2-1-2016

Look Up in the Sky: Latent Content Analysis of the Real Life Superhero Community

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Abstract

The Real Life Superhero (RLSH) subculture is a growing global community of individuals who adopt the superhero motif and are motivated by prosocial goals. Although the community has been the focus of documentaries, news articles and numerous internet forums, little academic research has been conducted on the composition of this subculture. Through the use of an online survey, socio-demographic information about this community was collected. This data was compiled and analysed via qualitative means to develop not only an overarching review of the composition of the subculture but also how members perceived themselves and other members. Membership and identity within the community was strongly tied to the activities and focus of each member, predominantly community and crime prevention orientated. The study identified a high degree of heterogeneity within the community with subdivisions focused on the perceptions of legal boundaries, focus of activities and level of authenticity.

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The Real Life Superhero (RLSH) subculture is a growing global community of individuals who adopt the superhero motif and are motivated by prosocial goals. Although the community has been the focus of documentaries, news articles and numerous internet forums, little academic research has been conducted on the composition of this subculture. Through the use of an online survey, socio-demographic information about this community was collected. This data was compiled and analysed via qualitative means to develop not only an overarching review of the composition of the subculture but also how members perceived themselves and other members. Membership and identity within the community was strongly tied to the activities and focus of each member, predominantly community and crime prevention orientated. The study identified a high degree of heterogeneity within the community with subdivisions focused on the perceptions of legal boundaries, focus of activities and level of authenticity. Keywords: Subculture, Real Life Superheroes, Structured Questionnaire, Open-Ended Responses, Latent Content Analysis

Society, as a whole, is not a homogenous body of people. Beyond the mainstream culture, there are also a variety of subculture and countercultures. The Real life Superhero Community (RLSH) is one such subculture. Individuals who identify as RLSH, or a derivative, have been reported across the world (HBO, 2011) with evidence of self-organization and large-scale community programs. Members of the RLSH community have a diverse range of activities and focuses. Some RLSH focus on community-level and grassroots style policing and service, some direct their attention towards crime prevention, going so far as to conduct "sting-like" operations (Laycock, 2012), others "costumed hero" publicity to promote societal changes (Mcinnes & Redrup, 2012) while even more focus on individual level community service (Venezia, 2011). The overarching identity of RLSH is still developing with heated internal debates about what membership means and what one needs to do to earn it. However, these debates point to definitive perceived demarcation between RLSH and non-RLSH members, a sense of and desire for a separate and distinct culture from the mainstream. For example, the Reallifesuperheroes.org (2013) website creed reads:

> We are Real Life Superheroes.
> We follow and uphold the law.
> We fight for what is right.
> We help those in need.
> We are role models.
> We will be positive and inspirational.
> We hold ourselves to a higher standard.
> Through our actions we will create a better brighter tomorrow.

And states that a RLSH member is "a person who selflessly serves a positive pro-social mission while in a heroic identity or motif inspired and influenced by comic book super heroes"

(Unknown, 2012a). The World Registry of Superheroes states "A Real-Life Superhero is a person who does good deeds or fights crime while in costume" (Unknown, 2012b). Consequentially, it can be seen that, although individually varied, members of the RLSH have a strong shared identity. This identity is self-enforced, with RLSH members publically identify code breakers or individuals not fulfilling membership duties. In fact, some individuals act as watchmen to the rest of the community. Of particular note are those within the community who take up the moniker *Real-life Supervillain*. While many adopt this persona because of attraction to the *Villain* persona, or to simply harass other RLSH, many use it as a means to identify individuals whom they feel do not uphold the values/duties of the RLSH, or simply overstep the boundaries of what is acceptable (McMullen, 2010).

The strong *superhero* themed costumes or uniforms worn by many RLSHs are similar to Cos-play costumes (Figure 1) and similarities between the two subcultures has been noted by some observers (Ackerman, 2010; Alverson, 2011; Willis, 2011). The costumes and uniforms may potentially relate to Kleinknecht (2003) concept of artefacts or symbolic items with a special meaning to the wearer. For example, to be included on the World registry of Superheroes, a RLSH must have a costume or uniformed persona. Like RLSH, Cosplayers regularly use alternative personas (Gunnels, 2009; Lotecki, 2012; Taylor, 2009; Winge, 2006), however they are usually derived from anime, graphic novels or similar sources (Lotecki, 2012; Taylor, 2009; Winge, 2006). In comparison, RLSHs generally use personas of their own invention. Cos-play also has a strong emphasis on *best-dressed*, the subculture's social and cultural capital (Taylor, 2009), while RLSH social and cultural capital derives from an individual's activities and behaviour, with costumes varying from little to very detail dressing (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Examples of the diversity of "costumes" for RLSHs. Top: The Original HOPE2011 Crew (HOPE, 2011). Bottom: The 2012 crew getting ready to hit the streets (HOPE, 2012).

