

Long-term Transformative Effects and Integration Challenges of Psychedelic Experiences: A Mixed Methods Phenomenological Study of the Romanian Population

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This study looked into the transformative effects and integration challenges of psychedelic experiences with psilocybin and lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) for the Romanian population. The aim was to determine the long-term transformative effects and challenges individuals might encounter during the integration process. The study employed a sequential mixed methods design, using qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) with six interview participants, followed by a quantitative survey with 39 responses. The qualitative data analysis led to a multi-layered hierarchical model of themes and subordinate themes ranging from changes in perception of self, emotional transformation, spiritual transformation, interpersonal transformation, to personal, interpersonal, and cultural integration challenges. The survey results made it possible to compare the interview group with a broader national sample, and the sample's statistical similarity provided extra validity to the smaller sample of qualitative thematic findings. The psychedelic experiences inspired long-term transformation and persisting positive effects in all participants. However, the nature and challenges of the integration journey ranged from mild difficulties to more substantial ones. Interpersonal and cultural challenges such as communication challenges, absence of a supportive community and oppressive legislation were common. Further in-depth cross-cultural studies on the topic are necessary to confirm cultural differences.

Keywords: psychedelic, experience, transformation, integration, mixed methods, challenges, culture, persistent effects

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The use of psychedelics has been linked to personal transformation (Griffiths et al., 2006, 2018; Nicholas et al., 2018). As Lerner and Lyvers (2011) point out, psychedelic drugs such as lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) and psilocybin often attract claims of facilitating transformative experiences, frequently portrayed as mystical. Transformation involves a change in one's life and/or worldview that can happen either suddenly or gradually over time and can affect one's attitude, behavior, and beliefs (Anderson & Braud, 2011).

The mystical quality of the experience and its intensity are seen as potential key mediators of longer-term positive shifts in mental health (Roseman et al., 2018). Furthermore, evidence produced by Johnson et al. (2019) suggests that non-medical naturalistic (non-laboratory) use of psychedelics is linked with beneficial mental health and interpersonal outcomes. Clinical research by Nicholas et al. (2018) showed that psilocybin elicits beneficial subjective shifts in perception, mood and psychological states and that these changes are dose-dependent.

Recent research by Griffiths et al. (2018) shows that besides a high dose of psilocybin, the integration practices after the experience are the key determinants of persisting positive effects. As Tadmor (2020) describes, the integration process refers to integrating insights, emotions, visions, ways of thinking and states from the experience into daily life, all within the backdrop of becoming a whole human being, a process that rarely occurs without psychological and social resistance as well as obstacles and challenges (Schlitz et al., 2007). Tadmor's (2020) study provides an informative qualitative depiction of the meta-integration process and is retrospective in nature. It observes that very little research has been done on the integration process of psychedelic experiences, limited only to a couple of studies done in ayahuasca retreat centers. Quevedo's (2009) field study argues that participants looking for insight and healing during and before the ceremonies had more luck in integrating their experience than those who went to satisfy more recreational impulses. Similar results were obtained by Cohen (2017).

Nayak (2020) stresses that psychedelic research faces an issue of diversity, as it is mostly undertaken in developed countries from Western Europe and the US. He also argues that besides set and setting, cultural context can prove to be important, especially in the integration process. Popovici and Simion (2017) note the lack of research on psychedelics and the Romanian population, and observed that Romanians seeking spiritual experiences with the help of psychedelics are facing significant mental health risks. However, their investigation simply relies on the cases of psychedelic users that ended up in treatment, which may not be representative.

