

Interactions Between Social Media and Mushroom Foraging

Ella Smith

Department of English, Virginia Tech

ENGL 1106: First-Year Writing: Writing from Research

Professor Mueller

November 10, 2023

Interactions Between Social Media and Mushroom Foraging

Introduction

Foraging is a method of gathering food from nature, typically plant or fungi (Sachdeva, Emery & Hurley, 2018). A forager requires a comprehensive understanding of plant life of the local area in order to collect edible plant and fungi species to cook without risking toxic side effects (Baillargeon, 2021). Mushroom foraging in particular involves the proper identifying and harvesting of fungi to be used for medicinal purposes or human consumption. Mushrooms that typically are sought out by foragers include oyster mushrooms, morels, chicken of the woods, maitake, wood ear, chanterelles, shiitake, lion's mane, and more (Bertoli, 2023). These specific mushrooms are foraged for their edibility and range of tasting notes.

There are methods mycologists and mushroom foragers use to identify species of mushrooms. Some mushroom identification factors include spore print color, location of growth, mushroom shape, color, size, scent, texture, or reaction to chemical solution. Spore prints are the placement of spores left by a mushroom, or more specifically the gills or pores of the mushroom, that are typically released for reproduction purposes. These spore prints can come in multiple colors, such as pink, white, brown, or black (Wisconsin Mycological Society). The spore prints are more accurate, however can take up to a few hours to produce, so for in-the-moment spore color determination, the color of the gills is observed (Wisconsin Mycological Society). The color of the spore prints can be a factor used in the determination of mushroom species. The location of growth includes the particular geographic region or the substrate it is growing in. Some mushroom species are specific to a particular region or biome, as well as time of year in that setting. From a more relative perspective, the substrate the mushroom is growing from, such as dirt or a decaying tree, can be indicative of what species the mushroom is (). Each mushroom

has specific physical traits, like shape, color, size, scent, or texture, that can assist in identification. Additionally, some mushroom species react to chemical solutions, such as (provide example), so sometimes mycologists or mushroom foragers use droppers of these chemicals in their foraging kits to determine mushroom species (source?).

People have been foraging all over the world since the beginning of humanity (Sonya Sachdeva, Marla R. Emery & Patrick T. Hurley, 2018). Alongside hunting, foraging was the primary source of food. With the gradual rise of colonialism, communities were industrialized and there was a heavy push to agriculture, with hunting and foraging becoming a rarer form of sourcing food over time (Saladino, 2022).

Social media is the general term for any online platform that is created and used for social interactions (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). Starting with MySpace in 2003, there are now a variety of social media platforms with users by the billions (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). Some of the most popular social media platforms currently include Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, Whatsapp, Wechat, Tumblr, Tiktok, X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, Snapchat, and Pinterest (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). Along with talking with other users, these platforms also allow for the sharing of media like photos and videos. According to a 2019 article on the rise of social media from the website OurWorldInData.org, “more than 50% of the content viewed on Twitter includes images and videos” (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019).

In 2023, the top six used social media platforms are Facebook, Youtube, Whatsapp, Instagram, Wechat, and Tiktok, in order by amount of users (Wong, 2023). In the United States, there is an average of 7.1 social media accounts per individual (Wong, 2023). According to Forbes, the most popular form of media on these platforms is “short-form videos” which are typically shorter than one minute in length (Wong, 2023). Another thing to note about social

media is the age range by platform. Facebook has been the most popular social media platform specifically for the reason that it is utilized by a wide age range of users. Other, newer social media platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and especially Tiktok, are primarily used by younger generations, specifically in the 18-24 age range (Wong, 2023).

