

Tripping Through Headlines: Psychedelics in Aotearoa New Zealand's News Media

A content analysis of the themes and voices present in the news media coverage of psychedelic substances in Aotearoa New Zealand.

A thesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology in fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Communications Studies

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Matthew Ko

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Abstract

Background: The past two decades have seen a revivification of research into psychedelic substances, resulting in a solid base of clinical data proving efficacy for the treatment of mental health diagnoses. The use of certain psychedelics for mental health therapy was legalized in Australia in 2023, sparking discussion around the prospects of Aotearoa New Zealand following suit. Key stakeholders in the Australian psychedelic market have identified the stigma associated with psychedelics as a major barrier to progress and stress the need for effective communication strategies for re-education. To contribute to this initiative, this thesis analyzed domestic news media coverage to provide a foundational understanding of the prevailing discourse around psychedelics to help guide and inform future communication strategies and re-education efforts

Methods: This research employs a thematic content analysis method to examine written news media content from Aotearoa New Zealand, sourced from the years 2000-2023. An inductive coding method was used to determine emergent themes and voices present in the articles. This thesis measured both how many articles referenced each theme and sub-theme, and the total number of times each theme and sub-theme was referenced overall. This provided two data metrics to demonstrate both the breadth and depth of themes in the reporting. Filtering this data to only include articles which contained a specific voice for third-party comment demonstrated how different types of outside commentary affected the thematic content of the coverage.

Results: Seventy-five (75) articles met the inclusion criteria. Analysis yielded six themes, 23 sub-themes and five types of voices. The “Potential Benefits” theme, categorizing reporting on the various proposed benefits of psychedelic use, was referenced in the most articles (n=67 of 75) indicating it was the mostly

widely covered topic. The “Clinical Studies” theme, categorizing coverage of the processes and results of clinical trials with psychedelics, received the most total references (n=463), indicating it was the topic which received the most in-depth reporting.

Conclusion: This research concluded that psychedelics have predominantly been portrayed as a pharmaceutical aid to psychotherapy in the Aotearoa New Zealand news media. This has primarily been achieved through commentary from ‘researcher voices’. The data in this thesis demonstrated that the inclusion of other types of voices greatly affected the thematic content of the reporting. As such, the dominance of ‘researcher voices’ caused other topics and important narratives regarding psychedelics to be muted and overlooked in the coverage. For the prospective psychedelic industry to overcome stigma through re-education, this research suggests that it is imperative that their communication strategies include a variety of voices to adequately address important information and provide holistic teaching from diverse perspectives.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1: Introducing the topic

Any academic work on psychedelics has the potential to incite controversy. The contemporary world is acutely aware of the potential hazards associated with hallucinogenic substances, shaped by long-standing opinions formed through years of propaganda, anti-drug legislation and education (Belouin, 2018). Despite this, in recent years psychedelics have been thrust into the forefront of the battle against one of the largest problems of our modern age: the mental health crisis. In 2019, the World Health Organization reported that 970 million people globally were living with a mental health disorder (WHO, 2019). The United Nations estimates that this number has increased at least 25 percent since the Covid-19 Pandemic (Kestel 2022). The effects of this growing problem are compounded by antidepressants and the currently available pharmacological methods of treatment often proving to be ineffective or only mildly effective, in many cases (Kirsch et al. 2003, Penn & Tracy 2012). In the face of this crisis, psychedelics have emerged as an unlikely hero. Despite decades of exclusion from public discourse and academic study, investigation into the potential of psychedelic drugs has seen a revivification in the past 20 years; a phenomenon which some are calling the “Psychedelic Renaissance” (Lu, 2021). Today, a decade’s worth of clinical data demonstrating efficacy combined with a pertinent need for new methods of mental health treatment, has psychedelic assisted therapy on the verge of legalization in many countries.

Even though psychedelics have shown incredible promise in treating mental health diagnoses, the development of the field has moved incredibly fast (Folkard, 2020). In most countries, psychedelics remain illegal substances. Years of anti-psychedelic propaganda and media coverage have maintained negative associations of the substances in the public mind (Belouin, 2018). Australia has recently

become the first country to legalize certain psychedelic therapies, resulting in the creation of a legitimate psychedelic industry in the country (TGA, 2023). An Australian study from the Sax Institute, an organization dedicated to improving health research and policy, concluded that stigma and biased attitudes present a significant barrier to progress for the psychedelic field (Kuntsler et al., 2023). As the industry seeks to make psychedelic assisted therapy a legal and legitimate form of treatment, re-educating the public on psychedelics through effective communication is of critical importance (ibid). This key observation is the main motivation for this thesis, which will seek to answer the research question “How are psychedelics being portrayed in the Aotearoa New Zealand news media?”.

1.2: This research and its aims

This research will seek to create new knowledge by answering the question “How are psychedelics being portrayed in the Aotearoa New Zealand news media?”. To answer this question, this research will undertake a thematic content analysis of written news content on the topic of psychedelics published in Aotearoa New Zealand over the last 20 years. The data will be sourced using Google search engine and the Newztext database, which includes full-text archives of domestic news sources such as *The New Zealand Herald*, *Fairfax Newspapers*, *Stuff*, *Radio New Zealand Newswire* and more. While social media platforms are gaining popularity as sources of information, traditional media sources still maintain the highest level of trust amongst New Zealanders (Myllylahti & Treadwell, 2024). As psychedelics are seeking to become an accepted and legitimate form of treatment, information and re-education must be disseminated from the most trusted sources (Kuntsler et al., 2023). This makes traditional news media the most relevant and important content to source for this research. Further justification and explanation for news media use will be discussed at length in Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods. The thematic content analysis in this research will code the various pieces of content, identifying emergent themes and voices to determine what topics and whose voices have been propagated related

to the topic of psychedelics. These findings can contribute to future re-education efforts by providing baseline data on what information on psychedelics the New Zealand public may have already been exposed to through news media coverage. Further, this thesis will analyse how different voices in the media frame the discussion, providing insights into optimizing re-education strategies through the effective use of diverse testimonies.

This research can be considered ‘advocacy research’, which is research that supports a certain position or primary argument (Streib, 1988). While other forms of academic research are aimed at discovering objective truth and broadly expanding knowledge, advocacy research begins with a narrow scope and expressly supports a particular reform or goal (ibid). This research adopts the definition of ‘advocacy research’ as it is aimed at supporting the prospective psychedelic industry in its effort to re-educate the public and overcome stigma. Additionally, while this thesis does not formulate an argument that legalizing psychedelic therapy in Aotearoa New Zealand would be beneficial, it does accept this position as an a priori principle and starting point for the research.

Arguments exist in opposition to the legalization of psychedelics, which will be briefly addressed here, in the interest of transparency and academic rigour. Opposition to psychedelics can be rooted in antiquated viewpoints and stigma based on decades of propaganda which will be discussed further in Chapter 2: Literature Review. However, there are also legitimate criticisms for the rapidly advancing psychedelic field. One of such criticisms is the need for further clinical study. While there is a solid base of clinical evidence for the efficacy of psychedelic therapies, critics suggest that more research is needed - especially with regards to long-term and lasting effects of psychedelic use (Jacob et al. 2020). With most of the clinical research with psychedelics occurring in the last decade, there is a lack of

comprehensive long-term data both on the lasting efficacy of the substances and potential side-effects (ibid).

Another criticism of psychedelics is a concerning link between the substances and those with a biological disposition to schizophrenia. A study published in JAMA psychology journal found “statistically significant interactions between psychedelic use and genetic vulnerability to schizophrenia” (Simonsson et al. 2024). These findings are supported by the fact that most clinical studies with psychedelics screen for and exclude participants who have a family history with schizophrenia (Griffiths, 2006).

A third criticism of the psychedelic field argues that the legalization of psychedelics could spark increased use outside of regulated environments. While no substance is without risk, psychedelics have demonstrated to be reliably safe across many clinical trials (Nichols 2020, Griffiths 2006). However, these studies only demonstrate this safety profile when taken in a highly regulated environment with careful patient screening, a supervised setting and a controlled dose. Assurances regarding the safety of these substances outside of these meticulous guidelines can only be anecdotally verified. Thus, there are legitimate concerns with individuals observing the ‘hype’ surrounding psychedelics and pursuing the substances outside of the clinicians office – where safety is a concern.

Therefore, there are legitimate arguments against psychedelic legalization efforts that oppose the progress in the field. This work recognizes these arguments, but maintains its aims to support progress of the psychedelic industry and its goals of re-education. Given that this thesis is ‘advocacy research’ these opposing viewpoints will not be addressed further. Additionally, while this research will analyze the data set to create a mostly impartial evaluation of trends in the reporting of psychedelics, it will not

create entirely objective knowledge. More information on bias in this research will be discussed in Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods.

1.3: Significance of this research

Psychedelics are a sparsely researched topic from the communications discipline. Currently, there is a solid base of clinical evidence for the efficacy of psychedelics in therapy, with more studies being undertaken regularly (Carhartt-Harris & Goodwin, 2017). As psychedelics move from a stage of initial study to a stage of implementation, the industry will require more than just pharmacological research. An influential study that guides this research was conducted by the Sax Institute in Australia in 2023. The Sax Institute is an Australian organization which aims to enhance health policy and practice through research involving both policymakers and practitioners. Through interviews with politicians and stakeholders in key organizations related to the legalization of psychedelics, their study identified three major themes surrounding the progress of the industry: (i) “More research is needed” (ii) “Negative stigma impedes progression” (iii) “Effective messaging is needed to inform positions” (Kuntsler et. al. 2023). The second and third themes are particularly relevant to this research as they clearly identify negative preconceptions as a critical barrier, and further, express the need for contributions from the communications discipline to find solutions to this obstacle and encourage progress. As the authors of the study write:

Clear and consistent messaging about treatment will be imperative to inform the public, influence political decision-making, and counter political misconceptions, misinformation and disinformation. ... Communication strategies are necessary not only to inform the general community and political views and legislative behaviours but also to support clinicians in gaining the knowledge and confidence they need to prescribe psychedelics. (Kunstler et.al., 2023 p.5).

The purpose of this thesis is to provide new knowledge, to contribute to the psychedelic industry from a communications angle. This will add to the range of knowledge available to the industry and align

directly with what experts have identified as the most significant and relevant needs for progress of the field.

1.4: Definitions

This thesis contains terminology that requires defining and clarification. The most important of these terms is “psychedelics”. Psychedelics are a category of hallucinatory drugs that includes several substances which, while slightly different, all have a generally similar effect on the brain and induce analogous experiences (Nichols, 2016). Literature on the pharmacological classification of these drugs has drastically shifted over time. Carhart-Harris (2017) notes the term “psychedelic” was coined by Humphrey Osmond in the 1950’s and is rooted in the Ancient Greek translation for “mind-revealing”. This term was initially rejected by the scientific community, as the consensus was that these substances mimicked states of psychosis, thus earning them the classification of “psychotomimetics” (Nichols, 2020 p.151). However, as further research was conducted, it became clear that the psychedelic experience did not accurately induce a state mind like psychotic mental illnesses (ie. schizophrenia), and therefore the term ‘psychedelic’ is now accepted in most circumstances, and the phrase “serotonergic hallucinogen” is accepted in more clinical settings, to describe the substances activity on the serotonin receptor systems (Nichols, 2020).

Psychedelics have been known to induce hallucinatory, sensory and spiritual experiences (colloquially referred to as “trips”) lasting for several hours depending on the dosage and substance (Grinspoon, 2021). As this research will deal with some clinical literature it is important to note that the proposed benefits and lasting effects from psychedelics are not stated as effects from being under the influence of the drug - but are measured post experience with the drug (usually one or two sessions, depending on the design of the trial). Therefore, if a study claims for example, that psilocybin reduced depression and

anxiety, it is not stating that patients were less anxious and depressed *while* under the influence of psilocybin, but rather that these effects were noted post-psilocybin session through follow-up inquiry. This differs greatly from most other pharmaceuticals, such as antidepressants for example, which typically require the substance to be actively influencing the body and brain to see effects.

There is some debate in the scientific community on the strict classification of psychedelic substances (Belouin, 2018). As such, for the purposes of this thesis, substances which have been included under the umbrella term of “psychedelic” by the domestic news media will be included in this research. These substances are listed in the figure below with their colloquial and clinical names, for clarification purposes:

Figure 1: Psychedelic Substances

| Clinical Name | Colloquial Name |
|--|----------------------|
| Psilocybin | “Magic Mushrooms” |
| Lysergic Acid Diethylamide (LSD) | “Acid” |
| Mescaline | “Peyote” |
| 3,4 Methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) | “Molly” or “Ecstasy” |
| Dimethyltryptamine (DMT) | “Ayahuasca” |
| Ibogaine | N/A |
| Ketamine | “Special K” |

Language choices when referring to psychedelics can carry certain connotations as well, especially in the case of psychedelic substances which have been subject to vilification through propaganda and negative press coverage (Bracco, 2019). For example, the term ‘psilocybin’ does not carry the same weight and associations as ‘magic mushrooms’. As such, this research will also code and analyze the use of clinical and colloquial terms for psychedelics.

1.5: Contextualizing This Research - Aotearoa New Zealand

This research is being completed within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand; a geographically isolated, sparsely populated nation sharing a culture of indigenous Māori traditions with those of the British commonwealth (Dalziel et al., 2024). Aotearoa New Zealand is a country of just under five million people (Stats NZ, 2024). While the country is primarily made up of people from European descent, the population continues to diversify as the number of those identifying as Māori, Asian, Pacific Peoples, among other ethnicities, steadily increases (ibid). The country is generally known to be politically progressive and forward-thinking, committed to prioritizing the well-being and prosperity of its citizens (Dalziel et al., 2024). Aotearoa New Zealand presents an opportunity to study communications in a localized, modern and socially conscious setting.

The New Zealand news media landscape presents some unique characteristics, while simultaneously facing many of the similar challenges as other traditional news media sources around the globe. A key characteristic of the New Zealand news media is its highly concentrated nature. The majority of the country's media outlets are owned by a few major players including New Zealand Media and Entertainment (NZME), Sky and MediaWorks - all of which are private-equity and shareholder owned (Hope et al., 2023). Some notable exceptions are the crown owned media corporations Television New Zealand (TVNZ) and Radio New Zealand (RNZ), as well as the now independently owned Stuff. The highly concentrated nature of the New Zealand news media landscape has sometimes prompted concerns about the diversity of reporting, especially in a political context (Gould, 2021). Also unique to New Zealand's news media landscape is the presence of Māori media programs and outlets, such as Whakaata Māori and Te Karere, which play an important role in promoting Māori language and identity (Hope et al., 2023).

Aotearoa New Zealand's news media faces challenges which are akin to traditional news media outlets around the globe. Traditional methods of reporting such as radio, broadcast and print are becoming increasingly digitized as audiences move online. This shift and the presence of social media platforms has undercut the ability of news media outlets to generate revenue through advertising. Other corporations such as Alphabet/google and Meta/Facebook now hold an "almost monolithic control over online advertising" (Hope et al., 2023 p.8). In Aotearoa New Zealand, this has led to significant economic pressures on media outlets, best exemplified by the complete shutdown of Newshub on July 5, 2024 due to a 74 million dollar disappearance in broadcast advertising revenue (Tupou, 2024).

1.5.1 Aotearoa New Zealand and Psychedelics

In relation to psychedelics, Aotearoa New Zealand provides a consequential location for this research to be completed. A critical development in the progress of the psychedelic field has occurred in Australia, as it became the first country to legalize two psychedelic substances for the purposes of therapy in July 2023 (TGA, 2023). While this is a significant moment for the industry worldwide, it has a distinct significance for Aotearoa New Zealand. This decision was undertaken by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA), an Australian institution. However, the protocols and processes for implementing psychedelic therapy have been established by the Royal Australia New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP) a joint institution between the two countries. Therefore, with their guidelines and recommendations – there is a clear path and framework of clinical practices for New Zealand to follow, should psychedelics be legalized domestically.

Furthermore, the legalization process for psychedelics in New Zealand presents another critical piece of information which makes the Australian legalization decision important, domestically. Psychedelic substances are not novel drugs and are currently restricted under the Misuse of Drugs Act (1975). As

such, their path to legalization and implementation is different from a new pharmaceutical. Under the Misuse of Drugs Act (1975), psilocybin, LSD and DMT are classified under Schedule 1 and MDMA under Schedule 2. For any one of these psychedelic substances to be legalized for therapeutic purposes, they must be reclassified to a less restrictive schedule. The application for reclassification of medicines is handled by the Medicines Classification Committee (MCC), which is part of the New Zealand Medicines and Medical Devices Safety Authority (Medsafe). After an application is made, public consultations are held, allowing for any interested parties to provide evidence or comment on the proposed change of classification (Medsafe, 2024). The MCC then deliberates on the application with all the evidence which has been presented, both from the applicant and from public consultations (ibid). Of critical importance to the progress of the psychedelic field in New Zealand is the fact that the MCC indicates that “Harmonization with Australia” is a part of the consideration process, whereby they have a disposition to harmonize domestic classification with their Australian neighbours, where appropriate (ibid). After this deliberation process, the MCC will make its recommendation before the Minister’s Delegate makes a final decision.

