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PERSPECTIVE AND PERCEPTION: HOW REDDIT TRIP REPORTS CONVEY AND
OFFER DIFFERENT KNOWLEDGES ABOUT
PSYCHEDELIC DRUGS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
Communication

by
Kevin Lawson Nutt
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Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

Psychedelics drugs are slowly gaining recognition for their potential medicinal value in therapeutic settings in Western science. However, there remains a great deal of hostility and hesitancy toward psychedelics, largely due to the psychedelics' collective classification as Schedule I drugs in America, which resulted from a history of the drug class' demonization. Nonetheless, several US states and cities having decriminalized psychedelic drugs in certain contexts, but the general population is relatively naïve to the potentialities psychedelics can offer. This thesis studies trip reports, which are firsthand accounts of individual psychedelic experiences, on Reddit to shed light on the different knowledges about psychedelics. Implementing a mixture of Brock's (2012; 2018) Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis and a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, this study takes a qualitative approach in analyzing trip reports to delve into the richness of the individual experience because psychedelics induce highly abstracted and unique sensations. In the findings, psychedelics are demonstrated to facilitate a myriad of self-revelatory effects, extraordinary perceptions of reality, and combinations of the two. Collectively, the trip reports serve as a challenge to mainstream views on psychedelics and offer detailed, highly individualized looks into the psychedelic experience and the knowledge surrounding it.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The use of psychedelic drugs, such as psilocybin (often colloquially referred to as ‘magic mushrooms’) and LSD, is slowly gaining traction as having legitimate medicinal value (Nutt, 2019; Bøhling, 2017), especially in therapeutic settings. However, there remains a great deal of skepticism from a more general audience towards the drugs’ efficacies and legal status (Wang, 2021; Acker, 2020). This skepticism can be attributed to several key factors such as the ways in which psychedelic drugs have been legally classified by the DEA, how politicians frame the drugs in relevant discussions, socioeconomic factors that influenced the stigmatization of the drugs, and how the drugs have been portrayed in popular media over the years. Due to the apparent conflict between the ongoing scientific push to demonstrate psychedelic drugs’ medicinal potentialities and the pushback against psychedelic drugs due to culturally ingrained beliefs, discourse surrounding psychedelics can be divisive and contentious.

As a result of newer scientific findings on the various applications of psychedelics, psilocybin in particular has been decriminalized in multiple US cities, including Denver, CO; Oakland, CA; Detroit, MI; and the District of Columbia (Wang, 2021). Further, Oregon recently became the first state to vote to legalize the medicinal use of psilocybin, and the regulatory process is aiming to finalize the law within the next two years (Acker, 2020). Clearly, there is evidence of a preliminary legislative movement that is reflective of changing attitudes and beliefs towards psychedelics. However, given the relatively few areas to successfully pass laws to decriminalize or legalize psychedelics, there is also considerable hesitation on the matter. For example, despite bipartisan support, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s twice-proposed amendment to loosen regulations on funding research for schedule I substances has twice been

struck down with even stronger bipartisan dissent (H.R. Rep. No. 116-109, 2019; 165 Cong. Rec. H4612-H4613, 2019; H.R. Committee Print 117-12, 2021).

Given the current divisive nature of psychedelic use, (de)criminalization, and (il)legalization, discourse around this subject illustrates the multitude of factors that shape our knowledge of and public opinions about psychedelic drugs. While there is a substantial volume of communication research surrounding substances such as alcohol, nicotine, and marijuana, recent literature concerning psychedelics is not nearly as robust and is in need of further inquiry (Beswerchij & Sisti, 2022; Bøhling, 2017). Like most hot-button cultural phenomena, historical context and systemic power structures such as white supremacy, racism, colonialism, America's war on drugs, and capitalism have collectively played roles in determining dominant discourse about these substances in the public sphere. To situate psychedelic-related discourse as a subject for study, the aforementioned contributing factors to popular conceptions about the drugs these factors will be discussed in the below literature review in greater detail.

Though psychedelics overall remain stigmatized in America's dominant culture, there are many online spaces where users of the substances and those curious about the drugs can openly discuss psychedelics without as much fear of social consequences. Particularly on Reddit, subreddits such as r/LSD, r/shrooms, and r/psychonaut filled with informative threads, detailed questions, and personal stories about psychedelic drugs. These online artifacts provide seemingly endless examples of discourse that routinely challenge, distort, and reimagine mainstream opinions about psychedelic drugs. This thesis will focus on analyzing 'trip reports' posted to these subreddits. In short, a 'trip report' is a personal recount of a psychedelic drug-infused experience (colloquially called a 'trip'). Although there are no formal requirements or processes for what constitutes a trip report, trip reports are generally written relatively soon after a

psychedelic experience ceases, include what the user experienced, and depict how the user has chosen to interpret the experience.

Collectively, trip reports from these online communities can shed light on the ways in which drug users understand or rationalize their use of psychedelics and subsequent psychedelic experiences. Given the unique context through which trip reports depict, discuss, and understand psychedelic drugs in contrast to popular depictions and ideas surrounding psychedelics, the recent push to reconsider the legality and criminality of these drugs can gain different perspectives to potentially influence legislation and further develop a more robust knowledge of these substances. Drawing upon a Foucault-influenced discourse analysis, this thesis studies the ways in which Reddit trip reports contribute to understandings of and knowledge about psychedelic drugs that challenge psychedelics' collective stigmatized reputation and subsequent classification as illicit substances.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Historical Considerations to Contextualize Psychedelics

Indigenous Roots and Colonization of Psychedelic Research in the West

First, naturally occurring psychedelics, such as psilocybin, ibogaine, mescaline, and ayahuasca, have all played important cultural roles in various indigenous societies (Ens, 2021; George et al., 2019; Fotiou, 2019). From medicinal uses to spiritual practices and social rituals, orally transmitted knowledge about how to use psychedelic drugs and stories of psychedelics have existed for centuries before the initial wave of white, western, and colonized research on psychedelics (Ens, 2021; George et al., 2019; Fotiou, 2019). These indigenous roots are important because they show that the modern wave of academic psychedelic research, as well as the earlier western academic movement of the mid-twentieth century concerning psychedelics, did not stumble upon anything new (other than the synthetization of LSD) in regard to medical applications of the drugs. In fact, the western approach to psychedelic research has been rightfully criticized for centering white perspectives and ignoring or flat-out silencing the indigenous roots of psychedelia, ironically including the western-coined term ‘psychedelic’ itself, which further postures this group of substances as being a discovery or invention of the West. (Ens, 2021; George et al., 2019).

Further demonstrating western research’s shortcomings in due diligence regarding early psychedelic inquiries, seminal works in western psychedelic literature such as Aldous Huxley’s 1954 book *Doors of Perception* and mycologist R. Gordon Wasson’s 1960 presentation entitled ‘The Hallucinogenic Fungi of Mexico: An Inquiry into the Origins of the Religious Idea Among Primitive Peoples’ misrepresented aspects of the meaning assigned to psychedelic experiences

by indigenous cultures (Ens, 2021). For instance, Huxley attributed a significant portion of the meaning derived from the Native American Church's peyote rituals to the individual's visual hallucinations, while more recent studies of this peyote ritual ascertain that the meaning was extracted from the communal aspect rather than through an individualistic (i.e., western) interpretation that focusses too much on the visual hallucinations (Jay, 2019; Ens, 2021). Continuing misinterpretations and misrepresentations of indigenous psychedelic practice, Wasson referred to indigenous cultures as 'primitive peoples', downplayed the seriousness of certain rituals by treating them as entertainment through the western gaze, and largely failed to acknowledge the legitimacy of indigenous medical and ritualistic epistemologies (Ens, 2021).

Subsequently, Huxley's and Wasson's—as well as many other white researchers from the same era—inaccurate depictions of indigenous psychedelic practices bled into future pieces of related research, effectively colonizing a significant amount western psychedelic research for years to come (Ens, 2021; Fotiou, 2019). In additional effort to illustrate colonized views in psychedelic studies, Fotiou (2019) argues that Indigenous ethnomedical systems are often seen as being more “subjective, symbolic, and constructed” than the West's biomedical model of practicing medicine, rather than acknowledging the West's medical apparatus as also being its own epistemological lens with its own set of a culturally based influences and limitations. To exemplify this claim, western science's biomedical model is largely driven by biologically deterministic scientific ideals, the production of empirical data in research, and leaves little to no room for the nuances of nonbiological moderators such as psychological, behavioral, and social factors (Deacon, 2013). Particularly in the realm of treating mental health concerns and disorders, the biomedical model is criticized for its lackluster treatments and outcomes, not to mention the myriad of political and economic factors that have affected the validity of

biomedical processes such as randomized controlled trials, which are often influenced by the insatiably for-profit pharmaceutical industry (Deacon, 2013; Bothwell et al., 2016). Despite these legitimate concerns of validity and efficacy in biomedical research, many westerners deify the biomedical model and its subsequent processes to a quasi-religious extent, treating it as a near-objective and supreme epistemology of a falsely perceived knowledge creation hierarchy (Bothwell et al., 2016).

Indeed, the concept of objectivity in the realm of science can neither be extrapolated from cultural influence nor exist in a vacuum (Taylor, 2003). Therefore, western science's overarching tendency to write off indigenous and other medicinal practices as being less legitimate, particularly in regard to psychedelics, is rife with the mindset of the colonizer, white supremacy, and racism. To combat the colonization of psychedelic research and to stay historically accurate, the indigenous origins of psychedelic use must be centered and uplifted. Though there are nuanced differences in various indigenous societies' ritualistic practices involving psychoactive plants, there are general consistencies that appear across different approaches. Metzner (1998) outlines five common themes found across many indigenous cultures: (1) a guide or shaman who leads the ritual and is often tasked with singing or making music, (2) potential for healing, be it physical, mental, or spiritual, (3) potential for gaining special knowledge via divination, (4) perception of alternate realms or realities, and (5) perception of spiritual entities. While far from exhaustive, this historical consideration is necessary for contextualizing the westernized approaches to psychedelics because the West neither discovered psychedelics' therapeutic potential first nor in a vacuum, no matter how much modern research may imply the contrary (Ens, 2021; Fotiou, 2019; George et al., 2019). With the underpinning and perpetual influence of

indigenous psychedelic practices having been established, the remainder of this historical contextualization can now transition to the western history of psychedelics.

An often-noted moment in scientific history that gestures towards the West's introduction to psychedelic research is Swiss chemist Albert Hofmann's synthetization of LSD during the late 1930s and early 1940s (Nutt, 2019; Ens, 2021). When introduced to the United States just a few years later, LSD quickly became a popular object of research for its abilities to induce alleged symptoms of acute psychosis, altered states of consciousness, ego-dissolution, thought disorder, visual hallucinations, and emotional awareness of repressed memories (Rucker et al., 2018; Nutt, 2019). Consequently, throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, LSD was researched for psychiatry and psychotherapy to better understand the mind and to treat mental health conditions, including alcoholism, depression, anxiety, and schizophrenia, to name a few (Rucker et al., 2018; Dyck, 2006). However, some psychedelic research at the time was of questionable ethics and helped contribute to its looming stigmatization. Timothy Leary, often recognized for his countercultural moniker "turn on, tune in, drop out," and Ram Doss (formerly Richard Alpert) were fired from Harvard after about two years of conducting psilocybin research and experiments due to irresponsible practices, accusations of pressuring graduate students to take psychedelics, and sharing drugs with students (Moreno, 2016; Ulrich & Patten, 1991).

Further tarnishing psychedelic research's collective reputation, even the CIA conducted LSD experiments with the now infamous project MK-Ultra from the early 1950s to the early 1970s in attempt to weaponize the substance for mind control (Ens, 2021). At the height of the Red Scare, the CIA funded research to see if LSD could act as a sort of 'truth serum' to expose suspected communists (Ulrich & Patten, 1991). Throughout the course of MK-Ultra, CIA researchers routinely implemented deeply unethical practices such as dosing unwitting

participants with LSD, which resulted in a plethora of poor outcomes for the participants, one of whom died by apparent suicide just nine days after being unknowingly dosed (Ulrich & Patten, 1991; Lee & Shlain, 1992). Obscene ethical failures notwithstanding, the MK-Ultra experiments additionally represent the state's attempt to weaponize and militarize psychedelics.

