

# **Turn On, Tune In, Don't Drop Out: The Mainstreaming of Psychedelic Drugs**

Chloe Dolgin

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By: Chloe Dolgin  
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Drugs

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Signed by the final examining committee:

\_\_\_\_\_ Chair  
Dr Jeremy Stolow

\_\_\_\_\_ Examiner  
Dr Jeremy Stolow

\_\_\_\_\_ Examiner  
Dr Derek Nystrom (McGill University)

\_\_\_\_\_ Thesis Supervisor  
Dr Charles Acland

Approved by:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Elizabeth Miller, Chair

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr Pascale Sicotte, Dean Faculty of Arts and Sciences, 2022

December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2022

## **Abstract**

Turn On, Tune In, Don't Drop Out: The Mainstreaming of Psychedelic Drugs

Chloe Dolgin

Psychedelic drugs once seemed synonymous with counterculture in North America. Many dubbed the 1960s the “psychedelic ‘60s” and the substances were hailed by many in the decade as having intrinsic revolutionary potential. With the official launch of the War on Drugs in the U.S. in 1971, a long-lasting moral panic around these substances began and persisted fervently throughout the following decades. Yet, today, psychedelic drugs are in the process of being reintegrated into North American popular culture and economy. This thesis argues that this seemingly radical shift is not so radical at all. Rather, it is simply a product of the specific neoliberal capitalist context in which we exist. By attending to contemporary television shows, books, films, podcasts and social media trends, this thesis investigates this shift through popular cultural discourses about psychedelic drugs. This large-scale picture of the mainstreaming of psychedelic drugs identifies how these countercultural objects are integrated into neoliberal capitalist structures and the specific conditions of possibility that arise from this hegemonic process.

**Keywords:** psychedelic drugs, capitalism, mainstreaming, hegemony, generations, medicalization, popular culture, counterculture, structures of feeling, neoliberalism

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## **Introduction**

### **Zooming in on Zeitgeist**

In 2021, streaming service Hulu released a major television show about therapeutic psychedelic drugs at a wellness retreat. The series stars actresses Nicole Kidman and Melissa McCarthy, among other big names. As promotion for *Nine Perfect Strangers*, Hulu and augmented reality company Blippar created a novelty mobile website that simulates the ingestion of a psychedelic smoothie. A drink floats before users as the website invites them to “tap to drink up and enjoy the effects of our mind-altering smoothie” in order to “open your mind.” Clicking on the smoothie triggers a series of warped visual filters through which the user may look at their surroundings with their cell phone camera. The experience includes about twenty seconds of vaguely psychedelic rock music.<sup>1</sup> This representation of once countercultural psychedelic drugs is surprisingly casual and corporate, given the substances’ history.

Today, we have entered a “psychedelic renaissance” (Gearin & Devenot, p. 919) in which these once fundamentally threatening objects and practices are trendy and increasingly integrated into North American popular culture and economy (Hart, p. 177). Over approximately the past five years, there has been a marked change in mainstream attitudes towards psychedelic drugs and a corresponding change in their representation in popular culture. Further, young people in North America “appear to be taking psychedelics at least as much as the boomers ever did” (Pace, para. 4). Indeed, a survey conducted by YouGov in 2022 found that 28% of Americans had reported trying one of the seven psychedelic drugs polled (Orth, 2022).<sup>2</sup> It is apparent that while these substances once supported counterculture and resistance among youth, they are clearly not understood in the same way today.

This thesis maps this newly respectable psychedelic zeitgeist by analyzing dominant discourse in contemporary popular culture. In doing so, it pinpoints the dominant modes and tropes associated with psychedelic drugs today in order to provide an explanation for why this cultural shift may be occurring. It situates dominant representations of psychedelic drugs within neoliberal capitalist ideologies. Upon first glance, it may seem surprising that psychedelics – once presenting such a fierce threat to dominant forces of power – could today be integrated into

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix, Figure 1 for reference images.

<sup>2</sup> Namely: LSD (acid), psilocybin (mushrooms), MDMA (ecstasy), mescaline (peyote), ketamine, DMT, and salvia.

those very same structures. This thesis contends that this shift was actually predictable, but not uncomplicated. By looking at today's "set and setting" created by dominant structures of power, the thesis ultimately argues that the hegemonic discourse of psychedelic drugs manages the felt conditions of possibility experienced by youth generations today. Ultimately, an understanding of psychedelics as essentially individualistic rather than collectivistic marks this shift.

### **From Countercultural Resistance to Neoliberal Insistence**

The 1960s was a decade emblematic of cultural change for many countries. In fact, many term the period the "psychedelic 60s." Various figures of the time understood psychedelic drugs as having revolutionary potential, especially for young people. Groups were inspired to question the economic, political, and cultural pillars upon which Western society was built (Schivelbusch, p. 224). Psychedelics were linked to what seemed to be the inevitable rejection of dominant society and were an important part of anti-establishment counterculture in several ways. Timothy Leary, Harvard researcher and major figurehead of the era, famously rallied in 1966: "turn on, tune in, drop out." He called for North American youth who were dropping Lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) to tune into their own needs and alternative ideas, clearly see the failings of the world around them, and drop out of their broken society in order to live a freer life: "He inspired a generation of young people (today's aging baby boomers) to reject mainstream society" (Pinchbeck & Rokhlin, p. xii). Bestselling food journalist Michael Pollan agrees by highlighting that "dated and goofy as those words sound to our ears, there was a moment when they were treated as a credible threat to social order, an invitation to America's children not only to take mind-altering drugs but to reject the path laid out for them by their parents and their government" (2018, p. 138-139). This concise slogan came to hold major cultural importance throughout the decade.

Five years later, in 1971, the U.S. government officially launched the War on Drugs. President Richard Nixon declared: "America's public enemy number one in the United States is drug abuse. In order to fight and defeat this enemy, it is necessary to wage a new all-out offensive" (Richard Nixon Foundation, 2016). One of the main justifications for its development was to suppress the potential threat psychedelics posed to dominant culture's status quo (Pinchbeck & Rokhlin, p. 137). Its assumptions and operations fueled long-lasting fear about

drug use in general and created extreme legal consequences for drug users. Many thousands of people were incarcerated, and many more had their lives destroyed by this campaign.

Today, after decades of contending with the War on Drugs and its policies, it seems its end is now in sight (Pollan, 2021, p. 5). Novel policy shifts in the United States and Canada have occurred and these shifts can be noted in popular culture. LSD, psilocybin, ayahuasca, DMT, ketamine, and MDMA are more frequently newsworthy topics, as contemporary studies appear to uncover their healing benefits. Over just the past three years, psychedelic research has exploded, and psychedelic therapy practiced by private practitioners is becoming increasingly accessible, especially in Canada. Since 2020, in the Canadian context, there are already many such clinics: Field Trip Health, Remedy and CRTCE in Toronto, MindSpace in Montreal, Thrive in Vancouver, Therapsil in Victoria and Atma in Calgary. These medical centers are established by psychologists who acquire special qualifications for “psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy,” and a few are even funded in part by public psychedelic companies such as Numinus or Field Trip Health. After vetting their clients’ needs based on specific mental health concerns, the clinics will provide private therapy sessions in which they administer psychedelic compounds – usually psilocybin or ketamine. These treatments are quite expensive and are rarely covered through current health insurance programs.

The rise of psychedelic private practice occurred on the heels of the relatively recent federal legalization and regulation of the Canadian cannabis market in late 2018 and in many American states. In Canada, this waning of the War on Drugs seems to extend beyond just psychedelics. In July 2022, British Columbia was granted a request to temporarily decriminalize certain illegal drugs for personal use, such as opioids, cocaine, MDMA, and methamphetamine. In fact, in August 2020, the Canadian government quietly began discussing broader federal illicit drug decriminalization. Further, in terms of changes for psychedelics more specifically, Toronto and Vancouver made applications requesting that psilocybin mushrooms be exempted for personal use in 2021. Since then, mushroom dispensaries that operate in a legal grey-zone have cropped up in many major Canadian cities, such as Shroomyz in Ottawa and Coca Leaf Cafe & Mushroom Dispensary in Vancouver. And, a poll conducted in 2021 by the Canadian Psychedelic Association showed that “82% of Canadians approve the use of psilocybin-assisted therapy for those suffering from an end-of-life illness” (Psilocybin Alpha, 2021).



This trend of softening policy coupled with the increased accessibility of psychedelic drugs is also apparent in the United States, where psilocybin has been deprioritized for criminal persecution in cities such as Oakland, Santa Cruz, Denver, Washington, Ann Arbor, and Seattle. It has been fully decriminalized in the city of Detroit and in the state of Oregon. Many other American cities have active legislation on the issue. In July 2022, in a letter from the Health and Human Services department, the Biden administration announced its plans to federally legalize psychedelic therapies within two years. Psychedelic science and research have also become more commonplace in both countries, as many trials are currently underway, and advocacy groups such as M.A.P.S. (Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies) and C.P.A. (Canadian Psychedelic Association) are more active than ever. The War on Drugs and the widespread panic it fueled in relation to psychedelics in particular seems to be fading into the background of the broader North American context.

Meanwhile, psychedelics' increasing presence in popular culture compliments this trend in policy shifts. Many *New York Times* bestsellers have been published which address the benefits of psychedelic drug use, such as Michael Pollan's *How to Change Your Mind* (2018) and its sequel *This is Your Mind on Plants* (2021), Carl Hart's *Drug Use for Grown-Ups* (2021) and Ayelet Waldman's *A Really Good Day* (2017). Popular television and film include scenes of psychedelic drug use more and more frequently, and these visual representations are far from dismissive or fear-mongering like those of decades past. Many celebrities are openly discussing their experiences taking psychedelic drugs, such as Sting, Joe Rogan, Will Smith, A\$AP Rocky, Jordan Peterson, Sarah Silverman, and Megan Fox, among others. Corporate culture – famously that of Silicon Valley – is known for its use of the substances to increase productivity while at work (Pollan, 2018, p. 175, Pinchbeck & Rokhlin, 2019, p. 68). In fact, even co-founder and former CEO of Apple Steve Jobs noted that taking LSD was “one of the most important things in my life” (Isaacson, 2011, p. 4).

Psychedelics also seem to be a hot topic in news stories everywhere. Coverage includes new scientific findings and mental health benefits, policy changes, investment advice, and even first-person accounts of psychedelic experiences. There is also discussion linked to the commercialization and corporatization of the substances, with articles such as Amanda Siebert's 2020 and 2021 holiday gift guides titled “What to Buy the Psychonaut on Your List” and “Gifts for the Psychedelic Explorer” published in *Forbes*, featuring themed t-shirts, magic mushroom

storage bags and a 14k gold psilocybin mushroom pendant. Further, Shelby Hartman and Madison Margolin's "The Psychedelic Industry Could Offer a Whole New Approach to Work" published in *Rolling Stone* and Tiffany Kary's "Psychedelic Therapy Retreats Target Corporate Executives" published in *Bloomberg Businessweek* signal a new trend of corporatization. There are also a number of publicly traded psychedelic therapy and wellness stocks on the market, as well as three ETFs (exchange-traded funds), one Canadian and two American. Clearly, psychedelics are making their way into many facets of popular culture and mainstream discourse within today's capitalist context. The drugs accepted into mainstream discourse are a version closely tied to ideas of medicalization, self-development, and capitalist benefit.

Psychedelic drugs are not only an object of dominant cultural interest but are also the commodities underpinning an important emerging North American market. As of April 2022, the psychedelics industry is composed of forty-eight public companies and thirty-eight private companies (Psilocybin Alpha, 2022), the vast majority of which are Canadian or American and can be divided into seven distinct industry segments. At the end of 2022, the global psychedelics industry was valued at 4.07 billion USD. The industry is projected to grow by a compound annual growth rate of 13.3% to attain a value of 7.58 billion USD by 2026 (Azoth Analytics, 2021). Between September 2020 and September 2021, the global psychedelics industry saw 960 million USD in capital flows, with 830 million USD attributed to public companies (Jones, 2021). The industry can be better understood by separating its activities into seven areas, as preliminarily sketched out in Katie Jones' article "A Visual Guide to Investing in Psychedelics," published on the blog Visual Capitalist.<sup>3</sup>

The first market segment relates to **biotechnological companies** that manufacture psychedelics and supply them to any given legal endeavour, such as scientific research experiments or therapeutic efforts. Companies making up this area possess licenses to cultivate or produce these drugs. This manufacturing and supply division of the industry can be further categorized into companies that manufacture pharmaceutical-grade synthetic psychedelics, companies that operate cultivation facilities for natural psychedelics, and those still applying for licenses to participate in either of these manufacturing efforts (Jones, 2021). Secondly, there is a

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that this article was sponsored by the public psychedelic company Tryp Therapeutics as a means through which to underline the psychedelics industry's growth and to promote investment. As such, it also serves as an example of an emergent industrial discourse about this newly legitimized sector.

market segment related to **delivering drugs as therapies by way of clinics and retreats**. As of today, legal therapies offered to the general public (who are diagnosed with mental illnesses requiring treatment) are limited to three compounds: MDMA, ketamine, and psilocybin. So, this segment can be separated into four sub-categories: companies that run clinics which administer ketamine, clinics that use psilocybin, clinics that use MDMA, and retreats that use psilocybin (Jones, 2021). These clinics and retreats run as for-profit businesses, even in the Canadian context, and have a relatively high price-point (Noorani, 2019, p. 36). Companies making up the third segment are those that **secure intellectual property rights and patents for specific psychedelic compounds** (Jones, 2021) allowing them to obtain a competitive industry advantage, much like traditional pharmaceutical companies (Noorani, 2019, p. 34). A few of these psychedelic companies are directly owned by pharmaceutical corporations and others regularly work in tandem with pharmaceutical firms. The fourth industrial segment is made up of companies exploring **patenting methods for bodily psychedelic drug delivery**. These refer to administration strategies, such as capsules, oral strips, and nasal sprays that can be used for therapeutic purposes (Jones, 2021). Then, companies that are engaged in **research and development of therapeutic methods** as well as clinical trials that involve psychedelics in the therapeutic field are a fifth market segment. This includes companies that are engaged in experimenting with compounds, new and old, to treat various ailments. The sixth segment has been reserved for operations by Dutch companies until relatively recently and refers to “**adult use and microdosing**.” Indeed, a few private Canadian companies are beginning to tread outside the official medical market by producing capsules of small, sub-perceptual doses of psilocybin for purchase and self-administration. Most notably is the company Microgenix, which primarily utilizes the social media apps Instagram and TikTok to market their products, and only ship within Canada. This segment is still within a legal grey-zone, but this is expected to shift relatively soon. Lastly, the seventh segment refers to perhaps a surprising area for psychedelic industrial activity: **technological platforms**. Nick Srnicek argues that “the platform has data extraction built into its DNA” (2017, p. 89). Many of the larger companies are focused on “carving a new path for the industry” through the implementation of technology and its data extraction mechanisms (Jones, 2021). This segment includes two distinct areas: companies developing software connected directly to psychedelic use (such as digital therapeutics and telehealth) and those developing apps tangentially related to psychedelic drugs (Jones, 2021).

Digital therapeutics are platform infrastructures that aid licensed therapists to access and monitor clients through digital means. The other subcategory refers to the development of “mental wellness companion apps,” meant to address psychedelic users more casually by offering practical guidance, integration techniques, music, and more in order to assist with the tangential aspects of psychedelic experiences (Trip, Psychedelic Guidance, 2021).<sup>4</sup> Access to users’ data about their drug use is a critical and practical method through which to keep drug activity known and in check. Users are now voluntarily offering data about their drug experiences to these companies by using these casual apps developed by the companies themselves.

This budding industry relies heavily on psychedelics’ continued cultural legitimization, as well as the softening of drug legislation. Yet, this softening is mainly reserved for very few countries – primarily Canada and the United States – that are relatively developed industrial Western societies. Many other countries still enforce dramatic and extreme punishments for drug trafficking and use. Ultimately, in North America, it is clear that any relationship of legitimization does not only flow one way; the economic viability of this emerging market is dependent on the drugs’ cultural legitimization, just as cultural legitimization is dependent on proof that the industry is economically viable. In this way, culture participates in the maintenance of capitalism.<sup>5</sup>

As we are in the midst of this renewed cultural zeitgeist, we are also in the throes of a shifting stage of Western capitalism. Technology is being integrated into all aspects of the everyday, which makes it easier for capitalism to encroach on otherwise reserved facets of human existence (Crary, 2013, p. 30, Srnicek, 2017, p. 5-6). Synchronously, neoliberal values of individualism, competition and profit are intensifying and becoming more esteemed and commonplace (Anderson, p. 795, p. 737). In this context, new experiences of precarity are becoming the new normal (McRobbie, 2016, p. 12-13). All this has contributed to the felt effects of a global climate crisis, extreme wealth disparity, inflation, and war. Piled on top of this is the COVID-19 global pandemic. Discussion among young people about collective burnout, stress, anxiety, and depression is high (Han, 2015, Institute for Precarious Consciousness, 2014, p. 5). Taking into account the qualities and workings of dominant power today illuminates an

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix, Figure 2 for image of the app’s home page.

<sup>5</sup> Katie Jones’ article in *Visual Capitalist* outlining these market segments lists an additional area that I have chosen not to include in this outline as I have deemed it too tangential. “Nutraceuticals” is a market segment that refers to psychedelic companies engaged in activities not related to psychedelics, but rather to “functional foods” such as antioxidant mushroom capsules or teas.

explanation for why representations of psychedelic drugs cannot be as politically charged as they once were. Contrary to the hopes of earlier generations, psychedelic drugs do not *necessarily* induce resistance or revolution.

### **Theoretical Alliances and Methodology**

This thesis continues in the tradition of British Cultural Studies, which involves an understanding of “culture” as fundamentally constructed, in-formation, multifaceted, and never static. Shifting contexts are crucial to this conceptualization of “culture,” and hence to this project. This work is based on these theorists’ ideas about how subcultural objects become integrated into dominant structures of power through hegemony (Gramsci, 1948, Williams, 1977b). While discussing counterculture’s relationships to the hegemonic media, this thesis has a specific understanding of “popular culture” that aligns with that of Stuart Hall. Hall’s conceptualization of the popular as a “battlefield” (1981, p. 354) clarifies how dominant meanings are perpetually in negotiation and inherently unstable. Furthermore, Tony Bennett highlights that popular culture itself must be understood as necessarily “historically and politically variable” and thus, never trans-historical (1986, p. 3). As such, showcasing the variability of culture in time and the constant mutability of cultural processes under dominant power are of crucial importance. Overall, these theorists elucidate how the workings of culture have the power to form our interpretation of the world around us – an idea which guides this project.