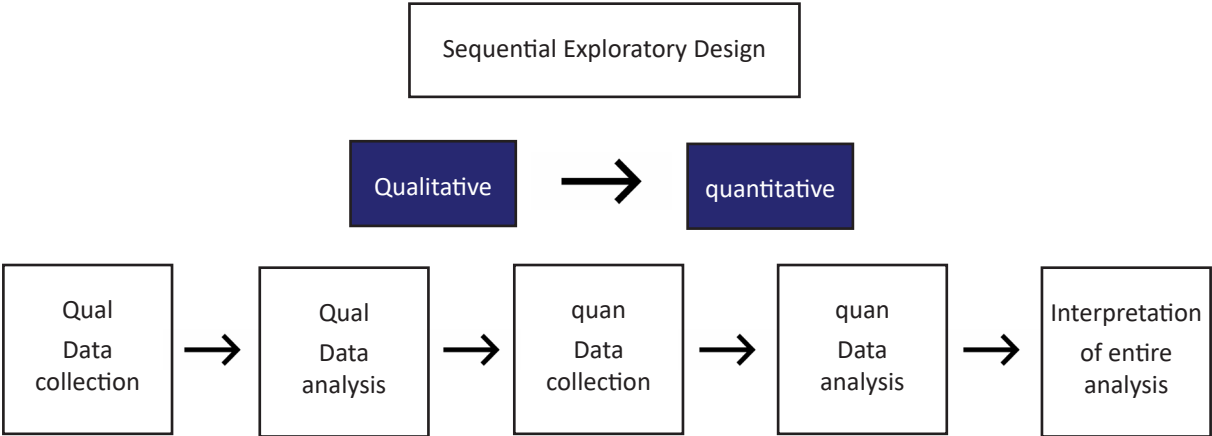
Present research aimed to look specifically at a culture that is different to the Western Anglo-Saxon one mostly researched to date, and to provide a deeper inquiry into psychedelic use in Romania, a country where psychedelics (such as LSD) and heroin are legally on the same schedule. It also attempted to address the exploration of the transformational effects of psychedelic use in more recreational set and settings, as

opposed to university laboratory conditions or the traditional shamanic settings used in ayahuasca ceremonies (Griffiths et. al., 2006; Quevedo, 2009). Furthermore, this research enquired into the challenges to the integration process such as spiritual bypassing, mental health imbalances, and difficulty relating to others. It was considered necessary to gain further insights into these areas of limited research and add to Tadmor’s (2020) research, especially looking into the experiences of non-mental health professionals, as his study focused exclusively on therapists or counsellors undergoing psychedelic experiences. A key aspect of the present research was looking at how participants viewed these transformations and challenges themselves, something that is difficult to address with quantitative surveys.

Method

This study used a mixed methods approach, namely a sequential exploratory design where the qualitative data collection and data analysis is followed by a quantitative data collection and data analysis, and then the interpretation of the analysis is made (Johnson & Onwuebuozie, 2004). Figure 1 outlines the process.

Figure 1
Study Design



Note: Qualitative is capitalised as this part was more emphasised.

The qualitative part of this study used phenomenology as an approach using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as its primary tool of data collection and analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with purposefully sampled participants who met the conditions described below. It aimed to explore and present how Romanian participants viewed transformations facilitated by psychedelics, their impact, and challenges encountered. The quantitative element of data collection was gathered through a survey which aimed to assess the generalizability of observed trends

from the qualitative part in the context of a wider sample of Romanian participants, and to enable a cross-cultural comparison with the data from Griffiths et al. (2006).

Sample

Purposive sampling was used for both qualitative and quantitative parts of the study, using the following participant inclusion criteria:

- A minimum of one transformative psychedelic experience with either psilocybin mushrooms or LSD;
- Not currently undergoing psychiatric treatment or are not diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder;
- In good overall mental health;
- Adults over the age of 18;
- Minimum of six months from the transformative experience has passed;
- Not trained psychotherapists, psychiatrists or counsellors;
- Romanian nationality and currently live in Romania;

Table 1 depicts the details of participants in the qualitative sample.

