While graffiti permeates the urban landscapes of cities around the world, the individuals responsible for it are rarely identified. As a result, the identities of graffiti writers are left unexplored and subject to speculation and conjecture. The purpose of this research is to investigate the graffiti writer social identity as impacted by membership and participation in the graffiti subculture. The method applied in this study was semi-structured interviews. Additionally, fieldwork and photo documentation of local graffiti established familiarity with the subculture and helped to maintain rapport with participants. Drawing from Social Identity Theory and two of its constituents, self-categorization and depersonalization, the graffiti writer social identity is conceptualized as a subculturally-based identity representative of writers' shared traits, values and subcultural norms. Results indicate that writers experience two major shifts in their social identity through the processes of entering and exiting the graffiti subculture. Upon entering, writers develop an alter ego and make their personal identities anonymous. Upon exit, writers may or may not retire their alter ego, but new social identities based on careers and adult responsibilities begin to eclipse previous self-concepts of being a graffiti writer. Experiences and skills developed as graffiti writers are residual after retirement or semi-retirement from the graffiti subculture, but are still incorporated into writers' personal identities. Additionally, the graffiti writer social identity can be characterized, paradoxically, by both of fame and anonymity.

IDENTIFYING WITH THE GRAFFITI SUBCULTURE: THE IMPACT OF

ENTERING AND EXITING THE GRAFFITI SUBCULTURE ON

THE SOCIAL IDENTITIES OF GRAFFITI WRITERS

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For over four decades now American graffiti has been a thriving pop culture

phenomenon spanning the globe and advancing as one of the most compelling art

movements in history. Yet, despite researchers' efforts to develop a clear understanding

of the graffiti subculture, it is still somewhat unclear *who* these "artistic outlaws" are who

stealthily maneuver city streets in the night's darkness. With anonymity as one of their

defining characteristics, "graffiti writers" frequently go unidentified. Instead, their alter

egos leave clues on the walls and surfaces of urban landscapes to let others know *they*

have been there.

Famously Anonymous

The Death of Pixnit

In Memoriam headlines the last post published on the website of *PIXNIT*

Productions (2006). The first line reads "PIXNIT, 35: Notorious Boston Artist,"

immediately followed by a short paragraph announcing the alleged death of the infamous

and controversial graffiti artist known as "Pixnit," who, according to police reports, was

last seen in Paris and declared missing in April, 2010. The post continues with details of

Pixnit's disappearance, stating that police maintain the artist is "presumed dead by

misadventure." The shocking news is interspersed with celebrated recognition of Pixnit's

talent and illegal artwork (In Memoriam, 2010, para. 4). The same week she was declared

deceased, a post on the website of *Big RED & Shiny* (2010) (a forum for criticism,

discussion, and promotion of the arts in New England) disputed Pixnit's death (Holland,

2010). The post followed an announcement sent out earlier that day on twitter

pronouncing Pixnit's death to the public. After receiving several distressed tweets in

response, an immediate update was made to the website in efforts to reconcile

heartbroken fans who believed the artist, known for her distinctive, illegal stencil art, had

tragically died. The update apologized for invoking such anguish, clarifying that the 35

year old herself was not actually dead, but rather the graffiti persona "Pixnit," had been

laid to rest:

> Pixnit was a persona that was created by a Boston-based artist seeking to hide her
> identity from anti-graffiti authorities. Much of Pixnit's work, though lately
> accessible in galleries and museums, is still viewable in the streets and alleys
> around Boston and the globe. Big RED & Shiny has verified that the artist behind
> the Pixnit identity is alive (para.3).

While no other significant details were offered, the mysterious publicity was a homage

paid to an unidentified graffitist.

Boston's "Alt-Art Outlaw"

Three years prior to her mysterious disappearance, a journalist for the *Boston

Globe*, Matthew Shaer (2007), interviewed Pixnit. Shaer's (2007) article introduced her

as a graffiti artist and then quickly disclosed that the artist behind the alter ego Pixnit

prefers anonymity. In addition, the *Globe* confessed that not even they know Pixnit's true

identity. Just obtaining an interview with Pixnit required some detective work and

determination. Shaer (2007) shares with readers:

> After seeing her graffiti around Boston, the *Globe* attempted to find Pixnit. A
> reporter eventually tracked her down through her MySpace page, and she e-
> mailed back from an anonymous address. She agreed to meet in person but would
> be photographed only with her face partially disguised. The Globe does not know
> her real name (para. 5).

The article continues with a quote from Chairwoman Anne Swanson of Graffiti

NABBers, a group dedicated to fighting graffiti in the Boston area. When asked about

Pixnit, Swanson remarks that she would "love to know the identity of this tagger. A real

artist would come forward and acknowledge the 'art'…This is graffiti vandalism like any

other" (Shaer, 2007).

Over the course of just a few years, the covert nature of Pixnit's identity appears

to have played a significant role in her subcultural persona becoming legendary to Boston

residents. Most intriguing is the paradox of her famous anonymity. While increasingly

wooing the public with her graffiti, Pixnit was vehemently concealing her true identity.

Shaer (2007) shares with readers:

> In just more than a year, Pixnit has populated every neighborhood from Jamaica
> Plain to Somerville with her spores, which can be red, white, blue, or green. She's
> painted the tops of buildings in the Back Bay, alleys in Allston, bridges in Fort
> Point, and dumpsters in the South End. She's shown at a handful of local galleries,
> including the Rhys Gallery…And she's never been apprehended by the police. All
> of which has made Pixnit one of Boston's most polarizing alt-art outlaws (para. 6).

While it seems only a select few may know the facts surrounding the presumed

death of Pixnit, her case has received wide publicity. Perhaps what has contributed most

to general curiosity is that Pixnit repeatedly refused to disclose her personal identity, yet has remained a controversial and renowned public figure. The fascinating case of Pixnit inspired my research into the identities of graffiti writers.

Identifying Graffiti Writers: Theory and Dual Identities

"Writer" is what seasoned members of the graffiti subculture call one another. The term has come to be recognized as a subcultural status, generally reserved for those who have mastered writing a unique tag. Graffiti writers do much more than write graffiti though; writers assume a social identity that is conducive to the norms, standards, and values of the graffiti subculture. Writers must also manage two types of identities in a symbiotic relationship: one actual and the other a subcultural alter ego. This distinct phenomenon of dual identity led me to research the complexity and foundation of a graffiti writer's social identity. Additionally, I questioned the specific impacts, if any, that entering and exiting the graffiti subculture has on the self-concepts of writers. The key research question in this study is: *What shifts, if any, occur in a graffiti writer's social identity through the processes of entering and exiting the graffiti subculture?*

Due to her stencil art graffiti, by subcultural terms Pixnit would more often be described as a "street artist" or "stencilist" rather than a graffiti writer. Even so, Pixnit's story perfectly illustrates the unique paradox of fame and anonymity at the crux of a graffiti writer's identity; a paradox that includes crafting a subcultural alter ego for public notoriety, while simultaneously remaining unknown in one's journey to fame. The graffiti writer social identity reflects a complex and polarized set of self-concepts. Thus,

identifying a writer as one who simply writes graffiti elides the intricacy of writers' identities and erroneously disregards the particular effects membership in the graffiti subculture can have on a writer's self-perceptions, social identification and public presentation.

The value of in-depth studies on human identities is revered by Richard Jenkins (2004) who writes: "Without identity there could be no human world" (p. 7). J. Patrick Williams (2011) also advocates for the exploration of identity, reminding us that identity has serious implications for the social sciences as we strive to comprehend humanity: "Becoming aware of the complexity of identity helps us be careful not to decide who people are too quickly" (p. 145). Jenkins (2004, 2008) and Williams (2011) pose a worthy challenge for researchers to create a body of literature that offers accurate conceptions and detailed insights on human identity. Williams' (2011) cautionary observation is particularly important to consider when researching underground, hidden populations, such as the graffiti subculture; a population often subject to speculations and stigmatization. This study acknowledges the complexity and significance of identifying with the graffiti subculture and takes into consideration the differing identities a writer holds at once.

Two types of identities were considered at the outset of this inquiry: *personal* identity, defined as one's self-concept based on the role one holds within the context of interpersonal relationships (Stryker, 1980; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Hogg et al., 1995) and *social* identity, described as an identity that represents group membership and is primarily active within the context of group related circumstances or activities (Tajfel &

Turner, 1979; Hogg et al., 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000; Worchel, Morales, Paez, & Deschamps, 1988; Abrams & Hogg, 1999; Halam, Reicher, & Reynolds, 2012). Consequently, two overarching theoretical paradigms were also considered. Identity Theory (Stryker, 1980; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Hogg et al., 1995), a theoretical framework for explaining personal identities, and Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Stets & Burke, 2000; Abrams & Hogg, 1999; Turner, 1999), a theoretical framework explaining social identities.

Graffiti writers possess both personal and social identities; however, the research presented here is fundamentally concerned with the graffiti writer social identity as subject to membership in the graffiti subculture. While this research was guided solely by Social Identity Theory, it is important to situate Social Identity Theory within a broader theoretical context that includes Identity Theory. Therefore, the basics of both theoretical frameworks are discussed. Moreover, contrasting Social Identity Theory with Identity Theory highlights the significance of graffiti writers' famous alter egos and anonymous personal identities.

Contributions to Scholarly Literature

Academic studies on the identities of graffiti writers are few. As a result, several gaps exist within the academic literature. This research addresses those gaps and offers further insights in areas lacking in-depth scholarly discussions, including: defining and conceptualizing the graffiti writer social identity, the fluidity of writers' social identities, identity shifts subject to the processes of entering and exiting the graffiti subculture, the

misrepresentation of the graffiti subculture as a youth subculture, and the underlying

paradox of fame and anonymity at the crux of the graffiti writer social identity.

The Graffiti Writer Social Identity

Social Identity Theory argues that individuals have certain identities that signal

their memberships in specific groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Hogg & Abrams, 1988;

Stets & Burke, 2000; Abrams & Hogg, 1999; Turner, 1999). Such identities are

considered a reflection of the collective's norms, values, behaviors, etc., and portray the

stereotypical or prototypical group member (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Burke & Stets,

2000). Researchers consider Social Identity Theory to be the most relevant theory for

examining the influence group membership has on members' identities (Hogg et al.,

1995; Stets & Burke, 2000). This study sought to understand participants' identities as

based on their membership in the graffiti subculture. Participants were asked to describe

who graffiti writers are, define the graffiti subculture and discuss their former self-

concepts as members of the graffiti subculture.

Social Identity Theory is a paradigm composed of multiple subtheories and

theoretical concepts concerning the development and agency of social identities. This

study also employed the subtheory of *self-categorization*. Self-categorization addresses

the process of identifying with others who share similar identity traits and values and

belong to the same social group (Stets & Burke, 2000; Haslam, 2001; Henri Tajfel,

(1981); Tajfel & Turner, 1979;Turner et al. 1987; Turner et al., 1994; Hogg et al. 1995;

Oakes, Haslam, & Reynolds, 1999). Graffiti writers share traits of being artistic and

daring. Writers also share values of fame and respect. Additionally, the theoretical

concept of *depersonalization* (a constituent of self-categorization) was deployed as an

explanation for the significance and purpose of anonymity in the graffiti subculture.

Depersonalization includes the modulation of personal identity characteristics that would

distinguish an individual as noticeably different from other group members (Hogg et al.,

1995; Stets & Burke, 2000; Postmes, Spears & Lea, 1999; Oakes, Haslam & Turner,

1998).

Avoiding a "Static Picture"

It is important to not overlook the fact that writers have not always been writers,

and most will not stay writers. In his book, *Social Identity,* Richard Jenkins (2004, 2008)

argues that the changeability of identity should be one focal point of research on self-

concepts, noting that identities are in continual flux and development. In her book *The*

Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinty and Identity in London and New York, Nancy

McDonald (2001) claims that studies often portray writers in a static existence. This

current study seeks to avoid a static picture of graffiti writers by questioning the

progression of the graffiti writer social identity. As the results show, the graffiti writer's

identity is influenced by membership and participation in the graffiti subculture, but these

identities are also subject to transformation. If a writer's identity is assumed to be fixed,

we lose sight of the identity shifts that occur through the processes of entering and exiting

the graffiti subculture. In addition to shifts in identity, this study addresses the social

context of such shifts. One of the most common reasons for exiting the graffiti subculture

is a writer's transition into adulthood. However, counter to what is suggested in the literature, a transition into adulthood should not be considered synonymous with exiting the graffiti subculture entirely.

Adult Members in a Youth Subculture

One characteristic commonly used as an identifier of graffiti writers is adolescence. The graffiti subculture is frequently portrayed as a *youth* subculture (Gastman & Neelon, 2010; Rahn, 2002; MacDonald, 2001; Castleman, 1982). Such a generalization automatically imposes upon a writer a youthful identity regardless of their age or maturity level Williams (2011) addresses the fallacy of subcultures being exclusive to young people. Williams (2011) writes:

> Subcultural affiliation is most likely to begin during adolescence, but its significance can last a lifetime. The concept of 'youth subcultures,' so commonly used in social-science writing, rhetorically denies the continuing significance of subcultural participation to those of us who have accidentally grown up and grown older over the years (p. ix-x).

Williams' perspective is relevant to this study. Participants in this study ranged in age from 32-36 years old. All but one participant indicated that they still feel connected to the graffiti subculture. Two participants reported still being active in the subculture, but in legal ways. While the degrees of participants' connections to the graffiti subculture have lessened, they have not been lost. Discussing the graffiti subculture as a youth subculture marginalizes some of its members. This study engages the problematic argument of

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"aging out" of a subculture and highlights the ways in which aging out may not adequately address the experience of some writers who are exiting the graffiti subculture.

Alter Ego Fame and Personal Anonymity

Little discussion in the academic literature is given to the paradox of fame and anonymity that underlies the construction of the graffiti writer social identity. Both fame (Snyder, 2009; MacDonald, 2001; Miller, 2002; Austin, 2001; Castleman, 1982; Lachmann, 1988; Cooper & Chalfant, 1984; Phillips, 1999; Docuyanan, 2000) and anonymity (Rodriguez & Clair, 1999; Pani & Sagliaschi, 2009; Rahn, 2002; Snyder, 2009) have been addressed separately in the literature, but this current study explored how the two are dually embedded within the identities of graffiti writers. The results of this research provide insights on this paradox and suggest that the balance of fame and anonymity is significant to maintaining a subcultural alter ego. Indeed, participants noted that each factor is significant to being a respected writer.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study employed a qualitative research approach including photo documentation of local graffiti, field work (attendance of public graffiti demonstrations and participants' gallery showings) and semi-structured interviews. Participants were located through four mechanisms: snowball sampling, key informants, networking at demonstrations and art openings, and recruiting through the social network site, *Facebook*. Participants were asked for verbal consent in order to maintain anonymity.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to offer participants a 'voice.' Interviews averaged one to two and a half hours utilizing an interview questionnaire consisting of eleven questions.

The data revealed that participants share a variety of identity traits, including a tendency and desire to take risks, artistic aptitude and appreciation for art, and a competitive drive to challenge themselves artistically. Participants also defined the graffiti subculture as a community, noting the significance of feeling a part of something in which they could relate to others who are similarly passionate about graffiti. Additionally, participants discussed a unique shift in their social identities as they entered the graffiti subculture and were no longer identified by their personal name, but instead by a tag name that represented a personal alter ego. Descriptions of identity shifts as a result of exiting the graffiti subculture were less definitive. Only one participant considered herself fully retired from the graffiti subculture. The rest of participants did not perceive themselves to be entirely retired. While some no longer considered themselves to be active writers, a more apt description of participants' subcultural statuses may be 'semi-retired.'

In the following chapter I review the body of literature on graffiti writers and their membership in the graffiti subculture. First, I address the history of graffiti and note the pioneering research that inspired scholars to investigate the graffiti subculture as a rich, complex and controversial network of graffiti writers. I explore the limited amount of literature that exists on entering the graffiti subculture. I then discuss the processes of becoming a graffiti writer, including mentorship and creating tag names to represent

writers' subcultural personas. I then address the factors of fame and anonymity in the

graffiti subculture. Finally, I discuss the limited literature on exiting the graffiti

subculture.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Countless cities across the United States showcase a vast amount of American graffiti. These illegal images and symbolic texts are often found coating the urban landscapes of city streets. Various types of graffiti mark city dumpsters, bridges, overpasses, trains, subway cars, walls of buildings, and frequently cover the facades of abandoned structures. As a result, urban dwellers come into contact with graffiti on a daily basis.

While the streets are laden with unauthorized markings, a limited number of researchers have managed to track down the individuals responsible for graffiti. Nonetheless, as academic studies have continued, researchers suggest that the graffiti subculture holds potential for helping us to understand society as a whole, as well as providing insight into groups that offer individuals alternative cultural experiences as a means to developing identities (MacDonald, 2001; Williams, 2011; Stocker et al., 1972; Rahn, 2000; Rodriguez & Clair, 1999; Ferrell, 1996, 1997).

While graffiti continues to be appreciated and admired by graffitists around the globe—and by many outside of the subculture—it is just as often considered visual pollution and presumed to be senseless acts of defacement (Castleman, 1982; Macdonald,

2001; Ferrell, 1995, 1996; Docuyanan, 2000). Yet it seems, despite the negative stigmas

and connotations associated with graffiti—and regardless of the public's differing

perspectives and recurrent civic arguments over how to define, interpret, and control it—

graffiti is undeniably here to stay and will continue to cover urban landscapes for years to

come.

This chapter provides an overview of the birth, history, and current

understandings of the graffiti subculture as an underground, alternative culture composed

of individuals who identify themselves as graffiti writers. The objective of this chapter is

to review the literature on entering and exiting the graffiti subculture, discuss the

fundamental aspects of subcultural membership, and to provide the reader with an

illustration of the graffiti writer identity. Additionally, core dynamics significant to

graffiti writers and their participation in the graffiti subculture are reviewed, including:

motives for becoming a writer and artistic career development. Finally, two of the most

significant characteristics defining the graffiti writer social identity, fame and anonymity,

are discussed.

The Birth of American Graffiti

The origin of American graffiti has been debated; however, most graffiti writers

and researchers charge the late 1960s, early 1970s, as the time period in which

contemporary graffiti first gained its practitioners. Two graffiti writers, "Taki 183" (

'Taki 183', 1971; Cooper & Chalfant, 1984; Snyder, 2009; Snyder, 2009; Gastman &

Neelon, 2011; Kennedy, 2011) and "CORNBREAD" (Gastman & Neelon, 2011; Moran,

2007; Snyder, 2009; Miller, 2002; Currier, 2010; Reiss, 2008) are often credited for bringing notoriety to a new, youth, pop culture movement of tagging and painting graffiti in the United States.

As a young bike messenger, Taki (a nickname for Demetrius) wrote his name, followed by the street number on which he lived (183), on the walls and structures of New York City as he traveled throughout the city running errands. As a result, Taki 183 ushered in a competition between NYC *taggers* competing to see who could scrawl their name on the most surfaces throughout the city. Taki 183 is most frequently recognized as the tagger who "spawned imitators" such as Joe 136, BARBARA 62, EEL 159, and inspired many other writers to take part in the competition ('Taki 183',1971; Gastman & Neelon, 2011; Kennedy, 2011). Taki 183 is also considered the first writer to catch the attention of local media, courting the public's eye and drawing attention from law enforcement to the issue of unauthorized branding of public spaces.

While Taki 183 may have been the first tagger publicly recognized, several years prior to Taki's fame, Daryl McCray—the "father of modern graffiti writing"—was quickly gaining notoriety throughout Philadelphia (Philadelphia City Paper, 2010). With high hopes for fame, CORNBREAD painted his tag on everything, everywhere (Moran, 2007). McCray quickly became infamous for his risky acts of graffiti, from marking police cars to tagging an elephant at the Philadelphia Zoo. In the documentary *Bomb It* (2007), McCray claims to be the "world's first graffiti artist," boasting of fame and respect for the risks he took. Taki 183 and CORNBREAD are said to have ushered in the graffiti movement. Since then, countless writers have joined together to establish a global

graffiti subculture. As the new world of graffiti expanded and the subculture was birthed, a new undertaking developed; scholars took interest in the subculture as an antithesis to mainstream culture.

Early Research

As a pioneer of research on graffiti, Craig Castleman (1982) set out to investigate the burgeoning culture of American graffiti in New York City during its infancy. Castelman (1982) conducted an exploratory study, introducing academia to a competitive and artistic, secret society arising within the youth culture of NYC. Soon after the start of his research, Castleman (1982) discovered that adolescent teenagers all throughout the city were engaging in a game of fame through prolific *tagging* on the streets and in the subway systems of NYC. Young competitors were aggressively marking subway cars with innovative, stylized letters and colorful designs. Castleman (1982) also discovered that this newfound sport was quickly spurring city officials, along with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), to fervently take action against the newest form of vandalism to hit NYC.

Castleman's (1982) study was purely descriptive, discussing *what* was taking place at the birth of graffiti writing. At the time of Castleman's (1982) research, information on graffiti, and the kids who were making it popular, was limited. Consequently, Castleman (1982) wanted to avoid speculating too soon as to *why* the new subculture was emerging. Castleman (1982) notes in the preface of his book *Getting Up,* a professor's advice to use a documentary style approach: "This isn't the time to worry

about *why* people write and fight graffiti, because we aren't even sure yet just what it is that they are doing. Find that out first. People can argue about what it all means later" (p. x). As a result, Castleman (1982) approached his topic of interest with an introductory breadth of inquiry.

In the early days of subway graffiti, two photographers, Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant (1984), documented the pervasive images of caricatures and bubble letter tag names painted on the subway cars of NYC. Additionally, Cooper and Chalfant (1984) spent countless hours speaking with young writers in efforts to learn more about their culture. Together Cooper and Chalfant (1984) published one of the first books, *Subway Art,* offering the public insider knowledge on the graffiti subculture with photos of rare and elaborate train *pieces*. *Subway Art* described graffiti's most basic constituents at the time: subcultural jargon, spray paint techniques, writers and crews, graffiti styles and cartoons, and the opposition writers were facing by local authorities who would raid train yards and tunnels to capture graffiti vandals. The book also revealed that younger, less experienced writers could be pressured by authorities to act as informants for the apprehension of veteran writers. Today *Subway Art* is considered one of the "classics" in graffiti literature.

Jeff Ferrell (1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 2010) is one of the more experienced and renowned scholars to study the world of graffiti. Much of Ferrell's (1995, 1996, 2010) research focuses on the deviant and unlawful nature of graffiti, including public reactions and the criminal legislation of it. Ferrell's book *Crimes of Style* (1996) is a case study of the early graffiti subculture in Denver, Colorado. In it Ferrell (1996) recounts several

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conversations with local writers and notes the history of graffiti. Ferrell (1996) also

recalls his own participation in graffiti-related activities during field research.

In addition to political commentary, Ferrell (1998) has specifically discussed

freight train graffiti. He claims that trains are used to mobilize graffiti in order to broadly

exhibit a writer's works, stretching the geographic boundaries in order to significantly

increase the size of one's audience. Ferrell (1998) refers to the freight train graffiti as a

contributing factor to the recent development of "criminal and deviant subcultures as

dislocated symbolic communities" (p. 587). Ferrell's (1997, 1998) criminological

expertise and cultural awareness continues to inspire questions about what the graffiti

subculture says about "cultural spaces" and the impact of efforts put forth by authority

figures to govern cultural spaces.

Castleman (1982), Cooper and Chalfant (1984), and Ferrell (1995, 1996, 1998) all

helped forge a new arena of research focused on graffiti. Consequently, graffiti research

has progressed down multiple avenues of analysis as scholars continue to address a

variety of graffiti-related subjects, including: motives for doing graffiti and joining the

graffiti subculture (Halsey & Young, 2006; White, 2001; Pani & Sagliaschi, 2009;

Taylor, 2010; Docuyanan, 2000; Snyder, 2009; MacDonald, 2001; Phillips, 1999;

Lachmann, 1988; MacDiarmid & Downing, 2012), graffiti as a means of self-expression

and identity formation (MacDonald, 2001; Lombard, 2013; Ferrell, 1995, 1997;

Rodriguez & Clair, 1999; Rahn, 2002; Austin, 2001; Klingman, Shalev, & Pearlman,

2000), deviance, criminality, law enforcement, and the prosecution of graffiti (Ferrell,

1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 2010; Austin, 2001; Miller, 2002; Schaefer, 2004; Cooper &

Chalfant, 1984; Edwards, 2009), mainstreaming graffiti and subsequent careers (Snyder, 2009; MacDiarmid & Downing, 2012), resistance and public space (Rahn, 2002; Ferrell, 1997, 1998; Ferrell & Weide, 2010; Halsey & Young 2006; MacDiarmid & Downing, 2012; Snyder 2009; Lachmann, 1988; Docuyanan, 2000), the legitimization of graffiti and graffiti as an art form (Kramer, 2010; Lachmann, 1988; MacDiarmid & Downing, 2012; Mettler, 2012; White, 2001; Klingman, Shalev, & Pearlman, 2000) entering and exiting the graffiti subculture (Rahn, 2002; MacDiarmid & Downing, 2012; Snyder 2009; MacDonald, 2001), becoming a graffiti writer (Snyder, 2009; Lachmann, 1988; Cooper & Chalfant, 1984; Gastman & Neelon, 2011), and ultimately what membership in the graffiti subculture (sometimes referred to as a *community*) entails (Miller, 2002; Rahn, 2002; MacDonald, 2001; Ferrell, 1996, 1998; MacDiarmid & Downing, 2012; Cooper & Chalfant, 1984). One thing researchers quickly discovered was that the world of graffiti was rapidly seducing individuals from all backgrounds and life experiences (Gastman & Neelon, 2010; Miller, 2002; Austin, 2001; Snyder, 2009; Rahn, 2002; Castleman, 1982).

Entering the Graffiti Subculture

In comparison to all the research conducted on the graffiti subculture, only a small fraction of studies discuss the process(es) of entry. A review of the literature did not render any studies outlining (in detail) the course taken from outsider to subculture member. This observation indicates a need for further inquiry into the specifics of entering the graffiti subculture. In spite of this need, researchers have made progress towards understanding the motives for why an individual would voluntarily enter an

arena of illegal activity, physical risk, and sometimes violent competition for the sake of doing graffiti. Prominent motives include: fame and recognition (Castleman, 1982; Lachmann, 1988; Snyder, 2009; Miller, 2002; Austin, 2001; Cooper & Chalfant, 1984), a thrill and adrenaline rush from doing something dangerous and illegal (Halsey & Young, 2006; Taylor, 2010; Pani & Sagliaschi, 2009; White, 2001), and to gain a sense of masculinity and autonomy (MacDonald, 2001; Lombard, 2013; White, 2001).

Fame and Recognition

Writers thirst for recognition. Several scholars assert that one of the more significant motives for becoming a graffiti writer is to gain fame (Snyder, 2009; MacDonald, 2001; Miller, 2002; Austin, 2001; Castleman, 1982; Lachmann, 1988; Cooper & Chalfant, 1984; Phillips, 1999; Docuyanan, 2000). Snyder (2009) describes the act of graffiti as "the public application of an alias for the purpose of fame" (p.33), while Halsey and Young (2006) note that "the sense of *publicity* that graffiti can provide for writers is another important reason for participating in the culture" (p. 279). Castleman (1982) recalls an urban legend about a "little old lady" writing "Pray" all throughout NYC in almost every single telephone booth. A few writers claimed to have met her, but there was never any proof that the legend was true. While the actual identity of the writer (or little old lady) may forever remain unknown, the fame of Pray keeps the legend going.

