Revisiting the situated nature of recreational drug use experiences

By reading 21,000 trip reports with digital methods

Oskar Enghoff & Jakob Demant
Sociological Institute
University of Copenhagen
Denmark

Research design: Data

Experience reports ('trip reports')

- First-person narratives about particular drug experiences
- Descriptions of:
  - Drugs (incl. amount and method)
  - Immediate effects
  - Author (e.g. previous experience)
  - Surroundings (physical and social)
  - Thoughts/reflections
  - Interactions

Erowid Experience Vaults

- Over 24,000 trip reports
- At least 15,000 voluntary contributors
- Approx. 500 different drugs
- Over 20 million words combined
  - Approx. 25 copies of the Bible
- Largest qualitative dataset in the field (…?)
- Submitted through public online form
- Collected since 1996 by Erowid (USA)
  - Non-profit organization
  - "Providing access to reliable, non-judgmental information about psychoactive plants, chemicals, and related issues."

Trip reports as a data source

Advantages

- Emic perspective
- Particular event
  - As opposed to e.g. general opinion
- Easily available in large quantities

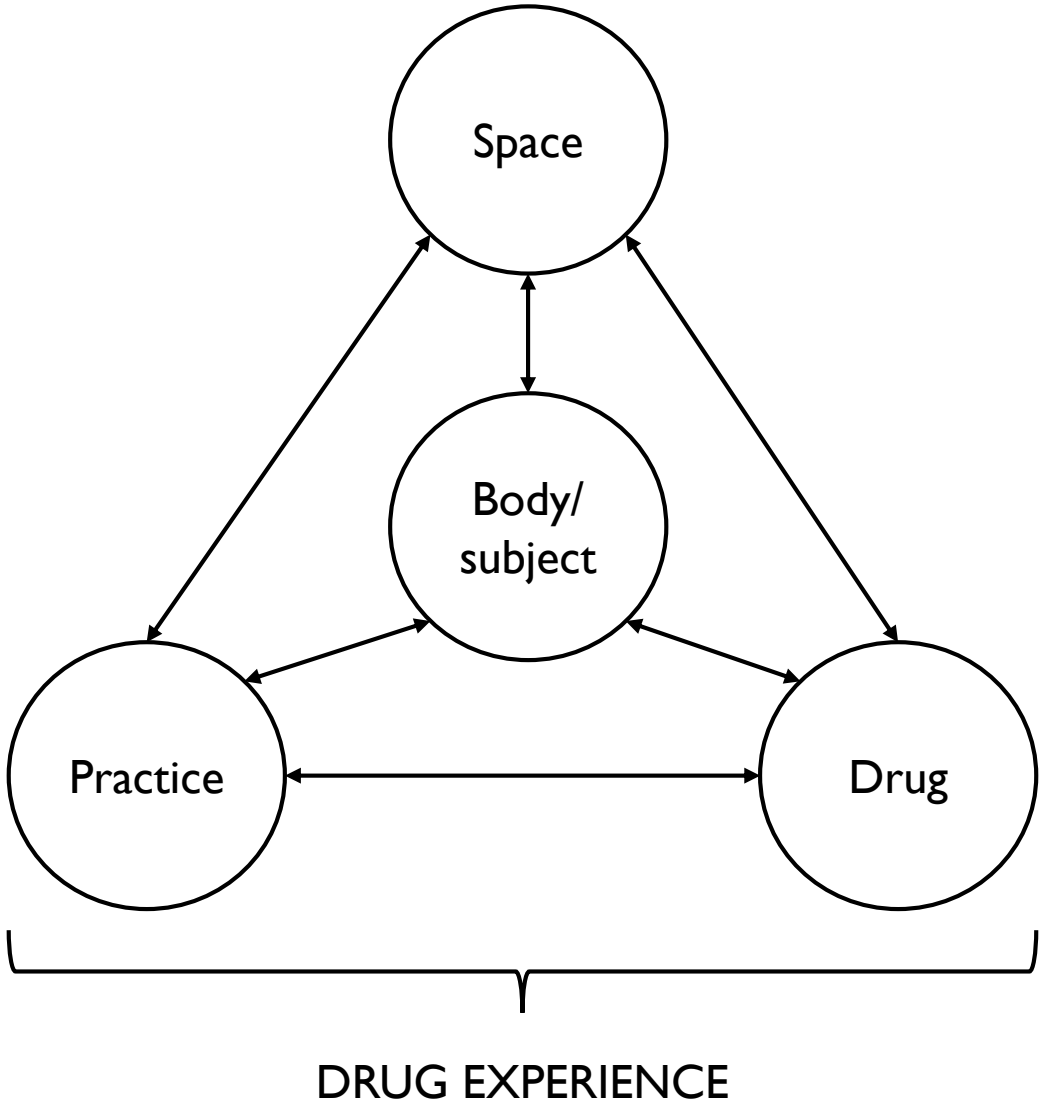
Disadvantages

- Ill-defined population
  - Demographics
- Non-systematic selectivity
  - What is left out?

"I looked around and saw a sea of people from 17 to 20-something, all looking just wild: face paint, glow sticks, fat pants, dancing in a style I've never seen before... it was very ritualistic. [...] He then asked if I'd ever done ecstasy, I said no, and he grabbed my hand, placed a green pill in it and said, 'drop this, you'll love it, it will make tonight an experience you're sure to remember'. [...] Thirty minutes later I felt an incredible feeling wash over my entire body - it was like having warm water pour all over me, and it was excellent! All of a sudden I felt no fear in meeting people and talking to people, it was totally a mind-opening experience. The music was enveloping me and I found myself on the dance floor dancing like I had never danced before. People were smiling at me and I smiled back, it felt good! [...] That night truly changed my life. So much happened but the most important thing to come out of it was that I was in a setting of a thousand people who all felt the same way I felt... euphoric!"