Table 1

Qualitative Sample Participant Depiction

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Occupation	Dosage for transformative experience	Number of psychedelic experiences to date
Alex	28	Male	Software, IT	200 mcg LSD	8+
Bogdan	23	Male	Student, NGO	400mcg LSD	5
Emilia	25	Female	Corporate, telecom	3g psilocybin mushrooms	3
Christina	28	Female	Resident, physician	5g psilocybin mushrooms	8+
Delia	27	Female	Software, IT	100mcg LSD	3
Roxana	26	Female	Corporate, operations	2.5g psilocybin mushrooms	8+

Two samples were analyzed in the quantitative part: the qualitative sample “QS” (N=6, as depicted in Table 1, who also completed the survey) and the national sample “NS” (N=39, from a larger pool of Romanian participants). A comparison of two samples is presented in Table 2.

Table 2*Comparison of Qualitative Sample (QS) and a Larger National Sample (NS)*

Sample	Age	Gender	Education Level	Psychedelics Used
QS (N=6)	Between 23-28 years with mean age 26	66.6% Female 33.3% Male	16.6% Bachelors degree 66.6% Master's degree 16.6% Doctoral degree	100% Psilocybin 100% LSD 100% MDMA 84% DMT
NS (N=39)	Between 22-43 years with mean age 31	51% Male 49% Female	22% Baccalaureate 34% Batchelor's degree 39% Master's degree 5% Doctoral degree	89.7% Psilocybin 84.6% LSD 79.5% MDMA 33.3% DMT

Note: LSD - lysergic acid diethylamide, MDMA – methylenedioxymethamphetamine, DMT – dimethyltryptamine

Materials

Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol included relevant questions in the following three main areas:

- Psychedelic experience (history and description)
- Overall impact and transformative effects
- Integration challenges

The quantitative survey was distributed online via social media, internet groups, and email to potential participants. It included the Persistent Effects Questionnaire (PEQ) (Griffiths et al., 2006), three questions on demographics and seven further questions informed by the qualitative analysis and relating to integration challenges such as mental health. The PEQ consists of 60 questions in a multiple-choice format scored from 0 (none) to 5 (extreme) and measures aspects of transformation such as changes in attitudes, moods, behaviour and spiritual experience.

Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis was performed with the help of MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software, following instructions on IPA data analysis provided by Smith and Osborn (2008). After an initial read, each transcript was read again. The text was coded and then the codes were refined and cross-checked with the literature and the researcher's own experience. Themes and subordinate themes were derived from the codes as per Smith and Osborn (2008). After coding and sorting all transcripts into main meaning units (codes and subordinate-themes), another pass at the data was attempted in which codes were condensed even further into themes and superordinate themes, thus completing the process (Moustakas, 1994), before making a final check with the raw data from the interviews.

Quantitative data analysis was performed with the PSPP software package. Data normality checks were made to determine if data was parametric, with the help of skewness and kurtosis tests, and if statistical comparisons could be performed using Student's t tests. The resulting independent sample t-tests were performed on the data obtained from the PEQ and on some of the extra items derived from the qualitative data analysis with chi-squared tests being performed on the remaining extra items that were yes/no in nature. Given the possibility of Type 1 errors due to multiple comparisons, a Bonferroni method correction was performed. Some results from the t-test were not deemed statistically significant, whilst all other results were unaffected by the new rejection of null hypothesis with a p-value of 0.00455.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) Research Ethics Panel. Since this research examined an activity that is still illegal in many jurisdictions, including Romania, the anonymity of participants was one of the key concerns together with their wellbeing, as some might fear potential legal repercussions of being identified with psychedelic substance use. Participants were given the option to sign the consent form with a pseudonym and were allowed to have the webcam off or use face-hiding filters during interviews. They could also withdraw their participation at any point, and were advised of harm reduction practices and providers.

