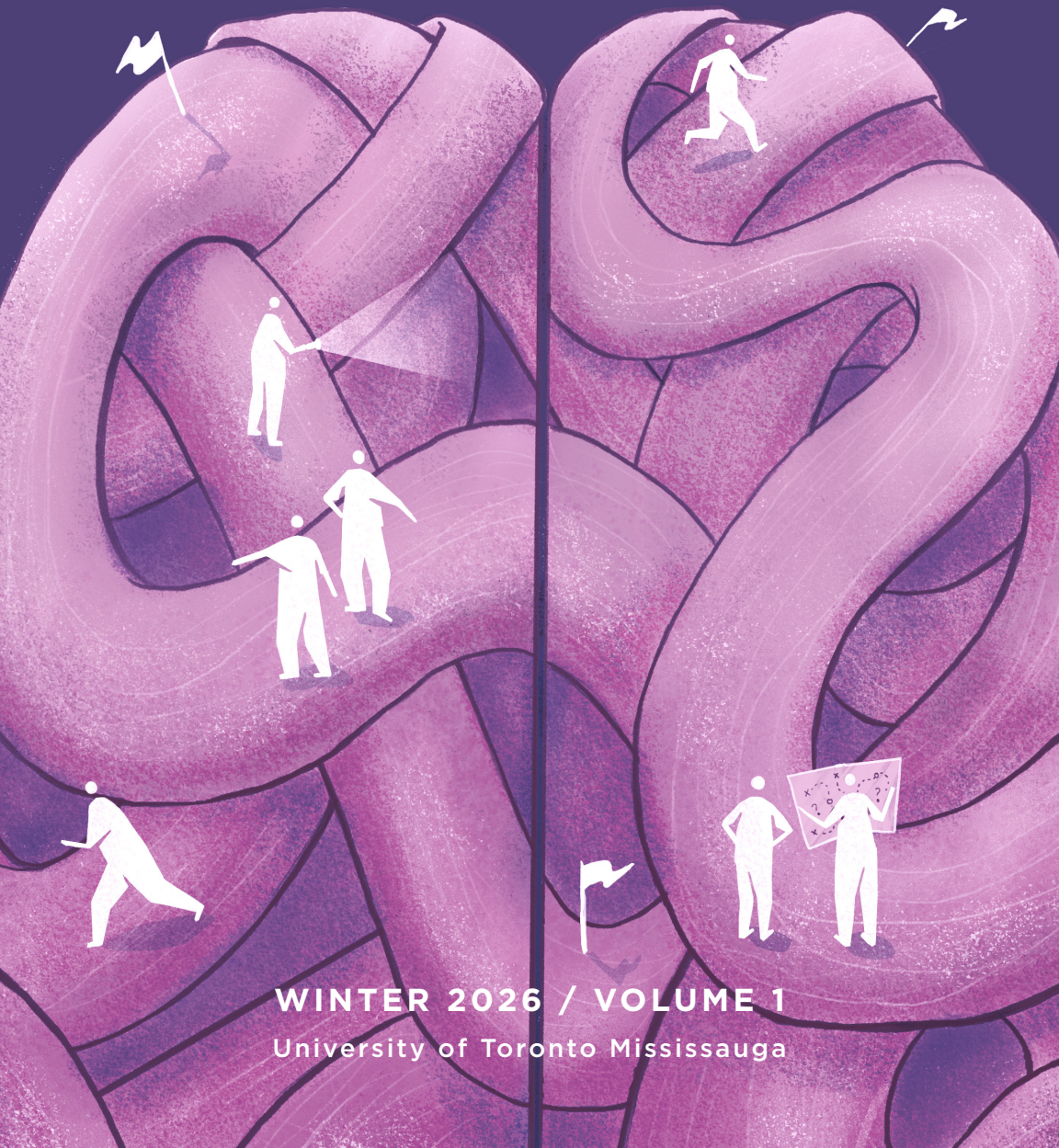
wavelength

Undergraduate Journal of Psychology



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About Us

Wavelength is a student-run undergraduate psychology journal at the University of Toronto Mississauga. We are dedicated to curating and publishing insights using a diversity of mediums to highlight the scientific and humanistic landscape of psychology and neuroscience. Through Wavelength, we hope to cover contemporary issues in psychology through a critical and accessible lens, oftentimes emphasizing marginalized voices and questioning how power shapes mainstream scientific understanding and engagement.

Dear Readers,

We are delighted to present to you the first edition of *Wavelength: Undergraduate Journal of Psychology* on behalf of the Psychology Association of Undergraduate Students Erindale (PAUSE) at the University of Toronto Mississauga. *Wavelength* initially emerged from PAUSE's "journal club," where students would congregate to discuss papers and studies relevant to contemporary psychology.

As the first editors-in-chief of this new initiative, our intention to transform that club into a peer-reviewed undergraduate-run academic journal was twofold. Firstly, we wanted *Wavelength* to be an academically rigorous *and* creatively vibrant journal that showcases work at the intersection of psychology and society, thereby challenging the conventional separation of "objective" science from the human experience. Secondly, we wanted to emphasize the importance of student voices in academia. Students offer fresh, creative, and critical insights that have the power to animate and influence the discipline of psychology, even at an undergraduate level.

At *Wavelength*, we believe that psychology does more than just produce scientific knowledge. Like many disciplines, especially the social sciences and humanities that are being systematically defunded and devalued, psychology asks difficult but necessary questions about the human mind, health, society, power, and our collective futures. Our journal exists as a small but deliberate act of resistance against the notion that scholarship and professional inquiry are reserved only for established academics alone. Scholarship can also belong to students, to emerging thinkers, and to those willing to engage deeply with the world around them.

Our first edition would not be possible without the labour of love from our all-student editorial board, as well as the illustrators who brought each piece of writing to life through their artistry and vision. We would also like to extend our gratitude to PAUSE's 2025-2026 president Silas Liening and to the professors at the Department of Psychological Sciences for their thoughtful and critical guidance. Lastly and most importantly, thank you to the contributors for giving us the opportunity to read, edit, and platform your voices.

With the establishment of *Wavelength,* we hope to continue inspiring more opportunities for critical and creative inquiry for students, by students.

