Still Writing

Subcultural Graffiti, Aging, and Digital Memory Work

Malcolm Jacobson

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Abstract

This thesis examines how the meanings of the past are constructed during digital memory work and how memory work contributes to negotiations of identities and group boundaries. I study this through an analysis of how graffiti writers use social media to remember collectively. The participants are graffiti writers who are no longer young. Using the internet, they share and discuss stories and photographs from their youth, reflecting on how graffiti has shaped their lives. In this process, they intertwine individual memories into collective memories and formulate arguments according to which graffiti is a valuable cultural heritage. The thesis offers cultural sociological insights into how digital memory work can maintain group cohesion over time. Additionally, it offers an understanding of how digital memory work can (re)negotiate the meanings of aging.

Graffiti is a subculture created by teenagers during the 1970s and 1980s; it is still associated with youth and crime. Like many other subcultures, graffiti expresses a symbolic rejection of the adult world and its demands. However, many graffiti writers have now reached middle age and are considering what it means to remain part of the culture. Their memory work largely revolves around exploring the paradox between being a responsible adult and celebrating the subversive lifestyle of their youth.

The primary material for this thesis consists of representations of memories gathered from the internet. I also use ethnographic methods to study interactions between graffiti writers both online and offline. Each of the thesis's three studies is based on a specific genre within social media. In Study I, I examine how biographies produced through podcasts formulate a shared history. In Study II, I explore how the writers use Facebook to collect and discuss photographs of graffiti from the 1980s and 1990s. In Study III, I investigate how ironic Instagram memes are used to represent aging bodies and lost youth.

In the thesis, I show that the different narrative conventions of digital media influence how the past is portrayed and allow it to be experienced in multiple ways. I also demonstrate that digital memory work fosters community by highlighting memories that emphasize similarities while overlooking conflicts within the group. At the same time, existing cultural ideals of youth and masculinity are reproduced.

Because graffiti is a practice that shapes identities and generates feelings of group belonging, I argue that digital memory work has become a new way of doing graffiti. Furthermore, I see this as an existential practice that negotiates the participants' sense of self and their way of being in the world. I conclude that memory work provides graffiti writers with means to accept the paradox of no longer being young in a youth culture.

Keywords: *digital memory work, collective memory, subculture, graffiti, cultural aging, internet, masculinities, cultural sociology, meaning-making, materialities, visual analysis, narrative analysis.*

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To Nina and Rolf

The past is never dead. It's not even past.

William Faulkner

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List of studies

I   Jacobson, Malcolm. 2019. "Graffiti, Aging and Subcultural Memory—A Struggle for Recognition through Podcast Narratives." Societies 10(1):1.

II   Jacobson, Malcolm. 2024. "Remembering Old School Graffiti: Subcultural Photography, Masculinity, and Aging." Pp. 199–235 in Urban Creativity: Essays on Interventions in Public Space, edited by E. Hannerz and P. Bengtsen. Årsta: Dokument Press.

III   Jacobson, Malcolm. "The Irony of Middle Age Graffiti Writers: Negotiating Subcultural Aging and Masculinity through Internet Memes." Under review.

Photographs

The photographs included in this thesis reflect how many people experience graffiti today—through their mobile phones. Most of the images feature older Swedish graffiti shared by writers on Instagram during the course of my research. Some depict the process of digitizing analog media from the 1980s and 1990s to make it accessible online. The accompanying comments capture writers' memories and illustrate the process of digital memory work. Alongside the Instagram images, some photographs of contemporary graffiti have been included. These highlight themes of aging and history or exemplify different graffiti genres.

The photographs were not part of the material analyzed in the three studies. Reproduction rights for the photographs have been granted by the respective photographers. The photos have been edited in photoshop. To safeguard privacy, the names of account holders and commenters, as well as individuals' faces, have been pixelated. Captions and comments originally written in Swedish have been translated into English.

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Photo 1

1. INTRODUCTION

In many ways, social media today function as an archive of memories. Moreover, they actively remind us of what we should remember, how, and when. Facebook, for example, sends us notifications that we "have a memory to look back on today." Smartphones and algorithms have become an extension of and foundation for our capacity to remember. Online platforms invite and even expect us to publicly share and reflect on our past (Turkle 2011; van Dijck 2013).

The present thesis investigates how *digital memory work* is used to collectively engage with the past (Ekelund 2022:15; Pentzold et al. 2023); this is approached through three studies on how no-longer-young graffiti writers use social media to construct identities, group boundaries, and meanings of aging. Memory is crucial to our identities, as Charles Taylor (1989:47) writes: "In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become and of where we are going." Accordingly, we make sense of our present selves through an ongoing interpretation of our biographies. In this respect, cultural meanings surrounding age and aging are crucial to how we interpret our life courses, how we engender feelings of belonging to a particular group or context, and how we construct the identities that accompany such belonging. For instance, looking at a photo or film of our younger selves sprinting down the sidelines after a ball brings back memories of a time when we were swift and in peak condition, which may be an emotional and existential experience. However, we are not alone in considering these questions. To make sense of who we are, we also need to have a sense of where and with whom we belong, that is, which groups we are embedded in. Mirroring the interpretation of our biographies, collective interpretation of the history of groups provides the ground in which our individual identities are rooted.

This thesis concerns questions that may arise from such recollections; this

includes how memories from youth can be used to treat identity conflicts and doubts about group belonging. I also investigate how participants in digital memory work can support each other in dealing with such dilemmas. By studying members of a subcultural group, I will show how social media technologies are used to establish and reform identities. Many of us use social media to connect with groups we once were part of, such as the schools or city of our childhood, our old sports club, and our old friends. Similarly, no-longer-young graffiti writers gather online to discuss their youth. In doing so, they bring the past into the present and revitalize identities, activities, and emotions grounded in a group they were part of in youth.

Swedish graffiti culture, which will be my main case throughout the thesis, recently turned forty. Several studies and books have pointed out that broadcasting of the documentary Style Wars in September 1984 marks the starting point of subcultural graffiti in Sweden. The film's dramatized storyline, through which the viewer follows youths in New York who are doing graffiti on subway cars, inspired teenagers in Sweden and other countries to start writing graffiti themselves. The young graffiti writers in the film seem to talk directly to youth around the world about thrills, creativity, and autonomy from the adult world. As an illustration, Dondi, one of the writers in the movie, reflects on aging in graffiti:

> *I mean, an adult, I just couldn't see an adult ever like putting that much energy into something that isn't gonna pay, or is gonna risk their life, or have like the possibility of them getting arrested.*

This is followed by another writer, Iz the Wiz, who states:

> *I see myself eventually growing out of graff and getting married and living the lifestyle, you know, and making good money, like that. And when life is at its best, you don't really want to run around in the trains.*

Here, subcultural life is represented not only as in opposition to work life and family life and as more youthful, active, and energetic than an adult lifestyle, but also as a phase you will eventually grow out of. In many ways,

Style Wars functioned as a blueprint for the symbolic system of graffiti and was one of the most successful means of disseminating the culture globally.

Graffiti is far from unique in stressing a distance and difference from the adult world; this is something punks, mods, rockers, skinheads, and hippies also do (Hall and Jefferson 1976). Subcultural style has long been explained as representing a distance from mainstream society and being against the expectations of adult life, which include forming families and developing professional careers. Instead, the ideals of subcultural members have been to prioritize the subcultural community over other social relations – in graffiti by creating letter-based art that is hard for outsiders to understand, through a subversive lifestyle including writing graffiti without permission, and through voluntary exposure to danger and legal consequences (Baldini 2018; Kimvall 2014; Macdonald 2001).

However, more contemporary work on subcultures has questioned not only the sharp distinction from mainstream society, but also the stress on youth. A number of studies have pointed out that many subcultures – once described as youth cultures – have become multigenerational cultures (Bennett and Taylor 2012; Hodkinson 2012a; Holmes et al. 2024; Willing et al. 2019). But becoming an adult in a culture developed by youths may appear paradoxical. The adolescents who, inspired by Style Wars, took to the streets and train tracks are now well beyond their fifties. As we will see, many remain with one foot (or more) in the subcultural, some persist in exposing themselves to the risks associated with graffiti (Andersen and Krogstad 2019), some have adopted less risky ways of doing graffiti (Paulsson 2024), and others no longer write graffiti. Despite individual differences, they share memories that may influence their present identities. Consequently, the present thesis also explores digital memory work as a collection of existential processes used to negotiate who one is and how to be in the world (Lagerkvist 2017).

The case of adult graffiti writers' self-identities and boundary work is sociologically puzzling because they are aging in a culture that is connected to youth, rebellion, and crime, while growing up and becoming an adult is culturally connected to being a responsible person, adhering to conventions,

and following the law. Somewhat echoing the above quotes of Dondi and Iz the Wiz, the participants I followed would again and again come back to the question of "how can you be old in a youth culture?"

1.1. Purpose and questions

In many ways, social media have democratized collective memory work. Similar to research on digital identity work (Creswell 2021; DiMaggio et al. 2018), the internet has made it possible to collectively share, react to, and discuss events of the past. This can be done instantly, anonymously, regardless of geographical distance, and with people whom we may never have met in person. Hence, just as many of our interactions have moved online so have discussions on who did what, when, how, and with what outcomes. Moreover, anyone with an internet connection can start a group, a thread, and post a picture (Hannerz 2016; Maloney 2013). Even if this makes us more dependent on the service providers for the form of the discussion, we are in many ways less dependent on gatekeepers like news media when deciding the content of those discussions, which – for better or worse – enables increasingly local and niched agendas.

Subcultures are interesting cases for investigating memory work and practices of identity negotiation. They center on a particular interest or activity and are structured through a simplified black-and-white version of the world where you are either part of a group or not. Different from the memory work we are part of in other groups, like connecting with our former classmates on Facebook, subcultural memory work occurs in relation to a group that is united by a shared interest and includes a variety of participants of different ages with diverse social and geographic backgrounds. Subcultural graffiti, the case in focus in this thesis, revolves around ideals concerning youth, able-ness, risk-taking, illegality, and creativity. At the same time, there is an increasing amount of research indicating that even though subcultural groups are becoming older and older, notions of subcultural sacred ideals remain relatively stable over time.

The purpose of the thesis is to investigate how digital memory work on

social media can be used to negotiate identities, group boundaries, and cultural meanings of age. Further, the thesis explores how a group's history and heritage are constructed through collective memories. My research questions are:

1. *How do no-longer-young graffiti writers use social media to construct and experience representations of the past?*

2. *What meanings of subcultural identities, group boundaries, and aging are negotiated through digital memory work?*

This is as much a study of how we have come to rely on digital technologies for reconstructing the past as it is one of how digital technologies are used to make sense of the present. Furthermore, my research provides insights into how the construction of meanings, identities, and group boundaries changes with new technologies. In addition, my case revolves around tensions between the cultural ideals of a subculture connected to youth and the expectations of a conventional lifestyle during a phase of life when bodies are not only chronologically and biologically older, but also sub-culturally older. In contrast to subcultural research focusing on how becoming older is connected to a re-orientation of practices, interests and ideals, the focus here is on how identity can be maintained, in a way against cultural norms and expectations, as well as on how group ideals can be transformed so as to be more accepting of conflicting identities. Moreover, I investigate the role of digital memories in how these negotiations are performed.

My thesis consists of three studies that constitute the analytical part and examine different aspects of the overall focus. In Study I, I address how podcasts about being young and writing graffiti in the 1980s and early 1990s construct notions of a shared past. In Study II, I investigate how graffiti writers (re)connect and share photos from their youth through Facebook. In Study III, I focus on how ironic memes on Instagram are used to negotiate how to be old in a subculture associated with youth.

Photo 2–3

1.2. Background: the social world of graffiti

Before proceeding to previous research on the specific topics of digital memories and aging in graffiti and other cultures, I will give a broader introduction to subcultural graffiti. The purpose of this is to provide insights into what graffiti writers remember and the cultural meanings that construct graffitied identities and group boundaries.

Graffiti, in the sense of writing and drawing on buildings without permission, may be as old as human civilization (Baird and Taylor 2016). The word was first used by archeologists to describe non-authorized inscriptions, and this type of graffiti has been found on buildings during excavations, for example, in the ruins of the Roman city of Pompeii, which was buried in volcanic ash and pumice in 79 CE (Jacobson 1996). Such texts and drawings have provided valuable insights into life during previous eras (Snædal 2014). Since then, graffiti has taken many forms, for instance, political graffiti and graffiti with sexual content written in public bathrooms. The type of graffiti this thesis investigates can be distinguished from earlier forms of graffiti because a subculture developed around it. Its central messages are not political but about individual expression, and it is directed at a bounded community rather than a general audience. Because of its connection to diverse expressions and techniques, it is known under many names, among them, hip-hop graffiti, Subway Graffiti, and Spraycan Art (Kimvall 2014). In the present thesis, I call it "subcultural graffiti" and its practitioners "graffiti writers" (or for simplicity's sake, "graffiti" and "writers," respectively).

