



DETERMINANTS OF ICE (METHAMPHETAMINE) CONSUMPTION IN SOUTH PUNJAB, PAKISTAN: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Pakistan is increasingly becoming plagued with Ice (Methamphetamine) usage specifically in young generation. The problem is aggravated to the extent that its use has intervened into educational institutions where young generation, irrespective of gender, is getting addicted to it. This study is an attempt to look into the factors responsible for commencement of the use of Ice, and its after effects on the lives of the addicts in South Punjab, Pakistan. The findings showed mainly six factors behind its initiation: Lack of social and emotional support to the young generation, initiation for the purpose of study to enhance concentration, as a recreational activity and exhibition of “heroism”, love affairs and breakups, coping with social pressure of unemployment, coping the stress of breaking laws and religious taboos. The findings showed many different narratives of after effects such as criminal traits, health deterioration, antisocial behavior, and culmination of career path. During the study, 31 interviews were conducted from the Model Drug Rehabilitation Center of Multan, South Punjab. Data was then analyzed thematically to get to the results.

Keywords: Methamphetamine, Ice, young generation, educational institutions

Introduction

Drug abuse is a very alarming issue and have created health and socio-political problems around the world [1, 2, 3]. There are a lot of socio-economic consequences of drug abuse [4,5]. According to United Nations drug report of 2020, almost 269 million people abuse drugs worldwide [6]. In recent years, the use of Methamphetamine, commonly known as Ice, has increased drastically which is highly addictive drug [7]. Especially, it has become famous in young generation as it provides extreme levels of ecstasy and concentration of mind. Methamphetamine is highly potent drug which has severe psychological and physiological side effects [8]. Pakistan is also plagued with problem of Methamphetamine. According to United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), as a result of the National Survey on Drug Use in Pakistan, 4.25 million people were involved in overall drug

use in the country and 19000 people have specifically used methamphetamine for the year 2013 [9]. Next drug use survey of 2024 has already been launched in the country, where the number of users of Methamphetamine are expected to be increased dramatically. Methamphetamine is mostly available in crystal form that is the reason it is referred as Ice [10]. The main reason for the rapid distribution and consumption of this drug is that it can be made out of ephedrine, which is over the counter medicine, with the help of household items such as paint thinner, drain cleaner, and lithium strips [11, 12]. It is made and distributed locally using the ingredients in small makeshift settings in the country. State authorities seem surrendered in front of the manufacturers and distributors of Ice as these small manufacturing units and distribution networks are transient and rapidly change addresses.

This study adopts qualitative approach to explore the individualistic narratives of the use of methamphetamine in young generation in South of the Punjab province in Pakistan. Many studies on drug abuse have already been published about Pakistan generally and about the use of methamphetamine particularly. However, qualitative studies consisting on the individualistic narratives are still lacking in number to which this study would fill the gap. In Pakistan, its use is increasing speedily involving more and more people which requires more research studies to understand the phenomenon in a better way. Factors of initiation and its after effects on individual level focusing on their perspectives is an interesting and informative phenomenon to find out.

Materials and Methods

The study is based on qualitative in-depth interviews using interview guide from drug addicts enrolled in drug rehabilitation center in Multan city of South Punjab, Pakistan. This drug rehabilitation center is considered a model rehabilitation center and drug addicts from all over South Punjab are brought to the facility for rehabilitation. A total number of 31 in-depth interviews were conducted from male methamphetamine addicts coming from different districts of South Punjab over a span of one year 2022-2023. Each interview lasts from 45 minutes to 1 hour and 35 minutes. Data was then transcribed and the reoccurring themes were drawn from the data by reading and re-reading the data sets. A software NVIVO was also used for this purpose and the themes drawn through the software were crossed and compared with the themes drawn manually. The short coming of this study is that only male addicts were recruited for interviews as the rehabilitation center admits only male addicts.