Therefore, the recent decision to legalize certain psychedelic therapies in Australia presents Aotearoa New Zealand as a rich context for the study of psychedelics. The MCC’s disposition for harmonizing legislation with Australia and the RANZCP’s established implementation guidelines make the prospects of the psychedelic industry in Aotearoa New Zealand very promising. This research will contribute to the psychedelic industry using a strictly domestic data set, making it optimally relevant for the future of the field in Aotearoa New Zealand.

1.6: Thesis Structure

To answer the research question, “How are psychedelics being portrayed in the Aotearoa New Zealand news?”, this thesis will be divided into six chapters:

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter introduced the purpose and motivation behind this research. It defined psychedelics and outlined the process for legalizing the substances in Aotearoa New Zealand. Further, this chapter has aligned the research in this thesis with the most significant needs of the psychedelic industry.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter summarizes the relevant literature on psychedelics. It begins with their introduction to Western academia in the early 20th century and follows their progression through history, highlighting their initial promising period of study and the war on drugs which halted all progress. It provides an overview of the latest breakthrough clinical data on psychedelics and concludes with an summary of the recent TGA and RANZCP decision to legalize psychedelic therapy in Australia.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

This chapter frames the thesis within an epistemological context to define the type of knowledge this research will generate and describes the methodology which has influenced the research design. It then outlines the specific methods and techniques used to gather, create and analyze the data, acknowledging the limitations and delimitations of the research design.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the findings from the data analysis. It highlights examples of the various themes and voices in the news media coverage of psychedelics and presents the data collected on their prevalence in the reporting.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The discussion in this chapter provides a response to the research question by outlining how the knowledge created by this thesis demonstrates how psychedelics have been portrayed in the Aotearoa New Zealand news media. Further, it will provide considerations for future efforts of re-educating and communicating psychedelic substances.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This chapter will address the limitations to this research and will suggest pathways for future research. It will summarize this thesis and discuss key takeaways.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The academic literature on psychedelics is a multidisciplinary panorama involving chemistry, biology, psychology, neuroscience, history, spirituality, philosophy and politics. With such a wide range of potential angles and topics related to psychedelics, this literature review will not create an all-encompassing summary and will instead focus only on the academic works which are most relevant to provide a background to this research. Therefore, this chapter will be divided into six sections. Section 1 discusses the history of psychedelics' introduction to Western academia and the initial promising period of study associated with treating mental health disorders such as depression and alcoholism. Section 2 overviews the "war on drugs" campaign banning psychedelics from study and their exclusion from public discourse, including the specific history of Aotearoa New Zealand. Section 3 discusses the current mental health crisis and the limitations of current methods of treatment, which has led to a reexamination into the potential of psychedelic substances. Section 4 summarizes the modern clinical data over the past 20 years, outlining the key takeaways of efficacy which has led to modern psychedelic legalization efforts. Section 5 outlines the recent legalization of psychedelic therapy in Australia and the lessons learned from this process, highlighting the need for communication strategies to re-educate and overcome stigma. Finally, Section 6 discusses the role of news media in shaping public opinion communicating trusted information.

2.1 History & Initial Period of Study into Psychedelics:

Evidence of psychedelic use predates recorded history in the ritual traditions of our primitive ancestors (Nichols, 2016). Daniel R. George et al (2022) argue that psychedelic use in shamanic rituals by ancient humans should be viewed as the universal "norm" given how ubiquitous the evidence is cross-culturally. George et al document several historic practices which give insight into how the psychedelic experience

was integrated into ancient human traditions. George et al (ibid) note how in Amazonian traditions, the shaman is known as “*curandero*” which translates to “healer” giving an indication to the curative properties of these drugs. Further, they describe Native American shamanic traditions as using psychedelics to solve “maladaptive thought patterns” and to refigure perspectives on personal predicaments (ibid. p. 895). The historic use of psychedelics as medicine for the mind foreshadows the current potential for psychedelics to treat mental health disorders. Despite their ancient roots, it took many generations for psychedelics to become a topic of interest in the modern Western academic tradition. Ben Sessa (2016) notes that the first case of such scholarship begins in the late 19th century with Henry Havelock Ellis’s investigation into the hallucination inducing peyote cactus rituals of Mexican tribes. While their research was the first to isolate a psychedelic compound (Mescaline), it did not spark much further research into the potential usefulness of psychedelics (ibid). That critical moment occurred many years later in 1943, by way of a convenient lab accident (Jay, 2013).

Working at the Sandoz laboratory in Switzerland, chemist Albert Hoffman synthesized a new compound, lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) (Jay, 2013). After having accidentally absorbed some of the new compound through the skin of his hands and noticing some mild psychoactive effects, Hoffman administered himself a dose of LSD to test the effects further (ibid). On his bike ride home from the laboratory, Hoffman was transported to a world of kaleidoscopic images and found himself experiencing the world’s first “acid trip” (ibid). Hoffman’s self-experiment with LSD allowed him to identify its potential as a therapeutic agent and shortly after, Sandoz laboratories began researching its potential benefits (Belouin, 2017). These trials marked the beginning of an incredibly promising period of study into the therapeutic potential of psychedelic substances.

During the 1950s over 500 articles on LSD appeared in scientific journals describing its promise for psychiatric research, none of which mention a potential for abuse (Dyck, 2005). Humphry Osmond and Abram Hoffer were two of the original pioneers of psychedelic therapy, who conducted the first trials with LSD to treat alcoholism. By the end of the 1960s Osmond and Hoffer had treated approximately 2000 alcoholic patients with LSD and reported that ~45% of these patients had not relapsed after a year (Costandi, 2014). Costandi (2014) further highlights that LSD's efficacy in treating alcoholism led to the substance being endorsed by the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous as the "next big thing" in psychiatry. Dyck (2005 p. 382) describes the initial treatments of alcoholism with LSD as providing "unprecedented rates of recovery", summarizing the surprising and striking success of these preliminary studies. As such, clinical trials continued to investigate psychedelics' potential to cure alcoholism and other addiction-type diagnoses. However, there were often intriguing side effects and observations which opened the potential for psychedelics to treat other clinical diagnoses as well (Nichols, 2016). Unger (1963) for example, noted that many patients underwent drug-induced rapid personality change after a therapeutic session with LSD, psilocybin or mescaline. He not only observed patients completely abstaining from alcohol, but also described neurotic behaviors and ailments as "practically evaporating" post-treatment (Unger, 1963, p.118). These types of observations prompted researchers to examine the potential for psychedelic treatment beyond addiction.

As the 1960s progressed, research into psychedelics began to encompass a much broader range of psychological problems including neuroses, depression, social anxiety, and even non-medical benefits including spirituality and creativity (Sessa, 2016). During this time, philosophers such as Aldous Huxley and Alan Watts began writing and lecturing on what psychedelics can teach us about spirituality and the human experience, prompting psychedelics to gain popularity outside of the clinician's office.

Recreational psychedelic use became increasingly widespread, bringing with it both problems and

controversy. Sessa (2016 p.8) writes “As the recreational use of psychedelics increases ... increasing cases of LSD-induced psychosis appear”. Not only are there growing cases of psychedelic misuse with unintended consequences, but psychedelics also become associated with counterculture “hippie” movements, which sought to radically shift the political climate of the time (Wesson, 2011). The widespread recreational misuse of psychedelics, combined with socio-political cultural movements of the time, provide the catalyst for sweeping government campaigns which put an end to all progress on the psychedelic front.

2.2: The “War on Drugs” and the Criminalization Psychedelic

Psychedelic research continued to flourish through the 1960s. However, outside of the lab, counterculture movements were beginning to take shape, proposing radically different philosophies and views to the establishment of the time (Bach, 2013). The epicentre of this cultural shift became San Francisco, USA at the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood, where revolutionaries, free thinkers and hippies congregated to oppose the establishment (ibid). Bach (2013 p. 78) writes, “counterculturalists sought to replace—destroy even—what they felt was an antiquated, corrupt, sick, degenerate, dominant culture they wanted to build an entirely new society consisting of alternative institutions and changed human relations.” In light of this radical philosophy, these counterculture movements became perceived as extremist and dangerous to the establishment and status quo.

Wesson (2011 p.157) emphasizes the centrality of psychedelics to the hippie movement and counterculture, he writes, “Psychedelic drugs were more than a new class of extremely potent mind-altering drugs; they were symbols of the counterculture both in mainstream culture and within the counter-culture itself”. Despite the indications of psychedelics as a promising tool in psychiatry, the centrality of the substances to the counterculture made their image synonymous with the notions of

fear and danger that surrounded the hippie movements of the time. The combination of recreational misuse and the association with contentious political movements resulted in a Nixon government initiative to put a stop to the societal disruption. This infamous campaign was known as the “the War on Drugs” (Pembleton, 2021).

In 1971 American president Richard Nixon held a press conference declaring drug abuse as “public enemy number one” and promised to wage an “all-out offensive” against this new enemy (Richard Nixon Foundation, 1971). As part of this campaign, Nixon’s government passed the Controlled Substances Act which classified psychedelics under Schedule 1 (reserved for substances with the highest potential of abuse, with no accepted medical use) which subjected them to the most stringent of available restrictions (Controlled Substances Act, 1971).

Jessica Bracco (2019) argues that news media coverage of psychedelics at the time exemplified biased propaganda and details examples to highlight how psychedelics were portrayed as extremely harmful and dangerous. She cites several news articles which claim that psychedelic use led to “chronic mental derangement” (p.14) and “harrowing seemingly schizophrenic nightmares” (p.9), labelling the drugs as the “nation’s newest scourge” (Bracco, 2019 p.13). Bracco argues that these news articles exemplify a period of news coverage which was intentionally directed at creating panic and fear in an effort to foster public support for legislative counteractions. She writes that the media “agreed with the [anti-psychedelic position of the] government despite little or no scientific basis” and argues that the media “also actively worked to persuade the American people that these drugs were untestable and damaging, not only to people’s brains but also to middle-class society” (ibid p.3). Bracco’s argument follows the prevailing narrative that the initial period of promising study on psychedelics was brought to an end by the propaganda and legislation included in the “war on drugs” campaign. Belouin (2018 p.7),

summarizes this common argument by stating that “stigmatization, rather than actual risk led to research-impeded regulatory control”.

However, whether this narrative is accurate is a point of debate amongst scholars. Wayne Hall (2021), argues that while the “war on drugs” certainly influenced the abandonment of psychedelic research, it was not the only factor. Hall notes that changes in the FDA regulations during the 1960s made it more difficult for research on all novel drugs to be completed, which was not limited to psychedelics. He adds that the widespread recreational use and overly “exuberant” advocates caused drawback from the medical community, which was more on the side of exercising caution and promoting psychedelics in a strictly clinical setting (Hall, 2021 p.28). He argues this was the motivation behind Sandoz laboratories restricting their production and distribution of LSD in the late 1960s, a critical decision which also stymied research (Ibid).

Regardless of whether due to fear mongering or legitimate factors, in the 1970s psychedelic research came to a stop and negative preconceptions surrounding the substances were deeply ingrained in the public psyche (Belouin, 2018). Although the criminalization of psychedelic substances began in the United States, it quickly spread to many other Western nations. Belouin (2018) cites the United Nations’ “Single Drug Convention” in 1961 and the “Psychotropic Convention” in 1971 as international drug control efforts aimed at harmonizing regulations worldwide. Aotearoa New Zealand was no exception to this trend in changing legislation.

Throughout the 1960s Aotearoa New Zealand had its own history of experimentation with psychedelic compounds. A notable figure in New Zealand’s history with psychedelics is Dr. David Livingstone, who conducted a series of studies on 55 individuals using LSD in New Zealand during the 1960s (Gates, 2023).

Livingstone was a public supporter of psychedelic use in therapy and advocated against their criminalization and restriction (ibid). He was not the only domestic researcher interested in psychedelics, Redmer Yksa (2017) notes that trials with LSD were also popular during this time in Ōtepoti Dunedin at the Waikari Hospital and Ashburn Hall. As Sandoz laboratories began to restrict the distribution of LSD, the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP) complained about lack of supply of the substance and expressed “the drug had been found useful and that it was desirable that supplies be continued” (Yksa, 2017 p.1). Yet despite the advocacy of the RANZCP and Dr. Livingstone, LSD was made illegal in Aotearoa New Zealand in 1967, with the rest of the psychedelic catalogue following suit, being criminalized under the Misuse of Drugs act 1975 (Gates, 2023). As such, the initial promising period of study into the therapeutic potential of psychedelics came to a halt in New Zealand as well as the United States of America.

2.3: The Mental Health Crisis

In the wake of sweeping international legislation and the “war on drugs”, psychedelic research entered a ‘dark age’ with little to no progress made in any regard from 1970s to 1990s (Nichols & Walter, 2020). Only relatively recently has the therapeutic potential of psychedelics been revisited in academic and clinical study - a revival which is motivated by a desire to solve one of modern society’s most significant challenges: the mental health crisis.

The phrase “mental health crisis” has been adopted by news media outlets across the globe to refer to the dramatically increasing rates of mental health diagnoses over the past few decades (Spence, 2022.; Gose, 2023). Global mental health statistics demonstrate that this crisis has become exacerbated in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. For instance, the World Health Organization reported in 2019 that 970 million people globally were living with a mental health disorder (WHO, 2019). But, since the Covid-

19 pandemic, the UN estimates that this number has increased at least 25 percent and approximates that 1 in 4 people globally now suffer from a mental health condition (Kestel, 2022).

Aotearoa New Zealand is no exception to this international trend as statistics also indicate a domestic crisis of mental health. A report from Te Whatu Ora [Health New Zealand] (2020) on mental health in Aotearoa New Zealand revealed that 1 in 5 New Zealanders aged 15 or older are diagnosed with a mood and/or anxiety disorder. The same report identified that 78% of participants had a personal experience of mental distress or knew of someone close to them going through mental distress (ibid). Issues of mental health disproportionately affected young people (18–24-year-olds), with 25% of the demographic reporting difficulty doing everyday activities due to mental health conditions (ibid). Additionally, the report found that young people in New Zealand have one of the highest suicide rates of all OECD countries (ibid). The Statistics New Zealand 2021 General Social Survey found that the proportion of New Zealanders that described their mental wellbeing across the five categories of “in good spirits”, “calm and relaxed”, “active and vigorous”, “fresh and rested” and “life filled with interesting things” had declined in all categories since 2018 (Statistics NZ, 2022).

Te Whatu Ora also reported that over 175 000 clients accessed mental health and addiction services in 2022, a number which has been steadily rising since 2013 (Te Whatu Ora, 2023). This demonstrates that not only are an increasing number of New Zealanders suffering from mental health conditions, but many are actively seeking sources of relief. Shaun Robinson, Chief Executive of the New Zealand Mental Health Foundation, confirms that Aotearoa New Zealand is experiencing a mental health ‘crisis’, especially post pandemic, as he states, “What we have is a crisis on top of a crisis, because mental health was already in a crisis [before covid]” (Spence, 2022).

Compounding the issue of declining mental health is the lack of adequate tools at our disposal to deal with the rising prevalence of diagnoses (Kirsch et al., 2008). The current pharmacological methods of treating many mental health disorders consists of several categories of drugs (ie. SSRIs, TCAs etc.) which fall under the umbrella term of “antidepressants” (Penn & Tracy, 2012). Penn & Tracy (2012, p.181) contend that, while widely prescribed and extremely popular, antidepressants have been under scrutiny in recent years because of “the rising prevalence of depression despite dramatic increase in antidepressant use”. Irving Kirsch et al (2008) published a study which argued that antidepressants were largely ineffective pharmacological methods of treatment. In their study, they find that antidepressants only meet the criteria of clinically significant efficacy in the most “extremely depressed patients” and that this is due to “a decrease in the response to placebo rather than an increase in the response to medication” (ibid p.266). Kirsch et al contend that “Meta-analyses of antidepressant medications have reported only modest benefits over placebo treatment, and when unpublished trial data are included, the benefit falls below the accepted criteria for clinical significance” (ibid p.260). This study received much attention and heavy critique as it undermined the value of the primary pharmacological treatment of mental health diagnoses. Yet even in critiques of Kirsch’s findings, the limitations of antidepressants are accepted. Penn & Tracy (2012), for example, argue against Kirsch et al (2008) that antidepressants do provide relief for millions worldwide and that they cannot be cast as entirely “ineffective”. However, even in Penn & Tracy’s (2012) study they concede that “limited efficacy” remains an issue for antidepressants, and further, conclude by advocating for investigating new approaches to treating depression. novel methods of treating mental health are necessary to deal with the growing crisis. Therefore, antidepressants are not a catch-all solution and there is an acknowledged need for novel methods of treatment to combat the growing mental health crisis.

The combination of rising rates of mental health diagnoses and the limited efficacy of current treatment methods, has sparked a renewal of research into psychedelics. Since the early 2000s, psychedelic research has entered a renaissance, showing promising results analogous to the efficacy of its initial period of study.

2.4: The Psychedelic Renaissance

After a several decade long hiatus, psychedelic research is once again flourishing. The first of the modern psychedelic trials began with Rick Straussman's 1994 examinations of DMT's effects on the brain, although these studies were not aimed at finding therapeutic value. Since then, the early 2000s have seen researchers investigate and find efficacy in psychedelic treatment of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), anxiety, depression, chronic tobacco smoking, alcohol dependence, major depressive disorder (MDD), treatment resistant depression (TRD) and more (Carhart-Harris & Goodwin, 2017). Importantly, these modern studies follow more rigorous scientific methods than the initial studies completed in the 50s and 60s including use of the double-blind, randomized control method (DB-RC) - the gold standard for pharmacological testing. This section will give an overview some of the more influential modern studies and their findings.

