

Addicted to the Risk, Recognition and Respect that the Graffiti Lifestyle Provides: Towards an Understanding of the Reasons for Graffiti Engagement

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Published online: 18 November 2010
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Abstract This paper, details from an educational perspective the reasons graffitiists give for their involvement in graffiti. Data gathered from interviews, web-blogs and newspaper reports were analysed within the grounded theory tradition allowing the core category of, *addicted to the risk, recognition and respect that the graffiti lifestyle provides* to emerge. In this regard, adolescent graffiti-writers contend that sustained involvement in graffiti-writing provides a rush experience, which over time becomes addictive as it rewards them with a non-conforming social identity, recognitional status, and the highly-prized graffiti-writer reputation. However, as they move out of adolescence into early adulthood, the addictive rushes previously gained from engagement in illegal high-risk acts of graffiti tagging, they claim, morphs into an obsessive desire for obtaining community respect. Thus, the outcome of the study suggests that the issue of graffiti-proliferation goes beyond the confines of educational/criminological research and enters the sphere of mental health, opening up different treatment options for recidivist graffiti-writers.

Keywords Graffiti · Adolescent · Risk-taking · Recognition · Respect · Addiction

Risk-taking has long been recognized as part of the adolescent domain (Jack 1986; Zuckerman and Kuhlman 2000). Indeed, Steinberg and Cauffman (1996) contend adolescents take more risks than adults because they are less able to regulate their emotional state, because they are more orientated towards the present than the future, and because they are more susceptible to peer-pressure. Moreover, the decision-making process involved in balancing imminent rewards against future risks is a task that adults are more skilled at than adolescents. Thus, it is small wonder that the rate of juvenile offending

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among 15–19 year olds is three times higher than that of adults (Australian Institute of Criminology 2007).

Engagement in minor risk-taking, sensation-seeking, boundary-testing and rule-breaking activities fulfils the basic adolescent need for individuality, control and autonomy. As such, some adolescent involvement in testing activities (e.g., swearing, cheating, body piercing, playing hooky, public urination, home/school time violations, fighting, smoking, and sexual experimentation) is an integral part of the psychosocial mechanism by which adolescents differentiate their burgeoning selves from that of the adults controlling their everyday lives (Taylor et al. 2009). Indeed, it is currently estimated that 50% of all adolescents engage in some form of delinquent activity during their adolescent years (Carroll et al. 2009; Maxfield et al. 2000; Moran and Hagell 2001).

Adolescents characteristically achieve self-identity differentiation through increased interactions with peers. For adolescents seeking a conforming social identity peer interactions generally take place within the adolescent mainstream peer group, but for adolescents seeking a non-conforming social identity peer interactions tend to take place within youth sub-cultures (McElhaney et al. 2008; Taylor et al. 2009). Although testing of societal adult-formulated boundaries is a fundamental aspect of identity establishment in both the adolescent conforming and non-conforming cohorts, the self-differentiation activities of non-conforming adolescents tend to be more pronounced in this regard (Lupton and Tulloch 2002). Moreover, the adolescent need to establish a separated self typically occurs alongside a number of bio-psychological changes that limit the adolescent ability to fully comprehend the consequences of their actions. As a result most adolescents operate under the belief that harm is something that befalls others (France 2000). This infallibility belief is superseded during early adulthood when the adult cognitive ability of rationality is sufficiently developed to comprehend the consequences of engagement in norm testing activities (France 2000; Steinberg 2004).

While the majority of adolescents successfully work their way through the self-differentiation and bio-psychological maturational processes to the extent they are able to establish a social identity, which apart from the only occasional flirtation with relatively minor antisocial behaviours, conforms to the prevailing social norms, however, a relatively small minority of other adolescents seek non-conforming social identities that actively challenge societal norms (Taylor and Houghton 2008a). Characteristically, this minority non-conforming group of adolescents operates on the fringe or outside of the mainstream peer-group, forming associations with other like-minded youth. These like-minded youth tend to congregate in groups (i.e., crews, gangs) providing each other with on-going positive reinforcement and support for their escalating exhibitions of anti-sociality (e.g., bullying, substance abuse, sexual promiscuity, shoplifting, property damage, drug taking, vandalism, joy riding, arson), which overtly challenge established societal norms (Goodnight et al. 2006). Continued demonstrations of such anti-sociality allow adolescents to gain the non-conforming social reputational status they desire (Reicher and Elmer 1986).