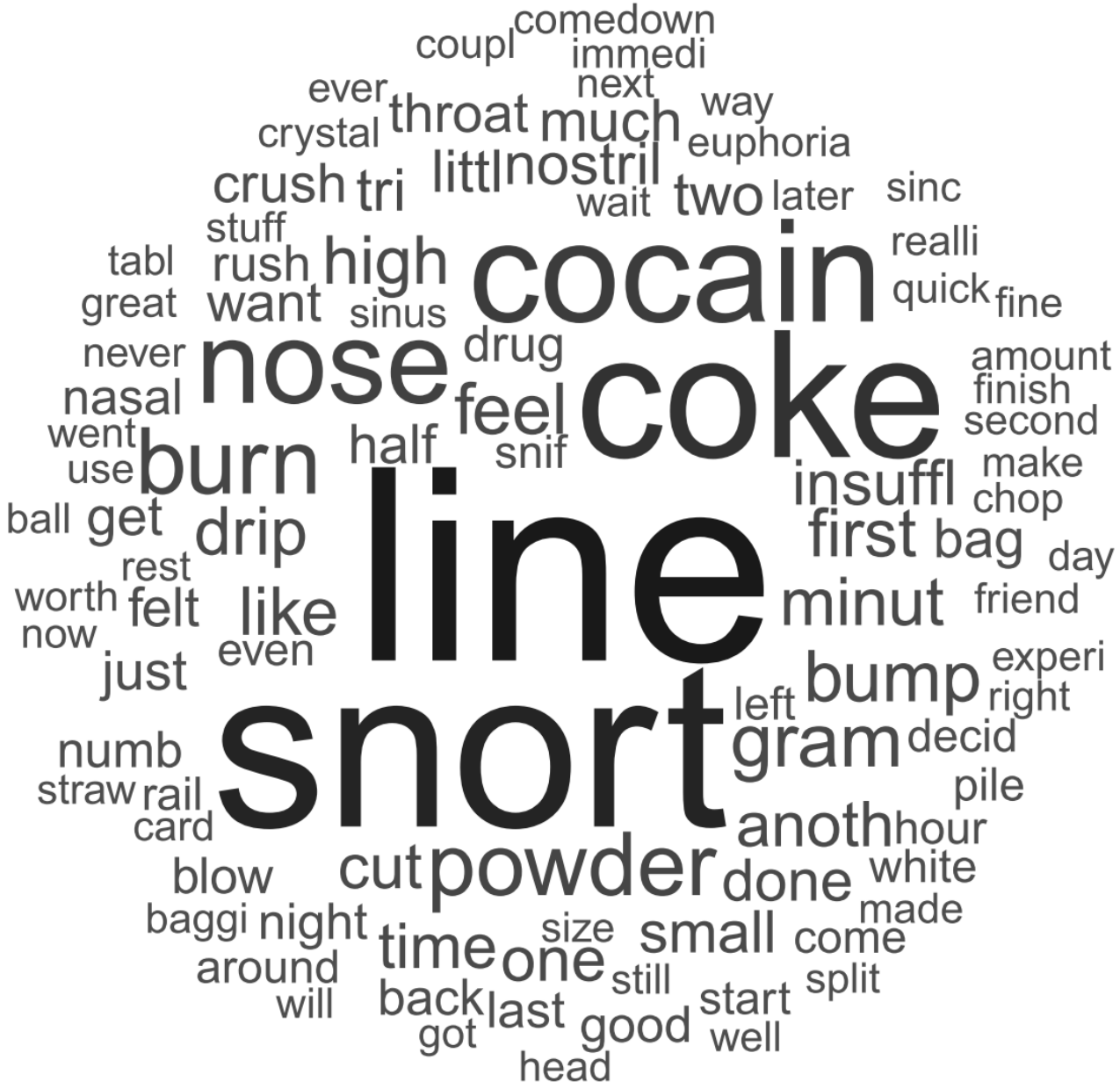
Research design: Methodology

- New digital data sources require new digital methods
- Must be able to trace relations between different components of the drug experiences in the data
- Choice of method:
  - Latent semantic analysis via topic modelling



