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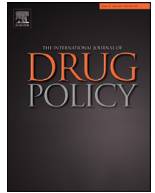
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## Research Paper

# Liminal spaces, seasonal faces: Challenging drug market assumptions via an exploration of naturally occurring magic mushroom markets in rural Kent

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** This article presents an exploration of naturally occurring Class-A magic mushroom markets in the UK. It aims to challenge some of the mainstream narratives about drug markets and to identify features of this specific market, which will extend our understanding of how illegal drug markets operate and are structured more generally.

**Methods:** The research presented comprises a three year ethnography of sites of magic mushroom production in rural Kent. Observations were conducted at 5 research sites over three consecutive magic mushroom seasons and interviews were conducted with 10 (8 male; 2 female) key informants.

**Results:** It finds that naturally occurring magic mushroom sites are reluctant and liminal sites of drug production, distinct from other Class-A drug production sites due to their: open and accessible nature; lack of invested ownership or evidence of purposeful cultivation; and lack of law enforcement disruption efforts, violence or organised crime involvement. Seasonal magic mushroom picker participants were found to be a sociable group, often acting in a cooperative nature, and without evidence of territoriality or violent dispute resolution. These findings have wider application in challenging the dominant narrative that the most harmful (Class-A) drug markets are homogenous in their violent, profit driven, hierarchical nature, and most Class-A drug producers/suppliers are morally corrupt, financially motivated and organised.

**Conclusion:** A greater understanding of the variety of Class-A drug markets in operation can challenge archetypes and discrimination in understanding drug market involvement, will allow the development of more nuanced policing and policy strategies, and contributes to the presentation of a fluidity of drug market structure that permeates beyond bottom level street markets or social supply.

## Introduction

In the UK magic mushroom spore kits can be widely purchased on the internet and grown discretely at home (Asicioglu, Okudan, Derman & Koca, 2014), or imported from abroad often as truffles (Jack, 2016). With nearly 200 different varieties of mushroom containing psilocybin or growing in the wild, however, naturally occurring magic mushrooms are still a significant feature of the UK market. The most common of these is the liberty cap (Walsh, 2016), found growing naturally in grassy areas and harvested by seasonal magic mushroom pickers in rural areas. Based on an exploration of this Class-A drug market in the UK, and the actors that operate within it, this article argues that we can provide further challenge to some of the mainstream narratives about drug markets and dealer identities which will extend our understanding of how illegal drug markets operate in general.

Psilocybin – the psychoactive ingredient present in liberty cap mushrooms - can cause mild hallucinations, laughter, anxiety and paranoia (Riley & Blackman, 2008). Psychoactive mushrooms in general have a long history of entheogenic use in ritualistic, cultural and religious settings in South and Central America (van Pool, 2019), Africa (Samorini, 1995) and China (Aung, 2005). During the 1960s, psychedelic rituals began to be popularised within Western cultures (Sessa, 2005). More recently, magic mushrooms have been caught up in the psychedelic renaissance (Sessa, 2017) sweeping the Western drug landscape, bolstered by experiments into their medical use for the treatment of illnesses such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and depression (Carhaart-Harris et al, 2016), and an increasingly established and lucrative part of ‘wellness culture’ (Nouril, 2020).

Hallucinogenic mushrooms are not subject to international control under the United Nations drug conventions, and there is thus consid-

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erable national variety in how they are controlled. Research suggests that the harm to individuals and wider society stemming from magic mushroom use is extremely low, and certainly less than other Class-A drugs such as heroin, cocaine, crack cocaine or even ecstasy and LSD (Nutt, King & Phillips, 2010). Nevertheless, the Misuse of Drugs Act (1971) designated dried or prepared magic mushrooms as a Class-A substance subject to the harshest controls. Until 2005, however, a loophole existed within this legislation leaving fresh, unprepared magic mushrooms technically not prohibited (Walsh, 2016). At this time, in the context of increasing commercialisation of the market for fresh mushrooms and rising levels of use (House of Commons, 2005; Roe, 2005), fresh mushrooms were also prohibited as a Class-A drug.