One of the first and most influential modern studies into psychedelics was carried out by Dr. Rowland Griffiths at John Hopkins University in 2006. Griffiths's (2006) study, unlike those of 1960s, used rigorous DB-RC method and opted to use "healthy normals" (individuals without a clinical diagnosis) as opposed to participants with a mental health disorder. A dose of psilocybin was administered with two monitors present, while the participant wore an eye cover and listened to music throughout the duration of the "trip". The results were gathered via the patient's self-assessment immediately after the trip and through a follow-up 2 months after. Input on the participant's behavior and attitudes from three

designated third-party “community observers” was also retrieved one-week post-treatment and then again seven to eight weeks after. The results of the study demonstrated two key observations of the effects of psilocybin. The first being that the substance can induce spiritually significant “mystical” experiences resulting in positive psychological effects. Remarkably, 67% of the volunteers rated the experience with psilocybin as either the single most, or amongst the top five most significant experiences of their lifetime - on par with the experience of “birth of a first child” or “death of a parent”. Further, in the follow-up results, 79% of patients described their experience with psilocybin as increasing “their current sense of wellbeing or life satisfaction” (ibid, p. 273). These self-reported psychological improvements were additionally backed by the data collected from the designated third-party “community observers” for each participant. Post psilocybin session, “community observer” data demonstrates what Griffith’s summarizes as “small but significant positive changes in the participants’ behavior and attitudes” (ibid, p. 278).

The second key observation demonstrated by Griffith’s study, is that psilocybin is safe when administered in the right conditions. While under the immediate effects of psilocybin, no volunteer required pharmacological intervention. Griffith also notes that at the time of the one-year follow-up, there had been “no reports of persisting perceptual phenomena sometimes attributed to hallucinogen use or of recreational abuse of hallucinogens, and all participants appear to continue to be high-functioning, productive members of society” (ibid, p. 281). Griffith’s watershed study provides reputable evidence that psychedelics can provide significant psychological benefit and demonstrated the relative safety of these substances, when administered in the correct conditions.

Dr. Rowland Griffith’s 2006 study paved the way for further research to be completed with psychedelics. One of the more significant trials which followed was completed by Robin Carhart-Harris in 2018, which

examined psilocybin's potential to treat treatment-resistant depression (TRD). While prior studies had already demonstrated efficacy in treating depression with psychedelics, *treatment-resistant* depression posed a new challenge. As the name suggests, TRD is depression which persists through standard methods of treatment, making it a perfect benchmark to compare the efficacy of psychedelics to other pharmacological methods of treatment. Carhart-Harris's study tested two doses of psilocybin on 19 patients, all of whom had previously attempted to cure their depression using SSRIs (and in some cases other antidepressants). Using the Quick Index of Depressive Symptoms (QIDS), the study assessed the severity of the patient's depressive symptoms, through self-reporting, across a one week to six month period, post treatment. The results notably demonstrated that *all* participants showed some improvements across QIDS scores, with maximal benefit occurring at five weeks post treatment. Suicidality QIDS scores were dramatically reduced with 16 patients scoring zero (the lowest possible score) two weeks removed from treatment. In addition, by week five, nine patients met the criteria for a sustained positive response to the treatment and four met the criteria for remission - with results remaining positive six months post treatment. To further illustrate the potential superiority of psychedelics to SSRIs, Carhart-Harris notes that "No patients sought conventional antidepressant treatment within 5 weeks of psilocybin" (ibid, p.399). While Carhart-Harris's 2018 study is limited by a small samples size and lack of control test variable, it clearly demonstrated significant and sustained benefit from psychedelic therapy, in a cohort for whom antidepressants had failed to do so.

Aotearoa New Zealand is also participating in this revival of psychedelic research. Currently, Dr. Suresh Muthukumaraswamy at The University of Auckland is conducting a study examining the effects of microdosing LSD with the hopes of finding antidepressant effects. While the results are not yet conclusive, Dr. Muthukumaraswamy comments,

“There are a lot of patients out there with mental health issues and patients with depression who either don’t like the medicines that they’re on or the medicines that they get prescribed don’t work for them. So they need more options, that’s become pretty clear.” (in Brown, 2023).

These studies are only a few of many clinical trials completed or are currently underway. In addition, there have been three DB-RC trials involving late-stage cancer patients with depression and anxiety which have all found “rapid, marked and enduring” positive effects (Carhart-Harris & Goodwin, 2017). Another noteworthy study examined the efficacy of psilocybin for tobacco smoking cessation and, incredibly, resulted with 80% of the sample abstaining from smoking at a 6 month follow up (ibid). Therefore, the clinical evidence collected over the past decade clearly demonstrates the relative safety and high efficacy of psychedelic treatment. This data, combined with a deep societal need for new methods of mental health treatment has sparked the discussion of legalizing psychedelics for treatment. This is exemplified by the American Food and Drug Administration’s 2018 decision to designate psilocybin as a “breakthrough therapy” giving it priority status for consideration in its regulatory processes (Reiff, 2020). Despite this promising clinical data and information, psychedelics are still subject to stigma and negative associations, both from policymakers and the public, which are impeding the progress of the field and preventing access to those who could stand to benefit from their use (Kuntsler et al., 2023).

2.5: Legalization in Australia

The emerging evidence of the efficacy of psychedelic therapies has led Australia to make a first of its kind decision to legalize two psychedelic substances for the purposes of treatment. In July 2023, the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) in Australia amended their “Poisons Standards” to permit MDMA and psilocybin to be used as controlled drugs (TGA, 2023).

The use of these two psychedelic substances, while now legal in Australia, is still heavily regulated and controlled. MDMA can only be prescribed for the treatment of PTSD and psilocybin for the treatment of treatment-resistant depression (TRD) - defined by the RANZCP as “depression that has not responded to two or more antidepressant medications” (RANZCP 2023, p.2). Both substances can only be issued by an authorized prescriber, and each case of prescription and treatment must be approved by a Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). Further, psilocybin and MDMA may only be administered under psychiatric supervision in a clinical setting, meaning patients will not be able to access the substances outside of a health facility. Under these conditions, psilocybin and MDMA are now approved for use and classified under Schedule 8 (Controlled Drugs), however under all other circumstances are still considered schedule 9 (Prohibited Substances) (TGA, 2023). Even if highly regulated, Australians meeting the necessary criteria now have legal access to two psychedelic substances for treatment.

There are other examples of countries legalizing psychedelics, such as Portugal’s 2001 decision to legalize all illicit drugs for personal use (Hughes & Stevens, 2010). This approach had little to do with psychedelics explicitly, as the decision was undertaken to provide a more humane legal framework surrounding drug use, with police resources being redirected to harm-reduction, user treatment and rehabilitation. (ibid). As such, while the Portuguese decriminalization of psychedelics provides a model of how the substances could be legalized, it was more of a blanket legislation for all illicit substances as opposed to being based on the merits of arguments to legalize psychedelics, specifically. Furthermore, given the disposition of New Zealand institutions to harmonize legislation with Australia where appropriate, the Australian model of legalization is far more relevant to Aotearoa New Zealand (Medsafe, 2024). As such, this thesis will situate the findings of this research with the Australian model of psychedelic legislation as opposed to the Portuguese approach.

The legalization decision in Australia has taken the therapeutic potential psychedelics have shown in clinical studies and created a legitimate and real psychedelic industry. Insight and information from the psychedelic industry in Australia is relevant and useful to the progress of the field in New Zealand. A study completed by Kunstler et al (2023) for the Sax Institute completed semi-structured interviews with politicians and key stakeholders of organizations who are involved in the psychedelic field in Australia. The goal of this study was to determine the key issues which impede the progress of the psychedelic industry. Their work identified three major themes

1. More research is needed
2. Negative stigma impedes progression
3. Effective messaging is needed to inform positions

Themes 2 and 3 are particularly relevant for the purposes of this research. Kunstler et al (2023) note that negative stigma remains one of the biggest barriers for the progress of the psychedelic industry, making it difficult for politicians to support legalization and for researchers to receive approval and funding, or for practitioners suggest psychedelic therapy to their patients (ibid).

To combat this stigma, Kunstler's et al (2023) study finds that key players in the industry are emphasizing the need for effective communication strategies to not only re-educate the public, but to influence decision making and counter misinformation (ibid). Kunstler et al (ibid p.5) emphasizes the need for intentional communication efforts for reeducation purposes as they write, "members of the public (including key stakeholders) can only become aware of the extent of the psychedelics evidence base if it is deliberately disseminated to them". Kunstler's et al study establishes that in order for progress to be made on the psychedelic front, stigma must be overcome through intentional and strategic communication through trusted sources.

2.6: The Importance of News Media

In this effort to overcome stigma and reeducate on the topic of psychedelics, news media is of critical importance and is therefore the data source for this research. News media is more than just a tool to inform the public on current events. Dating as far back as the late eighteenth century, the press has been considered a “fourth estate” - a term coined by Edmund Burke as he identified the press as a fourth pillar of society at the time (the other three being the clergy, the aristocracy and the commoners) (Hampton, 2010). Mark Hampton echoes this notion and argues that news media has been a key cornerstone of Western democracies. He describes the press as “‘an indispensable link’ between a representative government and its constituents. Whether to promote discussion and ‘educate’ readers, or to ‘represent’ them by publicizing abuses” (ibid, p.5). The news media’s role in democracy is to serve as a public sphere for debate “analogous to parliament itself” (ibid, p.4). Through news media, the discussions surrounding relevant issues and topics which happen behind the doors of parliament can also occur amongst the people. Representational democracy operates a step removed from the constituents, yet with the news media playing this role of the “fourth estate”, pluralism and diversity of opinion can be expressed in society, amplifying non-dominant perspectives which may not be present amongst elected officials. In this regard, the role of news media is a critical one for democracy.

With this role, news media can influence and shape public opinion. McCombs (1997) argues that the news media’s daily selection of stories - either deliberately or inadvertently - creates an identity for any given topic in the public mind. McCombs suggests that managing the ability to alter public opinion in this way is a recognized social responsibility amongst journalists and newsmakers. The role news media plays in shaping opinions and narratives is a staple of theories in communications studies such as “cultivation theory” which suggests that news media narratives are an important source of socialization which can construct realities and foster perceptions (Cohen, 2009). While the ability for news to

influence opinions is well accepted, it is important to recognize that this ability can often directly translate to change in legislation as well.

Rothstein's (2015) study examined news coverage on the topic of marijuana legalization in several American states and the subsequent decisions of these local governments to either retain or lift their punitive laws surrounding the drug. Rothstein found correlations between media reporting and political decisions to either legalize or criminalize marijuana. Rothstein (ibid p.40) writes, "This analysis does, however, support the conclusion that media institutions hold considerable power on shaping perceptions about social and political issues that may influence subsequent political action". Therefore, the news media plays a powerful role in not only informing the public and shaping opinion, but also legislation. As this thesis is aimed at assisting the psychedelic industry change perceptions on psychedelics to eventually achieve the goal of legalization, understanding how psychedelics are represented in news media coverage is essential.

It is important to note that news coverage of psychedelics does not represent deliberate educational material on the topic. Journalists choose stories based on a multitude of factors, which have been termed as 'news values'. This term was coined by Galtung and Ruge in their 1965 study where they identified 12 news values which determine a story's newsworthiness:

1. Frequency: Events that fit the news cycle are more likely to be reported.
2. Threshold: When an event's scope passes a certain threshold, it is more likely to be reported.
3. Unambiguity: Clear and easily understandable events are preferred over complex ones.
4. Meaningfulness: Events that resonate culturally or geographically with the audience are prioritized.
5. Consonance: Stories that align with media expectations are more likely to be covered.
6. Unexpectedness: Unusual or surprising events draw more attention.
7. Continuity: Ongoing stories that have already been reported are more likely to continue receiving coverage.

8. Composition: Editors balance stories to provide variety in the news. An excess of foreign stories might cause some to be dropped for domestic coverage.
9. Reference to Elite Nations: Events involving powerful countries are deemed more newsworthy.
10. Reference to Elite People: Stories about prominent individuals gain more coverage.
11. Reference to Persons: Stories that involve individuals are prioritized over large scale social forces are preferred.
12. Negativity: Negative events, such as conflicts or disasters, attract more attention.

News values shape the reporting on psychedelics, and as such, the resulting data from analyzing news media coverage on the topic reflects media priorities rather than a deliberate educational effort.

Nevertheless, this data offers valuable insights into public awareness of psychedelics and highlights which aspects are deemed newsworthy. This baseline understanding can inform further educational initiatives and reveal gaps in public knowledge about psychedelic substances and therapies.

In recent years, news media has seen a significant decline in trust in Aotearoa New Zealand (Myllylahti & Treadwell, 2024). Furthermore, new platforms such as social media are challenging traditional news media's dominance of information dissemination. Despite the declining trust in news media over the past several years, it remains an important institution and source of information for New Zealanders. The recent Trust in News Report (Myllylahti & Treadwell, 2024), conducted by AUT's Journalism, Media and Democracy Research Centre, demonstrates this through a thorough investigation of New Zealanders' attitudes towards the news. It found that while social media use is on the rise in Aotearoa New Zealand, as a source of news, social media is only the fifth most used source and more traditional news media outlets such as TVNZ and Stuff remain the dominant source for news (Ibid). Therefore, as news media remains the most trusted source of information for New Zealanders, it is a critical medium for disseminating information and re-educating the public on the topic of psychedelic substances.

News media is central to the psychedelic industry and to this research. As mentioned earlier, Bracco's (2019) work demonstrated how news media from the 1970s created moral panic and stigma surrounding psychedelics. This formed an identity for psychedelics, as dangerous and threatening substances, which remains to this day and poses a barrier to progress for the field. To combat this stigma, Kunstler's et al. (2023) study in Australia emphasizes the need to communicate strategically across trusted channels for the psychedelic industry to progress. As news media remains the most trusted source of information for New Zealanders, it is a critical medium for the goals of the psychedelic industry. Further, news media has a critical role for democracy as the "fourth estate" and has demonstrated through Rothstein's (2015) study, an ability to not only influence opinions but subsequent legislation changes. Therefore, news media is central to the future of the psychedelic industry and will be used as the primary data source for this research.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Method

This research seeks to examine how psychedelics are being portrayed in the Aotearoa New Zealand news media. It is motivated by a desire to aid the prospective psychedelic industry in addressing its most pertinent problem of overcoming stigma and educating the public on the substances through effective communication. By investigating the dominant voices and themes surrounding psychedelics in the Aotearoa New Zealand news media, new knowledge will be created on how the substances have been portrayed, thus far. This information will provide insight on what could be done going forward for the psychedelic industry to reeducate with an aim to achieve legitimacy and legalization.

This chapter will provide backdrop and reasoning for the different methods and methodological philosophies present in this thesis. First, it will explain the epistemological framework adopted by this research, then it will outline the methodology, and lastly present the method. Central to this chapter will be framing the inherent nature of subjectivity as it relates to this research.

3.1: Epistemology: Anti-positivism

This section will situate this thesis within an epistemological context to provide background for the philosophical influence on the research design. Epistemology is broadly defined as the theory of knowledge (Pernecky, 2016). Within the field of philosophy theories of epistemology create important debates on what can be known and how we can define and determine knowledge and truth (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Epistemology is an important set of assumptions which will necessarily guide research design, as defining what constitutes knowledge will directly affect how one seeks to create new knowledge (Pernecky, 2016). Therefore, an epistemological context must be applied to this thesis to define the underlying assumptions which will frame the research.

Gibson Burrell and Gareth Morgan (1979) lay out two broad epistemological approaches for research: positivism and anti-positivism. While this research will adopt an anti-positivist epistemology, an understanding of both must be reached to justify its use in this research. A positivist view seeks to form knowledge by identifying causalities and correlations between existing elements (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). It is an objective view, which holds that knowledge can only be achieved through verification or proof. As such, positivism quickly became associated with the natural sciences as its quantitative outlook provided the perfect epistemic framework for creating knowledge by analyzing the physical world (ibid). The positivist approach became the primary epistemology within academia as the natural sciences began to gain prevalence in universities during the early 20th century (Pernecky, 2016). During this period, qualitative and anti-positivist methodologies were viewed as less verifiable and therefore less valid to their positivist counterparts (Kara, 2020). Positivism became so ubiquitous that the humanities disciplines rebranded under the name “social sciences” to indicate their alignment with this dominant quantitative paradigm (ibid).

However, since the 1970s there has been a shift in the attitudes towards the second epistemological approach; anti-positivist methodologies (Kara, 2020). The Anti-positivist epistemology can be considered a more relativistic approach to the theory of knowledge than its positivist counterpart. Anti-positivism rejects the notion of an objective observer capable of forming dispassionate truths and instead argues that knowledge can be only understood from the perspective of a subjective observer (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Thus, objective knowledge is difficult or impossible to achieve with this view, as all knowledge exists within a broader context. While the quantitative positivist approach can be appropriate for investigating the physical aspects of the world, researchers began to notice that this was not the case as it relates to studying the more sociological aspects of reality (Kara, 2020). This has led to

the legitimization of anti-positivist methodologies, especially when examining data sets which are difficult or impossible to examine completely objectively. As Kara (2020 p. 11) states, “knowledge is worth having, no matter where it originates, and the more diverse someone’s knowledge, the more likely they are to be able to identify and implement creative solutions to problems”. With the validation of the anti-positivist epistemology, subjective knowledge within a wider societal context can be viewed as well-founded and justifiable. This is critical to the nature of this research, as subjectivity will be at the core of data and the knowledge produced.

