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### The Perpetuation of Graffiti Art Subculture

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## THE PERPETUATION OF GRAFFITI ART SUBCULTURE

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MENTOR: CARL BERGSTRAND

### Abstract

Graffiti art and the subculture that supports it is a form of graffiti that differs from gang graffiti, immediate graffiti, and street art. This research is a qualitative analysis using partial participant observation of a graffiti art subculture in a Midwestern city. Six themes which characterize this subculture were individual identity, communication, competition, criminality, aesthetic criteria, and changing forms of communication. The implications of the findings for labeling theory and differential association theories are discussed.

### Introduction

Graffiti is as old as human civilization. Its modern form, associated with inner-city subcultures, originated in New York City during the 1960s as an aspect of hip hop culture and has developed and expanded nationally and internationally over the last several decades. Graffiti art evolved differently in each city and served a different function based on the particular subculture that promoted it. According to Alonso (1988), graffiti art and the subculture that produces it is a form of graphic expression that can be distinguished from other types of graffiti:

**Gang graffiti.** Gang graffiti can be understood as solely representative of an individual's gang affiliation and related gang involvement. The artist's identity is completely immersed into the gang to which he or she belongs and is not represented in the graffiti. Gang graffiti utilizes colors, mottos, or symbols that represent the gang with which the artist is involved. Gang graffiti is employed as a means of communication with other gang members or rival gang members. Gang graffiti is also applied when establishing territory. The density of gang graffiti is dependent on an individual's proximity to the gang's central location. Gang graffiti artists generally do not give priority to aesthetic criteria, rules, or artistic components in their production of graffiti art.

**Immediate graffiti.** Immediate graffiti is random graffiti, commonly found in bathrooms or other public areas with low visibility. It is not always

spontaneous, but occurs as soon as the individual feels inclined to write or draw. The individual creating immediate graffiti does not usually adhere to artistic components, aesthetic criteria, or rules. The individual also does not typically identify with a pseudonym or an external group. This type of graffiti is not premeditated and does not have a defining purpose.

**Street art.** Street art is the type of graffiti frequently associated with graffiti art, otherwise known as a mural. The artists creating street art are referred to as muralists. Some muralists might identify with a pseudonym, but it is not represented in their art like it is in graffiti art. While still illegal, unless commissioned, street art is much more socially acceptable and somewhat desired in certain situations. Street art is easier for the public to understand, enabling a higher likelihood of favorable societal response or acceptance.

**Graffiti art.** Graffiti art is representative of an individual's identity that is consistently portrayed in the artist's artwork. The individuals perpetuating graffiti art identify as graffiti artists or graffiti writers and associate with other individuals who similarly self-identify. Graffiti art is limited by artistic components, aesthetic criteria, and evaluation from peers and society. Graffiti artists are governed by unspoken rules, acknowledged and enforced by other graffiti artists.

There is both a deviant and artistic aspect to graffiti art, which produces two different societal reactions. Many people recognize graffiti art as vandalism, gang activity, or a form of rebellion. Simultaneously, graffiti art is also present in galleries, museums, and prized pieces of notable art collections. It is much easier to look at a scribbled name on a dumpster and write it off as vandalism instead of pondering the purpose of that scribbled name. When society limits, redirects, or prohibits an individual's self-expressive outlet, the manifestation of graffiti art often occurs.

The graffiti art subculture resembles, in many ways, delinquent gangs—they are composed primarily of youth, their members are alienated from the larger society, they engage in criminal activities, they are labeled by law enforcement and the larger culture as 'deviant,' and they communicate with each other and the world through the use of graffiti in public places. Despite these general similarities, it would be a mistake to confuse the subculture of graffiti artists with a typical delinquent youth gang. Graffiti artists do not encompass any characteristics of a gang or organized crime. Graffiti artists are not violent and do not use graffiti art as a means of obtaining financial or material possessions. The few studies examining the characteristics of this

subculture suggest the purpose and meaning of graffiti, identity formation, and internal social dynamics are frequently very different from that described in the literature on delinquent gangs. This article will explore these facets of a subculture of graffiti artists' in a Midwestern city using partial participant observation.

