

## **Interrogating LBQ women's substance use: towards culturally responsive, community-informed approaches**

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There is robust evidence that lesbian, bisexual, and queer (LBQ) women's substance use patterns differ significantly from heterosexual women. LBQ women initiate substance use earlier, have higher rates of smoking, are more likely to drink and to experience problematic alcohol use, and are more likely to use illicit drugs. Yet, public health research, policy and practice on women's substance use rarely attends to these patterns. Treating LBQ women as simply a subset of "women" is not a neutral action – it obscures meaningful differences, contributes to inaction, and risks alienating LBQ women.

At the same time, research and policy addressing "LGBTQ" substance use often centres gay, bisexual and queer men, masking important differences or rendering LBQ women's use a lesser public health concern by comparison. Very little LGBTQ research elaborates on LBQ women's experience of seeking support for substance use or treatment outcomes, while intervention studies designed for –or even including – LBQ women are vanishingly rare. And the specific cultural, social, and structural contexts shaping LBQ women's substance use remains largely unexamined.

In this presentation, I argue that these differences matter. Drawing on data from three studies—the SWASH biennial survey of LBQ women's health in Sydney, the national UnLEASH quantitative cohort study of LBQ women's substance use, and the QSOX qualitative cohort study of LBQ women's alcohol and tobacco use—I explore patterns in smoking, vaping, alcohol, and illicit drug use. These patterns challenge dominant paradigms that seek to explain substance use either in terms of minority stress or socialisation. I argue for a more nuanced understanding of LBQ women as a cultural group situated at the intersection of gender and sexuality, with distinct norms, practices, and meanings around substance use.

What are the implications for health research, promotion, and policy when we take seriously the social and cultural contexts of LBQ women's substance use? I end this presentation by reflecting on the challenges this poses for mainstream organisations charged with responding to smoking, alcohol, and illicit drug use in Australia. How do we move beyond rainbow flags, to build responses grounded in the lived realities, values, and priorities of LBQ women?