Critical discourse analysis – grounded in Marxist thought – will be the primary method utilized for analyzing the landscape of representation of psychedelic drugs today. This thesis is then focused on investigating “how much power is anchored in this societal reality, who exercises it, over whom and by what means is it exercised” (Jager, 2011, p. 5). The main aim of critical discourse analysis is an examination of the place and influence of dominant ideology and power in contemporary discourse. This entails understanding “discourse” as much broader than the written word. It is always circulating through all levels of social formations and is both influenced by and influencing how our collective ideas about the world are (re)shaped. This methodology demands that discourse be understood as necessarily intertwined with dominant power. Hans Jager notes that “discourse as a whole is a regulating body; it forms consciousness”

(p. 4). The thesis takes this claim seriously and utilizes the method to describe popular discourse about psychedelic drugs and the ways in which this impacts those consuming popular culture.

The first chapter of this thesis, “Medicine, Mind Control, Misgivings & Motifs,” is a summary of the history of psychedelic drugs in mainstream North American culture. It begins with the discovery of LSD in 1938, follows medical research throughout the 1950s, the beginnings of the psychedelic counterculture and controversy, and the start of the War on Drugs. It continues to describe the rise of moral panic and the ensuing representations and aesthetics of psychedelic drugs during that time. It covers the treatment of a few other major drugs of the ‘80s and ‘90s, including both the crack epidemic and the opioid crisis. Ultimately, it briefly discusses the reassociations of psychedelic drugs in the contemporary context.

In the second chapter, “The Power of the Popular,” Stuart Hall’s conceptualization of “popular culture” as a battlefield is mobilized to investigate the dominant ways in which psychedelic discourse has manifested in contemporary popular culture within the last five years. This chapter focuses mainly on television and film, but briefly discusses books and news. This section argues that there are specific parameters set around how we understand the intended user and purpose for psychedelic drugs today.

The third chapter, “Set and Setting: Turn On, Tune In, Don’t Drop Out,” is split into two sections – “setting” and “set” – which refer to these concepts beyond their implications for individual users. In the first section, the chapter contends neoliberal capitalism as today’s “setting” and presents three dominant discursive elements that frame corresponding understandings of psychedelics: individualism, profit, and freedom. It posits the rise of a new figure – the “useful psychonaut” – as the primary consumer position embodied in this setting. It utilizes the case study of podcasts by The Intellectual Dark Web (IDW) to explore how this new form of personhood operates to legitimize both psychedelic drugs and neoliberal capitalism itself. In the second section on “set,” the chapter focuses on how collective affect under neoliberal capitalism bolsters this dominant discourse about psychedelics, especially among young people. It contends that specific conditions of possibility are established by this manufactured “mindset” which are fundamentally different from past possibilities of psychedelic collectivism. This is explored through the case study of a specific trend on TikTok, “the psychedelic *that* girl aesthetic.”

The conclusion draws this wide-ranging study to an observation about the operations of these discourses. It interrogates the continued possibilities of collective countercultural resistance within the context of the hegemonic forces of mainstreaming. To launch this thesis analysis, we turn first to a brief history of psychedelic drugs in North American culture.

## Chapter One

### Medicine, Mind Control, Misgivings & Motifs: A History of Psychedelics

In 1938, Swiss chemist Albert Hofmann discovered LSD-25 while working as a research chemist for Sandoz Laboratories (Hofmann, 2005, p. 15). On April 19, 1943, the chemist first tried the substance at his lab and bicycled home under its influence (2005, p. 19). This day is now commemorated annually by psychedelic activists as “bicycle day.” Though psychedelics had been used in many Indigenous cultures for thousands of years (Pinchbeck & Rokhlin, 2019, p. 43), Hofmann’s discovery of the effects of LSD catalyzed the very beginnings of mainstream psychedelic use in North America.<sup>6</sup> In 1949, Sandoz began shipping LSD to American researchers for free – through what is referred to today as a “crowdsourcing project” – in order to test the new drug (Pollan, 2018, p. 2). Even in the early years, “researchers had great hopes for LSD, suspecting it could be used to illuminate the chemical nature of psychotic conditions such as schizophrenia” (Cornwell & Linders, 2010, p. 315). Excitement in the scientific community about the potential positive effects of psychedelics grew rapidly.

In the early fifties, LSD and psychedelic drugs were largely unknown, and popular media had not yet amassed any significant representational stockpile. As such, they had no real cultural reputation or political stigma and were largely treated as any other pharmaceutical drug in early trials (Pollan, 2018, p. 104). Then, in 1954, Aldous Huxley wrote his famous autobiographical work *The Doors of Perception*. The book outlined in detail his experience with the psychedelic compound mescaline, as well as his ensuing philosophical musings about human existence. Many credit Huxley with the subsequent explosion of interest in psychedelics outside the scientific community. Cornwell and Linders speculate that “the use of LSD may have remained an uncontroversial scientific exploit if not for the writings of Aldous Huxley” (2010, p. 315). Huxley was enthusiastic about the possibility that psychedelics might “help bring in a new stage of human civilization by giving people the opportunity to control their own minds” (Green, 2018, p. 157). Furthermore, psychedelic drugs became even more popularly acknowledged after *Time*

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<sup>6</sup> It is crucial to highlight that there is a long and important history of natural psychedelic substances being used in Indigenous communities as sacred objects, dating back to ancient times. There is also research to suggest that various hallucinatory compounds were used by early Hindus and ancient Greeks (Sessa, 2006, p. 2). Yet, adequately exploring this historical cultural activity in depth is beyond the scope of this work.



*Magazine* published a front-page story in 1957 about a mycologist's experience with mushrooms in a Oaxacan Mazatec ritual (Siff, 2015, p. 74).

Following these publications, psychedelic research thrived throughout the late fifties and early sixties. The most famous of this research was the Harvard Psilocybin Project headed by Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert. There, a series of experiments with the active chemical in magic mushrooms were conducted between 1959 and 1963. Leary noted that these trials were greatly influenced by the principles and ideas in Huxley's book (Green, 2019, p. 162). During this time, there were also "LSD parties" at which researchers would take LSD out of their labs in order to conduct informal experiments with friends by watching over their trips. This proved to be the first way in which LSD leaked from lab use to street use (Cornwell & Linders, 2010, p. 316). By the end of the 1950s, much of the "above-ground" research had been conducted by optimistic researchers. There were hundreds of medical studies published in the United States alone (2010, p. 315).

While it is common today to associate psychedelics with the progressive politics of the sixties, it is worth mentioning that running concurrently with these positive early trials in mental health was a history of conservatism, war, and social control. With the inception of the Cold War, and rising fear about the Soviet Union's nuclear capabilities, it was speculated that LSD might be a useful tool for government mind control (Noakes, 2021, para. 1). MKUltra is the most well-known of these programs, but it is one of many. As a result, various experimental initiatives were undertaken throughout North America which relied on the administration of LSD to uninformed and non-consenting participants. Perhaps the most notorious were the Montreal experiments conducted in Canada between 1948 and 1964. These were co-funded by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Canadian government. Some affected families were compensated in 1992, but others still seek compensation for severe trauma (Noakes, 2021, para. 16). Furthermore, Roger Green writes of the "conservative Swiss and German intrigue with Albert Hofmann's discovery of LSD" (2019, p. 15). Ernst Jünger, a controversial figure, author, and former Nazi official, was one of Hofmann's most honoured friends with whom he frequently took LSD after the war (Hofmann, 2005, p. 125). In fact, the word "psychonaut" – commonly used to describe a person interested in exploring their own minds with the help of psychedelic drugs – was coined by Jünger himself (Pace, 2020, para. 12). Even more, Nazi researchers at Dachau performed experiments on prisoners with mescaline in order to test mind-control (Boon,

2002, p. 248). And, in the late sixties and early seventies, the hippie commune the Manson family – known for its various murders – habitually used LSD. This trend persists in some ways today, where there exist communities of Neo-Nazis and alt-right groups that center psychedelic drug use in their lifestyles (Pace, 2020, para. 7). Nevertheless, the mainstream psychedelic community continued to use psychedelics mainly for medical research until approximately the mid-sixties.

Psychedelics were viewed as increasingly controversial and soon relegated to the fringe of the scientific community. This shift in public attitude has been largely attributed to Leary's grandiose media personality and connection to the rising counterculture. He infamously called for youth to be inspired by psychedelics and to "turn on, tune in, drop out" (Pollan, 2018, p. 138). He publicly asserted statements like: "the kids who take LSD aren't going to fight in your wars, they aren't going to join your corporations" (Burkeman, 2018, para. 4) and "detaching yourself from the insanity of society requires group action" (Leary, 1966, para. 34). While there were still legitimate studies being conducted that showed positive results, psychedelic drugs quickly became associated with counterculture and viewed as a threat to society (Pollan, 2018, p. 59). As such, funding for psychedelic research programs began to dry up (Pollan, 2018, p. 57).

Leary was fired from Harvard University in the spring of 1963. He went on to establish the League for Spiritual Discovery (LSD) in 1966, which he defined as a religious organization that emphasized spiritualism (Stevens, 1988, p. 257). The group lived on a sweeping estate they called Millbrook, donated by heirs to the Mellon fortune.<sup>7</sup> Concurrently, Esalen, a religious conference with attention to psychedelic drugs, was first held in 1962 (and continues today). Alongside its new associations with spiritualism, psychedelic culture in the early sixties concurrently crystallized around North American youth. Heeding Leary's call, many young people were taken with psychedelics and their use became associated with countercultural practices of rebellion and alternative living (Stevens, 1988, p. 227). Author Ken Kesey discovered LSD after he volunteered to be part of an official medical LSD trial in 1959 (Wolfe, 1968, p. 40). Then, between 1965-1966 Kesey bought a school bus to drive his close followers – The Merry Pranksters – across North America to hold "acid tests."<sup>8</sup> These were huge celebrations at which young people would take LSD and party for many days straight. The

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<sup>7</sup> See Appendix, Figure 3 for image of the Millbrook estate.

<sup>8</sup> See Appendix, Figure 4 for photograph of an acid test event.

events became the template for psychedelic aesthetics in music and art in almost all ensuing popular cultural representations of the drugs (Stevens, 1988, p. 237). Moreover, there were important communities forged throughout the late sixties across North America, most notably in San Francisco. They emphasized psychedelic use and were made up of many disillusioned young people – mostly white and middle-class – who lived communally outside regular society (Wolfe, p. 11). An interconnected community experience was a fundamental aspect of the counterculture’s use of the drugs at the time.

Throughout the rest of the sixties, there were two main communities that used psychedelics: spiritual religious groups like Leary’s, and youth counterculture. These were certainly not binaries, and the spiritual and countercultural elements regularly came into contact with each other. Indeed, Kesey’s Merry Pranksters famously spent a few days annoying the League of Spiritual Discovery at their commune in upstate New York by not taking the spiritualism of LSD seriously (Wolfe, 1968, p. 104-105). Despite differing goals, in a private meeting between Kesey and Leary during this visit, the two “looked each other in the eye and promised to stay in touch as allies” (Leary, 1983, p. 206). Either way, by the mid-sixties, psychedelics were firmly associated with a “critique of the nation state” in the popular imagination (Green, 2019, p. 17).

Unsurprisingly, the association of psychedelic drugs with risk and the rejection of societal structures negatively affected their legal status. Jay Stevens argues that “nineteen sixty-six was the year America awoke to the gravity of the psychedelic movement and reacted with all the cultural power it could muster” (1988, p. 217). Psychedelics had been associated with the wrong crowd and used for the wrong purposes. The drug research began to be seen as a “scientific embarrassment” because the substances “had become identified with the counterculture and with disgraced scientists like Timothy Leary” (Pollan, 2018, p. 158). The drugs were viewed more and more as threatening to “society’s various structures of authority” (Pollan, 2018, p. 214). Then, in April 1966, laws against the possession of LSD were first introduced by the states of California and New York (Cornwell & Linders, 2010, p. 319). The same month, Sandoz Laboratories – still the only manufacturer of LSD – announced that it would cease distribution and recalled its supplies (Siff, 2015, p. 148). Within this context, black market LSD became even more common and rebellious youth consumption skyrocketed (Stevens, 1988, p. 227).

In May 1966, Senator Thomas Dodd convened subcommittee hearings about psychedelics in which Timothy Leary stood as an expert witness. Leary was still running unofficial tests with his group at the Millbrook estate and had published two books meant to help guide psychedelic experiences in 1964 and 1966, respectively. On the stand, Leary noted that he was not alarmed at the trend of youth taking psychedelics more and more (efootage, 1966). Such a publicly threatening figure making this statement rang alarm bells for many at the hearing. Robert Green contends that “the defeat of Timothy Leary et al. in senate hearings led restrictions on LSD to move from California’s decision initiated in October 1966 [...] to the federal ban in 1968 and efforts to ‘re-norm’ American culture” (2019, p. 10). Indeed, in 1968, LSD was criminalized while Richard Nixon campaigned for office. Nixon’s campaign relied on the promise of restoring a “more conformist, more traditional America” (Siff, 2015, p. 181) and the climate at the time proved to be extremely reactionary to the surge of a great many progressive movements. As such, “psychedelics were suppressed for ideological reasons” (Pinchbeck & Rokhlin, 2019, p. xi). Michael Pollan concurs that “there was a moment when they were treated as a credible threat to the social order” (2018, p. 139).

After Nixon’s election, the 1970 Controlled Substances Act was passed which made it illegal to do any research with these compounds (Green, 2019, p. 10). Nixon declared Timothy Leary “the most dangerous man in America” (Pollan, 2019, p. 158). In 1971, The War on Drugs was officially launched. This large-scale and strategic global campaign had the intention of putting a stop to the distribution, production, and consumption of illicit drugs. It is estimated to have cost more than one trillion dollars cumulatively (Mann, para. 32). Many understand that the War on Drugs has been wrapping up throughout the past few years, as it is generally thought of as having been a failure (Pollan, 2021, p.5). But, its sociocultural reverberations are still felt in many ways today. The War on Drugs has been described as part of a “larger regimen of control and indoctrination designed to maintain a particular status quo and socioeconomic order” (Siff, 2015, p. 137). The war was not simply meant to suppress the countercultural activities threatening the “American dream;” it also acted as a program through which particular groups could be disproportionately demonized and incarcerated, most notably Black and Latinx populations (Benson-Allott, 2021, p. 176). While psychedelics helped justify the beginning of a decades-long governmental program against psychedelics, the focus quickly shifted towards other drugs that could more effectively target marginalized groups (Hart, 2021, p. 20).

The first decade or so of the War on Drugs still fueled long-lasting moral panic about psychedelics in particular, especially exemplified in television and film. In fact, there is a significant “industrial history of U.S. television’s relationship to the War on Drugs” (Benson-Allott, 2021, p. 175). Throughout the 1970s for psychedelics, and into the 1990s for other drugs, the American government directly funded anti-drug public service announcements and partnered with television producers to create “special episodes” that would censor, discourage, and drive drug use further underground (2021, p. 172). Clearly, the power of popular culture to change social behaviour was well understood and instrumentalized. During the War on Drugs, the most common way to handle images of psychedelic use was simply to create associations with characters that were endowed with negative attributes. The programs would commonly create serious narrative consequences for such characters, such as alienation from society, addiction, imprisonment, or death (2021, p. 171).

After the criminalization of LSD through the late sixties and into the early seventies, psychedelics became the objects of “media hype” (Siff, 2015, p. 175). In April 1966, the month before the subcommittee hearings, the imagined figure of the “LSD psychotic” was first established in the media. Suddenly, there was evidence of the dangers of psychedelic drugs everywhere, fostered by cavalier readings of questionable statistics and misleading or false anecdotal evidence (Stevens, 1988, p. 219). The media had entered “full panic mode” (Pollan, 2018, p. 209). LSD was sensationally reported to alter one’s DNA, cause genetic damage, create birth defects, make people jump off buildings and “cause permanent derangement” (Siff, 2015, p. 154).

This rise in collective fear can be described as “moral panic,” a concept theorized in 1972 by sociologist Stanley Cohen. Cohen defines moral panic as when “a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media” (1972, p. 1). In Cohen’s framework, the object that created this moral panic might paradoxically become more visible through media efforts to have it demonized or eradicated. Indeed, “set against the near absence of drugs from mass media a few decades before, drugs seemed to be everywhere” (Siff, 2015, p. 189) in the popular culture of the seventies. Furthermore, what may be mostly imagined moral panic can sometimes give way to concrete changes and long-term repercussions “in legal and social policy, or even in the way the society conceives itself” (Cohen, 1972, p. 1). Moral

panic and its related representations in popular culture during the War on Drugs had important and long-lasting effects on the public perception of psychedelic drugs. This persists today, as popular culture continues to contend with the threads of these residual rhetorics.

While the representation of psychedelics during the tumultuous early years of the War on Drugs was mainly negative, there still emerged a coherent aesthetic language used to represent them. For the purpose of this thesis, these pre-established visual strategies can be separated into three categories used to signal psychedelics: an atypical experience of time, an altered sensory experience, and the use of motifs and symbols from sixties drug cultures. In the first category, time can be slowed down, sped up or mixed. In the second, visual blurriness, distortion, strange angles and the intensification of colour and light depict the altered sensory experience. In the last category, Day-Glo colours, psychedelic rock music and specific hallucinations, patterns, designs, and abstract shapes are all associated with “psychedelics.”<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, “the mass appeal that psychedelic drugs had as a *signifying* tool for revolution during the 1960s spawned its own psychedelic culture known as psychedelia” (Green, 2019, p. 9).

These aesthetics did not merely attempt to capture and describe an experience; they were commonly used to market and sell products throughout the late sixties and seventies. Evacuated from any truly threatening features, their superficial aesthetic commodity form became associated with “hipness.” Thomas Frank argues that in the sixties, the principle of hipness became deeply important to the way in which capitalism understood itself (1998, p. 26). Even articles and screen representations that were negative about psychedelics still paired their criticisms with “trendy art, repeating patterns, and swirling colors that signified a psychedelic trip” (Siff, 1998, p. 178). Squirt Soda called for its consumers to “turn on to flavor, tune in to sparkle, and drop out of the cola rut” (Siff, 2015, p. 150). In fact, the iconic slogan “turn on, tune in, drop out” itself was given to Leary by media expert and philosopher Marshall McLuhan (Pollan, 2018, p. 204) as a means to strategically market himself and the psychedelic movement (Siff, 2015, p. 148). As such, psychedelics have long been in conversation with dominant forces of power. As psychedelia became ingrained in popular culture, the media usually “had no explanation of what it was supposed to mean or represent” (Siff, 2015, p. 175). In fact, in 1969, my grandparents – Canadian diplomats who had never once ingested psychedelics – recall throwing a psychedelic-themed party that included colourful outfits, creative flashing lights, and

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<sup>9</sup> See Appendix, Figures 5 and 6 for images of this psychedelic aesthetic language in the ‘60s and ‘70s.

dancing to the new Beatles record. They even had a dinner spread they called a “psychedelicatessen.” They note that this party theme was relatively common at the time. Gearin and Devenot contend that “by the mid to late 1970s, the flame of the psychedelic counterculture had virtually burnt out, and psychedelia – in the form of art, music, and language – had been absorbed into mainstream culture” (2021, p. 922). Audiences became accustomed to seeing an anesthetized version of these drugs in popular culture and the psychedelic experience became more associated with its expression in media than with actual psychedelic use (Siff, 2015, p. 190).

