homonormativity" or "the sexual politics of neoliberalism", a concept originally introduced by Duggan (2002) in the US, but quickly applied to a variety of contexts (e.g. Collins, 2009; Visser, 2008). According to these critics, by living according to a set of social, moral, sexual, and spatial principles that reproduce the heteronormative ideal, some gay men access social acceptance and visibility, distinguishing themselves from sexual others (e.g. Ozbay, 2022), while gaining material and cultural advantages, and affective prospects (like 'happiness', see Lovelock, 2019).

Homonormativity has been associated to the desexualised and cleaned aesthetic of urban gay villages (Bell and Binnie, 2004). Mattson (2015) deepens such conceptualization, referring to homonormative Castro bars in San Francisco as "sleek", "self-conscious iconic minimalism", "clean lines and strategic lighting" and "clean black walls and electronic dance music" (pp. 3153–4, quoted in Andersson, 2019: 2997). The aesthetic of bars mirrors the homonormativity of their patrons who "exemplified the 'metrosexual' look also trendy among stylish, fastidious heterosexual men. Clothes were stylishly new, hair and eyebrows were well-groomed, and colognes were frequently worn. (…) Castro nightlife-goers disdained public sex as undisciplined or reckless" (Mattson, 2015: 3153). Analysing media coverage from the 1990s around the brandization of Soho in London, Andersson (2019) shows how, despite a minimalist, cleanliness aesthetic "replaced an earlier set of 'dirty' and 'unhealthy' images of male homosexuality" (p. 3006), the 'new' (gentrified) Soho was not desexualised, its bars facilitating sexual encounters and producing sexualised marketing material.

The analysis of the spatial configurations of homonormativity has included also domestic spaces, often inherently portrayed as homonormative, "reflecting the notion of home as conventional, normative, withdrawn and assimilative" (Gorman-Murray 2017: 151). Building on critical analyses of *homemaking* (e.g., Brickell, 2012), Gorman-Murray (2017) portrays queer homes as sites of political and social change through their ordinary, mundane character, rather than sites of inherent assimilation (which can occur), calling, therefore, for a careful contextualization (in space and time) of concepts such as 'domesticity' at the core of Duggan's definition of homonormativity (2002).

Gorman-Murray's argument builds on a well-established critique of homonormativity in human geography (e.g., Brown, 2009, 2012; Browne et al., 2021; Di Feliciantonio, 2015, 2019; Kenttamaa Squires, 2019). Gavin Brown is poignant when arguing that homonormativity is represented "as a homogeneous, global external entity that exists outside all of us" (2012: 1066), while theorised on the basis of research conducted in few global cities (e.g., London, San Francisco). His call for nuanced and place-based analyses of homonormativity influenced Di

Feliciantonio's analysis (2019) of the life histories of 'homonormative' gay men living with HIV in Barcelona, revealing a plurality of practices that challenge monolithic representations of coupledom, the (homonormative) 'love nest' and the domestication of sexual life.

The - apparently contradictory- co-existence of domestication/higyenisation and easy access to sexual encounters in gentrified gay areas (as spatial configurations of homonormativity) echoes recent analyses pointing at the co-existence of chemsex and homonormativity. Building on cultural criminology analyses of deviance and transgression, Frederick (2014) frames contemporary forms of gay drug and sexual deviance- including chemsex, *bug-chasing* and *conversion parties*- as signs of resistance to LGBTQ social inclusion centred solely around homonormative values. In France, Amaro (2016) analyses this co-existence of homonormativity and chemsex right after the approval of the *marriage pour tous,* when "the couple has become the most valued social unit" (p. 217), his ethnographic research with gay 'slammers' (people who inject drugs) revealing the ambiguous relationship between love (as both an ideal and a perceived feeling) and drug use. Building on Hakim's conjunctural perspective (2019) discussed earlier, Mowlabocus (2021a) suggests that chemsex should be considered as more than "just a reaction" to homonormativity and the representation of the 'good gay', "but that it is also managed and produced through the same political-economic context that has helped secure LGBT rights" (p. 3). While chemsex is usually represented as the extreme opposite of the "ideal/good/responsible gay male subject: married, middle-class, monogamous and monied" (p. 4) characterizing homonormativity, in reality they share "common soil", "[B]oth are structured by an avowedly neoliberal morality that invests in a philosophy of self-governance, personal responsibility and individual sovereignty" (p. 6). While not suggesting a causal relationship between marriage equality and the rise of chemsex, Mowlabocus perceives a correlation: "some of the appeal of chemsex stems from doing something that, in this day and age, gay men do not have to do in order to have sex: namely engage in behaviour that is both illegal and morally condemned" (pp. 10–11). Chemsex provides, therefore, an opportunity for men who might otherwise be read as 'homonormative' to engage in forms of ('disreputable') queer sociality that helps them satisfy needs that remain unmet by professional careers, long-term relationships, and comfortable housing.