Subcultural graffiti developed in the United States during the late 1960s when teenagers adopted pen names known as "tags" (photo 2) and wrote them on subway trains and buildings in New York City and Philadelphia (Austin 2001; Castleman 1982; Snyder 2009). In contrast to most previous forms of graffiti, participants in this graffiti developed shared norms, techniques, language, and elaborate aesthetics. Unique to this type of graffiti is that it spread over the world and created a global network (Chang 2005; Thor 2018). Central to the aesthetics of graffiti are graffiti writers' tags, which are written as calligraphy-like signatures, and the letters of these

pseudonyms are also motifs in big and often multi-colored graffiti paintings known as "pieces" (photo 3) Moreover, writers paint images of humans and animals known as "characters" (photo 6). Pieces and characters are often embedded in "productions" (photo 4-5) which are paintings in large format (several meters high and wide) that include painted sceneries with images of buildings, clouds, spray cans, and other things (Hannerz and Kimvall 2024).

1.2.1. Under several umbrellas

In addition to being an unsanctioned public art form, graffiti is entangled in several other cultures and worlds: it is considered to be under the umbrella of both hip-hop culture and street art (Ross 2016), and it has been part of the broader art world since the 1970s (Bengtsen 2014; Kimvall 2014; Wells 2016), even if it has often been treated with suspicion as primitive "prospective art" (Hansen 2017).

Many writers consider graffiti part of the hip-hop culture, alongside music performed through rapping and dance in the form of breaking (or break dancing) as well as DJing (Rose 1994). These expressions developed side by side in New York neighborhoods with a significant Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean population, but they were also practiced by many white youths (Austin 2001). In the 1980s, mass media and movies presented this bundle of art forms as one unified culture, and as such, it was adopted by youths all over the world (Chang 2005). Sweden was one of the places where a thriving trans-national hip-hop culture developed (Berggren 2013; Dankić 2019; Sernhede and Söderman 2010).

During the 1980s, Sweden had a large population of teenagers due to the high birth rates in the 1960s and early 1970s (Andersson and Kolk 2016). The early 1970s was characterized by urbanization and expansion of cities, which included the building of new suburbs with apartments of good quality that attracted families with children, who became teenagers in the 1980s (Hall and Vidén 2005). Culturally, during the post-war period, Sweden was highly influenced by North American and British culture. During the late twentieth century, many Swedish youths found community and formed identities through participation in subcultures from the United States and

Britain; among the popular subcultures in Sweden were punk, heavy metal, synth, skinheads, mods, and skateboarding (see Fornäs 1992); in the early 1980s, hip-hop including graffiti was added to this palette of youth identities (Sernhede and Söderman 2010; Söderman 2007). When subcultural graffiti developed and as it spread around the world, it mostly attracted young boys (Castleman 1982). Hence, graffiti has been found to be a resource used by boys to construct masculine identity during their transformation from youths to adults (Macdonald 2001).

Many have also conceived of graffiti as a form of unauthorized urban art under the umbrella term street art, including posters, spray stencils, and other unsanctioned visuals that are attached to buildings and elsewhere (Andersson 2006; Bengtsen 2014; Young 2014). Subcultural graffiti distinguishes itself from other forms of street art by the centrality of intricate letter images that often are more difficult for non-writers to decipher than other forms of street art.

The art world of the 1970s and 1980s experienced graffiti as a free and vibrant art form that aesthetically merged well with the pop art of the time (Kimvall 2014). Since then, thousands of writers have exhibited in galleries and museums worldwide (Wells 2016). As a consequence, graffiti became established as an art form that was much more than writing graffiti without permission (Kramer 2010). In addition to being sold as art objects (Borgblad 2019), since its early days, graffiti has been used by companies for marketing purposes (Jacobson 2017).

At the same time as it has been embraced as an art form, many have seen graffiti as vandalism and experienced an increased amount of unsanctioned graffiti as a nuisance and pollution (Austin 2001; Ferrell 1995). Graffiti covered many buildings, and both the insides and outsides of subway cars in New York, Stockholm, and other cities around the world, and considerable amounts of money have been spent to remove it (Karlander 2018), something Susan Hansen (2017) considers a form of negative curation. However, giving graffiti writers fines and sentencing them to prison has not stopped the graffiti culture (Fransberg 2021).

The following sections will explore the previous research on aging in

graffiti and other subcultures. It will also consider the fact that male graffiti writers dominate memory work and hence reproduce masculine ideals of risk-taking, and it will cover how digital memory work has enabled diverse groups to construct memories for their own purposes, which has given non-professional memory workers increased agency. Next, I will move forward to my conceptual and methodological approaches, before arriving at the summaries of my studies.

Finally, I will conclude by arguing that, even though online media offer new ways to collect and experience the past, and although there is a significant group of no-longer-young graffiti writers, the meanings of graffiti as a culture associated with youth are largely maintained. However, this needs to be qualified, while no-longer-young writers persisted in seeing themselves as anomalies, the very fact that they represent this seems to enable them to remain part of the culture. Hence, the thesis contributes to subcultural research on plural meanings by illuminating ways of accepting conflicts in meanings rather than either rejecting the non-ideal or assimilating ways of life that subcultures have considered conventional. The thesis contributes to memory studies by demonstrating that there are contexts in which systems of cultural meaning have a stronger influence than digital technology over shaping our past, and hence, that memories may continuously be grounded in collectives. Further, it contributes to sociology on a more general level by demonstrating ways in which individuals can maintain collective solidarity in digital worlds.

Photo 4-5   11

Photo 6

2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

In the following literature review, I will focus on three themes that are particularly important for my purpose: (1) Generational boundaries: In graffiti and other subcultures, identities and group boundaries have been constructed through communication of a significant difference between subversive youth and conventional adults. (2) Representations: Reproduction of memories in media are influenced by gatekeepers who tend to select memories that strengthen internal group bonds by reconstructing pre-existing meanings. (3) Digital memory work: Social media have democratized collective memory work by enabling individuals to share and discuss their past collaboratively. In memory studies, however, trauma and grief have been dominant themes. In contrast, my research aims to contribute to a smaller body of research that investigates brighter views of the past as well as the existential ambiguities of online life.

2.1. Generational boundaries

Previous research on graffiti has pointed to the subcultural as a phase connected to youth and risky behavior (Paulsson 2024). Graffiti has been attractive mostly to male teenagers who pursue a subcultural career by writing tags and doing graffiti pieces for joy and to gain the respect of their peers (Macdonald 2001). Several researchers have concluded that writers tend to leave the subcultural world in their late teens or as young adults (Austin 2001:226; Castleman 1982:76ff; Lachmann 1988:234). Hence, graffiti has been perceived as a rite of passage that offers means for teenage boys to transform themselves into adults (Macdonald 2001; Rahn 2002). During this passage, norms in the non-subcultural world are transgressed when graffiti writers set the rules in their construction of the world (Campos 2013). At the same time, the subculture has a structure to follow that offers

stability and support. In this way, writers can take charge of their development (Macdonald 2001:187; Rahn 2002:204). Consequently, in graffiti, as in other subcultures, communication of a "significant difference" from an adult world has allowed subcultural members to construct group boundaries and identities (Hannerz 2015:19; Hebdige 1979:102). Note that, when I use the term 'member,' I am not referring to formal membership in a clearly defined group, but to individuals who feel they belong to a collective *we*.

The cultural meanings of graffiti that construct group boundaries tie youth to crime (Kimvall 2015). Observing this, Jacob Kimvall (2014:13) suggests that we understand graffiti as a discursive formation that encompasses both rejecting and consenting narratives. A rejecting discourse represents graffiti as vandalism, criminal, and polluting (ibid.:46), while a consenting discursive formation may be that graffiti is a creative art form with pedagogic elements (Jacobson 1996). Baldini (2018) argues along similar lines, but instead of emphasizing the tension between art and crime, the emphasis is put on the latter. Baldini (2018:32ff) suggests that we define graffiti (together with street art) as a "social holistic property of 'being subversive.'" In this way, the phenomenon of graffiti is tied to "being illegal" even if graffiti may also be done with permission. Following this, we may conclude that the meanings defining graffiti are not limited to the core practice of writing, but they are shaped, as Baldini (ibid.:32f) writes, by the "ways in which graffiti writers live their lives" by "subvert[ing] acceptable ways of living in modern societies."

As pointed out previously, subcultures associated with youth include significant numbers of individuals who have become adults and raise children (Hodkinson 2012a). This is also true in graffiti, which constructs tensions regarding how to live as an adult and negotiates how this interacts with previous or present illegal graffiti writing (Andersen and Krogstad 2019). Members of subcultures may cherish youthfulness even if they are not objectively young (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004b:11). Consequently, Andy Bennett (2007) suggests that youth should be examined as a "discursive construct" and as a state of mind rather than a biological fact.

Research on subcultural aging is a relatively new field that looks at

changes in both practices and meanings (Haenfler 2012). Youth cultures thrived in the post-war era when youth began to have more spare time (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004b), and as a relatively new phenomenon, it was not until the twenty-first century that significant numbers of subcultural members reached midlife (Bennett 2013; Bennett and Hodkinson 2012b). Several researchers have found that shared meanings, identities, and group boundaries have become more fluid and that youth cultures have become increasingly fragmented (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004b). According to such "post-subcultural" perspectives, the concept of subculture is no longer fit for studying groups of individuals who engage in particular aesthetical communities (Bennett 2010; Muggleton 2000; Redhead 1990). However, other researchers have claimed that, as long as the internal meaning-making of participants is considered, the concept of subculture is useful for conceptualizing communities that persist in constructing identities and boundaries by communicating difference in relation to a perceived mainstream society (Blackman 2014; Hannerz 2015; Hodkinson 2016).

2.1.1. Adapting to age

Most research on aging in youth (sub)cultures focused on music, including goth (Hodkinson 2011), straight edge (Haenfler 2018), rave (Gregory 2012; Holmes et al. 2024), and punk (Andes 1998; Bennett 2006; Brunow 2019; Davis 2012; Way 2021). This research concludes that, for older participants, it is less important to express cultural attachments through spectacular style, because they perceive subcultural identity as something internal that does not need to be announced through broad gestures (Andes 1998), but also because subcultural style may not fit well with work life. Additionally, music events have increasingly been attuned to adult audiences, one example being day-time concerts and festivals where children can participate, which suggests that parenting and family life have come to be less in conflict with subcultural environments (Hodkinson 2012b). This indicates that subcultural and non-subcultural worlds become increasingly entangled as participants age. Associated with this is the fact that adults have more economic resources, which enable them to experience culture in new and possibly more

"age-appropriate" ways (Holmes et al. 2024), for example, music fans may go to winery concerts and sit-down dinners (Bennett 2018). Further, older participants' aging bodies cause them to distance themselves from the more demanding aspects of subcultural life, like moshing, breaking battles, alcohol and drug consumption, and late nights out – activities that may be too exhausting to combine with going to work and attending to children the following day (Fogarty 2012; Gibson 2012; Holmes et al. 2024; Tsitsos 2012). Instead, older participants may adopt organizing roles and mentor younger participants (Andes 1998; Fogarty 2012).

Apart from studies on music cultures, some research has been done on aging in breaking (Fogarty 2012), and several studies have investigated skateboarding (Bäckström and Blackman 2022; O'Connor 2018; Thurnell-Read 2022; Willing et al. 2019). These subcultures put a premium on the young and able-bodied, as they include risks of hurting one's body that increase with age. Skateboarding shares with graffiti the fact that it involves embodied performances of physical interaction with urban infrastructure and buildings. However, unlike skateboarding (and music cultures), graffiti is centered on the creation of visuals. For this reason, graffiti may give new insights into how the past is represented across different cultures.

Even if the research is sparse, there are some indicators that aging graffiti writers follow paths similar to those of aging people in other subcultures. Many writers now live in stable families, are raising children, and have occupations and resources associated with adult life (Kramer 2016:118). In passing, Malin Fransberg (2021:177) mentions that owning a car facilitates access to places to do graffiti. This is one example (specific to graffiti) of how subcultural adults' resources, compared to youths', can influence their practices.

Several researchers have concluded that younger writers are more oriented toward "bombing" (writing many tags without permission) than are older writers, who are found to devote more time to doing pieces, often with permission, and thus developing artistic talent by doing graffiti that is seen as aesthetically more elaborate (Kramer 2016:118; Macdonald 2001:79f; Snyder 2009). Michael Johnson (2006:89f) connects this to the search for

recognition and attention; when writers, after some years of intense graffiti writing, are content with the amount of recognition they have received from their peers, they may seek new audiences outside graffiti. This is thought to coincide with adulthood when writers need to support themselves financially, which may motivate them to transform skills learned in graffiti into economic capital through artistic careers as "conventional" artists (Johnson 2006:89f). David Shannon (2003) investigates the development of graffiti writers from a criminological perspective and observes two competing narratives: in one, graffiti is understood as a process of learning and creativity (see also Jacobson 1996); in the other, graffiti is a path toward becoming a long-term delinquent. Shannon's research (2003) indicates that there are multiple possible outcomes.

