The Online Street Art Walk

Using Digital Technology to Support Community Engagement with Young Street Artists: A report on the Katoomba Street Art Walk

Dr Neil Hall
Sera Harris

June 2016

Young and Well CRC
Unit 17, 71 Victoria Crescent
Abbotsford VIC 3067 Australia
youngandwellcrc.org.au
The Online Street Art Walk

Using digital technology to support community engagement with young street artists: A report on the Katoomba Street Art Walk

Dr Neil Hall
Director of Academic Program
Social Work and Community Welfare
Western Sydney University

Sera Harris
Research Assistant
Western Sydney University


Hall, N & Harris, S 2016, The Online Street Art Walk: Using digital technology to support community engagement with young street artists: A report on the Katoomba Street Art Walk, Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre, Melbourne.

This work is copyright. Apart from any use as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part may be reproduced by any process without prior written permission from the Young and Well CRC. Requests and enquiries concerning the reproduction and rights should be addressed to the Chief Executive Officer, Young and Well CRC, 17/71 Victoria Crescent, Abbotsford VIC 3067, Australia.
Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge that the Street Art Walk is located on the traditional lands of the Darug and Gundungurra peoples. We pay respect to their unique values, and their continuing and enduring cultures, which deepen and enrich the life of our nation and communities. We pay respect to Elders past, present and future.

The authors would like to acknowledge the partnership and work of SAMA, the Blue Mountains Council & Blue Mountains Cultural Centre and their pivotal roles in creating the Street Art Walk. We thank SAMA and MYST (Mountains Youth Services Team), in particularly Jarrod Wheatley and Damian Cooper, the relevant stakeholders in the Beverly Place precinct, and all the street artists for sharing their vision and creative process with us.

We would also like to thank the Young and Well CRC for their partnership and support throughout the project, the volunteers who conducted the survey and the research participants for sharing their experiences of the on and offline Street Art Walk.

Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre
The Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre is an Australian-based, international research centre that unites young people with researchers, practitioners, innovators and policymakers from over 70 partner organisations. Together, we explore the role of technology in young people’s lives, and how it can be used to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people aged 12 to 25. The Young and Well CRC is established under the Australian Government’s Cooperative Research Centres Program.

youngandwellcrc.org.au

Western Sydney University
Western Sydney University (WSU) is a modern research-led metropolitan university established in the late 1980s. WSU nurtures a distinctive, high-impact research culture, committed to enhancing the region’s cultural, economic, environmental and educational development, and is responsive to contemporary challenges in Greater Western Sydney and beyond.

westernsydney.edu.au

Street Art Murals Australia
Street Art Murals Australia (SAMA) aims to validate young people’s activity in the community, increase opportunities for street artists to receive professional jobs and work at breaking down the barriers between young graffiti artists and the general community.

streetartmurals.com.au
## Table of contents

Acknowledgements............................................................................................................. 3  
Table of contents................................................................................................................. 4  
Main messages.................................................................................................................... 5  
Executive summary............................................................................................................. 7  
Introduction: Street Art and Young People ....................................................................... 9  
Outlining the research ...................................................................................................... 14  
Conclusion & Recommendations..................................................................................... 23  
References......................................................................................................................... 25  

Appendices.......................................................................................................................... 28  
Appendix 1: QR Codes  
Appendix 2: Media Samples & Promotion of Event  
Appendix 3: Survey Questions  

List of figures .................................................................................................................... 33  
Figure 1: Walls 15 to 18 Before and After  
Figure 2: Streetscape with signage  
Figure 3: QR Scans June 2015 to April 2016  
Figure 4: Most scanned walls  
Figure 5: Top 3 walls  
Figure 6: Most used devices
Main messages

The Katoomba Street Art Walk has demonstrated a capacity for providing street artists and the local community to communicate and engage with each other in a way that promotes the positive wellbeing of young people. It has recently received a national award for excellence for local government partnership, for “excellence in building innovative and inspired communities”. Successful outcomes of the project are:

**Young street artists have increased legitimate opportunities for communicating with, and contributing to, their communities through the online and offline facets of the Street Art Walk.**

The Katoomba Street Art Walk, as a Council-approved project, offered 30 walls in one laneway to represent all styles of Graffiti and Street Art. Local young people worked alongside nationally and internationally renowned artists to create an outdoor gallery, with embedded QR codes to link to background information online. Young street artists embraced the opportunity to contribute to their local community through these means.

**Communities engage enthusiastically with street art in an outdoor gallery context.**

High numbers of visitors through the physical venue of the Street Art Walk show the enthusiasm for this type of community space: one which allows creative expression for artists, beautifies the urban landscape, and demonstrates high capacity for collaboration between a range of partners interested in the wellbeing of young people.

**Community members use digital technologies to recognise and applaud street artists’ contributions to community.**

Those visitors to the Street Art Walk who utilised the embedded digital technology gave extremely positive feedback, via TripAdvisor and social media sites, about the quality of the work and its unique contribution to the local community of Katoomba. Visitors from the local community and outside the local area equally gave high acclaim to the Project. Scans of the QR codes linking to a web page for each wall, comments on TripAdvisor, and likes on the Facebook page all point to recognition of the value of local young people’s contribution.

**Digital technologies play a positive role in creating and facilitating positive engagement between street artists and members of the general community.**

People who physically visited the street art walk appreciated being able to access online information about artists and their work. The supplemental digital content emphasised the legitimacy of the street art, and contextualised artists’ works through the lens of their personal histories and experiences for audiences. Furthermore, the online material encouraged community members to see the potential of street art to positively benefit their community, and allowed them to share their own positive experiences. The ability for artists themselves to access those positive expressions about their work, and for third parties to view spontaneous positive reactions to street art, has the potential to facilitate longer term dialogue between communities, traditional civic stakeholders, and young street artists.