3. Methodology

The paper is based on ethnographic notes and biographic interviews with 25 gay cisgender men living with HIV in five cities across England and Italy (Leicester, London and Manchester; Bologna and Milan). The age range of participants goes from the age group 18–25 to 55–65. One participant belongs to the group 18–25; 6 to the group 25–35; 9 to the group 35–45; 6 to the group 45–55; 3 to the group 55–65. Six out of 25 participants are non-White and 3 of them do not hold a EU passport.

In both countries there has been widespread media attention around chemsex in recent years. In England, Hakim (2019: 250) defines media and sexual health discourse around chemsex as "multi-faceted panic discourse", pathologising chemsex as inherently self-destructive. This discourse presents gay men who practice chemsex as dangerous, irresponsible and bringing death (Lovelock, 2018). Similar considerations can be made in relation to media discourse on chemsex in Italy where, together with the Mpox outbreak in 2022, some high-profile news stories involving chemsex have cemented its association with death and danger.

The study received ethical approval from both the host University (University of Leicester) and the funder (European Commission) through separate review processes (for an in-depth discussion of the ethical challenges posed by the project see Di Feliciantonio, 2021). Participants were recruited through digital applications and websites (Grindr, Bareback Real Time), attendance at meetings and events for gay men living with HIV, and snowballing. All participants provided informed written consent and their participation was voluntary.

Whenever possible, interviews were based on the guidelines of the biographic narrative interpretive method (BNIM; see Wengraf, 2001), with the interview realized in two parts. In the first interview, participants were only asked a very broad question about their life, allowing them to tell their story without intervention from the interviewer. The second session was a more traditional semi-structured interview, where the questions were based on what was (not) said in the first interview; participants were therefore asked about chemsex during the second interview only if they had mentioned it in some form during the first one. The research diaries and the interviews in Italy and the ones with Italian participants living in England are all in Italian; any quotation from them included in the paper has been translated by the first author.

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. Transcriptions were coded through a three stages-process. The first stage was based on a life course perspective, thus turning points were highlighted (e.g., "migration abroad", "new job"); the second stage was based on themes (e.g., "sexual life", "healthcare", "substance use"); the third one on 'emotional codes' (e.g., "distress", "happiness", "enjoyment") associated to each life transition and topic. The primary data included in this paper have been coded under "sexual life" and/or "substance use" in the thematic analysis.

4. Blurring the private/public space divide

In line with "critical chemsex studies" recognition of pleasure and sociability as drivers for chemsex (Møller and Hakim, 2021), our research participants discuss how domestic spaces provide an increased sense of comfort when practicing chemsex, allowing them to decrease their sexual inhibitions and become "pigs". Being a "pig" is usually associated with the exchange of semen and other bodily fluids, as well as with trying sexual practices one would not engage with otherwise. This is described clearly by 13 participants who explain the connections between domestic spaces and becoming "pigs" through two considerations: i) home facilitates the assumption of those drugs mostly associated with "pigness", i.e., T and G. In the words of Kiram (25–35, Milan), "after few rounds of G and T I can *literally* do whatever, I'm a *real pig*" (emphasis added); ii) some sexual practices (e.g., pissing mentioned by 8 participants) are difficult to realize in public venues, home spaces suit them better (e.g., "kinky venues get too messy, (…), I feel nauseous (…), home is much better for pissing", Madox, 35–45, Milan).

The participants' narratives around "pigness" can be framed through Florêncio's (2020) multidimensional analysis of gay "pig" masculinities, including chemsex, in their historical emergence since the AIDS crisis. Whereas Florêncio (2020) argues that, in "pig-sex", the "pig" gets pleasure from his body becoming porous and open to semen, piss and the bodily fluids of others, here we want to show that chemsex practitioners not only allow their bodies to become porous, but also their homes. This emerges quite blatantly in MrP's (45–55, Milan) narrative:

> Having all these men coming here [his flat] is so sexy, (…) them unloading inside me, (…) I love the cumdump role, people come over to unload and then leave. (…) [l]ittle souvenirs, maybe dirty socks, underwear, some drops of pee, cum, make me crazy. The best is when they forget toys, especially the smelly and wet.

In MrP's words, the porosity of his body is intertwined with that of his flat, strangers invited over to release semen and other bodily fluids inside him *and* the flat.

