THE BELONGING PARADOX: THE BELONGING EXPERIENCE OF COMMITTED UNCERTAIN MEMBERS

by

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Abstract

The existing literature in marketing and consumer behavior tends to adopt a somewhat static view of membership and belonging, focusing on the status uncertainty that surrounds new group aspirants. In the literature, the portrayal of becoming a member is one of a logical step-by-step process as members move toward the top of the social hierarchy and secure status. An underlying assumption of this process is that once an individual secures membership through status, that individual is no longer uncertain about their membership or belonging. This thesis presents an alternative to this static step-by-step view and introduces the idea of the belonging paradox.

A belonging paradox is a recursive cycle of an unsolvable duality of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion that can result from idiosyncratic factors such as gender, race, disability or self-doubt. This thesis also develops a new conceptual framework or perspective on the concept of belonging by integrating Uncertainty-Identity Theory, Self-Verification Theory and Symbolic Self-Completion Theory into a more dynamic and fluid understanding about the nature of belonging. Through the introduction of the belonging paradox and the new conceptual framework of belonging, a more comprehensive understanding of belonging emerges. Specifically, the belonging paradox suggests that beyond the initial stages of striving for group membership, uncertainty of belonging can continue to be a pervasive, continuous struggle even for committed hardcore group members.

Through an analysis of the skateboarding subculture, this thesis illustrates how members continuously construct and shape their own belonging experience within
groups. It also demonstrates the different ways members use consumption to try to cope with the duality and constant tension of the belonging paradox as well as explores the link between uncertainty and the ability to play with identities. This leads to a number of theoretical and managerial contributions.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

I traveled to Lens in France, to watch a crucial World Cup soccer game between England and Colombia. The atmosphere inside the stadium was impassioned. As the strains of ‘God Save the Queen’ began I rose and, together with the thirty thousand other English fans, I belted out the words to the national anthem with a vigor that shocked me. For a moment the cloud of ambivalence was lifted. I belonged. Why not, I wondered, submit to the moment and cease struggling? After all, what is wrong with a tee-shirt emblazoned with the Union Jack?….. However for me, the unequivocal answer to such private urgings is contained in the one word; ‘vigilance’.

Caribbean born, British raised novelist Caryl Phillips 2002
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The need for social belonging and inclusion is a powerful human motive (Maslow 1943; Baumeister and Leary 1995; Deci and Ryan 2000; De Cremer 2002; Mead et al. 2011). In fact, some people use DNA testing to examine their family roots and establish to which ethnic groups they belong (Hirschman and Panther-Yates 2008). Even in a marketing context, groups can play an important role in purchase decisions and influence consumption (Stafford 1966; Witt 1969; Ward and Reingen 1990; Carù and Cova 2003; Cova, Kozinets and Shankar 2007). For this reason, marketing and consumer behavior researchers are very interested in the various reasons behind consumers’ desires to belong to groups.
Groups help define who we are and are part of our extended self (Grubb and Grathwohl 1967; Belk 1988; Arnould and Thompson 2005). Groups also help consumers to pursue common consumption interests (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001; Belk and Costa 1998; McAlexander, and Schouten and Koenig 2002; Kozinets 2002; Kates 2002; Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann 2005), to forge feelings of social solidarity (Kozinets 2002; Thompson and Arsel 2004; Muñiz and Schau 2005; Belk and Tumbat 2005) and to take collective action (Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007).

However, it is apparent in the quote above from Caryl Philips; a British-raised Oxford-educated Caribbean novelist, that although he identifies with his British rearing, he also perceives that he does not truly belong to the nation of his upbringing. He carries with him a “belonging paradox” of simultaneously feeling inclusion and exclusion to a given group (Smith and Berg 1987; Martin 1992; Smith, Murphy and Coats 1999; Lewis 2000; Dawson 2006; Walton and Cohen 2007). Past experience taught him to be vigilant because feelings of exclusion are ever-present.

Feelings of inclusion and exclusion can arise for a variety of reasons and the phenomenon appears in research on such topics as social stigma (Kozinets 2001; Adkins and Ozanne 2005), race (Pinel 1999; Mendoza-Denton et al. 2002; Walton and Cohen 2007), age (Kramer 1998), gender (Kramer 1998; Pinel 2004; Kaiser, Vick and Major 2006), sexual orientation (Pinel 1999; Kates 2002, 2004), disability (Murphy 1990), occupation (Martin 1992; Leonard-Barton 1992) and self-doubt about a self-concept
(Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982; Oleson et al. 2000) to name a few. A committed member may have a strong desire to belong to a group, but in perceiving idiosyncratic differences, such as those mentioned above, may doubt his or her ability to belong, even when others would affirm his or her membership. That is, even committed group members can still perceive continuous belonging uncertainty which manifests itself through self-questioning their acceptance and status within a group.

This thesis investigates group membership and belonging from an individual, internal self-concept perspective, focusing on understanding what happens when a committed member questions his or her status and acceptance within a given group and how belonging uncertainty can arise at any time for this member. It examines the ways in which an individual, through various consumption behaviors including symbolic consumption, attempts to deal with a belonging paradox of simultaneous feelings of inclusion and exclusion and the presence of belonging uncertainty. Examining the belonging paradox will also allow for an examination of what it means to be a secure member of a group, one who feels like he or she “truly” belongs. Through this, a greater understanding of how a member constructs his or her own sense of belonging in the face of continuous and fluctuating belonging uncertainties will emerge.
1.1 Marketing’s and Consumer Behavior’s View of Membership and Belonging

Marketing and consumer behavior researchers have a long tradition of studying groups, whether it is informal social groups (Stafford 1966; Witt 1969), reference groups (Moschis 1976; Bearden and Etzel 1982), brand communities (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001; McAlexander, and Schouten and Koenig 2002), cultures of consumption (Kozinets 2001), hypercommunities, (Kozinets 2002), or subcultures of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). For example, with respect to brand communities (groups formed around the consumption of a brand), a traditional assumption in the research is that groups shape the self-views of their members because shared consumption behaviors within a group allow the group to form an ethos (common beliefs and values) (Schouten and McAlexander 1995) also known as a consciousness of kind (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001; O’Guinn and Muñiz 2005; Mathwick, Wiertz and Ruyter 2008), communitas (Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993) or a group will/we-intention (Bagozzi 2000; Cova and Cova 2002; Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006a, 2006b). Based on this thinking, much of this research examines the socialization process of how consumers become members of a group and how they attempt to establish their consciousness of kind/ethos and demonstrate group will (Ward and Reingen 1990; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001).

Within the marketing and consumer behavior literatures, becoming a member of a group and belonging to a group is typically posited as a logical step-by-step process.
One underlying assumption is that individuals who so desire can become members if they follow a ritualized process associated with group membership for that group. The process serves to lead to an increase in commitment, identification with and conformity to the group and the internalization of the ethos (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Belk and Costa 1998; Bagozzi 2000; Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann 2005). Also inherent in the process is the assumption that individuals can achieve a sense of belonging through a step-by-step process that grants status and, by extension, membership (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Belk and Costa 1998). Once an individual secures membership through status, the assumption is that the individual is no longer uncertain about their membership (Mathwick, Wiertz and Ruyter 2008).

In essence, belonging to a group entails performing rituals of belonging and separation, such as acquiring a unique language (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993). This reaffirms a group’s separation from the outside while affirming an individual’s status and commitment to the group’s ethos. Arnould and Price (2000) call these rituals Authoritative Performances because these performances make explicit what members value, and invite adherence to the ethos. The group then employs the ethos to enrich their shared consumption experience, differentiate the group from other groups, and grant or confer membership and status (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Kozinets 1997; 2001; 2002).

Arbitration of the ethos resides with the members of the group who set the evaluative standards of belonging (O’Guinn 1991; Belk and Costa 1998; Leigh, Peters
and Shelton 2006; Cova, Pace and Park 2007; Schau and Muñiz 2007; Mathwick, Wiertz and Ruyter 2008; Schau, Muñiz and Arnould 2009; Beverland and Farrelly 2010). For example, in their study of the Harley’s Owner Group (HOG), Schouten and McAlexander (1995) discovered from hardcore members that owning the “right” motorcycle (chopper) and clothes, and performing the appropriate rituals for an audience means you are a “true” member. On the other hand, not following the rules of a community could lead to negative consequences. Belk and Costa (1998) recount the experience of a Native American who did not win a costume contest within the Mountain Man community because he did not follow the rules of the community set out by the members. Despite his “real” costume, his incomplete participation within the rendezvous fantasy, as judged by the members, was viewed with disdain (Belk and Costa 1998). These examples also illustrate another assumption in the marketing literature; individuals are either in the group or out of the group and it is the group that decides this status.

Another assumption in much of the marketing and consumer behavior literature is that an individual becomes a secure member of a group after completion of the socialization process. That is, the group’s assessment of the individual’s adoption of rituals and his/her movement towards the group ethos is often the basis on which group members confer membership status (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Belk and Costa 1998). If individuals choose to conform to the values of the group, they are far more likely to gain membership status than if they do not conform (Hickman and Ward 2007). Consequently, the literature tends to focus on the dichotomy of hardcore members.
assumed to be certain in their status and, by extension, their belonging, versus new members who are uncertain about their status and belonging within a group (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Quester, Beverland and Farrelly 2006).

It is important to note that status is conceptually distinct from belonging or acceptance (Anderson et al. 2006; Anderson, Ames and Gosling 2008). Status is an individual’s position within the hierarchy of the group (Sell et al. 2004), whereas social acceptance/belonging is how liked and included within the group a person feels (Baumeister and Leary 1995). This distinction is important because a central construct of this thesis – the belonging paradox – includes elements of both acceptance/belonging and status from the individual’s perspective. Marketing currently assumes that status within a group leads to a feeling of belonging. This thesis will demonstrate that this is not always the case.

Approaching the belonging experiences of members as a simple binary construct can miss the complexity of the lived experience of those in the middle, such as committed members who are already members of a group but who experience continuous uncertainty about their belonging. This thesis extends the marketing and consumer behavior literatures by moving the focus beyond looking at how groups grant status/membership and socialize new members, through developing a more dynamic view of belonging. The goal is to examine the notion that uncertainty about belonging can arise at any time for members; therefore, belonging is a never-ending journey. The emphasis of this thesis is on how individual committed members deal with a continuous and
fluctuating belonging uncertainty in constructing their own sense of belonging within groups.

In consumption-related communities, it is the consumption behaviors that help to define group membership (Grubb and Grathwohl 1967; Belk 1988; Kozinets 2001; Arnould and Thompson 2005) and to reduce self-concept uncertainty (Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982; Schouten 1991; Noble and Walker 1997). Social exclusion also often leads individuals to spend and consume strategically to try and gain affiliation (Mead et al. 2011). Therefore, we can also explore the role of consumption as a means of asserting belongingness and as a reaction to the feeling of membership uncertainty by committed members. To do this, however, it is important to understand the role of self-perceived uncertainty.

1.2 Self-Perceived Uncertainty

Belonging is a core human motive, and groups are a central part of an individual’s extended self (Maslow 1943; Baumeister and Leary 1995; Belk 1988). Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that when individuals experience a belonging paradox (i.e., question their belonging) in a group to which they are committed, they also develop a certain level of self-perceived uncertainty about their self-concept as a group member. In general, self-concept refers to how a person subjectively perceives who and what he is, and revolves around doing (eating, sleeping, working), having (possessions) and being (generally, in relation to others) (Grubb and Grathwohl 1967; Sirgy 1982; Belk 1988;
Kleine, Kleine and Kernan 1993). In this thesis, the approach to self concept as it relates to a belonging paradox is one based on three relevant theories from social psychology that deal with self-uncertainty: Uncertainty-Identity Theory\(^1\) (Hogg 2000; 2007), Self-Verification Theory (Swann 1983) and Symbolic Self-Completion Theory (Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982).

According to Uncertainty-Identity Theory (Hogg 2007), feeling uncertain about their self-concept motivates individuals to identify with groups. Uncertain individuals identify more strongly with groups because the group can provide a prescription, or roadmap, in the form of its internal ethos or consciousness of kind. Individuals can reduce uncertainty through the use of this roadmap. Identification also leads to a sense of belongingness to the group (Mael and Ashforth 1992; Bhattacharya, Rao and Glynn 1995). The Uncertainty-Identity Theory research supports the general notion that individuals who are uncertain within a group tend to increase their identification with the group and demonstrate more inter-group bias towards the group in an effort to reduce their self-uncertainty and assert their belongingness (Hogg 2000; Hogg 2007).

However, Uncertainty-Identity Theory is silent on the process and form of group identification. Group identification is a self-perception of oneness or belongingness to a group where the individual brings his or her self-concept in line with the group prototype by emphasizing similarities with members of the group and dissimilarities with non-members of the group (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994; Bhattacharya, Rao and

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\(^1\) Originally called Uncertainty Reduction Theory or Uncertainty Reduction Hypothesis (Hogg 2000)
Glynn 1995; Tropp and Wright 2001; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann 2005). Therefore, perceiving that a group recognizes or verifies your self-concept as a member is important to identification and reducing the membership uncertainty that accompanies the belonging paradox.

According to Self-Verification Theory (Swann 1983), the desire to have others verify one’s existing self-concept is a fundamental self-evaluative motive. Individuals strive to reduce feelings of uncertainty about themselves, their social world, and their place in it. Individuals do this because it renders the social world around them, and groups they belong to, relatively predictable (Swann and Read 1981). This allows individuals to plan effective action and avoid mistakes or harm.

Self-verification researchers identify a number of behaviors performed by individuals to verify their self-concept. One form of self-verifying to others that an individual “looks the part” of a member is the physical act of symbolizing group rituals and norms, which is also a type of identification (Swann and Read 1981). An example of this symbolizing is “self-symbolizing” which comes from the research on Symbolic Self-Completion Theory (Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982). Self-symbolizing is the uncertain individual’s implementation of symbols to build and retain the completeness of the self-concept. An example of this is a member of a sport team’s brand community wearing team clothing and paraphernalia, and using team branded merchandise and accessories.
1.3 Outline for this Thesis

In this thesis, integrating the theories of Uncertainty-Identity Theory, Self-Verification Theory and Symbolic Self-Completion Theory into the lenses of self concept and self uncertainty, allows for the development of a conceptual framework of the belonging experience for members who are committed to a group yet still experience uncertainty about their membership. This framework will allow for discussions of identification, symbolic consumption and the construction of one’s own sense of belonging as responses of committed members to continuous self-perceived uncertainty and the experiencing of a belonging paradox.

This research seeks to make a number of contributions to the consumer behavior marketing and social psychology literatures. These include: unpacking an individual’s construction of the belonging experience within groups; examining issues related to the belonging process and continuous belonging uncertainty; exploring the link between uncertainty and the ability to play with identities.

With respect to unpacking an individual’s construction of the belonging experience within groups, this thesis will demonstrate that belonging to a group is not as simple a process as currently conceptualized in consumer behavior and marketing literature. This research will demonstrate that, even for highly committed members who are already accepted by others as a group member, a belonging paradox can perpetuate continuous uncertainties about belonging/membership. For many members, belonging is a never-ending journey, one that is not a simple step-by-step process. This more dynamic
and idiosyncratic approach to belonging is at the individual self-concept level, thus suggesting that individual members construct and shape their own belonging experience within groups. Placing the focus of belonging on an individual perspective, allows for the consideration of how idiosyncratic factors, such as race, gender, disability or self-doubt, can affect the manner in which an individual perceives his or her own sense of belonging within a group. In addition, these idiosyncratic factors may also cause members to question their belonging, leading to membership uncertainties even after status has been achieved.

This thesis, with its emphasis on the concept of a belonging paradox, also demonstrates how belonging uncertainties can be a pervasive, continuous struggle even for some group members who are committed to a group. Committed individuals experiencing a belonging paradox are in a constant state of uncertainty, somewhere between inclusion and exclusion.

Furthermore, a member may recognize the potential recursive cycle of the belonging paradox as the unsolvable duality of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion. This may give the member the creative freedom to play with their identity with respect to membership. The Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) literature has demonstrated how consumers, in the pursuit of an identity, can exert agency (free will) and play with symbolic resources. This occurs through a dialogue with the cultural frames that are imposed by dominant ideologies and discourses within the marketplace (Askegaard, Arnould, and Kjeldgaard, 2005; Crockett and Wallendorf 2004; Holt 2002; Peñaloza
While it is understood that consumers can play with their identity, little is known about what motivates them to play, other than to socialize (Holt 1995; Kozinets et al. 2004). This thesis will investigate the role of uncertainty and how it can motivate, as well as facilitate individuals in playing with their identity. This may allow consumers to creatively and socially construct their own sense of belonging around themselves, both mentally and physically.

Finally, this thesis aims to demonstrate that the status and socialization of members does not necessarily equate membership certainty on the part of the individual. High group identification may yield different outcomes for different committed members. For example, within the parameters of a belonging paradox, committed members who experience strong identification with a group could potentially engage in excessive self-symbolizing. Whereas, when committed members who have achieved more certainty, and are secure in their belonging, experience strong identification with a group will, they may be less likely to engage in self-symbolizing their membership. From this, it can be inferred that the use of symbols or group rituals does not indicate the level of an individual’s membership certainty; those members, even if they do not appear to be members, who do not engage in the use of symbols or group rituals may actually be the most secure members. This may have important implications for how marketers segment or target members of brand communities. Members who appear not to be members, based on their lack of public, symbolic use of the product, may, in fact, be one of the most loyal and profitable segments.
To accomplish these goals this thesis will investigate the skateboarding subculture. The skateboarding subculture is perfect to investigate issues around belonging because skateboarders perceive themselves at the margins of society and therefore symbolic expressions of belonging are common. This thesis is arranged into six chapters. Chapter 2 will review the literature from social psychology in developing a conceptual framework of the belonging experience from an individual’s perspective. The chapter will end with a review of the marketing and consumer behavior literature as it relates to belonging and how this thesis will extend it. Chapter 3 will discuss the methodology behind the study of the skateboarding subculture. Chapter 4 and 5 will analyze the findings of the study in light of the framework and lens developed in Chapter 2. Finally, the contributions of this thesis will be discussed in Chapter 6.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Belonging Paradox

The belonging paradox has its roots in research on group attachment (Smith, Murphy and Coats 1999; Rom and Mikulincer 2003; Marmarosh and Markin 2007), biculturalism (LaFromboise, Coleman and Gerton 1993; Takenaka 1999; Tsuda 2003; Dawson 2006), stigmatization (Pinel 1999; Walton and Cohen 2007) and organizational change (Smith and Berg 1987; Lewis 2000; Lüscher and Lewis 2008). All of these areas of research touch on the uncertainty and anxiety that arises when there is a feeling of insecurity with a group membership. The following section outlines the findings of various areas of research that pertain to belonging to a group.

2.1.1 Group Attachment

The need to belong is so persuasive in human life that individuals internalize working models of group memberships based on cultural and family groups. Therefore, group attachments become internal representations of groups based on past experiences with groups that govern expectations about a new group (Marmarosh and Markin 2007). Group members who do not experience a group as a safe environment can develop an insecure attachment to the group, which leads to a lack of feeling “contained” in the group, thus making them unable to reflect on group processes (Bion 1961).
Smith, Murphy and Coats (1999) suggest there are two dimensions of group attachment: avoidance and anxiety. Individuals who rate high on group attachment avoidance tend to view closeness to groups as undesirable. They also act independently and tend to avoid dependence on groups. Of particular interest in this research, individuals who rate high on group attachment anxiety feel unworthy of being a group member and worry about being accepted into groups. Consequently, high group anxiety attachment individuals are preoccupied with their emotional reactions to a group and tend to have negative self-concepts of themselves as group members, negative expectations about their ability to deal with group interactions, and fear rejection (Smith, Murphy and Coats 1999; Rom and Mikulincer 2003).

High group anxiety attachment, however, does not preclude them from being part of a group. Smith, Murphy and Coats (1999) report that an individual who is low on avoidance and high on attachment anxiety might still score high on group identification. Consequently, an individual who scores high on group identification may have a negative experience with a group, fear rejection, and feel dissatisfied with the group. This individual will try to please the group by putting more effort into group activities (Erez et al. 2009) and trying harder to fit in (by conforming) but still approaches group experiences with insecurity (Rom and Mikulincer 2003).
2.1.2 Biculturalism

Biculturalism is the study of individuals who live at the juncture between two cultures and can lay claim to belonging to both cultures (LaFromboise, Coleman and Gerton 1993). A bicultural individual maintains their cultural heritage while adapting to a new cultural identity. Support for the belonging paradox comes from the fact that bicultural individuals have a lot in common with both cultures, but are inherently different (bicultural) from each group, thus feeling like they cannot completely fit into either group. This creates internal conflict, which Du Bois (1903) labels double-consciousness, or the simultaneous awareness of oneself as being a member and an alien of two or more cultural groups. Dawson (2006) calls this double-consciousness partial inclusion or the space between total exclusion and total inclusion. For example, Japanese Peruvians and Japanese Brazilians who traveled to Japan as migrant workers during the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s were treated as Peruvians/Brazilians or simply as foreigners in Japan and as Japanese or Chinese in their respective countries of Peru and Brazil. This happened despite the fact that these individuals were of mixed-blood, and lived in Peru or Brazil for two or three generations (Takenaka 1999; Tsuda 2003).

Similarly, in his study of African Americans working in predominately white corporate America, Dawson (2006) finds that African Americans often felt excluded or did not feel comfortable socializing with white coworkers. They tended to keep relationships with white coworkers as “strictly business” relationships. These business relationships lacked the informal social interactions that foster trust, information sharing,
and a sense of belonging and camaraderie. Likewise, they also felt disconnected, lacking of sense of belonging within the African American community because of different careers, aspirations and experiences compared to others in that community.

An individual’s feeling of being in-between groups, and not feeling fully part of either, leads to vigilance, anxiety and uncertainty due to the fear of rejection and exclusion (Kanno 2003; Jafari and Goulding 2008; Huynh, Devos and Smalarz 2011; Sekhon and Szmigin 2011), as well as a loss of a sense of belonging with respect to both groups (Dawson 2006). At the same time, however, these individuals identify with, and demonstrate strong commitment to both groups. This results in bicultural individuals perceiving that they have to work harder with respect to demonstrating cultural knowledge (Cheryan and Monin 2005), and in jobs within corporate America, to achieve advancement within the company (Dawson 2006).

2.1.3 Stigmatization

For some people, like the disabled, racial minorities or women, the threat of stereotyping or discrimination is always present in the back of their minds (Pinel 2004). Individuals who expect to be stereotyped by others, and who are sensitive to rejection based on their stigma, develop a heightened stigma consciousness and anxiously expect, or readily perceive, threatening cues towards their self-concept that they would have otherwise overlooked (Kleck and Strenta, 1980; Steele, and Aronson 1995; Kramer 1998; Pinel 1999; Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002; Steele, Spencer and Aronson 2002). For
example, women who anticipate being the sole woman in a group expect to be stereotyped (Cohen and Swim 1995). This effect may be so prominent that individuals develop an uncertainty about belonging, questioning whether others similar to them belong within a group (Walton and Cohen 2007; Johnson, Richeson and Finkel 2011).

Stigma can also lead an individual to experience attribution ambiguity, an uncertainty about whether judgments made about him or her stem from personal merit or from prejudices held against his or her stigma (Crocker and Major 1989). For example, an African American in white corporate America can pose the question, “Did I lose my job because I am an African American or because I deserved to be fired based on job performance?” The effect also works for positive feedback on belonging. African Americans may perceive social acceptance feedback from Caucasians as disingenuous because of the strong societal norms in the United States, which discourage the display of prejudice (Mendes et al. 2008). For example, an African American individual may question, “Do they accept me because I am African American or because I deserve to be in the group based on merit?” Individuals who feel uncertainty in trusting feedback or in their ability to accurately assess the feelings of others will likely live in a chronic state of uncertainty, and experience difficulty in learning about themselves and their abilities (Aronson and Inzlicht 2004; Mendes et al. 2008).
2.1.4 Organizational Change

In the organizational change literature, Marianne Lewis and her colleagues examine the paradoxes of belonging (Lewis 2000; Lüscher, Lewis and Ingram 2006; Lüscher and Lewis 2008). They focus on the tensions between the self and the group, and how individuals can be themselves within a group (Smith and Berg 1987). Lewis (2000) identifies three such belonging paradoxes: tensions between individuality and the group (Smith and Berg 1987), tensions between group boundaries (Leonard-Barton 1992; Martin 1992) and the tension between cultures (Naisbitt 1994). Feelings of inclusion and exclusion arise because individuals are members of various occupations and subgroups within an organization (Martin 1992). Ybema (1996) finds such tensions within the workers at a Dutch amusement park. Workers at the park shared a feeling of pride in the success of the organization, but emphasized social distinctions between new professionals and established craftsmen. The paradoxes of belonging arise because of changes such as mergers, restructuring, globalization, or the formation of subgroups within an organization. Akin to the effects on biculturalism is the pull of two distinct groups when there are changes occurring within the organization. When such changes happen, an individual may feel as if he or she does not fit into either group. For example, as multinational corporations connect distant locales through advanced telecommunications and common goals, local groups struggle to fit in while maintaining their ethnic and linguistic distinctions (Naisbitt 1994).
Paradoxes of belonging can develop into “recursive cycles” (Lüscher and Lewis 2008 p. 232). According to Putnam (1986), “recursive cycles” is a double bind in which individuals feel stuck in an emotional cycle of recurring social interactions. For example, when individuals move toward the group, they fear losing their self-concept. Yet, as individuals reveal their self, they risk being rejected by the group. One side of this dynamic drives the opposite, fostering a recurring cycle and the inability to take action in order to get out of the cycle. Recalling the story of Caryl Phillips, found in chapter 1 of this thesis, the idea of recursive cycles appears in the way Phillips wanted to lose himself in the sea of English soccer fans, while at the same time fearing rejection by the group. In essence, Caryl Phillips is stuck in the middle where the feelings of inclusion lead to feelings of exclusion. A result of this is an increased desire to fit in and feel included, however, at the same time Caryl felt as if he was unable to do so, thus, creating a recursive cycle. Due to recursive cycles, Lewis and her colleagues believe that an individual cannot eliminate or resolve paradoxes of belonging, but manage them by embracing the duality of the paradox. Embracing paradoxes of belonging can force managers to move beyond the simple in/out or either/or solutions.

The focus with respect to the belonging paradox in this thesis is conceptually different than the focus of the paradoxes of belonging within the organizational change literature. The paradoxes of belonging in the organizational change literature focuses on how individuals can be themselves within a group. The focus of the belonging paradox in
this thesis, however, is not on how individuals can be themselves, but rather on how individuals attempt to deal with the continuous uncertainties of the belonging paradox.