The data for this research will be content disseminated within the domestic Aotearoa New Zealand news media, all of which are open to individual interpretation and will be analyzed by myself, a subjective observer. The rejection of an objective observer in the theory of anti-positivism, aligns with how I will be situated as a researcher: as a subjective lens through which the data will be engaged. Furthermore, as this research does not seek to create entirely objective knowledge, it has been framed with an anti-positivist epistemology which suggests that all knowledge is situated within a subjective context. In this epistemic view, the seeking of subjective knowledge is recognized as legitimate research, and further is appropriate for this data set, as much of the research into the fourth estate role of news media is anti-positivist. (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Thus, adopting an anti-positivist philosophy allows the knowledge generated by this research to be situated in the appropriate epistemological context and guide the methodologies chosen for the research design.

3.2: Methodology: Reflexive Thematic Content Analysis

This research will employ a thematic content analysis, examining content in the domestic Aotearoa New Zealand news media which covers the topic of psychedelics. The thematic content analysis present in this thesis will follow the methodological framework set out by Braun and Clarke (2022). Their approach

to thematic analysis follows naturally from an anti-positivist epistemology as the role of a subjective researcher is central to their methodology.

Braun and Clarke (2022 p.7) describe their methodology as “reflexive thematic analysis”. Critical to their philosophy is acknowledging and *valuing* the researcher as a fundamental element of thematic analysis. Many research methodologies view the inherent bias or subjectivity of the researcher as an obstacle and attempt to limit it as much as possible. Under Braun and Clarke’s reflexive thematic analysis, subjectivity is accepted and treated as an important and valuable part of the process. This methodology is indispensable for this research as I (the primary researcher) will be creating codes and applying these codes to the data collected at my own discretion. Furthermore, the conclusions found, and themes presented will also be primarily influenced by my own perspective as a researcher. Braun and Clarke’s methodological view holds this subjectivity as an asset which makes the research valuable, as the active, engaged and interrogative researcher is the engine that drives reflexive thematic analysis (ibid). My unique position as a Canadian, and thus a foreigner to Aotearoa New Zealand, previous education and research will be “what I bring to the table” to colour and make sense of the raw data. The epistemic view and methodological approach of this research holds that all knowledge is inherently situated in wider contexts. For the purposes of this research, locating myself as part of this wider context and acknowledging my role in the production of the knowledge present, is a critical part of the theory.

3.3: Locating myself as a researcher and addressing bias

To introduce myself as a researcher will begin with locating myself in relation to the topic of this research: psychedelics. Choosing psychedelics as the topic of this thesis stems, first, from a deep personal interest in the subject and a desire to contribute new knowledge to the field. Further, it is motivated by a recognition of societal need to address one of the more pressing issues of modern

society - the crisis of mental health (Wilson, 2020). The solutions available to address this issue, such as SSRIs or other anti-depressants, only provide limited efficacy and have associated negative side effects (Penn & Tracy, 2012). It is my personal belief, from researching the relevant literature, that psychedelics will be the catalyst for a more effective treatment for mental health and the general betterment of people. Thus, this research is being undertaken from a personal desire to contribute to this novel and blossoming field, from the angle of the communications discipline within Aotearoa New Zealand.

Braun and Clarke's methodology encourages researchers to situate themselves inside three categories of reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The first of these is "personal reflexivity" which begins with acknowledging my unique position as an international student from Canada, which positions me as an outsider in relation to the data for this research. While Canada and Aotearoa New Zealand are similar in many ways, both hailing from the British commonwealth tradition, there will naturally be cultural differences which may affect my research. For example, Canadians appear to be more open to the idea of alternative methods of altering states of consciousness, as evidenced by our recent legalization of marijuana around the same time the New Zealand referendum elected for the opposite (Fischer & Hall, 2021).

Braun and Clarke (2022) propose that a researcher must also be located along political and ideological lines. In this regard, I consider myself politically moderate and though raised Christian, would identify myself in the growing modern trend of those identifying as "spiritual but non-religious". I do not foresee my political views having a great impact on this research as they are firmly centrist on the political spectrum. My religious views may play a role, as psychedelics can often induce spiritual experiences and invoke religious language or claims. I may view these types of claims with more validity or value than an atheistic researcher who might instead see these experiences as delusion. Ideologically, I am on the side

of pro-legalization of psychedelics and have a strong belief in their ability to solve problems of mental health. This ideological commitment will colour the entire research project as it is the primary motivation for the selection of the topic and is thus necessary to acknowledge. These are the personal factors which will inevitably influence and drive my research.

To address Braun and Clarke's "disciplinary reflexivity" context, my previous education is a Bachelor of Arts, Honours with a major in philosophy. The discipline of philosophy fosters an actively inquisitive mindset and an ability to understand academic language which will be an asset towards this research. Furthermore, as philosophy deals with the humanities and the nature of the human condition, this educational background positions me to produce a piece of research unique to the field. Given that much of the research being done with psychedelics currently stems from scientific disciplines such as neuroscience and pharmacology, my educational background positions me to take a novel approach to studying the field. Furthermore, my academic experience in the humanities aligns well with the epistemology and methodologies chosen for this research, as they aim towards qualitative and subjective knowledge along the lines of the social sciences.

Thirdly, "topical reflexivity" in Braun and Clarke's methodology can be defined as my level of understanding and knowledge on the topic at hand (2022). I have a well-rounded understanding of the topic of psychedelics from personal readings of interest and from the process of researching the literature review included in this thesis. In my own time I have read works by psychedelic scholars including Huxley, Ruck and Wasson and have written essays in my undergraduate courses analyzing these writings from a philosophical perspective. I have additionally read books on the topic from scholars Muraresku and Harris which approach the topic of psychedelics from a historical perspective and a spiritual perspective, respectively. In developing a literature review, I have researched (and

included) the most relevant clinical studies in the recent revivification of psychedelic research. These studies have given me a strong understanding of the most accurate data on the effects of psychedelics, especially as they relate to the treatment of mental health diagnoses. Therefore, my topical reflexive background on psychedelics covers a wide breadth of angles on the subject ranging from philosophical, historical, and spiritual/religious perspectives, to detailed clinical data. I believe this broad and encompassing background of information which I have consumed allows me to be an educated and well-informed advocate for psychedelics, which appropriately situates me as the driver of this piece of advocacy research and will be an asset as I code and thematically analyze the data in this thesis.

By locating myself as a researcher, I recognize my subjectivity and have identified factors which will affect the production of knowledge in this thesis. The main goal of this research, however, is not to provide my own opinions, but to examine the range of themes and voices present in the coverage of psychedelics in the Aotearoa New Zealand news media. Therefore, while acknowledging that the personal factors present in this chapter will colour the research, I will still endeavor to examine and analyze the data set in this research with an interrogative, curious and open mind.

This section has acknowledged my biases and accepted that these biases will affect the research. This will result in qualitative outputs that, although biased, remain internally consistent as the entire process has been undertaken by a single researcher. In addition to these qualitative outputs, quantitative outputs such as the codebook and method of analysis have been generated. If these quantitative outputs were utilized by a different researcher, the resulting analysis may vary. Therefore, this research openly acknowledges the inherent bias in its qualitative outputs while presenting the quantitative outputs of the codebook and method as an avenue through which to explore the dataset from a different perspective.

3.4: Method

This section will outline how Braun and Clarke's (2006) method for thematic content analysis will be applied specifically to this research. Central to thematic content analysis is the development of themes, as they are the building blocks of the research. Braun and Clarke argue that there are two approaches to produce themes: theoretical and inductive. The theoretical approach is a top-down method of theme development, in which the researcher generates themes from previous knowledge on the subject matter and then applies these themes to the dataset. The inductive method is a bottom-up approach, in which the researcher develops themes as they emerge from interacting with the data.

This research will use an inductive method to develop themes. Psychedelics are a topic which can be approached from many angles or disciplines. Using a theoretical approach, would therefore generate themes which, while relevant to psychedelics studies, may not necessarily be reflective of how the topic has been covered in the Aotearoa New Zealand news. An inductive method will optimally address the research question, "how are psychedelics being portrayed in the Aotearoa New Zealand news media" by allowing themes to emerge from the data set.

This study is also influenced by Margot Gunning and Judy Illes's (2021) content analysis of Canadian news coverage on marijuana use, pre- and post-legalization. The researchers used a powerful search engine and database to pull written articles across a decade of Canadian sources and coded for emergent themes using both inductive and a priori coding techniques. Through this process, Gunning and Illes were able to report on the prevalence of certain themes and sub themes. This research will follow Gunning and Illes approach to data collection and will seek to find articles in the same fashion. Additionally, it will follow their approach to coding, for example by applying inductive techniques to allow themes to emerge from the data. However, their codebook could not be applied to this research as the difference in topic demanded different themes. Gunning and Illes's demonstrate their data using

two metrics, the first being the number of articles referenced a particular theme and the second being the number of times in total the theme was referenced. This design allows for an understanding of how widely disseminated a theme is across the data set and how much depth of discussion was dedicated to it. This research will do the same, creating easily accessible tables of these results.

3.4.1: Defining the dataset

This research will include written content from the domestic Aotearoa New Zealand news cycle which covers the topic of psychedelics. Limiting the research to written content has been done primarily to make the data manageable for the scope of a Master's thesis. This research will be focused on traditional news sources only, and as such magazines and social media will be excluded from the data. This decision has been made with two-fold reasoning. First, limiting the dataset to domestic news creates a focused piece of research, which is specific to Aotearoa New Zealand. Secondly, while new and alternative information sources (ie. social media) are gaining popularity, traditional media is still an important medium and maintains the highest level of trust amongst New Zealanders in comparison to these new sources (Myllylahti & Treadwell, 2024). This research is aimed at aiding the psychedelic industry in overcoming stigma through effective communication and reeducation from trusted sources. Thus, traditional news media, which maintains the highest level of trust domestically, is the most relevant source of data for this research.

This research will conduct a search of news on the topic of psychedelics using the Knowledge Basket's "Newztext" search engine and Google News search results. The "Newztext" search engine provides comprehensive coverage of Aotearoa New Zealand news, with tunable parameters and access to full-text archives of domestic news sources including Fairfax newspapers, NZME brand and more. Google News search results will supplement this search with content from major domestic news corporations

which are not included in the “Newztext” database (ie. Newshub.). The data set will include content from the past 20 years (2003-2023) to provide a thorough and inclusive view of the coverage within a reasonable timeframe.

Articles were sourced by searching “Psychedelics” into the Newztext database. The dataset in this research has been defined to only include news media, however the Newztext database accesses blogs, magazines and other forms of content which are not considered news media. Therefore the filtering functionality on The Newztext search engine, which allows the user to filter only “news” content, was used as an exclusion criteria to eliminate other written content which was not considered news media.

Furthermore, articles were excluded - at the discretion of the primary researcher - if they were not primarily on the topic of psychedelics. Search results included articles which described a piece of music as “psychedelic”, contained brief mentions of a celebrity’s use of psychedelics or were reviews of books/movies which featured psychedelics. These articles were excluded as they do not represent news media coverage on the substances themselves. Including these articles would have significantly skewed the data by introducing multiple instances of reporting with minimal or no references to the emergent themes and sub-themes identified in the codebook.

3.4.2. Six phases of Thematic Analysis

This research follows Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase method for thematic analysis. In the first phase the researcher “familiarizes themselves with the data” (ibid). This was done through the process of data collection as all articles were read, in a brief and passive manner, to determine whether they qualified to be included in the data set. In the second phase, I “generated initial codes” by reading the articles in more depth, identifying key topics and voices to be the starting points for generating codes. In

Phase three, I “searched for themes” by inspecting these codes for commonalities and correlations. These were then grouped into umbrella terms to create an initial set of themes. In Phase four, I “reviewed themes”. This meant that the initial set of themes were tested by coding several articles in the data set to gauge the viability of the themes. From this test, themes were adjusted as necessary and sub-themes were created. In phase five, I “defined and named themes”, which involved generating a codebook from these finalized themes and sub-themes. This codebook is represented in the figures and table below:

Figure 2: Data Source

| Title | Date | Publication |
|---|------------------|-------------|
| eg: “Psychedelic Drugs May be Ready for a Medical Comeback” | eg: Sept 9, 2015 | eg: STUFF |

Figure 2 demonstrates how each news article meeting criteria will be recorded, allowing for the source of the data to be represented and allowing for observations about the data to correlate to publication dates.

Figure 3: Voices Codebook

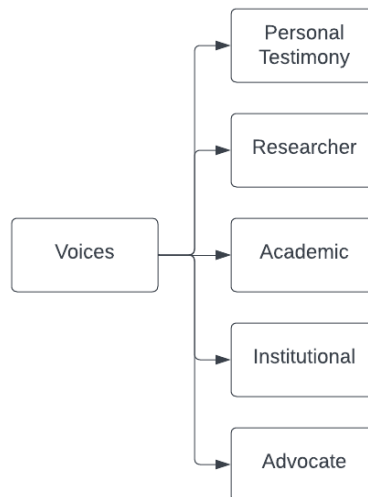


Figure 3 identifies the voices coded for. These voices refer to the types of individuals who journalists quoted in a given article as a source of outside commentary or opinion. Through the process of familiarization with the data, five voices emerged. 'Personal testimony' refers to outside comment given by someone who has used psychedelic drugs or undergone psychedelic therapy. The 'researcher' voice refers to the opinions or comments of someone running a clinical study involving psychedelics. The 'academic voice' refers to opinions made on the subject of psychedelics from an academic from a non-clinical field, such as the humanities. The 'institutional voice' refers to comments or perspectives delivered from those representing a government body, institution or corporation; for example the TGA or RANZCP. Finally, the 'advocate opinion' refers to those who are advocating for psychedelics, without an official or academic position. Figure 4 displays the codebook for the themes and sub-themes. The six themes emerged as umbrella terms for topics involving psychedelics which were most frequently mentioned in the data. Each of these themes have been broken down into sub-themes to provide further depth in analyzing the data.

Figure 4: Themes & Sub-themes Codebook

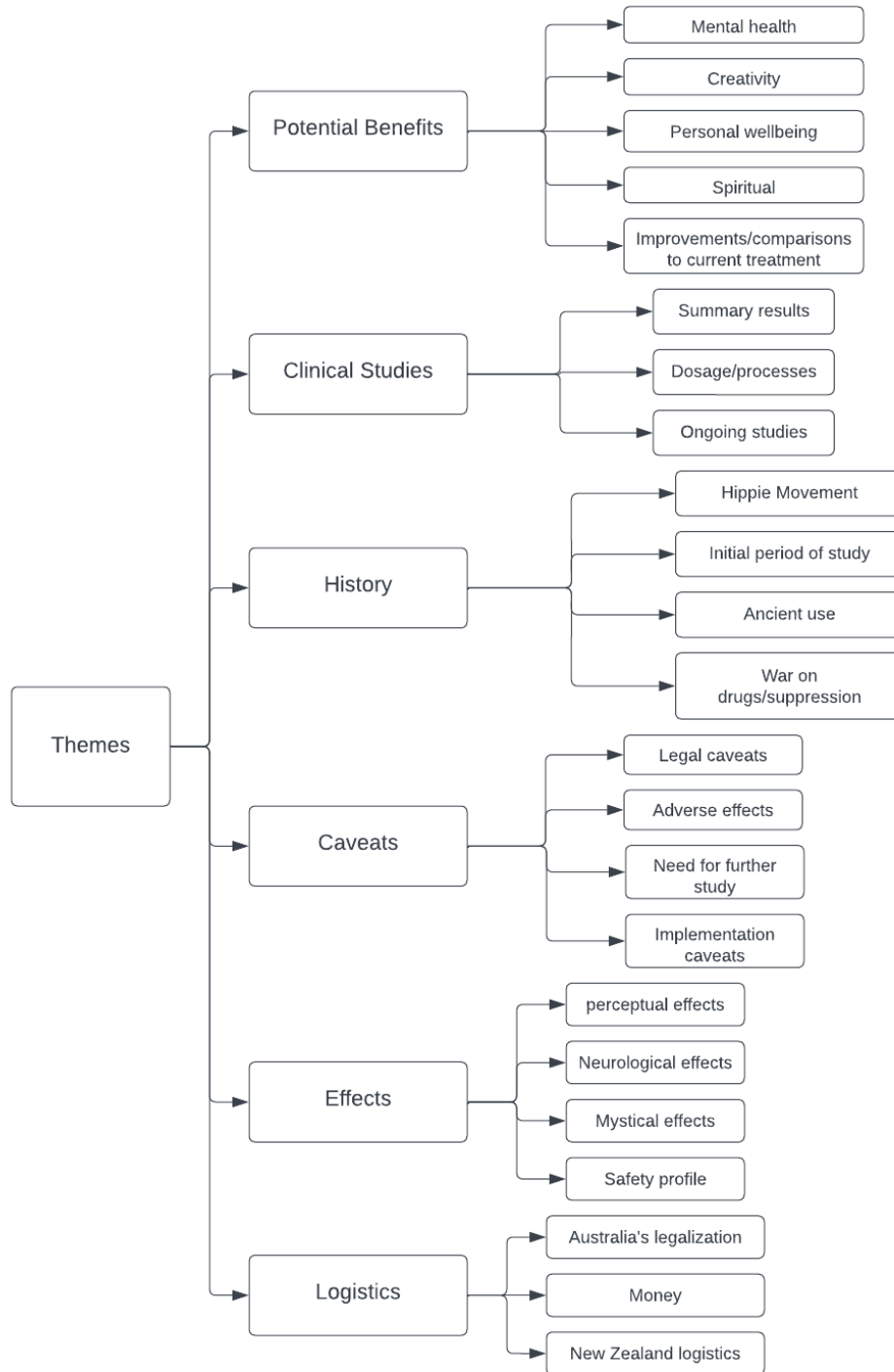


Figure 1 (repeated): Psychedelic substances

| Clinical Name | Colloquial Name |
|--|----------------------|
| Psilocybin | "Magic Mushrooms" |
| Lysergic Acid Diethylamide (LSD) | "Acid" |
| Mescaline | "Peyote" |
| 3,4 Methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) | "Molly" or "Ecstasy" |
| Dimethyltryptemine (DMT) | "Ayahuasca" |
| Ibogaine | N/A |
| Ketamine | "Special K" |

Figure 1 displays the various psychedelic substances included in this research, with both their technical and informal names. This research will record references to each substance and which name was used to determine which substances are most prominently reported on and under what label.

