

PSILOCYBIN AS A WELLNESS MODALITY:

A QUALITATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY

A Thesis

by

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Submitted to the Graduate and Professional School of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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May 2023

Major Subject: Anthropology

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative ethnographic study explores the perspectives of individuals who self-medicate with psilocybin outside of clinical research contexts. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand their motivations, knowledge sources, usage methods, trip experiences, and perceptions of psilocybin's impact on their lives and American society. The study identified three emergent theories: motivations for psilocybin use are rooted in curiosity and a desire to heal, psilocybin requires effort and intentionality on the part of the user, and responsible integration of psilocybin into mainstream society could benefit mental, spiritual, and environmental health. Participants recognized that recreational use and medical use are not separate categories but contain meaningful overlap. Overall, this study provides valuable insights into the experiences and perspectives of psilocybin self-medication. It highlights the potential benefits of responsible integration of psilocybin use into mainstream society and challenges the distinction between recreational and medical use.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply grateful for all of those that have encouraged me to follow my interests and challenge myself academically. I am also grateful for all those in my life that make each day a little brighter, a little lighter, and a lot more fun. Without these friendships and experiences, my wellness would have taken a toll and this project would not have been possible.

I would like to thank my committee chair, Allison Hopkins, for being a steadfast mentor for me since undergrad. It was through working with her that I discovered my love for the discipline of anthropology and ethnomedicine. She has always gone out of her way to guide and support me, in the way that worked best for me, without judgement.

I would like to thank my mother and godmother for their continued love and support and believing in me no matter what. They have always supported my interests and paths and believed in my ability when I could not.

Lastly, I would like to thank my loving partner, Jordan. Without his grounding presence and support, I would not have had the endurance to work on such a project. At every step of the way he was by my side doing everything he could to make my life easier so I could focus on my work. He always knows how to lift me back up and set me on the right path.

CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES

Contributors

This work was supported by a thesis committee consisting of Dr. Allison Hopkins, serving as committee chair, and Dr. Sergio Lemus as a committee member, from the Department of Anthropology and Professor Amanda Stronza of the Department of Ecology and Conservation Biology.

All work conducted for the thesis was completed by the student independently and has not been previously published.

Funding Sources

This study was supported by Texas A&M through funding the researcher via a graduate teaching assistant position.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
FIGURES	vii
INTRODUCTION	1
Overview of Psychedelic Research Resurgence.....	1
Research Question, Objectives, & Research Gap.....	3
LITERATURE REVIEW	5
Psilocybin.....	5
Psychedelic History	7
Legality & Commercialization.....	11
Existing Biomedical Research	12
Existing Anthropological Research	14
RESEARCH DESIGN.....	19
Recruitment.....	19
Theory	22
Data Collection.....	23
Data Analysis.....	24
Researcher Positionality	26
RESULTS PT. 1: INTRODUCTION & MOTIVATION	29
Motivations & Information Sources	30

Sources of Psilocybin Knowledge	31
Motivations for Use.....	35
Motivation Change	40
RESULTS PT. 2: BENEFITS AND RISKS	45
Experienced Benefits	46
Effort.....	63
Risks	66
RESULTS PT. 3: BELIEFS OF SOCIETAL INTEGRATION OF PSILOCYBIN.....	74
Believe Psilocybin Integration To Be Beneficial.....	74
Concerns for the Integration of Psilocybin Into Society.....	78
DISCUSSION.....	81
Major Findings	81
Limitations	87
Unexpected Results	89
Suggestions for Further Research	90
Conclusion	90
REFERENCES	92
APPENDIX	99
Semi-Structured Interview Questions.....	99

FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1: Primary Information Sources.....	34
Figure 2: Aggregate Motivations.....	40
Figure 3: Experienced Benefits.....	61
Figure 4: Potential Risks.....	67

INTRODUCTION

Overview of Psychedelic Research Resurgence

Psychedelics, or mind-altering chemical compounds that distort the senses, have explosively returned to the academic research scene in the last few decades. This Western research-based psychedelic renaissance was precipitated, in part, by breakthrough studies that showed psilocybin, often called magic mushrooms, as having the ability to induce meaningful mystical or spiritual experiences (Griffiths et al., 2006). Psilocybin is a psychedelic, or hallucinogenic, chemical compound naturally occurring in some mushrooms, most belonging to the genus *Psilocybe* (Carhart-Harris et al., 2017). Later studies showed that psilocybin had potential as a treatment for anxiety in cancer patients (Grob et al., 2011; Ross et al., 2016; Carbonaro et al., 2016; Moreton et al., 2020), treatment-resistant depression (Carhart-Harris et al., 2017; Watts et al., 2017), addiction (Bogenschutz et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2014), obsessive-compulsive disorder (Moreno et al., 2006), and cluster migraines (Andersson et al., 2017). While there is a growing expanse of clinical research covering psilocybin as a therapeutic tool, this project seeks to understand the qualitative experience of individuals who pursue taking psilocybin as a therapeutic modality on their terms outside of a clinical setting through developing emergent theories.

The increase in biomedical research interest resulted in a boom in public discourse surrounding psychedelics and their wellness potential. The public opinion of psychedelics, especially magic mushrooms, became more accepting of mushrooms as therapeutics for mental health due to the wealth of supportive and reputable research, media coverage, and social media discourse (Orozco & Harris, 2022). One journalist in particular, Michael Pollan, popularized

psychedelic therapeutic research through various media, which includes Youtube interviews, podcast appearances, books, and documentaries. His book *How to Change Your Mind* (2018), the documentary series adaptation of this book, and the abundance of interviews he has given have hugely influenced the knowledge and discourse of people who use psilocybin. The abundance of research and the popular journalism that brought it to society's attention began to bring mushrooms and other psychedelics out of obscurity and into the mainstream. The shift in public perception resulted in a "shroom-boom" of interest in psychedelic and non-psychedelic mushrooms, from those seeking benefits to those seeking to profit from the demand for clinical hallucinogenic treatment, non-hallucinogenic over-the-counter varieties, and other illegal providers. This complicated relationship between the demand for psychedelic therapeutics and the desire to profit off that interest is shaping the path forward for research, legalization, therapeutic and recreational, and business in the psychedelic realm, which will be explored in greater detail in the literature review.

While much of this thesis focuses on non-Indigenous use of psilocybin, it is essential to state that Indigenous people have used psychedelic plants as entheogens or spiritual facilitators has taken place for hundreds of years, with much documentation by anthropologists (e.g., Castaneda, 1968; M. Harner, 1979; Wasson, 1980; M. Harner, 1990). The Indigenous and Western scientific perspectives contributed to and shaped the original psychedelic research revolution and the current psychedelic renaissance, despite the Western cultural tendency to only value knowledge obtained using scientific approaches. In this thesis, the dominant exposure and knowledge of psychedelics of the people interviewed comes from the lasting cultural impression of the psychedelic counterculture movement of the 1970s, with American journalism, academia, and media presentation of psychedelics. Due to this epistemological context, this project focuses

on predominantly Western scientific research as it is most relevant to the constructed realities of the participants.

Research Question, Objectives, & Research Gap

As is characteristic of ethnographic research, this project seeks to explore and document the lived experiences of individuals in the United States who have consumed the psychedelic compound psilocybin for self-defined wellness purposes (Emerson et al., 2011). This project takes place remotely and focuses on individuals who use psilocybin outside of controlled and regulated medical, academic, or spiritual environments otherwise termed naturalistic environments. Qualitative interviews and analyses address the research question at the heart of the project: what is the lived experience of naturalistic psilocybin users? More specifically, the research objectives are:

1. to understand how people learn about psychedelics
2. what motivates individuals to consume psilocybin
3. how they use the compounds
4. their experience of the “trip”
5. how they perceive psilocybin to impact their live and wellness
6. how they perceive psychedelics fitting into American society

This project addresses a gap in psychedelic research: a distinct lack of qualitative, narrative, experience-based research focused on psychedelic users outside of a regulated context in the United States. Much of the recent academic literature surrounding psilocybin has been from a biomedical perspective (Griffiths et al., 2006; Moreno et al., 2006; Grob et al., 2011; Johnson et al., 2014; Bogenschutz et al., 2015; Carbonaro et al., 2016; Ross et al., 2016; Carhart-Harris et al., 2017; Watts et al., 2017; Varley, 2019; Moreton et al., 2020; Nutt & Carhart-Harris,

2021) and the anthropological research surrounding psychedelic mushrooms has primarily taken place outside of the U.S. and in Indigenous and spiritual contexts (Castaneda, 1968; M. Harner, 1979; Wasson, 1980; M. Harner, 1990; Metzner & Darling, 2006; Gómez-Barris, 2012; Guzmán, 2008; Moreno Fuentes, 2014; Hunter, 2015; Guzmán, 2016; Laure Vidriales et al., 2018; Fotiou, 2019; Sandoval-Cervantes, 2020). Therefore, this study addresses the lack of research in non-regulated non-Indigenous contexts, specifically in the United States. One of the reasons filling this gap is valuable is that much of the discourse around psychedelic therapeutics relies heavily on the Western scientific perspective of medicine and science. Acknowledging this cultural lens and providing information that supports and brings new insights into the current Western scientific discourse is vital in approaching the topic holistically and effectively that addresses naturalistic users and the history of the Indigenous practice. Another purpose of this research is to amplify the often-hushed voices of individuals who decided to take their wellness into their own hands and to understand and validate their experiences, perspectives, and needs. Ultimately, this project aims to increase empathy for alternative medicine users, break down the stigma for individuals seeking complementary and alternative medication, and contribute to the discourse around Western medicine's complicated relationship with wellness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To work towards increasing the understanding of people that use psilocybin as a healing modality, we must first review the history of psilocybin research and discuss the academic record. This literature review chapter will provide a brief overview of what psilocybin is, the Indigenous roots of psychedelic mushrooms, how magic mushrooms entered Western popular culture, the history of psychedelic research, the legal history of psilocybin, the growing commercial sector, biomedical research covering psilocybin, and anthropological research covering psilocybin. While this is not a conclusive deep dive into each of these topics, this literature review will provide helpful context that shapes the lived experience of many participants, shapes the development of this project, and informs the interpretive construction of the analysis.

Psilocybin

Psilocybin-containing mushrooms have a wide geographic distribution and often grow in dung in humid forest environments. Psilocybin is most commonly consumed in its dried form and can be procured through illegal dealers, non-regulated portions of the internet, foraging, or self-growing (Pestana et al., 2021). Psilocybin can also be lab synthesized, the common source for clinical studies and was the standard for all psilocybin research until the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) loosened importation standards for psilocybin grown in legal locations such as Jamaica (Luong et al., 2022).

Chemically speaking, psilocybin is an indole alkaloid belonging to the tryptamine class of psychedelics that acts on serotonin receptors of the brain due to its chemical similarity with the serotonin molecule (Carhart-Harris et al., 2017). Psilocybin affects the brain by acting on

these serotonin receptors as a neurotransmitter and serotonin modulator, meaning that psilocybin does not merely transmit new messages in the brain. Still, it alters existing neural communication and creates new neural networks for communication (Carhart-Harris et al., 2017). This mechanism is what leads to the psychoactive and non-psychoactive effects that are highly sought. These effects include changes to an individual's senses and perception, such as altering their vision to see patterns or distortions, generating feelings of euphoria, and, sometimes, mystical or spiritual experiences, potentially culminating in what is called a "psychedelic trip" at a high enough dose (Griffiths et al., 2006). Beyond those sensations, there is clinical evidence of lasting effects of psilocybin: a distinct after-glow period of a few days to a couple weeks and longer-term impacts. For some individuals, these lasting effects are said to include increased openness to ideas, improved mood, improved emotional regulation and coping skills, and generate a sense of connection to others and nature. In addition, microdosing is a psychedelic dosing practice in which an individual takes a smaller, non-psychoactive dose (Polito & Stevenson, 2019). A non-psychoactive dose means that the effects associated with tripping, such as distorted senses, are absent, but there may be noticeable effects on emotions and cognition. The effects of a micro-dose while the chemical is active are much less intense. However, those that consume them still report benefits such as "increases in vitality, creativity, productivity, social ability, focus, analytic thinking, positive mood, memory, mindfulness, and general wellbeing" (Polito & Stevenson, 2019, pg 2).

Due to the potential that has been shown, the business industry is eager to capitalize on the current hype surrounding legal mushrooms for wellness and the future of the psychedelic industry. This growing sector of fungal profit has been termed the Shroomboom and is a strong indicator for the future of the mushroom industry. There has been a surge in business

development in the arenas of psychedelic therapy, pharmaceuticals, and biotechnology to move into the space as it readies itself for legalization (Lee, 2022). The development and profitability of the psilocybin industry alone are projected to exceed the profit of the cannabis industry or at least follow in its footsteps. Including the growth of Ketamine treatment and other forms of psychedelics that are shaping up for legalization, the psychedelic business sector will surely be immense, bringing its unique set of capital-related conflicts.

Psychedelic History

While Indigenous traditional use of psychedelics has been going on for centuries, the development of medical psychedelic research and policy in much of the Western world is firmly rooted in a lab accident. Albert Hofmann accidentally discovered LSD in a pharmaceutical lab for Sandoz corporation in Switzerland in 1943 as he was working on synthesizing plant derivatives (George et al., 2019). This accidental discovery shaped much of the legal framework and public perception, as this was the watershed event for the psychedelic revolution of academic study in the 1950s.

The separate origins of psychedelic use, scientific drug experimentation, and long-standing Indigenous practice, developed different epistemologies that lend their own motivations, research questions, and beliefs that shape how we understand psychedelics. The influence of scientific drug experimentation is often closely associated with the wave of research in the 50s through the 70s and all of the connotations of that era's research, subculture, and dominant culture backlash leading to criminalization. The compounds associated with this movement are lab synthesized, such as LSD, as well as psilocybin and marijuana, as they were popular amongst the related subcultural movement. On the other hand, Indigenous epistemological origins are more closely associated with spiritual and healing realms that often

occur in guided ceremonies. The drugs associated with this origin are derived more directly from nature and include psilocybin, iboga, peyote, and ayahuasca.

Indigenous Roots

While the clinical potential of psychedelics as therapeutics is trending now, their consumption for wellbeing is not a recent discovery. Psilocybin, alongside other psychoactive plants, has been utilized by Indigenous cultures globally for centuries. Many cultures use psychedelic plants for healing, connection, and spirituality. This usage of these plants has been well documented by anthropological research, often focusing on realms of food, medicine, spirituality, and shamanism (Castaneda, 1968; M. Harner, 1979; Wasson, 1980; M. Harner, 1990; Metzner & Darling, 2006; Guzmán, 2008; Gómez-Barris, 2012; Moreno Fuentes, 2014; Hunter, 2015; Guzmán, 2016; Laure Vidriales et al., 2018; Fotiou, 2019; George et al., 2019; Palma Ramírez et al., 2020).

Mushrooms have been known to be a meaningful tool for Indigenous Mexican spiritual *curanderas* or shamanic healers. One Mazatec *curandera*, Maria Sabina, was an unintentional source of bringing psilocybin to the Western world. This became widespread because of the writings of the journalist R. Gordon Wasson, who participated in a mushroom ceremony in her home in Oaxaca, Mexico, in 1955 (George et al., 2019; Laure Vidriales et al., 2018). Through researching mycology with his wife, Wasson learned about these hallucinogenic mushrooms and deceived Maria Sabina into participating in her mushroom ceremony. The ceremony was a spiritual ceremony to heal and reunite with lost things, so Wasson lied about losing his son to gain entry (Pollan, 2018). Wasson took this experience and the photos he took that Sabina requested not be shared and wrote a piece for *Life* magazine in 1957 (Palma Ramírez et al., 2020, George et al., 2019). He described his and a companion's experience with the ceremony and

included the photos, breaking his promise of confidentiality to Sabina. Wasson later published *The Wondrous Mushroom: Mycoloastry in Mesoamerica* in 1980, further detailing Mazatec mushroom practices.

Although he used a pseudonym for Sabina and did not give the name of the community, the location and spiritual healer were located by masses of hippies who sought the mushrooms to experience the hallucinogenic sensations, which Sabina did not support. Wasson's article not only sparked psychedelic tourism in the region, which was largely unprepared for the impacts but led to a Mexican Army intervention in 1969 to remove the foreigners, ultimately leading to a brief jailing of Maria Sabina and subsequent ostracization from her community. *Curandera* Sabina believed the foreigners' disrespectful motivations ruined the sanctity and power of her holy children, as she called the mushrooms, and mourned their loss heavily (Palma Ramírez et al., 2020). This painful history has largely been forgotten as Maria Sabina's image, and a constructed notion of her became an icon of psychedelic mushrooms in the region and globally. While she became a public figure with her likeness printed on souvenirs for the financial benefit of others, she died in the throes of poverty, lamenting her and the holy children's extortion (Laure Vidriales et al., 2018).

