

The Psychedelic Revolution Will Be App-ified



How emerging tech tools are working to expand access to psychedelic therapy and make tripping more transformative

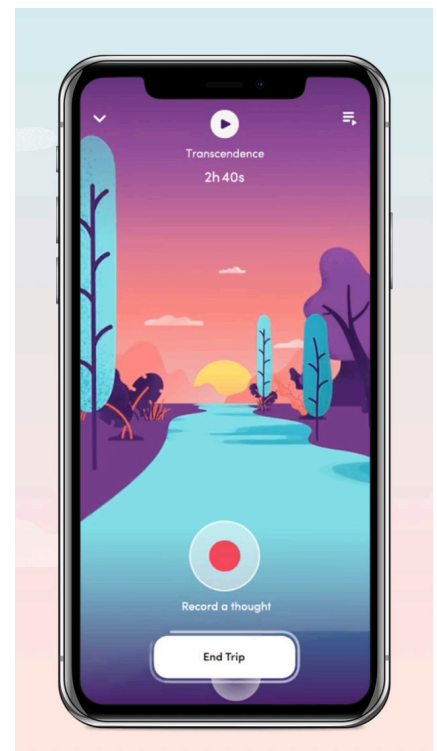
Nick Wing

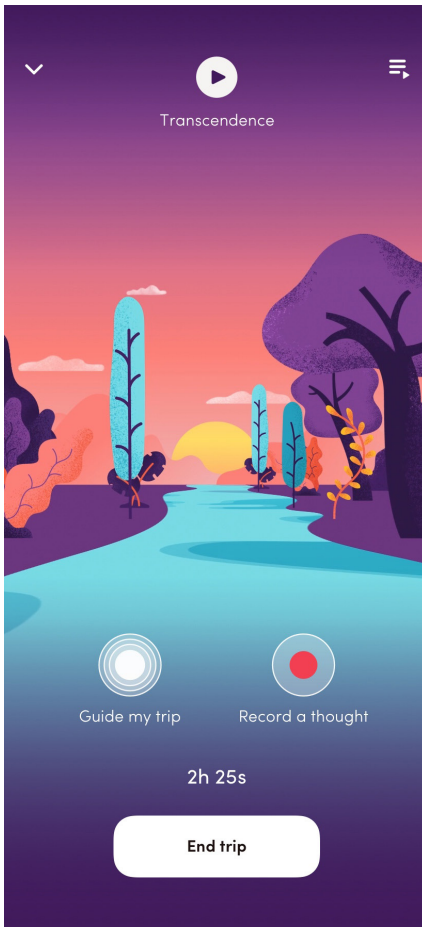
After more than half a century of open flirtation with psychedelics, the tech industry is taking the relationship to the next level with an influx of apps and digital tools designed to expand access to psychedelic medicine, facilitate transformative psychedelic experiences, and equip people to have safer, more informed trips.

These products mark the latest chapter in a modern tech history that has been infused with psychedelics since the beginning. In his best-selling book, *How to Change Your Mind*, author Michael Pollan traces the intersection of these two worlds back to the 1950s, when computer engineers at the electronics firm Ampex first took LSD to help them visualize the complex patterns used in early microchips (Pollan, 2018). Decades later, tech titans like Steve Jobs famously experimented with psychedelics, leading the Apple co-founder to call it “one of the two or three most important things” he did in his life (Mackenzie, 2011). And more recently, the media has fixated on psychedelic use in Silicon Valley, where techies have been microdosing (Dean, 2017) and tripping (Swisher, 2018) to boost creativity, increase productivity, and achieve mental breakthroughs.

Over the course of this history, tech has clearly taken a lot from psychedelics, and received a lot in return. But the tech industry hasn’t always been as eager to give back, or to share. Now, in the midst of a psychedelic renaissance that has put these substances on a path toward mainstream acceptance—and multi-billion-dollar corporate valuations—tech companies have come flocking like moths to a psychedelic flame (PRNewswire, 2020). Many of the early players in the psychedelic tech sector claim these products are an effort to give back, by helping to advance the field of psychedelics. But if they’re going to do that—and do it responsibly—their execution will make all the difference.

