

A Culture of Mushrooming: The Mushroom Identification Group of Facebook

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Mushrooming, the activity of gathering mushrooms in the wild, typically for food, has been a culturally significant activity for centuries (Boa, 2004). Throughout history, mushrooms have gained and endured various reputations, deemed both food and foe. Today, mushrooms are often categorized as vegetables but most of us know that they are actually fungi. The Mushroom Identification Group of Facebook is an online science-based forum for the identification and appreciation of mushrooms, the fleshy spore-bearing fruiting bodies of certain macro-fungi (Chang, 2017). Mushrooms nourish themselves on other living organisms or the tissue of rotting woody material, decomposing the organic matter and recycling nutrients. There are thousands of fungi species solely including wild-harvested and commercially cultivated mushrooms, the most common being basidiomycetes, “a large and incredibly diverse phylum of fungi, which, together with the ascomycetes, make up the sub-kingdom Dikarya – often referred to as the “higher fungi” (de Mattos-Shipley, 2016). For this reason, mushroom identification groups are a helpful and necessary resource to anyone involved in the study of these distinctive and curious organisms. People turn to Facebook groups such as the Mushroom Identification Group to connect to like-minded individuals and exchange knowledge about mushroom hunting and mycology, the scientific study of mushrooms, their biochemistry, taxonomy, and their use to humans as a food or medicine, as well as their serious dangers (only if ingested). Even for experienced mycologists, it can be tricky to distinguish harmful mushroom from edible varieties due to similarities in appearance. Additionally, because “foraging is becoming increasingly popular, people need to be aware of the associated risks of misidentifying mushrooms. Mushrooms of the *Amanita* genus, which includes over 600 types, cause most deaths from mushroom poisoning. However, despite these real hazards, only a handful of mushrooms are dangerously toxic (Canadian, 2015).

Upon scrolling through the Mushroom Identification Group page, I encountered an endless series of posts containing images of all types of mushroom growing on the rotting wood of logs of fallen or decaying trees, under the bark and leaf litter of forest understories, over rocks and roots, and colonizing ordinary grass lawns. A grand majority of posters seemed to have intentionally gone hiking in the woods to forage for mushrooms and were asking for help on the identification of their picks. Many of the posts were from people who lived in woodland or forest areas where mushrooms might grow and flourish in their yards. Concerned pet owners inquired about whether they should be worried that their pet ingested something poisonous. A few were looking for the identification of mushrooms their dog might (or definitely) have eaten and ingested. These types of posts would promptly get a response, usually reassuring them that their dog would be okay but might experience mild sickness, depending on the species.

In order to get a deeper understanding of the intents and purposes of the group, as well as the general attitudes expressed on the page, I was able to secure an interview with a prominent member and page moderator who had been an avid mushroom hunter and identifier for nearly the past 9 years. For the sake of privacy, he has chosen to go by Alan. According to Alan, “Once you know what to look for, it is about as difficult to tell a poisonous *Amanita* mushroom from an edible mushroom as it is a cauliflower from an artichoke.” Alan did not gain an interest in fungi until he learned about them in an intro biology course during his undergrad, and since then he has always been interested in the identification and research of fungal species; he had very little interest in eating them, but like many others, thought they were “the coolest thing on the planet” and was completely in awe of their “mysterious and otherworldly intelligent-like biology and morphology.” During the interview, Alan described his “interest and love for mushrooms” as a hobby, but it goes way further than that, stating that his “perpetual on-going mission in being

active on this page and other mycological groups is to increase knowledge about mushrooms by identifying them and dispelling misconceptions about their toxicity.”

The Mushroom Identification Group is a Facebook community of over 40.4 thousand members from around the world. This identification page was made to serve a group interested in mushrooms and interacting with the mushroom hunting community, but after reading through the pinned post, like all new or potential members are highly encouraged to do, I learned that it was not created for all-things-mushroom related; there are appropriate, ideal ways to post on the page. An ideal post, according to the mycologist and page moderator I was able to interview, contains “all of the appropriate information, with a single comment that provides the most likely species and not numerous conflicting responses...this rarely happens of course, and the reason we disable commenting on off-topic, high-traffic posts is to ensure that legitimate identification posts don’t get pushed down the feed without ever having been addressed.” According to another main admin, the formal guidelines (which people have to agree to in a series of questions in order to be granted membership) are in place in order to adhere to the original vision for the group, which is identification, and to keep the process efficient and things on the feed civil, on-task, and organized. Considering the flood of posts that are shared daily on the page timeline, and having witnessed it myself, rules are enforced to ensure that everyone that needs help with an ID can get a quick and proper response. In fact, according to Alan (and to the agreement of the admins), “the guidelines asking to make posts as complete and as clear as possible are meant to make it easier for everybody, but especially for new folks.”