Challenges of Indigenous Tradition

As exemplified by the exploitation of Maria Sabina, the Indigenous cultural roots of psilocybin and psychedelic healing make seeking, using, and studying these plants fraught with issues of exploitation, appropriation, and Indigenous erasure (Fotiou, 2019). These factors are exacerbated by growing business interests which are moving into place to capitalize off of the surge in interest as well as the focus on the Western scientific side of psychedelics. Additionally, there is a significant business sector profiting off of the Indigenous cultural usage of

psychedelics, resulting in psychedelic tourism and for-profit spiritual healing centers. While parts of the community may benefit from profits, there are other dangers to psychedelic tourism.

The growing demand for “authentic” psychedelic experiences can damage local Indigenous communities that face an onslaught of traffic and attention (Laure Vidriales et al., 2018; Gómez-Barris, 2012). Outside of issues of cultural exploitation, commodification, and appropriation, these often-small communities do not have the infrastructure to support tourism booms. They are at an increased risk of public health crises leading to the death of community members due to communicable diseases, such as COVID (Lane, 2020). Further, many Indigenous figures and academics critique the current psychedelic research movement for erasing the traditional knowledge of Indigenous healers and spiritual leaders who have been using psychedelics as tools for healing and spirituality for centuries (Laure Vidriales et al., 2018; George et al., 2019; Dumit & Sanabria, 2022). This is not only inherently harmful but distorts the cultural practice and allows people outside of Indigenous communities to profit. At the same time, healers and spiritualists are reputationally and financially at risk.

To address and hopefully mitigate and redress these damages, some organizations are focused on educating the broader public on the history of psychedelic medicine and the harm of thoughtless consumption, as well as organizations lobbying for the decriminalization of all forms of plants that have meaningful roles in Indigenous culture and spirituality. There is also the potential for psychedelic and spiritual tourism to follow community-based ecotourism models that allow the community to take power and agency over tourism.

Legality & Commercialization

Another aspect that further complicates the traditional usage of psychedelic medicines and ceremonial plants and the process of psychedelic research in any discipline is the broad illegality of psychedelics. In the United States, most psychedelic drugs, including MDMA, psilocybin, LSD, and DMT, are listed as Schedule 1 controlled substances, defined as having no currently accepted medical use (Luong et al., 2022). This makes having, using, and growing the compounds complicated and legally dangerous. However, psilocybin has been granted breakthrough therapy designation by the FDA, meaning that psilocybin may be clinically studied with expedited review processes by the FDA.

As interest and research on psychedelic therapeutics grow, commercial stakeholders are positioning themselves for success in the growing psychedelic business sector with the development of psychedelic retreats focusing on healing (Gómez-Barris, 2012; Fleming, 2019; Orozco & Harris, 2022) and psychedelic biotech and guidance start-up companies (Nichols & Nichols, 2022; Dumit & Sanabria, 2022). Psychedelics, and especially psilocybin, are perceived to have great potential despite their challenging past reputation as a counter-culture icon and threat in the United States; and these start-ups are looking to the development of the wildly profitable cannabis industry as a potential model (Dumit & Sanabria, 2022). Psychedelic tourism is a large part of this growing psychedelic business sector. Due to the challenge of the illegal classification of most psychedelics globally, there are growing opportunities for psychedelic retreats in locations where the regulation of psychedelics is either legal or unrestricted such as Mexico, Canada, Peru, the Netherlands, Jamaica, and others (Fleming, 2019; Gómez-Barris, 2012; Orozco & Harris, 2022; Laure Vidriales et al., 2018). These psychedelic retreats are often rooted in spiritualism, therapy, or a hybrid, providing psychedelics, guidance, and room and

board for thousands of dollars (Orozco & Harris, 2022; Fleming, 2019). There is also a market in these locations and others for individuals pursuing independent access to the compounds, either due to the history of Indigenous use of a psychedelic in a location or simply for easier access due to lack of restrictions. However, psychedelic tourism and the impacts of that industry on Indigenous cultures is a complicated issue, which will be further elaborated on in the section on the Indigenous history of psychedelics.

As psychedelics continue their path towards legalization, some states and cities have decriminalized psilocybin, including parts of California, parts of Washington, parts of Michigan, parts of Massachusetts, and Washington DC meaning that laws concerning the use and possession of drugs would not be enforced. As of 2023, Colorado and Oregon are the only states that have legalized psilocybin. In addition to decriminalization policies, there is a framework for procurement and infrastructure to regulate and tax psilocybin. Outside of the U.S., many hotspots psychedelic retreat destinations have similar decriminalized regulations, where psychedelics are not necessarily legal but are not regulated or prosecuted (Fleming, 2019; Orozco & Harris, 2022).

Existing Biomedical Research

A large portion of research on the topic of psychedelics exists in the realm of the biomedical sciences, specifically in neuroscience and psychology. Psychedelic studies have changed much throughout their study. In early psychological research, psychedelics were used as “psychotomimetic” to induce psychosis to attempt to understand the mechanisms for psychosis (Langlitz, 2013). As research on psychedelics continued to blossom, this era of research was dominated by studies focusing on LSD. Initially, researchers expected LSD to mimic psychosis because the descriptions of experiences while taking the drug were a complete departure from

what was believed to be sane cognition. As research continued, it was seen that regular cognitive function was always restored, and the symptoms of the trip did not mirror schizophrenia or psychosis, as researchers initially believed. Future studies focused on other potential uses aimed at enhancing standard psychotherapy practices by conducting talk therapy while under the influence of LSD, which was thought to expedite the healing process (Carhart-Harris, 2017).

However, as time went on and psychedelics, primarily LSD and psilocybin, became a counter-culture phenomenon that caused political tension; they were made illegal with the Controlled Substances Act resulting in the mass cessation of research in the 1970s (Griffiths et al., 2006). The collapse of psychedelic research was a complex process caused by unethical scientific practices, political upheaval, and the counter-cultural symbol that psychedelics became outside of academic study (Langlitz, 2013). However, before its cessation, there was an abundance of data that was generated about the neural mechanisms of psychedelics and their effect on humans, much of which was reputable and sound. The findings of these studies set up for success the later revival and laid the groundwork for the current research resurgence.

Broadly, psychedelic compounds and plants have a wide range of applied therapeutic benefits shown by therapeutic studies to improve outcomes concerning depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), addiction, end-of-life anxiety, anorexia nervosa, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) (Griffiths et al., 2006; Moreno et al., 2006; Grob et al., 2011; Johnson et al., 2014; Bogenschutz et al., 2015; Carbonaro et al., 2016; Ross et al., 2016; Carhart-Harris et al., 2017; Watts et al., 2017; Varley, 2019; Moreton et al., 2020; Nutt & Carhart-Harris, 2021). The findings show that psychedelic therapy has the power to be an effective and long-lasting treatment for a wide variety of disorders and improve the quality of life in patients (Carhart-Harris et al., 2017; Langlitz, 2013; Varley, 2019). Also, as a result of neuroscience

studies, the mechanisms that lead humans to experience hallucinogenic effects and what leads to beneficial effects in the brain are now much better understood. It is now understood that psilocybin acts on the 5-HT_{2A}R receptor while selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) act upon the 5-HT_{1A} receptors, leading to different user experiences. However, they act in similar portions of the brain (Carhart-Harris et al., 2017). The similarities between SSRIs, psilocybin, and LSD regarding the shared location of activation on the brain supports the often anecdotally cited diminished effects on the brain when an individual who takes SSRIs consumes psychedelics like LSD & psilocybin (Bonson, 1996). This is valuable information as it informs us on the differences and similarities between psilocybin and common treatments of depression and anxiety, such as SSRIs (Carhart-Harris et al., 2017). These two fields of biomedical research, psychiatry, and neuroscience have built an impressive understanding of how psychedelics work and what they can be used to treat. These studies have had a clinical focus showing promise for integrating psychedelic therapies into Western medical structures (Nutt & Carhart-Harris, 2021).

Existing Anthropological Research

As previously mentioned, psychedelic plants and fungi have been used in many Indigenous cultures as tools for healing and spiritual connection for centuries. Due to this traditional use of psychedelic plants, their usage has been studied ethnographically, archaeologically, and historically by anthropologists and historians over time (Castaneda, 1968; M. Harner, 1979; M. Harner, 1990; Metzner & Darling, 2006; Gómez-Barris, 2012; Guzmán, 2008; Moreno Fuentes, 2014; Hunter, 2015; Guzmán, 2016; Laure Vidriales et al., 2018; Fotiou, 2019; Palma Ramírez et al., 2020). Primarily, the anthropological record of psychedelics focuses on the Indigenous usage of these substances for medicinal and spiritual purposes. Due to these ethnographic texts and other sources that brought psychedelics to the Western consciousness,

people sought out Indigenous spiritual leaders for access to mescaline, psilocybin, and other plant medicines. After their experiences with these psychedelics in Indigenous contexts, many came back changed and felt passionate about continuing the exploration of these psychedelics to apply their abilities to Western societies (Langlitz, 2013). Despite the primary role Indigenous traditional knowledge played in bringing awareness to psychedelics as tools for healing and spirituality in the United States, their role is often left out of the discussion of psychedelic history (George et al., 2019).

There is relatively less recent research from the anthropological perspective because the focus of the psychedelic research boom had an incredible amount of funding due to its applied clinical angle. Another challenge that leads to the academic record having less anthropological work is the demanding time frame of ethnographic work. However, anthropological studies are focusing on the complexities of the developing global psychedelic sector with studies focusing on psychedelic healing retreat experiences (Orozco & Harris, 2022), the impact of psychedelic tourism on Indigenous communities (Gómez-Barris, 2012; Laure Vidriales et al., 2018), and calls for decolonizing psychedelic science (Fotiou, 2019; George et al., 2019.)

Within the current psychedelic research revival, there is a new focus on anthropological perspectives within the realm of Western medicine to add qualitative context to the therapeutic biomedical understanding of the compounds (MacLean et al., 2012; Carbonaro et al., 2016; Watts et al., 2017; Varley, 2019; Niles et al., 2021). Within this new area of anthropological research, there is not only a focus on the spiritual realms of research but on perceptions of medical providers concerning psychedelic treatments, communities of Western users, and their experiences (Carbonaro et al., 2016; Andersson et al., 2017; Pestana et al., 2021), the shifting

landscape of medical professional acceptance (Niles et al., 2021), and psychedelic tourism and retreats (Gómez-Barris, 2012; Laure Vidriales et al., 2018; Orozco & Harris, 2022).

Complementary & Alternative Medicine

Ethnographies that focus on qualitative patient analysis are also valuable to assess for this project. Most directly, ethnographies concerning complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). Of particular relevance to this project are ethnographies centralize chronic pain experience to explore themes such as navigating hope and despair (Eaves et al., 2016), hope and expectation management (Eaves et al., 2014), and how expectations change over time (Eaves et al., 2015). These studies focus on patient narratives and their experiences surrounding healthcare and the modalities of care. It is important for this project to understand that there are other disciplines, and anthropologists, that focus on patient care and narratives concerning medical treatment and systems.

Research on Western Psychedelic Users

Additionally, and most relevant to this project, there is a small but impactful corpus of anthropological research on Western psychedelic users outside of Indigenous or clinical settings. Many of the studies in this sector look at psychedelics broadly, as this research arena is in an exploratory phase. Many of these studies aim to understand broad motivations of drug use patterns and consumption modalities, types of drugs consumed, and their experiences. Specifically, some studies focus on usage patterns disclosed by naturalistic users virtually via questionnaires (Móro et al., 2011) and on virtual forums (Pestana et al., 2021), the definitions and usage of individuals that broadly consume psychedelics and other drugs, and studies where larger categories of drug using beliefs are studied, including psilocybin and other psychedelics (Andersson et al., 2017; Seikel, 2020).

In the study of psychedelic drug users by Móró et al., they found that intentional use focused on self-enhancement wasn't associated with problematic use but improved coping and spirituality. In the study by Pestana et al. that focused on psychedelic usage discussion on Reddit, they found that they prioritized responsible drug use. For the study participants, responsible drug use included preparation, education, integration, set and setting, communicating with the community, and consideration of set and setting. Additionally, in this study, users were motivated by self-investigation, self-knowledge, creativity, curiosity, and recreation.

The master's thesis by Seikel, *Psychedelia in the United States: An Ethnographic Study of Naturalistic Use*, outlines usage patterns, motivations, and perceptions of the effects of naturalistic psychedelic drug users. Seikel's findings state that participants perceived psychedelic use as a valuable tool in treating "debilitating mental, physical, and spiritual distress" (pg. 107). Other findings from this study state that psychedelic use improved individuals' relationships with themselves and nature.

This project builds upon this master's thesis and the projects of Pestana et al. and Móró et al. to explore the topics of motivations, behaviors, benefits, and beliefs surrounding psilocybin usage for healing from a narrative perspective. There is still much to assess within this research movement from an anthropological perspective. The nature of psychedelics as medicine has wide and complicated implications in Western society as it moves closer to integration with mainstream society.

In conclusion, this literature review covered psilocybin's chemical properties, including its composition and how it acts on the brain. It then delves into the historical roots of psilocybin use, highlighting its Indigenous roots and traditional use as a tool for healing and spiritual connection. The review also explores the Western world's use of psilocybin and how it has been

studied in the biomedical field, specifically neuroscience, and psychology. The review covers the therapeutic benefits of psilocybin, including its ability to treat depression, PTSD, addiction, anorexia nervosa, and OCD. Furthermore, the review discusses the challenges and opportunities of psilocybin's growing popularity. The review also addresses the legal challenges surrounding psilocybin use and how some states and cities have decriminalized psilocybin.

Additionally, the review then discusses the anthropological research on psilocybin usage, including medical providers' perceptions concerning psychedelic treatments, communities of Western users, and their experiences. Also, the review touches upon the challenges of Indigenous exploitation. Lastly, the review explores the realm of research covering complementary and alternative medicine. Overall, this literature review aims to provide readers with an overview of psilocybin, its history, and its potential as a therapeutic tool.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Building upon previous psilocybin research, this project takes a qualitative approach that is influenced by anthropological methodologies and medical patient narratives. As a result, this project emphasizes a perspective that focuses on the experiences of the participants and develops theories to make sense of observed patterns. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the data collection method in order to create space for the participants to use their own words to express their opinions and experiences. The following chapter will outline the recruitment process, the theoretical perspective that influenced this project, data collection procedure, and methods for data analysis. It will also discuss the background of the researcher.

Recruitment

Purposive, or intentional, sampling was used for this project. Due to this, participants were sought out for their shared characteristics of interest which, in this case, was psilocybin use for wellness purposes. This sampling type is less specific in quota and structure and allows for thematic exploration, which focuses on a situational analysis of a group, rather than an analysis of a comprehensive cross-section of the population (Bernard, 2006). Virtual recruitment was chosen due to the challenging nature of discussing an illegal substance. Participants experience a greater degree of anonymity and comfort participating in a virtual space, as opposed to a physical space. Additionally, virtual recruitment allows research to include people in a broader geographic region. Virtual forums and online communities on Reddit and Facebook were utilized as recruitment sites because the individuals, who were already participating in an open discussion about psilocybin in these communities, were predicted to feel more comfortable

discussing psilocybin use in another virtual setting than those who were not already participating in those conversations.

The sample size for this project was 20 individuals. This sample size was chosen due to the exploratory approach of the project and the constructivist grounded theory (CGT) that the design was influenced by. The sample size of 20 is adequate due to this project's purpose of understanding individuals who consume psilocybin for wellness purposes through exploring a thematic category, relevant group of people, and constructed meaning from that group. This project strove toward theoretical saturation, which occurs when new themes no longer appear in additional interviews, as the categories that are relevant to the group have already been discussed. This is appropriate because the goal of this project is to explore salient themes and experiences for the chosen user group, not to understand percentages of frequencies of beliefs or to provide generalizable findings.