With love and solidarity,

Zoha Faisal and
Mashiyat Ahmed,

Founders and 2025-2026
Editors-in-Chief

When Representation Falls Short: Queer Visibility and the Mind

How Tokenism, Queer-baiting, and Market-Driven Inclusion Shape Identity, Belonging, and Mental Health in the 2SLGBTQIA+ Community

BY CAO MURRAY, CONTRIBUTOR
ILLUSTRATION BY ALESHA FERNANDES

In recent years, 2SLGBTQIA+ characters have become increasingly common in mainstream film and television. Streaming platforms promote inclusive casts, media companies celebrate Pride Month with rainbow branding, and social media often portrays queer representation as evidence of social progress. But for many queer individuals, this visibility can feel incomplete. Instead of complex and fully realized characters, 2SLGBTQIA+ identities are frequently filtered through familiar tropes, hinted at but never confirmed, included but never developed, or celebrated only when profitable. This symbolic treatment of queer identities creates a gap between visibility and meaningful representation, one with measurable psychological consequences. According to psychological literature, mainstream media frequently exploits 2SLGBTQIA+ characters through queerbaiting, tokenism, and commodified visibility[1]. This, in turn, shapes queer identity development, sense of belonging, and mental health.

MEDIA AS A SOURCE OF SOCIAL LEARNING

Media is not just entertainment; it has become a dominant source of social learning. The Social Cognitive Theory outlines that individuals learn norms and expectations of the world and themselves by observing others, especially through repeated portrayals in popular media[2]. The identities and relationships shown on screen influence what viewers perceive as normal, desirable, and worthy of attention. For queer youth, visual media is often the first place where queer lives are seen.

The Impact of LGBT+ Representation in Media by Nicholas Panessa (2025) suggests that positive, sustained representation can affirm LGBTQ+ identities and support self-esteem . However, its effects on broader psychological outcomes remain complex and not fully understood[3]. Conversely, shallow or stereotypical portrayals reinforce narrow-minded messages about queer identities and are less likely to support positive outcomes, consistent with research on media exposure and minority stress[4]. One study found that 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals who frequently viewed media with positive queer portrayals reported lower psychological distress and higher life satisfaction. The same study found that negative or tokenistic representation was associated with increased stress[5]. When queer characters exist only in the background, function as comedic relief, or disappear without narrative development, the psychological benefits of representation are diminished and stereotypes are more likely to be reinforced, both internally and externally.

MINORITY STRESS THEORY: TOKENISM AND MENTAL HEALTH

While increased visibility may appear progressive, tokenism remains a persistent problem. Superficial portrayals of queer characters, (i.e. those included to signal diversity without narrative depth), often fail to encourage meaningful engagement with audiences—queer or otherwise. *The Big Bang Theory*

(2007-2019), a mainstream comedy sitcom, demonstrates this with its inclusion of minor 2sLGBTQIA+ characters used primarily as gag characters[5]. If not used for humour, their inclusion remains in the background and are not allowed fortified storylines or emotional complexity. Such portrayals treat diversity as an accessory rather than an integral part of reality and the human experience.

Media scholars Blanco-Fernández and Iñigo who adolescent audiences have identified *pinkwashing*, in which queer and gender-diverse characters are used for political, social, or commercial gain within a narrative while avoiding authentic engagement with queer lives[6]. In Blanco-Fernández and Iñigo's research, teen viewers often expressed frustration with inclusivity that felt performative, describing it as a "trend" or marketing tactic rather than an authentic narrative commitment. These responses suggest that visibility without substance can feel like exploitation instead of recognition[6].

Minority stress theory (MST) also explains how stigma, rejection, and internalized negative beliefs contribute to poorer mental health outcomes among queer individuals[7]. From the perspective of MST, queer marginalization produces chronic psychological stress by subjecting individuals to both external and internal stressors tied to their stigmatized identity[4,6,7]. These include overt discrimination, expectations of rejection, concealment of identity, and internalized stigma, all of

which accumulate over time to heighten vulnerability to anxiety, depression, and emotional distress. Importantly, MST emphasizes that these adverse mental health outcomes are not inherent to queer identities themselves, but are socially produced through persistent exposure to cisheteronormative structures that undermine safety, belonging, and self-worth[4,5].

As such, these stressors do not arise only from purposeful discrimination; they also emerge from environments that repeatedly communicate marginalization and disposability by reducing queerness to an aesthetic or narrative plotline. When media portrays queer characters as underdeveloped, peripheral, and expendable, it signals that queer identities are acknowledged but not fully valued unless a profit follows.

QUEERBAITING AND PARASOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

Another pervasive media practice is *queerbaiting*, a term emerging from online fan and media criticism circles to describe the practice of creators hinting at queer identities or relationships without meaningfully confirming them in the narrative[8]. A prominent example appears in *Voltron: Legendary Defender* (2016-2018), where the only canonically queer characters, Tadashi Shirogane and Adam W., were confirmed to have previously been romantically involved prior to the show's events[12]. This relationship never explicitly appears on screen. Adam exists within brief flashbacks throughout the show's seventh season before being killed off—a narrative choice that many viewers interpreted to be reflective of the "bury your gays," despite the producers earlier public commitments to inclusive representation[8,12].

Audience frustration was further amplified by the show's handling of non-canonical dynamics, most notably between Keith Kogane and Lance McClain, which employed repeated romantic tropes including emotional focus, jealousy, protectiveness, charged banter, and visually intimate moments, amongst others[12]. The pair's dynamic was ultimately framed as purely platonic, allowing for plausible deniability while still encouraging queer audience investment.

Although direct psychological research on queerbaiting remains limited, research on parasocial engagement with queer characters suggests that forms of mediated contact—such as parasocial friendship and wishful identification—are associated with more positive attitudes toward queer people, which supports the idea that positive, sustained media engagement can foster understanding and emotional connection when done right[10]. Queerbaiting undermines this process by building expectations and emotional connections, followed by a withdrawn representation. This can feel invalidating for queer audiences as this treats queer identity as an aesthetic suggestion rather than a lived reality deserving of nuance.