MacDonald (2001) points out that "fame, respect and status are not naturally evolving byproducts of this subculture, they are its sole reason for being, and a writer's

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sole reason for being there" (p.68). With the objective of fame, comes the prerequisite

that your name permeates the city, claiming every surface with potential to act as a

canvas. And the quickest way to gain fame is to become obsessed with tagging. Through

the act of tagging a writer is able to infiltrate towns and cities in a pseudo-crusade of self-

promotion. Castleman (1982) states that a writer who can repeatedly "get up" is highly

revered by other writers. In the days of NYC subway graffiti, before new methods of

cleaning trains put an end to the mobile galleries running between the city's boroughs,

the title "King of the line" was given to the writer who was able to get up the most on a

specific subway route. Of course, such titles are awarded via informal voting and/or

heated debates (Castleman, 1982).

Although there is such a thing as "instant fame," most fame comes through hard

work, an incredible drive to get up and a memorable graffiti style (Castleman, 1982;

Austin, 2001; Miller, 2002; MacDonald, 2001; Snyder, 2009). A writer's style should be

eye catching. In the graffiti subculture, style is considered the foundation of graffiti and

can make or break a writers' fame (Gastman & Neelon, 2011; MacDonald, 2001; Snyder,

2009; Miller 2002; Austin, 2001; Cooper & Chalfant, 1984; Ferrell, 1997).

Most writers begin developing their skills and personal style on paper in the pages

of their sacred *black books* (Snyder, 2009; Austin, 2001; Miller, 2002). Because of its

significance, writers are often judged quite severely on the complexity and originality of

their own style (MacDonald, 2001). Members of the graffiti subculture who have an

unworthy or underdeveloped style may be referred to as *toys* (Miller, 2002; Austin, 2001;

Rahn, 2002; Snyder, 2009; MacDonald, 2001; Lachmann, 1988). However, as Castleman

(1982) discovered, poor style is somewhat forgivable if a writer manages to demonstrate an impressive ability to get up. Since graffiti is oftentimes short lasting, in order to gain fame, writers must demonstrate creativity and ambition to get up (Castleman, 1982).

Finally, the quickest way to gain fame is to have your graffiti immortalized by the media (Miller, 2002; Castleman, 1982). However, there is a fine line between being immortalized and committing a cultural infraction by wooing the media. Rahn (2002) explains:

> The attitude to fame among writers in the community is paradoxical. Writers desire the notoriety of having their name painted everywhere and wish to receive the recognition for it, but they cannot appear to want this recognition too badly. A writer must be discreet about any media attention, despite the amount, to retain his or her standing. Individuals who are obsessed with being interviewed and photographed, or claim to speak for the graf community at large, will eventually be dissed and crossed out (p. 20).

While graffiti that ends up in print or captured on video secures a writer's fame, a writer must always appear outwardly humble.

Resistance and Risky Thrills

Several scholars address the illegality, risk and rebelliousness of writing graffiti, in particular noting the growing resistance and opposition between writers, city officials, and law enforcement (Rodriguez & Clair, 1999; Ferrell, 1995, 1996, 1997; 2010; Cooper & Chalfant, 1984; Castleman, 1982; Halsey & Young, 2006; Pani & Sagliaschi, 2009). Law enforcement and citizen vigilantes dedicated to keeping the streets free of "visual pollution" devote a great amount of time and resources to a publically declared "war on

graffiti" and combat with its insurgents (Dickinson, 2008; Halsey & Young, 2006; Iveson, 2010; Austin, 2001; Reiss, 2007; Ferrell, 1996; White, 2001). For graffiti writers though, opposition is not a threat; it is a thrilling challenge (Taylor, 2012; MacDonald, 2001). Accordingly, scholars have discussed the incredible draw to the risk and rebelliousness of graffiti, including the strong emotions felt through the act of doing graffiti and the excitement that follows (Halsey & Young, 2006; Taylor, 2012; Pani & Sagliaschi, 2009).

Jeff Ferrell (1997) and Rob White (2001) both note the parasitic relationship between anti-graffiti protesters and the writers who experience an adrenaline rush in resisting social control. Ferrell (1997) explains:

> Emerging from the confluence of practiced artistry and dangerous illegality, the adrenaline rush defines for writers the wired excitement of writing graffiti. Grounded as it is in illegality and danger, the adrenaline rush grows in intensity and pleasure as aggressive anti-graffiti campaigns proliferate (p. 29).

White (2001) adds to Ferrell's observation, noting that for some graffiti writers, "illegality is precisely the point…sending a message to those in authority that the rules will not be adhered to" (p. 259). Furthermore, Pani and Sagliaschi (2009) write that their interviews with 162 adolescents revealed a pattern of compulsive behavior and need to "show off" by tagging everything. Pani and Sagliaschi (2009) also note that participants expressed they "felt hooked" on doing vandalistic graffiti (p. 1027). Corresponding with this notion of addiction, Halsey and Young (2006) noted that some of their participants likened the pleasures of doing graffiti to the pleasures of drug use.

With looming potential for writers to be apprehended by law enforcement, a cat

and mouse game ensues throughout the streets, subway systems and train yards of major

cities (Castleman, 1982; Austin, 2001; Ferrell, 1996). For writers, the objective of the

game is not necessarily to end it with one winner, but to embrace the jeopardy of

committing a crime; therefore, risking arrest and prosecution for the sake of fame.

Castleman (1982) learned of writers' addictions to risk taking when he interviewed "Lee"

of the graffiti crew "Fabulous Five." Lee describes for Castleman (1982) his first major

feat in graffiti; painting an entire subway train of ten cars with fellow crew members.

Lee's story is filled with emotion as he expresses the feelings of fear, paranoia, triumph

and pride—all of which are a part of the thrill. According to Lee, the high of seeing one's

work speed down the track is an exhilarating payoff and ego boost. The risks to do

graffiti are perilous, but for writers, the adrenaline is worth it.

Autonomy and Masculinity

To date, Nancy MacDonald (2001) appears to be the only known researcher to

detail the role of graffiti in establishing masculinity. McDonald (2001) claims that young

boys participate in the graffiti subculture as a "rite of passage," entering as boys and

exiting as men. MacDonald (2001) reasons that developing the identity of an adult male

is a significant motive for some adolescents to become writers, claiming young males are

motivated by a need to establish and demonstrate personal masculinity through

participation in the "tough" and dangerous graffiti subculture. MacDonald (2001) also

draws a connection between graffiti and an adolescent's search for independence.

MacDonald (2001) notes that her participants felt part of becoming a man means gaining autonomy. According to MacDonald (2001), the graffiti subculture offers young males an escape from authority figures. Young writers have the opportunity and cultural space needed to establish who they want to be without the criticisms, expectations and judgments of oppressive social institutions or the oversight of parents or other adults. MacDonald's (2001) interviews expose participants' frustrations of being young and feeling powerless prior to participating in the subculture. MacDonald adds: "These writers all talked of their desire for independence, the need to stand on their own two feet and be recognized as their own person. With nowhere else to do this, they turned to the subculture" (p. 186). Inside the graffiti subculture, MacDonald's (2001) participants felt they could claim freedom and control—sometimes for the first time—as autonomous agents.

Yet, Halsey and Young (2006) critique MacDonald's (2001) focus by noting that "constructs such as masculinity—like constructs of class, race, ethnicity, age, intelligence—are in the order of the archetype or the mass. As such, they apply to *no* body in particular" (p. 294). Halsey and Young (2006) argue that discussing or placing graffiti in the context of masculinity is different from defining the purpose of doing graffiti. They argue that the primary purpose writers participate in the graffiti subculture is that it is satisfying, producing pleasure and pride, not masculinity. If masculinity were at the core of a writer's reasoning for writing, but doing graffiti did not provide substantial pleasure and respect, writers would find alternatives for building masculinity. Halsey and Young (2006) contend that it is actually counterproductive to suggest that

what writers do is "in terms of masculine scripts…" (p. 294). They claim that doing graffiti is ultimately a form of hedonism.

Still, Kara-Jane Lombard (2013) argues that the graffiti subculture embodies the ideological components of masculinity as conceptualized by the "colonizer" or Western, white, patriarchal society, including qualities such as: authority, competition, physical strength, aggression, power, activity, domination, violence, independence, and pride (p. 179). Lombard (2013) describes writers' masculinities as "graffiti(ed) masculinities" and asserts that the graffiti subculture is a cultural environment in which writers can develop the aforementioned qualities and "subvert as well as conform to dominant, hegemonic notions of masculinity" (p. 188).

Becoming a Writer

According to Greg Snyder (2009), not even a lack of artistic style—although a bit of an obstacle to overcome—necessarily impedes someone from becoming a writer. Snyder (2009) claims, "Anyone who can get large quantities of paint, is able to fight, and is willing to break the law can become a graffiti writer" (p.5). Snyder (2009) adds: "Novice writers with bad style and poor technique will be ridiculed by their peers, and they often quit, but with proper instruction and practice even people who cannot draw can develop an adequate tag and throw-up" (ibid). For beginning writers, the adoption of a tag name and mentorship by an accomplished, more experienced graffiti writer, are two of the first steps in becoming a skilled writer (Cooper & Chalfant, 1984; Snyder, 2009; Rahn, 2002; Miller, 2002; MacDonald, 2001). Furthermore, fashioning a tag name is

subsequently linked to developing an alter ego (MacDonald, 2001; Lombard, 2013; Ferrell, 1995, 1997; Rodriguez & Clair, 1999; Rahn, 2002; Austin, 2001). Ultimately, tags serve to protect the true identity of a writer *and* identify one's subcultural persona.

Mentorship

Mentorship is key to the process of becoming a graffiti writer (Rahn, 2002; MacDonald, 2001; Miller, 2002; Castleman, 1982; Snyder, 2009; MacDiarmid & Downing, 2012; Docuyanan, 2000; Lachmann, 1988). Castleman (1982) notes that young writers will often seek out more experienced writers to "teach them the ropes" (p. 24). Additionally, Castleman (1982) observes that "writers seem to enjoy the role of teacher and take pride in the accomplishments of their students, as well as take pleasure in the admiration and respect they receive from them" (p. 24). Thus, predecessors typically have one or more protégés.

Snyder (2009) discovered the significance of mentorship when he spoke with MEK, an experienced writer who has mentored several writers in the past. MEK explained that mentors help younger writers learn how to develop a style; a process that can be tedious and difficult to master on one's own. MEK tells Snyder:

> Mentors also help out with the final outline, which is once you get the piece up on the wall, you do a final outline and that takes skills. If you mess that up the whole piece could be ruined, so the older writer, who has a stake in transmitting the style of crew, will usually do the final outline. Another thing is that when you give an outline to a younger writer, it's best if they copy it completely. Young bucks are always trying to change stuff, but you never learn that way (p. 91).

Snyder learns that MEK was never himself mentored. At the time MEK was starting out, there weren't many writers around to guide him, so he started out by copying the styles of "old masters." Today, mentorship is a standard part of becoming a writer.

Although other researchers have touched on the role of mentors, Janice Rahn (2000) appears to be the only researcher to have made mentorship in the graffiti subculture a primary focus for research. Rahn's (2002) book, *Painting without Permission: Hip-Hop Graffiti Subculture*, offers insight on the graffiti community through the lens of pedagogical theory. Rahn (2002) aimed to inform youth workers and educators on the ways in which youth can be motivated to learn from one another through peer mentorship relationships. After substitute teaching a high school art class, Rahn's (2002) research was inspired by the mentorship relationships she witnessed taking place in the graffiti subculture. Rahn (2002) was struck by the eagerness and passion among young writers who had negative or apathetic learning experiences in school, yet were demonstrating large efforts to learn the trade of graffiti.

Tags

A tag name is a graffiti writer's signature and distinguishes their subcultural identity from others. Executing a unique and consistent tag is the first sign that an individual is on the verge of becoming a respected graffiti writer. Much of the graffiti encountered in major cities exhibits stylized letters spelling out the tag names of graffiti writers and/or crews. A tag name—typically different from a writer's actual name—may be seen written with nothing else around it or signing a graffiti piece, much in the same

way artists sign their artwork (Mailer, 9174; Cooper & Chalfant, 1982; Miller, 2002; Gastman & Neelon, 2011; Austin, 2001; Ferrell, 1996, 1998; White, 2001). Tags are generally scrawled upon the surfaces of high traffic regions for a vast audience of observers to view. Most importantly, as noted by White (2001), observing a tag on a surface communicates the message 'I'm here' and 'This too is my space' (p. 255).

In the opening chapter of his book, *The Faith of Graffiti,* Norman Mailer (1974) addresses the significance of the tag name. Without the constituent of a symbolic tag, the subcultural essence of a writer is lost. The tag is a foundation for a writer's career and identity. The tag is what proudly displays a writer's personal style. The tag challenges a writer's physical boundaries, enabling them to be omnipresent in a city. But ultimately, a tag name transcends its symbolism, style, location, and even the personal identity of the individual writer; Mailer writes: the "name is the *faith* of graffiti" (p. 8).

MacDonald (2001) explains that writers' tag names are chosen for various reasons; some are symbolic and others may be chosen for their specific letter combination (graffiti writers are typography gurus). Cooper and Chalfant (1984) comment on the nature of tag names:

> The name is at the center of all graffiti art. The writer usually drops his given name and adopts a new one—a new subcultural identity. He can make it up, inherit an established name from an old writer, become part of a series such as Take One, Take Five, and so on (p. 45).

A writer's unique tag is a part of their alter ego's identity. Ferrell (1996) notes:

> Tags both name writers and establish their identity…While writers may come to paint or mark their tags on back walls and dumpsters…this activity only begins to get at the meaning and importance of tags for writers. The public visibility of tags as physical residues derives from the subcultural significance of tags as stylized markers, as components of writers' social interactions and identities (p. 58).

In other words, tags function for a purpose beyond distinguishing who wrote what graffiti; they introduce and establish identities within the subcultural network of writers.

Introductions between writers are often virtual before actual. Writers typically introduce themselves by way of their tag names on graffitied surfaces before meeting (if at all) face to face (MacDonald, 2001; Ferrell, 1998). Similar to someone introducing themselves by stating their name, writers introduce themselves by painting their name (MacDonald, 2001; Austin, 2001). Ferrell (1998) points out that tags are placed in areas likely to be visited by other writers as a way to ensure further introductions. Tags offer a virtual "co-presence" between writers that unites anonymous individuals, resulting in a system of communication that is almost entirely written.

Tag names are a fundamental component in the world of graffiti. Writers showcase their artistic skills and innovative abilities by creating tags with worthy style. But perhaps the most significant value of tags is that they allow writers to be anonymously identified. Anonymity is essential in the graffiti subculture and the use of an alter ego makes anonymity possible.

Alter Egos and Subcultural Persona

One of the primary functions of a tag name is to represent a writer's alter ego or subcultural identity. Establishing a second identity in the graffiti subculture is a common practice for graffiti writers (MacDonald, 2001; Ferrell, 1995, 1997; Halsey & Young, 2006; Rodriguez & Clair, 1999; Rahn, 2002; Austin, 2001; Klingman, Shalev, & Pearlman, 2000). MacDonald (2001) writes: "Graffiti writers accommodate…two self-contained personas; one 'real life' and the other 'subcultural'" (p. 217). MacDonald's (2001) observation brings to light the unique complexity of identity in the graffiti subculture. But despite this insight, a review of the literature turned up limited discussion on the details of graffiti writers' subcultural personas. Researchers such as Ferrell (1997) and Rahn (2002) have alluded to certain aspects of graffiti writer's identities; however, their discussions have only addressed the matter tangentially.

Ferrell (1997) argues that conventional society offers little cultural space for adolescents to develop their identities. Therefore, youths must carve out their own social arenas for establishing who they are. Ferrell (1997) links the graffiti subculture to the significance of manufacturing cultural space for the construction of identity. Ferrell (1997) writes:

> Cultural space denotes those arenas in which young people and others construct meaning, perception, and identity…while powerful adults attempt to define and impose cultural space, less powerful young people attempt to unravel this imposition, to carve out their own spaces for shaping identity and taking some control over everyday life (p. 22-23).

While Ferrell (1997) addresses identity as significant to writers, the primary focus of his article is the "criminalization of young people's alternative cultural spaces…" (p. 24). Identity is therefore noted as central to the issue at hand, but given little more than a brief acknowledgement.

Janice Rahn (2002) writes that a lot of writers want to escape their everyday identity to create a new, better one. Rahn's (2002) also notes that an alter ego allows for freedom to write things that a writer would not normally write. The anonymity of one's personal identity empowers a writer to reveal a different side of themselves, a side that may not typically be associated with who they are in real life.

Rahn (2002) also notes that graffiti writers begin tagging at a crucial age, the age at which individuals normally begin searching for their identity and associating themselves with others who are likeminded. Rahn (2002) points out that adolescence is a time when identities are vulnerable and youths are looking for a social structure that will allow them to be heard, to be autonomous, to establish a community, and to organize group values; the graffiti subculture fulfills such desires. Rahn's (2002) research does infer a link between identity and the graffiti subculture, but does not cover the specifics of a graffiti writer identity.

To date, MacDonald (2001) appears to be one of the few (if not the only) researchers to have investigated in-depth the nature of identity in the graffiti subculture. MacDonald (2001) refers to a writer's tag name as their "virtual identity," whose name we see written on the wall, but who exists only on a metaphysical level. The virtual identity operates as a "stand in" that remains present even after the writer has left the

graffitied area. Furthermore, MacDonald (2001) notes that writers distinguish between a 'real' and 'subcultural' life when participating in the graffiti subculture. Subsequently, a writer's identity becomes fractured to accommodate two separate worlds. An additional identity evolves that only operates within the context of graffiti-related activities.

MacDonald (2001) equates joining the graffiti subculture to a writer's rebirth; including adopting a new subcultural name and customizing an alter ego specific to their graffiti writer self-concept. MacDonald (2001) claims that a writer's alter ego is conceptualized as the person they wish they could be. MacDonald (2001) notes that through a subcultural persona a young writer is able to visualize themselves as the "successful, famous, respected person that they may not be able to be elsewhere. Essentially this identity is their own route to self-actualization or the American Dream" (p. 189). Within the graffiti subculture, a writer escapes their real life to enter the American Dream by making their true identity anonymous.

Anonymity

Personal anonymity is at the crux of a graffiti writer's identity. In his book, *Banksy: Wall and Piece,* Banksy (2005) refers to the ultimate paradox of identity in the graffiti subculture: anonymity is key to fame. Banksy, who is considered the most famous, anonymous graffiti artist, remarks: "Nobody ever listened to me until they didn't know who I was" (p. 13). The mystery of Banksy's true identity has been a source of speculation both inside and outside of the graffiti subculture for several years now. As

Banksy travels the globe, he leaves behind images that are unmistakably "Bansky," but fail to reveal his true identity.

Graffiti offers writers anonymity; protecting them from law enforcement and societal judgment. Graffiti also allows writers to communicate openly any offensive or controversial perspectives without negative repercussions or reprisal (Rodriguez & Clair, 1999; Pani & Sagliaschi, 2009). But beyond avoiding undesirable consequences, writers seem to enjoy anonymity. One of Rahn's (2002) interviewees, "Dstrbo," expressed his pleasure in being anonymous:

> One of my favorite things about [graffiti] is the anonymity. I can get away with making public art and no one has to know it's me. I tell my friends about it but I'm not really looking to get recognition for it in the way a professional artist would want exposure or promotion (p. 40).

Graffiti writers are known for being unknown. Snyder (2009) notes that there are no prerequisites to the outer appearance of a graffiti writer and therefore, unless caught in the act, a writer can easily maintain anonymity in the eyes of the public. Snyder (2009) also notes that when writers remain anonymous, they have control over when, where and to whom they reveal their secret identities.

Exiting the Graffiti Subculture

Shortly after the New York Times article, *'Taki' 183 Spawns Pen Pals,* announced to NYC that the graffiti writing movement had officially commenced, Taki retired 183. No longer feeling a need to prove anything on the streets, and no longer possessing anonymity, Taki lost interest in being a graffiti writer. Taki explained his

sudden retirement; he was "ready to move ahead and be a responsible adult" (Gastman & Neelon, 2011). Like so many scholars, Taki's explanation depicts the graffiti subculture as a scene for young kids without the duties of adulthood. In other words, the graffiti subculture is a subculture of writers who "age out" once they hit adulthood.

Graffiti Youth

Despite the diversity of individuals who join the graffiti subculture, there appears to be one identifier taken for granted: age. Research suggests that most writers begin doing graffiti in their teenage years. Unsurprisingly, the graffiti subculture is frequently portrayed as a youth subculture (Gastman & Neelon, 2011; Ferrell, 1997; MacDonald, 2001; Rahn, 2002; Austin, 2001; White 2001 Dickinson, 2008; Phillips, 1999). In their book, *The History of American Graffiti*, Roger Gastman and Caleb Neelon (2011) note the young age at which most writers entered the graffiti subculture in the early 1970s, claiming that most memberships typically only lasted throughout a writer's teenage years:

> Only a handful of those involved were over the age of twenty, with the vast majority of artists between the ages of twelve and eighteen, a pattern that continued well into the 1980s. Graffiti can claim something that no other art movement can: It was entirely created and developed by kids. No grown-ups allowed (p. 23)!

Nancy MacDonald's (2001) research also suggests that most writers begin writing at a young age. Albeit, MacDonald (2001) may have taken the age of her subjects for granted; primarily concentrating on young writers and narratives of former writers'

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adolescent years. MacDonald (2001) writes: "I question why most graffiti writers are boys. I question why most 'active' writers (those writing regularly) are young, around their teens or early twenties" (p.6). From the start of her research, MacDonald's (2001) chief efforts were to understand the *young* male writer. Her language, including the terms "boys" and "girls," portrays the graffiti subculture—whether intentionally or not—in the same light Gastman and Neelon (2011) do, as a mischievous kids' club.

As an educator, Rahn (2002) took notice of school aged writers. Consequently, Rahn's (2002) interviewees were all teens or young adults who were asked to discuss their experiences as students. Rahn's (2002) study is another example of how the literature on graffiti writers tends to depict the graffiti subculture as a subculture exclusive to youth.

Naturally, when research presents the graffiti subculture as a youth subculture, the assumption is that writers retire or leave the graffiti scene upon adulthood. A review of the literature revealed that research on writers exiting the graffiti subculture is minimal. Only two studies were found to offer a fair discussion on the experience(s) of leaving the subculture (MacDonald, 2001; MacDiarmid and Downing, 2012). Both studies discuss an *aging out* process that suggests young writers leave the subculture once they transition into adulthood with adult lifestyles and responsibilities.

Aging Out

Taki's recollection of his retirement is reminiscent of MacDonald's (2001) claim; writers leave the graffiti subculture when adult responsibilities become reality. MacDonald (2001) concludes that writers in their teen years are likely testing out their masculinity for the first time; once a writer 'matures' and becomes more experienced in the subculture, there is less testing: "With fame, respect and status under their belt, or proof that their masculinity is valid, worthy and 'real', older writers can afford to slow down a bit" (p. 222). MacDonald (2001) notes that once older writers feel they have proven themselves, motives change:

> The emphasis changes and graffiti becomes a form of expression, rather than a source of respect; a demonstration of talent, rather than a display of courage. At this point, a writer's illegal career tails off, the identity that was nourished by it fades and a change in self-definition appears to take place (p. 220).

MacDonald's (2001) description of writers maturing, presents retirement from the graffiti subculture as a gradual process, a coming of age experience.

In contrast to MacDonald (2001), Castleman (1984) does not present the end of a writer's career as a process of aging out. Rather, Castleman (1984) notes that a writer's departure from the graffiti subculture can be sudden, whether age is a factor or not: "with a few exceptions, writers are considered to have retired once they stop writing, and they are forgotten quickly by most of the writers who are still active" (p. 21). As MacDonald (2001) observes, if a writer has not established their legacy by "proving" oneself a memorable writer, their subcultural identity may die as quickly as their graffiti is removed from the city's surfaces.

To date, Laura MacDiarmid and Steven Downing (2012) present the most detailed analysis of writers exiting the graffiti subculture. MacDiarmid and Downing (2012) note that the process of leaving the subculture can be a "rough" aging out with writers *drifting* in and out of subcultural participation and illegal activities. The research of MacDiarmid and Downing (2012) employed a life-course perspective and revealed that some writers experience a deep inner turmoil as they struggle to end their participation in the graffiti subculture. This struggle is often prompted by a consideration of professional opportunities to create art, but residual desires and opportunities to paint illegally. MacDiarmid and Downing (2012) claim that writers frequently do not want to distance themselves from their subcultural companions, but also desire opportunities to "mainstream" their artistic abilities and make careers out of legally painting graffiti. Furthermore, MacDiarmid and Downing (2012) note that exiting the graffiti subculture and aging out of graffiti writing is not an absolute or irreversible process; thus writers may find themselves drifting between the deviant subculture and mainstream, conventional society.

Additionally, MacDiarmid and Downing (2012) point out that most studies focus on a writer's extreme immersion in the graffiti subculture and fail to acknowledge a difficult point of impasse between remaining a writer and conforming to mainstream artist. Thus MacDiarmid and Downing (2012) contend that aging out of the graffiti subculture can be convoluted process. Finally, MacDiarmid and Downing (2012) note that a transition into adulthood and move away from illegal graffiti is often followed by the legitimizing of past graffiti behaviors. In other words, it is not uncommon for a writer

to use the skills and knowledge they learned from participation in the graffiti subculture

to crossover into a lawful career or hobby.

On the Job Training

Greg Snyder (2009) has studied the development of professional careers as a

result of past participation in the graffiti subculture. In his book *Graffiti Lives*, Snyder

(2009) discusses the tendency for graffiti writers to define themselves according to what

they *do*, not according to personal attributes such as race, gender, age, religious

affiliation, etc. What writers *do*, notes Snyder (2009), is write graffiti. Snyder's (2009)

participants claim that their time spent obsessing over and executing graffiti was on the

job training for future jobs in the commerce of professional art.

One of Snyder's (2009) most significant observations counters arguments made

by 'quality of life' advocates that suggest most graffiti writers leap from graffiti writer to

hardened criminal. In reality, Snyder (2009) found that many writers have established

professional careers using the skills they developed from doing graffiti. Snyder (2009)

writes:

> There is a broad range of career opportunities that successful writers have forged,
> from professional aerosol muralists and fine artists to graphic designers and
> clothing designers, as well as the numerous careers within the graffiti industry,
> which include documenting the culture in magazines, videos, and websites or
> supplying a global network of writers with graffiti supplies from paint to caps to
> specialized inks (p.10).

Snyder's (2009) research led him to conclude that participation in the graffiti subculture should not be viewed as a dead end criminal hobby; rather it should be recognized that some writers have actually used their experiences with graffiti to forge legitimate careers.