Cos-play is generally limited to specific settings, such as Cos-play conventions (Winge, 2006), while RLSHs are not. The limits on costume-wearing localities do vary across the world (Winge, 2006), and 40% North American Cosplayers say they go out in public in costume (Lotecki, 2012). However, this setting-specificity contrasts with the RLSHs who assume their costumed personae within the regular everyday community. Another aspect for comparison is whether a RLSH use of alternative persona is comparable to Cos-player's roleplaying, which may involve mimicking the mannerisms, persona and behaviour of those they are imitating through costume (Taylor, 2009; Winge, 2006). Many RLSHs do draw inspiration and seek to emulate characters like Batman and Superman, however, their focus on community work and other activities such as patrols, sting operations, clean ups and protests fall far outside the norms of Cos-play roleplaying (Australia, 2013; Krulos, 2013; Luke, 2011; Martin, 2011). Furthermore, while Cosplayers and RLSH draw from the world of fantasy, fiction, and graphic novels for inspiration, RLSHs also cite real world "heroes" like Dr. Martin Luther King and tragedies like the Kitty Genovese incident as sources for their design ideas and/or motivation.

RLSH strong focus on community service, patrols, community safety education programs and service and crime prevention without pay or personal gain does mean that RLSHs share a number of similarities with volunteers. Clary et al. (1998) defines volunteering as those who seek out opportunities to help others and contribute both time and skills to assisting others over an extended period (a form of helping relationship) at a personal cost (e.g., time, energy and opportunity). Zappalà and Burrell (2001) proposed similarly, "*An activity is generally classified as volunteering if it is freely chosen, does not involve remuneration, and helps or benefits the community*" (p. 1). Comparatively, RLSH promotes similar behaviour by its members with both the creed & self-definition of RLSH containing themes of *helping others.*

While the focus and presence of patrols, community safety education programs and service, brings RLSH into comparison with traditional volunteer efforts, many volunteer groups suffer from a lack of stability and continuity (Grossbard, 2009; Pennell, Curtis, Henderson, & Tayman, 1989; Wong, Chui, & Kwok, 2011). Despite strong efforts to maintain their numbers in the form of administration, internal and external funding, government, police, and community support, volunteer groups experience low recruitment and retention. Wong et al. (2011) also proposed that one of the threats facing volunteer groups was the high turnover (stemming from a lack of volunteer satisfaction). A 2009 report on the Australian Neighborhood Watch, suggested that the organization could become extinct in 25 years (Grossbard, 2009). Similarly, within the Guardian Angel movement, there is evidence of a lack of continual motivation and membership retention (Pennell et al., 1989). This is true particularly in the face of walking patrols, which many consider boring or unpleasant and report receiving verbal abuse (Pennell et al., 1989).

This is in stark contrast to the growing size of RLSH, where, patrolling, *in costume,* is a prominent and regular activity. In addition, while RLSH does have supporters, members also face negative repercussions ranging from public ridicule (Constant, 2013; Petersen, 2013; Zyber, 2011), personal injury (Luke, 2011), feelings of exploitation (HBO, 2011) and even legal consequences such as arrest and prison (Birch, 2012; Krulos, 2012; Martin, 2011; Pullman, 2012; Unknown, 2012c). The fact that exposure to the same factors, often to an even greater effect, that have affected the stability of volunteer groups but has not diminished the RLSH subculture, suggests that despite the surface similarities in terms of their focus, there exist core differences between the two groups which needs to be explored. Unpaid community service, often in the form of volunteer efforts and community policing, represent a large and crucial workforce and the RLSH movement is a new incarnation of this global workforce but potentially without many of the disadvantages and limitations that plagued previous efforts.

Despite the RLSH subculture growing membership and global distribution, there has been little academic research into RLSH community as a distinct subculture. Non-academic

research in the form of mainstream or alternative media has often been piecemeal or light hearted, focusing on the superhero mythology or use of costumed personas, with little effort towards understanding the full depth of the community involved. Other efforts to explore the subculture, although commendable and informative, have lacked the academic neutrality that a structured qualitative analysis would provide. To fully appreciate the nature and rich mosaic that is the RLSH subculture, a description cannot be extrapolated from studies of other groups but must be examined independently. This purpose of this study, therefore, is to identify key defining features of this community and the individuals within it. Due to the lack of any current empirical research into the community, this will be an exploratory study, the first of its kind in this new emerging community. The objective was to create a general understanding and overview of the RLSH subculture and the individuals within it (Elliott et al., 1999).

(Although RLSH/Real life superheroes is used in this study, it should be noted that some groups within this subculture do not identify with the label RLSH).

Methods

Ethical approval was obtained from University of Sydney prior to data collection. Due to the nature of the RLSH community, the author used prolonged online social engagement to gain access into the field. Information about the RLSH was obtained via an online survey of subculture members. The survey included both qualitative and quantitative components containing forced-answer and open-response questions. No question, besides age confirmation and informed consent were compulsory. The data was collected anonymously via Lime Survey.

