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# Electronic Dance Music Events as Modern-Day Ritual

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*Electronic dance music (EDM)* events may function as a ritual space for psycho-spiritual exploration and personal development, often linked to the occurrence of non-ordinary states of consciousness in participants. This paper reviews the literature addressing the spiritual, religious, and transpersonal facets of participants' experiences at EDM events, with an emphasis on the subsequent integration of these experiences into daily life. Several empirical studies conducted in the past two decades, of which the most recent was conducted by the first author of the present paper (Redfield, 2017, this issue), provides grounds to argue that EDM events can be vectors for enhancing personal and psychosocial wellbeing for their participants—a discussion that was omitted in previous studies that strictly emphasized either the dangers or the purely hedonistic nature of EDM participation. The paper concludes with suggestions for further research into the specific ways in which EDM events may benefit individual participants.

**Keywords:** *transpersonal phenomena, electronic dance music, club drugs, altered states of consciousness, spirituality, psychology, integration, qualitative research*

In most academic literature, controversial topics such as sex and drugs are most often talked about as two-sided coins—one side representing danger, and the other, recreational and hedonistic pleasure. Rarely, if ever, are the potentially transformative effects of such activities discussed. While human societies have used those activities as rites of passage, rituals, sacraments, and catalysts of spiritual growth for millennia, scholarly communities usually remain mute when confronting evidence of their potential value.

Electronic dance music (EDM) events participation has historically been studied through the lenses of danger and hedonism. While the potentially harmful psychological and physical consequences caused by the recreational use of club drugs by some EDM participants are real (Baggott & Mendelson, 2001; Gauthier, 2005; Gouzoulis-Mayfrank & Daumann, 2006; Henry & Rella, 2001; Holland, 2001b; Jansen, 2001; Kavanaugh & Anderson, 2008; Parks & Kennedy, 2004; Parrot, 2004, 2007; Sanders, 2006; Thomasius et al., 2006), they have also been sensationalized by media, government, and public health perspectives which simplistically view the rave scene as a war on drugs issue (Hunt, Evans, & Kares, 2007). Meanwhile,

a postmodern perspective dominated initial scholarly literature on EDM culture (Melechi, 1993; Redhead, 1993; Rietveld, 1993). In that case, a superficial analysis resulted, focusing on the hedonism and escapism purportedly enacted by EDM participants.

Using either perspective to understand the EDM scene neglects to address the subjective and beneficial aspects of EDM participation. The present paper uses the lens of transpersonal psychology to bridge this gap, and focuses on the potential for EDM events to function as ritual spaces of psycho-spiritual exploration and personal development, as well as to carry the possibility for positive impact on the psychological, psychosocial, and physical wellbeing of its participants.

The terms *electronic dance music (EDM) scene, culture, and events* are used throughout this paper to capture the range of phenomena associated with electronic dance music in the context of raves, clubs, and music festivals. It is beyond the scope of this paper to illustrate the complexities and nuances of the scene and its evolution. However, in order to provide context, a brief history and description of the music, culture, role of drugs, and types of events ensues. A representation of prior research on EDM culture with an emphasis on

the spiritual, religious, and transpersonal dimensions then follows. Next, the focus turns to ways in which EDM events induce altered states of consciousness and the role that set and setting play in evoking experiences of transpersonal phenomena. The paper closes with considerations of how transpersonal experiences are integrated into day-to-day life, and how those experiences may positively impact participants' wellbeing and health.

### Electronic Dance Music

The original style of electronic dance music, *House*, emerged as a progeny of disco in the early 1980s in Chicago, Detroit, and New York City. The Warehouse club in Chicago was the first to play it, and thus gave birth to the term House music (Collin, 2010; Matos, 2015; Reynolds, 2012). Fritz (1999) explained that "the disco beat remained but intensified, the vocals were minimized and eventually dropped out . . . and the song structure gradually gave way to a repeating, never-ending cycle of sound" (p. 66). Additionally, *disc jockeys* (DJs) began "playing records on two decks, cuing up one record and fading it in as the last record was ending, with the two sources primarily being used to create a smooth, seamless transition from one record to another" (Fritz, 1999, p. 66). These innovations created a template for DJs to play electronic dance music to this day. However, the popular medium for the music has recently shifted from vinyl to digital technology. Further development in the evolution of House music involved DJs mixing electronic tracks from Europe with new styles of disco (Collin, 2010; Matos, 2015; Poschardt, 2000; Reynolds, 2012).