Summary

The literature presented here informs readers of the historical and present day understandings of graffiti writers and the subculture to which they belong. As an alternative cultural space for identity development, the graffiti subculture allows writers a place to experiment with their identities as they seek fame for alter egos and make their personal identities anonymous. Motives for becoming a graffiti writer, processes of mentorship and choosing a tag name were reviewed here in order to establish key features of entering the graffiti subculture. A discussion on exiting the graffiti subculture includes reviewing two studies that suggest graffiti writers age out of the graffiti subculture. Finally, fame and anonymity were discussed as fundamental characteristics of writers' identities.

CHAPTER III

THEORY: GROUP MEMBERSHIP AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

Human beings possess a broad spectrum of identities. But identity is a social

phenomenon. Scholars point out that our identities develop and operate within social

contexts (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Stryker, 1980; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Turner, Oakes,

Haslam & McGarty, 1994; Haslam, Reicher & Reynolds, 2012; Hogg, Terry & White,

1995; Hogg & Abrams, 2001; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987; Stryker

& Burke, 2000; Jenkins, 2004; Jenkins, 2008; Stets & Burke, 2000; Turner, 1999;

Wetherell, 1996; Calhoun, 1994). Our relationships and interactions are saturated with

conscious and unconscious processing of human identities on both implicit and explicit

levels. In its most basic form, identity is that part of our 'selves' that is expressed within

the contexts of relationships (Williams, 2011).

As communal beings we continually strive to figure out *who* others are, while at

the same time communicating to others who *we* are. Additionally, "we work at presenting

ourselves so that others will work out who we are along the lines that we wish them to"

(Jenkins, 2004, p.6). Essentially, identities provide those we encounter with a

comprehensible version of who we are—often a simplified or stereotypical version—to

keep interactions manageable and sustained—even if only temporarily (Stryker, 1980;

Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Jenkins, 2004; Hogg et al., 1995). Knowing who someone is, and

is not, helps us to determine how we will interact (if at all) with those we encounter

(Stryker, 1980; Jenkins, 2004). Richard Jenkins (2004) stresses the significance of identity for an organized social world, noting that without a system of identification, humans would be in the same position as that of animals, using primal instincts such as smell and non-verbal communication to dictate our social interactions. Jenkins (2004) writes: "Without identity there could be no human world" (p. 7). Fundamentally, social life requires the conceptualization and presence of identities for its mere existence. In effect, identities reflect social life (Stryker, 1980; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987; Turner, 1999; Hogg & Abrams, 1988).

The process of identification cannot be escaped as long as there is, or has been, social interactions or human relationships of some sort (Jenkins, 2004, 2008). Even after we cease to live, as Jenkins (2008) notes, our identities surpass our lifetime. "Not even death freezes the picture: identity or reputation can be reassessed, and some identities—sainthood or martyrdom, for example—can only be achieved beyond the grave" (Jenkins, 2008, p. 17). Moreover, just as identity does not end with one's death, neither does it begin at birth. Identities also precede our entrance into this world. An unborn child may be identified by a predetermined name or social status such as heir to the throne.

Only within the past few decades have scholars begun studying identity in-depth (Jenkins, 2004, 2008; Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Hogg et al., 1995; Abrams & Hogg, 1999). As a result, it has become clear that unpacking identity is far more complex than previously understood. Jenkins (2004) notes, that even while identity may be mundane, it is paradoxically one of the most extraordinary aspects of human life.

For these reasons, the task of investigating the phenomenon of human identity is very much warranted.

The main inquiry of this project concerns shifts in graffiti writers' identities as they relate to membership in the graffiti subculture. The key research question in this study is: *What shifts, if any, occur in a graffiti writer's social identity through the processes of entering and exiting the graffiti subculture?* This research concerns *who* graffiti writers are, as opposed to what they *do.* The act of painting graffiti is not insignificant, however, in this study it is peripheral to exploring the graffiti writer social identity and participants' self-concepts of being graffiti writers.

This chapter presents a framework for understanding and exploring social identities. The following discussion introduces readers to a social psychological perspective on the social identities of individuals whose self-concepts are founded on membership in a group or collective. There are two major theories that are frequently evoked to explain human identity, Identity Theory (Stryker, 1980; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Hogg et al., 1995) and Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Stets & Burke, 2000; Abrams & Hogg, 1999; Turner, 1999). This research is guided solely by Social Identity Theory. However, before discussing Social Identity Theory in detail, it is important to situate Social Identity Theory within a larger theoretical field which includes Identity Theory.

In the following pages I will first address how identity is variously defined in the scholarly literature. Then I will discuss identity as a process and make a distinction between two types of identities: personal identities and social identities. From there I will

explore the key differences between Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory. Next, I will articulate an important subtheory of Social Identity Theory—the theory of self-categorization—and its constituent—depersonalization—that will be employed in this research. Lastly, I will show how Social Identity Theory will be employed in this study.

Defining Identity

Human "identity" is variously defined in the academic literature. Over time scholars have defined and re-defined the notions of identity. Sheldon Stryker (1980) was one of the first theorists in the social sciences to offer a definition of identity from a symbolic interactionist perspective. Stryker (1980) explains that individuals identify themselves in light of the roles they occupy within interpersonal relationships. Stryker (1980) writes: "Identities are 'parts' of self, internalized positional designations [roles]. They exist insofar as the person is a participant in structured role relationships" (p. 60). In other words, the personal roles individuals occupy within the contexts of interpersonal relationships yield self-concepts that form one's identity. Adding to Stryker's (1980) perspective, Tajfel and Turner (1979) note that not all identities are tied to social roles; some are a result of group membership. Together, Stryker (1980) and Tajfel and Turner (1979) present identity as a materialization of individuals' self-perceptions , or what Stets and Burke (2000) describe as "self-views," into self-concepts based on relationships with other individuals or groups of individuals.

Stets and Burke (2000) note that humans are reflexive beings, meaning we naturally engage in a process of self-labeling and place ourselves within a system of

social classification. Jenkins (2004, 2008) furthers this notion and defines human identities as products of judgment that yield a system of social classification:

> At a very basic starting point, identity is the human capacity – rooted in language – to know 'who's who' (and hence 'what's what'). This involves knowing who we are, knowing who others are, them knowing who we are, us knowing who they think we are, and so on: a multi-dimensional classification or mapping of the human world and our places in it, as individuals and as members of collectivities (p. 5).

Furthermore, Jenkins (2004, 2008) notes that the processes of judgment entail two set criteria: *similarity* and *differences*. Jenkins (2004) argues that through observations of similarities and differences we are able to identify (categorize) members of society in order to maintain social organization and operate as a whole. Likewise, to categorize ourselves is to identify who we are in comparison to others. In other words, a person's identity involves their self-concept of being similar to or different from others.

While human identity is explained by scholars from various angles, overlaps in definitions suggest that identities are fundamentally a matter of self-concepts and social classification (Tajfel & Turner 1979; Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker, 1980; Jenkins, 2004, 2008). Important to note though, is that identities are never set, instead they are in continual evolution and progression. Jenkins (2004) explains: "There is something active about identity that cannot be ignored: it isn't 'just there,' it's not a 'thing,' it must *always* be established" (p. 4). Essentially, identification necessitates continuous assessments.

Identity as a Process

Crucial to understanding identity is recognizing it as a *process* in constant state of flux (Jenkins, 2004, 2008; Calhoun, 1994). In order to grasp the full nature of identity, it must be kept in mind that identities are variable and always subject to differing contexts (Calhoun, 1994). In his book, *Social Identity,* Jenkins (2004) emphasizes the fluid nature of identity, reminding us that identities should not be discussed as if they are fixed:

> Too much contemporary writing about identity treats it as some*thing* that simply *is*. This pays insufficient attention to how identity 'works' or 'is worked,' to process and reflexivity, to the social construction of identity in interaction and institutionally. Understanding these processes is central to understanding identity. Indeed, identity can *only* be understood as process, as 'being' or 'becoming'" (p. 5).

According to Jenkins (2004), if we are to understand the identities of human beings we must always consider the ongoing changeability of human interactions, relationships and social networks. We must be careful not to freeze identity at the point of its assessment (Jenkins, 2004, 2008).

As research on identity has evolved, theorists have discussed human identity as a multi-faceted phenomenon. Of particular interest are the various foundations and compositions of differing identities. Identities are established when based on or rooted in some type of social structure, human interaction(s), or relationship with others (Tajfel & Turner 1979; Stets & Burke, 2000; Jenkins, 2004, 2008; Stryker, 1980). More recently, the concept of identity has been refined to distinguish between *types* of identities depending on the basis of their existence (Abrams & Hogg, 1999; Hogg & Abrams, 1995; Hogg et al, 1995; Stryker, 1980; Turner, 1999; Tajfel et al., 1995).

Personal vs. Social Identities

Studies concerning identity often differentiate between two types: *personal* identities and *social* identities (Deschamps & Devos, 1998; Hogg et al., 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000; Serino, 1998; Jenkins 2004, 2008). Occasionally though, this has proven problematic when not fully articulated. Similarities between theories concerning each type of identity have occasionally resulted in ambiguous research, leaving questions as to which identity traits or social contexts are specific to one's personal identity and which identity traits or social contexts are specific to one's social identity (Hogg et al., 1995; Doise, 1998; Stets & Burke, 2000; Jenkins, 2004). Distinguishing between the two types of identities will help to clarify the focus of this research.

Personal identities are reflections of individuals' self-concepts based on occupancy of unique roles in the context of interpersonal interactions or relationships (Stryker, 1980). Social identities are group-based identities that reflect a general self-concept shared by multiple members of a group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Stets & Burke, 2000; Abrams & Hogg, 1999; Turner, 1999. Multiple persons (group members) maintain the same social identity, whereas personal identities are maintained by only one individual and vary from person to person.

While such distinctions have been made to parse the concept of identity for more specific topics of research, Jenkins (2004, 2008) argues that the division of identity into two differing types produces more obscurity than clarification. He further states that in doing so, aspects of identity become segregated when they should in fact be studied together. Jenkins (2008) proposes that the ambiguity surrounding the debate of personal

versus social identities would be lessened by doing away with stringent classifications. Jenkins (2008) asserts that classifying any specific constituent of an individual's identity as primarily social or primarily personal is counterproductive. Jenkins (2008) writes: "Identifying ourselves or others is a matter of meaning, and meaning always involves interaction: agreement and disagreement, convention and innovation, communication and negotiation. To add 'social' in this context is therefore somewhat redundant" (p. 17). From Jenkin's (2004, 2008) perspective, personal identities *are* social identities. In other words, there is no significant need for distinguishing between personal and social identities.

Yet, from the perspective of other theorists, a distinction between personal and social identities offers a better understanding of whether or not certain components of one's identity, including self-perceptions and behaviors, are more frequently tied to individuals' roles within relationships or their membership in specific groups (Stryker, 1980; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Stets & Burke, 2000; Hogg, Terry & White, 1995). For these researchers, two distinct types of identities are a matter of analyzing their differing foundations. In so doing, scholars are better able to discuss the nature of particular identities by acknowledging the different origins and foundations that distinguish personal identities apart from social identities (Stets & Burke, 2000; Hogg, Terry & White, 1995).

This research concerns the graffiti subculture as a foundation for graffiti writers' identities. In order to maintain clarity, it is beneficial for this study to uphold the classification of two different types of identities. To analyze graffiti writers' identities as

based on the graffiti subculture is to specifically theorize about the graffiti writer *social* identity. This is not to insinuate that graffiti writers' identities are exclusively social, rather it is to clarify the focus of this research and establish graffiti writers as *subculture members*. Participants' personal identities were not considered expendable, but purposely given limited attention in order to direct a focus towards participants' self-concepts specifically as graffiti writers. Despite Jenkins' (2004, 2008) recommendation to avoid classifications of identities, to not specify the type of identity being researched here as 'social' could be problematic, lest assumptions be made that participants were questioned about their personal identities as well.

Identity Theory vs. Social Identity Theory

Two theoretical paradigms, Identity Theory (Stryker, 1980; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Hogg et al., 1995) and Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Stets & Burke, 2000; Abrams & Hogg, 1999; Turner, 1999), are frequently used to guide research on human identities. Identity theory (hereafter IT) focuses on personal or individual identities, while Social Identity Theory (hereafter SIT) focuses on social or group-based identities. Although differing in their applications, each paradigm views humans as cognitive beings whose identities are composed of materialized self-perceptions which are continually influenced within various social contexts (Hoggs & Abrams; 1999; Hogg et al., Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Stryker, 1980; Stryker & Burke, 2000).

The fundamental difference between the two theoretical approaches concerns the level at which each analyzes human identities. IT advances a micro-level framework to study human identities that are distinctive to individuals, in particular the identities associated with an individual's specific role(s) within social contexts (Stryker, 1980; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Hogg et al. 1995; Doise, 1988). In contrast, SIT advances a large-scale, group-oriented framework to study identities that are distinctive to collectives and shared by most members (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Stets & Burke, 2000; Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Social identities are still internalized on an individual basis, but are less unique to any one particular group member and more representative of the group as a whole.

When researchers consider subjects' identities through the lens of IT, they are considering persons on a more individual basis, studying an individual's self-perceptions of who they are within the context of certain interpersonal relationships (Stryker, 1980; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Hogg et al. 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000). Stryker and Burke (2000) note that IT concentrates on "the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated, contemporary societies" (p. 284). Such meanings yield the self-concepts that individuals establish as their personal identities. Therefore, IT favors more psychological traits and self-perceptions connected to one's individuality (Hogg et al., 1995).

In contrast to IT, SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Stets & Burke, 2000; Hogg & Abrams, 1988) focuses on collective identities or self-concepts shared by the majority of members in a group and subject to group membership, not occupancy of distinct social roles. SIT suggests that groups are composed of individuals' who share similar identity

traits. These traits are what unite members of a collective and make up the prototypical or social identity of a group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Therefore, individuals' self-perceptions are tied to what it means to be a group member or to be similar to others in the group. Essentially, SIT explains the patterns of individuals identifying with others who share distinguishable identity traits.

Ideally, research on identity would employ both IT and SIT, reviewing personal *and* social identities together for a complete investigation. Instead, current researchers have examined IT and SIT using comparative analyses to draw conclusions on how each theory can best be employed for research on human identity (Hogg et. al, 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000). Stets and Burke (2000) point out that differences between the two paradigms do not threaten the integrity or theoretical notions of the other, but instead allot flexibility for research on identity to go in differing directions. Stets and Burke (2000) conclude that all identities have a root or basis for their establishment. Whether that basis is a personal role or group membership will define which identity theory should be employed. Stets and Burke (2000) explain:

> In spite of their differences in origins as well as in language, orientation, and coverage, the two theories [identity theory and social identity theory] have much in common. In most instances, the differences are a matter of emphasis rather than kind. For the most part, the differences originated in a view of the group as the basis for identity (who one is) held by social identity theory and in a view of the role as a basis for identity (what one does) held by identity theory (p. 234).

According to Stets and Burke (2000), SIT favors the group as a basis for identity. Thus, for research focused on the impact group membership has on a member's identity, SIT should be employed.

Social Identity Theory

Scholars Henri Tajfel and John Turner are often credited with the preliminary development of SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Stets & Burke, 2000; Abrams & Hogg, 1999; Turner, 1999). Tajfel and Turner's (1979) interest in how group memberships impact individuals' rationale, decision making and self-concepts in the context of intergroup behavior, caused them to question how individuals identify with specific social groups. The research of Tajfel and Turner (1979) launched a dialogue within the social sciences concerning the shared self-concepts of individuals unified by their similar identity traits. Tajfel and Turner's (1979) research was significant in that it ushered in the development of SIT, which is today used as a theoretical framework for investigating human identity in a variety of contexts concerning groups or collectives.

One of the more fundamental claims made by Tajfel and Turner (1979) is that social identities are based on groups whose members share similar traits. Such traits are emotionally significant, acting as cohesive agents that psychologically bond group members (Turner et al., 1987). Furthermore, the most prominent traits shared by group members coalesce to become the group's social identity that depicts how members see themselves when in the context of group related circumstances (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Such identities can rightfully be described as 'social' identities, representing the majority of group members, since no one single individual or interpersonal interaction is responsible for its establishment.

Turner et al. (1987) have contributed significantly to the discourse on groups and social identities by noting the cognitive and psychological prerequisites for perceived

membership in a group. According to Tuner et al. (1987), groups may also be social networks that primarily exist and thrive at a psychological level. From this perspective, social groups are 'psychological groups', significantly influencing the actions, attitudes, and values of their members (Tuner et al., 1987). While Turner et al. (1987) do not suggest that groups are purely cognitive or psychological, they do contend that groups are much more than concrete, physical arrangements; group formations rely heavily on members cognitively and emotionally perceiving themselves to be a collective. Once this understanding is internalized, group members assume the group's social identity and use the group as a reference for identity development and identification (Turner et al., 1987).

SIT also considers the interconnectedness of group members through sociocognitive relationships that do not require personal interactions or even personal knowledge of every member belonging to the group; meaning, social identities can be based on groups of people who have never met or interacted with one another, but are still cognitively and psychologically linked as group members (Turner et al., 1987). In other words, members of a group may feel connected simply through the knowledge that they share significant identity traits and self-perceptions. Thus groups remain intact across a variety of contexts and regardless of individual members' physical locations or personal acquaintance with each other. Jenkins (2004) writes: "Group membership is a relationship between members: even if they do not know each other personally, they can recognize each other as members" (p. 85). Relationships are thus sustained through recognition of similarities between one another and shared social identity, not necessarily interpersonal interactions.

It is important to remember though that group members do not lose or discard their personal identities when assuming their group's social identity; instead, the social identity should be considered an 'additional' identity, one that is distinctive to the group and serves to let others know *who* an individual is as a group member (Turner et al., 1987). So while group members may at times project a particular social identity more so than their personal identities, their self-perceptions and identities as individuals are not obsolete, but are instead peripheral within the context of group related matters.

Since its inception, SIT has continued to evolve, becoming a major social psychological paradigm. SIT now encompasses a broad range of subtheories and theoretical concepts concerning the origin and development of social identities (Abrams & Hogg, 1999; Worchel et al., 1998; Hogg & Abrams, 1999; Stets & Burke, 2000; Hogg et al., 1995). While the scope of SIT goes well beyond the specific interests of this study, the subtheory of s*elf-categorization* (Stets & Burke, 2000; Haslam, 2001; Tajfel, (1981); Tajfel & Turner, 1979;Turner et al. 1987; Turner et al., 1994; Hogg et al. 1995; Oakes, Haslam, & Reynolds, 1999) and theoretical concept of *depersonalization* (Hogg et al., 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000; Postmes, Spears & Lea, 1999; Oakes, Haslam & Turner, 1998) are relevant to this research.

Self-categorization and Depersonalization

Self-categorization (Stets & Burke, 2000; Haslam, 2001; Tajfel, (1981); Tajfel & Turner, 1979;Turner et al. 1987; Turner et al., 1994; Hogg et al. 1995; Oakes, Haslam, & Reynolds, 1999) and depersonalization (Hogg et al., 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000; Postmes,

Spears & Lea, 1999; Oakes, Haslam & Turner, 1998) offer theoretical frameworks for explaining shifts in individuals' self-concepts and social identities through the processes of joining and leaving social groups. Self-categorization is a process of individual agency. It entails individuals purposefully associating themselves with others whom they perceive to be similar to them (Turner et al., 1987). Essentially, self-categorization is the necessary prerequisite to assuming a group's social identity (Tajfel, 1981; Turner et al., 1987; Turner et al., 1994; Stets & Burke, 2000; Hogg & Abrams; 1988).

Stets and Burke (2000) suggest that individuals are capable of self-categorization because "the self is reflexive in that it can take itself as an object and can categorize, classify, or name itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories or classifications" (p. 224). Self-categorization theory focuses on an individuals' self-conceptualization from classifying oneself as a member in a particular group and identifying with other group members (Tajfel, 1981; Turner et al., 1987; Turner et al., 1994; Stets & Burke, 2000; Hogg & Abrams; 1988). Members' perceptions of being like one another are what keep them feeling emotionally and psychologically connected within the boundaries of their group.

Self-categorization also includes an intellectual shift in individuals' self-perceptions, a process known as depersonalization (Stets & Burke, 2000; Hogg et al., 1995; Turner et al., 1994; Turner et al., 1987; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Stets and Burke (2000) draw from Hogg et al (1995) and Turner et al. (1987) to describe depersonalization as "seeing the self as an embodiment of the in-group prototype (a cognitive representation of the social category containing meanings and norms that the

person associates with the social category) rather than as a unique individual" (p. 231).

Stets and Burke (2000) go on to point out that the "activation of a social identity is

sufficient to result in depersonalization" (p. 231). In other words, the process of

depersonalization follows the individual's cognitive internalization of a group's social

identity.

When group members are in the contexts of group related circumstances, social

identities are more prominent than personal identities. Depersonalization invokes an

increased perception of "identity between the self and ingroup members…" over self-

perceptions of being an individual that differs from other group members (Oakes, Haslam

& Turner, 1998, p.77). Essentially, an individual who is in the process of

depersonalization progresses towards identification with other group members, thus

altering their behaviors, thoughts, values etc., in order to maintain uniformity. In other

words, through the course of depersonalization individuals modulate their personal

identity idiosyncrasies in order to reflect the prototypical group member (Hogg et al.,

1995). However, to be clear, depersonalization should *not* be considered the loss of a

personal identity or complete "submergence" in the group (Turner et al., 1987). Rather, it

should be understood that in certain contexts group members will project their social

identity to a greater degree than their personal identity.

Summary

Identities are central to social life and formed within the contexts of relationships. Our self-perceptions and the perceptions others hold of us play a fundamental role in the establishment of our identities. Identities often dictate our interactions with others and function as a framework for what those interactions will (or should) look like. As a result, the study of human identity is significant in that it offers insight and depth to understanding the human world as a social world.

While research on identity has proven to be an intricate and complex process, two theoretical paradigms—Identity and Social Identity Theory—are consistently used by researchers to explore differing types of identities and their foundations. IT is a micro-theoretical explanation of human identity and focuses primarily on identities that are subject to interpersonal interactions (Stryker, 1980; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Hogg et al. 1995; Doise, 1988). These identities are described as *personal* identities. SIT is a broader, group-oriented examination of human identity that focuses on people's identities as subject to group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Stets & Burke, 2000; Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Such group-based identities are described as *social* identities.

Researchers employ IT and SIT to theorize human identities depending on whether subjects' self-perceptions appear to be based on social roles or group membership. SIT suggests that social identities evolve within the context of group membership. Consequently, individuals base their social identities on who they are as group members, foregoing considerations of who they are as individuals differing from other group members. For studies employing SIT, the theory of self-categorization and

theoretical concept of depersonalization should be taken into consideration. Self-categorization suggests that individuals categorize themselves as members of particular collectives. As a result, individuals' self-perceptions are significantly influenced by their own understandings of being a part of the collective.

Additionally, self-categorization results in a sociocognitive process of altering one's behaviors, thoughts, values, etc., to reflect the group's social identity. In other words, a group member will reference the group for what their identity should entail. In contexts where one's social identity is activated and eclipses one's personal identity, a process of depersonalization ensues. Depersonalization involves individuals projecting who they are as group members, over who they are as unique individuals different from other group members. Depersonalization reinforces self-perceptions of who one is as a group member and supersedes perceptions of individuality.

Theoretical Use for Understanding the
Graffiti Writer Social Identity

This research employed SIT to answer the following research question: *What shifts, if any, occur in a graffiti writer's social identity through the processes of entering and exiting the graffiti subculture?* Since SIT concerns the influence of group membership on the establishment of individuals' social identities, it makes sense to employ this theory to illuminate how the processes of entering and exiting the graffiti subculture may impact a writer's social identity.

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SIT maintains that the most prominent identity traits shared by group members compose a group-based identity. In this study, participants were asked to define graffiti writers and describe who they saw themselves to be as members of the graffiti subculture. Additionally, they were asked to describe their current self-concepts as former or *retired* graffiti writers. Guided by SIT, these questions were designed to capture how social identities shift as graffiti writers move in and out of the graffiti subculture. Furthermore, these questions were designed to study identity as a process.

With regards to self-categorization and depersonalization, participants were asked to describe the processes of becoming a graffiti writer and maintaining personal anonymity. Through inquiry about each participant's experience entering the graffiti subculture, it was reasoned that responses may reveal details about participants intentionally categorizing themselves as writers and members of the graffiti subculture. In order to gauge any processes of depersonalization, or de-emphasis of individual identities, participants were asked to discuss making their personal identities anonymous in the context of the graffiti subculture and graffiti-related circumstances.

CHAPTER IV

METHODS

This research employed a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews to explore the graffiti writer social identity and membership in the graffiti subculture. Over the course of three years, I initiated informal interactions with several graffiti writers (some active, some retired). These conversations took place in a variety of locations with the intention to gain trust and access to individuals who typically remain anonymous when it comes to their involvement with graffiti. Introductions and communication took place through various means, most often face to face or through the social network *Facebook*, with occasional phone calls and/or emails. As I worked to develop relationships with writers, I also began photo documentation of graffiti to facilitate familiarity with graffiti and the norms of the subculture. After gaining access to this population, I conducted interviews with five former graffiti writers.

This chapter discusses in detail the measures taken to answer the key research question: *What shifts, if any, occur in the graffiti writer's social identity through the processes of entering and exiting the graffiti subculture?* I begin by briefly describing the graffiti subculture as a "hidden population" yielding unique methodological challenges for research. Second, I elaborate on the methods used to meet and recruit participants, including: snowball sampling, communication via Facebook and attending

graffiti demonstrations and gallery showings. In addition, I explain the importance and use of semi-structured interviews for data collection and describe the processes of coding and data analysis. Finally, I address ethical concerns, the use of photography in the research field and the limitations of this research.

The Graffiti Subculture as a Hidden Population

In recent years, scholars' interest in "hidden" or "hard to reach" populations have continued to increase (Singer, 1999, Baltar & Brunet, 2012). Merrill Singer (1999), whose own research on polygamists in Utah required her to access an excommunicated population, describes hidden populations as groups that reside outside of institutional settings whose activities are often secretive and concealed from the public. Singer (1999) points out that some hidden groups are stigmatized, but can be made up of individuals "who are 'passing' as members of the majority population" (p. 128). Singer (1999) also notes that hidden groups subject to social condemnation typically have members who seek to hide their identities and practices.

According to the characteristics defining hidden populations, the graffiti subculture is argued here to be a hidden population. While images of graffiti are frequently viewed by the public, the actual activity of creating graffiti is done in secrecy and the identities of graffiti writers are purposefully kept anonymous or "hidden" from others. Additionally, the graffiti subculture is an underground, stigmatized and often socially condemned group composed of individuals who in other social contexts "pass" as typical members of society. As a result, researchers interested in studying the graffiti

subculture should consider the challenges and methods recommended to research hidden populations.