POSITIVE REPRESENTATION AND IDENTITY AFFIRMATION

Research on 2SLGBTQIA+ youth and social media demonstrates that authentic expressions of identity can support self-acceptance and self-esteem, especially when met with supportive feedback. One U.S. study found that 2SLGBTQIA+ youth who shared aspects of their identity online reported higher self-acceptance, especially in affirming environments[1]. Similarly, research on narrative media portrayals have found that positive representations of same-sex relationships and queer characters can elicit supportive emotional responses and more positive attitudes among queer audiences, reinforcing identity affirmation and well-being[1]. This is illustrated by popular shows such as *Heartstopper* and *Sex Education,* which have been widely praised for their progressive portrayal of queer characters navigating identity, relationships, and emotional growth[13, 14]. Rather than reducing queerness to a trait or plot device, *Heartstopper* and *Sex Education* treat queerness as one aspect of a fully developed individual. These findings highlight two key points: identity exploration matters psychologically, and representation is most beneficial when it is sustained, contextualized, and humanized[15].

BEYOND SYMBOLIC VISIBILITY

Media representation does not exist in a vacuum and can reinforce the very marginalization it claims to challenge. Chen

& Mares (2024) found that 2SLGBTQIA + youth benefit from affirming environments that support self-acceptance, whereas hostile or dismissive contexts increase stress[1]. When 2SLGBTQIA+ representation is driven primarily by marketability, it risks becoming commodified visibility. Examples include rainbow branding during Pride Month or isolated "representation episodes" in long-running franchises such as *The Simpsons* (1989-present) or various Disney properties, where queer characters appear only in short arcs without sustained narrative follow-through.

Streaming platforms like Netflix, Hulu, and Disney+ often spotlight queer "content" in promotional materials while limiting queer characters to side roles or brief storylines. Despite these strategies' increasing surface-level inclusion, they frequently avoid challenging dominant norms or depicting the complexities of queer lives. McInroy & Craig's (2016) research suggests that representation supports identity affirmation when it is authentically executed and sustained[15]. These patterns highlight that even though visibility in media has increased, surface-level inclusion without narrative depth can leave queer audiences feeling seen but not valued.

The growing presence of LGBTQ+ characters in mainstream media reflects an important cultural shift, but visibility alone does not guarantee meaningful or thoughtful representation. Psychological research on social learning, minority stress, and media engagement demonstrates that representation has real-world consequences for identity, belonging, and mental health across a lifetime. When queer characters are reduced to tokens, marketing tools, and narrative suggestions, the media risks exploiting the very communities it claims to support. To move beyond symbolism, creators must recognize that 2SLGBTQIA+ characters are people, not diversity checkboxes. Meaningful representation should offer visibility whilst upholding depth, dignity, and the possibility of belonging in a society that conveniently writes them off. •

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ILLUSTRATION BY ANGELA YUEN

Who Deserves to Flourish?

Rethinking the Role of Culturally Affirming Spaces on Well-Being

BY LILLIAN DE-HEER, CONTRIBUTOR
ILLUSTRATION BY SIGOURNEY TISDALL

Across several Ontario universities, Black-affirming spaces have become gathering points for connection, identity exploration, and support. Early research, including work by Daniel (2021), suggests that these environments play a meaningful role in how Black students navigate campus life and well-being[1]. However, when one such article circulated on the social media platform Reddit, reactions were divided.

Some anonymous commenters wrote:

"Who would have thought, regressing back to segregation is actually progressive."

"Yes. It's racist. To exclude anyone from anything according to racist textbook racism."

"The entire safe space concept is inherently discriminatory."

These responses do more than express disagreement with the implementation of these spaces. They reflect a broader uncertainty about what culturally affirming spaces are designed to accomplish, despite their grounding in research on student well-being. When universities introduce initiatives that explicitly centre Black students, public discourse often focuses on perceived exclusion rather than the institutional conditions that have long shaped Black students' experiences on campus. But what does the research actually say about culturally affirming spaces? And how might we better visualize their potential and observed effects on Black student flourishing?

Drawing on research that links flourishing to both personal traits and supportive environments, this paper introduces a well-being matrix to map how culturally affirming spaces and internal strengths work together to shape Black student well-being. Understanding this relationship clarifies why cultural hubs on university campuses are not merely symbolic strides towards inclusion, but also essential for the promotion of Black student flourishing.

WHAT IS FLOURISHING?

Psychological research often defines flourishing as a state in which individuals experience sustained well-being, engagement, or a sense of meaning in their daily lives[2,3]. Several influential frameworks attempt to capture the components of this state. The PERMA model, for instance, outlines five components of flourishing: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment[2]. Other frameworks, such as the Broaden-and-Build model, propose that positive emotions expand cognitive and social resources over time[4]. PROSPER, a framework developed for educational contexts, adds dimensions such as purpose, optimism, strengths, and resilience to capture a more holistic view of youth well-being[5].

Across these models, flourishing is largely conceptualized through internal traits and psychological processes. While social relationships and supportive interactions are acknowledged, these frameworks rarely theorize the role of broader environments, such as institutional climates or culturally affirming spaces—environments that respect and validate one's cultural identity in shaping whether these traits can develop or be sustained[6]. This omission is particularly relevant for Black students, whose experiences in higher education are often shaped by systemic inequities that influence access to well-being. This gap raises an important question: how do internal strengths and surrounding environments each contribute to flourishing for Black students?

WHY BOTH TRAIT AND ENVIRONMENT MATTERS FOR BLACK STUDENT WELL-BEING?

Research on flourishing in academic contexts frequently highlights the role of internal traits in supporting student well-being. Liu et al. (2024) found that higher levels of self-compassion predicted greater flourishing among university students[7]. Oliver et al. (2017) reported that Black students at a predominantly White institution demonstrated stronger resilient coping than their White peers, a pattern the authors linked to experiences navigating discrimination[8]. Simmons et al. (2023) similarly identified resilience and self-compassion as protective factors for racially minoritized adults. Together, these studies underscore the importance of internal strengths in supporting well-being[9].