Consequently, there is a marked interrelation between the end of the CIA's MK-Ultra and the federal illegalization of psychedelics sharing similar timelines. Though this initial western wave of LSD research was rife with problematic ethics, inconsistent methodological approaches, and attempts at weaponization, psychedelic research overall showed definitive promise for therapeutic applications (Belouin & Henningfield, 2018; Rucker et al., 2018).

The War on Drugs, Media Depictions, Moral Panics, and Political Opportunism

However, despite its evident potential, LSD and other psychedelics were classified as Schedule I drug by the UN in 1967 and subsequently given the same classification in the US in 1970 via the Controlled Substances Act (CSA), which illegalized recreational use of psychedelics, labeled psychedelics as having no acceptable medical use, and placed harsh restrictions on researching psychedelics to the point of impracticality in most clinical contexts (Nutt, 2019; Belouin & Henningfield, 2018; Rucker et al., 2018). So, if LSD showed potential for medical applications, why was it effectively banned from research? While unethical practices in some of the LSD research projects contributed to the eventual stigmatization of psychedelics, there are also sociopolitical conditions that also influenced this stigmatization to consider.

Given the political climate surrounding the Vietnam War, some scholars have noted potential political motivations to criminalize certain drugs associated with certain activist movements. For example, African Americans and other racial minorities were unfairly associated with marijuana use, and marijuana was simultaneously demonized (Rosino &

Hughey, 2018; Vitiello, 2021). In addition, with African Americans being drafted to the Vietnam War at disproportionate rates coupled with the Black Panthers' antiwar stances, the illegalization of marijuana provided ample opportunity for the state to both criminalize blackness and silence dissent against the war (Rosino & Hughey, 2018; Wesson, 2011).

Similarly, parallel arguments have been made to suggest that part of why psychedelics were stigmatized and subsequently illegalized was due to the hippie/counterculture movement, which was also notoriously antiwar, and its association with psychedelic drugs (Goode, 2008; Wesson, 2011; Baum, 2016). As a result, hippies could be written off as deviants for their drug use, and antiwar sentiments could consequently be further delegitimized (Rosino & Hughey, 2018; Goode, 2008; Wesson, 2011). The initial illegalization of psychoactive substances like marijuana and psychedelic drugs could be understood as a precursor to or akin to a first major step towards the blatant war on drugs that began under the Nixon administration and continues today (Falcon, 2021; Kuzmarov, 2018; Baum, 2016).

In addition to the political motivations behind criminalizing psychedelics, Goode (2008) heavily criticizes the mainstream media of the 1960s for contributing to a moral panic surrounding psychedelic substances. In the criticism, the media is scrutinized for irresponsibly running stories with sensationalized headlines based on information of dubious legitimacy (and sometimes outright false) such as reports of LSD making people crazy, damaging chromosomes, and posing a threat that was "more dangerous than the Vietnam War" (Goode, 2008). Acting now as a seminal example of LSD sensationalism, *Life* magazine's March 1966 issue ran a cover story entitled "LSD: The Exploding Threat of the Mind Drug That Got Out of Control" (Lee & Shlain, 1992). Goode (2008) argues these incredulous stories from the media sensitized the public to these dramatized themes and, therefore, enhanced the perceived credibility of these

types of stories. Opportunistically, the political machine coopted the apparent moral panic surrounding psychedelic drugs when legislating the drugs' collective legality, manufacturing the ability to sway public opinion not only on the drugs themselves, but also on ideological comorbidities associated with drug use to propagate the military-industrial complex, racism, and the prison-industrial complex. (Vitiello, 2021; Falcon, 2021; Lee & Shlain, 1992).

Modern Push for Decriminalization/Legalization of Psychedelics

Despite the current wave of renewed positivity towards perceptions of psychedelic drugs, current negative views of the drugs may be influenced by the demonization of the substances from the 1960s (Davis et al., 2021; Vitiello, 2021; Goode, 2008). However, the resurgence in psychedelic research and the current social movement pushing for changes to psychedelic drugs' collective legal classification have arisen in spite of leftover, lagging, and misinformed narratives from the early war on drugs era. There are several key factors that can explain the oft-dubbed "psychedelic renaissance" (Sessa, 2017; Bøhling, 2017; Langlitz, 2013; Sessa 2012) we are experiencing now.

Although the academic research on psychedelics during the early to mid-twentieth century largely forwarded positive attitudes towards the drugs in terms of their therapeutic potential, a significant amount of the studies in retrospect fail tremendously to meet current academic standards (Fuentes et al., 2020; Langlitz, 2013). Consequently, this essentially created a significant gap in research and proved opportune for further academic inquiry. Though psychedelics' legal classification severely restricts certain types of studies and experimentation with the drugs, Europe saw a notable uptick in psychedelic research in the 1990s (Studerus et al., 2011). With significant advances in brain imaging technology and other scientific innovations, studying psychedelics, even under the heavy restrictions of drug regulations, became much more

feasible (Nutt, 2019; Langlitz, 2013; Studerus et al., 2011). Further, the specific potential of psychedelics' benefits largely revolves around aiding mental health, which has evolved into a widely discussed sociopolitical concern in the United States (Belouin & Henningfield, 2019). Considering the retroactive gap in legitimate research, advancements in technology, and the mental health crisis, a resurgence in psychedelic research is no surprise.

Additionally, there has also been a sort of slow, but sure, movement for normalizing the idea of psychedelics having potential health benefits in popular media (Bøhling, 2017; Langlitz, 2013; Sessa 2012). Just in the last couple of years, Netflix has released two major specials platforming potential positive aspects of psychedelics. In 2020, Netflix released the documentary *Have a Good Trip: Adventures in Psychedelics*, which featured various celebrities recounting anecdotes of using psychedelics, cultural impacts of the drugs, and other information relevant to psychedelics. In 2022, Netflix released the docuseries *How to Change Your Mind*, featuring environmental journalist Michael Pollan, author of a book of the same name, discussing the histories of and advocacy for four different psychedelic drugs: LSD, psilocybin, MDMA, and mescaline. Notably, *How to Change Your Mind*'s genre is classified by Netflix as "Docuseries, Medical TV Shows, Science & Nature Docs," arguably alluding to level of validity that Netflix attributes to the series. Though these examples are far from exhaustive and expand well beyond the scope of one streaming platform, there are plenty of other examples to suggest changing attitudes towards psychedelic drugs in mainstream media that are dramatically different from the sensationalized headlines and cover stories of the not-so-distant past.

Foucault Power/Knowledge

To frame the theoretical foundation of this thesis, I will draw upon the work and philosophy of Michel Foucault, who ironically happened to experiment with psychedelics in

1975 by taking LSD in Death Valley (Borg, 2020). Shortly after the experience before leaving the United States, Foucault told a fellow academic at Claremont University that the trip to Death Valley was “the greatest experience of my life” (Penner, 2019). Though Foucault never directly wrote about his LSD trip (Penner, 2019), a so-called ‘greatest experience’ is a blatantly significant label, especially coming from a philosophical powerhouse such as Foucault. While tracing the influence of the LSD trip in Foucault’s work is beyond the scope of this paper, the relevance of Foucault’s psychedelic experimentation clear because of its relation to several of Foucault’s larger theoretical ideas such as power, knowledge, biopolitics, and biopower.

Foucault was deeply concerned with the relationship between power and knowledge, particularly in the context of institutions that possess power or influence. With that power, institutions can collectively decide what types of knowledge are considered legitimate or ‘true’ (Foucault, 1980). From an interview on the relationship between truth and power, Foucault states:

The important thing here, I believe, is that truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power... Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (1980, p. 72-73)

Essentially, concepts of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, including the practical moral and ethical applications thereof, are subject to the influence of societal power structures. For Foucault, there

are five main traits and factors that determine a society's political economy of 'truth': (1) scientific discourse and how it is produced, (2) forces of economic and political incitement, (3) the result of mass diffusion and consumption of information-producing apparatuses, (4) dominant political and economic institutions, and (5) political debate and on the grounds of social divisiveness (1980, p. 73). To illustrate these societal determinants and mechanisms of truth/knowledge creation, I will apply them to the case of psychedelic drugs in America.

For Foucault's first factor in the political economy of truth, scientific discourse and how it is produced is certainly a player in popular views of 'truth' about psychedelics. Regardless of the recent scientific push to loosen legal restrictions on psychedelic substances, the drugs remain classified as Schedule 1, signaling psychedelics have no current acceptable medical applications. Caught up to current scientific findings or not, the DEA postures as an institution that makes decisions in congruence with formalized, academic science in its drug scheduling processes. Regarding how scientific discourse is produced, the previously mentioned biomedical model of practicing medicine, along with its strong reliance on producing empirical data and research methods such as the 'gold standard' of randomized controlled trials (Bothwell et al., 2016), is the dominant epistemological lens through which scientific discourse is created. In practice, the credibility (or 'truthfulness') assigned to scientific discourse and its mechanisms for production can be exemplified by how often published scientific research is cited as evidence for a claim, whether it be in a TV news segment, a CDC page on a particular illness, or an everyday conversation between individuals.

In addition, 'truth' about the nature of psychedelics is affected by forces of political and economic incitement. As demonstrated throughout the history of psychedelics in America, political and economic incentives have routinely reshaped societal views towards the drugs.

Initial western research introduced to America the idea of using psychedelics as a tool for better understanding the mind and mental disorders (Ens, 2021; George et al., 2019; Fotiou, 2019). Not long after, unsuccessful attempts by the CIA to weaponize LSD during the MK-Ultra experiments coupled with a convenient opportunity to silence acid-influenced and anti-war hippies led to the criminalization of the drugs, further legitimizing the USA's invasion of Vietnam by silencing dissent and propagating the military-industrial complex, which concurrently fed the prison-industrial complex as well (Vitiello, 2021; Rosino & Hughey, 2018; Wesson, 2011). For the mere cost of changing 'truth' about psychedelics, American capitalism and imperialism gained substantial ability to continue profiteering and expanding political influence.

Even today, economic and political influence can be seen in psychedelic discourse, particularly concerning micro-dosing, wherein people take a substantially smaller dose of psychedelics for various potential benefits. In the micro-dosing section of a CNN article about psilocybin, LaMotte (2022) deliberately references a mycologist's statement that psilocybin could make people better citizens. From a *Forbes* article, Kelly (2020) describes Silicon Valley workers micro-dosing for potential boosts in creativity, focus, and productivity to stay competitive in the job market. With the framing of profit motives and better citizenship, psychedelics, albeit a much smaller dosage than the standard, once again experience an alteration of their 'truth'.

Foucault's third trait of societal knowledge creation revolves around the mass diffusion and consumption of the broad, more informal apparatuses of education and information. In the case of psychedelics, this trait could be exemplified through common, often sensationalized, ideas about the drugs that have permeated dominant culture through a multitude of popular

media. Though several decades have passed since the initial demonization of psychedelics, many of the misinformed or deceitful ideas about the drugs that originated in the 1960s have withstood the test of time via a generational passing down of ‘truths’ and those ‘truths’ continued influence on mainstream attitudes towards the drugs (Siff, 2015). Examples include believing the drugs cause brain and/or chromosomal damage, psychedelics will make you do crazy things like jumping off buildings in attempt to fly, and LSD stays in your spine forever (Siff, 2015; Goode, 2008). Essentially, these ideas are a product of a collective consumption of information from a plethora of sources and anecdotes that reinforce the ideas to the point that they are commonly accepted as truth or valid knowledge. Due to the scale of this mass diffusion along with the relatively niche nature of psychedelic inquiry, shifting prevailing ‘knowledge’ about psychedelics is a tall order, and it is no surprise that ideas from the 1960s still have significant influence today.

Foucault’s fourth factor in society’s creation of truth focuses on the dominant political and economic institutions at play. Undoubtedly, large institutions with vast influence and power have a powerful effect on their constituents, and, through Foucault’s analysis, are significant players in a given society’s truth-creating mechanism. Foucault specifically pointed to institutions such as major media sources (1980, p. 73). While these institutions may not always align perfectly, they nonetheless have the power to regulate truth as a result of their perceived truth worthiness or credibility. In United States, just six companies are estimated to collectively control about 90% of mainstream media (Nalbandian, 2022; Louise, 2020). For comparison, around fifty companies to had roughly the same influence back in the early 1980s (Nalbandian, 2022; Louise, 2020). Additionally, Facebook, Google, TikTok, Twitter, Snapchat, and Reddit dominate the social media realm (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Though not quite a monopoly on

information distribution, these private companies all possess incredible power to influence what is considered to be knowledge, and they are all financially incentivized to propagate and reinforce capitalism and its core tenets due to their for-profit nature.