Several contemporary scholars have noted the challenges in accessing and studying populations that are considered "concealed" from society, such as the criminal and the isolated (Singer, 1999; Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Baltar & Brunet 2012; Mouw & Verdery, 2012). Some of the challenges include defining boundaries, characteristics, and distributions of unfamiliar (sometimes rather unknown) populations. In general, hidden populations are ambiguously defined and require that researchers establish some sort of target group boundaries structured by inclusion and exclusion criteria to guide the selection of participants (Singer, 1999). Singer (1999) reminds us: "populations, it should be stressed, are social constructs. A population's existence *as a distinct group* is not so much given in nature as it is constructed by researchers (although not arbitrarily and always for specific research purposes)" (p. 141). This study employed inclusion and exclusion criteria specific to recruiting *former* graffiti writers over the age of 18 years. These particular criteria met the prerequisites for approval by an Institutional Review Board and were conducive to recruiting participants who could offer insights on both entering and exiting the graffiti subculture.

Singer (1999) also notes that hidden populations can present difficulties in locating and recruiting study participants. However, several researchers have argued that this difficulty can be offset through snowball sampling (Singer, 1999; Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Browne, 2005) and the use of technology, including social networking sites such as *Facebook* (Baltar & Brunet, 2012; Browne, 2005).

Locating and Recruiting Participants

Locating and recruiting participants for this study proved challenging. I approached this illegal subculture without any personal experience with the subculture, nor did I know a single graffiti writer prior to initiating this research. Robert Weiss (1994) notes in his book, *Learning from Strangers,* that one of the easiest ways to begin searching for research participants when you don't know anyone within your target population is to begin by asking others who would *likely* know such people. Weiss (1994) recommends letting family, friends, acquaintances, etc., know you are looking for someone who can be "instructive about your topic" (p. 25). After putting the word out that I was interested in the graffiti subculture, a number of close friends were willing to help me make connections with writers they personally knew.

Preliminary referrals were unsuccessful in yielding participants for this study. One referral ended up in ICU shortly before our scheduled meeting. Another referral agreed several times to meet with me, but did not return phone calls when I tried to arrange specific meeting times. Another referral was arrested before I could meet with him in person. I did speak with a fourth lead on a few occasions, however, I discovered he was still very much involved in the graffiti subculture and failed to meet the criteria for having experience in exiting the subculture.

My biggest break came after encountering a graffiti demonstration at a local, public arts event where I conversed with an aerosol artist who was spray painting stencil art. I approached the artist and disclosed my interest in graffiti. He denied any personal experience with illegal graffiti on the streets, but informed me of another graffiti

demonstration scheduled to take place in a different city the following month. He offered

to introduce me to some experienced graffiti writers if I attended. As an artist respected

by the local graffiti community for his skills and unique style, this informant had the trust

and rapport that I needed with true graffiti writers. This informant introduced me to two

graffiti writers who then suggested others.

Over the course of three years I met several graffiti writers. Still, it was a struggle

to obtain participants who matched my set criteria for inclusion in this study. I found that

locating individuals who were former writers was difficult. The majority of writers I met

were active writers and only knew of other writers who had not yet exited the graffiti

subculture. This may indicate that after writers exit the subculture, they lose contact with

those people who are still in it. In the following sections I describe the three different

methods used to locate and recruit participants for this research. Methods included: using

informants and snowball sampling, communicating over the social media network

Facebook and networking at public graffiti demonstrations and gallery showings.

Informants and Snowball Sampling

Informants and snowball sampling were the primary method for locating

participants for this study. Informants are individuals who have trusted relationships with

members of the target population and may or may not be a member of the population.

Informants initiate and propel snowball sampling. Singer (1999) discusses how

informants can help with research on hidden populations and are vital for two reasons:

they offer insight and can typically provide access. Singer (1999) notes that without a key

informant it is likely she would never have been able to access the population of polygamists she desired to research. Singer (1999) explains that police raids of such unlawful groups are not uncommon and fear of undercover agents is widespread. Therefore, obtaining an informant was crucial to gaining access to the polygamist community (p. 152).

It was my experience that graffiti writers are suspicious of undercover law enforcement when one accused me of being a cop. I informed him that I was not a cop, but a graduate student interested in learning about the graffiti subculture and writers. Nonetheless, he attempted to convince his friend—another writer—that I was probably an undercover cop and should not be trusted. These types of incidences reminded me that it was a privilege to discuss graffiti with actual writers and should not be taken for granted by an outsider. As noted by Singer (1999) and Phillips (1999), informants are sometimes vital for gaining entry into hidden or unlawful populations who are suspicious of outsiders. The assistance of informants proved a time efficient and effective way for me to establish trust and rapport.

My associations with artists and former writers were crucial to meeting other writers. Once relationships were established with two former writers, I was informed of graffiti demonstrations and gallery showings where I was able to continue meeting other writers. This method is known as snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is an effective means to accessing members of hidden populations who are typically hard to reach due to the nature of their activities or stigmatization by society (Singer, 1999; Atkinson & Flint, 2001) Atkinson & Flint (2001) define snowball sampling in its most basic form as

identifying potential participants through the recommendations of other participants. In more detail, Chaim Noy (2008) notes the "snowball effect" of obtaining participants through informants:

> A sampling procedure may be defined as snowball sampling when the researcher accesses informants through contact information that is provided by other informants. This process is, by necessity, repetitive: informants refer the researcher to other informants, who are contacted by the researcher and then refer her or him to yet other informants, and so on. Hence the evolving 'snowball' effect, captured in a metaphor that touches the central quality of this sampling procedure: its accumulative (diachronic and dynamic) dimensions (p. 330).

Noy (2008) also notes that snowball sampling is often discredited for being seemingly too informal or "commonsensical" and lacking "systematic reflexive consideration" (p. 330). However, Noy (2008) explains that snowball sampling is one of the most common methods of sampling in qualitative research and is one of the more effective modes for obtaining access to hidden populations and participants.

Benefits of Snowball Sampling

Scholars continue to present multiple reasons for why snowball sampling is useful (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Weiss, 1994; Balter & Brunet, 2012; Noy, 2008). One prominent reason is that snowball sampling helps to obtain respondents not easily recruited because of unconventional beliefs or practices (Singer, 1999; Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Atkinson & Flint (2001) suggest another benefit:

The main value of snowball sampling is as a method for obtaining respondents where they are few in number or where some degree of trust is required to initiate contact. Under these circumstances, techniques of 'chain referral' may imbue the researcher with characteristics associated with being an insider or group member and this can aid entry to settings where conventional approaches find difficult to succeed (p. 2).

The artist who introduced me to my first two participants was respected by members of the graffiti subculture, was credible and had access to individuals associated with the graffiti scene. Without his assistance, I can only speculate as to how I would have been able to gain access to members of the local graffiti subculture.

Limitations in Snowball Sampling

One common disadvantage of snowball sampling is that it can be a biased sampling technique since participant selection occurs through social networks, rather than random selection (Browne, 2005; Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Informants subjectively choose the individuals they refer and therefore generalizability is jeopardized and limited (Atkinson & Flint, 2001).

Weiss (199) notes that snowball samplings will always be under-representative of those who have few social contacts. While Akinson & Flint (2001) argue:

Snowball samples will be biased towards the inclusion of individuals with interrelationships, and therefore will over-emphasize cohesiveness in social networks and will miss 'isolates' who are not connected to any network that the researcher has tapped into (p. 2).

The limitations of snowball sampling were considered prior to this research, but were not found significant enough to forego snowball sampling altogether.

Facebook: Use of Social Networking for Recruitment and Retention

Shortly after obtaining a key informant and meeting my first two participants, I created a Facebook account using a pseudonym. This account was strictly limited to viewing by participants, informants, and members of the research team. Jeff Ferrell (1997) notes that graffiti writers have created global cyber-networks for exchanging images and information. Consequently, utilizing online social networking as a means for communication may be one of the best methods for recruiting and retaining participants.

Additionally, Gemma Ryan (2013) notes that online social networking is cost-effective and efficient when needing to recruit from a wide range of communities, adolescents, young people and marginal populations in both qualitative and quantitative research. Ryan (2013) also notes that retention of participants can be enhanced through the use of social network sites like Facebook. Furthermore, Ryan (2013) specifically addresses 'hard to reach' or 'at risk' populations, noting that research suggests online social networking not only helps in the recruitment process, but also enables researchers to remain in contact with individuals from such populations.

Through Facebook I recruited my fifth participant. After posting personal photos of graffiti taken at a graffiti demonstration, one artist messaged me to ask if I was a graffiti writer. I responded that I was not a writer and fully disclosed that I was a graduate student interested in the graffiti subculture. This initial communication led to several messages over Facebook, allowing for me to disclose my research interests and ask further questions of my respondent in a less invasive, non-threatening way. This

participant informed me that they would be at a gallery showing I already had plans to attend and offered to answer any questions I might have.

Graffiti Demonstrations and Gallery Showings

From the fall of 2009 through the winter of 2012 I attended several of my participants' gallery showings and graffiti demonstrations taking place at hip-hop gatherings or public events. These occasions provided safe places where I could meet up with participants and network for more respondents. I considered my outings to be a type of semi-ethnographic fieldwork where I was able to witness graffiti writers interact with other writers and patrons on both social and professional levels.

Singer (1999) notes the value in fieldwork, noting that it takes the researcher "out of the academic or institute suite and into the street (or other settings) where members of the target population live out their lives" (p. 149). Nancy MacDonald (2001) also made this argument for why she felt doing fieldwork was crucial to her research. MacDonald (2001) states that theorists have done a disservice to the 'voices' of the graffiti subculture by discounting the value of fieldwork; instead, their theories and arguments have developed at a distance, away from the scene of the crime and away from the milieu of the subculture and away from the setting of a writer's story. MacDonald (2001) claims that by getting her "hands dirty" and venturing out to speak to her participants face to face, her fieldwork helped her to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the graffiti subculture.

In agreement with Singer (1999) and MacDonald (2001), Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte (1999) describe ethnographic work as valuable for taking the researcher into the unknown and away from the familiarity of academia:

> When we say that ethnographic researchers go to the field, we mean that they leave their own communities, institutional settings, and familiar behavioral and cognitive patterns to enter another social world—the world in which the research is to be conducted (p 70).

In addition to garnering new insights, fieldwork is conducive to quickly and efficiently establishing relationships with participants. My field excursions provided opportunities for me to build rapport and demonstrate support for my participants' "real" lives. By entering the field, a professional intimacy was established that facilitated rich conversations. Initially some writers appeared nervous, but consistently seeing me at events established familiarity with one another. As research continued, participants were more willing to be formally interviewed. The value of one on one conversations in the field was that it humanized and increased my sensitivity to participants' lives and experiences.

Participants

For this study, I specifically sought out individuals who had personal experiences with both processes of entering and exiting the graffiti subculture and could therefore discuss the course of each; this required targeting *former* graffiti writers. I also sought out participants over the age of eighteen to meet the legal obligations set by the University of North Carolina at Greensboro Institutional Review Board. Participants in this study

ranged in age from 32-36 years old, including one female and four males. Obtaining

participants in their thirties is advantageous in that the graffiti subculture is often

portrayed as a youth subculture, made up of young males in their early teens to early

twenties (Snyder, 2009; MacDonald, 2001; Rahn, 2002).

Four participants were white and one participant identified as African American.

All participants were tied to the same local graffiti scene in a medium sized city in the

Southeast region of the United States; however, not all participants knew one another

personally. While participants' backgrounds are quite diverse, all have had some level of

formal education in art and are now professional artists with established careers in

various mediums.

Data Collection

This study employed semi-structured interviews as the primary method for data

collection. I was inspired to employ this method largely based off of McDonald's (2001)

argument for why she chose to conduct interviews. MacDonald (2001) discusses giving a

voice to her participants who are rarely given a safe opportunity to speak about belonging

to an illegal subculture. MacDonald (2001) states:

> Graffiti writers receive a fair amount of media coverage, much of which is, in
> their view, uninformed and distorted. While they are not necessarily adverse to
> the negative coverage, they realize that they lack the power or voice to challenge
> these stories even if they wanted to. As a result, the issue of representation is a
> subculturally significant one. In recognizing this, my own position as narrator
> became more clear. I was responsible for speaking for a consistently 'spoken for'
> group (McDonald, 27).

Like MacDonald (2001) I wanted to allow graffiti writers the opportunity to speak. I wanted to hear first-hand, in their language, what their experiences were.

Semi-Structured Interviews (see appendix B)

Interviews, both informal and formal, have been conducted by past researchers of graffiti to obtain rich data and perspectives from inside the graffiti subculture that might otherwise remain undetected (Castleman, 1982; Cooper & Chalfant, 1984; Lachmann, 1988; Ferrell 1996, 1998; Rahn, 2002; MacDonald, 2001; Halsey & Young, 2006; Miller, 2002; Snyder, 2009; Phillips, 1999; Docuyanan, 2000).

Wayne Fife (2005) discusses the value in conducting semi-structured interviews in comparison to structured interviews or surveys. Fife (2005) explains that one weakness of structured interviews is that they impose a large degree of researcher authority when participants are asked only about very specific topics and given limited options for their responses. Fife (2005) notes:

> It hardly seems worth doing the study if we are already assuming that we know so much about the research situation before the actual fieldwork that we can reduce the potential results to a handful of possibilities in preformulated interview questions (p. 94).

Fife (2005) recommends conducting semi-structured interviews to maintain the control and direction of structured interviews, but also give participants more opportunities to direct conversations.

All formal interviews were audio recorded. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) explain that recording interviews frees the researcher to concentrate on the topics at hand rather

than being distracted from what is being when worried about picking up anything extra such as tone, pauses, and the like. The recordings allow the opportunity to listen over and over to what was being said and how it was being communicated (p. 179).

Still, Weiss (1994) points out that audio recorders can make people uncomfortable because they are reminded of the fact that what they say is on record. However, Weiss (1994) also notes that it is easier for the researcher to concentrate on what is being said when they don't have to worry about getting everything down in their notes. In addition, Weiss (1994) argues that notes never quite captured the "vividness of speech" (p. 54). In a way, note taking makes the conversations one dimensional, removing all the details that go into conversing with a researcher.

My greatest concern recording respondents' answers to interview questions was that I capture exact quotes in the wording they use that is specific to the terminology of the subculture. As a result, I chose to audio record each interview, but not before asking respondents if they felt comfortable being audio recorded and informing them that they had the right to end the recording at any time.

Interviews for this study were conducted face to face in locations secure from third parties. Three interviews took place in participants' private art studios, one took place at a participant's home and another took place in a private location on a college campus. This allowed for privacy as well as limited distractions. Weiss (1994) states that locations that are familiar and personal to interviewees (such as homes) can offer unique insights and most people prefer the researcher coming to them. One argument, Weiss (1994) mentions, against interviewing people in personal places is that they may be

committed to certain roles in that environment. However, since this study was on identity, interviewing persons in their studios actually seemed conducive to participants' perceptions of themselves as graffiti and fine art artists. During an interview in one participant's home, I was able to view the respondent's personal art over the course of my visit.

Interviews ranged from one hour to two and a half hours. Weiss (1994) states that in his experience, one to two hour interviews are appropriate. In this time period researchers can gain the insights they need, but avoid fatigue.

Coding and Data Analysis

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by me.   Data analysis software was not used, rather coding was done by hand. Coding by hand helped to avoid concepts and key topics being lost. Additionally, it exposed patterns that may otherwise have been overlooked with a simple word search. Kvale & Brinkmann (2009) explain that coding entails the attachment of a single—or more—keyword(s) to every segment of data in order to provide an organized and structured summary of statements later identified for patterns. The graffiti subculture is inundated with tacit knowledge that is foreign to outsiders and may be discussed with certain language that could be lost in translation if data was not coded by hand.

The coding format used in data analysis for this research is defined by Emerson, Fretz & Shaw (1995) as "focused coding" (p. 143). This particular type of coding involves reviewing notes (transcriptions) line by line on the basis of topics that have been

predetermined as significant to the study. Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw (1995) explain that data analysis entails combing through codes, code by code, to write up "initial memos" (p. 143). After all initial memos have covered the insights and common topics of the data, theoretical and "integrative memos" are formulated in order to develop and clarify the data. Data from this research was coded according to four major themes:

- Defining graffiti writers and the graffiti subculture
- Entry into the graffiti subculture
- Exit out of the graffiti subculture
- Identity shifts and the impact the graffiti subculture had on participants past and current identities

Ethical Concerns

In consensus with all formal research, this study addressed significant ethical concerns and took precautionary measures so as to not violate the ethics of social science research and/or the rights of participants. Most importantly, the methodology for this research was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) affiliated with the University of North Carolina – Greensboro. Protecting participants' identities was the greatest concern addressed. Due to the criminal aspects of graffiti, incrimination and criminal repercussions were determined to be a minimal risk for participants and as such, all cautionary steps were taken to secure the anonymity of participants. Finally, the rights of participants were disclosed in a consent form that required the verbal consent of participants before their participation in this study.

Institutional Review Board Approval

This research was conducted with the approval and jurisdiction of the Institutional

Review Board (IRB) affiliated with the University of North Carolina – Greensboro

(UNCG). Prior to IRB approval, the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI)

was completed by all members of the research team.

Three stipulations were met for IRB approval: ensuring respect for persons,

providing beneficence, and upholding justice. This meant that all participants must be

treated ethically as autonomous individuals with their autonomy protected throughout the

course of research. In addition, all steps must be taken to avoid any burdens from being

unduly imposed upon participants or from having any of the participants' ethical rights

violated that would lead to physical or psychological harm. Finally, all participants must

be treated as equals, with no persons being denied any benefits to come out of this

research.

IRB approval requires that all risks associated with this studied be assessed and

determined to be "minimal" before the study can proceed. Consequently, if risks increase

in the course of research, IRB requires they be notified immediately for reassessment and

negotiation of continued research.

Protecting Participants' Identities

Protecting participants' identities is a fundamental component of this research. A

verbal consent form was provided to each participant, notifying them that the risks for

legal consequences due to this research have been determined by the research team and IRB to be "minimal risks" should all required precautionary steps be taken.

To protect participants, each participant was assigned a random pseudonym and fake tag names. Participants were informed that every effort would be made to insure their privacy. All research data, including voice recordings, transcriptions, field notes and personal information for communication (phone numbers and email addresses) were stored in a locked file cabinet in a location accessible only by the research team. In addition, consent was verbal in order to prevent any detection of handwriting through participants' signatures.

Participants were not asked to provide any specific identifiers, including their tag names. When three of the participants disclosed their tag names during the interviews, the names were replaced and transcribed using fake tag names.

Participant Consent (see appendix C)

As a measure to ensure all participants were autonomous and clearly understood the nature and protocol of this research, each participant was given a verbal consent form indicating what this study is about, notifying them of why they have been asked to participate, informing them of their personal rights and the right to refuse participation at any point (including after research has begun), disclosing all risks, and informing them of who they may contact (the Office of Research Compliance at UNCG) if there were any concerns about their rights being protected or violated .

Photography and Visual Media

(see appendix D)

A handful of researchers have discussed the use of photography for research on the graffiti subculture (Ferrell, 1998; Phillips, 1999; Cooper & Chalfant, 1982). Initial efforts to conduct this research were very much influenced by the research approach of anthropologist Susan Phillips (1999). Phillips (1999) began her research on gang graffiti by scouting out a designated geographical area of research to photograph graffiti. After consulting the literature to learn where writers typically do graffiti, I spent several months searching for graffiti throughout the city I reside in, taking photos of all types in various locations.

From the summer of 2009 to the winter of 2012 I took hundreds of photos of local graffiti. Photographs were beneficial in three ways: 1) posting photos on Facebook piqued the interests of potential participants. Furthermore, photos maintained the enthusiasm of participants already committed to this study; enabling me to continue building and strengthening relationships. Participants' feedback (comments or "liking" particular photos on facebook) also informed me of what was considered impressive in skill and style. Occasionally I took photos of participants' work as a culturally acceptable gesture of respect; 2) my credibility as a researcher was strengthened when I took photos in covert locations. My willingness to go to places considered sacred "spots" let writers know my research interest was genuine and 3) by getting out into the field I became familiar with the types of individuals who would set out to paint in such risky and

challenging locations. I also became familiar with the types of graffiti which allowed for smoother conversations with writers.

In addition to photography, I watched several documentaries and YouTube clips to gain a better understanding of subcultural jargon which allowed me to carry on conversations with participants about renowned writers from the past and present. This proved extremely useful when discussing the topic of fame with participants. During one interview a participant mentioned his interactions with a famous graffiti writer. I learned of this writer from watching a documentary. When my participant realized I knew who he was talking about he got excited to talk to me about his experiences with the artist.

Limitations

Population Size

The number of participants that took part in this research is considerably smaller in comparison to other major studies. One of the largest obstacles in finding individuals who have retired from the graffiti subculture is that most do not have a reason to advertise the fact that at one time they were graffiti writers. In fact what I learned from my participants was that due to negative connotations associated with graffiti writers, oftentimes former writers who are now professionals keep their graffiti histories undisclosed so as to avoid jeopardizing their professional reputations.

Another factor contributing to a small population was that informants would suggest I contact certain individuals they knew, but were unable to introduce me in person; this proved a trial with a leery population that does not quickly volunteer

information about past illegal acts. When I was not able to get someone to personally vouch for my credibility, emails and facebook inquiries were not returned.

On a few occasions connections were made with potential participants and informants. However, as time went on some grew nervous and uncomfortable and chose to no longer take part in the study. Others became busy with personal or professional life circumstances and we lost touch. On one occasion I had dinner with a potential informant, however, it was evident that he was very hesitant to help me. While helpful in recommending literature and media on the history of graffiti, his aggressive demeanor and overt hesitancy to give me referrals led me to reconsider his participation in the study. I was not comfortable seeking information from an informant who did not feel assured of my trustworthiness.

Generalizability

This study lacks evident generalizability. Due to the small number of participants, it is not possible to generalize to the whole population of retired graffiti writers. However, as Margaret Myers (2000) notes, problems of generalizability can often have little effect on the goals of qualitative research that seeks to *explore* a phenomenon. Myers (2000) explains that a lack of generalizability needs to be taken into consideration with the reality of the situation. Additionally, Myers (2000) points out that smaller populations lacking generalizability may be a natural consequence to studying phenomenon that are continually in process. As the data for this research suggests, the identities of graffiti writers is in continual evolution.

Summary

This study approached the graffiti subculture as a hidden population. Methodological challenges included locating and recruiting participants. However, this challenge was offset using snowball sampling and the social network site, *Facebook*, both of which served as non-invasive, cost-effective and efficient means of contacting and retaining participants. Additionally, attending graffiti demonstrations and participants' gallery showings built relationships and established rapport. Finally, semi-structured interviews with conducted with five former graffiti writers. Ethical concerns were addressed with IRB approval, pseudonyms in place of actual names and verbal consent for participant participation. Additionally, photography and visual media were helpful in my discussions with participants. Photography familiarized me with types of graffiti, rules for the location and placement of graffiti, and subcultural norms. Population size and generalizability were each addressed and noted as difficult limitations to reconcile entirely.

CHAPTER V

RESULTS

Graffiti writers come from all backgrounds and life experiences. The diversity found within the graffiti subculture includes wide spectrums of age, ethnicity, social class, and race. And although significantly male dominated, both males and females have claimed membership. While a variety of personal differences exist between writers, there are also significant shared similarities that define who graffiti writers are. The most obvious of similarities is that all writers write graffiti. However, to be clear, not all individuals who write graffiti are entitled to being called "writers." These particular graffitists are not out for an unassuming night of mischief, they are out to achieve their status at the top of the subcultural hierarchy.

Writers can also be passionate perfectionists. As Jake notes, they are driven to constantly improve their graffiti, "you never paint until your sketch is perfect." Writers set the bar when it comes to style, artistic skills, and mandatory courage. While disputes over who is and who isn't a writer may ensue at times, one thing is clear, the status of writer is earned through hard work, dedication, risk-taking, and achieving 'street cred'; give anything less, and you are not a writer. "Writer" is a holy title and according to the participants in this study, to call yourself a writer before others do is to take that title in vain.

This study investigates the graffiti writer social identity as perceived by retired and semi-retired graffiti writers. The key research question in this study is*: What shifts, if any, occur in a graffiti writer's social identity through the processes of entering and exiting the graffiti subculture?* Participants were asked to discuss their past identities as graffiti writers and their experiences entering, participating in, and exiting the graffiti subculture. Of particular significance were participants' descriptions of who graffiti writers are. Initial definitions varied; however, as discussions continued, participants disclosed specific identity traits that the majority of writers share, thus offering a general illustration of the graffiti writer social identity. Participants' narratives suggest that the graffiti subculture offers writers a scene in which they can develop unique identities specific to their subcultural membership. Participants described experimenting with their identities through the construction of aliases or alter egos. These alter egos represented who participants saw themselves to be as promising artists in an exciting world of unlawful painting.

One of the more significant findings in this study includes an underlying paradox of fame and anonymity at the crux of participants' past graffiti writer identities. Graffiti writers strive for fame, recognition and respect, but must do it anonymously. Another key finding emerged as participants were asked to discuss their experiences leaving the subculture. Counter to my expectation, not all participants felt they had completely retired their graffiti writer identity even though their participation in the graffiti subculture had significantly lessened. While most participants had stopped painting illegal graffiti (a few admit they still do on rare occasions), responses differed when

asked if they were retired. Two participants stated they still considered themselves to be writers, even though their participation in the graffiti subculture had diminished considerably. Two participants stated that they no longer identified as writers, but still felt a connection to the graffiti scene. One participant claimed she is no longer a part of the subculture and no longer identifies as a writer, but that her experiences with graffiti will always be a part of who she is.

This chapter reports the results of five semi-structured interviews conducted with five professional artists who all claim to have been graffiti writers for some period of time in their lives. Unique to these particular artists is the fact that each one of them credits their days spent painting graffiti as on the job training for the demands of their current professions. While these artists are no longer out on the streets painting into the early morning hours, each participant discussed with fondness the time in their lives when they thought of themselves as graffiti writers.

Identity of a Graffiti Writer

Respondents were asked to describe who graffiti writers are and to recount who they saw themselves to be as graffiti writers in the past. Responses maintain that the graffiti writer social identity is not fixed or finite. Noticeable differences surfaced between participants' descriptions of *who* graffiti writers are. No two participants offered the same characterization. Definitions ranged from a writer being someone who dedicates all their time to graffiti and repeatedly "gets up," to someone who reaches a certain skill level of painting graffiti, to someone who knows all the ins and outs of the graffiti scene

and can maneuver it in an authentic way. An innovative and impressive ability to tag, along with seeking fame were also mentioned as defining characteristics of graffiti writers.

While the data reveals differing perceptions of who writers are, this does not mean there is a lack of common characteristics that make up a graffiti writer social identity. For example, writers are risk takers. As "artistic outlaws" writers must not only demonstrate boldness in doing their graffiti, but also in evading law enforcement. Whether one is bold in everyday life or not, courage is required to be a writer. Additionally, participants perceived themselves as deviant, but innovative, artists. Participants in this study all mentioned their artistic backgrounds and love of art prior to doing graffiti. Writers are also passionate about their craft and willing to devote countless hours to perfecting the works they will take pride in. Most significantly, writers desire fame and crave recognition.

Writers

When asked to define who graffiti writers are Marek answered, "If you come to me and tell me you're a writer or graffiti artist then you better be up…I mean anything else is retired…you gotta be up. I gotta know who you are without you telling me who you are." Marek's thoughts are that he must recognize the graffitist's tag name when he finds out who is anonymously behind it. If a graffitist claims he is a writer, but Marek hasn't seen the graffitist's tag around town, his confidence in that person being an actual writer is next to nil.

