



## Naturalistic psychedelic experiences and gender-based self-acceptance in transgender and gender-expansive people

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### Abstract

**Background:** While psychedelic medicines have increasingly been studied for their utility as an adjunct to psychotherapy, transgender and gender-expansive (TGE) individuals have rarely been the focus of psychedelic research. This study examines TGE people's naturalistic, non-clinical psychedelic experiences to explore how TGE people use psychedelics and how they describe relationships between psychedelic use and their gender journey.

**Methods:** Informed by Black feminist epistemological methodology, we conducted a qualitative analysis of 20 in-depth, hour-long, semi-structured Zoom interviews of TGE individuals who

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Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

previously responded to a quantitative survey about their psychedelic experiences. The interviews explored participant narratives about their naturalistic psychedelic use and how it may have informed their gender journey.

**Results:** We found three main themes. First, participants described how their mindset and the setting of their psychedelic experience influenced the quality of that experience. Second, many participants reported that naturalistic psychedelic experiences facilitated increased self-acceptance of their gender identity via increased self-compassion and an expanded concept of gender. Third, some participants described various experiences related to their mental health during and after naturalistic psychedelic use, including challenging experiences such as gender dysphoria and mental health benefits such as gender euphoria.

**Discussion:** These observations may help mental health clinicians better support TGE people who use psychedelics. Clinicians should consider encouraging the preparation of a gender-affirming setting and mindset before psychedelic use and supporting potential shifts in gender understanding and self-acceptance after psychedelic use. Tailored educational resources for TGE people who engage with psychedelic substances in naturalistic settings are needed.

### Keywords

Mental health; naturalistic psychedelic use; psychedelics; self-acceptance; transgender and gender expansive

## Introduction

Transgender and gender expansive (TGE) individuals include people who are transgender, non-binary, gender non-conforming, gender fluid, agender, Two-Spirit, third-gender (Keo-Meier & Ehrensaft, 2018; Meerwijk & Sevelius, 2017; Zhang et al., 2020). Many TGE people experience higher rates of depression, anxiety, and PTSD compared to the general population as a result of discrimination and marginalization (Bouman et al., 2017; Drabish & Theeke, 2022; Miller, 2020; Puckett et al., 2020; Tucker et al., 2019; Valentine & Shipherd, 2018). Some researchers are exploring alternative approaches to address these TGE mental health disparities, such as the intentional use of psychedelic substances in clinical settings (Carmel, 2022; Desrochers, 2024a; Stauffer et al., 2022).

Drawing on historical Indigenous psychedelic use (Ens, 2021; George et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2022), psychedelic-assisted therapy (PAT) is a Western format of psychedelic use that has been used to treat various mental health issues, such as depression and PTSD (Barber & Aaronson, 2022; Davis et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2021). PAT combines psychedelic drug dosing with psychotherapy, involving preparatory sessions, supervised substance use enhanced by auditory and visual stimuli, and post-experience integration with trained psychotherapists (Reiff et al., 2020). Psychedelics can also be used outside of the medical system in naturalistic settings (Glynos et al., 2023). Similar to PAT, naturalistic psychedelic use is associated with decreases in symptoms of depression (Nygart et al., 2022) and anxiety (Raison et al., 2022).

Psychedelics are relatively safe (Schlag et al., 2022), but difficult or challenging experiences still do occur. Difficult experiences are associated with a lack of preparation of one's

mindset, being in a disagreeable setting, and taking a dose that was too large (Simonsson et al., 2023). In general, a positive and intentional mindset and setting are thought to encourage a positive psychedelic experience (Borkel et al., 2024; Golden et al., 2022; Studerus et al., 2012); mindset refers to the psychological factors that someone brings with them into a psychedelic experience and setting refers to the physical environment, people present, and objects such as eye masks or mirrors. Even if a dosing experience is challenging, participants may still gain mental health benefits (Carhart-Harris et al., 2016), and mental health benefits from psychedelic experiences may take up to 2–4 weeks to manifest (Mans et al., 2021; Nayak et al., 2023; Nygart et al., 2022).

Recent studies have examined using psychedelics therapeutically within sexual and gender minority (SGM) populations (Bartlett et al., 2024; Desrochers, 2024b; Saade et al., 2024), a group that includes TGE peoples. Carlisle et al. (2023) suggested that psychedelics may be uniquely beneficial due to their ability to decrease self-focused attention and rumination, which can result in stress and negative mental health experiences. Hanshaw et al. (2024) use an adaptation of the relaxed beliefs under psychedelics (REBUS) model to suggest that psychedelics may be helpful due to their ability to shift perspective and relax maladaptive, strongly held beliefs associated with minority stress (e.g. internalized transphobia) (Carhart-Harris & Friston, 2019). This effect of increases in psychological flexibility may play a role in decreased symptoms of depression (Davis et al., 2020). Psychedelics may also allow for an increased sense of connection with others and increased self-acceptance (Watts et al., 2017). Naturalistic psychedelic use is also associated with lower levels of internalized shame in gay and lesbian individuals (Anderson et al., 2020; Cavnar, 2014; Healy et al., 2021; Mehtani et al., 2024).