Foucault's last component of society's political economy of truth lies in political debate, social divisiveness, and ideological struggle (1980, p. 73). Essentially, a society's conception of truth is at the mercy of political and intellectual movements. In the case of psychedelics, this phenomenon can be observed with the ever-changing mainstream sentiments about the drugs. From the initial wave of Western research into psychedelics, the substances were seen as a fascinating subject worthy of scientific inquiry (Ens, 2021; Fotiou, 2019; Nutt, 2019). From there, the hippie movement was born partially from a culture around using psychedelics for spiritual growth (Goode, 2008; Wesson, 2011; Baum, 2016). Then, as the US Government began experimenting with LSD coupled with the Vietnam War and the War on Drugs, the drugs became demonized and illegal (Ens, 2021; Nutt, 2019; Ulrich & Patten, 1991; Lee & Shlain, 1992). In recent years, a new wave of scientific research has begun to once again change the 'truth' about psychedelics by viewing them as potential aids in mental health struggles (Nutt; 2019). As debates, movements, and legal action surrounding psychedelics have come and gone over the years, so too has the 'truth' and acceptable knowledge about psychedelics.

Reddit & Online Communities

To situate psychedelic discourse into a researchable context, the use of online forums provides ample opportunity for analysis. Online forums, social media, and other means of computer-mediated communication have established themselves as both practical and dynamic objects of study. In the case of Reddit, users can easily organize around specific topics (subreddits) to build online relationships and cultures, observe and participate in highly niche

communities, and remain anonymous through the use of ‘throwaway’/burner accounts if they wish to do so (Proferes et al., 2021). Depending on the subreddit, users can typically post and comment in the form of pictures, videos, GIFs, and plain text (Proferes et al., 2021).

Given these affordances of Reddit, it is not hard to understand why communities centered around taboo topics emerge. In the case of illicit substances, there are many subreddits dedicated to the discussion of and community around certain drugs and drug-related activity. From the subreddit *r/tooktoomuch*’s constant feed of comedically-driven videos depicting people under the influence behaving oddly, to *r/drugsarebeautiful*’s boastful pictures of people’s drug stashes, to *r/askdrug*’s informative harm reduction strategies, and to the rather straightforward *r/cocaine* for all things cocaine, there are seemingly endless subreddits that build community around illicit substances in one way or another (Barenholtz et al., 2021). Psychedelics, of course, are no exception. Reddit users interested in psychedelic drugs post relevant memes, experiences with psychedelics (referred to as ‘trip reports’), and ponder the utility of the drugs on popular psychedelic-centric subreddits such as *r/LSD*, *r/shrooms*, and *r/psychonaut*, which I plan to draw upon for this thesis.

Research Questions

To better understand specific communities’ knowledge about psychedelic drugs and the structures that influence that knowledge, I propose the following research questions:

RQ1: How do trip reports from psychedelic-related subreddits offer knowledge about psychedelic drugs?

RQ2: How do underlying structures within psychedelic-related subreddits and subsequent trip report posts play into the knowledge-creating process with respect to psychedelic drugs?

CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

Critical Technocultural & Foucauldian Discourse Analyses

The method of this paper will largely draw upon Brock's (2012; 2018) Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) as it applies to Foucault's ideas around discourse and knowledge creation. According to Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2017):

When referring to 'discourse', Foucault does not mean a particular instance of language use – a piece of text, an utterance or linguistic performance – but rules, divisions, and systems of a particular body of knowledge. Discourse approximates the concept of 'discipline' in two ways: it specifies the kind of institutional partitioning of knowledge we find in medicine, science, psychiatry, biology, economics, etc. But it also refers to techniques and practices through which objects, concepts, and strategies are formed (p. 114).

With this Foucauldian definition, discourse becomes a tool through which to understand a given corpus of statements' conceptions of knowledge and truth in relation to (and revelatory of) existing power structures. As demonstrated throughout Foucault's work, knowledge has a fluid nature that is molded by its surroundings. By incorporating a Foucauldian discourse analysis, I hope to shed light on a snapshot of psychedelic knowledge in a particular context as the drugs flow into a slightly more acceptable societal standing.

With principles of Foucauldian discourse analysis, I will also incorporate the methodologies of Brock's (2018) Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA). In a seminal example of executing a CTDA, Brock (2012; 2018) analyzes the Black Twitter community at the intersection of the social platform's architecture and affordances, the textual

data of the discourse itself, and critical cultural considerations. Accounting for many of the nuances across online communication, a CTDA seeks to draw meaning from a discourse produced by the interplay of medium, content, and cultural context.

Data Collection & Analysis

My corpus of statements for this discourse analysis came from three of the most popular subreddits, forums dedicated to specific subjects on the website Reddit, that are directly related to psychedelic drugs: r/LSD (~675k subscribers), r/shrooms (~520k), and r/psychonaut (~425k). On forums like these, a popular type of post is a ‘trip report’ wherein users recount an individual psychedelic experiences they had. Trip reports can be anywhere from a couple sentences to several detailed paragraphs, but they each represent an individual experience with a psychedelic drug with potential to articulate different understandings and conceptions of the substances in comparison to mainstream sentiments.

I deliberately sought out 84 of the most popular trip reports across the three subreddits that were posted in the last year by using Reddit’s sorting and filtering features. I chose to look at posts from the last twelve months for the sake of timeliness and relevance due to rapidly changing sentiments surrounding psychedelics, exemplified by recent legal pushes to loosen restrictions on the substances (Wang, 2021). To more fully account for the current state of the so-called psychedelic renaissance, drawing upon a more recent sample was more appropriate for the purposes of this research. Additionally, I sampled from the most popular trip reports within each of the subreddits because posts with more upvotes are generally more representative of the communities at large and their respective cultures. While some nuance admittedly will be lost by not considering less popular trip reports, the cultural sensitivity component in the context of a

CTDA necessitated a sample that is more representative of a community's beliefs and behaviors (Brock, 2012; Brock, 2018).

With the collection of the 84 trip reports across the three subreddits, I conducted my analysis with consideration to the affordances of each subreddit, Reddit as an artifact itself, and cultural context within each community. After carefully reading and taking notes on each trip report, I looked for common themes and elements throughout the sample to tease out knowledges that the reports provide, and I identified mechanisms within the forums and their respective cultures that influence the subreddits' economies of truth.

In identifying themes, I categorized the trip reports based on how, if at all, they were challenging certain normative views towards psychedelics, which was guided by Foucault's five traits of the knowledge-production apparatus. For instance, a trip report could challenge psychedelics' status as Controlled I substances by speaking to the user's perceived medical benefits from their psychedelic experience. Additionally, a trip report could challenge the popular perception that people on hallucinogens are dangerous and potentially violent by describing a peaceful, meditative experience while on the drug. The trip reports collectively represent a form of knowledge about psychedelics, and I wanted to evaluate the alternative perspectives/knowledges that the reports can provide, as compared to the more dominant apparatuses of knowledge production.

From there, I analyzed the reports by how they specifically conceptualized what they took away from their experiences with psychedelics, whether it be through metaphor, through descriptions of emotions, as a tool for introspection, as a means of escape, etc. Not only did I seek to understand how the knowledge from trip reports challenges society's general conceptions of the drugs, but I also studied the means through which the knowledge is conveyed. Since

psychedelics offer a radically different experience of reality (Bøhling, 2017), describing one's trip often necessitates abstraction and indirect language, which is why I also wanted to break down the different structural techniques used in trip reports.

Following Brock's (2018) CTDA framework, I needed to account for the architectural mechanisms and affordances on Reddit as well as on the individual subreddits. In general, I articulated how Reddit's platform and limitations influence discourse. Whether it be the ability to be anonymous, the ability to create community around niche topics, the forms of content users can post (text, pictures, videos, etc.), sorting features, searching algorithm, or the upvote/downvote system, Reddit's medium-specific traits influence its users' discourse. Further, each individual subreddit has its own set of rules, procedures, and guidelines to regulate and influence content too, which ultimately leaves every subreddit with a unique culture even if there is overlap in subject matter. Because each of the subreddits have their own cultures, I considered differences in how r/LSD, r/shrooms, and r/psychonaut operate and build community. Lastly, I acknowledge that my own personal biases in relation to my views on psychedelics are subject to influencing the below analysis because qualitative data and its subsequent interpretations are not objective. Therefore, the results of the analysis are intersubjective between myself and the corpus of trip reports.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The Subreddits

r/LSD

Of the three psychedelic-centric subreddits I analyzed, the first one investigated was *r/LSD*, the largest of the group with just over 700,000 subscribers. Due to limitations in Reddit's search engine, the platform only allows you to review the most recent 1,000 posts. Within the top 1,000 posts of the last year, 20 of these were trip reports. Since 20 trip reports are a particularly small portion of the total posts, it is worth mentioning briefly other types of content on *r/LSD* to better understand the subreddit's culture.

For *r/LSD* specifically, the most popular posts in the last year often revolve around humor. From elaborate memes inspired by psychedelic art, to simple screenshots of tweets about LSD, and to seemingly mundane pictures accompanied with dramatic captions that suggest the original poster was tripping LSD while making the post, *r/LSD* subscribers clearly enjoy joking about acid. Built into the architecture of the subreddit, many posts will include specific "tags" located just before the title of a submission to categorize posts, but, unfortunately, there is no way to sort posts by a specific tag. Examples of tags include "psychedelic art", "question", "meme", "currently tripping", and "challenging trip", to name a few.

In addition, r/LSD also positions itself as being a useful source for harm reduction in drug use. On the front page of r/LSD, there are two posts from the subreddit's moderators that are permanently pinned, at the moderators' discretion, to the top of the page. The first post is titled "LSD information for newbies" and contains a thorough bulleted list of risks associated with using LSD, how to authenticate that a potential tab of LSD is authentic, how to prepare for a psychedelic experience, typical effects and reactions to LSD, and other educational resources. The second post pinned to the top of the page is titled "Don't believe the dosages you see on here" and is a much briefer caution to subscribers about dose sizes. Evidently, there is a growing concern that users who post to r/LSD often hyperbolize the amount of acid they take for the sake of self-aggrandization. Consequently, the moderators are concerned that LSD novices might get an inaccurate picture of what constitutes a 'typical dose', which could easily lead to rookie trippers taking more than they can handle. On top of the two pinned posts, r/LSD communicates its harm reduction goals by providing a myriad of resources in the sidebar of the front page that include links to drug authentication resources, a psychedelic emergency hotline, other psychedelic-related subreddits.

Another notable aspect of r/LSD is the subreddit's rules, which are also linked in the sidebar of the front page. Most, if not all, subreddits have a distinct set of rules or guidelines for subscribers and visitors alike. For r/LSD, there is an obvious importance placed on keeping posts legal, at least for Reddit's guidelines. Since LSD is illegal in most places, there are multiple rules against the sale of , promotion of , evaluation of, or search for drugs, even to the point of banning photos of people's drug stashes. Apart from drug-specific rules, there are also rules against doxing, 'toxic' behavior, low quality images, and off-topic posts. With stringent rules against

posts that allude to or exemplify drug trafficking, it makes sense as to why the vast majority of posts are related to the experience of taking drugs rather than the drugs themselves.

These rules have undoubtedly influenced the culture that has arisen from r/LSD, and the moderators curate the rules and atmosphere of the page to promote a specific idea of what the subreddit should be. In the sidebar of r/LSD just under the subscriber count, the subreddit's description reads:

Community designated to Lysergic acid diethylamide-25 (LSD) Welcome to this awesome subreddit! Education, Love, Mindfulness, Acceptance and Harm Reduction are our main goals here. We Are NOT a drug market, so please refrain from sourcing. What are you waiting for? Get some relaxing music on, Sit down, grab a soft blanket, some fresh fruit, a cool glass of water, and have a nice time. Let's try to keep this place positive, entertaining, and most of all, a safe, inviting place. :)

As evidenced by r/LSD's popular posts, tags, pinned moderator posts, rules, and description, there is a transparent goal to make the community a place of 'good vibes' with an emphasis on entertainment, education, and the various intersections of the two. These ideas will be further explored in the context of trip reports in later sections.

r/shrooms

Representing another major subreddit in Reddit's psychedelic sphere, r/shrooms has carved out its own niche with around 560k subscribers. Due to similar searching constraints that arose while looking for trip reports in r/LSD, I found 14 trip reports in r/shrooms in the top 1000 posts of the last year. Part of what makes r/shrooms' function as a subreddit so different from r/LSD has to do with the makeup of psychedelic mushrooms themselves. Rather than being synthesized in a lab like acid, 'magic mushrooms' are naturally occurring substances that can be

cultivated. Consequently, a significant number of posts in r/shrooms are centered around finding, growing, harvesting, and storing mushrooms. Due to these additional types of posts that do not exist in r/LSD, finding fewer trip reports makes sense. A follow-up study from this thesis could very well explore how participants in this subreddit discuss best practices around these many aspects of mushroom use. However, there are still many similarities to r/LSD in terms of content.