In order to establish a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of adolescent risk-taking behaviour considerable research endeavour to date has been devoted to understanding the identity establishment process in various sub-cultural groups of non-conforming youths (for a comprehensive review see Carroll et al. 2009). One sub-cultural group, however, who have received scant research attention are graffiti-writers. This omission is surprising on two fronts. First, graffiti-vandalism is an extremely costly act of youthful anti-social behaviour. Indeed the present estimated cost for graffiti removal in Western Australian schools is \$5,723 per school per year, and the cost of removing graffiti from the community is estimated to cost state tax-payers in the region of \$25 million per

year and federal tax-payers \$300 million per annum (Callinan 2002; Taylor and Marais 2009; WALGA 2006). As high as these costs are, the true costs of endeavouring to re-engage marginalized youth back into mainstream society remains unknown. The second reason why this lack of research endeavour in the field of adolescent graffiti-writing is surprising is that graffiti is known to be an entry port into juvenile crime (Taylor and Houghton 2008b). Therefore, the aim of the present study is, from an educational perspective, to generate an understanding as to why some adolescents become progressively involved in the anti-social act of graffiti-writing.

The Design of the Study

The study was designed within the symbolic interactionist tradition within social theory. Charmez (2006) describes symbolic interactionism as a theoretical perspective that assumes people create, construct, and mediate meaning of selves, society and reality through their interaction with others. This tradition emphasizes the need to explore participants' perspectives on issues, how they act in light of these perspectives, and the patterns that emerge through the interaction of their perspectives and actions over time. Grounded theory methods of data gathering and analysis (O'Donoghue 2007; Punch 2009), were selected as appropriate for the research as they are consistent with symbolic interactionism.

Participants

This study, as with other studies involving the recruitment of a representative sample of individuals engaged in illegal activities, necessitated the collection and triangulation of data from multiple sources, namely, 16 semi-structured interviews, 911 web-blog comments and 16 newspaper graffiti incident reports. The interviewees all resided within the metropolitan area of Perth, the state capital city of Western Australia with 37% ($n=6$) living in low socio-economic suburbs, 44% ($n=7$) in medium socio-economic suburbs and 19% ($n=3$) in high economic suburbs (as determined by an index defined at the postcode level from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998 Census of Population and Housing). Eight interviewees were high school students aged 15–18 years and the other eight were young adults aged 19–37 years. The mean age of the sample was 20 years. The shortest period of involvement in graffiti was 2 years and the longest 23 years with an involvement mean of 7 years.

Data Collection

Data collection from all three sources occurred concurrently. All data were transcribed verbatim into a Microsoft Word document. This amalgamated dataset was the source from which the study's core category emerged.

Interview Procedure

Permission to conduct the research was first obtained from The Human Research Ethics Committee of The University of Western Australia. Information letters and consent forms were provided to each agency (i.e., schools, police, & juvenile-justice teams) involved in the recruitment of the sample. These in turn were passed on to the graffitiists and, in the case of minors, also to their parents. On receipt of a returned signed consent form the respondent

was contacted by telephone and offered a choice of a face-to-face or telephone interview. The audio-recorded interviews varied in length between 25–50 min.

Data Analysis

The combined dataset was analyzed to detect patterns or salient features (O'Donoghue and Haynes 1997) so as to provide a comprehensive understanding of the participants' reasons for graffiti engagement. These patterns were subsequently explored to allow the identification of further trends. This process of simultaneous data collection, coding and analysis continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, that is until the new collected data were not displaying any new categories, but rather confirming those already found (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

The constant comparative method, which forms the basis of grounded theory analysis, was utilized. This process requires the employment of two analytic procedures: the constant making of comparisons, and the constant asking of questions (O'Donoghue 2007). This data scrutinizing process utilizes 'theoretical sensitivity' to recognize what is important in data and to apportion meaning (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Accordingly, data categories are formed, fractured, examined, compared, conceptualized, categorized and increasingly abstracted until a core category emerges (O'Donoghue 2007; Punch 2009; Taylor and Bogdan 1984). In this regard, the present study's core category: *addicted to the risk, recognition and respect that the graffiti lifestyle provides* is presented below.