Results

Qualitative Results

The data analysis process resulted in three main categories of analysis that portray the transformative effects and integration challenges of psychedelic experiences as experienced by participants and interpreted by the researcher. These categories are (a) superordinate themes that branch out into (b) themes and (c) subordinate themes. Their role is to give a clearer chronological dimension to the findings. The insights and realizations that facilitate transformations are effects that occur during the experience and immediately afterwards. The actual transformations happen in the days and weeks following the experience, whereas the integration challenges start at the same time as the actual transformations, but continue after the occurrence of these transformations. The themes that branch out of the superordinate themes are common to all transcripts and portray the essence of the lived experience of the participants, whilst then subordinate themes branching out from the themes occurred in most but not all transcripts. Figure 2 presents the full hierarchical superordinate theme, theme and subordinate theme model. Some themes and subordinate themes have been omitted from this results section due to word limits.

Figure 2

Overview of Qualitative Results: Full Hierarchical Depiction of Superordinate Themes, Themes, and Subordinate Themes

I. Insights & realisations facilitating transformation	II. Actual transformations	III. Integration challenges/ process
1. Changes in self-perception and understanding of self 1.1. Personal empowerment, courage / confidence 1.2. Realizations around death and hardship 1.3. Experiential learning 1.4. Ontological realizations	2. Emotional transformation 2.1. Increased emotional awareness and expression 2.2. Increased compassion and empathy 3. Spiritual transformation 3.1. Opening up to spirituality 3.2. Taking up spiritual practices 4. Transformation in interpersonal realm 4.1. Deeper and more meaningful interactions 4.2. Less judgement, more compassion 5. Embodied transformation 5.1. Increased care for the body 5.2. Increased acceptance and enjoyment of one's body	6. Personal integration 6.1. Further integration practice needs 6.2. Dehabituation and new habit development 6.3. Balance between inner and outer work 7. Interpersonal integration challenges 7.1. Communication challenges 7.2. Struggle for acceptance/ absence of a community 7.3. Difficulties in coming back to work 8. Culture and legal context 8.1. Need for correct information on psychedelics 8.2. Oppressive legislation and legal risks

Note: **Bold** – superordinate themes, *italicized* – themes, normal text – subordinate themes

Superordinate Theme I: Insights and Realizations Facilitating Transformation

The first superordinate theme encompasses the changes, shifts, insights and realizations that were made by the individual during the psychedelic experience that have helped them put the actual transformation process in motion. Theoretically it also serves as a qualitative overview of the mechanisms of change facilitated by the psychedelic experience.

Theme 1: Changes in self-perception and understanding of self.

This theme portrays the changes in how participants viewed themselves and understood themselves and the world around them as a result of their psychedelic experience. The theme has four subordinate-themes: personal empowerment, realizations around death and hardship, ontological realizations and experiential learning.

Subordinate theme 1.1: Personal empowerment.

This subordinate theme is of significant importance as all participants described how their experience at least partly increased their sense of personal empowerment, courage and self-confidence. For example, Alex described: “LSD...that helped me sort of reconnect in a way to the possibility of envisioning and driving my own future and my own life”.

Subordinate theme 1.2: Realizations around death and hardship.

Perhaps one of the realizations that had the most dramatic and sudden impact on participants came during the moments of the experience that faced them with death, disease or hardship. These realizations also had profoundly empowering qualities to them, and were seen in half of the transcripts. As Alex states: “It gave me access, let’s say, close enough to living the experience of dying and to understand the illusionary of the finitude of death”.

Superordinate Theme II: Actual Transformations

This superordinate theme presents actual transformations that occurred for the participants after the experience, not only relating to new insights and realizations, but also to stronger and deeper aspects. In many of the cases, these involved significant changes in behaviors and life circumstances. This superordinate theme and its themes most closely provide a depiction of the transformative effects of psychedelic experiences as discussed in the introduction.

Theme 2: Spiritual transformation.

The second theme, spiritual transformation, was encountered in all transcripts and which came as a surprise to some participants.

Subordinate theme 2.1: Opening up to spirituality.