As Miles (2017) argues, inviting strangers (or loosely known acquaintances) into one's home blurs established distinctions between private and public space. This is not to say that every part of the home and its contents are freely accessible to those invited in the space to party; as discussed by Mowlabocus (2021b) and confirmed by our research participants, very often hosts will lock away and secure

personal and valuable items or keep some parts of their home off limits to guests. For instance, Andrew (35–45, Manchester) never allows his guests to access and use his bedroom during chemsex parties, explaining: "I don't want people to go around my stuff in my room, I keep things I don't want people to see or touch there, those people are basically strangers (…)". In this way, the space that is made available to party in might be thought of as one that folds together private and public, with the door to its bedroom acting as the threshold of the private/public space divide whereas that function is usually exercised by the front door.

Whereas Miles (2017) discusses the dynamic of inviting a single stranger into the home for sex, our analysis extends this discussion by considering how the spatiality of the domestic space is altered when it is opened up to multiple strangers and intense recreational drug use is added to the mix. For Bonbon (45–55, Manchester):

> when you are at those chills [chill outs, a colloquial term used in England and Italy to refer to chemsex group parties] with maybe 15, 20 people, you probably don't know who is hosting (…) For me it's all about having a good time, people leaving, new guys coming over. (…) Sometimes a new guy arrives and it's me playing the host even if it's not my place.

Bonbon's words echo those of Tariq (25–35, Milan) during the first interview:

> it's my place but no one expects me to be like the entertainer greetings who arrives or things like that. I want people to have a good time, so they can do whatever they feel like as long as they don't ruin the atmosphere and don't damage my things.

Their words point at the blurring of the host/guest dichotomy during chemsex, confirming what Mowlabocus (2021b: 155) defines as the "heterotopic" blurring of the private/public space dichotomy brought by chemsex, "both a change in time and a change in space, as if a door had been opened to another world". According to Mowlabocus, for both hosts and guests there is a clear sense that, for the duration of the party, the domestic space ceases to be domestic.

The blurring described by Bonbon and Tariq, however, takes place once guests have arrived at a party, but who decides who is invited? How do people get access to chemsex parties in the private home of someone they don't know?

Discussing guest selection for chemsex parties at his place, Fedex (45–55, Bologna) explains:

> All the ones I can see online [*smiles*], I'm joking, more or less, it depends, it depends on how high I am, what time it is, how many guys are there (…). Other times I just write it on my profile, so anyone knows and it's easier.

Fedex uses digital applications (mostly Grindr) as a tool to make his own place *public-like*: at some point after the party has started, anyone is invited to the chemsex party, as long as they are online on the app; interested in group chemsex; and close enough to see his profile (or with an expensive subscription allowing them to see profiles beyond their proximities). In his own words, "I just invite people over, anyone is welcome". Moreover, it is not just him, but also his guests who actively invite others to the party and, therefore, within his home; this seems to be a frequent practice among research participants, with 20 out of 25 mentioning this is quite common when they are hosting a party. Participants' narratives of this practice offer the possibility to further explore the blurring of the private/public divide of home spaces during chemsex in two ways, while also revealing the tensions this process can generate: i) home becomes a *public-like* space whose experience is mediated by the use of digital applications and the use of drugs; ii) the private character of home is reinforced by perceived 'hosting duties'. The remainder of the section develops these analytical points.

Participants' apparent comfort with guests inviting people over, sometimes without even asking them, reveals the *public-like* character of home during chemsex formed around an inclusionary ethos that allows

the encounter with *difference*, i.e., individuals and groups outside familiar contacts and ways of life (Peterson, 2017). In the words of Bonbon: "the best part is having people of all ages, bodies, having sex with a 20something is *hot*. (…) Drugs make you feel comfortable beyond age, (…), I think they really help people who struggle with boundaries, you know?" (emphasis in original). The possibility of sexual encounter and experimentation with diverse bodies described by Bonbon is usually associated with the anonymity of cities (Brown, 2008). However, Miles (2017; 2021) argues that the increasing reliance on digital applications-allowing users to filter visualisations and interactions on the basis of, among others, body type, age, location, fetish and sexual preferences- to arrange (sexual) meetings in cities has reduced the chance of spontaneous street encounters. This does not imply that using digital applications leads to linear and predictable encounters though. Miles' considerations apply also to chemsex parties, most notably when someone is invited through Grindr only to get there and be ignored by the host and the other guests. This has been described by 14 participants who relate it to i) large group parties (10 or more people); and ii) the prolonged use of T which leads people to be constantly searching on Grindr for others to invite only to ignore them when they arrive, while not really engaging in group sexual activities. In the words of Green Eyes (18–25, Manchester),

> when you see it [someone arriving and being ignored] happening, it makes you feel kind of bad, but it's also part of the game, I think. You know you are going to a chill that has probably been going for 24 hours, the person who invited you is on T, so you know this is possibly going to happen, no need to get mad, just be cool and move on, there will be other guys online to hook-up with.