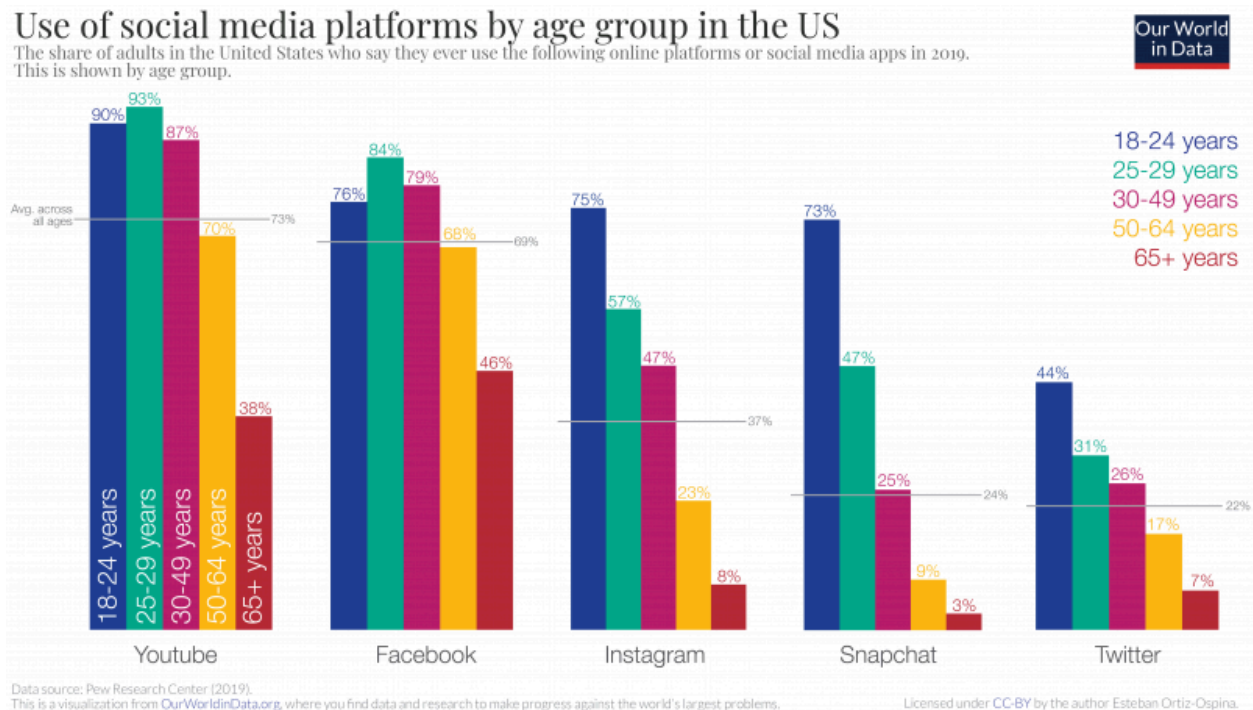


Figure 1. Use of social media platforms by age group in the US (2019), from OurWorldInData.org.

In the context of mushrooms in social media, one interesting trend in social media is the popularization of different aesthetics. The aesthetic called “cottagecore” references an older time, in which a cozy, nature centric ideal is promoted (Reggev, 2020). Cottagecore is heavy with mushroom symbolism, whether they are found as decoration in clothing, furniture, and dishware, or in an edible form, in which wild mushrooms are pictured in wholesome dishes (Reggev, 2020).

In this research paper I will be investigating the impact social media has upon the practice of mushroom foraging. Social media can be used as a way to communicate, argue,

educate, and share information or opinions in various forms (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). Specifically for this project, the ways mushroom foraging can be presented in a social media format will be explored. This is relevant because of how widespread social media has become, and how mushroom foraging has become a “trend” appearing on these platforms. The practice of mushroom foraging can have different levels of meaning to different people based on their culture, histories, interests, careers, or even aesthetics, and social media can be used to express these personal perspectives. However, the risk for misinformation is always a factor when social media can sometimes lack thorough background research, and in mushroom foraging which involves human ingestion of mushrooms that could have been discovered from social media, it could lead to significant problems.

Context

This project was inspired by my personal interest in edible mushroom foraging which was introduced to me by social media. My favorite TikTok creator, Alexis Nikole Nelson, also known as “the Black Forager” makes lovely, entertaining, and informational content regarding her foraged finds. She discusses the cultural backgrounds that are associated with many foraged foods, as well as how to properly cook the plants and fungi she finds. The videos she makes always seem to teach me something I had not known before, as well as putting a smile on my face with her witty comments.

Additionally, and rather oddly, I have also had dreams related to this topic. Multiple, in fact. There is an edible mushroom called “Chicken of the Woods” that can be found on decaying hardwoods, and forms in bright orange and yellow shelves. Many nights I find that I have dreamt of finding the mushroom, like a pirate finding treasure. Perhaps it is so exciting to me since I have been vegetarian or pescatarian since I was thirteen years old, so the idea of a chicken

replacement would fill the fried chicken shaped void in my heart. I still have yet to try chicken of the woods fried like chicken, but I have tried some in a soup and it was delicious.