Psychedelic substances may be particularly useful to TGE peoples with high levels of internalized transphobia from living in a cisnormative society (e.g. a society that purports that being cisgender is the only correct gender identity; Scandurra et al., 2018). TGE people can experience social, medical, and psychological gender-affirmation. Each of these forms of gender-affirmation is associated with improvements in mental health (Glynn et al., 2016), and conversely, gender-disaffirmation is associated with mental health issues and suicidal ideation (Lelutiu-Weinberger et al., 2020).

Psychological gender affirmation is a TGE person's internal sense of value in themselves as a TGE person (Sevelius et al., 2021). Psychological gender affirmation is different than transgender congruence, which instead focuses on whether a TGE person feels alignment between their internal sense of gender and their gender identity (Kozee et al., 2012). Psychedelics may aid in improving mental health outcomes by increasing psychological gender affirmation and decreasing internalized transphobia (Sevelius, 2019; Sevelius et al., 2021).

While recent studies have examined SGM psychedelic use, work focusing specifically on TGE peoples is lacking (Sevelius, 2019). In Desrochers' (2024a) work with SGM peoples in naturalistic settings, one TGE participant explained how ketamine helped relieve their gender dysphoria. Carmel (2022) spoke with a TGE person who had a similar experience and explained that while on dissociatives their gender didn't matter to them. In studies of

SGM people who use drugs, TGE participants reported decreased gender dysphoria and shame secondary to psychedelic substances (Pienaar et al., 2020a, 2020b); one participant explained how their psychedelic experiences allowed their relationship to their body to shift so that they could further enjoy their sexual experiences. Although not explicitly a psychedelic, some work has also investigated the ways in which cannabis has interacted with gender identity, gender euphoria, and gender expression (Barborini et al., 2024). Lancelotta et al. (under review) found that naturalistic psychedelic experiences positively influenced SGM individuals' attitudes toward their gender and sexual identities, reducing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and trauma while increasing self-acceptance and psychological flexibility. Stauffer et al. (2022) spoke with TGE participants about how PAT could be specifically adapted to TGE populations.

This study adds to the small amount of primary data about TGE naturalistic psychedelic experiences (Carmel, 2022; Desrochers, 2024a; Pienaar et al., 2020a, 2020b; Stauffer et al., 2022). Research questions from this qualitative study included: (1) In what ways might naturalistic psychedelic experiences help TGE peoples explore gender identity? (2) In what ways do naturalistic psychedelic experiences facilitate increased self-acceptance? (3) In what ways might naturalistic psychedelic experiences result in mental health benefits and gender euphoria?

## Methods

### Participants

The parent quantitative study was conducted by the Center for Psychedelic Drug Research and Education at The Ohio State University (Lancelotta et al., under review). Participants of the parent study ( $N = 346$ ) were recruited via advertisements on the Internet (e.g. [www.dancesafe.org](http://www.dancesafe.org), [www.bluelight.org](http://www.bluelight.org), etc.), social media (e.g. Facebook, Reddit, Discord, etc.), or email invitations (e.g. psychedelic mailing lists, etc.). The parent study recruited LGBTQIA+ adults (18+) who were fluent in English and had a memorable psychedelic experience 30 days ago or more between August and December of 2022. Out of the 346 participants in the original study, 169 participants identified with a gender other than cisgender. The present study recruited TGE participants ( $n = 20$ ) who participated in the parent quantitative study and agreed to future contact.

We used purposive sampling to select a sub-group of TGE participants that was diverse in the dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, and age. Participants who were (a) racial and/or ethnic minorities, (b) over age 50, and/or (c) identified as a transgender man, transgender woman, agender, bigender, or Two-Spirit, were prioritized during recruitment for this study. We chose to prioritize these groups given the historic underrepresentation of these individuals in psychedelic studies (Bouchet et al., 2024; George et al., 2019; Stauffer et al., 2022). Forty participants from the priority list were emailed multiple times before reaching out to others on the list. We invited potential participants to enroll via a Qualtrics link sent by email, which included the informed consent document, a demographic intake form, and a form to provide scheduling information. We first emailed invitations to 40 people who represented the dimensions of diversity described above and then another 40 people. We emailed 108 people before we finished recruitment. We completed twenty

primary interviews and five second interviews between August 2023 and March 2024, at which point we reached data saturation and stopped interviews.

## Procedure

Interviews were conducted via Zoom by two researchers who identify as TGE. Participants gave verbal consent after any questions were answered. Five main topics were discussed using a semi-structured interview guide. In this paper, we are focusing on conversations related to psychedelic use, participants' gender journey as it related to their psychedelic use, and their mental health related to their psychedelic use. Interviews lasted between 40–90 minutes, with an average interview time of 66 minutes. Participants were compensated for their time with a \$100 gift card for the primary interview, and \$50 for the second interview, if they participated. Each participant was invited to select their pseudonym for this paper's publication to maintain their confidentiality or have the research team choose their pseudonym. The Institutional Review Board at the Ohio State University approved this study.