Throughout the second half of the War on Drugs, moral panic around psychedelics faded into the background as new drugs became the objects of acute fear. While psychedelics were readily associated with a white middle-class counterculture during the sixties and seventies, the other drugs that became the war’s next targets – crack cocaine and heroin – were more commonly associated with marginalized peoples. A cheap, potent, but impure alternative to traditional cocaine – crack – surged in popularity throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s and instigated media-induced fear with respect to “crackhouses” and the stereotyped figure of the “crackhead” (Lenson, 1999, p. 21). These fearsome images spread to refer to all other drugs, including “softer” ones, and supported an entirely anti-drug public rhetoric (Lenson, 1999, p. 16). This period is referred to as the “Crack Epidemic.” Crack was associated mostly with lower-income inner-city neighbourhoods and disproportionately and fiercely affected Black communities during the War on Drugs. In time, intense crackdowns on crime began and a shocking rise in criminalization and incarceration for infractions relating to any drug, including softer drugs like cannabis, became routine. Carl Hart is critical of these “harsh penalties for some and sympathetic treatment for others” in the War on Drugs’ inherent structural racism (2021, p. 25). Indeed, marginalized communities were the ones principally targeted by these policies.

Then, in 1999, the Opioid Crisis began after the pharmaceutical company Purdue recklessly promoted OxyContin by downplaying its extremely addictive effects. This crisis is understood to have occurred roughly between 1999-2016, but its lasting effects persist today. Opiates and the story of this crisis have seen much sympathetic popular cultural coverage in books, films, and television shows, most recently in the series *Dopesick* (2021) and Patrick Keefe’s book *Empire of Pain* (2021). At first, the Opioid Crisis mainly affected those prescribed painkillers in a surgical setting who then found themselves addicted. Initially, these were mostly

white, middle-class people, unsuspecting of the lasting addictive effects of the substances (Keefe, 2021, p. 283). Yet, as a consequence of continued harsh crackdown policies as the crisis wore on, and because of many addicts' transitions from OxyContin to cheaper street drugs like heroin and fentanyl, there was ultimately still devastation of the working poor (2021, p. 16, p. 405). Opioid-related overdoses became the leading cause of accidental death in the United States – more so than car accidents or gunshot wounds (p. 17). However, OxyContin was initially associated with white users, as psychedelic drugs were in the 1960s (Hart, 2021, p. 21).

Between the drugs' association with powerful identities, the mistrust of the pharmaceutical industry in the wake of the many lawsuits against Purdue, and the increasing frustration over antidepressants' ineffectiveness in the growing mental health crisis (Kary, 2021, para. 6), the end of the War on Drugs came into sight. Today, these trends have given way to “psychedelic exceptionalism,” as psychedelic drugs are increasingly positioned as fundamentally different from these other illegal “dangerous” substances (Hart, 2021, p. 177, Noorani, 2020, p. 37). As exhibited by the activities of the psychedelics industry in the introduction of this thesis, the medicalization of psychedelic drugs – rooted in the failures of the pharmaceutical industry and the incentive to find alternatives – have served to locate them as direct substitutes to traditional pharmaceutical solutions (Pollan, 2018, p. 382). While somewhat ongoing, with the War on Drugs' decline beginning in 2009, funding for psychedelic research started to trickle in again. A few promising studies were published (Pollan, 2018, p. 300) and were tentatively praised in news media.

Akin to the impact of Aldous Huxley's inflammatory book published in 1954, I argue that Michael Pollan's 2018 book *How to Change Your Mind* acted as an important catalyst for propelling this new positivity about psychedelic drugs. While there existed some news coverage of the relatively few studies being conducted, as well as some fictional accounts of psychedelic use, the success of this book set a precedent for how and why psychedelics are now discussed in popular culture.

Michael Pollan presents just about the least threatening identity formation for the status quo that one can in the Western context. As a white, heterosexual, upper/middle class, male science writer born in 1955, he becomes the perfect figurehead for this legitimizing second wave of excitement about the substances. Indeed, there is implicit social trust in the figure of the white male expert that Pollan effectively embodies. Further, his book itself emphasizes almost



exclusively psychedelic use in the context of science and medicine. Dick Hebdige argues that dominant ideology “thrives beneath consciousness. It is here, at the level of ‘normal common sense’, that ideological frames of reference are most firmly sedimented and most effective, because it is here that their ideological nature is most effectively concealed” (1979, p. 11). The cultural work of reassociating how we might understand the purpose of drugs and their users become the perfect recipe for successful integration into mainstream capitalism. As such, Pollan’s book serves as an ideal template for upholding dominant interests, while still allowing for psychedelic use.

Psychedelics were once fundamentally associated with counterculture, but even before this, they were seen as no different from any other legitimate pharmaceutical drug in early trials. The drugs’ shift from fueling medical optimism, to inspiring real acts of resistance, to justifying the extreme and damaging governmental policy of the War on Drugs, is all intricately connected. From this legacy emerges new optimistic sentiments about psychedelic drugs today, especially within the medical space. Throughout their relatively short history in North American popular culture, the cultural understanding of these substances shifted dramatically. From exciting tools for positive structural change, to real threats to the conservative status quo, to neutralized symbols of superficial rebelliousness, and now to medical tools in the fight against mental health suffering, psychedelic drugs have seen a major shift in cultural perception that culminates in the contemporary popular culture of neoliberal capitalism.

## Chapter Two

### The Power of the Popular: Psychedelics in Contemporary Media

May 15, 2018 was a major turning point in the re-formation of popular discourse about psychedelic drugs. On that day, a well-established and respected food science writer published a hefty and largely celebratory book on the topic of psychedelics. It went on to become a *New York Times* bestseller. With *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression and Transcendence*, author Michael Pollan solidified the developing trend of the drugs' popularity and put psychedelics on the radar of many North American readers. Since then, psychedelic drug use has often been presented in Western television, film, books, and news as part of everyday capitalist life, especially in wellness and medical industries. Once seen as a dangerous countercultural indulgence, representations of psychedelic experiences in popular culture have become increasingly positive and numerous: "The mass media – which until recently scoffed at psychedelics as 'toys for the hippie generation' and mind-destroyers – now reports breathlessly on every trend" (Pinchbeck & Rokhlin, 2019, p. 86). This process of incorporation is far from complete, and it exhibits a continued and ongoing struggle between negative residual implications of the past and dominant consolidating forces of the present.

In order to document the incomplete incorporation of psychedelic drugs into mainstream culture following the release of Pollan's book, this chapter will provide a summary of representations of psychedelic drugs in popular culture within the last five years (2018-2022). It will argue that a consistent theme in media is a reassociation of the intended user and purpose of these drugs. This discursive repositioning process is a result of popular culture's power to impose specific parameters around the ways in which psychedelic drugs can be understood in the contemporary world. While this chapter includes primarily an analysis of film and television that show psychedelic "trips," it will also support these observations by looking at similar tropes in literary representations, news articles, and scenes on screen that do not feature drug ingestion.

#### Popular Power

In his seminal essay "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular," Stuart Hall's uneasy definition of "popular culture" rests on a specific understanding of dominant power as something

necessarily fluid, active, and negotiated. Hall argues that the force of power is always seeking to maintain the dominance of its ideologies (1981, p. 348). Popular culture acts as a site for the maintenance and exercise of such power (1981, p. 355). This does not mean that alternative ideas are not present in popular culture. In fact, it is quite the opposite: popular culture is a lived process – a “battlefield” – upon which some battles are won, and some are lost (1981, p. 354). For Hall, popular culture is then “an arena of consent and resistance” (1981, p. 360).

Hall’s theory rests on the idea that power functions through “hegemony.” Theorized by Antonio Gramsci in the 1930s and usefully reiterated by Raymond Williams in 1977, hegemony refers to the meanings, practices, and experiences that we perceive as “common sense,” but which serve dominant power structures and “the ruling class” (Williams, 1977b, p. 110). This formation and maintenance of the dominant is an active process which Gramsci sees as hailing from most areas of human life (1977b, p. 108). Williams contends that hegemonic structures are actively co-constitutive with lived experiences, rather than exercised in a top-down or static way (1977b, p. 110). Hegemony functions by constantly incorporating and editing practices and meanings which may threaten the power of dominant narratives. Maintaining a relatively coherent and complimentary story, and hence social stability, is its ultimate goal (1977b, p. 109). Thus, this process of maintenance functions as a loop that is predicated on a dispersed form of power, in which the movements of culture impact the possibilities of dominant power and vice versa. In this way, hegemonic power is like an ongoing conversation, project, and struggle (1977b, p. 113); popular culture plays an important role as one of the main sites where this conversation – or battle – occurs.

Stuart Hall argues that there is “no whole, authentic, autonomous, ‘popular culture’ which lies outside the field of forces of relations of cultural power and domination” (1981, p. 353). We are deeply affected by popular culture. Its power reaches into the everyday and sets felt parameters for our lives. As an active hegemonic force, it influences the formation of our collective ideas and holds a central part in the reproduction of knowledge. Dick Hebdige aptly argues that “the media play a crucial role in defining our experience for us. They provide us with the most available categories for classifying out the social world” (1979, p. 84). In so doing, popular culture participates in creating the conditions of possibility for how we apprehend the world around us. No culture is outside contending with the influence and context of the

dominant. While continually in battle, culture is also always conditioned and “saturated by popular imperialism” (Hall, 1981, p. 350).

Psychedelic drugs have had a complex history in North American popular culture, and their treatment is an unambiguous example of hegemonic contestation. Since the 1950s, their representations have always been mediated by “a specific ideological field which gives it particular life and particular meanings” (Hebdige, 1979, p. 80). Stephen Siff argues that “the idea of a psychedelic world is inextricably tangled with its representation in the media” (2015, p. 188). With the waning of the War on Drugs and the panic it fostered in relation to psychedelics, contemporary on-screen representation is more frequently “openly embracing drug cultures” (Benson-Allott, 2021, p. 172). Popular culture has unquestionably influenced the conditions of possibility for how we conceptualize these substances in contemporary Western society. Yet, popular culture never presents a totalizing picture. Instead, it is a site of warring present dominant narratives, residual moral panic, and alternative ideas. These forces actively spar, with some scenes inevitably giving more leeway than others with respect to who is associated with psychedelics and why they are used. The amalgamation of popular cultural instances function together in order to cohere around a popular cultural narrative that supports hegemonic interests, though not without inconsistencies.

### **Tripping on TV**

The following overview serves as a snapshot of the ways in which recent screen representations of psychedelic drugs demonstrate new positivity. It will provide a wide account of the legitimizing ideas that circulate around substances and users in today’s psychedelic “renaissance.” It will not be a detailed study of each media object, but rather an identification of common representational modes and tropes that resonate across media. This section will analyze ten different scenes of psychedelic ingestion that result in “trips” and were released within the last five years since Pollan’s publication. In these screen representations, I have identified four foci, rooted in the reasons for which the drugs are ingested. These include becoming a better worker, obtaining better purpose in life, or achieving better mental health in the face of one’s current circumstances. Furthermore, in establishing the kind of user that might be permitted to use psychedelics, these examples participate in constructing a particular idealization of whiteness that becomes associated with the drugs. A few of these scenes do show drug use without clarified

purpose or associated with people who are not members of the “ruling class.” Indeed, popular culture is a varied and conflicting space, in which hegemonic interests are fought for but not always decisively won. To exhibit this battlefield, this section will discuss seven television series and three films: “The Healing Trip” of *The Goop Lab* (January 24, 2020), “Moscow Mule” of *The Great* (May 15, 2020), “Motherlode” of *Nine Perfect Strangers* (September 8, 2021), “Episode 5” of *Sex Education* (September 17, 2021), “The Pincushion Man” of *Riverdale* (March 31, 2021), “The Tribes of Tatooine” of *The Book of Boba Fett* (January 5, 2022), “A Bee in Your Bonnet” of *Bridgerton* (March 25, 2022), *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018), *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (2019), and *Midsommar* (2019).

### **1. Tripping for Better Work**

Three of the ten scenes show psychedelic drugs used specifically to get better at a job or enhance a person’s productivity. In the 2018 interactive film *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, the protagonist takes a dose of LSD with a friend when he feels creatively blocked while writing his video game. The main character, Stefan, embodies an unthreatening subjectivity: he is a white, middle-class, male video game designer who is in school and lives with his father. He also exhibits adequate apprehension when presented with the drug and reveals he has never taken psychedelics before this moment. Colin, the friend with whom he takes LSD, embodies a more challenging figure that harkens back to sixties’ ideas of rebellion against the government. While Stefan enjoys the physiological effects of his trip that alter his visual and auditory perception, Colin raves about how “the government monitors people,” and likens himself to Pacman who “thinks he’s got free will, but really, he’s trapped in a maze, in a system. All he can do is consume.” He highlights that it’s a “nightmare world, and the worst thing is it’s real and we live in it.”

While the sequence contends with ideas of resistance, it ultimately stabilizes such discourse through Colin’s position as part of a powerful class: he is white, and he is wealthy. He is also merely a secondary character who ultimately gets killed off. The viewer is reminded of Colin’s position by setting the events in Colin’s living room, situated in an impressive high-rise condo, surrounded by expensive furniture and technology. Further, while much of the trip features Stefan laughing, staring at the wall, and having an otherwise enjoyable time, the scene reinforces the fact that drug use without supervision can be risky and thus indirectly sets

parameters around what is and is not acceptable. On the patio later in the trip, the image's colours shift darker and Colin announces that one of them must jump off the building – a common paranoid trope of sixties' and seventies' moral panic. When Colin jumps, the colours and music intensify and a hallucinated monster lunges for Stefan, another consequence of a “bad trip.” While the scene includes a somewhat challenging figure and gestures towards old tropes of moral panic, the drug is still used by two white, employed, able-bodied men who take it to become ultimately more successful at their jobs. The original rationale for Stefan's LSD experience is then satisfied as the trip unlocks his creativity and he is able to finish his game, becoming a successful entrepreneurial figure.

Teen television show *Riverdale* similarly negotiates residual discourse and moral panic while establishing why and by whom psychedelics might be used. The scene in question features one of the protagonists, Jughead, as he takes mushrooms to help with the writer's block he experiences through writing his second novel. While the development of creativity and art could be associated with alternative discourse, Jughead's primary goal is to sell his work in order to get his next paycheque. He credits the drugs for once helping him write two hundred pages of his first successful novel in only one night. Again, drugs are used by a character with desired identity markers in order to secure continued success. Jughead is a white man who is a popular writer. His ingestion scene begins with vaguely psychedelic music, enhanced colours and the image fuzzing as Jughead smiles and dances around the room. While pleasure is showcased by the scene, like *Bandersnatch*, it cannot be the primary goal or happen at the expense of productivity. The trip quickly takes a turn for the worse when Jughead's nervous girlfriend chains him to the desk, forcing him to focus on his writing. The close-up shot of her fearful expression serves as a touchstone through which the sober viewer might identify, and establishes feelings of anxiety with regard to Jughead's actions. The images then become progressively darker in colour, more heavily distorted and increasingly indistinct. Many traditionally fear-inducing signifiers are used, such as a rat scurrying across the floor, a train's headlights coming at the camera, and an emaciated monster crouching and staring in direct-address. The “bad trip” sequence ends with his girlfriend finding the handcuffs empty and covered with blood the next morning, further utilizing moral panic discourse as a way to describe the drugs.

While the scene may be one of the most aligned with the War on Drugs' visual and narrative strategies, Jughead's drug use ultimately inspires him to seek treatment for his

alcoholism. The contemporary idea that psychedelics are a shortcut to productivity is challenged by the fact that the experience does not allow Jughead to successfully write his book. Here, the definition of “productivity” in capitalist society is somewhat contested, as psychedelics help him become a healthier individual but not achieve his intended purpose that would entail financial gain. Overall, though, the scene’s instrumentalization of residual moral panic still cements psychedelics’ positive role in medical treatment while discouraging use solely for recreational purposes.

*Bandersnatch* and *Riverdale* are both relatively ambivalent about the positive potential of psychedelic drugs. Yet, American actress and businesswoman Gwyneth Paltrow’s reality television series *The Goop Lab* represents psychedelics with utmost capitalist enthusiasm. As such, the show portrays the ideal version of drug use within mainstream capitalist culture. In the episode, Paltrow sends four of her employees to participate in a mushroom ceremony in Jamaica to help them at work.<sup>10</sup> After what they describe as a formative experience in which they discuss their various traumas, the team is seen frolicking on the beach as one of the members states “this isn’t your typical workplace experience. Although, I kind of wonder if it wouldn’t be incredibly therapeutic for workplace teams.”

Indeed, the mushroom ceremony does end up making them better workers. Moreover, all four participants are white, as are their three “guides”. The politics of race are explicit: this idealized picture of psychedelics in a corporate context necessitates the exclusion of BIPOC representation. There is no trace of people of colour in the entire sequence. This is an especially shocking omission given the Jamaican setting. In *The Goop Lab*, the workers’ identities as “ideal citizens” are further compounded by their regular mention of their nuclear families, employment, and success.

Furthermore, psychedelics are simultaneously validated through medical discourse. Images of the team’s trip are interspersed with interviews with psychedelic doctors and participants in medical trials, conducted by Paltrow herself. These interviews pointedly reaffirm psychedelics as medically legitimate. In every interview, Paltrow agrees with the interviewee by repeatedly stating “right,” “yes,” and nodding her head in agreement. Paltrow’s star power and implicit authority as a businesswoman in a pseudo-medical space supports the show’s ability to draw parameters around acceptable drug use: Only as self-betterment and in a guided or medical

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<sup>10</sup> See Appendix, Figure 7 for an image of the psychedelic ceremony in *The Goop Lab*.

context. *The Goop Lab* is an apt example of contemporary hegemonic interests establishing exactly by whom and for what purposes these drugs can and should be used.

The show still acknowledges some of the controversial histories of these substances when two of the workers highlight that their parents would still not approve of their drug use. There is a brief nod to alternative counterculture when the show includes some marginal critique of the contemporary capitalist focus on work. At the beginning of the trip, one of the guides states: “I’d love to explore letting go of all things that we tend to identify with [...] your job title. You know, that’s just the work you do.” In fact, Raymond Williams reminds us that much of the incorporation of alternative culture into dominant culture “looks like recognition, acknowledgment and thus a form of acceptance” (1977a, p. 125). This acknowledgment of alternative discourse ultimately neutralizes its threatening power. Sarah Sharma states that in the neoliberal workplace, the employee is meant to work on the self while at their job: “the individual is not to be emancipated from work [...] but to be fulfilled *in* work, now construed as an activity through which we produce, discover, and experience ourselves” (2014, p. 90). Indeed, the guide’s comment has no real impact on the workers’ experience and the scene concludes with the participants back at work, productive and reinvigorated.

