It's like an uncontrollable demon in your body: The lived experiences of youth using crystal meth during the COVID-19 pandemic in Witbank, Mpumalanga

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A B S T R A C T

Crystal methamphetamine (meth) is quickly becoming one of the most used synthetic drugs worldwide, adding to the growing pandemic of substance abuse worldwide. Crystal meth may cause serious health effects including infertility, cancer and even DNA damage, especially among long-term users. Crystal meth users are often not aware of the serious health implications caused by crystal meth until it’s too late. This qualitative research paper employed the phenomenological research design to explore and describe lived experiences of crystal meth users. A total of 11 crystal meth users in the Witbank hotspots were identified through purposive convenience and key informants sampling. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and the thematic content analysis was used for analysis. The study’s findings reveal that crystal meth users have an uncontrollable urge to use the substance which results in them being stigmatized in society and negatively affecting their family functioning. The findings also show that some crystal meth users engage in criminal activities. There is a need for further studies on lived experiences across all types of drugs. Policymakers in South Africa should work towards an Instant-admission policy for people who use substances, through the capacity of social workers.

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

Throughout human history, the thorny pandemic of substance abuse has been a challenging public health issue and it was not an exception during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drug dealers have been innovative in getting lethal drugs across several markets, despite proactive interventions throughout the World. Crystal methamphetamine (meth) is quickly becoming one of the most used synthetic drugs worldwide, adding to the growing pandemic of substance abuse worldwide (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], World Drug Report, 2021, p.5). The Biological, Physical and Social harms from crystal meth enormously pose a great risk to the sustainable development of nations. For example, in 2019, an estimated 275 million people aged 15 to 64 had used drugs at least once in the year prior, which is equivalent to 5.5% of the population of this age group worldwide (UNODC, World Drug Report, 2021, p.19). A study by Ropek, Al-Serori, Mišík, Nersesyan, Sitte, Collins and Ferk (2019) found that crystal meth may cause serious health effects including infertility, cancer and even DNA damage, especially amongst long-term users. Drug users often are not aware of the serious health implications caused by crystal meth until it’s too late.

In South Africa, a country where crystal meth is also known as ‘tik or rock’, the use of crystal meth is mostly prevalent in the Western Cape (Nyabadza, Njagarah, & Smith, 2013, p.24) and observable in Mpumalanga (Witbank). This article focuses on the latter Province of South Africa, where there is a paucity and death of research studies conducted on drug use (Mokwena & Huma, 2014) irrespective of the province reporting an increase in crystal meth admission amongst centres (South African Community Epidemiology Network on Drug Abuse [SACENDU], 2023). SACENDU further report that drug dealers and traffickers in the Highveld area of Mpumalanga (Witbank) have been enfeebling several drug abuse interventions by government departments and

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Non-Profit Organisations, at the expense of the vulnerable victims of substance abuse (Harker, Lucas, Laubscher, Dada, Myers, & Parry, 2020). This led to the Witbank area of Mpumalanga being a hotspot in drug use for several years, owing much to its geographical area as a mining town and an economic hub of the Mpumalanga Province in South Africa. In essence, several studies (Dadhe, 2019; Asante, & Lentoor, 2017; Coleman, Ajetomobi, Hutttman, & Zeligman, 2021) have been conducted elsewhere on the lived experiences of methamphetamine users except in Witbank Mpumalanga, hence the researchers saw it fit to describe the experiences of young people using methamphetamine in the Witbank area. Through this research article, it is envisaged that more interventions would be capacitated and developed to help deal with the scourge of substance use amongst the youth. To achieve the study’s main objective, the researchers used semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data from 11 crystal meth users residing in the Witbank area. The crystal meth users were identified through purposive convenience and key-informants sampling in the Witbank area hotspots. Thematic content analysis was used to interpret the data. This approach allowed for the descriptive organisation of the data in a way that made it simpler to understand different aspects of the data by finding, analysing, and reporting patterns in a data set.