Most electronic dance music today directly derives from House music, featuring 4/4 steady beats, or drum patterns, and eight-bar repeating cycles. Those beats are typically composed through drum-machine programming, or through manipulating recorded samples of drums (Bakker & Bakker, 2006; Poschardt, 2000; Reynolds, 2012). Evolving technology and new computer software now allow acoustic, organic, and electronically generated sounds to be layered into the music and sampled, created, and manipulated in endless ways (Attias, Gavanas, & Rietveld, 2013; Fritz, 1999; Ratcliffe, 2014; Sylvan, 2005; Takahashi, 2005, 2017).

House music has split off into a number of variations that include, but are not limited to, Acid House, Progressive House, Deep House, Tribal House, Vocal House, Tech House, Techno, Trance,

Psytrance, Industrial, Garage, Electro, Ragga, Bhangra, Downtempo, and Ambient, all of which have different layers, textures, vocal styles, and speeds (i.e., beats per minute; Bakker & Bakker, 2006). Additional and different styles of electronic dance music include Breaks, Jungle, Dubstep, and Drum and Bass. These originated from R&B, hip-hop, and rap music, and are based on one of the following: a break beat, a 4/4 syncopated rhythm, or a drum pattern (Attias et al., 2013; Fritz, 1999). For the purposes of this paper, all these styles are categorized as EDM.

### The Role of Drugs in EDM Culture

A wide variety of psychoactive drugs, typically referred to as *club drugs* (MDMA/Ecstasy, methamphetamine, cocaine, ketamine, GHB, Rohypnol, marijuana, LSD, and psilocybin), are not only used, but normalized in the EDM scene (Hunt et al., 2007; Malbon, 1999; Takahashi & Olaveson, 2003; Winstock, Griffiths, & Stewart, 2001). However, *MDMA* (3,4-Methylenedioxymethamphetamine), also known as *Ecstasy*, is recognized internationally as the quintessential drug of EDM culture. The terms MDMA and Ecstasy are often used interchangeably in the literature as well as in this paper. However, MDMA typically refers to the pure form of the drug, whereas Ecstasy indicates a pill synthesized in an underground laboratory, which may contain MDMA and other chemical compounds (Baggott et al., 2000).

Also, EDM participants commonly combine the use of two or three drugs at the same time. This practice is referred to as polydrug use. Ecstasy is the most widely used drug taken in combination with other drugs (Groves, Kelly, & Parsons, 2009; Hunt, Evans, Moloney, & Bailey, 2009). The reason for Ecstasy's popularity in EDM culture is due to its euphoric and energizing effects as well as the way it heightens the sound of the music. As Reynolds (1999) illustrated, "the music's emphasis on texture and timbre enhances the drug's mildly synesthetic effects, so that sounds seem to caress the listener's skin. You feel like you're dancing inside the music, sound becomes a fluid medium in which you're immersed" (p. 84).

The German company Merck first manufactured and patented MDMA in 1912, but did not disclose its uses at that time. MDMA resurfaced in 1953 when the U.S. Army began testing various drugs for their potential use in psychological warfare, but its use remained

ambiguous until Shulgin (1986, 1990) synthesized it and explored its effects in 1965. Due to its reportedly uplifting and transformative impact on the psyche and its ability to cultivate empathy, Shulgin shared MDMA with his psychotherapist friend, Leo Zeff, thus initiating the emergence of MDMA-assisted psychotherapy (Holland, 2001a; Saunders & Doblin, 1996).

By 1985, MDMA use had seeped out of therapist circles and into the dance clubs of Dallas and other North American cities. Meanwhile, disciples of the Indian guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh in the United States began using MDMA as a tool for spiritual development, and eventually brought MDMA to Amsterdam. In 1986, MDMA and House music gravitated into the party scene of Ibiza and, from there, migrated to England, where the rave scene and EDM culture were born. Hence, though of American origin, EDM and MDMA use had its cultural foundations in Ibiza and England (Fritz, 1999; Holland, 2001a; Saunders & Doblin, 1996).

As stated in the introduction, the potentially harmful psychological and physical consequences caused by the recreational use of club drugs by some EDM participants (Baggott & Mendelson, 2001; Gouzoulis-Mayfrank & Daumann, 2006; Henry & Rella, 2001; Holland, 2001b; Jansen, 2001; Kavanaugh & Anderson, 2008; Parks & Kennedy, 2004; Parrot, 2004, 2007; Sanders, 2006; Thomasius et al., 2006) have been widely researched, and then emphasized and sensationalized by the media and governments. In the 1990s, laws were passed that allowed authorities to increasingly criminalize EDM participation, as well as to control and prevent informal EDM events and heavily regulate more official events (Anderson, 2014; Hunt et al., 2007; Kavanaugh & Anderson, 2008; Sanders, 2006; Sylvan, 2005; Takahashi & Olaveson, 2003).

