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Research Article
Exploring Knowledge, Attitudes and Openness toward Psychedelics among Medical and Psychology Students in a Conservative Cultural Setting

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Abstract

Background and Objective: Psychedelic substances have re-emerged as promising tools in mental health treatment, yet their integration into clinical practice is influenced by public and professional perceptions. In Saudi Arabia, research on knowledge and attitudes toward psychedelic science remains scarce, particularly among future healthcare professionals. This study assesses and compares the knowledge, attitudes and openness toward psychedelic science among medical and psychology students in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. **Materials and Methods:** A comparative cross-sectional study was conducted between September and December 2024 across six academic institutions. A total of 360 students (50.3% medical, 49.7% psychology) completed a validated bilingual questionnaire assessing knowledge, attitudes and openness toward psychedelics. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Chi-square tests, with significance set at $p<0.05$. **Results:** Psychology students reported significantly higher knowledge across all indicators, including curricular exposure (58.7 vs. 38.7%, $p<0.001$) and self-rated awareness of psychedelic-assisted therapy (47.5 vs. 23.2%, $p<0.001$). Attitudinal differences were also evident, with psychology students showing greater support for legalization (50.9 vs. 33.1%, $p = 0.001$) and recognition of potential benefits, including spiritual value (51.3 vs. 29.8%, $p<0.001$). Openness to learning and clinical application was higher among psychology students (62.0% vs. 48.1%, $p = 0.046$), though both groups expressed concerns about potential risks. **Conclusion:** Psychology students demonstrated greater knowledge, more favorable attitudes and higher openness toward psychedelic science compared to medical students. Integrating evidence-based psychedelic education into curricula may enhance awareness, critical evaluation and responsible clinical adoption in Saudi Arabia.

Key words: Psychedelics, knowledge, attitudes, openness, medical students, psychology students, Saudi Arabia, psychedelic-assisted therapy

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Data Availability: All relevant data are within the paper and its supporting information files.

INTRODUCTION

Psychedelics, a subclass of hallucinogenic substances, act primarily on serotonin receptors in the brain and can induce profound alterations in perception, mood and cognition[1]. While once stigmatized due to their association with recreational use, psychedelics have recently regained scientific interest for their potential therapeutic benefits, particularly in the management of treatment-resistant depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and end-of-life distress[2-4]. Despite their low addictive potential and relatively favorable safety profile compared to other psychoactive substances[5], psychedelics are not without risk, as they can elicit adverse psychological reactions such as anxiety, panic, or exacerbation of underlying psychiatric conditions[6]. Consequently, their clinical use requires careful regulation, professional supervision and robust evidence to support their safety and efficacy.

Globally, research on psychedelics has expanded considerably, exploring public perceptions, ethical considerations and potential clinical applications[7-9]. However, studies remain limited in the Middle East, where sociocultural and religious norms may strongly influence attitudes toward these substances[10,11]. In Saudi Arabia, where substance use is subject to strict legal and cultural restrictions, the exploration of psychedelic science remains in its infancy. Understanding how future healthcare and mental health professionals perceive psychedelics is critical, as their attitudes and knowledge can shape the acceptance, integration and regulation of psychedelic-assisted therapies in clinical practice.

This study addresses this gap by examining and comparing the knowledge, attitudes and openness toward psychedelics among medical and psychology students in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. As these students represent future healthcare providers and mental health practitioners, their perspectives provide valuable insights into the potential for integrating psychedelic science into educational curricula and future clinical applications.

The primary objective of this study was to assess and compare the knowledge, attitudes and openness toward psychedelic science among medical and psychology students in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. In addition, the study aimed to evaluate students' awareness of the therapeutic potential, perceived risks and legal considerations associated with psychedelic substances, as well as to examine differences in curricular exposure and self-reported learning between the two disciplines. Collectively, these objectives seek to provide evidence-based insights to inform educational strategies and support future discussions on the potential integration of psychedelic science into clinical practice within the region.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study design and setting: This study employed a comparative cross-sectional design and was conducted in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, from September to December 2024.