The preceding introduction provided the general area of this study, by introducing and defining the severity of the problem and its occurrence across different societies. Furthermore, the motivation and relevance of exploring the lived experiences of service users with crystal meth disorders were also described in the introduction. The data collection process and the methodological process were also outlined. In addition, the introduction also described the objective of the study which was to explore and describe the lived experiences of crystal meth users in Emalahleni (Witbank, South Africa).

The following sections are discussed in the article. Firstly, relevant existing literature on crystal meth was reviewed, focusing on the experiences and challenges faced by people using crystal meth across the globe. Furthermore, critical arguments of literature at a local, regional, and national level were also reviewed. This was done to indicate specific gaps, inconsistencies, and controversies in the reviewed literature. Secondly, the Biopsychosocial model is also discussed as an underpinning theoretical framework, this was done to indicate how the theory offers a thorough analysis of how crystal meth affects the livelihoods of young people and their opportunities. Thirdly, the adopted methodology comprising a research paradigm and approach, research design, sampling procedures, data collection methods and data analysis is discussed. The paper also discusses the findings of the study, while it ultimately concludes with a meticulous evaluation of the findings and recommendations for future research.

**Literature Review**

In 2017, the UNODC through its World Drug (2017) reported Crystal Methamphetamine as an increasing public health concern after reporting an increase in several countries. Moreover, the World Drug Report (2021:19) indicated that in 2019, approximately 275 million individuals globally aged between 15 and 64 had used drugs at least once in the previous year. Within this estimation, 27 million individuals were users of amphetamines in particular methamphetamine (0.5% of the global population aged between 15 and 64). This is very concerning because continuous crystal meth use is associated with several negative effects such as increased mortality, cardiovascular and immune diseases, and severe neurological complications such as incidences of psychosis and major depressive disorder (Stockings, Tran, Santo, Peacock, Larney, Santomauro, & Degenhardt, 2019). Furthermore, Individuals that use crystal meth are likely to face some long-term effects which include ‘anxiety, depression, violent behaviour, and psychosis (Buxton & Dove, 2008), as well as high-risk sexual behaviour, and increased risk of HIV, hepatitis, and tuberculosis (Brecht, O'Brien, Mayrhauser, & Anglin, 2004) as cited in Dadhe and Bettman (2019). An article written by Serra and Warda (2013) mentioned that 1 in 5 children located in the Western Cape were crystal meth users. Therefore, it was important to gather scientific evidence on this subject for an understanding of the experience that crystal meth users have in rural areas. It is also paramount to holistically describe and document the lived experiences of people using crystal meth because, as Brecht and Herbeck (2013) aver, the use of crystal meth does not only affect the user but also the family members and/or caregivers equally affected.