However, traits alone do not determine whether students flourish. For Black students in particular, the broader environment shapes how and whether these strengths can be expressed. Experiences of exclusion, social stress, and institutional mistrust can undermine well-being even when internal resources are present[10]. This is where culturally affirming spaces become especially relevant. Research by Daniel (2021) shows that Black-affirming campus spaces function as "racial oases" that foster identity safety, belonging, and emotional support[1]. Hypolite (2020) similarly found that Black cultural centres provide graduate students with community, membership, and opportunities for personal and professional development[11]. These environments do not replace internal strengths; rather, they create the conditions in which those strengths can develop and be maintained.

For individuals who have never needed culturally affirming spaces, the impact of these environments may be difficult to understand. Many students move through university without questioning whether they belong, whether their identity will be affirmed, or whether their well-being depends on finding community. For Black students, these questions are often unavoidable. Beyond comfort, affirming spaces provide psychological safety and a foundation that enables resilience to function as a resource rather than a survival strategy. Understanding this

	PRESENCE OF POSITIVE WELL-BEING TRAITS	
PRESENCE OF CULTURALLY AFFIRMING SUPPORTS	ABSENT	PRESENT
ABSENT	Vulnerability to Distress	Coping in Isolation
PRESENT	Supported Survival	Flourishing Potential

Figure 1: *A Conceptual Matrix of Black Student Well-being*

Note: This is a conceptual figure that illustrates how Black student well-being is a product of the conjunction between traits and affirming environments.

relationship between traits and environments is essential for interpreting research on Black student well-being and helps explain why affirming spaces—despite public repudiation—remain vital.

THE WELL-BEING MATRIX

Research on internal traits and affirming environments points to a simple but often overlooked reality: well-being is shaped by the interaction between who students are and the conditions in which they learn. For Black students, this interaction is especially important because campus environments can either support or constrain the expression of internal strengths. Yet for many observers, it can be difficult to visualize how these factors work together and why they are necessary to address.

To make this relationship clearer, this article introduces a well-being matrix that maps the interaction between internal traits and affirming environments. This matrix is not a diagnostic tool; rather, it illustrates how different combinations of traits and supports shape Black students' experiences of well-being on campus. It helps explain why culturally affirming spaces matter and why their impact cannot be reduced to pandering or identity-based exclusion.

The matrix includes four quadrants. The first represents students with limited internal strengths and limited environmental support, a combination associated with heightened vulnerability to stress, isolation, and diminished well-being. The second quadrant includes students with strong internal traits but limited environmental support. In this context, resilience functions primarily as a survival strategy rather than a pathway to flourishing. Students may cope effectively, but the effort required to navigate exclusionary or unwelcoming spaces can erode psychological resources and resilience over time.

Beyond comfort, affirming spaces provide psychological safety and a foundation that enables resilience to function as a resource rather than a survival strategy.

The third quadrant captures students who have access to affirming environments but are still developing internal strengths. In these cases, culturally affirming spaces act as scaffolding, offering mentorship, community, and identity safety that support the development of traits such as resilience and self-compassion. The fourth quadrant represents flourishing, where students possess strong internal traits and have access to affirming environments that allow those strengths to be expressed without the need to subdue identity.

Viewing well-being through this interactive lens helps clarify how culturally affirming spaces contribute to Black student well-being. These spaces provide relational and psychological grounding that allows internal strengths to take hold and grow over time. This perspective also helps explain why public reactions to these spaces often miss the point: without understanding the role of the environment in shaping well-being, affirming spaces are easily misinterpreted as exclusionary rather than supportive.

BROADER IMPLICATIONS FOR UNIVERSITIES: WHY CULTURAL HUBS MATTER

Understanding how internal traits and affirming environments interact has implications that extend beyond Black student well-being. While this article focuses on Black students due to the depth of existing research, the framework applies to many Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) communities whose experiences in higher education are often shaped by marginalization. For many students, flourishing depends not only on personal strengths but also on access to environments where identities are recognized, supported, and reflected in campus life.

This is where the concept of cultural hubs offers a promising model. Rather than functioning as single-purpose spaces, cultural hubs can serve as dynamic environments that support multiple marginalized groups. They can host cultural events, student-led programming, mentorship activities, and

community-building initiatives that affirm diverse identities. In doing so, they provide the environmental grounding that allows internal strengths to develop and take hold, a need shared across many BIPOC student communities, even as specific forms of support may differ[12].

Several Canadian universities have already begun experimenting with this type of infrastructure. Initiatives at Queen's University, Toronto Metropolitan University, and the University of British Columbia demonstrate that culturally affirming spaces can support diverse student groups while still addressing the specific needs of Black students[13,14]. By situating cultural hubs within a broader understanding of flourishing, universities can move beyond performative programming toward more integrated approaches to student support. These spaces create conditions in which internal strengths can be expressed and replenished not only for Black students but for many marginalized communities whose well-being is shaped by the environments they navigate.

MOVING FORWARD

The debate sparked by Black-affirming spaces on Ontario campuses reflects broader uncertainty about how well-being is shaped for marginalized students. When flourishing is understood solely through individual traits, it becomes easy to overlook the complex environments that influence whether those strengths can take hold. Research on Black student well-being, combined with the well-being matrix introduced in this paper, points to a more complete and nuanced account in which internal strengths and affirming environments work together to support students' capacity to thrive.

Research on Black student well-being, combined with the well-being matrix introduced in this paper, points to a more complete and nuanced account in which internal strengths and affirming environments work together to support students' capacity to thrive.

Cultural hubs offer universities a practical way to act on this understanding. By creating spaces where identity, community, and belonging are central rather than peripheral, institutions can help ensure that personal strengths are developed and expressed rather than exhausted. As conversations about equity and student well-being continue, universities have an opportunity to move beyond symbolic commitments toward structural investments that reflect the realities of student flourishing. Cultural hubs represent one pathway toward campuses where all students have access to the conditions that make well-being possible. •