Briefly, the methodology of this study could be considered as following:

1. Active participant recruitment via subculture membership and snowball procedures
2. Data collect via online survey with a combination of open-ended and forced answer questions
3. Preliminary quantitative data analysis via basic statistical methods
4. This exploratory study utilized an inductive method of analysis drawing from grounded theory approach (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). More precisely, open relational analysis on the latent content was the qualitative method selected to analyze the data (Busch et al., 2005; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). To achieve this, latent content analysis of open-ended questions was conducted via
   a. Preliminary review of the material to develop list of potential codes and descriptions to act as a coding guide
   b. Use of coding guide to code participants' responses by two person team
   c. Third party coding of participant responses using coding guide
   d. Comparison for inter-coder reliability between two person team and third party coding
   e. Discussion of final coding of responses by all coders

The varied terminology of the responses within the source material (in terms of manifest content, spelling, phrases, etc.) meant that the potential for miscoding was high if the analysis was performed via an automatic system. Therefore coding was done manually via the three researchers in two independent groups (Carley, 1993). Although time consuming (Carley,

1993), this method ensured that the coding process had a higher level of precision and errors were accounted for throughout (Busch et al., 2005). The use of three separate coders also provided a credibility check on the data analysis (Elliott et al., 1999).

Participants

Using purposeful criterion snowball sampling, participants were recruited based on (a) registration on relevant registries and websites and (b) identification by Tea Krulos, a RLSH historian and researcher (Krulos, 2013). Eighty-eight electronic invitations were sent to participants who met criteria and were above 18-years old, followed by weekly reminders sent within a five-month period. A response rate of 46% (n = 41) was achieved, however not all respondents responded to each survey question. The following is based on those that did respond.

Although original predictions on recruitment for this study was a minimum of 50 individuals, at 42 individuals, our snowball recruitment program failed to identify any new subculture members. Discussion with subculture members suggested this may be due to the stringent inclusion criteria. The age range of the participants was 18-52 years (M = 33) and the majority of the participants were male (male = 32, female =3). The average participant had been active for approximately 7 years (range 0.60 -36 years, SD = 8.42). Most RLSHs were members of a distinct RLSH group (74%). The average member spent over 19 hours per week (range 2-100 hours, SD = 18.86) in RLSH activities which were predominantly located in the United States of America (76%). Although most participants were located within the USA, there is a global" nature to the RLSH culture with individuals were located in Australia, Mexico, Canada and so on. Furthermore, the RLSH appears to have a strong cross-cultural appeal with participants identifying with a broad range of nationalities and ethnicities including Irish, Scottish and Asian and so on. When participating in RLSH activities, the majority considered their alternative persona "somewhat" to "extremely" important however, only approximately half of them utilize this assumed persona to hide their own identity (53%) with less than half claiming this was a deciding factor in its design (45%). For further quantitative analysis of the participants please contact the primary author.

Data Analysis

The analysis included both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Quantitative analysis was used for responses obtained via the forced answer component of the survey and focused on the component of the study that did not require further analysis (e.g., Age and gender distribution). Qualitative analysis focused on latent content (Busch et al., 2005; Carley, 1986; Diesner & Carley, 2005), with codes that were derived from the data by a two person research team, one familiar with RLSH and another acting as an outside observer, and confirmed by an external audit using the derived code guidelines (Carley, 1993; Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Stemler, 2001). For the qualitative portion, trustworthiness strategies of prolonged engagement and utilization of a research team and an auditor were used to ensure rigor (Cohen, 1960; Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999; Stemler, 2001). Mutual exclusivity was maximized prior to reliability testing using manual and computerized overlap identification methods. Codes were consolidated into themes or categories where appropriate (Carley, 1993; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). Documentation on coding and guidelines are available upon request from the primary researcher.

Results

Inter-Rater Reliability

　　　　Table 1 shows the results of statistical analyses of the inter-rater reliability. With and without coding guideline examples included, the coding showed a substantial level of agreement, 74.91% and 76.23%, Kappa respectively (Viera & Garrett, 2005). Although there were a few codes there were not at a significant level of agreement or a Cohen Kappa could not be calculated, all three researchers agreed with the final coding analysis.

Table 1. Inter-rater reliability between coding groups

Survey Question	focus	Average Inter-rater reliability (Cohen-Kappa, Primary and Secondary coder* Tertiary coder) ($p < 0.05$)	
		with examples from coding included	with examples from coding not included
2-4	subcategories	66.37% (Range: 21.3-100%, S.D. 20.56%) (24%N/A, 4% N/S)	60.65% (Range: 24.1-100%, S.D.: 23.86%) (44% N/A, 4% N/S)
5-6	personal label	47.42% (Range: 25.2-100%, S.D.: 18.87%) (7.14% N/S)	54% (Range: 43.2-64.8%, S.D.: 15.27%) 57.14% N/A, 28.57% N/S)
19	training	78.41% (Range: 35.7-100%, S.D.: 17.21%) (5% N/A)	91.19% (Range: 64.2-100%, S.D.:13.42%) (35% N/A, 5% N/S)
23	Importance of persona	74.93% (Range: 35.4-100%, S.D.: 25.98%)	90.32% (Range: 64.9%-100%, S.D.: 15.33%) (46.67% N/A, 20% N/S)
26-27	group membership	68.4% (Range: 45.2-100%, S.D.:18.13%) (18.18% N/A)	63.84% (Range: 36.2-100%, S.D.: 24.52%) (54.55% N/A)
28-29	activities	72.93% (Range: 30-100%, S.D.: 23.85%) (7.69% N/A)	70.78% (Range: 23.7-100%, S.D.: 25.62%) (7.69% N/A)
31	relationship with other RLSH	71.81% (Range: 37.1-100%, S.D.: 24.58%).	72.07% (Range: 43.3-100%, S.D.:26.85%) (14.29% N/S).
33	opinion of other RLSH	59.7% (Range: 36.8-71.7%, S.D.: 12.14%)	57.92% (Range: 47.5-63.5%, S.D.: 7.05%). (14.29% N/A)
34	origins	72.21% (Range: 33.9-100%, S.D.:19.48%).	76.93% (Range: 61.5-100%, S.D.: 13.68). (12.5% N/A, 12.5% N/S)
36	origins changes	100% (50% N/S)	100% (50% N/S)