Topic modelling

- A topic model inductively derives *K* topics (themes) from a corpus of documents
  - Topic: A cluster of words which tend to co-occur within the same documents
  - Unsupervised discovery of latent themes in large document collections
- A topic model allows exploration of a corpus through…
  - Individual topics – which words are in Topic X?
  - Exemplary texts – which documents have the highest proportion of Topic X?
  - Distribution of topics – which topics are most prevalent?
  - Correlation of topics – which topics tend to occur together with Topic X?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will
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last
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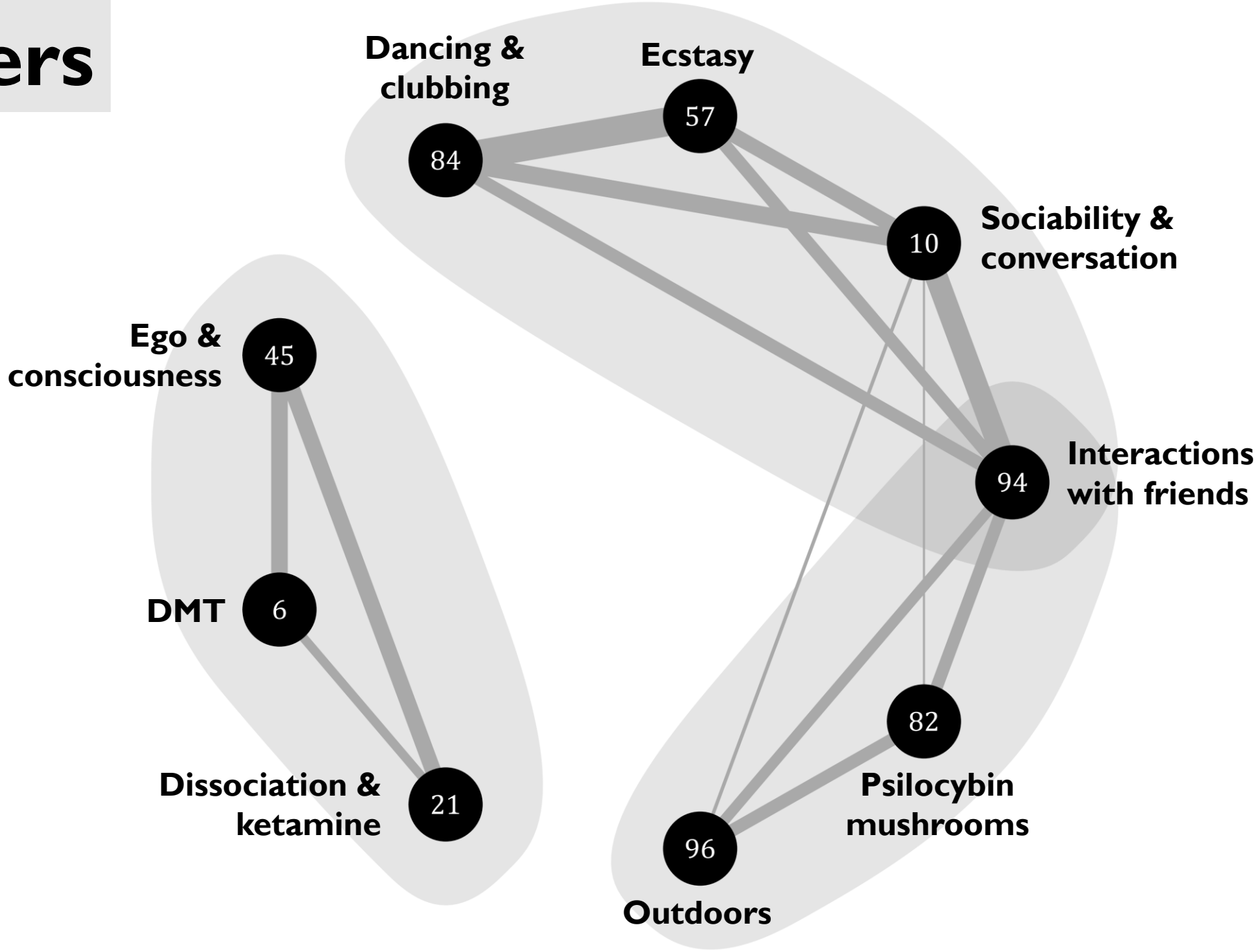
Highly correlated with DMT* and dissociation

