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From controversy to curiosity: A qualitative exploration of societal perceptions of psychedelics

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Abstract

The present study explored perceptions towards the use of psychedelics. Existing literature suggests that psychedelics can be an effective alternative in the treatment of mental health conditions. However, negative perceptions are commonly expressed in online communities about the use of psychedelics in the mental health context. This controversy in perceptions and societal beliefs surrounding psychedelic use was empirically explored through the collection of in-depth, qualitative data gathered from individuals who had no contact with psychedelics. Eight participants were recruited using snowball and convenience sampling methods and were interviewed online regarding their perceptions and beliefs on this topic. Four distinct themes emerged from a thematic analysis of the dataset: Imbalance within Control Dynamics, Therapeutic Efficacy, Across Generations and Borders, and Growing Awareness. Participants' narratives suggest that age and culture are important factors influencing individuals' perceptions towards the use of psychedelics. While the potential benefits of using psychedelics in mental health treatment is acknowledged, participants' accounts highlight their apprehensions regarding the application of psychedelics in controlled and safe settings. The present findings improve our understanding of perceptions and beliefs surrounding the use of psychedelics and influence a positive shift in societal beliefs and perceptions.

Keywords: Psychedelics; Perceptions; Beliefs; Qualitative; Thematic Analysis

1. Introduction

Historically, the use of psychedelic drugs has been universally stigmatized [1] and despite perceptions towards the use of psychedelics differing globally, due to factors including geographical location and cultural norms, psychiatrists in the United Kingdom have tended to agree on their use in therapeutic treatments [2]. Moreover, psychedelic drugs have gained some renewed attention for their potential therapeutic benefits, so understanding the stigma attached to their use becomes ever more important.

Stigma is a powerful social force that shapes how individuals and groups are perceived and treated. It often leads to exclusion, discrimination, and misunderstanding [3]. In the context of psychedelics, societal attitudes are heavily influenced by historical narratives, legal frameworks, and cultural beliefs, which have long portrayed these substances as dangerous or illicit [4]. However, as research progresses and perspectives shift, there is a growing need to explore how stigma persists and evolves. Hence, this study aims to uncover these attitudes and contribute to a broader understanding of how perceptions affect the acceptance and integration of psychedelics into society.

In contemporary society, the concept of stigma is recognized as a complex social phenomenon that significantly impacts individuals and their interactions within societal groups. Stigma, as defined by Goffman [5], refers to an attribute that

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is deeply discrediting, leading to the marginalization and discrimination of individuals or groups who possess such characteristics. Previous literature highlights that stigmatization can manifest in various forms, such as social exclusion, devaluation, and unjust treatment, all of which contribute to negative stereotypes and social inequalities [6]. Indeed, the issue of stigma is pertinent to the study of psychedelics as they are a class of substances that have been historically stigmatized, yet more recently are receiving a resurgence of interest both in scientific research and popular culture [7].

Psychedelics, also known as hallucinogens, are a category of psychoactive substances that induce profound alterations in perception, mood, and cognition [8]. Commonly known psychedelics include, among others, substances such as lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), psilocybin (the active compound in magic mushrooms), dimethyltryptamine (DMT). These substances have been used for millennia in various cultural and religious contexts, often regarded as sacraments or tools for spiritual exploration [9]. However, despite their historical significance and potential therapeutic benefits, psychedelic substances have been associated with negative connotations and widespread stigma [10].

Some notable negative perceptions towards psychedelics can be traced back to the 1960s and 1970s, when these substances became associated with countercultural movements and were subsequently criminalized under international drug control treaties [11]. The Controlled Substances Act of 1970 in the United States, for example, classified psychedelics as Schedule 1 drugs, a category reserved for substances deemed to have a high potential for abuse and no accepted medical use. Additionally, this legal status not only criminalized the use and possession of psychedelics but also contributed to their stigmatization, framing them as dangerous illicit substances [12].

