

Marketing Psychedelic-Assisted Wellness: Consumer Perceptions and Ethical Challenges in Emerging Psychedelic Markets

7084SMM - Contemporary Issues in Research Development Conference Paper

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Abstract

The renewed global interest in psychedelic-assisted wellness is creating fresh opportunities as well as significant challenges for organisations working in this rapidly developing field. Although scientific and therapeutic evidence for psychedelics continues to grow, we still know very little about how consumers actually understand, judge, and engage with these kinds of wellness offerings. Likewise, there is limited guidance on how companies can market such products ethically within a space that remains socially sensitive and historically stigmatised.

This developmental conference paper explores how consumers make sense of psychedelic-assisted wellness by examining the meanings they attach to these products, their interactions within the marketplace, and the cultural stories that shape their perceptions. Through a review of existing research, the paper highlights key theoretical, ethical, and methodological gaps that currently restrict a fuller understanding of consumer behaviour in this area.

Guided by an interpretivist perspective, the discussion considers how experiential, symbolic, and sociocultural influences shape consumer responses. To investigate these emerging interpretations in greater depth, the paper proposes a qualitative, netnography-inspired research approach. Overall, this work provides a conceptual foundation for future empirical studies and clarifies how marketing practices in psychedelic-assisted wellness can be developed responsibly while supporting consumer trust, wellbeing, and cultural sensitivity.

Keywords: Psychedelic-Assisted Wellness; Consumer Meaning-Making; Ethical Marketing; Cultural Narratives; Interpretivist Approach; Netnography; Conceptual Framework

1.0 The Purpose of the Research

Psychedelics are a class of psychoactive substances recognized for deep alterations in perception, emotion, and consciousness. These altered states often include increased introspection, enhanced sensory awareness, and experiences that users describe as mystical, insightful, or transformative (Nichols, 2016). The word psychedelic was coined by Humphry Osmond in 1957 to mean "mind-manifesting," highlighting how these substances make internal psychological processes more vivid and accessible (Pollan, 2018).

Most contemporary scientific frames conceptualize psychedelics within three main categories: tryptamines, phenethylamines, and lysergamides. Tryptamines, such as psilocybin and DMT, have been of particular interest to researchers for their high-affinity interaction with serotonin receptors; phenethylamines, such as MDMA, are associated with increased emotional openness and relational bonding; and lysergamides, including LSD, are known to have long-acting effects on cognition and perception. (Carhart-Harris & Goodwin, 2017; Gasser et al., 2014)

While all these substances have deep histories of use in Indigenous healing and ceremonial practices, modern scientific attention has significantly intensified within what is commonly referred to as the psychedelic renaissance. Contemporary studies are increasingly showing their therapeutic potential to treat depression, anxiety, addiction, and PTSD (Griffiths et al., 2016; Grob et al., 2011; Mitchell et al., 2021). Yet it is essential to differentiate between PAT, medically framed clinical intervention, and PAW, an ever-growing commercial sector providing retreats, microdosing products, coaching programs, and spiritual-wellness experiences outside traditional medical contexts (O'Donnell et al., 2018). This is critical for the present study since the ethical, regulatory, and marketing environments for PAW differ significantly from those governing PAT.

The growth of the PAW marketplace has been fuelled by an increasing public interest in holistic wellbeing, personal transformation, and alternative approaches to mental health. In response, organisations within the sector have begun using modern marketing tools, which include branding strategies, digital storytelling, influencer collaborations, and social-media engagement, to normalise and promote psychedelic-based offerings (Hungara & Nobre, 2021). Yet, despite this commercial momentum, academic understanding of PAW marketing remains limited. There is a paucity of research regarding how these products are marketed and how consumers interpret and react to promotional messages, with ethical concerns about how one markets substances associated with psychological vulnerability and historical stigma (Sessa, 2012). Particular concern arises from the lack of insight into how exaggerated claims, inadequate safety communication, and premium or exclusive pricing structures may mislead consumers and erode trust in the field of psychedelics (Carhart-Harris et al., 2018). Against this background, the current study aims to provide a conceptual framework for analyzing ethical and consumer-behavioral dynamics that influence the PAW market. The research has three interrelated objectives. First, the paper identifies a knowledge gap on how recent marketing practices-neuromarketing, digital micro-targeting, and cultural branding-shape consumer expectations and meanings of psychedelic-assisted wellness and how such practices create consumer transformative prospects in the psychedelic experiences (Daws et al., 2022; O'Sullivan & Shankar, 2019). Secondly, this study critically assesses ethical issues in the marketing of PAW and questions whether current marketing practices balance organisational objectives with consumer safety, informed consent, and responsible communication. Finally, this paper proposes an interpretive consumer culture theory- netnographic conceptual framework that may provide a pathway for empirical investigations into how consumers make meaning from psychedelic experiences and how those meanings direct their behaviors in an emerging and culturally sensitive marketplace (Arnould & Thompson 2005; Kozinets 2010).