40	secret identity (Non-RLSH) RWH community-No	100% (25% N/S)	100% (50% N/S, 25% N/A)
41	secret identity (Non-RLSH) RWH community-Yes	83.33% (Range: 67.6-100%, S.D.: 16.22%).	81.23% (Range: 64.50-100%, S.D.:17.84).
43	secret identity (RLSH) Non-RWH community-Yes	78.34% (Range: 61.5-100%, S.D.:14.28%).	72.12% (Range: 45.7-100%, S.D.: 19.5%).

*N/A- Kappa could not be calculated. N/S: not significant

Categories Within the RLSH Community

There appeared to be distinct "subgroups" within the subculture corresponding to divisions within the framework of what it means to be a RLSH. It is this framework that a member of the subculture used to categorize other members of the community (see Figures 2-5).

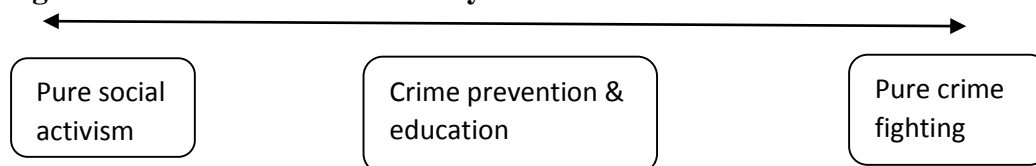**Figure 2: Division: focus of activity**

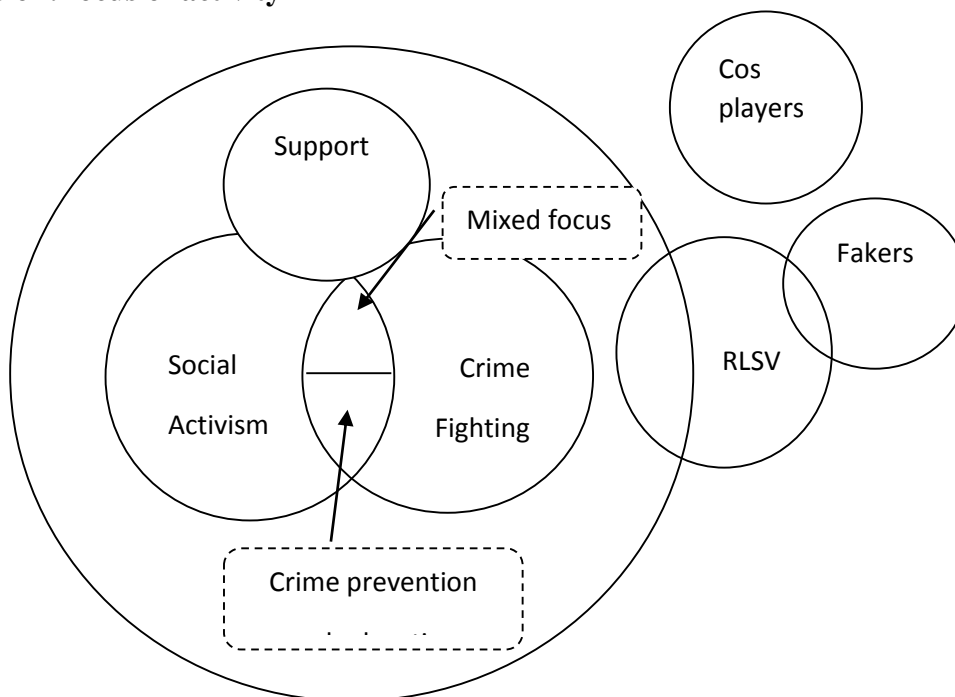**Figure 3: Division: focus of activity 2**

* RLSV: Real Life Super Villain: It is important to note that the RLSV is in itself a heterogeneous group. Many individuals who adopt the villain persona actually perform activities more in line with social or crime fighting (in this regard we can considered them a subcategory of RLSH, although for clarity this relationship is not shown). A role also adopted

by "RLSV" is constructively criticism of the RLSH activities- acting as "watch men" for the community as a whole.