As it relates to psychedelics, stigma can operate on multiple levels. At the societal level, psychedelics have been portrayed in the media and public discourse as substances associated with deviant behavior, mental instability, and moral decline [13]. One could argue that this has led to widespread fear and misunderstanding about their effects amongst the wider culture, as well as the individuals who use them. For example, the infamous moral panic surrounding LSD use in the 1960s, fueled by sensationalized media reports and government propaganda, created a lasting stigma that persists today [14]. At the individual level, those who use psychedelic substances often face social disapproval, legal repercussions, and shame which can result in social isolation and secretive behavior [15].

Nevertheless, in recent years, there has been a growing interest in the potential therapeutic applications of psychedelics, particularly in the treatment of mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) [16]. The resurgence in psychedelic research has sparked a reevaluation of certain substances, challenging the stigma that has long surrounded them. Clinical trials and studies have demonstrated that psychedelics, when administered in controlled settings can produce profound and lasting psychological benefits, leading some researchers to advocate for their reclassification and integration into mainstream medical practice [17].

Studying stigma in relation to psychedelic use lies in the potential to address such barriers and facilitate an informed and balanced understanding of these substances. By exploring individuals' thoughts on the origins, manifestations, and consequences of psychedelic stigma, researchers can contribute to the ongoing efforts to destigmatize these substances and promote their safe and responsible use. Understanding the dynamics underlying stigma in this context can provide insights into broader issues relating to drug policy, public health, and social justice. Education is crucial in challenging misconceptions and stereotypes by providing accurate, evidence-based information [18]; and reducing stigma in society requires a multifaceted approach that targets various levels of influence, including education, policy reform, and direct community engagement.

1.1. The Current Study

Psychedelic drugs represent a unique and timely case study for exploring the complex interplay between stigma, public perception, and policy. The historical stigmatization of these substances has had far-reaching implications for their legal status, social acceptance, and potential therapeutic applications. As the interest in psychedelic drugs continues to unfold, it is crucial to address the lingering stigma that surrounds these substances. This will help to promote a more nuanced and evidence-based dialogue on their role in society. The present study therefore aims to delve into the complex and evolving opinion surrounding psychedelics. It also aims to contribute to this discourse by investigating the perceptions and beliefs surrounding psychedelics and exploring the extent to which stigma influences public attitudes and policy decisions. Through this research, we hope to shed a brighter light on the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead in the ongoing journey toward the destigmatization and integration of psychedelics into modern medicine and culture. The overarching research question in the present study was: *"What are the perceptions and beliefs of the general public towards the use of psychedelics?"*

2. Material and methods

2.1. Design

This study employed a qualitative approach, emphasizing an understanding of how individuals interpret their surroundings and personal experiences [19]. Qualitative methods are commonly used for exploring opinions, beliefs, experiences, and attitudes [20, 21].

2.2. Participants

Eight adults with no personal experience of psychedelics were interviewed. Participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling methods and by advertising the study on social media. All participants were given pseudonyms, and their personal details were removed from transcripts to protect their identity. Additional sampling was deemed unnecessary as saturation had been reached, indicating that further data collection would not contribute meaningfully to the breadth or depth of the themes and analysis.

2.3. Data collection and ethical considerations

The code of conduct by the British Psychological Society [22] was followed. Ethical approval was acquired from the university ethics committee prior to the collection of data. Each participant took part in semi-structured interviews that lasted approximately 45 minutes. The interviews were transcribed verbatim to facilitate the analysis phase. All participants were asked to give consent prior to taking part in the study and debriefed at the end of the online interviews. Given the semi-structured nature of the interviews, the interview schedule was applied flexibly, functioning more as a guiding framework than a rigid set of questions. Prompts were used to offer participants the opportunity to elaborate further, enabling a more in-depth exploration of their opinions.

2.4. Data analysis

The study followed the six-step approach to Thematic Analysis (TA) outlined by Braun and Clarke [23]. This method facilitated a rigorous and nuanced interpretation of the participants' experiences. TA is a method which allows researchers to identify, analyze and report on core themes within datasets [23]. It provides flexibility and allows for a broad description of the dataset. From an analytical perspective, TA permits researchers to not adhere to a specific ontological or epistemological position [24]. The present study aimed to provide a genuine representation of the participants' narratives and did not attempt to align the analytic process with pre-existing ideas [23].

