

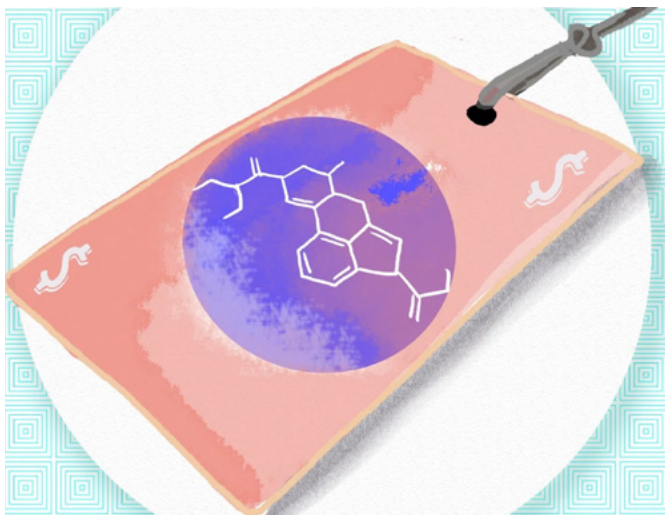


# The Emergence of a New Market: Psychedelic Science Conferences

BIA LABATE, PH.D

I confess I am a conference nerd. I love conferences: I like to attend them, to speak at them, and most of all, I deeply enjoy to organize them. They are a mix of intellectual stimulation, community building, networking, and, often, my main opportunity to have a trip and mini vacation. I enjoy all of it: from the cushy pillows at the free hotels; to the non-stop, vibrant, magical environment of ideas; to the fast connections; to the local flavor and all the adjacent activities in new places. Back when I was a social sciences student, we used to crash conferences secretly because we could not afford the tickets. It was so much fun.

I certainly love to organize conferences. I organized my first conference, The Ritual Use of Ayahuasca (CURA – Congresso sobre o Uso Ritual da Ayahuasca, an acronym for “healing” in Portuguese), when I was a young master’s student at UNICAMP in 1997. It was an amazing two-day international



gathering, the first one on this topic in a mainstream university in Brazil. Since then, I have created dozens of events, conferences, panels, and gatherings in Brazil, Mexico, the US, Germany, the UK, Spain, and Holland. I also volunteered or was hired by institutions in the field to produce their conferences or curate tracks of it. I am proud to have supported MAPS, ICEERS, Breaking Convention, OPEN, and Horizons among other friends, in several of their events through the last two decades.

Many are talking about the “commodification of psychedelics” or the “new psychedelic businesses” or “corporations”;

however, this boom is affecting all areas of our field. I feel an important piece missing from the conversation: the emergence of the new psychedelic science conference market.

With the advancement of clinical trials, and the perspective that both MDMA and psilocybin will be legal for medical prescriptions, and with the decriminalization movement spreading quickly throughout the country, many new people are entering into the space. And, with that, big money, either from big pharma, the cannabis business or tech. Whereas we are all thrilled and fascinated with the perspectives of these medicines being more culturally accepted and incorporated to our legal and medical healthcare systems, many of us also feel nauseous with the pace at which things are advancing. Many are talking about the “commodification of psychedelics” or the “new psychedelic businesses” or “corporations”; however, this boom is affecting all areas of our field. I feel an important piece missing from the conversation: the emergence of the new psychedelic science conference market.

This piece is meant to alert both conference speakers, conference organizers, and the public, on what to take into account when you produce or choose to attend a conference as speaker or as audience member

Since we live in a complex world, it’s always a challenge to understand and interpret what is going on. As with so many situations, this is a multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be separated from the increase in trainings, conferences, and the “market of ideas” or “expert voices” that emerge on multiple fronts. Certainly, psychedelics are entering the circuit of professional trade conferences. I am not going to do any major sociological reflection here, but simply point out some very concrete observations. This piece is meant to alert both conference speakers, conference organizers, and the public, on what to take into account when you produce or choose to attend a conference as speaker or as audience member:

- Is this the first edition of the conference, or has it been in the field for a while?
- Is there inclusion, diversity, and gender balance, or is it heavily dominated by white males?
- Is there a sliding-scale system and scholarships or only one price?