As stated before, the primary purpose of the group is for species identification, but it is an interactive forum where people share photos of their prized fungi finds in the wild, and where learning and discussion is welcome and encouraged. The standard format of an ideal

identification post has clear, in-focus still images of the full anatomy of the specimen (cap surface, underside/gills, stem, stem base), gives some context information about the location and habitat/substrate (does not have to be specific, general location data will suffice), and reports any notable traits or conditions of the find (color, bruising, odors, freshness, spore prints, texture, etc.). Furthermore, to make things less confusing, the guidelines ask to limit posts to a single perceived species. Daily, there are over ten new posts and new posts or posts that receive a lot of likes/comments can rapidly push down older posts. In addition to being indicators of the courtesy and dedication these experts have for attending to every genuine ID request, I thought that the rules were essential to the smooth operation of the page. It takes a lot of time to be able to develop the necessary skills and experience to identify mushrooms, and the fact that they offer their time and knowledge for free when they could easily charge a fee shows that they care about helping others learn and are passionate about this unique avocation that takes one outdoors and into nature.

The page clearly informs us of which type of content will get removed: anything off-topic or non-identification related, including discussion about edibility or cooking/preparation, discussion about psychoactive mushrooms, mushroom photography of known or pre-identified species (there are plenty of other pages specifically for that purpose), cultivation tips, speculation on the medicinal and drug properties of fungi, art, music, sales/marketplace posts, mushroom selfies (termed “melfies”), “thanks for the add” posts, bragging, pick-shaming, political talk, sensationalist misinformation about mushroom toxicity, polls and surveys, personal attacks, hate speech/discriminatory behavior, and spam of any sort. As long as people follow the guidelines and post valuable, mushroom-related content that pertains to the goals of the group, people are free to share their knowledge and interact however they please.

To acutely understand and get a true feel for the community, and in order to communicate that in a representational manner, I would visit the page every day and spend time observing the interactions that occurred and engaged with them too. I am a novice in mycology so I did not feel apt in making identifications for others, but after looking at enough posts and doing my own research about species characteristics, I felt that I could recognize species like morels, oysters, and chicken of the woods, which are known for being very easy to identify since they do not have many (or at all) lookalikes (Hall, 2003). I liked the posts that I thought were insightful, educational, and humorous or light-hearted. My activity on the page resembled the activity of many others, which goes to show that people collectively contribute to the sociability, accessibility, and efficiency of any well-maintained forum.

In the process of selecting a mushroom community to extensively observe and be apart of, both for the purpose of this research and my own personal interest in fungal ecology and scientific communities, I came across a vast number of Facebook pages dedicated to mushrooms. I also discovered so many different online and offline communities, societies, clubs, organizations, and associations all dedicated to mushroom foraging and the study of mushrooms. On top of that, almost every group I inspected, primarily the Mushroom Identification Group, provided additional resources and information that delved further into the various subtopics of mycology, mushroom identification, and the necessary gear for foraging, such as field guides. Throughout the research process, I realized how increasingly widespread this outdoor activity is becoming, especially in a time when health and environment-conscious consumers are choosing to practice and advocate local food sourcing.

I noticed that the posts that garnered the most traffic and likes were usually those that showcased mushrooms that were edible, known for being tasty, or simply those that were

structurally and aesthetically impressive. The bigger, more savory, colorful, and unusual specimens were sure to get the most attention. To me, this was an illustration of how certain mushrooms are valued differently than other, and how the most delicious mushrooms are certainly more favored and sought-after. Besides the identification comments simply stating the species name, these popular posts would often get commenters that suggested how to properly prepare and cook the mushrooms, offering recipes, or kindly complimenting their foraging skills or luck. Most of these interactions were short and friendly, sharing the excitement with the poster for what they had found. At the same time, there was a general sense of annoyance for the posters and commenters that would mention edibility or discuss anything not ID-related. I asked Alan about this reoccurring issue and he explained to me that this was because a lot of people joined this group specifically to escape the type of content that they can find on other mushroom-related FB pages, tailored for separate purposes and not identification. Despite the efforts of most active members to be kind and patient towards people who just started learning, there is still a tiny portion of people that tend to ridicule, shame, or be condescending towards novice enthusiasts, saying stuff along the lines of “if you are apart of this group, you should know this already.” I also saw a few people criticize the admins about the guidelines and complain about a number of things, such as the changing nature of the group and “obvious” (not obvious to beginners) species being repeatedly posted.

In conclusion, the Mushroom Identification Group was an example of how identifying mushrooms can turn out to be far more challenging than finding them, and for some, a lot more rewarding than eating them. I could see why people of all skill levels are profoundly engrossed in the activity of mushroom hunting. In many ways, the mushrooms are just a bonus in reconnecting with nature in the search for the fleshy and marvelous organs of fungi. In studying

the format and interactions of the page, I also learned that the posting, ethical, and safety guidelines for this group are salient to the existence and accuracy of mushroom identification. Online spaces like these help promote mushroom hunting as a fun and safe activity, as long as people know that they must exercise the necessary precautions and that only they are responsible for what they choose to do with the information they learn on the page. Lastly, as foraging becomes increasingly popular, it is important to keep in mind that fungal species are essential to the performance, well-being, and biodiversity of forest ecosystems.

## References

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