Figure 4: Division: Legality of activities
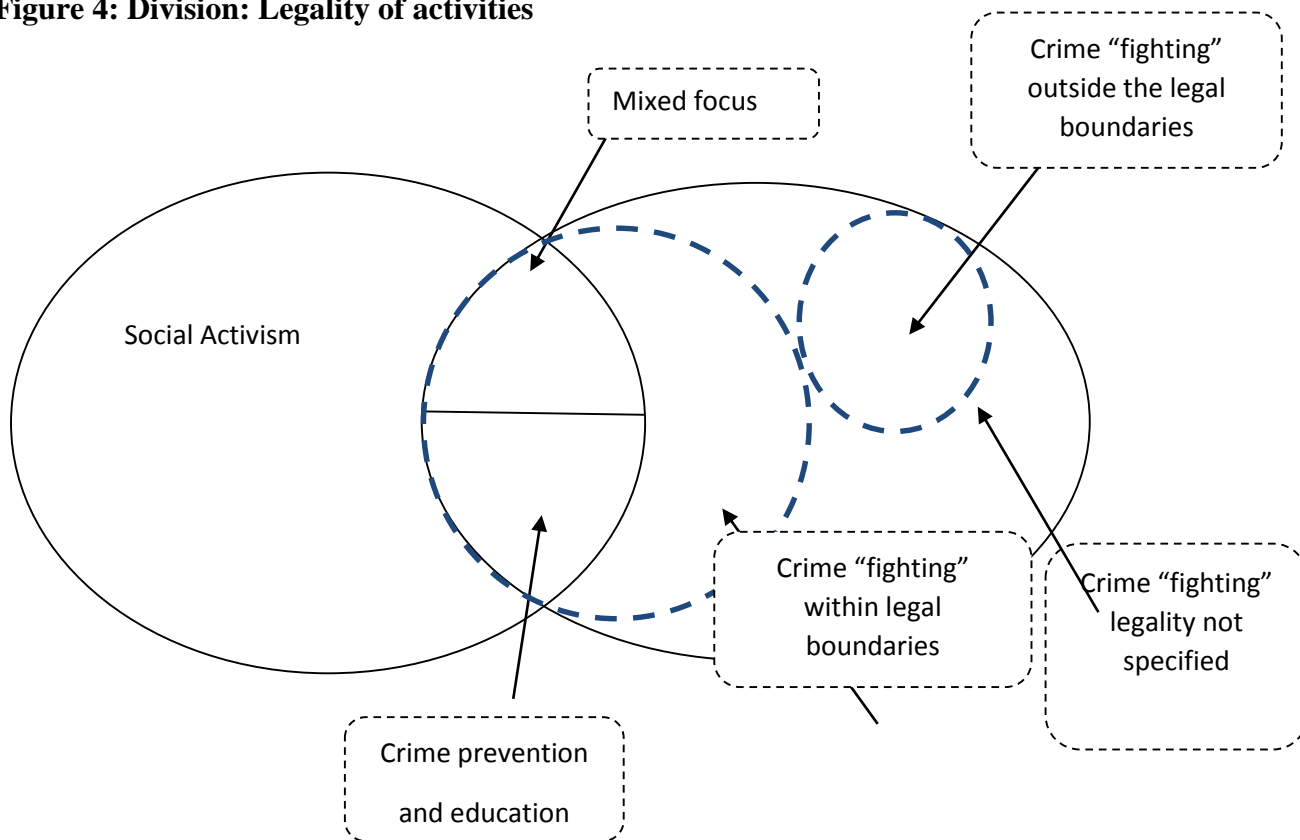
Figure 5: Division: Use of a RLSH persona
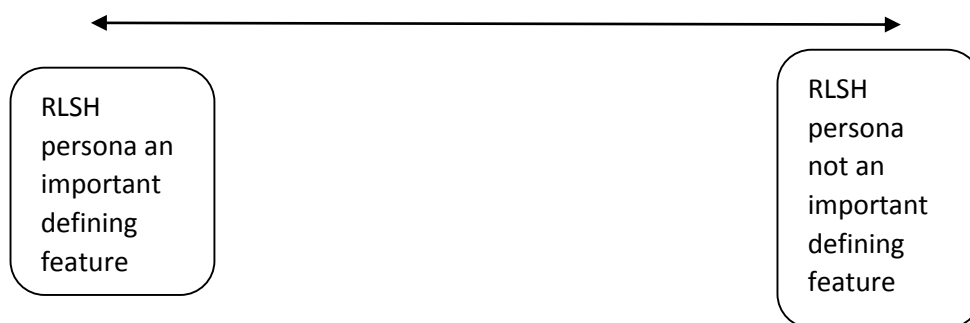
Focus of Activity

The overarching division appeared to be between social activism and crime fighting. This is supported by the results for training that RLSH have or utilized (Table 2), as the most common skills and training they had were first aid/CPR (25 occurrences) and fighting (25 occurrences). The predominant representation of these two categories potentially reflects the two core interests/divisions identified in the subcategories and personal labels.