In line with Braun and Clarke's methodology, these codes only provide a surface level layout of the content analysis (2006). Through stage six, "producing the report", quantitative data will be drawn to provide a set of knowledge with which to begin the analysis. This data will be collected by the primary researcher (myself) reading each article sentence by sentence. Each sentence which applies to a given theme or sub-theme will be quantified as one reference for that theme/sub-theme. Each article will therefore have a quantifiable number of references to each theme/subtheme. This process will allow the research to be able to determine how many of the pieces of content contained a specific voice or theme and how often a theme was referenced, as per Gunning and Illes' study. This quantitative data will provide insight into which themes are discussed the most and whose voices are being frequently disseminated with relation to the topic.

3.4.3: Limitations and Delimitations

This study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged to provide context for the findings and their interpretation:

1. **Small Data Set:** A significant limitation of this research is the relatively small amount of data available for analysis. Only 75 articles published in the last 20 years met the inclusion criteria, which restricts the scope and generalizability of the findings. This limited dataset reflects the niche nature of the topic.
2. **Researcher Bias:** This thesis acknowledges that it is advocacy research that begins with a pro-legalization position as an a priori starting point. The study does not aim to achieve complete objectivity but rather adopts a reflexive thematic analysis methodology that values subjective knowledge production. By embracing this approach, the research intentionally highlights and interrogates themes through a lens that acknowledges bias as inherent to qualitative inquiry. The qualitative outputs provided reflect this subjective yet critically engaged stance.
3. **Data Collection Method:** While the Newztext database provides a robust archive of New Zealand news media, supplemented by Google News searches, the possibility remains that some publications were not captured - especially when considering the 20-year timeframe for data collection. Variations in publication accessibility, archiving practices, and search engine algorithms may have contributed to omissions. As such, this dataset cannot be claimed as a comprehensive record of all news media on the topic of psychedelics during the specified period.

This study was intentionally delimited to written news media sources to ensure the dataset remained manageable for a single researcher. By focusing solely on written content, the research was able to comprehensively analyze emergent themes within a specific and well-defined medium. However, this decision excludes other forms of media, such as television or radio, which may also contribute

significantly to public discourse on psychedelics. Future research could expand upon this study by incorporating these additional media formats to provide a more holistic understanding of how psychedelics are represented across different mediums.

Additionally, the study was delimited to a 20-year timeframe, covering news media published from 2003 to 2023. This period was chosen as it aligns with the modern renaissance of psychedelic studies and their re-emergence in public and academic discourse. Limiting the timeframe to this period allowed the research to focus on modern developments and narratives surrounding psychedelics while excluding earlier historical contexts that may not reflect current themes and perspectives.

3.5: Summary

This chapter has laid out the epistemological and methodological framework for this research. The data for this research is inherently open to interpretation and as such this research does not set out to be a completely objective endeavour. Thus, an epistemological and methodological framework allowing for the researcher's subjectivity has been adopted. The methods section of this chapter explained the processes which have been used to gather source material and inductively develop codes. Through the methods set out in this chapter, this content analysis will create data will provide the groundwork for rich discussion on psychedelics, from a communications angle, by answering the research question, "How are psychedelics being portrayed in the Aotearoa New Zealand news media?".

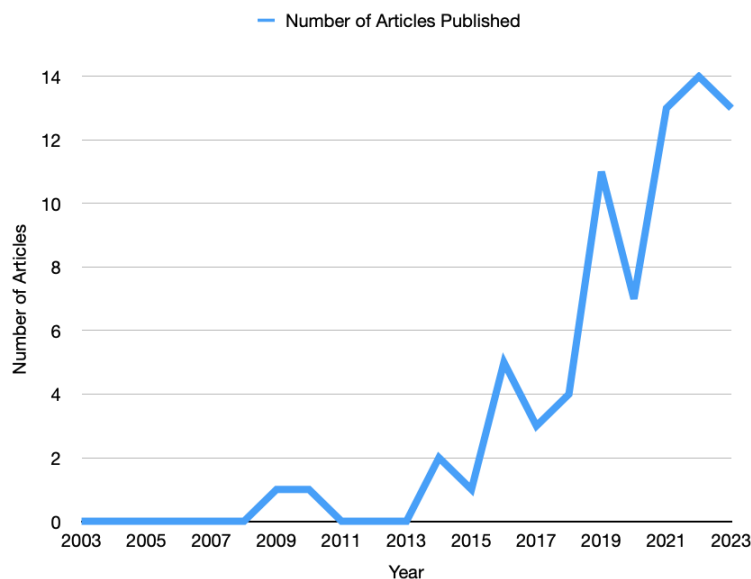
Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter will outline and summarize the findings from the content analysis and present patterns and observations in the data. The first section, “4.1: Overview”, summarizes the articles which met the criteria for inclusion in this thesis and present observations of the data collected. The sections, “4.2: Themes” and “4.3: Voices” present examples and data for the themes and voices which were coded for. This chapter will only present the data collected and identify notable observations; the following chapter will unpack the meaning behind these findings.

4.1: Overview

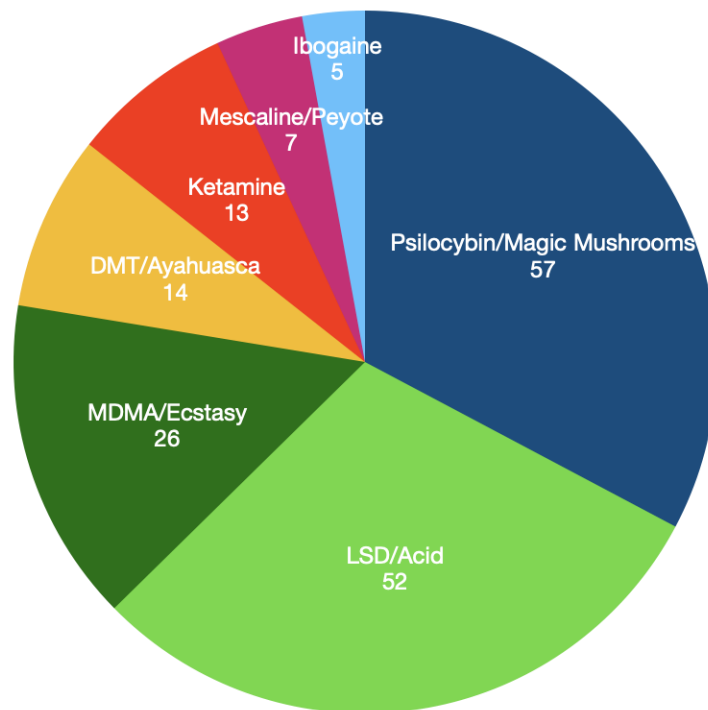
This thesis analyzes 75 news articles on the topic of psychedelics, over a 20-year-span (2003 – 2023). While this content analysis focused on the years 2003 – 2023, it is interesting to note that, no articles on the topic of psychedelics, meeting the criteria for inclusion, were found before 2009. Coverage on the topic of psychedelics trended dramatically upwards over time, following the international trends of increased study and attention given to the potential of psychedelic substances.

Figure 5: Articles Covering Psychedelics Published in Aotearoa New Zealand, Over Time



The news articles included in the content analysis covered a range of psychedelic substances, including Psilocybin, LSD, MDMA, DMT, Ibogaine, Mescaline and Ketamine. Psilocybin was mentioned in 57 of the 75 news articles, making it the most frequently mentioned substance; LSD was the next most frequently mentioned substance featuring in 52 of the 75 news articles. Figure 6 presents each substance included in the reporting, along with the number of articles in the data set which made a reference to that substance:

Figure 6: Number of Articles Which Referenced Each Psychedelic Substance (of 75 total articles)



According to the data, there is a clear preference to use the clinical names for substances as opposed to their colloquial names. For example, the term “LSD” was used 312 times across the data set, whereas the colloquial name for the same substance, “acid”, was only used 13 times. The same trend can be seen

with “psilocybin”, which was used 295 times whereas its informal name “magic mushrooms” was used only 114 times. This data indicates that reporters are generally aware that certain terms carry with them preconceptions and baggage. The use of terms such as “psilocybin” over “magic mushrooms, for example, suggests that reporters are invested in covering these topics from an objective and professional standpoint by avoiding colloquial terms that carry negative connotations.

4.2: Themes

This research coded for six themes which were emergent from the data set (see Table 1 below). The “Number of articles referenced” column refers to the number of news articles which made at least one reference to the selected theme or sub-theme. The “total number of references” heading refers to the number of sentences which mentioned the selected theme/sub-theme in total. The data is organized in this way to provide insight into the breadth and depth of the reporting, as a given theme/sub-theme may have been mentioned across many articles, without being dedicated a significant portion of the writing. For example, while the theme of “Caveats” was referenced in more news articles than the theme “Logistics”, it had fewer total references, indicating a comparative brevity of reporting on the “Caveats” associated with psychedelics.

Table 1: Theme Data

| Theme | Number of articles referenced | Total number of references |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Potential Benefits | 67 | 440 |
| Clinical Studies | 58 | 463 |
| History | 43 | 169 |
| Effects | 54 | 211 |
| Logistics | 36 | 165 |
| Caveats | 48 | 133 |

This section will explore the coverage of each theme by presenting the findings of this data in the reporting of the sub-themes corresponding to each theme category. It will indicate patterns and provide examples of how each theme was covered in the reporting.

4.2.1: Potential Benefits

The “Potential Benefits” theme indicates coverage on the proposed benefits of psychedelic therapy and use. Five sub-themes emerged from the data which fell under this category: Mental Health, Creativity, Personal Wellbeing, Spirituality, Improvements/comparisons to current treatment.

Table 2: Potential Benefits Data

| Sub-theme | Number of articles referenced | Total number of references |
|---|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Mental Health | 63 | 298 |
| Creativity | 18 | 31 |
| Personal Wellbeing | 21 | 46 |
| Spirituality | 10 | 14 |
| Improvements/comparisons to current treatment | 26 | 51 |

Mental Health

The “Mental Health” sub-theme refers to the therapeutic potential of psychedelics to treat clinically diagnosed mental conditions including depression, anxiety, addiction, alcoholism, post-traumatic stress disorder, etc. This was the most covered sub-theme, not only under the “Potential Benefits” theme category but across all sub-themes in the analysis, being referenced in 84% of all news articles in the data set.

Given the ubiquity of the coverage on this topic, it is important to note what kinds of news articles did *not* mention the potential of psychedelics to treat mental health disorders. Twelve articles made no mention of the therapeutic potential of psychedelics. The majority of these articles were dedicated to a historical story related to psychedelics, for example an article titled “*Psychiatrist gave LSD to soldiers in quest to win wars ‘without bombs and bullets’*” from the *Taranaki Daily News* provided a historical retelling of the CIA’s MK Ultra program which attempted to investigate whether LSD could be used as a mind-control drug during the 1960s and 70s (Taranaki Daily News, 2019). In addition, some articles

discussed clinical studies which were investigating psychedelics for the purposes of enhancing creativity or personal wellbeing, as opposed to clinically diagnosed mental health conditions. Other than these few exceptions, the coverage of psychedelics was dominated by references of their potential to treat mental health conditions.

Creativity

The creativity sub-theme referred to coverage on the potential for psychedelics to enhance users' abilities to think differently and find creative new solutions to their work. It was often mentioned in relation to a common practice for Silicon Valley tech workers, who have been microdosing psychedelics to approach their work from a more creative and innovative mindset. As one article from the *New Zealand Herald* reported: "Microdosing LSD has been used for a while among a growing number of Silicon Valley professionals who claim that taking it in small doses offers a "productivity hack", making them sharper, more creative and less stressed." (Lally, 2019). The potential for psychedelics to increase creativity was a relatively underreported topic, referenced in only 24% of the total news articles.

Personal Wellbeing

While the "Mental Health" sub-theme was dedicated to clinically diagnosed mental health conditions, the "Personal Wellbeing" sub-theme refers to the potential benefits psychedelics can offer to those who are *not* diagnosed with a mental health disorder, often referred to as "healthy normals" by clinical psychedelic studies (Griffiths, 2006). Benefits to "Personal Wellbeing" include improvements to mood, productivity, positivity and general wellbeing. This quote in an article from *The New Zealand Herald* exemplifies coverage of this topic: "A study in 2020 looked at different levels of microdoses, and found that between 5 and 20 micrograms "enhances sustained attention" and "affects mood states in positive directions" (Cheng, 2022). The "Personal Wellbeing" sub-theme was referenced in only 21 news articles

compared to the “Mental Health” sub-theme which was referenced in 63 news articles. This indicates that while there is a clear path for the benefits demonstrated in clinically diagnosed patients to be translated over to the general wellbeing of “healthy normals”, the current coverage is more focused on using psychedelics on those with severe mental health diagnoses.

Spirituality

The “spirituality” sub-theme refers to coverage of the potential for psychedelics to induce spiritual benefits, resulting in users experiencing life from a more meaningful and deeply felt spiritual perspective. The sub-theme of “spirituality” was one of the least covered sub-themes overall, being referenced in only 10 articles. Furthermore, of the articles which referenced “spirituality”, only one article dedicated more than 2 sentences to the topic. That article, published by *Stuff*, contained the following quote:

An earlier paper by Griffiths showed that psilocybin can “occasion mystical-type experiences” that have “substantial and sustained personal meaning and spiritual significance” ... It also moves beyond treatment, as surely we could all benefit from mystical, meaningful experiences, not just those who are unwell (Matthews, 2021).

Topics such as spirituality, as the quote suggests, begin to portray psychedelics as something more than just a method of treatment, a line which domestic reports appear reluctant to cross given the sparse coverage on the spiritual benefits of psychedelics.

Improvements/comparisons to current treatment

The sub-theme of “improvements/comparisons to current treatment” was not included in the initial codebook development, but rather emerged later through the coding process, appearing so frequently it warranted its own designation. It was the second most referenced “Potential Benefits” sub-theme by both the number of articles it appeared in (n=26) and the total number of references (n=51), and was tied for the sixth most referenced sub-theme across the entire analysis. Examples of this type of

coverage include the following excerpt from an article published by *The New Zealand Herald*: “Dr Frederick Barrett, assistant professor of psychiatry and behavioural sciences at Johns Hopkins, said psilocybin offered a “radically different model” of treatment as psychedelic drugs “don’t follow the cycle of abuse”. “People don’t typically experience craving or withdrawal after the use of psychedelic drugs” (Sabur, 2019). This sub-theme of “improvements/comparisons to current treatment” is notable as psychedelics are emerging, in part, as a consequence of the limited efficacy and negative side effects of current models of mental health treatment. As stated in the literature review, SSRIs and antidepressants can be ineffective in certain cases, yet psychedelics have demonstrated efficacy even with patients for whom multiple of these other treatments had failed. Framing psychedelics as a novel solution to this issue is important for the industry moving forward. The prevalence of this sub-theme, appearing in 34% of the total news articles, indicates that the current coverage of psychedelics supports this narrative.

Summary

In summary, reporting on the “Potential Benefits” of psychedelics was the most prevalent theme across the data set, appearing in 67 of the 75 total articles. “Mental Health” benefits dominate the reporting of this theme, being included in the most articles and receiving the most total references of any sub-theme across the entire data set. While other benefits are mentioned, including “creativity”, “personal wellbeing” and “spirituality”, these other benefits are covered relatively sparsely, as all of which appear in less than 30% of the articles. The reporting on psychedelics supports their portrayal as a novel treatment to address the failures of antidepressants as the “Improvements/comparisons to current treatment” was the 6th most referenced sub-theme, overall. Therefore, while several benefits of psychedelic use are present in the domestic coverage, the substances are very clearly being presented

as a novel and alternative pharmaceutical for those who have been failed by current methods of treatment.

