Published in final edited form as:

Int J Drug Policy. 2018 May ; 55: 249–255. doi:10.1016/j.drugpo.2018.04.005.

***Ice* parties among young men who have sex with men in Thailand: Pleasures, secrecy and risks**

Thomas E. Guadamuz^{1,2} and Pimpawun Boonmongkon^{1,2}

¹Department of Society and Health, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Mahidol University, Nakorn Pathom, Thailand ²Center for Health Policy Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Mahidol University, Nakorn Pathom, Thailand

Abstract

Background—Crystal methamphetamine (*ice*) has become the substance of choice among young men who have sex with men (YMSM) in urban Thailand. Yet, there is scarce data on this phenomenon, partly due to the difficulty in accessing men who will disclose and openly discuss the social contexts, meanings and risks surrounding *ice* practice. We present an ethnography of *ice* parties, critically discussing the in-depth social meanings of *ice*; the sexual socialities and the secrecy surrounding its use; the transactions between older and younger men; and the role of the Internet and mobile technology.

Methods—Forty repeated narrative interviews (life stories), ten focus group discussions, as well as systematic online and offline observations were conducted over a three-year period. Purposive sampling was used to recruit study participants in a variety of online and offline spaces and through working closely with local Thai community-based organizations serving MSM. To be eligible, participants had to be between 18 and 29 years, able to converse in Thai, had used *ice*, and had anal sex with another man in the past 6 months. We also strived for sample variability with respect to socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., age, educational attainment and living situation). Data analysis was conducted in Thai by two researchers using the constant comparative method based on grounded theory.

Results—On surface, participants described *ice* parties as exclusive, in trend, luxurious, fun and pleasurable—a kind of modern camaraderie among beautiful men. In reality, however, this group phenomenon was a social hierarchy containing several important players with relational power to one another, to the *ice* itself and to the physical space where *ice* was being consumed. These players included *ice* suppliers, party hosts, party guests and “icetenders.” The paper also discusses the sociality of secrecy that surrounds *ice* parties as well as the power relations between older relatively rich men who provide *ice* and the younger men who crave for the chemical, pointing to the risks associated with engagement at *ice* parties, including instances of rape, violence and

Correspondence: Thomas E. Guadamuz, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Mahidol University, 999 Buddhamonthon 4 Road, Salaya, Nakhon Pathom 73170, tguadamu@hotmail.com, Phone +662-441-9515.

Publisher's Disclaimer: This is a PDF file of an unedited manuscript that has been accepted for publication. As a service to our customers we are providing this early version of the manuscript. The manuscript will undergo copyediting, typesetting, and review of the resulting proof before it is published in its final citable form. Please note that during the production process errors may be discovered which could affect the content, and all legal disclaimers that apply to the journal pertain.

unsafe sex. For some participants, *ice* use was part of their “everyday life,” or even believed to be a “rites of passage.” For others, it involved sexual silence in cases where they were forced to have (unprotected) sex with certain persons or engage in high-risk activities against their will.

Conclusions—*Ice* parties, where high-risk practices were common, power and agency quickly became relational and negotiable. This paper illuminated the secret sociality of *ice* so that public health efforts will be better equipped with understanding and reaching out to young men who may be at heightened risk for HIV, STI, violence and other health concerns. *Ice* parties can, for example, be seen as opportunities for harm-reduction strategies whereby young men are not judged for the activities they engage, but are instead respected and approached in a contextualized, non-judgmental way. Finally, icetenders and party hosts may be individuals where public health practitioners can target and include in the development of novel harm-reduction programs.

Keywords

Crystal methamphetamine; Men who have sex with men; Sexual transactions; Secrecy; Thailand

INTRODUCTION

Crystal methamphetamine has become a common substance of choice for young men who have sex with men in Thailand. According to a recent review (Chomchai & Chomchai, 2015), Thailand and China are currently the largest methamphetamine markets in Asia. But to understand this phenomenon, an understanding of its history and contexts are essential. Methamphetamine (meth) use (commonly called *ya ba*) is not new to Thailand. It began several decades ago where it was originally used among mostly male day laborers, factory workers and truck drivers to improve strength and endurance during long hours that was required as part of their occupations (Farrell, Marsden, Ali, & Ling, 2002; McCoy, 2004). Ingested as a pill, it was called *ya ma* meaning the horse drug (strong and having endurance) and was commonly used until the Thai government noticed its abuse and wanted to control it (Cohen, 2014), which resulted in the Narcotics Act of 1979 (Narcotics Act, B.E. 2522 (1979)). *Ya ba* then transitioned from an occupational drug to a recreational drug, and subsequently became increasingly popular among Thai youth and adolescents (Ruangkanchanasetr, Plitponkarnpim, Hetrakul, & Kongsakon, 2005; Sattah et al., 2002; Sherman et al., 2009). This resulted in the Thai government renaming *ya ma* to *ya ba* (meaning “crazy drug”). While there is no reliable nationally representative assessment of meth use in Thailand (beyond self reports), one school-based study in Northern Thailand, conducted in 3 vocational schools and used both urine testing and self-administered ACASI questionnaire, found 10% of students to be current users of *ya ba* and 29% reported lifetime *ya ba* use (van Griensven et al., 2001).

In 2001, the Thai government established rehabilitation camps, compulsory urine testing in schools and random urine testing in entertainment venues, and eventually declared a “war on drugs” in order to respond to the meth epidemic (Vongchak et al., 2005). These policies, which included punitive laws, are still enforced today. For example, a person who possesses less than 3 grams of meth will face 1–10 years of imprisonment and/or 20,000–200,000 Thai baht fine (640 – 6,400 USD); if 3 grams or more of meth will face 10 years to life imprisonment and/or 1–5 million Thai baht fine (32,000–160,000 USD); and if dealing/

selling meth will face a life sentence or a death sentence and/or 1–5 million Thai baht fine (32,000–160,000 USD) (Narcotics Act, B.E. 2522 (1979)). These laws are indeed some of the harshest in the region.