### Literature Review

Yinger (1960) points out that subcultures emerge from frustration or conflicts that form a group in opposition to the dominant society with their own norms and values. Research on graffiti art subcultures has focused primarily upon the illegality of graffiti, how it is often falsely associated with more violent crime, how the 'deviant' label is assigned, and how a subculture emerges because it provokes a reaction within society (Williams, 2007). The dominant culture responds by attempting to reassign the group's place within an acceptable framework of society. Within graffiti art, this is accomplished through the commodity form, a socially acceptable outlet. Commodity form encourages graffiti writers to paint on canvases, sell their canvases, and ultimately generate a profit.

Ley and Cybriwsky (1974) make the distinction between graffiti artists, gang graffiti, and graffiti present in ethnic neighborhoods within Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Graffiti artists or "graffiti kings" value style, motivation, and inaccessible locations. The production of gang graffiti indicates gang activity, gang territory, or general content specific to gang involvement. The graffiti found in ethnic neighborhoods, with large ethnic diversity, identifies tension zones that are a result of various social changes in the composition of the neighborhood.

Alonso (1998) notes that inner city kids who endure discomfort and stress are the ones who seek to claim and protest territory because they have been systematically denied access to legitimate mastery over space (see also Ley & Cybriwsky, 1974). As a result of this systematic failure, an adolescent starts believing the only way to achieve respect is to become the best criminal they can be (Alonso, 1998). Labeling encourages criminal behavior among these adolescents.

Lachmann (1988) utilizes labeling theory in his study of graffiti subculture and identifies the evolution and structure of graffiti art in New York City. Social interaction among other graffiti writers allows graffiti to continue to develop through the roles of mentors, peers, and audience members. Mentors recruit and cultivate the youth's style, teach skills, provide motivations,

and introduce young artists to their audience. Graffiti writers can only be judged and critiqued by other graffiti writers because they are the only people who understand the artistic components, aesthetic criteria, and style of the genre. The audience reconfirms the writer's self-concept. Social interactions are extremely influential and crucial in the way respect is assigned, how fame is achieved, and how nonverbal rules and rituals are established (Lachmann, 1988).

Halsey and Young (2002) focus on the difficulties in legally eradicating graffiti. The art and criminal aspects within graffiti provide a difficult challenge to law enforcement officials. Graffiti is often linked to crime as opposed to art. The authors conclude that deterrence, intimidation, and hefty fines are ineffective ways of eliminating graffiti from society. The most successful methods of graffiti abolishment are through art education programs in schools and youth centers. Programs like the "Urban Art Program" have proven to be more effective than deterrence or imprisonment (Halsey and Young, 2002).

Our current knowledge of graffiti artists and their subculture is limited to a few case studies, which are often framed around the deviant or delinquent nature of the group rather than as an artistic community or subculture. This research is an exploratory analysis of a self-described graffiti artist subculture, exploring a unique community's contradictory character as deviant group and artistic community centered around self-expression through graffiti writing that acknowledges aesthetic criteria relevant to graffiti art.

### **Methodology**

A partial participant observational approach was utilized in this study using a snowball sampling technique. This methodology is one of the few effective methods for researching graffiti art due to the illegal and secretive nature of the subculture's activities. The snowball sample began with one graffiti artist known to the researcher and branched out to include ten graffiti artists, male and female. Partial participation was necessary because full participation would require the researcher to engage in illegal activities. Over a ten-month period, data was gathered using a combination of semi-structured interviews and by accompanying and observing the graffiti artist or artists while they painted. The interview questions used are listed in Appendix I. The information collected from the interviews and observations were used to construct a hierarchy of recurrent themes describing the central aspects of this subculture using the constant comparative technique or grounded theory (Gaser

and Strauss, 1967). By studying a subculture that participated in illegal activities, consent and confidentiality became important research issues. Each individual being interviewed or observed was made aware of the researcher's intentions. If an individual was uncomfortable being interviewed or observed, that individual was excluded from the sample. An initial meeting with each graffiti artist occurred to establish the importance of the study, ensure confidentiality, and promote trust between the subject and researcher. As a partial participant, the researcher was careful not to be involved in any illegal activities and this limitation was explained to each of the subjects in the study.