When asked the same question, Sam responds: "Writers are people who tag primarily." But not only do they know how to tag, "a writer is a guy that knows the whole scene and participates in it." Sam informs me that tagging and perfecting graffiti styled letters is the foundation of being a true writer. As a teen and new to the graffiti scene, Sam's initial participation in the graffiti subculture did not include writing or tagging. As a result, Sam was not yet considered an actual writer:

> When I got in I wasn't doin' letters, I was just doin' characters for the guys doing the letters. I did start doin' that, but I was late with that because I was good at drawing and so I was kinda brought in as the guy to do characters.

Years later when Sam moved to another city he began setting a foundation with letters in order to advance towards writer status. "When I was put into a new arena they were like 'you can't—you can't just be fuckin' paintin' characters, you gotta get your foundation right…" With the guidance of a few others, Sam began focusing strictly on developing his tag for the next couple of years, putting in the time required to learn the scene and earn the elite title of writer.

What all participants agreed on was that a graffiti writer is someone who is extremely dedicated and committed to the advancement and development of their artistic skills and style. Naturally, writers find themselves spending hours, sometimes entire days, creatively experimenting with new designs, styles, pieces and elaborate drawings in 'black books.' For Nicole, the defining characteristic of a graffiti writer is the hours put in. Nicole emphasized the prerequisites of time and dedication, sharing with me that graffiti is an intense labor of love:

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A graffiti writer is someone who dedicates all their time to graffiti. When I was really serious about it I watched graffiti videos all day long. I practiced all day long and I went out and I found my spots. I clipped the fences. I picked out my all black [clothing]. I got in shape so I could run. I mean yah, there's definitely an art form to it. And I took it seriously.

It is this degree of commitment and devotion to the graffiti "art form" for which writers are awarded 'street cred,' in turn securing one's identity as a legitimate writer and substantiating one's reputation. "A good writer has street credentials…they're respected on the street because they've put in their time," states Nicole, as she tells me that most esteemed writers can claim at least some degree of local fame.

According to Nick, "a graffiti writer is basically an individual who wants to first achieve a sense of notoriety." Nick shares that it is an intense drive and desire for fame that motivates writers to embark through an obligatory "rite of passage," working their way from "toy" status to respected writer:

I mean, just even in the process of calling yourself a writer is really a rite of passage thing—you know? For a while you're gonna be a toy…you're not a full-fledged writer 'til you come to grips with being a toy first. It's like there's gonna be a stronger sense of fear--a lot more questioning of yourself--it's like, 'do you have the balls to do it?' do you even have the *gumption* to just go out, pick a spot and just bomb…

When asked what it takes to move up the ranks from toy to writer, Nick states that the process includes accepting the fact that courage isn't an option, it's mandatory. Toys must recognize the precarious realities of being a writer. Nick explains:

Getting' caught up in the yard by cops--you're hanging off the edge of somethin' where if you let go you might die or break your neck or be paralyzed. Can you accept what comes with the [graffiti writer] life—what comes with the culture,

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you know? I mean beefs, fights and things of that sort; we've all had to deal with it. It's just one of those things where it's not for the faint of heart…male or female.

As Jake sees it, being a writer is a matter of being a skilled artist; demonstrating a certain level of creativity and ability. Expertise in executing a nice "piece" is a defining factor: "It wasn't your tags, it wasn't your bombs, it was [if] you had been able to make a masterpiece…3-D, the shells and everything really fancy. You had reached that level where you could execute a piece like that." Nick also noted the importance of artistic aptitude and ingenuity, in particular developing a unique. Nick emphatically states, "STYLE. IS. EVERYTHING. If you don't have style *first* then you aren't really a writer…it's the building block. It is *thee* core root of being a writer."

Throughout all interviews, participants repeatedly discussed the characteristic(s) they felt defined a writer, even when the interview questions being asked were not directly linked to defining writers. Marek spoke of getting up and personally enjoying seeing his name around town. Sam demonstrated an expertise and extensive knowledge of the ins and outs of the graffiti subculture. Nicole repeatedly spoke about the time and dedication it took for her to achieve the status of writer. Nick frequently discussed fame and noted the large amount of people who know him because of his graffiti past. Jake tended to speak more about the technicalities and artistic challenges of painting graffiti. It became clear that participants were describing who they perceived *themselves* to be as writers, not simply who they know writers to be.

An Unspoken Status

Despite variations in defining who graffiti writers are, one thing remains understood: a true writer does not arrogantly call oneself a writer. As an honorary title, a conceited self-proclamation tarnishes the honor and indicates to everyone that you don't know the code. "You can't go around calling yourself a writer," states Jake. "You can be a 'graffiti artist' or a 'tagger' or a 'bomber', but a 'writer' was up top."

While fame may be one's prerogative, bragging rights must remain silently demonstrated on the walls. When asked his opinion on writers who call themselves writers before others do, Marek states he feels it is discrediting: "I mean, *I'm* not cool with it…I feel like it's so defiant to tell somebody that you are something. I feel like if you have to tell somebody you are something, then you're probably not." According to Jake and Marek, being a writer is a status not to be claimed with unearned ego, but to be proven over and over again and one way writers set out to prove their status is by taking risks. The greater the risks, the more secure your title of writer becomes.

Risk Takers Only

At the core of every writer is a defining characteristic: courage. Writers are risk takers. Looking back on the risks he took as an up-and-coming writer Sam remembers the nerve it took to do some of his earliest graffiti pieces, "we were taking the biggest risks that I've probably [ever] taken out of my entire career…full blown, big, giant productions in the street—like nobody does that!...it was just so fuckin' ballsy to do that when I think back." Sam's enthusiasm suggests he still can't believe his audacity as a teen.

Of course one of the biggest risks for writers is getting caught. It is not every day a cash reward is put out for your apprehension, which was Jake's experience right before he decided to slow down on his graffiti endeavors. Law enforcement is an ever-present threat, with possible consequences stemming from hefty fines to jail time. For Jake, watching friends go to jail was a clear reminder that legal repercussions for doing graffiti are a reality. This eventually caused Jake to question whether or not the risks were worth it.

Nick feels lucky enough to be able to say he's never been arrested for any of his acts of graffiti, but also notes that a compulsive vigilance while out painting was never optional, it was a prerequisite. He states that he has always been well aware of the consequences of getting caught in the act and even today is still cautious about who he talks to about his graffiti past.

Calculating risks is just part of the game, a game oddly similar to Russian roulette when it comes to taking risks that could endanger one's life. For Sam, the risks were what initially attracted him to graffiti:

> I was always drawn to more dangerous, risk taking activities…years before [painting graffiti] we used to explore rooftops, it was our thing…We figured how to get on complicated rooftops to get as high as we could on them…I just liked getting up on them secretly at night.

While Sam has always enjoyed some element of risk to what he has done, adding the challenge of executing graffiti to his risk taking took his demonstration of courage to a whole new level. To be a true writer, graffitists have to upsurge their everyday risk taking.

Nicole also recalls her days climbing buildings, sometimes three stories high, all the while knowing others out there were assuming she was a "dude" because of the level of risks she was taking. Her pride is evident as she discusses the various perils she faced. The missions she accomplished let me know her bragging rights are not unwarranted. She discloses the fact that she is still not past the statute of limitations for some of her past acts of graffiti. With a slight bit of anxiety, she awaits the day when she knows she's safe from being prosecuted for the thousands of dollars in damages she racked up for the city she lives in.

For the Love of Art

With all participants, an appreciation and love for art preceded their love for graffiti. "I've always been into art. I used to draw when I was 3 yrs. old—whether it was with a crayon or a pencil," says Nick. "I used to sleep with pencils. I would always have a pencil and a piece of paper all the way to the point where I would fall asleep wherever I was at." Nick laughs as he shares how his habit produced high anxiety in his mother, "It would bug her out because she'd be afraid that I'd stab myself or impale myself."

In his younger years Nick drew his own characters and mazes. While mazes were a bit of a specialty, Nick states that as a kid there wasn't a specific type of art he was in to. However, once he had been exposed to graffiti, he began experimenting with different styles and components of graffiti. Nick had yet to create a "full-fledged black book," but had already begun sketching pieces, bubble letters and block letters. From there Nick

began creating characters and doing more illustrative work to the point that his peers would ask (and pay) him to draw on their jeans.

Artistic talent has always been one of Nicole's defining traits. Both in and out of the graffiti subculture, Nicole's appreciation for art has always been at her core. When asked what has defined her in life Nicole answers, "Art. Always, always loved art or things that were unique or anything creative. Creativity has always been there with me." As a graffiti writer though, Nicole's admiration for art became a passion and drive for who she wanted to become.

Sam also spoke of how his appreciation of art has significantly influenced his life course. "I've always been attracted to drawing since I was a kid. I always liked drawing." Despite the fact that Sam's high school was heavily focused on the sciences, his love for art compelled him to continually accept any challenges that would test his artistic abilities, including taking risks beyond what many are willing to take in order to showcase his skills.

The identity of a graffiti writer is multi-faceted and complex. According to participants, writers are not only individuals who have a passion for art, but who take big risks and demonstrate a competitive amount of courage as they tag or paint their graffiti. In general, writers also crave fame, or in the least, a fair amount of recognition on the streets. Respectable writers achieve street credentials and are given high reverence. It takes great ambition and dedication to become a graffiti writer, but first you must enter the graffiti subculture.

Entering a "Community of Artistic Outlaws"

Participants were asked to discuss the processes of entering the graffiti subculture and becoming graffiti writers. According to participants, each had their own unique course that naturally progressed at a subconscious level; therefore, according to participants, entering the subculture was a fairly instinctive process.

In order to understand writers, I had to first develop an understanding of the subculture that unites them. Therefore, participants were asked to define the graffiti subculture as they see it. It is interesting to note that rarely did a participant use the actual word "subculture" to describe the collective they felt loyal to; instead, terms such as "community," "secret brotherhood," "kindred spirits," and "family" were all used to describe the cohesive unit of writers bonded together by their shared love for graffiti. Sam described the graffiti subculture as:

> A collection of artists hyper focused on building an alternate identity through the act of painting graffiti. I mean it's all about building your reputation, getting recognition amongst your peers, positive recognition amongst your peers, negative recognition amongst everyone else…it's this community of *artistic outlaws*.

Most participants emphasized the strong feelings of acceptance they felt from being a member of the graffiti subculture, describing the collective as analogous to a family or tight-knit "community". Sam mentioned the primal instinct for humans to band together with others who are likeminded:

> At our core, community is absolutely as critical as food and water and shelter. So I think that when you participate in something that you enjoy doing, the natural gravitation is to find a community that is built around that. And then once you have that community built around what you're doing…acceptance into that community as a bonafide member is something inherently human.

Marek especially valued the 'family ties' of his crew, most significantly in a time when he felt very much disconnected from others in his high school. He states that most of the kids in his high school were rural "good ol' boys," less rebellious than he and more conventional. Marek felt out of place in that crowd and gravitated more towards skaters who he felt he could relate to better and form stronger bonds with. I asked Marek what was so special to him about his crew of graffiti writers, if it was ultimately the sense of belonging he liked most. "I think so, definitely. I mean that's a big part of it and it's kinda a *secret brotherhood* (he says with a mysterious tone) for a lack of a better way to put it…there's somethin' to be said for that."

Further into the interview, Marek states that in college he kept his graffiti world separate from his academic world, even though he was an art student. I asked him why that was:

> They felt different to me. The energy's different. The outcome's different…and two, the graffiti's more of a community. I felt like it was more like something you did with a crew. Like you're hanging out with these guys and [graffiti] is what you do…I mean it's definitely part of being a family, it's definitely a sense of belonging.

Marek's bond with other writers was something he kept isolated. His identity as a graffiti writer was intentionally kept from being salient in other social contexts.

When Nick was asked to define the graffiti subculture he responded with, "it's strictly community first. Writer's FIRST you know, it's like everything outside of it is really just a bonus, it's really what helps to supplement its continuation." From Nick's perspective, without that communal bond, graffiti would cease to exist; the subculture is ultimately about a unified body of people dedicated to their passion, graffiti. Nick tells me that as an adolescent and teen, he never felt like he belonged to any one particular group. He refers to his teenage identity as the "drifter," explaining that he would "drift" in between groups or cliques. Nick intentionally chose to avoid becoming too involved or a part of cliques, preferring to keep his circle of friends diverse and his net cast wide. "I was able to identify with everybody and not be classified specifically in a certain circle— I was the 'drifter'." He claims that artists have more social freedom to go unclassified and then states, "I think when you're an artist you can kind of move about—it's just a certain type of mentality, you don't necessarily want to subject yourself to a certain mold." When asked about not belonging to cliques, but then joining the graffiti subculture, Nick laughs and says, "right. I've become part of *a* clique." But without retracting his previous statements Nick adds:

> At the same time you still want that communal acceptance. So I think that's what it was—[joining the graffiti community] literally was another transition. It's like, 'ok, granted I know everybody, but I don't come from that mold.' It's not the same cut fabric and stuff. It's like, 'where is my cut fabric'?

For Nick, banding together with other graffiti writers was inevitable. Nick explains why: "I guess just that yearning to find my identity in those that come from the same walk in

life, that same viewpoint in life…and at the end…it's like I finally found my circle. 'this is the pack that I run with.'"

The consensus among participants' definitions is that the graffiti subculture is not simply a group of individuals creating graffiti, but more a network of individuals who feel a bond in being writers. They are psychologically and emotionally connected through their shared identities as graffiti writers. Their passion is graffiti, but their loyalties are to one another. After learning how participants view the subculture, I asked them to discuss how they became interested in entering it in the first place.

Fascinations and Intrigue

Nick recalls the first time he saw graffiti in real life. While visiting a relative in New York, he became mesmerized by the illegal texts and images covering highways, sound barriers and buildings. Nick remembers thinking, "this is real! This is *really* real!" Up until his first encounter with it on the streets, Nick had only seen graffiti on TV. As he watched the documentary *Style Wars* and films such as *Beat Street* and *Wild Style,* Nick became acquainted with the hip-hop culture and the illegal art it embraced. Even though he was unsure of how someone creates graffiti, or if it was anything he would ever be able to do, Nick recalls, "after seeing graffiti for the first time, that was it!" From that point on Nick knew graffiti would be a part of his life, "it's one thing to see it on TV—at that age it amazes you naturally—but when you actually see it in person…I felt [graffiti] was a calling." Nick resolved he was going to answer it:

I felt that with my love of art that maybe [graffiti] was somethin' I could do that nobody else around my age or in my area was doing. I hadn't even picked up a spray can yet and I sorted out, 'I'm gonna be a writer.'

Nick wasn't the only one to become interested in graffiti through media sources, Marek too remembers "pre-internet" days when magazines were a primary source for learning about pop culture enclaves such as the popular skateboard scene which seemed to fully embrace the defiant nature of graffiti. "I took to skateboarding culture and just kind of got into [graffiti] from there," Marek states. It wasn't until years later though that he became focused on the more challenging artistic elements of graffiti. For Marek, graffiti "started out being more of a rebellious thing." The early stages of his graffiti career were primarily driven by the excitement and adrenaline rush he experienced in a stage of insubordination. "I kinda felt like I was an anarchist. You know, like this anarchy that I was a part of…just the run and chase and the hiding…I mean there's definitely a little adrenaline to it…"

Similar to Marek's experience, Nicole and Jake also expressed the unique hand in hand relationship graffiti has with the skateboard scene. Nicole began experimenting with graffiti as a teenager after the neighborhood "hoodlums" she hung out with introduced her to it. Nicole's affinity for "skater punks" led her to associate with others who were a part of the skateboard scene and who had tried their hand at writing graffiti on the wall of a local park. "I always thought [graffiti] was cool too, but the boys that were there were skater punks. That was my genre," states Nicole. While it was the skater style that initially caught Nicole's eye, she soon discovered that her natural artistic talent came in handy as her graffiti caught the eyes of the skaters she had teenage crushes on. "I found

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that the more graffiti I did and the better I got at it…the nicer the boys were to me," she says as she laughs about her flirtatious teen years.

It wasn't until college that Jake became serious about painting graffiti, but his initial awareness of it happened in high school when he saw kids writing graffiti all over their clothing. Eventually Jake's days spent at the skate park and his innate appreciation for artwork set the stage for a growing curiosity with graffiti. "You go out to a skate park and there was graffiti on the wall and I'm like, 'what the hell is that?' So I was like, 'well, that's kinda cool.' You know, loving artwork, it just all kinda tied together." Like Jake, each participant described an initial intrigue with graffiti. As curiosities and appreciation for the illegal images grew, the graffiti lifestyle became more seductive and participants were eventually drawn in.

It Just Happens

Each participant described their personal experience entering the graffiti subculture as a natural process that kind of "just happened," almost without much thought. An authentic pull towards graffiti drew them into the subculture and wooed their participation. A deep connection to the artistic facets of graffiti and bonds with other writers already on the graffiti scene felt organic. All participants entered the world of graffiti through a typical progression of interest in graffiti and then recruitment or encouragement from others like them. Most participants stated that the process of stepping foot onto the graffiti scene was nearly instinctual, not really a choice but an

involuntary attraction towards something they had a strong disposition towards. I asked

Marek how someone gets into the graffiti subculture:

> To tell somebody how you get into [the subculture] is weird…it's not like, 'oh, if you want to get into the graffiti scene then you need to go do this.' I feel like it's kind of one of those things that just—it just feels like it happens.

For Sam, the path in was a paved highway. Sam found that he could use his

natural artistic talent as a vehicle to acceptance. Artistry was innate, an inherent resource

that gained him some much desired respect and social acceptance as a kid:

> I found a quick route to acceptance through getting better, faster at drawing. So I realized it could be a tool 'cause once I started being able to draw, I got a different kind of respect. I wasn't completely bullied all the fuckin' time. The better I got at drawing, the more people were like, 'yo, this kid can draw and he's cool.' I saw it as a vehicle and so it was natural again, it was just kinda natural for that vehicle to morph into graffiti.

Eventually Sam's die hard personality and passion for graffiti threw him onto the streets

of some major U.S. cities where he experienced an intense academy of "art school." Sam

talks about how his love of creating art and the elements of danger, risk, adrenaline and

competition all seduced him:

> I suddenly was thrust into a forum with the competitive nature that art schools or art classes typically have—but it was far more intense and far more honest and far more aggressive, so your critiques would be intense and they could be violent, you know! So it was just a natural fit—you know it fit my need for adrenaline— and kind of adventure. Plus it gave me a forum to practice my art and refine it and better it.

Like Sam, Nick too found entry into the subculture a visceral process, one that suited his artistic talent. "I was just *that* artist in school," states Nick as he tells me the story of how he was initially recruited by a couple of friends to try doing graffiti. Having carried a reputation for his artistic abilities throughout middle school and into high school, friends knew what he was capable of and suggested he come out with them to try painting in a legal tunnel (an area designated for legal graffiti):

> So one day I get this call from one of my friends at school and they're like, 'yo meet me out there in the courtyard at lunch.' So, you know, I meet up with him and there's some other friends of his, so we were just hangin' out for a second and he was like, 'yo Nick, we found this wall, we found this tunnel…and it's a legal tunnel, you can paint legally in there, not get arrested, nobody stops you.'

Nick notes that from the moment he first stepped into that tunnel he was hooked.

Becoming a Writer

When asked if becoming a writer is a gradual experience or if someone can become one overnight, Nick answered:

> No! It's never overnight. Never overnight, even if you are nice like that [and] you have skill, until you move forward it's never overnight; because if you stop at that point (referring to the first time you feel content with your graffiti style and abilities) you'll never know how much better or how much further you can go with it.

Nick discussed with me his first time ever painting, "First time I'd ever painted…like full-fledged my first piece I was like, "that's the shit!"…but then I had to say to myself at the same time, "I can do better than that…that still looks like a toy…"

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Nick's progression on the graffiti scene was gradual but intentional, born out of genuine

admiration and desire to push himself artistically, especially after seeing the intricate

pieces painted by others:

> I started to see more piece work—it wasn't a whole lot, but I saw more work that
> was intricately executed, like detail, fills, 3-Ds, shells around the whole piece, you
> know bubbles that just looked perfect and I'm lookin' at that and I'm like, 'damn,
> I gotta step it up.' So sure enough I started to get more into the research side of
> it—so it's like, "how can I get my lines that clean? How can I fill a whole piece
> without going through more than 2 or 3 cans of paint just for the fill—that's when
> I started learnin' techniques as far as cuttin' lines, being able to flare and things of
> that sort, and so gradually started to develop more and at that same time I wasn't
> out painting a whole lot…it was one of those things where I knew it was gonna
> take me a second, you know, I just had to get to it when I could…I had school I
> had to do, so it was in my free time…it probably took me about a good year or
> two before I started to really, really develop a style.

The way Nick sees it, you must push yourself to the brink—and further—before you can

consider yourself a writer, and to do so takes time.

Yet, unlike Nick, not everyone feels the process of becoming a writer need be

gradual. Writers can spend months, even years, as amateurs before becoming established,

but Nicole claims it was the help of her boyfriend and all her practicing that quickly

pushed her to writer status:

> I came up quick just because I had [name of her boyfriend at the time] who had
> been bombing for 20 yrs. So he taught me everything and I practiced it over – I
> put my fine art aside – and just practiced over and over and over and over and just
> went out there and just did it. So I came up quick.

In the process of questioning participants about how one becomes a graffiti writer,

one thing was clear; there are no concrete checklists of steps. Even so, two key factors

were common to participants' experiences in becoming writers: mentorship and an obsessive amount of dedication.

Mentorship

Mentors play a crucial role in the graffiti subculture; new protégés learn the ropes and are taught valuable lessons on developing graffiti techniques and personal style through the guidance of their more experienced predecessors. Both Jake and Marek credit their introduction to graffiti and initial style development to much more experienced writers willing to take them under their wings.

As and art student, Jake met his mentors in college. When he found out other college students were doing graffiti, he asked if they would teach him a few things. As he got better he was able to develop his own style and worked on collaborations with others. Marek's mentors were friends that were a few years older than him. Marek tells me that he felt challenged by them as they pushed him to do better work. As the youngest in the group he felt like he had to prove himself: "Having the older kids by my side I think pushed me 'cause I kinda had to prove more…I was the younger out of the bunch…it was almost like tryin' to surpass them, I just really tried to make a mark."

After taking a hiatus from doing graffiti in her teen years, Nicole found herself entering the graffiti scene for a second time in her mid-20s when she began dating a guy who had been "bombing" for close to 20 years. Together they bombed the city as a team, not telling anyone that the two of them were responsible for an inescapable amount of graffiti. "I think at one time we had close to 50 pieces runnin'," states Nicole. Without

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her boyfriend mentoring her, Nicole would not have been able to reach the status of writer nearly as quickly as she did. But that all said, Nicole pulled her own weight, devoting countless hours and grueling practice in order to keep up with him.

Dedication to the Performance

Becoming a graffiti writer takes an incredible amount of hard work. Painting graffiti isn't a hobby or leisure activity, it's a lifestyle. To become a good writer requires big sacrifices. Strains on time and relationships are common side effects and the demands put on one's creativity to consistently "one up" other writers requires huge investments on multiple levels. As Sam pointed out, graffiti is NOT "kid stuff." Graffiti is just like any other thing you want to excel at, it takes dedication.

Graffiti writers take seriously the execution of their perfected black book blueprints. Writers carefully plan out for when and how sketches will be transferred from their black books to illegal canvases; whether it be a freight train, subway, the façade of a building or the concealed concrete wall underneath an overpass or bridge (just to name a few options), the physical danger, risk of law enforcement, and passionate determination to create graffiti more elaborate and more refined than the last, are serious matters of performance. "I've said oftentimes that graffiti is as much a performance art as a visual art," Sam explained to me as we discussed the strenuous physicality that goes into showing off all that a writer is capable of doing. According to Sam, graffiti can be all or nothing, even when it is a one man show and the only audience member is the graffiti writer.

Marek also noted the ardent dedication it takes to become the best of the best. Despite its ethereal nature, graffiti is demanding. Marek explains to me that if you want to be good at graffiti, you must *live* it:

> That's the biggest thing…waking up doing it and going to bed doing it. I feel like where you see the most success—like those guys just eat [graffiti] for breakfast, lunch, dinner, like ALL the time. Black books every day, all the time.

As Jake, Marek, Nicole and Sam all explained, mentorship and dedication are crucial to becoming a writer. However, one thing is even more essential, choosing an alias.

Alter Egos, Fame and Anonymity

This study explores the progression of a graffiti writer's social identity as influenced through the processes of entering and exiting the graffiti subculture. Participants were asked to reflect on their past social identities during the time periods in which they considered themselves to be graffiti writers. Throughout all interviews three themes stood out: 1) Writers are primarily identified on a social level by tag names representing their subcultural personas, 2) Fame and anonymity are significant to a graffiti writer's identity, and 3) A certain degree of tension is often experienced as a writer attempts to simultaneously maintain and balance fame with anonymity.

Name "tags"

Writers aim to be identified by their alias or alter ego names. These alter egos are the ones who get all the credit for all the graffiti a writer does. Just as it is with fine art, graffiti works are also signed. However, instead of signing graffiti with one's personal name, it is signed with the "tag" name of the writer's alter ego. Nick describes alter ego names as writers "nom de plumes." "A lot more people know me as Nick, but writers know me as ATM. Anybody I've ever painted with, they know me as ATM." Nick describes to me how he carefully manages who knows about his graffiti past, or graffiti escapades he now enjoys every once in a while. Nick tells me that younger graffiti writers who recognize his tag name on the streets have suspiciously approached him in public to ask if he personally knows ATM. Nick claims that intuition plays a role in his response. Occasionally Nick confirms their suspicions, it all depends on whether or not he feels the person asking is reliable and will be responsible with knowing him as ATM.

The use of aliases often results in writers not knowing one another personally. Jake recalls his days running around the city where he attended college and explains that he didn't personally know who was tagging which tag or who was behind the graffiti he would find. Introductions to other writers are generally anonymous and take place on the walls through graffiti, rather than face to face. "[Other writers] see your work, they recognize your work, but they don't know who *you* are," states Jake. "It's very secretive," he says with a sly emphasis on "secretive" and laughs: "Which is fun." Jake expresses that he enjoyed the element of secrecy, not sharing with anyone outside of his crew what he was doing and *who* he was as a graffiti writer. In fact Jake protected his identity as a

writer so much that he managed to keep it from his girlfriend for a while. Eventually she

pieced things together, but not until after Jake had been successful at getting up all

around the city.

Yet, the process of choosing a name for one's alter ego isn't always quick. Some

writers try out several alias names before settling on the one they feel they can make

infamous. Nick describes his own experience choosing an alias:

> Dealing with graffiti is really about persona...when you're just startin' out you're
> gonna go through a million and one names; it's just natural…You can play around
> with a handstyle, letters and the whole nine forever, but it's when will that dead
> set persona sneak in? You just go through that process until it naturally happens. I
> went through several names throughout high school… I used to write (he pauses)
> um (another pause) I used to write RANC and there was a while I used to write
> MAYN (pauses again to try to recall more names) um (pause) what's another
> one? God, there's so many I made a point to forget them!