Study population: A total of 360 medical and psychology students, both male and female, were recruited from six academic institutions in Saudi Arabia: Batterjee Medical College, King Abdulaziz University, Effat University, Dar Al-Hekma University, University of Jeddah and Ibn Sina National College. Participants represented all academic levels, ranging from first-year to fifth-year students.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria: Participants eligible for inclusion were medical and psychology students aged 18 years or older, of any nationality and gender. Exclusion criteria encompassed individuals who declined participation, students not enrolled in medical or psychology programs, preparatory-year students, interns, postgraduate students and those who submitted duplicate questionnaire responses.

Sampling technique and sample size: A non-probability convenience sampling technique was used. The minimum sample size was calculated using Raosoft® with a 95% confidence level, a 5% margin of error and an expected prevalence of 50%, resulting in a required sample size of 360 students. The study was powered at 80%, based on a previously reported prevalence of knowledge about psychedelics of 39%[12]. Accordingly, the final sample comprised 360 students from two academic disciplines: medicine and psychology.

Study tool: Data were collected using an online questionnaire adapted from prior studies[7,8] with permission from the original authors. The questionnaire was bilingual (English-Arabic) to maximize accessibility. The translation underwent rigorous forward and backward procedures to ensure conceptual equivalence

To ensure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, a pilot test was conducted with 15 students who were not part of the main study sample. The pilot aimed to evaluate item clarity, logical flow and estimated completion time (6-8 min). Based on participant feedback, minor revisions were implemented to enhance clarity and improve overall engagement.

Questionnaire structure: The questionnaire comprised the following main sections:

- **Demographic information:** Six items assessing gender, marital status, nationality, academic major, year of study and university affiliation.
- **Knowledge, attitudes and openness toward psychedelics:** Seventeen items measured on a 5-point Likert scale, categorized as follows: Knowledge (4 items), attitudes- further divided into legal use (4 items), perceived effects (3 items) and risk perception (3 items)- and openness toward psychedelics (3 items).

Responses were scored from 0 to 4, where 0 = disagree, 1 = partially disagree, 2 = neutral, 3 = partially agree and 4 = agree. For each domain, average scores were calculated to reflect the overall level of knowledge, attitudes and openness.

Ethical considerations: All participants provided written informed consent. For the online survey, consent was obtained electronically after participants reviewed the form. Where applicable, signed written consent forms were also collected. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Ethical Committee at Batterjee Medical College, Jeddah (Ref. No. RES-2024-0049). The study was conducted in compliance with the Declaration of Helsinki, ensuring that the rights and safety of participants were prioritized.

Statistical analysis: Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26 (Chicago, IL, USA). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize qualitative variables, primarily through frequency distributions. Inferential analyses were conducted using Chi-square tests to assess associations between knowledge, attitude and openness toward psychedelics. A p-value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

Demographic characteristics: The demographic characteristics of the study participants (N = 360) are summarized in Table 1. The sample was predominantly female (71.7%), with males comprising 28.3% of respondents. Most participants were single (97.2%) and just under half were Saudi nationals (45.0%), while the remaining 55.0% were non-Saudi. With respect to academic discipline, 50.3% of students were enrolled in medical programs and 49.7% in psychology programs. Distribution across academic years showed that 31.8% were in their first year, followed by 20.7% in the second year. Participants were recruited from six universities in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, with the largest proportion from Batterjee Medical College (45.8%), followed by King Abdulaziz University (25.8%).