### **Findings**

This research identified six qualities or themes that are crucial to understanding the development and perpetuation of graffiti art and the graffiti art subculture. These qualities include individual identity, communication, competition, criminality, aesthetic criteria, and changing forms or mediums of artistic communication.

#### **IDENTITY: SELF-EXPRESSION THROUGH ALTER EGO**

On the most primitive level, graffiti art is an individual's outlet for self-expression, an outlet perceived as suppressed or blocked by society at large. For the graffiti artist, self-expression is central to the construction and maintenance of his or her identity.

The signature or name represented in graffiti art embodies that artist's identity and is their alter ego. An alter ego is defined as a secondary identity an individual creates for himself or herself. A graffiti artist's pseudonym can be created by the artist or is given to them by another graffiti artist. The graffiti artist's alias can hold a significant meaning, symbolize something, or just be a combination of favorite letters. For example, there is a graffiti artist that goes by the name of "Brrr". His signature is usually accompanied with a "Brrr Head", which is a simple illustration or character he created. He chose the name Brrr and developed the Brrr Head character during a bed bug epidemic. He thought bed bugs made a brrr noise and looked like the Brrr Heads he paints. Brrr's name has a symbolic and specific meaning, though not every graffiti artist's name signifies a particular meaning or representation.

Each graffiti artist chooses a moniker for different reasons and it is a very subjective process. This process enables the graffiti artist to develop a

sense of self in the context of graffiti art and on a deeper, more personal level. Issues related to the concept of self, such as self-esteem or identity, are addressed by the artist through the development of their alter ego. This alter ego not only aids in the identification of the self, but it also reveals how a graffiti artist earns respect and maintains their credibility as a graffiti artist.

Graffiti artists perceive their peers through the representation of their identities in their art. An artist's *nom de plume* is sometimes the only thing another graffiti artist will know about that person unless they personally know each other. If an artist is disrespectful to others or breaks the rules established by the norms of the subculture, other graffiti artists take notice. If someone is visibly talented and respectful, then other graffiti artists will pay attention to that as well. The graffiti artist establishes the amount of respect they receive through their name. Once an artist is awarded respect, their name becomes a method of maintaining their identity and integrity as a graffiti artist.

Occasionally, a graffiti artist will change their name if they become too well known with local law enforcement agencies, become tired of their current name, or dislike their name. Some artists have changed their handle, adapted it slightly, or have never changed it. The name is directly attached to the graffiti artist's identity and they will not receive satisfaction from painting their name if it is not a sufficient representation. Once an artist picks a name, becomes a skilled, and paints highly visible locations frequently, they will merit attention from other graffiti artists, the public, and law enforcement.

A successful and skilled graffiti artist can potentially become famous, establish a legacy, and receive admiration from both graffiti artists and non-graffiti artists. There are many graffiti artists who are very well known on a national and international level, such as Sofles, a professional graffiti artist from France. Graffiti artists can become so famous that an art collection is regarded as incomplete if a renowned graffiti artist's work is absent from the collection. The fame a graffiti artist acquires, either indirectly or directly, begins to establish that artist's legacy within the subculture. Many legendary graffiti artists become so popular they are invited to participate in art galleries, paint commissioned murals, or receive less supervision from law enforcement officials. There are several graffiti artists who are no longer involved in graffiti art but are still extremely well-known by their peers because of the legacy established through their art.

The recognition, attention, and admiration some graffiti artists receive for painting inspire other individuals to become graffiti artists. The resultant effects of positive attention encourages others. The ability to see someone excel at anything considered very controversial, like graffiti art, could give an individual the validation needed to rationalize his or her involvement in similar deviant behavior. Witnessing an established, respected, and famous graffiti artist's work provides enough evidence for an individual to develop the belief they, too, could become a celebrated and skilled graffiti artist.

## **GENDER**

A graffiti artist's gender also plays a significant role in their identity and how other artists perceive them. Graffiti art is a component of hip-hop culture, which is predominantly comprised of men. Taki 183, Cornbread, and Seen are considered the forefathers of the graffiti art movement. Thus, graffiti art is a component of a male-dominated culture that was initiated, perpetuated, and organized predominately by men. Due to the prevalence of men in this subculture, there are more gender-related issues that affect men and women in different aspects.