## 2. Tripping for Better Purpose

Two of the ten scenes show psychedelic drugs used to guide characters towards a clearer and more effective life purpose. Such is the case in the comedic television series *The Great*, a reimagination of Catherine the Great’s rule over 18th-century Russia. In the trip scene, the royal archbishop, feeling purposeless, uses mushrooms to reestablish his connection with God and to find spiritual guidance. It is alluded that he habitually uses mushrooms for such occasions. Evidently, the archbishop is a figure of the ruling class. He is a white, older man, holding a historically respected authoritative position. The idea of seeking and cementing individual purpose also aligns well with longstanding narratives of the American Dream. In this way, his drug use is far from alternative. The trip is quite short and begins with the archbishop crouched in the bushes, staring at a distorted and especially colourful leaf while breathing heavily.<sup>11</sup> He questions whether he is worthy of his position. But, later in the episode he is affirmed in official garb and acknowledged as the archbishop once more, his purpose clarified. However, through a

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<sup>11</sup> See Appendix, Figure 8 for an image of the psychedelic trip in *The Great*.



sparkling haze during his trip, a distorted ethereal voice permeates the scene. Catherine manipulates the archbishop while he is under the influence by pretending to be an angel in order to convince him to make future decisions in her favour. Though Catherine has good and progressive intentions, the archbishop's vulnerability to manipulation harkens back to residual anxieties of psychedelic mind-control. It also doubts whether the drugs have the potential alone to overturn long-standing patriarchal power, as the archbishop has made many questionable decisions and might be right to lack confidence in his merit. Yet, the show's status as a comedy dulls the depth of this questioning. Ultimately, the final portrayal of the archbishop as renewed with purpose, crying in awe on the floor mitigates these anxieties and does represent psychedelics with the power to solidify one's direction in life.

In the *Star Wars* spin-off *The Book of Boba Fett*, the "ruling class" and productive purpose are once more associated with psychedelic drugs. In the show, a white, middle-aged bounty hunter is revealed not to have died in a pit in the 1983 film, as it was meant to be assumed in the original *Star Wars* franchise. Boba Fett's characteristics as part of the ruling class and his extra-textual identity as a beloved character of the eighties guarantees him as an unthreatening figure through which to showcase psychedelic drug use. Carl Hart mobilizes a similar legitimizing technique in the opening of his book by stressing that individuals who use drugs "meet their parental, occupational, and social responsibilities; their drug use is well planned in order to minimize any disruptions of life activities. They get ample sleep, eat nutritiously, and exercise regularly. [...] These are all grown-up activities" (2021, p. 10). While Hart de-stigmatizes drug use through the possibility that one might use drugs and still be an effective participant in capitalist society, many of these shows do the same through their inherent racial politics and assumptions. The primary image of acceptable psychedelic use then becomes one intertwined with whiteness.

Boba Fett crawls out of the infamous pit and experiences a similar lack of direction as the archbishop. He then finds himself lost and tired in the desert and is abducted by Indigenous nomadic desert inhabitants. After he proves his worth and saves them from various dangers, they offer him a gift: a lizard that is snorted through the nose and generates a psychedelic trip. A desert inhabitant explains "it will guide you from inside your head." Fett does not know what is happening until after the lizard is in his nose, speaking back to the moral panic discourse of being "dosed" without one's knowledge. The trip sequence itself is dream-like and features Fett

confronting his trauma from the pit and from losing his father as a child. Ultimately, the protagonist comes back from his psychedelic experience to the tribe cheering, allowing him to be installed as an official member. This also showcases Fett's whiteness further by establishing him as a "white saviour figure." In this sequence, Indigenous drug use is legitimized, which is fundamentally different from the medicalized, industrial picture of psychedelic use instantiated elsewhere in popular culture. The scene is the only one of the ten that handles representation of Indigenous drug use at all. Yet, its primary association with whiteness through the singular showcasing of Fett's experience on the drug, and the fact that both the culture and the compound are entirely fictitious, evacuate the representation of any real resistant meaning. In the end, the lizard drug is presented as a generator of positive experiences through the clarification of Fett's individual purpose.

### **3. Tripping for Better Mental Health**

Two of the ten scenes show psychedelic drugs used to help soothe a character's negative mental state. In *Nine Perfect Strangers*, a group of people experiencing a variety of challenges in their lives are brought together to participate in a luxury wellness retreat that uses psychedelic compounds for treatment. Like *The Book of Boba Fett*, the show's first few episodes feature the guide microdosing the strangers without their knowledge. However, after a brief period of anger, they realize that the drugs have been helping them and unanimously decide to take a larger dose. In a related vein, while discussing workplace yoga, Sarah Sharma contends that it "is about dealing and coping. It is not about transforming objective social conditions or social relations but transforming how one relates to this social reality" (2014, p. 104). Similarly, this new focus on medicalization with respect to mental health is not a unique or radical shift in corporate priorities. It merely puts the onus on individuals to regard their struggles as individualistic failures and makes the structural failings of power less obvious.

In the tripping sequence, the characters are given liquid LSD in their morning smoothie with the intention of fixing their respective mental health issues – grief, suicidal ideation, strained relationships, depression, anxiety, and aggression. The show then introduces psychedelics as a means through which to help mental health suffering. In the episode, it is revealed that they all find relief for each of their mental health issues, even those who had a difficult trip. Much of the rest of *Nine Perfect Strangers'* sequence is devoted to the characters

meandering around a field surrounded by enhanced colours and twinkling lights.<sup>12</sup> Of the nine under the influence, two are Black and the other seven are white. While the Black characters – Ben and Carmel – get cursory time represented on screen, the principal characters the narrative follows are white. Ben’s trip is comparatively brief, mainly serving as comedic relief to comfort his white girlfriend as she hallucinates that her nose falls off. Ben is a good example of how mere inclusion is simply not enough to shift structural exclusion on screen. Carmel, the other Black character, is the most threatening and unpredictable character in the show. For the short time in which we see her trip, she is associated entirely with residual moral panic rooted in the figure of the “LSD Psychotic.” She expresses concern to her white friend, Lars, about hallucinating her ex-husband and becoming violent: “Should that happen to me... that wouldn’t be pretty. I attacked my ex with a fork. What if suddenly you should look like him to me?” Lars states in response “I don’t think that would happen,” effectively neutralizing this discourse, and the scene moves on to focus on Lars.

While the show spends much time showing the white characters laughing, falling in love, enjoying the scenery, and happily relaxing, it also includes a long “bad trip” sequence, in which one of these characters confronts the trauma of her son’s death. The woman screams and cries, hits her own head, and falls to the ground. While the sequence addresses anxieties about bad trips in the medical context, the single woman’s experience in juxtaposition to the eight other characters makes clear that this is simply the consequence of one woman’s trauma and not the drugs themselves. *Nine Perfect Strangers* effectively centers particular identities and supports the drugs’ effectiveness in treating mental health. In so doing, it stabilizes and sets discursive limits on the people and purposes acceptably associated with the drugs.

One of the central characters in the television series *Bridgerton* is also in search of mental health treatment. Benedict is anxiously awaiting his acceptance into art school when his brother offers him a powder which he mixes into his tea to “open his mind and transcend ordinary anxieties.” Clearly situated within the ruling class, their family is one of the wealthiest and most powerful in 19th century British nobility. His brother specifies that the powder is meant to be ingested as a “microdose” and acts as the voice of reason, implying that psychedelics should be taken in moderation if not in a medically supervised context. However, in a reckless moment of desperation, Benedict dumps all the powder in his tea. What follows is a comedic depiction of a

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<sup>12</sup> See Appendix, Figure 9 for an image of the psychedelic trip in *Nine Perfect Strangers*.

trip at a formal family dinner table. The scene alternates between Benedict's antics and the other dinner guests' polite conversation. Evidently, Benedict has taken too much of the drug. Yet, the only consequence is that he is sillier than usual and that he embarrasses his family by moaning with delight at the food, dumping wine on the table, and openly enjoying the sparkling light of the candles. As such, the scene negotiates alternative discourse that psychedelics might be taken simply to have fun, without adverse consequences. The scene's comedic juxtaposition deflates any residual fear that psychedelic drugs provoke terrible outcomes. In this way, the scene offers a progressive picture of drug-taking for pleasure. Still, by the end of the scene, the purpose for the use of drugs is reestablished as Benedict receives his letter of admission, crying with delight as his anxiety fades away.

#### **4. Tripping to Pass the Time**

As discussed, popular culture presents us with a contradictory array of discourse that is never perfectly aligned with hegemonic interests (Hall, 1981, p. 355). There are also three scenes of the ten that represent psychedelic drugs used without any specific purpose directly associated with productivity or betterment. Instead, the decision to take drugs is made in order to have fun or as a trivial way to pass time. Early in the film *Midsommar*, the protagonist named Dani is given mushrooms to take with her friends on a trip to visit a community in Sweden. She is a white, middle-class college student. After enjoying nature and noticing the trees "breathing," Dani's trip quickly devolves as she deals with the trauma of the brutal murder of her family. Non-diegetic drone music begins and Dani panics, telling herself to "stop it" and groaning. She hallucinates a group of people laughing at her, as well as her deceased family watching television. The music swells and she runs away as the screen turns black.

The scene presents us with the quintessential "bad trip." Yet, like most of the other scenes of psychedelic use, while Dani did not intend to confront her mental health, psychedelics are presumed to necessitate mental health treatment anyway. While the scene concludes that one need not be in a medical setting to effectively confront their traumas, Dani's trip is sufficiently difficult that one can assume things would have proceeded differently had she been with a trained therapist and had the right intentions. It is also unclear if this experience is formative for Dani. Despite being ingested by an affluent white woman, the character's lack of productive intention seems to incur negative reactions. And, while the use of psychedelic drugs in an

alternative context from American capitalist society – a Swedish cult – portrays one of the only alternative pictures of drug use, the inevitability of her negative experience and her confrontation with her mental health can be read as a mitigation of the threat this kind of drug use might pose. After this sequence, psychedelics are not addressed again until they are alluded to in the concluding scene. At the end of the film, the audience is presented with a cult ceremony, featuring sacrificial human bodies going up in flames while Dani watches, smiling. The ambiguity of the ethics of drug use in this film points to a wider ambiguity in discourse coherence about the drugs in popular culture.

In the film *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*, the protagonist also uses psychedelics flippantly. Cliff, a white, male, thirty-five-year-old stuntman, casually accepts an LSD-dipped cigarette from a hippie in the late sixties. The film acts as a portal into an alternative narrative universe that sets up an alternate history of the infamous Sharon Tate murder by the Manson family. In this world's timeline, Cliff's heroics on acid bests the murderers. The sequence is mostly a fight scene in which Cliff's remarkably casual attitude is repeatedly asserted; for example, when he gets a knife in his leg and only indifferently declares "wow" and smiles throughout the bloodiness of the scene. Despite his intoxication, he manages to defend himself, killing the hippies – after asking them if they're "real." While the consequences of being unprepared for such an occasion by having taken psychedelic drugs could be dire, Cliff still manages to display his strength and intellect.

Like most other representations of drug use, Cliff is a safe character that embodies powerful identity markers which are inevitably associated with his heroism on psychedelics. In line with contemporary progressive values about psychedelics, Cliff makes psychedelics feel safe. Unlike other sequences analyzed, this scene indicates psychedelics as without material consequences. At the very least, this is the case when someone such as Cliff uses them. Most importantly, in this alternative timeline, hippie drug counterculture is demonized by being associated almost entirely with the murderous Manson family and reassociating psychedelic drugs with Cliff, the heroic protagonist figure.

Finally, the representation of psychedelic drugs is most ambivalent in the teen sitcom television show *Sex Education*. When two Black students, Jackson and Cal, are approached on a school trip by a classmate with a bag of mushrooms, they shrug indifferently and accept. *Nine Perfect Strangers* and *Sex Education* are the only examples of the ten that present Black

characters tripping. This inclusion challenges the representation elsewhere of idealized white psychedelic use. Yet, Jackson is still the school's valedictorian, and the viewer is reminded of this in the scene when he hallucinates his principal declaring "you'll always be head boy." Their trip scene begins with a slow pan of the length of the school bus in which students are engaged in everyday activities. At the very back of the bus, set apart from the others, Cal and Jackson stare blankly into the distance. They then crawl to the front of the bus as they are surrounded by saturated and vibrant colours, stretching images, and they ultimately dance happily in the bus's kitchenette.<sup>13</sup>

Like *Bridgerton*'s scene, the trip narrative is juxtaposed with a sober comedic one about a student who clogs the bus toilet and accidentally throws his feces out the window at a moving car. The slapstick humorous effect of the scene as a whole inevitably takes the events out of reality and establishes them fundamentally as fiction. The scene further reinforces the comedy when the characters' inane reflections and silly movements are highlighted. Cal notes to Jackson "have you ever thought about how we're on a trip... on a trip?", to which he answers "fuck, that's so deep." The situational comedy of their trip is buttressed by the upbeat 1963 French song "Zou Bisou Bisou" that plays non-diegetically. The characters are meant to be laughed at, which functions to neutralize the potential threat of rebellion that might incur from countercultural activity otherwise associated with youth casual psychedelic use. It also makes drug use by Black characters seem of less importance.

Ultimately, there is no significant acknowledgment of residual moral panic discourse, which situates the sequence as essentially contemporary. And, the drug experience is not addressed again throughout the rest of the season as there is no obvious change in Cal and Jackson's characterization, other than their having had a pleasurable time. *Sex Education* then challenges the narrative that psychedelic drug use necessarily entails betterment in some way. While it displays hegemonic ideas, it is conflicted about the future of psychedelic use.

### **Psychedelic Parameters: Screen, Literature, and News**

Throughout these ten episodes, there are many instances of alternative or residual challenges to dominant interests that establish psychedelic drugs as a safe commodity in Western capitalism. However, popular culture still preserves these interests by centering powerful

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<sup>13</sup> See Appendix, Figure 10 for an image of the psychedelic trip in *Sex Education*.

identities and specific purposes in various ways. No popular cultural object exists alone outside a context of a vast media landscape of other objects. One scene's expressed conservatism inevitably allows for another's alternative representation, as popular culture is an unresolvable battle, active in hegemonic contention.

In his discussion of hegemony, Raymond Williams stresses that “nearly all initiatives and contributions, even when they take on manifestly alternative or oppositional forms, are in practice tied to the hegemonic (1977b, p. 114). The ideal dominant form of drug taking is one generally done by non-threatening identities that is usually within medical, supervised contexts. These experiences should result in one's betterment as a member of capitalist society. Although, in practice, with psychedelic research still in its early stages and public psychedelic therapy still difficult for many to access, scenes of psychedelic trips still almost always depict alternative forms of drug taking outside a medical environment. Williams suggests that by setting the terms of its own alterity, hegemonic popular culture can “produce and limit its own forms of counter-culture” (1977b, p. 114). Popular culture is a battlefield upon which mainstream discourse must bend to accommodate its alternative streams in order to present a coherent narrative. In doing so, it sets the terms and limits for these alternative stories. The overall picture of psychedelic drug use in the cultural imagination is still one reassociated with particular identities and for particular purposes.

Even in on-screen representations of psychedelic drugs that do not feature ingestion, the same reassociations with particular identities and purposes that align with dominant interests are made. There are a number of documentary films and television series that act as educational resources about psychedelics. For example, these include the episode “Psychedelics” of the television series *The Mind, Explained* (September 12, 2019), the film *Have a Good Trip* (May 11, 2020), and the series adaptation of Pollan's book *How to Change Your Mind* (July 12, 2022). For the most part, they feature interviews with the important white men of the contemporary psychedelic renaissance like Michael Pollan, Rick Doblin, and Paul Stamets. They often also include testimonials from (overwhelmingly white) people who have participated in medical trials. In fact, in the four-hour docuseries *How to Change Your Mind*, every single participant interviewed is white. On the infrequent occasions that BIPOC people are interviewed about their drug experiences, they are likely to be famous celebrities. Most examples in this reality-based genre do not acknowledge recreational use and simply present psychedelics as a medical tool by

nature. And, if they do, this acknowledgment is usually critical and relegated to the past, as in *How to Change Your Mind*. In this series, Pollan distastefully recollects drug use in the sixties: “we used to use them in a pretty careless way. You took a tab of LSD and went to a concert or walked around the beach and got into trouble.”

There are a few notable exceptions to this rule. The documentary *Have a Good Trip* structures itself entirely around celebrities discussing recreational experiences, in line with an emergent drug aesthetic which instantiates them as tools to secure a relaxed and productive lifestyle. However, the fact that they are all celebrities fundamentally sets their drug use apart from that of a regular viewer and/or user of psychedelics. Like all other documentaries about psychedelics discussed here, the film still includes a disclaimer title card stating that the audience should “always consult with a medical professional before engaging in psychedelic use.” Moreover, all these instances refer back to psychedelia in some way, whether through abstract shapes, funky colours, psychedelic rock, or stylized fonts and symbols. Thus, such content is always in discussion with residual understandings of psychedelics and their legacy. They also often touch upon the history of moral panic somehow, describing it as an overblown social reaction. These documentaries situate medical psychedelic use as the best solution to demystify and destigmatize these substances today. As such, they are able to acknowledge sixties counterculture without actually having to represent anything truly alternative.

Another important aspect in contemporary popular culture about psychedelics is the recent publication trend of *New York Times* bestselling nonfiction books. Most notably, of course, is Michael Pollan’s *How to Change Your Mind* (2018) and its sequel *This is Your Mind on Plants* (2021). Also worth mentioning are Carl Hart’s *Drug Use for Grown-Ups* (2021) and Ayelet Waldman’s *A Really Good Day* (2017), among others. These books present an optimistic approach to psychedelic drugs in contemporary society in which increasing well-being is the primary goal. They similarly emphasize a reassociation of who is taking and talking about these drugs: middle-aged people with doctoral degrees, impressive careers, and nuclear families. Authors then become important spokespeople for ushering in the waning of the War on Drugs and general excitement about psychedelics.

These authors are also a legitimizing force in popular culture across many parts of the media landscape. They are regularly interviewed in news, podcasts, television shows, and films as experts on the subject. In fact, they often make it clear at some point in their respective books



just how legitimizing the power of their own identities are. Carl Hart presents more of a threat to the ideal picture of dominant psychedelic drug use than the rest, as he argues passionately for wider drug legalization beyond psychedelics and is open about his own use of various drugs. While a professor at Columbia University, and writing about his nuclear family, Hart is Black. Further, while Pollan's books are focused almost exclusively on the medical use of psychedelics, Waldman's bends this by discussing microdosing at home. Still, the medicalization of psychedelics remains one of the primary legitimizing discourses in the publishing industry. For example, one of the most anticipated forthcoming books about psychedelics is by journalist Ernesto Londoño, which will focus exclusively on medicinal psychedelics (New York Times, 2022). Again, popular culture presents itself as an "arena of consent and resistance" (Hall, 1981, p. 360) and will always struggle with its alternatives.