Most of the participants were closed to spirituality before the experience, or at least agnostic, and one the strongest findings in terms of proportion of coded segments was their opening up to or reconnecting to spirituality, to the sacred, or to something greater than oneself. This is well exemplified by Roxana: “I actually connected... for the first time, to a form of spirituality”, and Bogdan, who shared: “I think I see the world more sacred in a way right now”.

Subordinate theme 2.2: Taking up spiritual practices.

An observation of significant importance in the context of actual transformations is that all but one of the participants took up spiritual practices, changing their attitudes or perspectives and changing their behavior and steering it towards spiritual practices. Some, like Delia, were inspired to try out various practices from different traditions: “And I felt like I could, I don’t know, take something from one religion and then from another one and do my own practice, like a do-it-yourself practice”. Others, like Emilia, discovered meditation: “Then I actually started being able to meditate, you know sit down and feel the connection.” This was something they did not enjoy previously and could not really practice.

Theme 3: Emotional transformation.

This theme is composed of two subordinate themes, increased emotional awareness and expression; and increased compassion and empathy. Five out of six of the participants felt that as a result of their psychedelic experience, they underwent change at an

emotional level that was largely positive in nature and that manifested itself through changes in attitudes, awareness and behavior, in some cases even opening the door and allowing participants to feel and reconnect with their emotions. As Roxana said: “I realized that I wanted to hold space... for the realness of my own suffering and my own emotions and of everyone else’s. So, I started to allow myself to feel”.

Subordinate theme 3.1: Increased emotional awareness and expression.

It is sometimes difficult to come to terms with one’s emotions, to be aware of them and to know how to handle them-. However, all but one of the participants were positively surprised by the increased emotional awareness and access that the experience brought to them, as Cristina best puts it:

The emotional level...this is my most difficult dimension to feel in a way, but with the help of psychedelics, I think I was in more in communion with what I felt...psychedelics made me open more towards wanting to see the emotions... what’s that emotion or where does it come from or how do I feel...

Theme 4: Transformation in interpersonal realm.

The fourth theme encompasses development in the interpersonal realm and presents the changes that the individual participants experience in relation to other people, both in terms of changes in actual behavior and changes in attitudes towards others.

Subordinate theme 4.1: Deeper and more meaningful interactions.

All participants reported that some of the insights and realizations they had during their experience led them to seek more authenticity and profundity in their relationships with friends, colleagues and other people in general. Cristina, for example, developed better listening skills that allowed her to have more real connections to others, “... and more caring about knowing them, listening to others deeply and establishing real connections... I think I became better at listening to people”.

Theme 5: Embodied transformation.

This theme illustrates the embodied transformation brought about by the experience and is composed of two subordinate themes: increased care for the body, and increased acceptance and enjoyment of one’s body. Embodied refers to transformations that occurred at the level of the participants’ bodies, from a healthier diet and more dedication towards exercise, to changes in body image perception, as portrayed below.

Subordinate theme 5.1: Increased care for the body.

This sub-theme was present in two-thirds of transcripts and refers to a variety of ways in which participants started to gradually take more care of their body after their psychedelic experience. This is succinctly expressed by Roxana: “I started taking much better care of myself, my body, regarding eating, sports...”

Superordinate Theme III: Integration Challenges/Process

The last superordinate theme portrays the overall difficulties in the integration journey and process.

Theme 6: Personal integration issues.

Theme 6 portrays personal integration issues and has three subordinate themes, namely the need for further integration practice, new habit development, and balance between inner and outer work. This theme tries to cover the issues that participants faced in their personal integration process, and appeared in all transcripts.

Subordinate theme 6.1: Further integration practice needs.

In order to integrate their powerful insights and experiences, integration practices and continual personal development work was necessary. The most frequent integration issue noted by participants was their need for continued practice, and that the integration process was far from being over, as Cristina realized: “So I realized and this is part of the integration process... yeah that I think it has it has many stages and probably we will have other in the future that it’s not finished yet”.

Theme 7: Interpersonal integration challenges.