## Epistemology

The design of this study was informed by a Black feminist epistemological methodology (BFEM), developed using Collins' (2000) Black Feminist Epistemology (James, 2021; Porter et al., 2023). This approach is critical for working with this population given the underrepresentation of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) (Ching et al., 2023; Rea & Wallace, 2021; Williams et al., 2021) as well as due to high level of transgender-specific medical mistrust (D'Avanzo et al., 2019). The aims of a BFEM are to (1) decolonize its research methods, (2) co-create knowledge with participants, and consider (3) power dynamics and (4) positionalities of the research team and participants.

1. To decolonize the research process, we centered the marginalized voices of TGE people and used an intersectional lens, with a focus on recruiting participants of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. During analysis we also considered how racism, sexism, transphobia, ageism, and ableism overlapped in unique ways that shaped participants' experiences with psychedelics. This approach allowed us to capture the nuanced realities of TGE people navigating systemic inequities. While our sample was predominantly white, our approach aimed to center antiracism and decoloniality to provide actionable insights that could support TGE psychedelic users. Publishing this research OpenAccess and redistributing findings to participants and nonacademic community members further aligns with decolonizing principles by prioritizing accessibility and community reciprocity.
2. In the tradition of BFEM, we engaged in collective dialogue (Collins, 2000; James, 2021) by inviting five participants to participate in second interviews. These participants reviewed initial codes and themes, contributing their expertise to refine the analysis. This process directly informed the final themes, ensuring they reflected the lived realities of participants rather than the biases of the research team. Participants were also given autonomy when asked to select their pseudonym for this paper's publication, which also reflects

BFEM's commitment to participant agency and valuation of participants' lived experience.

3. We attempted to address the power imbalance between researcher and participant by first acknowledging this dynamic and also expressing to our participants that we consider them experts. Participants' insights during the collective dialogue directly influenced how we framed and contextualized findings, ensuring that themes emerged from their lived experiences rather than being solely researcher-driven.
4. Our research team was composed of eight LGBTQ+ members; seven identify as TGE, six identify as non-Latinx white, one identifies as Latinx white, and one identifies as Black. The research team had a range of ages from the early twenties to forties, and research team members were at various training levels, from post-undergraduate to tenured faculty. Recognizing that our predominantly white research team could introduce biases, we intentionally engaged in critical reflection and dialogue. This included examining how our positionalities shaped the research process and actively seeking participant feedback to challenge our interpretations. Our team's diversity across gender, race, and educational backgrounds contributed multiple perspectives to the analysis.

This approach is novel for research with TGE peoples, as it integrates BFEM principles to center community voices, decolonize research practices, and produce findings that directly benefit marginalized populations.

## Analysis

Interview audio recordings were transcribed using Sonix.ai (Paulus, 2023); transcripts were then de-identified and uploaded to Dedoose for coding. Analysis was completed using the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The codebook was created deductively using the interview guide, with each of the three topics converted to parent codes, with child codes arising inductively once coding the interviews, making necessary adjustments iteratively throughout the coding process. Three research team members coded each transcript, the coders consulted with each other as needed, and each coded transcript was reviewed a second time for consistency. During the collective dialogue, initial codes and themes were presented to participants in a slide-show presentation during recorded Zoom calls, and participants were asked for feedback and additional comments. We used these conversations to guide our analytic process in an effort to center participant voices during each stage of the research process as informed by our BFEM. The research team revisited the data in Dedoose throughout the analysis and writing process to stay grounded in the data and clarify themes when necessary. Only the themes related to the current research questions related to psychedelics and gender, self-acceptance, and mental health benefits will be discussed in this paper. Filler words such as "um" or "like" have been removed from participant quotes for clarity.

## Results

Participant demographics are presented in Table 1. The sample had a mean age of 32 years, with an age range from 21 to 61 years old. Additionally, participants were asked during the interview which psychedelic substances they had engaged with; these results are illustrated in Table 2. We found three main themes, which are summarized in Table 3: (1) the importance of a gender-affirming psychedelic mindset and setting, (2) psychedelic-facilitated self-acceptance, and (3) psychedelic-related challenges and benefits to mental health.

### The importance of a gender-affirming mindset and setting

**Mindset:** Many participants discussed their mindset, which included their psychological state and intentions prior to their psychedelic experiences. For some participants, their mindset was formalized into a stated intention to explore their gender during a psychedelic experience. Jay (they/them), a 27-year-old Asian nonbinary and genderqueer person said, “I mean, obviously I went out into the wild and was like, I’m going to do mushrooms, and then think about my identity.” Jay further elaborated to explain how they have used psychedelics to help explore their gender identity over the course of various experiences.

Others entered psychedelic experiences without specific intentions and/or questions related to their gender journey. Zoey (she/they), a 21-year-old Latinx nonbinary person explained that they never “had the intention of really exploring a specific thing like gender identity.” However, Zoey also explained that they wished for assistance with learning how to use psychedelics to explore their gender identity.