It remains very difficult to gain an accurate picture of the extent to which magic mushroom offences are pursued by the police within the UK. In 2020 a series of freedom of information requests were submitted to various police forces, but many responded that they could not accurately provide this data (e.g. West Yorkshire), or they could only provide a general estimate (e.g. Suffolk). Dyfed-Powys (2020) police force perhaps provides the most detailed picture, recording 29 offences between 2015 and 2020, 17 of which related solely to magic mushrooms and 5 of which were passed forward for prosecution. Kent unfortunately was not included within these requests. The local police strategy (Kent County Council, 2017) does not include a section on the policing of magic mushrooms, but there are occasional local stories about magic mushroom busts. For example, two men were arrested in Dover in 2021 when police found “a large amount” of magic mushrooms in their possession during a raid (Hawkinge Gazette, 2021).

Data on mushroom prevalence and other trends is relatively scarce, but the Global Drug Survey (Winstock et al., 2021) suggests an overall global increase in last 12 month mushroom use amongst respondents from 8.6% in 2015 to 16.1% in 2020. Despite strict UK control measures, a recent report for Vice Magazine (Hillier, 2019) based on data from both Home Office reports and the Global Drug Survey, records a “12 year high” for magic mushroom usage. Beyond identifying trends in use, research mainly focuses around harm (Muller, Puschel & Iwersen-Bergmann, 2013), risk (Coordination Centre for the Assessment and Monitoring of New Drugs, 2000) or, increasingly, therapeutic benefit (Nutt, Erritzoe & Carhart-Harris, 2020). A rich stream of socio-cultural research exists around the entheogenic, traditional use of mushrooms in varied cultural and religious contexts (Winkelman, 2019), including a more recently emerging focus on sacred mushroom use in the Western context (Lutkajtis, 2020), and spiritual mushroom tourism (Ovies, 2021). Social research on non-entheogenic magic mushroom markets is even more limited: van Duyne (2008) explored magic mushrooms as valued and profitable commodities within the commercialised Dutch markets operating at that time; Musshoff, Madea & Beike (2000) document type and strength of different products available on the German market; and Riley, Thompson & Griffin (2010) explored the political and cultural discourses that shape magic mushroom user identities in the UK. The value that can be derived from exploring a neglected and, perhaps, atypical drug market such as that surrounding naturally occurring magic mushrooms in the UK is outlined below.

### Towards a less homogenous understanding of Class-A drug markets

Just over one hundred years ago the response to psychoactive substances underwent seismic change and became subject to international control and criminalisation (Berridge & Mars, 2004). In a relatively short time period the consumption, purchase, supply, importation/exportation and production of a growing number of substances became problematised (Bacchi, 2009). The use of criminal sanctions was justified by drawing on a growing appreciation of the harm psychoactive substances could cause – both to their individual users and to wider society. As international drug control policy matured, for many countries the main focus of controlling psychoactive substances coalesced around at-

tempts to eradicate or significantly disrupt their production and supply, conceptualised as the *most harmful* part of the market (Chatwin, 2018).

There are important arguments about the extent to which drug control policy itself, rather than drug use *per se*, is responsible for (some of) these harms (Bowling, 2011). Laying these debates aside, however, it is clear that the trade in illicit drugs can cause harm. For example, Costa (2008) notes the creation of a substantial international market that is lucrative for organised criminals, drug market related violence is reported as the most significant threat to the “well being and prosperity” of those living in drug production regions (Organisation of American States, 2013:75), and the international drug trade has been implicated in the corruption and destabilisation of fragile or otherwise vulnerable states (Pryce, 2012).

It is important to recognise, however, that this focus on harm – particularly in relation to the production and supply of drugs, has contributed significantly to the construction of archetypal stereotypes about both drug markets and the actors engaged within them. It has also shaped funded research in this area which tends towards a preoccupation with measuring harm and suggesting strategies to reduce the problem, rather than attempting to understand drug market structures and their relationships with larger social contexts (Curtis & Wendel, 2007). Drug markets, particularly those encompassing the substances perceived as *most harmful*, are depicted as being driven by systemic violence (Connolly, 2017) and economic compulsion (Seddon, 2006) while operating under hierarchical structures (McLean, Robinson & Densley, 2020). Meanwhile, the producers and suppliers of these substances are constructed as morally corrupt, financially motivated and organised (Coomber, 2006). The prioritisation of research conducted *within* the frame of harm, creates an unlikely image of homogeneity. When research is conducted *without* the frame of harm, it can bring down the “house of cards” that is the current conceptualisation of *the* drug market and *the* drug dealer” (Coomber, 2010:10), demonstrating the limitations of this approach.