Figures 2 & 3. Photos from my first sighting of Chicken of the Woods, September 2023.

My point in providing this personal foraging context is to highlight the intrigue this practice holds in an increasingly modern and industrialized world. With the increased access to food and the rise of agriculture, most will never experience the same level of excitement and relief of those who relied on foraging to be able to eat. To forage, in sustainable ways of course, gives us a hint to what those must have felt in the past, which broadens personal perspective on the reliance of our species on the resources this earth provides.

Materials and Methods

Primary Research

For this project, my primary research consists of a few interviews of students currently in the Fungus United club at Virginia Tech. The interview consists of six questions and are listed below:

1. How long have you been interested in mushroom foraging?

2. Is social media a good method of teaching/learning different hobbies? Why or why not?
3. What's your overall opinion on social media?
4. Do you think mushroom foraging content belongs on social media?
5. What introduced you to mushroom foraging?
6. Do you think mushroom foraging should be more popularized on social media? Why or why not?

The above questions were developed with the consideration of what information I would like to collect to answer my research question. The questions were written in regards to how I would answer them, and how a potential answer to the questions would assist me in writing this research paper and coming to conclusions about the selected topic. Four members of the Fungus United club volunteered to participate in this research. These volunteers were sent the questions to answer via email. The responses to these questions can be viewed in the appendix of this paper.

Secondary Research

Alongside the primary research being conducted for this study, it is important to also consult written works from foragers and social media foragers. This section, or secondary research, will be an investigation into a couple of these sources, in order to further develop a perspective on this topic.

Sustainability in Mushroom Foraging

Since foraging involves taking from nature, it is important to consider environmental impact and sustainability when mushroom foraging. Catawba Nation food sovereignty educator Linda Black Elk reinforces the idea that “foraging is also centered on balance between humans and nature, reciprocity, ethical and sustainable consumption, respect, consent, and rediscovering

our relationship to the land” (Baillargeon, 2021). This relationship, or “balance between humans and nature” is important to respect when practicing foraging because it mitigates harm between the two parties and promotes mutualism (Baillargeon, 2021). Linda Black Elk encourages more specific measures in foraging, like harvesting invasive species, respecting other foragers, keeping all your personal items accounted for, and knowing the best way to harvest each plant (Baillargeon, 2021). Overall, being aware, educated, and considerate are key components of being a sustainable forager.

Alexis Nikole Nelson and Historical Foraging in Black Rural America

Foraging is a practice of sourcing your own food from nature, and has been used by rural, Black southern Americans for centuries. In more recent history, it has found its way to the spotlight of social media app, TikTok, with the help of Alexis Nikole Nelson, known as “the Black Forager ” on the app (Greenlee, 2021). Some older Black Americans have been keeping the tradition of foraging over the decades, such as Justin Robinson, an ethnobotanist, farmer and cultural historian located in Durham, North Carolina, who has been hosting a Poke Sallit Festival for the past thirty years (Greenlee, 2021). Foraging has withstood the test of time in the Black American community and is being reborn in social media.

Nelson has brought whimsy and creativity into her content about mushroom foraging, which is what has made her content so popular on social media. She even regards nature metaphorically, stating it is “like Disney World, but full of plants and much cheaper food” (Mohtasham & Zomorodi, 2021). Another thing to note is the time context in which Nelson gained popularity- the COVID-19 pandemic. This was a difficult time for many, especially those struggling with food insecurity or living in food deserts. Nelson created content to help those

communities access fresh foods, which in turn provided them a sense of “self-sufficiency and stability” (Denny, 2021).

Results

The four participants had been interested in mushroom foraging from a span of two to five years. Two of the four participants had developed interest in mushroom foraging from social media platforms, specifically Facebook and Youtube. Additionally, it should be acknowledged that the age range of this population is relatively young, each participant being a member of a college club, so this factor likely was influential in their perspectives on this topic.

Questionnaire Response Table	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4	Question 6
% Yes/Positive	100%	0%	75%	25%
% No/Negative	0%	50%	0%	25%
Mixed	0%	50%	25%	50%

Figure 4. Table depicting questionnaire answer trends.