4.2.2: Clinical Studies

The “Clinical Studies” theme refers to coverage of pharmacological studies done with psychedelics. Three sub-themes emerged from this category: “Summary Results”, “Ongoing Studies” and “Dosage/Processes”. All three of these sub-themes were in the top five most referenced sub-themes across the entire data set, both in the number of articles in which they appeared and the total number of times they were referenced, indicating that this theme was not only widely covered, but was also discussed in depth.

Table 3: Clinical Studies Data

| Sub-theme | Number of articles referenced | Total number of references |
|------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Summary Results | 42 | 117 |
| Ongoing Studies | 42 | 120 |
| Dosage/Processes | 55 | 226 |

Summary Results & Ongoing Studies

“Summary Results” refers to coverage of completed studies with psychedelics and their findings, whereas “Ongoing Studies” refers to coverage of studies which are upcoming or underway and their aims. These were referenced in an identical 42 articles as most of the coverage on the topic of psychedelics was spurred by positive results from a study or the promise of potential results from an upcoming or ongoing study. An example of the “Summary Results” sub-theme comes from an article published by *Stuff*:

To cut a long story short, the pill, which is dubbed R107, has just had very promising results from a phase two trial on patients in New Zealand and Australia ... “What we’ve seen is on day eight, when they get their scoring done for level of depression, 75 per cent of them are well,” Surman says. On the Montgomery-Asberg Depression Rating Scale (MADRS) , they now have scores below 12, “which is really good” (Matthews, 2021).

The “Ongoing Studies” Sub-theme generally appeared much like this example from Newshub.:

“Volunteers have been asked to take the drug LSD and go about their everyday lives in an Auckland study looking at the link between the drug and increased creativity” (Swift, 2022). Both of these sub-themes often presented themselves as an announcement about a study, either past or future, which was used to introduce the reader to the topic and was followed by further information on psychedelics or the processes of the study itself.

Dosage/Processes

The “Dosage/Processes” sub-theme was a ubiquitous sub-theme in the reporting, appearing in 73% of articles and receiving 226 total references. Coverage of this sub-theme involved in depth explanation of how clinical studies with psychedelics were carried out, with mentions of sample size, dosage measurements, set and setting for trips, presence and practices of therapists, and placebo/blinding methods. This type of coverage is exemplified in the following excerpts:

The New Zealand trial will involve around 50 participants receiving multiple sessions of psychotherapy combined with either carefully controlled doses of MDMA or a placebo, administered in a controlled and supportive therapeutic environment. (Otago Daily Times, 2023)

Volunteers were required to undergo daily questionnaires and laboratory tests to assess the drug's effect on mood, creativity, focus and cognition. The tests involved brainstorming ideas such as naming as many possible uses for a household object such as a pencil for two minutes, linking three different words together with a fourth word and making a collage with scissors, glue and coloured paper (Swift, 2022).

The “Dosage/processes” sub-theme was the second most referenced across the entire data set, further indicating the extent to which domestic reporting on psychedelics is focused on the processes and design of clinical studies with the substances.

Summary

Overall, the theme of “Clinical Studies” appeared in the second most number of articles (n=58), yet received the most number of total references (n=463). This data suggests that the vast majority of articles covered this topic - and further - discussed it in great detail, dedicating more lines of writing to this theme than any other. The sub-themes of “Summary Results” and “Ongoing Studies” were referenced an identical number of times indicating that journalists found the potential prospects of studies just as newsworthy as the promising results of completed studies. When “Clinical Studies” were mentioned, the reporting was dominated by explanations of the processes of the studies making the “dosage/processes” sub-theme the most referenced under this theme category.

4.2.3: History

The “History” theme refers to coverage on the history of psychedelic study and usage. Four sub-themes emerged under this category: “Initial period of study”, “Hippie movement/counterculture”, “ancient use”, and “War on Drugs/suppression”.

Table 4: History Data

| Sub-theme | Number of articles referenced | Total number of references |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Initial period of study | 27 | 63 |
| Hippie movement/counterculture | 16 | 30 |
| Ancient use | 16 | 26 |
| War on drugs/suppression | 25 | 50 |

Initial Period of Study

The “Initial period of study” codes for references made to the academic and clinical studies done with psychedelics in the 1950s - 1970s, such as this reporting from *Stuff*: “This is the renaissance of LSD research. Between 1943, when Swiss chemist Albert Hofmann first tried 250µg of the chemical he synthesized five years earlier, and around 1970, more than 1000 scientific papers were published on

LSD. More than 20,000 patients sampled it” (Matthews, 2021). References to this sub-theme address the important point that clinical psychedelic research is not a new or novel phenomenon but instead has a multi-decade long and well recorded history. This sub-theme was referenced in 36% of articles making it amongst the 10 most referenced sub-themes.

Hippie movement/counterculture

This sub-theme refers to psychedelic substances’ association with countercultural political movements of the 60s and 70s, also known as “hippie” movements. As stated in the literature review, psychedelics became a central component of revolutionary & anti-establishment political ideologies, causing them to become subject to propaganda and subsequent suppression. *Newsroom* reports, “But in the early 1960s, LSD and by extension psychedelic drugs became a scourge of the establishment and synonymous with the counterculture movement” (Hurley, 2021). The “Hippie movement/counterculture” sub-theme was not widely covered appearing in only 21% of articles and was only referenced in 30 sentences across the entire data set. This indicates that psychedelics’ association with the 60s counterculture was typically only mentioned in passing.

Ancient Use

The “Ancient Use” sub-theme was also one of the least reported on, appearing in only 21% of articles with only 26 total references to the topic. This sub-theme consisted of reporting on primitive shamanic or ritual use of psychedelics by our early human ancestors, exemplified by the following quote from *Pharmacy Today*: “*This American psychedelic culture is ancient. Peyote buttons have been carbon-dated to 4000BC, while Mexican mushroom statues hint at Psilocybe use in 500BC. A 1000-year old stash found in Bolivia contained cocaine, Anadenanthera and ayahuasca – and must’ve been one hell of a trip.*” (Longrich, 2021). Of the 16 articles which covered the topic only two articles made more than two

references to the subject matter, further indicating the brevity and sparse reporting on the ancient use of psychedelics.

War on Drugs/Suppression

The “War on Drugs/suppression” sub-theme informed readers that psychedelic research had undergone a near 50 year hiatus as a result of changing legislation around the world. The following example comes from *the Spinoff*: “LSD was criminalised around the world in the late 1960s at the height of beat poetry, counterculture and America’s war on drugs, and as a result, psychedelics vanished from the psychiatrist’s toolbox.” (Glenny, 2020). This sub-theme was relatively well covered, appearing in 33% of articles - the second most under the “History” theme, indicating the relevance of this period to the present-day state of the psychedelic industry.

Summary

The “History” theme was a relatively prevalent topic, appearing in 43 of the 75 news articles that make up this study. Several articles were framed as historical articles, focusing a historical retelling of a story which involved psychedelics, as opposed to the substances themselves. An example of this would be “*Harvard Professor and Author Who Popularised LSD in the early 1960s*” from the *Manawatu Standard*, which was a biographical story of Richard Alpert (Baba Ram Dass) who studied and advocated for psychedelic use. Outside of these purely historical articles, when the history of psychedelic use was referenced, coverage tended to focus on the “initial period of study” or the subsequent “War on Drugs/suppression” of psychedelic studies. The reporting of these two sub-themes forms the historical narrative that psychedelics are not just recreational drugs which are novelly being used in psychotherapy. Instead, it establishes that their therapeutic potential is being rediscovered after a

period of propaganda-fueled suppression. Other historical topics such as discussion of the ancient use of psychedelics were underreported on.

4.2.4: Caveats:

The “Caveats” theme refers to the warnings and cautionary coverage of psychedelics and their use.

Under this category, four sub-themes emerged: “Legal Caveats”, “Adverse Effects”, “Implementation Caveats” and “Need for Further study”

Table 5: Caveats Data

| Sub-theme | Number of articles referenced | Total number of references |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Legal Caveats | 26 | 36 |
| Adverse effects | 22 | 39 |
| Implementation caveats | 13 | 29 |
| Need for further study | 16 | 29 |

Legal Caveats

The “Legal Caveats” sub-theme included warnings on the illegality of psychedelic use. References to this sub-theme appeared in 34% of articles, the most amongst the “caveats” theme, yet only received 36 total references. As such, coverage on legal caveats, while widely mentioned, was only briefly discussed and generally made as a short customary warning. An article from *the New Zealand Herald* reported: “Psilocybin is a Tier 1 illegal drug in the US, the equivalent to a Class A substance in Britain and New Zealand, and not yet been approved as a medical treatment” exemplifying the nature of these brief legal warnings (Sabur, 2019).

Adverse Effects

The “Adverse Effects” sub-theme refers to the potential dangers of psychedelic use including the phenomenon of “bad trips”, which are negative and unpleasant psychedelic experiences. This sub-theme was moderately covered, appearing in 29% of articles and is exemplified by the following quote:

“Evan personally did not experience negative impacts, but some of the risks listed on the patient information form included anxiety, vomiting, nausea, teeth grinding and an increased heart rate.” (Otago Daily Times, 2023). References to this sub-theme generally appeared as warnings of potential negative effects as opposed to actual cases of these occurring. However, one article did inform readers of an actual occurrence of adverse effects, with the story of a man who attacked his girlfriend, cut off his penis and jumped out of a window in an LSD-induced fit of madness (Stuff, 2016).

Implementation Caveats

The “Implementation Caveats” sub-theme identified reporting on the necessary precautions and procedures needed to use psychedelics safely, both as a clinical practice and on an individual basis. When approached from a macro-perspective, this sub-theme discussed the need for clinical oversight and regulatory processes for psychedelic use. On a more individual basis, references to this sub-theme often mentioned the necessity of ‘set and setting’, a phrase which refers to the mindset and physical setting of the user going into a trip. Clinical studies have shown that a positive ‘set and setting’ is necessary to ensure a positive psychedelic experience, maximize benefit and avoid adverse effects. An example of this reporting comes from *Newsroom*:

People draw on anecdotal evidence of people taking psychedelics in a really risky way. In those kinds of contexts dangerous things can happen. We’re talking about looking at the potential for psychedelics to be administered in a clinical environment, where things like setting are managed well to ensure safety. (Hurley, 2021).

Despite the importance of this information to ensuring positive experiences, it was sparsely covered in the data set, appearing in only 17% of the articles.

Need for Further Study

Despite the large amount of clinical evidence supporting the efficacy of psychedelics, some articles suggested more study was necessary to determine their value and usefulness. This type of reporting was

identified under the “Need for Further Study” sub-theme. The New Zealand Herald reported: “It will be a while before robust scientific evidence can shed more definitive light on microdosing. Until then, it’s too early to say.” (Lally, 2019). The “Need for further study” sub-theme was often referenced in relation to the practice of microdosing psychedelics – which is taking small sub-perceptual amounts of psychedelics frequently. This practice is a relatively new phenomena and therefore requires further study as opposed to the current models for psychedelic therapy involving a full dose - which have been studied more thoroughly. Of the 29 references to this sub-theme only six appeared after 2021, suggesting that this topic is diminishing as psychedelic studies progress.

Summary

On the whole, the “Caveats” theme can be summarized as being widely reported on, but in little detail. While the “Caveats” theme appeared in 48 of 75 articles, there were only 133 total references, the lowest amongst themes across the entire data set. This demonstrates that the caveats associated with psychedelics were not a major focus of the coverage and typically only mentioned in passing. When caveats were reported on, the cautions about legality and potential adverse effects were most prevalent.

4.2.5: Effects

The “Effects” theme was used to categorize coverage describing the effects of the psychedelic experience. Differing from the “Potential Benefits” which are the effects seen post treatment, the “Effects” theme refers to the effects of the substances *while active* in the body. Four sub-themes emerged under this category: “perceptual effects”, “neurological effects”, “mystical effects” and “safety profile”.

Table 6: Effects Data

| Sub-theme | Number of articles referenced | Total number of references |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Perceptual Effects | 38 | 92 |
| Neurological Effects | 20 | 43 |
| Mystical Effects | 15 | 33 |
| Safety Profile | 23 | 43 |

Perceptual Effects

The “perceptual effects” sub-theme was among the five most referenced sub-themes across the entire data set. This sub-theme included reporting of what it feels like to experience a psychedelic trip and the changes the drugs induce on one’s sensory experience. For example, an article from *Stuff* reported: “When combined, the two plants - Banisteriopsis caapi and Psychotria viridis [ayahuasca] - affect the central nervous system, leading to an altered state of consciousness that can include hallucinations, out-of-body experiences and euphoria.” (Martin, 2019). Not only was the “perceptual effects” sub-theme amongst the five most referenced sub-themes in number of articles, but it was also amongst the five most total references, indicating not only that it was widely covered, but that reporters dedicated a significant amount of their writing to the topic.

Neurological Effects

Covered in only 26% of the total data set of news articles, the “Neurological Effects” sub-theme refers to reporting on what physically happens in the brain when under the influence of psychedelics. References to this sub-theme included explanations of changes to brain chemistry such as the following quote in *The Southland Times*: “MDMA floods the brain with feel-good chemicals it produces naturally: serotonin, norepinephrine, oxytocin and dopamine. Meanwhile, fear is curtailed: the amygdala, the brain's threat response system, quiets down.” (The Southland Times, 2023). The relatively sparse reporting on this topic suggests that journalists are perhaps more inclined to report on more easily understandable

effects including what it feels like to be under the influence of psychedelics than the more complex workings of the brain.

Mystical Effects

The “Mystical effects” sub-theme categorises reporting which went deeper than the surface level “perceptual effects” to discuss the more transcendent aspects of the psychedelic experience. Clinical literature labels these effects as “mystical experiences” and include feelings of loss self-identity, unity with the universe or deeply spiritual/religious revelations (Griffiths, 2006). A description of this type of experience is found in an article from *the Spinoff*: “I just became a ball of light, and I was literally everywhere at once,” she says. “I was the sun, I was the stars, I was the moon, I was everything. There were lots of other lights around me. They were all souls, and I was a soul.” (Glenny, 2020). This sub-theme was one of the least reported on through the data set, being referenced in only 20% of articles.

Safety Profile

The “Safety Profile” sub-theme categorizes reporting on the near non-existent toxicity levels and the well documented safety of psychedelic substances when used in the correct setting. This sub-theme appeared in 23 of the 75 articles (30%). One example of how the “safety profile” was reported on is seen in an article from *The New Zealand Herald*: “No substance is zero risk, but the scientific community considers psilocybin to be less harmful than most other illegal drugs including amphetamines, opioids and cannabis, while legal substances alcohol and tobacco usually top the list of the most harmful.” (Cheng, 2023). Given the importance of safety to prospective pharmaceutical substances, it is surprising this topic was not emphasized further.

Summary

Overall, even though the “Effects” theme was third most referenced across the data set, reporting was dominated by discussion of the surface level “perceptual effects”. All other sub-themes under the “Effects” theme category appeared in 30% or less of the total news articles. Given that coverage has tended to adopt a pharmaceutical lens, it is notable that the “safety profile” sub-theme was underreported on compared to other strictly medical topics such as “ongoing studies” or “dosage/processes”.

4.2.6: Logistics

The “Logistics” theme was used to categorize reporting on the many institutional processes and elements involved in making psychedelic research, therapy and legalization a reality. Three sub-themes emerged from this theme: “New Zealand Logistics”, “Money”, “Australia’s Legalization”.

Table 7: Logistics Data

| Sub-theme | Number of articles referenced | Total number of references |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| New Zealand Logistics | 26 | 90 |
| Money | 20 | 51 |
| Australia’s Legalization | 8 | 24 |

New Zealand Logistics:

“New Zealand Logistics” was the most covered sub-theme under the “Logistics” umbrella by a significant margin, appearing in 34% of articles and receiving 90 total references - the sixth most across all sub-themes in the data set. Included in this sub-theme was reporting on the processes involved with researching and bringing psychedelics to market in the New Zealand context, specifically. Coverage under this sub-theme mentioned Medsafe processes, New Zealand legislation and indigenous Māori considerations and is exemplified by the following quote from an article by *New Zealand Doctor*:

The granting of the licence is the next step in the collaboration including a network of rongoā Māori practitioners, ESR (Institute of Environmental Science and Research), University of Auckland, University of Waikato, Manaaki Whenua Landcare Research, Mātai Medical Research

Institute, an iwi health provider and other community stakeholders. The collaboration aims to unlock the therapeutic potential of psilocybin found in indigenous varieties of ‘magic mushrooms’ (New Zealand Doctor, 2023).

Money

The “money” sub-theme refers to coverage of investment into the psychedelic space, including funding research and capital ventures in the industry. For example, the Whanganui Chronicle reported:

In 2020, psychedelics returned to Wall Street. London-headquartered Compass Pathways pulled off a US\$590 million (\$867m) Nasdaq flotation, making it the first psychedelics company to float in the US. Backers of the company, who include PayPal co-founder and early Facebook investor Peter Thiel, are betting that synthetic psilocybin, the active ingredient in magic mushrooms, represents a new frontier in healthcare. (Whanganui Chronicle, 2022).

This sub-theme appeared in 26% of the articles yet had a relatively high number of total references (n=51), indicating that when this theme was discussed, a significant amount of space was dedicated to the topic.