Even though the use of crystal methamphetamine is rapidly growing in South Africa, it is not entirely new to the global society. For example, a cross-sectional survey study by Papamihali, Collins, Karamouzian, Pursell, Graham, and Buxton (2021) reported an Increased use of crystal methamphetamine across North America and international jurisdictions, including a notable increase in the presence of methamphetamine in illicit drug toxicity deaths in British Columbia, Canada. A study (Dadhe,2019) conducted in Australia on the lived experiences of crystal meth users indicated that family of origin, social influences, and other individual factors (such as) play a role in the use of crystal meth use. The lived experiences study by Dadhe (2019) further corroborated the findings by Stockings et al. (2019) which postulated that using crystal meth has adverse effects not only for the user’s mental health but also for their physical (i.e, weight loss, loss of appetite, visual disturbances, fatigue etc). Some of the effects of crystal meth are exhibited in Figure 1 below.
This study is of the assumption that contexts differ when it comes to the lived experiences of crystal meth users, hence this study was undertaken. As discussed above, there are many studies which have taken place, however, the majority of them are in urban settings mostly within the Global West. For example, a Canadian ethnographic study by Fast, Kerr, Wood, and Small, (2014) on “The multiple truths about crystal meth among young people entrenched in an urban drug scene” found that several young people used crystal meth to engage in “socially acceptable” and “productive” behaviours, from looking for ways to generate income to get their resume and government identification organized in anticipation of applying for jobs and alternative school programs (Fast et al., 2014, p.44). In addition, the same study also found that some young people used crystal meth for losing weight, recreational activities, socializing with friends, dating and sex (Fast et al., 2014, p.44). Contrastingly, only a few studies in the South African context have reported the same results or at least documented lived experiences within rural settings. Other than the afore-highlighted studies there is a general paucity of literature contextualising the lived experiences of crystal meth users. Some, however, do attempt to describe the experiences of crystal meth users through their caregivers. To attest to this, a mixed method study by Sampson, Heinsch, Geddes, Velleman, Velleman, Teesson, and Kay-Lambkin (2023), was conducted in the United Kingdom documenting the experiences of family members and friends of people who use methamphetamine. The findings of the Sampson et al. (2023) study revealed that family members and friends of crystal meth users struggle to cope with the users due to significant changes regarding finances, lifestyles, relationships, and the psychological distress which emanates from crystal meth use. The same study postulated that friends and family members of people using crystal meth described their experiences of being close to someone using methamphetamine as rather unpredictable, depressing and usually filled with chaos and violence. These are just some of the effects of crystal meth use, which are also described in Figure 1 above. The striking difference between the study of Sampson et al. (2023) and the current study is that the former is based on secondary information (family and friends about lived experiences, while the current study is based on primary information from the crystal meth users on their livelihoods. There is still a dearth of literature on lived experiences of people using crystal meth during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the African continent, a study by Dumbili and Ebuenyi (2022) evinced that methamphetamine (also known as mkpulummiri in Nigeria) use is growing among young people, however, there has been a dearth of empirical research conducted. In their (Dumbili & Ebuenyi, 2022) study, the authors assert that crystal methamphetamines are a serious endemic in Nigeria, as more and more young people continue having access to it. There have been reports (Mark, 2013) in West Africa where there has been an increase in homegrown crystal meth which is even more potent and results in serious criminal behaviours in West Africa. These findings are also supported by Onyeaka, Kugbey, Ayanore, and Oppong-Asante, (2020), who enunciate that crystal methamphetamines resulted in several truancy cases among adolescents in West African countries. Despite all of these studies, studies on the lived experiences of people using crystal methamphetamines remain somewhat scanty. However, recent research (Nyashanu, Brown, Nyashanu, & Frost, 2023) contextualising the experiences of crystal meth users is undertaken to describe the experiences of people using crystal meth users. For example, Nyashanu et al. (2023) report that their findings found that crystal meth users experience difficulties in seeking assistance and treatment due to stigmatization, lack of awareness of drugs, and financial difficulties amongst others. Only a few studies have been undertaken on lived experiences of drug users, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Figure 1:** A visual presentation depicting the effects of Crystal meth on its users.
In South Africa, where the study took place, several previous and recent studies (Plüddemann, Flisher, McKetin, Parry, & Lombard, [2010]; Nyabadza, Njagarah, & Smith, [2013]; Asante, & Lentoor, [2017]; Davis, & Jansen, [2020]; Nyashanu, Nyashanu, Zawaira, & Zirima, [2022]) have been undertaken to understand the experiences and behaviours of crystal meth users. One of the aforementioned studies based on the caregivers’ experiences provides important insights into crystal meth modalities. The study by Asante and Lentoor (2017) reported that young males using crystal meth subject their caregivers to feelings of shame and misbehaviour resulting from their (users’) misbehaviour. Furthermore, the findings of the study indicated that caregivers also experienced personal challenges such as emotional problems, financial difficulties, and fear while they are caring for their sons who use crystal meth (Asante & Lentoor, 2017). Highlighting this study is important because the current study also reports findings which align with the findings above. The study was underpinned by the important model called the Biopsychosocial model which is then now discussed.

Theoretical Framework

The study was underpinned by the Biopsychosocial model as first advanced by Engel (1977). This model was important in shaping the study as it holds the view that substance use addiction is a brain disease (Heilig, MacKillop, Martinez, Rehm, Leggio, & Vanderschuren, 2021). According to Engel (1977), understanding chronic illness and disease as a complex interaction between biological, psychological, and social factors will propel a better understanding of those suffering from the disease. In this light, people using crystal meth experience several biological, psychological and social implications due to their crystal meth use. Becoña-Iglesias (2018) posit that biological, psychological, and social factors contribute to substance use. Hence the researchers are of the understanding that the lived experiences of people using crystal meth should be perceived from these three factors (biological, psychological, and social factors), to enable a better understanding of their plight of crystal meth use as depicted in Figure 2 below with an addition of the spiritual factors.