2.1.5 Summary of Research Related to the Belonging Paradox

All four areas of research discussed in this section (group attachment, biculturalism, stigmatization and organizational change) demonstrate that belonging to a group is a complex, anxious and insecure process, even for members that are committed. All four areas also provide initial support for the existence of the belonging paradox. The belonging paradox is an unsolvable duality of simultaneous feelings of inclusion and exclusion within a group. Attachments to groups form at an early age; therefore, it is likely that the belonging paradox develops and is continually influenced by past belonging experiences with groups.

Feelings of inclusion arise because a member is committed to the group, identifies with the group, and is granted status by members of the group. The feelings of exclusion can arise for a number of reasons, such as social stigmas (Pinel 1999; Mendoza-Denton et al. 2002; Walton and Cohen 2007), and inherent individual level differences between members, which include factors like: age (Kramer 1998; Pinel 2004; Kaiser, Vick and Major 2006); sexual orientation (Pinel 1999; Kates 2002, 2004); race (Pinel 1999; Mendoza-Denton et al. 2002; Walton and Cohen 2007); occupation (Leonard-Barton 1992; Martin 1992); disability (Murphy 1990); and simply self-doubt about a self-concept (Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982; Oleson et al. 2000). These
idiosyncrasies likely cause an individual to doubt his or her ability to achieve the type of self-presentation or performance of rituals needed to conform to the group. This causes the individual to question the nature of his or her belonging to the group. If the individual questions his or her performance, it leads to ambiguous self-questions such as, “Did I achieve status with the group because of my unique idiosyncrasies?” “Did members go easy on me or was my performance recognized for meeting the group’s criteria?” These idiosyncrasies and self-doubts can lead to feelings of ambiguity and exclusion. An individual, who identifies with the group, and as a result, has gained status within said group, also feels a sense of inclusion. Consequently, the individual experiences a belonging paradox and continuous uncertainty.

This thesis develops the belonging paradox within the context of consumer behavior, and examines how even committed group members use consumption as a means of dealing with the paradox. By extension, it also examines how these committed members use consumption in the construction and shaping of their own belonging experience in the face of continuous uncertainty.

2.2 Conceptual Development of the Belonging Experience

Most of the marketing and consumer behavior literature focuses on new members and the uncertainty that surrounds the socialization process (Ward and Reingen 1990; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). This chapter seeks to build on that research through discussing the uncertainty that can exist for individuals who are already accepted by
others as a member in a group and how the experience of a belonging paradox can affect those individuals’ self-perceived belonging experiences within a group.

Experiencing a belonging paradox can lead to a high level of continual anxiety and uncertainty within an individual (Smith, Murphy and Coats 1999; Dawson 2006; Walton and Cohen 2007). This can be very disruptive to a person’s sense of self, and is likely to require some form of effort to deal with these uncertainties. Given the consumer focus of this thesis, the research will explore the ways in which people use consumption in an attempt to deal with a belonging paradox, and the consequential self-questioning of their belonging.

Addressing this issue requires an understanding of how an individual constructs his or her own sense of belongingness and membership. Using the belonging paradox as a starting point, this thesis will develop a conceptual framework that looks at the membership from the individual’s perspective, and answers the question of what happens when an individual questions their belonging in a group. To accomplish this, this chapter will review three theories that form the foundations for the development of a conceptual framework, and the lens that will guide this research. The three theories are: Uncertainty-Identity Theory, Self-Verification Theory and Symbolic Self-Completion Theory.

These theories primarily focus on social categories, and ways to reduce self-concept uncertainty. According to Social Identity Theory, groups are social categories (Hogg 2003). When we cognitively categorize someone as a member of a particular group, it may be a broad social category, such as a PhD student, or a specific group, such
as a Marketing PhD Student at Queen’s University. Social groups are a continuum, ranging from loose-knit social or cultural categories, to tightly-knit groups. As such, research that focuses on social categories, like Symbolic Self-Completion Theory, Uncertainty-Identity Theory, and Self-Verification Theory, is applicable to groups as a whole.

In addition to their relationship to groups, all three theories focus on how individuals reduce self-concept uncertainty. Groups are an important element of an individual’s self-concept. Individuals belong to groups in order to build up, create and/or reinforce their self-concepts (Grubb and Grathwohl 1967; Belk 1988; Kleine, Kleine and Kernan 1993). Therefore, self-concept uncertainty conceptually relates to uncertainty about belonging. This is another reason why these three theories are useful for providing insights about how individuals deal with the uncertainty associated with the belonging paradox.

At the individual level within a group, this thesis focuses on an individual’s self-perception of their belonging and develops a conceptual framework called the Self-Concept Uncertainty with Respect to Belonging framework (SCURB). As will be discussed below, there are three types of self-perceptions that impact an individual’s sense of belonging: what the individual perceives about his or her own sense of belonging within the group; what other’s think of the individual’s belonging within the group; what the individual believes others think about his or her belonging within the group. These

1 For the purposes of this thesis, self-perception and perception are interchangeable.
perceptions are not mutually exclusive, but rather reinforce each other, helping to build a sense of belonging. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the contributions this research will make to marketing, consumer behavior, our understanding of the belonging experience, and excessive behavior.

### 2.2.1 Uncertainty-Identity Theory

Research on Uncertainty-Identity Theory stresses the importance of identification and consensual validation in reducing self-concept uncertainty. This research also demonstrates that individuals, who are uncertain with their self-concept, display bias towards their in-groups and, in extreme cases of uncertainty, focus on achieving the characteristics of the group prototype by becoming attracted to certain types of groups. These concepts appear to be important building blocks in the context of researching the experiences of a belonging paradox, and in building a conceptual framework of the belonging experience.

An individual can resolve the feeling of self-concept uncertainty in many different ways. The fundamental premise of Uncertainty-Identity Theory is that group identification is one of the most effective ways to reduce self-uncertainty. The basis of Uncertainty-Identity Theory is Social Identity Theory, which posits that self-categorization leads to group identification (Turner et al. 1987). Groups are social categories, which we cognitively represent as a set of characteristics, attributes, attitudes and behaviors, all of which are strongly associated with a particular group. This is known
as a group prototype (Hogg 2000). The group prototype is a cognitive representation of how group members should look and behave, which is shared by group members. The concept of a group prototype is similar to marketing’s and consumer behavior’s consciousness of kind or ethos (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001). When we categorize someone as a member of a particular group, we assign the group’s characteristics and attributes in varying degrees to that person. We view them through the lens of the group prototype, and we have expectations of what they think and how they should behave.

Individuals also do the same when considering their own group memberships. Group identification is a self-categorization process in which the individual brings his or her self-concept inline with the group prototype. This is achieved by emphasizing similarities with members who are seen as possessing the characteristics of the group prototype, and de-emphasizing dissimilarities with non-members of the group (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994; Bhattacharya, Rao and Glynn 1995; Tropp and Wright 2001; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; O’Guinn and Muñiz 2005; Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann 2005).

Through the process of identification and by identifying with a prototype, an individual can reduce self-concept uncertainty. The group prototype provides people with a map of who they are and what they should think, feel, and do as a member of a group. An individual experiences a sense of belongingness within the group because they feel some degree of connection to the group (Mael and Ashforth 1992; Bhattacharya, Rao and
Glynn 1995). In addition, individuals can predict the behavior and social interactions of others who identify with the same group prototype, thus further reducing their own self-concept uncertainty.

To confirm the link between group identification and reducing self-concept uncertainty, Hogg and his colleagues conducted a number of experiments (Mullin and Hogg 1998; Mullin and Hogg 1999; Hogg and Grieve 1999; Grieve and Hogg 1999; Reid and Hogg 2005). These experiments use the minimal group paradigm where subjects, for purposes of the experiment, are randomly categorized as members of arbitrary groups using categorical concepts that are either fictitious or unrelated to the experiment (Bourhis, Sachdev and Gagnon 1994; Diehl 1990). Originally, uncertainty was primed or manipulated by task, situational or judgmental uncertainty not directly related to a person’s self-concept. However, more consistent with this thesis’s focus on actual groups, recent studies (Hogg et al. 2007; Hogg 2007) prime self-concept uncertainty in real groups by asking participants to focus on things that made them feel uncertain/certain about themselves. The results revealed through the use of real groups are consistent with the finding that group identification reduces self-concept uncertainty.

Along with the finding pertaining to the reduction of self-concept uncertainty through strong group identification, Hogg and his colleagues also find that individuals with strong group identification display more intergroup discrimination (Mullin and Hogg 1998), show more in-group bias (Hogg and Grieve 1999), and have a desire to seek consensual validation and interact with in-group members (Mullin and Hogg 1999). This
demonstrates that individuals, who are uncertain with their self-concept, when identifying with a group, show more favoritism towards that group, seeking to self-verify themselves as group members. Individuals also identify more strongly when their self-concept uncertainty is subjectively important (Mullin and Hogg 1999; Hogg 2000), and the group with which they identify is relevant to self-uncertainty reduction (Reid and Hogg 2005).

Hogg et al. (2007) speculate that individuals who possess chronic, or extreme, levels of self-uncertainty, brought upon by personal or life crises, may be motivated to identify strongly with groups that are highly internally consistent, cohesive, share common goals, and are “groupy”. That is, the individuals identify with groups characterized by high entitativity (Campbell 1958; Hamilton and Sherman 1996; Lickel et al. 2000). Groups that have high group entitativity have prototypes that are clear, and tend to be the more extreme groups (Hogg 2004; Hogg 2005b). In other words, groups with a clear prototype will give self-concept uncertain individuals the clearest roadmap of behaviors to reduce their self-concept uncertainty. Therefore, people that feel a high degree of self-concept uncertainty identify more strongly with high entitativity extreme groups (Jetten, Hogg and Mullin 2000; Hogg et al. 2007; Hogg, Adelman and Blagg 2010). When theorizing about belonging uncertainty, the characteristics of the group, such as the group prototype and group entitativity, seem to play an important role in reducing self-concept uncertainty and must be considered.

According to Uncertainty-Identity Theory, individuals use tools that appear to be important, such as identification, consensual validation, bias towards the group and group
characteristics, in order to reduce self-concept uncertainty. Membership and belonging are significant building blocks of an individual’s self-concept; therefore, the findings of Uncertainty-Identity Theory extend to the research on belonging uncertainty and the belonging paradox.

Indeed, Hogg (2007) also speculates that Uncertainty-Identity Theory can be extended to the concept of group membership. For Hogg, one of the most important elements when considering membership is the group prototype. Recall that a group prototype is a set of characteristics, attributes, attitudes and behaviors strongly associated with a particular group (Hogg 2000). Prototypes tend to govern group life, and group members can vary a fair deal in terms of how prototypical of the group they are, how prototypical they consider themselves to be, and how prototypical others consider them to be (Marques et al. 2001; Hogg and van Knippenberg 2003; Hogg 2005a; Van Kleef et al. 2007; Walton and Cohen 2007; Lane and Gibbons 2007). Therefore, on an individual level, a member’s self-perceived level of how prototypical they are within a group becomes an important element in how that member perceives his or her membership or belongingness within that group, as well as a source of potential self-concept uncertainty (Hogg 2007).

Much of what takes place within groups can be considered a dialogue. This discourse concerning prototypes and prototypicality poses the questions “who are we?” and “where do I fit in the group?” (Hogg and Tindale 2005). Members who consider
themselves to be less prototypical of the group may well be more uncertain about their membership. It is not clear to these members where or how they fit in.

Accordingly, in extending Uncertainty-Identity Theory to include membership, it is evident that members who are uncertain about their prototypicality will likely seek to reduce this uncertainty through identification and consensual validation (Hogg 2007). In extreme cases of uncertain prototypicality, a member may rigorously strive to be conformist and engage in zealotry (e.g. Hogg 2004; Hogg 2005b; Hogg, Adelman and Blagg 2010) or radicalism (e.g. Hogg, Meehan and Farquharson 2010). For example, consistent with Uncertainty-Identity Theory (Hogg 2007), Wicklund and Braun (1987) demonstrate, using law students and lawyers, that highly committed members of a social group who have not yet become accomplished group members are more likely than full-fledged prototypical members to describe themselves in terms of the characteristics they associate with the group prototype. Even more relevant to this thesis, Wicklund and Braun (1987) find that by threatening a participant’s sense of accomplishment in a self-relevant group, the participant’s focus on the characteristics associated with a group prototype increases, presumably to reduce the self-concept uncertainty. A conclusion emerges that individuals experiencing extreme or continual self-concept uncertainty tend to focus on a limited set of characteristics of the prototype.

Uncertainty-Identity Theory points to the importance of identification in reducing self-concept uncertainty. It also demonstrates the significance of how self-perceptions of one’s self-concept as a member play an imperative role in identification. Uncertainty-
Identity Theory expounds how this identification leads to a desire to seek consensual validation. The individual’s perceptions focus on how they perceive their own membership, as well as how he or she perceives the manner in which others view his or her membership. This theory, however, does not specify the forms or behaviors this identification may take. Since this thesis is focused on the role consumption plays in dealing with uncertainty about belonging and the belonging paradox, it is necessary to link identification with behaviors that could have an impact on consumption. Self-Verification Theory provides a relevant basis for this task because it focuses on ways in which individuals try to influence the perceptions others have of them.

2.2.2 Self and Collective Self-Verification of a Group Membership

Self-verification research demonstrates how individuals who are committed to a self-concept actively try to shape the environment to confirm that self-concept. According to Self-Verification Theory, individuals want to perceive that they are known and understood according to their firmly held feelings and beliefs about themselves (Swann 1983). When feeling that others misunderstand them, individuals work hard using a number of different behaviors to attempt to ensure that their self-concept is understood and verified. Research demonstrates that the consequences of successful self-verification range from stable self-concepts (Swann and Predmore 1985), to increased relationship satisfaction (Swann, Chang-Schneider and Angulo 2007; Cast and Burke 2002) and commitment (Swann and Pelham 2002). These positive outcomes help
individuals deal with self-concept uncertainty, and also provide the important steps in building a sense of membership (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Therefore, research on self-verification, including the actions and possible behaviors of self-verification, are important building blocks in the development of a conceptual framework of how individuals deal with belonging uncertainty and the belonging paradox.

The basic premise of Self-Verification Theory (Swann 1983) is that people form “self-views\(^2\)” by observing how others treat them (e.g., Cooley 1902; Mead 1934). Once individuals form their self-concepts (for example, as a group member), they work to verify and preserve these self-concepts by seeking appraisals from others that confirm their existing self-concepts regardless of whether these self-concepts are negative or positive (Swann Pelham and Krull 1989), or objectively accurate (Swann, Rentfrow and Guinn 2003).

Individuals work to verify their self-concept because they seek order and symmetry in their self-perceptions and social reality (Lecky 1945). Individuals are able to stabilize their self-concept and reduce self-concept uncertainty through the self-verification process (Swann and Read 1981; Swann and Hill 1982; Swann 1983; 1990; 1999). This enables them to rely on their self-concepts in making predictions about their world and social interactions, maintaining a sense of coherence, control and continuity. The core assumption is that individuals want to be known and understood according to

\(^2\) Although, self-verification research uses the term “self-view”, conceptually it is very similar to a self-concept therefore this thesis will use the terms interchangeably.
how they see themselves (Swann et al 2003). Individuals who experience a feeling of being understood by others can predict how others will act towards them, thus allowing interactions with others to proceed smoothly (Swann, Stein-Seroussi and Giesler 1992).

Self-verification appears to be a powerful motive for individuals to help make sense of the world around them and researchers identify many different ways in which people attempt to self-verify and achieve that subjective understanding of their self-concept. These ways include: selective interaction (Swann, Pelham and Krull 1989), creating allies (McNulty and Swann 1994) and biased information processing through selective attention and the encoding and retrieval of self confirming feedback (Swann and Read 1981). For example, when an individual has to choose a partner, the individual shows a higher preference for a partner that verifies how the individual sees himself or herself (De La Ronde and Swann 1998; Swann, Wenzlaff and Tafarodi 1992; Katz, Beach and Anderson 1996; Swann 2005). Individuals also try to resist feedback that is inconsistent with how they view their self-concept.

Self-verification is particularly pronounced in individuals who start believing that others misconstrue them; this apparently occurs because these individuals compensate by working especially hard to bring others to confirm their self-concepts (Swann and Read 1981). For example, investigating a self-concept of dominance (the degree to which individuals like to take charge of situations), Swann and Hill (1982) find that when participants receive feedback from a partner that fails to verify the participants’ dominance-related self-concepts, participants behave in ways designed to resist the
feedback. Dominance participants viewed as submissive, behave more dominantly (actively refuting experimental feedback through conversation), whereas the reverse behavioral tendency occurs among submissive participants viewed as having a dominance related self-concept.

Recent work by Brooks, Swann and Mehta (2011), demonstrates that even when there is no direct challenge to an individual’s self-concept, if the individual perceives that efforts to behave in a self-verifying manner are blocked (in the form of not given an opportunity), they redouble their efforts in a subsequent task to achieve self-verification. When challenges arise about their own subjective understanding of their self-concept (an unfavourable experience on the part of the individual) or they feel their self-verification efforts are blocked, individuals work hard to reduce the uncertainty.

Swann (1983) also speculates that individuals display identity cues to “look the part” in an attempt to receive self-verifying feedback that matches the individual’s own subjective understanding of who they are. The concept of self-symbolizing supports this claim (Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982). Basically, individuals engage in a variety of symbolic activities, such as wearing a uniform, to gain self-verification of who they are. By using symbols related to a self-concept, individuals subjectively perceive and attempt to shape the world around them according to their own view of their self-concept.

According to self-verification research, when an individual questions their self-concept, they can engage in a number of behaviors and activities to try to restore that self-concept. Belonging to a group can be an important self-concept for an individual.
Therefore, self-verification, and its resulting behaviors, provides a window into how individuals may cope with a belonging paradox. These behaviors are important to consider when building a conceptual framework of the belonging experience. Indeed, Pinel and Swann (2000) reason that self-verification can be a motive for people to join social movements that share a similar self-concept, and in the process, verify their social identity or collective self-concept.

Recent research extends Self-Verification Theory to the collective self-concept level and membership (Chen, Chen and Shaw 2004; Lemay and Ashmore 2004; Chen, Taylor and Jeung 2006; Gómez et al. 2007; Gómez et al. 2009; Swann et al. 2009). The collective self-concept is the self, defined in terms of a social category or group membership (Brewer and Gardner 1996; Hogg and Williams 2000). It is an individual’s belief about particular attributes that characterize them as a group member. Therefore, collective self-verification is the act of an individual perceiving that others confirm his or her particular conceptions of their self-concept as a group member (Chen, Chen and Shaw 2004; Chen, Taylor and Jeung 2006). The manner in which an individual perceives how others comprehend his or her membership affects how an individual views that membership.

In studying collective self-verification, Lemay and Ashmore (2004) focus on changes in self-categorizations over time, in various social categories, by university students during a period of transition (first semester of their first year in university). The authors compare the participants’ own self-categorizations in 85 different social
categories with the same participants’ perceptions of the proportion of others who would categorize them as members of these categories at a later date. Participants’ self-categorizations predict their own subjective perceptions of being categorized by others (collective self-verification) into these categories. In sum, an individual’s perception of his or her membership will affect what that individual thinks others are thinking about his or her membership. These will then feedback into an individual’s perception of his or her own membership. A sense of belonging can be established through two processes that reinforce each other: the manner in which an individual views himself or herself as a member, and how the individual believes others view him or her as a member.

Consistent with the research on self-verification, an individual will engage in biased information processing that is consistent with membership when said membership is part of his or her self-concept. Collective self-verification leaves a member believing that others see them as a member of a particular social category.

Lemay and Ashmore (2004) also find that when the group is more important to an individual’s self-concept, the collective self-verification is stronger. Whether or not others truly think that the university-student participants are part of the social category did not seem to matter. To an individual, the ability to perceive that he or she has the capability to give others the opportunity to verify his or her membership, or that he or she subjectively perceives that others have the ability to see him or her as members, seems to be important. Individuals must believe others see them as a member in order to perceive that they are a member. A member’s self-perceptions of their membership appear to be an
important catalyst in the membership process. Hence, this thesis will investigate how an individual constructs and perceives their own sense of belonging, and how the belonging paradox alters their perception of that construction.

Using an actual group over a five-month period, Chen, Taylor and Jeung (2006) measure collective self-verification as the correspondence between an individual’s own description as a member of the group, and a partner’s rating of that individual as a member. They find greater collective self-verification, reflected by stronger correspondence between own and partner ratings, for attributes considered more distinctive of the group. They also find that high group identifiers have greater collective self-verification than low group identifiers, which is consistent with Mullin and Hogg’s (1999) finding that identification leads to the desire for consensual validation from other members. Chen, Taylor and Jeung’s (2006) findings also replicate and extend the scenario-based research of Chen, Chen and Shaw (2004), by investigating the long-term effects of collective self-verification on how members perceive their own membership. They find that collective self-verification on attributes considered more distinctive of the group leads to higher perceptions of the self as a prototypical group member, and greater dedication/commitment to the group.

Recent work on collective self-verification also introduces the concept of group identities, which are the beliefs about the characteristics of the group (Swann et al. 2009). Chen and her colleagues (2004 and 2006) and Lemay and Ashmore (2004) focus on verification of collective identities that are personal identities associated with group
membership. Gómez, Seyle, Huici and Swann (2009) find that individuals actively try to verify their group identity even when that group identity is not self-descriptive. For example, “Canadians are polite” but “I am rude”. The effect was stronger for individuals with high group identification.

Some individuals may feel that their personal self-concept merges with their collective self-concept. This is called identity fusion, which means they feel one with the group (Swann et al. 2009). Identity fusion is related to group identification and is associated with profound familial connection to the group and its members and feelings of obligation to sacrifice for a group with expectations that others will do the same (Swann et al. 2009; Gómez et al. 2011). Recent research by Gómez et al. (2011) demonstrates that identity fused group members who experimentally perceive ostracism from either outgroup or ingroup members work hard to achieve collective self-verification. They work to achieve this through endorsing extreme pro group actions such as fighting or dying for the group, refusing to leave the group and donating money to an ingroup member. The effects hold even when the ostracism stems from the group member being deemed “too good” for the group. In terms of this thesis, identity fused group members may actually be experiencing a form of a belonging paradox. They perceive inclusion because they feel one with the group but at the same time they feel the exclusion of the ostracism. Furthermore, all of the actions fused group members take appear to be consistent with a belonging perspective. The members who feel threatened
by the ostracism are trying to symbolically reaffirm through collective self-verification of their belonging to the group.

The processes of collective self-verification, and the ways in which individuals try to shape, influence and interpret the environment around them to be consistent with their beliefs about their membership, is important to consider when investigating the belonging paradox and its associated belonging uncertainty. Given the literature suggests that collective self-verification leads to a greater sense of membership, it may provide insight into how individuals deal with a belonging paradox.

The existing research on collective self-verification assumes that individuals are relatively certain about membership; however, this is contradictory for those experiencing a belonging paradox. Individuals experiencing a belonging paradox may have the desire to belong but believe they cannot fully achieve that desire due to past experiences with groups that cause them to doubt their ability to belong. Research on strategic self-verification (Swann and Schroeder 1995; Swann, Bosson and Pelham 2002) may help suggest a way to address this gap in the research on collective self-verification.

Originally, Self-Verification Theory assumed that individuals strive to verify self-concepts that match their characteristically unique core self-concept, a concept an individual strongly holds. However, recent research suggests that individuals may undertake self-verification to obtain exceptionally positive appraisals on relationship-relevant or contextually important self-concepts (Swann and Schroeder 1995; Drigotas et al. 1999; Swann, Bosson and Pelham 2002; Chen English and Peng 2006). The concept
of group membership that appears throughout this thesis is one example of a contextually important self-concept.

The label given to the verification discussed in the pervious paragraph is strategic self-verification. Strategic self-verification occurs when a person seeks verification of their extreme ideal selves rather than of their “typical” selves. When it is evident to an individual that positive evaluations are crucial to the success of their self-concept in a particular area, they are likely to seek especially positive evaluations, even if their chronic self-concept in said area is negative. Furthermore, according to strategic self-verification, not only do individuals want to be seen in a favorable light, but they also strive to truly achieve the highly favorable self-concept in the area of concern (Bosson and Swann 2001). That is, individuals are seeking self-verification of an actual, albeit ideal, self-concept. This is not to say that individuals are putting forth a false front in striving for an ideal self-concept; they are sincere in, and feel they deserve recognition for that effort (Bosson and Swann 2001). For example, Swann, Bosson and Pelham (2002) find that in a dating relationship, individuals wanted, and actually evoked, overly positive appraisals of their physical attractiveness; these desired appraisals far exceeded their own self-concept of their physical attractiveness. The authors reason that this occurs because physical attractiveness is a key component of attraction that allows individuals to move forward in the dating relationship. Dating relationships are typically a highly uncertain time. This uncertainty may also be a contributing factor in the individual’s use of strategic self-verification.
Individuals with negative self-concepts also tend to be relatively uncertain about these negative self-concepts (Bosson and Swann 2001). Therefore, these individuals are likely to use strategic self-verification because this uncertainty allows them to test out different self-concepts. In support of this hypothesis, Swann, Bosson and Pelham (2002) find that, in the dating context, individuals who are less certain about their own attractiveness self-concept are more likely to engage in strategic self-verification.

Uncertainty and a negative self-concept appear to drive an individual’s use of strategic self-verification and his or her focus on an ideal self-concept. The same reasoning behind strategic self-verification should apply in the area of collective self, as well as membership. The same process may apply to the belonging paradox. In many ways, individuals who are experiencing a belonging paradox have an uncertain negative self-concept in relation to their belonging, due to their past failures in this area. Therefore, the processes, tactics and possible behaviors associated with strategic collective self-verification are important elements to consider when building a conceptual framework of belonging. This also must be taken into consideration when trying to answer the question of how individuals live with a belonging paradox.

Research in self-verification and collective self-verification both point to the importance of perceptions in the self-verification process and the reduction of uncertainty. In Uncertainty-Identity Theory, there is also an emphasis on the importance of perceptions due to the role of group identification in reducing uncertainty. Group identification is a perception of oneness, or belongingness to a group, in which the
individual brings his or her self-concept in line with the group prototype. To achieve this, individuals emphasize similarities with members of the group, as well as dissimilarities with non-members of the group (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994; Bhattacharya, Rao and Glynn 1995; Tropp and Wright 2001; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann 2005).

An individual’s perception that a group recognizes his or her self-concept as a group member is important in order to achieve identification. Strategic collective self-verification is the manner in which an individual perceives how other members confirm his or her particular conceptions of the self as a group member. Therefore, group identification and strategic collective self-verification should reinforce each other. Group identification reinforces the desire for collective self-verification. This desire occurs when an individual strives to be known and understood by others according to their self-concept of being a group member, a key to identification (Swann et al., 2004; Chen, Chen and Shaw 2004; Chen, Taylor and Jeung 2006; Gómez et al. 2007). Conversely, the individual enjoys heightened feelings of coherence and predictability when he or she perceives that other members see him or her as they see themselves (Swann, 1983; Swann, Stein-Seroussi, and Giesler, 1992). In this case, the individual feels understood as a member, and yearns for that feeling to continue, thus leading to increased group identification (Swann et al., 2003; Swann et al., 2004).