3. Results and discussion

As can be seen in Table 1, four central themes emerged from the data. These four primary themes were: *Imbalance within Control Dynamics*, *Therapeutic Efficacy*, *Across Generations and Borders*, and *Growing Awareness*. These themes encapsulate a broad range of insights into perceptions, concerns, and evolving attitudes toward the subject of psychedelics.

Table 1 Summary of themes and subthemes with illustrative quotes

Theme	Subtheme	Illustrative quote
Imbalance within control dynamics	Losing control	<i>"For myself like my fear I would say is I'm a control freak I'm super scared to let go of my control and not being able to like control what I'm doing what I'm thinking what I'm feeling"</i>
	Under supervision	<i>"Just because if you're in a safe setting where you know there's somebody who knows the drugs who knows what to do if there's going something wrong"</i>
Therapeutic efficacy	Using it for the sake of mental health	<i>"With psychedelics I think people do see it like this can help me kind of an easy way"</i>
	Alternative therapy	<i>"Psychedelics like psilocybin, MDMA, and ketamine are showing a lot of potential in treating conditions like depression and anxiety, especially in cases where other treatments haven't worked."</i>

Across generations and borders	Environmental influence	<i>"The sixties counterculture reinforced the image of psychedelics as recreational and risky, influencing stigma even today."</i>
	Through cultural lens	<i>"In India, mental health is not something that is taking as a serious thing"</i>
Growing awareness	Changing perceptions	<i>"As more research shows the potential benefits of psychedelics, particularly in the treatment of mental health disorders, I think we'll see more widespread acceptance"</i>
	Persistent concerns	<i>"At the moment, if you hear psychedelic drugs... I think drugs is like the words that shocks off people"</i>

3.1. Theme 1: Imbalance within Control Dynamics

This theme captures participants' apprehensions regarding control and safety when engaging with psychedelics, emphasizing the tension between personal agency and external oversight.

3.1.1. Subtheme 1.1: Losing Control

A deep-seated fear of relinquishing control during psychedelic experiences was frequently expressed. One participant articulated, *"I'm a control freak. I'm super scared to let go of my control and not being able to control what I'm doing, what I'm thinking, what I'm feeling."* One could interpret this narrative as an expression of anxiety. This anxiety similarly reflects fears of the unknown and the potential for disorientation or overwhelming emotional experiences during psychedelic drug consumption. Other participants echoed concerns about enduring adverse, long-term effects, *"The fear also of what happens if I never get back to my normal state."* These fears are amplified by anecdotal reports of harm, such as those involving tragic accidents. The experience and behaviors of low self-control can be the subject of stigmatization in a scientific age and society predominantly focused on predictability over randomness. Feelings of loss of control could be one of the reasons that psychedelic substances are stigmatized by both users, and non-users.

Lebedev [25] discusses this phenomenon of transformative experiences, described as moments when they feel a profound loss of self-awareness yet gain a deeper connection to their surroundings or purpose. These findings align with what many of our participants mention, often surrounded by the thought of losing control. What could be interpreted from this sub-theme is that the loss of ego-awareness amongst wider socio-cultural environments and contexts, where a sense of ego is prominent, can become stigmatized.

3.1.2. Subtheme 1.2: Under Supervision

Participants' narratives emphasized the importance of structured environments and professional oversight in regard to the use of psychedelics. Participants remarked, *"It should be if you use it, it should be controlled by somebody who knows more about it."*, *"safe setting where somebody knows the drugs and what to do if something goes wrong."* This highlights a paradoxical relationship: while psychedelics are perceived as tools for profound personal exploration, they also necessitate external guidance to mitigate risks. This suggests a stigmatization of the context and setting in which psychedelic substances are used, as well as the intentions of the user. Psychedelic drug use in clinical and medical environments is more favorably perceived by society because of the supervisory role played by the healthcare professional.