While these depictions framed by harm have dominated our understanding of Class-A drug markets, a rich seam of drug market research has long sought to provide examples of alternative market structures and cultures of supply. Blum (1972), was one of the first to research drug dealers as individuals, and to recognise that not all drug dealing identities were equally framed by harm. Dorn et al (1991) present those involved in drug dealing due to ideological commitments (trading charities) and as part of friendship networks exchanging drugs in a reciprocal fashion (mutual societies), as distinct from more harmful types of drug dealer. Mohammed & Fitzvold (2009), meanwhile, researched wealthy, white campus drug dealers (dorm room dealers), finding that protective race and class characteristics allowed these dealers to present outwardly as less harmful and risky participants in the market. More recently, Fleetwood’s (2014) work on women’s roles within crack markets in England offers a fluid and flexible understanding that does not reflect dominant narratives about hierarchy and violence, and a growing body of work depicts the bottom level of some drug markets as dominated by ‘social supply’ between friends and acquaintances, not completely driven by profit, and fragmented, dynamic and messy, rather than hierarchical and structured (Chatwin & Potter, 2011; Coomber & Moyle, 2013; Taylor & Potter, 2013).

The dominant narrative which seeks to present all drug markets as homogenous is therefore dangerous because it can lead to the implementation of policies and policing strategies that lack nuance (Coomber, 2010), while challenging mainstream assumptions about drug markets serves to further enrich our understanding of the varieties of ways in which they can work (Curtis & Wendel, 2007). With this context in mind, the research presented here explores a potentially atypical market firmly designated, in the UK at least, as one of the most harmful: the production, harvesting and distribution of naturally occurring magic mushrooms. It explores the contradictions that exist between the classification of magic mushrooms in the UK and the lived reality of mushroom picking by observing production sites and engaging with

pickers. It aims to investigate the presence of the assumed features of the Class-A drug market within this specific setting and identify any alternatives, drawing out their relevance to improving the drug market knowledge base and extending our understanding of how to respond to diverse markets.

## Methodology

This paper is based on research encompassing a three year ethnography (2018-2020) of seasonal natural magic mushroom picking activities in rural Kent. The lead author collected the data, while co-authors contributed to the design of the methodology and the analysis/framing of the data for the purposes of this paper. Although magic mushrooms can be harvested from manmade equipment and while there are many types of magic mushroom to be found in Kent, this research is only concerned with naturally growing liberty cap mushrooms in outdoor spaces. Liberty caps bloom seasonally from September to November, making data collection restricted to this three month time period across the three years. The ethnography primarily comprised three seasons of ethnographic observations at the field sites and formal interviews with a sample of 10 magic mushroom pickers.

### Sampling

Much of the empirical work was made possible by established trust, stemming from a shared history, with some members of a local magic mushroom picking population. In particular, a trusted gatekeeper helped choose suitable fieldwork sites, provided introductions to other members of the picking population, and participated in many of the fieldwork visits. The interview sample was constructed through snowball sampling starting from a convenience sample of 5 pickers (4 male and 1 female) with whom the lead researcher had pre-existing relationships. The final sample included an additional 5 pickers (4 male and 1 female) encountered during the fieldwork.

Five distinct sites where liberty cap mushrooms were found to naturally occur were chosen for fieldwork. The criteria for selection was fields/areas with generally good public access where magic mushrooms were in evidence and which were frequented by mushroom pickers during the main season. Ownership of these sites varied (farmers, small business owners, the Ministry of defence), but all were privately-owned spaces fairly accessible via public bridle paths. Both participants and research sites are introduced more fully in the findings section.

### Ethnographic observations and interviews

Ethnographic elements of the research comprised the lead researcher accompanying one or more of the gatekeepers to a research site and shadowing their activity. The goal was to observe the sites and the pickers foraging within them in order to understand the peculiarities of the labour and the structure of the production site. Initially, the researcher adopted a low profile so as not to disrupt the natural behaviour in the observed space, staying close to his gatekeeper(s), observing and discretely making notes.