Individuals appear to put more effort into the strategic collective self-verification and group identification process when their self-concept is more uncertain and/or
important. According to Uncertainty-Identity Theory, this strategic collective self-verification should focus on the group prototype; membership uncertainty diminishes when an individual perceives an alignment with the prototype. The literature on self-verification and collective self-verification also suggests that an individual builds his or her sense of belonging through the interplay between his or her perception of belonging and his or her perception of what others think of his or her belonging. These two factors reinforce each other and put individual perception at the center of a sense of belonging. However, neither Self-Verification Theory nor Uncertainty-Identity Theory adequately addresses the physical manifestations of these two theories. Physical manifestations, such as enacting and consuming group rituals, symbols and norms appear to be one of the most effective ways for an individual to demonstrate their membership in a group (Marshall 2002; Collins 2004; Chalmers and Arthur 2008). Given that this thesis focuses on how consumers use consumption to deal with a belonging paradox, there needs to be a closer link established between self-verification and group identification on the one hand and consumption of rituals and symbols on the other. The last pillar of the conceptual framework is Symbolic Self-Completion Theory, which focuses on the manner in which individuals consume symbols to overcome self-concept uncertainty.

2.2.3 Symbolic Self-Completion Theory

Symbolic Self-Completion Theory argues that individuals participate in many activities, such as the purchase, consumption and/or displaying of possessions, intended
to substantiate their definition of themselves, thus clarifying their self-concept (Wicklund and Gollwitzer, 1982). These acts are especially prevalent when individuals feel uncertain or threatened. Therefore, Symbolic Self-Completion Theory focuses on the "volition" state, or implementation of actions, to reduce self-concept uncertainty (Gollwitzer 1987; Gollwitzer et al. 1999). The focal point of Symbolic Self-Completion Theory is the use of symbols to help reduce uncertainty around a self-concept.

Symbols and rituals are also an important way for a member to demonstrate that they belong to a group (Marshall 2002; Collins 2004; Chalmers and Arthur 2008). Employing Symbolic Self-Completion Theory, Ledgerwood Liviatan and Carnevale (2007) demonstrate that group members value symbols or objects possessed by the group. These possessions, also known as group property, can serve to communicate the group’s identity to others, and by extension, an individual’s membership within the group. In a similar vein, Symbolic-Self-Completion Theory can illuminate how individuals may use consumption in the context of a belonging paradox and continual belonging uncertainty. This theory will also assist in tying collective self-verification and group identification more closely to consumption. The act of symbolically “looking the part” through self-symbolizing, is one way to self-verify and gain a sense of group identification.

An individual’s perception of how others view him or her creates an external element in both Uncertainty-Identity Theory and Self-Verification Theory. For symbolic self-completion, the presence of the audience is important, but the theory is much more internally focused. The view that an enduring pursuit of a self-definition is spurred by an
individual’s commitment to a specific self-definition is at the core of Symbolic Self-Completion Theory. Research concerning this theory uses the term self-definition, which is equivalent to an individual’s self-concept. For consistency purposes, this thesis uses the term self-concept.

Symbolic self-completion focuses on how individuals actively rebuild their self-concept after it experiences a threat. This threat arises because of a gap between an ideal self-concept and a perceived actual self-concept. This generates a significant level of tension and uncertainty, and is only mitigated by positive perceived advancement towards the ideal self-concept (Dittmar, Beattie and Friese 1996). This threat can be perceived two ways: either through self-reflection (e.g. I lack the appropriate knowledge for my self-concept as an engineer) or by an external disruption (e.g. my ability as an engineer being questioned by someone other than myself). According to Symbolic Self-Completion Theory, to rebuild a self-concept and reduce tension, it is necessary to accumulate and display symbols of the self-concept, for example the attributes, skills, dress, and behaviors associated with it. The uncertain individual’s implementation of symbols to build and retain the certainty of the self-concept is known as self-symbolizing.

Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) outline a number of different forms that symbols associated with a given self-concept may take. For example, a member of the Apple brand community may use: self-descriptions (“I am an Apple user”); material objects or status symbols (wearing Apple logo clothes or owning one of the original Mac computers), titles or degrees (Vice President of Marketing at Apple); affiliations with
others known to possess the self-concept (membership in the Apple brand community or a Mac User Group); the influencing or helping of others (offering computer upgrade or repair tips) and successful performances (designing a piece of software for the Mac). The key is that these symbols help an individual perceive a social reality where he or she possesses that self-concept (Gollwitzer 1986). Symbols such as these help a person embed himself or herself in the cultural prototype of the self-concept or group; the expectation is that others will then react to the person as if he or she embodies the self-concept. Therefore, it can be theorized that people perceive and maintain a sense of certainty or security (with respect to their self-concepts) through such symbolic self-representations.

Self-concepts, such as “I am a hockey player,” tend to have an array of socially acceptable symbols, which the individual can use to express that self-concept. At the heart of Symbolic Self-Completion Theory is the “compensation hypothesis” (Braun and Wicklund 1989; Gollwitzer and Kirchhof 1998). This hypothesis states that when committed individuals experience a sense of uncertainty or threat to a self-concept, they will strive to rebuild that self-concept by trying to symbolize certainty; they compensate for the uncertainty in a self-concept through alternative symbols associated with it. This hypothesis finds support in several studies (Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982; Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1981; Wicklund and Braun 1987).

Research surrounding Symbolic Self-Completion Theory provides considerable support for the “compensation hypothesis” across a variety of self-concepts, for example:
mother, Catholic, vintner, businessperson, ethnicity, artist, journalist, athlete, lawyer, as well as many forms of self-symbolizing. Displaying symbols connected to the uncertain self-concept, such as a uniform, ethnic dress or possessions, is one of the more prominent ways of self-symbolization (Koch and Dickey 1988; Braun and Wicklund 1989; Schiffmann and Nelkenbrecher 1994; Arthur 1997; Crane, Hamilton and Wilson 2004).

The displaying and consuming of symbols is important when considering belonging, as group rituals and symbols are vital elements used in demonstrating membership (Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001; Chalmers and Arthur 2008).

Symbolic self-completion researchers also suggest a number of other ways in which individuals self-symbolize in an attempt to compensate. Compared to individuals who feel complete and certain in their self-concept, those individuals who feel incomplete and uncertain with respect to an important self-concept are more likely to attempt to persuade and/or influence others with the same self-concept (Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1981). They do this by making highly positive self-descriptions or claims about themselves relevant to the uncertain self-concept (Gollwitzer and Wicklund 1985), by not admitting relevant weaknesses (Gollwitzer, Wicklund and Hilton 1982), or by excelling at a task relevant to the uncertain self-concept in order to prove to themselves that they do have the self-concept (Gollwitzer, 1986; Brunstein and Gollwitzer 1996).

Pertinent to this thesis is the finding that self-concept uncertain individuals become preoccupied in portraying their personality characteristics, either as similar to the
aspired-to ideal (Gollwitzer and Wicklund 1985), or with the traits and external characteristics of perceived experts in the threatened self-concept domain (Wicklund and Braun 1987; Wicklund, Braun and Waibel 1994; Harmon-Jones, Schmeichel and Harmon-Jones 2009). This suggests that, in the context of belonging, it is important to consider who constitutes the experts of the group, and how the uncertain individual views those experts in relation to themselves in terms of the consumption of symbols. This may help explain an important source of belonging uncertainty.

The above findings seem to suggest that a sense of self-concept uncertainty is very disruptive for individuals, resulting in a preoccupation with resolving the uncertain self-concept. Indeed, research demonstrates that for some, self-concept uncertainty is so disruptive that it may cause extreme behavior. For example, some women who experience a high degree of uncertainty surrounding their self-concept as a woman may go to the extreme of having breast reconstruction surgery, prosthesis and/or plastic surgery (Feather, Kaiser and Rucker 1989; Schouten, 1991). Another example of this comes from the realm of inexperienced entrepreneurs who go to the extremes of joining multi-level marketing pyramid schemes in order to feel certain as an entrepreneur (Kuntze 2001).

Another core assumption of Symbolic Self-Completion Theory is the “social insensitivity hypothesis.” Not only are individuals preoccupied with resolving self-concept uncertainty, but they also tend to be impulsive. When placed in front of an accessible audience, an individual will tend to choose to immediately self-symbolize,
even when that audience is highly critical of that individual’s potential to achieve the self-concept (Gollwitzer and Kirchhof 1998). The “social insensitivity hypothesis” states that the focus of a self-symbolizer is solely on himself or herself, neglecting the feelings and interests of the audience. Consequently, the self-symbolizer does not see the audience as mutual exchange partners, but rather as serving the sole function of having the potential to take notice of his or her claim to possess the self-concept (Gollwitzer and Wicklund 1985).

In the mind of the uncertain individual, the potential for others to see the self-symbolizing activity is more important than the acknowledgment of effort. The act of symbolizing is vital to the uncertain individual insofar as they perceive that the symbolizing makes them certain of their self-concept. This is not to say that a self-symbolizer symbolizes indiscriminately in an effort to reduce his or her self-concept uncertainty; the uncertain individual will engage in symbolizing which he or she believes will result in certainty with respect to his or her self-concept (Gollwitzer et al. 1999). Therefore, an important element of the “social insensitivity hypothesis” is that individuals who are uncertain about their self-concept perceive the success of the act of symbolization, independent of any audience feedback.

When considering the research on symbolic self-completion, with regards to the type of symbols used for self-symbolizing, one of the important findings is that the symbols frequently used in the self-symbolizing process appear to have higher status than the original symbol identified as uncertain (Braun and Wicklund 1989; Wagner,
Wicklund and Shaigan 1990; Dittmar, Beattie and Friese 1996). Individuals who are uncertain about their self-concept appear to overcompensate. This is accomplished by replacing the questioned self-concept symbols with ones that are perceived as having a higher social standing, and therefore better at communicating, within that self-concept.

As well, uncertain individuals tend to self-aggrandize above and beyond what the situation calls for (Gollwitzer and Wicklund 1985), going to extremes to resolve the self-concept uncertainty (Feather, Kaiser and Rucker 1989; Schouten, 1991).

From the research on symbolic self-completion, we see that individuals can use symbols to help reduce an uncertain self-concept by possessing, using and displaying the symbols of this self-concept. Again, this highlights the importance of self-perceptions of individuals who are uncertain about their self-concept. Unlike the previous two theories, however, Symbolic Self-Completion Theory does not really consider the importance of the opinions of others. Displaying, in public, the symbols associated with their self-concept is vital for self-concept uncertain individuals. Therefore, symbols are one way individuals can deal with uncertainty. When uncertainty is extreme, the individual uses symbols related to the self-concept in question, but these symbols appear to be more grandiose and excessive as individuals fight harder to gain back a sense of the desired self-concept. Individuals also tend to focus on people whom they consider to be experts of the self-concept when considering which symbols to use to rebuild their uncertain self-concept.
When considering the belonging paradox and the construction of a belonging conceptual framework, it is important to consider the type of symbols and behaviors associated with self-symbolizing. Symbols and rituals are an important way for a member to demonstrate that they belong to a group (Marshall 2002; Collins 2004; Chalmers and Arthur 2008). Recall from above, symbolically “looking the part” is one way to self-verify and gain a sense of group identification, key elements in the belonging process. The behaviors associated with self-symbolizing are akin to manifestations of an individual’s attempt to “look the part” and belong.

Symbolic Self-Completion Theory posits that when an individual is perpetually uncertain about his or her self-concept, similar to those with a belonging paradox, he or she will keep searching for a symbol that reduces the uncertainty. In addition to this assumption is the supposition that any individual has the ability to access a limitless number of symbols related to the uncertain self-concept. However, for tightly knit groups, there are typically a limited number of symbols agreed upon by the group that are relevant for demonstrating belonging. This raises an interesting research question: how do uncertain members, especially when they are in the constant tension of a belonging paradox, use or reuse the limited symbols of the group in their attempt to belong?

2.2.4 Overall Summary of the Three Theories

Groups are an important element in an individual’s self-concept. The ideas discussed throughout this literature review extend and adapted readily to develop a
general framework of how an individual constructs their own sense of belonging, and

deals with the uncertainty of a belonging paradox.

Uncertainty-Identity Theory (Hogg 2007), Self-Verification Theory (Swann 1983)
and Symbolic Self-Completion Theory (Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982) all focus on self-
perceptions of the world and how individuals work to shape the world around them in
order to maintain their self-concept. All three theories assume that uncertainty (such as
the uncertainty related to experiencing a belonging paradox) is disruptive for individuals.
In addition, these theories focus on ways in which committed individuals attempt to
overcome uncertainty about one’s self-concept, be it through the mechanism of group
identification, self-verification, or self-symbolizing. Individuals use these various
mechanisms to adjust how they perceive themselves as members, and how they perceive
the manner in which others view them. The more uncertain and/or important the self-
concept, the more effort and focus the individual appears to put into these mechanisms.

Before the development of a conceptual framework of the belonging experience,
there will be an overview of how consumer behavior currently views belonging and
membership. This will be followed by the development of a conceptual framework of the
belonging experience, and the influence of a belonging paradox, employing ideas from
the literature review. This framework will be the guiding lens through which this research
will be facilitated.
2.3 Extending the View of Belonging within Marketing and Consumer Behavior

This thesis focuses on how consumers deal with a belonging paradox and continuous self-concept uncertainty with respect to belonging. This section reviews the current thinking of the marketing and consumer behavior literatures, which focuses on attaining status within a group, and by extension, certainty with regards to belonging within that group. The current thinking is then extended through the integration of Uncertainty-Identity Theory, Self-Verification theory and Symbolic Self-Completion Theory; the focus will be on the way in which the belonging experience is a continuous process for every member.

Within the marketing and consumer behavior literatures, the focus of research pertaining to groups typically concentrates on the uncertainty around the socialization process of new members (Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Mathwick, Wiertz and Ruyter 2008), as well as the achievement of status within a group (Ward and Riengen 1990; Belk and Costa 1998; Kates 2002). Becoming a member and belonging is typically seen as a logical step-by-step process (commitment, identification, conformity towards the group and internalization of the ethos). An underlying assumption appears to be that anyone can become a member if they so desire (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001; Cova and Cova 2002). The assumption that an individual can achieve a secure sense of belonging through the attainment of status within the group is also inherent in this process (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Belk and Costa 1998; Kates 2002).
Indeed Mathwick and Wiertz 2008 (p. 837) assert that hardcore members achieve a sense of belonging that gives them “emotional safety that encourages self-disclosure and intimacy.” Therefore, it is not surprising that one of the key questions found in the marketing and consumer behavior literatures is, “How is status achieved within a group?”

In much of the literature, the answer to this question seems to rest in how individuals can demonstrate that they are one with the group. For example, to be a member of a brand community, one has to demonstrate to said community a consciousness of kind. This consciousness of kind is a “collective similarity to one another and the group and a collective difference both individually and collectively from other groups” (O’Guinn and Muñiz 2005 p. 256). Over the years, both marketing and consumer behavior studied this collective similarity in many different contexts, using many different terms including: ethos (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), a consciousness of kind (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001; O’Guinn and Muñiz 2005; Mathwick, Wiertz and Ruyter 2008), communitas (Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993) or a group will/we-intention (Bagozzi 2000; Cova and Cova 2002; Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006a, 2006b).

Research exploring sub-groups within communities illustrates how some members differ in the manner of enactment of the ethos (common beliefs and values), or consciousness of kind. However, these studies still demonstrate all members attaining a sense of belonging within the group by achieving status through the movement towards, and adhering to, the ethos (Martin, Schouten and McAlexander 2006; Quester, Beverland and Farrelly 2006). The assumption behind the focus on ethos, or consciousness of kind,
is that either a member is in or out of the group. They either conform to the values of the
group, becoming a member, or they do not conform, and are therefore not considered a
member of a group (Hickman and Ward 2007). Consequently, the literature tends to
focus on the dichotomy of hardcore members (those who are certain about their
belonging) and new members (those who are uncertain about their belonging within a
group) (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Quester, Beverland and Farrelly 2006;
Mathwick, Wiertz and Ruyter 2008).

The step-by-step ritual/process that prospective members follow consists of an
increase in commitment, identification with, and conformity towards, the group, resulting
in the internalization of the ethos (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Belk and Costa
Membership security and group cohesion is the end result of this step-by-step
ritual/process.

In their recent meta-analytic review of the brand community literature in
marketing and consumer behavior, Schau, Muñiz and Arnould (2009) suggest that
membership “arises from the trajectory or the development of practices that foster the
exchange of collectively defined and valorized resources” (p. 35). These practices
include: welcoming, documenting, milestoning, badging and governing. According to
Schau, Muñiz and Arnould (2009), these practices act like apprenticeships. An
apprenticeship implies a social hierarchy that the group governs through the other

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practices that are normatively expected to the point where members feel “compelled to adopt them” (p. 37).

During the apprenticeship, documenting is the manual of how to consume information that allows members to be more deeply engaged in the brand community thus providing the rules on how to be become a member within the community. New members use the practice of milestoning to demonstrate membership and participation in specific rites of passage. Once a new member passes through these milestones he creates, purchases or is given a badge which helps document his journey. The reason for this badging practice is to help codify the proper behaviors to be deemed a true member of the community. New members learn these true behaviors through apprenticeship where knowledge is transferred from insiders or hardcore members to initiates or new members and there is a progression where new members learn the practices. These new members are granted membership and status within the community by following the practices and behaviors of a true member. Again, the assumption is that becoming a member is a logical step-by-step process where members move to the top of the social hierarchy where they are secure in their membership.

In essence, belonging to a group means performing rituals of separation, such as acquiring a unique jargon, performing for the group or wearing similar clothing (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993; Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2002). According to Arnould and Price (2000), these rituals are called Authoritative Performances because they make explicit what the members value and invite adherence to the ethos. For example, in the
HOG subculture, status is “conferred on members according to their seniority, participation and leadership in group activities, riding expertise and experience, Harley-specific knowledge...in short, the results of an individual’s commitment to the group’s consumption values” (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995, p. 49). Once again, the members are either in or out.

The importance of social categories (such as age, income, gender, ethnicity and social class) is de-emphasized by the step-by-step socialization process of becoming a member (Cova and Cova, 2002). When members move toward the ethos, group decisions and rituals, there tends to be a polarization towards the majority opinion. This occurs in order to demonstrate similar values and gain a sense of belonging (Ward and Reingen, 1990). The common goal of both the socialization process and ritual performances occurs through the strengthening of cohesiveness and ethos of the group (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Cova and Cova 2001; Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001; Muñiz and Schau 2005).

The current literature implies that it is the members of the group who are the arbitrators of the ethos, and who set the evaluative standards (knowledge, rituals, skills, norms and practices valued) to belong to the group (O’Guinn 1991; Belk and Costa 1998; Leigh, Peters and Shelton 2006; Cova, Pace and Park 2007; Schau and Muñiz 2007; Mathwick, Wiertz and Ruyter 2008; Schau, Muñiz and Arnould 2009; Beverland and Farrelly 2010). For example, in their study of HOG, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) discover from hardcore members that owning the “right” (chopper) motorcycle and
clothes, in addition to the performance of the rituals for an audience, means you are a “true” member. In a similar context, participants who did not participate in the “right way” at the Burning Man festival received the label of “lookie-loos” (Kozinets, 2002, p. 25). The organizers of the festival eventually published a set of rules to govern the “right way” of participating. Leigh, Peters and Shelton (2006 p. 487), in their study of MG owners, find that owners who hire a mechanic to restore the car, and who “trailer” it to shows (as compared to driving it), are viewed as “inauthentic” members by other members, even if their cars are in pristine condition. Members value the driving experience and the personal effort/investment of working on the car and of being one with the car. These three examples demonstrate the manner in which groups define what it means to be a member through a socialization process, as well as the importance the literature puts on it.

This socialization process aids in establishing the group ethos. Therefore, as a result of an individual’s commitment to the group’s ethos, the group grants membership. Kates (2002) notes that within the gay subculture, members have an internal status competition. But, after being granted membership in the subculture, members seemed secure and certain regarding their membership; this is an inherent assumption in the socialization process. Therefore, when an individual gains membership in the group, the assumption is that his sense of membership and belonging is relatively static and stable (Mathwick, Wiertz and Ruyter 2008).
While the granting of membership status, and the commitment to the ethos of the group are important elements for belonging to a group, they form only a portion of the overall process. An individual’s perceptions of their membership are equally important. An individual’s perceptions of belonging to a group can be influenced by idiosyncratic elements, such as race and disability, and/or past experiences with attempts to belong; these elements and experiences cause a perpetual level of uncertainty even after others in the group appear to grant membership to the individual. In demonstrating that belonging is a dynamic and fluid process where committed members can continually question their belonging (even after achieving membership status), this thesis will move beyond the focus of the dichotomous nature of uncertain and certain members.

It is important to note that status is conceptually distinct from belonging/membership (Anderson et al. 2006; Anderson, Ames and Gosling 2008). Status is an individual’s position within the hierarchy of the group (Sell et al., 2004), whereas social acceptance/belonging is how liked and included in the group a person feels (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Mead et al. 2011). Status and belonging, although related, are two separate concepts. This thesis will demonstrate how an individual may achieve a high status within a group while still questioning his or her self-perceived level of belonging. Therefore, this thesis will provide an alternative viewpoint of group membership and belonging. To accomplish this, it will focus primarily on the manner in which an individual constructs his or her own sense of belonging in dealing with the
continual uncertainty of the belonging paradox, while de-emphasizing the role of group cohesion and the conferring of membership status by the group.

2.3.1 A Member’s Sense of Belonging

Recall that the theories of Uncertainty Identity, Collective Self-Verification and Symbolic Self-Completion all focus on the self-concept. This indicates that individuals work to shape their self-concept as a group member in response to uncertainty about their membership. By integrating these three theories, this thesis will provide insight into group membership and the belonging experience from an individual’s self-concept perspective.

The current literature assumes that internalizing the ethos leads to hardcore membership, thus resulting in a secure sense of belonging (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Belk and Costa 1998; Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann 2005; Martin, Schouten and McAlexander 2006; Quester, Beverland and Farrelly 2006). Although conforming to the ethos of a group is an important element in gaining status within a group, this may not always provide a member with the desired sense of belonging. By situating the idea of belonging at a level of an individual’s self-concept, this thesis will explore how self-concept uncertainty, with respect to membership, can develop as a result of perceived idiosyncrasies, or constraints, that are independent of the group, such as race, sexual orientation, disability, or self-doubt. In summation, this research will demonstrate that belonging is not a simple process due in part to the fact that individuals
can continually, and internally, question their belonging, even after achieving membership.

An example of this internal questioning is a disabled individual who, as a member of a subculture, may successfully internalize the ethos of the group, thus having membership conferred upon him or her by the group members, but who, meanwhile, possesses lingering uncertainties about his or her belongingness within the group. The disabled individual, due to his or her perceived idiosyncrasies surrounding his or her disabilities, believes that he or she cannot achieve the self-presentation or performance of rituals required to conform to the group, and thus questions his or her belonging. Such individuals are likely to experience a belonging paradox where they develop feelings of inclusion and exclusion at the same time, thus continually questioning their belonging within a group.

This thesis also examines how uncertainties about belonging can arise even after a member has been granted membership through demonstrating a commitment to the ethos. This research will establish that demonstrating belonging is not only a question of whether a person achieves status within a group and internalizes its ethos, but also a question of how an individual deals with a continually uncertain sense of belonging and the tension of a belonging paradox.

With this in mind, the fact that members may perceive a continuous uncertain sense of belonging is the basis of the proposed conceptual framework. According to Uncertainty Identity Theory, Collective Self-Verification and Symbolic Self-Completion
Theory, the experience for uncertain members can be disruptive and negatively affect an individual. Therefore, the individual is at the center of the Self-Concept Uncertainty with Respect to Belonging framework (Figure 1) because he or she constructs his or her own sense of belonging within a group situated in a broader society.

**Figure 1: Self-Concept Uncertainty with Respect to Belonging (SCURB)**
Due to past experiences with other groups within the society, individuals may begin to question their ability to belong in groups. One way in which the element of exclusion in the belonging paradox is likely to develop is through the inherent constraints and idiosyncrasies a person perceives, compared to other members of a group and society, and with which he or she must continually cope. Recall the experiences of Caryl Phillips found in Chapter 1: past history taught him to be ‘vigilant’ because, no matter how much he feels like he belongs, he always perceives uncertainty about how other members feel he conforms to the group, given his race. He is weary of testing the hypothesis that he is like the other English fans because, based on past experiences, it might be disproven, and he could lose a further sense of belonging. However, the human motive to belong is so powerful that members who are experiencing a belonging paradox will still try to demonstrate that they belong to the group. Every attempt to belong, however, will also be plagued with the uncertainty of exclusion because members may perceive uncertainty about how other members feel they conform. Members attempt to deal with a continually uncertain sense of belonging because they have moments of inclusion through using the elements of group identification, collective self-verification and self-symbolizing.

The manner in which individuals possess perceptions of their belonging within a group, and the various mechanisms they employ in order to both adjust their way of seeing themselves within groups and deal with continual uncertainty, forms the guiding philosophy of this conceptual framework. The dashed circles in Figure 1 represent the
ability of individuals, groups, and society to influence each other. The points of the inner triangle represent the three central elements that the individual requires when constructing a sense of belonging: group identification, collective self-verification and self-symbolizing.

The fundamental premise of Self-Concept Uncertainty with Respect to Belonging framework is the belief that self-perceptions of oneself as a member are key in building a sense of belonging. Its other basic assumption – an assumption that is disparate to the marketing and consumer behavior literature – is the dynamic nature of an individual’s sense of belonging. This framework assumes that individuals are continually faced with uncertainty about their belonging, and have to work within that uncertainty.

Within the framework, perceptions can take two forms: how an individual views himself or herself, and how an individual believes others view him or her as a member. When a member aligns his or her self-concept with other group members through group identification, he or she seeks to have that effort verified through the use of self-symbolizing and symbolic resources. This reinforces his or her sense of identification and belonging. Self-concept uncertainty, with respect to belonging, occurs with the disruption of an individual’s sense of belonging either through another member questioning his or her membership, or through the self-questioning of his or her membership due to a belonging paradox. An individual attempts to deal with this uncertainty through the self-symbolizing of symbolic resources related to the group, which in turn reinforce his or her group identification and collective self-verification efforts. However, the experience of a
belonging paradox presents members with continuous uncertainty about belonging, and relentless persistence on efforts to belong. The more uncertain the belonging, the more effort and focus the individual appears to put into the mechanism of group identification, typically through the use of symbolic resources directed at self-verification and self-symbolizing.