Noorani [26] describes the critical role of "set and setting" in shaping psychedelic experiences, highlighting the need for controlled and guided environments. This aligns with the narratives of participants in the current study. It underscores how therapeutic and epistemic concerns intertwine with the political and economic imperatives to contain these powerful experiences. This resonates with participants' accounts, which similarly stress the paradoxical relationship between the personal exploration psychedelics enable and the necessity for professional oversight to ensure safety and structure. The role of a supervisor acting as a medical or psychological professional creates a more positive image of psychedelic drugs being medicinal rather than recreational.

3.2. Theme 2: Therapeutic Efficacy

This theme underscores the potential of psychedelics in mental health treatment, particularly as alternatives to conventional therapies. Many participants acknowledged and highlighted the therapeutic potential of psychedelics in addressing mental health challenges.

3.2.1. Subtheme 2.1: Using It for the Sake of Mental Health

Participants emphasized their role in addressing treatment-resistant conditions: "It has a lot of capability to help... if these psychedelics could bring in some sort of stability there." For some, psychedelics offered unique pathways to emotional release and self-awareness not easily achieved through traditional talking therapy. As another participant noted, "Sometimes you can't just say a few things... psychedelics, I feel, can help the person to open up."

Perkins and colleagues [27] study on medicinal psychedelics for mental health and addiction shows similarities with participants' narratives in the present study. Existing literature highlights the emphasis on the therapeutic potential of psychedelics in treating resistant conditions when used within medically supervised frameworks and underscores the importance of integrating psychotherapeutic support to facilitate unique pathways to emotional release and self-awareness [27]. Additionally, the need for rigorous research and carefully designed protocols to ensure safety and efficacy resonates with participants' concerns about responsible and structured use. Inferring from the study findings, one of the possible stigmas around psychedelics are the risk of recreational use which could harm mental health, while an integrated therapeutic approach could be perceived as more socially acceptable.

3.2.2. Subtheme 2.2: Alternative Therapy

Psychedelics were also framed as viable alternatives to traditional pharmacological and psychotherapeutic interventions. Participants shared, "With psychedelics, I think people do see it like this can help me, kind of an easy way." Despite this optimism, participants emphasized the need for integration into professional clinical settings to ensure safety and efficacy, "They need to be used in controlled settings, ideally with professional guidance."

The use of psychedelics as an alternative treatment when it comes to mental health conditions is on the rise. However, participants' narratives highlighted that the lack of knowledge regarding the efficacy of psychedelics treatments might hinder and negatively shape the societal attitudes towards this viable alternative. Moreover, when discussing the efficacy of this treatment, participants reflected on the second-hand knowledge of its effectiveness, expressing concerns regarding the availability of this treatment to members of society.

3.3. Theme 3: Across Generations and Borders

This theme highlights the influence of generational and cultural factors on the perception and acceptance of psychedelics. Participants reflected on different factors such as the environment, and the importance of culture when it comes to shaping the societal perceptions towards the use of psychedelics.

3.3.1. Subtheme 3.1: Environmental Influence

The narratives of participants suggest that broader societal environment significantly shapes individual attitudes towards psychedelics. Participants reflected on historical stigmas, stating, "My parents grew up with this... it was terrible with how people were there like it was a zombie land." Such historical contexts continue to color contemporary attitudes, especially among older generations. In contrast, younger participants displayed a more progressive stance, influenced by emerging research and public discourse.

Demographic factors such as age is an important influence when it comes to shaping perceptions of individuals [28]. The existing literature suggests that younger generations can have more positive attitudes towards behaviors that might be labeled as deviant.

3.3.2. Subtheme 3.2: Through My Cultural Lens

Cultural upbringing emerged as an influential factor in shaping perceptions. Participants observed, "In India, mental health is not something that is taken as a serious thing," highlighting regional disparities in the acceptance of psychedelics. Conversely, participants residing in culturally liberal environments, such as Berlin, expressed greater openness. "Living in Berlin really made me more open to everything... different kinds of ways of life." The experiences of the participants show how the socio-cultural context shape public perception and stigma around psychedelics and mental health.