The eligibility criteria for participating in this ethnography were 1) residing in the U.S., 2) speaking English, 3) being over the age of 21, 4) having consumed psilocybin at least once for the direct purposes of wellness, as defined previously, in a naturalistic setting, and 5) having access and availability for virtual communication. A critical criterion here is the naturalistic, which is used to capture the environments of use for individuals in this project, as they are not individuals in clinical trials, nor are they partaking in Indigenous ceremonies. They consume psilocybin on their own accord, following their own chosen methods, and in their own chosen environment, which is often their home and surrounding area. Additionally, wellness, for this project, is defined as any usage of psilocybin with an intentional goal aimed at the betterment of one's life.

Some virtual communities have moderators or administrators that oversee the forum, screen those who join the group, and moderate what people can post. In these cases, I reached out directly to them to gain permission and discuss the best path for sharing the recruitment information. In other cases, the online forums either didn't have obvious governing bodies or had clear procedures for sharing research recruitment information. In these forums, posts sharing the information were made without prior approval. The posts were requests for participation that included information approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Texas A&M University and allowed interested parties to submit a Google Form sharing a contact email and an alias. Participants could also self-validate their eligibility by verifying their compliance with each criterion. Once submitted, the interested parties' information was reviewed, and those that were eligible for participation were contacted and provided the information sheet detailing ethics guidelines, risks, benefits, and other information about participation in the project. If the individual was still interested in participating in the research, a Zoom interview was scheduled and conducted.

While there is a robust community of psychedelic consumers in the United States, the active compound in psychedelic mushrooms, psilocybin, is illegal. Due to this, privacy throughout the research project was paramount. To maximize the protection of participants' privacy and encourage participation, the interviews were entirely confidential, and participants were allowed to use pseudonyms to increase their anonymity. They also had the option not to use their video camera, as only audio was recorded. Participants were reassured that their sensitive information would be protected in compliance with IRB guidelines and that only minimal and necessary sensitive information would be collected. This was laid out for the participants through

the informed consent process before involvement with the project. These safeguards were in place to protect the participants and encourage their participation.

Theory

The primary theoretical perspective of this project is called “grounded theory.” Grounded theory is a research method that was originally developed by Glaser and Strauss to collect unbiased data that prioritizes questions and discovery that come directly from the data itself. Grounded theory has developed much since its invention. It has many offshoots, but, generally, it accomplishes the goal of grounding the research in the data by entering research intent on developing analyses and, sometimes, even the questions themselves, from the data without external influence. Grounded theory projects often use ethnographic methods, such as interviews and observation, to collect data and use thematic analyses of this data to allow the emergence of the questions, analyses, and findings (Sebastian, 2019). A classical grounded theory paradigm is that the scientist is an objectively neutral party who has no role in the findings and that the outcome is objective discoveries of truth, which is where this project branches from classical grounded theory to constructivist (Charmaz, 2014).

Constructivist grounded theory (CGT) is a constructivist and pragmatic type of grounded theory that operates under “the assumption that social reality is multiple, processual, and constructed” (Charmaz, 2014, pg. 13) and believes that researchers cannot be truly neutral, as they are human beings engaging in a human social process - scientific research - that is inherently imbued with the researchers’ influence. Additionally, CGT states that it is impossible to discover objective truths, but findings constructed by both the participants and the researcher may be concluded. This is grounded in the philosophical idea that science is socially constructed and affected by cultural beliefs, privilege, perspective, and experience. By being upfront about

this, CGT works towards transparent, grounded theory research that moves away from the notion of objective truths generated by value-free experts (Charmaz, 2014).

CGT ethnography was chosen as the theoretical framework for this project because it allows for the findings to be highly contextualized to the individuals studied in order to ascertain their perspectives and experiences while also addressing philosophical dilemmas of the impacts of a researcher's positionality. Ultimately, this theoretical framework allows the project to reach its goal of exploring the lived experience of psilocybin self-medicators to fill the qualitative gaps in the literature with a critical and transparent perspective that prioritizes the voices of the participants. The details of how this theoretical framework guided the design of this project will be outlined in the corresponding sections.

Data Collection

Data were collected virtually, utilizing internet forums for recruitment, email for communication, and Zoom for semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews use a set of predetermined open-ended questions, called an interview guide, to guide the interview process and allow for flexibility for follow-up questions to investigate topics of interest further (Charmaz, 2014). This allows for the answers to be more reflective of participants' inner worlds but also allows the answers to be better contextualized within the world in which they are constructed (Charmaz, 2014).

To appropriately address the qualitative gap in the literature from an exploratory perspective, the questions selected for the interviews have a direct rationale for inclusion aimed to understand a broad landscape (Bernard, 2006). In order to cover wide ground on user's experiences and beliefs the questions were developed to cover experience, behaviors,

perceptions, and values. After the initial creation of the interview guide, a test interview was conducted with a participant to help identify any issues with the guide and inform revisions.

Interviews were conducted from December 2022 through February 2023. Interview lengths ranged from 12 minutes to 71 minutes, all following the same interview guide. Although an iterative process between data collection and analysis is common for CGT, this research project separated collection and analysis into two phases with only one round of interviews per participant. This design was chosen due to the exploratory nature of the research questions and the flexible nature of CGT.

At the beginning of the interview, the interviewer gave the participant time to review the information sheet and allowed for questions. After, verbal consent was collected, and the interviewer gave the participant an outline of what to expect. Often, the participants were curious about the project or the work of the researcher and asked questions before the start of the interview. Discussing their questions gave the participants a sense of comfort and connection, allowing for some rapport to be built. This is an important ethnographic process, especially when discussing a potentially taboo topic. Interview data, including email, Zoom alias, audio, and auto-generated transcriptions, were all made anonymous by using coded identifiers rather than names and were stored on a password-protected computer.

Data Analysis

Constructivist grounded theory's analysis is "grounded" in the data by reflecting salient categories directly from the words of the participants. A practice also referred to as in-vivo coding, grounded theory text analysis was chosen for this project and was carried out over three separate phases to distill and organize the thematic content. Grounded theory was utilized in these phases by identifying themes that emerged from the data and compiling and comparing

data within and between those themes (Charmaz, 2014). The data collection and phases of analysis were not linear but reflexive, as different phases must be revisited and refined often as questions arise, themes develop, and gaps are revealed (Charmaz, 2014; Schensul & LeCompte, 2012).

An integrated software created a live transcription of the Zoom interviews. After these transcriptions were generated, they were reviewed and revised to apply text analysis coding methods within the software MaxQDA. MaxQDA serves as a location and tool for coding analysis and allows for media, such as transcripts and audio recordings, to be uploaded. To these, codes can be applied, managed, and analyzed.

The first phase was guided by themes of inquiry and memos, or thematic notes were taken during and after interviews discussing themes, patterns, relationships, or other insights from the participants. Thus, this first phase was influenced both by the research objectives and the grounded themes to find and establish the broad overarching categories that will be further investigated in phase 2. After the primary phase of text analysis that clarified themes, the themes were adapted and revised to clarify the concepts and allow for a more in-depth exploration of the themes in phase 2. The next step of the analysis was seeking patterns and trends to further understand the relationships within the data in phase 3. This will be used to develop theoretical models and pull exemplar quotes to illuminate the thematic categories.

Further, the constructivist nature is brought into the project in how the researcher is acknowledged as having an influence on the project. Through memoing throughout the data collection process and how the data is interpreted, the researcher's positionality has to be considered as having an impact on the project. Through this acknowledgment, CGT acknowledges that regardless of intention, the nature of this type of qualitative research will

always be constructed to some degree by the researcher alongside the participants (Charmaz, 2014). This framework also shapes how the findings are written up and shared, in that it is made as transparent as possible in acknowledging that the findings are constructed interpretations, unique to this ethnography and is a snapshot for exploring present themes and is “an interpretation rather than an exact representation” (pg. 4) that cannot exist in a vacuum without the researcher’s influence (Sebastian, 2019).

Researcher Positionality

As a researcher, I came to study psilocybin by way of food. I have always been fascinated by food and how much that can tell us about culture, as what people eat weaves a tapestry of human relationships, global economics, and relationships with nature. Because of this, I pursued the study of ethnobotany and the anthropology of nutrition to round out my undergraduate studies in nature & conservation. As my knowledge and interest in the human relationship with their natural environment expanded, I became interested in the topic of psychedelics and other mind-altering chemical compounds. I consumed documentaries, books, podcasts, academic papers, and journalism about herbal medicine, medicinal herbs, and naturally occurring mind-altering chemicals found in plants. Psychedelic compounds fascinated me due to their profound power to shape the human experience and brain. Much of what I learned showed that psychedelics have enormous perceived potential in mental health treatment. What stuck out to me was how moved individuals were who experienced the positive effects of psychedelics, the despite risks. Many testimonies of psychedelic healing have seemed to be profound and often spiritual. These drastic claims piqued my interest in the corresponding academic studies as I sought to understand the neural mechanisms for these experiences. As I continued to investigate this topic academically, I noticed a lack of qualitative research from an anthropological focus on

psilocybin users in naturalistic settings in the U.S. This led to this constructivist grounded theory ethnography to address those who fit in the gray area that isn't in clinical trials but are seeking therapeutic healing.

Research Qualifications & Experience

Over the course of my education, I have crafted a varied research skill set that has enabled me to develop this research project and ensure that I conduct ethical, organized, and sound research. Much of the independent research experience I gained during my time with Isla Mujeres Ethnographic Field School in Quintana Roo, Mexico. I studied research design, ethnographic theories and methodologies, data collection, and analysis methods in the field. My project looked into the high local consumption of soft drinks and their relationship with diabetes amongst the Indigenous inhabitants of Isla Mujeres. I developed a Wenner-Grenn research proposal, designed my research project, conducted data collection, analyzed the data, wrote up the results, and presented my findings as a conference paper presentation.

More recently, I assisted in a virtual qualitative research project that interviewed professors and analyzed their syllabi to investigate how their syllabi corresponded to their intended educational outcomes and how they measured success. As this project was conducted remotely, I have a strong working knowledge of utilizing Zoom for interviews, including recording, having virtual consent conversations, using auto-transcription, and safely maintaining the data. During the analysis phase, I gained an understanding of employing coding methods through the qualitative analysis software, Dedoose.

Working on both projects allowed me to learn how to prepare for research appropriately, design a project, develop interview skills, adhere to a research schedule, build respectful working relationships, analyze data, write deliverables with the findings and presently said deliverables.

My anthropology graduate education was built on the foundation of my undergraduate degree in Recreation, Parks, and Tourism Sciences, also at Texas A&M University. This undergraduate program helped develop my interest in the human relationship with natural environments and the relationship with nature that humans consume for sustenance, wellness, spiritual practice, and recreation. From an academic standpoint, I also developed interdisciplinary skills thanks to this foundation that allowed me to expand my approach to academic research that lends itself perfectly to the holistic nature of cultural anthropology.

Through my coursework during my graduate education, I have developed an in-depth knowledge of theoretical and methodological approaches from various anthropological perspectives, including ethnobotany, medical anthropology, and nutritional anthropology. Through each of these lenses, I studied how to approach different anthropological inquiries best for the data to best address the question and how to interpret said data in the most grounded, reliable, and transparent manner.

In conclusion, this exploratory research project is a virtually based ethnography aimed at understanding the constructed experiences of psilocybin as a wellness modality. The demographic of study for this project is people that have consumed psilocybin for wellness that are over the age of 21, residing in the US, English speaking Individuals who were invited to participate in this project via recruitment posts on psilocybin-focused internet forums. Using interviews and auto-generated transcripts, text analysis was conducted using MaxQDA software. This process was guided theoretically by ethnographic qualitative theory and specifically by constructivist grounded theory (CGT). This theoretical lens was chosen due to the researchers desire to be as transparent as possible while interpreting the interviews with participants. CGT is helpful in its ability to be flexible and focus on the participants constructions of their live.

RESULTS PT. 1:

INTRODUCTION & MOTIVATION

After the interviews took place and the auto-generated transcriptions were revised for mistakes, the interview transcriptions were analyzed using thematic text analysis qualitative analysis software MAXQDA. As outlined in the research design chapter, the qualitative text analysis was informed by flexible constructive grounded theory as the themes were developed inductively from the data and contextualized within the research questions for the project. The interview questions initially informed broad thematic categories to assist in narrowing down relevant themes, resulting in 5 parent codes being applied during the first analysis phase. These broad categories were then explored inductively into subcodes that reflected the experiences and opinions of the participants. As time and analysis passed, the text continued to be explored and broken down further into multidimensional hierarchies creating 29 secondary subcodes, 30 tertiary subcodes, and 10 quaternary subcodes. These 74 codes were applied to 1,023 segments. These codes and the text segments to which they are applied ultimately informed the following interpretation.

The theories that emerged from the data were dominant relationships that existed within and between codes that showed up consistently in multiple interviews. These theories will be expanded upon and supported by relevant illustrative quotes from the interview responses as psilocybin is explored as a healing modality. The emergent theories are contextualized within three thematic categories relating to motivations for use, benefits and risks, and conflicting beliefs concerning integration. The theories posited here are meant to explore the lived worlds of

psilocybin users and construct an understanding of the lived experiences of participants and their meaning constructions of psilocybin as a modality for healing and wellness.

Motivations & Information Sources

Emergent theory: Motivations are rooted in curiosity and an often desperate desire to heal. These motivations are shaped by information sources and can change over time due to experiences and new information, altering goals.

Motivations for consumption are the beliefs and interests that drive people to try psilocybin for the first time and reasons for continued usage. These intrinsic motivations are also flexible for some people because they change over time. This thematic category includes the sources in which people learned about psilocybin, motivations for their usage, and how motivation changes for some people over time. This category is critical in understanding participants' foundational knowledge concerning psilocybin and how this influenced their behaviors. Additionally, motivations are entangled with other factors of psilocybin as a healing modality, as desired outcomes drive motivations.

The key findings informed the emergent theory that psilocybin as a potential healing modality or curiosity was the primary motivation for initial usage. However, over time motivations shifted to a desire for healing and therapeutic benefits once individuals either learned or experienced the potential for intentional wellness usage. Motivations are often flexible for individuals as they are motivated by various factors that shift dominance. Individuals who were motivated by information that focused on psilocybin as a healing modality had a more static motivation that focused on psilocybin primarily as a tool. On the contrary, individuals that came to use psilocybin out of curiosity without specific end goals in mind concerning wellness

have experienced much more motivational fluctuation and do not always view psilocybin as solely a healing modality but as a tool for exploration and enjoyment.

Sources of Psilocybin Knowledge

The sources of information for participants were collected to assess if they influenced motivations and behaviors (Figure 1). It was observed that sources largely influenced opinions and behaviors, most prominently in sparking curiosity.

Cultural Awareness

Psychedelics have a strong presence in North America, and as a result, a large majority of people could not pinpoint a specific source but generally knew about mushrooms as a part of common knowledge. Many others with multiple sources of psilocybin information often shared beliefs they had held or heard derived from popular culture. Many participants received positive and negative information about psychedelic mushrooms from trusted people, such as their friends, partners, or parents. Additionally, other cultural components of daily life had influence, including music scenes, internet browsing, and anti-drug campaigns.

“I was like a kid, you know, like 10 years old and school and their you know, their anti-drug, their DARE campaigns, and all that stuff, and like just reading about psychedelic and hallucinogenic drugs and textbooks. I was like, oh, that sounds interesting.” Zeke

Internet Resources

These cultural influences on people’s awareness stoked curiosity that inspired many individuals to dig deeper into resources both online and in texts. Popular sources of personal internet research include the internet resources of Reddit and Erowid.

“I just like saw people on the Internet talking about hallucinogens and it piqued my interest. So, I just like, you know, did some research, I found Erowid and read up on that extensively.” Madison

Several participants sought Erowid out of a desire for more detailed information. Erowid is a comprehensive educational resource for many drugs and contains information about dosage, experiences, chemistry, law, culture, and more. Additionally, Reddit was used as a primary source for other people’s experiences, guides on dosage, and methods of self-growing.

Books

Book resources were a popular mode of information for those particularly interested in the potential mental health benefits and history of psychedelics. A few participants cited Michael Pollan’s book *How to Change Your Mind* as a source of knowledge before and after their first psilocybin experience, which influenced them to believe psilocybin has a high potential for mental health benefits.

“It wasn’t until I read Michael Pollan’s book where I was like holy crap. This is amazing stuff. I had always been curious about them, but you know I don’t think I realized that the potential that they could have until I read that book.” Briana

However, despite the book being largely influential due to its claim of the potential health benefits of psilocybin use, participants demonstrated the potential for the book to be divisive amongst psilocybin users.