Just like its acid-based counterpart, r/shrooms is saturated with humorous posts and memes, typically ranging anywhere from the psychedelic experience itself to anything mushroom-related. Popular posts in r/shrooms also resemble content from r/LSD with similar general questions about tripping and photos and videos from trips to fuel discussion and build community. Further, r/shrooms categorizes posts with nearly identical tags to r/LSD with a couple of additional tags that are specific to mushrooms, such as ‘cultivation’ and ‘hunting’. Much like r/LSD’s policies, r/shrooms has several rules against posts that appear to be drug trafficking or discussing specific places to obtain mushrooms.

Despite r/shrooms’ clear stance against trafficking mushrooms, the abundance of posts that center around growing mushrooms certainly blurs the line of what counts as a rule-breaking post. There is a seemingly endless stream of users’ pictures of recent mushroom harvests, questions about growing mushrooms and easily accessible information about different spores and substrates. Furthermore, while there might not be posts about *specific* locations to find psychedelic mushrooms, plenty of threads detail methods and environments for hunting mushrooms in the wild. I suspect r/shrooms has these rules in place primarily to abide by Reddit’s site-wide rule against soliciting or facilitating illegal or prohibited transactions.

The various processes for growing and finding mushrooms are crucial to r/shrooms’ identity, as evidenced by its description below:

A place to discuss the growing, hunting, and experience of shrooms.” Post about your first time or give advice to those who will experience their first time soon. Talk about your favourite teks, kits, species or strains. Post a picture of what you found in your area! Ask for help from other experienced growers on certain problems you're having. Learn about psilocybin and its derivative psilocin. Get help with identifying a certain species of fungus. Learn different ways of taking shrooms. In a tea perhaps? Toppings on a pizza? Maybe using the lemon tek?

Clearly, a significant component of the subreddit’s mission centers at least *part* of a process that could be interpreted as illegal action. With many posts detailing enormous harvests and stashes of mushrooms, intent to sell could be reasonably supposed. Notably, r/LSD has a specific rule against pictures of drug stashes. However, I have yet to see any posts or comments in r/shrooms that explicitly aim to sell or source mushrooms beyond the growing process or general hunting advice.

Narrowly avoiding Reddit violations aside, r/shrooms’ description also reveals key cultural differences when compared to r/LSD. In the case of r/shrooms, the description is strictly on-topic and lays out the various types of content found on the forum. Conversely, r/LSD’s description is much more focused on the overall atmosphere of the page with direct references to harm reduction, positivity, entertainment, and fostering a safe environment. The lone mention of LSD itself occurs in the first sentence. With r/shrooms, the substance is referenced throughout the description with no additional qualifiers about the intended atmosphere of the subreddit. Moreover, harm reduction does not seem to be nearly as significant to the r/shrooms community as it does to the r/LSD community. Neither r/shrooms’ sidebar nor its two pinned moderator posts at the top of the page refer to harm reduction, whereas LSD’s sidebar and pinned posts both

emphasized the importance of harm reduction. While it may be unfair to label r/shrooms as uncaring about harm reduction, r/LSD's front page clearly indicates a higher prioritization of safety in its culture.

r/Psychonaut

The third and final subreddit for this analysis is r/Psychonaut with around 436k subscribers. From the subreddit's description, a 'psychonaut' is defined as follows:

A Psychonaut is a person who explores activities by which altered states of consciousness are induced and utilized for spiritual purposes or the exploration of the human condition, including shamanism, lamas of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, sensory deprivation, and both archaic and modern users of entheogenic substances, in order to gain deeper insights into the mind and spirituality.

With the definition of psychonaut constituting the entire subreddit description, r/Psychonaut has a much more spiritual and philosophical bend than r/LSD and r/shrooms. Due to its focus on the psychedelic experience itself, r/Psychonaut is filled with posts about the whole gamut of psychedelic substances, rather than only acid or psilocybin. Further distinguishing itself from the other two subreddits in this analysis, r/Psychonaut explicitly bans memes and otherwise 'low-quality' content. Consequently, posts in r/Psychonaut are overwhelmingly textual, so formal trip reports were much more common, and I managed to find all fifty of the most upvoted trip reports of the last year.

As mentioned above, r/Psychonaut is strikingly different than the other two major psychedelic subreddits. Not only does this forum ban memes, but it also enforces another rule that requires all multimedia posts to provide an explanation of relevance in the comment section. As a result, these stricter content policies influence users to post text and text alone, contributing

to the more serious atmosphere of the community. Without memes and other lighthearted content, subscribers are more likely to reflect on their own psychedelic experiences and share with others. Therefore, trip reports are quite common amongst popular posts. Additionally, there are countless posts that explore the meaning behind psychedelic experiences with concepts such as ego death, allusions to eastern mysticism and religion, and philosophy in general. For r/Psychnonaut, psychedelics are seen more so as a tool for the conscious and unconscious mind rather than a drug or good time. Now that the subreddits have been discussed, the analysis will now transition to the specific trip reports found on the subreddits.

Trip Reports

With brief overviews of the three subreddits used for data collection, the focus of this thesis will now shift to the trip reports themselves. Because of limitations to Reddit's internal searching functions, I gathered 84 trip reports instead of the originally planned 150. However, I feel that saturation was reached even with the smaller sample size. Of the 84 reports, 20 are from r/LSD, 14 are from r/shrooms, and 50 are from r/Psychnonaut. After careful thematic coding and analysis, almost every single trip report frames the psychedelic experience as being either self-revelatory in a spiritual/emotional sense, extremely immersive entertainment, or some combination of the two. These psychedelic categories and the knowledge trippers claim to have gained in their reports will be explored in further detail in the below sections.

Psychedelics as a Tool for Self-Revelation

In the current era of the Psychedelic Renaissance, a primary motivator in the argument for loosening legal restrictions on the study of psychedelics is their potential for treating mental health issues. While this view has been gaining traction in the public sphere in recent years, specifics as to *how* psychedelics can be beneficial to mental health are often lacking. When

thinking of the typical range of medicines used to treat mental health in clinical and pharmaceutical contexts, substances that cause intense hallucinations for hours on end do not fit the traditional picture in mind. Thus, psychedelics' medical potentialities must be framed as a categorically different medication for mental health treatment. Any attempt to lump psychedelics into the same subset of medicines as SSRIs will ultimately obscure the utility of the substances. While this notion is likely obvious to anyone with medical expertise, educating or reeducating the essence of psychedelics to the masses is paramount in the knowledge creation process. While the psychedelic subreddits may not be explicitly aiming to educate the general population, they can at least serve as a catalyst for reeducation, given that they collectively share well over a million subscribers.

To begin the articulation of psychedelics as a revelatory tool, additional context is needed around the term 'self-revelation' and its relation to mental health. The word 'psychedelic' is rooted from Greek and roughly translates to 'mind manifesting' (Gunn, 2021). Down to the origins of the word, the mental nature of the psychedelic experience is arguably its most distinctive quality compared to other substances. Indeed, throughout the sample of trip reports, users consistently refer to vivid cerebral experiences that provide radically different perspectives on life, emotional understanding, and the very process of self-reflection. In the most upvoted trip report of the last year in r/shrooms, the original poster (OP) recounted their shared psilocybin experience with their significant other:

I was having crazy intense visuals, but I hardly noticed because the second it hit, it felt like somebody opened a gate inside of me and I finally got to understand myself. I spent 3 hours sitting on the floor of our kitchen with him, talking about everything that goes on in my head that I feel like I can never tell him. I was abused as a kid and have very

complicated feelings about my dad as a result, and I've never felt like I understood myself so much, or felt like I was allowed to acknowledge these things. Our relationship has changed so much just because of this. He is my favorite person in the world, and after 3 hours of him listening so intently to every word I said and crying along with me the whole time, I don't think that will ever change.

In this particular trip report, psychedelics are mainly framed as a tool for emotional processing and understanding, especially in the case of past traumas. To illustrate *how* this moment of working through trauma came to be, OP utilized a metaphor of a gate opening from within. For OP, the gate opened a previously unexplored part of their internal world, and the profundity of the trip was cemented by OP's reaffirmed love for their partner. Metaphorical representations of certain elements of tripping, such as the gate, routinely show up in trip reports as users attempt to capture their highly abstract experiences into words. In a different example of metaphor in trip reports, a user was processing their remorse in repeatedly using an ableist slur in social settings, and they described their extreme feeling of guilt: "I heard myself use this word over and over again, dark clouds emerged and suffocated my room. I could feel how this was hurting the universe and myself." As evidenced, when psychedelic experiences turn emotional, the intensity and abstract nature of the experience can sometimes necessitate metaphorical interpretation for a tripper to understand the event or communicate it to others.

From another psilocybin trip report, this time from r/Psychonaut, OP gives an uncharacteristically lengthy and detailed depiction of their very first mushroom experience. OP describes a mystical journey that revolutionized their conceptions of their own self of the universe, declaring the trip to be "by far the most significant spiritual experience" of their life.

OP explains they cannot sufficiently capture into words the “clarity and wisdom” obtained from the trip, so metaphor is once again used for interpreting a psychedelic experience:

Imagine you are a child of the most important person in the world, and that person is in the most important meeting in the world with all the most important people. Your parent is standing at the podium giving the most important speech of their life, and you walk up to tug at their shirt. Without skipping a beat, your parent stops mid-word and plops right down beside you, putting you in their lap. Your parent looks into your eyes and says kindly, “tell me what’s on your mind” and with that marvelous audience watching with rapture, your parent listens patiently to you, answering all your questions until you are satisfied.

This vivid conception of the revelatory nature of psychedelics highlights an immensely personal and vulnerable moment in the experience. However, OP’s metaphor operates in a fundamentally different manner than the previously mentioned metaphor of a gate opening from within. With the gate, there is emphasis that the ‘new world’ of understanding was opened from within, indicating an *internal* experience. On the other hand, the metaphor of the innocent child talking to a loving, all-knowing parent is a decidedly *external* depiction of revelation. Far from an anomaly, evidence of both internal and external interpretations of trips is scattered throughout the sample of trip reports, indicating a sort of dichotomous interpretive route in writing trip reports. Considering that many trip reporters admit to being unable to accurately describe the experience, this apparent internal/external dichotomy could be attributed to differences in the individual users. Conversely, unregulated doses, differences amongst specific psychedelic substances, and the subjective nature of psychedelic hallucinations could allude to inconsistencies in the psychedelic experience at large.

While plenty of trip reports utilize metaphor to communicate or understand the details of their experiences, there are also numerous trip reports that stay relatively grounded in their recounts, whether it be from taking a lower dose or simply wanting to be more straightforward. Just a couple of months after separating from their partner due to an irreconcilable disagreement about whether or not to have children, a user outlines an emotional and revelatory trip at their brother's home:

It was a mild high but just enough to start realizing what I want in life. Looking around his house made me think of what my life could look like if I finalized this divorce. Toy dinosaurs left on the window sill, art supplies and crayons scattered about, a mini toilet, little coats and children's furniture. What got me the most though is when I stepped into the bathroom and saw tiny green hand prints on the bathroom wall from my niece having fun in the bath. It's going to be a long and hard recovery from this but I think shrooms are helping me more than anything else is right now.

Although realizations akin to those above are certainly possible without the use of drugs, psychedelics can function as a tool for unearthing those realizations in manners different from a sober state of mind. Crucially, psychedelics offer *different* means of revelation, not necessarily *better*. Despite this user's self-admitted 'mild' high and overall unambiguous report, the potency of these substances cannot be understated. In another trip report, OP straightforwardly describes how a mushroom high contributed to their battle against opiate addiction and their subsequent accomplishment of 100 days free from opium:

All of a sudden everything was just so clear. I could understand how I was making my loved ones feel, I was super aware of my downward spiraling, and what I needed to do to stay off that shit. It was all so obvious and in front of my face but I was forced to really

look at my life. And so I did. Lots of tears were shed and I felt reborn spiritually... More importantly I haven't had any crazy urges to throw my life away for opiates anymore. I am able to see my addiction for what it was and all of the destruction it caused.

