

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Causes of Initiation of Methamphetamine Use in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan: A Qualitative Study

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Main Points

- Methamphetamine or ice is a stimulant drug, which has many highly addictive characteristics.
- Easy availability and influence are the main responsible factors for the initiation of methamphetamine use.
- The misconceptions that a stimulant drug like methamphetamine is not a toxic drug and is extremely effective in assisting to maintain concentration and improve memory

Abstract

Methamphetamine is a powerful stimulant drug, and its use has increased in the last decade in Pakistan. The purpose of the current qualitative study was to explore the responsible factors associated with the initiation of methamphetamine use in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The participants of the study were the officials of 14 Drug Rehabilitation Centers and Anti-Narcotic Force, Peshawar city, Pakistan. Data were collected through an interview guide, and each participant was selected through a purposeful sampling technique in 2020. The collected data were analyzed, and themes and sub-themes were extracted from it. The study found that four main causes are responsible for the initiation of methamphetamine as follows: (i) easy availability, (ii) peer influence, (iii) curiosity, and (iv) exam preparation. The study recommends that family may play a key role in the prevention of drug use, and public awareness should be created about the misconceptions and toxicity of methamphetamine use.

Keywords: Causes, initiation, methamphetamine, Pakistan, qualitative study

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Introduction

Drug abuse is one of the utmost complicated and complex social problems which modern society is facing. Most youngsters and even children are hooked on substance abuse, and most users are found to start using drugs at a relatively early age (Author et al., 2021a). After the initiation of drug use and initial experiences, abusers continue to try different potentially dangerous drugs. This behavior of an individual affects his/her day-to-day performance, such as social responsibility and decision-making. Numerous drugs, especially psychotropic,

are attractive to many as they affect the central nervous system (CNS) making them abusers and dependent (Author et al., 2021b).

Methamphetamine or ice is a stimulant and highly potent drug, commonly used throughout the world. The use and abuse of this toxic drug lead to serious long-term physiological and psychological consequences (Akbari et al., 2021). Since it is a high-class CNS and stimulant drug which can keep a person awake for a long time, some people call it a “club drug” (Mehrerjedi, 2013). It is a highly addictive drug; if a person takes it more than once or twice,

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there is a high chance that he/she will become addicted, and once a person becomes dependent on it and then stops it, the body will experience withdrawal symptoms, both physiological and psychological effects (Author et al., 2020; Darke et al., 2008). It activates the neurotransmitters namely, serotonin, noradrenaline, and dopamine in the brain. These are the chemicals which create a feeling of euphoria, excitement, and alertness (Courtney & Ray, 2014).

Methamphetamine comes in various purities and forms i.e. tablet, powder, base and crystal or ice (Mehrjerdi, 2013). It is known by an extensive variety of local/street names: "Ice, Tik, Lolly, Speed, globes, Tuk-tuk, Crystals and Hitler's drug" (Brecht & Herbeck, 2014). As it is found in different forms, so methamphetamine is classified into different categories including (1) Powder, (2) Base (a sticky substance/a damp wet powder), and (3) crystal ice (translucent methamphetamine). Further, the powder or base form of methamphetamine is less pure as compared to the crystal ice form. Ice is the highest purity and the users called it 'ice' or 'crystal meth' due to the shape of its transparent crystal (Author et al., 2020; Brecht & Herbeck, 2014). In Pakistan, mostly methamphetamine is available in crystal form that's why it is commonly known as ice (Jan et al., 2021a).

Methamphetamine is potent drugs that can be manufactured easily even in a households' kitchen. To produce this drug several household items are required such as; Freon, Drain Cleaner, Paint thinner and Lithium strips (strips used in batteries) (Jan et al., 2021b; Klasser & Epstein, 2005). Nevertheless, what gives the potency to this drug is ephedrine and pseudoephedrine, and both of these are available in many over the counter cold medicines (Brecht & Herbeck, 2014). The uniqueness of this drug is that all of the ingredients which are used in this drug are legal and can easily be acquired from hardware and pharmacy stores, and its recipes can be watched on the internet. When these easily accessible and legal ingredients are fused together then they produce an illegal narcotic in the form of methamphetamine (Jan et al., 2021a). It can be administered in multiple ways, as it can be swallowed, snorted, injected, smoked and even drank in a liquid form. Nevertheless, smoking is the most common way of it. The regular use of ice can lead to tolerance, which needs an increase in its quantity to get the same level of satisfaction as like in initial intakes (Bagheri et al., 2015).