Meth use, and the initiation of use, in particular, is often within a social context and for social reasons (Carnes, 2013; Hobkirk, Watt, Myers, Skinner, & Meade, 2016; Sherman et al., 2008). For some gay and bisexual men in the United States, meth use is part of the subculture for which they want to belong (Parsons, Kelly, & Weiser, 2007). For others, the “club scene” provides a place of social support that consequently also supports the use of and initiation of meth (Halkitis & Palamar, 2008). In South Africa, meth is considered “popular and trendy,” but initiation of meth is associated with unemployment and stress coping that often result from elevated community violence and crime (Hobkirk, Watt, Myers, Skinner, & Meade, 2016). *Ya ba* use among youth and adolescents in Thailand had been shown to increase energy, enhance and prolong sexual arousal and sexual performance, experience euphoria and appetite suppression as well as depression, mood disorders, paranoia, psychosis, and violence (Chomchai & Manaboriboon, 2012; Cohen, 2014). *Ya ba* is usually taken as pills or smoked, but can also be injected (Hayashi et al., 2011). However, it is not clear whether *ya ba* is common among young men who have sex with men (YMSM), or if the purer form of *ya ba*, crystal methamphetamine (crystal meth), is more common.

Various social media profiles, gay dating apps, and “hook-up” websites suggest that crystal meth (commonly called *ice* in Thailand) may be common among YMSM. These online spaces also suggest that *ice* use is a social phenomenon for YMSM, often in the contexts of parties. Additionally, online advertisements and invitations are usually embedded in coded and hidden languages and emoticons (e.g., placing a snowflake emoticon in one’s profile to indicate interest in “partying” or getting “hi” with “ice”). This also seems to suggest its secretive nature and the “risks” surrounding its consumption.

While there is scarce research on practices surrounding *ice* use in Thailand, similar to *ya ba*, *ice* produces similar euphoric effects and risks that may include prolonged and unprotected sexual intercourse with multiple partners (Chomchai & Chomchai, 2015). Meth use among MSM has been found to be significantly associated with polydrug use, increased libido and increased pain threshold (thus facilitating receptive anal intercourse), as well as decreased condom use and increased number of anonymous sex partners (Oldenburg, Jain, Mayer, & Mimiaga, 2015; Sewell et al., 2017; Wei, Lim, Guadamuz, & Koe, 2012; Xu et al., 2014). Therefore, risk contexts surrounding *ice* use and the online and offline spaces where these risks transpire are particularly important, yet they have not been extensively studied among Thai YMSM. It has been shown, for example, that Asian MSM who occupy both online and offline spaces engage in higher risk behaviors than men who occupy in only one type of space (Wei, Lim, Guadamuz, & Koe, 2014). Key questions include: How is *ice* consumed, shared, and exchanged among Thai YMSM? What are the social meanings of *ice* and *ice* parties? How and to what extent does the Internet and mobile technology play a role in *ice* parties? These questions are relevant and may inform current harm reduction efforts among YMSM in Thailand.

In this article, we present ethnography of *ice* practice, critically discussing in-depth the social meanings of *ice*, the sexual socialities surrounding its use, the transactions between older “less attractive” men and younger men with “chiseled bodies,” and the role of the Internet and mobile technology. Many times, illicit activities are done in secret in order to avert law enforcement personnel and to advert social stigma that may be attached to these practices. Also, these activities may be done as a group and eventually become part of everyday life. These activities are not new to gender and sexual minorities in Thailand (Panooapat, Boonmongkon, & Guadamuz, 2014). However, the notion of *ice* parties as a ‘secret sociality’ has not been reported and analyzed, to the best of our knowledge. We therefore use secrecy (Bellman, 1984; Hardon & Posel, 2012; Simmel, 1906) as an approach to better understand *ice* parties and provide implications for harm reduction efforts.

METHODS

This ethnographic study was conducted over a three-year period by the first author through a community-engaged process that included partnering with local MSM-serving community-based organizations in the Bangkok metropolitan area. Forty repeated narrative interviews (life stories), ten focus group discussions, as well as systematic online and offline observations were conducted. Study participants were recruited in a variety of online (e.g., MSM-identified apps, twitter accounts, and websites) and offline spaces (e.g., saunas, bars/pubs) through suggestions from local community-based organizations.

To be eligible, participants had to be between 18 and 29 years, able to converse in Thai, had used *ice*, and had anal sex with another man in the past 6 months. We also strived for sample variability with respects to socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., age, educational attainment and living situation).

Data collection

To fully understand YMSM’s perceptions, beliefs and practices; we used a narrative interview method whereby men were asked to tell us their life stories beginning from their first memory. Based on their answers, the interviewer probed for a variety of topics including: substance and alcohol use, sexual behaviors, partner seeking activities, family history, violence, social and peer pressures, coming out issues, gender and sexual practices, social support, and resilience. The interviewer also spent a significant amount of time with participants in building rapport and gaining participants’ trust. Participants were also able to talk about their life experiences freely, meaning that the interviewer did not limit the interview time or stop participants from telling their stories.

Usually, each YMSM participant was interviewed 3 times over the course of several months between each interview. An interview lasted between an hour to four hours. Not all participants were willing to share their experiences of *ice* practices initially. It took several interviews to get to the ice narratives.

To triangulate our data, we also conducted ten focus group discussions (FGDs), engaged in observations of online and offline spaces where YMSM frequent and conducted online ethnography (Boellstorff, 2012; Hine, 2000). The ladder two methods generated field notes

that were also used for data analysis. For the FGDs, recruitment method and eligibility criteria were similar to the narrative interviews. The FGDs were actually conducted to gain a general understanding of risk environments among YMSM, not necessary about *ice* parties or *ice* use. However, FGD participants who mentioned *ice* or seemed to be knowledgeable about *ice* activities were then individually asked to be included in the narrative interviews. FGDs were usually in the evening, lasted about two and half to three hours, and involved a dinner break in the middle.