Mainstream news is also an important way in which popular discourse on psychedelic drugs forms and is circulated. News sources tend to be almost entirely aligned with this ideal dominant form of drug taking. Psychedelics are regularly portrayed as a relevant contemporary public issue; even small city newspapers cover the topic (Stelmakowich, 2021, Smith, 2022, Riches, 2021). In North America, the tone of such news articles is one of positivity and reassurance as writers are more directly contending with disposing of some of the residual myths of moral panic once fostered by the news (Senthilingam, 2020, Smith, 2022, Hartman & Margolin, 2020). More than other media forms, it seems that writers are still working to destigmatize these substances in order to have more productive conversations about them. To do so, news sources – whether national, trade, or international – heavily emphasize policy changes as well as promising medical research and mental health benefits (Petrovich, 2021, Herrington, 2022, Singer, 2021, LaMotte, 2020). The articles are usually positive about the predicted likelihood of psychedelics' legalization or decriminalization, and regularly discuss profit opportunities in the psychedelics industry (Taney, 2021, Brown, 2022, Southwick, 2021, Wirz, 2022). In more casual news sources, such as *Vice* or *Refinery 29*, there are first-person accounts of writers' whose positive psychedelic experiences at retreats benefited their mental health (Jones, 2020, Joshi, 2022, Love, 2021). These authors are, somewhat predictably, almost always white. Based solely on news media, the prominent picture of drug use is a medicalized one.

Seeing these representations converge in the cultural landscape makes it clear that we live in a world saturated by popular culture. What is presented by conflicting collection of discourse

sets limits and parameters around our understanding of the world around us. Tony Bennett reminds us that “popular culture can be defined only abstractly as a site – always changing and variable in its construction and organization” (1986, p. 8). Representations of psychedelics are never singular or complete, but rather, always relational and in temporal flux. Hall stresses further that it is “impossible to somehow construct ‘a culture’ which remains untouched by the most powerful dominant ideology” (Hall, 1981, p. 350). Dominant power inevitably reaches into the conditions of possibility for drug use, dictating its parameters in order to secure and maintain power. Popular culture “by repetition and selection, impose and implant such definitions of ourselves that fit more easily the description of dominant or preferred culture” (Hall, 1981, p. 353). And, popular culture has the influence to “frame and organize popular experience and consciousness” (Bennett, 1986, p. 19).

Indeed, during the sixties when those identifying with psychedelic counterculture became the primary users of psychedelic drugs, and into the long years of the War on Drugs, it would have been near impossible to represent these relatively positive depictions of psychedelics. Indeed, it would have been even more impossible to imagine an industrial psychedelics market. As this shift occurs within neoliberal capitalism, it is always within specific limits established in part by the power of popular culture.

## Chapter Three

### Set and Setting: Turn On, Tune In, Don't Drop Out

We are “at the beginning of the process of figuring out a culture around drugs, rather than ‘just say no,’” established Michael Pollan in July 2021 on the exceptionally popular podcast *The Joe Rogan Experience*. By integrating into mainstream capitalist structures, these largely illegal substances inevitably crystallize around specific dominant cultural ideas. As the intensification of neoliberalism in North America has birthed new kinds of discourse, we are now in the midst of a shifting stage of Western capitalism (Anderson, 2016, p. 795, Han, 2017). In 1966, Timothy Leary argued that the most important controllable variables for the individual user of psychedelic drugs are their “set and setting”. Michael Pollan defines these iconic terms: “Set is the mind-set or expectation one brings to the experience, and setting is the environment in which it takes place” (2018, p. 6). These concepts can also extend beyond an individual’s personal circumstances and into shared experience. Neoliberal capitalism invariably has a hand in constructing both our set and setting for us. As such, this final chapter will investigate the context – or “setting” – in which this “renaissance” is occurring: neoliberal capitalism. It will go on to discuss the “set” which this setting cultivates. Most importantly, this chapter highlights how psychedelic popularization and industrialization occurs by establishing a new kind of consumer – one that operates to foreclose other possible versions of psychedelic drug use, especially for young people.

In the first part of this chapter on “setting,” psychedelics will be established as inert substances that can be integrated into any framework of power, dominant or otherwise. Then, the chapter will describe neoliberal ideology as it operates in contemporary capitalism. By highlighting three main discursive elements – individualism, profit, and freedom – it will isolate a specific emerging consumer identity in culture. The “useful psychonaut” is contended to serve as the primary embodiment of psychedelic drug use in contemporary neoliberal capitalism. In order to evaluate how this figure operates in culture, the thesis will go on to discuss the popular and controversial podcasts by the “Intellectual Dark Web” as case studies and investigate how they embody and perpetuate the useful psychonaut.

In the second part of this chapter on “set,” the consequences of the neoliberal useful psychonaut’s dominance are made clear. In order to establish the mindset that youth possess

about drugs under capitalism today, this section will begin with an evaluation of the ways in which “affect” can be shared and collective “set” can develop in response to dominant power’s “setting.” The analysis will then consider the communitarian possibilities of youth psychedelic counterculture in the 1960s. It will compare this with a case study analysis of an interesting site that represents youth psychedelic use – the social media app TikTok. Ultimately, this chapter will argue that this new set and setting necessarily influence the perceived collective conditions of possibility for psychedelic representation in contemporary media.

### **“Setting”: Neoliberal Hegemonic Power and Drugs**

One of Dr. Carl Hart’s main arguments in his book *Drug Use for Grown-Ups* is that “drugs are inert substances” (Hart, 2021, p. 12). They do not necessitate any specific experience. As mentioned, psychedelic effects are almost entirely dependent on one’s “set and setting.” Yet, it is widely assumed that psychedelics necessarily correlate with progressive politics or increased open-mindedness, as was observed in countercultural movements of the 1960s (Pace & Devenot, 2021, p. 1). For example, Alfred Hubbard, an early proponent of LSD in the 1950s, believed that “if we could give the psychedelic experience to major executives of the Fortune 500 companies, [this] would change the whole of society” (Pollan, 2018, p. 168). However, examples from the past seven decades (Gearin & Devenot, 2021, p. 931), and the widespread use of psychedelics by today’s billionaires (Pace & Devenot, 2021, p. 13), serve to undermine Hubbard’s utopian ideal. Instead, psychedelic drugs have not stayed outside dominant North American ideological structures. Psychedelics may indeed contain the potential to aid in ego-dissolution or the rise of collective resistance, but they can also just as easily allow for ego-inflation and individualistic conformity. They are merely amplifiers of pre-established conditions (Pace & Devenot, p. 1).

While there is a long history of dominant power structures managing and informing their alternatives, they are never totalizing and exist in constant negotiation. Thomas Frank writes that “capitalism is dynamic stuff, an order of endless flux and change” (1998, p. 19). Today, neoliberal capitalism functions as a dominant narrative (Anderson, p. 747). Its logics seem to reach deeply into mainstream cultural discourses (Williams, 1977a, p. 125). Sarah Banet-Weiser is skeptical that there are even “spaces that exist outside of consumer capitalism” (2021, p. 11). While psychedelic drugs may once have been known as countercultural objects, the ways in which they are understood is always within the parameters of culture at its specific time. Stuart

Hall argues that culture will take objects and “situate them within the dominant framework of meanings” (Hebdige, 1979, p. 94). So, this new “culture around drugs” that Michael Pollan observes is steeped in shifting neoliberal discourse. Hegemonic processes are crucial to understand here because they operate as common-sense structures that “offer us frameworks of meaning with which to make sense of our world” (Hall & O’Shea, 2013, p. 8). The cultural narrative established around psychedelic drugs, while inculcated into neoliberal discourse, is far from totalizing. Williams writes that hegemony is “in practice full of contradictions and unresolved conflicts” (1977b, p. 118) and Banet-Weiser stresses that the hegemonic process is “created as a dynamic, often contradictory force” (2012, p. 12). As such, Stuart Hall calls for us to “attend to the breaks and discontinuities” in any analysis of culture (1986, p. 23).

Brian Pace stresses that “the socioeconomic context, the setting, in which the psychedelic renaissance unfolds, is capitalism” (2020, para. 1). For the purpose of this thesis, the definition of neoliberalism as “setting” can be simplified to the operation of power in line with liberalized and deregulated market values, rather than with “principles of the public good” (Butler & Crawley, 2018, p. 266). It has been argued by many that the intensification of neoliberal ideology is a major factor in the environmental crisis, extreme wealth disparity, the rise of alt-right politics, and the epidemic of mental health issues we are seeing in contemporary society (Monbiot, 2016, Han, 2015, p. 1). Hall and O’Shea argue that as a result of rising neoliberalism, “the broadly egalitarian and collectivist attitudes that underpinned the welfare state era are giving way to a more competitive, individualistic, market-driven, entrepreneurial, profit-oriented outlook” (2013, p. 11). Like free markets themselves, competition and optimization become preeminent goals (Han, 2017, p. 18). Within this context, human beings are understood principally as market actors (Butler & Crawley, 2018, p. 267) with unlimited power to self-actualize. Not only does neoliberalism act as a political ideology, but it also acts as an affective force that guides capitalism more broadly. As such, a specific “entrepreneurial self” arises (McRobbie, 2016, p. 73) which prescribes individualistic understandings of the self, its agency, and its freedom. I argue that three primary themes arise from neoliberal ideology: individualism, profit, and freedom. Hegemonic discourses shape our understandings of cultural objects, which include the legitimization of certain drugs, practices, and industry within the defined parameters of contemporary capitalism. With respect to psychedelic drugs, the themes all crystallize in the rise of a new subjective consumer position: the “useful psychonaut.”

## **The Useful Psychonaut**

There are two distinct ways in which psychedelics have infused capitalism: one as an actual commodity (as displayed by the psychedelics industry) and one as a cultural idea. Michel Foucault theorizes that power does not emanate from a single source, but rather is present in all aspects of life, functioning in subtle and everyday ways (1991, p. 103). In order to operate and sustain itself, hegemony must be taken up and perpetuated by the actions of individual people. In his own discussion of neoliberalism, Foucault notes that power is fundamentally productive. Indeed, neoliberal power “says yes more often than it says no; it operates seductively, not repressively” (Bennett, 1986, p. 14). It works to cultivate new versions of personhood, new subjectivities and identity formations, which people might then adopt (Foucault, 1991, p. 100, Butler & Crawley, 2018, p. 266). Neoliberal power is predicated on “the formation of selfhood as a neoliberal subject” (Purser, 2019, p. 30). Power infiltrates the fabric of daily life, exercised in a way that influences people’s “customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking” (Foucault, 1991, p. 93). So, psychedelic drugs not only become integrated into capitalist structures through hegemonic processes, neoliberal power actually renders them *useful* to its maintenance through the cultivation of a new notion of personhood tied to drugs.

It is the specific circulation of hegemonic neoliberal discourse which constructs and sustains the figure of the useful psychonaut in culture, but also which situates it as the primary form of psychedelic drug-taking made available in the popular imagination. This character’s usefulness is twofold: materially useful as constructing a better participant in neoliberal capitalism and ideologically useful as a way in which neoliberal ideals and their authority are disseminated and perpetuated. Yet, despite there being crucial narrative continuity, the “useful psychonaut” legitimizes drugs in varied and sometimes contradictory ways.

## **Podcast Case Study: The Intellectual Dark Web**

While the useful psychonaut can be found all over dominant popular culture about psychedelics, there is scarcely a better example of the embodiment of this figure and its commitment to neoliberal values, than the members of the amorphous and widely popular “Intellectual Dark Web.” While constantly discussing and supporting ideas outside dominant narratives, as their label suggests, they are still commensurate with dominant discourse about psychedelic drugs. This group is largely made up of media personalities, academic figures, and

venture capitalists that operate through their network of respective podcast shows, on Twitter, and in live auditorium lectures. This dispersed collection of commentators are brought together by their commitment to absolute free speech, which is exercised through their podcast discussions of subjects deemed too controversial for mainstream legacy outlets (Weiss, 2018, para. 4). While being labeled as a member of the “Intellectual Dark Web” is more of a descriptor of public thinkers with similar beliefs, an article published in 2018 by Bari Weiss in *The New York Times* did much to define which people should be understood as “members.” Their beliefs vary, but always include the conviction that identity politics are a “toxic ideology” (Weiss, 2018, para. 1), that authoritarian convictions arise out of “progressive movements,” and that hierarchy is inherent and must be upheld in society (Pace & Devenot, 2021, p. 10). Further, the IDW is united by these figures’ belief in inequality as a core structure, as it is “essential to the maintenance of individual freedom, economic stability and cultural coherence” (Finlayson, 2021, p. 172).

These psycho-political figures are extraordinarily controversial, with both critical and sympathetic sources arguing that the group provides “gateways to the alt-right” (Pace & Devenot, 2021, p. 9). Yet, in recent years, most of the members have been relatively vocal about their support of and interest in the psychedelic industry. Through their popular cultural activities, they approve a particular understanding of psychedelic drugs steeped in neoliberal ideology by embodying the “useful psychonaut.” In this way, they are participants in the hegemonic process and their status as alternatives to the dominant, despite their embodiment of a great many dominant ideals, serves to position them as an example of ideological indeterminacy, contradiction, and unpredictability.

Ben Anderson reminds us that “neoliberalism is not a singular, coherent entity,” and “has a series of internal tensions and contradictions” (2016, p. 735). The following section will evaluate four podcast episodes from four members of the IDW in order to parse this discursive landscape involving individualism, profit, and freedom which perpetuates the useful psychonaut. The first episode analyzed is “Psychedelics as Medicine: What You Need to Know with Christian Angermayer” (July 4, 2021) of *The Rubin Report*. Rubin is an American media personality who has recently moved to political commentating and Angermayer, an affiliate of the IDW, is a venture capitalist. The second podcast included is “The Psychedelic Newshour” (September 3, 2020) of *The Tim Ferriss Show*. Ferriss is an American entrepreneur and self-help

author who has recently started in venture capital. The third episode reviewed is “The Psychology of Psychedelics” (December 20, 2021) of *The Jordan B. Peterson Podcast*. Peterson is a Canadian psychology professor and clinical psychologist who has since resigned and focused on public speaking. The final podcast included is “Michael Pollan” (July 6, 2021) of *The Joe Rogan Experience*. Rogan rose to fame as a media personality, commentating for the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). He also started his podcast in 2009 and is now exclusively available on Spotify after a two-hundred-million-dollar exclusivity deal closed in February 2022. The three other podcasts are widely available on all mainstream podcast streaming apps, as well as their individual podcast websites. Since it is common for these figures to interview other social commentators on their shows, this analysis will focus more carefully on what the IDW hosts themselves say, unless the guest is also a peripheral member of the group (i.e. Angermayer).<sup>14</sup>

## **1. Neoliberal Discourse: Individualism**

Byung-Chul Han argues that contemporary society “as a society of achievement and business, fosters individuality” (2015, p. 17). This individualism exists at the expense of collective structures rooted in community and care (Anderson, 2016, p. 738). Neoliberal ideology supports a perception of society as an aggregation of atomized individuals. Indeed, The Intellectual Dark Web podcasts are said to “celebrate heroic individualism” (Finlayson, 2021, p. 182) as aligned with the basic premises of their group. The IDW’s embodiment of the “useful psychonaut” becomes useful for hegemonic power, as it cements the subject position as a *singular* one, in opposition to some of the collectivist psychedelic ideals of the countercultural sixties (Frank, 1998, p. 32).

### **A) The Individual Psychonaut**

The IDW’s ideologies and public image is a centering, if not a celebration of individualism. In an article for *The New York Times*, journalist Bari Weiss writes that they are “renegades,” “rapidly building their own mass media outlets” (2018, para. 6) after feeling

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<sup>14</sup> It is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a more comprehensive analysis of all IDW materials released about psychedelics. However, it should be noted that many other members have shown public support for the psychedelic industry and scientific research: Maajid Nawaz (YouTube), Ben Shapiro (YouTube), Bret Weinstein (YouTube), Eric Weinstein (Twitter), and Sam Harris (Podcast).



blacklisted from legacy channels. They are all public figures, famous for their personal opinions. And, each individual in the group has their own podcast show through which they establish their identities as entrepreneurs. The psychedelic experience itself, too, is portrayed as an individualistic one by these podcasters. Banet-Weiser notes that “the contemporary environment is one in which the individual is centered at the expense of the social or collective” (2012, p. 170).

While these psychedelic experiences can point to inner experiences and treat mental health struggles, they have also had a myriad of other effects; most notably the capability to increase a sense of interconnectedness and/or decrease authoritarian views (Pollan, 2018, p. 316). Accounts of psychedelics changing inner mental health are the primary effect of the drugs highlighted in the podcasts. For example, Joe Rogan argues that “one of the things about psychedelics is the ruthlessly introspective nature of the journeys you go on, where you’re really forced to look at yourself and your actions” (2021). Tim Ferriss similarly notes “the capability of humans to rewrite their software” (2020) effectively putting all responsibility in the hands of individuals. Christian Angermayer does highlight that “you feel connected to humans in a way you can’t describe” but then goes on to say that psychedelics allow one to realize how they want to change their own lives in a way that will make them happy (2020). In a similar moment of contradiction, Rogan argues that “one of the benefits of these psychedelics is the enhancement of the feeling of love and community, which is what everybody needs right now,” before he immediately goes on to stress their “ruthlessly introspective nature” (2021).

Hegemonic processes are never straightforward and must be “especially alert and responsive to the alternatives and opposition which question or threaten its dominance” (Williams, 1977b, p. 113). While the podcasters might acknowledge the possibility of psychedelics uniting people, the psychedelic consumer as an atomized individual is always maintained. Indeed, Banet-Weiser reminds us that “the involvement of the individual in something larger than himself could only be understood in those terms – terms that relentlessly circle back to the individual” (2012, p. 175). While connection is discussed, rather than understanding that “everything is one,” one cements their individuality in order to connect with other individuals later.

## **B) Achieving Authenticity**

The individual “useful psychonaut” is intertwined with ideas of authenticity. Banet-Weiser asserts that “the 21st century is an age that hungers for anything that *feels* authentic” (2012, p. 3). But, she reminds us that “authenticity, like anything else, can be branded” (p. 13). In looking at sixties’ advertising, Thomas Frank raises the concept of “hip consumerism” to explain the cachet fabricated by consumption in the capitalist market. He argues that “in our consuming lives we are no longer merely affluent, we are rebels” (1998, p. 232). By virtue of their residual implications, any association with psychedelic drugs still brings up rebellious connotations. This rebellion pairs perfectly with the IDW’s identities as “renegades.” These psychonauts are especially useful for dominant conceptions of psychedelics because they allow for some of the affective ideas of resistance without threatening the economic status quo.

The cachet that comes from one’s association with psychedelic drugs also relies on a fantasy about what it means to be an early investor in psychedelics. The podcasts regularly mention the public “hype” stemming from the industry’s investment opportunities. Ferriss addresses investors by saying: “I think this is a golden window of time, let’s just say in the next 1-3 years, where people can go down in history for having been the spark that lit the bonfire that lit the world on fire in the most productive way possible” (2020). There is a continued revision of the residual discourse of psychedelics’ countercultural legacy and War on Drugs’ narratives. This establishes their economic potential and gives rise to “social capital” associated with the industry’s investors and leading figures.