From the responses gathered from the first question, most leaned toward the idea that social media was a good method for learning about or teaching certain topics, however there is a risk of misinformation. The overall opinion of social media based on the responses was that it had a negative impact on society and mental health, but does have positives like increasing communication and connectedness. As for the presence of mushroom foraging content on social media, all participants believed it did belong, however some pointed out the dangers of *only* using social media as a foraging resource. For the final question, the responses were mixed on the topic of mushroom foraging content becoming more popular on social media. A particular set of responses that stood out to me was for the final question, which had the most variation in responses, however each with good reasoning.

Discussion

From the results, it can be concluded that overall social media has a mixed impact on the practice of mushroom foraging. It can be a good place to spark interest and get introduced to the topic, or learn fun recipes to make with the foraged fungi. However, there are some risks that come with mushroom foraging in media, like spread of misinformation, or people only using social media as their source of information. As with many other pieces of information gained with social media, it is important to consider fact-checking, peer-review, or other regulations that assure the validity of the content being consumed.

Based on the investigation of the secondary sources, it is important to emphasize how significant foraging is in a variety of cultures worldwide. Alexis Nikole Nelson uses her foraging and cooking content to additionally educate viewers on the history of foraging in African American and Indigenous cultures (Mohtasham & Zomorodi, 2021). The connection between nature and human, which was extrapolated on by Linda Black Elk of the Catawba Nation, reflects ideas of sustainability in many methods while foraging (Baillargeon, 2021). The consideration of personal impact on the environment while foraging is essential to the practice.

As the research was conducted for this project, I realized if I were to attempt to gain significant statistical information, I would need a lot more responses to the questionnaire. Of the six questions written, four of them had a statistical value, such as a “yes or no” question, or any question that would have a categorical organization of responses. These were helpful to determine how the majority or the minority of the participants felt about a certain issue, but it would be interesting to see how a larger tested population would respond to the questionnaire.

After investigating the secondary research sources and conducting the primary research, some questions regarding the futures of mushroom foraging and social media came up. These questions include:

- What will the future of foraging look like in a world that is suffering from climate change and environmental damage?
- How will social media continue to or improve on the monitoring of misinformation?
- Will foraging still be a “trending” topic on social media or is that subject to dissolution like most social media trends?
- Will there be any new developments in terms of mushroom cultivation for human consumption?

In order to protect practices like mushroom foraging, we must push our efforts into environmental protection. This can be done with an increased education on the issue, protective policies being put in place to mitigate further damage, and restoration efforts to allow our planet to heal from the damage humans have caused. Something so seemingly simple, foraging, has been integral to our growth as a species. In order to feed a population, people were hunter-gatherers, which involved a deep knowledge of nature and foraging. Many communities of many different geographical locations have utilized foraging, such as Black Americans in rural areas (Mohtasham & Zomorodi, 2021).

References

- Baillargeon, Z. (2021, August 17). Want to be an ethical, sustainable forager? Here's your guide. Field Mag. <https://www.fieldmag.com/articles/sustainable-ethical-foraging-guide>
- Bertoli, A. (2023, September 5). Seek & you shall find: Edible mushroom hunting for beginners. Insteading. <https://insteading.com/blog/mushroom-hunting/>
- Denny. (2021, March 17). Alexis Nikole Nelson is making #ForagerTikTok our favorite place to be. Bon Appétit. <https://www.bonappetit.com/story/alexis-nikole-tiktok-forager>
- Greenlee, Cynthia. "How Black Foragers Find Freedom in the Natural World." The New York Times, The New York Times, 30 July 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/07/30/dining/black-foragers-nature-alexis-nelson.html?smid=url-share.
- Mohtasham, D., & Zomorodi, M. (2021, September 9). Meet Alexis Nikole Nelson, the wildly popular "Black forager." NPR. <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2021/09/09/173838801/meet-alexis-nikole-nelson-on-the-wildly-popular-black-forager>
- Ortiz-Ospina, Esteban. (2019). "The rise of social media" Published online at OurWorldInData.org. Retrieved from: '<https://ourworldindata.org/rise-of-social-media>'
- Reggev, K. (2020, October 21). What exactly is Cottagecore and how did it get so popular?. Architectural Digest. <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/what-exactly-is-cottagecore>
- Saladino, D. (2022, February 4). Wild foods are crucial for our future food security. GreenBiz. <https://www.greenbiz.com/article/wild-foods-are-crucial-our-future-food-security>