Part of a successful ethnography is to extend beyond existing trusted relations to trigger new 'in the field' informal interactions (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019), and thus as familiarity with the research sites and their occupants grew over time, the researcher began to intentionally drift towards other pickers, striking up general conversations before, in some cases, disclosing the nature of his presence and asking to engage in a more formal conversation. The fields were often full of different groups of pickers, as well as dog walkers, picnickers and legitimate foragers, so the presence of an unfamiliar face within the field was not necessarily a reason to impact on people's behaviour. As the researcher became more active in engaging with strangers, his presence did not appear to have an obvious impact on their behaviour, but it's important to recognise

the possibility that it may have done. All sites were abandoned with immediate effect if asked to leave by the landowner, but this was rare.

Sites were initially visited in 2018 between 10.30am and 5pm during 'mushroom season', that is September to November. Some follow up visits were also conducted during the 2019 and 2020 seasons. Observations typically lasted for 3-4 hours and at least 5 observations were undertaken at each of the different research sites during the main data collection year (2018). Written observation notes were discretely recorded using the notes function on a mobile phone. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 magic mushroom pickers.

Several requests were made to local enforcement agencies to interview them about their strategies for magic mushroom control in the area, but did not receive any response. We reflected together as a team to what extent to either pursue this avenue or to attempt to contact and interview some of the landowners of the research sites involved. Ultimately, we decided that it might potentially alert them to the location of magic mushroom production sites and/or the activity of local magic mushroom pickers and we did not want to be the cause of harm to our participants, so we did not.

### Ethics

The research was designed in accordance with British Society of Criminology ethical standards and GDPR requirements, and approved by the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research ethics board (application number 0439) at the University of Kent in 2018 prior to the onset of data collection. Anonymity and confidentiality were of the utmost importance as illegal behaviours were being directly observed. Informed consent was sought from all participants interviewed or directly observed. Risks to the researcher were minimised by engaging with a trusted network and identifying a key gatekeeper to facilitate access to the sites and population. Observation sites were chosen for their public access rights to avoid the possibility of allegations of trespassing. At no time did the researcher engage directly in picking activities and no illegal materials were handled at any time.

## Findings and discussion

Interviews were conducted with 10 participants (8 male and 2 female), all between 20 and 30 years of age at the time of the initial research, and all white. All were experienced mushroom pickers, many well educated and with full time employment, and some with partners and children. All were users of other illegal substances, as well as magic mushrooms. The most embedded members of the scene (Dan, Gary, Ian, Keith, Janet) were frequent magic mushroom users during the season and went picking 2-4 times a week, with others engaging in a much more occasional manner. All had sold or gifted to friends, but some were primarily motivated by the desire to consume mushrooms themselves and to enjoy the social aspects of a day spent picking (Dan, Gail, Barry, Keith, Dave, Roy), while others were more motivated by profit and were involved to some extent in other drug markets (Gary, Ian, Janet, Frank).

The 5 research sites comprised fields in various locations (between neighbouring villages, adjoining a village church and pub, and in more secluded rural areas) and are described here based directly on our ethnographic observations and fieldnotes. One site comprising a series of interconnected farm fields regularly hosted a flock of sheep; and a second smaller single farm field was home to "a large brown horse sporting a striking coat and largely unperturbed by the presence of pickers". The third was owned by the Ministry of Defence for occasional training purposes. A fourth more "secluded" site, "enveloped by woodland", was defined by a pylon and a steep sloping hill. Our final site was regularly used by people engaging in organised recreational activity. All were accessible by public bridle paths and shared at times with dog walkers, farm labourers, families out picnicking, and those engaged in other leisure pursuits. The most popular sites were secluded from nearby roads and buildings

but easy to access by car. “Short, well kept grass, possibly derived from sheep grazing”, made for easier picking. Fields which were overgrown, sometimes with “obstructive clumps of thistles”, and/or which were only accessible on foot, were less popular, as were those where a perceived degree of risk (large number of other users, highly visible from the road and surrounding area, not open to public access) was high.