For Green Eyes, the detachment between digital interactions, sexual expectations and physical encounter during a chemsex party is to be expected because "part of the game", confirming Miles' (2017) argument about Grindr users' struggle to navigate physical encounter and online sociality. Moreover, Green Eyes seems to presume that, because this is a frequent issue, people should know how to deal with it, "be cool and move on", his words echoing neoliberal imperatives of "self-governance, personal responsibility and individual sovereignty" (Mowlabocus,2021a: 6).

The frequent use of Grindr (or other applications) to invite people over, not just by hosts but also by guests, described by Fedex and 19 other participants, shows how the threshold between private and public space is no longer represented by the physical boundaries of the home but is mediated, displaced and distributed through digital applications. Therefore, gatekeeping takes place digitally, it does not necessarily rely on previous knowledge/connection and, as seen with Bonbon, it goes beyond existing social standards around body desirability and age appropriateness (Di Feliciantonio, 2022b), although forms of discrimination can also be reproduced (Mowlabocus, 2021b). However, the dislocation of the threshold does not distribute power equally, i.e., it is the host who retains the ultimate power to decide who stays/leaves and when the party ends. For instance, Alpe (35–45, Bologna) explains:

> I'm not rude, if someone comes at my place, I feel like I need to make sure they are ok and have what they need. (…) The same applies to my guests: I don't want rude people at my place, if you are an animal you are not welcome.

Alpe's words highlight how the politeness expected as part of 'hosting duties' confers them the power to decide who is "not welcome". However, as seen through Tariq's words earlier in the section ("it's my place but no one expects me to be like the entertainer greetings who arrives or things like that"), not everyone hosting a chemsex party feels like they should perform those duties.

The exercise of power by the host can generate tensions because of guests' disappointment, sometimes deepened by the use of drugs. In his second interview, Red80 (35–45, Manchester) recounts an episode highlighting these tensions. When the host of a party suddenly proclaimed the party was over and invited people to leave, he was confronted aggressively by one of the guests (leading to physical altercation), while others ignored him and kept on taking drugs and having sex. This episode shows how, when taking unexpected decisions affecting the whole group at a party, the host is exposed to (even violent) contestation, despite retaining (legal) power. Disinhibited by the drugs and driven by the will to keep on partying, some guests challenge the host's authority, this event revealing the instability of fixed categories like 'hosts' and 'guests' when engaging with an open, in flux process based on the encounter with a multiplicity of actors like chemsex (Di Feliciantonio, 2023).

The exercise of power and its contestation discussed above are just one example of a more general ambivalence of chemsex affects emerged in our research findings, in line with the work of Hakim (2019). Whereas Hakim's analysis of this ambivalence focuses on the practice of chemsex itself, our findings reveal how hosting a chemsex party at home can be a source of contradictory affects. Among the 25 participants, only 2 (Ias and Sebi) say that they never have people over for chemsex; this is because of the feeling of insecurity instilled by having strangers at home when under the influence of drugs. In Sebi's words,

> I don't like the idea, having people I have just met around my house when I'm high, I think I would become paranoid a little bit, I don't want to think about making sure everything is there, nobody is stealing stuff or anything like that, I want to have fun so I don't want to worry.

Like the participants to Hakim's study (2019), Sebi's words reveal a tension between the construction of chemsex as pleasure and fun against the feelings of anxiety provoked by the drugs when confronted with the possibility to be robbed. He further explains:

> I know of people who got robbed, (…), a guy told me someone stole his watch, and when he told me that I was already feeling paranoid, I had to leave the party, (…), maybe it was the drugs? Amphetamines do that, (…)I know it's better I don't host parties, it's just easier for me.

The feelings produced by the drugs and the experience of hosting strangers at home are, therefore, ambivalent: the drugs can enhance the sexual drive and the will to experiment through different body parts and fluids, but they can also generate negative feelings of anxiety and paranoia. This applies not just to people like Sebi who never host chemsex parties, but also to those who, at first, seem fully relaxed about it like Tariq. Asked about any negative experiences with chemsex during his second interview, he replies:

> Hundreds, things often get ugly, (…), maybe someone is too high and unbearable, someone passing out with G, K. I hate when it happens at mine's, it makes me anxious, paranoid, what if he collapses? What if we need an ambulance? These things freak me out, (…), when I see someone who might be close to lose his mind at my place, I usually ask them to leave immediately. (…) I know it doesn't sound very kind, but we're all adults with so many things to care about, I can't deal with that too, (…), [when hosting] I already have to make sure people are not stealing my stuff or damaging things, (…), it's supposed to be fun for me too, right?

