

Psychedelic Intimacy: Altered States of Consciousness in Romantic Relationships

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Abstract

Objective: Engaging in practices of intimacy meant to develop and sustain intimacy can be beneficial for couples. Psychoactive substances such as *3,4-Methylenedioxy methamphetamine* (MDMA) have shown to facilitate bonding within couples and it is hypothesised that classic psychedelics, due to their property to increase prosocial behaviours, can similarly promote interactional intimacy. This study explores shared experiences of altered states of consciousness within romantic couples and their impact on intimacy in relationships. **Participants:** Twelve participants (six couples) between 19 and 29 years of age who had used psychedelics with their current partner, were recruited. **Method:** Qualitative data was gathered via simultaneous interviews with both members of a couple. The semi-structured interviews featured an in-depth exploration of multiple shared psychedelic experiences. Reflexive thematic analysis was employed to analyse the resulting transcripts. **Results:** Three primary themes with multiple secondary themes were identified, portraying couple's experiences during psychedelic-induced altered states of consciousness: navigating anxiety (novelty, preparation, shifting environment, and calming presence), reshaping practices (excessive worrying, spirited discussions, and straight talking), and encountering bliss (meeting the unexpected, the beauty around us, leaving the everyday behind, and breaking through). **Conclusions:** Couples' experiences with classic psychedelics align with criteria for interactional intimacy (self-exposure, positive involvement, and shared understanding), but their distinct nature warrants a novel definition of *psychedelic intimacy*. The unique pair bonding during shared psychedelic experiences could be utilized by psychedelic-assisted couple's therapy.

Keywords: psychedelics, interviews, thematic analysis, couples, intimacy

Psychedellic Intimacy

Altered States of Consciousness in Romantic Relationships

The impact of romantic relationships on personal health has been thoroughly documented and relationship quality has emerged as central mediating factor. Thus, couples reporting higher relationship quality are more likely to enjoy increased levels of subjective well-being (Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005; Kamp Dush et al., 2008; Proulx et al., 2007; Roberson et al., 2018; Robles et al., 2014; Twiselton et al., 2020). This association also extends to young adults, for whom the exploration of romantic experiences constitutes an important part of their development (Furman & Collibee, 2014; Gómez-López et al., 2019). For them, simply being romantically involved is associated with greater well-being, while an unfulfilled desire to engage in romantic relationships is linked with greater depressive symptoms (Beckmeyer & Cromwell, 2018; Braithwaite et al., 2010). Thus, exploring means of enhancing romantic relationship quality is a pertinent question.

Couple intimacy has been identified as one of the contributing factors to greater relationship quality, even if definitions for this term have been varied (Birnie-Porter & Lydon, 2013; Greeff & Malherbe, 2001; Schaefer & Olson, 1981; Yoo et al., 2014). A model by Prager and Roberts (2004) offers a useful framework for defining intimacy by outlining how interactions characterized by self-exposure, positive involvement, and shared understanding lead to *interactional intimacy*, while the frequency and quality of those interactions determines *relational intimacy*. Thus, individual interactions can be thought of as the foundation of overall couple intimacy.

To better understand how couples develop and sustain intimacy, it can be helpful to group related individual interactions into *practices*. This concept was originally developed as part of sociological family research as *family practices* (Morgan, 1996, 2011). The family practices approach emphasises how everyday practices shape and reshape what it means to be a family, and it represents a deviation from earlier literature which regarded the family as a rather fixed construct. Drawing on family practices, Gabb and Fink (2018) applied the same reasoning to *couple practices*: not every couple is alike, and relationships can take various

shapes, depending on the practices which constitute coupledness. Specifically, this definition is akin to moving from a top-down approach of rigid definitions to a bottom-down approach of *couples are what couples do*. What those practices look like can be highly heterogeneous, as every couple establishes their own individual couple practices. While every shared activity can be read as a couple practice, Gabb and Fink (2018) point out that not all practices necessarily engender intimacy. However, the subset of couple practices which do enable or generate moments of intimacy, termed *practices of intimacy*, deserve special attention because they considerably contribute to enduring relationships (Gabb & Fink, 2018).

While quality couple time, physical affection, or sex are common examples of practices of intimacy (Gabb & Fink, 2018), they are, by far, not the only means. The psychostimulant *3,4-Methylenedioxymethamphetamine* (MDMA) is a prototypical entactogen characterized by its ability to induce acute feelings of sociability (Regan et al., 2021) and heightened emotional empathy (for a comprehensive review see Preller & Vollenweider, 2019). A qualitative study by Anderson et al. (2018, 2019) illustrates how shared MDMA experiences serve as practices of intimacy; enabling couples to intensify their emotional connection while fuelling a sense of intimacy which extends into everyday life. The authors argued that the innate pro-social effects of MDMA were enhanced by (ritualistic) practices the couples engaged in, such as coupling MDMA use with special occasions, tidying/decorating their environment, or mentally preparing themselves via meditation. Similar experiences were also reported by Colbert and Hughes (2023), whose participants emphasised the positive influence on relational intimacy and improved communication skills with their partners via shared MDMA use.

MDMA is not the only psychoactive compound known to affect social cognition. Clinical research into classic psychedelic drugs, characterized by serotonin (5HT)_{2A} agonism (Nichols, 2016), have seen a revival in the past decades, leading to a wave of new studies investigating the effects of these substances in both clinical populations and in healthy volunteers (Aday et al., 2020; Nutt & Carhart-Harris, 2021; Nutt et al., 2020; Vollenweider & Kommer, 2010). In regards to clinical studies, evidence is growing that psychedelic substances

such as psilocybin, lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), and ayahuasca could be a potential alternative treatment option for common and difficult to treat psychiatric conditions, such as depression, anxiety, addiction, and PTSD (Bogenschutz et al., 2015; Carhart-Harris et al., 2016; Gasser et al., 2014; Grob et al., 2011; Palhano-Fontes et al., 2019; Ross et al., 2016). Importantly, it has been repeatedly found that a single ingestion of a psychedelic drug in healthy participants alters social cognitive processes, increasing prosocial behavior such as enhanced empathy, willingness to disclose sensitive information about a person's life, and (emotional) connectivity with others (for a comprehensive review see Preller and Vollenweider, 2019). In clinical studies, patients attribute therapeutic efficacy to increased feelings of connectedness to themselves, others, and the world around them (Watts et al., 2017), and allude to persisting positive changes in friendships, improved relationship with family members, and increased prosocial activities in daily life, after psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy (Watts et al., 2017).