Nick shakes his head, showing amusement over how many names he went through:

> It's like when I finally got to that certain level I made it a point to forget those
> names. It's that era of shame. You want to forget those years when you were a
> toy…I think the last name I had before I started writing ATM was TRAYN and
> that was when the transition really started to form as far as like being a full-
> fledged writer—'this [ATM] is what I write, that's that.'

The graffiti writer identity is fundamentally social, carefully managed as an

identity specific to a writer's participation in the subculture and generally considered a

part from a writer's personal identity. These alter egos also serve as more than

pseudonyms, at times they function as "superhero costumes," instantly boosting

confidence and courage.

James Bond, the Masked Man & Avatar

For Marek, the difference between who he felt he was in his everyday life and who he felt he was as his alter ego, was most notable in the degree his mischievousness. When acting out of his writer identity, Marek would give into his craving for more intense thrill seeking, something he didn't feel he could do in ordinary life. Part of the adventure in developing an alter ego was in feeling that he could be somebody beyond the limits, expectations, and norms of everyday life. Marek recalls his alter ego days, "it always made me (he begins to laugh)—ah this is so cheesy—but it [gave me] that kind of 'super hero' feel—it's being that 'masked man.'"

Marek wasn't alone in feeling that his alter ego was someone more thrilling and elusive than he could be in "real" life. Jake also loved the excitement and adventure he felt as a writer. Writers operate in stealth, treating their graffiti missions as covert operations and it was this secrecy that Jake found exhilarating:

> When you're running around no one knows who you are or who your crew is. The only people who know are the people in your crew; it's just a big secret. You're not allowed to talk about it outside the group, you know. Just being able to keep it that quiet, it's just fun runnin' around like James Bond or something.

We both laugh as Jake smiles a huge sheepish grin.

For a period of time Nicole thought little of what the repercussions might be if she were caught; instead, she relished a super hero feeling of invincibility:

I was never worried about the consequences. I just felt invincible. I mean, I was in good shape. I mean, when you're scalin' walls and you're running – we did get chased a few times – and we were goin' out every night and when you're doin' the can (referring to the motions of moving a spray can back and forth) you start to get cut (defined arms). I just felt invincible.

Sam also discussed the exciting nature of having a second identity separate from his true identity:

At its core it's about extending who you are in your real life… you get to have a different character that's out there represent[ing] you in avatar - it's like the original avatar! Sam laughs. Really, you go out there and your [alter ego] is suddenly WAY bigger and WAY cooler and WAY more bad ass than you really are and so you're able to have this whole second identity.…and so you're able to craft this alternate identity.

According to participants, aliases allow writers to take on a superhero-like identity in the form of a famous alter ego. Writers know in reality *they* will never actually be famous, but the potential for their alter egos to be notorious is always there.

Fame

The factor of fame is undeniably significant to writers. Nick had defined a graffiti writer as "an individual who wants to first achieve a sense of notoriety." When asked to recall when he first knew he'd become a 'legitimate' writer, Nick tells me about his experience crewing up with two nationally known and respected crews. Simultaneously proud and humbled to be a member of each crew, Nick discloses that the honor lies in the crews' fame. I asked Nick if gaining fame is a writer's first goal:

Yah, yah, just fame. Fame first and everything else second. It's always gonna be about fame first. It's like if you have that type of spirit in you—just the gusto—to have the gumption to be like, 'Yo I'm gonna get up and people are goin' to know me whether to my face or not, people are gonna know me by my tag,'…to make a valid statement that 'this is me.' 'Here I am.' 'This is what I'm doin', like it or not, I'm here.' 'I am undeniable.'

In a moment of self-reflection Nick shares that he became less vain once he decided that he wanted his professional artwork to be the main attraction, not his alter ego. Ultimately though, he states that "fame is the drivin' force for any writer."

Particularly insightful was Sam's take on fame in the graffiti subculture. As we discussed the nature of being successful and desiring an infamous alias, Sam does not deny the fact that writers crave fame and work extremely hard to be seen as impressive. In his opinion, success and fame are a part of building identities:

It is what it is… and that's ok you know, it's the way that we define ourselves and we build our identity—these kind of 'notches of success,' 'notches of acceptance,' and the more acceptance you receive, the more you feel your identity is secured. I am an artist because I am accepted…

I finish his sentence with "by the artist community?" to which Sam answers "yes! And therefore that is who *I am*—not really—you just think that." Sam seems to suggest that even when a writer gets caught up in the fame and success of their subcultural identity, there's a truer, more realistic and conventional identity that is *actually* who they are, not their alter ego.

In discussing the seal of approval writers gain through fame, Sam candidly states that he feels an element of narcissism underlies every community made up of individuals who strive to create or perform some type of art form together; regardless of the chosen

medium. Sam provides examples, saying that a group of elderly women knitting, musicians rocking out together, writers bombing a city together, are all groups that offer a platform for self-expression. "I find that art itself—any kind of self-expression…is inherently narcissistic, and that's ok. It's supposed to be. It is the act of saying, 'look at me, look at me, look at me, look at me.'" Sam adds "somehow along the way that became taboo."

Yet, being taboo doesn't stop writers from craving fame, if anything, it seems to be an incentive. I asked Sam if fame is truly at the core of being a writer, to which he responded straightforwardly, "well sure. 'Cause it's all about getting famous and attaining levels of fame... So if nobody knows *you're* doin' it—what's the fuckin' point?" Sam remarks that one of the biggest misconceptions about graffiti writers is that they're only out to destroy property. The truth is, most writers desire fame and are in the business of self-promotion, making them some of the best marketers in the city. Sam tells me that writers are stereotyped. He describes what he believes to be the public's perceptions of writers:

> There's this unquenchable—this like rage of destruction—almost like this psychosis that's involved in destroying things. And I think that part of that exists, but by far it's artists trying to do illegal marketing. That's really what it is. They're doin' the same shit that advertisers and marketers do—the same exact shit—they're tryin' to find spaces that they can put stuff so you're gonna see it and remember it every fuckin' time. And what new way can I do it? What more creative way can I do it? What different kind of materials can I use to do it bigger? More memorable? More sticky? It's the same stuff. It's not about destroying necessarily, it's just about self-promotion.

Needless to say, the hoped for result of successful marketing is increased fame.

Nicole loved the notoriety she gained in the city she bombed. As a female she felt that she had done more than gain respect as a writer, she had demonstrated "female power" on a scene that has been male-dominated from the beginning. Nicole describes how she felt once she gained notoriety in the local graffiti scene. "There was DEFINITELY something cool about it. I do remember going to an art show…and people out of nowhere were like, 'yo, you're the female writer.' And there's somethin' kind of cool about it." While it's been over a year since Nicole has hit any graffiti spots, she feels she hasn't been forgotten:

> And even to this day I still feel like I left a little bit of a legacy behind because there's still a few things runnin' you know, but it was like I was the first female bomber that really came in and just smashed the town.

Nicole's pride is evident; but even more than having proven her graffiti writer status, she feels that she has demonstrated that a girl can do graffiti *and* gain respect from her male peers.

While fame and notoriety often seduce writers, not *all* writers succumb. In contrast to the other writers interviewed, fame was never the main priority for Marek. When asked if the desire for fame was a big part of Marek's motives for doing graffiti he responded with a straightforward "Not for me. No. No…I mean I don't seek after that public attention." The only aspect of fame Marek claims he enjoyed was occasionally overhearing someone talk about his graffiti without knowing it was him they were talking about. Marek was never about having large numbers of people recognize his work, rather, he was satisfied with occasionally stumping someone:

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I mean the biggest part was that it was pretty rad to go to a party and overhear somebody talking about [your graffiti] when they didn't know it was you. Whether it was good or bad, I mean I LIKED that! Like kinda 'fly on the wall.' I mean either praising or talking shit.

Maintaining secrecy and anonymity was more gratifying for Marek than being infamous.

Anonymity

Even when writers strive for fame, they also take heed to keep their personal identities anonymous. The most obvious reason for remaining unidentified is to avoid law enforcement, however, participants frequently mentioned a particular thrill or pleasure garnered from successfully remaining anonymous.

Nicole found anonymity to be one of the highlights of being involved in the graffiti scene. At first she found it amusing; being a writer became her "little secret". However as time went on and Nicole became more and more aggressive in bombing, her motive for anonymity changed. Having images of her graffiti broadcasted on the local news was a turning point for Nicole. No longer anonymous in the sense that she could get by without worrying about random writers giving away her true identity, Nicole aimed for anonymity to protect her from law enforcement, and more importantly to protect her child. "I liked the infamy at first, but the more I thought about it I was like, you know, 'I'm a mom'," states Nicole.

After showing me a news clip broadcasted one night by a local TV station, I could fully understand Nicole's concerns for remaining anonymous as her graffiti flashed across the screen several times. Nicole's graffiti had irritated some local citizens and they

were out to crack down on the vandals "defacing" the highway sound barriers and other public properties. Perhaps the public would be shocked to learn that a 30 year old mother was the culprit.

Both Nicole and Nick shared that younger kids caught by authorities oftentimes feel pressured to give up the names of older, more wanted writers. Law enforcement offers kids a break if they help them catch more established writers. Nicole and Nick's concerns of a younger kids 'ratting' them out was one incentive for remaining anonymous.

I mentioned to Nick that I found the anonymity factor of graffiti pretty interesting, to which he responded, "yah, the anonymity. The anonymity is a touchy thing." Nick expounds by telling me that one reason you don't disclose who you actually are is out of respect for a "code of anonymity" established by "old school" writers (writers who initially started the graffiti movement). Nick tells me that having been known for his art prior to being involved in the subculture made it more difficult to remain completely anonymous:

> I guess always being an artist, it's like, after a while people are gonna know you're the one that did[the graffiti] or you're responsible for creating something,'…there were too many people that knew me already as an artist originally before I was a full-fledged writer. It was a touchy thing for me for awhile. I was goin' through catchin' a lot of tags and hittin' illegal spots— whether you could see them or not—if I had gotten caught or somebody ratted me out, yah, I'd probably be in trouble for it to a certain degree.

After discussing the consequences of not pulling anonymity off successfully, I ask Nick if there is any other reason for remaining anonymous besides evading law

enforcement. Nick answers with a straightforward "to create legend." He explains that

anonymity "kinda stems back to fame, like folklore. Anonymity is really like–if you're a

good writer and you do maintain some sort of anonymity behind it, it's gonna do nothin'

but strengthen the rep, *the legend*." According to Nick, anonymity circles back to fame

and the greater the amount of anonymity, the greater the chances are that your alter ego

will become legendary.

The unique paradox of fame and anonymity in the graffiti subculture presents

fascinating ground for research into who graffiti writers are as their superhero alter egos.

As Nick mentioned, fame is everything. But even so, without anonymity a graffiti writer

is not likely to become legendary. While a writer's desire for fame may indicate a degree

of narcissism, Sam believes that all types of artistry involve some grade of narcissistic

motive. As he sees it, a desire for fame is natural. Sam tells me that writers know they

will never *actually* be able to gain fame for themselves, but at the same time believe there

is infamy to be won through their alter egos. Though maintaining anonymity while

seeking fame may not appear to be a hardship, participants noted that the tension of this

paradox is not an easy battle.

The Paradox of Fame & Anonymity

According to participants, anonymity is crucial, but it does nothing to negate a

writer's desire for fame. Yet, maintaining this paradox has strains of its own and can

prove to be just as difficult as becoming a famed writer. Sam shares with me that most

writers like the spotlight. As a kid he was a class clown and as a writer he yearned for

even more attention. He states that his desire for attention in the graffiti subculture

eventually overcame his efforts to remain anonymous. "As for me, I didn't do a good job

of protecting my name and I would be kind of chastised early and often–especially when

I was actively painting illegally–for doing interviews." Without concealing his identity,

Sam would agree to do interviews or talk openly to others about graffiti, an act not too

many writers condone:

> For me I couldn't help it. I liked the attention so much that I stopped writing a
> fake name and I just started writing Sam. I thought that was more ironic in some
> ways. I liked the idea of 'I'm just gonna write Sam because that's who I am.'

Sam eventually began "bridging" his two worlds together, so that everything he painted

he signed with "Sam-o":

> My graffiti life was slowly starting to kinda creep into my art life. My face and
> my name were starting to become more and more well-known and so it just
> seemed like a natural progression for me to just say screw it. I'm writin' Sam-o
> and I'll be known that way outside and inside. If something weird happens, or if I
> have to be held accountable for something that I did illegally then I'll just have to
> deal with that when it comes.

Sam tells me that I've picked up on the "crux in the community" as I ask him

about striving for fame, but choosing to remain anonymous. He states that the true strain

is "you want your [tag] name to be famous, but really *you* want to be famous." Sam tells

me he struggled with his alter ego getting all the credit for his hard work, explaining that

"it was difficult for me to allow my [tag] name to get more fame than I did." As Sam

semi-retired his subcultural persona, he made greater efforts to advance his art career by

merging his graffiti style with his professional works. He states, "As that merger took place the illegal activity happened less and less – except for a few drunk encounters."

Nicole's story is similar to Sam's. She states that initially it was easy for her to keep her graffiti activities and alias a secret because she enjoyed the secrecy. The mysteriousness of being unidentified was a novelty, "well for me for instance, if I see a piece of graffiti that I like and I see a lot of it and I don't know who the person is, it makes me want to know who that person is," Nicole explains. For Nicole, it was exciting to imagine people being curious about who she was. However, the novelty of remaining anonymous wore off as her graffiti persona became more and more infamous. She tells me that eventually she wanted people to know it was her doing the graffiti. Even so, she admits that she often felt a degree of regret upon divulging her identity to others.

The paradox of fame and anonymity is a fascinating component of the graffiti subculture; one that entails famous alter egos, but also requires stealth anonymity. As Nick revealed, the process of choosing an alias name is not always quick, but always essential. In addition to protecting writers' identities, alter egos provide feelings of being super-hero-like and satisfy cravings for fame. However, both Nicole and Sam faced inner tensions of letting their alter egos and tag names become more famous than themselves. Their desires for fame as individuals began to override their efforts to remain anonymous and the thrill of secrecy lost its appeal. Eventually, as major life events occurred and professional goals developed, participants had to decide if they would remain on the graffiti scene or leave their alter egos behind.

Exiting the Graffiti Subculture

Counter to what was expected, participants revealed that exiting the graffiti subculture is not always a smooth (or final) progression. Both Nicole and Marek recalled periods of time when they took sabbaticals from the subculture, only to come back later for the second – even third – time in their graffiti careers. While participants' experiences entering the graffiti subculture were similar to one another's, their experiences exiting the subculture varied significantly. Additionally participants noted that "exiting the graffiti subculture" does not always entail one's subcultural days becoming a thing of the past or complete retirement of one's alter ego.

When questioned about leaving the graffiti subculture, Sam tells me that every writer has their own pathway out:

> I think for different writers it's different how you leave. A lot of times it's some big event…you get busted and you fuckin' pay penance and you're like, "fuck that, it's not worth it for me anymore." Other people, it's kind of a slow, gradual thing—I think that's how it happened for me. There were a few times where I swore that I was done and I went back a couple times. There's a few big things we did—a few years back—I don't think we've done anything in a while. It just slowly became more important to me to focus on other stuff.

While Sam states that he is no longer a practicing member of the graffiti subculture, he has not entirely left the graffiti scene. Sam still does public graffiti demonstrations and openly talks to the public or younger writers about graffiti. Sam is still known by his graffiti style, but carefully manages how often he is associated with graffiti itself. According to Sam, there is a big difference between being an active writer who spends their nights safeguarding their membership in the graffiti subculture and being a writer

who has already proven themselves and who occasionally does graffiti demonstrations or attends hip hop events showcasing graffiti art.

Twice Marek experienced a cycle of coming onto the graffiti scene and then leaving; once as a teen and then again as a college student. He states there was a gap in time when he was not consistently doing graffiti and therefore didn't consider himself a writer during that time. Marek tells me that his initial years doing graffiti were "small town" while he was living in a rural area. Near the end of high school, Marek began visiting a nearby city to check out the skate scene and started to meet new people. Eventually Marek moved to the city to attend college. He tells me about his college years and how the move away from his home town interrupted his graffiti activities. It was at that time that he didn't feel he was a writer.

> I think when I first came [to college] I was really shy about the whole graffiti stuff. I wasn't one of those gung ho…I felt small town and I was very shy about that. I wasn't out to try to prove myself at that point. And I feel like that may be when that transition happened (referring to the first time he left the graffiti scene). I wouldn't say I was put off, but it was like I had lost that sense of belonging because I was so tight knit with [my hometown] crew. So going to [college] and trying to bully my way into something –I was a little more passive and kind of took the [fine] art side of it as a substitute.

After some time had passed, and while still in school for his fine arts degree, Marek re-entered the graffiti subculture and picked up where he'd left off. This time he brought with him fine art expertise and a new style.

Marek met other writers, including Jake, in the university's art department and soon after began hitting the streets with Jake. By this time Marek was interested in a new form of graffiti–more often called st. art–and began experimenting with wheat pastes

instead of aerosol. For the latter part of college Marek got up around the city, but following graduation, he left the graffiti scene for a second time and moved across the country.

Nicole experienced a roller coaster of moving in and out of the subculture with periods of time when she was significantly more active than others. Although her most aggressive years were not until her early 30's, her initial years doing graffiti as a teenager initiated her cravings. Nicole states that while in high school and in her 20's she didn't consider herself to be a *true* writer because she was primarily experimenting and only partially engaged with the subculture. Nicole's graffiti career slowed a bit in her early 20's and then picked up again in her mid-twenties after her fiancée passed away and she became a new mom. Still not totally immersed in the subculture as a teen or young adult, all that changed in her early 30's when she hit the streets with an obsessive determination and a competitive spirit. After a couple of intense years spent bombing the city landscapes–sometimes with her boyfriend and sometimes alone–Nicole abruptly left the scene. The birth of her second child and drama with other writers caused her to reevaluate the subculture. While fond reminiscence will always be there, the incentives to hit the streets again have dissipated.

The narratives of Nicole and Marek suggest that writers' subcultural experiences entering and exiting the graffiti subculture may not always be a linear process of entry, participation, followed by an exit. The degree to which a writer is involved in the subculture and the length of time they remain involved can also vary from one writer to another. Marek and Nicole each discussed multiple cycles of entering and exiting the

graffiti subculture. Additionally, Sam noted that every writer has their own pathway out and the time it takes for a writer to go through the exit process may vary as well. Sam also noted that a writer does not need to be fully active in the graffiti subculture in order to still be a part of the local graffiti scene and still be involved in graffiti-related events. Even so, each participant did share that there came a point in their graffiti careers when they had to step back and re-calculate whether or not it was worth still being active in the graffiti subculture.

Risk-Reward Evaluations

According to participants, at a certain point writers begin to consider how much longer they will paint graffiti and to what degree of risk is worth continuing. These moments of self-reflection come at various points in one's graffiti career and may include multiple issues to be considered. Significant negative events or circumstances, strains on relationships, legal consequences, moving to another city, increasing responsibilities such as marriage and children, or new career goals can all factor into a writer's decision to end their writing activities, or in the very least reign in the escapades.

Each participant acknowledged a period of time spent weighing out the risks and rewards of continuing to do graffiti. A few mentioned the fact that they began to feel a significant amount of tension when the risks of participating in the graffiti scene began to outweigh the extent of its rewards. For all participants there came a time when their focus on graffiti began to wane, eclipsed by new interests in career development and professional goals. Unwilling to jeopardize becoming professional artists, each

participant felt the time had come to concentrate on priorities other than graffiti. Some participants chose to remain on the graffiti scene as professionals now commissioned to do graffiti inspired artwork. Nicole was the only one to completely exit the subculture and cut most ties, but she claims she will always have a deep respect and nostalgia for it all. Nicole sees herself more as an "artist / mom" now than a graffiti writer.

Sam discussed his responsibilities today compared to the time in his life when he was aggressively hitting the streets; he brings up the fact that eventually he had to seriously contemplate the realities of participating in an illegal subculture. When asked at what point he decided he no longer wanted to be a graffiti writer. Sam answered: "So there's definitely not a time when you don't want to be a part of [the graffiti subculture]." When asked if writers ever lose the desire to do graffiti, Sam answered:

> No! I would love to do [graffiti] right now, but like I said, it's just a risk/reward evaluation. I just have other things in my life that I value more than the risks being taken…it just doesn't add up. I can't get arrested for [graffiti] right now, that would NOT be that kind of sophisticated departure…being older and getting arrested for it is not like being younger and getting arrested for it. So yah, I really do wish that I could still go out there and do it.

Like Sam, Jake also found himself weighing the risks, including potentially losing his girlfriend and potential for legal repercussions. He explains that his girlfriend was unhappy with what he was doing and asked him to stop. Once he discovered that law enforcement was looking for him, Jake made changes. I asked Jake about his reaction to finding out he was wanted. "I threw everything away. I got super scared," he says, but laughs. Jake continues:

Gosh, I wish I had some of that stuff now, but I don't know where it went. I was just so scared…locked everything up, laid low for quite some time and then [graffiti] started slowin' down quite a bit. And then I found different outlets – art shows and stuff – and again, my girlfriend was not happy with what I was doin' and there was a risk of goin' to jail, fines, this and that. Just not worth it.

Jake no longer considers himself a member of the graffiti subculture; but even so, he remains connected to the graffiti community through professional networks of artists and public graffiti-related events.

Nick also shared with me his own risk-reward evaluation, first stating "you know, we're old ass men now (Nick is in his mid-thirties). We have a lot more to consider so it's really more laid back nowadays, it's not like every single second 'yo we gotta catch this spot.'" With age came responsibilities and career goals. For Nick, by the time he became a husband and father he had to ask himself what he wanted for a future:

Here I am, you know, by this point I'm a husband and father, full time job and the whole nine. It's like, 'ok, do I want to just stay a writer or do I want to do more with my art?' And that's when it started– call it a transition–I was still painting [graffiti], still out doin' walls and stuff, tryin' to get up, but I had a couple little commissions and side gigs here and there that helped me on the network side of things so I could deal with my work on a more professional level.

Once Nick decided to try making a living as a professional artist, he knew it would require a lifestyle change:

Then it's like, ok, if I approach this wall at a professional level I may need to watch what I do a lot more. Not for the sake of getting busted but just for the sake of–do I want my illegal, risqué, 'let's go out and bomb or catch a tag somewhere' career into my 'ok, I'm the merchant artist.' I'm doin' more on fine art, full scale visual art, dealin' with the general public, face out, the whole nine…if both of those kind of collide it could turn into a problem.

For Nicole, risk taking had lost its appeal and she was left with negative consequences resulting from some of the risks she had taken while on the graffiti scene. Nicole suffered through an abusive relationship and continued to drink heavily while devoting her time to graffiti outings. Her professional goals had been put on the back burner while she set aside any motivation to advance her career as a professional artist. After breaking up with the boyfriend who brought her onto the graffiti scene, Nicole avoided the subculture all together because he was still in it. Friends were concerned about her and asked her to consider the true risks involved in continuing to do graffiti. Nicole determined graffiti was all too risky for a mother to continue at the pace she was going. She continued to "sticker" (referring to a common practice where writers put up homemade stickers on city surfaces, still technically considered graffiti) around her time in rehab, but no longer painted illegally.

After a time in rehab, Nicole realized that her participation in the graffiti subculture had evolved into a lifestyle she no longer found rewarding, but associated with negative things. She states that she came to the realization that when she was hitting the streets every single night she was operating out of her "Id" (referring to the Freudian three part psyche model in which impulsive acts are made and decision making is based off of primal desires and a lack of inhibitions). Nicole knew she needed to concentrate more on being a better mom and realized she needed to take responsibility for her actions. Nicole eventually decided that while she will always appreciate the graffiti community, her season is up.

Parenthood

Three of the five participants interviewed are now parents. Each one discussed the major impact having children has had on their graffiti career, noting that the ante was upped when their risky behaviors now meant that they were not the only ones who would suffer negative consequences if they were caught. Their responsibilities and love as parents made the risk-reward evaluations even more crucial.

Nicole speaks openly and honestly when it comes to talking about her more prized identity as a mom. She states that in the past, when it was just her oldest child she had to be concerned about, her identity was being a "cool mom." "I mean I was responsible with [my first child], but everything was *cool*. I don't know why it's different with [my second child]." I asked Nicole if she felt it was a mistake to want to be a cool mom, she responded, "to go to those extremes, definitely! You don't have to be cool. You don't have to go to extremes to be accepted or cool. Just be yourself—and that's something I want [my second child] to learn. You don't have to do a bunch of crazy shit to be cool (Nicole laughs hard)…but I still have the ultimate respect for the people that still do [graffiti]." Yet when asked if she would still be out doing graffiti now if she weren't a mom, Nicole answered, "I think I would probably still be doin' it a little bit. Not like before, but from time to time I would probably scratch the itch." Like Nicole, each participant transitioned from illegal artist to professional artist shortly after a risk-reward evaluation.

Becoming a *Professional* Artist

After talking to Jake about his intense experiences painting graffiti, he quickly noted that the status of writer can be short lived. Jake felt that as soon as he became more focused on street art and his professional career path, he could no longer consider himself to be a writer; he was no longer competing at an elite level of painting graffiti and all his energy was going towards fine art.

Further into Nick's interview, we returned to the topic of fame, this time discussing it on the level of merchant artist and fine art. He claims that even as a professional artist, the desire to be known doesn't disappear; rather, as professional artists there's a better understanding of having fame associated with graffiti. There are consequences and limitations, in particular how it will affect a career in fine art. Fame may still remain a goal, but it is viewed with a more mature perspective after a writer has transitioned from being known for their graffiti to being known for their professional art. Nick states:

> Fame is really the purest form of vanity. And I think I can freely say that now just because I don't feel as vain—you know? When it comes to my [fine art], I think—you still want to be known, you still want to have that rep and legend and stuff—but I think I've come to the point now…I want to be more transcending of my graffiti work.

For Nick, the desire to be known transitioned into a more humble sharing of his personal narrative with the public through his fine art. Rather than focusing entirely on announcing to the world his existence through tagging and graffiti, Nick wanted to share more of who he is as an actual individual, not as an anonymous alter ego. His desire changed from

wanting the public to know "here I am"— as the alter ego ATM, to "this is *who* I am"—as Nick.

For Sam, becoming a professional artist meant no longer being known as only a graffiti writer and artist. Although much of what he creates today is graffiti inspired, viewing Sam as an artist who only creates graffiti inspired art inadequately describes the full spectrum of his artistry. I asked Sam if he calls himself a graffiti artist when people ask his profession. He responded with an enthusiastic, "I don't!" When asked why not, Sam explained:

> Not outwardly. Not to people who don't understand…because people don't understand what that means—especially now that I'm older—it sounds like I'm doing some kid shit. 'Cause it just has that taboo related to it, so I don't like people knowing at all. I'll do interviews about the culture but I don't like in social settings [people saying] "oh, yah, he paints graffiti"…because I don't!