“I’ve read Michael Pollan’s book. I wasn’t overly impressed with it. I’ve recommended it to people primarily older people who may have kind of a negative view. But I think in that book. He’s selling something that’s not there.” Rocky

This participant believed that the book displayed positive potential but believed the benefits to be much narrower than posited and believes that society is misinterpreting the book's point. Many participants shared a similar sentiment that although psilocybin has largely benefited their lives, it is not a magic cure-all substance. It requires work and will not benefit everyone in the same way. The idea of psilocybin as a healing modality that requires effort and work to reap benefits was universally shared in varying degrees by participants and will be explored in depth in category 3. Hedging expectations and developing realistic hope will also be explored in greater detail in category 3.

Previous Drug Use

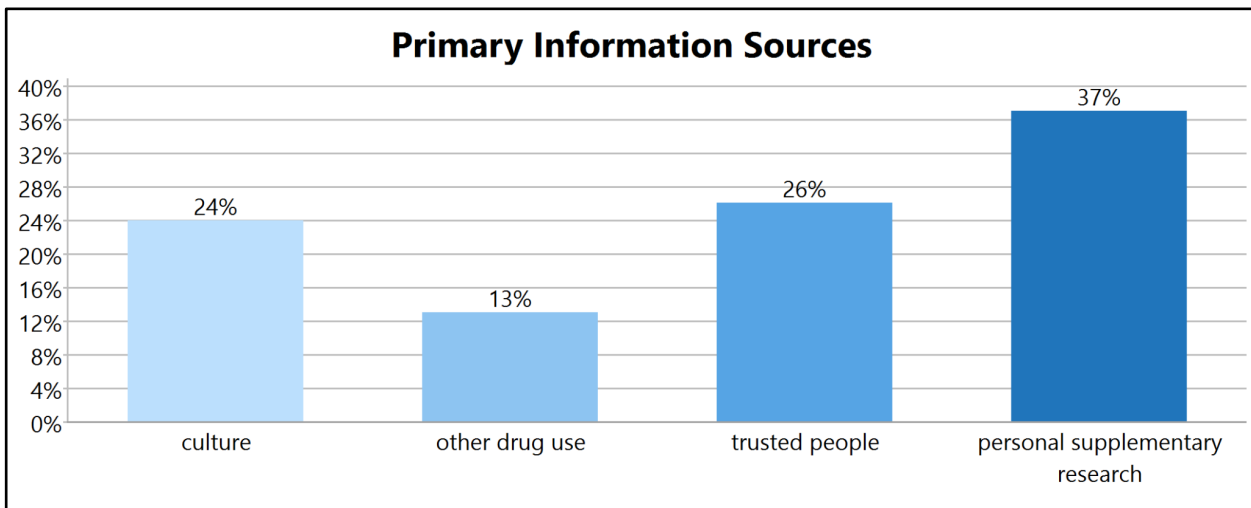
One source of information that spurred curiosity and motivation to try psilocybin was knowledge and exposure gained from previous drug use. These participants stated that their drug use of LSD or marijuana prompted them to either seek out more knowledge when they heard about psilocybin or had individuals offer them the drug leading them to further their research with internet-based sources prior to consumption.

"I started during 2020 during the pandemic in November with LSD tabs as a recreational party drug. And well, this is not psilocybin, but it definitely introduced me to a world of psychedelics... I definitely felt an immense weight off my shoulders when I first got into this, and so I knew that there was something 'd been missing and so, I was very intrigued by this and so I guess I first tried psilocybin in May of 2021 that way." Cameron

Often, these individuals framed themselves and their behaviors in terms of curiosity This was gleaned from discussions about how enrapt they became in research or their previous drug experiences fueled by curiosity followed by a continued desire to explore their consciousness and mind-altering substances. For them, there was a close connection between motivation and

information sources due to established practices of curiosity and exploration through mind-altering drugs. Additionally, the point of accessibility comes up here in that these individuals were already exposed to psychedelic drugs. Therefore, the procurement was not a barrier to entry as much as it was for other participants.

Ultimately, popular culture influenced most individuals, but this was built upon for all individuals in varying manners and only a primary source for 24% of participants. The most common informational source was personal research encouraged by information received from people in their lives, with internet resources being the most common source for further research. However, the most valuable takeaways are that many individuals were influenced by multiple sources over time and had varying degrees of information before consuming the substance for the first time.



(Figure 1): Primary Information Sources

Motivations for Use

Motivations for primary and continued use were assessed, which showed that, as previously discussed, curiosity was a primary motivation for people consuming psilocybin. However, as time progressed, the motivations of these individuals and individuals who were first motivated by wanting to enjoy the experience shifted to wellness benefits and spiritual exploration. However, this change in motivation was not the same for every psilocybin user. Potential health benefits were the lead motivation when focusing on continued motivations for use, with curiosity following close behind. Additionally, motivations included improved wellbeing, the desire to have fun, and spiritual exploration. These categories will be explored in the following subcategories.

Curiosity

With initial psilocybin usage, curiosity is an enormously influential motivating factor. However, curiosity has not only influenced initial use but also prolonged use as people are drawn to repeated explorations of the same and different aspects of the psilocybin experience.

“I think, just experiencing it, just really curious about what it was like. Didn’t really know what to expect. Obviously like seeing cool visuals was a prime motivator for a teenager and got so much more than that.” Bianca

Participants who discussed themes of fun often discussed the idea that self-exploration, fun, and pleasure are all integral parts of wellness. These individuals felt called to psilocybin to facilitate their ability for self-exploration, fun, and pleasure to improve their quality of life. Even individuals who did not cite fun or curiosity as a primary driver often discussed joy, enjoyment, and pleasure moments, whether having lighthearted giggles or feeling immense emotional richness.

“I tried it, and it was a really cool experience, and the reason I wanted to was just to have fun.” Andrew

Fun, recreation, and leisure are all terms that often do not get taken very seriously, much to the dismay of some psilocybin users. However, other participants did not share the perspective of fun being a motivator. Many individuals, primarily those driven to use healing, trauma processing, and inner work, do not share the same emphasis on fun and focus more on psilocybin as a tool for intentional work on healing.

Potential Mental Health Benefits

Whether it be hearing about mental health benefits from a partner or reading about clinical trials while researching treatments for severe anxiety and depression, the majority of participants claim that their primary motivating factor for initial or continued use is a desire to experience potential positive health outcomes. There was a particular emphasis on conditions such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, and trauma.

“I wanted to use it to treat depression and complex PTSD... I don't really work with it quite as much anymore. I mean maybe once or twice a year, because I feel like that's all I need, because I don't use it recreationally, I use it strictly as like a therapeutic aid. If I feel that, you know, I'm kind of leaning into this place of darkness and depression and anxiety where it's impacting my life in a significant way. Then I'll go 'Okay, it's time for me to like. Go in and do some work.'” Greyson

For some people, curiosity about altered states and hallucinogens was not enough. For some participants, it took the nudge of learning about potential benefits that pushed them to take the leap and try psilocybin. However, merely learning about the potential of benefits alone was not the only component driving individuals to seek benefits. Desperation was a driving theme for

individuals suffering from mental health issues to seek out psilocybin. As exemplified by the illustrative excerpt from a participant below:

“It wasn’t until I read Michael Pollan’s book where I was like holy crap. This is amazing stuff. I had always been curious about them, but you know I don’t think I realized that the potential that they could have until I read that book. It was like I need to get my hands on these things and try them for myself, because, you know, I’ve had depression throughout my life. I’ve had anxiety throughout my life, and I wanted to see if it was something that could help me. I wanted to experience not only the mental health benefits, but also maybe a spiritual experience. See if that was something that was possible for me.” Briana

Desperation for Support

While it is common for many individuals suffering from mental health discomfort and pain to suffer in silence, some individuals are able to be active in seeking support and solutions to improve their daily quality of life. When finding out the potential for alleviating their symptoms, many of these individuals are often eager to experience psilocybin and its benefits. Another component of this desperation is moderate to severe dissatisfaction with their treatment plans and options.

“Growing up it was not something I had heard positively, but as I was researching things like depression and anxiety, because even years and years ago, I kind of this hope to become a counselor. I knew that I had to kind of like do my own work first. It was too much, you know. I need to heal some of this, so I can help others. I came across [psilocybin], and this was quite a few years ago, so there wasn’t as much information. I started seeing people talking about it, helping with depression and anxiety and healing things, and also reading about MDMA as a possible help for things like PTSD. This is really interesting, and I really started to deep dive

into any science that I could find. And yeah, so I was so fascinated, back then there was such a huge disconnect between the cultural representation of people that take shrooms versus what the specific reality of things were. And so yeah, there was just kind of a search in a little bit in desperation to help myself, I guess, because talk therapy is not cutting it.” Christine

The above excerpt demonstrates an intersection of a few thematic categories discussed. This quote concisely highlights the deep desire to heal and the dissatisfaction with their current mode of treatment, talk therapy. This sentiment was shared by multiple participants seeking mental health support. This pattern indicates that using psilocybin as a tool of mental health treatment has a sense of reclaiming agency and taking mental health into participants’ own hands. A sense of dissatisfaction with mental health care in the United States was a salient component of the discussions on integration and will be explored more thoroughly in category 3.

Improved Wellbeing

Improved wellbeing is a category that includes connecting with others, relaxing, processing, and self-exploration. These components have intimate relationships with mental health but are slightly removed from mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety in the interviews. Improved wellbeing was a significant motivating factor as they are perceived by participants to lead to self-betterment as well, as exemplified by the quote below:

“I was very curious about psychedelics in general, and why they had affected me the way that they affected me, and further into how I could use this substance as a tool for my wellbeing and to continue my self-development and developing the skills that I wanted to develop.” 26

Individuals seeking improved wellbeing often did not cite it as their primary motivation for their first psychedelic experiences, but it is a common motivation for continued use. This is

due to the nature of participants experiencing benefits in wellbeing and returning to continue their growth and exploration of those areas.

Spiritual Exploration

Popular psychedelic culture centralizes themes of spirituality, and the participants expressed this theme as well. For many individuals, spiritual exploration was either a prime motivator or one of a few motivating factors for psilocybin use. Participants cite spiritual curiosity and the desire to experience something mystical as enticing factors for use.

“I had heard that it could be a spiritual experience, and provoke meaningful insights, and I wanted to see if it would do that for me.” Madison

Some individuals did not cite spirituality as an initial motivator but discovered spirituality along their usage journey, whether it be from first-hand experience or hearing secondhand accounts. Others have focused on spiritual development through other means and avenues, such as medication, and see psilocybin as a functional extension of their spiritual wellness practice.

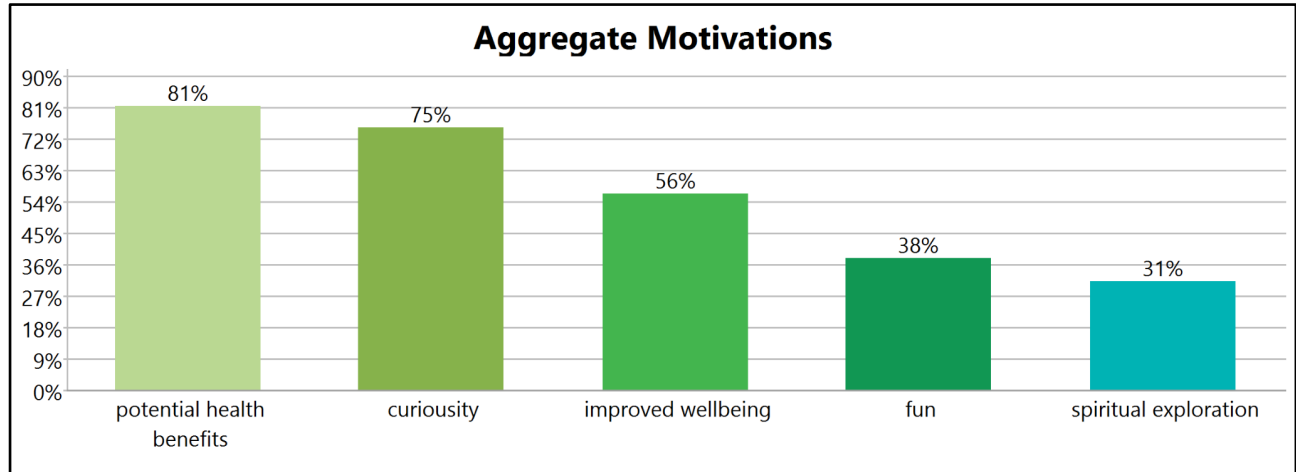
Entangled Motivations

As shown in the excerpts, motivations do not fit neatly in one thematic category for most individuals. Many participants cited motivations that coalesced to get them to consume psilocybin, whether people were moved by curiosity, hope for improved mental health, or general wellness, as exemplified by this participant:

“Well, I guess it’s just equal parts curiosity about other different states of mind, and exploring what else is out there, and not just the world we occupy mentally, because I don’t know I was always curious before I even tried it. I just loved reading about other people’s experiences, and it’s something that I always wanted to try for myself, so equal parts, curiosity,

and hoping to, find something that would help me heal or just be a better person in general.”

Alisa



(Figure 2): Aggregate Motivations

Motivation Change

While motivations can be singular or entangled, they can also fluctuate over time. Some participants are solely driven by personal betterment and self-exploration, and others are focused on mental health benefits or spiritual wellness. Other participants’ needs change dynamically, depending on their intuitive needs and wants. One participant explained how their motivations fluctuate based on their goals:

“There’s times where I’d like to expose myself to psilocybin in the private and sometimes, I could be going into those trips not necessarily with a goal, but an intention of mulling over something or trying to get down to the root of what’s causing concern in my life. So, there’s times where I’m searching that, and that’s why I’ll go to psilocybin there’s other times where it’s like ‘oh, cool it’s a group setting we’re outdoors I can micro-dose. Somebody’s going to go do this, I’m just going to do that.’ There’s times where the motivations change, but I notice in sort

of a vacuum stayed the same. If that makes sense through the sine wave pattern of 'hey, this one's for me and to kind of reach somewhere', and then as easily like 'oh, cool. We're going camping like I'm in. Let's all trip.'" Rocky

In this excerpt the individual has motivations that range from desiring active internal work and enjoying time with friends. They also reference that not only do their motivations change but their settings and dosage do. In this instance, the participant prefers reflective trips to take place alone and prefers to have trips for enjoyment with friends. Also, this participant views recreational doses as smaller or microdoses, and larger doses as therapeutic. Different doses can serve different purposes and have varying effects on individuals and mental health treatment methods. Many individuals fluctuate as they experiment and find a balance. As seen in the example below, fluctuations can result from varying mental health challenges that are being treated and revisited when they resurface.

"I stopped using it more consistently because I felt like I'd hit a point where I can go longer without experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression. Before it was pretty consistent, or before a couple of years ago it was pretty consistent every 3 months I would have to go in and do a macrodose to kind of keep things on an even keel for me. Because it would be noticeable. I would feel it when the long-term effects would start to wear off." Greyson

Fluctuating and dynamic needs were a common thread among participants. In these cases, intuition was largely responsible for shifting the participants' goals due to them noticing if they felt the need to work on their mental health or wellbeing or if they would like a fun experience. These categories need not be disparate, as many participants declared fun as part of wellness., All of these motivations serve the ultimate goal of wellness, they are only different in their

improvement mechanism, be it thoughtful work and integration, mood enhancement, fun, or processing challenging emotions.

Need Psilocybin Less

When recalling motivational changes and changes in consumption patterns, a few participants said that they have decreased their frequency of use or stopped consumption altogether. These participants felt the symptoms they were treating improved due to their psilocybin usage and have not returned, unlike the example above.

“I haven’t used it in quite a while. You know, I could it at any time. I would. And I just don’t. I just don’t feel the need to. Yeah, so it is very self-limiting.” Zeke

The idea that psilocybin can be non-addictive was a common one among participants. One participant felt that they began to use it too much, due to immense curiosity. However, they were able to recognize this and pull back from their usage. Other participants feel that psilocybin allows them an avenue to work on themselves and their mental health, but as they experience benefits in treating their mental health, they no longer feel the need to use psilocybin to prevent them from uncomfortable mental health situations, as they are no longer occurring or no longer occurring at a rate or severity that feels unmanageable through other avenues.

Use Has Become More Spiritual

For some individuals, spirituality has become an important motivational factor as they deepen their personal relationship with their spiritual exploration. For some, they began their spiritual journey independent from consumption, and wanted to use psilocybin as an extension of their exploration.

“I took like a really long break in between my younger days and where I’m at now. I had kids so didn’t do it for probably like 17 years. Now it’s more like more of a spiritual practice, I

would say, really trying to tap into like my higher self and what's going on in my subconscious for what I need to work on to heal myself more. Not just like cool party drug.” Bianca

For others, spirituality was a large motivating factor due to their experiences on the drug leading them to grow their practice outside of psychedelic exploration and continue to develop in a psychedelic space.