Theoretical Framework

To serve the purpose of theoretical framework, an adaptive model of reciprocal determinism for drug addiction by Mark A. Smith which is based on social learning theory (SLT) of Albert Bandura is utilized. SLT put forth by Bandura says that human behavior is result of a functional relationship between the behavior itself, personal factors, and external environment [13]. In order to use it for drug addiction, Smith says that drug addiction can be a result of functional relationship between the personal characteristics of the individual, his social environment and drug centric behavior which means drug addiction is a biopsychosocial disorder which have both internal and external aspects [14]. The functional relationship between the behavior, personal factors and environment is changeable. Thus, if we apply this model on drug addiction, the relationship between these three factors is always evolving with the changing environmental factors, addiction centric behavior, and personal factors. Bandura further added cognitive aspect in his social learning model. He argued that it is not only social learning that impacts behavior rather the behavior is largely dependent on the cognition of the individual that determine which environmental factors could be relevant, how the individual would interpret it, and to what extent it would impact the behavior [14]. It means individuals cognitive ability plays a lot of role in his adoption of certain behaviors and it is also relevant for drug taking decisions. The agency of the individual is considered very important in this regard which means that it is not only the external factors that influence the human behavior rather internal factors cannot be undermined. This model is very comprehensive and has already been applied by many scholars on drug addiction behavior of humans. The present study would also apply reciprocal determinism to study drug addiction behavior and its outcomes in South Punjab, Pakistan.

An interesting aspect of the usage of Ice in this study is that in most of the cases, the respondents moved to Ice through marijuana. They initially started using marijuana as a coping strategy against stress and then finally started consuming Ice. Many studies have assessed the use of marijuana through a four-factor framework with an additional motive namely expansion i.e. enhancement, social, coping, conformity, and expansion [15]. This framework is also applied for the usage of Ice as well.

Findings

1.Lack of Social and Emotional Support: Many respondents of the study narrated reasons related to absence of social and emotional support by the family, educational institutions and the locality. Many interviewed young drug addicts described reasons related to their social and emotional seclusion as they found no one in the family or in their surroundings to guide them the right way to live a life. Most of the respondents who responded this way were from broken families where their caretakers were unable to get hold on them. A respondent namely Zia, aged 23, stated that:

I live with my father as my mother has died many years ago. He does not have much time to look after me. He is a salesman in a distribution company of biscuits. He can neither give me enough time nor money. My father is also a neglected part of the society, so I even do not expect high morals from him.

Another respondent namely Esa, aged 19, responded in a similar fashion that:

Since I was 8 years old, I have been living with my maternal grandfather. My father divorced my mother and my mother remarried leaving me with my grandfather. He is old and is unable to take care of me now. I used to work in a snooker club as helper but now I do not work anymore. I strongly believe that if my father and mother had supported me, I would never have ended up being an Ice addict.

Many respondents blamed overall surroundings and educational system that our external environment is not supportive to the young generation. Young ones are misunderstood and misinterpreted. Their opinion is always ignored. They feel themselves over controlled and ignored at the same time.

2.Initiation for the Purpose of Study to Enhance Concentration: A considerable number of respondents said that they started taking Ice to develop concentration for their studies on advice of a few of their friends. Although, they got successful in gaining concentration but they could not leave it after that. They had stories in their minds about many other students who used the substance for concentration in studies and later on easily escaped from it. They followed the path but failed to escape.

According to a respondent, namely Khan, aged 31:

I was doing PhD but I got stuck in the thesis at final stages. My thesis supervisor pressurized me to complete my work as time was running short. With the advice of one of my friends, I started taking the substance which consequently improved my concentration but later on I realized that I had become dependent on it. Although, I gained some concentration while working on my thesis but before I could complete it, I found myself in another problem of addiction which led me to the rehabilitation center.

Another respondent, namely Muhammad, aged 21, said that:

I started taking Ice during my 7th semester final exams. I wanted to improve my CGPA which really needs to be improved. Initially, it affected positively, and I was able to concentrate more than ever before on my studies. Later on, I did it again to escape some of my domestic problems but afterwards, I found myself compelled to do it again and again.

3.Recreational Activity and exhibition of “heroism”: Some of the respondents said that they used Ice for the sake of recreation under the influence of social group of friends. Their motive was to always experience something new and exciting in their life spans to feel like as a “hero” in their own perceptions.

According to a respondent, namely Agha, aged 23:

I always do different and new things in my life to have experience and unique feelings. These new experiences give me a buzz which I really enjoy. In doing so, I started taking Ice within the company of my friends. A few of my friends just participated in Ice parties once or twice, but me along with some other friends continued and then later on got addicted. I really enjoyed those high feelings at the start but with the passage of time my life became miserable and my family took me to the rehab.

Likewise, another respondent, namely Ahmed, aged 20, described:

Initially, we used to take Hashish (charas) in the company of friends. We used to do it in a kind of competition to prove our youthfulness and continued taking hashish for hours in a go that whosoever would continue with it for a longer period of time, he wins. Later on, we started using Ice and used it with almost same competitive behavior which led me and some other friends of mine get addicted to it. I am in this rehab for the second time as 3 months ago I started taking Ice again after I was kind of recovered from the first span of its addiction.