Study participation was voluntary and anonymous. The first author conducted all of the interviews and facilitated all FGDs in Thai. At the first narrative interview with each participant and at the beginning of all FGDs, study protocols were verbally explained in simple Thai language to all participants and a study information sheet containing summary of the study protocol and PI and research center contact information were given to all participants. Verbal informed consent were obtained from all study participants, including consent to audio-record the interviews/FGDs. Each interview participant received an incentive of 300 Thai baht (10 USD) for each of the first two interviews and 400 Thai baht for subsequent interviews. Each FGD participant received 500 Thai baht (16 USD). Study protocol was reviewed and approved by the institutional review boards of Mahidol University and the University of Pittsburgh.

Online ethnography

Since YMSM in Thailand use the online space as a primary way to socialize with other YMSM, display and advertise their gender and sexualities, and in general, perform their sexual citizenship (Samakkeekarom & Boonmongkon, 2011; Samakkeekarom, Boonmongkon, Ojanen, & Guadamuz, 2012), it was therefore necessary to study this unique space where YMSM not only navigate the online space at least once daily, but multiple times a day and for some, never leaving this space as they occupy the offline and online spaces simultaneously through mobile devices like smart phones and tablets. Online ethnography was conducted through (1) observations of various websites (e.g., personals, social networking profiles, and sex-seeking/sex-facilitating apps like twitter, Grindr, Jack'd and Hornet) and chat programs (e.g., Camfrog, Line, WhatsApp), and (2) one-on-one interactions with online YMSM through websites and chat programs. These activities generated photos, texts and field notes that were then analyzed (Boellstorff, 2012; Hine, 2000).

Data analysis

All audio recordings were transcribed and data analysis was conducted in Thai by two researchers using the constant comparative method based on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2012). All texts and photos generated by online ethnography were conducted in similar ways whereby at least two researchers went through a subset of texts and independently coded, and then further refined the coding list, which was used for the remainder of the text. Structural narrative analysis, applying the categorical-form model, was also used (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Elliot, 2005). Themes were then compiled and discussed among the research team. In some cases, themes were confirmed with study participants.

Reflexivity

It was extremely difficult for the first author and his research assistant to gain entry into the secret world of *ice* users because neither the first author or his assistant had ever used *ice* or *ya ba*. The beginning was very rough. However, the entry point into the world of *ice* was through the online space and having some very courageous members from community-based organizations to step forward and help recruit their *ice*-using friends. This required tremendous trust, confidentiality, and a very careful research process on our part. To do this, the research team transferred as much power to research participants by having participants be in control of the days, times and location of the interviews; of the topics discussed, stopping whenever participants felt uncomfortable or preferred not to answer; and taking breaks when needed. Sometimes interviews lasted 4 hours because participants did not want to stop telling us their stories, while most first interviews were shorter. The repeated narrative interviews over several months were particularly beneficial because participants felt more comfortable talking to the researcher and with each face-to-face interview, participants provided more in-depth stories of their secret *ice*-using world. For the researcher, having some time between interviews assisted in digesting and analyzing the text from the interviews. Moreover, it gave time for the researcher to better explore the online space with either a different pair of critical lens or to explore new online spaces that were mentioned by participants. This iterative process then allowed for more probing in the next interview, particularly, it provided opportunities to go back to certain information that were shared but were not probed or were not connected to other types of shared information. In this article, the authors chose to present quotations in a confidential way in order to protect the identities of research participants from authorities. This meant that demographic details like occupation and living situation were omitted.

FINDINGS

Hi, hi fun, hiso: Meanings, status and pleasure

YMSM defined methamphetamine, or *ya ba*, as a drug of the lower/working classes (e.g., truck drivers, factory workers, construction workers). To use *ya ba* was also considered a “rough neck” activity, and was seen as cheap, dirty, ugly, addictive and harmful. Accessibility to *ya ba* was relatively easy and confined to blue-collar, rough-looking, unattractive men. Usually these men were thought to have *dumb* (darker/black skin) complexion, hence considered unattractive to most YMSM participants.

In contrast, YMSMs described the “*ice* scene” as positive, encompassing pleasure, agency, and beautiful men. Local terms referring to getting high on *ice* or describing *ice* itself included *hi* (being high), *hi fun* (being high and having fun), *nam keng* (Thai translation for the word ice) and *ai tim* (ice cream). *Ice* was also described as cool [intends to mean cold/cooling], pure, clean and *hiso* (high society). Men who use *ice* were considered to be of high social status, educated, having white or lighter skin shade and having perfect, in-shaped, and chiseled bodies. These beliefs highlight the unique functionality of *ice* for YMSM, but also hint at the social status that it brings to YMSM themselves. For example, participants mentioned that they have met numerous professionals (e.g., university professors, teachers, business executives, physicians, etc.) at *ice* parties.

Moreover, *ice* parties were seen as exclusive, in trend, and luxurious. Those who were invited to an *ice* party were thought to be “connected” and are “in-the-know,” implicating a kind of social or elite status or even forming a cultural elite sub-group or elite social network of MSM. *Ice* was also considered a weight-control substance, a skin whitening substance (hence the “pure” and the “cool”), implying that it is the substance of choice to achieve and sustain perfect bodies and complexion.

Aside from beauty and social status-related utility, *ice* was thought to be helpful with completing homework, catching up with office work and even studying for exams. Participants said that their concentration, productivity and stamina were improved when using *ice*. And hence it was not uncommon for YMSM to be *hi* on *ice* during university exam periods.

Yes I use *ice* during university midterms and finals. It helps me get things done. I am able to read through all of my books and lecture notes.

20 year old party guest

Sexing *ice*

Ice use among YMSM was a social phenomenon that usually involved two or more individuals and almost always included sexual activities: *ice* parties. Participants described *ice*-laced sexual experiences as the best sexual pleasure they have ever encountered and they want to be a part of it again and again. And so *ice* parties were essentially private sex parties where all the “beautiful” bodies are together, reaping pleasure with one another while *hi* on *ice*. Party guests may engage in one-on-one activities, may engage in group-sex activities or guests may have one-on-one sex, but with multiple partners throughout the party duration. Viagra and poppers were also common substances to achieve and maintain erection and to relax the anus for penetrative sex, respectively. Other chemicals were not mentioned, however. Moreover, sex roles were fluid at these parties. Exclusive tops (penetrators during anal sex) may become bottoms (penetrated during anal sex) and vice versa.