“It pointed me in the direction of mindful meditation and yoga and other practices that I've helped incorporate into my life. That has definitely shown improvement in many areas in my life... I definitely would like to just reiterate that it's brought me more into a spiritual practice.”

Jason

Experienced Benefits & Wanted to Maximize Benefits

Another factor that led to motivational change was entering a psilocybin trip due to fun or curiosity but experiencing mental health benefits. This experience led participants to continue work with psilocybin for wellness ends. Many of these individuals that had these revelations about their potential wanted to maximize their benefits as much as possible.

“I really saw I saw the benefits that could come with something like that, and I had some so much appreciation for everything that I had learned in my trip that I thought that I really saw the potential for this substance to be used for like mental health. After that, I guess I was just very curious about like psychedelics in general, and why they had, you know, affected me the way that they affected me, and I guess further into like how I could use this substance to like as a tool for my wellbeing, and to continue on my self development and developing the skills that I wanted to develop and like whether I the path that I begin walking on was the right path, and things that I had to remember along the way.” Denise

For some, this may look as simple as doing research to figure out dosage schedules, but others took research to another level as they took thoughtful notes to chronicle their experiences with varying doses and varying intentions. This took the form of journaling for many, which included various metrics such as dose, intention, setting, and emotions. This is where the development of psilocybin as a thoughtful and effortful tool becomes apparent.

RESULTS PT. 2: BENEFITS AND RISKS

This section will detail the benefits of using psilocybin as a tool for wellness by participants. The benefits have been broken down into subcategories: improved mental health, perspective shifts, improved emotional wellbeing, cognition enhancements, spiritual growth, appreciation of nature, improved physical health, enhanced creativity, and elimination of cravings for alcohol. This theme also includes sentiments of gratitude, the idea that the benefits of psilocybin trips are either enhanced by or reliant on effort and intention and how participants try to set realistic expectations.

This category is invaluable in understanding how people utilize psilocybin because potential benefits, experienced benefits, and motivations are profoundly entangled and often indistinguishable for many participants. Put simply, the motivations for use are the potential for benefits, and the motivations for continued use are the experienced benefits. Another notion of import is that these benefits have been experienced on a scale. While some individuals have had complete cessations of illness symptoms, others have experienced subtle improvements. Additionally, the benefits are often complex, with participants experiencing multiple benefits in varying degrees. This category will detail the experienced benefits of participants and touch upon mechanisms. Themes concerning the effort needed to experience benefits will also be discussed, as well as how participants manage expectations. Lastly, as this chapter covers benefits, it too must cover risks. Risks and risk management will be explored in the final subsection of this category.

Experienced Benefits

Emergent theory: While not everyone has had life-changing experiences with psilocybin, it has been beneficial in all of the lives of the participants, often through intentional work with the substance, with a majority experiencing valuable improvement to their quality of life.

There was a wide array of benefits reflecting multiple spheres of the psychedelic experience. These experienced benefits include improved mental health, beneficial shifts in perspective, emotional wellbeing, enhanced cognition, spiritual growth, appreciation of nature, improved physical health, enhanced creativity, and breaking of negative cravings. The benefits of the experience are the most valuable components of understanding why people use psilocybin for wellness and how this use impacts their wellbeing.

Mental Health

Mental health improvement was the dominant benefit that participants experienced. This subcategory includes decreased depression, decreased anxiety, and the ability to heal and process trauma. While it is understood that a wide variety of factors can influence mental health, and there can be complex indicators of improvement, this category is expressly for individuals that cited benefits to their mental health and mental health-related conditions.

Multiple participants cited the feeling of anxiety or depression being lifted, and one participant described the feeling as a jolt to their serotonergic system. For many individuals, psilocybin allowed them to experience life outside the narrow darkness of adverse mental health.

“It gave me this whole new lease on life, after being such a glass, half-empty, negative, pessimistic kind of person. All of a sudden, I was on Cloud 9, you know? You know what, it's genuinely beautiful it just is. How wonderful it is to feel the full range of emotions, you know,

like to feel excited, to be able to connect with all of these things off to just having an error message for emotions for a long time?” Mia

For participants who experienced a lifting of their symptoms, they used language to discuss the feeling that mental illness distorted reality into a dark and negative space. The ability that psilocybin gave them to break away from this line of thinking is one of the perceived mechanisms of this benefit.

Beneficial Shifts in Perspective

While shifts in perspective can directly improve mental health outcomes, they can also be beneficial for a broad variety of reasons. One way that participants believed a shift in perspective to be beneficial was the ability to see other people's perspectives more clearly and increase empathy. One participant succinctly exemplified this by saying:

“After I've tripped more likely to see things from other people's perspectives and give them the empathy that is more so required.” Rocky

Increases in empathy and connection with other individuals can be a valuable outcome of perspective shifts, but the shift alone can provide clarity for individuals as they look around them and assess their life and society. One individual described this clarity below.

“And I've definitely had the feelings afterward where you're sort of looking around, or you know I described it to a buddy one time as sort of at times it can show the underbelly of the situation. You know that third-party perspective. It can also, maybe get rid of that glitter.” Rocky

Participants that reference these sorts of experiences discuss feeling a sense of clarity and honest perceptions. As mentioned above, participants feel like psilocybin can take the veil off of some situations, revealing them for what they truly are. This heightened sense of clarity is often cited as not only showing clarity but dismantling human culture blindness. When people are not

blind to their culture, they describe being able to be more thoughtful about their participation in said culture. Thus, this perspective shift and sense of clarity towards the world around them allows them to break out of robotic cultural patterns and feel a greater sense of agency toward their decisions.

“It can show you or reveal to you different perspectives, different ways of seeing the world. for me one of the big things it strips away a lot of the pretenses of our culture. that we get caught up in the daily life of. And you just you. You forget that these things are just social constructions. internal fabrications. And then. yeah, taking the psilocybin sort of strips that away, and it reveals to you a more raw primal sort of experience of the world.” Zeke

Psilocybin-induced perspective shifts do not only break someone away from their cultural blindness but can break negative thought loops and patterns, like it did for the participant who stated:

“Being able to address issues kind of more head on you know and being able to see things in a different perspective. Clearing away the problems and getting rid of where you get stuck in these thoughts. So, helping with repetitive thoughts, repetitive negative thoughts, and patterns helping reduce those helping just you know. Kind of get out of your own head. I like that feeling that it kind of lets you just kind of see yourself as a different person in a way to look at yourself and examine why you think the things you do, or why you believe in certain things. The ability to give you a different perspective to help reduce negative thought patterns, which has been very beneficial.” Briana

For the excerpt above, we can see that they describe this shift in perspective as gaining the ability to look at yourself from a third person perspective, to gain that clarity. Breaking

negative thought patterns and allowing for transparent self-reflection are viewed as helpful for participants to improve their mental and emotional wellbeing.

Improved Emotional Wellbeing

Emotional wellbeing includes personal growth, improved mood, appreciation of emotions, and improved emotional coping skills. During data analysis, the category of improved emotional wellbeing was developed due to participant distinctions and categorical distinctions observed between emotional wellbeing and mental health. This category included within includes metrics of emotional intelligence, introspection, and emotional processing capacity. While these factors can be entangled with mental health, they stand on their own as alterations in these metrics do not necessarily impact mental health conditions. However, improved emotional wellbeing was often linked directly to mental health improvements and increased quality of life by participants.

One of the most cited components of emotional wellbeing is that psilocybin assists participants with increased willingness and ability to process challenging emotional feelings or thoughts.

“One of the lasting benefits that I've noticed is a willingness to turn towards things rather than away from things or be more willing to, anyway, because it's hard to do it sometimes. But when you realize that you're starting to feel bad or negative, or something. It's like good. This is a clue, you know, like. Turn towards it. Go and see what's up, rather than not wanting to deal with it, not wanting to experience it, which is just like our composed just like our default, I think, for a lot of people.” Mia

This ability to lean into a problem and work through it shows heightened emotional resilience and strengthened emotional coping skills. These skills were fundamental in many of

the participants' retellings of their impactful trip experiences. For many, leaning into those challenging emotions can be scary and can feel like they may be leading to a bad trip. These individuals were able to avoid being overwhelmed by negative emotions by releasing control to the experience and working through their discomfort.

Improvements in mood were a very important benefit for many individuals and were seen strongly in the after-glow period of a few weeks after a trip and also in individuals who were microdosing. Mood enhancement was referenced by multiple participants but often was accompanied by other benefits such as lessened anxiety and perspective shifts. While mood enhancement was seen after the trip experience, it is one of the benefits that is also felt quite acutely during the trip, via microdose or macrodose.

Personal growth is another component of emotional wellbeing that was highly represented in the sample. Personal growth is manifested in a few different ways for people including self-introspection, intentional work on areas of oneself that are believed to need improvement, and a sense of self-love. Personal growth was experienced by participants who looked inward to themselves and did the work of processing emotional blocks or traumas that were hindering how they engaged with the work. Experiencing personal growth through taking psilocybin, was closely related to helping people feel like they were working to become better versions of themselves.

This self-improvement often begins with an intentional look inward, beginning with self-discovery. One participant describes their understanding of self-discovery as:

“Self-discovery becomes part of that as you heal. That's a large part of my thought around it is that it's almost like archaeology of your true self. I mean you're always sort of building your true self, but you can be sort of buried underneath what others put upon you and

uncovering like your own truths underneath all the sort of noisy voices that have been put in your head by caregivers, or whoever in the past. The sort of thing that has been added to it, I think, is this understanding that it creates the ability for self-discovery as you sort of go in, and you realize that you're only going in to meet yourself. People are afraid you're gonna go in there and meet monsters, and terrible things are gonna happen. And really, whatever you meet is your own truth, and you can handle it, you know, especially if you have people to help you as well. I think most people especially, you know, when they're first starting out. Do you need help, especially afterwards processing and whatnot.” Christine

This participant discusses what it can feel like to turn inwards and discover your true self. They highlight that it be hidden through external ideas, this is a partial perspective shift as well. They also address how it can seem intimidating to look inward, especially for those suffering from poor mental health. This participant discussed the common cultural conception of mental illness as something scary internally, but their experience is that looking inward does not uncover something horrible, but potentially leads to enlightenment. Another important aspect of this example is the mention of support and integration afterwards. Participants often brought up other trusted people as being helpful for support during and after the experience to provide guidance, comfort, and constructive integration of the lessons experienced in the trip.

Building upon discovery, a sense of deep connection with oneself can lead to feelings of alignment, contentment, and self-compassion. Many individuals who worked on personal growth or experienced benefits related to self-reflection, often shared sentiments of increased satisfaction with themselves and a sense of love.

“I just feel like overall like more at peace with myself. And I feel like I've accepted myself more post psilocybin. more secure comfortable with my own skin.” Paul

For one participant in particular, psilocybin trip experiences were centrally focused on having time all to themselves for themselves. This participant had made a ritual out of setting up their bedroom to be as soothing and comforting as possible and would routinely start the trip with a bath. They would progress into a mode of psychedelic trip that is often used in clinical trials, utilizing a dark space, calming music, and laying down. For this person, their outcomes discussed benefits in mental health as well. Carving out time to simply be seemed to be an important factor for some individuals that led to impactful experiences that were deeply healing.

Enhanced Cognition

A benefit that was commonly linked to microdoses and macrodoses was enhanced cognition. Enhanced cognition is any perceived improvement in brain function such as improved memory, clarity, and mental output.

“Just generally speaking, my brain ages less quickly. Now my memory is not as good as it used to be, but whenever I take mushrooms, accessing my memories is just a lot easier. and I feel it kind of helps me to pick and choose which memories I want to keep, and which ones I don't.” Marco

Mental clarity was one of the benefits that was consistently linked to individuals that microdose, which people often described as feeling clear headed, faster in mental processing, and sure.

“Mental clarity. I feel more focused and aware on days that I've microdose.” Maria

Many of these individuals felt an increased ability to focus and understand. This was often applied to work situations such as writing, communicating, and working through problems. One participant who experienced increased cognitive function experienced ease of work and had a solution come to them in a dream.

“When I was in graduate school, and I was doing a lot of statistical analyses for some of my research, I remember having a really easeful experience working on some of my projects where I was like ‘Whoa! This doesn't feel hard. This feels totally manageable and doable, and like problem solving is coming easily to me right now, like writing is coming easily to me right now’ whereas you know, sometimes it feels like a slog, and you just gotta kind of get through it, or you get frustrated or hit those blocks, and that would never happen after I would work with psilocybin... I remember specifically having a dream about a coding problem I was working with. I was trying to figure out this this bug in my code, and it was like really frustrating, and I was working on it for days, and I had a dream one night like after working with psilocybin, where I found the solution to my dream. And then I woke up, and I like tried it out, and it worked. It was like Wow! Cool. It was like the connections between my subconscious brain and my conscious brain feel much, much, much stronger after I work with psilocybin.” Greyson

In this excerpt, not only did this participant experience increased flow state during their work, but also in their dreams. They attributed that to improved connections between their conscious and subconscious mind.

Spiritual Exploration

The spiritual sphere of psychedelic use is one that is not entirely separate from wellness as it may seem from the Western perspective. For around a third of participants, their connection with their spirituality and desire to improve and explore this connection was a primary motivator for consumption. These individuals were able to experience those benefits in varying manners as they used psilocybin to pursue spiritual growth. One participant describes their received benefits below:

“I'd say the benefits are maybe it's enhanced wellbeing a greater like development of one's spirituality, or, like you know. sense of sense of larger meaning in life, a broadened perspective on life.” Madison

Again, we see a recurring theme of perspectives shifting to which allow people to view life more holistically and better triage concerns in their life. For some, psilocybin offered them the ability to understand what was important to them in life and focus on aspects of their life that could improve their relationship with spirituality. Psilocybin was able to connect a handful of participants with spirituality who did not enter the psilocybin experience seeking spiritual growth. For one participant, recreational psilocybin use turned into mental health treatment as well as a continued spiritual practice. This participants' spiritual practice grew largely outside of psychedelic experiences and led to patterns of behavior that continued to improve their quality of life.

For one, it enabled them to heal their relationship with spirituality and finally fill the void that had been felt in them when they departed from Christianity. For another, psilocybin is a thoughtful and intentional extension of their faith and they have shared this experience with others who share their Christian faith. For this individual as well as their friends, they partially experience this spiritual growth through an expanded sense of oneness. Oneness is an important term that came up in multiple interviews as they discussed the sensation that living beings, other humans, and sometimes components of the natural world, are inherently and cosmically intertwined. Feelings of oneness were often associated with gratitude and deep positive emotions. These feelings not only improved spiritual growth but were positive influences on personal relationships and mental and emotional health.

Improved Physical Health

Impacts on physical health were also noted by some participants. One individual explained that improving their mental and emotional wellbeing directly influenced and improved their physical health.

“Increased mental/emotional health and wellbeing, which really can change so such an increase in your mental health and wellbeing that it can change your physical health. It can change your life path. It did mine. I know that I couldn't have, you know, becoming a counselor, even. you know, like a number of years ago, and it's helped me. My stress and the things I had been through headed for a had affected my physical health. and it's me to really practice things that have created more physical health. But the mental health is it's like back and forth, but that it's mental health helping to create physical health, which in turn sort of gives you more mental health.” Christine

Also, there were two participants that noticed that psilocybin use diminished or eliminated their severe headaches. One participant explained their suffering from cluster headaches and how psilocybin use improved their condition:

“Within a couple of weeks I noticed a significant reduction in the intensity of my experience with cluster headaches, and I eventually reduced down to maybe about 2 point 2 to point 3 grams every month or 6 weeks is enough to keep my cluster headaches in like 98% remission like I get a little bit of a headache now and again, but I haven't had one of those like trip to urgent care, like crisis headaches in maybe 2 and a half years now.” Madison

For this participant, this degree of improvement was enormous. After experiencing these life-crippling headaches for years, without much help from their medical treatment for them,

they were finally experiencing relief. Similar to the sense of desperation that many people feel with mental health concerns, the desperation to be free from extreme pain was also clear here.

Connection With Nature

A common thread throughout the interviews was that psilocybin can enhance the appreciation for and connection to the natural world. Many participants referenced thoughts surrounding nature being important parts of their trip experiences. This ranged from individuals noticing how beautiful the natural world is, to a feeling of deep spiritual connection, or oneness, with the natural world. This subcategory is also related to perspective shifts, as participants often felt their perspective shift to view nature more centrally to their daily lives and allowed them to break out of the habit of not noticing it.