Group identification, collective self-verification and self-symbolizing are reciprocal elements of an individual’s sense of belonging that reinforce each other, building an individual’s sense of membership. This is represented with the bi-directional arrows on the sides of the inner triangle. All three of these elements interact with and reinforce each other as they all focus on addressing self-concept uncertainty with respect to belonging; for each, the consumption and use of symbols is important in achieving this task. An individual faced with belonging uncertainty may use any combination of group identification, collective self-verification and self-symbolizing through the act of consuming symbols or objects, in an attempt to externally demonstrate and internally perceive a sense of belonging. The focus of this thesis will be on how a member’s sense of belonging within a group is affected by the continual uncertainty of the belonging paradox, as well as the multitude of ways in which a member can engage in consumption in an attempt to cope with a continually fluctuating sense of belonging.

The current literature views belonging as a logical step-by-step process where members confer belonging at the end of the process. Once membership is granted it is assumed that members are secure in their belonging, meaning that belonging is viewed as
a rather static process. The conceptual framework developed in this chapter takes a more
dynamic and fluid view of belonging one where uncertainty can arise even after members
become hardcore members. The framework will be the lens that is used throughout the
rest of the thesis in studying the belonging within the skateboarding subculture.
Chapter 3

Methodology

The goal of this thesis is to discover an individual’s subjective understanding of his or her experience of a belonging paradox and how he or she constructs his or her sense of belonging. Existential-phenomenological interviewing (Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989; 1990) is an appropriate approach for this task because it permits an understanding of the subjective meanings of consumers’ lived experience with groups and the belonging paradox. The basic assumption of the approach is that an individual’s life is a socially constructed totality where experiences interrelate coherently and meaningfully (Goulding 2005). It seeks to describe the experience as it emerges from the context and from the first person viewpoint of the respondent.

The phenomenological interview’s goal is to describe the experience as lived by the individual within the context of their life-world. The life-world is defined as the world in which individuals amongst fellow individuals experience culture and society, take a stand with regard to their objects, are influenced by them, and act on them (Schutz 1967). Experience is neither located “inside“ the person, nor “outside” the person but rather a combination of the two that is organized yet dynamic. In the context of this thesis, an individual’s sense of belonging cannot be separated from his or her past experiences and life-world.
At the same time the individual may be living in the world in a repressed way not necessarily questioning his or her reality or, in this thesis, belonging. However, existential-phenomenological interviews allow a dialogue between the interviewer and the respondent where the respondent critically reflects on the experience (Jopling 1996). The goal of interviewer is to provide a setting where the respondent feels at ease to freely describe his or her experience in detail. The interviewer’s role is also to ensure that the respondent discusses each experience in detail through an open dialogue with the interviewer (Pollio, Graves and Arfken 2006). Except for the opening grand tour question (McCracken 1988), such as “Tell me about your membership experience in group x,” the course of dialogue is largely set by the respondent. The questions and probes flow from the descriptions of the respondent and the course of the dialogue is not known in advance (Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989: 1990). The goal is to develop a description of the lived experience and allow the respondent to reflect on that experience which should provide insight both for the respondent and the interviewer.

The interpretation of the interview depends on an emic approach, which relies on the respondent’s own terms and category systems rather than the researcher’s goals or abstract theories. The text becomes an autonomous body of reflections of a lived experience of a respondent. To do this the researcher must bracket (set aside) any preconceived theories about the phenomenon being studied (Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989). There is no attempt to substantiate a respondent’s narrative with external verification and the interpretation should not exceed the evidence provided by the
respondent. Interpretations must be based on respondents’ own terms. Interpreting the interview is a two-step process. First, each interview is understood within itself to gain an idiographic understanding of each interview and respondent. Second, there is a search for global themes across respondents after the idiographic level interpretations of each interview. Support for a global theme must be present in each interview. The interpretation is a continuous hermeneutical circle of a back and forth process of relating parts to the whole (Thompson 1997). The interpretation seeks to describe common patterns in experiences through which themes will emerge about the phenomenon of study. This thesis will use existential-phenomenological interviewing to investigate the experience of a belonging paradox and the common ways in which individuals deal with it in constructing a sense of belonging.

Existential-phenomenological interviewing requires that the respondent actually live the experience under study and therefore sampling is purposive and prescribed from the start (Goulding 2005; Pollio, Graves and Arfken 2006). Individuals experiencing a belonging paradox are likely to exist in groups that possess high group entitativity. These groups have a clear group prototype where it is clear if an individual is in or out of the group. Therefore in order to explore the belonging paradox this thesis will research members in an a high entitativity group where the use or expression of being a user is very public and makes the member feel a strong identification with being different. One such group is Skateboarders (also referred to as skaters). This subculture has been threatened or marginalized at times but has also attempted to become more mainstream.
This forced members to make clear distinctions about who is in and who is out of the subculture. Consumption of the branded symbols related to the subculture, sport, and gear is one of the bases for these distinctions. This makes the subculture of skateboarders a fertile group for the exploration of the belonging paradox. Today the skateboard subculture, while not completely recognized as mainstream, supports a multi-billion dollar industry with dozens of brands available to skaters.

For this thesis the author recruited fifteen respondents, who others consider a member of this subculture, from a mid-size North American city using a snowballing technique. Snowballing refers to the technique of asking people and respondents if they know anyone they would consider to be a member of this subculture. In addition, the author examined online forums and went to public parks used for skateboarding within the city looking for potential respondents. This approach was able to identify committed members of the subculture, which is consistent with the focus of this thesis. Limiting the number of cases being analyzed for this thesis ensures the depth concerning life-worlds and belonging experience necessary for thick description and understanding of the belonging paradox (Mick and Buhl 1992).

The author being physically disabled deals with self-questions about his belonging on a regular basis. Initially this is what spurred on this research. However, this does create a number of biases for the author during the interviewing process. The author generally views the uncertainty of membership negatively and feels as if he is never really “in” any group. The physical nature of the disability also results in the author
focusing more on the symbolic rituals he cannot perform instead of focusing on the ones that he can perform and that will signify membership. As a result, the author tends to view membership as an in or out phenomenon which is rarely achievable and the uncertainty surrounding membership as a negative outcome. However, as discussed above within the literature review, uncertainty may be a positive thing and membership is likely not a black or white issue for individuals. Therefore the author of this thesis bracketed his experiences with and conceptualizations of belonging, uncertainty or a belonging paradox before conducting interviews to allow any belonging paradox to emerge from the lived experience of the respondents.

The interviews started with a set of grand “tour” questions (McCracken 1988) about the respondents’ personal background and interests, about the subculture and their personal histories and experiences within the subculture. In keeping with the conventions of phenomenological interviewing (Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989) respondents set the remaining course of the interview. The focus of the interview was membership and belonging within the skateboarding subculture for each individual respondent. The goal through the interview process was to discover how each member constructs their sense of belonging/membership within the subculture. This should allow the fluidity of membership and any uncertainty surrounding the construction of membership to emerge on its own. The interviewer took more of a reflective role while ensuring that the interviews covered key topic areas related to belonging such as how they came to be part of the group, their sense of membership and belonging within the group, consumption
and symbols surrounding their group membership, and any uncertainty they feel about their membership. Stories describing the genesis, evolution and uncertainty surrounding membership and belonging within the respondent’s life emerged. The author was careful not to prompt any specific uncertainty concepts.

To keep the interview focused on belonging and membership, the interviewer guided the respondent to focus on the experiences related to membership or belonging that emerged throughout the interview dialogue. This was accomplished by asking the respondents to reflect on any issues they brought up during the course of the dialogue and how these issues may relate to their own sense of belonging and membership. The goal of the interview was to see how the emerging life themes, situations, or circumstances might impact an individual’s sense of belonging to the subculture. This also allowed the interview to remain focused on the main phenomenon of this thesis, which is how an individual constructs their own sense of belonging within their own lived experience and society in general. The goal is that through the course of the dialogue, the respondents will reflect on how they experience belonging and any belonging paradoxes they may have.

Where necessary, the author conducted two or three interviews with a number of respondents over the period of a year in order to get a more in-depth understanding of their belonging experience. The first interview focused mainly at trying to understand the life world of the respondent and the respondent’s sense of belonging within the skateboarding subculture. The second and third interview concentrated on follow-up
questions or clarifications to gain a deeper understanding of how each respondent constructs his or her own sense of belonging within the subculture.

Whenever possible, the author observed and recorded the use of group symbols by the respondents within the context of group gatherings. This helped gauge a respondent’s symbolic usage in comparison to other group members allowing the author to observe how the respondents construct their own sense of belonging within the group. Also, the author collected and stored any blog, webpage, or other personal web presence related to each respondent. The author conducted all interviews, observations, and analyses, to guarantee the holistic perspective sought by existential-phenomenological interviewing. To ensure a “true” understanding of the respondent’s lived experience and to assess the credibility of interpretation, the author also did respondent checks (Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1988; Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1990).

3.1 Respondents

A total of 15 respondents ranging in age from 18 to 47 with the average age being 23 (See Table 1) participated in this research. The focus is on skateboarders who were a bit older because to answer the research questions the author wanted to interview individuals who have skated for a number of years and already consider themselves a member of the skateboarding subculture. The author conducted a total of 21 interviews ranging from 46 minutes to 195 minutes in length.
Table 1: Respondents Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th># of Interviews</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years Skating</th>
<th>Freestyler</th>
<th>Sponsored</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shawn</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evan</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glen</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chet</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ken</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hugh</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Average: 23 10.3

The author conducted interviews at West 49-Lyon Skatepark at Polson Park, which allowed the interviewer to gain a sense of the respondent’s consumption surrounding their belonging to the subculture. Polson Skatepark is the central hang out for skaters in the city making it an ideal place to observe and photograph the symbolizing and consumption of the skaters. It is also where most of the respondents preferred to be interviewed because that is where they spend most of their time. For many, it is “like a second home.” In addition to these live sites, the author was able to observe respondents
on the Internet on various skateboard related sites, as well as, YouTube, Facebook and personal Blogs.

All of the respondents except one are from Kingston, Ontario and grew up in the surrounding area. Respondents’ length of time skateboarding ranges from 5 years to over 30 years experience with the average being just a over a decade. For a further description of each respondent, please refer to Table 2. Thirteen of the respondents classify themselves as street skaters and the other two classify themselves as freestyle skaters.

The act of street skating requires a skater to utilize objects found in urbanized settings, such as curbs, ledges, benches, handrails, stairs and other obstacles to perform tricks. Freestyle is the grandfather of street skating and was popular in the late 1970s and 80s. Freestylers emphasize flat ground skateboarding, which means doing tricks with their feet and skateboard only, rather than using street obstacles. The other main form of skateboarding is vert skateboarding where skateboarders do tricks on a vertical ramp, bowl or halfpipe. This is the type of skateboarding featured at the X-Games.

Street skateboarding is the dominant form of skateboarding today and with the main skatepark in Kingston orientated towards street skateboarding, the vast majority of Kingston skaters are street skaters. All of the respondents are male with the majority of the respondents being amateur skateboarders. A number of the skaters received free products from various skateboard companies at some point in time (because a company likes their style or thinks they have potential) and a couple of the respondents receive sponsorships from the local skate shop Ruwa Board Shop. At one time, one of the
respondents received a sponsorship from a skateboard company based in the United States (the U.S. company has since gone under) and one had a long professional career as a skateboarder in the 1970s and 80s. Sponsorship is evidence of a skater’s degree of belonging within the subculture. Overall, the sample provides a broad cross section of the general skateboarding subculture and an accurate representation of the Kingston skate scene. In addition, the sample of skateboarders is a good representation of what others in the literature (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Mathwick, Wiertz and Ruyter 2008) deem hardcore committed members.

3.2 The Geographical Location

Kingston Ontario Canada is a city of 150,000 people located about 3 hours away from Ottawa, Toronto and Montreal on the shores of Lake Ontario. The city’s economy is centered on Queen’s University and other government services. For a city of the size of Kingston, the urban downtown is rather small and consists of mainly small retail outlets geared towards university students and tourists. The winters are rather cold and typically last from November to April with an average temperature in the winter of -5°C.

Kingston’s geographical location and weather conditions pose a number of constraints on Kingston skateboarders. The cold weather limits the time available to skate at the outdoor skatepark to between April to October. Kingston’s small urban downtown also limits the number of places a skateboarder can skate. As well, Kingston is located far away from the geographical centers of skateboarding, which are Vancouver (for Canada)
### Table 2: Description of Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>Ben is Matt’s older brother. He is studying History and Philosophy at the University of Ottawa on full scholarship. He has anxiety about losing his scholarship and failing classes although he has never come close to it ever. In fact he has an A+ average. When he is worried about school he picks up his skateboard and hangs out with his brothers and friends. Skateboarding helps him deal with the stress. He cannot remember what he did before skateboarding. School and skateboarding is it. For him, skateboarding is not something you do (activity) but it is something you are. Ben is a perfectionist constantly comparing himself to his brother who he perceives as the better skater. He readily admits that he will never be as good as his brother, characterizing himself as a nobody in skating and shifting his focus into supporting his brother. However, he does still wish he could be as good as his brother.</td>
<td>Like if we’re talking about skateboarding, I just do it for fun. I do it for fun and I support Matt. I help out with the making of skateboard videos and stuff like that. But as for me, I just do it for fun. I just skateboard around now. I never thought of going anywhere myself with skateboarding. Oh here goes the emotional stuff I wish I was good enough to be sponsored. I’d like to get some recognition too. That’s why I was really happy when we made a video and I had a couple tricks that were good enough to be in it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>Believes he is one of the few freestyler skateboarders in Canada, which puts him at a distinct disadvantage because the freestyle contests are all in the United States. Skateboarding is the only thing he believes he is good at. He currently has a sponsorship from the brand Ruwa. He likes freestyle because it is different and unique from what most others do today and this uniqueness is what drives him. He enjoys performing demos and shocking people with various freestyle tricks. He is constantly practicing and trying to invent new tricks. He focuses his consumption around the skaters of the 1980’s, the heyday of freestyle. His family does not support his skateboarding and he does</td>
<td>It’s (skateboarding) the only thing I’m good at, so I kind of never want to give it up. It just makes me feel happy when I’m on it. Honestly, when I don’t skateboard for a couple of days, I just start feeling miserable. I just want to get back on it. Everybody was doing vert. It was just like freestyle seemed more – not better-looking just different looking. And I liked it better, I guess.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>He is the younger brother of Ben. He loves art and says skateboarding appealed to him over other sports because it is very artistic. He has severe anxiety and admits to being obsessive-compulsive (OCD). Germs bother him yet he considers himself an urban skater with a unique style and skates in some of the grimmest spots in Kingston. He takes pride in his ability to find spots no one else discovered and enjoys skating in locations no one else can. He likes to push the limits of his talent and learn new tricks at these new spots. He is obsessed and driven to gain recognition from the larger skateboarding subculture and show that talent can come from a small town like Kingston.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shawn</td>
<td>He was always an outsider as kid who did not excel particularly well in school or traditional sports such as baseball or hockey. However, he is one of the best freestyle skateboarders in the world and in the 80’s he spent time on one of the best professional skateboard teams, Powell-Peralta. His nickname is The Ice Man and he is one of the smoothest skaters ever to live. Despite this he continues to have self-doubts about his ability. He is always trying to achieve flow and “being one” with his skateboard. He currently works in the skateboard industry and still actively competes in skateboard contests around the world.</td>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quote</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Everybody wants to have their own unique style. Not doing what everybody else is doing sort of thing. Everybody wants to be different.</td>
<td>I wanted to learn something new all the time. And if you don’t learn a new trick, you find a new spot. Kind of everything that’s new that day. And it’s more artistic. Skateboarding is definitely more artistic than other stuff. I love art, been doing art for a long time, and I think that’s also another reason why I enjoy it a lot. My tricks are unique. I have more of an artistic view towards skateboarding than some people, and I can find spots that maybe they wouldn’t see.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tim

He recently moved to Kingston in search of work. He currently works at a call center but he does not live to work he works to skateboard. He considers himself a “chilling dude” who is easy to get along and hang out with. He is also heavily into art and photography. On his blog he posts his pictures, which focus on skateboarding and on his life experiences consisting of skating in urban environments and partying.

It would be nice to start a website or something about the Kingston skateboard scene now that I’m really into it. I live in a house with two skateboarders. All we do is fucking talk skateboarding, watch skateboard videos, go skate. It’s the best. I couldn’t ask for a better lifestyle. I feel blessed.

I’ve got some goals, I’m always shooting photos or skateboarding. Having a good time. Everybody’s always bitching about work. It’s like, you know, why you complain about work? Because you have nothing better to do. You have nothing else on your mind other than work. I am just having fun, man. Shooting photos. I’m always nerding out on photo stuff on the Internet. What lenses work. Off-camera flash. I’m always nerding out on that kind of thing. How to take a photo.

Dan

He is pursuing a Masters in Urban Planning with a focus on environmental planning. He likes working and socializing with people and urban planning to him is a hands-on activity focusing on cause and effect. For Dan, skateboarding has the same elements as environmental planning with skaters needing to work with the environment in the performance of their tricks. He considers himself a people person who is very laid back and loves to hang out with his crew of skateboarding friends. He enjoys being a bit of rebel because of his interests in skateboarding and partying but at the same time he

It’s just like a good mix of – like I’m a people person, right? I do a lot of work with people. It’s a good mix of engineering with policy with learning about the relationships between this and that and why that’s there. It’s really hands-on, it’s really practical. So I just find that interesting. It’s not like it’s concrete. You get to work with people. It’s just neat how there’s like a cause and effect of everything.
believes in a balanced lifestyle with everything in moderation.

I guess I’m a socializer. I don’t know. I like to go out, make friends, meet people. That type of thing. Most skateboarders are not quiet people. [laughs] We tend to be a little bit rowdy. It’s just kind of like an aggressive sport from the first place. Aggressive people tend to be loud people. I mean, I’m not obnoxious, but I’m not quiet.

Evan quit skateboarding for a while to pursue a career in mixed martial arts. He was a local kickboxing champion. He currently works at a major chain restaurant as a dishwasher and now spends most of his money on skateboarding. He returned to skateboarding because he discovered he just missed it too much and loves doing it even at 1 AM after work. It keeps him emotionally centered. When at the skatepark he loves teaching young kids how to skate because he never had a skateboarding teacher. Even today, he feels similar anxiety to the young kids he teaches, especially when he perceives that better skaters than him are at the skatepark.

I still had my board and one day I went out because I just needed something to do. And I just found it again. I realized – there are just times if you feel upset, go out and skateboard. If you feel unhappy, go out and skateboard. You base your life around it. You have to. Like everybody will. You fall in love, in love with it. It’s weird. You sleep better. You dream about it. It’s crazy stories.

I love teaching other people to skate. There’s other things I could do. I could be out there and I could volunteer to do all this other work, like I used to. I used to coach hockey, coach baseball, and all this stuff. I love to just come to the park and watch kids progress and teach them something. Like some people tell me – I’ll go to the skatepark some days and I’ll teach kids to skate more than I skate myself. I’m just all for other kids skating and learning. Everybody learning.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Andy</th>
<th>He is into extreme activities and sports like skateboarding and motocross. He likes the risk and thrill of these activities and one day wants to try base-jumping. In addition to the thrill of these activities he likes the individual freedom they offer for doing his own thing. He works as a delivery driver for a major consumer products company where he makes good money. The money gives him the freedom and equipment to do all of these activities in his spare time. At the same time, he just wishes he could be a bum like the others at the skatepark and not worry about money because he defines himself as a skater and that is the group from where he draws the majority of his friends.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Glen</td>
<td>I’m mystified by myself. I don’t have a particular direction at the moment. I feel like a bit of a drifter. I’m not really seeking anything. I feel if some kind of calling or direction is apparent to me, it’ll present itself. It’s not something I’m going to work to find. It’ll just show up and then I’ll follow it. That’s always been the case with anything I’ve been interested in. Anything I’m interested in, I never see it and go, “That’s cool,” and start doing it. I don’t know, guitar, for example. There was an old guitar kicking around in my house, and I started learning some chords on it, and I’ve been playing it on and off for about 10 years. Things</td>
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For the last nine years, that was really the only sport that I participated in. And 90% of the people I know, anytime they’ve ever seen me it’s because I’ve been on a skateboard somewhere. Yeah. That (skateboarding all the time) would have been pretty fun. But then I don’t think I’d be able to handle not having money and just being a bum. That would just suck. I’d rather have a car to drive around. Any weekend I want to, I can go and drive to any skateboard park I want to and skate all day. You can’t have that freedom when you don’t have any money. It is just my want for material things. |
like that, I don’t necessarily see something and pick it out as something I’d like to do it and do it. I’ll encounter it and toy with it, and if I like it, I’ll continue with it. My mother’s old guitar I picked up, and now I’ve been playing guitar on and off for 10 years. Same with photography. There was an old 1960s banana board in my garage and I picked it up and toyed around on it, and here I am skateboarding. Because they feel good. I’m addicted to flow, if you follow. The feeling of being the moment. That’s something that really appeals to me. I’m very hard on myself and very critical of myself. Sometimes when I can’t do something that I’ve been working at, I’ll get down on myself and drop it for a while. I like that sense of accomplishment a lot, and when I’m not getting it, I’m not very happy with myself.

Nick  His one love is skateboarding. However, he was also a very good junior hockey player. While playing hockey, he received criticism for being different because he was a skateboarder and not the typical jock. He also received criticism for being a puck hog even though he had more assists than goals. As a consequence, Nick has a very laid back attitude about life and skateboarding. He believes life is a gift. He does not believe in criticizing anyone especially when they are doing the thing they love. He celebrates diversity and variety. He wants to be able to do his own thing because he loves it. For Nick, his own thing is skating.

Well, like I said, the team and the self thing, too. It’s just your own accomplishment with skateboarding. In a hockey game, it’s like your team. And that’s okay, too. But I think it’s more of a good feeling accomplishing something by yourself and doing your own thing.

It makes me feel good, but it makes me feel – there’s no criticism, ever. It makes you feel good, and it makes me feel like I’d rather be
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<th>Name</th>
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<th>Quotes</th>
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| Chet  | He dropped out of university because he felt it was too theoretical and entered the Energy Systems Engineering program at a local college where he focuses on practical applications for renewable energy. He likes the program because it is more hands-on which suits his personality. He wants to build things not just learn the theory behind it. Skateboarding also fits his personality because he needs to understand the environment to be able to do tricks and build-up combinations of tricks. He loves skateboarding because he can hang with his buddies and create his own thing. In order to go to school he needed to work full time so there were periods of time where he left skateboarding because he had no time to pursue it given his work schedule. | "Yeah, it's not like a team sport, but it's something where you can go chill with your buddies and skate. You can even go out and do your own thing. Like, I enjoyed the social aspect of it, too, just being able to go out and hang out with my buddies. I kind of made some of my best friends through skateboarding. You just really get to know them and hang out with them almost all the time."
Ugh, when I was working two jobs I still skated a bit, but it wasn't like every night for hours. But when I was working two jobs it was all I wanted to do, but I couldn't because I was too busy. |
| Jack  | He considers himself a Hesh skater (into rock music and hardcore fast paced skating of jumping down stairs). He is also into art and graphic design and looks for ways to combine art with his skateboarding. He has drawn and painted since he was little and cannot remember a time | "I just want them to view me how I want to be viewed, like a skater, as what I think skating is. I think skating is kind of fast paced and hard core, so I want to be viewed like a fast-pace, hardcore skater."
|
when he was not a skater. Skateboarding is who he is. Jack is pretty easy going and believes that he can get along with anyone, especially those at the skatepark. At the same time, he is always worried about his style of skating (Hesh) being misidentified by others to the point where he is obsessed about everything including the way he looks being consistent with this style.

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<tr>
<th>Jack</th>
<th>He is pretty easy going and believes that he can get along with anyone, especially those at the skatepark. At the same time, he is always worried about his style of skating (Hesh) being misidentified by others to the point where he is obsessed about everything including the way he looks being consistent with this style.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>He is just a skateboarder and that is what he does everyday. He is still looking to finish high school and is currently looking for a job. Still, skateboarding remains his top priority. Growing up he was a bit of a rebel and had issues with the strictness of his mother. He currently lives on Nick’s couch and generally likes hanging out with individuals who are older than him, including his girlfriend, because he perceives them as cooler. His two passions in life are skateboarding and the Beatles. He has a tattoo of John Lennon. He loves hanging out, partying hard and skateboarding with his friends.</td>
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<td>Ken</td>
<td>He is one of the more cerebral skaters in Kingston. He recently became interested in the creationism versus science debate on the Internet. In order to understand why creationists don’t like science he enrolled at university as a mature student in physics. According to Ken, nothing comes easy so if he is going to have an opinion he wants to know what he is talking about. It bugs him that most skaters just want to talk skateboarding, but at the same time, if he is going to talk skateboarding he feels he needs to be prepared with up-to-date knowledge. Similarly with tricks, he will not perform tricks at the skatepark until he knows he can land them. He always wants to be a skater, so I want to give off that vibe when I'm skating. Just like, the way you skate is the way you skate, and that's how you want to be portrayed. But there are days when I don't feel like it's me skating, or I don't feel like I'm on point, and those days I don't feel like I'm being viewed the same way as I was the day before or something, and that throws you off.</td>
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<td>We’d go on trips to Montreal or Toronto to go skate the indoor parks on weekends and stuff. I did a lot more skateboarding this winter than I ever did. But still it’s the longest periods of time I didn’t skateboard for. It’s fun. You just get a bunch of friends, fill up a van, we all put in some gas money. Go to an indoor park, skate. We’d just skate at the indoor parks and have fun with each other. Have some beers after, before we go back.</td>
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<td>I’m the type of person that I’m not going to have an opinion if I don’t know what I’m talking about. So I want to learn more about it And having so much trouble over learning something and then one day just being able to have it on command. And then just trying to broaden your talent and use it. Just the intense interest becomes an obsession and that becomes a passion. Between everything, just landing your</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hugh</td>
<td>He is friends with Ken and is taking biology at university. He pursued skateboarding because he claims it was easy for him to learn tricks although he also states that he does not have a natural talent for skateboarding. What motivates Hugh is his desire to be unique or different. He wants to be different than his fellow students that wear American Eagle and who to him all have the same opinions. Skateboarding allows him to achieve that difference. He is also driven to have a unique style within the skateboarding subculture. He wants to be his own person and contribute something unique to the world.</td>
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<td>It’s like I don’t understand why people would want to wear – you see like half the people on campus, they’re all wearing American Eagle t-shirts. I don’t understand what their identity is. I just don’t think they’re very unique, I guess. Like not very many people are following skateboarding trends. So it’s like a unique thing. I guess. Even the way you dress, it also reflects the way you think, I guess. If you see someone dressed a certain way, you automatically think what they’re personality is like. Stuff like that. I am self-conscious at the way the world – I guess if you see somebody who’s unique, you think they think more than somebody who’s acting like someone else. Like if I see two people who dressed the exact same, I’m like, “they’re probably the exact same person, why would I want to talk to them? There could be a thousand people who look like you, why would I want to talk to you or be friends with you?”</td>
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and the Mecca of skateboarding, California. Kingston skateboarders do perceive Kingston’s location and weather as a hindrance and source of uncertainty when it comes to belonging to the skateboard subculture.