Many of the initial entrants into this space have been developed with clinical applications in mind. Companies like Field Trip Health, Osmind, Mindbloom, Mindleap, and Wavepaths all offer services around psychedelic-assisted therapy, but they vary in terms of style and approach.





Nick Wing is a journalist who has covered a wide variety of issues ranging from drugs and drug policy, to race and criminal justice, to gun violence and other public health crises. He believes that the best journalism challenges the status quo, and uplifts the voices and issues that so often get ignored by legacy media. Nick previously worked as a reporter at the Huffington Post, and is currently an editor at The Appeal, a nonprofit newsroom dedicated to covering injustice and the U.S. criminal legal system. He received a bachelor's degree from Colorado College in 2009.

Field Trip Health and Mindbloom are directly involved in administering psychedelic medicine and therapy — only with ketamine for now, the lone FDA-approved psychedelic drug, which studies have shown to be effective in treating depression and anxiety. As the landscape changes though, protocols and procedures could likely be adapted to fit new substances and therapies.

On the boutique end, Field Trip Health offers ketamine-assisted therapy sessions in “spa-like” clinics, paired with a digital platform to help patients to get the most out of their psychedelic experiences. Field Trip’s online tool provides information and exercises to aid with intention setting ahead of clinical sessions. Afterward, clients can use the platform to follow up with their clinician, track outcomes, and complete exercises to help integrate their experiences. The baseline package, which includes two psychedelic sessions and four follow-up sessions comes in at \$2,400, and can be completed in one to two weeks.

For a less lux approach, Mindbloom is harnessing the power of telemedicine to offer at-home ketamine-assisted psychotherapy. The company’s licensed clinicians and trained guides prescribe ketamine to qualifying patients, oversee medical care, and facilitate one-on-one remote sessions, as well as group integration sessions. Mindbloom also has a digital tool with interactive educational content for use before and after psychedelic experiences. And if patients need to get in touch with clinicians during treatment, they can reach out on the app (Mindbloom, 2021).

Other companies never actually touch psychedelics. Osmind has created software and digital infrastructure for clinicians who are already doing psychedelic-assisted therapy. The platform allows providers to track outcomes and collect detailed feedback from patients, which will make it easier for clinicians to integrate emerging psychedelic therapies into the healthcare system, says Osmind co-founder and CEO Lucia Huang.

The Mindleap app takes a more familiar tech industry approach to the psychedelic space, serving as a peer-to-peer platform to connect clients with licensed specialists who conduct therapy sessions over video calls — kind of like Uber, but for psychedelic integration. This format also allows Mindleap to keep psychedelics at an arm’s length. While the company’s website advises that conversations between therapists and clients are “secure and private,” it clarifies that Mindleap “does not endorse, encourage, or support the attainment or use of illicit substances”

Wavepaths offers an entirely different sort of service for therapists, providing them with customizable musical soundtracks for sessions. Creator Mendel Kaelen, Ph.D., has partnered with instrumental and electronic music artists like Jon Hopkins to compile a library of original tracks that can be arranged and adjusted in real-time throughout a session. The goal, says Kaelen, is to help clinicians create a “completely flexible musical environment, adaptive to the constantly evolving therapeutic needs.”

The creators of these products all shared excitement about how technology could improve issues of access and equity to psychedelic medicine. Mindbloom, for example, has been able to use telemedicine to lower the price of ketamine-assisted psychotherapy to \$250 per session, says Mindbloom founder and CEO Dylan Beynon. He adds that Mindbloom can also reach people who might not live near a ketamine clinic, or who might feel more comfortable at home than in a clinical setting.

But there are also trade-offs to consider amid a shift to digital and remote methods of delivering care. Therapeutic touch, for example, can’t be replicated through a computer screen. And with the provider and patient in separate places, the container for healing becomes more difficult to standardize and control, notes Sara Reed, a li-

censed clinician and CEO of Mind's iHealth Solutions, a digital health company. "Not everyone has access to a quiet, private space for an online dosing session and this can impact how comfortable someone feels in exploring their inner wounds," says Reed. "What really gets lost is the human connection."