**The Street Art Walk fosters positive wellbeing for young people.**

The Street Art Walk, with both its physical and online presence, clearly addresses the social determinants of health. There is enhanced communication between young people and communities, increased young people’s sense of contribution to community, and undeniable community recognition of that endeavour. The reciprocal social engagement fostered through this project is key for developing and maintaining the positive mental wellbeing of the young people who participated. The Street Art Walk is now a permanent fixture in Katoomba, with the walls being repainted every 6-12 months as is consistent with the transitory nature of street art, and continually seeks expressions of interest from more local young people to be involved. Therefore, there is opportunity well into the future for contributing to positive mental wellbeing of young people.
Executive summary

In partnership with Street Art Murals Australia (SAMA), the Street Art Walk project saw the creation of an outdoor street art gallery in Beverly Place, Katoomba, in the upper Blue Mountains of New South Wales. Launched in June 2015, the Street Art Walk consists of 30 mural spaces, providing over 3,000 square metres of wall space for the creative work of 20 young street artists, with local and international artists invited to contribute.

The aim of dedicating space to young street artists was to:
- Promote the legitimacy of street art.
- Provide a legal and endorsed space for the creation of street art by young street artists.
- Validate and legitimatise young street artists’ role in renewing public spaces for the Blue Mountains community.
- Create an outdoor art gallery that embeds technology as an attraction for the wider community to access and engage with.
- Create a site for engaged research on street art, young people and the role for technology in fostering belonging, engagement and positive mental wellbeing.

After a successful crowd funding campaign, the negotiation of several key partnerships, the creation of legal wall space and the selection of young street artists to showcase, the Street Art walk was officially launched to the community on the 20th June 2015. In addition to the outdoor street art gallery, online narratives of both the street art pieces and young street artists were created for the broader community (end users) to access as part of the experience. Each street art piece included a QR (Quick Response) matrix barcode that, when scanned on a mobile device, took the end user to a website. The online material provided a background to the street art piece and to the young street artist, with mechanisms for feedback by end users, thus aiming to facilitate further engagement between the young street artists and the broader community.

During and subsequent to the launch of the Street Art Walk, this research into the end users’ experiences of the Street Art Walk and broader perceptions of street art and young street artists was conducted.

This research project had the following aims:
- To gain insight into community perceptions of street art.
- To evaluate the role of digital technology in the engagement between young street artists and the broader community.
- To identify the impacts of the Street Art Walk to the community.

To meet the aims of this research project, face-to-face surveys were conducted with members of the public who attended the launch and engaged with the 30 large-scale murals and pieces of the Street Art Walk. In addition to the data generated from 38 face-to-face surveys, tracking of the use of the QR codes, as well as engagement on SAMA’s Facebook page, the SAMA website, TripAdvisor and media generated by the event, were all considered.

End users at the Street Art Walk launch reported positive perceptions of street art and the role young street artists can have in the community. The main themes identified from the surveys with end users were that:
• The Street Art Walk offers beautification of the urban area.
• Street art is connected with potentially reducing illegal activity related to graffiti.
• The Street Art Walk is regarded as contributing to the artistic culture of the local community.

When end users were asked what they thought the young artists and the Street Art Walk aimed to achieve, the most common response (84%) was ‘to beautify public spaces, followed by ‘to connect with their community’ and to ‘express themselves’ (82% each). Only a very small number of end users attributed any negative or anti-social elements in the street artwork, with 8% responding that the art was used to ‘mark out territory’. None of the survey end users reported that they viewed the project as an act of vandalism, rebellion or of defacing the community, demonstrating that the project created a space in which the value of young people’s creative practices could be appreciated by the broader public.

Audiences were able to access narratives of the young street artists and their street art online and so the use of digital technology improved community engagement with young street artists by challenging perceptions of street art and young street artists as ‘illegal graffiti’ or ‘faceless vandals’. End users reported that they valued reading the young street artists’ statements (69%), seeing images of other works (50%) and listening to the young street artists’ stories (33%) as the most interesting and useful aspects of available information online. Of key significance is that 33 out of 37 responses (84%) indicated that end users have a better understanding of the purpose of young street artists and the Street Art Walk because of the background information available online.

Since the launch of the Street Art Walk in June 2015 there has been continued access of the QR codes, as well as mainstream media coverage about the project. As a multi-partner project, the Street Art Walk has won the National Award for Local Government in the area of “excellence in building innovative and inspired communities”, and has been listed by the world’s largest travel site, TripAdvisor, as number 8 of 37 listed ‘things to do in Katoomba’, with over 50 reviews written by travellers to the area.