Table 2. Coding occurrence for training of RLSH

Code	Description	Total number of occurrences
Emergency training	training specifically focused on dealing with unexpected situations that require immediate action	5
Security training		5
Activism		5
First aid/CPR	specific reference to First Aid and its derivatives	25
Bushcraft	unspecified non-urban skills	1
Communication skills	reference to the ability to explain, discuss and present ideas, concepts in clear manner	14
Computer/Internet	Any IT orientated skills	3
Weapons training and handling	reference to training or permits with weapons	6
Coordination and team management		9
De-escalation training		4
design		3
Fighting	reference to any skills within the arena of unarmed (or not specified armed) conflict	25
fundraising		1
Military training	reference to specific training via a military or quasi-military institution	5
Parkour		3
Religious training		1
Research	Research skills and ability	2
Rock climbing		1
scout		2
knowledge	reference to having specific knowledge base in areas believed to be of assistance	10
Teaching	abilities in education and training of others	1

Social activism could be further divided into subcategories of members where the themes that arose were charity, promoting a cause and/or social orientation. Crime fighting could also be subdivided into those who actively pursued *justice* and those who patrolled or educated others on crime avoidance and prevention.

In between these two extremes were individuals focused on crime prevention. For example, not actively focusing on criminals but addressing social conditions that allowed crime to occur was a theme that presented itself. This middle range also contained those who focused was a mixture of crime fighting and socialism.

While the model presented captures the key polar nature of the RLSH, there is also an important distinction between RLSHs and what is identified as *fakers*. For example, one participant noted Cosplayers as "someone who is into the RLSH scene only for the costumes & the fictional elements" and another participant stated that fakers were individuals who would "dress up, haze others, complain all the time, do not ever do anything good for anyone, but tell others how to do it" or as another participant stated, "somebody who has elaborate Pictures of what his Outfit WOULD look like, but does not have one. Does not patrol OR do Charity, but usually offers advice on how to do so correctly." Participants appeared to want distance the

RLSH from these subgroups and are very sensitive to their presence. The label "Fakers" and derivatives have strong negative connotations and included individuals who did not actively engage in activities that were in line with the focus of the RLSH pro-social and anti-crime goals. Further, they were seen to have claimed extravagant victories, acted in a way that was more in line with vigilantism, or simply were critical of other RLSH members without any basis.

There were also individuals within RLSH who could be considered support, rather than actively pursuing either of the dipolar goals- social or crime orientation. It is important to note that unlike the fakers, support individuals were not described in a negative way, instead many considered their activities an attempt to, as one participant stated, *"help better the RLSH community*."

Legality of Activities

Within the crime fighting, there appeared to be those who opposed crime within the legal boundaries and those who overstep this boundary. Although not always identified by participants, e.g., *"protecting people from violent crime,"* often this distinction was a categorizing factor. For example, the description by participants of the category *crime fighter included* that they *operates **within the confines of the law*** (emphasis added) while a vigilante was "***breaking the law** to disperse justice*" (emphasis added). Generally, those who fight crime were respected; however, lawbreakers were viewed negatively. Crime prevention and education and some crime fighting appeared confined to the legal subcomponent, while pure crime fighting contained those in which the legal stance is not important or the law is consciously broken in the pursuit of justice.

Active vs. Non-Active Members

Members who, irrespective of their focus (e.g., social or crime; use of persona etc.), were also classified within a negative or positive realm based on whether or not they were considered active in carrying out RLSH duties. This is strongly related to the concept of *fakers*. Participants viewed members that were "all talk" or spent more time online than actually pursuing their RLSH activities very negative. In fact, some participants felt compelled to become more involved in RLSH activities that they, as one participant stated, "*need to do more than sit in front of a computer in a mask"* to justify their continual membership. This potentially reflects a strong internalized group belief in the need for taking an active role in their own self-definition of a RLSH, coupled with external regulation by other members.

Costume vs Uniform

How RLSH described their manner of dress varied. While *costume* arose a number of times, one participant explained that the term was considered offensive, possibly due to the relationship the term costume has with Cosplay. Participants also used the terms uniform, outfit, mask, persona to describe their manner of dress.

RLSH Persona

The amount of effort a RLSH puts into the physical appearance of their RLSH persona does not appear to be a categorizing aspect (cf. Cosplay). Instead the importance of the RLSH persona appears to be internally derived by the person wearing it ranging from it being a key identifying construct to having little importance at all. Interestingly, when asked about the

importance of persona, a number of participants described it in related to their identity or a source of inspiration/symbol suggesting for many individuals even though they don't see it as a definitive criteria of their RLSH membership, it was still a defining component of their personality. This may suggest that it is not just the "dress" but the persona the "dress" represents that reflects this cultures artifacts (Kleinknecht, 2003).

Group Membership

The decision on whether or not be a member of a group within the RLSH subculture seems to stem from whether or not the participant perceives some benefit from the association or a benefit in not being associated. Some perceive strong benefits from this membership (e.g., codes such as good idea, network, safer, fun) with one participant stating "teach and learn from each other, share ideas and information, and also build camaraderie" and another stating "I feel more can be accomplished in a team setting rather than working solo." While individuals who are not members state that it "allows me equal access if I remain neutral." and they can "collaborate with the various groups." Beyond this, there are individuals who simply did not have the accessibility to join groups for reasons such as being the "the only RLSH in my country so far."