Over the years, Kingston has been home to a variety of outdoor and indoor skateparks. Currently, however, there are only two skateparks. There is one outdoor skatepark located at Polson Park, which is in a suburban neighborhood and there is one small indoor skatepark at the back of the Ruwa Board Shop. Skaters I interviewed also typically skate around Queen’s University in the summer and parking garages in the winter.

3.2.1 Skate Shops in Kingston

There are three skate shops in the Kingston area, West 49, Rockit Boutique and Ruwa Board Shop. All three shops sponsor teams with the West 49 team being made up of skaters from across Canada and the other two stores sponsoring a small number of local amateur Kingston skaters. Sponsoring skaters generally entails giving them free products from the store and paying for them to either perform demonstrations or enter skateboard competitions. The goal behind sponsoring a shop team is to support the local skate scene and have the good local skaters advertise the brand by using the product at skateparks or competitions. The intent of the shop is to hopefully spur on sales from other skaters who want to be part of the skate scene and to link their brands to belonging to the local scene.
West 49 is a cross-Canada retail chain of men’s and women’s apparel, footwear, accessories and equipment related to skateboarding. West 49 carries brands such as DC, Hurley, Quiksilver, Element and their own clothing line, West 49. The West 49 store in Kingston is located in the Cataraqui Town Centre shopping mall and caters to kids under the age of 18 who are just getting into skateboarding.

Rockit Boutique is a locally owned niche boutique that sells urban underground fashions, footwear, art and collectables. It is located in downtown Kingston. Rockit’s main focus is on urban hip fashion and as part of that focus they sell a variety of skateboard clothing/footwear and skateboard equipment or hardgoods such as decks, wheels, trucks and bearings. Their skateboard brands include Element, Vans, DGK, 10 Deep, Independent and Quiksilver.

Ruwa Board Shop is locally owned and located in a commercial area of Kingston in a nondescript garage that also contains an indoor skateboard park. Although the shop does sell a small variety of skateboard hardgoods, its main focus is on selling Ruwa designed decks and t-shirts.

3.2.2 Places to Skateboard in Kingston

The three main areas to skateboard in Kingston are, Queen’s University, the Ruwa Indoor Skatepark and an outdoor skateboard park at Polson Park.
3.2.2.1 Queen’s University

Due to the large number of concrete buildings, numerous sets of stairs and concrete ledges, skateboarders enjoy skateboarding on the Queen’s University campus.

Paul: The skateboarders skate along and jump off concrete walls, stairs and planters. I like to skateboard at Queen’s because there is just spots all over like ledges and benches and stuff but sometimes when you go there they kick you out automatically and sometimes you can get away with skating there a little while.

At Queen’s it is common to see skateboarders on campus in groups of three or four individuals skating a particular object with one skater acting as a look out (field notes June 22, 2009). Like Paul my respondents all said they love to skate Queen’s but they all complain that Queen’s campus security constantly chases them from the Queen’s campus.

3.2.2.2 Ruwa Indoor Skatepark

The Ruwa Indoor Skatepark is rather small for an indoor skatepark at around 800 square feet. The park has a 20-foot mini ramp, a 3-foot mini ramp, a camel hump and a small flat ground area (See Figure 2). The park charges $2.50 per hour and generally caters to preteen skaters that are just learning. With the limited space the older skaters tend to stay away unless the shop is hosting a competition, which happens every couple of months (field notes August 4, 2009). The competition results are posted on Facebook and it is a chance for the hardcore members of the Kingston skate to assert their status and achieve collective self-verification.
3.2.2.3 West 49-Lyon Skatepark at Polson Park

In 2004 the Polson Park Free Methodist Church, West 49 and the City of Kingston partnered together to build the West 49-Lyon Skatepark at Polson Park\(^1\). The skatepark is a fenced in flat concrete slab 100 feet long by 60 feet wide with a picnic bench and picnic table on the side for people to sit down. The skatepark has a system of concrete ramps, boxes, benches and rails positioned throughout the park to create four interchangeable lines of flow for the skateboarders to follow (See Figure 3). This makes

\(^1\) The skaters within the Kingston skate scene refer to the skatepark as just Polson Park or Polson Park Skatepark.
the park good for street skating because there are no big vert ramps or concrete bowls. Recall that the act of street skating requires a skater to utilize objects in urbanized settings, such as curbs, ledges, benches, handrails, stairs and other obstacles to do tricks.

**Figure 3: Polson Park Skatepark**

![Polson Park Skatepark](image)

The Polson Park Skatepark is the main hangout for the Kingston skate scene with typically 3 to 5 guys always at the park during good weather. “If you want to fit in all you have to do is go to the skatepark do some tricks and hang out with the guys” (Chet).

There are roughly 20 to 25 skaters who live in Kingston that are over the age of 18 and skate on a regular basis. With Polson Park being really the only designated spot for skaters in Kingston, skaters can almost guarantee they will meet up with someone they
know by just going to the park. This makes Polson Park Skatepark an ideal place for skateboarders to come to do self-symbolizing and collective self-verification.

When the older skateboarders come to the park, the younger less experience tend to leave or go to the sidelines meaning that the older skaters all of who know each other tend to own the park when they are there. These skaters use it as a place to meet up with friends and hang out. Often they are sitting on the benches between skating sessions for hours talking about the latest skateboard video they have seen or skateboard magazine/website they have read (field notes July 10, 2009). Paul who is 18 just moved to Kingston from Napanee to be with his girlfriend says that he met people to skate with in Kingston by just “coming here (Polson), skate meet people, talk to them and end up being friends with them and skate wherever.”

Due to the relatively small area of the skatepark and the fact that skaters have to watch and wait to take their line or path to an obstacle, skaters can pretty much guarantee that someone is watching them at all times. With the skatepark only 100 feet long and 60 feet wide, a skater can easily see all of it from any vantage point at the skatepark. When a skater is at the skatepark, he or she perceives that another skater is watching him or her even though he or she does not know whom. Each skater essentially perceives an audience of other skaters. The perception of skaters at the park is that the audience watching are making judgments on how good each individual is at skateboarding and whether he or she belongs at the park.
Shawn: When you look at a skateboard park the true skaters are the ones that are doing the same lines. When you look at a skateboard park it’s the lines and how they ride a park and the motion they actually take through the park. And you will see the kid who doesn’t know how to skate and lets call him the poser guy interrupt that flow and the minute he interrupts that flow you know that first of all he shouldn’t be there because it’s dangerous and the second part you realize that he is just not that true skater.

Although the skatepark is also a place to hang out, meet friends and perceive collective self-verification, it also has some drawbacks. Kingston skaters believe it is too small for a city the size of Kingston and that there is not enough variety of obstacles. There are only 11 obstacles at the skatepark and constantly skating the same 11 obstacles means that the skaters are competing over a limited symbolic resource.

Andy: This is a good park for skating benches….it’s just getting boring everything here is kind of little and you skate the same two things over and over again it just gets boring.

Skating the same object over and over again is not only boring for skaters but over time it becomes more difficult to create new tricks and progress on the obstacle. If a skater keeps landing the same trick on an obstacle, the trick loses its power as a self-symbol of belonging because the trick does not demonstrate continual progression. Progression is a key symbol within the skateboarding subculture. This forces the skater to be creative and put more effort in discovering a new trick on an obstacle at the park or finding a new obstacle within the city. However, even when skaters succeed in getting a new trick and demonstrating some progression, they are well aware of the effort that was
necessary because of the limited resources the city offers. The skaters also feel marginalized because the city of Kingston does not provide the resources for their sport like other cities in the area do.

Tim: Like I got to go skate. I feel like skateboarding so where is the skatepark so I come here… I like this place (Polson Park).…. But it is not big like for the city the size of Kingston they should have a HUGE concrete park huge like Belleville has a huge concrete park, Brockville has a huge concrete park, Ottawa has like 12 skateboard parks.

Both Belleville and Brockville are smaller cities than Kingston yet have bigger skateparks so the Kingston skaters feel at a disadvantage when it comes to skating and progressing. To add to this, the park does not have the right aesthetics because it is set in suburban neighbor park right next to a church and the obstacles are too perfect or easy to skate compared to the obstacles in a real urban environment. Therefore, skating at the Polson Park Skatepark cannot showcase a skater’s true talents and skills.

Ben: When you’re at Polson here your mind is totally blank it’s just fun that’s why it’s fun to meet up at a skatepark. It’s just like you don’t film at the skatepark and you just meet up with your friends everything is perfect you don’t have to worry about anything. I mean how many people get hurt here really? It is pretty much basically the safest place you could be to hone your skills and meet friends. It is just a good warm up spot.

Because it is really the only place in Kingston for older skateboarders to go to skate, a nice day will guarantee that there will be a group of skaters at Polson.
Chapter 4

Analysis Part 1: The Elements of the SCURB Framework

The theoretical SCURB framework outlined in Chapter 2, suggests that individuals use consumption to build a sense of belonging through group identification, collective self-verification and self-symbolizing\(^1\). These three elements (the points of the inner triangle) reciprocate and interact with each other to build a sense of certainty about belonging for an individual. Guided by this framework, the following is an examination of responses obtained in the interviews for each of the three elements. Each of the elements will be discussed individually with some overlap. A more thorough integration of the elements will happen in Chapter 5 when discussing the belonging paradox.

4.1 SCURB Element I: Group Identification

Group identification refers to aligning one’s self-concept with the group prototype and/or making oneself distinct from other groups. All of the respondents clearly see themselves as a skateboarder. In fact, for most of the respondents all they do and know is related to skating. These following four quotes are typical of all respondents.

Andy: It is part of who I am, my personality, how people know me – A skater.

\(^1\) For the purposes of this analysis self-symbols and symbols are interchangeable.
Ben: It’s pretty deep in my life, a huge thing in my life. It is a deep bond. It’s not just something you do. It is something you ARE.

Jack: I will be a skater till the day I die. It is who I am and what I do.

Shawn: When you skateboard and most skateboarders will tell you this you are dealing with your soul! You live and breathe it.

Each respondent defines himself as a skateboarder, spending most of his time skateboarding or working to support skateboarding. Skateboarding is a central part of their self-concept and there is a sense when talking to respondents that if they did not skateboard they would not know how to define themselves. The term “skater” rather than skateboarder is one typically reserved for people that are intimate with skateboarding. This shows an alignment with each other in terms of how they identify themselves. As Uncertainty-Identity Theory would suggest, members of this subculture self-categorize themselves as skaters and align their self-concept with each other by emphasizing similarities associated with other members and the group prototype.

One similarity is the amount of time each respondent spent on skating (self-symbol), regularly skateboarding for hours on end.

Glen: Skate or die the full on acceptance of the skateboard lifestyle…. The lifestyle is wake up go skate go party come home go to sleep wake up skate. It is skating above all else. Skating über alles.
Glen: It is pretty self-evident who skates and who doesn’t because it is the same people you see every day.

Indeed if the respondents go even a couple of hours without skateboarding they start to miss it and the belonging that comes with it. I interviewed Evan when he was early for work one day and decided to stop by the Polson Skatepark even though he did not have his skateboard. He sat beside me at the picnic table and I introduced myself. Within five minutes we were talking about skateboarding for ninety minutes straight until he had to go to work a shift at a restaurant. He said he would be back with his skateboard after his shift. Just being around the park allows him to feel like part of the group.

Evan: In the summer I will wake up at 7 AM, go to the skatepark and I wouldn’t leave until 9 or 10 at night, I would be at the skatepark all day. I will go out and if I work and close at 1 o’clock in the morning I will go out and just skate under a light for a couple of hours in the middle of the night. I have to stay good… you can go anywhere in the world if your skateboarding is good. It really is just like a family.

Respondents do appear to focus on a small subset of the characteristics associated with being a skater. In particular they focus on the time spent skating, how good you are with tricks and the effort a skater puts into the lifestyle. For example, both Glen and Evan focus on the time they spend skateboarding as a symbol of their group identification to the group. This focus on a limited set of characteristics is very consistent with Uncertainty-Identity Theory in that individuals experiencing extreme or continual self-concept uncertainty tend to focus on a limited set of characteristics of the prototype.
Evan believes that skateboarding is and will always be a central part of his life, stating, “I will be skating until I am 80 years old”. For Evan skateboarding is not just a pastime but also a way of life. Evan is similar to Ben in that skateboarding is not something you do but it is something you are. For all respondents, skateboarding is more than a culture or sport; it is a lifestyle.

Shawn: Anyone who has been skateboarding for a long time will tell you that skateboarding is more than just a sport it’s a lifestyle. And most skateboarders when they get into it, when they truly get into it, when they are really into it. The kids I see in Kingston living on their boards. They are into every aspect of skateboarding and that is music, it’s the clothing, magazines, it’s the everything it’s the fashion it’s the everything that revolves around the sport and it has always been like that.

Other observed similarities among respondents, with respect to group prototype, include that they tend to listen to rock or hip-hop/rap music and wear similar fashion such as skateboard shoes, a hat and shoelace belts. The prototype represented in these similarities is that of a professional skateboarder. For example, Nick defines himself as an all-round skateboarder and uses the professional Mark Gonzalez to show how he is prototypical of the group.

Nick: Being an all-round skater is better than skating one thing. I have things all around I got my flip tricks. I got my ledge tricks. I have got my tricks from transition. Being a good skateboarder is being able to skate everything to me. Coming from the words of the Gonz…. When a skateboarding legend Mark Gonzalez says that being an all-round skater is better, which I totally agree with, says that you better believe it.
Consistent with group identification and Uncertainty-Identity theories, skateboarders also demonstrate group identification by emphasizing what they are not. Skateboarding grew out of a surfing subculture and has a rebel/slacker attitude associated with it (Kelly, Pomerantz, Currie 2008). The skaters in the Kingston skate scene revel in the rebellious attitude especially as it relates to it being illegal to skate anywhere on private property except at the skatepark at Polson Park. Kingston By-Law 10 Sections 67 prohibits skateboarding on city sidewalks and streets stating, “No person shall run races on foot, or do roller skating or skateboarding on the pavement or play at any game or sport with a ball or otherwise..... in any of the public streets or places of the City” (By-Law No 10 - 1938; 94-251 – 1994 in City of Kingston Report 2003 pg. 29).

Ken: It is pretty much illegal to skateboard on private property or city streets and sidewalks so technically everywhere on the planet according to the rules.

Combined with this rebel attitude is an “us against the world” mentality. Ben believes the rebel attitude gives him the freedom to do what he wants which not only makes it fun but also a brother thing.

Ben: I mean like culture. There are so many things that go along with skateboarding. It’s not just something you do when you’re a skateboarder. It’s not just something you do, it’s something you are. There’s something like that too for skateboarding. It’s something that you live. It’s like everything about you that you do is skateboarding. Whether you go into downtown and you just roll around and maybe you jump off a curb, something that’s just really trivial. It’s really easy, but it’s fun. That’s skateboarding, everything about it is fun. There’s the lifestyle that goes with it, there’s
sort of the rebellious attitude… There’s graffiti. Hip-hop’s a big part of skateboarding culture. So is punk rock and all of that stuff. All these different cultural aspects all started coming into one with skateboarding..... If you go street skating, you’re being rebellious right there, because it’s illegal. I think you’re not even allowed to – “hey, Evan, you’re not even allowed to skate on the sidewalks here, right?” You’ll get a ticket. So even if you go on the sidewalk, you’re risking it. So the moment that you step on a skateboard on a sidewalk in Kingston, you’re already breaking the law. That’s why the point of a photo – or like a photo or a video or whatever. Grab the essence of the trick. But there’s so many things that are unseen. There’s so many unseen obstacles. Security is a big one. So the law. Like you’re breaking the law when you’re trying to get a trick out in the streets and you are doing it with your friends and brothers.

According to Shawn, skateboarders are portrayed in the media as “radical drug addicts” or have a bad boy image which is far from the truth, but since skaters wrongly have a bad boy image if you go another place you feel instantly connected to other skaters”. This attitude of us versus the world does bond the subculture together but interestingly the ‘other’ also comes from within the skateboarding subculture. A common theme that came up in the interviews was the idea of not being a ‘poser’—someone who dresses the part and acts like a skater but does not skate.

Shawn: Someone who would look and dress the part of the skateboarder but does not know how to skateboard and that’s what we have always considered a poser. Which there are lots of kids out there who are just learning but I am going after that 19 year-old kid who dresses the part holds a skateboard but doesn’t have a clue how to do anything and doesn’t want to know how to do anything. He just has it
because it is cool. Sits on the side and watches. He is part of the whole skateboard crowd but he is not a real skater.

Although posers are still part of the crowd or group in that they are physically at the skatepark, they are not real skaters because they do not want to learn to do tricks or progress in the learning of the tricks. Tricks are central to being a skater so using skateboards only for transportation is not skating. For most skaters, Longboarding is a perfect example of this. Longboarding is the act of skateboarding with a skateboard that is longer and sometimes wider in shape primarily for transportation, cruising around and downhill or slalom racing.

Chet: I definitely don’t like Longboarding…. I think it’s kind of stupid (laughing). It’s not skateboarding. It is just like anyone can do it there is no skill required. It is just a huge long board with huge wheels and trucks… With skateboarding there is more balance, you do tricks, which actually take skill. I mean with longboards you are just rolling around and a lot of skateboarders think that’s stupid, gay, like you don’t fit in when you ride those.

Posers serve a very useful purpose for the group. Posers help to codify the group prototype of what a skater is by providing clear examples of what a skater is not. The skater subculture is primarily focused on skill. Evan, for example, spends hours and hours at the skatepark to stay up on tricks and maintain his sense of skill and thus, his sense of belonging. Skill, however, is not just about doing tricks; it is also about demonstrating proper use of subculture-related knowledge. This knowledge comes from skateboard
magazines, which are, “their bible and the way you talk a skateboard language” (Shawn).

Tim recounted a time he was at a party and how when a poser approached his group.

Tim: When I was at a party and there was four of us talking about skateboarding and a random dude comes up over and thinks he knows something about skateboarding when he really doesn’t we were just like, “who the fuck is this guy?” So you know it’s like, “Fuck off!” It was basically like, “WE are skateboarders Fuck You!”

Consistent with Uncertainty-Identity Theory, Skaters gain a sense of brotherhood and togetherness by differentiating themselves from regular society or from posers that don’t do tricks with their skateboards. The togetherness (or WE as stated by Tim) exists because of the group ethos and prototype that separates the posers from the real skaters.

The skating subculture has a unique ethos, which provides some interesting insights about how individual skaters deal with belonging uncertainty within the group.

4.1.1 The Ethos

Arising out of the surfing heritage and its rebel attitude there is an interplay that exists between the group and the individual within the skating subculture. The belief within the subculture is that all one needs to skate is yourself and a skateboard. When Shawn puts on the headphones it is just, “him and his skateboard” and he tries to make his body “completely flow down to the board.” For him skateboarding is all about “you and the feel of the board. Instead of teamwork it was more of a self thing going on.” Evan has a similar belief stating that,
Evan: Everything (in skateboarding) you do you are doing for your self. In skateboarding it is not anyone else. It is not your best friend sitting there telling you what to do or clapping you on. It is you!

Paul takes it a step further comparing skateboarding to other team sports.

Paul: You make it your own really. It is not like baseball or hockey or something. You don’t have to do it when you don’t want to. You don’t have somebody telling you what to do with it. You don’t have like people like coaches it is just not a sport really it is like such an individual thing. You can just do whatever you want with it. That is pretty much why I like it. There is no scheduled practice or something stupid like that.

Paul is typical of other respondents appreciating that part of the ethos of skateboarding is that as a skater you can be an individual. This has a direct impact on who is attracted to the subculture. According to Shawn, kids that are uncertain about their self-concepts and/or belonging are attracted to skateboarding because it allows them the freedom to express themselves as individuals.

Shawn: It has always appealed to those guys that in most cases that has maybe struggled with normal types of sports. You know that little bit outsider type of kid. That is where skateboarding has gone over the years. The outsider kid usually picks up the skateboard. I think it is because the artistic flow in them comes out in skateboarding and nobody is dictating to them. Parents aren’t going do this. Coaches aren’t going go do this. It is theirs to grab and do whatever they want to and nobody else has to dictate to them. So that kid who has maybe struggled in school or any other sports that does not like authority will pick up a skateboard because he is his own authority when he skateboards. He is not listening to anybody else.
For the respondents team sports were restrictive while skateboarding gave them a sense of freedom that they lacked in their life. For Luke, “holding a skateboard feels like freedom just going anywhere with it”. It is the freedom to go anywhere and do anything with it that gives them control to do their own individual thing as echoed by Nick.

Nick: There is the big sense of freedom in skateboarding too. Do what you want and make your own decisions… This freedom is really indescribable! You do what you want to do. You don’t feel like you HAVE to do something or don’t HAVE to learn this trick today. You don’t HAVE to be as good as anybody it is just do whatever you know, do what makes you happy in skateboarding.

In addition to the individualism, there is also creative element to the group ethos. There is no set way to learn the tricks on a skateboard. There are trick tips in magazines and skateboarders watch skate videos but as Evan points out, everybody has to do their own thing. “Everybody has different size feet and everybody has different length of legs” (Evan). The consensus around Polson Park was that trick pages in the magazines were useless and videos were only marginally better (field notes July 11, 2009).

According to the respondents there are “thousands of tricks you can do” and even more if you add in the variations and physical objects on which to perform tricks.

Evan: It is something I can go out and do for myself at any time and no one can tell me what I can and can’t do. It is an art form. You see an obstacle and you say I am going to go do this on that and then go do it.

Shawn: What you were doing was creating something. It was more of an art form than a sport. I felt it was both a
sport and an art form. How to express yourself on to something which I could not do that in anything else.

The creativity and variety of tricks and objects on which to perform tricks allows skateboarders to conform to the individualism and skill part of the group ethos, thus, assisting them with maintaining their group identification. This creativity and the idea that skateboarding as an art form also extends into the making of skate videos.

While the ethos of skateboarding celebrates individuality, freedom, effort (time) and creativity, an interesting observation is that no one wants to skate alone. Skateboarding alone is boring because as Shawn points out:

Shawn: If you’re skating with friends you can skate a lot longer but if you are skating by yourself you might only last for two hours and then you are completely exhausted because the two hours is focused just on you.

What skating with friends provides is not only a group that will push and encourage others to progress as a skater, but also an opportunity for collective self-verification.

Tim: I view skating as kinda an individual thing. You don’t really rely on anybody. It is ALL you. You are battling yourself. If I didn’t want to have any friends I don’t need friends to go skateboarding. Mind you it would suck. When you are skateboarding with your crew, your group of skateboarding friends, it’s like you feel each other. You are trying something and your friends are hyping you up – Like, “yeah let’s do this. You got this.” It is just like energy between the group. I live for it.
Tim recognizes that if it weren’t for the group he would not be hyped up to try something new and progress, an important part of the skill aspect of the group ethos. Part of what drives the subculture is the evolution of tricks, which are the key symbol of belonging for skaters. Progress is a central part of this and is seen by many as “the whole point of skateboarding” (Nick). For example, in Shawn’s era the best trick was the 360 (how many times you could go around in a circle on your board). Today according to him “that trick is not even on the map” of hard tricks. “It is pretty crazy what people are doing these days. The videos you watch and stuff it is hard to keep up” (Jack). For skateboarders to maintain their sense of identity and belonging as a skateboarder they have to keep progressing.

The group helps to reinforce a sense of progress.

Jack: When you are skating with people that are busting all the time you are going to start busting more and trying harder stuff and that is what pushes you to get better.

Individuals also sit on the side of the park and watch other group members, learning tricks and thinking about new tricks. While competition within the group provides an audience for collective self-verification for those self-symbolizing tricks, it can also create belonging uncertainty for others.

In addition to promoting progress the group also provides a social scene and sense of belonging that someone outside the group is missing. Tim, for example, lives in a house with three other skateboarders where all they do is talk skateboarding. One of
Tim’s roommates, Nick, says skateboarding is “joining my friends in something we all love and keeping up on it. We love it and it is on your mind all the time.” Through the group Nick and Tim literally live skateboarding. Other respondents also commented on the social scene provided by the group.

Dan: It is all within your crew. Your group of skater friends. There are always crews. Skateboarders always hang out in crews. A group of guys that usually become very good friends and all compete against each other for sure. All work together film together and go on trips together kinda thing. It is definitely a crew sport. You won’t survive it or skate very long if you don’t have a crew. It just gets boring. Why would you want to skate with yourself all the time? You got to have a crew. Like who do you relate with. Who do you compete against?.... It is natural to want to progress, who would you want to progress against if you don’t have a crew? There is always that pack you always have a pack if you are skating. Five or six buds maybe more. You all hang out.

The group and common bond based on the ethos is so important to skateboarding that a number of the respondents quit for a time just because their friends quit or the local skatepark shutdown and there was no place for the group to meet. The group becomes a skater’s crew or family. It is through the association with the group that they feel like a skater. “If I am at school I do not feel like a skateboarder because I am not with skateboarders” (Ben).

Respondents also discuss how through skateboarding they feel connected to one big global family of fellow skateboarders.
Tim: That’s what I love about skateboarding you can go anywhere in the fucking world and meet skateboarders and because you have skateboarding in common you can relate and connect. It is just sick.

While there is a sense of global connectedness, within Kingston the focus tends to be on the city and the skateboard scene within a city. Each major city tends to have a scene. A scene is made up of 15 to 20 skaters who are passionate about skating and are always at the skatepark.

Ken: The ones that are actually skating and are passionate about it and ARE skaters and those are the ones who all come together. Those are the ones who make the inner city groups who stay in contact with all the other city groups and they are the ones who are the real skate scene of the city and country.

The scene is considered the hardcore skaters, “who keep skateboarding alive in the city” (Glen). Again, the group ethos of “skating all the time” is apparent. Also, in continuing to define their identity, Kingston skaters compare and contrast different scenes to their own to say what they are not.

To become part of the scene is to conform to the group ethos, which means being good at performing tricks and sharing a common interest and specialized knowledge. Specialized knowledge refers to the knowledge only skateboarders would know including music, tricks, industry information, anything in the skating magazines, skating websites and skating videos.
Tim: It is awesome that select few individuals can get together, skate together. We all exchange phone numbers and film whatever, talk skateboarding. We all got that in common. It is just a common interest. Often enough I know it is bad to say but being really good helps you fit into the clique. It is a social scene… You just skate how you skate and if they like your skating they probably want to hang out with you. You just kind of click… You just have conversations and get to know each other. The social aspect of skateboarding is really cool man. It is very unique it is not like a regular social atmosphere like school or work. I guess it is specialized knowledge. You could skateboard in a given city there is like fucking 20 hardcore skateboarders and if you mold into that crew you are fucking golden.

Tim symbolizes his group identification and provides an opportunity for collective self-verification by adhering to the ethos. Interestingly, through conversations at the skatepark Nick discovered that Tim was living with people who did not appreciate skateboarding and offered Tim a place in his house where all the housemates are into skating.