The environment has a significant influence on one's core values and belief system. Additionally, factors such as taught values and cultural norms might contribute to the belief systems surrounding controversial topics such as the use of psychedelics. The profound impact of cultural and social contexts on the content and interpretation of psychedelic experiences is undeniable. Both the study and our participants highlight how cultural upbringing and regional attitudes shape perceptions, openness, and expectations surrounding psychedelics. This shared focus underscores the

importance of understanding the extra socio-cultural factors influencing perceptions of psychedelic experiences and their subjective implications.

3.4. Theme 4: Growing Awareness

This theme captures the evolving public perception of psychedelics, balancing optimism for their acceptance against persistent concerns. It additionally represents the concerns surrounding the use of psychedelics in mental health treatment.

3.4.1. Subtheme 4.1: Changing Perceptions

A shift in societal attitudes driven by research and advocacy was observed in this study. Participants noted, *“As more research shows the potential benefits of psychedelics... I think we’ll see more widespread acceptance.”* This changing landscape parallels the destigmatization of previously controversial substances like cannabis. *“I think the stigma will reduce once more people see the advantages... it might follow the same path [as marijuana].”* The need for further academic studies and empirical evidence detailing the current experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of psychedelic substances and their relation to stigma remains ongoing. The demand for additions to the literature on this topic continues to be integral.

A study conducted on the changing perceptions of mental health in Germany over the last two decades shows that mental health is an evolving topic. Findings in the study by Angermeyer et al., [28] showcase less perceived stigma on mental health in 2011 compared to 1990. These results align with the changing perceptions mentioned by participants. With an increased awareness of mental health in some countries, the possible therapeutic benefits of psychedelics could decrease stigmatization when displaying the transformational experiences they invoke in medical settings. As such, further research on the topic, and positive outcomes of treating mental health conditions with the use of psychedelics might contribute to normalization of this treatment and allow individuals to gain a more positive perspective on their use.

3.4.2. Subtheme 4.2: Persistent Concerns

Despite this optimism, participants acknowledged enduring challenges, including fears of addiction and safety concerns. Participants remarked, *“At the moment, if you hear psychedelic drugs... I think drugs is like the word that shocks off people.”* They highlighted concerns about regulatory frameworks, stating, *“We do not want the pharma industry to get in there and get the Part 2 of this biopsychological model.”*

These reservations highlight the complexities in achieving widespread acceptance as well as the intricate processes in shifting perceptions. The language surrounding psychedelic substances will also be a critical element to positive receptivity and the changing of negative perceptions.

4. Conclusion

The present study collected in-depth, qualitative data on the perceptions and beliefs surrounding the use of psychedelics, particularly in the therapeutic setting. The findings revealed a multifaceted narrative on the topic, which was marked both by enthusiasm for their therapeutic promise and trepidation over their risks. The themes of control dynamics, therapeutic efficacy, cultural influences, and evolving awareness highlight an interplay of personal, societal, and systemic factors at work. Future research focusing on public education will be pivotal in addressing these concerns, fostering informed discussions, and unlocking the potential of psychedelics within safe, regulated frameworks.

The present findings emphasize the need for a balanced approach—one that integrates psychedelics into professional clinical frameworks while addressing the ethical, social, and regulatory challenges they present. As public awareness grows, it is essential to foster an informed discourse that respects the complexity of these substances and their transformative potential. By doing so, the medical and psychological fields can navigate the path toward broader acceptance while safeguarding individual well-being and collective responsibility.

Finally, the exploration of participants' perspectives on psychedelics reveals a nuanced interchange of concerns, hopes, and cultural influences. While the therapeutic potential of psychedelics in addressing mental health challenges is widely acknowledged, apprehensions about control, safety, and societal acceptance persist. These fears underline the importance of structured environments, professional oversight, and rigorous research to ensure both safety and efficacy. Generational and cultural factors further shape perceptions, with younger participants demonstrating greater openness that can further influence and be manipulated by emerging research and evolving societal attitudes.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Statement of ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at Regent's University London.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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