More contemporary studies have questioned the distinctions between law-breaking youth and lawful adults. Erik Hannerz (2024:75) mentions how one of the graffiti writers he followed prefers inner-city bombing, as it can be done in an hour or so, while doing pieces may require several hours. As a result, bombing is easier to combine with family life. And as noted by Fransberg (2021), adults seem to do graffiti in ways rather similar to adolescents' methods. Moreover, in contrast to earlier research on graffiti and other subcultures, Mikael L. Andersen and Anne Krogstad (2019) conclude that adult writers continue to construct a separation between conflicting spheres of life, such as family and graffiti. The interplay between meanings of age and potential adjustments of practices is central to understanding how subcultural members make sense of their identities and how memories of youth influence boundary work. Whereas more recent research has pointed to a demographic transformation from a youth culture to a multigenerational culture (Fransberg 2021:40; Kimvall 2015; Kramer 2010), there is a lack of studies investigating how these older participants negotiate tensions between increased age and feelings of belonging in a subculture.

2.2. Representations

As described above, older participants in youth-coded cultures continue to work on their identities through investment in style, taste, and memories of youth (Bennett and Janssen 2016; Bennett and Rogers 2016; Hodkinson 2011). Bennett (2010:261) highlights that memory is a cornerstone in cultural aging. The point is that the past of a youth culture has "continued presence and everyday use" in present adult life. Take, for example, Thomas Thurnell-Read's (2022) observation that the digitization and online distribution of VHS skateboard videos from the 1990s constructed "residual authenticity" based on representations of the past.

Feelings of belonging to subcultures are also constructed and maintained by material things including vinyl records, photographs, fanzines, flyers, and posters embodying cultural memories (Bartmanski and Woodward 2015b; Bennett 2010:258; Duncombe 1997; Thornton 1995). Such things serve as means through which individuals can grasp how their past selves are linked to their present selves. Furthermore, these things are resources that can function as representations of collective identities (Bennett: 2010:257f).

However, influence over representation of the past is not evenly distributed. As Paul Hodkinson observes, who and what gets attention can strengthen, preserve, and change subcultural styles and define the boundaries of subcultures (2002:167f). One example provided is how goth fanzines played the role of gatekeepers in determining what bands and events were relevant. The previous research on graffiti points to how the separation between now and then is achieved through stories about specific foregrounding writers (Austin 2001:42). This means that collective memories of graffiti may not give accurate accounts of the diversity of writers, for instance, graffiti magazines tend to reproduce the fame of the already most respected (Austin 2001).

Gender is a case in point. Fransberg (2021:171) and Jessica Nydia Pabón-Colón (2018:156) have disclosed patterns in male writers' storytelling. Narratives about graffiti have reoccurring structures; the stories often emphasize risk-taking graffiti missions and encounters with the police (Paulsson 2024). A common form is chase-stories, where graffiti writers appear as

heroes in conflict with guards and police, and such stories often celebrate hetero-masculine ideals (Fransberg 2021:155, 170). As Martin A. Monto, Janna Machalek, and Terri L. Anderson (2012:284) write:

> *[Male writers] have stories to tell that can be used as a resource for constructing their social identities, and they have memories, real and exaggerated, that can be used to construct their own self-conceptions, all infused with a particular version of masculinity.*

On that account, male gatekeepers reproduce existing narratives that marginalize women (Fransberg 2021; Pabón-Colón 2018). Because they tend to confirm male homosociality, subcultural boundaries, and norms, such stories can construct collective solidarity between male writers (Fransberg 2021: 171; Høigård 2002; Thor 2018:199).

The internet is appropriated as a cultural resource within many pre-digital subcultures that use it as a means to engage symbolically with the subcultural and to negotiate its meanings (Bennett 2004:165). Social media like Instagram have come to function as a window to a global world of graffiti (Baird 2022; Encheva et al. 2013; Hannerz 2016; MacDowall 2019; Polson 2022). The internet has become so interwoven with writing that its role in graffiti cannot be understood as offering mere representations; it has rather become a part of the practice of writing as such (Hannerz and Kimvall 2024). In this respect, preservation of an ephemeral art form is central, and social media function as an archive that helps writers remember graffiti that has been erased.

2.3. Digital memory work

It is no surprise that online remembering is not unique to the graffiti community; digital media offers increased possibilities for participation in cooperative memory projects. Because social media enable individuals to initiate memory work on their own terms, the agency of non-professionals has increased (Alivizatou 2019; Chidgey 2020; Ekelund 2022; Kirby et al. 2021; Proust 2024; Worcman and Garde-Hansen 2016). Collective memories are

always mediated (Bennett 2010), and as Walter Benjamin (1969 [1935]) observed, our experience of the world is shaped by technology (Malpas 2008). Anna Reading and Tanya Notley (2018) point out that digital technology, which is controlled by multinational companies, structures human agency. Unfortunately, the platforms' design, rapid evolution, and replacement render their influence on life obscure (van Dijck 2013). Additionally, social media come with risks to personal integrity, as control is limited concerning how personal information is used (Eichhorn 2019; Orzech et al. 2017; Turkle 1997, 2011). Moreover, for individuals in marginalized groups, for example, queer communities, disclosure of personal information can lead to harassment (Kirby et al. 2021).

Nonetheless, online media can also be user-friendly and can even offer care structures that help us investigate existential questions concerning who we are (Lagerkvist 2017:99). Online narratives are easy to edit, which makes the past increasingly flexible and open (Lagerkvist 2014). Digital memory work can be a means for individuals to construct and adapt their identities to diverse audiences (Garde-Hansen et al. 2009; Kirby et al. 2021). By way of example, in a study on blog archives, Palina Urban (2019:11) illustrates how users continuously reinterpret and edit their biographies. In this regard, digital memory work has some similarities with oral storytelling (Hoskins 2018b), or rather, the qualities of oral communication have been introduced into written memories.

Digital memory work may empower diverse communities in their aspirations. These include political struggles (Jansen 2007; Seet and Tandoc 2024), activism (Liebermann 2021), identity transitions (Brandtzaeg and Chaparro-Domínguez 2020), archiving (Lothian 2013; McDuie-Ra 2023), crisis management (Adams and Kopelman 2021), grief (Babis 2020; Karkar and Burke 2020; Proust 2024), heritage construction (Alivizatou 2019), and mere fascination (Ekelund 2022). As an example, construction of digital archives can be a way for marginalized and vulnerable communities to handle stigma (Kirby et al. 2021); such "living archives" can likewise be used strategically, examples being the Occupy Wall Street movement and during the Arab Spring (Chidgey 2020). Other projects can "re-frame and re-claim"

relations to a geographic place. In a memory project with black residents living in southern Louisiana, memory work led to "existential recovery" and encouraged hopeful imagination for the future of living in a place characterized by the transgenerational trauma of slavery (Mislán 2024). Similarly, Sara Uhnoo and Ove Sernhede (2022) found that non-white residents in stigmatized Swedish suburbs used podcasts as a form of counter-politics and non-formal civil education. Their podcasts constructed an imagined community between residents from suburbs across Sweden with similar experiences of marginalization. These are examples of how sharing memories online can connect individuals without them meeting face-to-face. Instead, through repeated exchanges of information, digital memory work enables construction of identities and communities (Bennett 2004; Lagerkvist 2014).

Dominant themes in memory studies have been "dark pasts," such as memories of war, grief, and trauma (Lagerkvist 2017). But lately, more attention has been devoted to brighter memories, for example, Robin Ekelund investigates how "mood work" in retrospective Facebook groups can produce positive emotional relationships with the past (2022). This may attune individuals' moods toward the norms of a group and as an outcome construct social inclusion or exclusion. Still, Ekelund warns us that the interface and culture of Facebook risks molding memory work into a feel-good culture, which may result in memories with a "positivity bias" (Walker et al. 2003).

The internet offers new spaces for exploration of existential questions. Existential media studies have investigated how humans construct themselves online as meaning-making beings in an uncertain world. Amanda Lagerkvist highlights that social media influence our "sense of time, memory, space, selfhood, sociality, and death" (2017:97). As existential beings, we are confused, lost, seeking, vulnerable, and hurting, but online, we can also experience joy, community, and support (Lagerkvist 2017).

While Lagerkvist (2014) suggests that digital memory work is central to the human search for connection and community, Hoskins (2018a) claims that memories are no longer collective, because technology has intruded into how individuals are embedded in groups. This mirrors the long-standing

debate in research on youth cultures concerning whether the concept of subculture is useful for understanding groups that may or may not have become more fluid (Bennett 2011; Bennett and Hodkinson 2012a; Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004a). However, with this thesis, I aim to investigate how participants who grew up in a subculture with strong collective ideals use digital memory work to consider their shared pasts. My studies suggest that, in some way, digital memory work can maintain group boundaries, identities, and cultural meanings over time. What these meanings are and how they are reproduced are two questions I aim to answer.

Photo 7

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

My purpose in writing this thesis is to investigate how digital memory work can be used to negotiate the meanings of identities, group boundaries, and age. The empirical case concerns how no-longer-young graffiti writers represent their memories. In this chapter, I will describe how I link the theoretical perspectives of *memory work*, *cultural meanings*, and *identification*. First, memories are representations of the past, but they are neither neutral nor objective descriptions of what once was; instead, they are interpretations constructed from the horizon of the present (Zerubavel 1996). Digital social media have become one of the most common methods used to disseminate representations of the past. This is done through collective practices, which I discuss as memory work (Kuhn 2010). Second, representations are used to symbolize and display cultural meanings (Alexander 2003). Third, representations of memories are building blocks for narratives that construct meanings of identities and group boundaries through practices of identification (Jenkins 2008). This includes how cultural meanings of age are formed around the expectations for how one should act during different phases of life (Krekula 2021).

3.1. Memory work

The concept of *collective memory* is the most popular for capturing the role of memories in social life, in addition to related concepts like *social memory* and *cultural memory* (Hoskins 2018a:91). Even though these concepts address similar ideas, they may emphasize different aspects of groups' and societies' memory practices, although in many cases they are used interchangeably. Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins define social memory studies as "a general rubric for inquiry into the varieties of forms through which we are shaped by the past" (1998:112). Further, they advise us to not

investigate what collective memory *is* but rather *how* memory is done in various contexts.

Memory work examines interconnections between individual memories, historical events, and social and cultural structures (Kuhn 2002). As Annette Kuhn puts it: "Memory work is an active practice of remembering that takes an inquiring attitude towards the past and the activity of its (re)construction through memory" (2010:303). But memory work is not only *one* practice; it is rather a bundle of practices, technologies, materialities, discourses, and cultural expressions (Smit et al. 2018:3120). Digital memories shape how we interpret the world, our sense of self, and our relationships with others, while also helping us imagine the bonds that join us over time and space (van Dijck 2007). Ekelund (2022:9) analyzes online memory work as a "performative engagement" with past, present, and future. Furthermore, it is important to remember that media are both containers for memories and places where memory work is performed (Neiger et al. 2011a:13).

Rooted in social science and humanities, memory studies investigate how "minds work together" rather than individual memories (Olick and Robbins 1998:109). Maurice Halbwachs (1992 [1941, 1952]) concluded that the meanings of individual memories are based on their groups' belief system as well as that collective representations of these meanings constitute individuals' and groups' understanding of the world and themselves. Informed by Halbwachs, Paolo Jedlowski (2001:33) concludes that collective memory is a "set of social representations concerning the past which each group produces, institutionalizes, guards and transmits through the interaction of its members." These meanings of individuals' and groups' past are interpreted from their present horizon and expressed as narratives (Zerubavel 1996). As noted by Karida L. Brown, how the past is told in the present is just as interesting as "what 'actually' happened" (2018:200).

3.1.1. Selecting memories

Groups engaged in collective memory work can be conceptualized as mnemonic communities held together by shared memories that typically emphasize similarities within the group and differences in relation to other

groups (Zerubavel 1996). In memory work, desirable versions of the past are constructed as individuals (with uneven power resources) negotiate what to remember and what to forget, what to emphasize, and what to play down (Connerton 1989). This is guided by the relatively subjective construction of memories that lead to group cohesion and by privileging memories that fit master narratives and belittle or ignore other memories (Neiger et al. 2011a; Schwartz 1982). Ron Eyerman (2004:161) stresses that collective memories are built by enmeshed representations, biographies, and narratives:

> *Collective memory unifies the group through time and over space by providing a narrative frame, a collective story, which locates the individual and his and her biography within it, and which, because it can be represented as narrative and as text, attains mobility. The narrative can travel, as individuals travel, and it can be embodied, written down, painted, represented, communicated and received in distant places by isolated individuals, who can then, through them, be remembered and reunited with the collective.*

Hence, myths about significant persons and events construct historical horizons that define groups and their boundaries (Zerubavel 1996). As Brubaker (2002) notes, remembering conflicts within one's group does not strengthen collective solidarity, but memories of conflicts with other groups may do so. As an illustration, in the memories of graffiti, *chase stories* are a common narrative (Fransberg 2021:155, 170). Such stories recall encounters with the police and thus represent a conflict between the subcultural group and conventional society.