### Types of EDM Events

EDM events range widely in size as well as in design, depending on the financial means, vision, and intentions of the organizers. EDM events also have different classifications, referred to in this report as *raves*, *music festivals*, *mainstream clubs*, and *after-hours clubs*. The key component in these events is the technologically produced dance music, continuously mixed by DJs, for long durations (sometimes up to 12 hours or longer) and with the purpose of encouraging people to dance. Additional elements that comprise most EDM events include elaborate decorations and visual effects, such

as lights that flash to the rhythm of the music, lasers, wall projections depicting symbols, images, film, and sometimes, theatrical performances and dancers on stage with the DJ (Gauthier, 2004; Hutson, 2000; St John, 2012b; Sylvan, 2005; Takahashi, 2005).

The term rave is typically defined as a gathering of people who listen and dance to electronic dance music in often unlicensed, obscure, continuously varying, and spontaneously organized locations such as a warehouse, church, beach, desert, or forest (Fritz, 1999; Gauthier, 2004; Hutson, 2000; St John, 2001; Sylvan, 2005; Takahashi & Olaveson, 2003). Raves are frequently described as *underground* dance events that are sometimes created with the intention to generate a cultural or spiritual change. “The value of the dance event is more likely to be seen in terms of the community created within it than in terms of financial profitability” (Lynch & Badger, 2006, p. 29). The basic philosophy of rave culture is often summed up in the acronym PLUR (Peace, Love, Unity, Respect; Sylvan, 2005, p. 26). Nevertheless, the use of the term rave has been decreasing due to its association with illegal drug use and negative media attention (M. Takahashi, personal communications, March 19, 2013).

A more commercialized form of rave has emerged recently, targeting a younger crowd. Anderson (2014) explained that “a global EDM industry, dominated by entertainment companies like Made Events, Go Ventures, and Insomniac Productions, has brought raves to corporate-branded festivals, stadiums and mega-nightclubs” (p. 51). EZoo, Electric Daisy Carnival (EDC), and Ultra Music Festival are examples of these types of EDM events, referred to in this report as *music festivals* featuring EDM. Less commercialized versions of these large music festivals also exist; they include: Burning Man, Boom Festival, Shambhala Music Festival, Lightning in a Bottle, and Symbiosis. At these music festivals a variety of different EDM subgenres are usually featured as well as other styles of music. Also, additional activities are often provided, such as yoga, art, and lectures on numerous topics. These events typically last for days and are held outdoors (St John, 2012a, 2012b; Sylvan, 2005).

Many EDM participants report that the type of participant crowd has a major impact on their EDM experience (Malbon, 1999). Mainstream clubs that feature EDM are licensed, commercial operations in which organizers seek a profit while providing a safer,

more regulated environment (Lynch & Badger, 2006; Sylvan, 2005; Takahashi & Olaveson, 2003). The most important factors distinguishing mainstream clubs from raves are their accessibility, usually being open to anyone of legal drinking age who can pay the entry fee. Therefore, no consensual framework exists marking the purpose of the event as generating an atmosphere consistent with the PLUR philosophy that is characteristic of a rave. While there are individuals present for the aforementioned reasons, others are motivated by behaviors associated with bars, such as drinking and seeking a sexual partner (Gauthier, 2005; Sylvan, 2005; Takahashi & Olaveson, 2003). In other words, the crowd at a club may have a different feel from the crowd at a rave.

After-hours clubs that feature EDM are licensed venues that stay open past the designated curfew for clubs that serve alcohol. Therefore, after-hours clubs typically do not serve alcohol. They tend to hybridize mainstream club and rave atmospheres. The levels of exclusion, hierarchy, and difficulties associated with entry in mainstream clubs (Goulding & Shankar, 2004; Malbon, 1999; Thornton, 1996) are often less apparent in after-hours clubs. They frequently stay open into the morning or the next day, sometimes never closing for days at a time. As a result, the use of drugs is more prevalent in these clubs, for both their euphoric and energizing effects.

### Early Research on EDM Participation

Although EDM events first appeared in the mid-1980s, scholars and researchers did not explore them until they were flourishing in the 1990s throughout the United States and Europe (Olaveson, 2005). A postmodern perspective dominated initial scholarly literature on EDM culture (Melechi, 1993; Redhead, 1993; Rietveld, 1993). As such, a superficial analysis resulted, focusing on the hedonism and escapism purportedly enacted by EDM participants. Using a postmodern perspective to understand the EDM scene denies exploration into the personal, “lived experience” (Olaveson, 2005, p. 206) of EDM participation.