**Setting:** Participants described using psychedelics in various settings such as in nature, in their home,, while at music festivals, while partying, alone, with friends, with family, or with a romantic partner. Some participants highlighted the importance of their setting by discussing negative or challenging experiences related to the setting where they used psychedelic substances. Participants explained that it was important to be with people that they trusted in an environment that felt comfortable to them. Overall, many participants explained how their gender journey influenced the setting and mindset that they chose for their psychedelic experiences, and sometimes, their setting and mindset influenced their gender journey. Some participants made clear choices about what they wanted to wear or where they wanted to be to feel gender-affirmed during their psychedelic journey. Other participants explained how a setting inclusive of other TGE peoples could feel gender-affirming.

For example, many participants described gender-affirming elements, such as pronouns and gender-affirming clothing, as important aspects of the settings in which they used psychedelics. Some participants discussed how dressing as their true selves allowed them to explore their relationship with gender while working with psychedelic substances. For example, Siobhan (she/her), a 29-year-old white transgender woman said, “I dressed femme, which I was doing kind of in private at the time ... It really allowed me to expand my understanding of femininity and what a woman is.” Siobhan further elaborated that her

choice of clothing while under the influence of psychedelics helped her feel alignment with her gender and a sense of gender euphoria.

Participants also discussed using mirrors during psychedelic experiences to explore their relationship with their gender. Bergamot (they/he), a 31-year-old white nonbinary person discussed their “mirror moments” where they looked in the mirror while using LSD and reflected on their body and their gender. They explained that they used these experiences to ask themselves questions about who they were and dive deeper into self-exploration with the assistance of psychedelics. Bergamot explained how looking in the mirror before undergoing gender-affirming top surgery brought on dysphoria and discomfort. They also explained that psychedelic experiences after the gender-affirming surgery involving mirrors were euphoric. For example, they said:

Just acknowledging so many of the past iterations of mirror moments and just recognizing how much can change in just a couple of years. And that was a really beautiful gender euphoric moment for me. And it was also the first trip after my top surgery. And so I was doing it while my hair was going to my chest, but it was a different chest ... my heart just always fills up when I think about it.

### **Psychedelic-facilitated self-acceptance**

Many participants reported that using psychedelics helped them come to understand their true selves as it relates to their gender and gain a better sense of contentment with who they are as it relates to their gender. All participants mentioned a psychedelic-facilitated increased sense of self-acceptance related to their gender identity.

Some participants reported that psychedelics helped them make peace with who they are deep down and allowed for a mind space to work through questions related to their gender. Psychedelics did not change participants' gender identities but rather allowed participants to consider their identities with additional complexity, an insight that they described as facilitated by their psychedelic experiences. Sashi (they/them), a 24-year-old Asian nonbinary and agender person illustrated this by saying, “I think I knew that I was some kind of nonbinary before I ever even touched any mind-altering substance. But I think because psychedelics have empowered me to accept my wholeness, my gender is a part of that.” In this quote, Sashi explains that they felt increased self-acceptance overall, and this also included acceptance of their internal gender identity. Participants described psychedelic-facilitated increases in self-acceptance in a myriad of ways; however, two sub-themes emerged that illustrate the pathways to self-acceptance as described by our participants: self-compassion and expanded concepts of gender.

**Self-compassion:** Many participants explained that their experience of psychedelic-facilitated self-acceptance was related to an increased sense of compassion for themselves. Some psychedelics have been shown to increase empathy (Hysek et al., 2014), and some participants explained how increased empathy positively influenced their gender journey. Some participants reported that this increased self-love made it easier to exist as a TGE person in a transphobic world and accept who they are. Katie (she/her), a 43-year-old white bigender person explained: “I would just say that it has helped me be more self-accepting

and more loving and caring towards myself ... And psychedelics have certainly helped me ... not beat myself up or put myself down for being different.”

Participants explained that in their everyday lives, increased self-rejection and decreased self-compassion often led to rumination and feeling stuck. Some participants described how psychedelics helped them decrease this self-rejection. Kendall (they/he), a 32-year-old white nonbinary and genderqueer person said, “[Psychedelics] have generally been helpful in alleviating some of the self-loathing that can come with depression ... like beating yourself up about things that you feel are your fault when really, it’s not.”

Self-compassion was also illustrated by participants who described feeling a greater sense of belonging in the world and feeling at home in society. Increased belonging was described by participants as an inner contentment with them-self inside of society. Jay (they/them), a 27-year-old Asian nonbinary and genderqueer person said, “When I do psychedelics ... I feel so safe in my identity that it makes it easier to ignore the rest of the world and to be like, ‘I’m content with this, I’m happy with who I am.’” Illustrated in this quote is the increased self-kindness and acceptance that many participants described as secondary to their psychedelic experiences.