Another key to molding into the group is not to intentionally seek attention. As Tim mentions, you have to skate how you skate. Skating for yourself means doing your own thing and developing your own style. Looking for recognition is not skating for yourself, it is skating for someone else and this goes against the creative, individual and freedom part of ethos.

Evan: That’s what it is about it is doing it for yourself. If you go somewhere else in the world and you start skateboarding and you are looking around trying to get everyone else to look at you. Some people call it beaming and you are not going to make friends…If you just go to a
Within the skateboarding subculture there is debate over the importance of the different elements of the ethos, but there is no disagreement over what those elements of the ethos are. The following is a discussion among three respondents and Tim comes in at the end and sums up the agreement.

Paul: We were talking about what skateboarding was the other day. It’s an art. It’s not a sport. It is an art.

Nick: It is kinda a sport. It is an activity.

Paul: Yeah it is an activity not a sport. Sports have rules. There are no rules in skateboarding.

Nick: It is an art in a way. But it is not all art because you are not going to be called an artist when you are a skateboarder. It is art but it is an active art. A lot of people like to call it an art. A lot of people call it some sort of sport. I like to call it something I like to do. I hate getting into arguments about it. Oh it is sport. No it is an art form. No it is a fucking extreme activity. No it is a form of fucking self fucking what ever. I prefer just to do it.

Paul: I prefer it not to be called a sport because it is like the anti-sport.

Nick: A lot of us don’t yeah.

Ben: Nick, you said everything but a lifestyle.

Nick: It is a lifestyle.

Paul: It is an art and lifestyle and nothing else.

Nick: What makes you think that?
Paul: It is not a sport there are no rules to it.

Nick: Sports don’t have to have rules.

Paul: Name a sport that does not have rules.

Nick: Well then what are we doing? MMA does not have rules.

Paul: Oh yeah true.

Nick: So what is skateboarding?

Paul: It’s an art and lifestyle.

Nick: So where are your drawings?

Paul: Photography is art.

Nick: Are you fucking taking photos or are you skateboarding. Are you going to go up to a skateboarder and say, “Are you an artist?”

Paul: Yeah?!

Nick: Apparently we are artists now (laughing).

Ben: It is not a sport.

Paul: Ben is with me.

Nick: I did not say it was.

Paul: You do it when you feel like it. You don’t have to compete. You don’t have to do anything.

Nick: Competitions are part of skateboarding though.

Ben: It is more of a lifestyle than any of that shit.
Paul: A lot of people don’t agree with competitions. A lot of pros don’t even go to them because they don’t agree with them.

Nick: Most pros have to because it is for the sponsors.

Paul: The lifestyle is being able to do whatever you want whenever you want.

Nick: I agree with you then.

Paul: Skateboarding to me, it’s a lifestyle just chilling with your buddies. Even if you are not skateboarding with your friends, skateboarding that is what you talk about and watch.

Tim: It is a unique recreational activity that you participate in amongst your friends.

Ben: Tim has got it.

Discussions about the ethos is a normal group activity because different individuals are trying to assess “who we are?” and “where do I fit in the group?” (Hogg and Tindale 2005). The reason there is agreement over what the elements of the ethos are (but not their relative importance) is because the skateboard subculture appears to have a clear ethos of individuality, freedom, creativity, progress/self-improvement, putting in the time/effort and a rebel slack attitude of chilling with your buddies and it is us against the rest of the world.

The skateboarding subculture likely has this clear prototype because of the threats it experiences from society from time to time resulting in high group entitativity. Uncertainty-Identity Theory can help provide insights as to why Shawn said the “outsider
“kid” has always been attracted to skateboarding. Outsider kids have a fair amount of belonging uncertainty and the clear ethos of the skateboarding subculture provides a roadmap for them to reduce that belonging uncertainty.

In sum, with respect to identification, all respondents see themselves as skateboarders and see skateboarding as a central part of their self-concept. They demonstrate the classic technique of increasing their group identification by aligning themselves with the group ethos and by focusing on what they are not. For them skateboarding is an inherently individual activity embedded in larger group or subculture. There is clear commitment to the lifestyle of a skateboarder and it being part of larger group. They cannot see themselves as anything but skateboarders. Using the lens of current literature, the respondents have all the characteristics of hardcore members who are secure in their membership and belonging. However, the lens provided by the SCURB framework will provide further insights to demonstrate how belonging is a pervasive continuous struggle even for hardcore members. The analysis next turns to the remaining two elements of the SCURB framework, collective self-verification and self-symbolizing, to understand other ways skateboarders address their feelings of belonging to the group.

4.2 SCURB Element II: Collective Self-Verification

There are many forms of collective self-verification within the subculture meaning there are many ways in which skaters verify whether others perceive them to be
skaters. These include hanging out at the skatepark, making videos or taking photos, posting those videos and/or photos to the Internet/Blogs, formal and informal competitions and possession of new self-symbols such as new tricks, knowledge or being the first to skate at a new spot (i.e., owning a spot). What is important for a skater in each one of these forms of collective self-verification is the perception of providing others the opportunity to verify that skaters’ belonging to the group. For skaters the perceived opportunity for collective self-verification is more important than the actual collective self-verification because of the way skaters selectively manage their presentation of their self-concept.

4.2.1 Contests

One of the easiest opportunities for collective self-verification is through skate competitions. Most of the respondents took part in competitions at the skateparks in the surrounding areas and two of the respondents Shawn and Tim entered professional contests. Most claim they enter the contests to win free equipment because equipment wears out very quickly, however, contests are also a good way to skate in front of an audience.

Jack: Oh yeah, I like doing comps. I love just being able to perform. You know get the crowd hyped and stuff like that. You land a trick and everybody cheers. It is a good feeling.

Through the clapping and cheering the crowd is essentially acknowledging the talent of a skater by appreciating his self-symbolization through the tricks performed.
Consumption in skateboarding is a performance and if the tricks are not seen by others and verified, they don’t count. Recall that if skaters don’t do tricks they are not considered skateboarders. Entering contests is an excellent way to perceive that someone is watching.

Doing well in a contest can be a powerful form of collective self-verification because the verification is coming from independent knowledgeable judges and not a group of friends who may be biased. If results appear on Facebook, good results are also a useful symbol to achieve status and belonging within a scene.

Tim: The smaller local ones I won enough of them. All the local contests that were hosted by local skate shops. I guess I took first a couple of times and won myself some shoes and boards and stuff. There was a Muskoka Woods contest throughout Ontario and you ended up at the Muskoka Woods skate camp up in the Muskoka area. I have been out in Vancouver for DC nationals. Did a whole bunch of DC nationals contests.... I got top 10 in Vancouver. I was 9th place and that got me a ticket to skate in the Canadian West 49 contest in Mississauga at the Hershey Center. I was like rubbing shoulders with like fucking Koston and Chris Haslam like all the big name pros I was on the same course as them..... Like I said I come from a small town and everyone knows who I am. I don’t want to boast or anything but me and my select few friends we were THE skateboarders like we were the dudes in the town. I was the guy that was always going into the contests. People were talking you know like, “Tim What’s up?”

Consistent with the SCURB framework, collective self-verification and self-symbolizing appear to feed off of each other and have reciprocal effects. Tim recognizes the power and importance of competitions within the skateboard subculture pointing out
to Frank (another member of the Kingston scene) that at the DC nationals in Vancouver he beat one of the Decenzo kids who are “now big.” The national competitions and rankings confirmed Tim’s self-concept as the contest guy. At the same time the collective self-verification from the contests serves as a status symbol within Tim’s local scene. The local scene then provides verification for Tim simply by knowing about the contests.

Self-symbols are central to the collective self-verification process but at the same time collective self-verification is also a self-symbol used for verification at different levels of the subgroups of the subculture. For Tim and other respondents, collective self-verification and self-symbols are mutually reinforcing elements and how they construct their sense of belonging.

Contests are a central element within skateboarding subculture and are good self-symbols and opportunities for collective self-verification but they are a huge risk to an individual’s sense of belonging as well. Tim and Jack recognize that skateboard competitions also add a lot of belonging uncertainty because there is also a lot at risk.

Jack: Different (laughing) than just skating. It is a lot more pressure of having to land tricks rather than just trying a trick until you land it you know. So you are a little more conservative in your skating. Sometimes you try the odd trick you won’t usually try because it is a little more hard. But it is really fast paced and I have sports induced asthma so skating a minute and a half in a two minute run I am like dead after but it is cool because all eyes are on you so it kinda jacks you up to try to bust. At the same time it is way different than just chilling and skating.

Tim: It is all eyes on you, the pros you know it is kinda like in any social atmosphere you are kinda how do I look?
What do people think about me? You know if you feel those insecure thoughts. It is the same way when you are in front of a bunch of skateboarders. It is like this is our scene and do they accept me or don’t they? You are wondering this so sometimes you feel a little pressure because of that. You don’t really know and it is all eyes on you.

Skaters form their self-concepts in part on how they perceive others view them, which is the basic premise of self-verification. Skaters like Tim are worried about how they are perceived in front of the audience of other skaters. They are concerned with how they look in front of the audience, which comes down to two forms of self-symbols, their dress and their tricks. When they perceive that someone is watching them they can develop uncertainties about these self-symbols and thus their belonging. Self-questions arise such as: Do I look the way I want to look?, Will I be able to land this trick and does it look effortless? and Will others perceive me the way I want to be perceived given I may not land a trick?

To deal with the pressures of competitions, respondents continuously practice their competition runs in front of an audience through the informal competition that arises at the skatepark. They also produce and post skate videos of their tricks. Using these forms of collective self verification provides the respondents more control over when and who sees their self-symbolizing.

4.2.2 Collective Self-Verification at the Skatepark: Informal Competition

Polson Skatepark is the focal point of the skateboard scene in Kingston and is the only legal place to skateboard in public in Kingston. Before the city established Polson,
there was a temporary skatepark of wooden ramps set up by Kingston Collegiate and Vocational Institute (KCVI) high school. However, the KCVI skatepark was torn down because it was deemed unsafe.

Ken: It is just time now. It is pretty much being everywhere and that obsession and that intensity of skateboarding at first kinda makes people a little more well known. Like I skateboarded all the time. I went to EVERYWHERE around the city. I looked behind every building, every major building to see if there would be spots that would be ideal for skateboarding. Found the KCVI skatepark down beside the school and it ended up being one of the best places to skateboard when it was still there. The majority of the other guys who were the best in the city and the majority of people who skated a lot they found that spot too because it was the best place to skateboard. So that is why they kept going there.

Once Polson replaced KCVI, Polson became the place in Kingston for skaters to hang out and meet up with other skaters. When the weather is good it is the place in Kingston where skaters will skate until it is dark. On most every evening in the summer I was able to find at least 4 to 6 skaters at the Polson Park (field notes July 10 2009). Indeed most Kingston skaters go to Polson Park knowing that they can find other skaters.

Evan is typical of other respondents in that before and after work or school he heads to Polson Park to find a group of skaters.

Evan: Just usually here I don’t skate street by myself. I always skate with these guys when I am around here. I will go out and skate street with other people but I won’t go down and to Queen’s and skate by myself. I will skate with who ever is here.
Paul like a lot of other Kingston skaters starts his day at Polson park, “at any
given time and there is usually one or two people that I know that are here (Polson).”
Collective self-verification is so important to perceive a sense of belonging that skaters
come to the park for an audience or group to skate with so that they can perceive that
collective self-verification. Furthermore, due to the park being so small, skaters always
perceive that someone in the park is watching them.

Given that it is common knowledge that if you show up to the skatepark you will
find skaters, a primary way to become part of the Kingston scene is to continually show
up at the Polson Skatepark. Although frequency and time spent at the park are important
symbols of belonging, what also helps an individual mold into a city’s scene is their
ability to consistently do tricks and progress. According to the respondents, the way the
scene verifies that you are good at tricks is through watching you and giving you
spontaneous cheers or nods. These nods also acknowledge that you are trying to improve
by constantly showing up at the park and therefore are embracing the ethos.

Interviewer: What do you mean absorbed into the scene?

Glen: Well it is just, ah you know, you come to a park the
first couple of times and nobody knows you and you just
kinda do your own thing and they do their own thing. You
might get a nod or something but after a couple of times
you come to the park and people are saying, “hey” to you
and you’re on a first name basis with everybody. You just
naturally become part of the scene.
Ken: Then just through time and skating and all the time and always seeing the same people. It just takes something as much as someone trying a hard trick. You see them try that all the time. You are like I see this kid he always tries that and then them doing it and finally learning it and being able to do it all the time. You are just like whoa that is amazing. That was a really good trick. That is awesome you just finally landed it. That is pretty sick. They are like yeah I got it. That’s kinda your introduction to them. That is kinda how you meet. Then the next day you come and there was kind of a good moment and now you guys kind of know each other. Then through skating you are both skating around and talking. “Well what are you doing today?” “I don’t know I want to go skate street somewhere, I didn’t really want to stay here.” “Well, ok I want to go skate street too. We should just all go somewhere.” Then people go out and skate together.

The audience at Polson Skatepark typically consists of 2 to 3 people skating and another 2 or 3 people sitting at the picnic table or bench watching and discussing skateboarding (field notes July 10, 2010). When skaters come to the park they perceive that someone is watching them whether the others are sitting on the benches talking or up waiting their turn to jump into the flow.

This audience at the skatepark is important because it gives each skater the perception of collective self-verification or, that at least others have the ability and opportunity to see them as skaters. Within the skateboard subculture collective self-verification of tricks is important and skaters in the Kingston skate scene have a name for someone who makes unverified claims or wants credit for a trick they cannot do.

Matt: Bunter is someone who says they have done something when they really haven’t.
Ben: When someone tries everything without committing to it.

Evan: It is someone who tries to do a trick that they can’t do. Or they say they have done it and no one has ever seen it.

Nick: I really liked it when he was saying I was bunting on the Nollie Fakie Spin Backtail. I did not land it that well but fuck sake I landed it! He fucking dished at me ughhhhhh that was a bunt.

Consistent with the SCURB framework in the skateboard subculture self-symbolizing and the perception of collective self-verification go hand in hand in helping an individual build or maintain a sense of belonging. Skaters not only need to perceive someone sees the self-symbolizing of the trick but perceive others notice that the trick is done properly. Properly means that the trick looks like it takes no effort. The quality of the self-presentation of the trick matters because the smoother it looks the more power it will have as a symbol. The skater needs to maintain an attitude that the trick was no big deal and that he can do it again at will.

The skater also needs to have style, which means performing the trick in the right spot wearing the right clothes and controlling all body movements to present the right picture to the audience. For example, Nick in Figure 4 was aware the photo was being taken and made sure to add some flare with his arms in order to give trick style. Everyone has a “personal style and technique of skating the way your arm body movements the way your tricks look.” (Ken) Unique style also reinforces the individualism part of the group ethos.
Paul: You can just tell by the way their body movements, everything. It just smoothly happens and everything looks good. You can just tell by the facial expressions like it took no effort and it happened naturally. A lot of those guys (hardcore group in Kingston) can do a hard trick and ride
away like that was not hard at all. I can do that with some tricks. The tricks I am good at.

Andy: What tricks they land what tricks they attempt. You can tell how close a person is coming to a trick whether they are just trying it to make it look like they can try it or they actually look like they are going to land it. And everybody develops a style when they start skating so you can tell who is just learning and who has been at it for awhile...Just the way they hold their body and the way they set up for a trick.... That was switch 3-flip that was a really hard trick but it looked like he put no effort into it. So, stuff like that you can tell. It is just a certain smooth effortless style that everybody develops after a while.

Ben: It is about how you look doing them. Nobody wants to look at an ugly skateboarder… Style is everything.

Several times I observed the skaters at Polson Skatepark cheering on the other skaters (See Figure 5) and paying attention to the tricks as well as the progress skaters are making. On one occasion I was sitting with Evan, Ben and Nick while Matt was skating and a big cheer erupted from the skatepark when Matt landed a hard trick.

(Cheer from those around the skatepark)

Ben: Yeah! I don’t know if that was crocked though.

Nick: It was!

Ben: Still, I can’t do it.

Interviewer: So seeing something like that....

Evan: Oh that made me so happy to see him do that... No seriously really that was an Ollie Flip Crock and I can’t do that. I can Ollie Kick-Flip and I can crock but I can’t do those together like that. That is crazy. Maybe I will try it in
a year from now when I can pop Ollies that high but not right now. I am happy for him. That is the first time I have seen him land it.

**Figure 5: Tim Landing a Frontslide Flip with his Friends Cheering Him On**

Evan, Ben and Nick all recognized the hard trick that Matt performed and at the same time acknowledged the progress that Matt made. Matt knows from the cheer he received that he achieved collective self-verification with that self-symbol. The key as Glen points out is that the trick has to be perceived as hard.

Glen: Anybody who lands a trick it almost makes you feel good by association to see it happen. You know when someone lands something that is generally perceived to be hard by whoever is here, you usually hear a round of applause or a cheer or something.

As in the case of Evan, Ben and Nick, the cheer is almost instant and involuntary. But the collective self-verification for Matt’s friends is a double edge sword because at the same time they recognize his accomplishment and progress, they know they can’t do
it. This then creates uncertainty for them about their belonging within the group and a desire to also be verified by the crowd. After a skater successfully lands a good trick other skaters commonly jump on their skateboard to try to land their tricks.

Nick: That’s what I like. That is the good part about skateboarding. He did a really good trick they cheered and got stoked and they both got on their boards, which makes them want to do things. It is like, I want to do that or I want to learn a new trick because look at him he has a smile on his face. He likes that and then he does it, they cheer for him. But you screw up that is part of it. You still keep a smile on your face. He (one of the guys that got up) did something different but it still doesn’t matter, he has landed something. It got them excited and you can do anything but you want that feeling that he just got. That feeling of accomplishment he had a big smile on his face like saying that was awesome kind of thing, I am glad I did that. Let’s try something else I am having lots of fun.

The external collective self-verification of the progress of an individual, offered by the crowd at the skatepark, pushes the others to try to reestablish their belonging, which starts an informal competition at the skatepark. This competition can spiral into a continuous competition because if one person lands a difficult trick, then others in the skatepark attempt to land something of their own that is difficult and that will provide them with a similar sense of collective self-verification. This is then followed by the first person to try to land an even harder trick. And so on…

Ken: If he lands something that is better than you, then you do something better than him and you are upping him and staying a trick or two ahead. He is always trying to do what you can do. It happens even now. We will all go to the park and we will have the same trick selection. If he is trying
something and he is not landing it. You will come up and try to do it behind him and land it.

Andy: The guys that skate here call it backups. If somebody lands a trick another guy will try to come up right behind him and land a harder trick and they call it backups. That can go on for three or four tricks in a row depending on who you have skating with you. There is always... when guys are just sitting around here skating, there is always competition between them. Like one guy will land a hard trick and the other guy and somebody that is sitting down will jump up and oh I got an idea and they just keep trying to show each other up. It is always competitive.

Hugh: It wasn’t very hard because we sucked. It was just like I don’t think anyone could Kick-Flip so I learned that. We just tried to show each other up all the time it is pretty funny. We would go to 3 stairs see who could do it. No one could do anything so if you did one thing it was pretty big.... It is fun and a sense of progression.

The competition to one up each other at the skate park leads to a temporary sense of collective self-verification and belonging but also a continuous sense of belonging uncertainty because self-doubt is always just around the corner. This is one of the reasons skateboarders place so much importance on their personal progression and why progression is such a significant part of the ethos of the subculture.

Glen: That is the one commonality that is the lowest common denominator right there, everybody wants to improve. It is the unifying element everybody wants to get better..... If you don’t want to improve then what is the point of continuing to do it.

Progress, however, is not limited to learning to perform the same trick better; it is also focused on the one-upmanship of progressively more difficult tricks. While the
skatepark ends up a source of certainty about belonging through collective self-verification of tricks, that same collective self-verification leads to uncertainty because of the inherent self-symbolizing competition within the subculture for status and belonging. Therefore, skaters have to continuously learn new tricks to maintain their sense of belonging.

Another means of collectively self-verifying and progressing at the same time is to participate in a game of SKATE. Each of a group of skaters takes turns doing the same trick and a skater who misses a trick receives one of the letters of the word SKATE. A skater receiving all of the letters is out of the game. The trick to perform can either be determined by a set of dice or each skater takes turns determining the trick. There is also often money on the line as well as the opportunity to publically claim victory in a game of SKATE.

Glen: Oh I mean, we will play games of SKATE which is where someone sets a trick and the other person attempts to do the trick and if they don’t do the trick they get a letter and the first person to spell SKATE loses. But I mean the motivation is always... you know it is never fueled by a real sense of competition. It is just kind of a fun thing to do. You end up improving yourself by playing SKATE because your consistency improves so it is kind of friendly competition it is not real cut throat rivalry. It enforces that sense of camaraderie because everyone is still friends after a game of SKATE.

Paul: A lot of times I just want to play a game of SKATE. It’s just like, hey you want to play a game of SKATE and we will get a bunch of people together and have fun. I just like to have fun with it and hang out with people too.
Interviewer: How often do you win at a game of SKATE?

Paul: It depends what we are playing. If we are playing on the bench, not so often. If we are playing flat ground, I win quite a bit and if we are playing like all around, maybe like the odd time I will win or something.... I enjoy it. It psychs me up, it gets me the chance to like try to learn new stuff and it is fun doing it too. I actually enjoy it, trying to learn new stuff. It is not like I am totally incapable of doing the trick, it’s just that I have not really taken the time to learn them fully. So sometimes I might fluke it and land it. Sometimes I might get close to get it so I will get pumped on that. Come here one day and try and learn it.

Games of SKATE are popular because they guarantee someone is watching and verifying the trick since others in the game have to perform the same trick (See Figure 6). Like Paul, skaters control who they play games of skate with and what obstacles they use, thus giving them the best chance to achieve collective self-verification and also gain the symbolism of winning the game. A skater will usually select skaters that perform similar tricks, which is consistent with the research on self-verification that finds that individuals use selective interaction (Swann, Pelham and Krull 1989) to achieve self-verification. The players make sure the tricks are done right in terms of style and look effortless. Progress occurs because a skater does not know the next trick so it forces each participant out of his or her comfort zone and progress is necessary for winning.
Typically, games of SKATE tend to be impromptu usually organized by skaters who feel they have something to prove. For example, Frank, one of the younger skaters who hangs out with the older skaters at the park has a reputation for always organizing games of SKATE with the older skaters (field notes June 29, 2009). Frank is one of the more talented skaters at the park but experiences a belonging paradox because of his age. He is 5 years younger then most of the hardcore skaters in his skate scene. As a consequence, Frank is constantly at the park and is always dressed head to toe in new skateboarding clothes. I also observed Frank at the skatepark when he was skating with skaters his own age and his skating did not seem to have the same intensity (field notes,
Frank’s constant consumption of clothes and always challenging others to games of SKATE are some of the ways that he tries to deal with his belonging paradox. Frank is able to gain a sense of belonging by winning games of SKATE as it symbolizes his skill as a skateboarder.

At the same time Games of SKATE can carry with them a lot of belonging uncertainty for the respondents.

Jack: Like Heel-Flips, it is a really basic trick that I could do before. I could do Kick-Flips or better than I could Kick-Flips anyways. Then for like a long time I couldn’t even do them at all. It is ridiculous. It is such an easy, well basic trick. I have relearnt those because I feel like I should have it in my bag of tricks. Especially for things like games of SKATE. Like I like playing games of skate with other people just because you learn stuff. It makes you try things you won’t normally try. But something like that you don’t want to get a letter on a Heel-Flip. You have to make sure you have all the basics down. So you don’t get out on something easy.

Louis: What was that?

Andy: A Fakie 3-Flip?

Louis: I think it was an Ollie?

Andy: Maybe it was an Ollie. Does he skate regular?

Louis to the group: An Ollie 3.

The group: An Ollie 3.

Interviewer: Do you win at games of skate?

Andy: Sometimes (laughing). Sometimes I do. I don’t win them a lot because I give up half way through. It just gets
boring sometimes. Some people do stupid shit too. Like the simple stuff that you first learn that becomes obsolete once you learn the hard stuff. It eventually becomes the hard stuff to do again because you don’t have the muscle sense memory to do it anymore. When you skate with people who aren’t as good as you and are going through that first stage of skateboarding, learning the simple stuff, and you play a game of SKATE with them and that is all they know how to do. It has become hard tricks for you to do like Pop Shove-it and stuff like Varial Flips. You just forget how to set up your feet to do them. You hate losing on that little simple crap that you just don’t any more. That is why I hate playing skate because I lose on something simple. It would piss me off a little bit.

Hugh: Sometimes I doubt my skill especially when I am playing games of SKATE. Like in the past I probably never lose a game of SKATE against anyone because I used to practice only flat ground tricks and that is what games of SKATE are. So now I play at the park or play anywhere a game of SKATE against anyone, there is probably a slim chance I am going to win, because I don’t know, either through injury or me skating less I have just lost like a lot of my skills in doing flip tricks and skating flat ground.

External collective self-verifications of the informal competitions, such as games of SKATE at the skatepark, carry with them the promise of inclusion in the form acknowledgments of the group but also moments of exclusion when others surpass a skater’s self-symbolism in the form of harder tricks or a skater loses the game on easy tricks. The exclusion is created because skaters have this belief that everyone in their group is at the same level.

Tim: You go to the skatepark and have a good time….If you are good enough at skateboarding you end up with skateboarders that are at your level too right.
If everyone is at the same level, when a skater is the only one who does not land a trick it means that the group has progressed beyond the skater and with this sense of exclusion comes increased belonging uncertainty. One of the most common responses to this belonging uncertainty is to spend hours practicing to regain a sense of belonging. That is why, as Glen says, the need to improve is a unifying element and drive within the subculture in order to try to stay one step ahead of the belonging uncertainty.

4.2.3 Looking for Collective Self-Verification and the Role of Knowledge

Beyond performing tricks, another key part of the skateboarding ethos is the idea that a skater skates for himself or herself, which is counter to the need to have tricks collectively self-verified. Skateboarders overcome this problem by shifting focus from or claiming they have no interest seeking collective self-verification.

Evan: Beaming is where you do a trick but before you do the trick you wait until someone is watching that you want to watch you do it. Go and do it and then look at them after. It is showing off that is what it is and I hate more than anything. It is unnecessary. It makes people feel like crap even when young kids come to the park I encourage them to skate and not just sit down.

Ben: Beaming is where you land a trick and your eyes go up for approval.

Evan: For before when you do a trick you stand there and wait and if everybody looks at you.

Ben: Watch what Frank does, because he has a girl over there he wants to impress. It is like showing off.
However, from the transcripts it is evident that skaters try hard to at least perceive there is collective self-verification to the point where skaters engage in continuous never ending competition of self-symbolizing. Part of the game, it seems, is to appear not to care about it. If a skater demonstrates they care too much that would legitimatize and explicitly signal their belonging uncertainty to themselves and the rest of the scene.