Newcombe (1991, 1992, 1994) conducted the first academic research on EDM culture. He used systematic in situ observations to understand club drug use in the British EDM scene, with the goal to inform public health initiatives on how to enforce harm reduction policies in EDM culture (Measham & Moore, 2006). His research prompted a major trend of studies

that used EDM culture to explore the use and effects of club drugs (Baggott et al., 2000; Bellis, Hughes, & Lowey, 2002; Grov et al., 2009; Halpern et al., 2010; Hunt & Evans, 2003; Hunt et al., 2007; Hunt et al., 2009; Kavanaugh & Anderson, 2008; Kelly, 2007; Malbon, 1999; Miller, Furr-Holden, Voas, & Bright, 2005; Moore & Miles, 2004; Parks & Kennedy, 2004; Parrot, 2004; Perrone, 2006; Rushkoff, 2001; Sanders, 2005, 2006; Winstock et al., 2001; Yacoubian et al., 2004).

### A Transpersonal Approach to Understanding the EDM Scene

Postmodern perspectives as well as those held within government, the media, and public health studies constitute important considerations regarding health and safety at EDM events. Danger can be inherent in the EDM scene due to the use of illegal drugs, sometimes used excessively and incautiously, as well as the hedonistic and escapist motivations of some participants. However, such perspectives deny the potential for EDM events to function as a space for psycho-spiritual exploration and fail to inquire into the individual motivations of participants. A number of researchers in the field have recognized this gap in the scholarly literature and research on EDM culture (Hutson, 1999, 2000; Gauthier, 2004, 2005; Malbon, 1999; Sai Chun-Lau, 2006; St John, 2006, 2012a; Sylvan, 2002, 2005; Takahashi, 2004a, 2004b, 2005; Takahashi & Olaveson, 2003; Till, 2006). Using research methods inherent to the fields of anthropology, sociology, and religious and cultural studies, these researchers explored the meaning EDM participants associate with attending EDM events and uncovered transpersonal, spiritual, and religious dimensions of their experiences.

Transpersonal is defined as “beyond the personal” (Scotton, 1996, p. 3) and includes experiences and processes that extend beyond the limits of individual ego and personality and past the boundaries of time and space (Braud, 1998; Tart, 1991; Grof, 1988; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993). Ferrer (2000) has viewed transpersonal phenomena as arising from *multilocal participatory events*, where the emergence of transpersonal experiences “occur not only in the locus of an individual but also in a relationship, a community, or a place” (p. 223; cf. Ferrer, 2008). Ferrer’s participatory approach reframed the experiential dimension of transpersonal phenomena to include the influence of participating in a transpersonal

event on individual consciousness. From this viewpoint, it is not the expansion of individual consciousness alone that allows access to transpersonal contents. A transpersonal event, like an EDM event, induces a transpersonal experience in an individual. In this paper, the term transpersonal is utilized to encompass the range of spiritual and religious phenomena associated with EDM participation.

Through the act of dance, EDM participation requires one's awareness to be in the body, allowing participants to experience "a kind of bodily mysticism, in which mystical union is experienced on physical, somatic, and kinesthetic levels" (Sylvan, 2005, p. 78). Repeated accounts of embodied, unitive experiences stimulated research into the ways in which EDM events exemplify the nontraditional forms of religion emerging in modern day life (Gauthier, 2005; Lynch & Badger, 2006; St John, 2004; Sylvan, 2005; Takahashi & Olaveson, 2003). Sai-Chun Lau (2006) and Till (2006) investigated the relationship between EDM culture and Christianity following reports of people seeking religious experience at EDM events instead of in traditional religious institutions. Sai-Chun Lau (2006) and Till (2006) found that Christian participants used EDM events as a spiritual practice.

While it is debatable whether the EDM scene can be categorized as a new religious movement (Olaveson, 2004; Wallace, 1956, 1966), religious terminology is sprinkled throughout scholarly descriptions of EDM participation (Gauthier, 2005; Hutson, 2000; Sai-Chun Lau, 2006; St John, 2004; Sylvan, 2005; Takahashi & Olaveson, 2003; Till, 2006). For example, Sylvan (2005) found that new EDM participants usually begin their involvement in EDM culture with a *conversion* experience, in which they feel that they have been reborn. Then they immerse themselves in the scene by going to EDM events frequently, which Sylvan compared to going to church. Similar to church attendance, EDM participation occurs, for some participants, regularly, often on a weekly basis, with both the EDM event and church contexts having consistent, ritualized structures (Takahashi & Olaveson, 2003).