For a male graffiti artist, gender issues are relevant to the individual's masculinity. Men maintain their masculinity within this subculture in a variety of ways, including engagement in risky behavior, establishing and maintaining respect, and executing their artwork. Men are inclined to take greater risks when choosing a location to paint, such as water towers and billboards over highly-trafficked interstates, among other areas. If a male graffiti artist disrespects another male graffiti artist, the conflict is frequently resolved with physical or verbal aggression. This masculinity is represented in the man's graffiti art, incorporating more masculine colors, sharper angles, and an overall aggressive image compared to female artists. The level of masculinity established and maintained by a male graffiti artist often depends on how masculine he is in other areas of his life. A less-masculine man tends not to display his masculinity within the subculture. Alternatively, a more aggressively masculine man displays and defends his masculinity more often.

Women suffer gendered discrimination, positive and negative, within this subculture because graffiti art is considered a "boys club." Initially, female graffiti artists are required to work much harder to earn and maintain respect from other artists. This difficulty in establishing esteem stems from the interactions and relationships between female and male graffiti artists.



Fame attracts a variety of people to a well-known artist. Admirers of male graffiti artists are called “Graff Groupies” or “Graffiti Groupies”. Graff groupies are women who are drawn to male artists because they paint graffiti art and are involved in illegal activities. These women desire attention or sexual attention from the male graffiti artists. In addition to graff groupies, most female artists, become involved through a romantic partner or a spouse. The contexts of female interactions and immersion within this subculture are often dependent on a male graffiti artist. That dependency translates into an ideology that women are only painting to receive attention, whether romantic or platonic, or because a romantic partner wants her to get involved.

While observing a group of several graffiti artists, predominantly male, an older, well-known, male graffiti artist noticed a name in pink letters on a telephone pole. He assumed it was written by a man, not one of his female companions, and began joke about “the guy who wrote in pink.” When the female graffiti artist confessed it was her name on the pole, he laughed and taunted her: “Of course the girl has the pink marker. Oh, this will be good. So, how long have you been painting? A couple months?” This comment illustrates that men do not take women’s involvement in graffiti art seriously.

Initially, it is challenging for a female graffiti artist to establish herself as a serious artist to others. However, once male and other serious female artists understand and believe she is truly committed to graffiti art for the sake of art, she is accepted by others and treated with respect. In response to the derisive comment made by the older male graffiti artist, the young female graffiti artist replied, without inflection, “I have been painting for five years.” Surprised by her response, he realized he had misjudged the young woman and apologized. The end of that conversation also illustrates the recognition awarded to female graffiti artists once they have established their validity as serious artists.

Despite the challenges female graffiti artists face based on their gender, there are also some benefits. Female graffiti artists are noticed, recognized, and distinguished more readily than their male counterparts. Due to the smaller population size of female graffiti artists, they do not need to become popular or famous to receive attention. Other artists of both genders notice a woman engaging in graffiti art more quickly than a male because of her gender.

In addition to easily-attainable recognition, female graffiti artists are not noticed or approached by law enforcement officials as often as their male counterparts. When thinking about someone who engages in risky behavior,

vandalizes property, or other activities related to graffiti art, most people do not think a woman would engage in those activities or behavior. The “profile” of a graffiti artist employed by law enforcement officials does not typically incorporate women. Inside the subculture, the female graffiti artist’s gender negative or positive effects, depending on the context of the situation. Outside the subculture, it positively impacts her as she is better suited to evade the police.

## **COMMUNICATION**

Within the realm of graffiti art, the graffiti artist is communicating with a specific and non-specific audience. The specific audience involves direct communication between the members of the subculture. The perpetuation of the subculture is highly dependent on social interactions among graffiti artists. The non-specific audience involves indirect communication between members of the subculture and the general public. The indirect social interactions include methods used to spread the ideas and images of graffiti art to all people, despite their awareness of graffiti art. These indirect social interactions are crucial to the progression of this subculture because they indicate to current members who is still involved and permit non-graffiti artists to become involved.

Direct communication includes specific social roles, collaboration, and the rules that govern the subculture. The specific social roles include that of a mentor, a crew, and non-crew members. Graffiti artists work together to become better artists and better criminals. Direct communication allows novice graffiti artists to learn the rules that govern respect between established active and inactive graffiti artists.