Based on the known effects of classic psychedelics, and their mechanistic overlap and similar subjective effects to MDMA, it seems likely that shared classic psychedelic experiences by couples will have an impact on their relational intimacy and couple practices. Anecdotal reports attest to this, as a growing number of couples claim using classic psychedelics together on their own accord, with the explicit goal of improving relationship quality (Hanna & Thyssen, 2002; Hodges, 2021; Johns, 2017; Joshi, 2022; Schuster-Bruce, 2022; Williams, 2017). However, no scientific publications have explored these experiences in romantic couples so far. Thus, the current study aimed to understand how a shared experience of a psychedelic-induced altered state of consciousness by romantic partners influences their (perception of) intimacy. To do this, reflexive thematic analysis was used to delve into the specific experiences couples went through after consuming a classic psychedelic substance together. Couples were given the opportunity to share their experiences during an in-depth interview involving both partners simultaneously.

Materials and Methods

Study design

An experiential qualitative research design was used to explore the effects of shared classic psychedelic use amongst partners in a romantic relationship. The study included two online questionnaires, created and hosted on the Qualtrics software platform, which inquired about individual and shared history with psychoactive substances. Information from the questionnaires was utilised to prepare the in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which served as primary data. Transcriptions of all interviews were the basis for a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013, 2022). The exploratory, open-ended approach inherent to qualitative research was most suitable to shed light on intimate practices related to psychedelic experiences in romantic relationships.

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and subsequent amendments concerning research in humans and was approved by the Ethics Review Committee of Psychology and Neuroscience and Maastricht University (ERCPN-233_19_02_2021). Participation was voluntary and no incentives to participate were provided. All volunteers gave their written informed consent to participate, and in order to participate both partners had to give their consent independently. The research team was not involved in the participants decision to take any psychedelic substances.

Twelve participants (six couples) were recruited via word of mouth and social media, which included local and special-interest channels dedicated to psychedelic science. The sample size followed the recommendation by (Braun & Clarke, 2013) for small, interview-based, qualitative research projects. To meet inclusion criteria, all participants were required to be 18 years or older and to be in a committed relationship for no less than six months. Furthermore, they must have had at least one experience with a classic psychedelic with their current partner (excluding “microdosing” experiences (Kuypers et al., 2019)). Eligible classic psychedelics were defined as LSD, psilocybin (magic mushrooms or truffles), DMT (5-MeO-DMT or N,N-DMT), and mescaline (peyote, san pedro, or synthetic) (Vollenweider & Preller, 2020).

Measures

Demographics

Demographic information collected included age, gender, nationality, self-described ethnicity, native language, level of English proficiency, highest education level achieved, and current employment status. Participants also indicated how many past relationships they had. Relationships were characterized on a per-couple basis in terms of duration, type (i.e., monogamous, open relationship, relationship anarchy, polyamorous, or other), and living situation (i.e., cohabiting or living separately).

History of Substance Use

Participants were first asked about their individual history with psychedelics and other psychoactive substances (irrespective of whether their partner was present or not). They reported how often they had used classic psychedelics and specified which other psychoactive substances they had experience with (e.g., cannabis, cocaine, ketamine, MDMA). The second questionnaire was answered by both partners simultaneously and covered *shared experiences*, which were defined as experiences during which at least one of the partners consumed a psychoactive substance. This definition was specifically chosen to include experiences during which one partner served as *trip sitter* (i.e., a usually sober guide or companion who ensures a safe experience), a common harm reduction practice within the psychedelic community (Pestana et al., 2021). The couples provided an overview of how often they had consumed each of the four eligible classic psychedelics, average dosage, and under which setting (i.e., did both partake or only one of them, were they alone or with others, did they combine the psychedelic substance with other psychoactive substances). Finally, they were asked to describe their three most recent shared experiences, including dosage and motivation.

Interviews

The questionnaires provided a first overview about the scope of their individual and shared experiences. Prior to every interview, this information was incorporated into the interview guide to tailor questions to the couples' background. The interview guide (see supplement methods) was designed to cover the relationship and the role of psychedelics in it,

as well specific instances of psychedelic experience. The focus of the interviews was an in-depth discussion of one to three shared psychedelic experiences. For each experience one of the partners was responsible for recalling the experience in as much detail as they were comfortable with, afterwards the other partner was given the opportunity to comment. This is a variation of a *single question inducing narrative* (Wengraf, 2001), which allows for uninterrupted sharing of subjective narratives. Throughout the study, the guide was reviewed and adapted where necessary (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Five out of six interviews took place via zoom while one was conducted face-to-face. Both partners were interviewed simultaneously; This allowed for interaction between them and created an interview environment which valued shared experiences rather than individual histories (Bjørnholt & Farstad, 2012; Wimbauer & Motakef, 2017). Every couple was interviewed only once and most interviews were slightly longer than an hour ($M = 74.8$ minutes, $SD = 8.8$). The audio from all interviews was recorded, anonymised, and manually transcribed for thematic analysis.

Thematic Analysis

Data analysis was performed in a qualitative research framework and employed reflexive thematic analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2022). Working inductively while putting the spotlight on an experiential analysis enabled the study to capture the complexity of the couples' experiences. The development of themes was guided by an exploration of *how* couples experienced psychedelics together and *to what extent* psychedelics opened new avenues of eliciting intimacy. The generous use of direct quotes in the findings section serves to preserve authentic representation of (often ineffable) psychedelic experiences (cf. Watts et al., 2017).

Results

Demographics and Experience with Psychoactive Substances

Demographic characteristics and a summary of the results from the individual questionnaire are reported in Table 1. Participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms,

based on popular names for their nationality. All twelve participants were similar in age ($M = 23.2$ years, $SD = 3.0$) and lived in Europe.

Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics and Individual Experiences with Psychoactive Substances*

Pseudonym	Age <i>years</i>	Nationality	Gender	LSD <i>n</i>	Psilocybin <i>n</i>	DMT <i>n</i>	Other psychoactive substances <i>n</i> ≥ 1
Damiano	21	Italian	Male	30	10	30	2C-B, changa, cocaine, ketamine, MDMA, many NPS
Victoria	21	Italian	Female	≤ 5	≤ 4	2	2C-B, ketamine, MDMA
Natalia	22	Slovakian	Female	20	5		2C-B, ayahuasca, DOB, cocaine, codeine, heroin, MDMA, N-bomb
Jakub	22	Slovakian	Male	≥ 23	≥ 9	2	2C-B, amphetamine, ayahuasca, cocaine, DOB, DOM, ketamine, MDMA, nitrous oxide
Judith	27	German	Female	3			Amphetamine, MDMA
Vijay	29	India	Male	5	10		MDMA
Sara	25	Swiss	Female	2	2		Cocaine, MDMA, nitrous oxide
Liam	25	British	Male	5			Cocaine, ketamine, MDMA, nitrous oxide, salvia
Ida	19	Belgian	Female		1		
Lewys	20	Irish/Welsh	Male		1		
Helena	22	Greek	Female		≥ 2		MDMA
Milos	25	Greek	Male	25	5	1	2C-B, amphetamine, changa, cocaine, MDMA

Table 2 outlines length ($M = 39.5$ months; $SD = 26.0$) and type of relationship as well as couples' shared experiences.

Table 2. *Description of Relationship and Shared Experiences with Psychoactive Substances*

Couple	Relationship type	Relationship length <i>months</i>	LSD <i>n</i>	Psilocybin <i>n</i>	DMT <i>n</i>	Other psychoactive substances <i>n ≥ 1</i>
Damiano Victoria	Open	62	4		5	2C-B, 2-FMA, 2-FDCK, 3-ho-pce, 3-FEA, 6-APB, changa, DOC, ketamine, kratom, MDMA, modafinil, NEP, opium, salvia
Natalia Jakub	Monogamous	52	24	9	2	2C-B, amphetamine, ayahuasca, benzos, DOB, cocaine, ketamine, MDMA, N-bomb, nitrous oxide
Judith Vijay	Monogamous	72	2			Amphetamine, MDMA
Sara Liam	Relationship Anarchy	8	3			Cocaine, MDMA
Ida Lewys	Monogamous	25	1			
Helena Milos	Monogamous	18		2		

Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis identified three overarching themes: (a) Navigating Anxiety, (b) Reshaping Practices, (c) Encountering Bliss, and eleven subthemes. All themes relate to shared experiences while under the influence of classic psychedelics and, thus, illustrate couple dynamics in these altered states of consciousness. Figure 1 provides an overview of all subthemes.

---Insert Figure 1 here---

Navigating Anxiety

The theme *Navigating Anxiety* was present in all couples; It encompasses a multitude of unpleasant mental states – such as feelings of being anxious, worried, stressed, panicked, or scared – and how those were mitigated in cooperation with the partner.

Novelty

The extent of prior experiences with psychedelics or other psychoactive substances was unevenly distributed in most couples (see Table 1) and half of the participants experienced psychedelics for the first time together with their partner. Four couples reported that this discrepancy led to one partner assuming the role of mentor, who discussed previous experiences and gently introduced their partner to psychedelics. Even though the psychedelic-naïve participants reported feeling well-prepared, which they attributed to their more experienced partner or extensive online research, the novelty of psychedelics and uncertainty about what was about to happen still caused increased levels of anxiety for them. Some participants were initially hesitant to try psychedelics and, therefore, delayed their first psychedelic experience:

“We once had mushrooms, we wanted to take them together, but I was a bit scared. So, we didn't do it” (Judith).

“Before we got together, I was fascinated by his stories, but I was, like, very scared. I was not thinking I would have done that” (Victoria).

261 **Preparation**

262 While one couple, Natalia and Jakub, recalled rare instances of spontaneously taking
 263 psychedelics with friends, most discussed experiences were preceded by careful planning and
 264 preparation. At the minimum, this included picking a day in advance to make sure that both
 265 partners were free for the entire day and had no other obligations to attend to. Additionally,
 266 no one reported consuming psychedelics without being aware of their (potential) mind-
 267 altering effects. More extensive preparations included activities such as cleaning the whole
 268 apartment, preparing/ordering food in advance, creating music playlists, or booking a special
 269 location for the experience.

270 Natalia and Jakub reported a fondness for taking psychedelics with friends, but
 271 explained how communal experiences with more than two people can be challenging for their
 272 relationship as well. In those cases, preparations were not limited to their mental state and the
 273 environment but also included preparing their friends:

274 “I’m just trying to keep my head on the top level of goodness (laughs) for one
 275 week was very important. Because if I’m angry before doing LSD that’s not
 276 much, much fulfilling experience for me and it’s, uh, sometimes turned out to
 277 be not so good than when my head is fully prepared for it” (Jakub).

278 “I definitely have to clean everything, because when I’m on LSD I hate dirt.
 279 [. . .] I can’t stay in the room where there is dirt, that’s why I’m better outside,
 280 because there is everything okay” (Natalia).

281 “You have to prepare people of course, too (both laugh), because when they got
 282 crazy, you know, your trip is directly affected by them and, as we mentioned
 283 before, then when the trip is bad it’s directly affecting our relationship” (Jakub).

284 All those preparatory activities and plans are meant to facilitate an enjoyable
 285 experience for the couple by reducing as many sources of anxiety as possible. However, even
 286 well-prepared couples reported moments of anxiety caused by unpredictable events such as
 287 sudden weather changes, accidents, and interactions with other individuals (cf. *Shifting*
 288 *Environment* subtheme). While preparations can provide couples with a sense of security,
 289 being able to let go of plans was equally important and, as reported by Sara and Liam, even
 290 lead to unexpected moments of intimacy:

291 “The things planned like body painting, or like some drawing, we didn't even
 292 get around to that [...] 'cause we were forced to stay inside and we were forced
 293 to kind of really focus on each other 'cause it was no external stimuli, it made it
 294 like a very like intimate feeling” (Liam).

295 ***Shifting Environment***

296 The importance of their environment was emphasised by all couples as an influence on
 297 their wellbeing. While the previous subtheme dealt with preparing environments, *shifting*
 298 *environment* describes how couples' surroundings can unexpectedly shift into anxiety-
 299 inducing places and how partners can facilitate a shift into more pleasant environments.