The findings are divided into two parts with the first focusing on the naturally occurring sites of magic mushroom production and landowner involvement in the market, and the second addressing the identities of the magic mushroom pickers and the structure of the market they operate within.

#### *Magic mushroom fields as reluctant and liminal sites of drug production*

Existing work on sites of Class-A drug production presents such locations as valuable assets to criminal enterprises who are likely to exert territorial control over the area, often enforced by violence (Connolly, 2017), and make visible efforts to prevent access by the general public and/or hide activity and dissuade attention from law enforcement agencies. Synthetic drug factories, for example, are often characterised by a proliferation of specialised production equipment, hidden within farms, warehouses, or smaller kitchen type operations in residential homes (EMCDDA, 2015), while UK based cannabis farms might be located within seemingly deserted residential houses (Bateman, 2019) or even camouflaged within dense woodland (Chantler-Hicks, 2020). Where production operations are naturally less discrete – for example large outdoor grown crops such as opium poppy, coca leaf or cannabis plants – they are often under armed guard (Hobbs, 1998) and linked to territorial violence (Mejia & Restrepo, 2013).

Based on our ethnographic observations, the magic mushroom fields described above are immediately distinct from other sites of Class-A drug production: they are indistinguishable (to the inexperienced eye) from surrounding sheep fields and farmland, subject to a natural and seasonal cultivation period rather than an industrialised one, and openly accessible to the general public. In contrast to other Class-A drug production sites, they represent ambiguous spaces where legitimate uses are confounded with a naturally occurring and temporal potential for deviant behaviour during the brief mushroom season. Picking is only one among many behaviours the sites facilitate, meaning the deviant potential of the space is only realised through the activity of picking itself. Picking is easily observable by other countryside actors, but might be mistaken for regular mushroom foraging, bird watching or flower collecting, creating a dual purpose space that is a Class-A drug production site only for the pickers themselves. The natural sites of magic mushroom production described here are thus spaces in a continuous state of liminality (Turner, 1987), betwixt and between legality and illegality.

A variety of actors owned the mushroom picking sites included in this research and could have exercised their ownership over a potentially lucrative crop of Class-A drugs. Instead, landowners were rarely observed by us or our participants and seemed largely unaware or unconcerned about the harvesting of their unintentional crop. When they were present, they were more concerned with getting on with their own activity than disrupting the work of the pickers, or seeking to secure the crop for themselves.

*“Jumped the fence over to the MOD field and a bloody army squad pop out the grass. They were retraining or some shit and weren’t sent to scoop us up. Obviously, we went back the way we came through. Don’t want to step on GI Joe’s toes.”*

(Garry, Interview).

In our final round of follow up research in 2020, we observed an interaction between a group of pickers and an increasingly knowledgeable landowner.

*Landowner encountered without note last year approached the group of pickers declaring he knew what they were up to and thought they should*

*leave. One of the group suggested they would be willing to pay fees to camp on the field if that might make him more amenable. He said he would give it some thought and the pickers moved on to a different site in good humour.*

(Ethnographic fieldwork note).

Overall, however, the landowners were observed and reported as near invisible actors, disinterested in either profiting from or eradicating the magic mushroom crop. Despite the Class-A status of magic mushrooms, no obligation exists on landowners in the UK to take steps to discover and eradicate crops (Walsh, 2016). They usually demonstrate an unusual lack of awareness of their involvement in the illegal drug trade, somewhat akin to the increasing number of postal workers distributing drugs ordered off the darknet and delivered in innocuous brown packages or disguised as gardening supplies (Connolly & Doble, 2017), or to the absent landlords who discover that their houses have been turned into thriving cannabis farms (Hamilton Fraser, 2020).

*“I’ve only ever been asked to leave a field once. So we did. Went up the road and just picked a different patch.”*

(Janet, Interview)

Naturally occurring magic mushroom sites can thus be described as ‘reluctant’ sites of drug production. In part this relates to their unique status as existing entirely without intentional human intervention or cultivation – in fact it is notoriously difficult to create a natural crop of liberty cap mushrooms even in sites where the environmental conditions are ideal (Azarius, 2020). While other drug production sites in the UK might be partially reluctant – for example the practice of ‘cuckooing’ or taking over residential properties to use as crack houses (Spicer, Moyle & Coomber, 2020) or the phenomenon of ‘guerrilla gardening’ whereby cannabis seeds are wilfully sown in public places (Reynolds, 2009) – they still retain an element of human intentionality.