Some have not been bottoms before, for example, then after using *ice*, they only want to bottom!

29 year old party host

These parties usually took place in private settings, usually an apartment, a condominium, a house or a hotel room and can last—from start to finish—for about 6–12 hours, for days, or sometimes longer. Sizes for these parties also vary, sometimes they are large, lavish gatherings in one of Bangkok’s luxurious high-rise condominiums or one of the five-star hotel suites, equipped with *ice* bartenders (icetenders). Other times they are more intimate, occurring in a studio apartment of a university student, for example. One participant describes the setting:

I like the scene... a dark room with very soft lights, dance music and cool air conditioning

29 year old icetender

Parties were also not exclusive to invited guests. Many times, guests of guests may appear or last-minute invitations may be extended throughout the duration of the party from the host or even from one of the party guests, usually through the use of the Internet and mobile-based apps, and other forms of social media. However, these non-invited guests were part of the secret sociality in that they could speak and understand the coded secret languages of *ice* users.

(De)icing technology: Chiseled bodies, transactions and the Internet

The Internet and mobile technology is central to *ice* transactions on several levels. It is foremost a medium whereby YMSM find and negotiate their invitations to *ice* parties. “Perfect” bodies of YMSM become the currency and the *ice*, or more specifically, free admittance to *ice* parties, becomes the commodity. To do this, YMSM advertise their bodies, showing their well-defined light-color skin and chiseled chests and six-pack abs. Many YMSM profiles on Twitter and in various MSM-identified mobile-based apps even show their erect penises and buttocks. Once the buyer (party host or a party invited guest) is satisfied, an invitation is extended to these YMSM. Usually the buyers are older (late 20s and older) because they have the means to either host a party or contribute to the costs of the party. It is therefore an informal transaction between YMSM (sellers of their chiseled bodies) and older MSM (buyers/providers of *ice*) through the online space. A participant explained this phenomenon:

If you are young, have a chiseled body and handsome face, you will have the power to negotiate with party hosts and never have to pay for *ice*. Sometimes you don’t even have to look for it, they will come to you [online profile] and invite you to the parties.

29 years old icetender

Aside from displaying chiseled bodies in online spaces, there also exist specific, coded languages/phrases/key words and even emoticons that are used between buyers and sellers. For example, words such as “cool,” “snow,” “airrrr,” “Hi,” “highfun,” “ice cream” and “fly” all refer to what these men with chiseled bodies are after, *ice*. These coded words are often displayed alongside YMSM profiles in various gay dating apps and websites.

Moreover, the photos and emoticons included in these profiles have significant symbolic meanings and convey specific messages. For example, in a popular twitter profile of a YMSM who has almost 42,000 followers, ice cubes and snowflake emoticons are displayed and convey that he is an *ice* user and available for *ice* parties. Other popular emoticons next to *ice* user profiles are airplanes, ice cream cones, and clouds. Popular phrases and hash tags next to these emoticons may include: “I like cool, sensual fun...invite me” or “fly fly I can be easily invited #top #fly #cool” or “#Hi [Thai spelling for the word ‘hi’],” “#I can do anything if only you invite me,” “#I can do anything if it’s fresh/cool,” “#Invite me please.” Some profiles may even have syringe emoticons indicating that he is either looking to inject *ice* specifically, or that he is open to injecting. Another twitter profile of a 27 year-old *ice* user who has almost 80,000 followers have the following phrase: “Manly guys let’s fuck hard and deep, rough and raw, let’s not stop our mutual feelings, anyone into this? Then

invite me...I can smoke, I can inject.” Clearly, this YMSM is looking for bareback sex and is open to smoking or injecting *ice*.

The phrases and emoticons were written to attract buyers whereby YMSM use their chiseled, white youthful bodies as currency for *ice*. Through our online ethnography, we also noticed that in a similar way, personal ads of YMSM advertised through mobile phone-based apps like Grindr, Jack’d and Hornet also have these phrases/key words in addition to photos of chiseled bodies. Sometimes video clips are posted instead of photos. One tweeter profile of an *ice* user, for example, posted a home-made clip of him having bareback sex with two other YMSM at an *ice* party. In the clip, one can notice an *ice* smoking apparatus next to bed as well as a laptop live streaming the activities (usually to invite more YMSM to attend the party). Next to the clip he wrote: “Hi hi slam slam fuck fuck such incredible feelings that I send a clip for you to get horny for now (I was the top and was great) recorded yesterday.”

Scratching below the surface: Power, violence, and risks

On surface, YMSM described the *ice* scene as mainly positive, fun and pleasurable—a kind of modern camaraderie among beautiful men. In reality, however, this group phenomenon is a social hierarchy containing several important players with relational power to one another, to the *ice* itself and to the physical space where *ice* is being consumed. These players include dealers/suppliers, party hosts, party guests and icetenders.