300 Four out of six couples shared at least one instance of anxiety during the trips, which
 301 were linked to their environment, also known as *setting* (Zinberg, 1984). These anxious
 302 moments were reported to be unexpected and sudden but could be mitigated by shifting
 303 location, as explained by Judith:

304 “We had to leave the lake because [Vijay] got scared of the, uh, monsters
 305 within” (Judith).

306 Other people can elicit a similarly strong response, as reported by Jakub when he
 307 quickly developed a “bad trippy feeling” in response to his girlfriend's colleague. He described
 308 it as a sensation of “antipower”, a strong urge to stay away from that person and their perceived
 309 negative energy, which ultimately resulted in him panicking and leaving shortly after.

310 Most participants considered their home as an especially safe environment for
 311 psychedelic experiences. While being outside in nature was evaluated as a pleasurable setting
 312 by most couples, some encountered instances where they felt a strong wish to return home.

313 “The sun was going down and I wanted to get home. And I was scared of, like,
 314 staying in the forest for too long. And not being able to make it home” (Ida).

315 Even an environment perceived as pleasant in one moment, can quickly transform into
 316 a source of anxiety. For example, when Sara's partner dragged a chair across the floor, which
 317 resulted in scratch marks in the forest cabin they rented for their trip.

318 “When I looked down and I saw it, I like freaked out, and it made me very
 319 anxious, 'cause I was like, ‘Oh no, they will be so upset and we messed this area
 320 up’. [...] I definitely, I think when I became more anxious, had more of a desire
 321 to be at home, where it's, like, comfortable and safe” (Sara).

Sara described the choice of location as a “fine balance” between the safety of one’s home and the beauty of nature. Sara and Liam had to ensure both felt comfortable in their environment, because anxious feelings of one partner can easily impact the other. Overall, couples’ ability to curate their environment and easily move to a different location if necessary were described as crucial skills in navigating anxiety. In cases, where external influences limited these very skills, couples were especially vulnerable to developing anxiety. For instance, when Sara and Liam’s experience was disrupted by a snowstorm. Confronted by this loss of agency (i.e., the inability to change location and follow the original plan), they both reported feelings of anxiety, which were heightened by a sense of responsibility for their partner’s well-being.

“There was a lot of, maybe, anxiousness from both of us for different reasons. I remember Sara was a little nervous, uhm, and I was also a little nervous [. . .] because there is always, like, a fear when we take something like that, like I don’t want her to have a bad time, I don’t want me to have a bad time, that’s most important. [. . .] Especially ‘cause we couldn’t go out and do the things we planned to do, uhm, it was just, yeah sort of like: ‘I hope this works out’” (Liam).

“It was very different to what either of us had planned and especially like me, ‘cause I am quite a planner, but yeah it was nice, ‘cause I think it just became very like cozier. I remember lying down, like it was very cozy we had, like, lights going and, like, fluffy blankets and stuff like that and that was, that was again a very, like, sort of intimate close time” (Sara).

Calming Presence

All participants described the presence of their partner in positive terms, for example as “reassuring” (Sara), “relaxing” (Victoria), or “ready to take care of me” (Helena), especially when faced with anxiety-inducing situations.

“There was like one point where I was starting getting quite anxious, like, I kept trying to clean the apartment, and he was like: ‘Stop, this is how you have a bad trip. Stop’. And he, like, forced me away from it, so I thought that was quite reassuring” (Sara).

When Victoria was anxious, Damiano soothed her nerves by chanting. His calming presence allowed her to be vulnerable in a psychedelic state.

“I did it only because I knew he was there for me. With him I was feeling safe in exploring my turbulent self” (Victoria).

355 “I thought that maybe to warm her and to calm her I would ‘shanti om’. So, I
356 began chanting and it became just natural thing to keep on doing” (Damiano).

357 As Damiano immersed himself in a DMT experience, Victoria found pleasure in
358 reciprocating the role of the caring partner. Afterwards, it was Victoria’s turn and Damiano
359 was making sure she felt comfortable during her DMT experience.

360 “You make yourself comfortable for making him comfortable and then it's
361 something that I think... I personally find a nice thing to do, I don't feel like I
362 need to do it” (Victoria).

363 “I was super calm and relaxed. It made me smile, I was really smiling and, also
364 having Damiano by my side was a part of my relaxation. I was feeling good
365 being there with him. I could share my smiles with him and it was very powerful
366 coming back to life” (Victoria).

367 As Vijay was considerably more experienced with psychedelics, he took over the role of
368 trip sitter to guide Judith through her first experience:

369 “You were a bit navigating the whole thing. And then, I don't really remember
370 the transition somehow, suddenly I was in a completely different sphere thing
371 and then we just started talking and telling each other what we experienced and
372 what we were thinking and like sharing what was happening. And so I think
373 that was also to reassure me a bit because I was a bit nervous about what is
374 gonna happen” (Judith).

375 In contrast to other couples, where the more experienced partner assumed the role of
376 caring for the other, Ida and Lewys were both inexperienced prior to consuming truffles. Ida’s
377 way of reciprocating care was reassuring Lewys he doesn’t have to care for her in this moment
378 (cf. subtheme *Excessive Worrying* below). This highlights that the ability to provide a calming
379 presence for the partner is not contingent on prior experience.

380 “We must have talked four or five times, she went like: ‘Don't worry about this
381 now’ – This: ‘We're doing this to have fun’ – ‘You can relax’ – ‘We're safe’ –
382 ‘Everything's okay’. And, after a couple of times. [. . .] I got to spot where I was
383 like: ‘Okay, tell me if anything's wrong, I'm gonna proceed to be completely
384 smashed as well now’” (Lewys).

385 “That was really nice for me to be able to have, uhm, a time where I can let go
386 with her and just be really happy. [. . .] I wasn't worried after. I don't know. She
387 had to kick me out of it though” (Lewys).

388 **Reshaping Practices**

389 The second theme revolves around everyday practices the couples engage in, which
 390 were reshaped during their psychedelic experiences. Half of the interviewed couples talked
 391 about common patterns of interaction, which re-emerged during the experience in a markedly
 392 transformed way. All of them indicated that the practices described below are a common
 393 occurrence in their relationship prior to their psychedelic experience. As exploring these
 394 practices requires a more in-depth discussion of individual couples and their relationship, the
 395 three subthemes focus on just one couple each.

