

Assembling Methamphetamine: A Corpus Based Discourse Analysis of an Online Forum for People Who Use Crystal Meth

Methamphetamine is a stimulant drug that has been widely portrayed as dangerous in media, policy, and research. This perception has contributed to the stigmatization of people who use the drug, who are often depicted in negative terms. As a result, many individuals who use methamphetamine do so surreptitiously or with the support of like-minded individuals.

This study analyzes the language used in a Reddit community made up of people who identify as methamphetamine users. We collected approximately 1,000 discussion threads from the community and compiled a corpus of about 370,000 words. Using quantitative corpus linguistic techniques, including keyword and collocation analysis, we characterized the words used in the community to construct and contest the nature of methamphetamine and the identities of its users.

We also qualitatively examined recurrent discursive formations in the corpus. We drew on the critical analysis of addiction by Keane (2002) and the notion of collateral realities described by John Law, which problematizes the binary opposition of health and disease in relation to addiction.

We found that forum contributors employed a diverse lexicon to enact different realities of methamphetamine and related substances. They used neuroscientific terms, informal slang, and brand names to describe the drug and its effects. Contributors also used keywords to construct opposing affective states of methamphetamine use, such as the sought-after euphoria and the inevitable comedown. These contrasting states were managed by employing different lexical types, each with its own discourse prosody. Drawing on Derrida's concept of the pharmakon, forum contributors navigated the undecidability and aporia of methamphetamine as both an enjoyable and mind-expanding substance and a dangerous toxin, using a diverse lexicon to construct and contest the meaning and social significance of the drug.

Contributors used language to construct symbolic boundaries between different types of people who use methamphetamine, with some categorizing themselves as "functional addicts" while stigmatizing others as "tweakers."

Finally, forum contributors disputed the mainstream biomedical contention that methamphetamine use inevitably leads to psychosis and the construed psychosis as resulting from a more complex assemblage that includes excessive methamphetamine use along with other habits and practices.

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