Dealers/suppliers and hosts

Sometimes there is an *ice* dealer (the person who sells the *ice*) that co-organizes the party or is an invited special guest of the host. Hosts are individuals that organize the party, sometimes supplying the *ice* and often are the owner/leaser of the space. Hence, dealers and hosts have tremendous power over the *ice* and the space. Since *ice* is classified as an illicit drug in Thailand with harsh punishments if found in procession, or worst, if found dealing/selling, it is therefore extremely risky to host these parties—hence providing power to dealers and hosts. As a result, dealers and party hosts have the most say as to who join the party, who has to leave the party and who can be invited back to subsequent parties. Unlike party guests, dealers and hosts are usually older (over 25 years), do not necessary have to be “beautiful” or have chiseled bodies, however they still strive for beauty. YMSM participants have described them as “older, ugly, fat, and have darker skin.” Dealers and hosts can also have their first choice picks among the YMSM guests as to who they would like to have sex. One party host stated:

In using *ice*, the final destination is to climax either as part of a large orgy, with one other person or with 2 or 3 others...sometimes when using *ice*, we play cards, or watch a movie or talk...really depends on my mood [the host]. But I always want to *fin* [climax]. I actually have a sign in my room that says “(1) please take off your clothes before pulling [using *ice*] and (2) turn off your mobile devices or go home”

29 year old host

Guests

Unlike dealers and hosts, guests have to be young and “beautiful,” unless they are close friends of the dealers and/or hosts and hence they may themselves be hosts at other *ice* parties. Guests at *ice* parties are active participants. Seldom do guests observe or join in the sexual activities without consuming *ice*. While most participants indicate they had agency in attending and hosting *ice* parties, one participant did not speak as positively of his first experience at an *ice* party when he was 19 years old:

It was almost three am and I was returning home from being with friends. On the way home I'd thought maybe I can meet up with this guy who I had been chatting online for several weeks. I texted him and he said to come over to his place for our first meeting. Once there, I noticed that he was not alone. I had thought he was alone and wanted to see only him. There were 3-4 other guys there and they were all naked. I also saw an apparatus that they told me was for smoking *ice*. I did not feel comfortable and wanted to leave. At that point, he convinced me to come in and hang out for a little bit. But once inside, the others wanted me to try *ice*. I didn't know what it was and didn't want to try, but eventually I gave in and next thing I knew I was taken to the bed and all of them undressed me. I was scared, but I didn't know what to do, I couldn't fight them off. Taking turns, they all fucked me throughout the night without condoms. I went home the next day around noon.

19 years old party guest

There are opportunities for sexual coercion to transpire in these settings, especially when everyone is *hi*. And even if the men had agency at the beginning, they may eventually lose that agency through the relational power that co-exist in an *ice* party. Below is another example where a research participant was offered *ice* for the first time and also where he was sexually assaulted by seven other men:

When I was eighteen, I was invited to a party where I tried *ice*, E [ecstasy], GHB, and K [ketamine] for the first time. Then I remembered being numbed, almost floating. I could not feel my arms and legs, but I knew what was happening. I remembered seven guys taking turn fucking me for hours—I later learned that this went on from that evening until the next evening and that I was fucked without condoms. I have never bottomed before and I don't know how I did it. Throughout that night and the next day, they also kept giving me more [drugs] to make sure I was always high and numb.

29 years old icetender

Guests told us that they regularly or sometimes go beyond their comfort levels in terms of sexual activities with other guests, hosts and dealers. These included having sex without condoms, having sex with multiple partners, sometimes all at once and for an extended amount of time. Participants indicated that at an *ice* party, everyone is versatile and that dealers and hosts have power in determining who they want to have sex with and what anal sexual position they would like to engage in (i.e., top versus bottom). This may be problematic for exclusive tops, for example, to suddenly bottom for a host.

Finally, guests at *ice* parties have to also think about their exit strategy in that they sometimes need to coordinate with hosts when the party will be over and for how long they can stay. Because of the constant policing by Thai authorities throughout the night, especially on the weekends and public holidays, guests prefer not to travel when it is still dark, thus not to risk being caught by the Thai police. They therefore need to have a plan if they are *hi* and the party is over before dawn. Some go and stay with friends who live nearby the *ice* party and some may even ask the host if they can stay until dawn, thus releasing more power to the host.

Ice tenders

Ice tenders have a unique role at an *ice* party. Sometimes icetenders are dealers, but other times they are just icetenders, there to look over the *ice* supply, to prepare the *ice* for guests' consumption and to make sure the various activities of the night are going smoothly. Some icetenders also make sure that there is enough food and water stocked to last the duration of the party. Sometimes icetenders are full participants of *ice* parties and sometimes they participate partially, or not at all. One icetender said:

I look after the *ice*. Before I used to icetend very frequently, sometimes once a week, but now a lot of people know me [due to his occupation]. Also [as icetender] I cannot have sexual activities with them [guests] like I can be naked during the party, but cannot engage in sexual activities with the party guests because I need to stay in the living room/common room and tend to the *ice* and the 2 bedrooms would be where they would have sexual activities with all doors open. Doors are never closed.

25 years old icetender

It seems that hosts dictate whether icetenders can be participants of sexual activities or not. One icetender participant explained that he "loves going to *ice* parties" because he gets free *ice*, gets to network and then go home with some money from the hosts. In his case, the host trusts him greatly.

DISCUSSION

Sexualized bodies and the secret sociality of *ice*

Ice parties among YMSM in the Thai context is a social phenomenon that is complex, risky and embedded in the subculture of urban YMSM. This urban subculture is uniquely framed in coded languages, secret gatherings and secret transactions, a direct result of Thai society's negative view and legal and social consequences of an illicit activity. There has been precedent through the previous Thai government's Social Order Campaign where users of meth were prosecuted, MSM-frequented venues (e.g., bars, bathhouses) raided, and dealers of meth shot at gunpoint (Vongchak et al., 2005). Although not the current policy, it still perpetuated an environment of fear surrounding *ya ba/ice* use. It is important to note that *ice* activities described in this article are indeed an urban phenomenon. The online spaces, for example, is heavily dominated by Bangkok residents.

Ice parties are therefore rooted within a society of secrets, but at the same time, are very social. This complex duality transpires into a kind of “secret sociality” that is full of coded languages and symbols, as well as a shared culture among YMSM that is only meant for those who are “in the know,” while adverting Thai authorities (Bellman, 1984; Green & Halkitis, 2006; Simmel, 1906). In this embodied practice among *ice* users, power relations and negotiations of sexualized bodies between YMSM and the *ice* that belongs to older less attractive MSM transpire and co-exist (Hardon & Posel, 2012; Simmel, 1906). Sexualized bodies of YMSM are highly valued (Guadamuz et al., 2012), partly due to the Global North-imported ideology of what is attractive and beautiful (Atman, 2002). These bodies hence represent the ideology of what is attractive—being youthful, thin, masculine, and white; which is the perfect currency for the transactions of *ice* in Thailand.