As demonstrated, some revelations do not need elaborate metaphors to capture the magnitude of the experience. For trippers like this person struggling with addiction, the introspection gained from psychedelics can be brutally clear, and that clarity translated into a parallelly lucid report in this example.

Many trippers do obtain the insight they initially desired prior the high, but the sheer power of the drugs can result in wanting extended breaks from psychedelics or even vowing to never trip again. In such a case, an r/Psychonaut user reflects on a visceral LSD experience:

So I took 11 gel tabs of LSD last night and I have still not slept from the experience. It was frankly intense past what I had previously understood as an intense trip (not to sound mushy). Come up was scary and dark/twisted. I don't view acid as a toy anymore and will be stopping my further use. I got what I wanted from this, crazy as it sounds It was exactly what I had hoped for. A fresh start.

Vagueness of exactly what this user got from this trip aside, this trip report underscores an aspect of the risk accompanied with psychedelics. First, it must be noted that 11 tabs of LSD is a *remarkably* high dose compared to the traditional one- or two-tab dose, but smaller doses can produce scarily intense experiences as well. The deliberate characterization of acid as no longer being a toy also contributes to the seriousness of an extraordinary trip. Additionally, phrases like 'fresh start' and references to being reborn frequently appear in trip reports, further emphasizing the visceral nature of tripping. Though many trippers indulge in psychedelics for entertainment, as will be discussed in later sections, the potential for fierce self-revelation is always lurking.

From a report in r/LSD, a first-time tripper reflects on a one-tab experience with their partner when the emotional intensity moved them both to tears:

it was like we were just holding each other and melding together in this pit of darkness, with everything swirling around us, just letting the pain run through us. And then I cried with her. I don't know how long it lasted, but after a while we came back, and holy shit did it feel good.

Here, OP alludes to the catharsis achieved from processing difficult emotions over the course of a trip, and later in the report they ruminate on a sense of reward after coming down from the LSD, while also acknowledging that it will be a long time before tripping again. Through the lens of clinical therapeutic value, psychedelics routinely demonstrate the ability to almost force users into moments of feeling their deepest feelings, previously repressed into the recesses of the mind or not.

In addition to processing powerful emotions and intense introspection, trip reporters often express perceptions of spiritual experiences during psychedelic highs with varying degrees of religiosity, ranging from direct references to God or the use of blanket terms such as ‘the universe’ or ‘reality’. Notably, due to the previously mentioned spiritual slant of the subreddit, the vast majority of spiritually focused trip reports came from r/Psyonaut. Throughout the sample, many reports theorize and speculate on the nature or existence of god(s) as well as humanity’s relationship to god(s).

In a decidedly external conception of the psychedelic experience that frames the drugs as their own entity capable of communication, a user states that the mushrooms “told” them that “we are all Gods” indulging in the human experience. Interestingly, despite the user’s external depiction of psychedelic revelation, they go on to imply belief in an internal god, saying, “the

only reason we believe the divine to be EXTERNAL to us is because we have been TAUGHT so. But WE are the divine. We are literally God experiencing itself.” If god is within us, what makes one believe psychedelic mushrooms tell you things? Are the mushrooms a distinct entity from god capable of direct communication? Whether it be pedantic or genuinely paradoxical in some way, there is a throughline of confusion about the experience in the trip report. After entertaining the thought of abandoning their atheism and speculating on the nature of divinity a bit more, the user concludes their philosophizing with “This trip really just fucked with my head lol.” From there, they suggest their spiritual journey is far from over, and they wrap up the report by asking if anyone else had similar thoughts after a trip.

Though lacking in direct references to god, another trip report details a similar representation of spirituality:

I feel like I truly understand existence in its entirety. Our entire lives as we know them have essentially been hallucinations since nothing separates us from the things around us. Everything is made up of the exact same molecules and atoms as everything else. We are everything. Everything is us.

Without getting into the esoteric weeds of atoms and molecules, the prevailing sentiment in this trip report is remarkably analogous to the previous report about the nature of god. Rather than believing everyone to be god and god to be everyone, this trip reporter believes *everything* is everyone and *everyone* is everything, implying a universal interconnectedness. However, the internal logic of both views is basically the same regardless of differences in religious representation. Later in the report, the user cements the belief in an interconnected reality, avowing, “I feel so connected to everything and yet still so excited to be myself.”

Another report ruminated on the exact same ‘everything is everything’ idea, but through a more scientifically oriented lens:

As the separation between myself and others began to disappear, so too did the separation between myself and *everything*. The universe isn't comprised of x-number of individual things, it's simply comprised of *everything*. The entirety of the universe (according to our current understanding) comes from one singular place and event- the Big Bang. There isn't a single thing that exists in our universe that didn't come from the Big Bang, therefore I'm a cosmic cousin to every bit of stardust and every alien across the heavens, and so are you.

Though this user took more of a ‘hard science’ route for interpreting their trip and understanding the universe rather than a more explicitly spiritual or religious route, it is important to note their deliberate parenthetical disclaimer- ‘according to our current understanding.’ This could imply a hesitancy to speak in more absolute terms, as if the strength of the experience loosened this user’s previously rigid ideas about the nature of reality and truth itself, or it could be a more general acknowledgement that even our more ‘objective’ ways of knowing are ultimately subject to change over time (e.g., heliocentrism).

Continuing the theme of an interconnected reality, other trip reports have referenced this belief with phraseology such as “I was part of the ONE,” “there is a collective consciousness,” and “I saw thousands of faces of people who have been in my life. I experienced aspects of my great-great-great-great-grandparents, as well as love for my grandchildren. I experienced eternity.” Clearly, *something* about the psychedelic experience produces perceptions of consciousness and connectedness well beyond the individual. The philosophical similarities across the spiritual side of trip reports are too evident to be written off as simply hallucinations.

However, out of all these terms and phrases that allude to a universal interconnectedness, perhaps the most frequently occurring term in Reddit's psychedelic sphere is 'ego death'. Specifically, ego death, sometimes referred to as 'ego dissolution' or the most extreme endpoint of ego dissolution, refers to a total loss of one's sense of self. In r/Psychnonaut, and even in the less spiritually focused psychedelic subreddits, users often discuss ego death as if it is the highest 'achievement' in the whole psychedelic experience. Often, but not always, users aiming to achieve ego death take substantially larger doses of the psychedelic of their choice. These large doses for the purpose of experiencing ego death have been dubbed 'heroic doses' by the psychedelic community. Here, a user attempts to describe their perception of ego death:

I took a heroic dose of shrooms, I couldn't tell you how much as I did not measure. two small handfuls. I experienced ego death. I felt as though I was unplugged from my body. I forgot who I was, I forgot what money was. I forgot my entire life for what was 15-30 minutes but felt much longer. I felt as though I was floating, flying and everything went black. I was re born, I took my first breath for the second time in this body. It was very intense my breathing was so loud and so overwhelming. I was able to look at myself as it was another person looking back at me. I was replugged in but it was different.

While there is debate within these psychedelic communities about what distinguishes *total* ego death from 'partial' ego dissolution, if anything at all, the key characteristics of the experience are basically the same, with perhaps just differences in intensity. In previous examples of spiritually focused trip reports, descriptions of universal oneness and collective consciousness certainly run parallel to descriptions of ego dissolution and even ego death. Therefore, experiencing a sense of a universal interconnectedness could be attributed to ego dissolution, as if the universal is hidden behind a facade of the self.

In the above user's account, an out-of-body experience allowed them to examine their self from an outside perspective, radically shifting their self-concept. Though 'death' implies a point of no return, a significant majority of users who have experienced ego death do report a return to their 'old' self, but with new knowledges, perspectives, and ideas. However, for some of those users who report experiencing an ego death, the new information from the trip can be so transformative that they no longer identify with their old self in certain manners. For instance, later in the above trip report, OP wrestles with their new conceptions of their self:

I have lost all sense of direction and sense of self. I no longer hold strong opinions or even weak opinions about anything. I now just exist. I know who i used to be. And i dont know what i should be next.

With the ability to induce existential crises of this magnitude, leaving users with extremely divergent conceptions of self after the experience, the power of psychedelics cannot be understated. Beneficial or not, users planning a psychedelic trip must accept the possibility of a life-altering event so intense that the distinction between transformation and death is futile. Though some users take issue with the term 'ego death', plenty of other users believe the term to be very adequately named. Despite some communal disagreement, many users justify the semantics of the term with genuine allusions to death. From the sample of trip reports that discuss ego death, other OPs have described the 'death' component of the term with "I really feel like I experienced death," "I lost myself and for a brief moment everything was gone, i wasn't breathing, i had no heart beating, i was like nothing," and " I experienced and grieved my own death, found God, and had the most beautiful and profound experience of my life." For previously mentioned users who identify with the universal oneness after their trip, perhaps their ego dissolution was not 'strong' enough to result in a perception of one's own death.

Nonetheless, ego death represents the spiritual component of psychedelics in its most visceral form.

While many spiritual trip reports allude to an intertwined universality in their spiritual speculations, numerous trip reports, even including some of those that believe in interconnectedness, there are also trip reports that provide a much more individualized conception of spirituality. For instance, in the same report that referenced the collective consciousness, OP deliberates, “even if life can seem meaningless and insignificant it is the value that we place upon it that determines what it is worth.” Independent of the collective conscious, OP gestures towards a more subjective and individualized meaning of life. If someone believes life is meaningless, then it is. Conversely, if someone else believes life has substantial meaning, then it also does. For this trip reporter, the universal and the personal are not mutually exclusive.

In another spiritually individualized trip report, OP felt as though the spirit of god, distinct from the self, was speaking through them during the trip. The user details, “I cannot adequately describe the clarity and wisdom that came from my mouth in those hours. My mind was constantly awash in the infinite wisdom of that other world.” Rather than a universal oneness, OP characterizes their self-revelation as an external spiritual entity communicating knowledge through them. Again, the dichotomy of internal and external sources of knowledge in psychedelic trips comes into play, but the user’s personal religious beliefs could also mediate this decidedly external conception with references to a god, which OP named ‘Rafiki’ after a shamanic monkey character in Disney’s *The Lion King*.

As evidenced throughout this section, there is an undeniable spiritual and self-revelatory component of the psychedelic experience across Reddit’s psychedelic communities. While the *source* of the information that leads to self-revelation during trips is up for debate, whether it be

from the drugs themselves, external beings accessed through the drugs, the self, or some interaction of the three, users routinely describe transformative experiences in their trip reports that result from new knowledge, wisdom, and perspective gained during the trip. Additionally, regardless of the various philosophical and religious characterizations, theories, and descriptions (metaphorical or straightforward) users offer in their reports, the common throughline remains that psychedelics are often used for personal growth by means of self-revelation. However, not all trippers are seeking enlightenment or healing.

Bad Trip Reports

Before moving onto trip reports that describe a more entertainment-focused experience, a notoriously unpleasant aspect of the psychedelic experience must first be addressed: bad trips. While a multitude of trip reporters detail wonderful and profound experiences when reflecting on their psychedelic highs, there is an apparent darker side to psychedelics that can severely hinder or completely undermine the experience as a whole. Tales of and references to so-called bad trips permeate the respective cultural fabrics of the three subreddits. Likewise, exaggerated, fabricated, and cherry-picked characterizations of bad trips in popular media have played a prominent role in the demonization of psychedelics over the years, as previously discussed in the literature review and historical contextualization of the drugs. Consequently, anxieties about bad trips can sometimes take precedent over the more positive aspects of psychedelics on both the micro and macro scale. Regardless, freakishly nightmarish, stressful, paranoia inducing, and overall horrific experiences under the influence of psychedelics are certainly true phenomena. Despite the cultural prominence of bad trips in both the subreddits and amongst the general population, the definition for what exactly constitutes a bad trip is hotly contested, even to the extent of questioning whether the phrase ‘bad trip’ is necessary or adequate at all.