## **MENTORING**

The role of mentor is very important to both the mentor and the novice graffiti artist. Not every artist has a specific mentor, but they each have an individual or a group of individuals who guide them. A mentor teaches a novice how to paint, cultivates their talent and style, explains different methods of evading law enforcement, instills rules, and describes the rationalization behind painting graffiti art.

There are specific techniques involved in painting graffiti art that must be learned from another artist. In addition to different techniques, there are a multitude of brands of paint, types of graffiti art, and other accessories that can be used while painting. A mentor helps the novice to learn

these skills and then teaches the novice how to apply these techniques in their artwork. Some individuals are somewhat artistic prior to becoming a graffiti artist. Just like any art form, the artist must adhere to the structure, aesthetic criteria, and artistic components involved in the evaluation of the artwork. A mentor is responsible for recognizing a novice's abilities and potential. With that recognition, the mentor begins to help the novice cultivate their personal style and skills as an artist.

Due to the illegal nature of graffiti art, understanding how to evade law enforcement is important. The mentor explains to the novice which areas have less police supervision and the best methods for eluding the police. The mentor also gives the novice a good foundation of knowledge related to committing other acts of deviance needed to paint graffiti, such as trespassing.

One of the most vital responsibilities of a mentor is instilling the rules and rationalizations of graffiti art into the novice. If a novice wants to become a graffiti artist, respecting the rules and understanding the motivation that fuels the art is of utmost importance. Graffiti artists are not allowed to paint on churches, schools, or private homes and property. These pieces of property are considered places of neutrality that people visit to worship, learn, or live. Painting graffiti art on these locations would be an invasion of privacy, a breach of trust, and potentially a threat to individual safety. This would generate a very negative societal reaction to the graffiti art, which artists are keen to avoid.

Graffiti artists allow themselves to paint on abandoned property, government owned property, and public property because the damage is being done to a large organization, not a "mom and pop" establishment. An additional rationalization is the concept of "visual pollution." Visual pollution is the term used to define the amount of advertisements the public is forced to see inside and outside their home. These advertisements are fueled by money, power, and consumerism. Graffiti artists believe that if corporations can force the public to look at advertisements that are motivated by money, why can't they force the public to look at something motivated by art? From the artists' perspective, their art is fueled by creativity and beauty and, unlike corporations, is not harming anyone. The mentor explains these guidelines and rationalizations to the novice to ensure their understanding of what's acceptable and their commitment to graffiti art. Any violation of these rules or signs of disrespect is handled accordingly by someone within the subculture. After a novice has worked with a mentor for an extended amount of time, they progressively gain more independence.

## **CREWS AND ASSOCIATES**

Crews function as an artist's "Graffiti Family". They are established to illustrate social alliances within this subculture. Crews are comprised of people that an artist trusts with their legal and physical livelihood. Crew members are usually very close friends who enjoy painting with each other. When a graffiti artist starts to exhibit skill, commitment, and artistic competency through their graffiti, other artists start to take note. When a crew is considering a new member, it is put to a vote. If the majority of the crew vote "yes", the individual is invited to join the crew. If the majority of the crew members vote against the individual, it will be put to vote again until the verdict is yes. Depending on the crew, there might be an initiation ritual or rite of passage. The crews comprised of older, experienced, and more established artists might have more difficult initiation rituals than a younger crew. Once a part of a crew, the graffiti artist must always represent their crew or risk losing their affiliation.

Crews are important because graffiti artists prefer to paint with other people. Painting graffiti art is time consuming, requires collaboration, and involves risky behavior. Crew members paint together because they enjoy spending large amounts of time with each other and desire their crew members' constructive criticism and advice. Someone has to always be aware of the crew member's surroundings, police presence, and pedestrian presence. Certain crews have designated locations that only members of that crew are allowed to paint. Associates can only paint in those areas if a crew member gives the independent graffiti artist permission.

Graffiti artists often paint with crew members alongside another group of unassociated artists. Solely painting with crew members is considered a very limiting and dull activity. Painting with non-crew members offers new places to paint, a larger spread of ideas, and relationships with other artists. A prominent graffiti artist stated: "Painting with your crew is like painting with family, but you can't spend all your time with your family".