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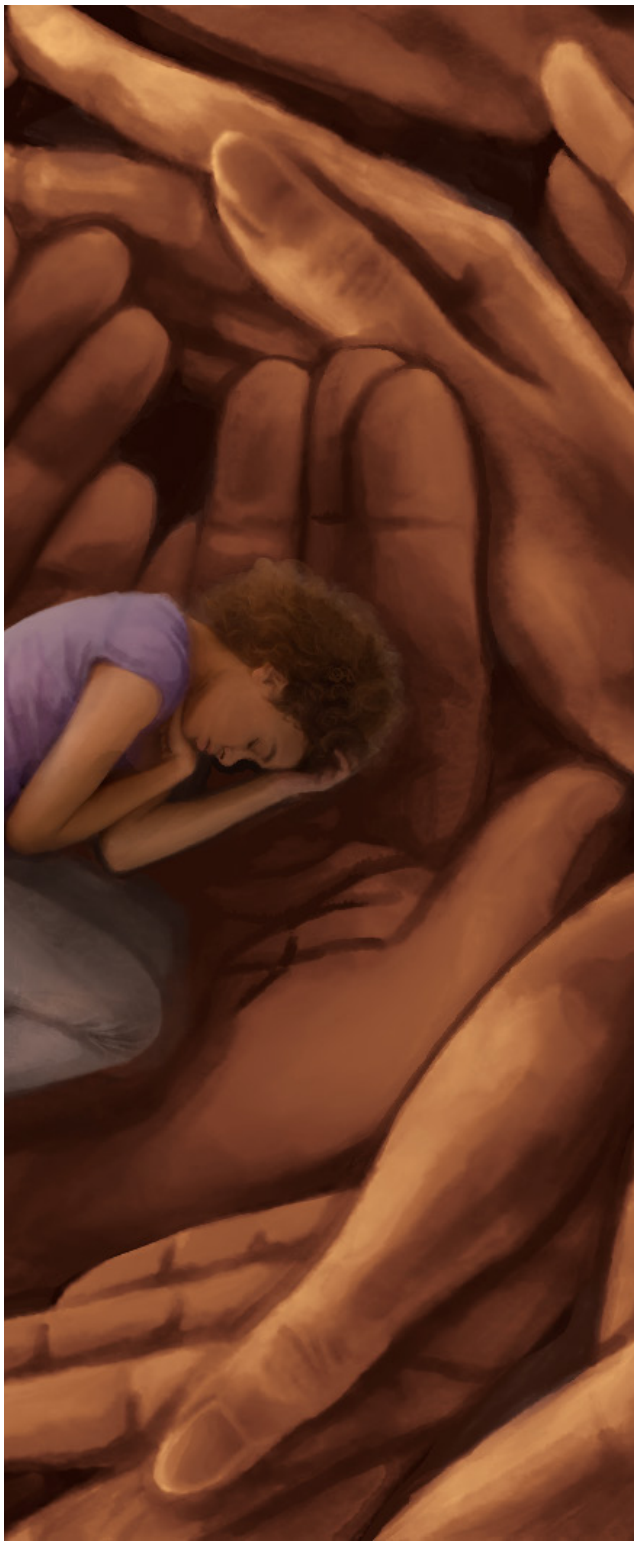


Medicalization, Monopoly, and Mental Health

The Underbelly of a Psychedelic Renaissance

ARTICLE & ART BY MASHIYAT AHMED, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

In the summer of 2023, the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS) held its fourth scientific conference on psychedelics in Denver, Colorado. Advertised as the largest of its kind in history, the conference gathered thousands of healthcare professionals, therapists, scientists, investors, journalists, and politicians to participate in the recognition and celebration of scientific progress in psychedelics, medicine, and mental health innovation. As the conference neared its end, MAPS founder and psychedelic drug advocate Rick Doblin appeared on stage for closing remarks, celebrating the historic conference and the future of psychedelics[1].

However, Doblin's enthusiastic remarks were interrupted by Indigenous rights activists who criticized MAPS and the broader Western psychedelic community for commodifying and misappropriating the substance—which has long been considered sacred and spiritually significant for numerous Indigenous localities and cultures, particularly across the Central Americas. "You have been deceived by this movement," one protestor proclaimed, "this is not a collective liberation movement. This is capitalization!"

Across West Africa, Mexico, and South America, the thousands of plant preparations concocted for healing and health purposes indicate a complex botanical, pharmacological, and spiritual knowledge system that stretches back centuries before being embraced by Western researchers[3]. Yet, what took place in MAPS and the convictions of the Indigenous protestors does not exist in a vacuum, which is to say, this is not the first time aspects of Indigenous culture have been abused, stolen, and tokenized by non-Indigenous hands: for example, tobacco and cocoa are familiar aspects of our society but are originally sourced from Native American medicinal and cultural traditions[2].

A psychedelic commonly denotes a psychoactive substance that produces an altered state of consciousness characterized by significant changes in sensation, perception, mood, awareness, emotion, and other cognitive states by interacting with the brain's serotonergic system. In addition to these changes, a "psychedelic trip" can also produce profound feelings of transcendence, empathy, openness, and creativity depending on dosage, trip duration, as well as pre-existing environmental and psychological factors[3]. At a glance, these effects appear overwhelmingly positive, but a small minority of users also report persistent negative side-effects after tripping, such as mood fluctuations and depressive symptoms[4]. Psychedelics are diverse and broad-ranging in their neurobiological mechanisms, chemical structures, and psychoactive potency, with lysergic diethylamide (LSD), mescaline, psilocybin (i.e., magic mushrooms), and diemethyltryptamine (DMT) being well-known psychedelics, both culturally and scientifically[3]. In recent years, the "psychedelic renaissance"—an upsurge of scientific, economic (commercial), and cultural interest in the therapeutic, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions of psychedelics have propelled the once stigmatized substance into the evolving frontiers of neuroscience, psychology, psychiatry, and mental health.

Numerous studies have indicated, with various degrees of empirical strength, that psychedelic-assisted therapies

can benefit individuals struggling with drug-resistant depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other forms of psychological distress[3]. In Canada, most psychedelics, including psilocyin—the active ingredient in magic mushrooms—LSD, DMT, and mescaline are listed as Schedule III substances under the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act; however, in the context of the psychedelic boom, legal exceptions such as authorized use in clinical trials, research, and therapeutic or personal benefit exist. Importantly, the unauthorized production, possession, and sale of psychedelics are still heavily prohibited[5].