**Expanded concepts of gender:** Some participants also discussed that psychedelic-facilitated self-acceptance was due to an expanded concept of gender. Some found that psychedelic experiences gave them an opportunity to reflect on the socially constructed nature of gender and move beyond rigid ideas of gender. Participants discussed how the gender binary, or even the scripts about how various genders should perform in society, felt less important following psychedelic experiences. After psychedelic experiences, some felt an expansion beyond the rigid gender concepts within our society that they had internalized. This expansion beyond rigid ideas allowed some participants to more fully accept who they are and feel reassured in their truth. Aspen (he/him/they/them), a 32-year-old Latinx and Native American/Alaska Native transgender man stated:

[Psychedelics] kind of provided an abundance of compassion for seeing myself as more than a gender... When I transitioned, I was so hyper-fixated on my gender that I really need[ed] to remember that I was a human before a trans man.

In this quote, Aspen describes psychedelic-facilitated internal validation. He explains here that while his gender matters to him, psychedelics have facilitated a shifted view to see himself as more than his gender. These expanded concepts of gender allowed for increased self-acceptance.

While some participants discussed increased internal validation, others also explained that psychedelic experiences facilitated a decreased need for external validation. For most people, external validation is an integral part of experiencing gender due to the relational nature of gender (Bouman et al., 2017; Puckett et al., 2020). However, some participants, such as Aspen above, explained that after psychedelic experiences, they felt less of a need to perform a culturally defined gender role to elicit validation from others and instead could focus on being and expressing who they truly are. The decreased need for external validation is closely related to the expanded concept of gender. For some, an expanded

concept of gender allowed them to move beyond societal expectations of the gender binary and different gender roles. For others, a decreased need for external validation allowed them to feel less negative emotion if they deviated from gender roles. Some participants explained that psychedelic experiences helped them feel less dependent on the approval of others. For example, Sashi (they/them), a 24-year-old Asian nonbinary and agender person said:

I think before, I did care quite a bit. And I think the more I take psychedelics and the more I give myself fuller and fuller permission to be more and more wholly myself, the less I care about how other people will perceive me and the more I care about what ... I think about myself.

Overall, participants described experiencing a shifted understanding of gender that allowed for increased self-acceptance and a decreased need for external validation.

### **Psychedelic-related challenges and benefits to mental health**

Many participants discussed how their psychedelic experiences felt very important to them, and having time to later reflect on them helped them realize mental health benefits and feelings of gender euphoria and congruence. In addition to benefits, some participants also experienced difficult psychedelic experiences. However, some also explained that although some experiences were difficult, these same experiences were later beneficial after integration. Many participants explained that their psychedelic experiences had both positive and challenging elements, but overall, they were grateful for their naturalistic psychedelic use.

**Challenging psychedelic experiences:** While many experiences that participants described were overwhelmingly positive, some participants also discussed difficult or challenging experiences they had with psychedelic substances. As a note, we are using the phrase “challenging experiences” to describe what some may consider negative experiences or “bad trips.” This choice is a reflection of the participants’ language as illustrated by Siobhan (she/her), a 29-year-old white transgender woman, who said, “I don’t like to describe them as like bad trips because I don’t think there’s such thing as a bad trip. I think they’re all challenging, and they all teach you something.” For some, a difficult experience was described as negative feelings like anxiety or feeling overwhelmed or trapped within a psychedelic experience. Some of these participants explained that they felt that they were fighting the experience rather than allowing themselves to just experience it, which resulted in anxiety and feeling overwhelmed. For others, a difficult experience was due to an unsupportive setting. Still, others explained that negative experiences were due to improper dosing or from engaging with psychedelics in what some described as too frequent to allow for proper recovery and integration between experiences.

Some difficult experiences were due to gender dysphoria that was experienced or intensified during or after psychedelic experiences. Siobhan (she/her), a 29-year-old white transgender woman described her experience as follows:

I think in some of the early challenging trips I had before I had come out to myself ... that feeling of dysphoria came to the forefront a lot ... I think it pushed me closer and closer to confronting those questions on a conscious level, which

eventually got me into therapy, which eventually got me to a place where I could come out [and] start my journey.

As illustrated, sometimes difficult psychedelic experiences highlighted areas of incongruence between gender identity and gender expression, which for some, led to an increased desire and agency to make changes (e.g. starting hormone therapy or planning for a gender-affirming medical procedure) that ultimately led to decreased gender dysphoria and increased gender euphoria. This sentiment is captured when some participants explained how benefits often followed challenging experiences but sometimes took time to manifest. Darren (any pronouns), a 33-year-old white agender person described this in the following quote:

I went through a period of destabilization where the feelings being brought to the surface were intense anxiety. And it felt worse before it got better. But ... for maybe the past three quarters of the year, I've felt better than when I started. I've gotten to that point now. I feel much calmer about many things, and I feel more functional.

Even though difficult experiences occurred for many participants, sometimes these experiences yielded benefits later. Additionally, many participants who reported challenging experiences also reported other psychedelic experiences that were positive and beneficial. Participants also discussed that sometimes part of the experience was difficult, while a different part of the experience was easier or more beneficial.