Australia’s legalization:

This sub-theme refers to coverage of the landmark TGA and RANZCP decision to legalize psilocybin and MDMA for therapeutic purposes in Australia. References to this sub-theme often introduce the reader to the topic of psychedelics by informing the reader of Australia’s legalization and making correlations to the New Zealand context, such as in the following example from *The New Zealand Herald*: “Australia has become the first country to classify psychedelics as medicines at a national level in an attempt to address mental health illnesses - with one prominent New Zealand ED doctor saying they could potentially be used here.”(Lyth, 2023). This sub-theme appeared in the fewest number of articles across the data set, only being mentioned in 8 out of 75 news articles. This is unsurprising as the data set searched for articles over the past 20 years, and this decision only occurred in 2023. One article in 2021 referred to the deliberation process on whether to legalize the substance (Whitten, 2021). The

importance of this decision to the psychedelic industry warranted its inclusion as a designated sub-theme.

Summary

While the “Logistics” theme appeared in the least number of articles (n=36) it had a higher number of total references (n=165) than the “Caveats” theme (n=133), indicating that while it was not widely covered, when it was mentioned it was discussed in detail. Unsurprisingly, “Australia’s legalization” was the least mentioned given the recency of the decision. When “Logistics” was reported on, the focus was on “New Zealand Logistics” which is unsurprising given the strictly domestic New Zealand data set.

4.3: Voices

In addition to the themes presented in the previous section, this research coded for voices which were quoted in the reporting as third-party commentary. This was done to investigate how the inclusion of different perspectives affected the thematic content of the reporting. Five types of voices emerged from the data set: ‘Researcher’, ‘personal testimony’, ‘institutional’, ‘advocate’, and ‘academic’. The number of articles which contained a quote from each one of these types of voices is listed on Table 8, below. Twelve articles did not contain any comment from a third-party source. This section will identify how these outside voices influenced the types of information being presented on the topic of psychedelics, in relation to the previously discussed themes.

Table 8: Voices Data

| Voice | Number of Articles This Voice Appears In |
|---|---|
| Researcher | 48 |
| Personal Testimony | 19 |
| Institutional | 16 |
| No quotes from third-party sources | 12 |
| Advocate | 11 |
| Academic | 3 |

4.3.1: Researcher Voices

The researcher voice identifies third-party commentary from a researcher who was involved in the clinical study of psychedelic substances. Comments from these individuals were by far the most prevalent, being included in 48 of the 75 news articles. When filtering the data to only include articles which quoted a 'researcher voice', some changes were observable in the thematic content of the reporting. While the "Mental Health" and "Dosage/Processes" sub-themes were referenced in the majority of articles across the data set (84% and 73%, respectively), they were both included in 98% of the articles which included a 'researcher voice'. This indicates that the presence of commentary from 'researcher voices' tends to focus the reporting heavily on the clinical and pharmaceutical topics associated with the substances. The prevalence of researcher's voices in the reporting can thus partially explain why certain topics, such as "spirituality" or "mystical effects", which stray from the strictly medical purview, were underreported on.

Filtering the data for researcher voices also created a significant increase in references to the "War on drugs/suppression" sub-theme. Across the data set, this sub-theme was referenced in 33% of articles, but was referenced in 45% of the articles which included comments from a researcher voice. This demonstrates that researchers are commonly commenting on the fact that promising psychedelic research was suppressed by dated legislation and are indicating that it is a barrier to progress, as exemplified by this quote from psychedelic researcher, Dr. Rosalind Watts in an article from *The New*

Zealand Herald:

However, research into psychedelics ground to a halt in the Sixties. Psychedelics showed promise as therapeutic treatments in the Fifties but soon became tarnished due to a number of factors, including irresponsible recreational use. Hopefully, this is starting to change now, thanks to a new wave of modern psychedelic research which in the UK was spearheaded by Amanda Feilding, and my colleagues at Imperial, David Nutt and Robin Carhart-Harris. (Lally, 2019).

This content analysis found that researchers' voices also provided much more intricate and digestible explanations of certain topics. The "Neurological effects" sub-theme was referenced in 26% of articles across the entire data set, but was present in 37% in articles containing a researcher voice. This topic was also discussed in much greater detail when coming from a researcher's explanation. This quote referencing the "Neurological Effects" sub-theme was written by a journalist: "MDMA floods the brain with feel-good chemicals it produces naturally: serotonin, norepinephrine, oxytocin and dopamine. Meanwhile, fear is curtailed: the amygdala, the brain's threat response system, quiets down." (The Southland Times, 2023). Comparatively, researcher David Nutt writes:

We can get into problems like depression, OCD and addiction because the brain can't disengage, it gets too involved in negative thoughts (in depression) or too involved in thinking about heroin (in heroin addiction). What psychedelics do is they disrupt, during the period of the trip, that over-engagement and so they allow people to escape from those disorders during the experience. And then also because of the chemistry of these drugs they leave the brain more flexible. So after the trip people can develop new, alternative ways of thinking and potentially overcome their problems. (Gibson, 2018).

While the journalist's quote plainly explains changes in brain chemistry which occur under the influence of psychedelics, it does not provide good explanation for how these neurological changes correlate to the benefits seen post psychedelic treatment. Professor Nutt's quote, on the other hand, provides a more whole description of how the neurological effects of psychedelics influence patients undergoing treatment, demonstrating the value of researcher voices in explaining certain topics.

In summary, 'researcher voices' unsurprisingly tended to focus on more clinical and pharmaceutical themes, which directs reporting of psychedelics through a medical lens leaving other topics under-reported on. When articles include a 'researcher voice', the coverage on history is dominated by mentions of the suppression which halted psychedelic research and the after-effects of which remain impeding progress to this day. 'Researcher voices' also proved to be more effective at explaining topics

which fell under their realm of expertise when compared to the layman's summary written by journalists.

4.3.2: Personal Testimony

The 'personal testimony' voice identifies comments or opinions from individuals who have experienced psychedelics firsthand. These include patients who have gone through psychedelic therapy or those who have used the substances outside of a physician's office. This content analysis found 19 articles which included some form of 'personal testimony', making these voices the second most sourced for third-party comment. One of the more notable observations with the articles that included personal testimony is the prevalence of reporting on the "mystical effects" sub-theme. While across the data-set, this sub-theme was referenced in only 20% of articles, making it the fourth least covered sub-theme, it appears in 37% of the articles which contain personal testimony. This indicates that while reporters and clinicians may be wary of discussing the more transcendental aspects of the psychedelic experience, those who have used the substances appear to be willing to share and discuss these ineffable feelings and speak to the importance of this aspect of the experience.

Reporting on the "perceptual effects" of psychedelics was also more prevalent amongst articles which included personal testimony. Appearing in 50% of the articles across the entire data set, 68% of the articles with personal testimony contained coverage of "perceptual effects" indicating that when personal testimony was sourced, it was generally done to provide first-hand accounts of what the psychedelic experience felt like. However, this was not the only information that personal testimony provided, as descriptions of the benefits of psychedelic use appeared more tangible when delivered from a first-hand account. Summary lines which indicated the potential mental health benefits written by journalists were prevalent across the data set. *New Zealand Doctor* reported: "Psilocybin has shown

promise in preliminary studies for treating various mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety, and PTSD.” (New Zealand Doctor, 2023). Voices of ‘personal testimony’ supplemented these surface level claims with more vivid and digestible commentary such as the following example published by *Newshub*:

It was completely life-changing," he said. "A huge weight has been lifted off me that I have carried around for a very long time. Between those two sessions, every symptom of PTSD that I had left, and it's been more than 18 months now and I've had no symptoms of any kind. (Whitten, 2021).

Another notable observation was in the referencing of the “improvements/comparisons to current treatment” sub-theme. While only present in 34% of articles across the data set, more than half of the articles (n=52%) with personal testimony referenced this sub-theme. This lends firsthand testimony to verify and support the previously mentioned narrative of SSRIs and antidepressants being largely ineffective for many individuals.

In summary, voices of ‘personal testimony’ tended to focus the coverage on psychedelics towards the experience itself, seeing increases in reporting on “perceptual effects” and “mystical effects”. This content analysis found that personal testimony backed claims from clinical studies of the benefits of psychedelic use with tangible, palpable and often deeply personal examples. The biggest change in the data when filtering for voices of personal testimony was the prevalence of reporting on the “improvements/comparisons to current treatment” sub-theme. This clearly emphasizes the pressing need for novel methods of treatment for mental health from the firsthand accounts of those for whom current methods have failed.

4.3.3: Institutional Voices

‘Institutional voices’ categorize third-party comments from individuals in government, institutions or corporations participating in the psychedelic space. These were often representatives from health

administrations or companies invested in bringing psychedelics to market. Sixteen of the 75 articles included institutional voices. 'Institutional voices' tended to direct reporting towards the "Logistics" theme, as references to all three sub-themes under this category became more prevalent when the data was filtered for 'institutional voices'. The "New Zealand logistics" sub-theme appeared in 34% of articles across the entire data set but appeared in 68% of the articles which included 'institutional voices'. This indicates that 'institutional voices' are primarily concerned with the processes and red tape involved with bringing psychedelics to market in Aotearoa. Further, with the reporting of this sub-theme being so dominantly present in articles with 'institutional voices', it demonstrates that this topic is not widely addressed by other voices.

This data also revealed a significant increase on the coverage of the "Australia's legalization" sub-theme when filtering for 'institutional voices'. Appearing in only 10% of articles across the entire data set, references to "Australia's legalization" were made in 37% of articles which included an 'institutional voice'. This is a particularly large number, given that Australia only made the decision to legalize certain psychedelic compounds for therapy in 2023. This observation in the data demonstrates that the inclusion of 'institutional voices' in the reporting of psychedelics has been a more recent phenomenon, which is further evidenced by the fact that no articles in the data set included an 'institutional voice' before 2019.

The recent inclusion and prevalence of these types of voices speaks to how media coverage of psychedelics is reflecting the state of the industry. As the psychedelic industry moves from a stage of research into a stage of implementation, the logistics of legalizing the substances and bringing them to market has become a more pertinent topic. As such, this data demonstrates that journalists have sought 'institutional voices' to provide relevant commentary to this transition.

4.3.4: Advocate Voices

'Advocate voices' categorized third-party commentary from representatives of advocacy groups or other individuals who were involved in publicly recommending psychedelics, without an official position in an institution or company. Commentary from 'advocate voices' was not widely sought, being featured in only 11 of the 75 articles, indicating that journalists appear more inclined to seek commentary from qualified researchers or those who hold official positions. When 'advocate voices' were present, references to the "Improvements/comparisons to current treatments" sub-theme increased. While present in 34% of articles across the data set, references to this sub-theme were made in 63% of the articles featuring 'advocate voices'. This data suggests that advocates for psychedelics are interested in recommending psychedelics, at least in part, due to the failures of current treatment options for mental health. Commentary from 'advocate voices' further the prevailing narrative that new and novel forms of treatment for mental health are necessary, and that psychedelics hold the potential to solve this issue.

While the sub-theme of "money" was relatively underreported throughout the data set, being referenced in only 26% of articles, more than 50% of articles which included 'advocate voices' referenced this sub-theme. Although 'advocate voices' touched on a number of different themes, this data indicates that a large part of their role in the reporting was emphasizing the need for funding to finance research and further progress within the psychedelic field.

In summary, third-party quotations from individuals who are advocates for psychedelic research and progress appeared sparsely throughout the data set. When they were included for comment, they focused on presenting psychedelics as a possible alternative to antidepressants and emphasized the need for further funding and investment into the psychedelic space.

4.3.5: Academic Voices

The ‘academic voice’ was used to categorize commentary on psychedelics from an individual with an academic background outside of the clinical fields (ie. neurology or psychology) which have dominated the modern study of psychedelics. These included professors interested in psychedelics from other perspectives of the humanities such as anthropology or philosophy. Only three articles across the data set included commentary from ‘academic voices’, making their commentary very rare. The most prominent change in the data when filtering for the academic voice came in the references to the “spirituality” sub-theme. Coverage of the spiritual aspects of psychedelics appeared in the second fewest articles of any sub-theme, being referenced in only 10 of the 75 total articles. However, all of the articles which featured academic voices made reference to this sub-theme. This observation suggests that while those from the more clinical disciplines shy away from discussion of the spiritual elements of the psychedelic experience, they are of particular interest to those from other disciplines. This data demonstrates that psychedelics can be examined from many different perspectives and that academics and intellectuals from varying disciplines will discuss and emphasize different aspects of the substances. Thus, in order to communicate topics which may be underreported on, certain voices must be included more frequently.

4.3.6: No Quotes From Third-party Sources

Twelve of the 75 articles did not contain any comments from a third-party source and only contained reporting from the journalist authoring the story. When filtering for articles which did not source outside comment, the most notable trend was in the reporting on the “mental health” sub-theme. Benefits of psychedelics to mental health dominated reporting across the data set being referenced in the most articles of any sub-theme at 84%. However, amongst the articles without any outside comment, only 41% of articles referenced the mental health benefits of psychedelics. This is partially because many

articles which did not seek third-party comment were historical retellings of stories associated with psychedelics. One such article which was a story, published by *Taranaki Daily News*, on the CIA's "MK Ultra" experiments in which they tested psychedelics to gauge their potential as mind control substances (Taranaki Daily News, 2019). Another article, from *Pharmacy Today*, provided a historical overview of humanity's history of drug and alcohol use (Longrich, 2021). These articles stray from the primary trends of reporting on psychedelics' potential use in society as a tool for mental health and well-being. This data demonstrates that, in most cases, when the future value of psychedelics is the primary focus of reporting, some form of third-party commentary or expert opinion is sought. What type of voice is included for comment greatly impacts how psychedelics will be portrayed by the media.

4.4: Conclusion

This chapter has presented a summary of the findings and notable observations from the data gathered through this content analysis. These findings show that reporting on psychedelics has dramatically increased over the past five years and mostly focused the coverage on three psychedelic substances: MDMA, LSD and Psilocybin, with journalists preferring to use their clinical names over their colloquial labels.

This chapter explored how psychedelics have been portrayed in the domestic news media through the analysis of the breadth and depth of coverage of six themes associated with psychedelics and their corresponding sub-themes. This data demonstrates that coverage was dominated by information regarding the "dosage/processes" involved with the clinical studies examining psychedelics' potential to treat clinically diagnosed mental conditions. Other highly covered sub-themes included the "initial period of study", "war on drugs/suppression", descriptions of the "perceptual effects" of psychedelics as well as "legal caveats" about their use. Sub-themes which appeared in the coverage but were heavily

underreported included the “spirituality” associated with psychedelic use, “mystical effects” felt under the influence of the substances as well as “implementation caveats”.

This chapter also outlined how the inclusion of different voices for third-party commentary affected which themes were discussed. ‘Researcher voices’ focused reporting on clinical studies and their processes. The extensive commentary from these voices across the data-set aligns with the prevalence of these topics. Voices of ‘personal testimony’ led to increased reporting on the experiential aspects of psychedelics, with their perceptual and mystical effects being discussed more frequently. ‘Institutional voices’ shifted the focus of reporting towards the logistical processes involved with legalizing psychedelics and bringing the substances to market. Other, less frequently sought, voices such as ‘advocate voices’ or ‘academic voices’, also demonstrated dramatic changes to the type of themes included in the reporting.

Therefore, this chapter has summarized the data in the content analysis to demonstrate which themes associated with psychedelics have been mostly widely covered in the Aotearoa New Zealand news media and further, has shown that varying voices included as third-party commentary greatly influences how psychedelics are portrayed.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This thesis is a piece of advocacy research. The intention for this research is to contribute to the progress of the psychedelic industry as it seeks to move from a stage of initial study to legalization and implementation in Aotearoa New Zealand. As aforementioned, the biggest barriers to progress in the field are the presence of negative stigma and preconceptions surrounding psychedelics (Kuntsler et al., 2023). According to key stakeholders in the industry, re-education and effective communication are necessary to inform the public, policy-makers and practitioners on the potential of psychedelics and to combat misinformation (ibid). To contribute to this communication effort, this thesis has sought to create new knowledge by answering the question “How are psychedelics being portrayed in the Aotearoa New Zealand news media?”. This chapter will discuss how the content analysis in this research has answered this question and will include in this discussion, considerations for how to best communicate and educate readers on psychedelics going forward.

5.1: Psychedelics as a pharmaceutical aid to psychotherapy

This content analysis coded the data set across several themes which categorize the various topics associated with psychedelics that have been published throughout written domestic news media content. Through this analysis, it is clear that psychedelics are predominantly being portrayed as a pharmaceutical, to be used in conjunction with psychotherapy, to treat clinically diagnosed mental health issues. Throughout, the reporting, journalists focused heavily on the potential for psychedelics to treat mental issues such as PTSD, depression, addiction etc. This is unsurprising as the recent revival of interest and study into psychedelics has been spurred by their potential in this regard. However, identifying the methods of communicating psychedelics’ promise and establishing which of the auxiliary

topics and themes were most disseminated in the process of educating the readers on the subject is where the data in this thesis can provide unique insight.