Takahashi and Olaveson (2003) emphasized the ritual element of EDM participation, viewing EDM events as "contemporary rituals" (p. 75). Other researchers (e.g., D'Aquili & Laughlin, 1975; Newberg, 2002) have defined ritual as a sequence of structured and patterned behavior that employs varying types of

repetitive rhythmic activity, tending to recur in the same or nearly the same form with some regularity. Relatedly, all over the world, EDM events contexts include the rhythmic pulse of electronic dance music, a crowd of dancers, elaborate lighting systems and visual displays, and the presence of mind-altering substances. Takahashi and Olaveson (2003) discovered that EDM participants attend EDM events for many of the same reasons people attend "formal, culturally sanctioned religious rituals" (p. 75), including the desire for transcendent and transformative experiences.

Based on interviews with an unspecified number of EDM participants in the United States, Hutson (2000) found that many participants viewed the EDM scene "as a more direct form of spirituality than organized religion" (p. 38). In his ethnographic research on EDM culture in Canada, Gauthier (2005) described the EDM scene as an exemplar of *implicit* religion, a term that acknowledged the creation of religion outside of its traditional forms. He stated that "the recent flight from traditional religions does not reflect the death of the anthropological need for religion in our secularized societies, but rather its moving and morphing into new areas of cultural expression" (Gauthier, 2004, p. 408). St John (2001, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2012a, 2012b), an Australian cultural anthropologist, conducted extensive ethnographic research on EDM culture all over the world. While specializing in the evolution of the psytrance scene, he provided numerous examples of the transpersonal, spiritual, and religious aspects of EDM participation.

Takahashi and Olaveson (2003), from their experiential anthropological research conducted in the central Canadian EDM scene, revealed the transpersonal nature of EDM participation. They identified seven central themes based on both qualitative and quantitative data analysis: connectedness; embodiment; altered states of consciousness; spirituality; personal transformation; utopian models of society; and neo-tribalism, gnosis, and connection to the primordial past. These themes supported Sylvan's (2005) data on the transpersonal elements of EDM participation that emerged from ethnographic and qualitative research on the San Francisco Bay Area EDM scene. However, Sylvan interpreted the theme of connectedness beyond simply connecting with other people, as in Takahashi and Olaveson's research, to "a sense of unity and being part of a larger whole" (p. 72). Such direct experiences

of unity are an important facet of mystical experiences that are well documented in many religious doctrines (Beauregard & O'Leary, 2007; James, 1902; Pahnke, 1972; Stace, 1961; Underhill, 1974).

Sylvan (2005) also reported that a number of EDM participants described experiencing the presence of spirits at EDM events with whom they developed a conscious and beneficial relationship or by whom they became possessed. Sylvan conjectured that "this awareness of spirits in the dance-floor experience at raves is in an early developmental stage, especially compared with West African and Afro-Diasporic traditions that can skillfully identify with the particular spirit and its domain of expertise" (p. 92). Takahashi (2005, 2017) corroborated these findings by noting similarities between the music played by EDM DJs and the music played by musicians in possession trance rituals designed to summon spirits. Takahashi (2017) pointed out that, unlike in EDM culture, "possession trance is learned, expected, and socially acceptable" and "entrenched in a collective worldview that operates within a cosmological system that is enacted in a framework where the participants have a shared understanding of the sacred" (pp. 19-20). EDM culture lacks a collective spiritual framework that can help participants attain understanding of the experiences they have on the dance floor.

Other benefits of EDM participation discovered by researchers include an experience of rites of passage (Northcote, 2006), enhanced psychological health and wellbeing (Hunt et al., 2007; Hutson, 1999, 2000; Lynch & Badger, 2006; Sylvan, 2005; Takahashi & Olaveson, 2003), and feelings of solidarity (Kavanaugh & Anderson, 2008). Researchers revealed that EDM culture fostered a social network where participants developed intimate, supportive friendships (Hunt et al., 2007; Lynch & Badger, 2006; Malbon, 1999; Moore & Miles, 2004; Sylvan, 2005; Takahashi & Olaveson, 2003). Such experiences of novel and therapeutic group cohesion led to the term *neo-tribalism* (Maffesoli, 1996) to be used liberally in commentaries on EDM culture (Takahashi & Olaveson, 2003; St John, 2012a).