Collective memories are mediated through material things that function as memory sites, including monuments, buildings, archives, images, text, events, rituals, and bodies (Halbwachs 1992; Nora 1989; Olick and Robbins 1998). Today, the interfaces of platforms like Instagram and Facebook influence what memories have come to be and how they are shared, selected, and experienced (Hoskins 2018b; Pentzold et al. 2023; Turkle 2011). To sum up, five aspects important to studies of collective memory are that: (1) memories

be selected by agents of groups in specific contexts, (2) meanings of past and present co-produce each other, (3) memories be functional for groups' meanings and cohesion, (4) memories be materialized to have effects, and that (5) memories be narratives of interpretation (Neiger et al. 2011a:4f).

3.2. Cultural meanings

Central to cultural sociology is that we investigate what motivates and engages individuals beyond rational interests (Alexander 2003). There are many occasions when feelings associated with meanings rather than with rational interests seem to rule the world (Alexander 2003). Jeffrey C. Alexander (2003) finds that this is guided by cultural structures of meanings that are both enabling and constraining. But because these are obscure to us, the task of cultural sociology is to provide insights into these structures. This way of doing cultural sociology has been conceptualized as neo-Durkheimian, as it draws on Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, in which he finds that symbolic meanings are the foundations of societies (Durkheim 1995 [1912]; Thompson 2004). One thing Alexander picks up on and uses is Durkheim's ambition to "reach beneath" collective representations to grasp underlying meanings that construct social worlds and boundaries (1995:2).

I identify as a cultural sociologist, and my theoretical approach aligns with Alexander's, in that I understand culture to be relatively autonomous from social structures. Similarly, concerning one of my main themes – group boundaries, Michèle Lamont and Virag Molnar (2002:187) claim that one of the greatest contributions of cultural sociology is to analyze the content of symbolic boundaries in addition to traditional sociological analysis of more concrete social structures. Culture is argued to have a causal influence on human action that is relatively independent of more material structures like concrete networks and social relations between individuals (cf. Geertz 1973 [1957]:144). Hence, cultural systems can be investigated separately from social structure before they are analytically connected to the bigger picture of social life (Alexander 2003; Alexander and Smith 2003).

Following this line of thought, subcultures are not primarily the results of reactions to or protests about social structure and political or economic pressures, which the Birmingham School (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies) concluded (Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979). Instead, more recent theories have conceptualized subcultures as relatively independent formations based on meanings that are shaped rather autonomously by the members of subcultural groups (Thornton 1997). Hence, because cultural meanings are not merely upshots of social structure within each particular subculture, they are rather similar regardless of distinct socio-political contexts. For instance, Hannerz's (2015) research shows that punks in Indonesia and Sweden share decisive meanings and practices despite living in very different material and political contexts.

Unsurprisingly, as Lamont and Molnar (2002:182) point out, this is not unique to subcultures. Not all communities involve a significant amount of face to-face interaction, instead their formation may be accomplished through information technology, resulting from common identities, and be based in shared categorization systems.

3.2.1. Social performances and narratives

I approach digital memory work as a form of *social performance* through which actors display, experience, and negotiate their social situation (Alexander 2004). Furthermore, social performances make meanings "walk and talk" through actions and stories (Alexander 2004:532). As we are at once actors and audiences, social performances make us conscious of ourselves. In the same vein as Alexander, Victor Turner sees collective action as rituals through which we as members of groups "scrutinize, portray, understand, and then act" on ourselves by "showing ourselves to ourselves" and others (1982:75). According to Turner (1982), in contemporary societies, media can function as substitutes for the functions rituals had in previous periods. Along similar lines, in his argument that subcultures should be interpreted as enactments of symbolic representations rather than as clearly bounded groups, Peter J. Martin (2004:33) writes that feelings of belonging

arise through collaborative activities, often ritual in nature, in which individuals jointly construct and sustain a sense of self and others.

Ritual-like social performances enact narratives that organize the complexities and details of the world through plots built by temporal units, including a beginning, a climax, a turning point, and an end (Turner 1982:66). They also include collective representations of sceneries, costumes, and props, and employ protagonists and antagonists who are assigned roles as heroes, victims, and scapegoats (Alexander 2004; Turner 1982:74). Given the topic of the current thesis, this may include archetypes such as a parent, friend, partner and grown-up (see Study III). The cultural meanings of roles like these are generally shared by members of the same culture (Turner 1982:94). The protagonists and antagonists of such narratives are given objectives, agency, and moral prescriptions concerning how to act, however, the possible rhetorical forms of narratives are circumscribed by the form of established genres (Smith 2005:12ff). This means that diverse media genres have relatively fixed conventions that shape how the past is organized and re-presented (Bennett 2010:246).

To have social effects, collective representations need to be materialized through artifacts, individuals, words, gestures, and other means deployed in social performances (Smith 2005:12f). Hence, when collective representations are given material form, meanings become visible, tangible, and auditable (Alexander 2008). Things charged with such symbolic meanings can evoke emotional energy, which Durkheim (1995:238) conceives of as "collective effervescence," that is, intense affective experiences that cause participants in a group to experience the invisible bonds that unite them and thus feel collective solidarity. Bartmanski and Woodward (2015:18) exemplify this by pointing out how, for many DJs, vinyl records are not merely material carriers of sound, but also non-verbal channels of meaning production that can engender "collective enchantment." For members of other groups, other things have similar sacred status. For example, in graffiti, spray cans are not merely objects to paint with, but also used to represent cultural meanings of art and illegality (Macdonald 2001:109).

3.2.2. Symbolic systems and codes

Following Durkheim, Alexander and Smith postulate that collective representations are constructed by symbolic codes that organize things, places, and behaviors through a binary structure that determines what is considered either sacred or profane (Alexander and Smith 2003:22; Durkheim 1995:73, 438). Similar to Durkheim, Mary Douglas (1966) asserts that codes organize things into symbolically pure or polluted, which defines what members of a society or a group should aspire to, what they should avoid, and what and who should be rejected and pushed out. The codes constitute systems of meanings that function as an underlying blueprint for the practices and ideals within distinct cultures. In the case of this thesis, this is relevant in analyzing, for example, how symbolic codes can form representations of different age categories and lifestyles that are either sacred or profane.

Gregor McLennan (2005) argues that the binary logic of Alexander's sociology is excessively dualistic and does not capture the heterogeneity of social life. But following Lamont and Molnar (2002:174), we may conceive of this as contextual. They suggest that groups that construct boundaries toward several other groups may utilize multiplex systems of meanings, while groups that construct boundaries in opposition to a single group may develop symbolic systems based on binaries. However, subcultural theory suggests that binary oppositions are not necessarily constructed in relation to concrete groups. Instead, subcultural groups define themselves in opposition to symbolic constructs of *one* "undifferentiated" mainstream (Hannerz 2015). Consequently, subcultural members construct boundaries by disregarding the heterogeneity of non-subcultural others who are part of many groups. This is in line with Lamont and Molnar's (2002:168) suggestion that we should make analytical distinctions between symbolic and social boundaries (which is not to say that they do not co-construct each other).

By drawing on the cultural sociology briefly described above, I will analyze the building blocks of graffiti culture's system of meanings. I use binary codes in my analysis, but I show that the representations constructed by these codes have many layers. The concepts developed by Alexander and Smith (2003) helped me analyze how narratives of the past were constructed.

To understand graffiti writers' digital memory work, I also drew on theories of identification, which include how individuals construct biographies, group boundaries, and meanings of age.

3.3. Identification

Social performance theory aligns well with Richard Jenkins's (2008) conceptualization of identities and group boundaries as doings rather than entities. On that account, for individuals to develop a sense of self and feel belonging within a group, identification must be made to have significance through symbols and interaction.

Many concepts have been used to describe processes of identification, including *boundary-work* (Lamont and Molnar 2002), *in-groups/out-groups* (Tajfel 1970), *groupism* (Brubaker 2002) *imagined communities* (Anderson 2016), and *we-ness* (Alexander 2006). Broadly speaking, these theories in one way or another conceive of individual identities and group formations as interdependent constructions of similarities and differences (cf. Simmel 1950 [1908]). For example, meanings of similarity and difference can define who is considered a *civil* member of a nation (Lund and Voyer 2019) and, similarly, who is accepted as an *authentic* member of a subculture (Hannerz 2015).

Furthermore, as discussed in chapter one and two, in graffiti, similarities between writers and differences from others are constructed by graffiti's particular aesthetic forms, by writing without permission, and by contrasting young writers with adult non-writers. Ascribing similarities and differences leads to practices of inclusion and exclusion, which are embedded in power relations.

The inclusion of some individuals often comes with the exclusion of others. This perspective on identities and groups fits squarely with Martin's (2004:33) definition of subcultures as symbolic representations of particular social practices and relationships by highlighting some aspects over others. In this thesis, my approach to the group of no-longer-young writers is to see them as a community with loose boundaries. As such, the *group* has no

formal membership but is defined by the *members*' experiences and practices of identification.

During identification, social beings reflexively and emotionally interpret themselves and others based on their embodied and cultural points of view (Jenkins 2008:61ff). And at the border between similarity and difference, they can discover what they are and what they are not (Jenkins 2008:103). It is foundational for cognition that we categorize ourselves and others (Jenkins 2008:13). For instance, when riding the subway, we may create ideas for ourselves about our co-travelers based on their appearance, and we constantly talk with friends, family, and colleagues about nationality, age, art and other identity markers, on the basis of which we make assumptions about others' behavior and belonging.

Moreover, identification employs narration of self-reflexive biographies that can contribute to feelings of selfhood and making sense of one's position in the world (Giddens 1991). However, narratives about the self and one's group are not objective, but instead representations of interpretations (Hall 1996:4). With this follows that identities are multi-dimensional processes of continuous negotiations, in which memory plays a crucial role (Berger 1963:106).

3.3.1. Age identification

Memory is a cornerstone in the meanings of age and aging (Bennett 2010:261). Further, age is one of the most influential categories of identification and among those that have the greatest consequences for the lives of individuals, not only physically, but also culturally and socially (Hockey and James 2003). Age can be defined in at least three ways: chronological age, which is the number of years you have lived; biological age, which is how much your body has aged; and social age, which refers to the cultural meanings of age and how they shape social interactions and agency (Katz 2005).

Cultural aging is a reflexive process in which individuals represent and construct their aging selves (Bennett 2010:259). This is guided by "normative timetables" with expectations concerning at which ages individuals should undergo certain life transitions (Elder et al. 2004). Therefore, patterned

narratives about our life courses age us through culture (Gullette 2003). The meanings individuals ascribe to their life courses depend on which narrative genres they have access to in different contexts (Laceulle and Baars 2014: 35). In a youth-centered Western culture, the prevailing narratives often portray old age in a negative light (Alftberg 2021:108; Katz 2005:17). For this reason, there is a deficit of narratives that concern experiencing late life as meaningful (Laceulle and Baars 2014: 42).

Age classifications are preexisting resources used to construct identities and assign social positions (Heikkinen 2021:31; Jönson 2021:80). Hence, the cultures we inhabit, and that inhabit us, form our ideas about age classes such as *generation X-er*, *baby boomer*, *being young*, or *being no-longer-young* (Gullette 2003:107). Like in other dimensions of identification, when individuals *do* age, they often make assumptions about similarities within and differences between age classes, and through this, established meanings of age may be confirmed and reproduced (Krekula 2021:64).

Jenkin conceptualizes identity as ongoing processes of being and becoming (2008). I view practices of engaging with one's past and reflecting on age transformations as existential processes that reconfigure identities and generate questions regarding feelings of belonging (Bengtsson and Flisbäck 2016; Lund 2017b). Moreover, as our existence is intertwined with online technology (Turkle 2011), identification and aging are processes that can bring forth the ambiguities and uncertainties of how to be in the world (Beauvoir 1976 [1947]), including how our memories and sense of self are formed online (Lagerkvist 2017:97).

Photo 8

33

Top phone screenshot:

hallon 4G · 18:13 · 48%

Posts

❤️ 103 · 💬 6

Liked by ▓▓▓ and others

Bottom phone screenshot:

hallon 4G · 18:13 · 48%

Posts

Liked by ▓▓▓ and others

▓▓▓ Its a kind of magic...

It turns out that i can do some pretty amazing stuff with Canon EOS R and correct gear. It seems that i can pull out better quality from the negatives as the old pictures were and all this without a scanner. So the speed is quite a turbo compared to scanner workflow.

With the correct lenses i get the print size of these beauties close to A2 this meaning 300 ppi.

Oh my god this weekend is going to be life changing for my Swedish graff pic collection.

Heja Sverige!

▓▓▓ ▓▓▓ ▓▓▓ Awesome! Maybe send you some negatives?

▓▓▓ ▓▓▓ 👏👏

View all comments

34

Photo 9-10

4. METHODS AND MATERIAL

The primary data for the present thesis were gathered from digital platforms where graffiti writers engaged in activities related to collecting and sharing memories. The material included podcast interviews (Study I), a digital ethnography of online and offline crowdsourcing of photographs (Study II), and an analysis of Instagram memes (Study III). In addition to these data, fieldnotes from interactions during a book launch and interviews were important to Study II. Informal conversations at different events and my knowledge from the subcultural field served as background material for all three studies.