It is remarkable, however, that none of the participants mentioned the side effects of *ice* or overdose from *ice*. Although *ice* parties are social, these risks seem to be silenced, perhaps a byproduct of the punitive laws from the state (Race, 2009). *Ice* initiation seems to involve prolonged and unprotected sexual intercourse with multiple partners and sexual violence. These activities may increase STI and HIV acquisition and transmission risks. For some YMSM, *ice* use is part of sexual identity development, a kind of “rites of passage.” Subsequently, the idea of truth telling and disclosure extend beyond sexualized bodies, pleasurable experiences and social networking opportunities. It also involves sexual silence in cases where YMSM are forced to have sex with certain persons or engage in certain activities against their will—which has been shown to increase risks for HIV/STI infections (Guadamuz et al., 2011). Therefore, power and agency quickly becomes relational and negotiable at *ice* parties. For example, while hosts and dealers seem to galvanize their powers by controlling the space and the *ice*, YMSM—depending on their agency, attractiveness and confidence—may in fact have just as much power or more, and able to demand *ice*, sex and even extend invitations to other YMSM they find attractive. More research should investigate these power relationships in these intimate spaces so to better inform harm reduction programs. Interestingly, these parties do not seem to encourage safer sexual activities or even HIV status disclosure, rather, it supports, albeit indirectly, the secrecy of HIV/STI risks and of HIV status. One icetender stated:

So I was shocked to find these beautiful men and was surprised that they come to a bareback *ice* party, they can have anyone out there [outside the party], but they come here to this bareback party. I don't know if they would have bareback sex [if not *hi*] out there, if they went somewhere else. I still really regret not being able to have sex with them...because I was working, was on duty [as an icetender] at that party.

25 years old icetender

Finally, YMSM may also not be “out” or have disclosed their male-to-male sexual activities to their friends, or their social and family networks. This may make disclosure of *ice* practice, or of sexual activities at *ice* parties, problematic and consequently hinder access to public health services, or even social and peer support. Again these men may end up coping or suffering in silence, similar to the participants who, for the first time, disclosed their sexual assaults to the interviewer. Regardless, from all the interviews, it was clear that

attending *ice* parties and participating in shared, illicit and risky activities with other MSM was considered highly pleasurable. The only risks foreseen for these men were how to avoid the authorities and not get caught. Drug overdose, needle-related injuries, transmission and acquisition of HIV and STIs were not considered risks.

Toward a harm-reduction approach

To our knowledge, this study is the first to critically document in detail *ice* practice among YMSM in Bangkok. Several years ago, an article was published in *The Nation*, one of Thailand's leading English-language newspaper, that urged HIV/AIDS organizations to respond to the escalating drug use among YMSM, suggesting that drug use is related to the HIV epidemic in Bangkok where about 3 in 10 YMSM were living with HIV, usually not knowing it (van Griensven et al., 2010; van Griensven et al., 2013). Since then, sadly, there has been little or no response to the *ice*-using practices of YMSM by these organizations (Guadamuz et al., 2014; Guadamuz, Cheung, Wei, Koe, & Lim, 2015). Perhaps it is the complex phenomena surrounding *ice* use—that we have attempted to describe and analyze in this article—that sustains a distance between *ice*-using YMSM and HIV/AIDS service organizations.

There are some study limitations. Firstly, findings from this study may not be generalized to all *ice*-using YMSM in Thailand. This is certainly not the objective of a qualitative study. However, this study still provided contexts of *ice* practice and *ice* parties, with the hopes that the findings will inform current harm reduction programs in Thailand and similar settings elsewhere. Additionally, the investigators of this study are not *ice* users and did not attend *ice* parties, thus this may have limited the inter-subjectivity between the interviewer and study participants. Regardless, study investigators used several methods to triangulate data collection which were aided by members of YMSM-serving community-based organizations and current *ice*-using YMSM to guide participant recruitment and data collection, as well as data analysis. Finally and to the best of our knowledge, this is the first ethnography of *ice* parties among Thai YMSM; findings have the potential to generate other research studies and inform current and future preventive interventions and programs for *ice*-using YMSM.

Our findings are not meant to support or suggest policing of *ice* practices among YMSM, policing of online spaces where YMSM negotiate their bodies for *ice*, or encouraging censorship or closing down of websites or of MSM- and *ice*-specific mobile apps. Rather, we want to encourage better understanding of the secret sociality of *ice* so that public health efforts are better equipped with understanding and reaching out to YMSM who may be at heightened risk for HIV, STI, violence, overdose and other health concerns. The fact that MSM are vulnerable to multiple problems and negative health consequences such as substance abuse, violence, depression, suicidality and HIV/STI infections have been suggested previously (Guadamuz et al., 2013; Guadamuz et al., 2014), yet public health efforts have not been responsive (Stall, Herrick, Guadamuz, & Friedman, 2009; Yuntadilok et al., 2013). We therefore suggest a rights-based harm-reduction approach whereby YMSM are not judged for the activities they engage, are respected for being themselves, and that the reduction of harms or risks of harms are approached in a contextualized, non-judgmental way. For example, these can include substance treatment programs geared toward YMSM

where they are treated with dignity and respect, peer-based or network-based interventions to reduce harms, and online interventions in spaces where YMSM navigate and advertise their bodies for *ice* (Broadhead et al., 1998; Latkin, Sherman, & Knowlton, 2003; Shoptaw & Reback, 2007).

Moreover, public health prevention efforts need to also take a resiliency approach (Herrick et al., 2011), learning, for example, from *ice*-using YMSM who circumvent harms and at the same time keep themselves healthy. Finally, icetenders and party hosts may be individuals where researchers and public health practitioners can target and include in the development of harm reduction programs.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank study participants for permitting us to share their personal stories that, for some YMSM, have never been told before. We also thank Kunakorn Kanchawee, Danai Linjongrut, Nattharat Samoh, and Chanan Yodhong for assisting in data collection. The funding for this study was supported by the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health (MH085567), with supplemental funding from the University of Amsterdam ChemYouth project and the Thailand Substance Abuse Academic Network (TSAAN) funded by the Thai Health Promotion Foundation.

