

### OBJETIVE

Recently in Spain, ChemSex has been much discussed in the media, but there are a number of misunderstandings about the magnitude of this phenomenon, what drugs are consumed and the spaces where gay men consume them. This study aims to inform the debate by describing the use of drugs among customers of a gay sauna in Barcelona, a space where ChemSex occurs.



a day, 365 days a year. Ticket prices range from 14 € and 18.5 €. Pass cards (for 3, 5 or 10 visits) are sold, reducing the fee to between 11 € and 13 €. Large private rooms can be rented by the hour.

#### The sauna: function and meaning

Sauna customers are mostly men aged over 30. The sauna is a living space in which there is movement and presence of customers throughout of the day. The sauna is not only a venue for sex, but also functions as social space. But for some customers it is a "space for consumption." For other men, the sauna is part of a "party circuit" that starts in a disco or sex club, continues at a private sex party and ends up in the sauna.

#### Drug dealers

In the sauna there are usually 3-5 regular dealers, others are "opportunistic". Most are Brazilian or Moroccan, and self-identify as heterosexual. They use a pass card to enter the sauna and may have worked there for many years (4-10). Some use "marketing strategies" and "customer loyalty" incentives when offering their "products" to new faces, giving away a packet of cocaine (a single line) or using a speaker with music to advertise their spot. "Territorial fights" may occur if a new dealer appears in the sauna especially as some depend entirely on drug sales for their livelihood.

#### Drugs and their consumption

The most frequently used drugs are GHB/GBL, cocaine, ecstasy, silver bars (MDMA), ketamine, poppers and Viagra. Tina (crystal meth) consumption is increasing and low consumption of mephedrone was also observed. Evidence of consumption (packaging, rollers, drug residues) can be found throughout the sauna (in cabins, bathrooms).

### METHODS

This study was an ethnographic study in preparation for a larger study (formative research). A gay sauna in Barcelona was visited once or twice per week for 6 months (July 2015-January 2016), at different times (morning, afternoon and late at night), staying for between 6 and 8 hours at the venue each visit. Data collection was through participant observation and informal interviews with customers, sauna employees and drug dealers. Ethical considerations were addressed before and during the study. Analysis was descriptive, with a focus on thematic patterns. Data were validated using testimonial validity.

### RESULTS

In this space, drugs may assume a symbolic value in which having drugs is having power (to attract men for sex, to make "friends" or to have some company). "Chillouts" can be organized in the large private rooms rented by a group of buddies. Slamming may also be practiced (a client told me he had once found a dressing case with syringes in the bathroom).

#### The consumer client

According to clients, drug users are often present from late at night to dawn, when they have access to about 60-70% of their clientele. Many men are poly-drug users (consuming several drugs at the same time) who bring more than one drug and/or accept any drug that is offered, often without knowing what it is. Some consumers may spend several days in the sauna, longer stays being associated with uncontrolled drug use. During interactions with consumers, some acknowledged having mental health problems (personality disorder, addictive behaviour, sexual compulsiveness, strong feelings of loneliness, etc.).

#### Consumption risks

Some consumers accept drugs from others without knowing exactly what they are. I witnessed many episodes of GHB overdose ("chungos", a state of semi-consciousness/unconscious or erratic behaviour, clumsy walk, screams, convulsions, vomiting, etc.). During these semi-conscious or unconscious periods, there is a risk of theft or sexual assault. Employees have also reported more extreme cases, including death. Drug users report that, in general, the use of condoms in the sauna is low.

#### Sauna's attitudes toward the consumption

There is a formal policy prohibiting drug use but the sauna turns a "blind eye" to it because it understands that many of their clients are drug users. The sauna apparently does not have a protocol to follow in the case of intoxication or overdose.

### CONCLUSIONS

The results are only valid for the sauna studied. A sauna subculture exists within the broader gay culture. Permissiveness in the use of drugs in the sauna reflects broader attitudes of permissiveness within gay culture. The high consumption of drugs is not only a problem for individuals, it is a problem of the gay community. This study reveals several important gaps in prevention: little information, insufficiently focused interventions, a lack of services for drug users and specific mental health services for the LGBT population. Any intervention should take a risk reduction perspective and should involve and engage the owners of the sex venues to tackle problematic drug consumption.

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