Activities

As expected, members reported that the activities they spent their time on and what activities they consider the most important were very similar, further emphasizing that the external values and regulation are internalized by the members (Table 3 & 4). However, one interesting aspect is that although time online and networking took up the majority of the time neither was considered very high in terms of importance. This is probably related to the fact that *identity* is related to activities (e.g., "Community service" and "crime fighting") rather than group membership and social bonds.

Table 3. Activities (derived from coding) listed as participants spending the most time on, average importance and average time spent in activity

Activity	Number of times mentioned *	level of importance (1-5)	time spent in activity
Activism	3	3 (Range:2-4, S.D.: 1)	8 (range:7.5-15, S.D: 4.19)
Community Service	35	3.64 (Range: 1-5, S.D.: 1.34)	14.99 (range: 1-80, S.D.:17.90)
Community service patrol	6	4.17 (Range: 3-5, S.D.:0.98)	9.2 (range: 5-15, S.D.:5.31)
Crime fighting patrol	4	3.33 (Range: 3-4, S.D.:0.67)	14.5 (Range: 3-20, S.D.: 8.02)
Crime fighting	11	4.64 (Range: 3-5, S.D.: 0.68)	22.7 (Range: 4-100, S.D.: 29.19)
Fund raising	3	2.67 (Range: 1-4, S.D.: 1.53)	12.67 (Range: 5-20, S.D.: 7.51)
Networking	12	3.58 (Range: 2-5, S.D.: 1.31)	30.27 (Range: 3-150, S.D.: 45.89)
Online	3	3.33 (Range: 2-4, S.D.: 1.16)	88.33(Range:15-160, S.D.: 72.51)

Patrol	15	3.80 (Range: 1-5, S.D.: 1.27)	21.58 (Range: 1-80, S.D.: 21.14)
Preparation	33	4.28 (Range: 1-5, S.D.: 1.14)	66.69 (Range: 1-720, S.D.: 148.06)
Promote awareness	5	4 (Range: 1-5, S.D.: 2)	18 (Range: 4-40, S.D.: 14.68)
Publicity/Appearance	2	2 (Range:2-2, S.D.: 0)	5.5 (Range: 5-6, S.D.: 0.71)
Training others	1	4	30

*Not all participants who listed these items completed the follow up questions on level of importance and time spent

Table 4. Most important Activities (derived from coding) listed by participants and average importance and average time spent in activity

Activity	Number of times mentioned*	level of importance (1-5)	time spent in activity
Activism	2	3.5 (Range: 2-4, S.D.: 0.71)	11.5 (Range: 8-15, S.D.: 4.95)
Community Service	23	3.82 (Range: 1-5, S.D.: 1.34)	16.29 (Range: 1-80, S.D.: 21.29)
Community Service Patrol	3	4.33(Range: 3-5, S.D.: 1.16)	8.67 (Range: 5-15, S.D.: 5.51)
Crime fighting	8	4.63 (Range: 3-5, S.D.: 0.74)	23.14 (Range: 1-100, S.D.: 36.44)
Crime fighting patrol	2	3 (Range: 3, S.D.: 0)	11.5 (Range: 3-20, S.D.: 12.02)
Fund raising	1	4(Range: 4, S.D.:0)	20 (Range: 20, S.D.: 0)
networking	10	3.5 (Range: 2-5, S.D.: 1.18)	40.9 (Range:3-150, S.D.: 45.88)
Online	1	4 (Range: 4, S.D.:0)	160 (Range: 160, S.D.: 0)
Patrol	10	3.9 (Range: 1-5, S.D.: 1.37)	25.67 (Range: 1-80, S.D.: 22.47)
Preparation	20	3.85 (Range: 1-5, S.D.: 1.37)	51.16 (Range: 1-420, S.D.: 95.80)
Promote awareness	5	4.8 (Range: 4-5, S.D.: 0.45)	20.2 (Range: 5-40, S.D.: 12.66)
Publicity/Awareness	1	1 (Range: 1, S.D.: 0)	5 (Range: 5, S.D.: 0)
Training others	1	5 (Range: 5, S.D.: 0)	25 (Range: 25, S.D.:0)

*Not all participants who listed these items completed the follow up questions on level of importance and time spent

Relationship With and Opinion of Other RLSH

Within the RLSH, relationships and opinions varied, with many participants acknowledging the variety and heterogeneity within the group. Overall, the relationships and opinions were considered positive suggesting that despite their diversity of goals and methods, a number of participants did hold strongly negative opinions of other members. One participant claimed that "most of them [RLSH] are out of shape and look ridiculous." Furthermore, there was also strong reoccurring theme of *fake vs. real* with the same strong negative connotation with those who they feel are not active or capable of doing what is perceived as RLSH activities. These divisions (i.e., *fake vs. real*, *ill-equipped*, and *dangerous*) combined with *avoid arguments*, suggest that some divisions are present.

Why Participants Became RLSHs

Considering the strong perceived similarities with Cosplay and graphic novels, it was surprising that the most common motivation for being a RLSH was not being a Cosplay or superhero fan. In fact, although Cosplay or superhero fandom was present in some responses, many who cited it did so in conjunction with other reasons (i.e., planning on doing homeless activities at the same time as a comic book convention). Instead, most participants had a *desire to do more* in a way that was not available through other means with some feeling there was a *failure of the system* in regard to their particular focus. This is particularly interesting considering that many did not hold a negative opinion of other societal groups. This suggests that although many RLSHs feel that the "system" is not completely successful in addressing social concerns, they are aware of the reality of practical limitations and restrictions and do not hold this failure against the other groups.