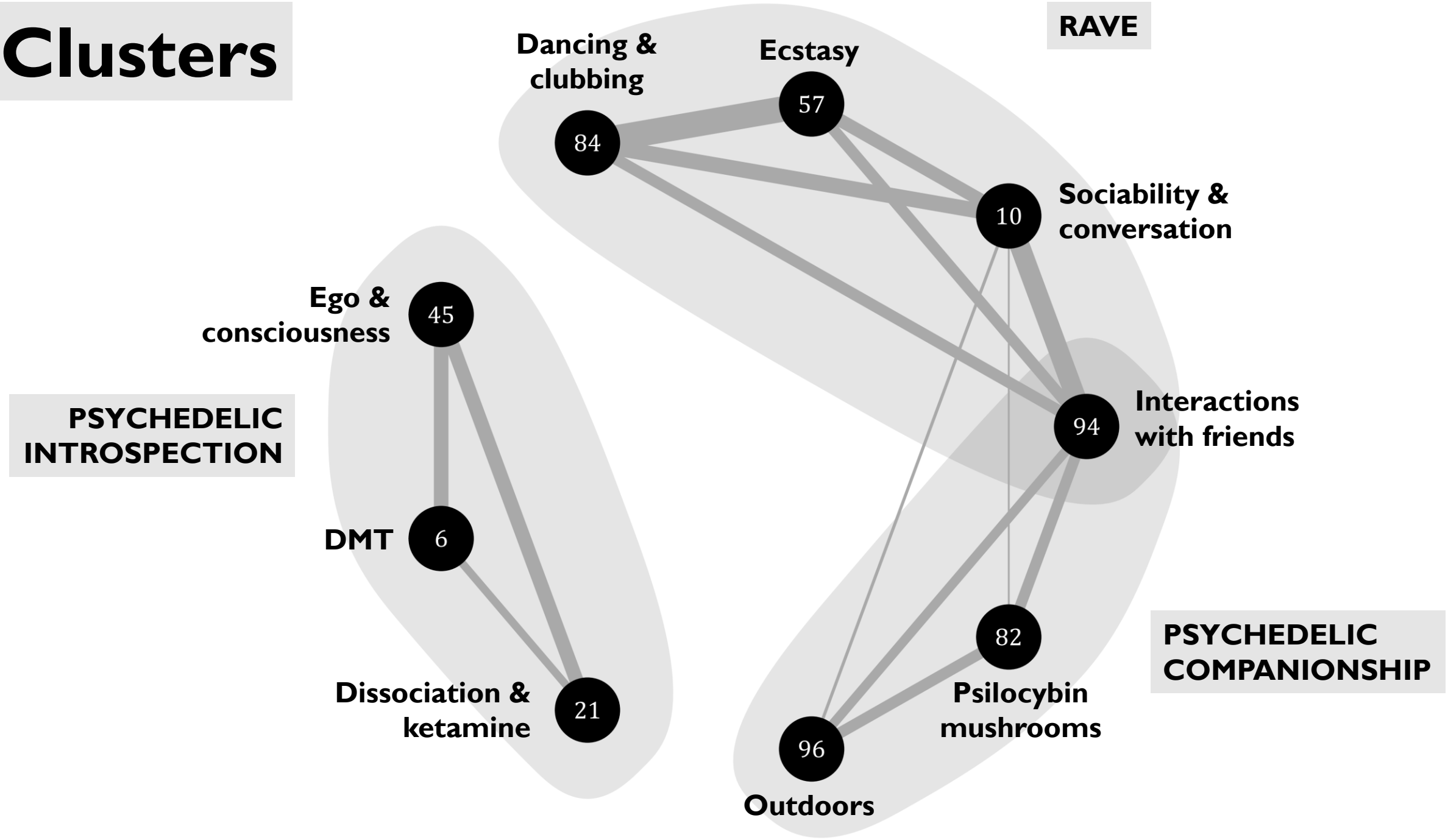
* very potent and short-acting psychedelic compound

Highly correlated with psilocybin mushrooms and interactions with friends

Clusters


Dancing & clubbing
84
Ecstasy
57
Sociability & conversation
10
Ego & consciousness
45
Interactions with friends
94
DMT
6
82
Dissociation & ketamine
21
Psilocybin mushrooms
96
Outdoors