To guide this development, the study adopts the following SMART objectives:

- **Specific:** To examine how consumers perceive PAW marketing practices and the ethical tensions surrounding them.
- **Measurable:** To utilise mixed-methods insights from existing qualitative and quantitative studies to highlight patterns in consumer attitudes.
- **Achievable:** To synthesise extensive secondary literature across consumer culture theory, psychedelic science, and ethical marketing.

- **Relevant:** To contribute to academic and industry understanding of responsible marketing frameworks within an emerging and sensitive sector.
- **Time-bound:** To develop a conceptual model within the project duration that can guide future empirical investigation.

Overall, this research is significant because it integrates scientific, ethical, and marketing perspectives to address an under-explored issue in contemporary consumer research. By establishing conceptual clarity around PAW marketing, the study provides a foundation for future work that can support ethical business practices, protect consumer wellbeing, and contribute to an informed public understanding of psychedelics in modern wellness culture.

2.0 Literature Review

Psychedelic research has undergone a major rebirth over the past two decades, led by clinical trials at institutions such as Johns Hopkins and Imperial College London, which demonstrate therapeutic potential for conditions including depression, anxiety, addiction and end-of-life distress (Griffiths et al., 2016; Carhart-Harris & Goodwin, 2017). These scientific developments have enabled the emergence of a wider commercial landscape, where psychedelic-assisted wellness (PAW) services such as retreats, microdosing programmes and wellness coaching operate alongside but distinctly from regulated psychedelic-assisted therapy (PAT). Despite rapid market growth, academic engagement with the marketing, consumer experience and ethical challenges of this sector remains limited. This literature review synthesises existing research across consumer studies, psychedelic science, anthropology and digital marketing to establish the theoretical and conceptual foundations for examining consumer perceptions of PAW.

2.1 The Psychedelic Market and a New Wave of Consumerism

The contemporary psychedelic marketplace is shaped by two parallel but interconnected developments: the clinical evidence base supporting PAT, and the consumer-driven expansion of PAW. While PAT is bound by medical regulation, PAW operates within wellness and lifestyle markets, where experiences are positioned around self-development, emotional healing and spiritual insight (de Veen et al., 2018). Commercial providers frequently attempt to legitimise their offerings by referencing clinical research or Indigenous traditions, yet consumers often lack the knowledge to differentiate scientifically validated claims from promotional narratives.

Diffusion in Innovation theory provides a useful lens for understanding the adoption of psychedelic wellness practices. Early users of microdosing, psychedelic retreats and integration coaching often self-identify as seekers of alternative wellness or transformative experiences (Johnson & Griffiths, 2010; MacLean et al., 2011). The perceived relative *advantage* of psychedelic practices (e.g., enhanced creativity, emotional openness), combined with highly visible testimonials on social media, accelerates adoption. However, the observability of

life-changing experiences creates ethical tensions when marketers use anecdotal accounts to signal outcomes that may not be generalisable (Griffiths et al., 2016).

Scholars highlight opposing perspectives regarding commercialisation of psychedelics. On one side, commercial growth is argued to support destigmatisation and broaden access to wellness interventions. On the other hand, critics argue that commodification risks trivialising spiritual practices, producing exaggerated expectations and exposing vulnerable consumers to safety risks (Sessa, 2012). This tension signals the need for rigorous research into how marketing constructs meanings around psychedelics and how consumers interpret them within broader cultural narratives.