Pierre Bourdieu first presented this concept of social capital to refer to the network connections and institutionalized relationships that provide members of a group with a certain cultural cachet (1986, p. 22). For Bourdieu, it is impossible to understand the social world without considering “capital in all its forms” (p. 15). The IDW’s discursive efforts participate in the animation and bolstering of social capital tied to psychedelic drugs. Indeed, Tim Ferriss indirectly highlights this by saying that “more and more people are realizing that it’s an incredible reputational opportunity to align yourself with these unconventional treatments,” and is hailed on his podcast as having prestige (2020). Angermayer sees himself as a psychedelic visionary, as he notes “for two years I was looking around thinking ‘are there any companies I can invest in?’ There weren’t. And then I did it myself.” Rubin goes on to call him the “magic mushroom guy” (2021). Connections with these drugs, once evoking a history of moral panic

and damnation, are *rescued* by these neoliberal rebels who are seen as “brave, subversive thinkers unafraid to challenge established power” (Finlayson, 2021, p. 174). IDW figures capitalize on past discourses about the alternative and authentic individual outlier of the sixties, reimagining them as business-savvy investors.

This social capital is reserved for people who are already in privileged positions by having the money to invest in drugs. It is also compounded on pre-existing social capital of one’s whiteness, which allows the IDW to talk about their drug use without incurring negative residual connotations enforced by the history of the War on Drugs (Hart, 2021, dedication). As such, the useful psychonaut reserves legitimate psychedelic drug use to people already in power, which then represents a dominant image of the practice as effectively white, male, and wealthy. These parameters extend far beyond the IDW and into other popular cultural narratives that also mobilize the useful psychonaut figure.

Discourses of morality are also an important aspect of authenticity’s legitimizing power. The podcasters assume that psychedelics have an inherent good. Peterson notes that psychedelics “should be done within an ethical framework, you should do it with the highest possible intent and reverence” (2021). Ferriss mentions the benefit of aligning oneself with psychedelic science because there is necessary good that will come from this research (2020). Rogan argues that suppressing positive information about psychedelics for so long during the War on Drugs has “done irreparable harm” (2021). Tying morality to psychedelic drugs serves these figures, as perceiving psychedelics as inherently “good” “can and does serve as PR cover” (Pace, 2020, para. 20). Not only is the useful psychonaut instrumentalized to legitimize psychedelics, psychedelics are also instrumentalized to legitimize *them*.

Yet, the mere fact that morality is a consideration – beyond simple market viability – gestures towards the fact that dominant discourse can never be totalizing. Indeed, “a lived hegemony is always a process” (Williams, 1977b, p. 112) and is in continual conversation. This movement towards neutralizing the reactionary history of moral panic is in many ways a progressive one. Ferriss notes that he only invests in non-profit psychedelic ventures because he does not “want to have or be perceived as having any conflict of interest that affects how I think about or speak to any of these subjects” (2020). While he may not capitalize financially off the drugs, he still does so by aligning himself with the neoliberal discourses of the authentic and

ethical individual. His individualism and continued neoliberal ideals are highlighted by his encouragement of others throughout the episode to invest and “make a great return.”

### **C) Happy Mind, Happy Grind**

Like in the popular cultural examples analyzed in chapter two, productivity and work are of fundamental importance to emergent dominant discourse about psychedelic drugs. One of the central ways in which psychedelic drug use is justified by these podcasts is through mental health as a means to an end for increased productivity. Psychedelics are meant as tools to achieve a desired goal – not for fun. This discourse speaks to psychedelic medicalization that is enabled by neoliberal ideals, situating mental health problems within individual people’s shortcomings (Noorani, 2019, p. 38). The narrative of individualized mental health has been criticized for strategically offloading responsibility in order to obfuscate larger systemic issues (Purser, 2019, p. 229). Even more, it helps to guarantee the individual’s continued achievement within a harmful structure once their problems are “solved” by psychedelics (Han, 2017, p. 30).

All four podcasters acknowledge the “mental health epidemic” we are faced with in North America. Peterson calls it an “existential insufficiency” and notes that “it warps and hurts our entire society” (2021). Ferriss has built a successful career around mental health advocacy and is celebrated on his podcast for “radically transforming the landscape of mental health in this country.” He also notes that “we are really struggling as a community, especially right now” (2020). Angermayer echoes that “the whole world is really in a mental health crisis,” and Rubin argues that psychedelic treatments would help “people feel happier, less depressed and with less anxiety” (2021). The imagined goal of psychedelic treatment for the useful psychonaut is to “reconfigure her relationship with objects of her inner psychological terrain and to transform herself [...] in the hope of becoming a mentally healthier and satisfied individual” (Gearin & Devenot, 2021, p. 923). There is an underlying assumption that happiness is the product of individual effort; simply a “skill” to develop (Purser, 2019, p. 34). Of course, this discourse excludes those who struggle against systemic discrimination or do not have a livable income. While mental health is recognized in certain ways, the podcasters are continually unwilling to look at the pressures and inequalities of neoliberal ideology which exert pressure on mental wellness in the first place.

## 2. Neoliberal Discourse: Profit and Psychedelics

Neoliberalism's main objective is that the capitalist market thrives. On his podcast, Dave Rubin argues that psychedelics are “what the new conservative *thing* is” (2021) and Tim Ferriss asserts that “the billionaires I know, almost without exception, use hallucinogens on a regular basis” (2021). In fact, Pace and Devenot argue persuasively that since billionaires – and IDW members – rely on the continued existence of wealth disparity and inequality to exist as such, psychedelic drugs cannot be inherently “a solution for ameliorating the exhaustive harms caused by social inequality” (2021, p. 13). Instead, it is clear that psychedelics can and are being integrated into the market. The discourse on these podcasts refers to this emerging market and relies on related ideas about optimization and competition. This establishes the useful psychonaut as a new kind of consumer who is a useful participant in the market and thus, in the maintenance of dominant power.

### A) Corporadelics and Entrepreneurialism

An increased interest in these once countercultural objects means their integration into today's capitalist structures that already support individualism, exclusion, and capitalism itself. Corporatization and commodification of psychedelic drugs has been colloquially dubbed “corporadelics” (Sokol, p. 24) and is acknowledged and promoted across all four podcast episodes as a positive shift. Jordan Peterson argues that the scientific research for psychedelics on the market “is of crucial significance” (2021). And, the marketability of these substances is regularly presented as a reason for their destigmatization and legitimation.

While the IDW's political culture is regularly hailed as “alternative,” entrepreneurialism and optimization are celebrated and tied to ideas of the heroic individual (Finlayson, 2021, p. 181). The podcast episodes uphold this trend, elevating the individual investor as an innovator. Christian Angermayer, Tim Ferriss, and Dave Rubin all currently publicly invest in psychedelics. Angermayer highlights the importance of “money going into innovation” (2021) and Ferriss is praised for “putting money and resources, and encouraging others to put money and resources, into research, development, and commercialization of these powerful tools” (2020). It is understood to be up to the individual consumer's agency to invest their own money to push for change. This inevitably puts decision-making power into the hands of the financial elite and establishes competition at the base of modern psychedelics. Tim Ferriss highlights that “as it

stands right now, the research we are seeing is almost entirely dependent on *individuals* finding conviction in the data or sometimes their own experiences” (2020). The venture capitalists on the podcasts all put out at least one call for entrepreneurs listening to pursue psychedelics as a promising investment. These critical decisions in the hands of those who stand to gain profit from them are celebrated by the podcasters. In reference to young people having cryptocurrency to invest, Angermayer asserts: “I’d rather trust a sixteen-year-old kid to make the right allocation decision than the government!” (2021). Further, Ferriss notes that “if I take some of my money and some of my friends’ money and we put it towards this stuff, then all of a sudden it doesn’t matter what the NIH or the NIMH says, we can make research happen” (2020). So, the privatization of for-profit psychedelic research is applauded.

The neoliberal push for competition and optimization is also well embodied by the popularization of “microdosing,” which many podcasters mention and support. This refers to the practice of “taking a tiny, ‘sub-perceptual’ dose of LSD [or other psychedelic] as a kind of mental tonic” (Pollan, 2018, p. 175), meant as a “cognitive enhancer,” but without any of the effects of a larger dose (Fadiman, 2011, p. 196). A popular practice in Silicon Valley (Pollan, 2018, p. 150), it has been hailed as a “biohack” that can be used to enhance organic human capacities and to increase “creativity, inspiring new ways to pump out code, design interfaces, or harness the entrepreneurial spirit” (Wilcox, 2020, para. 1). Carl Hart is critical of microdosing because he sees it as redirecting drugs away from recreational fun and towards labour productivity (2021, p. 180). Like many of the other popular cultural examples in chapter two, the podcasters regularly highlight that psychedelics are best used for self-optimization. For example, while Pollan is discussing microdosing on the podcast, Rogan interrupts him to exclaim “it allows people to work better!” (2021) and Ferriss refers listeners to Sam Harris’ meditation app in order for psychedelic users to “squeeze the most juice out of their experiences” (2021). The IDW’s relentless discourse connecting psychedelics, neoliberal ideology and the market are trotted out as “common sense,” while other forms of drug use necessarily fade into the background as a consequence.

While these neoliberal discourses circulate to cement the useful psychonaut as a better participant in and authority of neoliberal ideals, there are still pieces that do not quite fit into this singular hegemonic narrative of profit accumulation. Tim Ferriss shows his ambivalence as he himself is unwilling to invest in for-profit psychedelic ventures (2020). Also, many of the

podcasters still discuss and respect Indigenous use of psychedelics in controlled ceremonies, which is situated outside the contemporary industrial market.

## **B) Profit as Pretext**

Despite continued policy-based controversy in many states, there is recent large-scale legalization of cannabis in much of North America, and profit has been an important factor in shifting public attitudes about this drug (Hart, 2021, p. 170). The IDW expresses faith that the psychedelics industry will grow in a similar way to the cannabis market. And, they use this predicated success as justification for the need to shift psychedelics' cultural reputation. Tim Ferriss notes "my goal is to give fifty thousand dollars to something that I think can raise fifty million, no problem, a few years later. Therefore, the objective has been to pave the way through destigmatizing and reputationally derisking" (2020). Similarly, Joe Rogan stresses that the main way this controversial industry will be accepted is "to make it super profitable" (2021). Psychedelics become a commodity like any other. Yet, the "beneficial" outcome of profit means that other potential goals become less evident. Ben Anderson says that "investment of hope in the market as the source of a good or better life" means the "weakening of hope in other collective solutions" (2016, p. 738). In fact, on his podcast, Joe Rogan contends that "the people who are competitive capitalistic people should be embracing this because it's better for the market overall; you'll have more contributors and consumers" (2021). Centering profit positions the useful psychonaut as a consumer above all else.

Sarah Banet-Weiser asserts that "power is often exercised in contradictory ways" (2012, p. 12). An important site of uncertainty is still the recreational market. As of today, most North American psychedelic companies have established a lack of interest in foraying into similar recreational market structures as cannabis, even down the road. The IDW members generally agree with this limitation. It is clear that based solely on economic considerations, a recreational market would be beneficial. Yet, understanding psychedelics in this way would cause complications for policy and culture. Thus, there is clearly a much more complex negotiation of discourse occurring in order to reach a seemingly coherent hegemonic narrative.

### **C) Medicalization Mayhem**

Medicalization can be defined as “the ways that human problems or conditions are defined or treated as medical problems” (Gearin & Devenot, 2021, p. 919). More and more, psychedelics are imagined through this lens by scientific institutions, governmental regulatory bodies, and popular culture (p. 920). As one of the primary ways in which psychedelics are legible in society, medicalization speaks to their commodification as “the argument for psychedelic medicalization is made in dollars and cents” (Pace & Devenot, 2021, p. 14). Psychedelics are often made to be seen through the lens of an already established industry.

Yuval Noah Harari makes a distinction between North America’s penchant for medicalization and its new interest in self-optimization (2015, p. 395). He notes that new areas of industry are pivoting from treating pre-existing conditions towards focusing on allowing humans to go beyond their physiological limitations (2015, p. 16). Byung-Chul Han makes a similar observation by arguing that our “achievement-society” relies on “neuro-enhancement” (2015, p. 30). Humans can become like gods, capable of controlling all aspects of natural life. This idea of self-optimization is relevant to psychedelics as their instrumentalization as medical tools are regularly conflated with those of self-optimization. Even if one does not struggle with mental health issues, psychedelics are still seen as potentially useful “biohacks” to “improve” in other ways. As such, the goal of psychedelics need not be limited to mental health treatment. They can be used by people to extend beyond their natural abilities to work, achieve, and even more, to navigate the negative obstacles of power structures.

Either way, drugs can still be seen as “medicine,” that is, not as frivolous recreation. Psychedelics’ history of fueling countercultural resistance can be neutralized through the development of this “tight definition of substances” (Gearin & Devenot, 2021, p. 919). While on his podcast Joe Rogan begins a particularly long monologue by criticizing capitalism “we’re so hellbent on profit and capitalism,” he continues on to argue “the more people we can educate and provide therapy, the more people that can get out of that, the less losers we’ll have, which means the better America will be overall, and we’ll have more people contributing and more competition [...] it’s better for everybody” (2021). The useful psychonaut is useful because the drugs can continually reassert the psychonaut’s position as a productive member of neoliberal capitalism.



Hall and O'Shea criticize neoliberalism for measuring benefit solely based on something's, or someone's, exchange value on the market (2013, p. 12). While this logic is prevalent elsewhere in neoliberal popular culture, for these podcasts, the focus on the profitability of the psychedelics market is not the only goal in sight. The hosts, especially Rogan and Angermayer, assert the need to find humanitarian solutions for the mental health epidemic. However, as mentioned, academics have argued that this serves to redirect focus away from the broken infrastructure of power and instead becomes a coping strategy to maintain the structure that gave rise to the epidemic in the first place (Han, 2017, p. 6, Gearin & Devenot, 2021, p. 923, Purser, 2019, p. 7). In this way, hegemonic power retraces "lines laid down by the dominant discourses about reality" and continues to sustain a relatively coherent narrative (Hebdige, 1979, p. 15).

### **3. Neoliberal Discourse: Freedom High**

Neoliberal hegemony relies on dreams of "freedom." Han argues that neoliberal power is exercised not by prohibition or censorship, but instead by instrumentalizing freedom in specific ways (Han, 2015, p. 11). In fact, "power can use freedom to its own ends" (Bennett, 1986, p. 13). These neoliberal free market ideals bleed into the discourses about personhood in everyday life. Hall and O'Shea contend that neoliberalism tells us "these days, we all want greater freedom and personal choice" (2013, p. 12). Individuals are understood, first and foremost, as participants in the market and as "achievement-subjects" (Han, 2015, p. 11). They must seize entrepreneurialism and are fundamentally free to pave their own paths with minimal intervention (Finlayson, 2021, p. 168). Of course, this version of freedom ignores the very real relative structural limitations for everyone who is not a wealthy, straight, white man. It compounds and ensures exclusion by securing the opportunity of this kind of freedom only for those in already powerful positions. Yet, neoliberal discourse tells us that in the grand search for individual optimization and self-fulfillment, "everyone is free to choose their responses, manage negative emotions, and 'flourish' through various modes of self-care" (Purser, 2019, p. 11). While neoliberal freedom presents as ultimate freedom for the useful psychonaut, it is still constrained by rigid parameters.

## **A) Freedom High**

One of the foundational ideological tenets of the Intellectual Dark Web is the preservation of free speech. Their businesses rely on their telling the “truth,” which they argue other institutions otherwise hide or silence. This commitment is widely popular and profitable. Raymond Williams maintains that hegemony “is a realized complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits” (1977b, p. 112). So, even the IDW’s convictions about freedom have their own limits and must be managed against conflicting neoliberal values or dissonant discourses elsewhere.

The useful psychonaut’s legitimation of the psychedelics industry still contends with histories of cultural trepidations about psychedelic drugs and those of countercultural resistance, which necessarily bump up against limitless consumer freedom. After decades of saying “no,” drug policy and popular culture have widely begun to say “yes.” Yet, this permission is only given to particular identities under particular circumstances. It begins to feel like “common sense” (Hall & O’Shea, 2013, p. 8) that psychedelics “should only be consumed in a safe context with trained therapists” (Gearin & Devenot, 2021, p. 918). This serves two purposes: to make less accessible other forms of consumption without having to say “no” and to set limits on freedom by emphasizing other outlets through which one might act freely – as a better market actor. Indeed, the IDW emphasizes the individual’s freedom to continue engaging in neoliberal capitalism, to seek mental health treatment in any desired form, and to optimize themselves to become better neoliberal actors.

Ironically, while espousing “freedom” as the ultimate value, the IDW members all express concern about the use of psychedelics outside a controlled, medical, institutionalized, or guided context. Angermayer notes that the companies he is invested in will “only be medically available, not for taking at home on prescription” (2021). Rogan establishes that psychedelics are different from cannabis, which he believes can be easily integrated into a recreational market (2021). Ferriss asserts “whenever I can, I try to play the role of a conservative voice in the media related to psychedelics because I do not view psychedelics as panacea” (2020). And, Peterson contends that there is “plenty of danger” with excessive enthusiasm about the drugs (2021). Thus, there is an ambivalent and convoluted narrative at play, as the denial of recreational psychedelics logically takes away individual freedoms, of which IDW figures are defensive. This contradiction is evident in the podcasts, as Angermayer describes himself as “kind of a

libertarian, I want to mind my own business and I want everybody else to mind their business” but is the most adamant of the four about limiting psychedelic use (2021). Nevertheless, there is evidence of fear that the full legalization of these substances might threaten neoliberal ideology’s dominance. After his guest on the podcast episode notes that psychedelics have the power to “really destabilize cultural institutions,” Peterson reminds him: “well, that’s what happened in the sixties, we underestimate the magnitude of these processes” (2021). Ferriss makes a similar point about the decade (2020). Hegemony must be “continually renewed, recreated, defended, and modified” (Williams, 1977b, p. 112).

While the podcasters establish hard limits with respect to psychedelic use, they themselves become exceptions to these rules, making clear that if freedom is to be understood as the freedom to participate in the market, there are few who are not excluded. Ferriss, Rubin, Angermayer, Peterson, and Rogan all allude to having taken drugs outside official channels. In fact, at the end of the podcast, Rubin exclaims to Angermayer: “I would love to trip with you sometime!” to which he enthusiastically agrees but tells him “I don’t know if I want to go there... here on a public...” signaling that they will have a private conversation after the show (2021). In line with their identities as rebels, these figures have special freedoms which they deny others in order to maintain the idealized vision of the useful psychonaut.