## **COLLABORATION**

Graffiti art is a collaboration between many individuals working together to become better artists. Artists work together by painting together, discussing each other's art, and sharing black books, which are sketchbooks for practice. They frequently trade black books with others to look at, draw in, or discuss new ideas with visual context. The exchange of black books is important because they hold all of an artist's ideas and illustrations. After a graffiti artist

completes a black book, they save it and begin a new one. The black book is where artistic ideas originate and are practiced countless times before being executed on an actual structure.

When graffiti artists paint with each other, they periodically offer advice or ask the others for advice. There is an open dialogue the entire time they paint together. Even while they aren't painting, artists will reference each other's previous, current, or future pieces in an open discussion. The discussion identifies an artist's strengths, weaknesses, areas for growth, artistic merit, and other forms of constructive criticism.

In addition to black books, graffiti artists practice on different kinds of canvases. A canvas is any surface that is legal to paint on. Graffiti artists typically utilize wood, glass, or metal surfaces for themselves or in collaboration with other artists. If the canvas incorporates multiple graffiti artists they might decide on a theme or central idea for the canvas which can be used for gifts, profit, or personal decoration.

Graffiti artists collaborate in both artistic and criminal endeavors. They teach each other to become better criminals. Before painting somewhere together, graffiti artists will discuss the location they want to paint, how dangerous it is, the degree of police presence, and the most efficient method for access and execution. Even if they are not painting together, graffiti artists will still share information about different places to paint, ideal ways to get to those spots, the amount of risk involved, etc. Everyone's goal is to paint and leave the location successfully, which means everyone requires the most efficient technique of committing deviant behavior.

## **TAGGING**

The indirect communication between graffiti artists and society incorporates the use of trains, photography, film, and a graffiti artist's tag. A graffiti artist's tag is their stylized signature and is often the visual representation associated with graffiti by society at large. A tag is quick, easy, and can be created with a basic writing utensil. The graffiti artist's tag visually marks where that artist has physically been. If it is an appropriate location to paint, the graffiti artist will write their tag before leaving. Common places for tagging are public restrooms, dumpsters, or street signs. Similar to the tag itself, the nature of the locations are very accessible. The prevalence of a particular artist's tag in a specific area could indicate where that person works, goes to school, or frequently spends time. Tagging is a method of maintaining respect and identity with the subculture and the general public. When a graffiti

artist sees another artist's tag, it conveys the message that they are still actively involved in the subculture.

## COMPETITION

The competitive aspect of graffiti art motivates and encourages graffiti artists to become better artists. Without competition, the art would not progress or evolve within the subculture. The competitive components of graffiti art include the artist's style, the frequency and quantity of the art, the degree of legal and physical risk taken by the artist, and the visibility of the artwork.

Style is the illustration of a graffiti artist's skill, structural competency, and artistic abilities. This allows other artists to evaluate others' aptitude without directly communicating or knowing the artist personally. Graffiti artists with style receive more respect and attention from their peers and the public. Graffiti artists pursue style because it is an indicator of skill and earns respect and attention.

The frequency, quantity, and visibility of a graffiti artist's art will establish the artist's identity and credibility. Frequency entails how often an artist's name stays in the public eye. The regularity of a graffiti artist's name within the public realm is crucial to that artist's establishing respect, as well as their identity. The quantity is linked to the number of places an artist's name is physically located. The number of spots a graffiti artist writes or paints their name is an informal measurement of that artist's dedication. The artist's visible commitment to their work earns that artist more respect helps them maintain it. However, frequency and amount are irrelevant if an artist is painting spots with limited visibility. Spending time painting spots that are not highly visible is considered a waste of time by graffiti artists. Visibility is important because the goal is for the art to impact the greatest number of people. Graffiti artists strive to keep their signature in the public eye to achieve status and establish respect.