396 ***Excessive Worrying***

397 The previous theme outlined how Lewys reported worrying about Ida's wellbeing
 398 during the experience, but Ida managed to break him out of this pattern by repeatedly
 399 reassuring him that she is fine. This couple dynamic is worth exploring further because they
 400 reported how the practice of *Excessive Worrying* took place outside of the psychedelic
 401 experience, as well. Therefore, it is interesting to examine how the influence of psychedelics
 402 reshaped their couple practice.

403 **Alcohol.** Drinking was not pleasurable for Lewys as "some of the bad experiences with
 404 alcohol have been with Ida" and he suffered from what he described as "sad alcohol". On the
 405 rare occasion that they did drink alcohol, their interaction followed this pattern:

406 "When I drink with Ida. I'm, uhm, I'm obviously trying to stay as sober as I can,
 407 making sure she doesn't fall, she doesn't hurt herself. I don't know, I'm very
 408 aware because I'm worried" (Lewys).

409 "I never drink like that much. I'm not, like, someone who is gonna get, like,
 410 shitfaced drunk. So, you, like, wanting to care, like, for me and being really
 411 responsible. It's pretty much... I think it's also coming from, from a place of,
 412 like, fear" (Ida).

413 For Lewys it was "very much stressful" to watch over Ida when she was in this alcohol-
 414 induced "very happy-go-lucky" state. Ida, in contrast, felt protected by Lewys as he "take[s]
 415 that place of almost being like a father" and she can let herself go. His supervision allowed
 416 Ida's "inner child . . . [to] resurfac[e] from time to time" and enabled her to relive carefree
 417 child-like experiences.

Truffles. In the beginning of their truffles experience, Lewys was again worrying about Ida and in Ida's perspective, trying to assume the father role. He inquired whether she is alright, and she responded that everything is okay. The same call and response interaction was repeated multiple times: Lewys asked and Ida reassured him. As the experience intensified, this was increasingly difficult for him because he "was trying to focus on being smashed and her at the same time" (Lewys). Finally, after a few back-and-forths of reassurance the pattern was broken and Lewys realised "she's just totally smashed, but she's fine".

"I went with it and after that there was no afterthought, there was no worrying. So, yeah, that was really nice for me to be able to have, uhm, a time where I can let go with her and just be really happy" (Lewys).

Lewys attributed both Ida's comforting presence and the effect of the truffles to him being able to enjoy their shared experience without excessive worrying.

"It genuinely makes it hard to worry, like, you're very, very calm, very happy. That's it, bringing the dopamine out or whatever" (Lewys).

Integration. Although Ida had not realised the impact her reassurances have had on Lewys until they talked about it in the interview, she believed this *reshaped practice* might be beneficial in the future to counteract Lewy's tendency to worry.

"I'm gonna tell you every time. . . . I'll remember always telling you when we do cannabis and alcohol. Like: 'I'm okay. You see, this is a safe situation'. Like: 'You can relax'" (Ida).

Spirited Discussions

While psychedelic experiences in many ways represent a deviation from ordinary practices, some couple practices are such an integral part of a relationship that they might reappear under the influence of psychedelics as well. At the core of Judith and Vijay's relationship are what Vijay described as "heated" or "spirited discussions" during which they vigorously try to convince each other that their opinion and line of argument is superior. While their (political) views "more or less" (Vijay) align, they still manage to find topics of disagreement quite regularly.

447 “And then, when we do find something where we don't agree, then it's, it's
448 gonna be a four-hour long discussion” (Judith).

449 – “Right, right. Yeah” (Vijay).

450 “And I think that happens, I don't know, every second week or something”
451 (Judith).

452 – “Sure” (Vijay).

453 “Or even once a week. It happens a lot, so that is quite regular actually”
454 (Judith).

455 During the interview, they tried to avoid common (mis-)conceptions about couples
456 engaging in regular fights, namely the assumption that a higher frequency of fights might be
457 indicative of an unstable relationship. They explained that those spirited discussions were
458 what brought them together in the first place and emphasized that the foundation of their
459 relationship is not shaken up by those fights; on the contrary, the discussions brought them
460 closer together.

461 Taking LSD together set the stage for more discussions, albeit with a slightly different
462 outcome. While extensive discussions were not part of their two LSD experiences with a larger
463 dose (i.e., 120 ug), they played an important role during a few experiences with lower doses
464 (“45 micrograms or so” (Vijay)). As usual, they got into a discussion eventually, but – unlike
465 the other times – it did not turn into a fight:

466 “One thing that was different is that we didn't fight. Usually, when we discuss
467 these things we fight at some point, but we didn't then. And we didn't do that
468 on any of those trips. . . . We discuss philosophical, political topics all the time.
469 . . . And we always fight. I actually hadn't noticed this before, but during those
470 trips we never fought. Although, we discussed those topics that usually make
471 us fight, but then we didn't” (Judith).

472 Vijay believed that his individual use of psychedelics had a positive influence on him
473 and, thus, contributed to the positive outcome of the discussion.

474 “I think it made me a more open person. There is no denying it. I think I would
475 have been much more locked in my own corridors of thought and opinion”
476 (Vijay).

477 Judith adds that the ability “to really listen” helped both to appreciate the opinions of
478 the other and allowed them to break their usual patterns:

479 “When we discuss I feel like we're going in circles and just repeating the same
480 thing and I'm frustrated because you don't really see what, why my opinion is

481 better, but... (laughs) I think we were a bit more exploring the topic together
 482 instead of having a fixed opinion and trying to persuade the other. Because
 483 that's what we usually do" (Judith).

484 While Vijay was convinced that he became a more open person thanks to his
 485 psychedelic experiences, he was more careful when it came to drawing conclusions about the
 486 lasting impact on the relationship. He seemed sceptical whether the few experiences they had
 487 together, all of them many years ago, were enough to have "really changed anything". Even
 488 though the spirited discussions remain an integral part of their relationship practices, "small
 489 rituals" of trying to convince the partner, he believed the way they fight has shifted slightly.

490 "I think that changed in a way. Now we do consider each other's opinion more
 491 openly" (Vijay).

492 ***Straight Talking***

493 While the spirited discussions examined above were evaluated as a positive aspect of
 494 Judith and Vijay's relationship, the lack of *Straight Talking* was perceived as a negative
 495 influence by the next couple. According to Milos, Helena has difficulty to express the "main
 496 point" when talking to him and he quickly becomes angry in response to this, because he
 497 prefers straight answers. Additionally, while waiting for the main point, he finds himself
 498 getting lost in his own thoughts, which increases his irritability further. Helena agrees with
 499 Milos and recalls several instances where he got angry with her because of not being "straight
 500 to the point". Furthermore, Helena admits that situations during which she struggles to
 501 express her thoughts sometimes lead to feelings of anxiety.