Sonya Sachdeva, Marla R. Emery & Patrick T. Hurley (2018) Depiction of Wild Food Foraging Practices in the Media: Impact of the Great Recession, *Society & Natural Resources*, 31:8, 977-993, DOI: 10.1080/08941920.2018.1450914

Wisconsin Mycological Society. (n.d.) How To Look at Fungi Spore Color. Retrieved via <https://www.wisconsinmycologicalsociety.org/how-to-look-at-fungi-spore-color.html>

Wong, Belle. (May 18, 2023). *Top Social Media Statistics And Trends Of 2023*. Forbes. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/advisor/business/social-media-statistics/>.

Appendix

Questionnaire responses

1. How long have you been interested in mushroom foraging?

- a. I have been into foraging for mushrooms since 2018.
- b. I really only started learning about it about 2ish years ago.
- c. My interest began my freshman year, so about three years.
- d. I have been interested in mushroom foraging since the pandemic started. I never really had time or a way to learn before and when I found myself in the Virginia foraging community on Facebook groups, I began to learn and form an interest. After that I started foraging on my own with an identification guide and would ask my groups for confirmation on identification.

2. Is social media a good method of teaching/learning different hobbies? Why or why not?

- a. I think social media has heavily influenced my expansion/learning of hobbies. For example, I am (unfortunately) an avid tiktok user. I maybe spend 4-6 hours a day on the site, either actively watching or having it play in the background as a stim. People would probably describe me as a very outdoorsy person, I have so many interests relating to nature, so naturally I try to cultivate a feed that provides that for me. So far, Tiktok has influenced me to start rockhounding (looking for gems/rocks), mudlarking (looking for human “artifacts” (mostly old trash from dead generations), crocheting, dye making, bushcraft and more. There is a plethora of information I have gleaned/found from interacting and being on socials, and when I find a creator that particularly interests me, I go through a big ol rabbithole and binge their content.

- b. I think it's a good way of introducing people to new hobbies and numerous teaching perspectives.
- c. I would say it's a good method but not the best. Social media is great for introducing people to new hobbies they have never heard of, and exposes them to teachings of those hobbies. However, social media can be flooded with thousands of teaching/learning videos about certain hobbies that are not always fact checked and/or are presented by amateurs who may give bad advice. It's up to the individual to filter through these videos, and determine which ones are offering the best methods for certain hobbies. I think a better method of teaching/learning different hobbies would be to attend meetings/events that have experts that can answer any questions a person might have of that hobby.
- d. I believe it is a good method to teach and learn different hobbies. Facebook was my avenue to learn a lot about the safety of foraging so with how much outreach social media can have, I think it should be utilized.

3. What's your overall opinion on social media?

- a. I think I lose too much of my time and life to social media and it makes me feel very depressed for two main reasons. Reason one, tiktok and other platforms intentionally put controversial or disturbing content on the app so that you continue to binge creators videos, so instead of me being on the app for a reasonable 20-30 min, I'll binge it for a few hours and then go back to work. Secondly, I think that it's too easy to access content and the speed at which i can move on to a new video is disturbing because I am constantly stimulated at the quickness of a new video's ability to appear and can paralyze my motivation or ability to get things done with my day.

- b. It's fine. It has its pros and cons but I think it's important to remember that it isn't all real in order to avoid the cons.
- c. I think social media has had an overall negative impact on society, especially on mental health. I think the platform in general promotes people to focus on what others think of them and what their social status is rather than the content of their character through daily actions and beliefs. That being said I do recognize the positives in social media such as educational information and connectedness. People all around the world can communicate and share information with one another, and used in the right lens a person can learn a lot through social media.
- d. I like using social media but I don't like the way the social media can restrict the way you use it or pull you into a loop. Hopefully more innovative, creative ways to use social media will continue to be made

4. Do you think mushroom foraging content belongs on social media?

- a. Absolutely, I particular love a few creators such as @chaoticforager, @alexisnikole, @wellfedwild, and @fascinatedbyfungi. Mushroom foraging content online has exposed so many people to the idea of going out into nature, enjoying the beautiful senses that the natural world can incur, and the excitement that comes with finding a mushroom, especially one that is rare or a delicacy to eat. I love all of the people I have met through this online community of foragers, mostly tend to be very nice and understanding, and it is a community of love where all people feel welcome, which is one of the reasons I love mycophiles so much. I am also so thankful for all the wonderful information I have learned on seasonality, mushroom anatomy, where to find particular species, different

mushroom events available for people to attend, and much more. I think this kind of content is just starting, and once it picks up even more popularity, the mushroom community will blossom.