Many researchers (e.g., Hutson, 1999; Kavanaugh & Anderson, 2008; Northcote, 2006; St John, 2012a; Sylvan, 2002; Takahashi, 2004a, 2005, 2017) observed how EDM events mirror a variety of spiritual ceremonies, rituals, and shamanic practices performed in various cultures and indigenous, tribal societies. When viewed through this lens, EDM events

can be seen as *liminal* spaces that induce a psychologically subjective state of being on the threshold of, or between, two existential planes. In anthropological research, *liminality* is referred to as the state of disorientation one experiences in the middle of a ritual, when one no longer holds one's pre-ritual identity, but has not yet stepped into one's post-ritual identity (Turner, 1969; Van Gennep, 1984). Turner (1969) championed the liminal state as the key ingredient to the ritual process, as well as the source for cultural creativity, personal growth, and transformation (M. Takahashi, personal communications, March 19, 2013), all of which apply to states fostered by EDM events. Another term used by researchers (e.g. Gauthier, 2005; St John, 2010) to describe EDM culture is *communitas*, defined as people engaging together in the spirit of an unstructured, egalitarian community existing in a liminal state (Turner, 1969).

#### EDM Events Inducing Altered States of Consciousness

Relatedly, researchers (e. g., Malbon, 1999; Takahashi & Olaveson, 2003; Takahashi, 2004b, 2017) have acknowledged EDM events for the ways in which they induce altered states of consciousness (ASCs) in participants. Krippner (1972) defined an ASC as "a mental state which can be subjectively recognized by an individual (or by an objective observer of the individual) as representing a difference in psychological functioning from that individual's 'normal,' alert, waking state" (p. 1; Laksi, 1961, 1980; Tart, 1990, 2008). Winkelman (2004), a leading researcher on ASCs and neurotheological perspectives on shamanism, considered shamanism the foundation of "human cognitive evolution and spiritual experience" (p. 194). Winkelman (2009) explained that "shamanism's roots are found in primate social bonding rituals that were elaborated across human evolution to enhance group unification, psychosocial bonding, and therapeutic responses" (p. 248). Shamanism is found all over the world in broadly disconnected cultures, a fact that is not a result of diffusion, but a product of human psychobiology, which suggests that humans are innately drawn and biologically driven to enter ASCs (Bourguignon 1973; Weil, 1972; Winkelman, 2004).

Winkelman (2004) traced the origins of ASCs to hunter-gatherer societies in which shamans engaged in prolonged chanting, drumming, and dancing. These all-night ceremonies deliberately induced ASCs to provide

healing, admission into the spirit world, and access to supernatural powers (Bourguignon, 1973; Durkheim, 1976; Katz, 1982; Rouget, 1985; Walsh, 1990). These activities still occur today in various cultures, as well as at EDM events. EDM has similar features to the music, specifically, the drumming and rhythms, used in shamanism and spirit-possession ceremonies known to generate ASCs (Becker-Blease, 2004; Maurer, Kumar, Woodside, & Pekala, 1997; Neher, 1961, 1962; Nencini, 2002; Reynolds, 2012; Rouget, 1985; Sylvan, 2002; Takahashi, 2004b, 2005, 2017; Vaitl et al., 2005; Walsh, 1990; Winkelman, 2003). Drawing from the cross-cultural work of ethnomusicologist Rouget (1985), Takahashi (2005, 2017) explained that a similar method of “tension and release” (p. 257) is utilized by both DJs at EDM events and musicians in shamanic and possession ritual trance, where “the acceleration of tempo, an increase in volume (crescendo), the use of polyrhythm, rhythmic changes such as syncopation, and even a brief cessation of the music- such catalysts are techniques that interrupt the music’s flow, triggering trance” (p. 257). For this reason, DJs are sometimes referred to in the literature as *technoshamans* (Hutson, 1999; Takahashi, 2005, 2017).

EDM events induce ASCs in participants through several channels: the use of the auditory stimulation of electronic dance music (Takahashi, 2005, 2017); the photic stimulation of lasers, strobe lights and elaborate lighting systems, as well as visual imagery projected onto screens and theatrical performances on stage (D’Aquila & Newberg, 2000; Gellhorn & Kiely, 1972; Takahashi, 2004b; Winkelman, 2000); dancing (Frecka & Kulscar, 1989; Malbon, 1999; Prince, 1982; Takahashi, 2004b; Vaitl et al., 2005; Winkelman, 1997, 2000, 2004); and the crowd (Frecka & Kulscar, 1989; Malbon, 1999; Winkelman, 2004, 2009). Other factors that induce ASCs in participants include sleep deprivation (if the event is late at night and extends into the morning; Takahashi, 2004b; Winkelman, 1986); the ingestion of psychoactive drugs; and fasting (because drugs have a more potent effect on an empty stomach; Takahashi, 2004b; Winkelman, 1986). Additionally, the DJ’s connection to the crowd and their skill in utilizing the music to induce ASCs is crucial to the EDM experience (Takahashi, 2005, 2017). EDM events can be found in almost every country around the world, which suggests that they satisfy the innate psychobiological need to enter ASCs.