502 "She has this tendency to explain things, uhm, but... the main point kinda gets
 503 delayed in our everyday life. And, I'm kinda getting angry every time, because
 504 I know that we're missing, I'm missing the main point and I'm waiting. I'm like:
 505 'Give it to me, please. Fast'" (Milos).

506 "I thought that the, there have been several times that you get angry, uh, with
 507 me when I, when I'm not straight to the point" (Helena).

508 "There's some times that I, I'm scared or... Not scared, I'm anxious about. . .
 509 what I would say to something" (Helena).

510 When they took mushrooms together, this pattern of interaction was reshaped and
 511 their way of communicating with each other changed: Milos did not become angry when they

512 talked with each other. Both partners acknowledged that a shift or a break in the pattern
 513 occurred during the experience, but they have different viewpoints on the reason for it. Helena
 514 had the impression that Milos was more patient with her, but Milos insisted his “patience
 515 didn’t change at all”. Instead, he credited Helena for being more straightforward and being
 516 able to connect with her emotions.

517 “She had a better connection with her feelings, because she’s a very sentimental
 518 person and every time she speaks, she speaks from feelings. She had a better
 519 understanding of her own feelings, so she didn’t have to explain to me, real-
 520 time, in order for her to listen to herself to understand what’s this feeling. She
 521 already knew” (Milos).

522 Furthermore, Helena noticed a change in her confidence levels and, thus, her ability to
 523 communicate more easily with Milos.

524 “I was feeling very confident and, uh, about my actions. And Milos, too. Uhm.
 525 And that was nice. [. . .] I wanted to dance, I was dancing. And, uh, Milos didn’t
 526 dance, but it was okay. (laughs) And... Uh, I wanted to have sex. Milos, too. And
 527 it was okay” (Helena).

528 **Encountering Bliss**

529 Even though moments of anxiety were a possibility during the experiences, all couples
 530 reported an overall positive response to psychedelics. The final theme *Encountering Bliss*
 531 covers shared moments of joy, some expected and some unexpected, which were highly valued
 532 by all participants.

533 ***Leaving the Everyday Behind***

534 When describing what the psychedelic experience felt like, half of the participants
 535 compared the trip to going on a vacation or holiday. Packing a suitcase might be enough for a
 536 traditional vacation, but a vacation “of the mind” (Vijay) requires a different kind of
 537 preparation to ensure a pleasant experience (cf. Navigating Anxiety).

538 “I would say that going for a [psychedelic] trip is like going for vacation or going
 539 for movie or something. It’s... It depends, if it’s a good trip, it will make you
 540 come closer together. If it’s a bad trip, maybe it separates you a little bit”
 541 (Jakub).

542 For those couples, whether they stayed at home or not, the experience meant being
 543 distanced from the everyday, the routines, and the obligations. It was described as a cherished
 544 rare occurrence, something out of the ordinary.

545 “I'm a really stressed person, with my future et cetera [. . .]. So, for me, it was
 546 finally a moment where I was, like, not thinking about stuff, not wanting to be
 547 a control-freak and plan everything in my life and my relationship. And I really
 548 let go. Uh, we didn't really have responsibilities, we were just in for the fun”
 549 (Ida).

550 “I just remember thinking ‘I'm having such a great time right now’. And I did
 551 have such a great time” (Vijay).

552 “You'd do it once a year and then your normal life is there and, you know, you're
 553 back to it and you think ‘ah, that was a nice holiday’ and you just continue with
 554 whatever you were doing. It kinda takes you out of the context of, context of
 555 your daily life and then sort of makes you think about things afresh anew and
 556 then you come back to your normal life” (Vijay).

557 With the everyday obligations out of the way, Liam and Sara felt like taking LSD
 558 together in a remote location in a forest was the best way to celebrate Sara's master graduation
 559 and to relax after a few stressful months:

560 “It's something that we only can do rarely . . . something that we want to do
 561 rarely. That makes it extra special. . . . It was more about just having sorta a
 562 special experience and . . . doing something to kind of heighten the intimacy
 563 between us” (Liam).

564 “We were like ‘We should use this time, 'cause it just is... It's, like, so rare’. Uhm.
 565 And it felt like a nice way to enjoy that. Like, to really appreciate that time off”
 566 (Sara).

567 ***Meeting the Unexpected***

568 When Ida and Lewys took truffles, the first psychedelic experience for both, they
 569 quickly realised that no amount of research would have been able to explain what to expect.
 570 Navigating this unknown psychedelic space was described as a “discovery experience” (Lewys)
 571 and an “adventure” (Ida). *Meeting the Unexpected* was not a cause for stress, but an enjoyable
 572 “surreal” (Lewys) experience for them.

573 “If I were asked: ‘Was it as good as I expected?’. I would absolutely say: ‘Yes’.
 574 ‘Did it match what I expected?’ – ‘No, I couldn't have expected it’. Uhm. I
 575 couldn't have known what was coming, but it very much matched my

576 expectations in the sense that it was as amazing as I was hoping it would be”
 577 (Lewys).

578 Even for more psychedelic-experienced couples, such as Sara and Liam, it was not
 579 uncommon to encounter unexpected elements during their experiences. They reported to
 580 value those moments, because not exactly knowing what is going on turns the experience into
 581 an adventure, a unique experience which is unlike anything that might happen on a regular
 582 day. When taking LSD, the necessity to “carve out time” (Sara) for (at least) a whole day
 583 reportedly allowed them to focus on their partner and bond through the shared adventure.
 584 Sara explained that no matter what they did, everything “felt more exciting” because they
 585 experienced the adventure feeling “like one team and one unit”. For Sara, turning the
 586 experience into a good adventure meant:

587 “Just doing something shared, where you're like: ‘I don't really know what's
 588 happening, but this is, this is entertaining’. You're like: ‘This is something that
 589 we either can, like, tell a story about or, like, kind of had a shared experience
 590 of...’” (Sara).