4.1. Material

While I followed social media in which Swedish graffiti writers interacted, I noted that many writers were engaged in recollections about their youth; in particular, I encountered memory work through podcasts, Facebook, and Instagram. Drawing on Patton's (2015:401) conceptualization of "purposeful sampling," I found that these sites had the potential to answer my questions because they were rich in information and could facilitate in-depth understanding of representations of aging in a youth culture.

Hence, I did not select material based on who the participants in the subculture were, but instead on the activities they were engaged in. This strategy was inspired by Howard Becker's (1998:ch. 2) "trick" of the sociological trade, which is "turning people into activities." Becker advocates not making the basic unit of analysis a type of person, as contexts may have more explanatory value than individual attributes. In the case at hand, my main interest was in how participants represented themselves in digital settings rather than who they "actually" were. In most cases, I do not know their exact age, other than they reported being teenagers in the 1980s and 1990s (Study I and II). Their stories suggested that most were men who had grown

up in Sweden. Because their discussion revolved around an absent youth, as clarified earlier, I label them "no-longer-young graffiti writers," or to keep things simple "writers."

As each of my studies investigated one particular genre of digital memory work, I could identify, on the one hand, patterns in meanings that were consistent across media genres and, on the other, how the different materialities of the genres influenced the shape memories were represented in. Study I gave insights into narrative patterns in biographies. Study II illuminated transformations between different material forms. Study III investigated how images of generic persons and environments were used as symbolic representations in memes. Table 1 briefly summarizes how the materials complement each other.

Table 1: Studied media genres

Study	Narrative genre	Materialities	Site
I	Podcast interviews	Recorded audio	Online
II	Facebook & print	Photos & texts	Online & offline
III	Instagram memes	Images & texts	Online

In general, the material rested heavily on a subcultural vernacular. For the audience to apprehend the constructed representations, they had to be familiar with the vocabulary, references to events, and mentioned individuals. The digital projects I investigated were non-profit and rarely included commercials. They were created by amateurs without support from any formal organization or company. I conceptualize this as subcultural media, given that the participants shared that they were graffiti writers and demonstrated limited ambition to adapt content to a non-subcultural audience (Hannerz and Kimvall 2024).

The material for Study I consists of audio in the form of podcasts. They were public and available online for listening without charge. Each episode consisted of a semi-structured interview, where one or two hosts posed questions to one or two guests reconstructing the writers' biographies. Between January and June 2019, I downloaded twenty-nine podcasts from the three Swedish podcasts about graffiti that were available during the study. The

episodes ranged from forty-five minutes to two hours. Because my purpose was to study aging in a culture associated with youth, I selected episodes in which guests talked about being teenagers writing graffiti in the 1980s and 1990s, indicating that they were now in their 40s and 50s.

While my main focus in this thesis is on digital memories, Study II unexpectedly came to offer insights into how entangled they can be with non-digital materialities. The study began with a Facebook group that functioned as a continuously expanding digital archive and discussion forum centered around crowdsourced (i.e., jointly collected) photographs of Swedish graffiti done during the 1980s and early 1990s. The writers shared personal anecdotes on Facebook, each of them contributing fragments of information rather than longer stories, creating a unified shared experience. When the writers later produced a tangible book and met face-to-face, Study II evolved into a mixed-methods study utilizing both online and offline photographs, texts, documents, interviews, and ethnography. During 2019 and 2020, I did around three hundred hours of online ethnography in the Facebook group. I analyzed a book with hundreds of photos with captions, and during the release party for the book, I did three hours of ethnography. Moreover, to gain additional perspectives, I recorded five hours of interviews with eight writers.

In Study III, I analyzed 351 memes in the form of still images with overlayed texts that were published on Instagram (cf. Lee and Hoh 2021; Tesnohlidkova 2021). This material was collected in 2021 from six accounts after a search of the hashtags #graffitimemes (10,500 posts) and #graffitimeme (9,700 posts). A sample was made of memes that were rich in information and could offer an in-depth understanding of representations of aging in a subculture. I made a purposeful sample of this material, as it addressed dilemmas of aging from several angles (cf. Patton 2015:401). For example, aging was represented by parenting and through bodies with declining ability. As memes rarely represented concrete events and individuals, this was less obviously a memory project, and approaching it as such offered novel perspectives.

As discussed earlier, previous literature has found that subcultural

meanings are relatively autonomous from cultural, socioeconomic, and political contexts, as the bonds of subcultural groups are woven globally shared meanings (Hannerz 2015; Hodkinson 2005). This means that subcultural practices are typically rather similar even in different geographical sites. Because the studied memes were not delimited to Sweden, Study III can illuminate this. The study established that overarching patterns of meanings were consistent across different accounts with different nationalities. I take this as an indication that the symbolic system used by the Swedish writers is likely not unique to Sweden.

Because memory work is contextual, each subculture has its unique meanings to negotiate. To understand general patterns in digital memory work, we need to understand how varied such work can be. Other subcultures may illuminate different aspects of how collective memories are constructed and experienced. For instance, given that skateboarders express subcultural style through movement, they use digitalization of old vhs video tapes to represent the past (Thurnell-Read 2022). DJs instead use vinyl records, one case being Bartmanski and Woodward's (2015:60) study showing how vinyl records have received iconic status among many DJs. In one respect, vinyl records are rather obsolete media containers, but in another, they can materialize past experiences, individual biographies, and cultural history. These examples illustrate that digital memory work takes many forms and needs to be examined in relation to non-digital materialities. Taken together, research projects on diverse subcultures may provide deeper insights into the ways in which groups construct and experience the past.

4.2. The researcher and the field of study

In many research fields, it is not uncommon for the research idea to start from personal curiosity and the researchers' own experiences. I have a background as a graffiti writer, which has provided me with embodied knowledge of the practice; this serves as a case in point. My knowledge from the subcultural field serves as background data for my studies. In the introduction to the current thesis, I mentioned the documentary Style Wars about

youths writing graffiti on subway cars in New York City. Forty years have passed since one evening in September 1984 when it was aired on Swedish public service television (Kimvall 2014). During my research, I encountered numerous statements confirming that this film inspired writers to initiate their graffiti careers, hence, the film marks the beginning of Swedish subcultural graffiti, and it still serves as a reference point for the meanings of graffiti. This is reflected in Study I and II, where the content of the studied representations starts from 1984. I was also inspired by Style Wars as a teenager. I saw a poor video copy of the film in 1988. Because the media coverage on graffiti was very sparse at that time, the VHS tape had been copied several times and circulated between graffiti writers. Since then, graffiti has been part of my life in diverse ways. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, I wrote graffiti in Stockholm. After a few years, I adopted an observational role as a photographer and book publisher (Jacobson 2015). In 2018, it was again time to transform my approach to graffiti, now as a sociologist.

Two weeks into my doctoral research, a graffiti writer I knew sent me a text message on Instagram saying: "Hi Malcolm, It's been an awful long time […] it would be fun to have coffee one day. Would like to buy some photos to frame that you took a long time ago :-)" I sent him my phone number, and within a couple of minutes, he called. After quitting in his twenties, he returned to writing graffiti in his forties. He told me that he had created an account on Instagram and started posting photographs of graffiti he made as a youth. When I told him about the research I had initiated, he said: "People are drawn to graffiti because it's a community. Everyone evolves in different directions, but in the end, you have something in common." This, and similar interactions, indicated how the past can be very present as a person ages and that new media technologies offer a means to represent and share the past or pull users into these activities. As will be discussed further, this illuminates how my previous experiences facilitated entrance to the field and guided me toward the content of my studies.

There has been considerable epistemological discussion regarding how being an insider in relation to a studied group influences the validity of research results. The harshest critics claim that insider researchers will arrive

at different conclusions than outsider researchers when studying the same research case. A more pragmatic stance concludes that different experiences lead to different questions (Merton 1972). Central to the critique is that an insider may lack critical perspectives, risking confirmation of the researcher's presuppositions, and diminishing the researcher's analytical ability by taking the group's meanings for granted (Appadurai 1988; Merton 1972). Nevertheless, even though insiders are not the only ones who can understand *their* group, they do have valuable knowledge. For instance, Hodkinson (2005:143) argues that "having experienced activities, motivations, feelings and affiliations" that are similar to those of participants in a group can serve as an "extra pool of material" in relation to which researchers can evaluate what they encounter in the field. Another benefit of insider researchers is the potential to be attentive to and thus illuminate ignored issues concerning marginalized groups. This has been, and continues to be, the case in, for example, feminist research and studies on race and racism (Hamdan 2010; Hodkinson 2005; W.E.B. Du Bois 2015 [1903]).

However, several researchers have pointed out that being an insider or outsider is not a question of either or, but of a degree of similarity and difference regarding diverse aspects (Appadurai 1988; Hodkinson 2005:139). I agree with Sonya Corbin Dwyer and Jennifer L. Buckle (2009:60) in that researching one's community "does not denote complete sameness" with the participants in the group. Additionally, researchers have varying degrees of closeness and distance to different individuals within a group. Some share many experiences and attributes with others, while others share less. I am similar to the participants in the memory work I investigated because I am a Swedish man born in the 1970s who wrote graffiti in the 1980s. However, I am different from most writers because I became a professional photographer and have participated as an observer rather than a graffiti writing practitioner. Further, podcasts, online crowdsourcing, and memes were new to me. Being positioned between sameness and difference can contribute to an in-depth understanding of the studied subject (Merton 1972; Taylor 2011). Hodkinson (2005) concludes that the benefits of proximity to the field are greatest when combined with the distance of a researcher's perspective.

During Study I and III, such distance was achieved by investigating podcasts and Instagram rather than through direct interactions with participants. I also found a productive intellectual distance in my academic work, such as presenting at seminars and conferences (cf. Wacquant 2004).

My previous experiences with graffiti culture had four benefits, in particular: First, I understood the vocabulary and knew how graffiti had been practiced through concrete writing on walls. Second, I did not need to study the basics of the culture, which saved time (see Hodkinson 2005). Third, I believe this familiarity with graffiti enabled me to formulate novel questions about digital memory work in graffiti, a topic that had not been studied previously. Fourth, as will be developed in the ethics section of this chapter, it facilitated access as participants knew who I was.

4.3. Abductive approach and thematic analysis

My research is inspired by an abductive approach, which does not separate deduction and induction. As Stefan Timmermans and Iddo Tavory (2012) explain, abduction acknowledges that a researcher's work process may involve some deductive preconceptions while also allowing for an inductive approach, where encounters with an empirical field inspire new questions (see also Aspers and Corte 2019:153). Digital practices constantly shift, requiring researchers to adapt to particular research settings on the go (Hine 2015). An abductive approach helped me remain open to such changes. Following this, I developed my questions and theoretical framework as the research project proceeded (cf. Betta and Swedberg 2018; Swedberg 2012). Initially, I had a broad research interest in how graffiti writers' past had influenced their present life, and my delimitation to digital memory work evolved progressively. This guided my methodology and what questions I could answer, which I will discuss below.

Thematic analysis and abductive methodology function well together in helping the researcher move from empirical particulars to analytical conclusions (Braun and Clarke 2006). After I had collected my material, I organized and prepared it for coding by transcribing the audio verbatim and by

organizing images in folders. During the initial process for my three studies, I repeatedly listened through the podcasts and reviewed images; as Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006:87) state, such "familiarizing" with empirical material is "the bedrock for the rest of the analysis." Later in the coding process, I returned to the "raw" data to ensure I had made correct empirical descriptions. I reflected on my interpretation of the material before me and on whether concepts and theoretical perspectives were appropriate to making the "empirical come alive" (Lund 2017a:85).

Herbert Blumer (1954:7ff) concludes that social phenomena and culture are "sensitizing in nature" and thus impossible to study using pre-defined concepts. Following this, I developed codes and themes that were progressively tested and refined in dialogue with the material (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). I paid particular attention to material that did not fit my initial framing of the study and progressively (re)constructed codes and themes. This allowed the material to speak back and challenge my preconceptions and emerging analysis. Each code represented one feature of the empirical material that helped me identify patterns (Braun and Clarke 2006:88; Merton 1945:465). The codes were then organized into theoretical themes at a higher level of abstraction, until I arrived at my conclusions (Creswell 2013:52).

I will share a few concrete examples from my research to describe this analytical process. To develop codes, I first used "in vivo" coding in which codes were constructed from the actual language in the material, as these codes "honor[ed] the participant's voice" (see Saldaña 2009:74). In vivo coding was suitable for identifying which representations were commonly used, for example, specific graffiti vocabulary like "wholecar" (i.e. a graffiti piece that covers the entire side of a train car) as well as words and images that were not unique to graffiti, for instance, "parents." In vivo coding was useful as a starting point before I had any clear ideas about how to conceptualize the material. Eventually, however, I found that in vivo coding produced an abundance of codes and did not reflect the meanings of representations, or how themes were related to or contrasted with each other (Saldaña 2009:76). To account for this, "versus coding" was useful; this focuses

on distinctions in the form of binaries (Saldaña 2009:74,95). As an illustration, I observed that several representations used a dichotomy that I coded as "having parent" vs. "being parent." I used this code for digital memories that described graffiti writers' roles in family life. "Having parent" typically represented how writers constructed graffiti in opposition to their parent generations, while "being parent" represented identity conflicts concerning the fact that no-longer-young writers had become parents themselves. For example, in memes, stereotypical images of parents were used as representations of conventional lifestyles.