The integration process can bring about challenges not only at a personal level, but at an interpersonal one as well. This theme is composed of three subordinate themes, namely communication challenges, struggle for acceptance/absence of a supportive community, and difficulties in day-to-day life (job).

Subordinate theme 7.1: Communication challenges.

Communication challenges comprising of either difficult or uncomfortable discussions around psychedelics, newly held beliefs, or not being able to express oneself honestly were seen in all participants, each within their own personal circumstances. For some it was an inability to communicate the truth behind their experience and a dismissal from others of what they experienced, such as the case of Alex: “When it comes to communicating with others, it was hilarious because everybody was, you just had a nice trip and that’s it and you’re making it bigger than what it is...”

Theme 8: Culture and legal context

The final theme presented in this article looks at culture and the legal context as part of the integration process and its challenges. Whilst this theme affects both personal and interpersonal integration, participants expressed concerns that are relevant to the entire Romanian population, surrounding the lack of correct information on psychedelics in public discussions, and the oppressive legislation and legal risks that psychedelic users are exposed to.

Subordinate theme 8.1: Need for correct information on psychedelics

The Romanian culture does not seem to be a friendly space for psychedelic users and

this is partly due to lack of correct information on psychedelics and popular myths about drug use, such as some people equating a mushroom experience with heroin use. Common across all transcripts, participants like Delia noted an unfortunate yet common misconception that abides in the Romanian culture: “People in Romania largely think that drugs are only for junkies...and this is how drug users are seen...” Participants expressed their frustration with this, as they themselves either have to go through communication challenges or difficult conversations, or simply face the stigma caused by the lack of correct information on psychedelics. As Roxana puts it: “With so little information for the population to actually know what these substances are, how they are used...I think making them illegal does not solve anything, so yes I think this is a problem...”

Quantitative Results

Comparative results on quantitative measures between the smaller qualitative sample (QS) and the larger national sample (NS), as well as a comparison with Griffiths et al. (2006) are provided in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3

Comparison of PEQ Scores

PEQ Category	QS (N=6)	NS (N=39)	GS (Griffiths et al., 2006) (N=30)	t-test (QS vs. NS)	t-test (NS vs. GS)
1. Positive attitudes about life and/or self and/or self	75.9%	75.1%	55%	0.09	3.58*
2. Negative attitudes about life and/or self	8.0%	6.4%	0.5%	0.45	3.45*
3. Positive mood changes	48.0%	50.5%	39.2%	-0.28	3.57*
4. Negative mood changes	12.0%	7.0%	1.5%	1.09	2.57
5. Altruistic/positive social effects	59.6%	61.3%	46.6%	-0.19	3.67*
6. Antisocial/negative social effects	11.1%	7.8%	0.7%	0.75	3.49*
7. Positive behavior changes	86.7%	75.9%	60%	1.35	2.94*
8. Negative behavior changes	6.7%	7.2%	0%	-0.08	2.25
9. How personally meaningful was the experience?	6.5	6.1	6.5	0.128	1.35
10. How spiritually significant was the experience?	4.8	4.8	4.8	0.2	0.07
11. Did the experience change your sense of wellbeing or life satisfaction?	+2.2	+2.3	+2.0	-0.26	1.03

Note: PEQ – Persistent Effects Questionnaire, QS – qualitative sample, NS – national sample, GS – Griffiths et al. (2006) sample. For PEQ, data on attitude, mood, social, and behavior changes are expressed as a mean percentage of maximum possible score, and data for the last three questions are mean scores from the participants ratings, for item 9 on a scale from 1 to 8; for item 10 on a scale from 1 to 6 and for item 11 on a scale from -3 to +3. *Represents a result that is statistically significant, with a p-value <0.00455; after applying Bonferroni correction for type 1 errors, p-value for rejecting null hypothesis 0.00455