The above schema, therefore, highlights how the lived experiences of people using crystal meth can be better understood instead of being judged based on the factors which surround them. Hence the biopsychosocial model fits well with this study, owing much to its explicit elucidations of the experiences of people using crystal meth use disorder or using crystal meth (Al Ghaferi, et al.,2017).

Research Methodology

In the quest to systematically explore and describe the lived experience of crystal meth users, the qualitative research approach and phenomenological research design were employed. The approach in the study was informed by the constructivists’ paradigm or worldview as it sought to explore the lived experiences of people using crystal meth (Huyler & McGill, 2019). Through the phenomenological research design, participants were able to detail their lived experiences across the biological, psychosocial and...
Findings And Discussions

Theme 1: Stigmatization of crystal meth users during the COVID-19 pandemic

Participants have reported that they are being called names for using substances. Stigmatization was revealed as one of the challenges faced by users of crystal meth. According to Cheetham, Picco, Barnett, Lubman and Nielsen (2022), people who use substances are often receiving stigmas from their society which can create challenges for the recovery of those who are addicted. Some respondents have reported that they are perceived as dangerous people in society. Moreover, Deen, Kershaw, Newton, Stapinski, Birrell, Debenham, Champion, Kay-Lambkin, Teesson and Chapman (2021) aver that the stigma and discrimination that one experiences can vary from drug user to the other. Thus, it must be noted that the experiences of crystal meth users cannot be the same as the experiences of people who are using other types of substances. Some respondents echoed that:

“I use crystal meth to cope with the challenges I face in my life, but during the COVID-19 pandemic, it got worse because of the disruptions that the COVID-19 pandemic caused in my life which also resulted in some people distancing themselves from me and calling me by names. People who found that I am using crystal meth their behaviour and attitude towards me changed. Some Parents used me as an example for their kids like ‘I do not want you to go to universities that are far because I do not want you to end up like...’”

“Just because I use crystal meth people often assume I am dangerous like I am not a good person. I think it’s mostly because I am a female and as a community, we are used to males using drugs compared to girls. I have heard people label me and call me names such as ‘Junkie’. Someone once even told me that I am such an embarrassment to my family which I understand and although it hurts to admit I agree with them”

In addition, other respondents echoed that:

“I have a friend who drinks alcohol and smokes weed, they are viewed as normal. They are treated differently compared to how I am treated, little do these people know that some of us use Crystal meth to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic.”

“People are quick to judge us, we cope with situations differently and I must indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected me negatively, I couldn’t cope with it, that is why I am using crystal meth to help me cope with the situation.”

The findings above indicate that people who use crystal meth are experiencing stigmatization in their respective communities such as being called by names. It can be deduced that some individuals associate the use of substances such as crystal meth with negative views such as believing that all substance users are dangerous. This study's findings align with Deen, et al (2021) who found that people who use substances such as crystal meth are often stigmatized and viewed negatively in society. It must also be noted that some individuals are using crystal meth to cope with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is in line with Ullman, Relyea, Peter-Hagene, and Vasquez (2013) who aver that some individuals use substances to cope with their traumas or challenging situation.

Theme 2: Family Functioning of Crystal meth users during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Some respondents have indicated that smoking crystal meth to cope with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected their family relationships. Thus, it can be noted that the use of crystal meth harms families and affect their functioning as averred by Gruber and Taylor (2006). Some respondents have reported that they use crystal meth to cope with difficult conditions of their lives. In the same breath, Chodkiewicz, Talarowska, Miniszewska, Nawrocka and Bilinski (2020) aver that during the COVID-19 pandemic period, some individuals resorted to alcohol consumption as a coping mechanism. Some respondents echoed that:

“Way before the COVID-19 pandemic, my relationship with my mother was not good. But after she found out that I am smoking crystal meth, our relationship became worse even the other family members are tired of me.”