Before moving to my ethical considerations, I will briefly describe how I approached digital representations of memories as empirical material. To understand the meanings of memories, I strived to see the world through the eyes of the graffiti writers and to listen to their stories in the same manner as they did (cf. Lund 2013:190). I think of the representations I studied as material that would exist in spite of my presence (Caliandro 2016; Hine 2015; Pérez Aronsson 2020; Webb et al. 2000). Hence, I was not formulating questions for participants. Instead, I listened to answers to the questions they posed to each other. Hence, the material reflected what meanings were important to them. Their meanings were articulated through representations in text (spoken or written) and images. These meanings were analyzed by investigating narrative components and structures. Representations in different material forms (image or text, digital or analog) share the fact that they can be regarded as symbolic codes for cultural meanings (Alexander and Smith 2003); as such, they are pieces that construct stories. Because identities are a central theme in my analysis, I have been inspired by Stuart Hall's (1996:4) description of how they are entangled with representations and narratives:

> *Identities are [...] constituted within, not outside representation.*
> *They relate to the invention of tradition as much as to tradition*
> *itself. [Identities] arise from the narrativization of the self,*
> *but the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way*
> *undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity, even*
> *if the belongingness, the 'suturing into the story' through which*

identities arise is, partly, in the imaginary (as well as the symbolic) and therefore, always, partly constructed in fantasy, or at least within a fantasmatic field.

Hall points to how entangled representations, stories, identities, and belonging are. This has informed my methodological choices, and Hall's proposition has worked as a road map during my dissertation work. It reminds us that representations of the past are not descriptions but stories. Consequently, while that which objectively has happened undoubtedly has shaped the present, (re)interpretations of the past continue to do the same.

4.4. Ethical considerations

In this section, I will describe the choices I have made to limit the risks of causing harm to the writers engaged in digital memory work. First of all, ethical considerations include conflicting interests, risks of harm need to be weighed against the value of research, and methods should be chosen that reduce risks as much as possible while also enabling the production of knowledge of significant value to the research community, the wider society, and the studied individuals (Elliott 2017; Vetenskapsrådet 2017). In the case of this research, its value is to expand knowledge about the relationship between digital memory work and aging in a subculture. This knowledge has societal relevance, as it can bring understanding to how the meanings of identities, group boundaries, and age can be negotiated through new technologies, in graffiti, and potentially in other cultures as well.

As my purpose was not to study the daily life of individuals but instead the way they represented the past, I did not regard the studied representations as facts about the participants. However, because the members shared individual experiences, I considered what the consequences could be if parts of their private information were made available in ways they did not approve of (cf. Sylwander 2020:79). I considered that the material could include sensitive information like stories about committed crimes, but I found that the risks of harm were reduced because such information was rarely detailed enough to

tie individuals to specific events. Besides, the incidents happened so long ago that any crimes would have passed the statute of limitations.

As previously mentioned, in subcultural research, the ongoing or previous participation of the researcher can facilitate access to the research field and encourage trust on the part of research participants (Hodkinson 2005; Weill 2022:49). My background in graffiti, as well as my non-academic publications on graffiti, have opened doors and caused participants to trust that my research would not be harmful to them. In a way, I was already positioned as a "chronicler" (Hannerz and Kimvall 2024); participants often knew who I was and had read some of my work. This facilitated access to the field and allowed me to present my purposes and how and where I would use the memories they shared.

My previous participation in the graffiti community could have made my present role as a researcher unclear. To respect the integrity of the graffiti writers, it was important to clarify my new role. When I met writers (online and offline), I informed them that participation was voluntary. I stated my aims and methods and clarified that they could terminate participation at any time (Vetenskapsrådet 2017). However, the Facebook group in Study II had many participants, and it was impossible to obtain the consent of each individual member. To balance the risks of influencing interaction and breaching the integrity of participants, I asked and received permission from the group moderators to participate in the group as a researcher. Similar procedures have been followed by other social scientists (Hine 2015:57; Pérez Aronsson 2020:70). Then, to utilize material from community members, I contacted individual participants through private messages and asked for consent to use their posts. Their responses were always positive, and they also showed interest in my research. As a result, all participants I asked approved my using their material for research purposes.

Given that the produced material was not intended for research purposes, it was important to consider what level of privacy members in the group expected (Buchanan and Zimmer 2023). The Facebook group I followed had low thresholds for participation, and the moderators told me they admitted individuals who asked to join unless there were specific reasons to

think they would disturb the group, which was rare. In effect, the group was "semi-public," and thus, participants had limited control over who could access the information they shared (Bluteau 2019; boyd 2011; Pérez Aronsson 2020; Sveningsson Elm 2009). According to my observations, the members perceived the group in this way, that is, as more or less public. Because of this, some took precautions and chose not to share sensitive information. For example, I observed that one member talked about himself in the third person so as not to reveal that he had written some of the graffiti that was posted and discussed. I asked him why, and he shared that he feared colleagues at his current workplace might find out he had been doing graffiti.

I pseudonymized the individuals in Study II so as not to disclose their identities when I published the study. Additionally, I carefully edited quotes to remove any identifiable details. I did not pseudonymize individuals in Study I, because the podcasts were publicly available. Also, in the podcasts, writers used their tags, not their legal names, making them difficult for outsiders to identify. For Study III, I was granted permission from the Instagram account holders to reproduce a selection of the studied memes. I experienced that the risks of harming anyone were the lowest in this study, as the memes rarely depicted concrete writers. The precautions I took have been reviewed and approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Etikprövningsnämnden Dnr 2021-04680).

4.5. Limitations

Because every study has its limitations, I have reflected on which limitations come with my approach, and I identified three issues that my material and methodology could not address. First, the choice to focus on representations was mirrored by the fact that I could not pose follow-up questions to participants and audiences (in Study I and II). While the material made it possible to analyze patterns of symbolic meanings, I could not know what the writers had not included in their memory work, nor could I determine how selective their descriptions were; as a case in point, negative experiences and conflicts within their community were rare. Additionally, I did not get firsthand

insights into their day-to-day life. Consequently, I did not investigate writers' past and present lives in the "real" world. However, as Max Weber (1968 [1922]:4) reminds us, social actions are defined by having meanings that are oriented toward other individuals. Following this line of thought, I understand online representations as social actions that are no less real than offline social actions. Additionally, online and offline life are profoundly entangled (Bennett 2004; Hine 2015; Sylwander 2020).

Second, digital memory work does not cover the full diversity of graffiti practices, and not all writers participate. Hence, the selected material is not able to address questions regarding those who do not take part in digital memory projects. My material does not disclose who currently writes graffiti or has desisted, and it does not include the stories of those who may have left the culture altogether.

Third, and as described above, my similarity with the studied individuals and the knowledge we shared had several benefits, but it also had its limitations. Being a middle-aged white man has influenced my research interest in the identity work of no-longer-young male writers. Further, I encountered spaces I could not access; for example, I asked to attend a meeting for female and non-binary writers; unsurprisingly, such access was denied. As a few non-male researchers have pointed out (Fransberg 2021; Pabón-Colón 2018), women are marginalized in the storytelling of graffiti. I am trying to take responsibility for the knowledge I am producing by critically analyzing how male writers use digital media to (re)produce their interpretation of the past. Unfortunately, I may nevertheless be reproducing a dominant male story.

In the next chapter, I will summarize the three studies that resulted from the methodologies discussed above and reflect on how they contributed to fulfilling the purpose of the thesis.

Photo 11-12
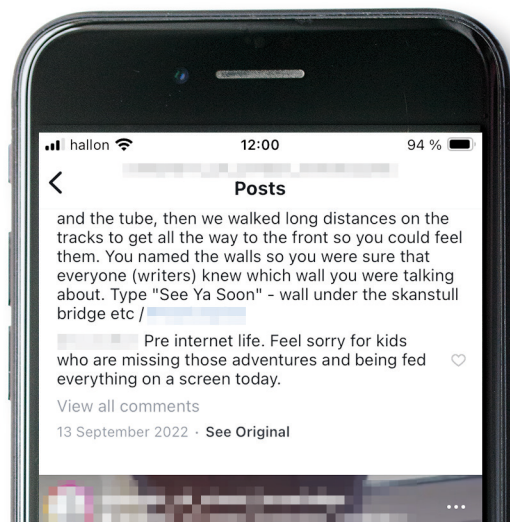
5. SUMMARIES OF STUDIES

This thesis comprises three studies examining the digital memory work done by no-longer-young graffiti writers, each study starting from one online media genre. Study I investigates audio in the form of recorded interviews published online as podcasts. Study II investigates a memory project of collecting photographs through Facebook. Study III is focused on ironic memes on Instagram. By combining these materials, I intended to acquire an in-depth understanding of how digital memory work has been used to negotiate meanings of identities, group boundaries, and aging in graffiti culture.

Study I: Graffiti, Aging and Subcultural Memory—A Struggle for Recognition through Podcast Narratives

This study explored how Swedish graffiti writers in their 40s and 50s used podcasts to discuss memories of youth. The purpose was to understand how podcasts were used to construct midlife identities and group boundaries in a culture associated with youth.

Between January and June 2019, I downloaded twenty-nine episodes (each 45-60 minutes long) from three Swedish podcasts dedicated to subcultural graffiti. This material offered direct access to how no-longer-young graffiti writers represented themselves and their biographies. The study drew on cultural sociology and memory studies to discern how actors constructed meanings of the past instead of viewing memories as insights into what had *actually* happened. This approach contributed new perspectives to graffiti research, which has often taken statements about the past at face value.

The podcasts interwove individual memories into collective memories that reconstructed feelings of group belonging. The study found that memory work was another way to do graffiti. This was based on perceiving graffiti

as a bundle of practices that produce identities and group boundaries (cf. Baldini 2018). Hence, I concluded that, in addition to writing graffiti on concrete walls, graffiti may also be done by writing memories. The podcasts reconstructed the writers' biographies according to patterns structured by graffiti culture's symbolic system. Typically, the biographies started when the writers saw graffiti for the first time, as children or adolescents. These occasions were described as life-changing epiphanies, such as when writer Core laughingly described how a book with graffiti had caused him to abandon his former identity as "a table tennis and windsurfing guy":

> *I was falling off the chair. You know [...] when I opened up the pages it was like boom [...]. When I saw it, it was like instant. I understood, this is what I will be doing. It just was a kind of mega-experience. [...] It was absolutely magical.*

Quotes like this represented meanings of embarking on a new life course that was constructed as creative and non-conventional, in contrast to the perceived dull mainstream life of non-writers, in Core's example formerly being "a table tennis and windsurfing guy." Similarly, the writer Brain said: "I kind of chose a different path […], my life is kind of defined by graffiti. I've found myself." A pattern in the narratives was that things that were in line with the group's systems of meanings seemed to be remembered, while memories that could disrupt the group's unity were rare. Feelings of belonging were also constructed using internal subcultural vocabulary, glorification of the past, and recurring tropes like exciting stories about being chased by the police and stealing spray cans; these are two out of the many ways in which subversiveness was represented, often based on hypermasculine ideals, such as exposure to voluntary risks (Macdonald 2001).

However, at the same time as they celebrated crime, writers also claimed that non-subcultural society should recognize their culture as a cultural heritage. This was done through counter-narratives that challenged discourses of graffiti as a deviant and dangerous subculture. They argued that their subversive lifestyle had given them the agency and self-confidence to become part of a broader non-subcultural society. As the writer Moral stated,

because graffiti was "self-chosen" and provided "community and warmth," it became a "path into society" that made him feel he would be competent in other spheres of life too. Consequently, the narratives enabled writers to claim two parallel identities, one celebrating risk-taking, crime, impulsivity, and rebellion and the other characterized by being mature, controlled, and responsible adults. Podcasts, as a process of representing biographies, enabled these two identities to be joined in one subject.

Throughout the podcasts, there was an existential theme concerning how to make meaning out of having become an adult who now leads a relatively conventional lifestyle while still maintaining strong emotional bonds to a culture that celebrates youth and rebellion. This study provided insights into how digital memory work can be used to negotiate such identity conflicts. Hence, the study contributed to existential media studies, a novel field of research that complements technology-oriented perspectives with approaches aimed at investigating cultural practices and lived experiences online (Lagerkvist 2017). The study did this by illuminating how joyful online life can be and how digital memory work can provide support and help in managing feelings of confusion and vulnerability.

Jacobson, Malcolm. 2019. "Graffiti, Aging and Subcultural Memory— A Struggle for Recognition through Podcast Narratives." Societies 10(1):1.