4. Love Affairs and Breakups: The phenomenon of breakup in love affair was also the cause of the initiation of methamphetamine in many interviewed cases. They mainly started taking Ice to cope with the post-breakup trauma but later on could not get rid of it.

A respondent, namely Shah, aged 17, described:

I was living my routine life and I was not involved emotionally into any girl. I used to see many friends who were into love affairs and thought that I should also get myself indulged in love. Once I saw a girl in my neighborhood and started liking her and she also replied to my advances. But all of a sudden, she got engaged with someone from her family leaving me heart broken. I was so intensely involved in her that I was not able to live my life without any emotional support which no one provided to me. At last, first I started drinking alcohol, then Hashish and later on, I used Ice. Initially, It gave me very high feelings of happiness but afterwards it became a nightmare for me when my family got to know and they started abusing and scolding me and took me to the rehab.

Another respondent, namely Subhan, aged 24, described that:

I fell for a girl who was a friend of my elder sister. She was into Ice. At the start, I didn't know it, but later on, I got to know about her habit and with some reluctance, I started joining her in this frenzy. I was very excited at the start. I was the one who used to buy Ice for both of us and we took it together many times. Then she got seriously ill and her parents took her to another city and I made my way to this rehab.

5. Coping with Social Pressure of Unemployment: Coping with the stress and social pressure of unemployment was also among the causes for the commencement of methamphetamine. Many respondents responded that after their graduation, they were unable to find employment. Not finding employment was alright for them in the absence of social pressure. However, the society and family put a lot of pressure on employed ones who always face criticism and ridicule from the peers.

A respondent, namely Ali, aged 24, described:

I obtained my BS degree in political science from a government university 2 years ago. However, I was unable to get a suitable job. Although, I did some odd jobs but ended up leaving those placements because of low salary and overtime requirements from the employer. After leaving those placements, I used to stay at home but my family members ridiculed me a lot. They gave me a lot of stress that I abandoned staying at home during the day. I used to come home only to sleep at night. During the day, I started meeting a few old friends who were also unemployed and together we started taking Ice in order to cope with the stress that was accumulated because of the behavior of my family.

Another respondent, namely Shams, aged 26, stated that:

I am not much educated. I worked as a store supervisor in a company. I was hardly maintaining the daily expenses of my family and myself. My life is quite tough with a stressful routine of long working hours, fear of downsizing in the company along with the stress of maintaining everyday life expenses. My only escape from this routine was taking hashish in my friend's gatherings whenever I find some extra time. One day, one of our friends brought us Ice and rest is the history.

6. Coping the Stress of Breaking Laws and Religious Taboos: This finding is very interesting as according to the respondents, it is a cyclical process of breaking the laws or religious taboos, taking substance to cope the stress of it and then recommitting the same thing again.

A respondent, namely Jazib, aged 16, said that:

I like men but I know that how shameful it is. In Islam, it is totally unacceptable but I cannot help it. I have tried very hard to say no to these sorts of thinking and acts but I got failed every time. I was in a constant stress with the type of personality which I have. I used to drink alcohol with one of my friends who used to say that he loved me. He brought me Ice one day. When I started taking it, I felt very happy. That is why, I started using it regularly. Sometimes, we both used it together.

Another respondent, namely Ali, aged 24, commented that:

I was jobless. What do you expect to do from someone who is jobless for a long time? Of course, he would try to earn some money by using maybe illegal ways and especially when he has become drug addict too. Two FIRs have been registered against me as I was somehow involved in a trivial street crime. So, my life was very stressful from every side. Instead of leaving drug usage, I took it more often. It eases my pains.

After Effects of Ice Consumption

Factors of Ice consumption, especially, narrations from the respondents are quite unique in this study. However, after effects of the study are in line with the previous findings of addiction studies.

Criminal Traits: Most of the respondents were either still involved in criminal activities or have been part of these activities at some point during addiction period. It was either because they needed money to buy the substance to use or after taking Ice while being high their mind became less sensitized to whatever they do and they committed crimes. As one of the respondents, namely Ali, aged 24, said that:

It is part of the game. When you need something to buy you are addicted to, you have to arrange money one way or the other. At the start, I took money from my house secretly and later on I, along with one of my friends, started looting people on the streets. This way, we were able to arrange money enough for the consumption of Ice and food for a few days ahead and then we would do it again.

Health deterioration: Almost all the interviewed respondents have some health issues in their young ages. Their health problems ranged from less serious diseases such as irregular heart beat or dental problems to more serious diseases such as heart disease or lung disease. Weight loss and restlessness was very common in almost all the research participants.