The Street Art Walk successfully integrates an outdoor street art gallery with digital tools that offer the young street artist further means to connect with community. Whilst measuring the direct impact on the young street artists was not within the scope of this research project, it does provide evidence that integrating both online and offline spaces allows for improved understanding and appreciation of street art as a legitimate cultural activity by young people. End users positively received the opportunity for interaction with young street artists through digital spaces, and in this way, young street artists have increased opportunities to positively connect and engage with their broader community. Given that the social determinants of health include connection with community (Easthorpe & White 2006; Hall 2011; Macdonald 2006; Eckersley et al 2006), it is posited that the online and offline Street Art Walk can foster the positive mental health and wellbeing of young street artists.
Street Art and Young People: The Relationships to Wellbeing

Social determinants
There are many factors that contribute to the health and wellbeing of young people. A broad understanding of the social determinants of health and wellbeing include external or structural considerations such as education, access to services, housing, nutrition and social supports. The literature (e.g. Easthorpe & White 2006; Hall 2011; Macdonald 2006; Eckersley et al 2006) demonstrates that connectedness to community is one of the social determinants of young people’s wellbeing, and components of connectedness include a sense of belonging as well as a sense of contribution to community. Opportunities for young people to develop supportive networks and engage positively with those around them impact their current and future wellbeing, in particular the ways in which they are able to negotiate transitions to adulthood. These transitions can expose young people to risks; specifically activities associated with illegality, or those that are labelled as ‘anti-social’ can further contribute to vulnerability (Hall 2004; Iveson 2010; McAuliffe 2012; Taylor 2010; Cahill 2000; Austin & Sanders 2007). Street art is often framed in public discourse as an activity that contributes to the vulnerability of young people, because of its connection with pursuits which are illegal or marginal to society.

Street Art: Art, Vandalism or Community Connection
Street art is a complex subject that inspires debates about its purpose, legitimacy and role in broader society. The term ‘street art’ incorporates several art forms and mediums, and builds upon definitions of graffiti which traditionally refers to art created freehand with aerosol paint, to also include stencilling, stickers, yarn, sculpture, wheat pasting, murals and installations (McAuliffe 2012). Fundamental to the definition of street art is that it is a creative endeavour that utilises public space, usually in an unsanctioned manner, as a context for artistic expression. This report uses the term ‘street art’ to gesture towards a broad set of mediums, and also because it challenges the ‘graffiti’ discourse that focus primarily on crime and deviance. The creation of the Street Art Walk, from which this piece of research stems, utilises this definition to acknowledge the range of mediums used by young people, as well as delineating the context for artistic practice and experience.

Pereira (2005) and Young (2010) both report that street art initially emerged during the 1970’s, stemming from the subways in New York City. Since the emergence of street art, its status as a form of artistic expression or vandalism by subcultures of young people has been hotly contested. Viewed as creative social commentary by some and vandalism by others, differentiating between street art as vandalism or art is dependent on the terminology used to describe it, e.g. graffiti, graffiti art or street art. The ways in which it is labelled has a significant impact on whether the form is viewed or discussed positively or negatively, how it is dealt with, the development of policies, and how the general community react (Austin 2010).

Australian discourse around this debate mirrors the global discussion. McAuliffe (2012) highlights a key moment of Australian street art development as the screening of an American music video that depicted aerosol work being created in the underground subways of New York, which was soon recreated on the train lines of Sydney’s railways, and is said to have been the beginning of the ‘War on Graffiti’ in Australia. McAuliffe (2013) argues that graffiti art on trains and railways was designed to ensure artists’ work was distributed and seen amongst other street

---

A glossary of graffiti terms can be found at: http://www.graffiti.org/faq/graffiti.glossary.html
artists, creating an identity and reputation. Russell (2011) and MacGillvary & Curwen (2007) identify that the use of ‘tagging’ in graffiti art is a form of communication within young peoples’ subcultures, countering the popular belief that it is solely vandalism.

Iveson (2010a) also explores whether street art is a form of expression, or vandalism and a source of rebellion. Fundamentally, he raises the question of how, if at all, a mutual understanding between street artists, the community, government and law enforcement can be reached. The history of the medium, as well as the ongoing policy context, has meant that the terms ‘graffiti’, ‘vandalism’ and ‘street art’ are often treated as synonymous. Iveson (2010b) highlights the harsh views surrounding graffiti, where governments liken graffiti to acts of terrorism. Iveson (2010b) explains how graffiti and street artists are viewed much like terrorists; finding and exploiting the vulnerabilities within society, creating disorder and chaos, which then is said to develop into a loss of control for society.

With the emergence of the post-industrial economy, the changing discourses about art and the promotion of creative cities has resulted in re-thinking and re-evaluating graffiti as art and valuing the artists and their work (McAuliffe 2012). Visconti et al (2010) examine the site for street art and question whether public space is actually public, due to the penalties for using public places in ways that are deemed unacceptable. They conclude that the public place is consumable and should be ‘beautified’. Austin (2010) also explores the concept of street art adding to the urban landscape as an art form, not as an act of vandalism. Halsey & Young (2002) explore the diversity of street art (for example tagging, throw ups, pieces), as well as highlighting the negative view that is often associated with freehand aerosol graffiti compared to other mediums of street art such as painted murals, installations and sculpture. Dovey, Wollan & Woodcock (2012) go further to explain how street art, specifically murals, have become a form of advertising and tagging prevention in Melbourne, with businesses commissioning graffiti works; thus highlighting their transition from illegal to legal status. Halsey and Young (2002) conclude that street art is creative and complex, and there is a great need for regulatory bodies to engage and promote street art culture, young people’s expression as well as authorise the creation and presence of street art within communities.

Current Policy
The policy context contributes to the way street art is constructed as an activity and its significance to the community. Many authors (e.g. Stewart 2008, Hughes 2009, Young 2010, Irons 2009, Crawley 2015, Lister 2015) have drawn the conclusion that the policy context drives the language and meaning that communities associate with street art and therefore predicate eradication strategies on that basis. The current policy in New South Wales is the Graffiti Control Act 2008, which states that a graffiti-related offence includes damaging or defacing property by means of graffiti implement, possession of a graffiti implement, posting bills or marking, or possessing spray cans, markers or implements designed to leave a permanent mark. The Act also states that penalties include fines up to $2,200 and imprisonment for up to 12 months. The Act is detailed and strict, but does not cover the handling of commissioned street art, although it does state that if local Councils deem it graffiti, they have the power to remove it against the landholder’s wishes.