Findings

It will be recalled that the central social-psychological problem underpinning the study was 'Why do some adolescents become involved in graffiti writing?' The emergent core category of *addicted to the risk, recognition and respect that the graffiti lifestyle provides* is now outlined in three parts. *Part One* describes an early adolescent perceived addiction to the risk involved in the act of graffiti tagging. *Part Two* details how mid-late adolescents attest to an addiction to the recognition status to be achieved through engagement in graffiti vandalism. Finally, *Part Three* reveals that mid/late adolescents indicate that their addiction to graffiti morphs into an adult obsession for public respect. Each of these three parts is now outlined in turn.

Part1: Risk-Taking

Early adolescent graffiti-writers identify six associated reasons for their involvement in graffiti, namely, alleviation of boredom, emulation of others, the rush derived from committing an illegal act, the rush gained from engaging in acts of aggression, the satisfaction derived from retaliation, and the reward of a non-conforming social identity.

While, it is impossible to categorically state every adolescent is motivated to engage in graffiti for all of the six stated reasons, or indeed in the order stated, these six reasons remain the ones consistently proffered by adolescent graffiti-writers. Each reason is now detailed in turn.

Alleviation of Boredom

Early adolescents state that their initial reason for graffiti involvement arises out of a fundamental desire to challenge the boredom associated with their rule-bound everyday

lives. They complain of feeling constrained by adults. A feeling, compounded by the lack of youth unregulated recreational opportunities. As one teen explained; “*There’s nothing for us to do round my place so going night tagging with my mates, now that’s like real fun*”. [Interview #16] See Table 1 for other comments in this regard.

Emulating the Graffiti Activities of Others

A second reason early adolescents give for engaging in graffiti-writing (typically initially in concealed places [toilets, backs of buildings, side alleyways] and youth frequented spaces [playgrounds, skate parks]) is the inspiration they gain from viewing their peers’ graffiti (Taylor et al. 2010). One 15 year old recounted:

I started tagging at 12 and just like any punk ass kid I hung out with my friends. The guys at the time were into doing tags. Every one of them had a tag but I didn’t. They didn’t really care that I didn’t have one and I didn’t really care, but when they were running around the streets with spray cans and it all started to look like great fun. So I thought WOW! And then I thought; Well hell, why not? The stuff they were doing looked really good. I wanted to do something good too so I started doing it. (Interview #3)

This type of pro-social peer involvement bonding (McBride et al. 1995) is known to be highly correlated to juvenile crime (Kreager 2004). Indeed, Table 1 reveals that although the initial reasons given by the study’s participants for their graffiti involvement are an alleviation of boredom and emulation of peers, these reasons are regularly superseded by the rush experience they say they gain from illegally tagging public spaces.

The Addictive Adrenalin Rush Derived from Committing an Illegal Act

According to these early adolescents, the inherent risk of detection and subsequent police apprehension is what stimulates the release of an euphoric rush of adrenalin into their bodily systems. Moreover, they contend that over time this rush experience becomes addictive. However, comparatively little is known about the affect adrenalin rushes have on adolescent involvement in illegal high-risk criminal activities (Farabee et al. 2001). In the present instance, the study’s participants indicated that their adrenalin rush fuelled graffiti-writing experiences are so exhilarating they are totally unlike anything else they have experienced before. They also reveal that their rush experience has the power to override their childhood concepts of right and wrong. One mid-teen explained:

I skate but there isn’t much else out there that gives me such a thrill. Graffiti is a rush. I definitely know what I’m doing is wrong but I like doing it. Graf is such a big adrenaline rush. You get a real rush out of it. You don’t need drugs to do it. It’s like so bad. If, I get caught, then I’ll pay the consequences, but if I don’t, then WICKED cos its like totally addictive. (Interview #4)

