



Expert opinion on the Ph.D. Thesis

Title of Thesis: Individual, social and cultural factors shaping the use of amphetamine-type stimulants in Europe

The author of the Thesis: Marcus-Sebastian Martens

Field of study: Addiction: Specialization in Health Care

Author of the Expert review: Petr Kachlík, Assoc. Prof., MD., Ph.D.

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Ph.D. Thesis Review

The presented dissertation is mainly based on the ATTUNE project, which is focused on individual, social and cultural factors influencing the illicit use of stimulant drugs in Europe. The author primarily focused on amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS), the illegal use of which has a serious impact on all components of the holistic health model of the individual, as well as the entire society. The topic addressed is highly current, in accordance with the studied field. The title of the work describes its professional focus well. The author of the dissertation, as the main researcher, participated in the preparation, coordination and implementation of all essential phases of the ATTUNE project, using his previous work experience and partially also the results, presentation and publication outputs of the project.

The main goal of the research part of the dissertation was to describe and obtain data that would allow a better understanding of the factors that on an individual level influence the motivation, beginning, various phases and termination of ATS use. Special attention was paid to the possibilities of prevention, targeted intervention and treatment leading to controlled consumption or less problematic patterns of consumption and social integration of ATS users. Consistent with the bio-psycho-social model, individual differences, social dynamics, environmental, and cultural factors influencing ATS use were examined.

The objectives of the study are clearly and relevantly formulated. Valuable for practice is the implementation of a specific qualitative investigation on a larger sample of users, in which standardized tools were used. It was possible to obtain unique data that could have remained hidden if a different research design had been chosen. The research carried out as part of the submitted dissertation therefore brings new knowledge that is practically usable in the prevention, treatment of addiction to ATS and the social integration of users.

The dissertation is based on the ATTUNE cross-sectional study and long-term follow-up, author will use a mixed research design. In the qualitative phase of the investigation, a research sample (n=279) was recruited, with the help of interviews different groups of participants were approached in 5 EU member states - ATS users and a comparison group. The selection criteria and characteristics of the individual subgroups of the research group are properly described. Criteria for assessing addiction and data on the health status, lifestyle and social context of the participants are also given. Using the established characters, author categorized the trajectory of ATS use and identified possible risk factors. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, subjected to coding and further analysis using MAXQDA software. Based on the knowledge gained, another step followed, in which standardized computerized instruments (CAPI) adapted locally were used to understand a number of addiction, health and psychological characteristics of the participants.

In the phase of the quantitative investigation, the sample included a total of 1656 people. Participants with different patterns of use and dependence on ATS were identified. A large amount of socio-demographic, health and addiction data was obtained. Standardized questionnaire-type instruments were used for the comprehensive assessment of the use of addictive substances with an emphasis on ATS. Statistical analysis was performed using the SPSS 25 software package.

The author respected the principles of research ethics and good scientific practice when collecting and processing data and when publishing the results. The data in electronic form was properly secured and access to it was authenticated. Interviews were conducted by trained interviewers in person or via electronic links (video calls).

The chosen research design, methods and techniques used in the qualitative and quantitative part of the investigation are adequate to the set goals. They are described clearly and in sufficient detail in the text.

In his dissertation, the author used 114 recent literary sources, which are duly cited mainly in the text of the theoretical part and in the discussion. They are also properly cited in the reference list using the APA citation standard. The mentioned professional literature is closely related to the problem being addressed. The author demonstrated a solid understanding of the problem, in the theoretical part he created a good starting point for the subsequent experimental part.

The results of the qualitative and quantitative part of the research are presented in text form, which is suitably supplemented by 23 tables and 1 diagram. The description of outputs and comments on them are clear and understandable. The levels of statistical significance obtained in the framework of statistical testing differences between the observed groups of participants are attached.

The results showed that the beginning and development of ATS use is significantly influenced by the family background of individuals. In all cases, peer groups and the social environment in general played a key role in the initiation of ATS use. ATS were often used as a means of relaxation and escape from the monotony of everyday life, offering a change of perspective. Problem use and dependence on ATS led to health and social consequences of varying severity, mainly related to emotional stress, social isolation and anxiety. The decline or cessation of ATS use was a long-term process, motivated mainly by the users' serious health problems. In addition to reintegration into society, the participants also had to find meaningful leisure activities. A detailed analysis of the research sample revealed significant differences in the use of ATS according to the demographic data of the monitored country. Personal perception of social integration and social position were negatively correlated with ATS use. Approximately 40 % of respondents rated their use of ATS as recreational, 25 % as compulsive, and 10 % as intensive.

The author perceives the solved problem in a wider context and is aware of the limits of his research. In the discussion, he lists 20 sources whose authors dealt with similar topics. He has demonstrated that he is able to obtain data using literature research, make relevant arguments and lead a well-founded discussion based on them. The discussion is carried out in text form, contains 1 table. The author asks himself 5 questions, to which he answers critically. Individual sections of the discussion address demographics and patterns of ATS consumer use, reasons for ATS use, and associated factors, risk and protective factors. Conclusions are concise and clearly formulated.

I consider the presented text to be original, the author properly cites the used literary sources according to the APA standard and lists them in the bibliography. His own professional erudition is documented by 7 publications with an impact factor that are directly related to the dissertation and in which he participated, as well as 1 publication without an impact factor. Adopted thoughts, opinions and methods are clearly distinguished from the author's own outputs and opinions.

The scope of the dissertation is 105 pages and 25 pages of appendices, which is at the lower limit of the standard. I consider the author's own contribution to the topic to be sufficient and substantial, it offers new data and perspectives aimed at understanding the problem of ATS, prevention, treatment and resocialization of users. I recommend accepting the work for defense. I recommend the research results obtained as part of the dissertation for publication.

Conclusion

I rate the submitted dissertation of Mr. Marcus-Sebastian Martens as original and beneficial for practice. The theoretical and empirical part of the text is at a good level and meets the content and formal requirements. It is obvious that the author has been active in the field of addictology for a long time, demonstrated a good orientation in the topic, he used the outputs of the project of which he was the lead researcher, further developed and expanded the research. Candidate demonstrated knowledge of professional sources, ability to work with literary research. He prepared and implemented a mixed research investigation, properly processed the obtained data, including statistical procedures. He presented the results of the study in a comprehensible manner and thoroughly discussed them, clearly and critically formulated the conclusions.

I recommend the work for defense. Mr. Marcus-Sebastian Martens has demonstrated the prerequisites for independent creative scientific work and for the award of the title "Ph.D." after his name.

Questions and remarks on the defense of work:

1. Please indicate what preventive measures aimed at ATS can be applied in the population based on the facts you have found.
2. What are the options for self-help support when reducing doses or stopping the ATS use?
3. What important distress stimuli influence the ATS use and how can they be reduced?

Place and date of preparation of the report

Signature of the Expert

Brno, August 30, 2023

Petr Kachlík