Other forms of collective self-verification and self-symbolizing that are important within the skateboarding subculture include the skater’s dress and the knowledge that each skateboarder possesses. Dress is important because it is part of style and look skaters present when performing in front of an audience. Knowledge is important because skateboarding is an athletic physical activity, requiring breaks throughout a day to recover. During the course of the day there are numerous times when skaters hang out at the side of the skatepark resting and talking about skateboarding with other skaters. Knowledge is important because skateboarders only really appear to talk about skateboarding.

Ken: In my experience anyways, with Eastern Ontario with kids in Montreal and Toronto and Kingston, they are the ones who are the real people that you see at the skatepark every day, the ones who know the other people in the other cities and are known by the kids in the other cities. Are the ones that are going to talk only skateboarding and the ones that have skateboarding and that is it. They skate all day all the time because when you go on these websites it is nothing but skateboarding. There is nothing, hey what do you think about this? What do you think about that? It is really only skateboarding... That is another thing I really noticed, the mentality of entire skate scene. Most of the people here are really awkward. They are really in this little
nich where you have to think a way you have to act some way. You can’t really care and it is just skateboarding. School I don’t even think about that I just skate.... Skate all day, go home talk to my friends on MSN. Browse on the website skatersinc.com. Anything that is new around North America. Everyone would post their footie and if someone found something good say from Seattle someone would find it and post it on the website. Everyone would talk about it discuss it....if it verged away from skateboarding it was just awkward for them.

Beyond the skatepark, conversations centered around skateboarding also take place on MSN and websites. Hardcore skateboarders, like the respondents, need to keep up during these conversations or be left behind and feel uncertain about their belonging.

According to Ken knowledge does help members establish and maintain their belonging in the “real” skate scene within North America and Kingston.

Ken: We talk about skateboarding. It is a similar interest. There is such a small group of things to talk about in skateboarding. You only really talk about the tricks. You talk about who you know that skates, spots that have been skated around the cities. Like certain cities have certain spots and that spot has had so many tricks done on it. Who are the people that have done those and everyone just kind of knows around such a large area that I saw that. Oh yeah I know that kid I heard about him in Montreal. He did this trick on this spot. Then my friend will be like I was there for that. And I mean just talking about tricks done in spots in cities like made you really good friends. So now like I have people I can go see in Montreal, San Francisco, Vancouver, Toronto. I have lots of friends that I have never hung out with for more than like a day that I am actually better friends with than people I have known for a really long time just because of skateboarding, just because the passion was there for me and a passion was there for them. We both skateboarded so much.... The knowledge base
helps, yes, and if there is no knowledge then the passion is
kind of what makes you part of it. You kinda gain
knowledge of it and you are a part of it or you just have the
passion and it brings you into it and through that passion
you gain the knowledge through your experience in it and
you will be a part of it.

Knowledge is an important self-symbol for a skateboarder especially for those in
Kingston. Kingston skaters feel so far removed from California, the Mecca of
skateboarding, that the one way they attempt to deal with this is by using knowledge to
feel a connection with the larger subculture. Consistent with research on self-verification,
Kingston skaters use the knowledge to create allies and collective self-verification within
the larger subculture.

The main sources of knowledge for skateboarding are the monthly magazines and
the Internet, including YouTube, Facebook and various websites that cater to
skateboarding. All respondents recognize that knowledge is an important element and a
symbol of their sense of belonging within the Kingston scene and the larger subculture.
This causes them to do daily research on the websites or make sure they are the first in
the scene to get a new magazine.

Nick: I do a lot of research. It is just to keep up with what’s
going on in the skateboarding world. It is like news but for
skateboarders..... I talk it over all the time with my buddies.
I don’t know if you noticed the other day I came back (to
Polson) with a magazine from the store and we were all
looking at it. And oh, this guy is sponsored by this
company. I cannot believe he changed or something.
Like the collective self-verification that occurs with respect to tricks, the skaters at Polson Park also verify each other’s knowledge. They are aware when someone is trying to demonstrate that they know skateboarding but really are not that knowledgeable. One of the signs that a skater is not knowledgeable and is not a hardcore skater is that they hang out and talk first and skate second.

Hugh: People that try too hard and if you are down with skating you don’t want to associate with them as much. Just like they talk to you too much and you are trying to skate and you know they don’t really know anything because they are talking too much.

Furthermore, skateboarders have a specialized knowledge that only skaters would know and any hardcore skater should know in order to be considered part of the scene.

Ken: It’s the people who ACTUALLY like skating, you can tell, and that where the scene and the REAL scene and the real kind of group come from. Like the ones that can actually talk because there is people that come to the skatepark and I will know from how they act and how they treat me who literally is a skater and who isn’t. Who is just some kid who goes “Hey man, it is pretty nice park we just moved here from the city.” I am like yeah you are weird what’s up? And they will be like “oh not much I am from here we have this park and its pretty cool and me and my friends do this here and there.” The ones that kind of brag like but I know they know nothing about skateboarding because I know for a fact the 20 best kids, who the 20 best kids in Toronto are. Who the best kids in Montreal are. Who the top kids are coming up in the States, like I know their names. I have never met them. I don’t know the people that are their friends but by just from searching YouTube and being on websites where kinda like someone searches and finds it - Yeah look at this guy. Then you kind of look at their scene. Oh Seattle this kid Cory Kennedy is really
good. I liked his video personally. I think he is amazing, oh so does everyone else. Oh he is continuously putting out new video footage. He is continuously filming and it is always getting better. Like he is going to be really good and then the people that are actually in the skate scene will KNOW these kind of people and they won’t come and brag they will just kinda, what up. They will just skate and they will be somewhat decent. They don’t have to be good. I mean people are bad. People are amazing but they will skate they won’t care and then eventually they will say what’s up or I will say what’s up. I will ask them where they are from and it will just come down to oh yeah sick I like this spot and they will be like, oh yeah we go there all the time. It is more laid back. They don’t have to talk about it. They don’t talk about themselves like they are a part of something they are just themselves and you KNOW they are a part of it. And then they kind of have similar interests and do the same things. They pay attention to the same things they know who is good and they know what product is good. They have similar interests.

Consistent with both the laid back attitude and the doing it for yourself attitude of the skateboarding ethos, skaters do not brag about their knowledge. Knowledge is merely part of who a skater is and that skater’s passion for skateboarding. At the same time Ken, like Tim, recognizes that there is a specialized knowledge of the spots and the people that are good in a city that every “real”/hardcore skater should know about in order to be part of the Kingston scene. If the skaters at the park feel like a person is trying too hard to impress with their knowledge or a person does not possess the correct knowledge, skaters will stop talking to that person and by not verifying the knowledge may cause belonging uncertainty for that person.
Collective self-verification of knowledge as a self-symbol of belonging also helps a skater in the Kingston scene feel like others understand them as they understand themselves. Recall that individuals who experience a feeling of being understood can predict how others will act towards them, thus allowing interactions with others to proceed smoothly (Swann, Stein-Seroussi and Giesler 1992). The skaters within the Kingston scene all work hard to maintain their knowledge in effort to predict how the social interactions at the park will go and reduce the chance of uncertainty arising.

Ken: Like I know people around who I have met and they say, “oh yeah I skateboard,” but like I said I can say something like “ok gnarly” but if I talk about anything to do with skateboarding they don’t know what I am talking about. They don’t know something as obvious as names of tricks and THEY THEMSELVES are the ones talking. I don’t ask them questions. I don’t decide who is in it or whatever but I am just trying to think of another example outside of skating that I can relate it to. Cause it is more of a... I guess it is kind of in general a group thing. Like people who even golf they know the golf etiquette. They know the things. I mean if I like golfing and I go buy a set of clubs and I go to a golf course. I am like I like golfing and I was talking about golfing. Somebody who golfs all the time and talks to people that golf all the time are going to listen to me and probably won’t really be able to have a real conversation with me. It will probably be a lot harder than someone who actually golfs and goes to the course all the time. It is the same way with skateboarding and around here (Polson Park).

Although it is evident from the transcripts that knowledge can never replace the ability to do tricks, knowledge of the subculture, such as brands, industry news, and spots to skate does appear an important element for hanging at Polson park and feeling part of
the Kingston scene. While collective self-verification does confirm a hardcore skater’s membership within a city’s scene, in the age of the Internet knowledge quickly becomes out of date thus creating belonging uncertainty. It is apparent that self-symbols, like tricks and knowledge that are dynamic and ever changing, are a double-edged sword for the respondents because these symbols carry with them the promise of certainty but also the potential for uncertainty. Within the subculture the only certainty is uncertainty.

4.2.4 Collective Self-Verification of Style: Combination of Brands & Tricks: Under the Gaze of Others

According to Swann (1983), one of the best ways to achieve self-verification is through the display of identity cues to “look the part”. Within the skateboarding subculture, dress is a key way that skaters identify with each other and with the subculture. In fact, Shawn openly admits that he provides collective self-verification to skaters who have the complete look by talking to them.

Shawn: So t-shirts you had to wear that, skateboard shoes you had to wear that. Skateboarding was more than just buying the board you had to buy the stuff to go with it like the shoes, the t-shirts and the hats everything like that. You couldn’t be a skateboarder and wear a non skateboarder t-shirt back then. You looked like an idiot. I mean people were just like, “that guy is not a skater,” it was just part of that lifestyle. A lot of guys wore hats. It was the skateboard t-shirt, you know skateboard shoes which were Vans back in the day. So if you had all those things going for you, you were just looked at upon right away as a skater. Back in the day if some kid had jeans and a Led Zeppelin t-shirt on and skateboard you probably wouldn’t go up and talk to him in 1977, even though Led Zeppelin was the hottest thing on
the planet. You would talk to that guy if he had a baseball bat with jeans and a Led Zeppelin t-shirt but you wouldn’t if he had a skateboard because you did not think he was a skateboarder.... I think even today it is the complete look.

Since the inception of skateboarding in the 1950s and 1960s, dress has been an important element of how skaters separate themselves from society and identify with the subculture. Dress is a good example of how a self-symbol increases group identification and collective self-verification at the same time. The respondents talk about going to a different city and feeling an instant connection to other skaters, in part, because others are wearing skateboard branded clothing, worn out skate shoes and shoelace belts (See Figure 7 and Figure 8). Hardcore skaters, like the respondents in this thesis, will go through a pair of skate shoes in a couple weeks. Wearing haggard looking shoes is a self-symbol of their belonging and status within the subculture.

Figure 7: Worn out Skate Shoes
Glen: I call it a tribe because it is easy to identify skateboarders just as it is easy to identify people who own, let’s say iPods for example, the classic example with the white earbud headphones. You are automatically perceived to be “cool” or at least Apple would like you to believe that because you are wearing the white earbud headphones. Things to look for with skateboarders would be shoelace belts, ripped up shoes, the skateboard is obvious. But there are skateboard apparel, skateboard branding clothes you know there are trademark cues to show that they are another skateboarder. I had a... I was on the ferry between Vancouver Island and Vancouver and there was a guy on the ferry probably 5 years older than I was. He had pretty haggard looking shoes and so did I and he just kind of gave me a nod and I gave him a nod back and it was a recognition that we were both skateboarders. It was a
friendly gesture that I might not have received if I hadn’t worn those shoes that day.... I just found it interesting that because I wore those shoes that day, and because he wore those shoes that day, suddenly we had something in common.

This passage by Glen demonstrates how the elements of the SCURB framework reinforce each other. Glen wears the self-symbol of skater clothes because he identifies with skateboard subculture or tribe, as he calls it. At the same time, those self-symbols are recognized and acknowledged by others, which gives Glen a sense of collective self-verification which reinforces the connection to other skaters and the group at large, thus, reinforcing his group identification, and causes him to continue to wear the haggard shoes.

Collective self-verification does not need the acknowledgement of others to impact a skater’s sense of belonging. What is important is how a skater perceives he or she is being viewed. At the skatepark, the skaters are acutely aware others are watching them (See Figure 9), which pumps them up to perform.

Chet: Everyone there is watching you. They are watching to see what kind of tricks you can do. How well you skate. You are kinda always under the watchful eye. You know there is people on the bench watching you and you are taking turns doing tricks on things. Everybody is watching you all the time. Which makes you kind of nervous but sometimes it even gives that edge or that extra push to actually land it. Because there is people watching, you kinda want to show them that you can.
As Jack says, “For the most part I don’t remember their names but you see them at a skatepark and you remember the look, style and skating.” Skaters may not know who is watching but they can perceive that someone is always watching them at the skatepark.

Tim: Basically just coming here (Polson Skatepark). Louis knew me, apparently from like he has seen me in Ottawa. He was like, “Yo you Ollie Back-Heeled the double at Legacy (Skatepark)”. I was like yeah,”man that was me!” That was rad....
Interviewer: Did you like it when Louis remembered what you did on a spot?

Tim: Yeah, Yeah I was like, “holy fuck I did not even see you there. As if you know”. That gives me a self-gratification. He is remembering me because of a trick I did. If I just skated around he wouldn’t have remembered me but I did this gnarly trick. It makes you feel good. You get remembered for what you do do. If there is too much of something you just get sick of it. It is like that in the art world you know and that goes hand and hand with skateboarding.

Dress also plays a big role in how skaters want to be understood. For example, West-49 clothes are seen as loud, colorful, obnoxious and sloppy. According to Ben, if “you wear West-49 clothes you start to skate like a West-49 person. You are loud, obnoxious and do ugly tricks.” Dress is another self-symbol of belonging that needs to compliment the tricks and create a complete style and way of self-presentation.

Jack: I think what you wear and how you skate define you as a skater…. As far as style goes, it is a huge part of skateboarding. There are companies specifically for skateboarding. Like clothing lines that are just skate clothing. It’s a huge huge part of skateboarding, what people are wearing and what people look like.

There are many subgroups within the skateboarding subculture all based around a combination of the type of music each group listens to, the type of dress they use and the type of skating they perform. There are skateboard brands for each one of these subgroups. These brands help to define each subgroup through the symbolic resources the brands provide, such as clothing and skater equipment.
Nick: The guys with the tight pants and listen to metal music and they skate really fast they like to call them, “Hesh”.

Examples of Hesh brands are Fallen and Zero.

Nick: Then there is the Fresh that wear like the new baseball hats and the bagger pants and listens to rap or Hip Hop.

Examples of Fresh brands are G-Unit, Zoo York, DGK and Phat Farm. Then there is the urban group that dresses in plain t-shirts and pants because they want to highlight the urban gritty spot that they have found.

Matt: I started dressing this way because these shirts and pants have the more urban style. The urban style is to be blank, have a creative mind but be blank on the outside.

With the urban style it is more about the creative urban spot skaters find on which to perform tricks and less about a particular brand (See Figure 10). Each one of the brands mentioned above sponsor a team of professional skaters that have a style of dress and skating that is consistent within the brand. Skaters that like a certain style of skating can use the brands to emphasize, project and augment the style of tricks they like to do.
Skaters know that they are being watched and they don’t want to be misconstrued and if skaters perceive that their style is being misunderstood any way this can create a
belonging paradox which will be discussed in greater detail in the belong paradox section. Within the skateboard subculture, the brands are a very powerful symbol resource of belonging for a number of reasons.

Shawn: Create a brand name of quality to put with pros. Try to get the best team and advertising together. The image you have to create is making sure we have some of the coolest best skateboarders on the planet. We are going to take the top 5 guys and pay them more than anyone else is paying them to get them on to your team. We are going to have the best artists working for us. We are going to have the coolest graphic. We are going to have all these things going for us. We are going to make sure the magazines are covering our team. We are going to send our guys on the proper tours that they should be going on to the key areas to sell the most skateboards and we are in business.

As mentioned previously, these teams are based on a certain style of skating with all the team members having the same style of dress and skating. The brand can then project a consistent image or style that skaters can then use. Skaters in the Kingston scene use these brands to project that image about their style and perceive that they will achieve collective self-verification. They are all aware of which brands fit which style of tricks because, according to the respondents, they talk at the skatepark about the different teams and what is going on with them.

Ken: If they (brands) project the type of image I like to see, then that is the type of image I am going to want to project. So it is going to give that brand a better buying power for my specific point of view (in skating). All of skating is like that. All the type skaters have the same mentality and like the same style of skating. They seem to purchase the same products and do the same thing. The other guys who are
Hesh and crazy like the rock, they all seem to like the same music, have tight black pants and like the same brands. The brand gives me confidence because you preset a goal and you are achieving it basically because this brand already preexists. You had an idea and you look around and the idea preexisted in the form of this brand. You are able to achieve what you thought was possible and kind of accomplish your goal because of the existence of this particular brand. You wanted this style. You like this sort of person and team. You want to project yourself as this and have the same sort of mentality. You look around and you see something and you look around and you are like, “Wow”. They are doing everything I was hoping some company would do. If you like all the people that are part of the team, it really stays in your mind. You can’t ignore that, it stays in your mind.

The goal Ken is talking about is one of belonging. Brands and products within the skateboarding subculture are all about belonging. The skateboard companies recognize this as a goal of their target market. Brands help Ken achieve an image or style he wants to achieve and the brands and the products he uses amplify his style. That image is important for collective self-verification purposes but equally important, for Ken, is the professional team behind the brand. It is the team part that really sticks in his mind. For Ken, his team is Girl Skateboards.

Ken: Product is brought up through some guy being good and being part of a team. For a good instance, Girl Skateboards. They produce good skate footage and they do have a quality product. And with just their good attitudes that fit kinda the mentality of the general real skate scene which also sells the product. All skaters I like who are super good are all in this one group. Like I mean they just kinda get together.
Ken buys Girl skateboards because the team has the same mentality as him and he feels that the team is part of what he defines as the real skate scene. The brand can be used within the local Kingston scene to perceive that his style will be verified and thus his belonging. The brand also allows him to feel like he belongs or is part of the team and thus the larger subculture. The whole team has the same style and outlook as he does and is embedded in the larger subculture allowing him to perceive a larger sense of belonging. The companies go to great lengths to cultivate this sense of belonging.

Most skateboard companies include a team section on their website with bios and pictures of each of their skaters. They produce skateboard ads that focus on a group or team (Figure 11 through Figure 15). The companies also produce skate videos and blogs when their teams are on tour. Footage on these videos focuses on the behind the scenes stuff, such as showing the team just hanging around, partying and goofing around. This makes the professionals real people to the skaters in the Kingston scene.

Andy: The average professional skateboarder is not making millions and millions of dollars they are still pretty down to earth people real people who like to party with their friends.

The goal or dream of most skaters is to be sponsored by one of these companies and be part of their team or group.
Figure 11: Flip Advertisement - A Hard Day's Night
Figure 12: Flip Advertisement - International Artists

![Image of flip advertisement with artists' names: Alex Moul, Rune Glifberg, Geoff Rowley, Andy Scott, Tom Penny]
Figure 13: Flip Advertisement - Buddies
Figure 14: Girl Skateboard Advertisement – Welcoming new team members.
Glen: To be sponsored by them (skateboard companies) ultimately you don’t have to be super good. You don’t have to give it your all per se. You just have to be chilling. As long as you do nice tricks that look good and you know you are friendly with everybody. You are able to party with them. Like it is more like a clique kind of when it comes to companies and stuff. You become part of the family. If your personality sucks you are going to go nowhere in skateboarding.

On the one hand, brands are self-symbols that skaters perceive, and that others in the local scene will use, to verify their style and belonging. But within the skateboard subculture the brands, as self-symbols, provide another route to collective self-verification and identification and thus belonging. The skateboard companies build their
brand around a team of professional skateboarders to establish a group ethos through the videos, websites, ads blogs and tours. This gives the brand a sense of belonging attached to it so when a skater buys a brand that matches their style and way of skating, they are self-verifying their own sense of belonging.

Ben: You pick a team that represents YOU. If you skate like crazy near death stuff, like jumping down stairs and handrails, you probably do like Zero Skateboards or Toy Machine, or Fallen Footwear. Like, there are all these different brands that have teams…. like, their teams are that type of skateboarder. Or if you want to do something like Matt. Lakai, Vans and Traffic.

Nick is a good example of this process. He believes skateboarding is a diverse thing.

Nick: Skateboarders are not judgmental. Skateboarding is a diverse thing. No racism. Or even the way you dress you are not looking at somebody, “oh he has really baggy clothes so he is a gangster.” It does not matter as long as you’re skateboarding, you’re all friends, you are all brothers when you are skateboarding. Like there is no Hate!

Nick’s outlook is that life and skateboarding are for chilling, relaxing, not harshing on anyone and having fun. This attitude is in part a response to a belonging paradox he faced while playing hockey. Nick was a very good hockey player making it all the way to Major Junior A, just 2 steps away from the NHL. But others picked on him in hockey, accusing him of being a puck hog. As a consequence, he seeks collective self-verification and belonging through his use of the brand Flip.
Nick: I like Flip because we have the same viewpoint. Flip’s viewpoint on skateboarding - is be yourself and skate don’t hate just chill. You see that in the ads, the website, videos and magazines. Like look at this graphic how simple is that. It is not a picture of fucking skeleton or snake. That team is filled with different style of guys. So many different styles of guys. You got your Hesh guys, you got your G-guys, you got your guys in the middle. You got your guys that you don’t even know how they dress but who cares. In the ads they show the guys. They put little quotes and keep it simple and chill. Keep it Ja. The hand of Ja. I like the variety why shouldn’t there be variety. Why does it have to be one specific way? I hate that!

Nick found a brand that represents his outlook and through it’s continued use he is able to perceive collective self-verification because of the belonging already attached to the brand through the use of their professional team. Through the website and videos and ads, he can tell that the Flip team has the same outlook as him, allowing him a way of belonging to the skateboard subculture.

4.2.5 The “Trick” to Strategic Collective Self-Verification: When to Self-Symbolize

Being under the watchful eye of others raises a lot of anxiety and uncertainty about belonging at the park.

Tim: In any social situation, like here (Polson Park), you are subconsciously thinking you are being judged by people. When in reality of course some people are looking at you like you know, “Who is this guy? Who the fuck is this guy?”...If you’re insecure those things are going to be difficult. I have seen a lot of really good skateboarders that don’t come through because they are insecure with themselves. They are not comfortable with themselves. It is a combination of how you are treated and how you view yourself.
One of the reasons for the constant wearing of brands consistent with a style is so that skaters can perceive that their self-concept is not misconstrued. However when self-symbolizing through tricks, it is more difficult to be consistent; therefore, respondents engage in strategic collective self-verification.

Shawn: Every skateboard park or event I went to I was always intimidated when you get there because you go there and you are seeing all these.... I guess in my mind when I am looking at skateboarders for the first time in Calgary for argument sake, they are intimidating me because there are good guys in Calgary and everybody has got their unique style. So you are like is that style better than mine? Is that trick better than mine and intimidated until you start to get to the comfort zone.... Therefore, I wouldn’t really take a new trick out there to the public until I had it dialed in. My friends and I would practice it but until I got it really good I wouldn’t show it. I would not show it if I thought there were better people at the park. I would not take a trick to a new skatepark until I knew it. I didn’t want to you know... It is a little bit of a show off thing too right. You are going to meet guys for the first time so you want to show them the best possible thing. You don’t want to start practicing a trick and the guy is going, “that guy sucks he hasn’t landed that trick in 30 tries.” So you want to go to a new thing and make sure that what you are showing them is the stuff that you really do. Sure you go back home and practice with your friends and screw up a thousand times before you land the trick but you would never take that out. My friends were all like that too.

Chet: I always kind of felt like a poser, that is why I skated by myself so I could learn tricks before I went back to the park. Skate flat ground usually and get my flip tricks back and get my board feel back. I wasn’t as good anymore and I wanted to get good again before I went back to the park and skated in front of people. You definitely want to able to hold your own when you are there.
Interviewer: What do you mean hold your own?

Chet: I guess there is kind of a social aspect where if you can’t do the tricks you will kind of be shunned a little. Like, “that guy is no good.” Like, “we are not going to skate with him.” So yeah, I guess it is important to be able to have tricks. They won’t want to go out with you. They will skate with you at the park but they are not going to ask you to come out and skate on filming sessions and stuff if you can’t skate very good.

Chet could not skate very much for a two-year period because he was working two jobs at once, thus he felt he lost some of his ability to do tricks. If a skater cannot consistently land what they deem are hard tricks, which they were once able to do, a belonging paradox can develop based on ability. They know they can do the tricks (inclusion) but at the same time they are not landing them consistently, which creates feelings of exclusion because they feel embarrassed and perceive that no one will invite them to go to spots and film. This is where skaters will engage in strategic collective self-verification of practicing alone and only showing their most consistent hardest trick at the skatepark in order to avoid any feelings of belonging uncertainty and a belonging paradox. They are verifying their ideal sense of belonging instead of their actual belonging.

Another common way skaters engage in strategic collective self-verification while at the park is to sit at the edge of the skatepark when they perceive that someone better than them is at the park. In essence, perceiving that someone is better than them causes them uncertainty about their own ability to self-symbolize and thus belong at the park.
Ken: Like when I would go to a different city and I didn’t know people and I saw people that are better than me it almost makes me not skate as much because I wouldn’t want to get in the way. I wouldn’t want people to see me not do anything good or fall on something they might consider easy and kind of be like, “whoa this guy sucks,” then…. nervous. Because a few things happened. I always remember going to the skatepark, and if people were not there and it was people I didn’t really care about, people who I didn’t associate with the Toronto scene, people then I didn’t care. But if there were people I would want to see, like Morgan Smith (up and coming professional skateboarder) and stuff were around, I wouldn’t want to fall. And I know what I can do, and I wouldn’t want them to think negatively about me, so I would try the tricks, but I would think more about the landing. And I guess the nervousness also made me uncomfortable, and feeling uncomfortable made the tricks I did normally more difficult. So it made me nervous, and I had more insecurities as a skater. I would skate less and be more afraid. Not necessarily afraid, but more uncomfortable in general. And I wouldn’t skate, so I would sit around and watch more. And when I’d skateboard with a bunch of people, I wouldn’t want to film as much, because I know they were more devoted to it, and they wanted to film. As where I would think it would be fun to film with my friends and I would enjoy it for that reason, I wouldn’t want to waste the time or I wouldn’t want people to just be like, “Whoa.” And if you had one trick you did, someone else would always do a better trick. So that would always put you off. Because you know if someone wants to film this, which I consider better, I’ll just let them go do it. I’ll skate on flat ground, don’t film me, I don’t want you to waste the film, don’t waste the battery. And I’d Skate with them, but I wouldn’t film as much for that reason.

Interviewer: How did you come to think this way?

Ken: Probably, insecurity because I was insecure. When I started skating I was hiding my skateboard in a duffle bag when I would go down the street because I didn’t want to be
associated with that. It was more else me being uncomfortable with people saying “Oh you skateboard. Want a do a trick for us?” and me not being able to do anything and just being embarrassed.