Study II: Remembering old school graffiti: subcultural photography, masculinity, and aging

Study II followed a memory project in which no-longer-young graffiti writers crowdsourced (i.e., jointly collected) photos of Swedish graffiti from the 1980s and 1990s by posting them in a Facebook group. The group functioned as a cumulatively expanding digital archive and discussion forum, but also became a point of departure for producing a book filled with photos of the past and for meeting face-to-face.

The material for the study was collected between 2019 and 2020, first through online ethnography and then through visual and narrative analysis

of a book. Additionally, the material included ethnography of a book launch party and interviews with eight writers. The study identified three stages of this project during which the memories were materialized in digital, printed, and embodied forms. These forms influenced how the past was experienced and how writers interacted. First, on Facebook, thousands of photos were posted, and the participants engaged in discussions that infused the photos with symbolic meanings, which produced the intense emotions of belonging together that Durkheim (1995:228) calls "collective effervescence." Writers described the experience as "magic" in enthusiastic comments such as the following:

> *You know, there are such important memories, so it's amazing, stories, almost like myths, fairy tales, [...] small stuff about how it was in the 80s, [...] that's wonderful! [...] And it doesn't stop, the more people you get to know [during memory work] the more you get to hear about the old times. [...] You get warm [inside,] time stops, you just sit and listen.*

However, the writers also stated that the virtual character of the internet did not do justice to their photos' value. In the Facebook group, new images were constantly being added, but returning to and revisiting specific photos was difficult. Because of their emotional impact, collecting and discussing photos online led to the desire to transform them into a book, which became the second phase of this memory project. It was argued that a printed book would materialize the value of their history "properly," as one of the writers described it. Another writer said that the experience of seeing photos in print had a completely different feel:

> *Compared to when you see it digitally, to have [the photos] in physical form is like so much more valuable than seeing them online, where they're just like in the feed somewhere.*

Further, the book's considerable size (260 pages, measuring 9.5 by 12 inches, and weighing four pounds) and lavish design symbolically represented the great value of their history. Hence, the book became a "secular icon" that

materialized the group and caused its members to feel their collective bonds (Binder 2012).

During the writers' face-to-face meeting at the book launch party, their middle-aged bodies with greying hair or bald heads contrasted with the images printed in the book depicting themselves and their friends as young. Therefore, as a third form of memories, the writers came to embody the passing of time, the absence of youth, and consequently memories of youth. Furthermore, at the event, the endurance of their social bonds was materialized by the warm atmosphere and their joyful way of greeting each other. The party was like a family reunion where you meet relatives you haven't seen in a long time and second cousins you've never met. As in such events, writers reconnected with old friends and connected with new ones. One of them said that he felt an immediate connection to writers he met for the first time:

> *If you were there then [in the 1980s] you kinda know what type of person it is, what he did and such [...]. You know, it gets like a base [...] we're all writers, that's where we come from.*

At the same time, during the launch party, it was clear that guests who had not been "there then" did not experience the same feelings of belonging. This was expressed by disengaged faces, which contrasted with the joy and excitement on the faces of the no-longer-young writers. As in other memory projects, representations of the past were targeted to members of the mnemonic community, and the participating writers rarely tried to explain graffiti's history to a non-subcultural audience. Consequently, the project (re)constructed boundaries between the subcultural and non-subcultural world by representing and performing similarities between members and differences in relation to non-members (Jenkins 2008). Moreover, identification through symbolic construction of similarities and differences can be effective even when it is not explicitly articulated. One example of this is that there were almost no photos of female writers or their graffiti in the book, and very few women attended the book launch party, rendering this memory work a performance of male homophily.

However, the project did occasionally offer openings to non-subcultural worlds; this did not happen through the internet but through the book and its concrete materiality and symbolic value. It was a thing that could be used to invite non-subcultural audiences into the writer's world and meanings. One writer in his fifties shared that, through the book, he could communicate pride over his art and life in ways he had not been able to do previously:

> *I invited my mom who never kinda got what I've been up to, 'cause [my graffiti writing has] mostly been a problem in her life. [...] But when she saw this hardcover book with these chrome letters [on the cover] she went: "Oh Lord, what's this?" I went: "This is a reward for you too mom." Cause it was a hardcover book, for her you know it made it [into] something she can show her friends, [...] now it was like her son had been acknowledged, for her. It was a big deal for me, to see her looking in my book.*

This example illustrates that the book could communicate the value of graffiti to writers as well as non-writers. To conclude, this study showed how different media forms are codependent. They connect people in complementary ways and produce different kinds of experiences, values, and meanings.

Jacobson, Malcolm. 2024. "Remembering Old School Graffiti: Subcultural Photography, Masculinity, and Aging." Pp. 199–235 in Urban Creativity: Essays on Interventions in Public Space. Årsta: Dokument Press.

Study III: The Irony of Aging Graffiti Writers: Negotiating Subcultural Identities through Internet Memes

Study III investigated how memes on Instagram represented the tensions related to aging in a subculture associated with youth. The analysis uncovered how irony was used to negotiate the symbolic system that constitutes identities and group boundaries in graffiti.

Image macros constitute a genre of internet memes that juxtapose still images from popular culture and texts with contrasting and ironic meanings.

In October 2021, I scraped three thousand memes that had been tagged with the hashtags #graffitimeme or #graffitimemes from six Instagram accounts dedicated to graffiti. Of these, 351 memes that were particularly rich in information on aging were analyzed in detail. I utilized narrative analysis to identify how collective representations were combined into plots with protagonists and antagonists; this included identifying how image macros, as a genre, structured the narratives (Smith 2005:27f).

The memes dealt with existential dilemmas concerning transformation from youth to adulthood. They represented how becoming an adult leads to adopting conventional lifestyles, being a responsible father or caring husband, and consequently failing to live up to the graffiti culture's ideals of subversiveness (cf. Baldini 2018). The symbolic system of graffiti is tied to youth, crime, and rebellion against the parent generation (cf. Kimvall 2015). In the meme narratives, family members, girlfriends, employers, older relatives, and others associated with non-subcultural life were represented as blocking characters who threatened to prevent writers from doing ideal graffiti. These characters were represented as disrupting the community of writers and challenging their identities as authentic writers. The memes used binary codes that expressed what was either sacred or profane in graffiti's system of meanings. The most foundational codes were *subversive-conventional* and *young-old*. In the memes, these codes were represented by things like spray cans (sacred), barbeques (profane), and activities like writing graffiti with peers (sacred) or staying at home with girlfriends and watching TV (profane).

A common narrative was constructed by bundling the binaries *subversive-conventional, young-old*, and *urban-domestic*, through depictions of writers in domestic settings, in contrast with the urban environment to which graffiti should ideally belong. One meme did this by representing an adult graffiti writer in a family home who was teaching his son to do graffiti, as this would be considered equivalent to helping his son do schoolwork. In graffiti's system of meanings, however, it is youths who should know how to do graffiti, and parents are expected to prevent them from it. Consequently, the meme turned the meanings of graffiti on their heads, and the situation appeared absurd and comical. This and other memes represented

no-longer-young writers as anomalies by placing them in situations and environments where they appeared to be alien. According to this representation, aging caused writers to end up on the wrong side of a sacred-profane binary.

Another common narrative was memes that bundled the binaries *subversive-conventional* and *young-old* with *able-declined*, *active-passive*, *criminal-lawful*, and *risk-safety*. In such memes, no-longer-young writers were represented as anomalies through images of old passive bodies. These representations drew on memories of how graffiti was practiced in youth, and the old bodies were contrasted to memories of once having had young bodies. For example, one meme displayed a man with a hurting back lying on the ground because he couldn't carry his bags of spray cans. This meme represented the threat of having a decaying body that cannot handle the challenges of doing graffiti. This meme can be understood against the backdrop of a symbolic system in which it is sacred to be young and able-bodied because this enables you to overcome the risks of doing graffiti without permission, which may include climbing, jumping fences, trespassing train tracks, and outrunning the police (Macdonald 2001). Memes depicting inability to do subversive graffiti were a common way to represent conflicts between the ideals of graffiti and the realities of aging.

Previous research on youth subcultures has found that when participants become adults they change lifestyles and may assimilate previously rejected values, such as family life (Bennett 2018; Hodkinson 2012a). This study exhibited another way to handle aging in youth-coded cultures; that is, narratives with plural meanings were constructed using ironic memes. Consequently, the perceived anomaly of being no-longer-young was inscribed into the graffiti culture's symbolic system. On the one hand, memes reconfirmed existing ideals about youth and subversiveness; on the other, failure to live up to these ideals could be accepted. Thus, even if memes represented no-longer-young writers as anomalies, they did not need to be pushed outside the group's boundaries. They could re-configure their identities, from singular expectations of subcultural authenticity into doubly articulated subjects with plural identities encompassing both a past subversive self and a present conventional self. As a consequence, the representations offered potential to endure as part of a collective *we*.

Photo 13   57

Photo 14

6. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

In this thesis, I have investigated how digital memory work can negotiate group boundaries, identities, and cultural meanings of age. Further, the thesis explored how a group's heritage can be constructed through collective memories. The case at hand was no-longer-young graffiti writers who used podcasts, Facebook, and memes on Instagram to construct collective memories. Building on cultural sociology (Alexander 2003), memory studies (Olick and Robbins 1998), and theories of identification (Jenkins 2008), I approached this by asking two questions:

1. How do no-longer-young graffiti writers use social media to construct and experience representations of the past?

2. What meanings of subcultural identities, group boundaries, and aging are negotiated through digital memory work?

6.1. Constructing and experiencing digital memories

Concerning the first question, I suggest that memory work can be seen as a way to *do* graffiti. This draws on previous research pointing out that graffiti is a practice of identity construction and boundary work (Campos 2013; Macdonald 2001). I find that memories of subversive life in youth can construct identification as graffiti writers through narratives of non-conventional life courses. As Andrea Baldini (2018) argues, graffiti culture is a holistic totality of activities that construct subversive identities. Baldini does not extend this into memory work, but I conclude that graffiti can be done both through material writing on walls and by writing memories. Ergo, many no-longer-young writers who have withdrawn from doing concrete graffiti are still writing through digital memory work, and by doing this, they negotiate the meanings of subcultural aging. In this memory writing, embodied performances from the past that communicated the "significant difference"

of subcultural life (Hannerz 2015:19; Hebdige 1979:102) are transformed into remembered difference.

The narratives I studied revolved to a great extent around subversiveness, and Baldini's insights have been very helpful for my analysis. However, I believe that Baldini's emphasis on the singular aspect of subversiveness needs to be qualified. In Study II, the joy of seeing graffiti's artistic development in its early years was very important to writer's construction of cultural heritage, and as Jacob Kimvall (2014:13) concludes, the meanings of graffiti are constructed by two discursive poles in an interplay between art and crime (see also Hansen 2017).

Furthermore, diverse digital media interfaces illuminated diverse aspects of aging, as well as enabling different kinds of interaction between the participants. Podcasts create narratives of individual development. Facebook constructs the value and heritage of a cultural art form. Memes construct identity conflicts due to aging in a culture associated with youth (Alftberg 2021; Heikkinen 2021). The analyzed podcasts had personal, detailed, linear stories about the development of a small number of specific individuals from youth to adulthood. They included existential themes on the fragility and uncertainties of life. Even though they were based on individual experiences, the memories were structured by patterns of cultural meanings and were therefore found to be collective in nature (Halbwachs 1992). In podcasts, subcultural life journeys were represented through individual biographies with recurring patterns of shared experiences in youth that came to define writers' identities. The biographies included statements of progress where graffiti was represented as a risky and irrational activity but, at the same time, a non-conventional path toward becoming rational, reflexive, and responsible adults (see Gullette 2003). The crowdsourcing of photos through Facebook examined in Study II produced unstructured narratives with many voices as well as an abundance of disorganized and chronologically mixed photos. This digital genre offered less detailed insights into specific individuals' life courses. Instead, the genre focused on the visual experience and values of artworks created by individuals. The Instagram memes investigated in Study III were least personal in that representations

consisted of stereotypical fictional characters rather than portraying specific living (or dead) writers. Instead, they distilled ideas into binary codes with few nuances. Consequently, memes most clearly pronounced ideals regarding ways to live as a member of the graffiti community. This was done through dramaturgical plots with protagonists (young writers) and antagonists (individuals embodying adult and conventional lifestyles).

6.1.1. Gatekeepers and selection

Collective memories were constructed through practices of selection of what to remember and what to forget (Zerubavel 1996). Differences between online platforms influenced how such gatekeeping was carried out. Podcast producers decided who to invite, what to discuss, and how to edit it, thus rendering audience influence limited. Most of the time, one producer and one guest functioned as gatekeepers of the past. Each podcast episode had a fixed beginning and end and was not edited after publication. Facebook enabled a wider group of individuals to influence the negotiation of meanings. Facebook had similarities with oral communication (Hoskins 2018a), as it was fluid, and the stories did not have a fixed end but could be continuously developed (Urban 2019). On Facebook, photos and comments were added cumulatively, and participants posed questions and helped each other answer them. Hence, on Facebook, the group's moderators had less influence over what was remembered.