Knowledge about psychedelic science: Knowledge about psychedelic science, presented in Table 2, was consistently higher among psychology students than medical students across all measured indicators, with all differences reaching statistical significance (all $p<0.001$). Regarding educational sufficiency, 41.9% of psychology students agreed or partially agreed that they had received sufficient education on psychedelic science, compared to only 26.5% of medical students. Disagreement was substantially more common among medical students (46.4%) than psychology students (22.9%), while neutral responses were reported by 27.1% and 35.2% of students, respectively ($p<0.001$). When asked whether they kept themselves updated on new findings, 43.1% of psychology students agreed or partially agreed, versus just 23.8% of medical students. Again, medical students showed a higher rate of disagreement (43.6 vs. 25.6%), with similar rates of neutrality (32.6% vs. 31.3%; $p<0.001$). In terms of self-rated knowledge of psychedelic-assisted therapy, only 23.2% of medical students reported agreement or partial agreement, in contrast to 47.5% of psychology students. Nearly half of medical students disagreed or partially disagreed (47.0%), compared with just 20.1% of psychology students, while neutral responses were relatively similar (29.8% vs. 32.4%; $p<0.001$).

Finally, significantly more psychology students (58.7%) than medical students (38.7%) reported that they had learned about psychedelic science in their educational program ($p<0.001$; Fig. 1).

Collectively, these findings indicate that psychology students not only report greater curricular exposure to psychedelic science but also higher self-rated knowledge and more active engagement with current evidence than their medical counterparts.

Attitudes towards psychedelics: Attitudes toward psychedelics were assessed across three domains: Legal use, perceived effects and risk assessment (Table 3). Regarding clinical implementation, similar proportions of medical (55.8%) and psychology students (58.7%) supported the integration of psychedelic science into clinical practice in Jeddah ($p = 0.755$). However, psychology students were significantly more likely to support or partially support the complete legalization of psychedelics for public health purposes (50.9 vs. 33.1%; $p = 0.001$). Agreement with legalizing

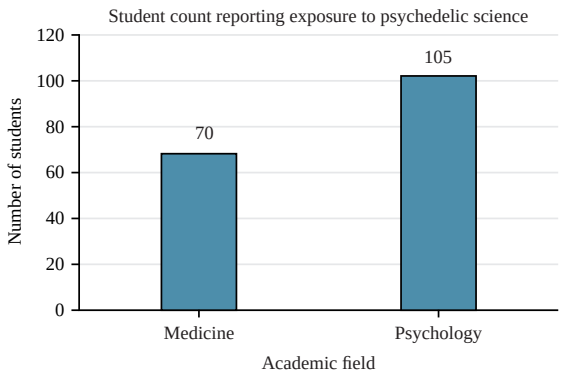

Fig. 1: Number of medical and psychology students reporting exposure to psychedelic science in their educational program

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of participants (N = 360)

Variable	Category	N	Percentage
Gender	Male	102	28.3
	Female	258	71.7
Marital status	Married	10	2.8
	Single	350	97.2
Nationality	Saudi	162	45.0
	Non-Saudi	198	55.0
Major	Medicine	181	50.3
	Psychology	179	49.7
Academic year	1st year	115	31.8
	2nd year	75	20.7
	3rd year	57	15.7
	4th year	63	17.5
	5th year	50	14.3
University	Batterjee Medical College	165	45.8
	King Abdulaziz University	93	25.8
	Effat University	47	13.1
	Dar al-Hekma University	37	10.3
	University of Jeddah	16	4.4
	Ibn Sina National College	2	0.6

Table 2: Knowledge about psychedelic science among medical and psychology students (N = 360)

Knowledge statements	Student cohort	Disagree (%)	Partially disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Partially agree (%)	Agree (%)	p-value
I have had sufficient education	Medicine	26.0	20.4	27.1	14.9	11.6	<0.001***
about psychedelic science in my program	Psychology	10.6	12.3	35.2	18.4	23.5	
I keep myself updated on new findings	Medicine	29.8	13.8	32.6	11.6	12.2	<0.001***
in psychedelic science	Psychology	12.8	12.8	31.3	14.0	29.1	
I am knowledgeable about	Medicine	26.0	21.0	29.8	11.6	11.6	<0.001***
psychedelic-assisted therapy	Psychology	15.6	4.5	32.4	16.2	31.3	

***Significant p<0.001 and Chi-square analysis

evidence-based psychedelic-assisted therapy was equally high in both groups (47.5%), with borderline significance (p = 0.055). Moreover, a considerable proportion of both medical and psychology students believed that administering psychedelics to patients would sooner or later lead to bad outcomes, with no significant difference between groups.