Young (2012) highlighted the discrepancies within the penalty system; comparing similar offences and the different sentences handed down. Furthermore she conducted an investigation with street artists, gathering their experiences with the police and discovering the harsh treatment of the police when searching and charging individuals, and the

2 Repetitive signing of an artist’s graffiti name
3 A word painted quickly with one layer of paint and an outline
4 Short for masterpiece, is a detailed artwork
differences between sentences for similar offences, signifying the inconsistencies between Act and implementation. Additionally, there have been attempts to change current policy targeting legal street art. Young (2010), a consultant to the Melbourne City Government, helped create a unified policy suiting both the community and graffiti artists, ultimately negating the effectiveness of Zero Tolerance policies. The process resulted in the legislation being turned down before it even proceeded into parliament. Nonetheless, it highlighted the desire to implement less restrictive policies regarding street art, and the beginning of a new discourse regarding street art and young people’s participation in the community. Within the context of policy, ‘permission’ seems to be the dividing line between art and vandalism (Stewart 2008) but, according to Hughes (2009), that line reduces the likelihood of communities appreciating the aesthetic value of street art. Young (2010) further contends that perceptions of street art as an issue of public concern had led some councils to develop policies without being well-informed as to the specific needs of their community and the range of options available to them. Iveson (2010 p27) agrees that unsanctioned street art has been categorised at local government level as a form of ‘anti-social behaviour that threatens community values’. However Halsey and Young (2006) suggest that street art can be seen as an aesthetic practice rather than just a criminal activity. By outlining the different understandings of street art as a subculture of ‘juvenile delinquency’, as a historical phenomenon, and as a social problem to regulate, they argue that there are common assumptions made about the motivations by young people to create street art such as “supposed boredom, a desire to damage and deface, or the lack of respect for other people’s properties” (2006 p279). These assumptions about the reasons young people participate in the creation of street art frame much existing policy, and thus limit the capacity for engagement by young street artists with the broader community.

Young People and Street Art
Whilst street art attempts to be highly visible, due to the contentious nature of the creation and perception of street art in community and policy discourses, young street artists themselves are less likely to be visible. When discussing young people and street art culture, subculture is an important concept to consider. Street art, specifically graffiti, has long been associated to subcultures of young people (Lachmann 1988), and these understanding can contribute to the portrayal of young street artists as “the threatening other” (Baker 2015, p1001). Pereira (2005) links the development and nature of street art culture as an underground movement to a means of self-expression for young people, concluding that street art is equally valid as a form of creative expression as any other artform. Waclawek (2011) demonstrates how the subculture allows the development of individual identity. Nilan, Julian & Germov (2007) explain that young peoples’ cultures provide the opportunity for them to ‘become somebody’, frequently employing the concept of bricolage, which involves experimenting with cultural practices to create new identities (Moje 2002). Blackman (2007) states that foundational to the concept of subculture is that it involves a group within society who pursue patterns and behaviours alternative to the societal norm. Blackman (2014) further determines that subculture is just another term to label and understand deviance within society which impacts upon how street art and young street artists are constructed in community and policy discourses.

Docuyanan (2000) suggests that there is consistent tension between young street artists ‘making place’ for themselves through their creative work, and the limited space given to them to do so. Baker (2015) explores how young street artists negotiate liminal spaces, blurring boundaries between public spaces, legalities, voices and identities. Baker (2015) also sees street art as a potential site for psychosocial development of young people, however there are

---

5 ‘Zero Tolerance’ is the current graffiti management policy, which states that no graffiti is acceptable and will result in severe penalties. Even legal and commissioned street art can be removed under this policy.
many structural issues that young people need to navigate, and as Baker (2015) concludes, young people are separated from ownership of their art. As suggested by Wheatley & Adams (2011), it is uncommon for young street artists to have the opportunity to articulate their own perspectives on their art to the broader community.

A Role for Technology

For young people aged between 12 and 25 years, life is increasing mediated by digital technology. In the Australian context, young people are immersed in digital spaces, as 99% of young people use the Internet, with 95% connecting daily (Burns et al. 2013). Whilst there is a growing body of research into the role of digital technology in young people’s lives, and in fact the life of broader society, there is very limited research into the role that digital technology can offer to the sanctioning of both the young street artist and their work. Street art is often associated with physical public spaces. However, the Internet is another medium for the street artist to document, share and create their work as well as their identities.

Snyder (2006) highlights the development of sharing through technology, specifically websites and blogs, where street artists are able to upload their work, creating their identity and building their reputation with an audience beyond the subculture of other street and graffiti artists. Light, Griffiths & Lincoln (2012) argue that the use of YouTube can be a means of sharing skills and in the identity creation of young street artists. This project seeks to contribute to the limited research by exploring the role of digital technology in fostering the engagement process between street art, the young street artists and the community.

Situating the Street Art Walk

This research was situated in the Blue Mountains Local Government Area (LGA), west of Sydney, an area that is referred to as ‘the city within a World Heritage National Park’ (Blue Mountains City Council, 2009). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011), the resident population is 78,691 with around 10% aged 12-25. Residents live across 27 towns and villages situated predominantly in a line along, or radiating out from, the Great Western Highway. Being situated in a National Park, and the ‘natural environment’ draws many visitors to the region.