Across the globe, there is a growing recognition that methamphetamine or ice as a significant threat is becoming more and more apparent in the world of drug use. The use of methamphetamine among people in East and South Asian countries has increased dramatically in recent years (UNODC, 2021).

According to the World Drugs Report (2021), globally in 2019 alone, approximately 27 million people have used amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) such as; methamphetamine, amphetamine and drug stimulants. This data corresponds to 0.5% of the adult population. An estimated half of the world's amphetamine users (12.7 million) lived in Asia in 2019 (World Drug Report, 2021).

According to the National Assessment Report released in 2013, Pakistan has a drug problem with 6.5 million drug users. Drug use was reported to be most prevalent in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

province, with 11% of the population, followed by Sindh province with 6.5%. In Balochistan province, nearly 5% of the population use drugs, while in Punjab, the figure is 4.8% (UNODC, 2013).

The drug user's quantity in the country has increased like a drug epidemic in Pakistan. The use of ice has seriously affected the users economically and socially (Jan et al., 2021). Opium, cocaine, and marijuana have been commonly used, but ice, which is now considered one of the most harmful drugs in the world, is also becoming a common commodity used by drug users. The biggest danger facing the Pakistani society on this issue is that the agencies that are responsible for the curbing of drug use in the country have failed to control the increase in drug addicts in the society. Therefore, this qualitative study has been carried out to identify the causative factors which are responsible for the use of ice.

Methods

The nature of the current study is qualitative and was conducted in 2020 in district Peshawar, The data was collected from 14 officials of Drug Rehabilitation Centers and the Anti-Narcotic Force (Table 1). A purposive sampling technique was performed, and the collection of data was continued till the saturation point. A purposive sample is one of the types of a non-probability sampling technique. This is usually done by applying expert knowledge of the population to select a sample of elements representing a cross-section of the population in a non-random manner (Ballou & Lavrakas, 2008).

Since the tool for the qualitative aspects of the study was an in-depth interview, the researcher asked everyone's consent before beginning each interview. The interviews were recorded with a mobile tape recorder by telling them that it is difficult for the researcher to remember and capture all the conversations. To analyze the data, audio files of the interviews were first transcribed into the manuscript, followed by carefully studying the manuscript and developing themes and subthemes.

As for the research ethics are concerned, the researcher while conducting the current study followed all the considerations related to research ethics from the very outset till the end. For instance, the confidentiality of the respondents was fully secured; for obtaining information from the respondents, their consent was sought, and the respondents were fully assured of their rights regarding their withdrawal from the provision of information at any stage. Furthermore, whenever the researcher approached the interviewees for the collection of information, pseudo names were used for the purpose to preserve their anonymity.

Furthermore, for this study, an ethics committee approval was obtained from the Institutional Research Ethical Committee (Decision/protocol number: Ref. No-REC/2022/IEC/03) of the Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University, Sheringal, Dir Upper, Pakistan.

Results

The result of the current study shows that there is not a single factor responsible for the use of ice rather a multiple causative factors are responsible for the use of ice. These causatives factors are divided into main four different subcategories (Table 2).

Theme 1: Easy Availability

Most of the participants of the study believe that methamphetamine is readily available everywhere in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Most of their patients tell them they do not need to go to the hawker to buy the drug. They can easily get their drug over the phone wherever they go. Three participants recorded as follows:

Respondent 10: "When my parents go to sleep I give a phone call to the ice suppliers and they come on the motor bike. Then I put money in a basket or carton and hang it down from my room window towards the peddler down in the street. They get the money from the basket or carton and put ice pinch parcel in it. So, ice is readily available for me whenever and wherever I want it."

Respondent 2: "Ice is easily available nowadays as compared to other drugs because it can easily be shifted from one place to another. Owing to its shape, which is like sugar or china salt, it occupies less space and it can be hidden anywhere while peddling. Moreover, the dealers are now more interested in ice selling as it is comparatively a profitable drug and they try to introduce it through street dealers."

