Chemical sexualities: the use of pharmaceutical and cosmetic products by youth in South Sulawesi, Indonesia

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Abstract: Although young people in their everyday lives consume a bewildering array of pharmaceutical, dietary and cosmetic products to self-manage their bodies, moods and sexuality, these practices are generally overlooked by sexual and reproductive health programmes. Nevertheless, this self-management can involve significant (sexual) health risks. This article draws from the initial findings of the University of Amsterdam's ChemicalYouth project. Based on interviews with 142 youths, focus group discussions and participant observation in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, we found that young people - in the domain of sexual health - turn to pharmaceuticals and cosmetics to: (1) feel clean and attractive; (2) increase (sexual) stamina; (3) feel good and sexually confident; (4) counter sexual risks; and (5) for a group of transgender youths, to feminize their male bodies. How youth achieve these desires varies depending on their income and the demands of their working lives. Interestingly, the use of pharmaceuticals and cosmetics was less gendered than expected. Sexual health programmes need to widen their definitions of risk, cooperate with harm reduction programmes to provide youth with accurate information, and tailor themselves to the diverse sexual health concerns of their target groups. © 2013 Reproductive Health Matters

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The everyday lives of youth are awash with pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, energy and nutritional products to boost sexual pleasure, performance, appearance and health. While youth routinely use these products to self-manage their bodies and moods, these practices are generally overlooked by sexual and reproductive health programmes that aim to protect and enhance youth sexual health.

Youth consume a bewildering array of chemical products to generate their desired gendered subjectivities — to be sexy, alluring women, or strong, virile men. Recreational drugs, for example, are fueling a new form of femininity in Granada, Spain, one which emphasizes young women taking the initiative in sexual encounters. While these young women are aware that their sexual disinhibition risks unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease, they experience this risk as empowering: "Risking it is like an adrenalin boost... by taking risks in my life, I achieved loads of other things...".1 Halfway around the world, young women in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, use limestone and herbal substances (known locally as jamu) intra-vaginally to achieve peret (tightness) to increase friction during intercourse.2 They buy these products discretely in informal stores and market stalls where privacy is guaranteed.

The use of amphetamines and the off-label use of psychoactive prescription drugs are a rising trend among youth in many parts of the world. Studies in the United States have shown that drugs such as methylphenidate (Ritalin) are widely used by university students to aid concentration.3 A study on methamphetamine initiation among students in Chiang Mai, Thailand, found that the drugs were seen as a panacea for tiredness, emotional volatility, and being overweight.4 A young Thai construction worker reports: "I felt I could work more and earn more as well... when we took yaba [crazy drugs] we became diligent, we