591 One of these unique, adventurous stories was shared by Liam:

592 “Whenever I take acid, it doesn't really matter what we end up doing, uh, it
 593 always feels like an adventure. It always... It doesn't matter where we go or what
 594 we do, we always seem to run into sort of unique or interesting experiences.
 595 Like, uhm, like when we were sitting on that hill and some like sweaty man ran
 596 up to us. . . . We didn't really know what was going on, but I think he said he
 597 was being chased by a dog or something. . . . You just meet these, like, weird,
 598 unique people. And you're like: ‘Is this because I'm on acid that I'm, like, really
 599 appreciating this sweaty man for everything that he is?’” (Liam).

600 ***The Beauty Around Us***

601 Jakub preferred taking psychedelics with his partner Natalia and friends over solitary
 602 experiences, because he would rather see the movie in the “real world” than the “cartoon in
 603 [his] head”. For him, the former emphasises connecting with others and immersing oneself
 604 in psychedelics’ visual effects while the latter is akin to an introspective experience. He was
 605 quite fond of the movie analogy and compared taking LSD to getting excited about seeing a
 606 newly released movie in the cinema. The crucial difference being for Jakub was that with LSD

607 there is no need to wait for the next release, but instead *The Beauty Around Us* can be
 608 immediately experienced:

609 “The world is beautiful at every second. . . . You are used to its beautifulness,
 610 but when you are being LSD, it's *beautiful* beautiful, you know” (Jakub,
 611 emphasis added).
 612 — “And you can see the beauty” (Natalia).
 613 “So, that's like invitation to see the world even more beautiful like it already is”
 614 (Jakub).

615 Almost all participants attributed their (newly found) admiration of beauty as a
 616 positive influence on their experience; Especially in nature, when they “appreciate trees”
 617 (Lewys) or notice how “the green stuff is breathing” (Sara).

618 “What got me the most in the whole trip was just the picturesque experience of
 619 it all. Genuinely just everything was so beautiful” (Lewys).

620 “I just remember thinking ‘I'm having such a great time right now’. And I did
 621 have such a great time. And we sat under the tree and we were surrounded by
 622 mountains. It was like a bowl, and then there were these fractals in the
 623 mountains, uh, you know. It was a great time” (Vijay).

624 ***Breaking Through***

625 Due to the brevity and intensity of a DMT experience, Damiano and Victoria consumed
 626 it not simultaneously but took turns. Damiano had smoked DMT multiple times but had
 627 previously never managed to “break through”, a trance-like state characterized as “passing
 628 into a ‘space’ that may be thoroughly alien or uncannily familiar yet is commonly reported as
 629 veridical and authentic” (St John, 2018, p. 58). Damiano reported his physical, mental, and
 630 spiritual preparation, which included breathing and yoga exercises, had culminated in his
 631 ability to experience a “kundalini awakening” immediately followed by a DMT breakthrough.

632 “I experienced an extreme sense of peace, of joy, of calm, of calmness. My body
 633 was below my consciousness, and it was sitting in the lotus position. Completely
 634 empty inside. Like I felt my body was just . . . an empty vessel. And, that was
 635 extremely therapeutic emptiness inside my body. All the tensions, all these
 636 [word in Italian] body behaviour, everything was just clear, washed. I was in
 637 this realm of light, above my head. Every sufferance, every that came up from
 638 the body to this realm, it transformed into light. Anything positive, negative,
 639 neutral, there is just light. There is no judgement, everything is light, everything
 640 becomes this ethereal existence. And, I was extremely blessed. And, yeah, I
 641 loved it” (Damiano).

After the experience was over, he shared with Victoria what he witnessed. Damiano reported an encounter of pure bliss and “the true faith” in the realm of light. Victoria described being touched by Damiano’s transcendental experience and feeling close to him.

“A realm where everything is light, where there is only peace and calmness and joy and ecstasy. Whenever, in the days later, whenever I felt like something was bothering me, I would just throw it up. Because into this realm, everything just dissolves into the universal light” (Damiano).

“I love to see people experiencing their true self. Because you can see it. I could see his bliss in his posture. He was like, he looked empty and, like, very stable. He was not moving a muscle. He was like a statue. I don't know. (laughs) And he came back and he said this, and I was still feeling blessed by my experience, so I was even more closer to him” (Victoria).

Discussion

The study has explored the nature of psychedelic experiences within romantic couples and three themes were developed as part of a reflexive thematic analysis: Navigating Anxiety, Reshaping Practices, and Encountering Bliss. The themes portray aspects of what it means to be in an altered state of consciousness with a romantic partner and psychedelics’ impact on the relationship itself. The primary focus of the exploratory study was on the acute effects during the psychedelic experience, induced by one of the classic psychedelics (LSD, psilocybin, or DMT). This leads to the question whether the acute influence of psychedelics (Preller & Vollenweider, 2019) encouraged moments of intimate relating between partners, as defined by the *interactional intimacy* model by Prager and Roberts (2004). Based on the results of this analysis, this paper argues that couples’ psychedelic experiences featured phenomenologically distinct instances of interactional intimacy termed *psychedelic intimacy*: a state of interactional intimacy achieved via a psychedelic-induced altered state of consciousness. The three necessary and sufficient conditions – self-exposure, positive involvement, and shared understanding – as defined by Prager and Roberts (2004) are thus extended by a fourth condition, induced by a psychedelic-induced altered state of consciousness.

While the fourth condition is self-evident for the interviewed couples, the other three conditions require a closer examination of the findings. First, *self-exposure* is promoted by

verbal or nonverbal behaviours revealing aspects of the self, which are considered private or personal; the lowering of defences and willingness to show oneself in a state of vulnerability is often accompanied by strong emotions (Prager & Roberts, 2004). The theme *Navigating Anxiety* meets this condition as it highlights how participants willingly put themselves in a vulnerable position and did not shy away from revealing their innermost self to the other. Second, *positive involvement* between partners is a state of mutually undivided attention to the present interaction with the other featuring a positive regard for the other, which may be expressed via verbal cues, nonverbal cues, or a combination of both (Prager & Roberts, 2004). The couples' reports contained many instances of positive involvement: The interactions outlined in the theme *Encountering Bliss* were characterized by couples enjoying the present moment together while feeling connected to their partner. Among other examples, we can think of how positive involvement contributed to the *Calming Presence* of a partner or promoted *Spirited Discussions* between partners. Third, *shared understanding* is built during an interaction when both partners gain insight into the inner experience of the other and develop a deeper understanding of their partner's lived experience, which extends beyond the interaction in question (Prager & Roberts, 2004). The theme *Reshaping Practices* highlights interactions during which the couples gained a shared understanding, for example related to their communication patterns (*Spirited Discussions*, *Straight Talking*) or reasons for *Excessive Worrying*.