For the purposes of this paper, I will broadly define bad trips as certain psychedelic experiences that are perceived negatively and considered by the user to not have been revelatory or beneficial in a meaningful way. Definitionally, the distinction between beneficial versus unbeneficial negative experiences is the key qualifier. For further context, there is a school of thought in the psychedelic sphere that insists a ‘bad trip’ represents a sort of mental or spiritual trial and demands further introspection or analysis from the tripper for proper closure. As a result, those who adhere to this interpretation refer to the negative experiences as ‘challenging trips’ and deliberately avoid using the term ‘bad trip’. As such, several trip reports from the previous section of this analysis can serve as examples of challenging trips, wherein stressful, depressing, or otherwise negative experiences eventually led to cathartic realizations or healing. Though this view of challenging trips exists in each of the psychedelic subreddits, r/shrooms has a dedicated section for bad trips on its FAQ page and reflects the contested nature of the terminology in its definition:

When you take shrooms (or other psychedelics) and you have a negative experience, some people label this as a "bad trip". Common features include: extreme anxiety, feelings of terror and alienation, overwhelming sadness, paranoia, confusion, loss of self-identity, and physical discomfort. Some people are of the opinion that there are no "bad trips", only "difficult trips", and that working through the issues that come up during these trips can present great opportunities for growth and healing.

Due to the ongoing debate over ‘challenging’ versus ‘bad’ trips, this section will only examine aspects of trips that are believed by the OP to have been bad.

To begin, not all bad trips are bad from start to finish. In one such case, the user was having an exhilarating experience and dancing along to their favorite music. Quickly, the

increasing intensity of the trip overrode the good vibes in a sequence that eventually landed OP in the emergency room:

I kept yelling out for people to help me until I finally gave up because I felt like I was dying. It felt like I was vomiting in between words. "I'm dying. I'm dying. This is death. This is what death feels like. You all wanted to know!" I was choking on vomit (so it felt like) as I saw the most beautiful bright light develop and I felt myself being lifted up towards it. Then everything went dark. When I woke up, I was in a strange room and in a strange bed. I was wearing a medical bracelet. I ripped out my IV and watched the blood run down my arm. I thought I was tripping and was actually still at home and just imagining this.

For OP, the trip became disorienting to an extreme degree. In their delusions, the user thought they were dying, screamed incessantly for help, blacked out, was eventually found by emergency services (revealed later in the report), and subsequently transferred to a medical care center.

Despite being brought to a more stable environment, the user was still struggling with reality as they failed to realize that they were actually in the emergency room. Further, OP was seriously risking additional suffering by manually ripping out their IV. As demonstrated, adverse reactions to psychedelic substances can put trippers in serious danger. Earlier in the report, OP noted this was the highest dose of psychedelics they had ever taken, which makes the severe reaction more understandable. In multiple cases throughout the sample, bad trip reports are birthed from extraordinarily high doses.

On top of the above example, another bad trip report alluded to taking several tabs of LSD in tandem with a standard mushroom dose. While milder doses are also subject to bad trips, extreme doses must be taken with even more extreme caution. Continuing to demonstrate the

importance of proper dosing, yet another bad trip report details a horrific experience after becoming careless with doses:

I got my hands on a vial of liquid LSD after i had burned through that sheet. I began using it very cautiously, only doing very conservative drops on my finger or empty blotter tabs. But one night when i was drunk, i ended up dosing about 1100-1200 micrograms by my estimation. I had severe thought loops and visuals, horrible vertigo and almost had ego death. I managed to remain calm and ride it out, ended up tripping for like 32 hours or so. The six months following was the worst period of my life. Horrific HPPD 24/7, and random panic attacks. Slowly overtime, the symptoms went away, and I stayed off psyches for a whole year after. I respect LSD so much more after my experience, and I am thankful to have emerged relatively unscathed.

This particular trip report introduces HPPD and the concept of thought loops. The American Academy of Ophthalmology defines HPPD (Hallucinogen Persisting Perception Disorder) as a disorder that can result from intense drug experiences, causing its victims to have flashbacks to hallucinations or even chronic hallucinations long after the drugs have worn off (Lee et al., 2022). Luckily for OP, the recurring hallucinations eventually subsided, albeit after several months. While HPPD can be a subsequent consequence of an intense trip, thought loops, on the other hand, can occur during a bad trip. Thought loops are exactly as they sound, a repeating series of thoughts or hallucinations. Notably, the user is usually unable to tell they are in a loop for a significant amount of time, forgetting where the thought leads as it restarts, until eventually realizing they are caught in a repetitious cycle. In fact, a different user referred to thought loops as being comparable to déjà vu. Often unrelenting and notoriously difficult to escape, thought loops can serve as stressors that trigger or worsen bad trips. In the above report, the devastating

potential of thought loops and their consequences are on full display. Further, the strikingly strong dose likely exacerbated the bad trip as well.

Whether due to an improperly high dose or simply a general lack of preparation, the intensity of the psychedelic experience itself can also result in bad trips. In such a case, another tripper came out of a frightening trip feeling completely lost:

I decided going for a walk, no phone, when it hit me like a train: intense visuals, time distortion, couldn't seem to get out of the same place. I was scared. Managed to get home and call my girlfriend. She was literally talking in slow motion. She said she was coming straight away, but what took 30 minutes in reality where 5 very intense hours in my head. When she got there I felt immediately better, but I was sounding insane by then. "Who am I? Is my mom dead? Is the sun ever coming up again?" ... Part of me believed I would stay there forever. When I finally started coming down, I just couldn't believe this was my reality. My girlfriend was pretty traumatized by the experience, very scared I would go crazy forever. This feeling that I don't belong, I don't identify and that my life is not my own is been haunting me. I'm 100% functional, and nobody complains, but I feel I'm in a hole, and don't know what to do honestly.

The intense and abstract nature of psychedelics can be profoundly overwhelming, as evidenced by the increasingly disturbing series of questions OP asked their girlfriend. Here, visual and time-based hallucinations led to traumatizing experiences both for the tripper and their sober girlfriend, broadening the scope of potential victims in instances of bad trips. Yet again, bad trips are shown to have long reaching effects well after the trip concludes.

Explicitly distinguishing bad trips from challenging trips, the final trip reporter in this section offers the following preamble before describing their bad trip:

A lot of people on these types of forums will say that there's no such thing as a bad trip(myself formerly included), but due to what I'm about to describe, I believe that's no longer accurate and dismissive of other peoples' experiences. I'm writing this out as a form of therapy and perhaps a cautionary tale for others or solidarity with people have been through something similar.

OP feels that people who do not believe in bad trips simply have not yet experienced a bad trip for themselves. To strengthen the point, OP explains this exact phenomenon happened to them too. This section of the trip report highlights an important understanding of bad trips versus challenging trips boiling the distinction down to a matter of personal experience.

Pivoting to the trip itself, while OP was tripping with a large group of people, worry grew amongst the group that a neighbor might call the police on them for noise. For OP, the group's collective worry served as a trigger for the bad trip:

This is where things get really bad. I go inside and everybody is freaking out (In actuality, nobody was freaking out. A few people were mildly concerned about the neighbor calling the cops and everyone else was doing their own thing having a great time). But my trippy brain saw people panicking. I looked at the stairs nearby, and I see a pool of blood flowing down them. And I Freak. The Fuck. Out. I run out of the cabin (not very far, maybe 20 feet I was still on the property), bare footed and soaking wet with no towel. We're in the mountains, it's night time, and it's freezing cold. The trees have morphed into something sinister and I'm in a full blown panic about what happened in the cabin. My friends, very understandably concerned, follow me out and try to calm me down.

Once triggered, OP's negative experience only devolved into more terror. Later in the report, the user began to distrust their friends because they felt the friends were withholding information about the previously hallucinated pool of blood. From there, OP's panic and paranoia led to threats of violence towards their friends, who were just trying to help:

I said I'd fucking kill the next person who tried to touch me, I cannot describe the absolute terror I felt in that moment. I was convinced I was in some sort of apocalyptic scenario, where all my friends had turned on me and my life was in very immediate danger.

Eventually, the situation deescalated, and OP's friends were able to calm them down. However, the point remains that bad trips can put people, actively tripping or not, into seriously dangerous spots. Although psychedelics can offer a temporary divergence from reality, that divergence comes with no guarantee of a positive experience. In the above case, once the seeds of panic and paranoia were sowed, all that could be reaped were extremer negative perceptions until the trip had ran its course.

Given the historical demonization of psychedelics, there comes an almost innate desire to focus on the positive sides of the drugs to counteract ongoing propagandized, vilified characterizations of the substances. However, to frame psychedelics as being unilaterally beneficial in their potential for entertainment or self-revelation would be to further propagate dishonesty in drug-related conversations, just from the other side of the debate. With the inclusion of bad trips reports in a standalone section, I hope to capture necessary nuance in the complex discourse surrounding psychedelics. Having established the reality that psychedelics can be exceptionally harmful in certain scenarios, the lighthearted and fun aspects of the drugs can now be examined in good faith.

Psychedelics as Entertainment

Given the sheer amount of humor present in psychedelic subreddits such as r/LSD and r/shrooms, the existence of trippers merely looking for a good time makes sense. However, with the range of extremely intense and serious experiences discussed in the previous sections, what would compel prospective trippers to take psychedelics for fun? Simply put, not all trips venture into the spiritual, emotional, or self-revelatory realm. Independent of self-revelation or not, psychedelic trips also induce vivid hallucinations that dramatically augment one's experience of reality. In the right contexts, the hallucinations in and of themselves can provide entertainment akin to a childlike wonder. Conversely, in the wrong contexts, psychedelic hallucinations can be indescribably frightening or stressful, often referred to as "bad trips". Even with the possibility of a bad trip in mind, users still pursue psychedelic experiences for the sake of entertainment.

To begin to capture the entertaining aspects of tripping, part of the fun is in making ordinary events extraordinary. For instance, a user describes their experience with defecating whilst tripping mushrooms: "oh my god. i've never felt so primal and human and whole in my life. i think that was the best shit i've ever taken." For context, this was the seventh most upvoted trip report in r/shrooms of the past year, and that quote was the entire trip report. The fact that an unusually brief trip report about pooping gained so much popularity gestures towards the humorous and absurd aspects of both the psychedelic experience and the r/shrooms community. In another somewhat mundane context, a user, this time from r/Psychonaut, details their run-in with a spider during a trip:

I was tripping on about 5 grams of mushrooms and I was having a great time until I saw a spider crawl out from under my couch. I was overcome with fear and started to think there were hundreds of them under the couch. I grabbed a paper towel and smushed the

spider and threw it in the garbage and my fear almost immediately diminished. But then I started to think about it, how the spider wasn't doing anything wrong. It was probably just looking for food and I killed it purely for coming out of hiding. I felt really guilty for a while and even opened the garbage and checked the paper towel to see if it might somehow still be alive, but it was definitely dead. It felt like I just hit someone's pet with my car or something. After a while I felt less guilty, and it became a little funny. The emotional Rollercoaster of mushrooms can be so interesting.

While this trip report describes an emotional rollercoaster of fear and guilt, the entertainment ultimately comes from the user's reflection on the mushroom experience. It was not the fear and guilt that made the trip entertaining but the retroactive analysis of the situation. Indeed, while trips can be too intense for entertainment in the moment, ruminating on the trip once sober can be the source of entertainment. Additionally, though the perspective-changing abilities of psychedelics can induce irrational fear and guilt in otherwise benign situations, entertainment value can be found within the perspective change itself.

In another trip report, a user told of a time when they took LSD and forgot they had a dentist appointment later in the day. After convincing a sober friend to drive them to the appointment, OP describes a surreal and stressful experience trying to act sober while simultaneously panicking about the situation as the LSD effects grew stronger:

with the light above her and the way her mask looked i felt like i was literally being experimented on by aliens | she starts putting the fluoride on my teeth and holy fucking shit | it tastes so bad | it's so bad that i can't refrain myself from licking it just to acknowledge how bad it is | i get about 7 licks in and she stops | "can you keep your tongue still for me?" | fuck | so i'm trying so very hard not to keep licking this vile paste |

i failed | i licked it again | this time she doesn't say anything and so i decide to just keep on going | about 4 licks later she takes her hands out of my mouth and i'm like oh | shit | "okay, i really need you to stop now"

Later in the report, OP begins to literally refer to the hygienists as 'aliens' because of how strange the dentist experience felt under the influence of LSD. While a perception of being operated on by aliens does not sound pleasant, OP found humor in the situation once they returned to their friend's house, revealing, "we spent the next hour or so laughing about my experience being mouth fucked by aliens." Overall, this trip report exemplifies the *post hoc* entertainment found in experiencing reality in such a different way, compared to a sober state of mind. OP *felt* as though aliens were probing them while simultaneously *knowing* they were at a run-of-the-mill dentist appointment.