In terms of perceived effects, concern about physical health risks was high across both groups (61.3% medical vs. 51.4% psychology; p = 0.176). Psychology students more frequently endorsed the belief that psychedelic use could improve the world (35.8 vs. 23.8%), while medical students were more likely to disagree (48.1% vs. 26.8%; p<0.001). Similarly, a significantly greater proportion of psychology students recognized spiritual or transpersonal value in psychedelics (51.3%) compared to medical students (29.8%; p<0.001).

Risk assessment revealed that psychology students were more likely to view psychedelics as less dangerous than other substances (45.8 vs. 38.1%; p<0.001). Concern about mental

Table 3: Attitudes towards psychedelics among medical and psychology students (N = 360)

	Attitudinal statements	Student cohort	Disagree (%)	Partially disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Partially agree (%)	Agree (%)	p-value
Legal use of psychedelics	I believe psychedelic science can be put into clinical practice in Jeddah	Medicine Psychology	7.2 3.9	5.0 5.0	32.0 32.4	24.3 26.3	31.5 32.4	0.755
	I believe a complete legalization (including private use) of psychedelics would benefit public health	Medicine Psychology	23.2 10.1	12.7 13.4	30.9 25.7	12.7 24.6	20.4 26.3	0.001**
	I believe evidence-based psychedelic-assisted therapy should be legalized in Jeddah	Medicine Psychology	7.2 3.35	12.2 9.5	33.1 25.1	19.3 29.05	28.2 33.0	0.055
	I believe administering psychedelics to patients will sooner or later lead to bad outcomes	Medicine Psychology	6.1 10.6	13.3 14.5	34.8 30.7	24.3 22.4	21.5 21.8	0.569
Effects of psychedelics	I am worried about the effect of psychedelics on physical health	Medicine Psychology	7.7 5.6	6.1 8.9	24.9 34.1	23.8 17.3	37.5 34.1	0.176
	If more people used psychedelics, the world would be a better place	Medicine Psychology	31.5 15.1	16.6 11.7	28.2 37.4	10.5 19.6	13.3 16.2	<0.001***
	Psychedelics can give valuable spiritual and/or transpersonal experiences	Medicine Psychology	25.4 9.5	11.6 10.1	33.2 29.1	13.8 30.7	16.0 20.6	<0.001***
Risk assessment of psychedelics	I believe that psychedelics are less dangerous than other illegal drugs	Medicine Psychology	13.3 6.1	9.4 15.1	39.2 33.0	27.1 20.1	11.0 25.7	<0.001***
	I am worried about the effect of psychedelics on mental health	Medicine Psychology	3.3 2.8	4.4 7.3	25.4 30.2	27.6 21.2	39.3 38.5	0.467
	If psychedelics were used privately to a greater extent, it would lead to an increase in mental illness	Medicine Psychology	3.9 2.2	4.9 8.4	27.1 31.9	23.8 18.4	40.3 39.1	0.368

**Significant p<0.01, ***Significant p<0.001 and Chi-square analysis

Table 4: Openness to psychedelic science among medical and psychology students (N = 360)

Openness statements	Student cohort	Disagree (%)	Partially disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Partially agree (%)	Agree (%)	p-value
I am interested in learning about psychedelic science in my program	Medicine Psychology	3.9 1.7	6.1 2.8	27.6 24.0	20.4 25.1	42.0 46.4	0.244
If psychedelic-assisted therapy is put into clinical practice in Jeddah, I am interested in conducting such treatment	Medicine Psychology	8.3 3.9	9.9 5.0	33.7 29.1	19.9 24.0	28.2 38.0	0.046
I believe that psychedelic science should be increased in Jeddah	Medicine Psychology	7.2 1.7	11.1 8.4	38.1 27.4	17.1 20.1	26.5 42.4	0.002**

**Significant p<0.01 and Chi-square analysis

health effects remained high in both groups (66.9% medical vs. 59.7% psychology; p = 0.467), as did concern over increased risk of mental illness (64.1 vs. 57.5%; p = 0.368), with no significant differences.