Going beyond the topic of intimacy, many of the themes identified as important for couples in Britain correspond with themes related to psychedelic-induced experiences. Gabb and Fink's (2018) couples valued communication practices which allowed them to "relate to each other" (p. 54) or build a "deep knowing, beyond words" (p. 60). Similarly, this study's couples emphasized how psychedelics facilitated novel patterns of communication (cf. *Reshaping Practices*). This overlap could indicate how psychedelics' pro-social effects might be able to encourage ways of communicating which are otherwise more difficult to attain.

In a similar vein, many aspects of the couples' experiences bore resemblance to couples who had taken MDMA together (Anderson et al., 2018, 2019), such as the carving out of

special time for the experience, the distance to everyday routines, and feelings of closeness/oneness with the partner. Both classic psychedelic drugs and MDMA have been found to increase feelings of trust, openness, and unity, while reducing fear avoidance (Dolder et al., 2016; Krediet et al., 2020; MacLean et al., 2011; Mason et al., 2020; Preller & Vollenweider, 2019), an essential factor in establishing therapeutic alliance in the clinical context. In romantic couples, it may lower the threshold for the self-exposure condition of interactional intimacy, especially as partners embark on a potentially anxiety-inducing experience together. Classic psychedelics have also been linked to an increase in mindfulness, particularly the aspects concerning present-centred awareness and non-reactivity (Agin-Liebes et al., 2021; Kiraga et al., 2022; Madsen et al., 2020; Radakovic et al., 2022), which may exert a beneficial influence on couples' ability to focus their attention on each other during interactions featuring positive involvement, the second criterion for interactional intimacy. Moreover, heightened empathy both under the acute influence of psychedelics (Preller & Vollenweider, 2019), and in the days following (Kiraga et al., 2021), could contribute to novel insights participants have gained about their partners and associated experiences of shared understanding, the third conditions for interactional intimacy. The combination of these three factors (openness, mindfulness, and empathy) during shared psychedelic experiences could create a fertile environment for interactional intimacy between romantic partners.

Given the growing clinical trials with psychedelics, exploring them as a potential therapeutic substance for a range of mental and physical health implications, it is important to consider the clinical implications from this study. First, one of the most significant personal relationships, where one gets most of their emotional needs met, is in a romantic couple. Romantic relationship quality, a person's subjective perception that their relationship is relatively good versus bad, is thus a powerful psychological construct. Accordingly, unhappy relationships are associated with many negative stress-related outcomes. To avoid far-reaching societal consequences of low relationship quality, interventions and practices attempting to maintain or improve relationship quality are of high importance. Results of this study indicate that a shared psychedelic experience may enhance aspects of intimacy that can

support relationship quality, this suggests the possibility of utilizing psychedelic-assisted couples therapy as a therapeutic approach to, for example, promote relationship quality. That said, future studies should directly address whether a shared psychedelic experience can directly enhance relationship quality (See clinicaltrials ID: NCT05670184 for ongoing work).

Furthermore, in the current study, participants reported that especially their first psychedelic experience was associated with increased feelings of anxiety. Appropriate preparations and being in the presence of a more experienced partner were reported as helpful anxiolytic strategies. However, even when both partners were taking psychedelics for the first time, they were able to exert a calming influence on one another. In clinical trials, some participants reported high anxiety going into their psychedelic experience as well (Watts et al., 2017). Thus, the involvement of a romantic partner (or even close family members) for the first, preparatory psychedelic session might be worth exploring as a means of reducing anxiety. Additionally, clinical trial participants indicated during the follow-up interview that talking to others with similar experiences proved beneficial in terms of making sense of and reconnecting with what they had experienced under the influence of psilocybin (Watts et al., 2017). While topics such as processing and integrating past psychedelic experiences were not explicitly addressed in the current study, it is possible that couples could benefit from being able to make sense of their experience together.

This study is not without its limitations. It is possible that couples who had less impactful or beneficial experiences were less likely to reach out because they felt their experiences were not worth mentioning. On the other end of the spectrum, couples with unpleasant experiences might have preferred not to discuss those during an interview. Furthermore, some couples explicitly sought out these shared experiences not for purely recreational purposes but to engender intimacy and strengthen their relationship. Given the sample population of couples in ongoing relationships, no conclusions can be drawn about the impact of psychedelics on the longevity of relationships. Finally, spending quality time together as a couple has been recognized as positive influence on intimacy and relationship health (Gabb & Fink, 2018; Girme et al., 2014; Milek et al., 2015; Pearson et al., 2009), so it

is possible that couples also received benefits from dedicating an entire day to focus on themselves.

Conclusion

Psychedelic research thus far has emphasized the benefits for patients in clinical research (Vollenweider & Preller, 2020) or healthy individuals (Gandy, 2019). Consequently, the prosocial effects of psychedelics have mainly been studied *within* individuals (i.e., impact on an individual's emotional empathy), whereas this study is the first to start to assess effects *between* individuals (i.e., an increase in prosocial behaviour between people). More precisely, the present study is the first to examine experiences *within* couples under the influence of classic psychedelics. The reflexive thematic analysis led to the development of three themes, which make up the quilt that was the psychedelic experience for the interviewed couples. When faced with a potentially negative experience, the couples in the current study were *Navigating Anxiety* with careful preparation and the calming presence of their more experienced partner. For some couples, the constituting practices of their relationship resurfaced during the experience, and the psychedelic experience supported the couple as they were *Reshaping Practices* by renegotiating how they relate to each other. *Encountering Bliss* was essential to all couples' shared experiences, and they cherished those moments of pure joy bringing them closer to the person they care so dearly about. The reported experiences met the conditions for the presence of *interactional intimacy* (Prager & Roberts, 2004). However, given the distinct phenomenological quality of psychedelic experiences (such as drug-induced increases in openness, trust, connectedness, mindfulness, and empathy), the term *psychedelic intimacy* is suggested to encompass couples sharing a psychedelic-induced altered state of consciousness.

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1022 Figure 1. Overview of the three themes (in bold) and subthemes



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