“Helping us connect to nature and the world, and kind of getting us out of this, out of our own heads essentially, reconnecting us to nature. I love that idea so like that, you know, continues to draw me into it.” Briana

One individual in particular, is developing a plan to work even more intentionally on using psilocybin to heal and intensify their connection with nature. For them, psilocybin trips allow them to explore their relationship with the natural world and provide a space to process and connect with their spirituality. They want to dive deeper into psilocybin in this way, to begin to address, process, and cope with deep grief centering eco-crisis and ecological despair. They believe that psilocybin can be a beneficial tool for people to not only connect with nature but find their path in how best to serve the planet.

Enhanced Creativity

A few individuals felt that their creativity was enhanced through psilocybin use. They felt that they were better able to access their creative side and ideas.

“A method of expression that I feel really connected to is verbal communication and writing, and it just it comes out so effortlessly in a way that always surprises me of how closely it's aligned with, how I feel or what I want to say, which is what I experience when I microdose for the first time and with other mediums that I work with, you know painting and drawing, or just like having creative insights like will come much, much more easily to me.” Greyson

However, that did not always translate into improved output. For one individual, psilocybin use helped them connect to their creativity, but not in a way that allowed them to produce creative content. Microdosers were more likely to discuss creativity than individuals taking macrodoses.

Relationship Improvements

The ability to see life in different perspectives and improve emotional intelligence lends psilocybin to being beneficial in improving relationships between people. As discussed previously, participants felt that psilocybin usage could improve self-love; people reported psilocybin improving their relationships with others in similar ways. This improvement could be seen in examples of a couple discussing trauma that was brought up to be worked through, a mother healing herself to give back to her family and her community, and a father gaining clarity on the distance that had developed between himself and his family. In all of these examples, psilocybin brought things up for the individual to understand or to help them work through, and the individual had to take action to integrate those changes.

In the excerpt below, the participant discussed how going through an emotionally charged experience with their partner allowed them to be more vulnerable with them and fostered an improved connection that allowed them to continue to work on issues together.

“I feel like it's a really cool opportunity. We've just been able to talk about some really really hard stuff that is really cool, and I feel like it helped both of us afterwards connect, and just process, some things that we might not have processed.” Andrew

This participant additionally believes that psilocybin impacts their mood and makes it easier for them to be affectionate towards their partner. This mood enhancement alongside the emotionally charged experience allowed them to experience long-term benefits from the psilocybin use as it brought them closer together as they worked to better themselves and each other.

In another case, one participant disclosed her journey with healing through psilocybin and how it made her a better mother. This woman had a lifelong passion of bettering herself mentally so that she could help others to the best of her ability. Her drive to help others came from a background of trauma that she put in diligent effort to overcome.

“I was a really really young mom. I went off to college, and I you know what the hell was up, and I got to do a bad situation and ended up pregnant, and I had no support, and I like scrolling my way through my undergrad with a baby on my hip, just like trying to survive. And so, she got really young me, which I was passionately devoted to being a good mom, and I tried so hard. She was with me the other day, and she took my hand. She was like Mama, you're so different. I'm so proud of you. You are just amazing. And I was like what? and she didn't mean in a bad way, like you were a bad mom before, but she was just like. you know, almost like your little plant put on flowers. She was trying to explain what I was like. I see it sort of reverberate in her life as I'm able to get the better version of me. So, it's such a precious thing.” Christine

In working to heal herself to help others, she was able to also improve her relationship with her daughter, who noticed the improvement in ways her mother had never noticed. As a

mother who was absolutely dedicated to raising her children with love and compassion, it meant the world to her that her daughter was able to see that in her. As she said, in filling her cup, she is in a better position to love and support those around her.

Another parent had an impactful experience concerning their family relationships and psilocybin revelations. During one psilocybin trip, a participant had visions in which he could clearly see how distant he had become from his children. He also saw how he was not loving his wife in the way that she needed. These revelations spurred him into action, to make an effort to reconnect with his family and be the thoughtful father and partner that he wanted to be. He became aware that those relationships had changed because he was bogged down in his work and routines. He said it was not easy and did not give him exact answers, but the psilocybin trips did give him the clarity and inspiration he needed to do the work himself. He summarizes the experience here:

“It's helped me to be more present to my family. It's helped me to see a pathway of growth that I want to pursue, just get some clarity on that. And then it takes work, right? It's not like this magic thing that fixes me. It. It helps me to see where I need to go and be more intentional. I'm able to be more intentional in practices and other parts of my life that put me on that path towards the direction I want to go.” Jason

For these parents especially, they had not been able to evaluate their behaviors grounded in context because they were clouded by their daily lives and personal problems. Through clarity and healing, they were able to use that introspection and energy to improve relationships that they cared about deeply.

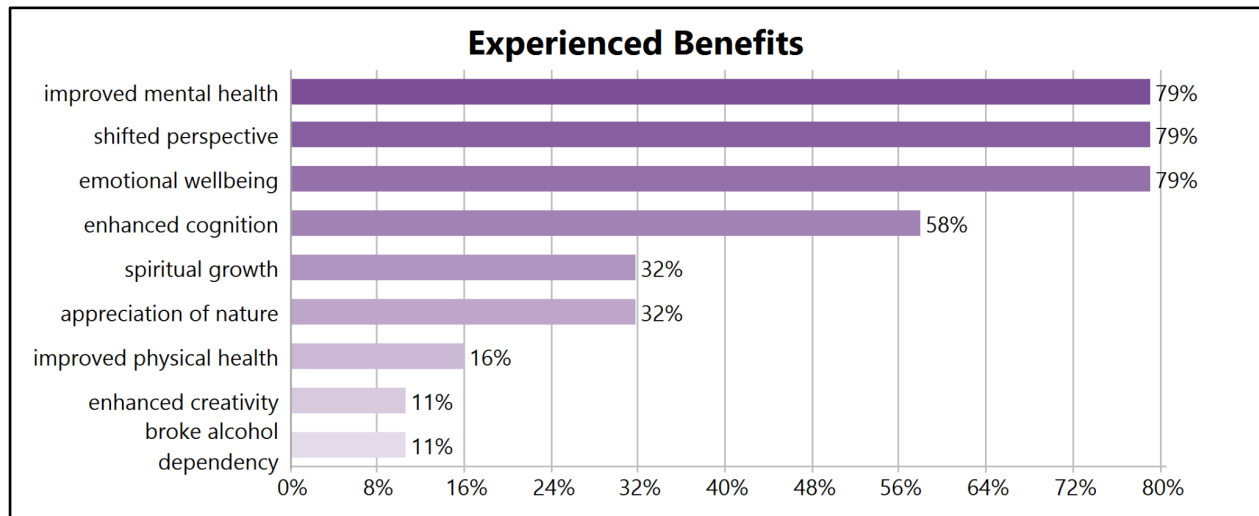
Cured Alcohol Cravings

For one participant, they did not receive the alleviation from mental health symptoms in the way they wanted to experience. However, in recalling the lasting impacts of use, they described how using psilocybin eradicated their cravings to consume alcohol. They explain their experience with alcohol and the effect of psilocybin usage here:

“I would qualify as abusing alcohol with the number of drinks I would have in the evening, and I recognize that, and it was something that I was like trying to cut back on, but you know it's like every evening. I would just have that craving for a drink, right? It's dark out. I'd be looking forward to it, from the afternoon time to have a drink and after one of those initial larger doses, even though I didn't have this like really trippy experience in the moment because of the Zoloft, my desire for alcohol when completely away and it was something I had read about people taking psychedelics to help with alcohol, abuse, or drug abuse. The idea that people are going to take LSD to overcome their alcoholism and I didn't get it. I was like, okay, that sounds cool. But you know, how does that even work? but it was amazing, in the days after that trip just going about my routine and being like, ‘All right. This is the time where I would start craving for a drink’ and it was almost like something just plucked that right out of my head. The ability to crave alcohol was just gone. I couldn't even bring up that feeling from a memory. What is it? What is like to crave the alcohol? and I had always assumed it was kind of a physical craving, because it felt like a physical craving. But it's a mental craving and it was just, and it was gone, and I was able to dramatically cut back on the amount of alcohol I had after that and last week started feeling better physically and stuff like that. I would say, if anything that is one of the biggest benefits, I've had from it from taking the mushrooms is just it's totally lessened my desire for alcohol to the point where it's... even at a party. Sometimes I'll be like, you know. I'm not

even interested in having a beer. Occasionally I'll still have drinks, you know, now and then at social events. But I don't have that kind of desire that I used to.” Briana

Although she did not receive the direct benefits she had expected, this individual had a breakthrough with something that they had been struggling with and was curious about. This is also an example of someone experiencing a benefit that they did not enter a trip with the intention to change a specific behavior. This is worth noting because with psilocybin, there is often a focus on needing to set the intention of a trip to receive benefits. However, with this example, we can see that it is also possible to receive a large benefit without the direct intent to receive said benefit.



(Figure 3): Experienced Benefits

Hedging Expectations

As referenced in the previous quote, people do not always get all they want from psilocybin usage. For many individuals, especially those who have read books like Pollan’s and read stories from individuals that experienced life-changing healing, the benefits seem too good

to be true. Some participants engage in varying expectation-hedging behaviors to minimize their disappointment with not getting everything they wanted out of the experience.

“I don't think I've gotten everything I want to get out of it, and maybe I won't ever get everything I want out of it, you know. I'm hoping that I kinda that I didn't, you know, overestimate its power, you know, like. I worry sometimes that I'm like, you know, getting too into it. And it's not like this, You know, big life-changing thing that other people have said it's gonna be that it's gonna be the same for me. And you know I don't want to end up being disappointed after all of this, and you know, just like all right. Well, I guess I'll go back on to the Zoloft, so I'm hoping it doesn't end up like that. and try, and I'm trying to be cautious with. You know how much of how much I invest in this.” 24

With psilocybin impact having an incredible number of variables, people often tend to break them apart to understand how it's impacting them and any ways they can improve the outcome. A driving force to this desire to make it work is often a disappointment with mental healthcare alternatives that have not worked satisfactorily for them in the past, as with the example above.

Gratitude

While not everyone experiences a life-altering trip, many people walk away with benefits in multiple areas of their lives, often pertaining to a sense of improved quality of life. For those that experienced immense benefits in areas of their lives that they felt pain and discomfort in, their gratitude overflowed.

“I think immense gratitude for just being able to step outside of what I was used to was one of my main feelings, as I sort of started to float back up into a normal consciousness that I was even able to have the journey because I really felt the sense of desperation.” Christine

These participants have struggled with the immense weight of their challenging experiences and have sought multiple solutions. For some of them, psilocybin gave them a sense of relief that they had never experienced before. Many individuals discussed feeling hopeless or struggling with mental health discomfort for some time. After experiencing improvement in these areas, many individuals felt a renewed emotional vitality and were able to find clarity in their life paths. Individuals who were able to improve vital relationships in their lives felt a sense of gratitude that they could see their pattern of behavior and make a change. The previously mentioned benefits are valuable on their own, especially when they are paired with people taking actionable steps toward improving their lives. Individuals that expressed gratitude for these events often used language of reclamation and agency as they were reclaiming joy, connecting with their spirituality, or healing.

Effort

Emergent theory: Psilocybin cannot heal alone but allows you to work on yourself.

A belief that was held by most of the participants and especially those that focus directly on mental health and emotional wellbeing is that psilocybin requires effort in order to reap benefits. Participants have a wide range of ways that this work manifests, resulting in a spectrum of effort. The activities mentioned by participants included growing or foraging the mushrooms themselves, journaling, developing a microdosing regimen, setting up thoughtful environments for their trip, setting specific intentions, and integrating their insights from the psychedelic experience afterward.

A large part of this effort is due to the fact that individuals want to experience impactful changes to their life that they have heard about being possible. Seeking these benefits, people have found that their benefits do increase as they increase intention and effort, especially those

that used psilocybin recreationally in the past. Many individuals can see a distinct shift in their usage methods as they focus their goals on therapeutic benefits. Setting a safe and peaceful environment and setting an appropriate mindset are the main preparatory activities people do in varying degrees of intensity. Integration or processing lessons and implementation into the framework of daily life is a crucial step in receiving therapeutic benefits for many. This intentional effort is necessary for these individuals because while they see the mushrooms as powerful, they do not believe they can heal independently.

“I've talked with many people who kind of just expect the plant or the fungus medicine to like, do the work for them, and if they just use it, then they'll be healed. And aren't, really anticipating or expecting, or even interested in doing, the hard work that comes after integrating the experience, and applying your insights about what you've learned. And I think that that's something that is really missing from a lot of the conversations that I'm seeing or hearing from the general population around psychedelics. It's not this cure all, just like so many things are that people try to sell to you, and that's capitalism coming in and like painting over and commodifying it.” Greyson

In this excerpt, the individual discussed the importance of the effort and how important integration is to the experience. They also address their perceived root cause of misinformation which they believe to be the commodification of psilocybin. This influence on psilocybin was a salient theme from many participants who were concerned that psilocybin would be commodified and lose its purpose through inappropriate use. Some individuals believe that using microdoses to be more efficient at work is another substance misuse, while others find it a helpful coping tool for their workdays. While this critique will be explored in greater detail in the discussion regarding integration in category 3, it is essential to see that a primary complaint of

this commercialization is that it seemingly promises benefits without effort or strain. That idea feels impossible and misleading for individuals who have received therapeutic benefits due in part to their hard work through preparation and integration.

Another way that individuals took control of their psilocybin usage through their effort is by procuring psilocybin-containing mushrooms on their own.

“I view mushrooms as more of a respect thing because when I was learning about them, I was learning about the culture and stuff too. So, I was really doing my research on what psilocybin can bring to you, the healing properties that it can bring to you. So, I was like, all right. Let me give it a shot.” Maria

In this excerpt, the participant felt they needed to respect the mushrooms and their culture of use, so they felt that the effort placed into preparing them would be worth it because respect is what the mushrooms deserve. The effort that was placed into the use here was the research into the cultural heritage, the growing, and the consumption of the fungi. This act directly contrasts with the idea of commercialization of psilocybin into a pill that requires little to no effort. Instead of outsourcing the procurement effort, they are taking it into their own hands. Additionally, this individual uses psilocybin as a microdose to work on mindfulness, meditation, journaling, and other active inner work. They do not believe psilocybin to be doing the work but more of a tool to help them enter a space where they can effectively do the healing work themselves.

“I make sure to journal and meditate and do all that. It's more like psilocybin allows me to calm down and reach those thoughts in an overall sense, but the psilocybin is just like me lighting the candle and setting the mood. The actual work and lasting effects for me comes from the actual work. I do meditation well, when I microdose that day.” Maria

This participant says that as they consider it, they do not honestly know how much of a role psilocybin plays in their meditation practice. It could be more significant than they initially considered. Regardless, the effort they put in is a necessity for their received benefits, much like many others.

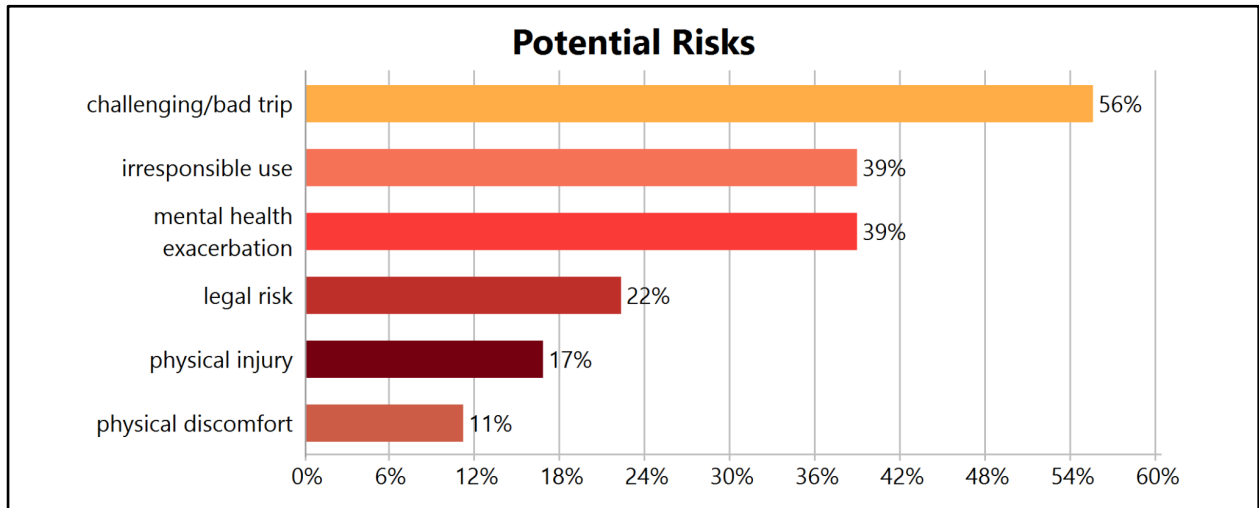
Risks

Discussions of risks were essential to discussing trip experiences and the integration of psilocybin into greater society. A dominant theme among participants was that psilocybin is low risk. Many participants believe psilocybin is non-toxic and can never lead to an overdose. In multiple interviews, participants would compare the risks between psilocybin and other drugs, believing psilocybin to be much safer. This observation was seen often as participants compared psilocybin to alcohol as highlighted in the following quote.