Respondent 11: "Nowadays ice is easily available everywhere. One of our female patients was the student of a local University and she told that through a mobile phone call the ice seller would hand over the ice packet to the hostel gate keeper (Chacha) and then he would take it to us."

Theme 2: Curiosity

During the course of research for the current study, it was concluded that most of the participants were of the opinion that the basic causing factor of the abuse of ice was curiosity. To satiate their craving, according to the experts, the addicts are always in search of new and new drugs, and during this journey of experimentation of drugs, they become addicted and then its regular use becomes their obligation. Three participants reported as follows:

Participant 6: "Ice is a new emerging drug as compared to other drugs. Therefore the addicts are more curious about it. Moreover, it is the strongest stimulant which leads the addict to its peak."

Participant 7: "As ice is a stimulant drug and it is newly introduced in Pakistan, the addicts of other drugs are curious to try this new drug. Our patients told us that whenever a new drug came into the market they tried it. They further told that when ice came into their circle they could not control themselves and they became curious to taste the power of the new drug."

Participant 11: "A patient (a university hostel's gate keeper) told me that the hostel girls used to call the drug suppliers who would come to the gate and handed over the ice to him as he was the mediator between the girls and the suppliers. On every supply the female students gave him money for that favor. At that time, he was the addict of cannabis but he became curious about the ice. One day he tried it and became addicted to it."

Theme 3: Peer Influence

Peer influence is also an important factor in initiation of the ice use. Participants in the study reported that peer influence played a crucial role in ice use. Three of the participants stated their patients' stories as below:

Participant 04: "I was an addict of alcohol and was working in Thailand. One day my roommate asked me to go with him to the club. But before going to the club he convinced me to take the ice as it is a stimulant drug and it would give me energy to stay awake and have full enjoyment in the club. So I took a dose with my friend and then became habitual of ice."

Participant 03: "Peer influence is one of the main factors in the abuse of ice. While sharing their experiences majority of our patients told me that they became addicted to ice due to their friends as they used to talk about the positive aspects of ice and then they continued without any fear."

Participant 01: "Besides other many causative factors, one causes of ice is the insistence of friends. Ice users insist their friends to use ice, mostly, to expand their drug business or to get their company."

Theme 4: Exam Preparation

It is highly ironic that for maintaining concentration/focus, students commonly use stimulants like ice which help them in improving their retention and comprehension. In order to cope with stressful situations during the preparation of examinations, many students of colleges and universities are indulged

Table 1.
Characteristics of Participants of the Study

S. No.	Participant's Position	Organization
01	Medical officer/ Psychiatrist	Drug Rehabilitation Center, Social Welfare Department, Peshawar
02	Psychologist	
03	Psychologist-1	Drug Rehabilitation Department, Lady Reading Hospital (LRH), Peshawar
04	Psychologist-2	
05	Social medical officer	Drug Rehabilitation Department, Khyber Teaching Hospital (KTH), Peshawar
06	Program manager	Dost Welfare Foundation (Drug Rehabilitation Center), Peshawar
07	Manager Children Department (Gulona Kor)	
08	Treatment manager	
09	Psychologist-1	
10	Psychologist-2	
11	Program manager	Drug Rehabilitation Center, Al-Khidmat Foundation, Peshawar
12	Project officer (Drug Demand Reduction)	ANF, Peshawar
13	Assistant director (ANF)	
14	IT officer	

ANF = Anti-Narcotic Force. Source: field data

Table 2.

Extracted Themes of Causes of Methamphetamine Use from Data Analysis

Theme 1: Easy availability

Theme 2: Curiosity

Theme 3: Peer influence

Theme 4: Exam preparation

in stimulants drugs, specifically ice. The use of ice has become rampant in the academic institutions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province of Pakistan because the students indulgent in it believe that it boosts their retention, improves their concentration on the study, and helps them to remain focused and awake, especially during the preparation time of examination. Three of the participant stated as follows:

Participant 5: "one of the main causes of ice is the lack of awareness about the toxicity of the ice. Our patients (only students) reported us that their friends and suppliers told them that it would help a lot in exam preparation and it had fewer side effects as compared to other drugs."