I then asked Sam if the reason he doesn't describe himself as a graffiti artist is because of the social stigma. Sam responded with:

> Right. Yah, exactly! What I do now is I paint pictures on walls legally that I would love for the person that I'm talkin' to, to go check out and appreciate. But I don't want people to think that I'm paintin' (referring to illegal graffiti) frequently. One, I'm not. I don't do that really. My identity is more from [being a professional]…I'm an artist now, so I do all sorts of shit…[graffiti inspired art] is *one* of the things I like to do…and it used to be my sole identity pillar, everything was built on that one thing. But it's not that way anymore…and if I'm talkin' to another artist I'll refine further and say that I do illustration. I do some spray paint stuff. I mean that's really what I say now. 'Cause that really is what it is, spray paint related art. And then I'll clarify from there. But, I tell people I'm an "artist".

Each participant discussed with me that as professional artists they are still a little hesitant to disclose their pasts as graffiti writers. Most felt that the general public

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(including other fine artists) have too limited of an understanding of the graffiti scene to fully grasp the art and difficulty of it all without referring back to stereotypical assumptions. While all participants credited the graffiti scene as their alternative alma mater, each now identifies as a professional artist capable of much more than graffiti.

(Semi-)Retirement

I began this study with the assumption that writers eventually retire, no longer perform acts of graffiti and move on from the graffiti subculture in order to pursue different interests: I stand corrected by Nick. At the beginning of Nick's interview, I referred to him as a former writer. Nick stopped me mid-sentence and corrected me, telling me that he still sees himself as a writer, not a 'former' writer. At the end of my interview with him I ask Nick to explain to me what he means when says he is *still* a writer:

> I still am. I think I always will be just because it's a part of me, you know, naturally, like whether I paint a wall once a year or once a month or once a week, it's all the same, when you go into the graffiti world—there's really no comin' out unless you just never pick up a can ever again you know; and 9 times out of 10 there's a reason behind [never painting again], there's another story behind all that for you to just totally walk away. It could be too many bad experiences, it could be life threatening experiences, it could be other people—taking into account it's like when you have other people in your life sometimes other things take precedence, just naturally, we all get old, we get married, we have kids, life goes on. And I think I've just been blessed to have a family that understands who I am first being an artist, second being a graffiti writer. I think that's the one reason I don't think I'll ever walk away from it…as much as I do mural work nowadays, I don't think I'll ever be able to walk away from it because that's what people know me for. Half the business I get is from half the illegal shit I've done.

Marek's point of view on retiring the graffiti writer identity contrasts Nick's. It was Marek that said graffiti writers are only writers if they have graffiti up around the city. I asked if that viewpoint stood for writers who still paint every once in a while. Marek responded: "I guess—and I see where people come from, 'once you're a writer, you're always a writer,'—I mean I get that mentality. It'll always be a part of my life." With that, Marek admits he hasn't completely given up his addiction "we all have our pseudonyms that we may use, just to get the urge out."

For Marek the urge to do graffiti has not gone away, "but it's not the same now." However, from Marek's perspective, if you're only out *once in a while* to get your fix, then technically you're retired. Marek tells me that there came a time when he moved away from painting and felt he was "passing the torch" on to the next generation. It was at that stage that Marek feels he had retired. He had paid his dues and demonstrated that he deserved the title of writer. Marek then felt he no longer had a reason to prove himself and his graffiti writer identity was laid to rest.

Despite Marek's viewpoint that inactive (or semi-active) writers are technically retired, Sam has a different perspective. Although Sam isn't hitting the streets like he used to, he doesn't consider himself a retired writer. Sam explains to me that once you've proven yourself to be a successful writer you always have a foot in the graffiti scene. As Sam sees it, writers don't retire, they just go through transitions in their identities or become — for a variety of reasons—less active in the graffiti scene; but nonetheless, they are still writers.

Sam tells me that it never feels like you quite leave the scene because the lifestyle becomes so ingrained:

> All that (referring to the graffiti lifestyle) is sooo addictive you want to keep doin' it…I don't think that ever leaves you. You never stop seeing spots ever. And there's a part of your brain that never stops thinking, 'I'm gonna do that spot one day.' You're older now, you got a lot of shit goin' on, but you never stop looking at the world like that no matter where you go…

I ask Sam if it becomes a habit to see potential canvases throughout the city. Sam answers with, "It becomes second nature…It happens all the time. It happened when I was driving here…it's weird how [graffiti] sinks its claws into you like that."

As my interview with Sam comes to a close he tells me that painting graffiti is *still* an option for him, just not always worth the risks. I am struck by this comment as it counters what I had assumed about graffiti writers before beginning this research. I tell Sam that in the past I have referred to older writers as "former writers," but after hearing him explain that he *still* has the option to paint, I want to know if writers are ever really retired. Sam immediately responds:

> NEVER! Never. I mean never, it's one of the benefits of being an artist…at any time you can pick it up and go do [graffiti]…it's not like a sport where you're like, 'ah shit man, I'm never going to be in the NFL again because I just can't play—or my knee—or I just can't run.' At any moment in time I could choose to do [graffiti]. The retiring aspect isn't necessarily in the act of painting it's in the act of taking excessive risks…it's just that I'm gonna choose the avenues that aren't excessively risky as opposed to what I did as a kid, but I'm still gonna paint. I'll always paint—you know—always. I can't imagine myself ever saying, 'I'm done painting.'…as a matter of fact, I think at some point as you get older it becomes cool again. Now the risk is back on…the pseudo risk is back on…because you're like so fuckin' old.

From Sam's perspective, part of never being a retired writer means always having the option to do graffiti. Writers who are now older have professional reputations to protect. The risk of still being a writer for these professional artists now involves risking professional ties if particular people find out they are connected to graffiti.

Additionally, Sam feels that his age is something younger writers notice and admire. He is now smarter about "choosing avenues that are not excessively risky," but tells me that when he does do some type of graffiti in public or out on the streets, he makes sure to do something that the younger generation can't beat. Sam's way of reminding younger writers that he is still a writer is to paint graffiti that proves his maturity and skill, something only age can develop.

The Mold Was Cut

Each of the writers interviewed felt their participation in the graffiti subculture was inevitable. At the end of his interview Nick states that becoming a graffiti writer was just part of his fate: "it becomes a part of you. It's second-nature, you know. It's like you're born with it—it's destiny so to speak." Smiling over his remark, I throw back the common cliché, "so it was in the stars." Nick confirms with an enthusiastic: "It was in the stars!"

Sam also referred to his entering the graffiti subculture as inevitable. I asked Sam who he would be today if he had never linked up with the guys who introduced him graffiti. Sam tried to imagine the possibilities and then said:

> You know at that point (referring to the time when he was first recruited) who I saw myself as was somebody who was very creative and enjoyed taking risks— very passionate and emotional in general—investing himself in big things that required a lot of emotion. I don't really know what that would have been if it wasn't [doing graffiti], probably things that were not productive…because it's hard to find the right kind of outlet that's *healthy* when you have those kinds of drivers; when you have the drive to take risks and to be seen as somebody who's not on the beaten path.

Sam gives me his final thoughts on participating in the graffiti scene:

> I think the mold was cut for me. This was what I was going to do…I was going to explore and I was going to try different things…It's weird how life works out like that, you know. You just kinda gravitate towards the things that you feel are gonna fulfill your desire to be happy and challenged, even if it's dangerous, you know, you just naturally go towards that.

When asked if he had any last words to end his interview, Sam comments that he thinks the graffiti subculture is perfectly suited for studying identity:

> It's a cool arena to explore [identity] in, especially now that you have writers that are getting older, now that there is no mask anymore—we know you're really Clark Kent…and you have a family and a fuckin' mortgage you're tryin' to figure out how to pay, it's not *as* exciting anymore.

Sam admits that getting older and being concerned with major life responsibilities can be less exciting than the graffiti scene; nonetheless, Sam feels older writers still have a lot to share about identifying with the graffiti subculture.

Summary

This study sought to gain insights on the graffiti writer social identity by asking the key research question: *What shifts, if any, occur in a graffiti writer's social identity through the processes of entering and exiting the graffiti subculture?* Interviews were conducted with five former graffiti writers who are now professional artists. Each participant was asked to recall their experiences as members in the graffiti subculture and to describe their past self-concepts as graffiti writers. In addition, participants were asked to define who graffiti writers are and the subculture to which they belong.

According to participants, graffiti writers are driven; dedicating countless hours to sketching, practicing and strategizing for their next time out on the streets. It takes great ambition and dedication for writers to permeate a city with their tags, or other forms of graffiti, to the extent that others cannot help but take notice. Graffiti writers are also risk takers, both condemned and praised for the immense risks they take for the sake of their graffiti getting recognition. As Nick pointed out, being a graffiti writer is "not for the faint of heart." Participants also noted that good writers must have artistic aptitude to create admirable pieces of graffiti or tags with impressive lettering and a unique style. Most importantly though, good writers have street credentials and are recognized and respected by others in the graffiti subculture. Writers have also been known to have an obsessive desire for fame, but pride themselves on their stealth and anonymity.

Participants were also asked to define the graffiti subculture. While the term "subculture" was lacking in most descriptions, terms such as "community," "secret brotherhood," and "family" were used to describe the collective of writers participants

felt loyal to. According to participants, the graffiti subculture offers a community of respect and support for writers focused on building their reputations and alternate identities through the act of writing or painting graffiti. The aspect of community was stressed by all participants and the feelings of being with others who were likeminded, and passionate about graffiti, was what made being a part of the subculture extremely satisfying and rewarding for participants.

Contributing significantly to the unique findings of this study are participants' insights on graffiti writer alter egos and the paradox of fame and anonymity in the graffiti subculture. One fascinating aspect noted about the graffiti subculture is that it appears to be a community in which members are encouraged to purposefully engage in a unique and subculture specific identity shift; participants must craft a second, or "alternate identity" as Sam terms it, in the form of an alter ego. Sam pointed out that the subculture is all about "extending who you are in real life."

Participants also noted that the purpose of an alter ego is threefold. One, it functions as the primary way writers remain anonymous. Two, it offers writers a virtual existence. In a sense, alter egos justify writers' mischievousness and law-breaking acts of graffiti. Three, alter egos serve as a means to self-perceptions that are more exciting and "cooler" than the self-concepts connected to writers' personal or more conventional social identities. Such self-perceptions typically include being famous through recognition of one's alter ego name (tag) by the public and other writers. By painting one's tag throughout a city, a writer can market their alter ego name for fame, while at the same time going unidentified by law enforcement.

Participants' narratives suggest that fame and anonymity are at the crux of the graffiti writer social identity and crucial to being a member of the graffiti subculture. Most participants shared that fame was the primary motive and driving force behind much of the graffiti they painted. Just as enjoyable for participants was the challenge of anonymity. Participants shared that being anonymous was exciting and gave them a certain type of thrill. However, both Sam and Nicole confessed that an inner turmoil developed when they started to desire personal fame, wanting others to know it was them behind their graffiti. Each stated that they liked the attention, making it less appealing to strive for anonymity.

Finally, participants discussed very different experiences exiting the graffiti subculture. Yet, one consistency between participants was that each individual went through a process of risk-reward evaluations to determine whether doing graffiti was still worth the risks as older writers with more life responsibilities. Nick and Sam noted that they still feel very much connected to the graffiti community and will always perceive themselves as graffiti writers. While their self-concepts of being writers have been eclipsed by their social identities as professional artists, Nick and Sam claim they have not retired their social identities as writers; being a writer has become a part of who they are today and always will be. Nick and Sam's involvement in the graffiti subculture no longer looks the same as it has in the past, nonetheless their experiences as writers as the connections they still maintain give an appearance of only being semi-retired from the community. Nick and Sam's exit from the graffiti subculture appears to only be partial.

Marek and Jake's exit experiences are similar to Nick and Sam's in that they still feel very much connected to the graffiti community today, but differing in that each claims to have fully retired from the subculture. Neither Marek nor Jake perceives themselves to still be writers. Their former identities as graffiti writers are still a part of who they are on a personal level, but no longer who they present themselves to be; though Marek shares that he still tags his pseudonym every once in a while to satisfy any impulse for his old habit. Marek also commented on the subcultural adage of 'once a writer, always a writer,' but vied that in his opinion if you get up only once in a while, technically you are retired.

Nicole's experience exiting the graffiti subculture was different from all other participants. Nicole concluded that the graffiti lifestyle had left her with too many negative repercussions and had jeopardized too many good things in her life. Nicole's risk-reward evaluation took her completely out of the subculture and fully retired her graffiti writer identity.

While participants' experiences exiting the graffiti subculture and retiring their graffiti writer social identities differed noticeably, the consistencies and patterns emerging from the data collected suggest that the graffiti subculture and graffiti writer social identity are fairly reflective of Social Identity Theory. The following chapter draws connections between the insights participants offered on the social identities of graffiti writers and the theoretical notions of Social Identity Theory. Discussion of this research includes: a review of participants' definitions of graffiti writers and the graffiti subculture, an overview of self-categorization and depersonalization and how each relates

to an individual entering the graffiti subculture and assuming the graffiti writer social identity and two significant findings. The first finding notes the factors of fame and anonymity as the crux of writers' social identities and the second finding suggests significant variability in the exit process of the graffiti subculture and differing degrees of retiring one's graffiti writer social identity.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION

Research on identifying with the graffiti subculture is limited, providing minimal understandings of who graffiti writers are and the nature of their identities as members of the graffiti subculture. One challenge to researching graffiti writers is that members of the graffiti subculture choose to conceal their true identities: graffiti writers are identified by tag names representing subcultural personas while they keep their personal identities anonymous. As a result, researchers must frequently rely on informants to gain access to the graffiti subculture and must invest large amounts of time into building rapport and trust before questioning writers. Yet, even after gaining entree, the numbers of respondents recruited can be much fewer than desired, as the subculture reflects a hidden population with reasons for writers to remain covert: the illegality of graffiti, public disdain for it and the stigmatization of graffiti writers.

Regardless of the abovementioned obstacles, a small number of researchers have successfully managed to interview graffiti writers. But even so, additional research is needed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of who graffiti writers are and the impact(s) that membership in the graffiti subculture can have on the self-concepts of graffiti writers. Literature that primarily emphasizes the criminality of graffiti portrays— whether deliberately or not— graffiti writers as rebellious, unlawful and/or deviant individuals (Ferrell, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 2010; Austin, 2001; Miller, 2002; Schaefer,

2004; Cooper & Chalfant, 1984; Edwards, 2009). Literature defining the graffiti subculture as a youth subculture depicts graffiti writers as adolescents (Gastman & Neelon, 2011; Ferrell, 1997; MacDonald, 2001; Rahn, 2002; Austin, 2001; White 2001 Dickinson, 2008). Additionally, literature emphasizing the use of graffiti as a means to garner fame may describe writers as individuals who are shamelessly egotistical with no concern for other writers (Castleman, 1982; Lachmann, 1988; Snyder, 2009; Miller, 2002; Austin, 2001; Cooper & Chalfant, 1984.)

While each of the aforementioned characteristics may be—to variable degrees— true facets of the graffiti writer identity, existing literature can too simply characterize graffiti writers as young, egotistical criminals. I see this as problematic: repeatedly highlighting only a few very specific attributes of the graffiti writer character presents a partial depiction that personifies only a fraction of the graffiti writer population. Therefore, writers who do not match such descriptions are unfairly represented and/or marginalized. Consequently, we are left with gaps in the scholarly literature and offered an inadequate illustration of graffiti writers. Such gaps allot for speculations as to who graffiti writers are, who they believe themselves to be, and how becoming a member of the graffiti subculture may impact an individual's social identity. This research sought to address and begin diminishing those gaps by speaking directly with retired and semi-retired graffiti writers.

The purpose for conducting semi-structured interviews was twofold: First, to give participants an opportunity to describe, in their own words, their past self-concepts of being graffiti writers. Secondly, to explore the graffiti writer social identity through open

ended questions that gave participants the freedom to elaborate on their personal understandings of what it means to be a graffiti writer. Interviews also allowed for significant subcultural terms and concepts to be defined primarily by writers.

The data to come out of this research suggests that members of the graffiti subculture look to the subculture for cues to establish their identities as "graffiti writers." Participants repeatedly stated they felt they were once a part of a "community" of individuals who shared their same passions, interests, values, and characteristics; all centered on doing graffiti. Additionally, participants appear to have experienced shifts in their identities through the processes of entering the graffiti subculture and becoming graffiti writers.

The Narrated Self

The method employed by this study was semi-structured interviews. Participants' accounts were reported in the form of narratives; however, it should be acknowledged that narratives have their limitations. While interviews provide insider perspectives and details first-hand, it is important to recognize that responses are self-regulated; especially when asking for respondents to recount past experiences from which they have been removed for an extensive amount of time. Narrations always have potential for false memories or lack clear details. Additionally, researchers' interpretations are based on select information.

In her book, *Been a Heavy Life*, Lois Presser (2008) discusses aspects of narratives that can limit research findings. Presser (2008) points out the most significant

limitation: people are never exactly who they say they are. Presser (2008) notes that people tend to present themselves in a more favorable light and can only speak about matters from lived experiences. Consequently, asking people to discuss their identities can yield descriptions that may misrepresent who they truly are.

Presser (2008) also argues that "the self cannot be known without reference to others" (p. 3). In just the act of being interviewed, respondents' identities progress through a process of re-construction. Furthermore, the researcher influences its construction. Presser (2008) refers to this interaction as a "social transaction" and notes that "narrated identities" are social products. As such, there is potential for a respondent's identity to be described in different ways depending on who is receiving the narration. A person's identity may be described one way to a researcher and another way to someone with no agenda or less authority.

Despite the aforementioned limitations, narratives are rich sources of data; they can be used to "illuminate how people see (or saw) their world" (Presser, 2008, p. 9). This point was significant to this research. This study explored the graffiti writer social identity using the narratives of participants as tools for understanding the self-concepts of graffiti writers Narratives provided an account of how participants interpreted who they are (or were) in graffiti-related contexts. In contrast to an emphasis on the historical accuracy of participants' recollections, the objective of this study included an appreciation for the interpretive value of participants' pasts. The objective of this study was not to identify an exact representation of the graffiti writer social identity, but to glean from the narratives collected a fair representation of who graffiti writers interpret

themselves to be as members of the graffiti subculture. The aim of this research was to have participants communicate what it meant for them to define themselves as graffiti writers; the image they hoped to project to others. In this sense, participants' narratives were extremely beneficial to this study.

Defining the Graffiti Subculture

This study refers to the population of graffiti writers as the "graffiti subculture." However, it should be noted that the label "subculture" is a sociological term imposed on collectives defined in various ways. Left undefined, the term remains an ambiguous label commonly used to define a group of people whose members, in reality, may or may not identify with the same culture. This has been deemed problematic in the past when describing a population that is heterogeneous; specifically noting that some populations are made up of individuals from various ethnic backgrounds, social class, race, religion, or include different geographic regions, but nonetheless comprise a single collective (Fine and Kleinman, 1979). While the etymology of the term subculture extends beyond the scope of this study, it is important to at least acknowledge the potential for its use to misrepresent the graffiti writer population.

With its members spanning the globe and representing numerous, differing cultures, the "graffiti subculture" is a noticeably diverse population. To categorize graffiti writers as belonging to one international subculture may be a precarious misjudgment. Ken Gelder (2005) distinguishes subcultures as groups of people that stand in opposition to—or counter—the broader culture in which they are immersed. Gelder (2005) states:

Subcultures are groups of people that are in some way represented as non-normative and/or marginal through their particular interests and practices, through what they are, what they do and where they do it. They may represent themselves in this way, since subcultures are usually well aware of their differences, bemoaning them, relishing them, exploiting them, and so on. But they will also be represented like this by others, who in response can bring an entire apparatus of social classification and regulation to bear upon them (p. 1).

Subcultures are socially constructed phenomena, yet are subjected to sociological analysis as if such populations are easily definable and fully observable segments of society. As Gelder (2005) notes, those within a subculture are subject to being defined by those who are outside of it. I see this as problematic; especially when determining the characteristics of a group—such as a collective of diverse graffiti writers—as the basis for a particular social identity.

To avoid purely imposing an "entire apparatus of social classification and regulation" on graffiti writers, participants in this study were asked to define the graffiti subculture in their own words. This was important, as scholarly literature habitually refers to the graffiti writer population as a *subculture*, yet does little to expound on how graffiti writers are a subset of the broader culture—other than to define the collective as deviant and illegal. However, to do so furthers the notion that cross-culturally, graffiti is unorthodox or criminal to the same extent.

The title of Nancy MacDonald's (2001) book, *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity and Identity in London and New York*, along with her broad cross-cultural discussions, presents the graffiti subculture as a population that is globally defined, from within, as a "subculture." This may be problematic as it disregards cultural implications, generalizing the population of graffiti writers from regions where only a fraction of

writers reside. Asking graffiti writers to personally define the social network to which they belong precludes the preconceived boundaries frequently imposed upon the collective when using the term subculture.

To contest defining the population of graffiti writers as the graffiti subculture would have taken this research in an entirely different direction. For the crude simplicity of discussion on the graffiti writer population, this study took the lead of past scholars by referring to this specific social group as the graffiti subculture. However, I argue that future research would benefit from redefining the graffiti subculture from the perspective of its members, in the language of the culture. This may result in various terms being used to describe this particular collective, but would provide a more accurate illustration of the graffiti writer population

Additionally, participants in this study offered varying definitions of the graffiti subculture; however, one consistent theme to emerge was a description of the subculture as a "community." This term seemed to capture more intimate ties and note the secured bonds between some writers. Nick shared that the graffiti subculture is "strictly community first," and Sam defined it as a "community of artistic outlaws." Referring to the graffiti subculture as a community keeps writers interspersed within the broader culture, not segregated, as the term subculture may suggest. Future research on the graffiti subculture should include exploring what it means to writers to be in a part of a community of graffiti writers. Researchers must ask: Is the graffiti subculture truly a subculture? Should the graffiti subculture be referred to as the graffiti writer community?

Participants' accounts of bonding with other graffiti writers in the community

mirror theoretical concepts of SIT. According to SIT, groups are composed of members

who are psychologically significant to one another due to the fact that they share similar

identity traits (Turner et al., 1987). Nick shared that his yearning to be with others from

the 'same cut fabric' was satisfied upon gaining membership in the graffiti subculture.

Nicole's recollection of being drawn to graffiti included her stating that the skateboard

culture was her "genre." Marek's description of his graffiti crew being like a "secret

brotherhood" suggests that he felt he had found others like him. Participants' narratives

suggested a desire to belong to a certain category of individuals, a desire to self-

categorize, or identify, with others similar to them.

One of the more fascinating aspects of the graffiti subculture is that it is a

collective composed of anonymous members. This is not to suggest that writers do not

know *any* other writers, but that most writers know their crew members and only a

handful of other writers by their true names. Even so, Jenkins (2004, 2008) and Turner et

al. (1987) claim that anonymity does not impede group formation or the degree to which

members can identify with a group. Jenkins (2004, 2008) and Turner et al. (1987) stress

that a group may still be considered a group even when members have no personal

knowledge of—nor interact—with one another. In other words, group membership may

involve abstract relationships maintained between anonymous members. Jake claimed he

recognized other writers by their tags, but did not know who they actually were. He knew

the anonymous writers to be members of the graffiti subculture, but did not know them

personally.

The Social Identity of a Graffiti Writer

SIT explains the graffiti subculture to be a basis for the graffiti writer social identity. Social identities materialize out of the most common characteristics shared by group members; therefore, as explained by SIT, the graffiti writer social identity is comprised of the archetypal characteristics representing the majority of graffiti writers. In order to conceptualize the graffiti writer social identity, participants were asked to define who graffiti writers are and discuss who they saw themselves to be as writers and members of the graffiti subculture. Variations in participants' descriptions suggest a complex and multifaceted social identity. Yet, all participants shared general characteristics of being passionate artists, thrill seeking risk takers, fully dedicated, and driven to challenge themselves through painting graffiti and participating in an illegal subculture. Additionally, participants valued fame and recognition. This study does not suggest that there is a single illustration of a graffiti writer, but does suggest there is a type of person that identifies with the graffiti subculture. As the data suggest, this type of individual is often more than a young, egotistical criminal.

The most prominent description of graffiti writers expressed by participants was that graffiti writers are risk takers. For all participants, part of the allure of the subculture were the risks involved. Whether the risks involve potential for bodily harm or being apprehended by law enforcement, according participants, a significant part of being a graffiti writer involves overt demonstrations of courage. Furthermore, competition is one pillar of the subculture and in most cases the competition involves audacious risks.

Participants portrayed themselves as thrill seekers who eagerly embraced the illegality and dangers of doing graffiti.

Participants' accounts parallel the literature that states graffiti writers enjoy the adrenaline rush of risky behavior and look for ways to "show off" through tagging (Pani & Sagliaschi, 2009). Ferrell (1997) noted that writers take pleasure in the unlawful message graffiti sends to public authority. Corresponding with Ferrell's observation, Marek claimed he enjoyed feeling like an "anarchist" that had a role in anarchy of graffiti. While participants did note the criminality of their behavior, being an "outlaw" was discussed far less than the other characteristics used to describe writers. From participants' perspectives, they were risk-takers more than criminals.

Worth noting is participants' characterization of graffiti writers as a combination of thrill seekers and pursuers of fame. According to Sam, graffiti writers can be skilled in shameless acts of self-promotion; primarily through the precarious marketing of their subcultural personas. Tag names become logos; representing alter egos who get all the credit for the deviant and dangerous risks taken to paint graffiti. Ultimately, writers tag surfaces to communicate: "This is me." "Here I am." And depending on the level of risk, "look at what *I* can do!" While egotism appears to be an actual constituent of the graffiti writer social identity, participants also expressed consideration of others in the writer "community." This specific characterization of writers presents a possible area for future research. Further exploration of fame in the graffiti subculture could entail an analysis of the desire for fame versus infamy.

Nicole was the only participant to refer to her notoriety as "infamy." However, a pattern emerged out of all participants' narratives that suggested they were specifically seeking recognition and respect for taking noticeably dangerous and illegal risks. Sam described the very risky and public "full blown, big, giant productions in the streets," that he and his crew members were responsible for; emphasizing their courage by stating "nobody does that!" Considering fame as a significant motive for graffiti writers and the attention given to illicit risk taking, a good question to ask might be, "Do graffiti writers desire fame or infamy?"

Both fame and infamy allude to widespread recognition, however the two have very different undertones. Fame is generally viewed in a positive way, while infamy often carries a negative connotation. Fame is not always associated with huge risks, but infamy can frequently be a matter of risky or deviant behavior. Participants in this study divulged livelihoods of being famous and infamous, but ultimately, not satisfied with conventional recognition. Future research could include questions about who graffiti writers believe their audience to include. Who do writers seek fame from: the public, other writers, or both? Do graffiti writers seek fame within the subculture, but infamy from the public? Do writers view themselves as famous in the subculture, but infamous to the rest of society? These questions take into consideration what light a writer sees themselves under.