Further, the trip report itself is stylized to entertain others in addition to the user themselves. Rather than being written in sentences or paragraphs like most other trip reports, this report was structured more like a hypothetical lovechild of stream of consciousness writing and free verse poetry with very little grammatical consistency, sparse punctuation, and numerous single-word lines. Notably, this particular user is wildly popular in r/LSD for their uniquely styled reports, and, subsequently, four of the twenty posts in the r/LSD sample came from this one user. In fact, this user's trip reports are so popular and significant within the r/LSD community that the user is officially verified on the subreddit and is the only account I noticed to be verified other than moderators. Due to this user's apparent influence on r/LSD and its culture, the popularity of their trip reports demands a deeper dive.

As previously mentioned, r/LSD and r/shrooms are much more humor laden than their more philosophical counterpart, r/Psychonaut. Consequently, r/LSD and r/shrooms provide the

cultural infrastructure to allow entertainment driven users to gain popularity within the subreddits and to grow into micro-celebrities of sorts. For the verified r/LSD user (who I will be pseudonymously referring to as 'Lucy' in the spirit of psychedelic culture), uniquely stylized trip reports afforded them high status and a following within r/LSD. To evidence Lucy's following, the most upvoted comment on one of their trip reports reads: "God damn man. Best avant garde author on all of Reddit." From another one of Lucy's reports, again, the top comment fanaticizes: "i started reading this and just because of the indentation and like way u type i realised and looked at your name, been a while was missing these stories." Additionally, in response to an unpopular comment that was actually criticizing Lucy's style, a much more upvoted reaction simply retorted, "You're in the presence of a legend, dweeb." Clearly, Lucy's humorously structured trip reports have captured r/LSD users in a way other trip reports have not.

In each of Lucy's four posts in the sample, nary a philosophical or seemingly serious point arises. Rather than detailing an abstract encounter with a god-like figure, a profound emotional breakthrough, or any sort of overt self-revelatory experience, Lucy sticks to telling chaotic and perilous stories of previous trips and frames them as casual misadventures in their rural hometown, such as their aforementioned dentist appointment on acid. Whether there is a need for more entertaining trip reports or if Lucy is simply the best entertainer in r/LSD's trip reporting sphere, readers seemingly cannot get enough of Lucy's content. Additional popular comments under Lucy's stories demonstrate a palpable demand for similar posts with statements like "All long stories should be split up like this. I don't wanna read a 10 line paragraph about how you met god. I mean I do, but this is better," "Honestly with most of the very fluffy, philosophical kinda trippers on Reddit it does the heart good to know there's wild boys out there going full tilt," and "best shit ive read in a minute thanks for the real laugh, its been awhile lol."

With r/LSD already being saturated with humorous psychedelic-related memes, photos, GIFs, and videos, the emergence of an entertainment focused trip reporter micro-celebrity was all but inevitable.

As previously alluded, Lucy's stories and their subsequent popularity represent another angle of psychedelics' function as entertainment. While the drugs can entertain the users themselves, psychedelics also enable users to entertain others by recounting their own experiences. Though it may be a stretch to say some users indulge in psychedelics solely for the purpose of entertaining others with their resulting stories, there is no denying that many users enjoy sharing their experiences through trip reports, pictures, and videos. Given the infinitely unique and abstract nature of a psychedelic trip, users are compelled to share their own experiences and to possibly build community around them, such as in Lucy's case.

With this discussion of Lucy's r/LSD stardom and the entertainment value in sharing one's psychedelic experiences, Reddit's karma rating system must join the conversation in order to more accurately capture the preexisting incentives to post anything to any subreddit in the first place. Per Reddit's help page, karma is framed and defined as follows:

Many redditors like to joke that karma is "fake internet points," and there's a lot of truth to that. But even fake internet points can have real meaning to people and the communities they contribute to. On Reddit, your karma is a reflection of how much your contributions mean to the community. How much karma someone has is publicly displayed on their profile.

Here, Reddit clearly equates karma to being a quantitative measurement of a given user's impact and influence. Consequently, countless users aim to maximize their karma, effectively turning the upvote/downvote system into a potentially self-aggrandizing popularity contest. As the

definition implies, though users cannot really utilize their karma in a meaningful way, these “fake internet points” nonetheless carry a great deal of meaning for many users.

In the context of the psychedelic subreddits and trip reports, posting a report that gains substantial karma can give the OP pleasure due to the heightened sense of popularity alone. However, highly upvoted posts can also provide ample opportunity for stronger engagement in the comments due to increased visibility in the ‘hot’ or ‘top’ sections of a subreddit, which in turn generates further entertainment value for all involved parties: the OP, commenters, and readers alike. Therefore, psychedelics’ function as entertainment stretches well beyond the amusement derived from merely taking the drugs, but to strip these trip reports of their context within Reddit’s infrastructure would be to severely restrict room for nuance in this analysis. While trip reports in and of themselves do have the capability to entertain through a variety of lenses, this entertainment cannot be solely attributed to trip reports or psychedelics alone because Reddit’s karma system and its incentives also moderate the possible entertainment available in the reports.

With the acknowledgement of Reddit’s infrastructural influence on trip reports’ entertainment value, psychedelics also entertain through community building. Indeed, apart from psychedelics’ ability to entertain the tripper by the experience itself or by the opportunity to share details of a trip to others, psychedelic content’s collective audiences, including both active commenters and lurking readers, are also subject to psychedelic entertainment, albeit vicariously. Commenters can find amusement in engaging with trippers’ posts, engaging with the tripper directly, and by building or participating in the various communities derived from the psychedelic cultural artifacts on the subreddits. As discussed earlier, Lucy and their eccentric trip reports grew a fanbase over time within r/LSD. A sort of community within a community,

Lucy's followers are able to both engage with Lucy's content and engage with other users' engagements with the content. Throughout the comment sections of Lucy's posts, users discuss their favorite characters that have appeared in multiple stories, relate to the stories with their own experiences, and even co-opt Lucy's slang along with other aspects of their stylistic idiosyncrasies. Moreover, Lucy's community can experience further entertainment by the prospective boosts in karma just from commenting. Having drawn upon the Lucy example once more, psychedelics can be shown to indirectly entertain, but said indirect entertainment reaches well beyond Lucy.

In a broader sense, the psychedelic experience, collectively transmitted through individual trip reports, photos, videos, memes, etc., can entertain any onlooker, including those who have never taken a psychoactive substance. Given that both r/LSD and r/shrooms have dedicated pages for so-called newbies who have never experimented with the drugs, it is safe to assume at least some of these subreddits' active users have never personally taken a psychedelic. However, if a newbie is hesitant to try the substances for whatever reason or is unable to safely acquire the drugs, they can at least get a taste of the psychedelic experience through ingesting trip reports and other related content on the platforms, and, of course, heavy users of psychedelics can also vicariously enjoy psychedelic content. Continuing the indirect entertainment, passive lurkers who simply consume content rather than actively participate via commenting or posting can still find entertainment in the mere existence of culture and community in the subreddits. Essentially, participation is not a prerequisite for entertainment in the realm of the psychedelic subreddits.

In sum, psychedelics serve as direct and indirect entertainment for a variety of audiences. For the individual tripper, psychedelics entertain through the myriad of visual and auditory

hallucinations that toy with one's perception of reality. From there, psychedelics can indirectly entertain trippers by affording the opportunity to tell others about their experience. On the flip side, lurkers and readers alike can vicariously enjoy aspects of the psychedelic experience by reading, engaging, building community around the psychedelic content, and participating in already existing communities. Additionally, on top of the direct and indirect influence of psychedelics within the subreddits, Reddit's karma rating system further incentivizes posting and engaging on the platform.

Psychedelics as Both an Entertaining and Self-Revelatory Experience

Regardless if a tripper is seeking personal growth or just a good time, psychedelics do not afford users the opportunity to choose the type of experience they desire. As a result, many a trip report describe volatile ebbs and flows over the course of a psychedelic high. With unpredictable and often rapid shifts, trippers under the influence can go from being amused in the hallucinations and distorted reality to being launched into the depths of profundity and spiritual perceptions, and vice versa. In some cases, the entertainment and the revelation manifest concurrently, almost synergizing one another. While previously analyzed trip reports tended to focus primarily on one of the entertainment factor or self-revelation, reports in this section highlight trips that had plenty of both. These reports collectively emphasize the multifaceted nature of psychedelics on the micro scale, underscoring the beauty and meaning within the chaos a singular trip can offer.

To begin exemplifying the interactions between entertainment and self-revelation within trip reports, an r/Psychonaut user describes amusement in comprehending a physical representation of their anxiety:

At one point I saw my anxiety and it looked like a lemon headed figure, with textured skin that reminded me of the “real life SpongeBob meme”. It was heavily disproportionate and goofy looking and I just laughed at it and saw it as equal.

Everything became equal to me and I realized my innate blessings as a human.

During a moment of abstract emotional processing, the absurdity of the hallucination became a source of hilarity for OP. Then, the laughter paved the way for deeper insight. In another case, an r/LSD trip reporter reveals their transition from wonder and awe to working through their traumatic past:

Immediately after walking outside I felt a sense of peace and calmness wash over me from the beauty of the outside world. The sky had these transparent lines and structures forming across it entirely as did the ground and mid section to the scenery around me. These lines quickly split up into fractal patterns and a range of very intricate geometrical designs. They rapidly began to gain color from being originally clear in appearance like glass. We arrived at my other friends house as the peak had begun. The world became one giant interface of fractals and rainbow designs. I knew it would be hard but, I began to think about past trauma issues. My friend who has similar experiences began to ask me very introspective questions about my life and these experiences of mine.

Similar to what was implied in this post, many trippers share a common perception that as the high becomes more intense and approaches its maximum effects, typically referred to as peaking, the trip becomes more revelatory.

In a more overt demonstration of the relationship between self-revelation and peaking, another trip report, which was actually posted and updated live with timestamps over the course the user’s trip, illustrates shifting from enjoyment to the profound:

11:50: everything is starting to feel clear, my breaths have calmed down and I am feeling euphoric | 12:00: starting to get heavy, seeing visuals and hella shit. I can alr tell that there will be some points that I will not be able to type. About to smoke a bowl off of my pipe | 12:10 starting to trip balls. Picked up my guitar and played for 10 mins that seemed like an eternity | 12:30 listening to transporting by Kodak and feeling really good. Can feel the peak coming on | 12:45 geeked out | 1:40 so many profound thoughts and understandings at this point. Can barely type this right now

Though difficult to put into words, trip reporters like the one above can nonetheless *feel* when the peak is looming. For this particular report, the timestamps capture the rate at which a peak can arrive. However, the peak's arrival was likely mediated by OP's mixing of substances (re: "About to smoke a bowl off of my pipe"). Additionally, the timestamps also reflect the sheer power of the peak. The widening gaps in time between the updates can likely be attributed to the user's loss of typing skills, to which they alluded, as the peak intensified. Essentially, the peak can *capture* trippers, impairing some of their most basic abilities necessary for engaging with sober reality, and almost forcing them to submit their undivided attention until it subsides. To further exemplify the forceful nature of an intense psychedelic experience, another trip report describes OP's communication difficulties during the peak, detailing, "I was absolutely broken. I called my brother to ask him where he was and when he asked me if I was okay I couldn't respond. I couldn't talk. I was having immense difficulty processing and responding to language."

Shifting focus back to the interactions between entertainment and self-revelation in trip reports, in certain cases, the distinction between what is fun or wonderful and what is profound and meaningful can be extremely blurry, to the point where they may all be happening

simultaneously. In one such case, a user's hallucinations gave them the awesome perception of being able to connect to and communicate with nature. However, when the user began to connect with trees in their urbanized neighborhood, revelations concerning environmental consciousness took center stage:

Every single cell of my body felt the PAIN that these trees were in, they were strong but they were incredibly ANNOYED by all of the traffic noise, pollution, and even radiation? I could feel the confusion from the baby trees that didn't understand what and why this was happening. It was so HEARTBREAKING and I felt embarrassed to be apart of this conceited society. They were so incredibly alive just as alive as the people that were walking by me, they were filled with love and EMPATHY! ... The female tree said to me "THANK YOU, I LOVE YOU, we've seen you before, thank you we care about YOU, visit us more"

In a vacuum, the idea of being able to speak to plants is incredible. Nonetheless, the ability comes with no guarantee of positive or lighthearted conversation. Here, the intensity of OP's feelings is on full display with added emphasis on the capitalized words and phrases. Despite the heartbreaking aspect of the experience, OP was able to gain valuable insight, perhaps sparking a new outlook on environmentalism or a newfound love for the natural world.