One neurobiological explanation for this adolescent desire for the adrenalin rush graffiti-writing provides is an over-responsive reaction to chemical stimulation, which in turn, results in inappropriate regulatory control of the body’s reward systems (Lubman et al. 2004). As such, adrenaline (Norepinephrine), being an excitatory chemical, when released into the body system activates the brain’s pleasure-seeking centre and produces a *fight* (risk-taking) or *flight* (risk-avoidance) response (Wright et al. 2008) with high levels of

Table 1 Early adolescent reasons for engaging in graffiti

Reason	Interview comments	Web-blog comments
1. Boredom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It beats staying at home. • It's just something really to do. • It's a game. It's fun. It's something you can do and have a real laugh with when you're out with your mates. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's an escape. • When I'm in the zone doing it I feel alive. I feel free.
2. Emulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Walking home from school catching tags and thinking they're pretty cool. Thinking how fat ass is that! I then started drawing my own tags. • My brother tags. I just grew up to tag. • Where I grew up all my mates and their brothers who I liked were doing it so I wanted to be just like them. • I used to hang around with this guy who did it. I watched and then tried working up my own style on paper. • My friend got me into graffiti. He was doing it and it was appealing so I thought I might try it. Going out trying new styles with my mates is great fun. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I saw a piece on a wall and I wanted to copy it. • I saw my brother doing a piece and thought WOW. Then I started sketching. • Meeting someone who knew how to write was what got me started. • I was taking the bus bored and looking out the window when an older boy got on with a book with all weird writings. I was amazed by his talent so unique and detailed. I wanted to do it so I practiced and practiced until I got good at it.
3. Adrenalin rush	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is the adrenalin rush of getting your word up. When you are spraying your word on the wall. It's the best feeling. • The rush is doing it. You can't understand the buzz of graffiti unless you actually do it. • Just thinking you might get caught. It's such a rush to get away with it. • What a rush! Awesome! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The rush factor is definitely there. • It's the direct action. You get a real buzz in seeing your name up. • The ride you get is what you cherish forever.
4. Aggression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People get bashed up for having bad style or for writing someone else's tag. • When you go over someone's graf that's like saying stuff you, let's smash. • There are people who get big crews to go out to hurt people. • There are like wars between crews, they'll sometimes have a battle. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are fights over writing. • People are out to cause trouble. • There is much beef between writers.
5. Retaliation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you do a really nice piece and someone slashes it or goes over it then you're going to get angry and want to get back at them. It's a vicious circle. • If you want to get someone then you'll get them and if someone wants to get you, they'll get you. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is this guy around my neighbourhood that we all hate so we tag up his front door and just vandalize his whole building.
6. Identity formation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's just what I do so I do it so that other people know I do it. • I want to be known for it. • It's all about my crew, my friends, it says what we do. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Graffiti is one of the best ways of expressing yourself. • It's all about describing how u r feelin and all about expressin urself. • I wanna to look bad ass.

norepinephrine being positively correlated to aggression. It is small wonder then that the study's early adolescent writers reported being attracted to graffiti because of the opportunity it provides for them to become involved in fights.

The Rush Achieved from Engaging in an Aggressive Act

Physical aggression has been linked to increased involvement in criminal behaviour (Doidge 2007; Dutton 2002; Fishbein 2001). The early adolescent attraction towards physical acts of aggression manifests itself in the graffiti context as 'slashing' (i.e., the drawing a line through someone else's or another crew's tag). Slashing is a fight declaration. Once drawn the slash provides the provocation for a fight. The study's participants reveal that they experience an exhilarating rush just from anticipating a forthcoming fight. One adolescent explained:

If you put a line through someone else's graf that they've taken lots of time to do then it's like disrespecting and that causes lots of grief and lots of fights. So, when you write your tag underneath your slash, then you know, BANG! Soon there's going to be trouble. You just know that as soon as they see you a fight is going to erupt. So, before you slash you've gotta be real sure you know whose tag it is you're slashing. I mean if you slash someone's tag you don't know then that person could be a 37 year old speed-freak with a knife who's going to find you and stab you. (Interview #3)

The 'rush' achieved from provoking a fight is sufficient to override any physical pain that might be incurred. As one graffitist contended: *'I've been sprayed and stabbed, but you've just gotta be willing to pay the consequences'*. Although, in most instances, once a fight has been fought the slashing incident is generally considered settled, but in a small number of cases the slash can initiate a 'vicious circle' of on-going retaliatory acts.