**Mental health benefits:** All participants self-reported some benefit to their mental health following at least one of their psychedelic experiences. Participants discussed relief from depression, anxiety, PTSD, impacts of racial and/or gender-based trauma, grief, suicidality, and chronic pain, which they described as facilitated by their psychedelic use. One of the most common mental health benefits participants described was relief from depression. Aspen (he/him/they/them), a 32-year-old Latinx and Native American/Alaska Native transgender man said, "I have received a lot of alleviation, specifically from mushrooms, with depression." Relief from symptoms of various mental health conditions often co-occurred. For example, many participants described relief from symptoms of anxiety and depression together.

Some participants also discussed psychedelic-facilitated mental health benefits specifically related to gender euphoria. Gender euphoria is the term our participants used to describe feeling aligned with their gender as well as feeling joy derived from living authentically as themselves (Austin et al., 2022). This definition of gender euphoria can also be understood in the literature as gender congruence (van den Brink et al., 2020). However, we use the term gender euphoria in this paper to reflect our participants' language. Vince Slater (they/he), a 21-year-old white nonbi-nary, gender nonconforming, and genderqueer transgender man explained how feeling gender euphoria during and after a psychedelic experience helped him have the courage to medically transition. He explains this process as follows: "I started dabbling in, 'I think I want to like, medically transition' ... the euphoria that I felt on LSD was like, I want to replicate that in a way that's not just like doing drugs all the time." This

experience illustrates how, for some, psychedelic experiences allowed them a chance to feel gender euphoria, which they were able to later replicate in other areas of their lives.

Other participants also discussed gender dysphoria. For some, gender dysphoria diminished following psychedelic experiences. Hayden (he/him), a 46-year-old white gender-fluid transgender man explains, “Probably when I started using psychedelics, it kind of coincided with like [a] complete loss of all gender dysphoria that I might have had.” This sense of decreased gender dysphoria and sense of gender euphoria often interacted with mental health conditions, such as depression and suicidality. Jay (they/them), a 27-year-old Asian nonbinary and genderqueer person illustrates this when they said, “I was a huge suicide risk last year ... at the early stages of my transition ... and then I changed my name, like literally started thinking about names, probably like the month that I did mushrooms and was like, ‘let’s not kill ourselves’.” Jay described how feeling affirmed in their gender secondary to their psychedelic use helped them feel less suicidal and benefited their mental health.

## Discussion

Together, these experiences illustrate how TGE people’s self-concept of gender influenced their psychedelic experiences and how these experiences impacted their ongoing gender journeys. Understanding naturalistic psychedelic experiences may help mental health clinicians support TGE peoples who use psychedelic substances.

The mindset that TGE peoples had going into their naturalistic psychedelic experience varied, but some participants explained that they entered the experience with the intention of exploring gender identity or that this intention arose during or after their experiences. The presence of a mindset related to gender exploration intentions is consistent with recent literature that found that over three-quarters of respondents thought that using psychedelics could help people suffering from issues related to gender dysphoria (Lancelotta et al., under review). Mental health clinicians may be able to assist TGE peoples who use psychedelics in naturalistic settings if they have a mindset encompassing intentions to explore their gender.

Naturalistic psychedelic settings varied widely, but many discussed being intentional in their choices of setting for their experiences. Some participants explained that they chose a particular setting to affirm their gender, such as dressing in gender-affirming clothing or using mirrors to facilitate self-compassion. These results are consistent with previous literature that suggests that a positive mindset and supportive setting help elicit a favorable psychological response to a psychedelic experience (Borkel et al., 2024; Golden et al., 2022; Studerus et al., 2012). These stories expand upon these data by suggesting that specific elements of mindset and setting might uniquely apply to TGE populations. In particular, ensuring that one is in a gender-affirming setting, surrounded by supportive people, can help optimize benefits for TGE peoples. An appropriate setting additionally extends beyond simply being gender-affirming, but also includes being mindful of the influence of other intersecting forms of oppression such as the influence of racism.

All participants also described a psychedelic-facilitated increase in self-acceptance, which is consistent with previous literature with the general population (Davis et al., 2020; Watts

et al., 2017) and specifically with TGE peoples (Carmel, 2022; Desrochers, 2024a; Pienaar et al., 2020a, 2020b). Participants described this increased self-acceptance as secondary to increased self-compassion or expanded concepts of gender. Previous studies explained how psychedelics may uniquely decrease rumination and shame in SGM peoples, which is consistent with the subtheme of increased self-compassion (Anderson et al., 2020; Carlisle et al., 2023; Cavnar, 2014; Healy et al., 2021; Mehtani et al., 2024). The subtheme of expanded concepts of gender are also in agreement with Hanshaw's adapted REBUS model for SGM people (Carhart-Harris & Friston, 2019; Hanshaw et al., 2024). In this model, psychedelics may uniquely aid in relaxing minority stress-related beliefs such as internalized transphobia. Thus, expanding ideas about gender may also be thought of as a relaxation of fixed beliefs such as internalized transphobia.