The strength of competition in the graffiti art subculture leads graffiti artists to engage in risky behavior. Behavior that threatens an artist's legal or physical livelihood is a popular method for earning respect and establishing validity. One of the greatest risks a graffiti artist takes is catching the attention of law enforcement officials. Being arrested threatens an artist's legal livelihood. The presence of law enforcement officials is one of the few deterrents to a graffiti artist. When graffiti artists successfully paint a location with a significant police presence without getting caught they receive praise, recognition, and respect from other artists. An additional risk graffiti

artists take is situational risk. Often a location an artist desires to paint involves a significant threat to the artist's physical livelihood. Certain spots, like bridges over high traffic interstates, are physically difficult to paint and could result in fatal accidents. Even though painting these spots could result in death, the graffiti artist who paints the spot successfully receives greater esteem from peers.

### **CRIMINALITY**

Graffiti art is intrinsically deviant or criminal behavior. If there is not an illegal aspect to the creation or perpetuation of the artwork, it is not graffiti art. In most cities, painting or writing graffiti art is illegal and has legal consequences. Trespassing, criminal mischief, vandalism, and defacement of public property are just a few charges brought against an artist caught writing or painting graffiti.

Engaging in graffiti art usually requires supportive criminality that assists the artist in painting. The most lucrative and convenient crimes include theft and drug trafficking. Spray paint, markers, and other accessories utilized to paint graffiti are expensive. By stealing what they need or earning money from trafficking drugs to purchase what they need, a graffiti artist can paint frequently and independently. The deviant lifestyles graffiti artists lead help perpetuate and support their art.

### **AESTHETIC CRITERIA**

Graffiti art is both criminal behavior and art form. Graffiti art is one of the most accessible art forms because everyone knows how to write their name, utensils required for writing can be easily obtained, and it does not adhere to traditional art standards. Graffiti art is free from social constraints. Even though graffiti art is accessible, it requires the same amount of dedication involved in mastering any other art form. Practice and repetition are crucial to the development of the graffiti artist's skill and technique. A graffiti artist must be willing to commit a lot of time to their art. Graffiti artists who are unwilling to devote a large quantity of their time to honing their artistic abilities cannot become skilled, established, or respected.

An illustration can only be perceived as art if it is recognized as art. Graffiti artists and the traditional art realm recognize graffiti art as an art form. Graffiti art must adhere to specific aesthetic criteria if the artist wants their art to be considered as graffiti art. The criterion used to evaluate graffiti art includes the artist's style, use of color, and structural components. Graf-

ffiti art is recognized by the traditional art world through incorporation in galleries and art collections.

### **CHANGING FORMS OF COMMUNICATION**

The original methods of indirect communication among graffiti artists and the society they inhabited were subways and trains. The graffiti art movement began in the 1960s before the photography and film technology was sufficiently mobile and accessible. Trains and subways travelled all over the city, making it easy for people who did not have private transportation to see graffiti art. They were also very efficient means of communication because trains and subways were commonly used as transportation. In addition to the use of trains and subways, graffiti artists would go “benching” with each other.

Benching is a term associated with the activity of meeting at train stop benches to watch trains. Graffiti artists would meet up at train stops to see who was painting, share ideas, and associate themselves with other artists. Benching still occurs today, but it is not as common due to the decrease in the widespread use of trains and advances in technology. As photography and film become more accessible and advanced, so too did the methods of graffiti artists’ indirect communication.

Prior to the widespread use of photography and film, there was no efficient method of preserving graffiti art. An artist had no idea how long their artwork would last before someone from the city removed it. Now, few graffiti artists are concerned with the removal of their artwork because a photograph can preserve the image. Photography did not function solely as a system of preservation; images of graffiti art started appearing in books, magazines, and other publications. Incorporating pictures of graffiti art in national and international publications made it much easier for the ideas and illustrations associated with the art to spread on local, state, national, and international levels. Graffiti artists who did not live in close proximity to each other could now become aware of each other through these images. The prevalence of graffiti art images publication led to the publication of books and magazines entirely devoted to graffiti art. Graffiti art became more accessible to artists and society due to the advancement in photography and its widespread presence in popular media publications (Synder, 2006).



### Conclusions and Implications

Graffiti art is an independent type of graffiti which should not be associated with gang graffiti, immediate graffiti, or street art. Graffiti artists are commonly regarded as criminals, but should be considered as artists as well. Graffiti artists adhere to the standards of artistic evaluation used to assess the quality of their art. The only difference between an artist and a graffiti artist is the legality of the artist's canvas.