2.2 Theoretical Frameworks: Consumer Culture Theory and Anthropological Perspectives

Traditional models of marketing do not adequately explain consumer behaviour in markets built around subjective, symbolic and experiential value. Interpretive Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) provides a more appropriate analytical foundation, as it frames consumption as a cultural practice through which individuals construct identity, negotiate meaning and participate in marketplace communities (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). The consumption of psychedelics involves deeply personal and often spiritual experiences that extend beyond functional benefits. Thus, meaning-making rather than product attributes drives consumer engagement.

CCT also helps explain identity work within psychedelic communities, where shared experiences contribute to collective narratives about transformation, healing and authenticity (MacLean et al., 2012). These narratives not only influence consumer expectations but it also influence how brands position themselves, often adopting symbolic language associated with consciousness expansion, indigenous wisdom or holistic wellbeing.

Anthropological research further contextualises ethical tensions within PAW marketing. Psychedelics such as ayahuasca have deep cultural significance within Indigenous Amazonian traditions. Yet commercial retreat providers often appropriate Indigenous symbols or ceremonial language to enhance brand legitimacy (Grob et al., 2011). Such practices will raise the concerns about cultural commodification, misrepresentation and exploitation of traditional knowledge systems. Ethical marketing in this domain therefore requires sensitivity to cultural origins, community rights and the risk of reducing sacred traditions to consumer experiences.

2.3 Digital Technologies, Algorithmic Targeting and Emerging Ethical Challenges

The rise of digital marketing has transformed how psychedelic wellness providers engage with consumers. Social media platforms host vibrant communities that share personal experiences, microdosing insights and retreat testimonials, generating powerful peer-to-peer influence. Within these environments, netnography provides an essential methodological approach for analysing online discourse, community values and meaning systems associated with psychedelic wellness (Kozinets, 2010). However, the persuasive power of digital storytelling also amplifies ethical concerns.

AI-driven targeting and big-data analytics enable companies to identify psychographic profiles associated with anxiety, emotional vulnerability or spiritual seeking—traits that may correlate with interest in psychedelics (O'Donnell et al., 2018). While such targeting can improve campaign efficiency, it risks exploiting individuals who may be psychologically at risk, replicating ethical debates seen in algorithmic marketing more broadly. Similarly, the “funnel effect” within digital marketing moving consumers from inspirational content to high-cost retreat offerings raises questions about informed consent, expectation-setting and harm reduction.

Across the literature, several gaps remain:

- **Psychological influence mechanisms:** Limited research examines how neuromarketing principles, emotional triggers or symbolic cues influence consumer expectations of psychedelic experiences.
- **Ethics of algorithmic targeting:** No studies systematically assess how AI-based marketing may target vulnerable populations within wellness sectors.
- **Consumer journey mapping:** Academic work does not yet explore how consumers move from online engagement to in-person psychedelic experiences, nor the ethical risks across this journey.
- **Narrative disparities:** A gap exists in comparing scientific narratives (e.g., clinical trial outcomes) with commercial narratives used by wellness providers.

These gaps demonstrate the urgent need for interdisciplinary research combining psychology, marketing, anthropology and ethics to support the responsible development of psychedelic-assisted wellness markets.

3.0 Research Methodology

This paper adopts an Mixed Methods Research (MMR) design based on an interpretivist philosophical position and an inductive logic of enquiry. The interpretivist orientation is appropriate, as consumer perceptions of PAW are socially constructed, subjective, and deeply embedded within cultural narratives and personal meaning-making processes. It allows the study to integrate rich qualitative insights with broader quantitative patterns, enabling a comprehensive investigation of consumer attitudes, ethical tensions, and marketing dynamics in the emerging PAW market.

A sequential exploratory design is followed, where the in-depth qualitative phase precedes the quantitative phase. This structure helps to ensure that qualitative insights inform the development of measurable variables for the quantitative stage, making findings more valid and grounded in real consumer experiences.