This research found that journalists primarily chose to communicate the therapeutic potential of psychedelics through lengthy and detailed explanations of clinical studies. The “clinical studies” theme, received the most total references across the data set (n=463) indicating that the majority of the reporting was dedicated to this topic. Under this theme category, the sub-theme of “dosage/processes” was the dominant subject of discussion, being featured in 73% of articles and receiving 226 total references. Comparatively the “summary results” sub-theme was featured in 56% of articles and received 117 total references. Journalists, therefore, dedicated more of their coverage to discussing the details and particulars of how the studies were conducted than they did reporting on the actual results of the studies. While some description of how studies are conducted would necessarily be part of the coverage, the reason why the studies are of interest is due to the promising results. As such, the consequences of the findings from clinical trials became a secondary topic to discussion of the studies themselves. This approach in the reporting was heavily influenced by the fact that ‘researcher voices’ were the primary source of third-party comment.

The data analysis demonstrated that the inclusion of certain voices greatly influenced the themes and topics discussed in the reporting of psychedelics. ‘Researcher voices’ were the most pervasive third-party commentary sought throughout the data set, being featured in 48 of the 75 articles. Their opinions and insight are incredibly valuable in synthesizing research-based information into understandable commentary but tend to focus the reporting heavily on the minutia of the processes involved with their research. However, ‘researcher voices’ were not the only outside commentary which demonstrated the ability to communicate the therapeutic benefits of mental health. Voices of ‘personal testimony’

provided first-hand accounts of how psychedelics have provided relief and healing from mental health ailments. This testimony often provided more tangible and personal evidence to the benefits of psychedelics than the more data driven and clinical commentary from researchers. While both perspectives provide value, 'personal testimony' was only featured in 19 articles compared to the 48 which featured a 'researcher voice'. Providing multiple perspectives on psychedelics' benefits to mental health creates a more well-rounded and convincing description with considerations from research and data, but also felt personal experience.

As psychedelics are predominantly being presented in domestic news media as a pharmaceutical aid to psychotherapy, the lack of coverage on the safety of these substances was surprising. For any prospective pharmaceutical product seeking approval, the safety profile of the substance is particularly relevant (Medsafe, 2024). Psychedelics have proven, through clinical trials and statistics of recreational use, to have a near nonexistent toxicity profile and to be generally safe when taken in the proper conditions (Griffiths, 2006). Yet, this research's data demonstrated that the "safety profile" sub-theme was referenced in less than a third of the articles in the data set. Seeing as psychedelics have primarily been covered with a medical lens this topic is particularly underreported. It would be beneficial for discussion of the potential mental health benefits of psychedelics to be supplemented with information about the relative safety of the substances to dispel preconceptions which inherently view the drugs as dangerous.

As stated throughout this thesis, the recent revivification of psychedelic studies is, in part, due to the failures of current methods of treatment for mental health (Penn & Tracy, 2012). The ability for psychedelics to treat particularly resistant cases of mental diagnoses, for which multiple other forms of treatment had proved ineffective, was a prevailing narrative throughout the clinical literature sourced

for the literature review included in this thesis (Carhart-Harris, 2018). Throughout the data the “improvements/comparisons to current treatment” sub-theme appeared in 34% articles. While this is relatively high compared to other sub-themes, its importance to the clinical literature suggests it warrants a similar emphasis in the media coverage. Reporting on this topic increased when ‘advocate voices’ were included, indicating that the inclusion of varying voices can ensure that important narratives and topics are adequately addressed.

While it is unsurprising that psychedelics have been portrayed in the domestic news media as a pharmaceutical aid to psychotherapy, this data has revealed some notable patterns and observations in how this portrayal has been achieved. Journalists mostly communicated the potential of psychedelics through the perspective of ‘researcher voices’ rather than ‘personal testimony’. This has led to a more research-based focus, prioritizing discussion of the clinical studies rather than the benefits of the substances themselves. The inclusion of ‘personal testimony’, in tandem with researcher commentary, allowed for articles to present a description of psychedelic’s potential from both a data-driven and first-hand perspective. Further, despite the predominantly medical lens which has been applied to psychedelics, important sub-themes to the pharmaceutical future of the substances were underreported on, such as “safety profile” and “improvements/comparisons to current treatment”. These sub-themes were more prevalent when ‘advocate voices’ were included in the reporting, again demonstrating how the inclusion of varying voices ensures relevant topics are discussed. Therefore, in addition to demonstrating that psychedelics have been portrayed as a pharmaceutical aid to psychotherapy in the domestic news media, it has also demonstrated the need for multiple voices to be included in communicating psychedelics to adequately address all important perspectives and topics.

5.2: Identifying Muted Narratives

Psychedelics are a complex and multi-faceted subject which can be approached from a variety of angles. With such a complicated subject and a limited understanding, journalists had the difficult task of selecting how to approach covering psychedelics, within the parameters of their publication. Whether by conscious or unconscious choice, certain narratives associated with psychedelics were amplified and others were muted by the reporting. The data in this research demonstrates this. Other than the five most referenced sub-themes, all other sub-themes appeared in less than 40% of the articles. As such, readers have been left without a complete understanding of psychedelics. The previous section identified how the portrayal of psychedelics as a pharmaceutical aid to psychotherapy has been amplified by the domestic reporting. This section will identify themes and narratives which have been muted by the reporting.

5.2.1: Psychedelics Beyond the Medical

As psychedelics have been primarily portrayed as a pharmaceutical aid to therapy, journalists have appeared reluctant to address other potential benefits of psychedelics. The literature review in this thesis has included studies which demonstrate that psychedelics can act as a tool for personal wellbeing in “healthy normals”; individuals who are not diagnosed with a severe mental health disorder (Griffiths, 2006). Therefore, there is real potential for psychedelics to not only treat the sick but to also become a tool for the betterment of well people, with a demonstrated ability to improve mood, personality and general sense of wellbeing and life satisfaction. Despite this, the “personal wellbeing” sub-theme appeared on only 28% of articles. This data indicates that, at this time, the potential for psychedelics to be used for a larger audience of “healthy normals” as opposed to being restricted to the severely unwell, is not being widely discussed.

Another aspect of psychedelics which was heavily underreported were the mystical effects of the psychedelic experience and the reported spiritual benefits of psychedelic use. Clinical studies with psychedelics have demonstrated that they can induce particularly powerful and meaningful mystical experiences and participants who underwent these experiences described them as incredibly spiritually significant (Griffiths, 2006). Despite this, “Spirituality” and “mystical effects” were particularly underreported sub-themes, being amongst the four least referenced sub-themes across the data set. With such a heavy focus on the pharmacological aspects of psychedelics, these more transcendental aspects of psychedelics have been muted by the domestic reporting. However, it is important to note that mentions of mysticism and spirituality appeared in the clinical literature, indicating the importance of these topics to psychedelic researchers and their work.

Furthermore, articles which included voices ‘personal testimony’ referenced the “mystical effects” sub-theme more often. This demonstrates that the mystical and spiritual elements of psychedelics are not only relevant to the clinical literature, but also to the personal experiences of psychedelic users. As such, communication and education on psychedelics should not shy away from these topics. While only sought for comment in three articles, ‘academic voices’ addressed the “spirituality” benefits of psychedelics every time they were featured. Thus, ‘academic voices’ from outside the clinical disciplines, could prove to be a useful resource in amplifying this underreported, yet important, aspect of psychedelics in future communication efforts.

5.2.2: Using the Historical Narrative to Undermine Stigma

As stated in the literature review, psychedelics are not novel substances, and their use predates recorded history (Nichols, 2016). Furthermore, their potential to be used in therapy is not a recent discovery either, as a 20-year long period of clinical study into their therapeutic potential to treat mental

diseases occurred in the 1950s and 60s (Costandi, 2014). The subsequent “war on drugs” campaign and ban on psychedelic use and study was motivated more by their association with countercultural political movements, than dangers of the drugs themselves (Belouin, 2018). Jessica Bracco’s (2019) work demonstrates how the news media propaganda of this era established the moral panic and stigma which remains associated with psychedelics to this day. This narrative is critical to understanding psychedelics as a whole, but more importantly, to understanding the why psychedelics have been criminalized and why they are perceived as dangerous. Despite this, all the sub-themes which fell under the “history” theme category appeared in less than 40% of articles. As aforementioned, stigma and negative preconceptions surrounding psychedelics are proving to be the biggest barriers to progress for the industry (Kuntsler et al., 2023). The historical narrative surrounding psychedelics allows readers to understand and examine their own prejudices towards the substances, by educating them on how these notions are rooted in misinformation and political agendas. The “hippie movement/counterculture” sub-theme was referenced in only 21% of articles, indicating that this causal relationship, between disruptive political movements and modern-day psychedelic stigma has been muted by the reporting. Communicating this historical narrative in a more complete manner will be critical for progress in the psychedelic industry as it seeks to re-educate the public.

5.3: Summary

This thematic content analysis has answered the research question and determined that psychedelics have primarily been communicated in the New Zealand news media as a pharmaceutical aid to psychotherapy. While this is on the whole unsurprising, this research has also determined how journalists have formed this portrayal and identified important narratives which have been muted by the domestic reporting. One of the major findings of this research is that the presence of voices for third-party commentary greatly affects the topics being discussed and further, how key information is

communicated. The majority of reporting was dedicated to the potential mental health benefits of psychedelics and this research found journalists elected to communicate this point overwhelmingly through 'researcher voices'. While their commentary was valuable, it tended to shift reporting to focus on the processes of clinical studies rather than the consequences and results of those studies. This thesis found that voices of 'personal testimony' were also capable of communicating the benefits of psychedelics through more tangible firsthand accounts, yet these voices were underrepresented in comparison. In addition, despite the pharmaceutical lens with which psychedelics were portrayed, topics clearly relevant to this medical perspective were underreported, namely, their safety profile and how they compare to often-ineffective, currently available treatments. This thesis proposes that the inclusion of a wider array of voices to supplement researchers' perspectives will be critical in making sure these topics are addressed.

This research also identified important narratives which were muted by the reporting being so heavily focused on the pharmacological potential of psychedelics. One of these was the potential for psychedelics to move beyond the strictly medical, to be used as a tool for the betterment of well people, through benefits to wellbeing and spirituality. Themes which moved beyond the medical lens, which portrays psychedelics strictly as medicine for the severely mentally ill, were particularly underreported on. However, this thesis established in the literature review that these topics were addressed in the clinical literature and therefore would warrant inclusion in the reporting.

This thesis additionally identified that the historical narrative of psychedelic prohibition was muted by the coverage. Further, this chapter discussed the importance of this narrative in allowing readers to understand the source of stigma and bias surrounding psychedelics. Thus, the history of psychedelics' association with countercultural political movements and the resulting propaganda which followed will

require more attention going forward as the industry seeks to change minds about psychedelic substances.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This chapter will summarize the research presented in this thesis by discussing the implications of the findings and key takeaways. This chapter will also overview limitations to this research and suggest pathways for further study.

6.1: Implications of this Research

This thesis is a piece of advocacy research, motivated by a desire to assist the prospective psychedelic industry. In the process of developing the literature review, this research located an Australian study which interviewed key stakeholders of what is now a legal and legitimate psychedelic industry. This study was instrumental in identifying negative stigma as one of the primary barriers to progress in the psychedelic space (Kunstler, 2023). This study further emphasized the need for effective communication from trusted sources to re-educate and combat misinformation on the topic of psychedelics. To address what has been identified as the most pertinent needs of the psychedelic industry, this thesis performed a thematic content analysis of domestic news media to answer the question “How are psychedelics being portrayed in the Aotearoa New Zealand news media?”. The findings from this content analysis can provide the psychedelic industry with data and information on what themes and voices associated with psychedelics have been the most prevalent in the domestic reporting and which narratives need to be more adequately addressed. This research found that psychedelics have primarily been reported on through a medical lens, being portrayed as a pharmaceutical aid to psychotherapy. While this was an unsurprising conclusion, how this portrayal was communicated, and which narratives were amplified or muted has implications for the psychedelic industry going forward.

A key observation from this research is that commentary from different types of voices greatly affected the types of topics and themes included in the reporting. This thesis found that ‘researcher voices’ were by far the most dominant voices present in domestic coverage of psychedelics. Their presence heavily

directed the coverage to topics and themes associated with the clinical research of psychedelics. This resulted in the majority of writing being dedicated to discussion of the processes of clinical studies involving psychedelics as opposed to the substances themselves. The implications from this finding suggest that different types of voices must also be included to ensure that audiences are being educated on all important topics. For example, the inclusion of voices of ‘personal testimony’, resulted in more reporting on other themes such as the “mystical effects” of psychedelics, and the inclusion of ‘academic voices’ increased the reporting on “spiritual benefits”. Commentary from different voices not only ensured that certain themes were addressed, but also served to supplement each other with multiple perspectives on the same topic. Voices of ‘personal testimony’ were able to communicate the same benefits of psychedelics as ‘researcher voices’, but from a more tangible first-hand perspective. The inclusion of both resulted in holistic reporting on the benefits of psychedelics, linking the data-based perspectives of researchers to the felt experiences of those who used the substances. The findings from this research imply that communication strategies from the psychedelic industry would benefit from the inclusion of a variety of voices to ensure important topics are addressed and supported from multiple perspectives.

This research also identified narratives which were muted by the reporting. Whether by the conscious or unconscious choice of the journalists, certain threads of important information regarding psychedelics were particularly underreported on. With news media’s important role as the fourth estate, the muting of certain narratives leaves citizens only partially informed when forming their opinions on psychedelic substances.

With such a heavy focus on portraying psychedelics as a pharmaceutical aid to psychotherapy, the potential for the substances to move beyond the strictly medical was a narrative which was muted by the reporting. While the mental health benefits of psychedelics were heavily covered, the potential

benefits to those without a severe mental health diagnosis (“healthy normals”) were not widely discussed. The psychedelic clinical literature contains studies which demonstrate positive outcomes from psychedelic use amongst “healthy normals”, including positive personality changes, increased productivity and general life satisfaction (Griffiths, 2006). The potential market for psychedelics, and population whose welfare could be improved by the substances, is therefore much larger than just those with severe mental health disorders. However, news media coverage at this time has generally been reluctant to address this. Further, important transcendental aspects of the psychedelic experience such as the “mystical effects” and “spirituality” benefits were largely excluded. With a potentially controversial topic, it is understandable journalists would avoid discussing topics which seem to be outside of the scientific purview. However, the clinical literature on psychedelics not only mentions the mystical and spiritual aspects of the psychedelics, but also emphasizes the importance of these types of experiences (Griffiths, 2006). Voices of ‘personal testimony’ also more frequently mentioned the “mystical effects” of psychedelics further indicating the importance of this aspect of psychedelics to those who have first-hand experience. The implication of this finding is that communication surrounding the more transcendental aspects of psychedelics is relevant and important information to both the clinical data and the experiences of users and therefore warrant inclusion in psychedelic re-education efforts.

The historical narrative regarding psychedelics was also muted by the reporting. This narrative is crucial to understanding that the roots of psychedelic stigma lie in historical political agendas, as opposed to dangers of the substances themselves (Belouin, 2018). Educating audiences on this narrative can undermine negative preconceptions they may hold and result in self-reflection of their own biases. Despite the importance of this information, historical sub-themes such as “hippie movement/counterculture” were particularly underreported on, leaving audiences with a poor

understanding of the history behind psychedelic stigma. As the psychedelic industry seeks to overcome the preconceptions surrounding these substances, one of the key implications of this research is that the historical narrative of psychedelics will need to be emphasized further.

6.2: Further research

This thesis has provided a methodological framework for studying psychedelics from a communications angle. The development of the codebook in this thesis allowed for the most domestically disseminated themes and voices associated with psychedelics to be identified. This codebook and methodology could therefore be applied to further study of different mediums (ie. Television or radio broadcast) to create a more encompassing picture of how psychedelics have been portrayed in the Aotearoa New Zealand news media. This thesis has provided implications for how the findings in this research could assist the psychedelic industry in its goals of overcoming stigma. Receiving feedback from audiences on which of these voices and themes resonate with them the most would provide the next step in formulating a communications strategy for re-education on psychedelics. A study using a method involving surveys or focus groups would create new knowledge to compliment this research by gauging audience reactions to different types of content. This would provide a two-fold piece of market research for the psychedelic industry by demonstrating which themes and voices are most prevalent, and which of these are most effective, according to audience feedback, in re-educating and changing minds.

6.3: Concluding Remarks

This thesis identified the most pressing need of the psychedelic industry: overcoming the barriers of stigma through effective communication and re-education from trusted channels. To contribute to this initiative, this thesis analyzed domestic news media coverage to provide a foundational understanding of the prevailing discourse around psychedelics to help guide and inform future communication strategies and re-education efforts. By employing a thematic content analysis, this research has identified the most

prevalent themes and voices in the domestic news media coverage of psychedelics. An examination of the data generated by this analysis revealed that psychedelics are primarily being portrayed in the Aotearoa news media as a pharmaceutical aid to psychotherapy. This research demonstrated that this has predominantly been achieved through commentary from researchers discussing the processes of clinical trials with psychedelics. Due to the dominance of 'researcher voices', important narratives and themes were muted, including benefits to "personal wellbeing", "spirituality", "mystical effects" and the historical narrative of psychedelic prohibition. The primary implication of this research for the psychedelic industry is that the inclusion of various types of voices greatly impacts the themes being discussed. Further, various voices supplement each other by affirming information from multiple positions. This research suggests, for the psychedelic industry to overcome stigma, it is imperative that their communication strategies include a variety of voices to adequately address important information and provide holistic re-education from diverse perspectives.

Word Count: 25459

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