Self-categorization and Entering the Graffiti Subculture

Richard Jenkins (2004, 2008) notes that human identity is made stagnant when scholars present only snapshots of the contexts in which identities operate; therefore, it is important for researchers to carefully avoid portraying identities as static or unchanging. Jenkins' (2008) observation that identity is a matter of process influenced the direction of this research. This study recognized the fluidity of human identity and the nature of its continual progression and variability. In order to avoid misrepresenting the graffiti writer social identity as a fixed self-concept this study explored possible shifts in participants' social identities as a result of entering and exiting the graffiti subculture. According to participants' personal experiences entering the graffiti subculture, the course of becoming a graffiti writer appears to reflect a process of self-categorization. The theory of self-categorization suggests that identity is made up of the self-perceptions that materialize when individuals place themselves in social groups and identify as group members (Stets & Burke, 2000). In this sense, the self is reflexive, making self-categorization essentially a means to self-identification. Group members must believe and know that they are actual members of the group before they can begin to fully identify as a group member. Nick described the point at which he knew he had become a writer: when two nationally known graffiti crews adopted him as one of their own. Knowing that both crews were composed of famous writers confirmed to Nick that he was indisputably a writer as well.

Fundamentally, self-categorization is contingent on group members perceiving themselves to be like one another; thus yielding a cognitive and psychological network of relationships based off of members' most prominent similarities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979;

Turner et al., 1987; Stets & Burke, 2000). Participants shared that entering the graffiti subculture was nearly intuitive, a decision made with very little hesitation. This may be due to the fact that participants were naturally attracted to those whom they felt they were similar to and could relate. Sam disclosed that he feels it is innate for humans to seek out social groups centered around an activity or interest they find appealing, and then become a part of that community. Sam likened this to a primal instinct, noting that humans naturally gravitate to others who are similar to themselves and look to belong to groups in which they "fit the mold." As Sam sees it, when you find others doing things you like to do, "acceptance into that community as a bonafide member is something inherently human."

Furthermore, all participants shared that their participation in the graffiti subculture yielded a cognitive and psychological understanding of acceptance and membership, a key factor in the process of self-categorization. Marek spoke of feeling a connection with his graffiti crew that he didn't feel with the good ol' boys he was around in school. Sam discussed using his drawing as a "vehicle" to acceptance by others. It appears that participants engaged in a process of self-categorization as they bonded with other writers, joined the graffiti subculture and established their graffiti writer social identity.

Also interesting to note is the speed at which participants felt they progressed toward writer status. The variations suggest that shifts in one's social identity occurs at very different rates, even when joining the same group and assuming the same social identity. Nick's remark that the process of becoming a writer is always a gradual process

suggests that the graffiti writer social identity is assumed over time. Nicole, on the other hand, described her experience as a quick process. She identified as a writer soon after entering the graffiti subculture. Nick and Nicole's contrasting experiences reveal a matter that does not yet appear to be addressed by the theory of self-categorization: variability in are the rates at which individuals identify as group members? Participants noted that individuals can be a part of the graffiti subculture as toys, but until they meet the standards of what defines a graffiti writer, they cannot call themselves writers and cannot legitimately assume a writer identity.

The data suggest that a process of self-categorization yields a graffiti subculture built around members' shared similarities. Participants in this study shared: an appreciation for art, interest in graffiti, a tendency towards thrill seeking and a desire for fame. In addition, all writers fashioned alter egos which were likened to super-hero self-perceptions. The construction of subcultural personas or alter egos was one of the more obvious shifts in participants' identities. Parallel to that particular shift in identity was a secondary shift through the process of depersonalization, as participants made their personal identities anonymous in contexts related to the graffiti subculture.

Depersonalization and Anonymity

A graffiti writer makes their personal identity anonymous as a way of projecting a subcultural persona in the form of an alter ego. Through activation of an alter ego, a writer sustains their identity as a writer. Sam noted that at the core of graffiti is a second identity "extending who you are in your real life." Participants in this study not only

became anonymous out of standard practice, but took pleasure in creating mystery around who they actually were in everyday life. Sam spoke of crafting a second identity, or alter ego, that is "way bigger and way cooler and way more bad ass," than he could ever be in real life. So while graffiti writers may feel insignificant as individuals in their everyday lives, alter egos offer them a sense of significance as a graffiti writer.

The data that came out of this research suggests that the activation of a graffiti writer social identity includes a shift in identity that reflects a process of depersonalization. Depersonalization involves an intellectual shift in one's self-concept when persons self-categorize with a group (Stets & Burke, 2000; Hogg et al., 1995; Turner et al., 1994; Turner et al., 1987; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Individuals see themselves as an embodiment of a specific social identity rather than as an individual differing from other group members. Individual characteristics not congruent with the group's social identity are minimized within the contexts of group related matters or circumstances (Hogg et al., 1995).

One indicator of depersonalization within the graffiti subculture is the crucial component of personal anonymity. A graffiti writer's social identity eclipses their personal identity when anonymity is made a priority. This is often achieved through the adoption of a tag name. Nick reported that more people know him as Nick, but writers know him as ATM. This is a good example of how writers conceal who they are in everyday life through the use of a tag name as primary identification. Nick referred to his tag as his "nom de plume," noting that in the graffiti subculture an alias becomes who you are to the public. The concealment of one's true identity aids in depersonalization as

a writer's self-concept shifts from who they are outside of the graffiti subculture to who they are as a writer.

As noted by the theory of depersonalization, adopting a social identity does not mean an individual loses their personal identity, nor are they completely submerged in the identity of the group; rather, in certain circumstances individuals will think and behave primarily in accordance to their social identities rather than individual (Turner et al., 1987). Marek experienced a cognitive shift in his identity through the construction of an alter ego. He explains that he saw himself in a super-hero light. His mischievousness increased and he felt that he wasn't limited by who he was during the day. Similarly, Jake's self-concept changed under the guise of his alter ego. Jake noted how anonymity was fun because it enhanced the thrill of graffiti, comparable to the fictional secrecy of James Bond. In her daily life, Nicole was law abiding, but as a writer she felt invincible and at times thought little of the possible legal consequences she could incur for her graffiti.

Fame and Anonymity: Crux of the Graffiti Writer Identity

This research suggests that fame and anonymity are at the core of a graffiti writer's social identity. Participants noted that the balance of each is especially significant for maintaining alter egos. Ironically, anonymity appears to yield fame for graffiti writers. According to some participants, the longer a writer is able to remain anonymous, the more others become curious about the writer's true identity: as curiosity increases, fame for a writer's alter ego increases. Even though Marek was the one

participant to note that he was not interested in gaining fame, he still enjoyed learning

that others were talking about his graffiti around the city.

In light of participants' accounts, it appears that a writer's social identity becomes

paradoxical as he or she assumes an alter ego for the purpose of fame, but keeps their true

identity concealed. Sam offered significant insights on alter ego fame that highlighted a

writer's emphasis on their alias over their personal identity. Sam discussed the

narcissistic nature of art, including graffiti. Interesting to note though, is that it appears

the narcissism he speaks of is not actually about the writer themselves, but about the alter

ego representing a writer. Perhaps the best indicator of this is Sam's comment that self-

expression—in this case through graffiti—is inherently a way of saying to the world,

"look at me, look at me, look at me…" This could indicate that graffiti writers are

egotistical *as* writers; asking others to pay attention to their subcultural personas. As Nick

noted, by getting his graffiti up in public, people were going to know "AIM," whether or

not they would ever meet "Nick." Graffiti was a way for Nick to let the public know,

"Here I am…I am undeniable," as AIM.

What truly makes fame in the graffiti subculture noteworthy though, is an

underlying, but nonetheless significant, factor of anonymity. According to participants,

anonymity is a standard prerequisite for writers and a result of specifically being a graffiti

writer. Participants were careful not to disclose their personal identities for several

reasons. First, and most obvious, anonymity is vital for avoiding legal repercussions.

Second, a certain satisfaction or thrill was experienced through being anonymous, most

noticeably for the fact that anonymity contributed to a pseudo super-hero experience for

participants. Third, anonymity is a part of securing fame. As Nick noted, anonymity "creates legend" and strengthens the writer's reputation: "if you're a good writer and you do maintain some sort of anonymity behind it, it's gonna do nothin' but strengthen the rep, the legend." According to participants, anonymity is both functional and emotional.

One of the more significant discoveries to come out of this research was participants' descriptions of an inner turmoil felt while trying to maintain fame and anonymity. Both Nicole and Sam experienced a struggle to be comfortable with their alter egos gaining more fame than they were personally. This was especially apparent during Sam's interview. Sam confessed that he was often chastised by other writers for not protecting his personal identity, but that his desire for personal attention was so great he found it hard to continue being anonymous. Sam knew that signing graffiti with his actual name and granting interviews as "Sam," was taboo and scorned by some writers. Yet, doing so did not change his self-perceptions of belonging to the subculture and identifying as a writer.

Nicole enjoyed her infamy at first, but eventually felt guilty about jeopardizing her identity as a mom. Nicole's dual identity as a writer and mom clashed as she found it hard to maintain both. She knew taking risks as a writer not only affected her, but her child as well. In addition, maintaining anonymity was deeply ingrained in Nicole, so in times of being found out or disclosing her true identity, she regretted telling others that she was a writer. Sam and Nicole's experiences both illustrate a unique identity struggle. While fame and anonymity are customary (and expected) in the graffiti subculture, the tension of maintaining both can result in inner turmoil.

Exiting the Graffiti Subculture

While participants' experiences entering the graffiti subculture were comparable, their experiences exiting were far more variable. Sam noted the potential for this variability when he stated that leaving the graffiti subculture looks different for different writers. Sam shared that some writers abruptly exit the subculture, sometimes as a result of big events, such as getting arrested. For others, it can be a gradual process. Sam's observations parallel those discussed in the literature: MacDonald (2001) and Castleman (1984) portray writers' departures from the subculture in two differing ways. According to MacDonald (2001) as writers mature, participation in the graffiti subculture diminishes until they eventually age out altogether. Castleman (1984) makes no mention of age, but states quite simply; when a writer is no longer painting graffiti, they are considered retired.

Participants in this study shared that their diminished participation in the graffiti subculture followed a risk-reward evaluation that produced a fairly gradual exit or partial exit from the subculture. Each participant revealed that their career goals played a major part in their decisions to alter their participation in the graffiti subculture and end their illegal painting. Participants' disclosure of lifestyle evaluations mirror those discussed in the literature by MacDiarmid and Downing (2012), whose research findings suggest that graffiti writers experience a "rough" aging out from the graffiti subculture.

MacDiarmid and Downing (2012) claim that writers enter adulthood with expectations and career goals (many wanting to mainstream their artistic abilities), but that for some writers, a desire to stay connected to the subculture and continue engaging

in illegal activities remain strong. The subsequent inner turmoil is what makes exiting the graffiti subculture a "rough" experience. While participants' in this study described their risk-reward evaluations with a bitter-sweet undertone, their narratives did reflect the dramatic course of aging out that MacDiarmid and Downing (2012) describe. Participants did not lose the desires to continue doing graffiti, but all had reached a point when they recognized that the risks unnecessary, especially if doing graffiti might jeopardize their professional careers.

One of the more significant disparities between participants' experiences leaving the graffiti subculture were the degrees to which they exited. Counter to initial expectations, not all participants perceived themselves to have fully departed from the subculture; additionally, there does not appear to be a correlation between the extent to which participants exited the subculture and retirement of one's subcultural identity. Instead, there appears to exist a subcultural space that serves as a scene for semi-retired writers who still identify as graffiti writers and are actively involved with graffiti-related events, but are no longer immersed in the subculture or look to the subculture for identity development.

There also appears to be a point at which a writer has achieved a "hall of fame" status, meaning they continue to identify as a writer, but no longer need to prove themselves on the streets or fully participate in the subculture. With respect to SIT, and considering the graffiti subculture as a reference group, it may be that writers, such as Sam and Nick, who no longer fully participate in the subculture, but still identify as

writers, do not look to the subculture as a reference group any longer. This entails a cognitive shift; the graffiti subculture is no longer a source of establishing identity.

Despite the fact that Nick and Sam paint illegal graffiti only on very rare occasions now, neither felt they had entirely exited the graffiti subculture. Furthermore, neither considers themselves a "former" graffiti writer. They claim their identities as graffiti writers have become second nature; ingrained in their being and essentially a part of who they have become on a personal level rather than who they are as members of the graffiti subculture.

Marek and Jake both claim they stay well connected with the "graffiti community," but that heir days spent painting illegal graffiti have given way to a primary focus on their fine art. Each feels their alter egos have had their place, but now identify more as fine artists. Nicole was the only participant to state she is no longer a writer, nor does she still feel tied to the graffiti subculture. Nicole takes notice of local festivals and events that showcase graffiti, but no longer makes it a priority to attend or keep up with the writers she once knew. However, she does state that her graffiti writer identity will always be residual in who she is today.

What appears to have been the biggest identity shift upon exiting the graffiti subculture –or in the least, partially exiting–was that participants began cultivating identities as fine artists. All participants discussed a risk/reward evaluation when they had to decide if the risks of doing graffiti outweighed the rewards. This evaluation appears to have been the beginning of an identity shift for participants and was generally spurred on by career goals or responsibilities for family members. Eventually participants were

forced to contemplate *who* they were going to be as career professionals, taking into account the fact that being identified as a graffiti writer could jeopardize professional career goals. However, each participant credited their experiences with graffiti as a type of internship for their current professions.

Participants claim that doing graffiti developed their professional artistic styles and techniques. Such claims parallel the research of MacDiarmid and Downing (2012) and Snyder (2009). MacDiarmid and Downing (2012) claim that writers often legitimize their past illegal activities as a way to make money and remain connected to the graffiti subculture. Snyder (2009) notes that writers can develop lucrative careers by going mainstream with their artistic talents. Snyder lists the types of careers writers can develop, including becoming professional muralists and graphic designers, two occupations held by some of the participants in this study. Snyder (2009) argues that graffiti should not be seen strictly as a dead end hobby, but can transition writers from the streets to professional canvases.

This shift is also significant as it appears to have resulted in a change of emphases regarding fame and anonymity. Nick stated that his desire for public recognition changed when his self-concept changed from identifying as a graffiti writer to professional artist. Nick went from wanting to announce to the public his presence in the world as ATM, to wanting the public to know him as *Nick* on a more personal level. Nick's desire for fame shifted to a desire to simply be a well-known artist, who wanted to share his personal self with others through art. Nick has made his career less about an alter ego, keeping his alias anonymous now, and more about who he is on a personal level. This is also the case with

Sam. Sam noted that he doesn't call himself a writer outwardly because the general public doesn't understand what that entails. While Sam still signs much of his work with Sam-o, his identity as a graffiti writer has transitioned from infamous to semi-anonymous as he is careful with who knows about his past involvement in the graffiti subculture.

Participants' experiences exiting the graffiti subculture—whether fully or partially—bring to the light the fact that there is still much to be evaluated when it comes to exiting the graffiti subculture. Not only did participants' experiences vary, but there were also significant disparities in the retirement of one's alter ego and social identity as a graffiti writer. Marek, Jake and Nicole have all retired their graffiti writer social identities, but have retained aspects of it in their identities as professional artists. Nick and Sam no longer seem to consider the graffiti subculture as a reference group for their lifestyles, but share an understanding about the graffiti writer identity that seemingly implies, "once a writer, always a writer."

Participants in this study all discussed a gradual exit from the graffiti subculture. Future research on the process(es) of exiting the subculture should also include interviews with writers who have made sudden departures. In addition, this study did not include individuals who left the subculture as a result of traumatic or extreme circumstances. Possible areas of future inquiry include leaving the subculture as a result of criminal arrest, physical injuries, violent encounters with other writers, near death experiences or exposure to the death of another writer, or other significantly negative events that lead to exiting the graffiti subculture.

Conclusion

Research on the social identities of graffiti writers is limited. This study was conducted in order to address this gap in academic literature and contribute insights on the nature, origin and characterization of the graffiti writer social identity. This research addressed the key research question: *"What shifts, if any, occur in a graffiti writer's social identity through the processes of entering and exiting the graffiti subculture?"*

Two fundamental concepts about human identity support this research. First, identities are fluid and continually evolving. Richard Jenkins (2004, 2008) stresses this point and asserts that research on identity cannot fail to acknowledge its changeability and impressionable nature. Second, specific kinds of identities, termed social identities, are primarily subject to group membership and reflect the general self-perceptions or self-concepts of group members. The theoretical framework of SIT explains social identities as products of group membership; therefore it was presumed that the processes of entering and exiting (joining or leaving) the graffiti subculture may be significant to shifts in the social identities of graffiti writers (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Stets & Burke, 2000; Abrams & Hogg, 1999; Turner, 1999). Additionally, SIT suggests that upon identifying with a particular group, members use the group as a reference and basis for establishing identity. Consequently, this research inquired into the make-up and nature of the graffiti subculture as a reference group for the basis of graffiti writers' identities.

Data collected through semi-structured interviews with five former (including two semi-retired) graffiti writers revealed the following findings: First, there does in fact

appear to be a specific type of social identity internalized by graffiti writers. According to participants, graffiti writers are dedicated risk-takers, committed perfectionists, have an appreciation for art and are determined to garner fame. Second, the graffiti writer social identity is based on a subculture of anonymous individuals united through their shared identity characteristics and therefore cognitively, psychologically and emotionally connected to one another. Third, the factors of anonymity and fame appear to be at the crux of the graffiti writer identity and underlie subcultural membership. Finally, there appears to be a general process of entry into the graffiti subculture that results in fairly consistent shifts in a graffiti writer's social identity. In contrast, the process of exiting does not appear as consistent with some participants claiming a true writer never fully retires their graffiti writer identity. In addition, it appears former or semi-retired writers may remain connected to the graffiti subculture, but no longer use the subculture as a reference group. Thus, identity shifts resulting from an exit (or partial exit) from the graffiti subcultural appear to be much less defined and in need of further research to fully understand the complexity of the exit process.

Future Research

This study made contributions to the scholarly literature concerning two key matters of inquiry: the graffiti writer social identity and shifts in an individual's social identity as a result of entering and exiting the graffiti subculture. While this research contributes key insights, gaps in literature are still evident and warrant further research on graffiti writers and identity in the graffiti subculture. To address the temporal limitations

of this current study, future research should include interviewing writers at different stages of participation in the graffiti subculture.

Participants in this study were all retired or semi-retired from the graffiti subculture. In order to comply with the Internal Review Board of the university out which this study was conducted, this research was limited to recruiting participants over the age of 18 yrs who were no longer actively painting illegal graffiti. Additionally, for the purpose of gaining insights on the processes of exiting the graffiti subculture, writers who had fully exited the graffiti subculture were targeted for recruitment.

Due to a restricted study sample, this research lacks noticeable generalizability. Scholarly literature on entering and exiting the graffiti subculture would benefit from future research including a broader demographic with graffiti writers at different stages of membership in the graffiti subculture. Research would include participants who are just entering, currently participating in, or in the midst of exiting the graffiti subculture. Interviewing writers at these stages could potentially yield more detailed data about the course of entry and exit, something the current body of literature lacks.

Additionally, future research on the use of alter egos as secondary identities could include a comparative analysis between the graffiti subculture and other subcultures, professions, or social groups whose members are typically identified by alter egos for the purpose of concealing personal identities. Research might include investigating membership in the "gamer" or "hacker" subcultures. Gamers and hackers are generally known by screen names and can be highly secretive about their true identities or personal lives outside of their technological networks.

Additional research would not be limited to subcultures. Professionals such as musicians and exotic dancers frequently operate under the guise of alter egos or stage personas. Famous musicians Jay-Z and Lady Gaga, whose real names are Shawn Carter and Stefani Germanotta are publically identified—in particular by the media—as their alter egos. Due to their fame and propagated professional images, fans may feel they know Jay-Z and Lady Gaga without actually knowing them personally. Exotic dancers also go by their stage names. Their professions require them to conceal their true identities as a way to fashion a fantasy image meant to "tease" patrons.

Alter egos are also a part of some sports, such as roller derby and professional wrestling. These two sports encourage "tough" personas meant to intimidate opponents and entertain fans. Choosing a derby name is considered an art, much in the way a graffiti writer spends time choosing a tag name. Professional wrestlers brand their names to gain fame and an audience, similar to writers tagging as a means to fame and obtaining a public audience.

Further research on graffiti writers holds potential for developing a greater understanding of membership in the graffiti subculture. Such knowledge may possibly lead to a better comprehension of the types of identity shifts writers experience at various stages of membership. Additionally, research including comparative analyses of the graffiti subculture with other social groups for which alter egos are the norm, may offer additional insights on the presentation of the alter ego self to the social world.

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APPENDIX A

VOCABULARY

Graffiti: unauthorized images or text marking or branding a surface (typically visible by the public and/or other writers). Typically graffiti is created using spray paint or markers.

Black book: a graffiti writer's sketchbook. Black books are used for sketching potential graffiti. Black books are considered extremely valuable (a graffiti diary of sorts) and are sometimes autographed by other writers who write their tags inside.

Bomb (a.k.a. to hit): to paint or tag several surfaces in a specific location. Bombing a city refers to graffiti-ing numerous areas within a city.

Crew: two or more graffiti writers who collaborate on and assist one another in executing graffiti. Crews also have a tag name that represents all members of the crew.

Getting Up: tagging public surfaces extensively and often. The objective of "getting up" is to develop one's reputation, garner fame and maintain public recognition.

King (Queen, if female writer): Writers who have achieved fame and are especially respected within the graffiti subculture.

Piece: large, intricately stylized graffiti murals. Short for masterpiece. Typical aspects of pieces are 3-D effects, arrows, several colors and complex styles. To "piece" also means to "write."

Street Cred: short for street credentials.

Tag: a graffiti writer's signature and subcultural name. Short for nametag. To "tag" also means to "sign." Tags are the quickest, simplest and most often created type of graffiti, typically done using only one color.

Toy: an inexperienced or amateur graffiti writer. Generally used as a pejorative term to describe individuals who are new to the graffiti subculture and may not have a full grasp of all that the subculture entails. The term can also be used to describe poor or unskilled graffiti.

Writer: an individual who paints or writes graffiti to a standard acceptable within the graffiti subculture. Writers have generally developed a skilled tag and are recognized by the graffiti community.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Share with me how *you* would define the graffiti subculture?

2. In the past, did you consider yourself to be a graffiti writer and member of the subculture? If yes, what did that title mean to you? Do you still consider yourself to be a writer?

3. Tell me a little bit about how someone becomes a graffiti writer and what that was like for you?
     a. Was it a process or did it happen overnight?

4. Do you feel that you became a different person once you entered the subculture? If so, tell me about who you were before you got involved with the graffiti scene.

5. Describe to me that initial moment or first time when you thought of yourself as a *true* writer, or the moment you considered yourself to *legitimately* belong to the graffiti subculture.

6. Did you let people know outside of the subculture that you were a writer? If not, or if only a few, Why?
     a. How did you protect your identity?

7. At what point did you decide you no longer wanted to be a writer or a part of the graffiti subculture? And why?

8. Describe to me what it was like to stop writing graffiti and leave the subculture.
     a. Was it a process or an overnight decision?

9. Do you feel you became a different person once you left the subculture? If yes, how so? Can you describe who you were while you were in the subculture and then who you became once you left it?

10. Tell me about any influence you feel that the graffiti subculture has had on who you are today.

11. Who do you think you would be today if you had never been a writer or a part of the subculture?

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT VERBAL CONSENT FORM

What this study is about
This is a research study. Research studies include <u>only</u> volunteers and offer <u>all</u> volunteers the right to end participation at any given point during the research process. You have full control over how far you proceed in this study.

This study is designed to investigate shifts in identity for former graffiti writers. The research team is interested in how the process(es) of entering and exiting the graffiti subculture affect a writer's identity or how they see themselves.

<u>Aneliese Dar</u> has explained in the earlier verbal discussion the procedures involved in this research study. These include the purpose and what will be required of you. Any new information that comes up during the study will be provided to you if the information might affect your willingness to continue participation in the project.

What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?
You will be asked to take part in an oral interview that is expected to last one to two (1-2) hours depending on how much information you prefer to provide, the amount is entirely up to you. Please note that you have complete freedom to choose <u>not</u> to answer <u>every single</u> question and to end the interview if you feel it is a constraint on your time and/or you become uncomfortable answering questions.

Interviews will be recorded with a digital recorder and may take place face-to-face or over the telephone, depending on what you prefer. Should you begin an interview and then desire that you continue another day, you have that option. We ask that you please consider finishing the interview within two (2) days from starting it.

Why are you asking me?
You are being asked to take part in this study in order to share your personal experiences as a former graffiti writer and provide any information you can on how, if at all, entering and exiting the graffiti subculture has personally impacted your identity. Specifically, you will be asked questions about how you see yourself today as a result of being a writer in the past and to reflect on who you were prior to, during, and after your involvement with the graffiti subculture.

Possible good things that may come out of this study
This study will assist researchers in gaining a fuller understanding of who graffiti writers see themselves to be and any impact the graffiti subculture has on a writer's sense of self.

At this time, the research team anticipates there will be no direct benefits to participants in this study.

<u>Is there and audio/video recording?</u>
Interviews will be audio recorded during a private interview with Aneliese Dar. In attempts to protect your voice from being recognized, recordings will be destroyed once a hard copy has been typed "word for word". Audio recordings help us to make sure we don't misquote you or miss any significant points that are important to our research. However, please be aware that because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the tape, your confidentiality for things you say on the tape cannot be *guaranteed,* although the researcher will try to limit access to the tape as described below.

<u>Possible risks that may occur in this study</u>
It has been determined that there are minimal risks. The research team acknowledges that graffiti is illegal and has legal repercussions. Therefore, as a precaution the research team will be assigning you an alias by which all information you offer during your interview will be said to be offered by your alias name. It is <u>extremely important</u> to the research team that your identity and privacy be protected and every effort possible be made to do so. Any information provided by you will be kept confidential, stored and locked in a secure location known only by the research team with access to it only by the research team. In addition, you <u>will not</u> be asked to provide any information that would personally identify you (including personal tag names) as a participant in this study and you <u>will not</u> be asked to discuss any <u>specific</u> acts of past graffiti.

<u>Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?</u>
Participation in this study is voluntary and will not cost you anything. Compensation for your time is not offered.

<u>All of my questions</u>
<u>Aneliese Dar</u> has answered all of your current questions about you being in this study. Any other questions concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study can be answered by Dr. Gwen Hunnicutt who may be contacted at (336) 334-3705.

<u>Leaving the study</u>
You are free to refuse to participate or to withdraw your consent to be in this study at any time. There will be no penalty or unfair treatment if you choose not to be in the study. Being in this study is completely voluntary and free from expectations by the research team. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state.

<u>My personal information</u>
As discussed above in the section titled "Possible risks that may occur in this study" every effort will be made to insure your privacy will be protected. You will not be identified by name or other identifiable information that would reveal to the public who you are and that you participated in this research. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law

<u>What about new information/changes in the study?</u>
If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

<u>Study approval</u>
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro Institutional Review Board makes sure that studies with people follows federal rules. They have approved this study, its consent form, and the earlier verbal discussion.

<u>My rights while in this study</u>
If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated or if you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at UNCG (Phone # listed)

By proceeding with the interview, you are agreeing that you have read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly and willingly consenting to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By proceeding with the study, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate.

APPENDIX D

PHOTOGRAPHS

Example of a "Piece"

Underground Location

Because dumpsters are only occasionally cleaned, writers tag dumpsters while believing their tags will remain visible for a longer period of time

"That Hanes hand is tight": Comment left on Facebook by a participant who viewed this photo posted on my account