Some participants reported challenging psychedelic experiences that were difficult due to feeling overwhelmed or anxious. Some credited these negative experiences to being in an unsupportive setting or to taking an incorrect dose. These observations are consistent with previous literature (Simonsson et al., 2023). Additionally, many participants reported that while there were elements of their psychedelic experiences that were difficult, in the end, these experiences were beneficial after time had passed and they had better processed or integrated their experiences. These results are also consistent with data that suggests that sometimes mental health benefits take time to manifest following psychedelic experiences and that psychedelic experiences are not without risks and challenges (Carhart-Harris et al., 2016; Mans et al., 2021; Nayak et al., 2023; Nygart et al., 2022). Negative experiences were also reported as secondary to forms of oppression such as racism and transphobia, and thus clinicians should critically consider power dynamics present within psychedelic experiences (Gaughan and James, 2025).

Many TGE peoples reported mental health benefits and gender euphoria consistent with previous studies. TGE peoples who engage with psychedelic substances in naturalistic settings might find mental health benefits within these experiences. These results are consistent with literature that has illustrated mental health benefits secondary to psychedelic experiences (Barber & Aaronson, 2022; Davis et al., 2021; Lancelotta et al., under review; Mitchell et al., 2021; Nygart et al., 2022; Raison et al., 2022). The increases in gender euphoria are also consistent with previous literature that has illustrated decreased gender dysphoria secondary to psychedelic experiences (Carmel, 2022; Desrochers, 2024a). Observed gender euphoria may be due to increased psychological gender affirmation and/or increased transgender congruence secondary to psychedelic experiences (Kozee et al., 2012; Sevelius et al., 2021). Observed mental health benefits may be related to perspective shifts and decreased rumination secondary to increased self-acceptance (Anderson et al., 2020; Carlisle et al., 2023; Cavnar, 2014; Hanshaw et al., 2024; Healy et al., 2021; Mehtani et al., 2024). Mental health benefits may also be secondary to gender euphoria as illustrated in previous studies (Austin et al., 2022; Dorsen et al., 2022; Glynn et al., 2016; Sevelius, 2019; Sevelius et al., 2021). These data expand upon this previous literature and uniquely contextualize these mental health benefits within a larger group of TGE individuals.

## Implications

These results suggest that mental health clinicians could potentially encourage TGE patients who use psychedelics to carefully consider choosing a setting that feels gender-affirming. This could include choosing a gender-affirming physical setting, wearing gender-affirming clothing, experiencing psychedelics with TGE-allies, and considering if interacting with a mirror would feel gender-affirming or not. Clinicians working with TGE peoples can help preemptively consider which conditions can help avoid challenging psychedelic experiences as well as prepare strategies to skillfully respond to these experiences if they do arise. Clinicians need to consider their own positionality when working with TGE people – not only as related to gender – but also being mindful of the compounding effects of other intersecting forms of oppression (Gaughan & James, 2025).

Naturalistic psychedelic experiences for some might allow for beneficial increases in self-acceptance related to gender identity. TGE peoples seeking relief from rumination related to living in a transphobic society might find increased self-compassion and an expanded view of gender secondary to naturalistic psychedelic experiences. TGE peoples may also choose to engage in naturalistic psychedelic use to further explore their identity (Lancelotta et al., under review). For TGE peoples engaging with naturalistic psychedelic use, it may be important to consider that mental health benefits might follow challenging experiences. This study is not recommending that TGE peoples should begin using psychedelics for gender-identity-related questions, but rather, this study can allow clinicians to develop support resources and harm-reduction strategies to maximize the benefits and minimize the harm TGE peoples receive from these experiences.

## Strengths and limitations

This project offers rich data from an understudied population in psychedelic research. The strengths of this paper include both a sample and research team that aimed to be representative of TGE communities. This is important because study design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation are informed by the lived experiences of the research team and participants. Thus, to accurately reflect the lived experiences of the populations being studied, a representative team is important. An additional strength of this project is the novel application of BFEM to TGE and psychedelic research. This allowed our interpretation to stay grounded in our data and allowed us to center marginalized TGE voices. Our collective dialogue with five of our participants also allowed for reflexivity in interpretation and allowed our participants to help inform our analytic process.

While our team had a range of gender identities, education levels, socio-economic backgrounds, and ages, our team was still a predominantly non-Latinx white group of researchers. This is an important limitation to consider when conceptualizing our interpretation of these findings, as this could influence how our data was understood and reported. Additionally, self-reporting bias could be an aspect of this study, given that participants may emphasize positive psychedelic experiences and de-emphasize negative psychedelic experiences. Socioeconomic status and residential location were not collected in this study, which could limit our understanding of our participants' backgrounds and lived experiences. Participants from the parent study were recruited from online psychedelic

forums, which may influence how individuals in our sample understand and discuss their psychedelic experiences. This sample only included participants who have engaged with psychedelics in the past, so this study does not speak to the experiences of TGE peoples who have not used psychedelic substances.