### **B) Your Own Trip: Self-Actualization**

The freedom to self-actualize is essential to the contemporary discourse around psychedelic drugs and the maintenance of the figure of the useful psychonaut; everyone should have the freedom to seek their full potential, especially as a capitalist participant. Adding quotation marks around “freedom” is helpful, as it can always be understood within specific limits tied to the context in which dominant hegemonies are maintained (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 154). Han argues that neoliberal freedom is fundamentally within limits: “the *free constraint* of maximizing achievement” (2015, p. 11). In capitalism, the care of the self is itself “expressed as a particular kind of ‘freedom’” (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 176). This discourse of self-care, wellness, and self-actualization is central to these podcasts’ interpretation of psychedelics, instrumentalized to replace recreation. Peterson argues that people who take psychedelics “report that their lives are better – but it’s not a hedonic better like cocaine better, it’s not a psychomotor

stimulant better – it’s a philosophical better” (2021). People are free to take these drugs, but only for particular purposes.

Wolfgang Schivelbusch contends that there is an intrinsic, collective human desire to change consciousness which has been sustained throughout human history (1993, p. xiv). Michael Pollan echoes this observation in his own book (2021, p. 1). While these podcasts support various limits on freedom, they also endorse the relative accessibility of fulfilling this human desire, which was denied throughout the reactionary War on Drugs. Furthermore, the instrumental deployment of medicalization and self-actualization does mean that these figures progressively buck against residual discourses and “cultural baggage” of moral panic. However, this process of legitimation is always simultaneously securing paths towards a profitable market and is largely exclusive.

As emblems of neoliberal values and ideology, the IDW’s interest in psychedelics provide a relatively clear picture of the ideal version of the drugs in neoliberal capitalism and its supportive discourse. Individualism, profit, and freedom all work in tandem as discursive areas through which psychedelic drugs and industry are culturally understood by the IDW, and more broadly. This process works through the establishment of the useful psychonaut, a subject position to embody when encountering these drugs. These three categories regularly contradict each other, displaying their own ambivalences and inconsistencies. The conditions of possibility established by the “setting” of neoliberal power takes up these inert substances and makes the drugs legible through its values.

Of course, as inert substances that simply amplify pre-established conditions, they *can* be integrated, no matter their past countercultural implications. The intersecting web of discourse surrounding psychedelics functions to create emergent cultural understandings of both the possibilities of psychedelic drugs themselves, as well as the subjective position attached to them. No longer is this figure a dangerous hippie that drops out of society. Instead, they are a productive, informed, law-abiding, and well-established citizen. This setting and its discursive assumptions then create a particular “mindset” experienced, especially by young people. The following section will utilize youth representations of psychedelics on the social media app TikTok in order to investigate the practical consequences of this mainstreaming process.

## **“Set”: Structures of Feeling and Mood**

We always find ourselves within the conditions of possibility of larger structures of power. As North American society becomes further individualized, psychedelic drugs are no longer associated with the same possibilities of the past. Thus, representations of psychedelic youth culture display individualism rather than collectivism and point to a new “mindset” being cultivated. The rate of casual LSD use in North America among young people is similar to what it was in the 1960s, with about ten percent of youth opting to ingest these substances (Drug Policy Alliance, 2021). (In this case, “youth” refers to those twenty-five years and under.) Yet, the collective resistance of the sixties is no longer engrained in Western culture as it once was.

It is widely understood that a person’s emotional mindset before a psychedelic trip can drastically condition the experiences they will have (Pollan, 2018, p. 14). As mentioned, this “set” can also exist beyond individual feelings. Raymond Williams describes “feelings” as “meaning and values actively lived and felt” (1977c, p. 132). He notes that we must pay attention to the ephemeral, unfinished, and in-flux aspects of cultural experience that are still in formation and not yet entirely concrete. In so doing, he introduces the concept of “structures of feeling” to understand how shared affective charges unite people under particular lived experiences. These organic and changing cultural “feelings” are not yet solidified “world-views or ideology” (1977c, p. 132). Rather, they are a “kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate” (1977c, p. 131). Jonathan Flatley specifies that “when certain objects produce a certain set of affects in certain contexts for certain groups of people – that is a structure of feeling” (2008, p. 16). These feelings can be instigated by shared experience under structures of power – setting. In order to qualify as a “structure,” this kind of feeling must necessarily be shared, as it is inherently a social phenomenon (Williams, 1977c, p. 131). These structures still manage to “exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and action,” (1977c, p. 132) even though they are still in formation. While not yet a concrete part of culture, structures of feeling are constantly influencing cultural processes.

The existence of a shared “mindset” beyond the realm of the individual can be connected to Martin Heidegger’s concept of “mood,” as he also conceptualizes shared feeling. For Heidegger, these collective experiences of feeling end up imposing specific felt parameters for future possibilities. “Mood” hinges on possibility. As humans, we exist and move forward

through life by seizing or being denied specific sets of possibilities – he calls this our “directionality” (1962, p. 135). Based on previously encountered possibilities, new ones are either closed or disclosed to us. We are then made to notice and care about specific things, only because we are thrust in that particular direction. Flatley notes Heidegger’s synonym for mood is “attunement” (Flatley, 2008, p. 10). For Heidegger, a “mood” refers to being attuned to a specific set of possibilities encountered at a particular moment. In this way, moods (collective sets of possibilities and impossibilities) constitute how we experience our subjective realities (2008, p. 19). Crucially, moods are also fundamentally social. We do not contain our own moods, we are acting within moods (Heidegger, 1962, p. 176). They circulate around us, and we are simply attuned to specific ones (1962, p. 176-178). Heidegger’s radically external understanding of mood as possibility helps clarify the stakes of a structure of feeling. Flatley highlights that “we all only have access to the moods that have been shaped or determined by the concrete historical context in which we coexist” (2008, p. 19). Structures of feeling and mood as constructing a “set” make certain things seem both more and less possible for youth.

Youth generations are a good example of how these two concepts play out in culture as “mindset.” One can understand the delineation of different generational formations as distinctly related to specific affective charges formed and maintained by specific experiences. Past cultural patterns create a “sort of historical reservoir – a pre-constituted ‘field of possibles’ – which groups take up, transform, develop” (Hall et al., 1975, p. 4). As an arbitrary construct, generations are fundamentally felt and held together by shifting shared mindsets. Their “set” establishes the conditions of possibility for discourse, meanings, frictions, and values related to and presented by the groups.

### **Then: Youth “Set” in the 1960s**

While psychedelics are inert substances and do not necessarily elicit any essential experience, they do always produce some form of altered feeling (Willis, 1975, p. 89, Boon, 2002, p. 273). Given that drug use in the sixties was associated with communal youth groups and activities, psychedelic experiences were accordingly understood to necessitate feelings of interconnectedness, which suited a mindset of the time (Stevens, 1988, p. 90). Taking psychedelics as a group was the primary way to utilize the substances, and communal living was fundamental to their ethos (Wolfe, 1968, p. 35, p. 353, Stevens, 1988, p. 240). Charles Acland

argues that “generation-units are ways of marking structures of feeling, but they also have conceptual and textual life as they help to order and regulate a sense of historical change” (2004, p. 50). Indeed, psychedelic youth in the 1960s had a real sense that they were ushering in this historical change (Polan, 2018, p. 196). This was determined more by the cultural meaning of generation rather than any particular intrinsic property of drugs (Willis, 1975, p. 99).

The historical context also contributed to the possibility of this kind of collectivity. The civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam war movement, the gay liberation movement, and the women’s rights movement, while rarely connected directly to any psychedelic youth movement, still cultivated a general mindset that supported resistance to dominant power. Still, Michael Pollan argues that “psychedelics deserve much of the blame – or credit – for creating this unprecedented generation gap” (2018, p. 216). Indeed, this gap was largely predicated on a distinction between “the aware” and “the unaware” (Wolfe, 1968, p. 129). There was a general understanding that psychedelics were reserved for youth generations. In a quasi-manifesto audio recording from 1966, Timothy Leary states “this record is a message to young people: to people under the age of 25, and certainly to people under the age of 40. If you’re over the age of 40, I’m not sure you should listen to this record” (para. 1). Usually, users of psychedelic drugs were young, middle class, and largely white (Wolfe, 1968, p. 358). And, in accordance with Leary’s call to “turn on, tune in, drop out,” psychedelics were associated with the refusal of mainstream “unaware” society. It seems that within the conditions of possibility set by their setting, a psychedelic large-scale generational consciousness among many youth was possible and a resistant mindset was fostered.

In his acclaimed book *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968), journalist Tom Wolfe paints an honest picture of the psychedelic youth counterculture of the sixties. Throughout the early decade, the author followed Ken Kesey and his group of Merry Pranksters – whom he argues were the foundation of this counterculture – as they threw parties at which LSD was consumed en masse. Throughout the book, Wolfe makes clear the importance of community and shared experience for both the Merry Pranksters and the later hippie youth communes consuming psychedelics across North America. Wolfe describes “the psychedelic *thing*” primarily as a “feeling” throughout his book (p. 27, p. 45, p. 415). He observes “it was...*beautiful*, it was... a whole *feeling*” (1968, p. 134). Beyond their material existence living together, the interconnected affective charge felt by these psychedelic communities seemed to be made possible by their own

generational structure of feeling. At the end of his book, Wolfe argues that “you couldn’t put it into words. You had to create the conditions in which they [his readers] would feel an approximation of that *feeling*, the sublime *kairos*” (1968, p. 231). A philosophy of “intersubjectivity” guided these groups (1968, p. 110). There was an understanding that life was bigger than the individual (1968, p. 125). In their group psychedelic trips, they regularly became “one being” (1968, p. 205). And, the “mass acid experiences” of the acid-test parties were said to be deeply affective themselves, as the “attuned multitude headed towards the pudding” (1968, p. 238). Jay Stevens contends that one cannot dismiss the importance of the “exhilaration that came from collective action [...] it was a collective peak experience whose import lay [...] in the fact that they *were* together” (Stevens, 1988, p. 233). This shared mindset helped establish community as fundamental to the operation of the psychedelic generation. It was a sense of solidarity that brought the group together and also what differentiated it from others (Wolfe, 1968, p. 128). Community was intertwined with the psychedelic.

It is important to note that this is still not a story of 1960s’ psychedelic youth counterculture as exclusively or consistently resistant. Like any other cultural movement, psychedelic youth were still situated within the conditions of possibility of the form of capitalism prevailing at the time. Many have argued that youth counterculture of the 1960s was not so radical at all and was actually connected to the mainstream in many ways (Frank, 1998, p. 33, Perlstein, 1996, para. 30). No counterculture is outside the forces of hegemony, or it would not have anything to be counter *to*. Indeed, consumerism played an important role in many of psychedelic counterculture’s operations. Thomas Frank argues that “despite their hotly professed anti-materialism and their suspicion of consumerism, is their heightened appetite for the new. Unlike their parents, the hip new youth are far more receptive to obsolescence” (1998, p. 122). This idea of hip consumerism became “an ideal expression of the new vision of consuming” in capitalism more generally (1998, p. 106). Even in Wolfe’s book, there is much discussion about the Merry Pranksters’ obsession with The Beatles, perhaps the decade’s most popular and commercial music.

Fred Turner contends that the sixties were not a true break from the decades before. Instead, “as they turned away from agonistic politics and towards technology, consciousness, and entrepreneurship as the principles of a new society, the communards of the 1960s developed a utopian vision that was in many ways quite congenial to the insurgent Republicans of the 1990s”



(2008, p. 8). In their focus on living outside the mainstream, the psychedelic youth of the 1960s still exhibited many seeds of neoliberal values. Moreover, as psychedelics were used mainly by white youth, the picture of “dropping out” became one enabled by privilege. Wolfe highlights: “the Youth had always only three options: go to school, get a job, or live at home. And – how boring each was! – compared to the experience of... the infinite” (1968, p. 65). While this youth movement was certainly resistant, this resistance was generally reserved for people in privileged social positions. Further, though there was crossover, the psychedelic youth movement was disconnected from movements at the time which actively and directly fought for structural change (Wolfe, 1968, p. 356). In his quasi-manifesto, Leary notes “you cannot do this alone in acts of isolated rebellion. Detaching yourself from the insanity of society requires group action” (1966, para. 34). However, this detachment was exclusive and largely funded by the money of white, middle-class parents (Wolfe, 1968, p. 134, p. 358). Even more, Marcus Boon raises this privilege by observing that “psychedelic substances offer an escape from the limits of everyday life [...] into a world beyond words, which is the experience of an elite, the few who believe they have been privileged to go beyond the laws of everyday life” (2002, p. 257). While at its core defiant, the capability for resistance in youth counterculture was inconsistent.

As inert substances, psychedelics rely on a pre-established set and setting. As such, the contemporary mindset and setting necessarily informs how psychedelics are represented and understood by youth today. Despite its inconsistencies, the sixties represented a time of social upheaval, community connection, and resistance; feelings which were then amplified by psychedelics. However, with the rise of a new youth mindset under this neoliberal stage of capitalism, psychedelics have come to be better read as individualistic tools of self-management.

### **Now: Youth “Set” in Contemporary “Setting”**

The activist group The Institute for Precarious Consciousness understands capitalism as affective, “producing and being sustained by certain feelings, attitudes, and ways of relating” (2014, p. 12). With the integration of digital technologies into almost all aspects of everyday life and the intensification of neoliberalism (Srnicek, 2017, Han, 2017, Anderson, 2016, p. 795), new feelings of precarity are becoming increasingly common (McRobbie, 2016, p. 2-3). Within this context, more time is devoted to participating in capitalism than ever before (Crary, 2013, p. 30). Regularly touted in popular discourse, the idea of being a self-made entrepreneur is hailed as a

preeminent goal, as social safety nets like regular salaries, pensions, and healthcare are becoming less and less accessible (McRobbie, 2016, p. 58, Srnicek, 2017, p. 17). It seems as if there is a disinvestment in the future and that “capitalism no longer cares about making profit that it can reinvest into the future of capitalism, but rather cares only about generating enormous short-term profit for a very small percentage of the population” (Grossberg, 2001, p. 130). With this exponential growth, we are faced with extreme wealth disparity, a dire and worsening climate crisis, housing crises, inflation, and war. It is increasingly difficult to imagine genuine alternatives to capitalism as it evolves more and more into unchecked manifestations of itself (Fisher, 2009, p. 8, Han, 2017, p. 12).

As mentioned, society is now faced with an epidemic of mental illness, especially in young people (Han, 2015, p. 1). Talk of collective burnout, anxiety, and depression is rising. And, feelings of stress, precarity, and exhaustion in the face of such an unstable social environment are growing (Han, 2015, p. 31, Purser, 2019, p. 63, Fisher, 2009, p. 19). Byung-Chul Han argues that this tiredness is “solitary tiredness, it has a separating and isolating effect” (2015, p. 31). As an essential prop of the neoliberal context, individualism has become a fundamental tenet of general capitalist operation. Hall and O’Shea note that the “*structural* consequence of neoliberalism – the individualisation of everyone, the privatization of public troubles and the requirement to make competitive choices at every turn – has been paralleled by an upsurge in feelings of insecurity, anxiety, stress and depression” (2013, p. 12). As such, capitalism appears to support a mindset that functions to the detriment of mental health; grounded in the very issues that its proponents claim it stabilizes.

A specific “mood” is entangled with this shared feeling that dictates the felt conditions of possibility experienced by youth. Indeed, the possibilities of real psychedelic collectivism become unrepresentable in popular culture. Neoliberalism “seems to require and seek the negation of many forms of individual and collective agency, including the very possibility of imagining alternative futures” (Grossberg, 2001, p. 134). Within this context “possibilities of communal life are rendered unthinkable” and the “cooperative, as a lived set of relations, cannot actually be made visible” (2013, p. 114-115). Youth are brought together by this affective experience provoked by living under this contemporary power structure. This impacts the imagined possibilities of collectivity represented in media. Purser reminds us that as “as self-management moves to the foreground, collective lives become less important” (2019, p. 41). In

being more “attuned” to individualism, these values float to the forefront of the cultural understanding of psychedelic drugs. A new structure of feeling crystallizes around psychedelics as they transform into a means through which neoliberal values are circulated and affirmed.

Alan Finlayson notes that neoliberalism is “a means of governing through practices of the self, shaped by an ideal of the ‘entrepreneurial subject’ immersed in competition” (2021, p. 180). Today’s psychedelic consumer, the “useful psychonaut,” situated within this productive process, is an isolated individual that enjoys the freedom of taking psychedelic drugs as long as they do so without rejecting larger neoliberal narratives. Gearin and Devenot argue that “now LSD and magic mushrooms aren’t for fun or adventure, but for wellness, life-hacking, therapy and self-care” (2021, p. 929). Drugs are seen as “tools,” instrumentalized for individual “betterment”. Psychedelics are used now to search for mental wellness and to guarantee self-optimization in order to ultimately become a more useful participant in dominant power structures. This trend of individualism and wellness is best exemplified by the representation of psychedelics for and by youth cultures on social media apps like TikTok.

### **Social Media Case Study: The “Psychedelic That Girl Aesthetic” on TikTok**

As a discourse of capitalism, neoliberalism also operates affectively (Anderson, 2016, p. 735). Ben Anderson contends that structures of feeling are fundamental to conditioning how neoliberalism gets integrated into everyday life (2016, p. 745). He specifies that “structures of feeling intensify around scenes/objects/figures through which people are pulled into the orbit of neoliberal reason” (2016, p. 747). Psychedelic drugs operate as such objects. In order to evaluate contemporary individualistic representations of psychedelics, this section will discuss some of the familiar modes and tropes utilized on the social media platform TikTok.<sup>15</sup> Since 2020, notably the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an astronomical rise in TikTok’s popularity, especially with younger people. TikTok allows for the creation of videos paired with commonly used sounds and effects (Zulli & Zulli, 2022, p. 1873). This platform is unique because it is not predicated on the networking of offline social groups, but rather rewards

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<sup>15</sup> TikTok’s engagement and trends are largely dictated by algorithms. Properly accounting for their impact is well beyond the scope of this thesis. However, the neutralizing effects of TikTok’s algorithms on dissenting voices is a good example of the hegemonic force of dominant power discussed throughout this thesis. In fact, as I was conducting research throughout the month of August, almost 50% of the TikTok videos intended to be analyzed were taken down by TikTok’s “community guidelines”. This suggests that there is something still powerfully destabilizing about the psychedelic practices described.

original content disseminated to strangers. Video creation is often embodied as a form of imitation, in other words, the following of trends. Diana and David Zulli contend that TikTok's encouragement of mimesis positions it as "the *basis* of sociality on the site" (2022, p. 1873). TikTok is a critical site to consider in order to pinpoint youth experiences. The app's popularity relies on repetition and mimesis of temporal trends geared at other similar viewers, which makes it more meaningful as an accurate illustration of shared generational youth discourse and ideas. Indeed, Ioana Literat notes that TikTok can function as a "window into youth experiences" (2021, p. 1). Raymond Williams stresses that "art and literature are often among the very first indications that such a new structure [of feeling] is forming" (1977c, p. 133). And, he reminds us that "no generation speaks quite the same language as its predecessors" (1977c, p. 131). TikTok videos as an aesthetic practice act as a means through which to tease out the generational "mindset" most commonly represented of psychedelic drugs.