### Set and Setting

The use of drugs and the specific kind or kinds of drugs consumed can greatly influence the state of consciousness one experiences at an EDM event. While there are patterns and commonalities to the phenomenological experience of specific drugs, an individual’s personal experience of each drug is unique. Set and setting play a major role in these differences. Timothy Leary formulated the set and setting hypothesis in the early 1960s (Metzner, 2002). Researchers and therapists (e.g., Greer & Tolbert, 1998; Grof, 1975; Metzner & Adamson, 2001; Metzner, 2002; Mithoefer, Wagner, Mithoefer, Jerome, & Doblin, 2010; Pahnke & Richards, 1966) later tested this hypothesis while developing the field of psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy.

For example, when MDMA is used for psychotherapeutic purposes, the set includes the expectations, attitudes, personality, and mental state of the subject, along with her or his intention for utilizing MDMA. The therapist’s perception of MDMA is also important, as well as her or his personal method for facilitating the MDMA experience. The setting includes the physical environment and the relationship between the therapist and the subject (Greer & Tolbert, 1998; Grof, 1975; Metzner & Adamson, 2001). Taking a drug during psychotherapy or at home, for example, will generate a different experience than will taking a drug at an EDM event (Malbon, 1999).

Several researchers were specifically interested in the setting of EDM events, and the types of transpersonal experiences such settings evoke in EDM participants. EDM participants reported transpersonal phenomena at EDM events that are both drug- and nondrug-induced (Fritz, 1999; Malbon, 1999; Redfield, 2017, this issue; Sylvan, 2005; Takahashi & Olaveson, 2003). For example, in the study conducted by Takahashi and Olaveson (2003), 57% of their sample of personal accounts of EDM participation bore reports of having experienced an ASC at EDM events. An unspecified number reported the ingestion of MDMA or other psychoactive drugs as inducing an ASC, while an unspecified number used the term “natural high” (p. 83) to describe their accessing of ASCs and associated the shift in their state of mind to the music, extended length of time dancing, and the crowd’s influence.

In order to emphasize the importance of set and

setting, Cohen (1995) reported a survey of users who had experienced paranoia and anxiety after having ingested MDMA in clubs, bars, cafes, and malls. The setting of these environments may not have been conducive to a beneficial, growth-oriented, transpersonal experience. Similarly, not all EDM settings induce experiences of transpersonal phenomena for participants. Furthermore, not all EDM participants who use drugs at EDM events have transpersonal experiences (Fritz, 1999; Malbon, 1999). Although Ecstasy and other drugs can serve to enhance the EDM experience and encourage the induction of transpersonal phenomena, they are only a facet of a larger picture. The size of the EDM event, the visuals, the decorations, the lights, the crowd, the skill of the DJ, the music, and the state of one's mind all conspire to either prevent or foster a drug- or nondrug-induced transpersonal experience.

It is also important to note that the variety of settings within the EDM scene is extensive due to the numerous subgenres of electronic dance music and events organized around each specific subgenre (Kavanaugh & Anderson, 2008). For example, attending an outdoor psytrance event may affect a person differently than a deep house event in an after-hours club. Additionally, a person drawn to attend an outdoor psytrance event may have a different set going into the event than someone attracted to attending an after-hours, deep house event. However, all EDM events have a common ground, or ritual structure that includes the auditory stimulation of electronic dance music, photic stimulation, dancing, a crowd, and the presence of mind-altering substances. The following section examines experiences of transpersonal phenomena that are induced by this general setting and the subsequent integration of these experiences into day-to-day life.

### **Integrating Experiences of Transpersonal Phenomena into Daily Life**

For EDM participants who experience transpersonal phenomena, integrating these experiences is key. Ferrer (2000) cautioned that transpersonal experiences could occasion two potential pitfalls: spiritual narcissism and integrative arrestment. He defined spiritual narcissism as “the misuse of spiritual practices, energies, or experiences to bolster self-centered ways of being” (p. 220) and integrative arrestment as “the hindrance of the natural integrative process that translates spiritual realizations into everyday life toward the transformation

of self, relationships, and world” (p. 222). As Tart (1991) stated, “making glimpses of transpersonal realities (however brought about) part of one's being, instead of passing excitements, is what is essential for real growth” (p. 263).

Both Ferrer (2000) and Tart (1991) agreed that the integration of transpersonal phenomena into everyday life is one of the most important undertakings of transpersonal psychology. One major reason for this is that, while access to transpersonal experiences is relatively easy to come by, the stabilization of those experiences into day-to-day life is a difficult task. Failure to integrate spiritual openings is often considered a cause for psychotic disorders and spiritual pathologies (Grof & Grof, 1989; Wilber, 1986).