Callinan (2002) reports on NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research from 1999 and found the Outer Western Sydney region recorded one of the highest rates of graffiti. Furthermore, in 2007/2008 the Outer Western Sydney region of Sydney had the highest reports of malicious property damage, with the majority involving graffiti (Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research 2013). During this timeframe, and as a counterweight to crime statistics, there has also been a growing interest among many youth services in the region in street art as a creative form for engaging positively with young people. One example of this development comes from the partner organisation of this research project, Street Art Murals Australia (SAMA). SAMA aims to validate young people’s activity in the community; to increase opportunities for street artists to work in professional jobs; and to work at breaking down the barriers between young street artists and the general community (Mountains Youth Services 2014).

McAullife & Iveson (2011) and Iveson et al (2014) emphasise that geography is a significant factor in community attitudes towards street art. That is, geographic area, site in public space and perceived intention all contribute. To this end, a stereotype often circulates anecdotally amongst Australians that the Blue Mountains LGA is a slightly more alternative/artistic community, although there has been no significant measure of this. It is the case, though, that the now nationally known SAMA was originally established as a forum and artistic outlet for young Blue Mountains street artists. The location of sanctioned street art in an outer region of Sydney can also be viewed significant on another level. As Baker (2015) notes from her research on street art conducted in the outer suburbs of Melbourne, street art narratives tend to
be 'city-centric'. There may be opportunity to shift these narratives to be more inclusive of diversity of sites for street art through the creation of street art from the geographical 'peripheries' (Baker 2015).

This research forms part of a broader inquiry on street art in the Blue Mountains region and builds upon previous findings. A recent Honours thesis (Buttigieg, 2014) explored how young artists use street art to communicate and engage with the Blue Mountains community, concluding among other things, that street art was used for creative expression, status-seeking within the street art subculture, and communication of ideas or opinions to the general community. Following on from that, research was conducted to gauge community perceptions of street art in the Blue Mountains (Hall & Wheatley 2016), which concluded that, in general, community members did not view street art or artists to be offensive or require punitive responses.
Background

The research outlined in this report is part of a larger project that explores street art created by young people. In partnership with Street Art Murals Australia (SAMA), the Street Art Walk project saw the creation of an outdoor street art gallery in Beverly Place, Katoomba, in the upper Blue Mountains of New South Wales. Launched in June 2015, the Street Art Walk consists of 30 mural spaces, providing over 3,000 square metres of wall space for the creative work of 20 young street artists, with local and international artists invited to contribute.

In the project on which this report is based, the research partners developed a multi-layered, participatory research pilot project with simultaneous engagement in community development processes, which sought to explore 3 related areas:

1. Young artists' ideas about how they use street art as a means of engaging with their community.
2. Community perceptions of young people’s street art in the unique community of the Blue Mountains.
3. The use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) embedded in street art as a medium for facilitating engagement between young street artists and the general community.

This report primarily outlines the findings from the last area, paying attention to the ways that digital technology can be utilised in the experience of street art by end users.

Aims

Acknowledging that engaging and contributing to the broader community is a social determinant of a young person’s wellbeing, this research project had the primary aim of evaluating the role of digital technology in the engagement between young street artists and the broader community.

In addition, the following aims were explored through this research:

- To gain insight into community perceptions of street art.
- To identify the impacts of the Street Art Walk for the community.

More broadly, the research objective was to enhance the wellbeing of young people who create street art by improving their engagement opportunities with the community, while challenging the community's perception of street art and young street artists as ‘illegal graffiti’ or ‘vandals’.

Methods

The study is grounded in a phenomenological approach. This approach enabled the examination of the lived experiences of street artists and the community, in relation to engagement as a social determinant of mental health & wellbeing. Lester (1999) argues that phenomenological research explores the different and subjective experiences of individuals in relation to the social problem being investigated. Importantly, phenomenological research is effective because it uses the experiences of individuals to refute the general assumptions made about a particular issue.
The study incorporated a variety of qualitative and quantitative research techniques to both collect and analyse data, which can be described as ‘multi-method’ research as opposed to ‘mixed-method’ research (Morse as cited in Esteves & Pastor 2004; Bazeley as cited in Burke Johnson, Onuebuzie & Turner 2007). Morse (cited in Esteves & Pastor 2004) argues that multi-method research is about using quantitative and qualitative methods separately during the research study. After data is generated from both of these methods, the findings are then sorted, triangulated and analysed. Similarly, Bazeley (cited in Burke Johnson, Onuebuzie & Turner 2007) proposes that multi-method research is about integrating different research approaches only after conclusions are reached about the study.6

To meet the aims of this research project, 38 face-to-face surveys were conducted with members of the public who came to the launch to engage with the 30 large-scale murals and pieces of the Street Art Walk. At the launch of the Katoomba Street Art Walk by Street Art Murals Australia (SAMA) on 20th June 2015, four researchers from Western Sydney University (WSU), representing the Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre, conducted face-to-face surveys with members of the general public, to gauge initial community responses to the Street Art Walk and to determine the likelihood of the community’s use of digital technologies associated with the Street Art.

Along with demographic questions relating to the end users (gender, age and postcode of residence), the survey questions focused on what the end user thought the street artists were trying to achieve through the creation of the Street Art Walk, and their reactions to the content that was made available about the street artist through the use of the QR coding. In addition to the data generated from 38 face-to-face surveys, tracking of the use of the QR codes (Appendix 1), community experiences of the Street Art Walk documented on TripAdvisor and Facebook, as well as mainstream media generated by the event were used as sources of secondary data. A descriptive and thematic analysis of the survey responses was conducted. Descriptive analysis of secondary data was also included.