Despite monumental interest from the scientific community, psychedelics are also booming into a big business as biotechnology companies, big pharma, investors, and venture capitalists eye the possibilities of a multi-billion dollar mass market. Beyond the hype of this renaissance lies the little to no critical analysis of how the politics of modern capitalism and other oppressive power relations are shaping psychedelic developments and reproducing systems of cultural and ecological exploitation, inequality, and harm. Uncomfortably so, how are Western scientific paradigms, approaches, and industries responsible for deepening this harm?

FROM MOLECULE TO MEDICALIZATION: THE MAINSTREAMING OF PSYCHEDELICS

Social science research on medicalization has persisted since the 1970s[8]. Broadly speaking, (over)medicalization refers to defining and treating human conditions and social problems exclusively through a medical lens requiring medical surveillance, management, and intervention. Medicalization, rooted in dominant social and economic paradigms such as capitalism and neoliberalism, defines a problem in medical terms, using medical language, by adopting a medical framework, and/or by using a medical intervention. In his seminal paper *Medicalization and Social Control*, scholar Peter Conrad explains that medicalization has three distinct expressions: the conceptual (e.g., through definitions, philosophies, framings, and ideas), the institutional (e.g., as organizations, institutions, and industries adopt medical approaches), and the interactional (e.g., through patient-doctor exchanges)[6].

Medicine, physicians, hospitals, pharmaceuticals, and other healthcare innovations are a net-benefit to society. Conrad, however, is less concerned with whether something *is* medical and more concerned about *how* and *why* certain conditions, experiences, and substances come to be seen in that way. In other words, medicalization, though appearing neutral and scientific, reflects cultural values and power dynamics imprinted onto our institutions, approaches, and even daily interactions[6,7]. Providing a medicalization critique of the psychedelic renaissance is just one way to understand the myth of scientific neutrality and how psychedelic expansion—whether through research and medical authority, industrialism or commercialism, and recreational use—can be a vehicle of invisible harm.

Conrad's work highlights that the push for medicalization—which is usually gradual and hides behind the opulence of scientific discovery—increases directly with its economic profitability: the more something is medicalized, the more the industry cropping up around it expands, creating new and lucrative markets for pharmaceutical companies, specialized researchers, physicians, and insurance companies[8]. When something is overmedicalized, the structural and social components of human health, harm, and knowledge production are sidelined to prioritize a single and valorizing narrative of discovery, innovation, and progress.

In an interview with *The New York Times,* prominent psychedelic researcher Dr. Roland Griffiths argues that synchronizing psychedelics with medical authority will help ensure a smooth rollout and work towards decriminalization. Similarly, psychiatrist Ben Sessa believes that we must work with governments and medical authorities to get psychedelica approved; without that cover, Sessa fears that psychedelics "will remain illegal forever" and will "languish in Peruvian jungles"[1]. For Griffiths and Sessa—both of whom come from white, privileged backgrounds—the long-term cultural legitimacy of psychedelics cannot

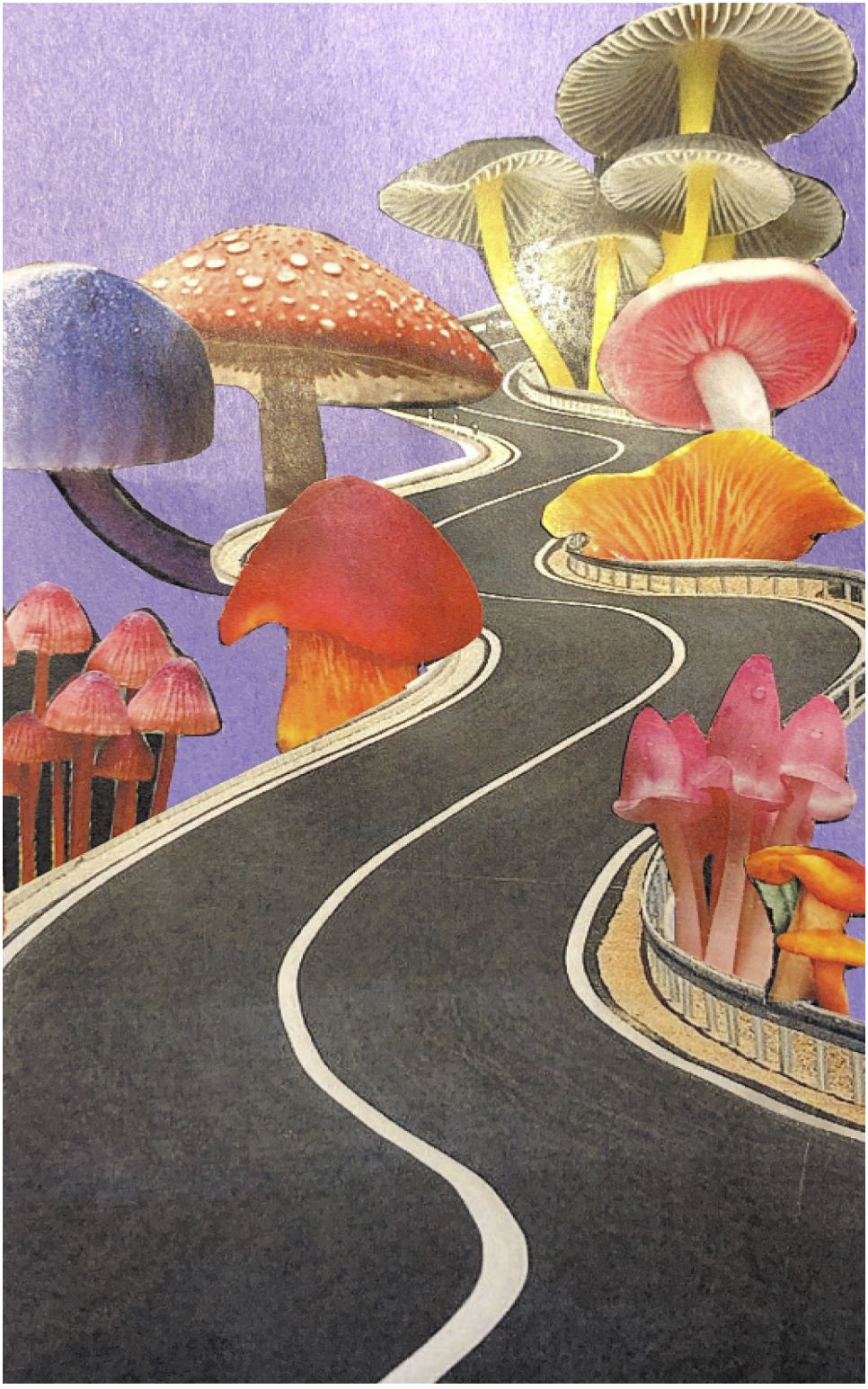
happen without medicalization. Deemed as an attractive opportunity for psychedelic mainstreaming, merging psychedelics with the contemporary political economies of health and research presents certain benefits such as reliability of service, consistency in product quality, accountability in the face of malpractice, and in some cases, greater affordability[1]. Largely absent in the psychedelic conversation, however, are issues associated with the biomedical model of mental health and Western approaches to knowledge production.