The Satisfaction of Retaliation

Retaliation is not an act that is confined internally to members of the graffiti community. In some instances, graffiti tagging is also used as a 'payback' mechanism for perceived wrongs occurring outside of the graffiti sub-culture. For instance, one early adolescent described his targeted placement of tags as being a payback mechanism he often used to 'get back' at his parents. He recounted:

One day my parents noticed I was graffing on my schoolbooks and so they went to my bin and found all the bits of paper I'd been practicing on. They compared them to the ones down the street and they were mine. So they told the police. My parents actually dobbed me in! Then I was like cautioned for my first ever graffiti charge. After that I just kept doing it [tagging] but telling my parents I wasn't. I'd sneak out of the house late at night and go with my mates. We'd get money and buy paints and we'd secretly tag like everywhere. Although I'd changed my tag after I got caught mom and dad knew my new tag so every day when they went to work I made sure they'd see it up. They couldn't miss it. The best place was this spot on XXXXX Ave. It's this big open wall with this board on it. I put my tag there. Mom goes that way to work every day. I also climbed over the side of the bridge on the freeway and I put my tag up there. Dad saw that one every day. (Interview #4)

Retaliation tagging is also not an activity that is restricted to individuals with whom adolescents have on-going contact (e.g., teachers, parents, neighbours, or peers). Retaliation tagging is also directed at institutions (e.g., schools, police stations, city councils, or businesses) as pay-back for their anti-graffiti policies or, in some instances, for even more esoteric reasons. One adolescent, for instance, described himself as an environmental graffitist and indicated that he regularly targeted buildings belonging to corporate businesses with poor environmental records. Thus, this type of retaliation reasoning can become part of the adolescent identity (Taylor and Houghton 2008b).

Identity Formation

As already alluded to most adolescents seek a conforming identity (i.e., one that complies with the mores of the mainstream peer-group) however, others either through choice or circumstance set out to acquire a non-conforming deviant social identity (Carroll et al. 2009). Regardless of type, an audience, particularly a peer audience, is a vital component of the identity formation process. As such, adolescents seeking a non-conforming identity will often team up with other adolescents seeking the same social identity. This teaming process maximizes the chances of peers noticing their identity-seeking exploits (DeGennaro and Brown 2008; Roth et al. 2004). Their aim being not only to have their peers regard their tagging as being wanton acts of youthful defiance, but also to view them (individually and collectively) as being people that need to be approached with caution. As one adolescent explained:

Graffiti is the easiest way to gain fame. People start noticing you more. If everyone sees your tag up all the time, then you're treated differently. Like, "WOW! You're really cool". You just don't get blanked. (Interview #1)

Success at this stage of a young person's identity-seeking formation process is often determined by the recognition peers afford their recognitional exploits (Sirin and Fine 2007; Sirin and Rogers-Sirin 2005).

Part 2: Recognition

Gaining a 'graffiti writer' reputational status is the prized goal of older adolescent graffiti-writers. Reputation achievement typically involves a two-step recognitional process. The first step requires adolescents to obtain not only broad peer recognition of their tag name but also of the high level of daring involved in the placements of their tags (see Table 2). Ultimately, it is peers who bestow the highly prized reputational identity of a 'graffiti-writer' on adolescent prolific taggers.

Step One: Identity and Status

The first step, gaining attentional recognition, involves older adolescent graffiti-writers putting their tags (their 'ego-footprint') in prominent positions so that their exploits can be recognised by peers. Unlike younger adolescents who tag predominantly within their own residential area these older adolescent graffiti-writers indicate they tag over a much wider geographic area (Taylor et al. 2010). As one 15 year old tagger explained; "*When you start off you do small walls in inconspicuous places but as you get better you want more people to see your work so you do it where they'll see it*". By extending their tagging territories older adolescent taggers claim they are able to maximise their tags' exposure and, in