Results

SURVEY

Participants
The launch event enabled a broad range of community members to participate in the survey. Thirty-eight face-to-face surveys were completed, with a male/female ratio of 50%. Participants ranged in age from 18 to over 65. The most common age group to participate in the survey (26%) was 25-34 years, although the 45-54 and 55-64 age groups were also well represented (18% each). Participants’ home postcodes ranged from Blue Mountains to Inner Sydney, with other Western Sydney areas (Parramatta, Blacktown), Central Coast and one Victorian represented.

Themes
The overwhelming majority of participants (95%) had seen street/graffiti art before, whether legal or illegal. However, 34% had never seen works on this scale before.

---

6 By contrast, mixed method research involves using a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods to complement each other throughout the study.
End users at the Street Art Walk launch reported positive perceptions of street art and the role young street artists can play in the community. The main themes identified from the surveys with end users were:

- **Beautification**: Participants thought that the Street Art Walk beautified the urban area.
- **Reduction in graffiti crime**: Participants suggested that the potential for street art to be connected with reducing illegal activity related to graffiti.
- **Facilitation of artistic culture**: Participants indicated that they regarded the Street Art Walk as contributing to the artistic culture of the local community.

Open response comments collected through the survey were highly positive. In line with Visconti et al’s (2010) ideas about beautification of public spaces, responses suggested that participants saw graffiti as adding to the visual appeal of unadorned public space. For example, many participants commented on the *beautification* of the area through the art (Figure 1):

- “Brightens up one corner of the town.”
- “I think it’s wonderful & adds to Katoomba’s appeal.”
- “I think its beautiful project adds value on life & street.”

**Figure 1: Walls 15 to 18 Before and After**

![Image of Before and After comparison of walls 15 to 18](image)

Participants saw the value of the street art and its potential in *reducing illegal activity*:

- “Useful, respected, not vandalism.”
- “Excellent, what Katoomba needs. Minimises illegal work and maybe inspire others.”

In this way, participants’ responses affirmed Halsey and Young’s (2006) suggestion that street art can be seen as an aesthetic practice rather than just a criminal activity.

Further, for some participants, street art has a generative potential. Consistent with Austin’s (2010) concept of street art adding to the urban landscape as an art form, not as an act of vandalism, other participants related the street art’s contribution to *artistic culture*:

- “Fantastic - brings new life into urban space & brings people together. An expression of the people.”
- “Awesome - Blue Mountains has great street art culture, fostering good channels.”
- “Love it - bringing in culture.”
When asked what they thought the artists/project were trying to achieve, the most common response (84%) was ‘to beautify public spaces, followed by ‘to connect with their community’ and ‘express themselves’ (82% each). Only a very small number of participants related the Street Art Walk to negative graffiti discourse, with 8% responding that the artist was aiming to ‘mark out territory’. None of the survey participants viewed the project as an act of vandalism, rebellion or defacing community, although one participant was still unsure of the legality of the work, despite all the official signage (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Streetscape with signage**

INTEGRATING TECHNOLOGY

Challenging the portrayal of young street artists as “the threatening other” (Baker 2015, p1001), 89% of survey participants expressed an interest in knowing more about the artist and their story. Facilitating this connection, the QR codes associated with each wall enabled end users to scan a code and visit a website with background information about the artists and the project, images of their other works, audio interviews with artists, and eventually video footage of the works being created.

At the launch, this aspect of the project faced technical challenges that impacted the ability of end users to download the background information. The websites linked to the Street Art Walk were slow to load and sometimes didn’t load at all. The research team attributes this to the sheer volume of people moving through Katoomba for the Winter Magic Festival (which sees 30 000 attendees), utilising mobile devices. Some data was still captured and viewed by survey participants. Survey participants who experienced difficulties accessing the online content were referred to a printed booklet also available on the day. Based on both experiences (QR codes and printed material), participants valued reading an artist’s statement (69%), seeing images of other works (50%) and listening to the artist’s story (33%) as the most interesting and useful aspects of available information.

Thirty-three out of thirty seven (84%) responses to the question of the value of the street artist’s story to the end user indicated that participants had a better understanding of the purpose of the art/artists/project because of the background information.

“Finding out artists’ background is important.”
"It's interesting to find out about the artist and maybe follow them and their work."

"Creates more meaning about the artworks."

When asked about their perceptions of street art changing due to the Street Art Walk and knowing the narratives of the street art and young street artists, the majority of survey participants indicated that they already felt positive about street art, with 22 out of 34 reporting that there was no change to their perception of street art. Examples of comments from participants on their perception of street art after accessing the background information on the street artist and the Street Art Walk included:

"Already believed in street art."

"Never thought it was bad, always thought it awesome. Project reaffirms that."

"Already had a positive view of street art."

One significant response, though, came from the individual who was previously unsure about the legality of the work, who stated:

"I get it now that this is all fully approved. It's fantastic."

This comment indicates that the background information made available through digital technology changed the participant's attitude and understanding of the Street Art Walk and of the young street artists. Other participants also accounted for the change in their perception, with responses such as:

"It has changed for the better. It's good to see the artist stories."

"Changed in a very positive way."

"Already interested, so added and made it more available."

In terms of using the QR code technology, ratings out of 10 were predictably poor on the ease of use with an average score of 4.4. However, participants rated their likelihood of downloading a scanning app at an average of 6.4, indicating that a tailored app would improve engagement with the initiative.