Tariq's narrative, which in the first interview seemed to frame hosting a chemsex party in positive terms only, reveals the co-existence of different affects, the negative ones connected with the possibility of having to deal with the consequences of his guests' acts. His words too seem to point at the need to practice chemsex following neoliberal principles of personal responsibility and self-governance (Mowlabocus, 2021a), liberating the host from the aggravations of caring for others.

5. Enhancing the chemsex experience through home design

Inviting multiple strangers into one's home to party is not the only

way in which domestic space is altered to facilitate chemsex. In line with the analysis of Mowlabocus (2021b), 16 participants describe how they design and/or adapt the interior of their homes to enhance their chemsex parties. This could be through the selection and arrangement of specific kinds of furniture, or by paying attention to how lighting, music, and the display of pornography might create an atmosphere that encourages sexual play and complements the rhythms and intensities of the drugs consumed by participants. Among these features, the presence of a large screen projecting porn in the main room where the party occurs is the most mentioned by research participants (14 talk about it). For Ben (55–65, Manchester) this is "to get the party going, (…), the screen and the lights create the atmosphere", while Gab (35–45, London) argues "you need porn, especially when you are tired and you are wanking, you can't get the hard-on". In his second interview, Gab describes his preference for large screens as he seems to hate when hosts only have a laptop to project porn because "you can barely see the actors, it is difficult to watch a small screen and fuck simultaneously".

Ben and Gab's words can be framed through Dilkes-Frayne's analysis (2016) of the relationality between space, social processes, and drug use: the material composition and the layout of space produce specific collective experiences, affective atmospheres, and knowledge. While certain sociotechnical devices (such as WiFi, 4G and mobile phones) have already been identified as key "intimate infrastructures" of contemporary gay men's sexual encounters (Race, 2015), here we explore how home spaces become an important part of these "intimate infrastructures". Those homes that are popular venues for chemsex parties frequently adhere to 'homonormative' tastes (e.g., minimalist décor) and aspirations (multiple bedroom- and bathroom- flats within luxury/high-end buildings and/or (re)developments, located in either city centres or gentrified neighbourhoods/suburbs), whilst also facilitating embodied 'piggy' pleasures (e.g., presence of a sling) that sit awkwardly outside the expected comportment of the 'homonormative' gay man (Mowlabocus, 2021a).

Prince (35–45) and YWC (25–35) are sex workers sharing a flat in central Milan, in an area where the average price of property is currently 7,070€/sqm, while the city average is 4,885€/sqm.[2] Given they mainly rely on digital applications for their work (especially Grindr, Instagram and OnlyFans), for Prince and YWC self-branding is essential (Ryan, 2019). As non-White, North-African men, they cater to and/or reflect the sexual stereotyping common in White Western gay male cultures, by presenting themselves as masculine and fit, and performing exclusively as 'rough top'. They often show themselves travelling to glamorous destinations (e.g., Dubai, Monaco) with a luxury lifestyle to match (expensive hotels; displays of branded clothes and accessories). They also present themselves as bareback, chemsex practitioners (on OnlyFans only), who participate in group sex.

Their home (which is over 120sqm and includes a massive reception/living room of around 50sqm) frequently figures in their online content, as detailed by Cesare in his research diary in January 2019:

> Several videos on the OnlyFans pages of YWC and Prince are recorded at home. I could see the red sofa in two videos uploaded on YWC's profile and three on Prince's profile, all these videos portray group sex, (…). In the same videos you can also see the screen in the living room, there is always gay porn (…). Although there is no direct image of drug use in the videos, there are several 'signals' that these are chemsex sessions: you can see pipes, dishes with rolled notes.

Home plays, therefore, a central role in their sex work practice and digital personas, alongside chemsex. However, it is important to note that they practice chemsex for (unremunerated) pleasure as well as for work. Home for them is not simply the place where chemsex occurs; their flat was chosen (and reorganized) because it suits chemsex. As

articulated in Cesare's research diary in November 2018:

> YWC and Prince's living room is very big, on one side there is a very big modular red sofa, I counted 8 pieces, (…) I praised the beauty and size of the sofa and, YWC told me, smiling, that it is an essential feature of their house, 'it's perfect for parties, it's perfect for work'. I asked the reason why it is perfect for parties, and he told me that it is better not to have a sofa with legs if you end having 15 people on it, they used to have a very different one, but it broke during a chemsex party. (…) On the other side of the room there is a huge screen, you have the feeling you are in a movie theatre. (…) YWC told me that the screen too is a key-component of sex parties in two ways. First the image is so big that you have the impression actors on the screen are in the room with you (…). Second it creates the movie theatre vibe, he said he likes imagining they are in some sort of public space, especially when there is someone just chatting at the other side of the sofa and he is being blown by someone else.