3.1 Qualitative Phase: Grounded Theory and Digital Ethnography, and Netnography

The first phase employs **Grounded Theory** to inductively generate conceptual insights about how consumers interpret psychedelic wellness marketing. This is essential because existing theories do not yet adequately explain behaviour in this emerging market. The qualitative phase combines two complementary methods:

Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews will be conducted with three key stakeholder groups:

- **Consumers:** Individuals who have engaged with PAW services or are interested in such experiences. Interviews will explore motivations, perceived risks and benefits, trust in marketing claims, and personal meaning-making.
- **Marketers/Providers:** Businesses and marketing professionals operating within the PAW sector, providing insight into branding strategies, ethical considerations, and communication practices.
- **Experts:** Academics, ethicists, and policymakers who can contextualise industry developments and highlight broader societal and regulatory implications.

Semi-structured interviews allow flexibility for participants to express nuanced interpretations, aligning with the interpretivist framework.

Digital Ethnography & Netnography

Because much of the cultural conversation surrounding psychedelics occurs online, a **netnographic study** (Kozinets, 2010) will analyse discussions in digital communities, including:

- Social media groups
- Online forums
- User testimonials
- Retreat marketing platforms

Netnography enables the researcher to observe naturally occurring consumer dialogue, symbolic expressions, identity construction, and community norms. This provides essential insight into how marketing messages circulate socially and how consumers collectively negotiate meanings, expectations, and ethical boundaries.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data will be analysed using **Thematic Analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis will follow six stages:

1. Familiarisation
2. Initial coding
3. Theme development

4. Theme refinement
5. Theme definition
6. Reporting of findings

Themes emerging from interviews and netnography will identify:

- Perceived credibility of PAW marketing
- Ethical concerns (e.g., cultural appropriation, exaggerated therapeutic claims)
- Drivers of consumer trust and scepticism
- Meaning-making narratives surrounding psychedelics

The insights generated will inform the construction of survey items for the quantitative phase.

3.2 Quantitative Phase: Survey Strategy and Statistical Analysis

Following the qualitative stage, a **survey-based quantitative study** will be conducted to test and generalise the themes identified earlier. The survey will be distributed online to reach a diverse sample of consumers aware of or interested in psychedelic wellness practices.

Key Constructs to be Measured

The survey will examine:

- Demographics and psychographic traits
- Attitudes toward psychedelics and mental health
- Trust in wellness-oriented vs. clinical marketing claims
- Perceived risks (legal, psychological, cultural)
- Influence of marketing channels (social media, scientific messaging, influencers)
- Purchase intentions and willingness to engage in PAW
- Ethical concerns about marketing transparency and cultural representation

Data Analysis

Statistical analysis will be conducted using SPSS or similar software. The methods will include:

- **Descriptive statistics** to summarise attitudes and behaviours
- **Reliability tests** for scale validation
- **Correlation and regression analysis** to test relationships between marketing variables and consumer responses
- **Factor analysis** (if appropriate) to identify underlying constructs

This stage enables broader generalisation of findings and supports the development of an evidence-based conceptual framework for ethical PAW marketing.

3.3 Consideration of Alternative Research Strategies

Although mixed-methods are best suited to this study, other strategies were critically evaluated:

- **Experimental Research** could measure the persuasive effects of different marketing claims but raises ethical concerns due to potential psychological vulnerability in this population.
- **Case Study Research** would provide depth but lacks generalisability across the wider PAW sector.
- **Action Research** is unsuitable because it prioritises organisational improvement rather than independent academic critique.
- **Longitudinal Research** would offer insights into evolving consumer perceptions but is impractical within the time constraints of this project.

The chosen mixed-methods approach provides methodological rigour while respecting the ethical sensitivities of the psychedelic wellness context.

3.4 Ensuring Rigour and Transparency

A **PRISMA flow diagram** will be used in the literature review to document article identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion procedures. This increases transparency and strengthens the academic credibility of the research process.

To ensure methodological quality:

- **Credibility** is enhanced through triangulation of interviews, netnography, and quantitative data.
- **Dependability** is supported through clear documentation of analytic procedures.
- **Transferability** is enabled by providing rich contextual descriptions.
- **Ethical compliance** will be maintained through informed consent, anonymisation, and sensitivity toward potentially vulnerable participants.