Participants rated very highly (average between 8 and 9) their likelihood of revisiting the Street Art Walk, revisiting the SAMA website, and telling friends about the project. The most preferred method of telling others about the Street Art Walk was face-to-face conversation (79%), followed by Facebook (58%) indicating that technology plays an important role in the promotion of the project.

SECONDARY SOURCES

The number of downloads of the QR Codes as well as digital content that described the Street Art Walk were also considered by the research team as secondary sources. The QR Code data, public perceptions of the Street Art Walk on TripAdvisor and media generated by the launch event on the 20th June 2015 were included in order to further explore the connections between the Street Art Walk and the role of technology in generating information available to the broader community about the street art.
QR Codes
Despite the difficulty of using the technology on the day of the launch, there have been 703 scans recorded on the QR tracking software from the opening until the 12th April 2016. As shown in Figure 3, after the launch the pattern of scanning tend to be clumped around school holiday periods or an occasional school excursion. This indicates that young people are accessing the Street Art Walk and QR Codes, and that participating schools have sanctioned this activity. The largest number of scans of the codes coincided with the launch event (107).

Figure 3: QR Scans June 2015 to April 2016

Figure 4: Most scanned walls
Figure 4 above shows the 7 most highly scanned walls. Walls 29, 17 and 27 received the highest numbers of scans at 83, 64 and 58 respectively and are displayed below.

**Figure 5: Top 3 walls**

Of the 7 most popular walls, local young street artists created 4 (including the most popular), and the other three were produced by nationally and internationally renowned street artists. The implication of this finding is that local young people can feel confident that their contributions sit with substantially equal status to professional artists. Self-confidence builds resilience, another factor of positive mental wellbeing.

The devices used to access to the QR codes have predominantly been from smartphones with a number of brands represented, and only 3% from tablets, represented in Figure 6.

**Figure 6: Most used devices**

---

**The Role of Other Digital Spaces: TripAdvisor**

The Street Art Walk has also been listed by the world’s largest travel site, TripAdvisor, as number 8 of 37 listed ‘Things to do in Katoomba’, with over 50 reviews written by travellers to the area. It is the only activity in the top 10 that does not make reference to the natural environment surrounding the area. The majority of reviewers have rated the Street Art Walk as ‘excellent’ or ‘very good’, with one rating at ‘average’. There are local, national and international reviewers represented, with one review in Dutch and one in Portuguese.

Reviews make reference to other locations known for street art, as well as comments about their perceptions of the street art itself. The emerging themes from the reviews include:

- A high appreciation of the quality of the street art
- An appreciation of local artists’ (young people) work
• Acknowledgement of the beautification/transformation of the urban environment
• Recognition that the Street Art Walk contributes to local tourist economy
• An understanding that the Street Art Walk creates a community ‘vibe’
• An element of surprise in finding the Street Art Walk.

Below are 3 examples of reviews taken from TripAdvisor:

“What can I say - I just loved it - what a great step forward in beautifying decaying parts of Katoomba - it is an outstanding example of how some “out of the box” thinking and a willingness do something risky by Katoomba Council has created a truly beautiful and inspiring space!”

“It’s a little touch of Melbourne in the Blue Mountains!”

“Hidden from view of the main road is this wonderful alley of Street Art. Not usually one to appreciate murals with spray cans but I can honestly say that this is really impressive. Colourful and detailed they make an otherwise drab street look wonderful. We decided to take a look while waiting for the crowds to disappear from The Three Sisters Lookout and I’m glad we did.”

Whilst there was no mention of the QR codes or the background information about the street artists in any review, SAMA was mentioned in 2 of the reviews, which praised the project. The QR Codes may or may not have been accessed by reviewers, however there is also the possibility that the QR Codes have seamlessly become integrated into the experience of the Street Art Walk.

Other Media
The SAMA Facebook site generated 2876 ‘likes’ of the Street Art Walk and the launch generated 3 media articles in local print media and the *Sydney Morning Herald* (see Appendix 2). The project was contextualised in articles as an ‘outdoor art gallery’ for the promotion of the launch event and linked street art and the project positively to the community.
Conclusion & Recommendations

Art as a Conduit

Overall, it is clear that the majority of end users surveyed were supportive of street art and of the benefits that a project such as this can bring to the community. What this indicates most clearly is that the Street Art Walk is well located to be positively received and accepted by the Blue Mountains community. Locating similar projects such as the Street Art Walk in geographic areas where community perceptions about street art are not deemed as positive could help gauge whether projects such as the Street Art Walk can create progressive change in this area, challenging the construct of street art as vandalism and young street artists as criminals.

Whilst the direct impact to the young street artists was not within the scope of this research project, it does provide evidence that integrating both on- and offline spaces allows for improved understanding and appreciation of street art as a legitimate cultural activity by young people. End users positively received the opportunity for interaction with young street artists through digital spaces, and in this way, young street artists have increased opportunities to connect and engage with their broader community in positive ways. Further research into young street artists’ perceptions of creating online narratives as well as physical street art is needed. The meanings young street artists attribute to this process would allow for further perspectives into social and personal impacts, and whether young street artists have an increased sense of community participation or belonging.