“Well, I will say, the risks in regards to safety itself are very, very, very low, I mean my God, like compared to alcohol or something? Forget about it. And there's no sort of physical repercussions. You're not gonna be like ‘Oh, my God! I had a hang over for 2 days and almost died!’ I mean you might have an emotional thing afterwards. But I think, in a physical sense, I believe it to be very safe.” Christine

However, while participants believe psilocybin to be low risk, most people cited risks they believe to be avoidable and manageable. While the perception of risk is low, another prevalent idea is that psilocybin and psychedelic use should be done with care. Participants discussed the most significant risks for them, with the most prominent risk being uncomfortable or challenging trips, often referred to as bad trips, as referenced in the excerpt above. Other perceived risks include unsafe or irresponsible usage, mental health exacerbation for certain conditions, legal risk, causing oneself physical harm, and low levels of physical discomfort, as

seen in the figure below. Participants felt like risks could be effectively managed in different ways.



(Figure 4): Potential Risks

Challenging Trips

Bad, negative, challenging, uncomfortable, and scary are all terms used to describe unpleasant trip experiences. This is the primary cause of concern for psilocybin usage for most individuals. Challenging trips can cause disorientation, fear, and emotional discomfort in various ways. These experiences can potentially retrigger trauma, especially for those entering a psychedelic experience to work on their trauma.

“I’ve only really had one challenging trip, and you know those are hard, but you still learn a lot. I don’t think it’s dangerous in any way if I am in a safe place.” Bianca

The example above shows that although challenging trips can be scary, they are not considered dangerous. Also, many individuals cited accessible risk management practices to reduce the chance of a bad trip or coping once in one. These preventative practices are making

sure that one is well informed before entering the experience about what it could entail, being cautious about mental health conditions that may worsen with psychedelic use, making sure one is in a safe and pleasant environment, setting an intention or goal, and finally releasing into the emotional duress to face the source and overcome it. Despite the discomfort that they bring, challenging trips are thought to be functional and can be positive for healing as discussed by the excerpt below.

“I also pay attention to the other side of the scary aspect of having a bad trip, which I myself wouldn't call a bad trip. I would just call it a difficult trip, and I feel like sometimes you need to go through those difficulties to learn things about yourself, and if you're brave enough, if you're willing to do that work, there's so much benefit that could come from that, and so much you can learn about yourself and increase your self awareness through that.” Denise

Being educated about what to expect and how to manage discomfort can help minimize discomfort and maximize the benefits, such as emotional processing. Participants who felt that challenging trips could be insightful gave varying advice to look deeper into the discomfort's meaning and release control to work through the pain and experience healing. One participant explained how they envision this process of releasing into pain and how it can ultimately be empowering and beneficial:

“You're almost giving up your own power and putting it into the pain. We think that pain is this thing that can almost destroy us or consume us, or we don't understand. We're almost not okay even being sad as a culture. I always tell my kids it's okay to be sad. It's not gonna hurt you in and of itself. It hurts to feel sad, but it hurts more to resist it, and I know it becomes this Buddhist thing, where, in the release, that's where the relief of the pain is, and its sort of paradoxical when you you're up against it and you're fighting, and it hurts more and more and

the more you just go 'Okay, I'm just going to dive in.' And in that in itself there is this immense release beyond what you ever expected, and your own empowerment sort of flows back into you with that like power almost like comes back into you, so you can sort of continue to walk forward because there's something so much more beyond that pain, though, and can be sort of like nonlinear. And you may need to come back and visit it. But there's always something, this gift on the other side of it." Christine

Another central theme in the conversation of challenging trips, is that even with recreational use, psilocybin can bring up emotional topics for you to work on, as this participant warns:

"If there's something that you're dealing with internally that the universe, or God, or whatever you want to call it, wants you to deal with, it will be brought to the forefront of your mind, so I tell people before they embark to be weary and just know that it's not all sunshine and roses." Cameron

This is vital risk management information for individuals seeking recreational experiences because even if their intent is mood enhancement and fun, they may experience something more emotionally challenging. People may find themselves in an uncomfortable position if they are not ready for an emotionally demanding experience and in a place where they are emotionally capable of doing the work. It is also important to note that the guidance concerning challenging trips is typically aimed at higher dosage psycho-active trips. While challenging trips are believed to be a mechanism of healing for macrodose trips, they are not referred to as a mechanism of healing for microdose experiences. This is because microdose experiences do not trigger the same level of emotional confrontation.

Irresponsible Use

Irresponsible use captures participants' perspectives on behavior that, to them, is inappropriate and dangerous. This theme includes using psilocybin without appropriate education on the substance, taking mushrooms in an unsafe setting or around unsafe people, or using psilocybin in a setting where one could cause harm to themselves and others. This category was often linked to alcohol use by participants stating that the same guidelines observed for alcohol use should be applied to psilocybin. Therefore, one should not be operating a car in an unfamiliar environment or under the influence of psilocybin.

Pre-Existing Mental Health Conditions Worsening

Another serious concern for many participants is people with unstable mental health conditions worsening their condition through psilocybin use. While this was not experienced by any participants or observed directly, it is a prominent point of concern as this participant shares:

“I did hear stories of people like you know who are like predisposed to like mental issues just completely wreck in their brain.” Alisa

It is believed that there are a variety of mental health concerns that can be exacerbated through psychedelic use, such as schizophrenia. Outside of that, many participants believe that some individuals are not ready emotionally. Regardless, participants urge that an abundance of caution be observed in trying any psychedelic for the first time because individuals may have underlying mental health concerns they are unaware of.

Age

Another factor participants believe could lead to trouble is someone too young to consume psychedelics. This idea was strongly held by multiple participants who cited the need for the brain to fully develop before tampering with its balance. Young people are also not

believed to be ready for the experience that can be occasioned by psychedelics, especially an emotionally challenging trip. Also, one participant feared that they would be more likely to abuse and overuse the substance due to their brain not being fully developed and being prone to riskier behaviors, as they explain below.

“I don't think like young people should use it. I know I used LSD and mushrooms a lot when I was like a teenager like in middle school and I mostly am okay. But I feel like I've gotten so much more from it as an adult with that, with my brain fully developed. I think there is some danger for young people to abuse it and to not be able to recognize like. Oh, you need to. You need to chill out. They might not be able to recognize that. So that's what that's another concern of the dangers that I have.” Zeke

Legality

A risk that was brought up a few times, was the legal risk associated with consuming psilocybin. While the United States is making progress with legalizing psychedelics in various locations, the substance is still federally illegal and the use of it carries weight not only legally, but reputationally and professionally as well. One participant described how they minimize this risk by being private about their use.

“Well, I mean it definitely the legal risk, you know I've been very cautious with who I've shared it with, the fact that I've grown these and taken these. I've only shared with that information with, my husband, my sister and one or two close friends.” Briana

Another participant had a job offer revoked when they disclosed their past psilocybin usage, so while legalization is in progress across the country and public opinion is softening, legal repercussions are still a powerful risk.

Physical Injury

As previously mentioned in irresponsible use, there are a variety of situations that are dangerous under the influence of psilocybin. Situations like driving can lead to physical injury, which is a category of risk brought forth by participants. A few participants were concerned that they would put themselves in a situation where they could endanger themselves, and as a way to mitigate that risk, they manage their environment and have support nearby.

“You know it kind of has always, occurred to me, so I’m trying to make sure when I’ve done it, I’ve been home. I’ve always been home, I’ve never done it not at home, and, like I always have, like, make sure my husband is around in case like something does go awry, and he needs to kinda like talk me down, or something like that.” Briana

In these instances, the individuals have relied on supportive people to help them emotionally, but no participants stated that they ever put themselves in harm and had to have a person intervene. Most often this support person has aided them in challenging trips. However, it is still helpful for peace of mind for many to maximize the security of their environment to minimize potential physical injuries.

Discomfort

A couple participants referred to physical symptoms of discomfort that they associate as risks for consuming psilocybin. These physical conditions include fatigue the day after a trip, stomach upset, and diarrhea. These conditions were declared to be minor, but still impactful to the participants as considerations.

Risk Mitigation

As mentioned in the discussion of potential risks, there are many ways to mitigate risk in psilocybin usage. In order to minimize the potential damage of expressed concerns, participants

openly gave their input on ways they believed could help. These suggestions are well supported across a majority of the interviews. In order to reduce risks of psilocybin integration participants suggested: age restrictions, access to comprehensive information about the substance, access to spiritual and medical professional guidance, avoiding psilocybin if you suffer from mental health conditions that can be exacerbated by psychedelic usage, access to a personal support network, cautious and respectful use, and thoughtful communication of usage.

RESULTS PT. 3:

BELIEFS OF SOCIETAL INTEGRATION OF PSILOCYBIN

Emergent theory: Integration into mainstream society is necessary for both recreation and medicinal psilocybin use, which are overlapping categories but should be done thoughtfully to minimize risks.

This final finding chapter covers participants' beliefs surrounding psilocybin integration into society. Their opinions have been broken down into their beliefs relating to psilocybin integration being beneficial and their concerns for integration. These categories were developed from the interview data as all participants believed integration to be beneficial in some aspect. While there was a widespread belief that integration would be positive, there were also a number of concerns with the process of integration in mainstream society that are explored as well. Additionally, the line between medical and recreational integration was perceived to be overlapping rather than occupying discrete categories. This relationship is also explored in this chapter.

Believe Psilocybin Integration To Be Beneficial

When asked how they felt about psilocybin being integrated into American society through both medical and recreational portals, all participants thought that it would be positive. Participants believe that if psilocybin were to be integrated into mainstream society, there would be mental health benefits, enhanced relationships with nature, and recreational benefits, all leading to better wellness outcomes for broader society. However, participants also believe that there are right and wrong ways to go about integration, and it should be done thoughtfully with risk mitigation and equitable access in mind.

Mental Health Care Benefits

“I think it's great. I'm very in favor of it. I feel like there is a lot of people, especially those who are very resistant to any form of treatment. I think that this should be something to also consider, it might help. I actually feel so strongly about it that I am getting ready to go to graduate school and hopefully be a license psychotherapist in the future, and I would love to have that be my practice.” Denise

Most participants believe having mental health infrastructure that enables access to professionals would lead to better information, support, and guidance. These are also important factors in risk mitigation for trip experiences. These participants strongly believe that with thoughtful implementation, that integration could help mental health professionals effectively treat people that are in desperate need for improved care. Having professionals lead treatment and experience integration could be incredibly impactful, many people believe. Another component that has the ability to be beneficial or harmful is access.

“I think it access in a medical setting especially, you know, being administered by medical professionals. and just it's honestly just having the access to it. It's key for me.” Maria

Multiple interviewees brought up how access could make or break psilocybin legalization. Having equitable access to psychedelic mental health treatment is the goal for many participants. However, they are concerned because they can see a variety of ways that psychedelics may be integrated in ways that would be inaccessible, exclusive, and ultimately harmful.

Environmental Connection

The ability psilocybin has to connect people more intimately with nature, was perceived to be a valuable benefit for many individuals. These individuals believe that integrating that benefit into society and getting humanity to reconnect with the Earth would lead to more thoughtful stewards of the planet. They believe that this would have positive outcomes for the environment and for the wellbeing of the individuals as well. There are many people who are crippled by the ecological crisis and are experiencing sensations of doom and hopelessness. One participant stated their plan to help people cope with this type of ecological crisis, through psilocybin experiences.

“I will say we're right on the edge of beginning more of this work with people specifically around the environmental issues that we're facing in the ecological crisis and so using a light to moderate dose as an ally for deeper nature connection in the processing of grief and other difficult emotions around the eco-crisis that we're facing, there's a lot of potential and promise, and I think that's where in this next year I'll be putting a lot of energy into inviting people in in small groups and community into these kind of medicine Psilocybin supported experiences out in nature facilitating group rituals that would continue to deepen one's connection to the natural world and to one into people's own unique calling to the service of life.” Jason

Through this experience they hope to overall better their community as well as the natural world in which we live. Additionally, this touches upon the benefits of allowing people to connect with greater senses of meaning, which is believed to be a very promising component of psilocybin being integrated into society.

Recreational Use Having Spiritual & Wellness Related Benefits

All participants viewed recreational use as also valuable in some ways. While many had additional precautions they would like to see taken with recreational use, they believe the experiences to be beneficial whether it be for pure fun or for more nuanced exploration.

“My definition of personal wellness includes curiosity. So that first time I did it out of curiosity. I just wanted to see what it was like and to any experience, whether there's good aspects or not. I'm still going to learn from it somehow.” Bud

It was a common theme that was brought up in interviews that recreation is more complicated and often linked to exploring spirituality, oneself, and factors of wellbeing. Fun, it was said, should not be looked down upon as something to write off, but is a valuable part of human wellbeing.

Additionally, there was a strong sentiment that people should have the right to explore their own consciousness and experiment with varied states of consciousness. Some believe recreational use to be a steppingstone into using psychedelics as a tool of spirituality or wellness as explored below:

“I'm also in full support of [recreational use]. I think that's usually how people get started in this world like of psychedelics. I think they're interested from a recreational or an aesthetic point of view, and then they find out that it can be incorporated in so many other ways in my life. I was at least out for me, and how it worked for several of my other friends. But I think I mean my life is fun, I think. if you take chances, and you have great intentions and good intentions for your actions and your effect on the world around you. I think it's a great experience. Yeah, absolutely. Some people bring up discourse about how that aspect of creates

curiosity, and just general fun and recreation and expansion all that are. They are segments of wellness.” Cameron

Overall, participants were largely very enthusiastic about integration, believing the potential outcomes to heal a lot of society’s problems. However, this overwhelming support for integration did not come without its caveats. A majority of participants were conflicted or had concerns about integration, despite ultimately wanting it to happen.

Concerns for the Integration of Psilocybin Into Society

While participants were overwhelmingly in support of integration, the majority of participants shared at least one concern for integration. The concerns that apply to both medical and recreational use include thoughtless commercialization of psilocybin, unfair access, careless use that causes public opinion to shift unfavorably, and people having too high of expectations. Additionally, many people are concerned that pharmaceutical companies will try to maximize their profit by making psilocybin harder to access. Incorporated in this concern is the other side of consumerism, the consumer. Many feel that in creating a product for a consumer, those who purchase the product may be less informed or use psilocybin for intents that the research participants disagree with.

“I kind of worry, everything is commodified in our society, so I worry that it's going to be sort of dulled down and not treated with like the respect that it deserves, I guess. Especially with the microdosing culture... You see a lot of these like Silicon Valley tech bro types that are like trying to use it to microdose and for for the goal of being more productive towards capitalist ventures and that feels like a total misuse to me.” Zeke

Their concern is that commodification will enable thoughtless use, and psilocybin will become a tool to further capitalist interest and not a tool for self-reflection, exploration, healing, and spirituality.

Also, people are concerned that medical integration will make the usage of psilocybin as a naturally occurring fungus more challenging for those who would like to seek spiritual and recreational benefits. Participants believe that medical integration can be positive if it does not come at too high of a cost with patented usage restrictions. The goal for many of these individuals is to have psilocybin integrated into medical frameworks and for thoughtful, personal use to be legalized.

A handful of individuals also call into question the dueling paradigms of the Western Medical System and whole plant medicine. Some are worried because they cannot see these two working together harmoniously, especially because they are already seeing great stratification in access.

“I think it's the cause of a lot of suffering for both health care professionals and patients in the Western medical paradigm is that healing is not a priority. Right now, you have to have a lot of money, and you have to have access to somebody who can hold space for you and have that journey session with you, and let's be honest. It's not available for people who are on Medicare/Medicaid. It's something that you're paying for out of pocket and that's creating this stratification of access for people. And health care, I don't think, should work that way, but it does.” Jason

While many people shared the sentiment that there seem to be warring paradigms between Western medicine and complementary and alternative medicine, they believe there is a way forward.