TikTok is most popular among women aged 18-24 (Zulli & Zulli, 2022, p. 1875). For North American youth on the app in 2022, psychedelics are regularly discussed by mobilizing the trend of the "*that girl* aesthetic." A resurgence of the 2014 "#girlboss" trend, this aesthetic fad centers young, thin, white women who wear minimalist but expensive makeup and clothes. They take self-care and wellness seriously, showcasing their balanced lifestyle of elaborate morning routines, healthy diets, Pilates, and productivity through entrepreneurial activities (Sharma, 2021, para. 2-3). This idealized trend has been criticized for being unattainable and exclusionary (Sharma, 2021, para. 8). While there are a number of similar videos with lower engagement numbers, this section will focus only on TikTok videos that exemplify the trend – what I call "psychedelic *that girls*" – and garner more than ten thousand likes. As such, five videos from different TikTokers will be analyzed in order to describe how understandings and representations of psychedelics have changed for youth since the 1960s. The videos are by @kundaliniawake (January 6, 2022), @chloedetscher (January 20, 2022), @laublivin (February 7, 2022), @its\_nicolettemarie (May 29, 2022), and @danijlee (June 12, 2022).

All five videos show individual women bettering themselves in some way. The primary method in which the "psychedelic *that girl*" is attached to the drugs is through first acknowledging the worsening mental health crisis among young people. They all mention their own mental health struggles casually in some capacity and how psychedelics help them. @chloedetscher notes that "I was this close to going back on antidepressants, I struggle with

anxiety, panic attacks and ADHD”. She also includes the hashtag “#healingjourney.” @kundaliniawake similarly uses the hashtag “#healing.” @laublivin overlays text on her video declaring that psychedelics “help become more healed.” @its\_nicolettemarie uses the hashtags “#selfhealingjourney” and “#healing” and shows herself crying in bed before she fixes her problems with magic mushrooms.

The organization Precarious Consciousness argues that “each phase [of capitalism] blames the system’s victims for the suffering that the system causes” (2014, p. 1). Anxiety, depression, and stress are accordingly “understood as individual psychological problems, often blamed on faulty patterns or poor adaptation” (2014, p. 5). The COVID-19 pandemic, beginning in 2020, severely worsened this mental health crisis for young people. In its wake, Gill and Orgad highlight that wellness culture does “acknowledge stress and difficulty, and at times highlights their gendered impacts, yet nevertheless systematically figure responses and solutions in individual, psychological, and often consumerist terms” (2022, p. 44). Rather than recognizing this mental health experience as a product of complex interpersonal and environmental conditions, it is instead taken by these creators to be “private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating” (Williams, 1977c, p. 132). All these women struggle with their mental health and acknowledge that many others do as well, but express this as an individual failing that can be rectified by individual actions or a desired lifestyle.

As such, the psychedelic drugs represented in these videos are tools utilized by individuals to “fix” themselves with ease. @its\_nicolettemarie uses a narrative sound bite that declares “I woke up one morning and decided I didn’t want to feel like that anymore, or ever again, so I changed, just like that.” She captions her video “□□□ and with that.” @daniilee uses a musical sound bite over her video describing her discovery of microdosing, as Kanye West sings “man, why can’t life always be this easy?” According to these women, it is within one’s power to solve one’s mental health problems through special self-help techniques. In individualistic neoliberal logic, “social change is achieved not through political protest, organizing or collective action, but via the free market and atomized actions of individuals” (Purser, 2019, p. 35). Fixing this mental health epidemic is possible if enough “psychedelic *that girls*” decide to change themselves, one at a time. Locating these problems within individual failings “makes collective solutions we need a lot less likely” (Purser, 2019, p. 251). Gill and Orgad argue that “self help is always changing in response to multiple trends and forces [...] it is

increasingly figured in psychological terms calling on subjects to look inside themselves and to foster and develop new attitudes and dispositions” (2022, p. 47). Indeed, @kundaliniawake elaborates in a pinned comment on her video “do you need anything outside yourself to heal your trauma? No. Everything you need is within you.” Ultimately, one only requires one’s own self, psychedelic drugs, and the desire not only to change, but to *improve*.

Ronald Purser explains that in the worsening mental health crisis, “since organization and outright refusal are no longer viable options in most industries, the most common form of post-industrial resistance is stress, burnout and apathy [...] this spurred a burgeoning wellness and happiness industry” (2019, p. 135). Indeed, the “psychedelic *that* girl” videos are located within a larger wellness and self-care industry that flourished in particular ways after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. This “wellness” discourse targets women especially, operating as both “a global multi-million-dollar industry and as a cultural matrix through which we are invited to know (and improve) ourselves” (Gill & Orgad, p. 47). According to this discourse, problems are solvable simply through a few concerted moments of individualistic self-care, therapy, and consumerism. @kundaliniawake captions her video “self-care day” while she applies cream to her legs and pets her cat after taking mushrooms. @chloedecher notes the “happy boost” she feels when she microdoses psilocybin mushrooms and claims that “it’s overall improved my mental health and well-being.” @its\_nicolettemarie uses the hashtag “#wellnesstok” and includes other signifiers of wellness culture such as a gym, fresh produce, and her upscale apartment to create a connection between psychedelics and commodified self-care. And, on a pinned comment on her video, @danijlee reminds viewers that when microdosing, “company/product is everything,” relocating psychedelics to an official part of the wellness industrial space.

Not only are psychedelics represented as a means to ameliorate mental health issues through self-care and wellness, they also aid in securing productivity and individual entrepreneurialism. In wellness culture, “to be negative about work [...] is treated as a toxic mentality. Resistance to labour is cast as a type of negative thinking and an unhealthy fixation on happiness” (Sharma, 2014, p. 103). Psychedelics are not used to reject society and drop out anymore, but rather to increase one’s capacity to do more work and be a more effective participant in dominant society. This necessarily forecloses the possibility for effective youth resistance. @danijlee highlights that microdosing helps her drink less when she is out and still

“wake up the next morning to complete [my] to do list and be active” and captions her video “life hack.” @chloedetscher notes that she now has more energy and uses the hashtag “#growthmindset”. @laublivin argues that psychedelics help her “become more healed, productive and creative.” She directly references the “that girl” trend by claiming that in using psychedelics “u can be THAT girl,” and including the hashtag “#thatgirlroutine.” Even more, she connects entrepreneurialism and psychedelics by captioning her video “I put the MICRO in micr0dosing & microinfluencing.” An important aspect of the “psychedelic *that girl*” is her motivation to heal her mental health problems not only for their own sake, but for the ability to become more productive, efficient, and productive. As a way to understand this logic, Sarah Sharma raises the concept of “capitalistic endurance.” In discussing the phenomenon of workplace yoga, she argues that “while the limits of the body are to be recognized, the body needs to be trained and treated well in order to develop a form of capitalistic endurance” (2014, p. 100). Indeed, wellness becomes a means to an end.

Stuart Hall et al. contend that “each group makes something of its own conditions – and through this ‘making,’ through this practice, culture is reproduced and transmitted. But this practice only takes place within the given field of possibilities and constraints” (1975, p. 5). Trends in today’s neoliberal discursive understanding of psychedelics on TikTok, mobilized by young women, help negotiate the dominant representational discourse that makes up how we understand psychedelics’ place in society. Charles Acland sees generations as held together through shared discourse (2004, p. 33) and argues that one of generation’s most important roles is circulating shared ideas (2004, p. 34). A lot of this work is done through generating “feelings” (2004, p. 50). In their popular representations by young people, psychedelic drugs are connected to a “whole *feeling*,” just as they were in the sixties (Wolfe, 1968, p. 134). The setting in which contemporary youth find themselves – capitalist society and its neoliberal values – fosters a particular affective structure of feeling and mood, or mindset. This necessarily influences the conditions of possibility for what is more likely to become produced and circulated.

While we may be in a “psychedelic renaissance,” as power evolves, so does the nature of such a psychedelic zeitgeist. Ultimately, as inert substances that enhance the set and setting already there, it is not surprising that these once threatening objects are being integrated into, and actually reinforcing, mainstream discourse. Popular cultural depictions of psychedelics constructed by young people are not regularly showing countercultural ideals. Evidently, youth

are not inspiring or inspired by a new wave of collective resistance. Perhaps a better fitting psychedelic slogan for today would be: “turn on, tune in, don’t drop out.”



## Conclusion

This project began by questioning how it is possible that the substances that fueled such a strong counterculture, proving to be such a threat to dominant social order, could then be integrated into these same structures of power. But, it has become clear that this is not the most apt question to ask. The integration of psychedelic drugs into neoliberal capitalism is emblematic of how dominant hegemonic power works; it always contends with and integrates its alternatives (Williams, 1977b, p. 113). Rather, asking *how* this occurs, who is impacted, and what falls through the cracks prove to be much more valuable points of entry when analyzing the mainstreaming of psychedelic drugs. As such, describing the breadth and contradictions of the shift in popular culture's discursive landscape became the primary focus of this work.

In chapter one, the thesis set out to provide a comprehensive historical account of the flows of cultural ideas about psychedelic drugs. This included the media's role in fostering moral panic, the assumptions of the War on Drugs, and the contemporary shift instigated by Michael Pollan's 2018 publication. Then, in chapter two, it described new representations of psychedelic drugs in popular culture by looking at television, film, books, and news. In this chapter, the thesis attempted to account for contemporary popular culture's espousal of dominant neoliberal capitalist values, but also of its continual referencing and integration of alternative and residual discourses. It utilized examples to show how popular culture has the power to construct the very ways in which we interpret the world around us. The thesis then narrowed its scope by focusing on two specific case studies: The Intellectual Dark Web podcasts and popular TikTok videos. It used these case studies to look more closely at how the complexities of contemporary neoliberal discourse co-opts and infuses more niche popular cultural examples. It then looked at the contemporary conditions of possibility for youth generations. In so doing, it contended that there is a crucial affective aspect to the representational shift contained by today's "set and setting." Ultimately, this thesis argued that the potential of collective resistance by youth generations is much less representable and imaginable in today's context.

Neoliberal capitalism, like any hegemonic structure of power, is a force imbued with contradictions and complexities. This work has highlighted that power is in flux and in constant negotiation. As such, the recent shift of psychedelic representation is not an account of clean co-optation and integration. Instead, the mainstreaming of psychedelic drugs includes inconsistency, struggle, and various small rebellions. Further, this thesis was not meant to function as a total

opposition to all that has been made possible by the integration of psychedelics into the current mainstream. Of course, psychedelic science in many ways has helped provide much needed relief for many difficult-to-treat mental health issues and has been fundamentally productive, despite its exclusivity. Further, the waning of the War on Drugs and the increased accessibility and decriminalization of psychedelics has meant less incarceration and thus less systemic violence and suffering. This process of mainstreaming, while deeply flawed in matters of power and privilege, is certainly not without its benefits.

Psychedelics are inert substances that are deeply affected by the set and setting in which they exist. In fact, it can be hypothesized that the contemporary context in which people take psychedelic drugs is likely impacting people's psychedelic trips themselves. Stephen Siff argues that during the era of moral panic, "bad trips" were much more common: "news media triggered anxiety among hyper suggestible LSD users, actually causing some of the freak-outs that were described" (Siff, p. 179). As such, based on conditions of possibility established by neoliberal capitalism's set and setting, a person's trip in the sixties would arguably look quite different from a person's trip today. Yet, these cultural histories of alternative psychedelic use and resistance still pervade the cultural imaginary, necessarily still influencing our understanding of drugs in popular culture in other ways.

Dominant power sets the conditions of possibility we experience, but these conditions are far from deterministic. As was foregrounded in this thesis, what is made possible by dominant structures of power and how these possibilities are seized are still varied and complex. Indeed, as mentioned, Cultural Studies scholarship takes seriously the historical and political variability of culture through time and space. Culture is always changing, with power always shifting. It is practically impossible to say definitively where we are headed next, or how these historically controversial substances (and their media representations) might be understood in five, twenty, or even fifty years. Every cultural object is born and lives its cycle within the complex flows of culture and power, which are themselves always in flux.

While "dropping out" may no longer seem like an option according to the parameters of the mindset established by popular culture, perhaps this is not necessary. It seems that outright rejection of society and "dropping out" – as the psychedelic youth counterculture once did – was not all that effective after all. In fact, many members of these communities ultimately rejoined the society which they spurned; getting married, getting jobs, and becoming regular participants

in conventional capitalism. No matter how permanent and unchangeable the detrimental logics and effects of power structures may seem, there is always still space within its contradictions for resistance (Fisher, 2009, p. 81). And, just as psychedelic trips might look different today as a result of different conditions of possibility, so too might acts of resistance. Aspects of the mindset that supported psychedelic counterculture may still be instrumentalized in the contemporary moment to question the detrimental aspects of power and incur structural change. Perhaps there is room for small acts of collective resistance between the cracks of our multifaceted popular cultural discourse.

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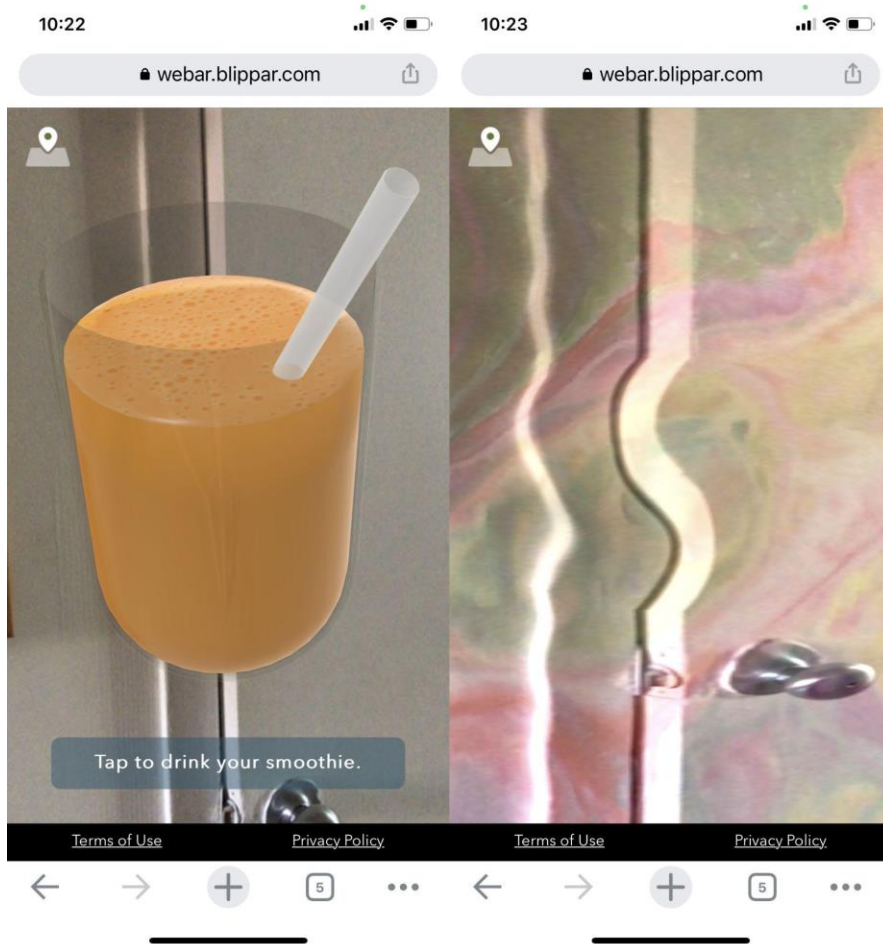
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## Appendix Reference Images

**Figure 1**

*Screenshots: Promotional Augmented Reality Website for Nine Perfect Strangers*



*Note.* In augmented reality, the user “drinks” the psychedelic smoothie. This triggers a filter of warped visuals and psychedelic music over the user’s environment through their phone camera.

**Figure 2**

*Screenshot: Field Trip Health Mobile App Home Page*



*Note.* The home page of the Field Trip Health mobile app named “Trip” includes guided meditations, music and soundscapes, and access to informational articles about psychedelic health.

**Figure 3**

*The Millbrook Estate: Home of the League for Spiritual Discovery*



*Note.* The estate out of which Timothy Leary ran the League for Spiritual Discovery and numerous group drug experiences. Obtained from the *World Religions and Spirituality Project*. (2012). <https://wrldrels.org/2016/10/08/league-for-spiritual-discovery/>

**Figure 4**

*Ken Kesey, Acid Graduation, 1966*



*Note.* Photograph by Paul Ryan from Ken Kesey's acid test graduation on October 31st, 1966 in San Francisco. Reprinted from the *San Francisco Art Exchange*. (1966).

<https://sfae.com/Artists/Paul-Ryan/Ken-Kesey-Acid-Graduation-1966>

**Figure 5**

*Psychedelic Concert Poster for the Band Grateful Dead in 1967*



*Note.* Psychedelic aesthetics seen on a Grateful Dead concert poster from 1967. Reprinted from *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. (2020). <https://www.inquirer.com/entertainment/vintage-rock-posters-auction-bob-dylan-jimi-hendrix-20200813.html>

**Figure 6**

*Psychedelic Canada Dry Soda Advertisement*



*Note.* Canada Dry advertisement using psychedelic colours, shapes and copy from the early 1970s. Reprinted from *Design You Trust*. (2019). <https://designyoutrust.com/2019/01/colorful-psychedelic-advertisements-from-between-the-1960s-and-early-1970s/>

**Figure 7**

*The Goop Lab Mushroom Ceremony*



*Note.* The beginning of the mushroom ceremony in the television show. The white group cheers before drinking their mushroom tea. Still from *The Goop Lab*, Paltrow, G., Loehnen, E., Fried, A., Minoprio, S., & Lillegard, D. (Producers). (2020, January 24). The healing trip (Season 1, Episode 1). Boardwalk Pictures.

**Figure 8**

*The Great: The Leaf from the Archbishop's Psychedelic Trip*



*Note.* Psychedelic visual aesthetics are at play when the archbishop holds a leaf as he hallucinates. Still from *The Great*, Bert & Bertie. (Directors). (2020, May 15). Moscow mule (Season 1, Episode 4). MRC Television.



**Figure 9**

*Nine Perfect Strangers: Tripping in a Field*



*Note.* Some of the main characters run joyfully through a field under the influence of mushrooms while surrounded by bubbles and enhanced colours and light. Still from *Nine Perfect Strangers*, Levine, J. (Director). (2021, September 8). *Motherlode* (Season 1, Episode 6). Hulu; Blossom Films.

**Figure 10**

*Sex Education: Tripping in a Bus*



*Note.* The colours, shapes, and lights of the bus are blurred and stretched as the characters crawl down the bus under the influence of mushrooms. Still from *Sex Education*, Rizwan, M. (Director). (2021, September 17). Episode 5 (Season 3, Episode 5). Eleven Films.