### Future studies

Recent studies have examined naturalistic psychedelic experiences in various contexts (Byrne et al., 2023; Glynos et al., 2023; Lancelotta et al., under review; Nygart et al., 2022; Raison et al., 2022) and have explored TGE psychedelic use (Carmel, 2022; Desrochers, 2024a; Pienaar et al., 2020a, 2020b; Stauffer et al., 2022). This study adds to the literature by examining TGE people's naturalistic psychedelic experiences. Future studies of naturalistic psychedelic use should continue to investigate gender-related experiences in samples inclusive of TGE peoples. Additionally, studies should work toward designing and providing resources and tailored support for TGE peoples who engage with psychedelic substances in naturalistic settings. Randomized trials could consider working with TGE communities to explicitly examine whether psychedelic experiences increase self-acceptance and gender euphoria.

Future studies should additionally continue to use a BFEM when working with psychedelic substances and TGE communities to center the experiences and wisdom of participants in the research process. Future studies should focus on recruiting racially and ethnically diverse TGE people, and explicitly explore how living with multiple minoritized identities informs naturalistic psychedelic experiences.

### Conclusion

To our knowledge, this study was the first of its kind to ask TGE participants about their naturalistic psychedelic experiences in relation to their gender identity. Our results suggest that for many, psychedelics facilitated increased self-acceptance and led to mental health benefits such as gender euphoria and a decrease in negative experiences like gender dysphoria, depression, and anxiety. Further research may help further understand TGE people's naturalistic psychedelic experiences and how they may relate to mental health and well-being.

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**Table 1.**

Participant demographics.

| Identity                             | # of Participants        | % of sample* |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------|
| Gender identity                      |                          |              |
| Nonbinary                            | 11                       | 55%          |
| Transgender man                      | 4                        | 20%          |
| Gender nonconforming                 | 3                        | 15%          |
| Genderqueer                          | 3                        | 15%          |
| Agender                              | 2                        | 10%          |
| Gender fluid                         | 2                        | 10%          |
| Two-Spirit                           | 1                        | 5%           |
| Bigender                             | 1                        | 5%           |
| Transgender woman                    | 1                        | 5%           |
| Race and Ethnicity                   |                          |              |
| White                                | 14                       | 70%          |
| Asian                                | 5                        | 25%          |
| Native American/Alaska Native        | 4                        | 20%          |
| Latinx White                         | 3                        | 15%          |
| Black                                | 2                        | 10%          |
| Latinx Native American/Alaska Native | 2                        | 10%          |
| Age (mean, range)                    | 32.35 years; 21–61 years |              |

\* Percentages add up to more than 100% due to participants endorsing multiple gender, racial, and ethnic identities

**Table 2.**

Participant psychedelic use.

| Substance                 | # of Participants | % of sample * |
|---------------------------|-------------------|---------------|
| Psilocybin/Mushrooms      | 19                | 95%           |
| LSD/Acid                  | 16                | 80%           |
| MDMA                      | 12                | 60%           |
| Ketamine                  | 8                 | 40%           |
| DMT (and its derivatives) | 8                 | 40%           |
| Mescaline                 | 3                 | 15%           |
| 2C-B                      | 3                 | 15%           |
| Ayahuasca                 | 2                 | 10%           |
| Salvia                    | 1                 | 5%            |

\* Percentages do not add up to 100% due to participants using multiple psychedelic substances

Table 3.

Summary of themes.

| Theme                                                        | Subtheme                            | Representative quote                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Gender-affirming mindset and setting                         | Mindset                             | "I feel like with my trip, I never really had the intention of really exploring a specific thing like gender identity." – Zoey (she/they), a 21-year-old Latinx nonbinary person                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|                                                              | Setting                             | "I dressed femme, which I was doing kind of in private at the time. .. It really allowed me to expand my understanding of femininity and what a woman is." – Siobhan (she/her), a 29-year-old white transgender woman                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Psychedelic-facilitated self-acceptance                      | Self-compassion                     | "I would just say that it has helped me be more self-accepting and more loving and caring towards myself. .. and psychedelics have certainly helped me ... not beat myself up or put myself down for being different." – Katie (she/her), a 43-year-old white bigender person                                                                                                                                       |
|                                                              | Expanded concepts of gender         | "[Psychedelics] kind of provided an abundance of compassion for seeing myself as more than a gender. When I transitioned, I was so hyper-fixated on my gender that I really need[ed] to remember that I was a human before a trans man."<br>- aspen (he/him/they/them), a 32-year-old Latinx and Native American/Alaska Native transgender man                                                                      |
| Psychedelic-related challenges and benefits to mental health | Challenging psychedelic experiences | "I went through a period of destabilization where the feelings being brought to the surface were intense anxiety, and it felt worse before it got better. But .. for maybe the past three quarters of the year, I've felt better than when I started. I've gotten to that point now. I feel much calmer about many things, and I feel more functional." – Darren (any pronouns), a 33-year-old white agender person |
|                                                              | Mental health benefits              | "I started dabbling in, 'I think I want to like, medically transition' ... the euphoria that I felt on LSD was like, I want to replicate that in a way that's not just like doing drugs all the time."<br>- Vince Slater (they/he), a 21-year-old, white nonbinary, gender nonconforming, and genderqueer transgender man                                                                                           |