4.0 Critical Discussion and Conclusions

This paper has critically analysed the emerging market of psychedelic-assisted wellness, shifting the focus from clinical efficacy debates toward the marketing, ethical, and cultural complexities that accompany the commercialization of psychedelics. While growing interest in psychedelic wellness offers various opportunities for personal growth and civic engagement with alternative health practices, it simultaneously generates a range of challenges that remain under-investigated within both academic and industry debate. This chapter synthesizes insights

from the literature, theoretical frameworks, and methodological reasoning to arrive at a coherent, evidence-based conclusion.

A central argument pursued throughout this paper is that the PAW market dwells within a grey zone between wellness and regulated clinical practice. Unlike psychedelic-assisted therapy, which is strongly prescribed under medical protocols, PAW functions within a commercial environment where marketing narratives, consumer expectations, and cultural symbolism are potent drivers of engagement. This suggests an urgent need to better comprehend how consumers interpret psychedelic wellness offers, how companies communicate these services, and how ethical boundaries can be maintained in a rapidly changing landscape.

Key findings emerging from this critical analysis include the following:

1. A major research gap exists at the intersection of marketing, ethics, and consumer behaviour.

Current scholarship focuses heavily on therapeutic outcomes, while little attention has been given to how organisations construct marketing narratives, how consumers evaluate these claims, or how ethical challenges manifest in an unregulated wellness setting. This study highlights the necessity of addressing these blind spots.

2. PAW marketing poses unique ethical risks compared to PAT.

Consumer-facing wellness products may include claims that blur spiritual, therapeutic, and experiential benefits. Without regulatory safeguards, these narratives may inadvertently target vulnerable individuals or create unrealistic expectations about transformative outcomes. Understanding how such claims shape perceptions and actions is essential for responsible practice.

3. Interpretive Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) is crucial for examining the subjective value of psychedelics.

Psychedelic wellness consumption is rooted in identity construction, symbolism, community belonging, and experiential meaning-making. Traditional marketing models are insufficient; instead, interpretive frameworks enable a deeper analysis of how consumers assign cultural significance to psychedelic experiences.

4. Digital technologies introduce new layers of complexity and ethical sensitivity.

AI-driven targeting, algorithmic segmentation, and social media narrative-building can amplify both positive engagement and harmful misinformation. The “funnel effect,” where consumers are subtly guided from curiosity to high-cost retreat purchases, raises concerns about autonomy, transparency, and informed decision-making.

5. The proposed mixed-methods design offers a comprehensive solution for addressing these gaps.

The qualitative phase using semi-structured interviews and netnography will capture rich, contextual insights into consumer meanings, marketing practices, and ethical tensions. The quantitative phase will then validate emerging themes at a broader population level. This dual approach ensures methodological rigour, comparability of perspectives, and a strong foundation for drawing defensible conclusions.

Overall Contributions and Anticipated Impact

This research is expected to generate significant academic, societal, economic, and policy value:

Academic Impact

The study advances marketing scholarship by integrating CCT, ethical theory, and digital ethnography into a new domain where experiential, symbolic, and psychological factors converge. It establishes a conceptual and methodological foundation for future empirical research on emerging wellness industries.

Societal and Cultural Impact

By illuminating how psychedelic wellness is communicated and consumed, the research can contribute to public understanding, reduce misinformation, and encourage responsible engagement with substances that hold both therapeutic promise and significant risk.

Economic Impact

For organisations operating within the PAW sector, the study offers insights that can inform ethical branding, consumer education strategies, and sustainable value creation. Responsible marketing will be essential for maintaining credibility and long-term industry viability.

Policy Impact

The findings can support policymakers in designing guidelines that ensure consumer protection while enabling innovation. Clear regulatory frameworks will help prevent exploitative marketing, safeguard vulnerable individuals, and promote health-oriented communication standards.

Final Conclusion

This paper argues that the rapid emergence of psychedelic-assisted wellness necessitates a systematic, ethically informed investigation into its marketing practices, consumer perceptions, and cultural implications. By combining interpretive theoretical frameworks with a robust mixed-methods research design, this study provides a pathway for understanding—and

ultimately guiding the responsible development of this transformative but sensitive market. The insights generated have the potential to support a more informed public, a more ethical industry, and a more evidence-driven policy environment.

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