“Crystal meth has mostly affected the relationship I have with my child like I do not have time for her, once I smoke, I just want to do my own thing and be in my world.”
In addition, another respondent echoed that:

“It is unfortunate that I use substances to assist me to forget my struggles, the COVID-19 pandemic stressed me until I was introduced to crystal meth which assisted me to cope with the situation but at the same time it made me fight with my family.”

The findings above show that crystal meth negatively affects the relationship between users and their families. According to a study conducted by Dykes and Casker (2021), it was revealed that substance abuse negatively affects users by causing health complications and disorientating their family functioning. It can be noted that the well-being of the users and their families is affected as a result of the use of crystal meth. The findings further show that families of the users do not appreciate having crystal meth users as it causes them anxiety. This is supported by Dykes and Casker (2021) who aver that substance abuse has an impact on the caregiving of families in that parenting becomes difficult and the family functioning is negatively affected. However, it cannot be concluded that family functioning is only negatively affected when the young members of the family use substances. The researchers believe that the use of substances by parents can also affect the users’ family functioning. This is supported by Dyba, Moesgen, Klein and Leyendecker (2018) who posit that family functioning gets negatively affected when parents use illicit substances as their priority changes to the consumption of the substances other than the functioning of the family.

Theme 3: Engagement in criminal activities

According to Menard, Mihalic and Huizinga (2001), people who use substances are more likely to engage in criminal activities than those who do not use substances. In the same breath, Gizzi and Gerkin (2010) state that crimes such as property crimes are related to the use of substances. A study was conducted on the effects of methamphetamine (“tik”) on a peri-urban community in Cape Town, South Africa, by Watt, Meade, Kimani, MacFarlane, Choi, Skinner and Sikkena (2014) found that criminality and violence were some of the issues that communities face as a result of substance abuse. Thus, it can be noted that crystal meth is one of the contributing factors to crime in society. Most of the respondents have reported that crystal meth has led them to engage in criminal activities. The following subthemes emerged from the findings:

Subtheme 3.1: property and robbery crimes by crystal meth users during the COVID-19 pandemic

Most of the respondents indicated that the COVID-19 lockdown resulted in them losing their jobs and resorting to robing and stealing people’s property after smoking crystal meth. The respondents further reported that they rob people and steal people’s property for survival as they are without jobs and money. The findings of the study are in line with Ferguson, Bender, Thompson, Xie and Pollio (2011) who found that people resort to different survival strategies to sustain their livelihoods wherein some use risky survival strategies such as stealing and prostitution. It can be noted that crystal meth pushes some people to use negative strategies for their lives. Some respondents echoed that:

“After I lost my job because of the lockdown, it was difficult for me to survive until I decided to use crystal meth to cope with my situation, after smoking it I would start having the courage to rob people. That's how I made my living during the lockdown”.

“Facing my problem of being unemployed has been hard for me I tried looking for a job until I gave up and started smoking crystal meth which made me rob people and steal their property. But you I cannot be blamed, as a man I had to make means of surviving “.

In addition, another respondent echoed that:

“I do not have a job and I also dropped out of school, sometimes I do odd jobs to make money so I can buy meth but it's very hard to find one. I often engage in criminal activities such as stealing people's phones, and housebreaking. I do not usually use the stuff I steal I sell them to make money and buy drugs again, my addiction is too much.”

The above findings show that crystal meth user resorted to robbing and stealing people’s properties for survival during the COVID-19 pandemic period due to job losses that they experienced from the implementation of the national lockdown regulations. This is supported by Campedelli, Aziani and Favarin (2021) who aver that increment and decrement of various types of crimes such as robbery, shoplifting and thefts were affected by the application of the COVID-19-related containment measures. The researchers are of the view that although some crystal meth users resorted to stealing and robbing people for survival, such crimes decreased during the COVID-19 lockdown due to regulations such as home confinement. On the same wavelength, Díaz-Faes, Vidal-Codina, Segura, Aguilar and Pereda (2023) posit that crimes such as theft, burglary, assault, robbery and sexual offences exhibited general decreases during the COVID-19 period.