These notes reveal the tight connections between home design/decoration- notably the sofa and the screen- and hosting chemsex parties, while also providing further strength to the argument about the blurring of the private/public space divide made in the previous section (i.e., the home becoming "a sort of public space").

The availability of a big room is also an important home feature, especially for those who host large parties. Prince and YWC prefer to start their parties using that room only because, Prince explains, "you need to create the vibe, everyone in the same room getting high, chatting, getting hard. (…) once the vibe is there, people can move around, use different rooms." In the case of their flat, another core component is represented by a playroom with a leather sling, masks, whips and belts. Everything in the playroom symbolizes their identity as 'brutal tops' willing to dominate their sexual partners (not just clients). This gives further validation to Gorman-Murray's argument (2007a) about the connections between domestic objects and sexual identity affirmation.

The playroom, probably originally conceived as the help's room given the building was destined to bourgeois households (Scramaglia, 2012), is an 'invisible' room that cannot be accessed from the main hall but just from one of the rooms. In order to access it, guests need, therefore, to be informed about it by the hosts. As commented by YWC,

> that's not a room for everyone, you need to *earn* your right to access it. [*laughs*] That room has very expensive stuff, we cannot just allow anyone to go in, (…), one of us [referring to Prince and himself] is always there if we open it. (emphasis in original)

YWC's words show how, despite opening their home for group parties- but not to anyone in the same terms discussed by participants like Fedex in the previous section, their parties being more 'selective' (i.e., they usually only include very good-looking guys and clients) in order to maintain their successful status -, they enact a strict control over the playroom given the value of what is in there. Such control is made easy by the configuration of the flat, the playroom being accessible from one room only.

The playroom within YWC and Prince's apartment is one example of what Race (2015) conceptualizes as the "infrastructures of the sexual encounter", even though in their case the infrastructure is also used for work. Hosting clients at home and the use of the playroom are indeed 'extras' that clients are willing to pay for; asked about their clients' interest in the playroom and having sexual encounters at home, Prince explains:

> for clients, those who follow me on OnlyFans, you know the ones that maybe meet me after a while, (…) those clients have a fantasy, they have seen my place so they want to fuck here, sometimes they ask me 'can we fuck there?', they have the vision in their mind, they come for it. (…) The playroom is usually their first choice, they are obsessed with the sling and the mirror. It's the fantasy of the Arab

guy, the rough man beating you and fucking you, it makes them horny, they like these dominations games.

Beyond the clear sexual racism behind the clients' preferences (Boussalem and Di Feliciantonio, 2023), Prince's words reveal how private homes, which, we have seen earlier, are arranged in order to maximise the chemsex experience, are also made *public-like* by their digitalized working practices, their clients being already familiar with their home spaces through the online content they share online. This is a well-established topic of discussion in the literatures on women's work and home-based working (e.g., Hanson and Pratt, 1995; Mirchandani, 2000). Moreover, Prince's words reinforce the previous argument about the increasing role of digital technologies in blurring the private/public space divide; in his case, such blurring appears even deeper because of the lack of separation between work and personal time and spaces determined by platforms like OnlyFans (Cardoso et al., 2023).

The home features discussed so far (i.e., large screens in big rooms, comfortable sofas, slings, playrooms) highlight the advantages of a medium-upper class house to host chemsex parties, as discussed by 12 research participants, including Ben who comments:

you are probably staying there 12, 24 hours, so a nice accommodation makes everyone feel better. (…) Believe me, you don't wanna play 24 hours in a shitty room at [name of an affordable hotel in Manchester city centre well-known for chemsex group parties], been there, done it few times, it's revolting.

Participants across the five research locations mention how there are some 'well-known' homes in the local chemsex scene, where parties frequently take place. The main reasons for the popularity of these venues seem not to be limited to the attractiveness of the hosts, but also to the characteristics of the homes themselves: big living rooms with multiple sofas, big screens, slings, dildos and the possibility to move around different rooms. Green Eyes defines one of these houses a "chemsex paradise" due to how many people it can comfortably accommodate. Combined with the previous argument about the power of hosts, these considerations favour a better understanding of how class-based advantage does not really disappear even in an open encounter like chemsex group parties. This way, our analysis seems to respond to Hakim (2019) and Mowlabocus (2021b) calls for the need to frame chemsex within hegemonic socio-economic structures. However, a deeper understanding of the class politics of chemsex hosting requires a specific consideration of the local, place-based dynamics of housing markets and rent. For instance, an average prized two bedroom-flat (with two bathrooms) in Manchester city centre might cost 200–300 K GBP, a price unimaginable in cities like Bologna, London or Milan. Similarly, very large houses (over 300sqm) described by some participants to host parties outside cities are almost impossible to find in city centre locations (made exception for the homes of the wealthiest, but none of the research participants describes himself as being wealthy). These considerations show how the economic and symbolic value of class and housing are place-based (Harvey, 1989).

