

Commonplace yet poorly conceptualised: A scoping review of sexualised drug use among heterosexual adults

Thomas Norman¹, Joel Anderson¹, Jennifer Power¹, Miranda Millen¹, Adam Bourne^{1,2}

¹*Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health, and Society, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia,* ²*The Kirby Institute, University of New South Wales, New South Wales, Australia*

Presenter's email: T.Norman@latrobe.edu.au

Introduction: Over one-fifth of heterosexual people who use substances report using alcohol and/or other drugs to enhance sexual encounters. However, most literature on sexualised drug use (SDU) has focused on men who have sex with men (i.e., 'chemsex'). This study is comprised of a mixed-methods systematic review of the existing literature on SDU among heterosexual individuals, including substances used, motivations, behaviours, and associated health factors.

Methods: A systematic search across seven databases identified 29 relevant qualitative and quantitative studies. These were synthesised using a thematic approach in order to consolidate current evidence on heterosexual SDU.

Results: Heterosexual people commonly engage in SDU, though the literature reflects a weaker conceptualisation of these practices compared to chemsex research (i.e., SDU among men who have sex with men). Substances typically used include alcohol, cannabis, MDMA, and cocaine—distinct from methamphetamine, GHB, and mephedrone more common in chemsex settings. Motivations for SDU among heterosexual individuals often parallel those seen in chemsex, including enhancing sexual performance, increasing intimacy, building confidence, and reducing shame or embarrassment, though group sex is less frequently reported. SDU is associated with elevated risks among heterosexual people, including higher STI transmission rates, reduced condom use with casual partners, mental health concerns, and potential dependency on substances in sexual settings. Several studies focused on individuals engaged in sex work or HIV-related care and testing.

Discussion and Conclusions: SDU is a prevalent yet underexplored phenomenon among heterosexual populations, with unique patterns and health implications. This review highlights the need for more nuanced research to better understand the diverse contexts in which SDU occurs. Expanding this evidence base can inform more comprehensive, targeted, and sex-positive harm reduction and health promotion strategies that reflect the experiences of heterosexual individuals who use substances in sexual contexts.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

None to disclose