“I think, that we need an entirely new system to house many different types of therapy in order for it to really work in a harmonious way where everybody has equal access to use medicines as they wish to heal themselves, and a more collaborative approach between providers and patients, and the opportunity for patients to see somebody who, you know, understands their culture, who understands their background, who respects their choices, for you know how they want to manage their health and acknowledgment, too, of, like the trauma that exists within the land in the United States, because in my experience the one time that we're just still saving outside. But in my experiences with other types of psychedelic medicines, that connection between earth and self during the journey is super profound, and I know that other people have that experience, too, and it's like a hallmark of some of these journeys.” Jason

This system would seemingly integrate Western medicine practices of “saving the outside” and add a holistic approach to wellness as well. Through healing in this way, the realms of the spiritual are also addressed. For many participants, this is an important part of wellness that they feel is too often left out of Western medical practice. In summary, many individuals are concerned about how psilocybin will be integrated into Western medical practices. Still, they think that if it is done thoughtfully, it will be widely beneficial for a plethora of reasons.

DISCUSSION

In this final chapter, this study's findings and emergent theories are reviewed and contextualized within the existing literature. More specifically, the literature is integrated into the thematic theory category and there is a discussion regarding how the findings either support or conflict with the findings of other projects. The discussion also includes the limitations of this project, explanations of unexpected results, and suggestions for further research. The chapter then ends with a conclusion.

Major Findings

The significant findings of this project have been presented as emergent theories that encompass key aspects of the data reported. There were three major interpretive emergent theories regarding motivations, benefits, and beliefs concerning the integration of psilocybin into society. These thematic categories relate to the research questions in that they cover the behaviors of use, perceived benefits and risks, and beliefs of integration. Due to the constructivist grounded theory approach to analysis, the initial categories of research questions were revised from their initial organization: 1) how people learn about psychedelics, 2) motivations for consuming psilocybin, 3) methods of use, 4) trip experience, 5) how they perceive psilocybin to impact their lives, and 6) how they perceive psilocybin integration into society.

Due to the participant influence on the data organization, the categories were condensed to reflect importance and participant categorization, resulting in 1) motivations & information sources, 2) benefits & risks, 3) conflicting beliefs concerning societal psilocybin integration. In

this section of the discussion, emerging theories will first be summarized, then contextualized within extant research to highlight the implications of the findings.

Emergent Theory 1: Motivations

The emergent theory regarding motivations for psilocybin use highlighted that they are rooted in curiosity and an often-desperate desire to heal. These motivations are shaped by information sources and can change over time due to experiences and new information, thus resulting in the altering of the goals of psilocybin use.

This emergent theory was directly supported by the findings of Seikel 2020 whose study indicated that motivations for psychedelic use change over time, often beginning with curiosity or recreation-motivated use and changing into intentional use with therapeutic and spiritual goals, inspired by new information and experiences. Additionally, Pestana 2020 found that the motivations of psychedelic users on Reddit include self-knowledge, self-investigation, self-medication, creativity, curiosity, and recreation, all of which were found to be motives for use for participants in this project as well.

An important motivation for many was the ability to self-medicate. This motivation was observed in association with a sense of desperation for healing. The theme of desperation was prevalent in individuals suffering from more severe forms of depression, especially for those that do not experience sufficient relief from their existing modes of treatment within biomedicine, including medication and talk therapy. However, where there is desperation, there is hope, and individuals in desperation for healing are hopeful of the potential for improved health outcomes. This relationship between desperation and hope was explored by Eaves and colleagues (2014), which found that hope substantially impacted participants' assessment and reports of their expectations of how effective Traditional Chinese Medicine treatment for their

temporomandibular disorders, which is a difficult to treat form of jaw and facial pain. This project also observed this complex relationship between psilocybin treatment and mental health issues, which lead to expectation hedging.

Management of expectations of benefits was observed in this project, as many participants had heard incredible stories about the healing benefits of psilocybin but not all participants experienced the same results. Eaves and colleagues (2015) explored expectation management, assessing how participants manage chronic pain expectations. They found that expectation management included measures of acceptance and agency. While acceptance was not directly discussed in this study by participants, there were discussions of agency and how to change behaviors to improve outcomes. Additionally, in the expectation hedging, there were undertones of acceptance, but hope was still the dominant feeling.

The theme of desperation is important because desperation and hope are prevalent in discourse concerning complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) practices. This implies that psilocybin treatment may become recognized as a CAM modality. Additionally, further investigations of the relationship between psychedelic treatment and CAM modalities could lead to a better understanding of psychedelic wellness and the patients who seek it. This understanding could allow psychedelic treatment to follow CAM models, providing some existing options for integration with biomedicine and mainstream society.

Emergent Theory 2: Benefits and Intention

Another robust theory emerged from the data that psilocybin does not heal alone but requires effort and some degree of intentionality. This emerged in the discussion of benefits and consumption methods, where most individuals declared this sentiment directly. In contrast, others explained the importance of managing certain factors to ensure positive outcomes from a

trip. While this observed spectrum was wide, many individuals emphasized that psilocybin allows individuals to work on themselves but is not a cure-all or magic bullet treatment.

One often mentioned way of putting in the effort to receive benefits is facing challenging trips and yielding control to the experience. Many participants thought that challenging trips were opportunities to do emotional work, and healing and positive outcomes could be achieved through that work. In a study by Carbonaro et al. from 2016, they assessed challenging trips and reported that 84% of participants benefited from their challenging trips, thus aligning well with the findings from this study. Another finding supporting the emergent theory that psilocybin benefits are enhanced or reliant on effort, are Móró and colleague's (ADD YEAR) results that indicate intentional psychedelic use was not associated with problematic behavior but was associated with improved coping and spirituality. The findings of Seikel 2020 also supported the idea that many psychedelic users engage in intentional practices aimed at maximizing their benefits.

The benefits participants reported have been well documented by a wide array of medical sciences and anthropology studies. The results of Seikel (2020) showed that individuals were able to use psilocybin to effectively treat physical and mental distress, helping with conditions such as migraines, addictive behaviors, anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Additional medical sciences studies have shown that psilocybin is effective for treating conditions such as treatment-resistant depression (Carhart-Harris et al., 2017; Watts et al., 2017), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), alcohol dependence (Bogenschutz et al., 2015), end-of-life anxiety (Grob et al., 2011; Ross et al., 2016; Varley, 2019; Moreton et al., 2020), anorexia nervosa, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) (Moreno et al., 2006). More broadly, the findings from this study align with previous studies that found that psychedelic therapy can heal a wide variety of

conditions and improve the quality of life in patients (Carhart-Harris et al., 2017; Langlitz, 2013; Varley, 2019).

This study's finding also shows that psilocybin can improve one's relationship with nature and how this can additionally lead to feelings of oneness and connectedness. This has been well documented in Seikel 2020, as their findings indicated participants experiencing these benefits. Additionally, Seikel discusses the potential power of using psychedelics to cope with ecological crises, as was referenced by participants in this study. The idea that psilocybin can occasion mystical experiences has been well documented by Siekel in 2020 and supported by the research paper that led to the psychedelic renaissance Griffiths et al., 2006. Additionally, Watts et al., 2017 reported increased feelings of connectedness and oneness, which are often linked to spiritual connection, and how these sensations related to improved mental health metrics.

Also, as many participants were microdosers and described their benefits as enhanced clarity, cognition, creativity, mood enhancement, and general wellbeing, this mirrors the findings of Polito & Stevenson 2019 who documented the benefits of microdosing.

As evidenced by the research presented above, the benefits reported by participants in this project align well with the results of previous studies. These benefits include mental health, physical health, cognition, spirituality, connection to nature, assistance with breaking addiction, and mood enhancement.

Emergent Theory 3: Integration of Psilocybin into Society

The third emergent theory was that psilocybin integration into mainstream society could potentially be beneficial to society if done thoughtfully. There was also a developed sub-theory that recreation and medicinal usage categories are not entirely separate but contain meaningful overlap. Participants believe that if psilocybin is integrated into Western culture thoughtfully,

there can be mental health benefits, improved relations with the natural world, and an improved sense of self and purpose related to spiritual benefits. The perceived risks leading to the conflicting view on integration despite perceived benefits are potential irresponsible use, dangers of commercialization and the conflicting paradigms of the Western medical system and psychedelic treatment.

In supporting the sub-theory of recreational value, Seikel 2020 found that the intentions of many participants were both therapeutic and recreational. It was believed by their participants that there was a synergistic effect when psychedelics were used for both purposes. The findings of this study suggest that participants often value recreational use and cannot disentangle it from their practice and benefits entirely. As previously mentioned under motivation changes, much psychedelic therapeutic use was discovered through initial recreational use which was also supported by the findings of Seikel 2020.

Many project participants were concerned about responsible use for themselves and in relationship to integration with society. Safe and responsible usage is a huge priority for many that use psilocybin. This affinity for responsible use was also observed in Pestana 2020 that found that respondents put a high emphasis on safe practices. These practices include being well informed, setting intention, preparing one's environment, experience integration, dosage caution, and communicating experiences with others. All of these, with the exception of communicating the results of an experience, were evident in the findings of this project. This goes against the common perception that individuals that use drugs are individuals comfortable with high risk. This contradiction is further supported by Seikel 2020 which found that individuals who use psychedelics are intentional with their use and take significant precaution to both minimize risk and improve outcomes.

Concerning the other risk that was prevalent in this project, the concerns of conflicting paradigms between the Western medical system and Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM). These tensions have long been understood in the field CAM, and are well documented CAM researchers, such as Verhoef and colleagues (2005) and Ritenbaugh and colleagues (2003). They address the disconnections and differences between alternative medicine paradigms and biomedical ones and ways to move forward with integration. The conflicts between these paradigms were of major concern to participants with many having very little faith in the Western medical system adopting psilocybin thoughtfully. Additionally, commercialization and profit were seen directly connected to the Western medical system, which exacerbated their concerns about unethical integration of psilocybin into Western healthcare. Watts 2017 further emphasizes the differences between the two paradigms by suggesting that the healing mechanisms for psychedelic treatment and traditional medical treatment are antithetical. This aligns with participants' perceptions in this study of healing from psilocybin as entirely different to their experiences with medical intervention.

However, participants in the study did believe there was a way forward despite their concerns. The suggestions for moving forward often refer to holistic comprehensive care, which is supported by the findings of Varley 2019, which found that there was a need for healthcare providers to rid themselves of the rigid medical paradigm in order to improve individual care.

Limitations

While this project was designed intentionally, due to time and scope constraints, there are limitations to discuss. The main limitations that will be expanded upon are lack of diversity within the sample, bias due to sourcing locations, reduced ability for interview exploration, and lack of longitudinal data. Additionally, it is important to call back to the theoretical principles of

CGT, stating that this data is interpretive and not generalizable to the entire population of psilocybin users. Also, the intention of this exploratory project was to understand the mainstream use and beliefs of individuals who partake in psilocybin healing. This project recognizes the Indigenous heritage of use, but the connections to indigeneity were largely not discussed by participants in interviews, leading them to be absent from the findings and discussion.

As the participants for this project were recruited confidentially from Reddit and Facebook, there are implications for diversity. To maximize confidentiality for participants, demographic data and where they heard about the project were not disclosed. Due to this, there is no data on the racial and ethnic, age, or gender diversity of participants. Therefore, no measures could be effectively taken to create a representative sample along different demographic dimension. As previous studies have mentioned, online communities of psilocybin users tend to be white and non-representative of Indigenous usage. Sourcing via Reddit and Facebook could also lead to bias in the sample.

Bias due to sourcing from social media communities may very well be present within the data set. Additionally, as recruitment selected the first participants who declared interest and eligibility, recruitment was limited to those with quick access. This is important to consider because often, individuals that are heavily involved in online forums have strong opinions due to their received benefits. In contrast, individuals with psilocybin experiences with negative or neutral outcomes would seemingly be less inclined to participate in online communities centered around the substance. However, as the research questions and goal of this project is not to assess whether psilocybin is good or bad but to understand the motivations, behaviors, and beliefs of individuals that consume psilocybin for healing purposes, this was a concession made to increase the feasibility of the project.

The time frame for this project only allowed for one interview per person, ruling out the ability to assess longitudinal data or to further explore themes brought forth in the initial interview. Additionally, to maintain consistency between interviews, the interview question guide was closely followed. This approach was chosen to improve the comparability of data across participants, but it limits the amount of exploration within a topic, especially for those naturally inclined to speak less. The time constraints also influenced the sample size. However, the sample size is believed to effectively represent the demographic due to the observed saturation of concepts in data analysis, meaning that as analysis continued, new themes were not arising.

Unexpected Results

While there were no emerging themes that were particularly discordant from the extant literature, there was an unexpected shift in thematic categories. As designed, the project was broken down into specific categories, which informed the initial parent codes to encapsulate the broad landscape of psilocybin use. As interviews and analysis continued, it was clear that certain themes were not salient as separate categories for some individuals. As analysis continued and hierarchies developed within the parent codes, restructuring occurred to better represent the findings from the participants' perspective. This is reflected in the altered structure of the finding's chapters and how certain categories, such as the integration of medical and recreational usage of psilocybin, merged into one thematic category. In addition to this merging, the thematic category of recreational and medical use, not being disparate categories, also emerged and was reflected in the findings. In summary, through analysis and interpretation of the constructed realities of the participants' worlds, the thematic structuring of the project was altered to be better grounded in the interview data.

Suggestions for Further Research

While this project generated thoughtful insights that support extant literature and give voice to those who are often voiceless, it is ultimately exploratory and not generalizable. To better understand the relationships between themes and assess the generalizability of the data to broader samples, further research is needed. Projects that could provide benefit to this end could include a more structured assessment of the relationship between motivations and methods of intention and how these factors relate to received benefits. Other studies to assess how widespread these beliefs and behaviors are across a diverse sample would also benefit the literature. Additionally, further research would be beneficial in understanding the functional differences between microdosing and macrodosing as healing modalities. Viewing these projects from a CAM perspective, would also be valuable due to CAM researchers established practices of assessing alternative medicines.

Conclusion

This discussion reemphasized the emergent theories from the findings relating to the motivations, benefits, and beliefs of psilocybin users. The findings of the project indicate that the motivations for psilocybin use are often rooted in curiosity and a desire to heal, with information sources shaping these motivations and goals changing over time due to experiences and new information. Additionally, psilocybin use requires effort and intentionality for it to be effective, and it cannot be considered a cure-all. The integration of psilocybin into mainstream society in the United States could lead to mental health benefits, improved connections with nature, and spiritual benefits, but participants also identified potential risks such as irresponsible use, dangers of commercialization, and conflicting paradigms between the Western medical system and psychedelic treatment. Although participants believe that if psilocybin is integrated thoughtfully,

it could benefit society, they were also concerned about the potential risks and unethical integration of psilocybin into Western healthcare system.

The limitations for the project were related to the time frame and scope and include a lack of diversity in the sample, potential bias due to sourcing from social media, and lack of longitudinal and revisited data. Suggestions for further research include exploring the relationship between motivations and received benefits, understanding the functional differences between microdosing and macrodosing as healing modalities, assessing the generalizability of the data with broader samples, and relating psychedelic therapeutics to CAM modalities. Overall, this discussion provides an insightful summary of the major findings, limitations, and suggestions for further research of the project, which contributes to the ongoing discourse surrounding the use of psilocybin and its potential integration into mainstream society in the United States.

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APPENDIX

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Psychedelic trip experience

1. Please describe your first experience with psilocybin.
 - 1a. How did you first learn about psilocybin?

Motivating factors

2. What was your primary motivation the first time you tried psilocybin?
 - 2a. If you continue to take psilocybin, has your motivation changed over time?

Methods of use

3. What typical dosages do you use and why?
4. How many times have you consumed psilocybin?

Impacts of psilocybin

6. Has psilocybin had any lasting effects on you after your “trip”?
7. Could you be specific on how you use psilocybin as a tool for personal wellness?
(What methods do you follow to use psilocybin as a tool for your personal wellness?)

Psychedelics in society

8. What are the risks you associate with psilocybin?
9. What are the benefits you associate with psilocybin?
10. How do you feel about psilocybin being used as a treatment in Western medicine?
11. How do you feel about psilocybin being used as a recreational drug?

Is there anything I didn't ask that you'd like to touch on concerning psilocybin?