6. Housing aspirations and homonormative ambivalence

Apartments like the one occupied by Prince and YWC in Milan represent an ideal type of accommodation for a particular kind of aspirational gay lifestyle, with its city-centre location and stylish furniture. In this section we focus on what participants' narratives around homes and chemsex might reveal about 'homonormative' values. For instance, Gab, who has a partner (who sometimes attends chemsex parties with him), works in customer care and lives in a studio apartment near Vauxhall (central London), explains how he never hosts big groups at his place because.

[M]y place is ugly! (…) I often feel judged. (…) London is a city where the gays love to show off, sometimes I end up at these chemsex orgies in incredible houses, you enter and it's like 'fuck I want to be

that rich', and you can see that the host is so happy because everyone is praising the house, how beautiful and expensive everything is, it's better to have an orgy in a beautiful house than a small dump.

Gab's words reveal the pressure to have a nice house and lifestyle and the sense of inadequacy it can originate. His narrative resonates with those of other participants living in 'world', 'homonormative' cities, shaped by deepening socio-economic inequalities (Sassen, 2018), such as London and Milan. As discussed by Tariq,

I know my place is not the best for big groups, (…) It's Milan, you have *very* fancy houses, very very very fancy, (…), one of the houses I end up quite regularly is in [name of a very high-class street], it's *ridiculous*, they even have a pool!(…) I like hanging out there, you almost feel better by just being there, (…),you get to be part of that world, (…), I even got to fuck some very well-known people there. (emphasis in original)

Despite being working-class (but lucky enough to own a flat in Milan, even though he does not have the financial means to renovate and maintain it properly), through chemsex Tariq gets to spend time in high-end houses that he could only have dreamt about (not to own, but even just to enter). His words reveal how one of the often unacknowledged pleasures that some gay men- especially working class, those precariously employed, on benefits and/or on a limited income, 17 out of 25 participants self-describing as belonging to one of these categories-enjoy through their attendance at chemsex parties is the opportunity to spend time in types of housing that they aspire to but cannot realistically achieve.

However, the narratives of research participants in relation to the encounter with upper class men and homonormative aspirations vary across research locations. For instance, the narrative of Lorenzo (35–45), the only participant living in Leicester, is very distant from those of participants, such as Gab and Tariq, living in London and Milan. Lorenzo also often attends chemsex parties in big houses, but these are usually located in ordinary towns or even the countryside, and they are not associated with wealth. He describes how "there is a mix of everything at these parties, established professionals, unemployed, people on benefits, regular guys like me", the inter-class encounter does not appear exceptional, "it's the same kind of people you find in a gay bar". What appears to be a key-element of the mundanity of Lorenzo's encounters is the lack of those types of guys (i.e., fit, good-looking, fashionable) who would be considered as embodying homonormative standards in big cities. This is clearly articulated when talking about his nights out in London:

there are so many hot guys, (…), you don't meet those guys in Leicester, guys like that don't live in Leicester! Here guys are simple, very regular, (…) I remember a chill I went to [in London], it felt like being in a porn video, everyone was so fit, (…), we were in this gorgeous house, I can't even imagine how it would cost, (…), the hosts were a couple, great bodies, handsome, clearly wealthy, I remember one of them saying they had just got back from Dubai, (…) those guys who seem to have everything.

This extract from Lorenzo's second interview makes a direct comparison between homonormative guys practicing chemsex in Leicester and London. While the homonormative ideal in Leicester is built around being regular and ordinary, in London it is associated with higher beauty standards, high end lifestyle and more wealth. In line with human geography critical perspectives on homonormativity (e.g. Brown, 2012; Browne et al., 2021), Lorenzo's account is a reminder of the central role of place in the formation of homonormativities, not just in terms of the actors involved and the unstable dynamics of inclusion and exclusion they entail, but also in the very same definition of what counts as 'homonormative'. While most existing analyses of homonormativity tend to frame it as a uniform, linear process to be found well beyond the Minority World, a careful, place-based engagement with the concept (and people's lived experiences) reveals its inconsistency, because

normativities are formed in time and place across different communities (Brown, 2015).