Before psychedelics saw the insides of sterile labs and individualized therapy clinics, underground users and practitioners developed inventories of data and information about psychedelic compounds and experimented with different forms of therapy outside of the Western biomedical framework, which focuses on diagnosing and treating diseases as chiefly biological abnormalities, frequently equating mental illness with physical illness[9]. Some of the first medical studies of psilocybin, for example, were initiated because of observations about how underground communities were using it to self-medicate against anxiety and headaches. Even more, American ethnomycologist Gordon Wasson first encountered magic mushrooms by observing Indigenous ceremonial use in Oaxaca, Mexico; he then brought back his insights on Indigenous use to the United States at the expense of local communities, triggering what would become a burst of psychedelic interest in the West[10]. This continuum—from traditional Indigenous healing practices to today's "above-ground" clinical research—is a unique trajectory in the history of medicalization, where the knowledge collected over decades by a stigmatized and marginalized psychedelic underground is now being incorporated into medical research and put under patent law, as well as attracting the attention of monopolistic markets.

We must ask why is it that psychiatrists, pharmaceutical companies, and the Western medical establishment are considered best suited to bring psychedelics into the mainstream? Why are their knowledge claims privileged over others'? The clinical knowledge we have of psychedelics thus far owes a great debt to Indigenous healing practices and conceptualizations, as well as underground researchers and guides. Today, medicalized research is largely confirming what these marginalized voices have documented within their own communities and methods. It is well-established within marginalized underground networks—many of which are Indigenous—that use and experimentation of psilocybin, for instance, is perfectly safe—as in one cannot overdose from it—and has significant therapeutic utility[1]. Yet, thousands of dollars in clinical research has gone into empirically investigating claims of safety: there is no reason why Western medicine, methodologies, and epistemology should sit at the top of the hierarchy of knowledge surrounding safety. Nor should the establishment function as a medical gatekeeper of therapeutic approaches. Such claims rely upon an appeal to medical authority—an authority whose track record for mental health is troublesome.

In addition to these concerns, we must also problematize medicalization in the absence of decriminalization and destigmatization efforts: confining psychedelic use to a medicalized framework risks reproducing prohibitionist anxieties that these substances are somehow unsuitable for use outside of medical settings when, for most of human history, they were used in ritualistic and communal contexts to promote healing, divination, and social bonding10. A medicalized view would say that without a professional therapy setting and guidance as deemed appropriate by Western psychotherapy, the healing potential of psychedelics is diminished. This is certainly not true, and believing so threatens to subsume the diversity of psychedelic experiences under one dominant epistemology. It also lends support to the false and harmful dichotomies, rooted in Indigenous marginalization, regarding what qualifies as "medicine" and what qualifies as "drug."

These false dichotomies and contradictions inherent in the dominant medical and legal establishments are reflected in systems of bifurcated scheduling, where a drug product is placed in a schedule different from the active ingredient in it[1]. To illustrate, if the Food and Drug Administration



(FDA) were to approve psilocybin for depression treatment, what would be rescheduled? If history is any indication, only FDA-approved medicinal psilocybin products would be rescheduled, while the substance itself would remain in an illegal schedule and continue to be prosecuted as a restricted narcotic[1]. In this way, the division between the "good" psychedelic user and the "bad" psychedelic *abuser* can be justified as "continuously sticking to the science or the law," spurring further concerns about stigmatization and the devaluation of certain, non-dominant ways of healing.

THE POLITICS OF MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHEDELIC EXCEPTIONALISM

Mental has become a pressing and multi-faceted scientific and social challenge. In 2022, the World Health Organization (WHO) released a report that claimed that almost a billion people suffer from some form of mental illness, ranging from PTSD, depression, anxiety, substance abuse disorders, and more. Further, the WHO states that the vast majority of mental health conditions go untreated, and that mental health is one of the most neglected areas of public health[1]. Even when treatments and resources are available, they are likely to be unaffordable, inaccessible, or stigmatized. With the COVID-19 pandemic, self-medicational and recreational use of psychedelics increased, with one survey of 5,618 Argentinians finding that psychedelic use was associated with increased positive outcomes in the face of pandemic-related stress[11]. Other surveys have replicated similar results. Even among recreational users, casual psychedelic use can have positive effects.

Whether or not a person has experienced illness or disease, dominant health paradigms shape our lives. Under medicalization specifically, many are convinced that their discontent or unhappiness arises from biomedical abnormalities, deficient brain chemistry, and that a medical or technical intervention is required, usually in the form of a pill. Even if it can be shown that mental illness has a neurobiological basis, causation and therefore treatment is more complex. I contend that depression, anxiety, and problematic substance use can and should be viewed as predictable reactions and coping mechanisms to wide societal problems such as economic inequality and fractured systems of social connection. Psychologist Bruce Alexander explores the mental health impacts of capitalism in his scholarship on the globalization of addiction. For Alexander, the problem of addiction is a social phenomena anchored in the rise of individualism and competition, resulting in alienation, social dislocation, and diminished resilience[1]. Any serious discussion about improving mental health must address the precarious context in which millions of people live, yet, our big pharma-dominated system and the philosophies that underlie medicalization largely deny the possibility of social causation. In the process, it individualizes and depoliticizes mental health while providing a lucrative market for pharmaceutical companies that profit off the commodification of human and existential distress[1].

Indeed, a failure to engage with the political economy of health risks turning psychedelic science into a distraction from the root issues of the mental health crisis.