Subtheme 3.2: Physical Assault by crystal meth users

Some of the respondents have indicated that they physically assault people as a way of taking out their frustrations after smoking crystal meth. In other words, some people become victims of physical assault as a result of living with crystal meth users in their families and communities. According to Spatz Widom, Marmorstein and Raskin White (2006), substance abuse contributes to the victimization of individuals in that the users physically assault those who are around them. Some respondents have indicated that their frustrations are coming from the COVID-19 lockdown regulations and guidelines such as home confinement. This is supported by Frenkel, Giessing, Egger-Lampl, Hutter, Oudejans, Kleygrewre and Plessner (2021) who state that some individuals found the COVID-19 crisis stressful and difficult to deal with as it brought challenges such as job loss. One respondent echoed that:
“How do I explain this, you see after smoking crystal meth, I become aggressive and violent to the point where I take out my frustrations on other people. I always wake up to cases of assault, but I cannot help it my addiction keeps pushing me to use crystal meth which makes me hurt other people”.

In addition, another respondent echoed that:

“The COVID-19 situation of having to stay at home and do nothing pushed me to try other substances to cope with my problems, I found myself abusing crystal meth. My brother I have even lost count of the number of people I have assaulted after smoking crystal meth; I even assault my family members”.

The above findings show that the COVID-19 lockdown regulations and guidelines have caused frustrations for some individuals which resulted in them smoking crystal meth and assaulting people, including their family members. In the same breath, studies show that crimes such as sexual assault and physical assault/abuse in families and communities are instigated by the use of substances by some of the perpetrators (Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005; Finkelhor, 2009). However, it cannot be concluded from the findings that the assault incidents that occurred during the COVID-19 lockdown or period are a result of substance abuse. The researchers are of the view that some incidents were instigated by regulations such as home confinement as echoed by Ramoshaba and Singwane (2023).

**Theme 4: Uncontrollable urge to use.**

Respondents have indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic pushed them to use crystal meth as a coping strategy which resulted in them not being able to control their usage. The respondents further reported that crystal meth feels like an irresistible demon in their bodies which requires them to feed it all the time. This is what some of the respondents echoed:

“Crystal meth is a demon that I cannot resist, whenever I wake up I think of it, during the day I also think of it, I feel like I cannot live without it”

“Ever since I started using Crystal meth, I feel like I am under a spell of a demon that I cannot resist, I am addicted to the substance, I cannot function without it”.

Another response echoed that:

“I blame COVID-19 for forcing me to use Crystal meth, now I must live with this demon in my body. I am now addicted to it, I cannot go for a day without smoking it”

The above findings show that they cannot control their intake or usage of crystal meth as they have developed an addiction to it. The respondents compared crystal meth to a demon which requires them to feed most of the time. Thus, it can be deduced that the uncontrollable addiction to crystal meth can lead to health or mental issues. This is in line with Ali, Onaivi, Dodd, Cadet, Schenk, Kuhar and Koob (2011) who aver that substance use addiction is a major neuropsychiatric problem that needs to be given attention.

**Conclusions**

The findings from this paper make a significant contribution to the understanding of the lived experiences of people using or addicted to crystal methamphetamine in their environment. The paper described the experiences of young people using methamphetamine in the Witbank area of Mpumalanga, it is envisaged that more interventions would be capacitated and developed to help deal with the scourge of substance use amongst the youth especially after the findings were reported. From the findings, it is evident that society still stigmatized drug users instead of helping them get treatment.

The following recommendations are presented in this article.

i. There is a need for further studies on lived experiences across all types of drugs

ii. Drug use treatment interventions in treatment centres should also involve caregiver-centred knowledge in understanding the biopsychosocial phenomena of addiction.

iii. Policymakers in South Africa should work towards an Instant-admission policy for people who use substances, through the capacity of social workers.

iv. There is a need for more inpatient treatment centres in South Africa, to combat the scourge of substance use

v. Law enforcement in the Witbank area should expedite their efforts towards illicit drug trafficking as this influences the scourge of crystal meth use in the area.

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