A final consideration in researching naturally occurring magic mushroom production sites, is the extent to which law enforcement engage in efforts to eradicate or disrupt the activity. International drug control prioritises focusing on the most harmful drugs and targeting production and supply (Chatwin, 2018). These principles are certainly enshrined in the UK’s new 10 year drug policy which promises to “step up our response to the supply of the most harmful drugs, attacking all stages of the supply chain” (Home Office, 2022:1). Law enforcement agents should thus be concerned with the suppression of magic mushroom production. Active policing would require minimal resourcing with mushroom sites existing out in the open and only in operation for a few months a year. The Kent Drug and Alcohol Strategy 2017-2022 (Kent County Council, 2017), however, makes no acknowledgement of magic mushroom markets as a local problem and no law enforcement activity was observed during the course of this research, suggesting this is a case where law in action differs from law on the books. Pickers maintained a nonchalant attitude towards the likelihood of encountering police during their activities:

*“I’ve never seen a copper [police] up here, and I’ve been coming for over 10 years now. Got more chance of seeing a woodland fairy.”*

(Dave, Informal field note).

Where occasional encounters with police were recounted in interviews, they had been coincidental rather than as the result of targeted disruption activities.

*“We were picking ... turn around there’s a fed [police] car pulling up. People are pranging out [becoming anxious] and me and my sister start running out of there ... she lost the car key. Can’t even brave it through and leave. We have to wait it out. So, we are there for about an hour, peaking through the trees. Turns out they were there for a domestic at a nearby campsite and weren’t interested in what we were up to.”*

(Ian, Interview).

The information discussed in this section thus situates naturally occurring magic mushroom production sites in the UK as distinct from other Class-A drug production sites due to: their open and accessible nature; their liminality as dual purpose or ambiguous sites; a lack of invested ownership or evidence of purposeful cultivation; and failure to inspire either attempts from existing landowners to reap the profits or interventions from law enforcement to disrupt or eradicate production. Taken collectively, these features describe a unique market that can be conceptualised as liminal and reluctant; at odds with characterisations of Class-A drug markets as violent, highly profitable, organised or hierarchical. The next section turns to an exploration of the pickers themselves, the extent to which they fit within archetypal stereotypes of drug dealers, and the structure of the market they operate within.

#### *Magic mushroom pickers and magic mushroom supply*

As outlined earlier, Class-A drug dealers have been generally framed by mainstream narratives (for example in the media or policy documents) as greedy, profit driven, morally reprehensible and violent individuals (Coomber, 2006), and Class-A drug markets as organised, hierarchical, exploitative, driven by economic compulsion and controlled by violence (Connolly, 2017; McLean et al., 2020; Seddon, 2006). It is important to recognise that important alternative depictions of these markets do exist already (see for example: Paoli, 2002 on disorganisation within illicit markets; Coomber & Moyle, 2013 on minimally commercial supply; and Dorn et al., 1991 on different typologies of dealer), but are less prominent, particularly in relation to Class-A markets. In this second part of the discussion, this paper explores evidence of these archetypes within UK based, naturally occurring magic mushroom markets. Magic mushroom pickers hold a unique position in drug market typologies as producers (or custodians of and guides to production sites), suppliers and consumers. The seasonal nature of natural magic mushroom production and the relatively large quantity of mushrooms required to produce an effective dose, further sets this market apart, limiting it to a relatively small scale, disorganised and uncommercial venture.

In practice, magic mushroom picking was primarily observed as a foraging activity, and to acquire a substantial amount of mushrooms required long, laborious physical work, not dissimilar to fruit picking or farm labouring.

*Approaches to picking varied, from upright undirected roaming, to meticulous ground level searches, with those engaged in the latter sometimes using gardening gloves and kneel mats, and often standing to stretch out their backs.*

(Ethnographic fieldnote).

Most pickers spent between 4-6 hours a time on the activity and indicated they would consider 500-1000 mushrooms a good yield.

