

THE EFFECT OF ANTIRETROVIRALS ON THE SEXUAL CULTURES OF GAY AND BISEXUAL MEN

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Background:

The use of drugs for a wide range of purposes is an increasingly prominent feature of both pharmaceutical markets and lifestyle practices. This trend is particularly evident in sexual and gender minorities where licit and illicit drugs have become key technologies for transforming sexual experience. However, to date there has not been a detailed consideration of how HIV antiretrovirals, alongside other substances, enhance sexual experience.

Methods:

Drawing from a larger study examining LGBTQ drug consumption practices, we explore through in-depth, qualitative interviews, the effects of antiretrovirals – alongside other substances – in enhancing sexual experience. Drawing on insights from STS we investigate the ways in which the effects of substances are produced in relation to various other actors, arrangements and networks.

Results:

As with other consumers of other pharmaceuticals, PrEP and TasP users are increasingly positioned as self-determining consumers who make informed decisions and play an active part in their own healthcare. Alongside this conceptualisation as active consumers, new forms of peer education and collective association have emerged that entertain a wider distribution of expertise, knowledge and credibility about chemical experiences. In addition, the digital environment has given rise to online communities in which users exchange information about their experience of a wide range of substances – both therapeutic and illicit – and the effects they generate. Notably, information about access to, and the use of, antiretrovirals as PrEP, is increasingly circulated through these online communities.

Within gay men's sexual cultures, HIV antiretrovirals (as PrEP and TasP) are also increasingly consumed in combination with stimulants such as crystal methamphetamine, and other therapeutic agents such as sexuopharmaceuticals. Our findings suggest that consumption of these drugs in combination enhances sexual experience, and does so in a manner that mixes recreational and therapeutic/prophylactic logics.

Conclusions:

By considering together substances that, because of their varying legal status, are rarely recognised as linked, our findings provide new perspectives on how risk, care and pleasure inform and/or interfere with each other across a range of different settings.