Table 4

Comparison of Additional Survey Items between the Two Study Samples

Additional survey questions that arose out of qualitative analysis	QS (N=6)	NS (N=39)	Statistical test (t-test/ Chi-square)
1. Did you experience any mental health issues from one week after the experience to the present day?	40% (Yes)	10.8%	X ² =8.72*
2. How difficult was it for you to integrate your psychedelic experience into your daily life?	7.0	4.0	t=2.75*
3. Did you tell your immediate family about your psychedelic experience?	33.3% (Yes)	48.7% (Yes)	X ² =1.65
4. Did your experience affect in a negative way your communication with others, especially those that did not have a psychedelic experience?	43.3% (Yes)	10.8%	X ² =9.87*
5. Is there a need for more accurate and abundant quality of information on psychedelics?	100% (Yes)	100% (Yes)	X ² =1.88
6. Do you think the current legislation around psychedelics is oppressive?	100% (Yes)	97.5% (Yes)	X ² =1.34
7. Were you afraid of the legal consequences of your experience?	66.7% (Yes)	62.5% (Yes)	X ² =1.55
8. How afraid were you of the potential legal consequences of having your psychedelic experience?	33.3%	23.6%	t=0.62

Note: QS – qualitative sample, NS – national sample. For item 8 data is expressed as percentage of maximum possible score; data for items 1,3,4 and 5-7 are expressed as a proportion of ‘Yes’ answers, whilst data for item 2 are raw scores on a scale from 1 to 10. Three further questions and their results not reported due to lack of further relevance. *Represents a result that is statistically significant, with a p-value <0.05.

In the case of the QS and NS comparison it can be observed that for most of the items the difference is not statistically significant (implying similar groups with potential for generalization,) whereas for most items in the NS and Griffiths et al. (2006) sample comparison, the difference is statistically significant (implying sufficient difference amongst the groups). Overall score on the PEQ is similar across QS and NS and much higher than in the Griffiths et al. (2006) sample.

Discussion

The key findings of the present research are that changes in self-perception and understanding of self as a result of the psychedelic experience seem to be the triggers for the actual transformations in the lives of the participants. These can be seen as persisting positive changes in attitude and behavior that span a wide range from embodied, emotional, and spiritual to interpersonal transformations. Although participants used different dosages of LSD and/or psilocybin, and their set and setting differed across cases, a significant proportion of these positive long-term effects was observed in all cases. Challenges to the integration process were observed on personal, interpersonal and cultural levels.

Statistical analysis on the smaller qualitative sample compared with the national survey sample point out that there are no statistically significant differences across the two groups in terms of their PEQ results. This provides some evidence for a claim that the qualitative results, particularly on the transformative effects, are generalizable to a broader national sample.

Persisting positive effects across an integral spectrum with potential difficulties in the integration process

The quantitative results (especially overall PEQ scores) from this study seem to confirm the findings of Nicholas et al. (2018), Griffiths et al. (2006), and Tadmor (2020) regarding actual long-term transformations in the lives of the participants. Specifically, they confirm that people who took psychedelics did indeed experience largely positive and persistent transformations. The themes that resulted around transformative effects reflected an integral spectrum of transformation (Wilber, 2017).

While both Griffiths et al. (2006) and Tadmor (2020) provide evidence for similar positive transformations in their participants, this study brings added nuances and detail around those transformations as presented in the subordinate themes found in the results section (Figure 2). For example, Griffiths et al. (2006) lists positive behavioral changes as one of the effects. This study confirmed the positive behavioral changes as seen in the survey results (Table 4), yet provided more detail and nuance around these positive changes in behavior as seen in subordinate theme 5.1, *increased care for the body*, to mention just one example.

The qualitative data from the interviews were supported mainly by the quantitative findings of the PEQ, as seen in Table 4, and the percentage scores on the positive transformations were higher in both the QS and NS compared to Griffiths et al. (2006) results. Interestingly, the negative items on the PEQ were also higher in both QS and NS compared to the sample in Griffiths et al. This could be partially explained by the differences in set and setting. The lower negative results in the Griffiths et al. sample could be due to professional support and guidance during sessions. At the same time, the QS and NS sample had more psychedelically mature participants, compared to the lack of psychedelic experience of participants in the Griffiths et al. study, and this could partially explain the difference in positive scores. Quantitative results

from the PEQ across both groups point out a high degree of similarity in positive attitudes, mood changes, social effects, and behavioral changes with mainly slight differences in scores.