For people who may not be interested in psychedelics for approved therapeutic use, other products are aligned toward personal use in more recreational settings. Field Trip Health has released a separate app called Trip, which it brands as a digital toolkit to promote more informed, transformative psychedelic experiences. The app asks users to set an intention before they trip, then provides music and guided support throughout the experience, along with a button to record voice notes. Afterward, Trip reminds users to journal and follow up with other integration exercises.

Mydelica, a forthcoming app being developed by Dr. Robin Carhart-Harris and other researchers at Imperial College London, seeks to teach users about tripping — and to learn from their experiences. The app will provide educational resources for every stage of a psychedelic experience, along with an online health tracking tool that can chart the mental health effects of a psychedelic experience. Using detailed surveys across a variety of psychometrics, users will be able to see how a trip affects their mood and mental wellbeing, says Carhart-Harris.

The content on both Trip and Mydelica is based on vetted protocols created by psychedelic experts, the creators say, but they're quick to note that their products aren't intended to be a replacement for psychedelic-assisted therapy supervised by a clinician or guide. Still, there's no point pretending people aren't using these substances on their own, says Ronan Levy, executive chairman at Field Trip Health, citing recent moves to decriminalize psilocybin and other natural psychedelics in cities like Oakland, Santa Cruz, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Washington, D.C. By providing curated and validated information, they believe they can reduce harm, and in the process help people have more meaningful psychedelic experiences, says Levy.

"The biggest risk probably right now is someone experimenting with psychedelics, doing something stupid, and engendering the same kind of backlash that we saw in the 60s," says Levy, before paraphrasing a quote from psychedelic pioneer Stan Grof, M.D., Ph.D. "The most important thing we can do right now in terms of the psychedelic renaissance is not fuck it up."

So far, the initial products in the psychedelic tech space seem to be taking some care not to mess it up for everyone else. The largest companies on the clinical side note that they conform to best practices that are grounded in psychedelic science and research, and developed in conjunction with experts.

But that alone may be setting the bar too low. Sara Reed

of Minds iHealth Solutions says she's concerned about the blindspots that will inevitably emerge when combining tech and psychedelics, two fields that have historically lacked diversity and struggled to incorporate the experiences of people from different backgrounds.

"There's going to be a fundamental difference in the tone and the objectives of a company that's run by, just to be frank, serial entrepreneurs or predominantly white men, versus a company that's founded by a clinician who is also a black woman," says Reed. "Though the missions and visions might sound the same, the execution of them can look a lot different."

On the recreational side, the most popular and polished offerings also seem to be starting off in the right direction, with an eye toward harm reduction and a commitment to credentialed information. Of course, an eye test is not a substitute for more rigorous studies to determine whether these apps are actually helping people, or harming them, or doing nothing at all, says David B. Yaden, a research fellow at the Johns Hopkins Research Fellow at the Johns Hopkins Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness.

And even if there are no obvious red flags yet, in a highly decentralized, unregulated tech world filled with potentially unscrupulous players who may be motivated more by profit than a genuine interest in advancing the field of psychedelics, there are no guarantees that this will remain the case.

"What kinds of companies will enter this space?" asks Yaden, "And will there be highly problematic iterations of these apps in the future?"

Right now, the answers to those questions are anybody's guess.

References

- Dean, J. (2017, January 4). Micro-dosing: The Drug Habit Your Boss is Gonna Love. GQ. <https://www.gq.com/story/micro-dosing-ld>
- Field Trip Health. (2021). <https://www.fieldtriphealth.com>
- Mackenzie, I. (2011, October 6). What Made Steve Jobs Unique? BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-15196874>
- Mindleap Health. (2021). <https://mindleap.health>
- Mindbloom. (2021). <https://www.mindbloom.com>
- Pollan, M. (2018). *How to Change Your Mind*. Penguin Press.
- PRNewswire. (2020, June 24). Psychedelic Drugs Market Projected to Reach \$6.85 Billion by 2027. <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/psychedelic-drugs-market-projected-to-reach-6-85-billion-by-2027--301082594.html>
- Swisher, K. (2018, August 23). How and Why Silicon Valley Gets High. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/23/opinion/elon-musk-burning-man-drugs-ld.html>
- Wavepaths. (2021). <https://wavepaths.com>