References

- Altman, D. Global sex. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 2002.
- Bellman, B. The language of secrecy. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press; 1984.
- Boellstorff, T. Ethnography and virtual worlds: A handbook of method. Princeton University Press; 2012.
- Broadhead RS, Heckathorn DD, Weakliem DL, Anthony DL, Madray H, Mills RJ, Hughes J. Harnessing peer networks as an instrument for AIDS prevention: results from a peer-driven intervention. Public Health Reports. 1998; 113:42. [PubMed: 9722809]
- Carnes, NA. The meanings gay men attribute to meth and sex: A qualitative study. Master's thesis. 2013. Retrieved 29th March 2018 from <http://hdl.handle.net/1805/3614>
- Chomchai C, Chomchai S. Global patterns of methamphetamine use. Current opinion in psychiatry. 2015; 28:269–274. [PubMed: 26001916]
- Chomchai C, Manaboriboon B. Stimulant methamphetamine and dextromethorphan use among Thai adolescents: implications for health of women and children. Journal of Medical Toxicology. 2012; 8:291–294. [PubMed: 22555762]
- Coffey, A., Atkinson, P. Making sense of qualitative data: complementary research strategies. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications; 1996. Narratives and stories; p. 54-82.
- Cohen A. Crazy for Ya Ba: Methamphetamine use among northern Thai youth. International Journal of Drug Policy. 2014; 25:776–782. [PubMed: 25067795]
- Elliott, J. Using narrative in social research: Qualitative and quantitative approaches. London: Sage; 2005.
- Farrell M, Marsden J, Ali R, Ling W. Methamphetamine: drug use and psychoses becomes a major public health issue in the Asia Pacific region. Addiction. 2002; 97:771–772. [PubMed: 12133111]
- Glaser, BG., Strauss, AL. New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction. 2012. The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research.
- Green AI, Halkitis P. Crystal methamphetamine and sexual sociality in an urban gay subculture: An elective affinity. Culture, Health & Sexuality. 2006; 8:317–333.
- Guadamuz TE, Cheung DH, Wei C, Koe S, Lim SH. Young, online and in the dark: scaling up HIV testing among MSM in ASEAN. PloS one. 2015; 10:e0126658. [PubMed: 25973907]
- Guadamuz, TE., Friedman, MS., Marshal, MP., Herrick, AL., Lim, SH., Wei, C., Stall, R. Health, sexual health, and syndemics: Toward a better approach to STI and HIV preventive interventions for men who have sex with men (MSM) in the United States. In: Aral, SO.Fenton, KA., Lipshutz,

- JA., editors. *The New Public Health and STI/HIV Prevention: Personal, Public, and Health Systems Approaches*. New York: Springer Science+Business Media, LLC; 2013. p. 251-272.
- Guadamuz TE, Lim SH, Marshal MP, Friedman MS, Stall RD, Silvestre AJ. Sexual, behavioral and quality of life characteristics of healthy weight, overweight and obese gay and bisexual men: Findings from a prospective cohort study. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. 2012; 41:385–389. [PubMed: 22038410]
- Guadamuz TE, McCarthy K, Wimonasate W, Thienkrua W, Varangrat A, Chaikummao S, Sangiamkittikul A, Stall RD, van Griensven F. Psychosocial health conditions and HIV prevalence and incidence in a cohort of men who have sex with men in Bangkok, Thailand: Evidence of a syndemic effect. *AIDS and Behavior*. 2014; 18:2089–96. [PubMed: 24989128]
- Guadamuz TE, Wimonasate W, Varangrat A, Phanuphak P, Kanggarnrua K, Van Griensven Mock PAF. Correlates of forced sex among populations of men who have sex with men in Thailand. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. 2011; 40:259–266. [PubMed: 19830540]
- Halkitis PN, Palamar J. Multivariate modeling of club drug use initiation among gay and bisexual men. *Substance Use & Misuse*. 2008; 43:871–879. [PubMed: 18570022]
- Hardon A, Posel D. Secrecy as embodied practice: Beyond the confessional imperative. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*. 2012; 14:S1–13.
- Hayashi K, Wood E, Suwannawong P, Kaplan K, Qi J, Kerr T. Methamphetamine injection and syringe sharing among a community-recruited sample of injection drug users in Bangkok, Thailand. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*. 2011; 115:145–149. [PubMed: 21130584]
- Herrick AL, Lim SH, Wei C, Smith H, Guadamuz T, Friedman MS, Stall R. Resilience as an untapped resource in behavioral intervention design for gay men. *AIDS and Behavior*. 2011; 15:25–29.
- Hine, C. *Virtual ethnography*. London: Sage; 2000.
- Hobkirk AL, Watt MH, Myers B, Skinner D, Meade CS. A qualitative study of methamphetamine initiation in Cape Town, South Africa. *International Journal of Drug Policy*. 2016; 30:99–106. [PubMed: 26614737]
- Latkin CA, Sherman S, Knowlton A. HIV prevention among drug users: outcome of a network-oriented peer outreach intervention. *Health Psychology*. 2003; 22:332. [PubMed: 12940388]
- McCoy, AW. The stimulus of prohibition: A critical history of the global narcotics trade. In: Steinberg, MK, Hobbs, JJ., Mathewson, K., editors. *Dangerous harvest: Drug plants and the transformation of indigenous landscapes*. New York: Oxford University Press; 2004.
- Narcotics Act, B.E. 2522 (1979). Retrieved 29th March 2018 from <http://www.fda.moph.go.th/sites/Narcotics/en/Shared%20Documents/Narcotics-Act-B.E.2522.pdf>
- Oldenburg CE, Jain S, Mayer KH, Mimiaga MJ. Post-exposure prophylaxis use and recurrent exposure to HIV among men who have sex with men who use crystal methamphetamine. *Drug & Alcohol Dependence*. 2015; 146:75–80. [PubMed: 25482500]
- Panoopat P, Boonmongkon P, Guadamuz TE. 'For me... it's a miracle': Injecting beauty among kathoepis in a provincial Thai city. *International Journal of Drug Policy*. 2014; 25:798–803. [PubMed: 25047007]
- Parsons JT, Kelly B, Weiser J. Initiation into methamphetamine use for young gay and bisexual men. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*. 2007; 90:135–144. [PubMed: 17398040]
- Race, K. *Pleasure consuming medicine: The queer politics of drugs*. Durham: Duke University Press; 2009.
- Ruangkanchanasetr S, Plitponkarnpim A, Hetrakul P, Kongsakon R. Youth risk behavior survey: Bangkok, Thailand. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2005; 36:227–235. [PubMed: 15737779]
- Samakkeekarom R, Boonmongkol P, Ojanen TT, Guadamuz TE. Online sexuality: Globalization of gay sexual citizenship, power and sexual representations of smart phones. *Sexuality Studies Journal*. 2012; 2:181–196. in Thai.
- Samakkeekarom, R., Boonmongkon, P. Cyberspace, power structures, and gay sexual health: The sexuality of Thai men who have sex with men (MSM) in the Camfrog on-line webcam chat room. In: Jackson, PA., editor. *Queer Bangkok: 21st century markets, media and rights*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press; 2011. p. 121-140.
- Sattah MV, Supawitkul S, Dondero TJ, Kilmarx PH, Young NL, Mastro TD, ... Griensven FV. Prevalence of and risk factors for methamphetamine use in northern Thai youth: Results of an