Although not the most common theme, some participants stated that their RLSH persona was part of the *true identity* and a means of improving themselves. This could explain the appeal of contributing to society in this manner as oppose to volunteering, joining the police force or the Guardian Angels (particularly in light of the lack of negative opinion of their effectiveness), in that each of these alternatives involving adopting a "persona," created by another. In comparison, becoming a RLSH allows an individual to create their own desired persona and then inhabit it.

Those who had experienced a change in why they were RLSH either reported a change in their life, altering and limiting what they were capable of or willing to do, or a change in their perspective due to a greater understanding of the factors involved in their activities and related groups they interact with.

Secret Non-RLSH Identity

The reasoning for keeping the non-RLSH identity a secret from other RLSH members seemed to very practical in nature with a focus on safety. This may have been related to the perception of other RLSH members being dangerous or simply there to cause trouble and make arguments. This further emphasizes the concept of heterogeneity within this subculture and that although there is a strong positive community feel, RLSH are very aware of their internal heterogeneity and possible negative components. Interestingly, those who did not keep their identity a secret did not perceive the same danger, focusing instead on lack of need and practicality with some feeling was *not being necessary* to have a secret identity, or that such an identity would be *incompatible with focus* of their activities. A number of individuals appeared to perceive the realistic logistical challenge in keeping a secret identity, that "it is impossible to keep a secret identity, that if someone wants to find out who they are- they will." This raises

the question of whether those who saw keeping their identity a secret as a form of protection were actually succeeding or whether those who felt it was not possible, simply did not conduct themselves in a way that allowed for such secrecy.

Secret RLSH Identity

The most reoccurring theme was "incompatible with focus," in terms of why keeping your RLSH identity a secret from non-RLSH members suggesting that although RLSH do believe their RLSH persona is important, the mission or their focus that was paramount and what participants were willing to compromise their identity for what they believed was their goal.

Discussion

The study describes the subculture of the RLSH community that, while overlaps a number of other subcultures, has a strong and distinct individual identity. The community comprises a range of subgroups, predominantly categorized in terms of focus and activities. In general the public and mass media consider the costume or uniform that many members of the RLSH movement wear during their activities as a key characteristic of this subculture. However the results of this study suggest that the costumes, while important, are only one feature of a rich and diverse subculture. In fact, while some had associations with cosplay, most RLSHs proposed the presence of social injustice and crime stemming from these conditions were the reasons for them joining the community. Although, the superhero (and derivatives) persona is a defining feature of this community, the main focus and drive for members was assisting the larger community, which they dedicate a surprisingly large amount of time, skills and commitment to. This focus also appeared to be the strongest criteria for how individuals perceived themselves and other members of the subculture, creating sub-identities and labels based not upon group memberships or geographical range but the goals and objectives they pursue and the means they utilized (legal or otherwise) to achieve these.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

One of the key findings of this study is the level of heterogeneity within the RLSH community. Although still a relatively new subculture, the community is already showing signs of diversions both along those discussed above but also on a macro level. Individuals, that to the outsider would be considered members of the RLSH subculture, have discarded this label to take on their own distinct identity. In particular, it should be noted that a number of potential participants "dropped out" of this study due to the perceived focus on the "RLSH" subculture. Future research should look towards these offshoots in terms of perceived differences and sense of identity. As shown in the literature review of the introduction, the parameters of an identity is often best highlighted by examining what that identity is not (i.e., Cosplay) therefore further investigation into these offshoots would further clarify both their identity and that of the RLSH community.

Furthermore despite the high representation of males in the sample set, personal observations would suggest there is a strong female component within the community. Examining of the list of attendees to such events as HOPE (an RLSH prosocial drive), female RLSH profiles including in Krulos "heroes in the night" Blog (Krulos, 2010) and the presence of S.T.A.N.D. (Superheroines' Tips And Networking Department) would support this. Previous research has shown that female's experiences and perception of their community and social

relationships is distinctly different to that of males (Gantz & Wenner, 1991; Leblanc, 1999; Sullivan, 2001). Future research should focus on being more inclusive of this gender.

Finally, the majority of the participants originated from the USA. This is to be expected as the largest concentration of RLSH appear to be within this region. However, while their presence is being felt predominantly in the USA, individuals who identify as RWH, or a derivative, can now be found in a number of regions, including Australia, Europe, and Asia. Although participants from some of these regions were included, considering the different cultures, legal constraints and population demographics that members would face in these other regions, it would be worth examining how this subculture varies across regions.

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Article Citation

White, D., Szabo, M., Tiliopoulos, N., Rhodes, P., Spurrier, M., & Griffiths, S. (2016). Look up in the sky: Latent content analysis of the real life superhero community. *The Qualitative Report, 21*(2), 178-195. Retrieved from http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol21/iss2/2