A number of technology and infrastructure issues were faced during the research project. The Street Art Walk launch was held on one of the largest Blue Mountains community events of the year, the Winter Magic Festival, with over 30,000 visitors to Katoomba on that day. Whilst the launch event enabled the access of a broader range of community members as participants for the survey, the event created a Wi-Fi ‘overload’ effect and content accessible via the QR codes was difficult to download. Ideally, the QR codes would have been accessed without any technical difficulties by end users on the day of the launch and survey. The research team used printed versions of the online material for survey participants, however this limited the information that they based their responses on to text and images, without the full experience of the digital download which also included video footage of the street artists creating and discussing their work. These limitations of technology and infrastructure also impacted upon the community being able to respond to the street artists’ information. However embedding the QR codes into the Street Art Walk was not limited to the Street Art Walk launch event, and there were 600 more scans of the QR codes after the launch event. An online version of the face-to-face survey that was linked to the QR Codes and made available for a longer period of time could have also been used to compensate for some of the challenges faced on the day of the launch.

Despite the challenges encountered, the online presence of the Street Art Walk and the young street artists fosters a positive form of engagement with and by the community. Street Art and young street artists are provided legal and legitimised spaces in which to share their art and their identities, and similarly the community are able to share their positive experiences of street art. With an understanding that the social determinants of health include positive connection with community, the on- and offline Street Art Walk has potential to contribute to the positive mental health and wellbeing of young street artists. Whilst there needs to be more research into the impacts on young street artists’ wellbeing, this project indicates that there is strong likelihood than an initiative of this kind can positively impact young people at the same time as beautifying urban spaces, from which the broader community can also benefit.
References and bibliography


Buttigieg, F 2014, ‘How do young male graffiti artists in the Blue Mountains use their art to engage with their community?’, Bachelor of Social Work (Honours) Thesis, Western Sydney University, unpublished.


Hughes, M 2009, Street art and graffiti art: developing an understanding, PhD dissertation, Georgia University.

Irons, J 2009, Spray Away: Making the case for legal graffiti as a legitimate form of public art in Sydney, PhD dissertation, University of New South Wales.


Appendices

APPENDIX 1: QR CODES

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15
APPENDIX 2: MEDIA SAMPLES & PROMOTION OF EVENT

Blue Mountains Gazette 23/6/15

Bluemountainsaustralia.com 10/6/15

Sydney Morning Herald 7/10/14

Blue Mountains Explorer Bus

Street Art Murals Australia (Facebook)
https://www.facebook.com/streetartmuralsaustralia 2876 likes

WSU ICS

Gillie and Marc

Blue Mountains Getaways 22/9/15
http://www.bluemountainsgetaways.com/blog/22-attractions/90-an-outdoor-gallery-for-katoomba-the-katoomba-street-art-walk

Blue Mountains Gazette 2/5/16
APPENDIX 3: SAW LAUNCH SURVEY

1. Have you seen work like the Street Art Walk before?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes – legal street art</th>
<th>Yes – other legal graffiti walls</th>
<th>Yes – illegal graffiti/art</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not works on this scale</td>
<td>Only photos/online</td>
<td>Not really at all</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. What do you think is the most interesting aspect of the Street Art Walk?


3. What do you think is the least interesting aspect of the Street Art Walk?


4. What do you think the project and/or the artists are trying to achieve?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Connect with their community</th>
<th>Make a statement</th>
<th>Rebel/cause trouble</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deface the community</td>
<td>Stand up for their rights</td>
<td>Express themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be creative</td>
<td>Belong</td>
<td>Become famous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicate with their friends</td>
<td>Get an adrenaline rush</td>
<td>Beautify public spaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give to their community</td>
<td>Make a joke</td>
<td>Mark out territory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop an individual style</td>
<td>Inspire/empower others</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. How interested are you in meeting the artist and/or knowing their story?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very interested</th>
<th>Somewhat interested</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Not really interested</th>
<th>Not interested at all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

6. (Show use of QR app to visit Project website) How useful did you find the information available from scanning the code?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very useful</th>
<th>Somewhat useful</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Not really useful</th>
<th>Not useful at all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

7. How interesting was it to find out more about the art/artist?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very interesting</th>
<th>Somewhat interesting</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Not really interesting</th>
<th>Not interesting at all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Why/why not?


8. What was most interesting and/or useful about the information available from scanning the code?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seeing the images</th>
<th>Reading the artist statements</th>
<th>Listening to the artist stories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seeing video of art being created</td>
<td>Links to other artists/sites</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9. Do you feel you have a better understanding of the purpose of the art/artists/project?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Much better</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Not really</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

10. After finding out more about the art/artist, has your perception of the work/project changed? In what way?


11. What other information/resources would you like to have access to by scanning the code?


12. Have you ever used a QR app before?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

13. How easy was it to use the QR app?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very easy</th>
<th>Somewhat easy</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Somewhat hard</th>
<th>Very hard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

14. How likely would you be to download the QR app on your own device?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Already have</th>
<th>Highly likely</th>
<th>Somewhat likely</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Somewhat unlikely</th>
<th>Highly unlikely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

15. How likely would you be to revisit the Street Art Walk when it is completed?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highly likely</th>
<th>Somewhat likely</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Somewhat unlikely</th>
<th>Highly unlikely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

16. How likely would you be to revisit the Street Art website?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highly likely</th>
<th>Somewhat likely</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Somewhat unlikely</th>
<th>Highly unlikely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

17. How likely are you to tell others about the SAW? (and the website)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highly likely</th>
<th>Somewhat likely</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Somewhat unlikely</th>
<th>Highly unlikely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Thank you for your time. Can we just take down some background info as well please?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Postcode:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 15</td>
<td>15-24</td>
<td>25-34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>65-74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of figures

Figure 1: Walls 15 to 18 Before and After
Figure 2: Streetscape with signage
Figure 3: QR Scans June 2015 to April 2016
Figure 4: Most scanned walls
Figure 5: Top 3 walls
Figure 6: Most used devices