- Does the price seem reasonable in comparison to other conferences in the field? (for example: \$1,000 is a lot for a two-day conference!)
- Does the conference have a program for volunteers?
- Who are the organizers of the conference? Are their photos and bios displayed online? Is it an individual or a business? Often conferences that are strictly commercial do not offer information about who the organizers are.
- Even if the organizers are displayed, do they have ties to the community? Do they have any particular intellectual expertise or contribution to the field?
- What is the intellectual vision of the conference? Is there a theme, a specific identity or approach, or it is a random mish-mash?
- Beyond the flashy images and promotion, what is the intellectual quality of the conference? Are the biographies of speakers carefully edited and presented, and are titles and abstracts to their presentations offered?
- Are the invited or guest speakers' traveling expenses covered?
- Are academic researchers included, or just mainstream psychedelic corporations or celebrities?
- Are their community partners or promotional partners that are solid and recognized in the field?
- Does the conference seem like a trade show for business-people?
- Does the vendor's area receive more attention than the conference itself?
- Is there an afterparty that seems mainly a money-generating event?
- Are the videos of the conference shared for free online afterward?
- Who are the sponsors of the conference? Are these legitimate players in the field?
- How much do the packages to sponsor cost? Are these numbers reasonable compared to other initiatives in the field (numbers range from \$5,000 to \$10,000 depending on the size of the conference).
- If the conference is strictly business oriented, does it offer any kind of reciprocity to the field?
- What is the quality of the speakers? Do they have real expertise or are they being included because they are promoting similar conferences that perhaps offer cross-promotional benefits?
- Are speakers pushing too hard to present in your conference?
- Are continuing education credits offered?
- Are community and promotional partners offered a courtesy ticket?

Established researchers and research institutions should also think of the question of reciprocity and legitimacy.

Established researchers and research institutions should also think of the question of reciprocity and legitimacy. When you attend a conference as a speaker, or join as promotional partner or sponsor, you lend legitimacy to it. How much does that cost? And is that even for sale?

Supporting a conference (either as a speaker, partner or sponsor) is certainly an exchange, as you will get visibility, the chance to network, learn, debate, etc. However, if you accept the invitation to participate in or support a conference, you are both helping to add credibility to it, and, perhaps, having less time or resources of your own to attend other conferences potentially more intellectually enriching to you and more beneficial to the field as a whole. You might also choose to do so, while being fully aware of the implication of these choices.

Speakers should ideally be compensated for their time and expertise with payment of an honorarium. However, the offering of honorariums depends, of course, on the means available to the organizing team or institution. As with the majority of academic conferences, grassroots non-profits or research-based institutions frequently cannot afford honorariums.

In sum, please chose carefully where you lend your name and brand, as other speakers will see you there and assume it's a worthwhile initiative and do the same. Your support potentially has a "domino effect."

*This article was originally published at <https://chacrana.net/the-emergence-of-a-new-market-psychedelic-science-conferences/> on February 12, 2020*

---

*Dr. Beatriz Caiuby Labate (Bia Labate) is a queer Brazilian anthropologist who immigrated to the U.S. in 2017. She has a Ph.D. in social anthropology from the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP), Brazil. Her main areas of interest are the study of plant medicines, drug policy, shamanism, ritual, and religion. She is Executive Director of the Chacrana Institute for Psychedelic Plant Medicines (<http://chacrana.net>), an organization that provides public education about psychedelic plant medicines. She is Adjunct Faculty at the East-West Psychology Program and at the Integral and Transpersonal Program at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) in San Francisco. She is also Public Education and Culture Specialist at the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS). She is co-founder of the Interdisciplinary Group for Psychoactive Studies (NEIP) in Brazil, and editor of NEIP's website (<http://www.neip.info>), as well as editor of the Mexican blog *Drugs, Politics, and Culture* (<http://drogaspolitica-cultura.net>). She is author, co-author, and co-editor of twenty-one books, two special-edition journals, and several peer-reviewed articles (<http://bialabate.net>).*