

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 global resurgence of interest in psychedelic-assisted wellness has generated new opportunities and challenges for organisations operating in this emerging marketplace. Despite growing scientific and therapeutic evidence supporting psychedelics, little is known about how consumers interpret, evaluate, and engage with such offerings, or how ethical marketing practices can be developed within a highly sensitive and historically stigmatised context. This developmental conference paper examines how consumer meaning-making, marketplace interactions, and cultural narratives shape perceptions of psychedelic-assisted wellness products and services. Drawing on secondary research, the paper identifies the theoretical, ethical, and methodological gaps that hinder a deeper understanding of consumer behaviour in this domain. An interpretivist orientation underpins the discussion, enabling the paper to explore how experiential, symbolic, and sociocultural factors influence consumer responses. A qualitative, netnographic-informed approach is proposed to investigate these evolving consumer interpretations. The paper contributes by outlining a conceptual grounding for future empirical research, clarifying how marketing within psychedelic-assisted wellness can be developed responsibly while maintaining 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 refer to a group of psychoactive substances known for producing profound changes in sensory perception, emotional processing, and states of consciousness. These altered states are associated with intensified introspection, enhanced meaning-making, and experiences often described as mystical or transformative (Nichols, 2016). The term *psychedelic* was introduced by Humphry Osmond in 1957 to describe “mind-manifesting” substances, emphasising their capacity to make internal psychological processes perceptible (Pollan, 2018). Contemporary scientific classifications typically group psychedelics into three broad categories: tryptamines, phenethylamines, and lysergamides. Tryptamines such as psilocybin and DMT have attracted significant research attention for their strong interactions with serotonin receptors; phenethylamines including MDMA demonstrate therapeutic potential through enhanced emotional connectedness; and lysergamides such as LSD exhibit long-lasting perceptual and cognitive effects (Carhart-Harris & Goodwin, 2017; Gasser et al., 2014).

Although these substances have been used for centuries within Indigenous ceremonial and healing traditions, modern scientific interest accelerated with the current “psychedelic renaissance,” which has produced growing evidence for their therapeutic value in treating depression, anxiety, addiction, and PTSD (Griffiths et al., 2016; Grob et al., 2011; Mitchell et al., 2021). However, an important distinction now exists between **psychedelic-assisted therapy (PAT)** a medically regulated intervention and **psychedelic-assisted wellness (PAW)**, a rapidly expanding commercial sector offering retreats, microdosing products, coaching services, and

spiritual-wellness experiences outside traditional clinical settings (O'Donnell et al., 2018). This distinction is central to the present study because the ethical, regulatory, and marketing conditions within PAW differ substantially from those within PAT.

The emergence of the PAW market has been shaped by rising societal interest in holistic wellbeing and personal transformation. At the same time, companies have begun adopting contemporary marketing strategies including branding, digital storytelling, and social-media engagement to legitimise and promote psychedelic experiences to consumers (Hungara & Nobre, 2021). Yet despite increasing commercial activity, there remains **limited academic understanding** of how such products are being marketed, how consumers interpret and respond to these messages, and what ethical implications arise when promoting substances associated with mental health vulnerability and historical stigma (Sessa, 2012). This gap is particularly concerning given that overstated marketing claims, lack of safety communication, and exclusionary premium pricing models have the potential to mislead consumers and undermine public trust in the field (Carhart-Harris et al., 2018).

Given these issues, this research seeks to develop a conceptual foundation for investigating the ethical and consumer-behaviour dynamics shaping PAW marketing. The study addresses three interconnected aims.

First, it identifies the **research gap** concerning how contemporary marketing techniques such as neuromarketing, digital targeting, and consumer culture dynamics influence consumer perceptions and expectations within PAW (Daws et al., 2022; O'Sullivan & Shankar, 2019).

Second, it critically examines the **ethical challenges**, questioning whether current marketing practices adequately balance organisational goals with consumer safety, informed consent, and responsible communication.

Third, it proposes a **conceptual framework** informed by Interpretive Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) and netnography, enabling future empirical research to explore how consumers construct meaning around psychedelic experiences and how these meanings shape marketplace behaviour (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 revival 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 of Innovation theory provides a useful lens for understanding the adoption of psychedelic wellness practices. Early adopters 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 the commercialisation of psychedelics. On one side, commercial growth is argued to support destigmatisation and broaden access to wellness interventions. On the other, 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 marketing models 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). Psychedelic consumption 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 influence not only consumer expectations but also 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 raise 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 study employs a **Mixed-Methods Research (MMR)** design underpinned by an **interpretivist philosophical position** and an **inductive logic of enquiry**. An interpretivist orientation is appropriate because consumer perceptions of psychedelic-assisted wellness (PAW) are socially constructed, subjective, and deeply embedded within cultural narratives and personal meaning-making processes. Mixed-methods enable the study to integrate rich qualitative insights with broader quantitative patterns, producing a comprehensive understanding of consumer attitudes, ethical tensions, and marketing dynamics within the emerging PAW market.

A **sequential exploratory design** is adopted, beginning with an in-depth qualitative phase, followed by a quantitative phase. This structure ensures that qualitative insights guide the development of measurable variables for the quantitative stage, thereby strengthening the validity of the findings and grounding them 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 examined the emerging market of psychedelic-assisted wellness (PAW), shifting the focus from clinical efficacy debates towards the marketing, ethical, and cultural complexities that accompany the commercialization of psychedelics. While the growing interest in psychedelic wellness presents significant opportunities for personal development and public engagement with alternative health practices, it simultaneously introduces a range of challenges that remain insufficiently addressed in academic and industry discourse. This chapter synthesises insights from the literature, theoretical frameworks, and methodological reasoning to form a coherent, evidence-based conclusion.

A central argument developed throughout this paper is that the PAW market operates in a grey zone between wellness and regulated clinical practice. Unlike psychedelic-assisted therapy (PAT), which is governed by rigorous medical protocols, PAW functions within a commercial environment where marketing narratives, consumer expectations, and cultural symbolism heavily influence engagement. This distinction creates an urgent need to understand how consumers interpret psychedelic wellness offerings, how companies communicate these services, and how ethical boundaries can be maintained in a rapidly evolving 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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