Overall, psychology students showed greater acceptance of legalization and more positive perceptions of potential benefits, whereas medical students expressed higher levels of caution, particularly regarding physical and mental health risks. Nonetheless, both groups demonstrated considerable concern about potential harms.

Openness towards psychedelics: Openness to psychedelic science was assessed through students' willingness to learn about the topic, engage in its clinical application and support its expansion in Jeddah (Table 4). Across all measures, psychology students demonstrated greater openness than medical students, with statistically significant differences in key areas. While 71.5% of psychology students agreed or partially agreed that psychedelic science should be included in their academic curriculum, this was slightly lower among medical students (62.4%), though the difference was not

statistically significant (p = 0.244). However, psychology students showed significantly greater interest in clinical application, with 62.0% expressing willingness to conduct psychedelic-assisted therapy if implemented in Jeddah, compared to 48.1% of medical students (p = 0.046). Support for expanding psychedelic science in Jeddah was also notably higher among psychology students (62.5%) than their medical counterparts (43.6%; p = 0.002). These findings indicate a broader openness among psychology students toward engaging with psychedelic science academically and clinically, consistent with their higher knowledge scores and more favorable attitudes.

DISCUSSION

Unlike studies conducted in Western or less restrictive regulatory contexts, this study highlights how educational background interacts with cultural and legal frameworks to shape future healthcare professionals' openness to emerging therapies. In the Saudi Arabian context, where psychoactive substances are subject to strict regulation and strong sociocultural norms, observed differences between medical and psychology students may reflect not only curricular exposure but also varying professional identities and ethical orientations. Accordingly, this study provides the first comparative assessment of knowledge, attitudes and openness toward psychedelic science among medical and psychology students in Saudi Arabia, revealing significantly higher knowledge levels, more favorable attitudes and greater openness among psychology students compared to their medical counterparts.

Psychology students reported significantly higher self-rated knowledge of psychedelic science and greater exposure to relevant content in their academic curricula. These findings mirror results from international studies showing that mental health-oriented programs often incorporate psychopharmacology and neuropsychiatric content more extensively than traditional medical curricula[13,14]. The limited exposure among medical students may reflect an absence of structured teaching on emerging therapies, a phenomenon previously documented in medical education research[15]. Moreover, psychology students' greater engagement with new findings may reflect higher intrinsic motivation to explore innovative mental health interventions[16]. Integrating psychedelic science into both curricula, particularly within pharmacology and psychiatry modules, may bridge this gap and ensure that future healthcare professionals are adequately informed.

Attitudes toward psychedelic use varied, with psychology students expressing greater support for legalization and acknowledgment of potential benefits, including spiritual and transpersonal experiences. Similar patterns have been reported among psychology students and professionals, who are often more familiar with evidence on psychedelic-assisted therapy for depression, anxiety and PTSD[2-4]. Conversely, medical students expressed more caution, particularly regarding physical and mental health risks- consistent with findings from regions where strict legal frameworks shape medical education and public perception[17,18]. Interestingly, both groups shared concern that psychedelic use could lead to adverse outcomes, underscoring the need for controlled, evidence-based clinical implementation supported by rigorous safety protocols.

While psychology students were more likely to perceive psychedelics as having positive effects, concerns about mental health risks remained high across both groups. This aligns with prior research suggesting that even among supportive populations, apprehension persists due to historical stigma, limited clinical exposure and uncertainty about long-term outcomes[18-20]. These findings highlight the importance of incorporating risk–benefit discussions and evidence-based harm reduction strategies into educational programs, ensuring that future clinicians are equipped to evaluate psychedelics critically.