Table 2 Older adolescent reasons for engaging in graffiti

Reason	Interview comments	Web-blog comments
1. Style recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When you first start out your style is toy, just scribble, but you eventually get better. • Your tag is the essence of graffiti. It is the one line that says what your style is so you have to get it right to pull it off. • You get a lot of people in the graffiti culture who are very, very good so your style is very important in getting other people to take a shine to yours. It's like any sport or profession people in the same field will appreciate the technical factors and dangers involved in what you've done. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Right now I'm a classified TOY. [inexperienced writer] I just wanna to get to the point where my tags and throw-ups are recognised. • I wanna be able to do actual good widestyles and stuff. I wanna be all city and make a few headlines. • I want fame. I want to be a legend when I'm older.
2. Gaining street recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You have just got to get yourself out there if you want to be known. • You do stuff just to get recognition. • The thing is to put your tag where no one else can get to. • You want to get your tag in the best spot possible where you can see it but also that is like open to everyone else to see it. • The more risky the area, the more high up and hard to get to it is, the more recognition you get. • The more people see it the more they'll say: "He knows what he's doing". That gives you like street cred. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'm wanting to get my tag linked to me. • I wanna paint and get my name about. • If you get up then people admire you. • I'm doing it as much as I can now. I just wanna be up everywhere • I'm a little fish in a big pond so I have to bomb [mass tagging]. • I have to get my props [street credit] cos I'm trying to get rep points lol. • You get more props the more visible and daring your bomb is.
3. Gaining crew acceptance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When your graf gets known you'll get dropped [invited to join] into a crew. • If you're good, your friends drop you into their crew. • When a person gets dropped into a crew it is like the crew knows that person. • The sooner you're dropped into a crew, then like the higher you are. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He (experienced crew member) taught me a lot, he took me under his wing and then from then on we did everything together.
4. Attaining a reputation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You are seen as someone that you would want to get into a fight with because you have the backing of your crew. • Reputation isn't everything but it does help you gain respect. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I go to a school where if you are a graf artist and you have a book filled of your art then u get the girls and the rep.

addition, their 'street cred (credibility). In this regard, some older adolescent writers attest to their desire to be *all-city* (i.e., to have their tag placed in multiple suburbs across the city).

Step Two: Sustaining Identity and Status

Older adolescents contend that their extensive program of brazen tagging becomes as an adrenalin-fuelled game of 'catch-me-if-you-can' with the police. Moreover, the winners obtain maximum peer recognition for, and acknowledgement of, their brazenness and are

ultimately rewarded with the highly-prized youth identity of a ‘graffiti-writer’. This identity they maintain carries a degree of awe. One adolescent explained:

I got high up on a roof and did it [tagging] then someone from a crew saw it. They said: Cor that’s sick man! How did you get up there to do that stuff? It definitely gave me massive street cred. What happens then is that crews pick up on the stuff you’ve put up and you’re invited into a crew. The thing about being in a good crew is you’ve got to be able to put it up, like your initials and the crew’s initials. You’ve got to really work quite a bit to make sure you put them up. It’s like you’re giving the crew coverage as well as yourself, it like works both ways. (Interview #2)

Admission to an established crew is said to carry great status. One 16 year old graffiti-writer explained; *‘If you say you’re a FDP (crew initials) person, then people will automatically know you’re part of an active crew. And they’ll make the assumption that you’re pretty good yourself. Then they’ll treat you different’.*

To maintain their writer identity older adolescent graffiti-writers hold they need to progressively increase the brazenness of their graffiti-writing exploits. Especially, as the amount of street cred awarded is, they maintain, directly related to the amount of danger/daring involved. As one late teen succinctly summarized: *‘You’ve gotta prove you’ve got balls!’*

The study’s mid-late adolescent graffers reveal that proof in the form of photographic evidence published online or recorded on a cell-phone allows them to amass more street cred (aka props). Moreover, it is through publishing the brazenness of their exploits (e.g., hanging upside down over a bridge underpass in order to tag the span; jumping onto a train and tagging it while it is in motion; tagging a police car/station) that their writing styles become recognised and validated within the graffiti community. Indeed, it is they say this sustained publication of brazen graffiti vandalism that over time actually increases their chances of being dropped into a prestigious (*top*) crew. Accordingly, such ‘top’ crews can have in excess of 40 members or can be very small select units specializing in a specific type of graffiti (e.g., train graffiti).