In another instance, vivid visual hallucinations eventually gave way to deeper introspection and emotional processing. Specifically, OP's ritual of tripping while blindfolded and listening to instrumental music seemed to act as a catalyst in reaching the introspective stage of the experience. As a warning, the following description details memories of childhood sexual abuse. It is used in this thesis because of how it exemplifies the ability of psychedelic trip reports to discuss different forms of knowledge:

The trip itself was amazing! I laid there with blindfolds and non-vocal music on my headphones. I learned SO much from that trip. The CEVs [closed-eye visualizations] was insane. I was in a total 3D world. I could navigate it by moving my eyes in tune with the music. There were fractals everywhere. And I also met people in my life that I could communicate with just by thinking. I suffer from cPTSD from childhood sexual abuse and this trip let me navigate all the negative feelings I had without it being overwhelming and causing a panic attack... And instead of panicking I was able to think “That gave me a feeling I don’t like. That’s uncomfortable. Why is that uncomfortable?” And then I went into those feelings. Those thoughts I have avoided for years and years. I learned SO much about myself. And I was even able to put myself in my abuser’s place. See it from his perspective. I won’t say it made me forgive him. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to do that. But I think it helped me take back the power he still, after 25+ years, had over me. It was the most spiritual, most enlightening, the most healing trip I’ve ever had.

In this report, OP deliberately used a blindfold and music to intensify the overall experience. Far from an anomaly, many trippers insist restricting or otherwise limiting your external senses (e.g., blindfold, closing your eyes, staying in a dark room, over-ear headphones, etc.) is a key ingredient for a deeply introspective trip. While in the above case the music mediated the hallucinations, the increasingly intense visuals eventually led to hallucinatory manifestations of actual characters in OP’s life, affording the opportunity for new, abstract, and life-changing perspectives on past traumatic events.

Further demonstrating the effects of manipulating one’s environment to alter a trip’s dynamic, a different trip reporter, having combined mushrooms and DMT, outlays a potent chain of events, saying, “I put on a sound bath from the youtube channel Healing Vibrations with a

really good speaker and this is where things started getting crazy.” Here, OP’s YouTube video helped to intensify the experience. For context, ‘sound baths’ are specifically geared towards meditative and immersive experiences, engulfing subjects in an arrangement of supposedly healing harmonies (Auster, 2019). Naturally, sound baths and psychedelics can build on one another to amplify their inherent introspective and spiritual qualities. After experiencing a series of other-worldly visual hallucinations and even ego death, the same trip reporter goes on to mention the following:

As i came back to myself and was put back together i was completely one with my higher self and started looking at all of my bad decisions ive made like my occasional cocaine use and at first i was disgusted, but i also understood myself and why i was making these decisions and this lead to me saying to myself "i understand you, i forgive you, i appreciate you, I love you... at this moment i had the opportunity to reconnect my mind body and soul and for the very first time in my life, with pure authentic and unconditional love, i switched the word you for the word myself. I said loudly, and proudly, I LOVE MYSELF AND I FORGIVE MYSELF, and i felt all 3 parts of me merge and i now feel whole with true love for myself and the universe.

Yet again, the interplay of entertainment and self-revelation results in a tripper achieving cathartic realizations. Much like the tripper who communicated with trees, this tripper highlights a deeply empathetic and understanding love that was unearthed over the course of the trip. However, instead of an emerging love for the natural environment, this tripper discovered a newfound love for their self. In reaching this catharsis, all that was materially required was the right combination of psychedelics and a YouTube video.

In the final trip report from the sample that concerns the relationship between entertainment and profundity within the psychedelic experience, OP's trip serves as an exemplar for this section of the analysis, interweaving numerous aspects of previously discussed reports, including communicating with nature, utilizing external media to augment the experience, demonstrating the strength of a peak, losing various motor functions, and ruminating on the overall absurdity of a psychedelic high. To begin, OP describes:

It started off way too intense and my emotions were swinging wildly. No fear really but I could barely walk and couldn't figure out how to work my phone to talk to anyone.

Luckily a friend called me and talked me down a bit and things began to even out.

Once settled into the trip, OP managed to put on a YouTube documentary about the stone age, which began to have a profound effect on the user:

I felt like I was in the documentary and the tribe was in an uproar hunting a mammoth. I felt this insane primal urge to be naked and out in nature, to hunt, to chase and stalk the prey with the other tribe members and feel the danger, the excitement and the thrill of spearing the mammoth.

Primed by the YouTube video, OP perceived their self to be tapping into their inner primitive humanity. The power of the hallucinations is on full display, allowing OP to be immersed into the documentary to the point of feeling as though they are part of the video. Further, the strength of the peak induced a more material commitment to the perception of being a primitive human.

OP goes on to say:

At that point I actually did strip completely naked and exited my house running into the woods on my property. Thankfully I had the sense to stay in the woods but I was filled,

absolutely brimming with this feeling of being part of the cycle of life. I was an animal, I was where I belonged and this is where I wanted to be.

Continuing their devolutionary experience, OP is increasingly distancing their self from modern humanity. First, OP delves into ancestry, fantasizing about primitive life. From there, the user reaches a point of identifying as merely a part of a grander lifecycle and acknowledges the animalistic side of their existence. Finally, OP hallucinates a communicative encounter with a tree, recounting:

Eventually I came up to tree that I found very interesting. I spoke with it. It didn't "speak" in words but it communicated images to me. It showed me what it was like to be a tree, motionless, watching the seasons change year after year. I was a home to the animals with my roots firmly planted in the earth. Me, the earth, the tree, we were all one being.

Fixed and timeless. Completely as we should be, perfect and emotionless but yet content.

Over the course of this trip report, numerous aspects of the relationship between entertainment and self-revelation are demonstrated. External media, another YouTube video in this case, can be used to affect the trip's dynamics. The absurdity of the hallucinations can generate perceptions of being beyond human in a sense, offering primitive and animalistic feelings. Lastly, a trip can bend one's experience of reality to the point of hallucinating a conversation with a tree, resulting in a feeling of oneness with the universe. With each of these aspects combined into a singular trip, the intersections of entertainment and self-revelation become very apparent.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to build upon knowledge surrounding the psychedelic experience through the examination of trip reports on Reddit. Specifically, this thesis posed two research questions:

RQ1: How do trip reports from psychedelic-related subreddits offer knowledge about psychedelic drugs?

RQ2: How do underlying structures within psychedelic-related subreddits and subsequent trip report posts play into the knowledge-creating process with respect to psychedelic drugs?

While utilizing Foucault's ideas about the relationship between power and knowledge for the theoretical basis for the paper and Brock's (2012; 2018) Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis for the thesis' methodological approach, a myriad of psychedelic knowledge pertaining to each of the two research questions was explored through Reddit trip reports.

Considering the inextricable influence of longstanding cultural beliefs about psychedelic drugs, Foucault's political economy of truth can be applied to psychedelics to understand how the substances have been widely accepted as a net-negative and worthy of their Schedule I status. Media giants, political discourse, and socioeconomic forces collectively contributed to the demonization of psychedelics across the latter half of the twentieth century (Wesson, 2011; Goode, 2008; Lee & Shalin, 1992). On the other hand, scientific discourse and research produced from the ongoing psychedelic renaissance exemplifies an aspect of the economy of truth that is legitimizing the idea that psychedelics could have beneficial applications, contrary to

the components of the economy of truth that factored in the substances' vilification (Nutt, 2019; Rucker et al., 2018).

Regarding the trip reports, the content from the three psychedelic-related subreddits used in the analysis both challenged and affirmed aspects of popular narratives. On one hand, bad trips, despite their contested nature, were routinely characterized as truly horrible experiences, inducing unspeakable levels of anxiety, paranoia, panic, and fear for trippers and sober bystanders alike. In this sense, preexisting narratives about the dangers in taking psychedelic substances and bad trip hysterics were affirmed. On the other hand, numerous trip reports revealed a throughline of overwhelmingly positive experiences, ranging from profound moments of self-revelation, to instances of pure entertainment, and to combinations of both revelation and entertainment. Apart from the growing scientific movement to study psychedelics in clinical therapeutic settings, the total sample of 84 trip reports largely challenged normative views about the drugs.

Across the sample of self-revelatory trip reports, users detailed extremely abstract and profound experiences of self-discovery, spirituality, and emotional breakthroughs. Contextually, this sect of trip reports closely aligns with the potential therapeutic application of the drugs, albeit in informal, unregulated settings. Whether conquering addiction, getting through a divorce, processing insecurity, or gaining fresh perspective on one's own behavior, psychedelics can offer trippers a wide variety of opportunity for self-improvement and self-actualization. Future investigations into the therapeutic value of psychedelics can build off these findings to capture a more robust picture of the drugs' collective potentialities.

Regarding the entertainment-focused reports, users demonstrated a key component in the motivations behind any recreational drug use: the pursuit of a good time. More precisely, trip

reporters in the entertainment section often referred to whimsical and beautiful hallucinations, occurring visually, auditorily, physically, or mentally. Essentially, psychedelics can afford users a completely different experience of reality in terms of aesthetics. On top of that, even the process of creating, sharing, and interacting with the trip reports in and of themselves can be a highly entertaining pastime, even creating subcultures around aspects of the reports, broadening the scope of entertainment value beyond the tripper's individual experience.

Of course, psychedelic trips are rarely *only* self-revelatory *or* entertaining. Consequently, another section was dedicated to the interactions between entertainment and self-revelation within the sample of reports. Throughout this section, trip reports described how amusing hallucinations can rapidly launch users into the depths of their own minds, resulting in viscerally cathartic revelations. In some cases, the entertainment even seemed to serve as a catalyst for deeper realizations as trippers peaked on the psychedelic high.

With respect to infrastructural and cultural uniqueness amongst the three psychedelic subreddits in this study, trip reports from different subreddits had slight stylistic differences and substantial volume differences. r/Psychonaut produced 50 of the 84 reports in the sample, largely due to the facts that it prioritizes textual posts, bans memes and otherwise humorous posts, and takes a more overtly philosophical approach to the psychedelic experience compared to r/LSD and r/shrooms. Conversely, since r/LSD and r/shrooms are much more humor driven and indiscriminately accept multimedia posts, formal trip reports are sparser. However, the less serious atmosphere of r/LSD and r/shrooms allowed more opportunity for community building around humorous and entertaining aspects of the psychedelic experience.

While the trip reports in and of themselves undoubtedly contributed meaningful knowledge to the posed research questions, there are nonetheless limitations to the contributions.

84 trip reports gathered from just three subreddits is by no means a comprehensive look into how psychedelics can be used or be beneficial to the user. Additionally, this thesis took a qualitative approach to the research questions, so generalizability is sacrificed for the sake of emphasizing the richness of individual experiences. However, this thesis can still serve as a starting point for further intellectual inquiry into psychedelic knowledge.

This thesis also adds to existing knowledge about psychedelic drugs. Although more research is necessary, this paper analyzes specific examples of individual experiences to better understand the multifaceted nature of psychedelics. When the layperson is introduced to the idea that psychedelic drugs can be medically beneficial, they may be naturally drawn to skepticism. Nonetheless, individual testimony from experienced trippers can serve to demonstrate the positive aspects of the drugs and counteract some of that skepticism. Stripped from scientific jargon and academic language, trip reports reflect the prospects of psychedelics' medicinal and recreational potential in a more approachable and accessible manner.

In addition, the cumulative discourse from the trip reports largely challenges political apparatuses regarding drug legislation and other relevant forms of political domination that influence public opinion on psychedelic drugs, as discussed in the Foucault section. While the journey to decriminalization or even legalization is far from over, this thesis demonstrates the importance of continuing to explore the possibilities of psychedelic drug use in a variety of circumstances and contexts.. Whether it be from profound self-revelation, strong senses of spirituality, highly abstracted emotional breakthroughs, unique experiences of an augmented realities, or some combination of the four, psychedelics' sheer potency can transform lives in ways most conventional Western medicines could never, posing a serious threat to several sociopolitical superstructures.

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