- audio-computer-assisted self-interviewing survey with urine testing. *Addiction*. 2002; 97:801–808. [PubMed: 12133118]
- Sewell J, Miltz A, Lampe FC, Cambiano V, Speakman A, Phillips AN, ... Clarke A. Poly drug use, chemsex drug use, and associations with sexual risk behaviour in HIV-negative men who have sex with men attending sexual health clinics. *International Journal of Drug Policy*. 2017; 43:33–43. [PubMed: 28189979]
- Sherman SG, German D, Sirirojn B, Thompson N, Aramrattana A, Celentano DD. Initiation of methamphetamine use among young Thai drug users: a qualitative study. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2008; 42:36–42. [PubMed: 18155028]
- Sherman SG, Sutcliffe CG, German D, Sirirojn B, Aramrattana A, Celentano DD. Patterns of risky behaviors associated with methamphetamine use among young Thai adults: A latent class analysis. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2009; 44:169–175. [PubMed: 19167666]
- Shoptaw S, Reback CJ. Methamphetamine use and infectious disease- related behaviors in men who have sex with men: implications for interventions. *Addiction*. 2007; 102(s1):130–135. [PubMed: 17493062]
- Simmel G. The sociology of secrecy and of secret societies. *American Journal of Sociology*. 1906; 11:441–498.
- Stall, R., Herrick, A., Guadamuz, TE., Friedman, MS. Updating HIV prevention with gay men: Current challenges and opportunities to advance health among gay men. In: Mayer, KH., Pizer, H., editors. *HIV prevention: A comprehensive approach*. London: Academic Press; 2009. p. 267-280.
- van Griensven F, Supawitkul S, Kilmarx PH, Limpakarnjanarat K, Young NL, Manopaiboon C, ... Mastro TD. Rapid assessment of sexual behavior, drug use, Human Immunodeficiency Virus, and Sexually Transmitted Diseases in Northern Thai youth using audio-computer-assisted self-interviewing and noninvasive Specimen Collection. *Pediatrics*. 2001; 108:e13–e13. [PubMed: 11433092]
- van Griensven F, Varangrat A, Wimonasate W, Tanpradech S, Kladsawad K, Chemnasiri T, Plipat T. Trends in HIV prevalence, estimated HIV incidence and risk behavior among men who have sex with men in Bangkok, Thailand, 2003 to 2007. *Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome*. 2010; 53:234–239.
- van Griensven F, Thienkrua W, McNicholl J, Wimonasate W, Chaikummao S, Chonwattana W, ... Tapper JW. Evidence of an explosive epidemic of HIV infection in a cohort of men who have sex with men in Thailand. *AIDS*. 2013; 27:825–832. [PubMed: 23169330]
- Vongchak T, Kawichai S, Sherman S, Celentano DD, Sirisanthana T, Latkin C, ... Aramrattana A. The influence of Thailand's 2003 'war on drugs' policy on self-reported drug use among injection drug users in Chiang Mai, Thailand. *International Journal of Drug Policy*. 2005; 16:2115–2121.
- Wei C, Guadamuz TE, Lim SH, Huang Y, Koe S. Patterns and levels of illicit drug use among men who have sex with men in Asia. *Drug & Alcohol Dependence*. 2012; 120:246–249. [PubMed: 21831535]
- Wei C, Lim SH, Guadamuz TE, Koe S. Virtual versus physical spaces: Which facilitates greater HIV risk taking among men who have sex with men in East and South-East Asia? *AIDS and Behavior*. 2014; 18:1428–1435. [PubMed: 24077974]
- Xu JJ, Zhang C, Hu QH, Chu ZX, Zhang J, Li YZ, ... Yan HJ. Recreational drug use and risks of HIV and sexually transmitted infections among Chinese men who have sex with men: Mediation through multiple sexual partnerships. *BMC Infectious Diseases*. 2014; 14:642. [PubMed: 25443542]
- Yuntadilok N, Timmuang R, Timsard S, Guadamuz TE, Heylen E, Mandel J, Ekstrand ML. Eroding gains in safe sex behavior, HIV/AIDS knowledge, and risk perceptions in Thai Navy conscripts after 28 years of the AIDS epidemic in Thailand. *AIDS and Behavior*. 2013; 18:S42–49.