However, despite the different roles of gatekeepers, I observed that memory selection emphasizing the cohesion of the community was clear on all studied platforms. Similar to pre-internet memory work, gatekeepers and participants were in favor of non-disruptive memories that emphasized similarities within the group and maintained boundaries towards its outside (Halbwachs 1992; Jenkins 2008). However, meanings were represented in forms more appropriate to the present situation of no-longer-writers, as will be discussed further down.

6.1.2. Materialities and heritage

Interestingly, while Facebook was the memory site that enabled direct

connection between individuals, it sparked participants to transform photos from an online form into a tactile form. Even though Facebook's interface privileges memories, the participants experienced that it had deficits regarding preserving and experiencing memories. The writers experienced the Facebook material as ephemeral, and they missed the tactility of analog photos (cf. Binder 2012) which they found offered more profound experiences and a feeling of preserving memories in durable form. The physical and symbolic weight of a printed book could better communicate the high value of their culture. That being the case, despite the importance of online media to how societies remember, I observe that Gutenberg's invention has not come to be obsolete but rather complementary (cf. Hoskins 2018b). This is similar to other analog media such as vinyl records, which have become less a practical technology for dissemination of information and increasingly a symbolic communicator of cultural heritage (Bartmanski and Woodward 2015).

Writers experienced that a combination of digital memory and non-digital technology was very useful for writing their culture's history, constructing its heritage as an art form, and experiencing its great value. Politicians and mass media have often argued graffiti ruined the life courses of writers and the quality of life of other citizens. The writers expressed that memory work could confront such stigmatization. Still, they represented their culture as having two sides: one essentially subversive, and the other, a cultural expression of value to society at large. Rather than dismissing the subversive aspects of graffiti, the meanings of graffiti as both art and crime were preserved (cf. Kimvall 2014).

6.1.3. Not doing-it-yourself

Considering that subcultures are do-it-yourself cultures that adopt media technologies for their own purposes (Bennett 2010; Duncombe 1997; Hodkinson 2002; Thornton 1995), one could expect that writers would remix online services to function according to subcultural logic, similar to what they did when they began constructing identities by "posting" their names on the outside of subway cars in the form of tags and pieces (Hannerz and Kimvall 2024). However, according to my observations, the specifics of

graffiti culture do not influence how online media are used. For example, memes were often constructed by employing the same images used by other groups and non-subcultural meme producers.

Even though the different genres of digital memory work constructed different representations and experiences of the past (Neiger et al. 2011b; Smit et al. 2018), this did not significantly influence which meanings were constructed. Previous research on collective memories has found that gatekeepers and technology are very influential in constructing collective memories.

However, even if the diverse media genres molded memories differently and enabled diverse experiences, the underlying system of meanings was rather consistent (Alexander and Smith 2003; Douglas 1966; Durkheim 1995). As I understand this, in this context, culture has the upper hand over technology. Similarly, the moderators and participants in the memory projects I studied reinforced already-established meanings of youth and subversiveness. It seemed as though the system of meanings was so robust that hosts, moderators, and participants aligned with a single meaning of the past.

Consequently, I do not see that online collective memory has become essentially different from previous forms of offline memory work (cf. Hoskins 2018b; Pentzold et al. 2023). According to my observations, memories are still collective despite the increased number of voices and new technologies. To conclude, before answering the second question, similar to offline memory work, participants selected memories that confirmed group cohesion (Halbwachs 1992). But while the symbolic system remained rather intact, different forms of representations constructed different experiences: connectedness and visual reencounters with the past were very appreciated on Facebook, but as online media are elusive, the experience of recognition and heritage was easier to feel offline through the use of print on paper.

6.2. Negotiating identities, boundaries, and aging

As described above, the interfaces of the different online genres enabled different experiences and illuminated different aspects of aging in relation to

graffiti. Nonetheless, the underlying system of cultural meanings was surprisingly consistent across genres. This section will discuss the codes of these systems, thus attempting to answer my second research question: *What meanings of subcultural identities, group boundaries, and aging are negotiated through digital memory work?* I will show that representations of aging in graffiti construct ambiguous identities, as well as acceptance of inconsistencies, and that digital memory work may offer existential support.

6.2.1. Acceptance of ambiguities

No-longer-young writers used digital memory work to represent aging in graffiti culture as something paradoxical, this was represented through narratives of "doubly articulated" subjects who consist of two co-existing identities (cf. Brusila 2021:31). In memory work, writers represented themselves, on the one hand, as a past and sacred youth with a subversive lifestyle, and on the other, as a present and profane no-longer-young person who embarked on a conventional life course. Hence, sense of selfhood among no-longer-young writers seems to be based on encompassing two conflicting identities. As mentioned, paradoxical identities are brought together in podcast narratives through biographies of development from youth to adult. Hence, representations are used to articulate dilemmas regarding aging in a culture developed by youths. Consequently, these dilemmas become available for collective reflexivity, or rather, digital memory work construct aging as a dilemma, thus reproducing the notion that age is central to the system of meanings that define graffiti culture (cf. Kimvall 2015; Macdonald 2001).

Mary Douglas (1966) states that a symbolic system requires group members to act according to the system's meanings. Further, Douglas discusses several strategies a group can employ to handle members who do not act in this way. One strategy would be to exclude them. However, Douglas also proposes that ritual treatment and construction of myths may allow the pure and polluted to co-exist within one single system of meanings through the utilization of "symbols of anomaly" (1966:41). I put forward that digital memory work can function as ritual-like social performances that produce representations that can function as such symbols of anomaly (Alexander

2004; Alexander and Smith 2003; Turner 1982), for example, in the form of memes about conflicting ways of belonging within a subculture.

Accepting such conflicting ways to live can enable no-longer-young graffiti writers to not feel excluded from their group, or rather, they do not exclude themselves because they can share with each other the experiences of not being ideal participants. Accordingly, digital memory work functions as a ritual-like social performance through which group boundaries are (re)negotiated and writers can experience continuously belonging to a collective *we* (Alexander 2004). As Turner (1982:79f) writes: "there is undoubtable transformative capacity in a well-performed ritual." I suggest that memory work, understood as performances, may have the capacity to reframe the meanings of age by accepting the paradox of being no-longer-young in a culture associated with youth rather than by trying to resolve it.

6.2.2. Existential support

Our lifeworlds are entangled with digital media. Hence, internet platforms are technologies of the self (Lagerkvist 2017; Turkle 2011). Moreover, since we are "thrown" into digital lifeworlds, we may experience a lack of control of the conditions that define us and the conditions for our "being-in-and-with-the-world" (Lagerkvist 2017). However, online media also offer means for exploration of our existence, and I found that, through memory work, writers supported each other in representing their life in a form that allowed them to recognize themselves (cf. Turner 1982:75). Additionally, constructing narratives of biographical continuity over individuals' life courses can reduce existential anxieties (Giddens 1991), and the digital memory work of graffiti writers may be an example of this.

Anthony Giddens (1991) argues that it has become increasingly difficult to experience security in the social world and that the challenges of constructing meaning increasingly rest on individuals. Following this line of reasoning, it has been claimed that identities are less stable now than they were previously in history. In the same vein, both in memory studies and subcultural research, it has been argued that stable group meanings are dissolved. For instance, Andrew Hoskins (2018a) claims that online technology disjoints

memories from groups and, as a consequence, that memories are no longer collective. Similarly, subcultural researchers argue that subcultures have been dissolved into more fluid "neo-tribes" and "scenes" (Bennett 2011). This may be true in some cases. However, my results suggest that, online, groups can find resources to maintain cultural meanings and that a collective effort like memory work can maintain group boundaries and reproduce systems of cultural meanings. By connecting through memory work, writers can feel collective solidarity, as one of them said about writers he met in the memory project investigated in Study II:

> *If you were there then, you kinda know what type of person it is, what he did and such [...]. You know, it gets like a base [...] we're all writers, that's where we come from.*

This quote illustrates how digital memory work can construct similarity between participants that can, in turn, lead to feelings of trust and belonging.

Before briefly discussing possible directions for future research, I would like to expand on the existential implications of my research. Digital memory work seems to be a never-ending practice of collecting fragments to make sense of existence. In life, we encounter inconsistencies and dilemmas that may not be easy to rationally resolve, but that are rather affectively experienced (Lagerkvist 2017). As the analyses presented here show, representations link past and present identities within one subject. At the same time, these conflicting identities have come to be inscribed in graffiti culture's system of meanings. This process is reminiscent of how Simone de Beauvoir (1976 [1947]:13) thinks about the human condition:

> *It is not granted to [man] to exist without tending towards this being that he will never be. But it is possible for him to want this tension even with the failure which it involves. [...] To attain his truth, man must not attempt to dispel the ambiguity of his being but, on the contrary, accept the task of realizing it. He rejoins himself only to the extent that he agrees to remain at a distance from himself.*

In my reading, what Beauvoir refers to as "man" is an embodied social being with ambiguous identities, one ideal and one grounded in lived life. As I understand this, we never succeed in being the people we want to be, but this should be approached as an existential condition and not as a failure.

6.3. Future research

I hope that these pages have provided valuable insights into how digital memory work can be used to negotiate and construct identities, group boundaries, and meanings of age. Because the ways in which memory work is performed are rapidly changing, these developments must be continuously explored. We will likely see a significant amount of research on how artificial intelligence influences collective memories, as this is an obvious direction for research to go. However, my research also shows that tactile experiences remain important, meaning we should not forget to follow how the interdependence between tangible things and digital technology evolves. Furthermore, regarding studies on digital memory work that focus on technology and social interaction, we need to pay attention to the existential dimensions of memory work, which remain largely unexplored.

We also need to gain more insight into how robust the meanings of a culture can be over the life course of participants. Despite technological shifts, such insights may offer theoretical and empirical threads for future research on how human-technology entanglements influence collective memories. In this respect, future research should investigate how the non-human agency of technology coexists with human agency and how they interact and compete in constructions and experiences of the past.

More narrowly, members of many subcultures struggle with questions similar to those graffiti writers are dealing with regarding aging in cultures associated with youth, for example, skateboarders (Willing et al. 2019) and DJs (Holmes et al. 2024). Hence, more research is needed on how digital memory work can be used to negotiate meanings of subcultural age and aging across diverse cultural expressions.

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SAMMANFATTNING [Swedish abstract]

I den här avhandlingen undersöker jag hur digitalt minnesarbete används för att reflektera över det förflutnas meningar och förhandla nutidens identiteter och grupptillhörigheter. Jag studerar hur graffitimålare som inte längre är unga använder sociala medier för att dela och diskutera berättelser och fotografier från sin ungdom. Samtidigt reflekterar de över hur graffiti har påverkat och format deras liv. Under processen väver de samman individuella minnen till kollektiva, samtidigt som de artikulerar argument för graffiti som ett värdefullt kulturarv.

Avhandlingen bidrar med kultursociologiska insikter om hur digitalt minnesarbete kan hålla samman en grupp över tid. Utöver detta erbjuder avhandlingen förståelse av hur digitalt minnesarbete kan (om)förhandla meningen av åldrande. Graffiti är en subkultur som skapades av tonåringar under 1970-talet och 1980-talet och förknippas fortfarande med ungdom och brottslighet. Liksom många andra subkulturer uttrycker graffiti ett symboliskt avståndstagande från vuxenvärlden och dess krav. Men nu har många svenska graffitimålare nått medelåldern och frågar sig vad det betyder att fortsätta vara en del av graffitikulturen. Deras minnesarbete handlar i stor utsträckning om att utforska paradoxen mellan att å ena sidan vara en ansvarsfull vuxen och å andra sidan hylla ungdomens subversiva livsstil.

Det huvudsakliga materialet för avhandlingen består av representationer av minnen som hämtats från internet. I avhandlingen använder jag också etnografisk metod för att studera graffitimålarnas interaktion på och utanför internet. Var och en av avhandlingens tre studier utgår från en specifik genre inom sociala medier. I den första studien undersöker jag hur biografier producerade genom podcasts formulerar en gemensam historia. Den andra studien fokuserar på hur målarna använder Facebook för att samla in och diskutera fotografier av svensk graffiti från 1980-talet och 1990-talet. I den

tredje studien undersöker jag hur åldrande kroppar och förlorad ungdom representeras i ironiska Instagram-memes.

I avhandlingen visar jag att digitala mediers skilda narrativa konventioner påverkar hur det förflutna gestaltas och låter det upplevas på ett flertal sätt. Jag påvisar också att digitalt minnesarbete främjar gemenskap genom att graffitimålarna lyfter fram minnen som betonar likheter, medan konflikter inom gruppen förbises. Samtidigt reproduceras befintliga kulturella ideal om ungdom och maskulinitet. Då graffiti är en praktik som formar identiteter och alstrar känslor av grupptillhörighet argumenterar jag för att digitalt minnesarbete har blivit ett nytt sätt att göra graffiti. Vidare argumenterar jag för att detta är en existentiell praktik som förhandlar deltagarnas självbild samt deras sätt att vara i världen. Jag drar slutsatsen att minnesarbete ger graffitimålarna förutsättningar att acceptera paradoxen att inte längre vara ung i en ungdomskultur.

SAMMANFATTNING [Swedish abstract]