Antisocial Behavior: Seclusion or passing time with other addicts was a very common impact of Ice addiction in the interviewed participants. The respondents described that they used to become aggressive with their family members and often used abusive language with them. Many respondents living in rehab facility also showed extreme fits of anger sometimes. A few of the episodes happened with some respondents when someone from their family arrived to see them. It could be because of their distrust on their family members or they might want to leave the rehab facility to get hold of the substance again. However, it can be said with somewhat certainty that they were suffering from a dependent cycle of anger on substance. The respondents also reported to feel extreme loss of

confidence to meet someone in their daily lives. A respondent, namely Shah, aged 17, said that: I do not meet my relatives or friends at all. I think they might know that I am addicted by just looking at my face and moreover, I have become unpresentable and have lost a lot of weight and hairs.

Culmination of Career Path: All the respondents in rehab had either lost their jobs or had discontinued their studies. They had no future plans ahead.

Discussion

As Smith (2021), described that drug addiction is a biopsychosocial disorder impacted by both internal and external factors [14], which means that it is a combination of personal characteristics of individuals who initiate drug use, their psychological behavior toward drug use that how much they could resist and how good or bad they might feel taking drugs etc. and what is their social environment such as friends and family around them. Of course, drug usage can be understood holistically through every possible aspect of it. So, biopsychosocial aspects of drug usage make a functional relationship with each other which means if one aspect changes somehow, it impacts the others. The findings of this study can also be understood in the light of functional relationships of these three aspects.

Out of six determinants of findings, three are internal while the other three are external factors. One of the important findings of determinants regarding Ice initiation namely lack of social and emotional support being an external factor is found in many cases interviewed. Most of the cases who reported lack of social and emotional support being a factor behind Ice usage are from broken families or are being taken care by single parent or any other relative. Many studies regarding addiction have concluded the same results about poor social and emotional support from the parents or guardians leads to drug addiction in later stages in life. Such as Shaw (2006), found association between poor parenting regarding social support and alcohol addiction in later stage in life [16]. It is an external factor and as per the theory of reciprocal determinism if one aspect changes, it impacts the others which means good parenting and social and emotional support can minimize the chances of Ice addiction.

Another important finding of this paper which is initiation of Ice to enhance concentration for the purpose of study is also an external factor. A considerable number of respondents who were students reported to initiate Ice for the purpose of enhancing concentration especially during exams. Neighbors et al., (2019), argued that use of substance by individuals depends on their experiences which are likely to result which can be called their expectancies that can be both positive and negative [15]. Regarding the findings of the study, the positive expectancy could be the concentration which they might apply to get good scores in exams. These expectancies are also based on several factors such as perceptions of peers and close friends [17]. According to reciprocal determinism, of course, if perceptions of the peers or close friends change, likelihood of Ice usage might also get affected positively or negatively. Third external factor which is taking Ice as a recreational activity and exhibition of so-called heroism can also be attributed to the expectancy model through which a sense of enjoyment could be achieved initiating its use because of the perceptions of peers and close friends. Remaining three internal factors such as taking Ice because of love affairs and breakups, coping the social pressure of unemployment, and finally, the stress of breaking laws and religious taboos are also reported significantly in the interviews. A commonality between all these three factors is stress which is induced by the activities described where Ice has been used as a coping strategy. Stress leads to the consumption of alcohol and drugs and reduces the motivation to abandon the habit [18]. Addictive behaviors are associated with specific metacognitive beliefs which can be positive and negative [19, 20]. For this study, Positive metacognitive beliefs specifically can be thoughts of individuals that Ice consumption would benefit them to cope with the stress which instigate them to start Ice consumption. After effects of Ice consumption such as, criminal traits, health deterioration, anti-social behavior and culmination of career path are in line with the previous findings of drug addiction. While talking about specifically the Ice, it further exacerbates these conditions which are evident in the interview data.

Conclusion

The study has explored narratives of Methamphetamine (Ice) initiation in South Punjab and its after effects. Although, a significant literature has been produced on drug addiction in Pakistan, but qualitative studies are still less in number. Specifically, narratives of the addicts, which have been given a substantial space in the study, are important to include in the scholarship of drug addiction in the context of South Punjab, Pakistan. Theoretical framework of reciprocal determinism and four factor framework of drug usage helped a lot to explain the results of the study. Of course, the study would help the policy makers to specifically focus on young generation for their socio-psychological support in order to make them useful members of the community and virtuous citizens of the state.

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