Participant 12: "Three categories of people come here for rehabilitation and/or detoxification namely, the elite class, the middle class and the students. The students reported that they could not concentrate properly on studies and had a weak memory which was a hindrance in their academic performance. In such conditions, friends suggested the use of ice for exam preparation because it would make them stay awoken, help in memorizing and also make them alert but they became habitual to it".

Participant 8: "Nowadays ice is well-known among the university and college students. Our patients who were studying reported that they started ice for exam preparation".

Discussion

The current study was conducted with the purpose to explore the causes of methamphetamine/ice use in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Therefore, this study finds out four main responsible causes for the use of ice, each of them analyzed and discussed below as follows:

Easy Availability

Keeping in view the above-discussed facts, the researcher has reached the conclusion that one of the major causes of ice abuse is its on-hand availability.

In short, this phenomenon can be explained by the financial gains derived from drug trafficking. Ice is considered more profitable in comparison to other synthetic drugs like heroin because ice is used by elite and upper-middle-class strata of society. Furthermore, the transportation of ice is not a cumbersome task because of its uniqueness and newness due to which law enforcement agencies are unable to recognize it. All and above, the results of some other high-level studies also support this fact. McKetin et al. (2005) concluded that the basic factor for the use of ice in Australia is its uninterrupted supply.

Curiosity

On the basis of experiences in the present study, it is clear that the most basic causing factor in the use of ice is curiosity. When an addict cannot get satisfaction from the old drug, then the addict switches over to another drug of high intensity for the sack of satisfaction. In support of this, a qualitative study conducted by Lankenau et al. (2010) found that there are several factors that are responsible for the use of methamphetamines like easy availability and its popularity, peer influence, and more than all of these is curiosity. Similarly, the study of Hobkirk et al. (2016) is also in the line with the current study because they also opine that switching to methamphetamine from other drugs is because of curiosity. Moreover, addicts consider that methamphetamine provides more vitality to its users in comparison to any other drug and with its smoke one can do whatever comes in one's heart.

Peer Influence

Peer influence is considered as one the most effective tool for enticing the younger folk to participate in dangerous activities like drug abuse. The findings of the instant study fully endorse similar studies on the same subject matter like those of Jan et al. (2016) and Jan et al., 2021a. Their study found that the influence of friends in the case of the use of drugs may either increase or decrease the risk of drug use depending upon the nature of the friends. Therefore, the fact remains that a major factor in the use of drugs is the relationship with such friends who are drug users and under whose influence close friends and peer groups are turned toward addiction (Akbari et al., 2021; Urberg et al., 2005). Author et al. (2021) and Yen et al. (2006) have divulged that the newcomers do not know about the sources of supply of drugs; therefore, they rely on their friends for getting their doses.

Exam Preparation

In the colleges and universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, students use ice for the preparation of examinations and regard it as very effective without contemplating its adverse and lethal consequences. They believe that through its use they would perform very well in their examinations. The ice-addicted students and suppliers provide fabricated mirages about the safety of ice and its power to improve performance in examinations. Thus in this way, the business of the drug industry flourishes resulting in increasing the ratio of its use. The results of the current study are in full support of the other studies carried out by Bashirian et al. (2012) and Sweeney (2010) who also agree that in the lust of getting high grades, students are turned toward methamphetamine (a stimulant drug), and then they associate their grades with it, and thus with the passage of time, the quantity is increased.

In conclusion, the result of the current study finds out that there are four main causes that are responsible for the initiation of methamphetamine use such as easy availability, curiosity, peer influence, and exam preparation. On the basis of the findings of this study, it recommends that public awareness through religious scholars, family heads, community leaders, social media, and seminars in educational institutions should be created about the toxicity and misconceptions of methamphetamine use.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The present study was limited to the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan due to time and cost constraints. Future research

may be conducted across Pakistan to identify the associated risk factors and their health-related effects. We also suggest that the Government of Pakistan may provide projects to make aware the youth, specifically the students, about the negative health effects of methamphetamine through seminars, conferences, and social media.

Ethics Committee Approval: Ethical committee approval was received from Institutional Research Ethical Committee of Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University, Sheringal, Dir Upper, Pakistan (Decision/protocol number: Ref. No-REC/2022/IEC/03).

Informed Consent: Informed consent was obtained from all participants who participated in this study.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

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