It is worth stating that besides the transformative effects experienced, most participants in the QS reported some or significant integration challenges, something recreational psychedelic users should keep in mind.

Importance of looking at different cultures

This research further confirms Nayak's (2020) call for more psychedelic studies that focus on different cultures than primarily developed Western cultures (with mostly white psychology students as research participants). Half of the participants from the interviews had contact with both the Romanian culture and either the UK or German culture, and all of them found themes around lack of correct information on psychedelics and oppressive legislation to be much more present in Romania. More so, while they could find the support of communities that either tolerated or supported psychedelics abroad, they had a tough time doing this when they returned home. Psychedelic research within supportive communities as done by Davis et al. (2019) has shown that a supportive environment, preparation of dose and subsequent integration of the experience tend to produce more sustained positive effects with fewer challenges. Such an environment is not available in Romania.

The quantitative data comparing the PEQ results across the NS and the US sample from Griffiths et al. (2006) points out that the two samples are different to a statistically significant degree, further strengthening the call for more culture-specific and cross-cultural psychedelics studies and validating the rationale for this present study. As Lerner and Lyvers' (2011) study showed, there seem to be no cross-cultural differences in the values associated with psychedelic use; however, different cultural circumstances can affect the integration process in significant ways.

Limitations of the study and future research

Due to stringent word limitations, this article might suffer from possible underreported sections where more focus would have been due. A small sample size coupled with a potentially biased qualitative sample (as friends of friends were selected) could add to the limitations. Furthermore, the exclusion of participants under psychiatric treatment or in poor mental health, made in an effort to maintain ethical standards, could account for a potential positive results bias. For future research, there would be a need to explore to what extent psychedelic experiences have been factors in the overall psychological and emotional decline and unfavorable effects of participants.

The samples used in this study are too different in terms of set and setting to the Griffiths et al. (2006) to be able to directly compare PEQ results. This difference points to how variance in set and setting can affect these results, especially professional support in the sessions and experience with the use of psychedelics. The comparison across the NS and Griffiths (2006) sample cannot simply confirm or disconfirm significant cultural differences. A more

detailed quantitative study would be needed, with potential future research employing a cross-cultural mixed-method study, for example, comparing the UK or US population with the Romanian one.

Conclusion

There is only a small body of research on the long-term transformative effects of psychedelic experiences, and very few among them are mixed-method in nature. Of these, none focus on the integration challenges of such experiences, hence this study provided a small, but hopefully significant insight. The psychedelic experience, especially relating to its long-term transformative effects and integration challenges, has not been studied within Romania. This study showed that persisting positive effects occur in non-clinical, recreational psychedelic use in Romania, which is aligned with results seen in the recent literature. These effects were mainly triggered by changes in self-perception and understanding of self. These benefits also came with personal, interpersonal and cultural integration challenges. Set and setting might account for most of the differences in both positive effects and negative effects between the Romanian samples and the Griffiths et al. (2006) sample. Lack of supportive communities and proper integration culture as well as participant mindset in the form of expectation and intention from the experience are key.

The psychedelic experience might well be a possible seed of transformation, however, the integration of the experience into daily life is the nourishing soil needed for enduring transformation and development. Hence, this study concludes with a strong recommendation on past, present and future psychedelic users to strongly consider methods and tools to improve their integration process and put a greater emphasis on it.

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Victor co-founded Quantum Civilization, an NGO dedicated to promote integral development and bridge the gap between the science and spirituality and is a certified Tantra Yoga teacher. He enjoys spending time in the mountains and doing cold baths.



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