Takahashi (2004a) pointed to integration failures when she acknowledged the complications associated with EDM culture, as a spiritual movement, valuing direct experience over doctrine. These complications include “fewer structures in place to help individuals interpret and integrate the content of their experiences. Left to their own devices, anxiety disorders and depression may ensue” (p. 275). These were symptoms she found anecdotally related to the EDM participants she interviewed and the people they knew. Such symptoms often caused participants to leave the EDM scene altogether (Gauthier, 2005).

Fritz (1999), in his commentary on EDM culture, stressed that one of the most important challenges of EDM participation is to incorporate the profound experiences evoked by those events into day-to-day life. He encountered EDM participants who viewed EDM events as “a separate reality to be put aside until it is recreated at the next party” (p. 46). He cautioned that, if this division between the EDM event and daily life continues for too long, it can cause EDM participants to become dissatisfied with their daily lives and become dependent on EDM events in the same way people can become dependent on a drug.

Conversely, Fritz (1999) reported on many EDM participants who carried the beneficial effects of EDM events over into their everyday lives. They described improved relationships, more ease in accessing love and empathy, revived enthusiasm for life, and enhanced hope for their lives and the planet. Moreover, Takahashi and Olaveson (2003) encountered many EDM participants who emphasized that EDM participation had changed their lives in a positive way,

which included identity formation, personal growth, changes in attitude, and transformation. Sylvan's (2005) research similarly found many EDM participants to report profound shifts in perspective about their lives and how they fit into the larger world. This shift in perspective included being more open, loving, and compassionate towards others, as well as making life changes aligned with deeply held values and a higher vision. Some of Sylvan's participants also reported that the EDM experience allowed them to expand creatively, as well as spiritually, which subsequently inspired either the initiation or the deepening of a spiritual practice. Furthermore, several researchers (e.g., Hunt et al., 2007; Hutson, 1999, 2000; Kavanaugh & Anderson, 2008; Lynch & Badger, 2006; Malbon, 1999; Moore & Miles, 2004) found that EDM participation caused profound and positive long-term changes in psychological wellbeing and social behavior, as well as helped cultivate deeper bonds with friends and nurtured a sense of solidarity that carried into participants' daily lives.

The first author of this paper conducted follow-up research on the types of transpersonal phenomena experienced by EDM participants, as well as further investigation on the integration of these experiences into participants' day-to-day lives (Redfield, 2017, this issue). The study was based on face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 12 participants. A thematic analysis applied to the data revealed the themes associated with this topic. Findings suggested that EDM events have the potential to foster interpersonal relationships with the numinous, spiritual beings and human beings, as well as cause transformative intrapersonal and spiritual experiences, implying an enhancement in psychological and physical health and wellbeing in day-to-day life. Almost all participants in this study reported positive therapeutic effects during and following their experience of transpersonal phenomena at EDM events, both drug- and nondrug-induced. This suggests that these transpersonal experiences may have a favorable impact on the mental health and wellbeing of individuals. However, due to the small sample size used in this preliminary study, themes may not have reached a saturation point that would allow them to be generalized to the larger population of EDM participants. Hence, future studies using a larger sample size would be warranted in order to expound on the following results. For a detailed examination of the method and findings of this study, refer to Redfield, 2017, in this issue.

## Conclusion

The convergence of research documenting the potential for EDM events to function as a space for psycho-spiritual exploration and personal development, as well as to yield positive psychological, physical, and behavioral effects when integrated into daily life, should be taken into consideration when conducting future research in this field. While those experiences may also bring about neutral or negative effects, the potential for enhanced wellbeing on participants should no longer be considered a negligible piece of information, having been empirically documented by several independently conducted studies in the past two decades.

While all EDM events have a similar setting in regard to the auditory stimulation of electronic dance music, the photic stimulation of lights, dancing, the crowd, and the presence of mind-altering drugs, each EDM scene subgenre utilizes these components in varying ways. Therefore, an interesting future study could target transpersonal experiences of EDM participants in different subgenres and conduct comparative analysis. Additionally, since EDM culture exists all over the world, it may be illuminating to examine experiences of transpersonal phenomena among EDM participants in more countries.

The self-reported health and wellbeing benefits of EDM participation, for many individuals, is being described as directly connected to the ASCs induced by the combination of music, dancing, drugs, and communal feelings intrinsic to those events; however, whether a transpersonal experience is needed for EDM participation to have a therapeutic effect is a question worthy of further exploration. Thus, future research on EDM participation should focus on the therapeutic effect of EDM participation itself, whether transpersonal phenomena occurred or not.

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