The results of this research are significant because this subculture has not been the subject of prior study in any depth. The academic knowledge regarding this group of people is limited, especially in comparison to other subcultures. The peak of academic research on this subculture occurred almost twenty years ago. These findings are also noteworthy because they reveal information about a subculture that is not typically covered in the mainstream media.

Further research on this unique subculture could have important theoretical implications, particularly for differential association theory and the ways in which deviant behavior is legitimated or 'neutralized' (Matza, 1990) by the perpetrators. Differential association theory hypothesizes that criminal behavior, rationalizations, and techniques are learned through social interactions (Lachmann, 1988). Like other deviant subcultures whose goals are to perfect their criminal activity or defeat rival gangs through violence, a graffiti artist's success also comes from collaborating with other artists. The lone graffiti artist cannot excel as an artist or criminal if there are limited social interactions within the subculture. An individual cannot become an established, skillful, or respected without the guidance or influence of other graffiti artists that is achieved through various social exchanges.

However, the graffiti artist does not see him/herself exclusively or even primarily as a criminal. They view themselves as artists who are eager to share their craft with society. This suggests a complex and nuanced sense of the self that exists between the legitimate and criminal world. The neutralizations that explain it may not be found in other subcultures traditionally seen as criminal or deviant. Further research should examine more closely this complex relationship between graffiti artists, the world of 'legitimate' art, and society at large.

Further research should include a more representative sample size of graffiti artists, including a more geographically diverse group with greater gender parity. To develop a more detailed and comprehensive understanding

of the graffiti art subculture, observation and interaction with artists is crucial. Interacting with graffiti artists from different cities would be beneficial because the subculture is unique to the city it exists in. More female graffiti artists should be studied to gain a better understanding of the female perspective within this subculture. The population size of female graffiti artists was underrepresented in this study because of the limited number of female graffiti artists in the area of study.

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## Appendix: Interview Questions

### GENERAL QUESTIONS

- How would you define graffiti?
- Would you consider graffiti a subculture?
- What is the difference between graffiti art and gang graffiti?
- What is the purpose of graffiti?
- What is your philosophy as a graffiti artist?
- Is graffiti apart of our society or does it co-exist?
- What is a crew?
- How do you get involved in a crew?
- What is the purpose of a crew?
- Are there different types of graffiti?
- What is the purpose of a mentor?
- Are there rules?
- Where did graffiti originate?
- Is graffiti writing addicting?
- Is there a writer mentality?
- Where can you paint?
- Is it competitive?
- Explain the artistic and stylistic component of graffiti.
- What does “visual pollution” mean to you?
- Is graffiti about the individual or the group?
- How do you think society views graffiti?

### PERSONAL

- What do you write?
- What does your name mean to you?
- Why do you write?
- What does graffiti mean to you?

Why does graffiti appeal to you?  
Do you prefer to paint in certain spots?  
Do you prefer to paint with certain people?  
Explain the relationship you have with the people you paint with.  
What are you trying to accomplish through graffiti?  
How long have you been writing?  
How old were you when you started painting?  
How did you become a writer?  
Did you have a mentor?  
Who was your mentor?  
Have you mentored anyone?  
How do you interact with other writers?  
Are you in a crew?  
How did you become a part of a crew?  
Which crew?  
How do you feel about your crew?  
Why do you risk your livelihood to write your name?  
What motivates you?  
Do you want to establish a legacy or fame?  
Did you benefit socially from being an artist?

**FEMALE**

Who got you involved in graffiti?  
What is it like to be a female graffiti writer?  
Do you feel like you are taken seriously as a writer?  
Do you have to work harder to gain respect?  
How do male writers treat you?  
Is there a noticeable gender difference?  
Are there a lot of female writers?  
Are more girls getting involved in graffiti?

Will it always be challenging to be a girl graffiti writer?

**MALE**

How do you feel about female graffiti writers?

How do other male writers view female writers?

Do you care if girls write?

Do you think they have to work harder to earn respect?

Is graffiti only for men?

Is it hard for guys to earn respect as a writer?

Is there a noticeable gender difference?