*"I can't imagine anyone making more than maybe £100 off a hard day's work. It's not the worst wage I suppose - hell."*

(Barry, Interview)

Participants encountered in the field suggested a lackadaisical approach to the processing and storing of mushrooms once they were picked.

*"Discovering a bag of wet shrooms you forgot about in the boot of your car, maggots rolling around in there - hell."*

(Dan, informal field conversation).

This lack of profit and lack of professionalism were atypical in terms of established wisdom about Class-A drug markets as capitalist enterprises.

Despite the hard work, mushroom picking was also evidently a social occasion with our ethnographic observations noting some groups setting out to camp overnight, others taking frequent communal breaks to share snacks and sometimes smoke joints, and one or two combining their

magic mushroom picking with foraging for other edible mushrooms and wild food sources.

*"There's always a day at the start when you don't really get any. But you're just up in the countryside blazing [smoking cannabis] so it aint all bad. I go up there with my mates so you're not just lost and empty handed. We have a nice day."*

(Gail, Interview).

Supply activities tended to be largely at the social level, with exchanges made for minimal economic capital, for other drugs such as cannabis, and even sometimes given away for free.

*"The guy dishing out the free trips is obviously a legend."*

(Ian, Informal field conversation)

Three interview participants reported being partially dependent on income from selling mushrooms. It was widely acknowledged that drying and storing mushrooms for sale in the summer, long after the season had finished and while festivals were underway, was much more profitable, but our participants had never managed to benefit in this way.

*"After New Year's they're all gone ... The dream is always to hold onto them for festival season. I'd probably make way more. But it never happens. I need the money at the time, so I sell them."*

(Keith, Interview)

Demand for mushrooms largely came from local consumers, although one participant reported supplying to friends in the North via the postal service. Supply was almost entirely to people already known to them, although some would also sell to those referred by a friend. Nobody reported any links with organised crime networks, although 4 interviewees were sometimes active in other local drug markets.

Access to and knowledge of mushroom production sites was reported by participants as being passed down through word of mouth between local populations.

*"I went with my mate, whose mate took him, whose brother took him, whose mate probably took him. You always need a guide until you become the guide."*

(Barry, Interview).

Mushroom pickers were rarely observed or described coming into conflict with each other, but rather enjoy a more co-operative relationship, with strangers not being regarded as rivals whilst competition amongst friends is light-hearted and trivial.

*"You share a spot with a mate, then they share it with someone else. Next thing you know there's bare [lots of] other heads [people] in your field ... But like, what you going to do? It aint my field is it at the end of the day?"*

(Gary, Interview)

Overall, the presence of other pickers was generally reported as a positive by participants as either reassurance that you were in the right place or indication the field was at low risk from law enforcement.

*"When you see the guy in the distance crouch down, you know he is safe. He's here for the same reason as you."*

(Ian, Informal field conversation)

Therefore, even though pickers are, in theory, in competition with one another, they did not act as opponents even when directly engaged at production sites. Instead, magic mushroom foraging appears to have its own code of conduct - one of friendly co-operation.

Drawing together findings reported in this section, in contrast to traditional depictions of Class-A drug markets as competitive (Burrus, Sackley & Sollars, 2007), we find a sociable group involved in the shared deviancy of magic mushroom picking. While some participants are economically motivated, profits are slight and the work is hard. Rather than a profitable capitalist enterprise, mushroom picking was depicted as a seasonal opportunity to make some extra money or to provide other

sources of capital (Bourdieu & Waquant, 1992) such as social status. In common with Jacinto, Duterte, Sales & Murphey's (2008) work on ecstasy dealers, pickers themselves did not necessarily see themselves as real dealers and could be described as drifting into the seasonal role of mushroom supply. Naturally occurring magic mushroom markets are small in scale and provide limited opportunity to form commercial enterprises. The cooperative nature of picking communities demonstrates a lack of territoriality or use of violence to resolve conflict, either with landowners or with each other, depicting magic mushroom picking and supply as having more in common with normalised (Coomber, Moyle & South, 2015), social (Taylor & Potter, 2013) or minimally commercialised (Coomber & Moyles, 2013) markets.