The ultimate recognition triumph mid-late adolescent graffers hold is to have their graffiti exploits published in the popular media (i.e., T.V., newspapers). Indeed, through explicitly reporting the details of graffiti attacks, the media unwittingly facilitate the graffiti-writers’ recognitional endeavours. For instance, one local police reporter elevated the status of a 17 year old alleged ‘graffiti idiot’ among some of the present study’s sample by publishing his following comments verbatim:

I’m an idiot but I wanted to do it, I don’t regret it. It was fun ... [When prosecuted] you go to Rangeview (a remand centre) and it’s like a playground and the worst that’s going to happen is you go to Banksia Hill (a detention centre) after that. Banksia is better than Rangeview so you really haven’t got much to worry about... I vandalize stuff. I’m not really into the art side of it. It (tagging) is about getting as many (tags) as you can wherever you can. You get fame. You tell (people) what you write and everyone will know you.

Rather than deterring adolescents from committing further offences publications of this nature increase the writer’s fame. A web-blogger summarized the fame factor when he wrote, *‘Everyone wants to get to the next level but u can only do that by playing the game over and over. So play the game!’*

Moreover, the study's sample indicated that they revelled in the rush experience they obtained from playing the game. They hold that it is the rush that cements their addiction to the graffiti lifestyle. The essence of their attested addiction is captured in the following two comments:

I've tried to quit for 2 years but I can't stay away from it. I'm not sure why possibly the influence of other people around me. Graf is a big addiction, a super addiction. The buzz of it is fun as is the getting away with it again and again and again. You keep all those little buzzes. (Interview #9)

I don't really know what got me addicted to graf but at the rate I'm going I'll never stop. Graf is an addiction that is f*cking hard to get rid of. (Web-blogger)

This constant need to 'up the anti-' is consistent with the Gruber and Köszegi (2001) model of addiction in which they contend personal activity reinforcement (i.e., the more individuals partake the more they want to partake) and increased tolerance to the pleasurable experience obtained from engaging in an activity are fundamental conditions of addictive behaviours.

For some of the study's older adolescents, their addiction to the graffiti-rush lessened as the game began to lose its appeal. Typically, they indicated that this occurred in the year prior to their 18th birthday when the realisation hit that if they were caught as an adult they would be subjected to severe penalties under the law. The choice then became one of continuing with their graffiti-vandalism lifestyle regardless of the increased legal risks or to pursue their graffiti lifestyle within the constructs of society, namely, through becoming a legal urban artist. For this latter group, the reason they most consistently gave for their continued involvement was that of gaining community respect for their artwork.

Part Three: Respect

According to the study's graffiti-writers many adult graffitiists assume normal roles in society, that is, they take up employment, marry and have children. They reveal that such adult responsibilities do not quench the addiction to the graffiti lifestyle. To the contrary, one adult explained: "*Graf's a life-style, a mind-set. A true writer's addiction never stops. I love graf. It isn't a hobby to me it's a life-style*". Hence, some of the study's older more artistically-minded graffiti-writers say they are attracted towards the kinds of part-time positions within the local community that provide opportunities for them to legally continue with their graffiti-writing activities (e.g., running graffiti workshops, painting commissioned urban art pieces, running youth workshops for at-risk adolescents). In this regard, they claim they lead double lives; a respected citizen during the day and an occasional graffiti-artist at night: One adult related the following account:

I personally work five days a week as a chef. I have no criminal record. I am an honest person and I have morals. All the people at work and even my close friends don't know I do graffiti because honestly if I told them then they'd picture me vandalizing people's property and not spending thousands of dollars on paint each year and spending most of my free time perfecting my skill. (Interview #5)

While for most of the study's adult graffiti-writers their artwork is a secondary occupation a few managed to incorporate their artistic talents into their regular field of employment (e.g., sign writing, graphic artist, car detailer, clothing design).