The social and political dimensions of mental health are critical to the medicalization of psychedelics because the very capitalist system that is responsible for producing human distress through systemic alienation is now in the business of rectifying the situation with the same profit-over-people approach.

In the future, psychedelics may end up being viable pharmacological options to treat specific mental health conditions, but they alone are not going to "solve" or fundamentally address the mental health crisis. In fact, treating psychedelics through a glorifying lens—one that exceptionalizes the substance according to its efficacy in Western contexts and paradigms—erases both the Indigenous, communal, and spiritual context of psychedelics, and works to disempower critical conversations about the politics of mental health and who or what

should be held responsible[12]? Treating individual emotional and mental suffering, while potentially helpful, does nothing to address the social problems that are contributing to mental illness. Indeed, a failure to engage with the political economy of health risks turning psychedelic science into a distraction from the root issues of the mental health crisis. In other words, if co-opted into health under capitalism, maintenance rituals involving psychedelics will only help workers get out of bed in the morning and cope with their structural exploitation, not address them.

MOVING FORWARD: WHAT ROLE DOES PSYCHEDELIC ACTIVISM PLAY?

Through medicalization, psychedelics will only grow in cultural popularity and economic investment. Now more than ever, it is important to locate the psychedelic renaissance in the context of medicalization, corporate capture, and the preexisting societal fabric of marginalization and appropriation that shape how health, disease, and healing are understood. The rise of these substances are inevitable and they represent exciting psychological avenues of research. However, a conversation about the history, present, and future of these substances must go beyond simply research or therapeutic potential. Limiting psychedelics to patients with acute forms of mental illness negates their wider political, cultural, intellectual, and spiritual potential. The current moment in psychedelic studies opens up unique and critical opportunities to disrupt our ways of thinking about society and our relationship to the historical and scientific realities that shape us.

In what underground researcher and harm reduction advocate David Nickel calls "radical psychedelic engagement," a medicalized, monopolized, and highly individualized mainstreaming of psychedelics will invariably diminish the radical liberatory potential of psychedelic experiences in helping us carve out a better world[13]. Ultimately, the connection between an ethical rollout of psychedelics and challenging the exploitative norms of capitalism cannot be overstated enough: both are mutually necessary to imagine and manifest a better future for psychedelic science, Indigenous rights, drug policy, and the future of mental health. •

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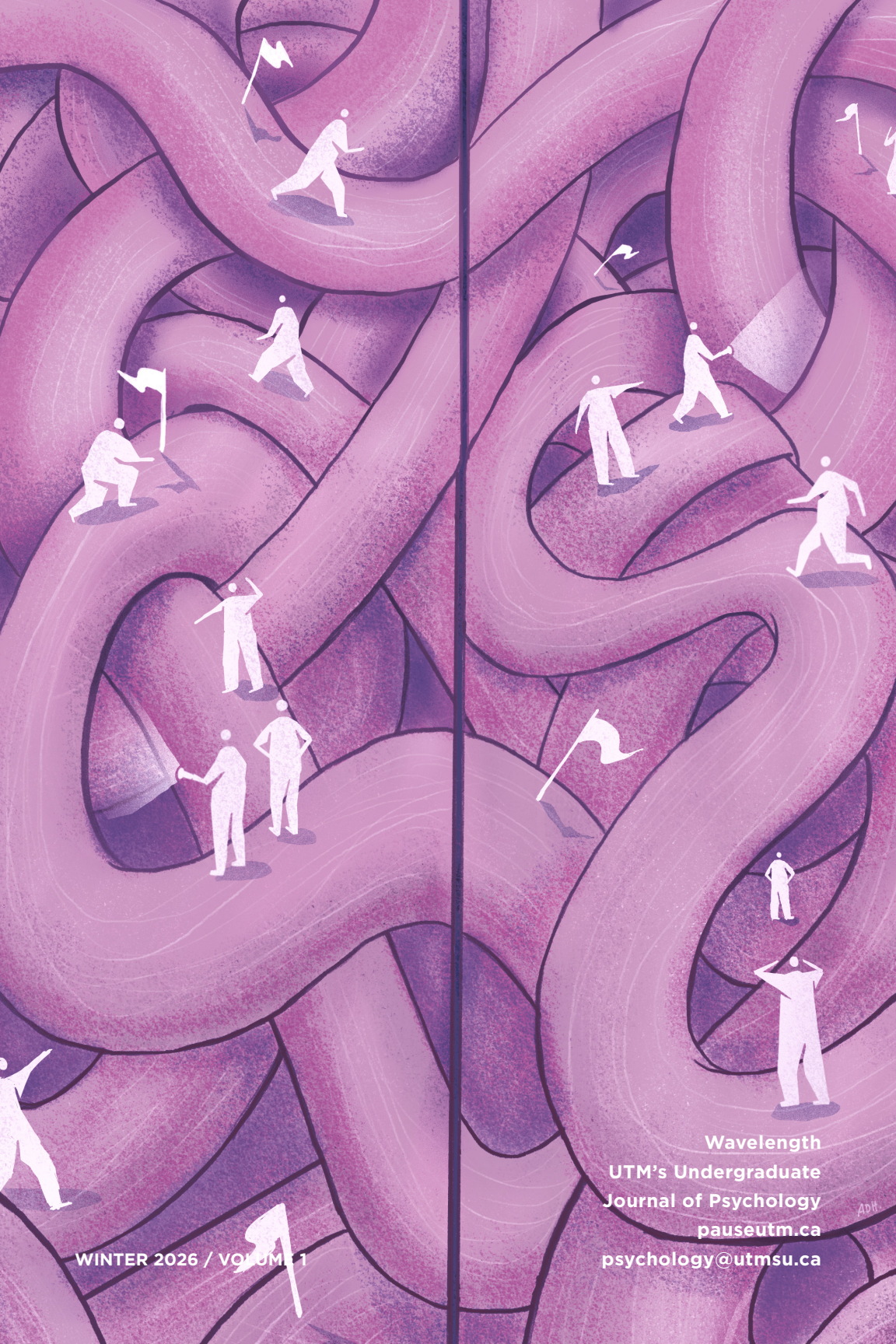

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