Clusters


RAVE
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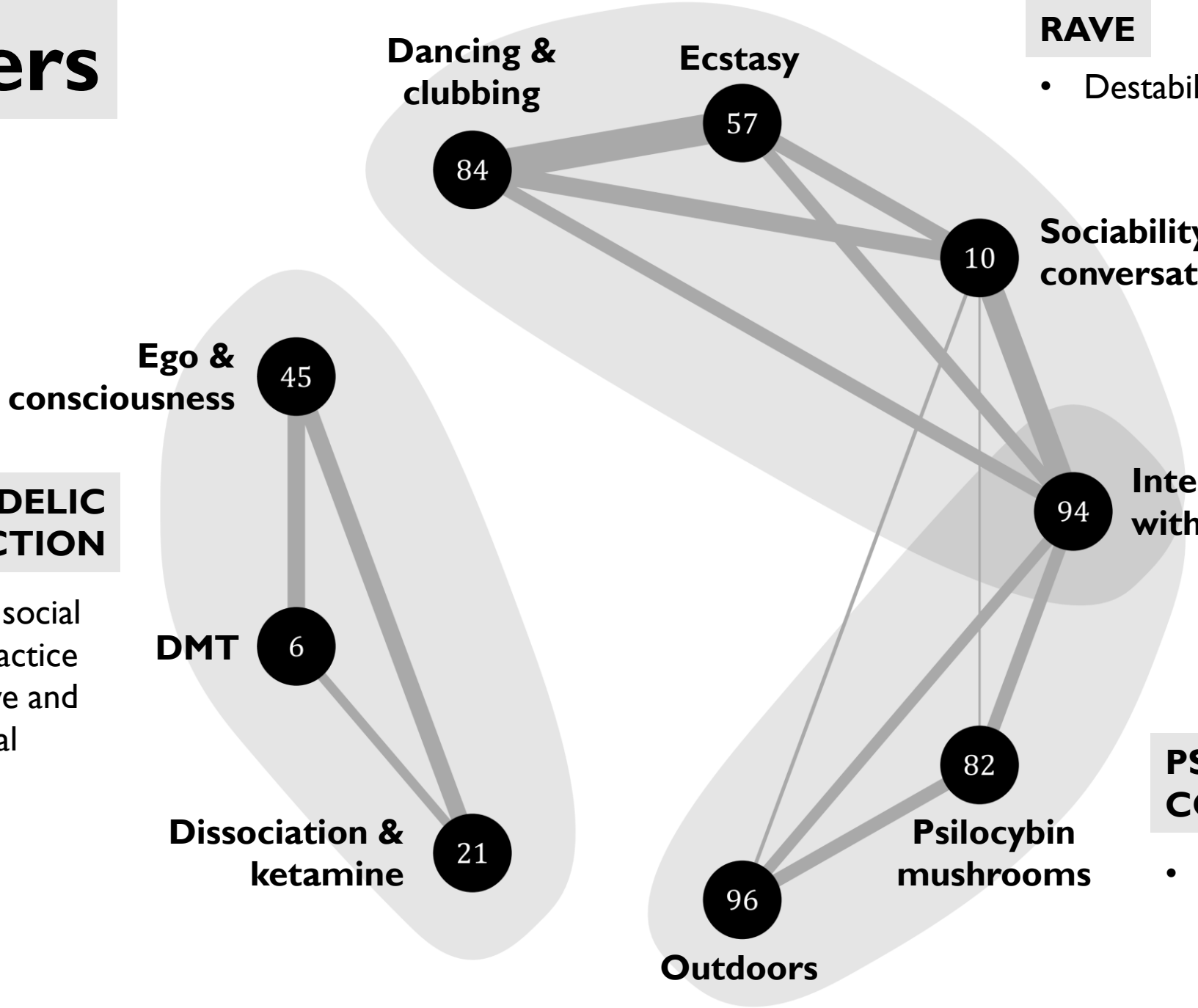