7. Conclusions

In this paper we make three substantive points in relation to the material and symbolic ways that home spaces contribute to chemsex cultures and experiences. First, we argue that home is the preferred site for chemsex parties because it increases comfort and sexual disinhibition, framed around "pigness", leading to a blurring of the private/public space divide while generating contradictory affects. The blurring of the private/public space divide includes the relocation of its threshold in two ways simultaneously: i) some spaces *within* the home are locked away and out of bounds to guests- the real inner sanctum of private space. In this way, the front door to the house/apartment no longer functions as the threshold to private space; ii) the threshold is also displaced *outside* the home and mediated through Grindr and other digital applications, as that is where the real gatekeeping for the party and the domestic space, i.e., who gets to be invited, takes place. The findings of our research show that, often, anyone (who is online on the app; interested in group chemsex; close enough to see the profile of someone at the party or with a subscription allowing them to explore profiles beyond proximities) is invited to the party, the decision to invite someone else taken not just by the host but also by guests (even without consulting the host). This makes domestic spaces *public-like*, allowing the (sexual) encounter with *difference* while also blurring the host/guest divide. However, the host relinquishes the ultimate power to decide who stays/ leaves and when the party ends, but the exercise of this power can be contested and opposed, even violently, by guests. This kind of conflict reveals the ambivalence of the affects generated by chemsex, including the experience of hosting a chemsex party; as seen, 2 research participants never host parties at their places because of the sense of insecurity provoked by having strangers over when under the influence of drugs.

Our second argument concerns how specific (material) configurations of home spaces (e.g., large screens projecting porn, comfortable sofas, availability of big rooms, slings and playrooms) enhance the experience of chemsex, becoming part of the "infrastructures of the sexual encounter" (Race, 2015). Homes with these characteristics, often symbolizing a middle-upper class status, appear to become particularly popular within local networks of men practicing chemsex, reinforcing the class-based advantage of hosts (which varies across locations because related to the dynamics of local housing markets).

While our first two arguments elaborate on the relationship between home and hosting a chemsex party, the final strand of analysis argues that men's use of others' homes during chemsex parties reveals something of the (often unattainable) housing aspirations which are entangled with contemporary ideals of homonormative lifestyles. Several participants describe to enjoy having the opportunity to attend chemsex parties in "beautiful houses" that they could only dream of living in themselves, and encounter men who seem to embody the metropolitan homonormative ideal (good-looking, in shape, luxurious lifestyle including frequent travelling abroad). This dynamic seems more pronounced in 'world' cities (i.e., London and Milan) shaped by deepening socio-economic inequalities, leading to a remarkable process: whereas everyday urban life is increasingly characterized by class segregation and the privatization and commodification of space (e.g., Brenner and Theodore, 2005), chemsex brings people from different classes together, giving working class men the possibility to enjoy, momentarily, high end houses. On these grounds, we suggest that drug use in chemsex settings is not just about disinhibition that facilitates specific embodied pleasures, and the high itself, but also offers temporary respite from lives marked by material aspirations that cannot be realized otherwise. Without intending to pathologize sexualized drug use, this dynamic might help to answer why – when people have been having sex on drugs for a very long time – 'chemsex' (as a specific subculture) has coalesced as a particular cluster of sexualized drug use practices amongst gay men *now*.

Through these arguments, the paper's contribution to the literature is threefold. First, it contributes to the recently established "critical chemsex studies" by demonstrating how home is not just the setting of chemsex parties, its multidimensional character (both material and symbolic) shaping chemsex encounters and the affects they generate in a distinct way from public venues (e.g., clubs). Second, the paper contributes to housing geographies through the recognition of the specific ways chemsex, because consisting in having multiple strangers over, blurs the private/public space divide, i.e., a double, simultaneous relocation of its threshold *both* within *and* outside the home. Given the spreading of chemsex as a cultural and social practice, and the increasing role of digital technologies in mediating gay men's sexual lives more generally, this contribution is aimed at making housing geographies more inclusive (Di Feliciantonio and Dagkouly-Kyriakoglou, 2022) . Third, it contributes to the interdisciplinary literature on homonormativity, and its connections with chemsex, by highlighting the central role of place in the formation of homonormative ideals and aspirations, cautioning against the adoption of 'strong', universal conceptualizations based on a limited range of cases as they erase the lived experiences of a myriad of gay men outside the main metropolitan areas. Taken together, these contributions call for an increased awareness, among social scientists, around the role of place and space in shaping social processes, including sexual practices, and, among geographers, around the importance of sex and desire in organising people's everyday lives and spatial practices.

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