- b. I think it's cool that foraging has become popular on social media because it's (usually) a sustainable practice and can be a useful thing to know about. However I think it's dangerous for people to go foraging with information from only social media.
- c. Absolutely! I think a lot of people still hold a negative connotation with eating mushrooms found in the wild. A lot of people still think you can get sick just by touching a poisonous mushroom which is false. Social media can be a tool to destigmatize some of these false beliefs, and shed new light on the wonderful benefits of foraging for mushrooms .
- d. I do think it belongs on social media.

5. What introduced you to mushroom foraging?

- a. This is one of my favorite questions to get asked! So, When I was about 15 or 16, I was a HUGE youtube kid. I would constantly binge shows and creators I liked, and I, in particular, loved to watch cooking channels. One of my favorite youtube chefs, now gone celebrity (I literally saw him on TV????) Matty matheson, is a canadian based chef with a focus on restoring food to its most hearty basics. It is through him, and his Canadian based farm, Blue Goose Farm, that I discovered the word “foraging”. Despite living on a farm, I didn’t even stop to think that the woods may be full of fruits and vegetables just waiting for me to come and find them. So, after watching a video of his farm, I got to learn about a few of their foragables they were growing and I thought, “wow!! That is so cool that they are doing that, I want to learn more!”. I then went out into my family’s

woods, and starting looking around at the nature around me, and the mushrooms caught my eye the most. The first mushroom I ever took a picture of was the HUUUGE dryad's saddle that was about 25 feet up in a tree, and I remember looking at it and just being in shock that mushrooms could get that big. SO anyways, after that day, I continued to take more trips into the woods and take pictures of mushrooms just cause I thought they were so interesting, and then I got to college after I graduated, and one of my good friends, Xavier barreda, had apparently started a mushroom club at tech when I was a freshman. I, obviously, went crazy for this, and started getting heavily involved with foraging and what it means to go out and look for mushrooms. After my continued enthusiastic involvement and participation in the club, Fungus United has made me their club president, which has been one of my happiest achievements to date. The club has exploding with mycophiles, and I am so proud to be the one leading them all :)

- b. I'm not sure. I like hiking so I think I thought it was cool to be able to identify local plants and fungi and started from there.
- c. I was already really into hiking and then my good friend Derek told me to go foraging for mushrooms with him and it quickly became a hobby.
- d. The Virginia mushroom foragers group on Facebook introduced me to mushroom foraging. There's a great moderator and admin team that have extensive knowledge on mushroom identification and safety. The community is a great way to slowly curate your knowledge and have an area to confirm your identifications.

6. Do you think mushroom foraging should be more popularized on social media? Why or why not?

- a. I do and I don't. I think it is great to have these free resources of expert information from mycologists from all over the world, however, there are quite a few individuals who are improperly educated and spread misinformation about mushrooms which people have taken, and I have personally seen some people injure themselves online from misinformation surrounding mushrooms. Also, due to the explosion in mycophilic interest, lots of drug dealers have been popping up on social media trying to popularize and sell psychedelics, which has been an issue to the educational side of mushroom socials.
- b. I think if it's more popularized than there will probably also be more content out there which would give viewers more information to go off, hopefully lessening the dangers. But I also think it's important for people producing social media content on foraging to provide proper safety warnings.
- c. Yes it should be. Having mushroom foraging more popularized on social media can display all the amazing benefits such as better connection to nature, gathering free food, better nutrition, and a friendly community.
- d. I think it is fine the way it is now. Not a lot of people do it, but now I feel like the awareness is truly there for anyone to try. If it becomes too popular there may be a negative effect from human consumption and use but as long as safety and respect is taught well I think it wouldn't be a bad outcome.