RAVE

- Destabilizing social practice

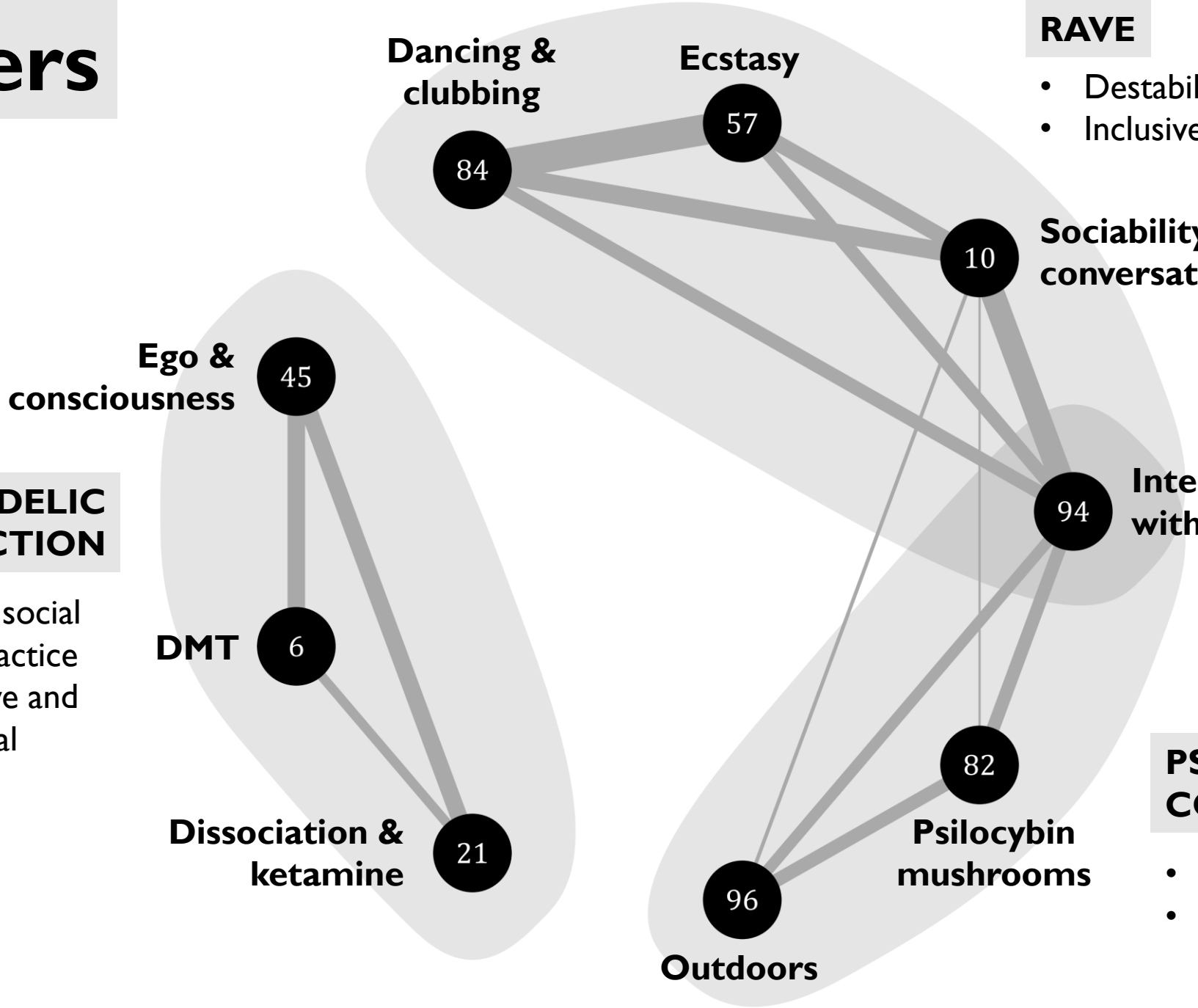
PSYCHEDELIC INTROSPECTION

- No explicit social space or practice
- Introspective and philosophical

PSYCHEDELIC COMPANIONSHIP

- Stabilizing social practice

Clusters



RAVE

- Destabilizing social practice
- Inclusive social space

PSYCHEDELIC INTROSPECTION

- No explicit social space or practice
- Introspective and philosophical

PSYCHEDELIC COMPANIONSHIP

- Stabilizing social practice
- Exclusive social space

Perspectives

- The study:
  - Replicated findings from more strictly qualitative studies
  - Contributed to the field of psychedelic drug use
  - Identified general trends in social space and practice across different types of drug experiences
- The methodology:
  - Holds promise for further studies in this research area
    - E.g. the digital distribution of social sanctions and rituals among drug users
  - … and for the (re)utilization of 'overwhelming' datasets
    - E.g. data from cryptomarkets or sites like Leafly.com (cannabis reviews)
    - Please let me know if know of any relevant datasets!