Regardless of whether they use their graffiti skills on a part-time or fulltime basis the study's adult graffitiists reveal that their addiction for graffiti does not go away - it simply

morphs. They say that the rush they used to experience when writing graffiti in prominent/dangerous places is achieved in their adult years from having their graffiti (legal and illegal) publically valued for its artistic content. This recognition, they state allows them to feel respected both within the graffiti sub-culture and the public domain (see Table 3). Their position is best captured in the final following comment: *I'll always do graf in some form or other. I've heard people say it's an addiction but I say, it's respect which is the addition. Respect gained from other people. (Interview#10).*

This concept of an addiction being able to morph is consistent with West's (2001) conceptualization of addiction change. He suggests that the character of an addiction can change over time and is usually punctuated by the addicted individual's repeated attempts to abstain or regain control.

Discussion

The presented study aimed to address a perplexing question for educationalists why do some adolescents become involved in graffiti? While the current findings identified what could be described as the 'usual suspects' involvement reasons (i.e., boredom, peer emulation, aggression, identity formation, retaliations) the findings also revealed a

Table 3 Adult reasons for engaging in graffiti

Reason	Interview comments	Web-blog comments
1. Self-respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I feel great when I'm painting. • I make sure I don't dress like a graffer. • I take time to make my art look clean and tidy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I practiced and practiced and yeh now I'm good • I started out a small fry but through hard work I have ended up a big fish. • I released myself on the world and have proved that I'm as good as any boy and sometimes even better. • I've made a name for myself. • It's one of the biggest parts of my life and I couldn't be more proud of it. • I paint for myself these days. I'm not concerned about getting my name on everything and getting my name seen. I paint cos I want to paint.
2. Peer respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is easier to meet people when people have seen your graffiti everywhere because that like brings more respect to you. • There are a few older graffers I know who are absolutely awesome. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I've gained the respect of all the friends of who's who in the graffiti world.
3. Community respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I would like to get my artwork out. I want to have notification for my artwork. I want to be seen. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I want to showcase my work at galleries.
4. Universal respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I would like graffiti to be considered a lifestyle, the kind of artistic lifestyle people would take serious. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As a writer I respect other people's work so I want respect for mine. • I think that as long as some thought has been put into the graffiti then it shouldn't be frowned on. • People should give it more respect and treat it like an art-form. • It's a beautiful form of art that should be appreciated. It shouldn't be put down because of what it is done on and by what age group it is done by. Call it modern art and sell it for loads. • Graffiti is art if it is done the right way.

core category reason (i.e., *an addiction to the risk, recognition, and respect that the graffiti life-style provides*) that transcends all graffiti-writing age groups (i.e. early adolescence [12–14 years], mid-late adolescence [15–17 years] and adulthood). This conceptualization of graffiti-writing being an addiction moves the juvenile graffiti proliferation issue beyond the educational and criminal domains into the sphere of adolescent mental health.

While considerable debate currently exists as to the precise definition of an *addiction*, (see Lubman et al. 2004; Potenza 2006; Selman 2009), West's (2001) examination of 138 addiction theories would seem to suggest that an addiction is a chronic relapsing loss of control over behaviours which have harmful personal consequences. If this definition holds, then graffiti-writing would appear to fit the mould of an addictive behaviour. Particularly, given the sample's assertion that while graffiti initially starts out as an impulsive rush-seeking action, over time it becomes a habitual high-risk compulsion over which they have little control. Furthermore, graffiti influences every aspect of their daily lives and overrides any consideration that their involvement could cause themselves or the ones they love physical or mental harm.

Recent research is additionally shifting the focus away from the causes of addiction towards a greater understanding of the complex bio-psychosocial factors that underpin 'addictive' behaviours. Indeed, Wood (2008 p 176) contends that there is a growing body of evidence which suggests an 'addiction is the manifestation of poor coping abilities, either for dealing with traumatic events (e.g., abuse) or everyday life stresses'. While not all of the graffitiists involved in the present study came from what could be termed a deprived social background there was, however, considerable evidence of multiple personal stressors, for instance, family dysfunction (at a communicatory level), school disinterest, substance abuse (i.e., alcohol & drugs) and mainstream peer marginalization.

Finally, the findings of this paper highlight the belief among graffiti-writers that graffiti is an addictive force in their lives. Whether this is true, or not, in the clinical sense it is a challenge for researchers working in the field of adolescent mental health to address. A determination, however, is needed in order that treatment programs can be proposed that effectively rehabilitate rather than simply punish recidivist graffiti offenders.

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