## Conclusion

In the UK, magic mushrooms are considered to be in the group of most harmful illegal substances (Class A), subject to the strictest control and most readily associated with the dominant archetypal representations of violence, greed, corruption, territoriality and links to organised crime. In this context, our findings present a particularly stark counterpoint. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that our findings also clearly accentuate the differences between naturally occurring magic mushroom markets and mainstream narratives about all drug markets, and thus have wider relevance to contexts where they may be considered less harmful than the UK. This research thus makes an important addition to existing evidence that not all drug markets, and not even all Class-A drug markets, are defined by these features. Instead, it presents a rich, alternative depiction of a neglected market, not characterised by harm or fraught with danger for those involved. This is important for several reasons.

Firstly, it demonstrates the impact of framing drug markets in this manner, in terms of funding research focusing solely on harmful characteristics. When drug markets are conceptualised as violent, harmful and profitable, research tends to coalesce around these factors, pushing alternative markets or counter examples to the margins, and instead focusing on markets already known to display these features. Such explorations are likely to confirm existing knowledge, rather than expanding our understanding of the variety of drug markets in operation, the features that define them, and the way they interact. Relatedly, it also perpetuates archetypes and discrimination within our understanding of drug markets. For example, drug market research, particularly in the context of Class-A or most harmful markets, tends to focus on inner city, male dominated, often ethnically diverse, organised groups. This leads to further confirmation that these are indeed the people we should associate with such activity, while exploration of alternative markets can reveal a different kind of participant.

Secondly, a narrow focus on Class-A, or most harmful, drug markets and their occupants leads to policies and policing practices that lack nuance. At both global and national levels, an emphasis is put on disrupting and eradicating the supply of drugs - all drugs - but particularly those ascribed to cause the most harm. The UK's new 10 year drug strategy (Home Office, 2022) prioritises breaking supply chains for the most harmful substances and suggests this can be best achieved by preventing drugs from reaching the country, breaking the control and involvement of gangs, going after the money, cracking down on organised operations, restricting the supply of drugs into prisons and targeting local street markets. Yet these strategies would be deeply unsuitable for effectively policing naturally occurring magic mushroom markets in the UK. Collecting more information on a variety of markets could lead to more nuanced UK policies and might allow some Class-A drugs to be prioritised over others, lead to a declassification of magic mushrooms due to a discrepancy in harm compared to other Class-A markets, or allow potentially more effective disruption strategies to emerge.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, ignoring drug markets that do not fit the dominant narrative leads to silences (Bacchi, 2009) in our knowledge. Traditional models of drug markets tend to depict

them as static and hierarchical, with actors occupying fixed identities within them. While a long tradition of important work challenges this drug market structure (see for example: Coomber, 2006; Paoli, 2002; Pearson, Hobbs, Jones, Tierney & Ward, 2001) evidencing instead a more disorganised picture, particularly at the bottom level, the enduring prioritisation of the traditional model can be seen in the UK context. Here, emphasis on organised drug supply emanating out from cities to more suburban areas, involving violence and exploitation, has renewed under the new label of 'County Lines' (see for example: McLean et al, 2020), attracting the attention of the media, providing a focal point for law enforcement and government agencies, and confirming the archetypal drug dealer stereotypes (Coomber, 2006).

Our research does not of course suggest that such drug market structures and identities do not exist, but seeks to remind that, even within the most harmful Class-A drug markets, fluidity and disorganisation can be found permeating throughout the entire structure, from production down to sales and consumption. Even Class-A drug suppliers are not always all-encompassing archetypal identities as evidenced by the seasonal nature of magic mushroom picking: this drug market role straddles all levels of the market, yet the mushroom picker is a deviant face (Goffman, 1955) which can be adopted and discarded as the season dictates. Research on niche markets, operating outside existing explanations of market structures and without archetypal features, can thus lead to deeper and more enriched models of understanding drug dealer identities and drug market structures.

## Ethics approval

The authors declare that they have obtained ethics approval from an appropriately constituted ethics committee/institutional review board where the research entailed animal or human participation.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**George Henry Robert Simpson:** Funding acquisition, Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft. **Caroline Chatwin:** Writing – original draft, Supervision. **Elke van Hellefont:** Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

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