The greater openness among psychology students to engage with psychedelic science academically and clinically is consistent with their higher knowledge and more favorable attitudes. International studies suggest that willingness to engage in emerging therapies is closely tied to prior exposure and perceived relevance to professional practice[21,22]. The findings indicate that educational interventions such as seminars, workshops and research electives could enhance openness among medical students and prepare them for potential future integration of psychedelic-assisted therapy within clinical care.

The study's Saudi Arabian context is particularly significant, as cultural and religious factors heavily influence perceptions of psychoactive substances[23]. Despite these constraints, the observed willingness to engage with psychedelic science- especially among psychology students- suggests a growing interest in evidence-based mental health innovations. Ethical frameworks tailored to the region will be essential for guiding future policy, ensuring that clinical use, if adopted, aligns with cultural values and regulatory standards.

This study contributes novel insights by comparing two distinct student populations within a Middle Eastern context, yet several limitations warrant consideration. The cross-sectional design limits causal inferences and convenience sampling may introduce selection bias. Self-reported measures could also be influenced by social desirability bias, particularly in a setting where substance use is highly regulated. Future studies should incorporate qualitative approaches to explore underlying perceptions and longitudinal designs to evaluate changes over time.

The findings of this study offer practical guidance for integrating psychedelic science into higher education curricula and professional training. Educational institutions should consider incorporating structured modules on psychedelic-assisted therapy, psychopharmacology and neuropsychiatric mechanisms into both medical and psychology programs. Workshops, seminars and research electives focused on evidence-based psychedelic science could enhance students' knowledge, address misconceptions and foster informed attitudes toward therapeutic applications. For medical students, targeted interventions emphasizing clinical safety, risk-benefit assessment and legal considerations may bridge the current knowledge gap and promote openness toward innovative treatments. Collaborative initiatives between medical and psychology faculties could also encourage interdisciplinary learning, enabling students to appreciate both clinical and psychosocial dimensions of psychedelic therapy. Additionally, culturally and ethically tailored educational frameworks are essential in the Saudi Arabian context, ensuring that discussions on psychedelic use align with societal values and regulatory guidelines.

Future research should adopt longitudinal and mixed-methods designs to examine how knowledge, attitudes and openness evolve over time, particularly in response to curricular interventions and clinical exposure. Qualitative studies exploring the underlying beliefs, ethical concerns and cultural influences shaping students' perceptions would provide deeper insights into barriers and facilitators for adopting psychedelic-assisted therapies. Expanding the study to include other regions, academic disciplines and practicing healthcare professionals could inform broader educational strategies and policy development. Finally, evaluating the impact of pilot educational programs or workshops on students' knowledge, attitudes and clinical readiness could guide evidence-based implementation of psychedelic science within medical and psychology training in Saudi Arabia.

CONCLUSION

This study provides the first comparative assessment of knowledge, attitudes and openness toward psychedelic science among medical and psychology students in Saudi Arabia. Psychology students demonstrated higher levels of knowledge, more favorable attitudes and greater openness compared to medical students, likely reflecting differences in curricular exposure and intrinsic interest in mental health innovations. Despite these differences, both groups expressed caution regarding potential risks, highlighting the importance of evidence-based education and controlled clinical application. The results underscore the need to integrate psychedelic science into academic curricula and professional development programs, preparing future healthcare professionals to engage critically and responsibly with emerging therapeutic modalities.

SIGNIFICANCE STATEMENT

This study provides important insights into knowledge, attitudes and openness toward psychedelic science among future healthcare professionals in a conservative cultural setting. It highlights educational gaps and emphasizes the need for evidence-based curriculum integration to support informed decision-making, reduce stigma and guide the responsible clinical adoption of emerging mental health therapies.

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