Ken moved to Toronto from Kingston because the skate scene was better in Toronto and he wanted to progress. He took a night job at Tim Horton’s so that he could skate all day and be part of the skate scene there. In recounting his experience in Toronto during the interview, I could tell he enjoyed the time he spent in Toronto and the connections he made, but at the same time being among better skaters caused him a lot of self-questions about his belonging within the skateboarding subculture. In fact, according to Ken, it triggered the same feelings of insecurity that he had when he was just starting out even though he had already been skating for a number of years. His response was to sit on the sidelines and not film. He was part of the scene by being at the park but did not want to risk his belonging through symbolizing his tricks that he felt were not up to par with those skating.

Within the Kingston scene, Evan has similar experiences to Ken. Evan believes there are two or three skaters that come to Polson Park that are very good and could go places skateboarding if they wanted to. This causes him uncertainty and doubt about his belonging at the park.

Evan: Still every time I see them skate and do their tricks, I feel like the first day I started skating again. Like every time I feel like that. It makes you honestly for the first minute you are thinking in your head I should quit right now. Why am I even skateboarding? Then after that minute if you don’t quit and stop or leave the park right there, you are
going to go and try to learn shit you never did before. It pumps you and motivates you. Literally I still do it every time someone really good comes to the park. I will go and I will sit down and watch. Like I will watch them skate. It is crazy.

Interviewer: What is the purpose behind sitting down?

Evan: Just to watch them because you are impressed and you want to see you don’t want to miss anything. At the same time you don’t want to get in their way. You don’t want to skateboard because they are better than me and I look like a fool trying to learn.

Evan’s initial response to this self-questioning of his ability and belonging was to try to learn harder tricks so that at least in his mind he was keeping up with those at the park. However, his attempts to learn harder tricks makes him feel like a fool in front of better skaters so he sits at the side of the park and will try the new tricks when no one is around. He knows it is crazy because he believes that he is skater worthy of being at the park. He experiences simultaneous feelings of inclusion and exclusion and develops a belonging paradox based on ability.

Others have similar experiences with good and bad days performing tricks.

Paul: I just take my time getting up and make my way over to the skatepark. See if I am having a good day on it or not and take it from there. If I am having a good day I might go down to Queens and like skate there. If it is not such a good day I go home. It really depends, some days you just want to skateboard all day till like you can’t anymore and some days you just don’t really feel like it.

Interviewer: How do you know when you are having a good day?
Paul: You just start landing your tricks more consistently and you are just having more fun. Some days I will come here sit down try a couple of tricks won’t be able to land them and not have just that much fun and maybe go home. Some days I come here, get right into it. Land everything I try just have lots of fun doing it. Then just want to skateboard the rest of the day with people.

Skaters engage in strategic collective self-verification by leaving the park when they feel they are not putting their best ideal collective self-concept forward. On the other hand, when they feel things are going well, they perceive that they are putting their best self-concept forward. In those situations they seek out others to skate with in order to self-symbolize in front of an audience allowing them to perceive collective self-verification.

4.2.6 The Crew: Strategic Collective Self-Verification: Creating Allies

Another common response to the belonging uncertainty that skaters face at the park is selective interaction and selective attention, which goes hand and hand with creating allies. When faced with a belonging paradox around ability, some skaters choose to ignore the skaters that they perceive are better than them and/or that they don’t know. In the process, they construct their own little subgroup at the park, of skaters that they know and are at same ability level as them.

Andy: If there is someone at the park that is better than me, I just do not pay attention to them. I go to the park and I do my own thing. If I am there with friends I will skate with them every once and awhile. We will all skate around and do our own thing and then everybody will get ideas for something and just be like... like I do it all the time. After a
couple hours of skating I will go and start grabbing my friends and tell them, come skate this specific object with me. When someone says they are sessioning something that is usually what they mean is they are having a group skate one specific object.

Andy, like the other skaters, practices before he feels ready to symbolize his belonging in order to present his ideal collective-self, but Andy takes it a step further by constructing his own subgroup at the park as his audience. He only brings his friends into his group because his friends tend to be all at the same level as he is, thus avoiding the belonging uncertainty caused by the better skaters at the park. His friends are also surely his allies, and the individuals who are most likely to verify who he is as a skater. He is also more likely to verify his friends.

Other respondents also work to create allies and crews. Nick rented a house and has Tim, Paul and 2 other Kingston skaters living with him. According to Nick, in the house there is “always skateboard videos on and skateboard talk. Everything skateboarding including posters” and they refer to themselves as the Lund crew (the house is on Lund Street). The friends will not question Nick’s belonging within the Kingston scene; rather they are more likely to verify it. Dan found the same thing with his crew.

Dan: Maybe I can do something with this (skateboarding). Maybe I can be amazing. You always hold on to that. Especially you and your little crew like you are all having so much fun. Yeah like we are the sickest skaters. We are the best and ah... Yeah we are the best crew there is and ah.... but like I mean it is all within your crew right. Like in
the real world there is a lot more fish in the sea. There is a lot of good skaters out there.

4.2.7 Strategic Collective Self-Verification: Getting it Right on Video

Videos and filming is central to the skateboarding subculture. In fact, three of the respondents, Hugh, Luke and Ken said they got into skateboarding by playing the Tony Hawk Pro Skater video game. By collecting all the bonus videos within the game, they were able to watch videos of professional skaters. Videos are a central part of the skateboard subculture with the skaters in Kingston regularly filming and going on filming trips to Toronto, New York, Ottawa, and Montreal.

Ben: Since Matt could do a trick we have always been filming, and Adam has always been filming. We have been together in this filming thing since like day one. It is never.... I don’t remember skateboarding without a video camera. That is why it is so central to us especially. That is why it is so important to US. A lot of people in Kingston have cameras and film once in awhile and stuff but we have been doing it so long it’s like part of the family thing we do. Like having a video camera around is like having a skateboard around. You can’t skateboard without a video camera.

Matt: It is part of life. It is part of skating.

Ben: We always have a video camera. It is fun.

Matt: To make sure you capture every tail grind on film.

There are many reasons why videos and filming play an important role within the skateboarding subculture. The act of filming and making a video is a creative act of self-expression just like skateboarding, and complements nicely the ethos of being creative.
Matt mentions another reason for the videos, which is to record the tricks to showcase others. In general, once a skater progresses past the basic tricks of an Ollie, and Kick-Flip, the more advanced tricks become more difficult to land consistently for the skaters in the Kingston scene. Having a camera allows them to record the self-symbolism of a trick done well. They then seek collective self-verification by showing their friends successful symbols of tricks they did land.

Ben: After the video is over going to someone’s house and watching the video in the living room with everyone that was taking part… it is a way of reminiscing.

But videos are more than reminiscing. They are about perceiving that each skater belongs to the Kingston scene and the subculture as a whole.

Dan: It's more based on my own friends’ abilities too. Because when you have a group of friends that you skate with, you all compete against each other and I fell somewhere in the middle type of thing. We would all make videos and whatnot. That's what you do, a lot of people film that's a big part of it. I am going to film now I'm going to film Friday actually around campus. My buddies have a sick camera. It's a three chip camera. It is pretty good quality we just try to get stuff together. One of my tricks is getting put up on Facebook. Do you have Facebook? If you want we can send you some footie. I will get you hooked up with some videos. There is something rewarding about it. It is just fun. I think it stems from when you watch these pro videos when you're younger. You see all these sick skaters and then you just like.... it is like when you skate you don't have your own crowd. It is not like basketball or soccer where you do it in front of a crowd. Like skating is fun in and of itself, don't get me wrong, but when you have something you can hold onto, a video. It like lasts forever and you can show it to people. “Hey, look this is what I
did.” That's obviously what everybody wants to do. Everybody wants to, I am not going to say show off, but everybody wants to show off it is true but like I mean you don't brag but like it is just something to hold on to. It is just something that makes you feel good about yourself. You landed a sick trick and here it is and you can watch 100,000 times if you want to so I think that's a big part of it. Your friends think it is cool too.

For Dan, just the act of filming tricks is a way to achieve collective self-verification because the professionals do it. The professionals are seen as the experts of the subculture and by doing what the experts are doing Dan is symbolizing his commitment and his belonging to the subculture. He says that skateboarding does not have it’s own crowd like other sports, so videos of tricks overcome by being posted on Facebook. He believes that someone on the Internet will watch his video, and thus he develops a perception of collective self-verification. In a sense, he creates a virtual group of skaters in his head.

Within a subculture there are multiple levels of belonging. An individual can feel like they belong to the larger subculture (Harley Riders) or to subgroups within that subculture such as a local HOG (Harley Owners group). The skateboarding subculture is no different with subgroups broken down on type of skating (Vert or Street), style of skating (Fresh, Urban or Hesh) and graphical scenes (Kingston, New York City, North America). Typically, collective self-verification discusses verification at one level within the group at a time. The interesting thing about videos is that they allow skaters within the Kingston scene to perceive collective self-verification at many levels simultaneously.
Dan or Ben can show their friends and feel collective self-verification within the local Kingston scene. At the same time, the very act of making the video and posting it online allows them to feel like they belong to the larger skateboarding subculture. Skate videos as a self-symbol provide the potential for collective self-verification across many levels of the subculture.

When editing videos, the music has to be consistent with the style of skating and types of tricks performed. If you are a Hesh skater, you are into skating hard and fast and doing sets (stairs) so the music should be heavy metal or rock. If you are a Fresh skater then the music on the video should be Rap or Hip-hop. All of the tricks that are edited together should also be of the same style so that you project a consistent ideal collective self, which you will perceive gets verified through others watching the video. Just like any self-concept, the highly theatrical strategic ideal self-concept has to be consistent so that the individual can perceive that he is understood the way he wants to be understood. Videos also legitimize skateboarding as an art form and when questioned by society about the legality of skateboarding they can point to its artistic qualities.

The process of self-verification assumes that there is always an audience of willing partners to achieve a self-verification. However, it does not discuss what happens if that audience is just the individual seeking self-verification. In making a video, skaters have the ability to watch themselves and verify themselves. If Dan ever needs a reminder that he is a good skater, he can watch a video to self-verify that he is a good skater. Indeed, Luke also says that watching old videos gets him into the mood to skate.
the ethos that “you skateboard for yourself”, videos are a great way to incorporate that attitude into a sense of belonging. Videos, as a self-verification mechanism, help mesh the individual and collective needs within the subculture by allowing an individual to verify him or her self, show other skaters later or post videos to the Internet to perceive collective self-verification from the larger subculture.

Ben: Why is filming so central to skateboarding? Because the world can’t be there when you land a trick. That’s as easy as you can put it. If you want to be recognized, word of mouth isn’t good enough. It’s like seeing is believing. And the only way that you can see it is through video and photo. And since it’s an art form, photography obviously goes very well with skateboarding if it’s an art form. It’s about capturing that moment. Because a trick is a split second and it’s gone. The only way that you can capture something amazing is by taking a photo of it, and that’s why filming is so important.

Dan: Oh look at this man I got this trick. Look at how sick this is. You can’t do that (laughing). There is a lot of competition to it. It is not as formal as other sports but it is definitely competitive. It is definitely competitive but it is all fun competition. It is not serious, if it were serious you would not do it.

Tim: Then there is me. I don't want to talk about myself too much because this blog right here is pretty embarrassing for how much I beam my shit. I could probably just tuck everything away and keep it for myself! But one thing I'd like to say about this part is that it is in fact my most favorable part in a more favorable time in my life. Plus I wasn't getting stupid with the long hair and sweatbands just yet. I need to skate rails again... It's been a couple years.

Interviewer: Do you post them to YouTube?
Jack: I do. I like to see what people think of my skating. I mean you go to skateparks wherever you land a trick it is pretty cool and I like it but it is nice to see what other people think. It’s just a good way to get your name out there too and like I said it is kinda hard to go somewhere in skating but it’s just nice to see what other people think. And it is to show friends and stuff too right. You cannot bring videos around like that. Any family or people that I meet.

“Do you have any videos?” Yeah YouTube. The quality is pretty crappy and they cut two tracks off my videos right because of copyright but I am thinking of getting my buddy to write some music for it. He does not have to worry about that because he is the one-man band so he could do it. It’s just figuring out the sound I want.

Both Jack and Tim like the fact that the Internet can expand their audience and they like reading the comments of others who they don’t know. It appears the act of doing the video and posting the video to the Internet is enough to perceive collective self-verification and belonging to a virtual group within the larger subculture. In fact, Jack likes to do at least one video a year to see his level of progression but also substantively to keep his followers up-to-date on his progress. Posting videos online for the collective self-verification is so common there is actually a website skateboardvideos.org for members to post their videos.

One thing that is striking about the above quotes is the concern Jack and Tim demonstrate about their presentation and the presentation of their videos. Tim’s concern is with the way he looks in the video and Jack’s concern is with having the right music for the video. This suggests that videos help skaters present their ideal strategic collective self for verification. Skateboarding is an extreme activity or sport and therefore there is a
lot of risk involved. Videos help control that risk as well as the uncertainty that comes with self-symbolizing.

Another reason videos are so popular is because the skater has control over the consistency of symbolizing of tricks. Skaters want to make sure that when they do land that impossible trick they have proof.

Shawn: There are two different mentalities you see out there with skateboarders. You see the guy that wants to compete and wants to show how good he is to a group of 5 people who are judging him and have a level where he is - he is either 1st or 10th. There are other guys that are so anti-organization that especially now days they feel that skateboarding has jumped the level of coolness and gone into too mainstream. So they would rather keep the core image and the coolness image and just do it off of video. And remember a lot of the videos that are out there that are the most popular videos in the world, the guy is doing something so crazy that there is no way he is going to pull it off in a contest. He is going to pull it off once for the camera and probably never do it again because it is so intense. It is life threatening in most cases but he is going to try it once and that is it. He might of had a 1000 shots before he got that one take, where now in a contest you better do a clean run or you are not going to get top 5. So a guy, like Chad Musket, he might go to a contest and never land one trick but him in a video part he is incredible, but that video part might have taken him a year to film because he might have fallen 1000 times before he made that one trick on a particular rail. But, oh my god it is crazy, nobody has ever done that 18 sets handrail. They will sit there with their video camera just forever and ever and ever and back in the day, when I was getting filmed what was going through my head is the waste of film. Now a days, it is just push a button and that’s gone, go to the next one. Back in the day when I was getting filmed with 16mm and boy would I feel bad when I missed a trick because oh my god I
just wasted whatever 20 bucks on film because it was real film.

In essence, videos allow for strategic collective self-verification because they provide an expression of the ideal self through the filming angles, editing of the tricks and the adding of music. Through the video, skaters can present their own subjective understanding as they see themselves as skaters or an ideal collective self-concept. Once the video is posted to the Internet, the video may go viral and might become famous, but at the very least, skaters will always have an ideal self-concept of how they want to be seen as a skater to show other skaters when needed.

Jack: I like watching and seeing what I look like when I skate, especially just because like I don’t know what I look like when I skate right? So I like making videos and just kinda seeing what I am doing right, seeing what I am doing wrong, seeing how I can adjust and fix and stuff like that. So I can get the best look possible. They are fun to make. The videos are great, especially when you are with your friends. You can edit like stupid little things you do and stuff like that. It is just more memories. It also goes kinda with the art thing too. Being creative and stuff like that, because you can do different stuff with the videos and music as well. It kind of all incorporates the music, the skating, and the creativity all that stuff together. Everything I do goes around what I have kinda grew up on, the creativity and the music. Videos are a good way and just the memories.

As the subculture progresses and the tricks became harder and harder, the art of the trick and the style surrounding the trick became more important as a way to differentiate yourself. In a very real way, the production value of a video becomes just as
important as the trick itself for strategic collective self-verification. Is the trick presented in the right manner on the right spot with the right lighting, with the right music and aesthetics? The production value of a video can make an ordinary trick look amazing. The theatrics behind the video become just as important as the trick. They become their own self-symbol of a skater as an artist, which is a key element of the ethos and can be used to increase group identification. Self-presentation in videos and photos is so important within the subculture that there is a website devoted solely for that.

Skateperception.com gives tips and instructions on the type of equipment that is best for filming skateboarding, advice on how to film skateboarding and the best way to edit the skateboard film to make the trick look stylish.

Tim: Skateboarding is still young but it has matured a lot. You know it’s becoming more refined. It’s like street skating like the type of skating we are doing here is 22 years old. Like street skating only came about like of course there was like cruising sidewalks like in the ‘70s and stuff. They did power slides and like you know those whirlies whatever but like street tricks never came till like 1988. ‘86 to ‘88 it was just developing then, in ‘89 it started to explode. By ‘92 people were doing everything. All the tricks we are doing now were like done in ‘92 but they looked ridiculous. Everyone did them low. Not stylish and like old videos man, H Street, Plan B, Video Days, Blind Video they were all like really... it was like basically like the baby stages of street skating and then by the mid to late 90’s you had like... People were going fast. They were doing tricks really good and then now you got this whole like art thing. It is an art explosion of like you know how the music goes with it, how it is filmed, how you do the tricks, the spots you do the tricks at, you know there is a lot of art put into it. There is a lot of thought. You go to a spot and you look at it and it is like what trick could I do? How
am I going to do it? Is it going to look good? Will it look better at night or during the day? You know what I mean? That is why I love taking photos because like I know a lot of good skateboarders and I feel like once I get really good it is going to be no problem for me to be able to submit to magazines and stuff you know. I just love skateboarding. I love to analyze, watch it and be a fan. It is always learning. There is this forum I go on called, skateperception.com and they have sub-forums for everything possibly known - business, design, photography and filming in skateboarding, tutorials, critiques, photo galleries. Like I posted a couple of photos on there for critique and they tell me what I did wrong, what I should have done or you know like if they like it or if they don’t like it and then they have a classifieds, that is where I got my flashes from. You know it is just total skateboarders helping skateboarders in this whole thing. It is really sick. I really like it.

Tim: I can kind of relate it to figure skating because like figure skating is kind of like you know you are making a performance just like music performance and you film a bunch of tricks throw it all together and put music on top of it. It is a form of art same thing with photography you know. Like, oh like how does he look in the photo? You know, is he making the trick stylish or does it look you know childish?

Videos give skateboarders a creative stage to present their ideal collective self. Videos also allow an audience of one. That is because the trick is recorded for all of time and skaters are able to watch themselves, and thus self-verify themselves. Consistent with reciprocal nature of the elements of the SCURB framework, videos are not just an opportunity or form of collective self-verification but also self-symbols of belonging. They are simultaneously a self-symbol and a form of collective self-verification. Videos as self-symbols are rather complex. Making a video is a self-symbol but also, in terms of
quality, how the video is made is an important self-symbol. In this one example of videos, it is easy to see how collective self-verification and self-symbolizing and group identification all reinforce each other. Making a self-symbol of a video increases a skater’s group identification because they are doing what the experts or professionals do. They are being artists and bringing their self-concept inline with the ethos. As soon as the self-symbol of a video is produced, it is either watched by the skater by themselves or by/with others. This produces collective self-verification of a strategic collective self as an artistic hardcore skater. This, in turn, pumps the skater who will want this verification to continue, so he will continually produce videos (self-symbols) to increase his group identification as a creative skater.

4.2.8 Collective Self-Verification from Being Spot On

Not only is the making of videos creative, with the filming, editing and music, but there is one more creative element that adds to the aesthetic of the video. One thing that emerges from the transcripts is the importance of the location or spot of the video. This passage by Matt illustrates the importance of spots as a self-symbol and also as a form of collective self-verification.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a story of a spot?

Matt: There is definitely one spot that is really kind of a spot that I never looked at before. Over there is a bank to ledge. It is kind of like a park bench with a little bank on the end but ah the ledge is really chopped up. You can’t grind it. It is really rough. It is a piece of crap actually but it really… and I don’t know and nobody had skated it before
that. I skate that stuff at home all the time, you know, I skate really crappy stuff and I can slide through really what ever I want to unless it is absolutely not skateable. That spot was really really rough so it took us a long time to wax it and make it sort of skateable. But falling on it hurt really bad too and the top was really just a piece of crap. The whole ledge is just the worst thing ever but the bank is smooth. You had to take something there and set kind of a standard trick. So I tried a trick that I had been practicing at the park for a while. I had been trying a Nollie Heel Tailslide a lot on the bench at the park and I decided that I would take that there. I think it took me about a day to get. Probably a couple of hours because it was really, I had to actually figure out how the ledge slid first because it was really hard to power through it and I didn’t think it was going to work and it probably took about an hour to even get used to what the ledge was and getting into sliding. It is a night spot too. You can’t really go there during the day because everyone parks their cars and eats food at Red Lobster, so you have to actually.... It is not really a trick where you say that you want to go do it right now because I feel good because you will go and there will be cars there you know. You have to sorta look at it whenever you drive by. You can’t really feel good or feel like crap at skating that day. You just have to kind of just go do it. That also makes it even tougher because it is a spot you can’t just go to because it is so packed all the time and it is even more rough, so if you are not on with your skateboarding that day you could fall really hard or you just can’t get through it. But yeah, I kind of opened up another spot by skating that and more people are skating it now and there are plenty of other spots now. You know some of the spots are just so crappy that the city actually pulls them right out because they don’t think anyone... like it is ugly or something to them but it looks really good on camera and they pull it out and it doesn’t exist anymore but that doesn’t suck because I kind of I got the first and last trick on it kind of thing. Nobody else will get to skate that so it is kind of like a spot that only I got to skate. It is a good feeling. I would like to see more stuff on it and I would like to do more stuff on it but it got pulled out so at least I did something on it before
it was gone. But yeah there is all kinds of those spots where you just have to just skate them but they are really really tough. But it is kind of why I might do a little bit of an easier trick on it because people don’t understand how hard it really is and the easier trick is the only thing you can do on it. You can’t do a 360 flip or a Nollie, Nollie-flip maybe you can only do an Ollie because that is all it will allow you to do.

The spots add to the difficulty of the trick in a number of ways. Skateboarding is illegal in Kingston, therefore the skaters have to wait until no one is around. As Ken points out below, they have to coordinate when they descend on the spot and use their time wisely. When a skater puts the effort into getting the right spot on film, it symbolizes to the rest of the scene the skater’s dedication and commitment to skateboarding and status within the scene.

Ken: The whole city has security everywhere. They have additions to the obstacles so it makes it impossible to skate them or really difficult. So it is more of kind of a mission. More of kind of extra work just to skate....Drive out to the city and run around the city to get like 3 three seconds on the spot. Someone who is hardcore about filming will because they are going to want to get the trick on the spot. They know it is going to be security for these hours. They know it is going to be really hard to get out there with a bunch of people with a camera. They are going to get a few tries down and if they are successful it is going to be rewarding for them.

Tricks on street spots are acknowledged by the skaters to be harder to do than at a skatepark. The skatepark is seen as too perfect because all of the benches there have smooth metal edges; therefore, if a skater does the same trick on the street with its rough
edges and risk of getting caught, it is seen as a harder trick and the symbol of the trick is
given more weight within the scene.

Matt: I like it because it is difficult. Adds a lot of... makes the trick that much harder if it is really rough or just really hard. Like you don’t want a really perfect spot because if the spot is really perfect then you know everyone gets tricks there. Your tricks can be beat but a lot of the spots around here you go there and skate them and they are really hard to skate then people will go and they find out how hard they are to skate and it’s difficult for everyone to get tricks. It just sets kind of a standard for a spot in the area..... That is probably one of most important things or the style of the trick, but most important I think is how hard it really is because it may look easier on camera but then when you go to that spot you realize how hard it is. Plus once you land something that you have been trying for a really long time, it feels so good to just like land it and have it over with but at the same time have it on camera so you can show it. You know show people that this spot is skateable. It is not not skateable. Tricks can be done and like going there and figuring out how hard it is. It is important because that is the kind of standard that is set is that trick and if you do anything really less it is kind of not as good because that was the first trick and it was, you know, the standard. Toughness is one of the most important things.

The spot is important for a number of reasons as a symbol. The spot adds to the difficulty of the trick because the trick is harder on rough spots and it takes more skill to land the easy tricks on difficult spots. Being the first to skate a spot is an important self-symbol because this means that a skater is more creative than others in the scene having skated a spot that others thought unskateable. Being the first to open up a spot also allows the skater to perceive a sense of collective self-verification when seeing others skate the
Interestingly, however, while Matt does like seeing others skate his spots, at the same time he likes being the only one to skate the spot because the self-symbol of the spot is more powerful. Self-symbols that are also used as collective self-verification opportunities appear to lose their effectiveness as a self-symbol the more they are used for a collective self-verification.

Skaters want other skaters to come to their spots that they opened up and try and beat them because that verifies their creativity and ability to find spots and do tricks. However, at the same time those that have not skated the spot feel that their status within the scene is being usurped and the same competition for belonging that happens at the skatepark will happen at the new spot. Others will go to the spot with a camera and try to record a harder trick than the original standard that was set in order to reduce any feelings of exclusion that arises from the opening up of a new spot. “Let's say you go and do a trick somewhere and you film it. Someone will go and do a better trick than that and start up an argument or confrontation because he did this trick over yours.” (Evan) The spot will then become well known and busy or blown up as they call it within the Kingston skate scene as everyone tries to do a harder trick on the spot and own the symbol of the spot. As a result, the spot loses its power, as a symbol of belonging because the skater no longer owns the spot and skaters must look for a new spot.

Matt: Sometimes I will see a spot that I opened and a bunch of kids will be skating it when I wanted to skate it but you know, what ever I don’t care. Or maybe I wanted to get another trick on it or something for another video part but other kids... that spot becomes like a more famous spot in
Kingston and you are starting to see it more in like other videos and stuff and now it is not as sort of special because it has been blown up. The more you see of that spot the less skateable it becomes because everyone is starting to hit it. It is kind of the down to opening up new spots in a really small town is that when you open up a new spot everyone swarms to it and then they start filming on it and it just like.... It is not like they are doing better tricks, you know. They could be doing better tricks or they could not be doing better tricks it’s all….. It doesn’t matter if they are doing a bad trick or a good trick they are still like blowing up the spot because the more tricks you get on it the more it is going to become famous that is what happens. Then you have to go find another spot and although there is stuff in this town, it is limited big time because it is really small and the more spots that get opened the more people skate and the less spots there are to skate in the town. That is kind of the ups and downs to opening up a new spot. It gets really kind of busy. It is just not as fun.

Matt, who is originally from a small town outside of Kingston, claims that he is used to skating crappy spots because the town does not have anywhere to skate. Being from a small town forced Matt to be creative when looking for spots to skate. This developed his eye for spots, which in his mind helps differentiate him from other skaters. “My tricks are unique because I have more of an artistic view towards skateboarding than some people and I can find spots that maybe they wouldn’t see”. Tim has the same view about skating as Matt; believing that there is more than one way to show that you are a good skater.

Tim: I am in to art and stuff. You know self-expression. If you are the contest guy you are that guy. You are the dude that is always going into the contests and busting your ass and skating like too hard. It is much more chilling if you’re
just skating for fun or you are going to film stuff you know getting creative, finding creative spots. Finding spots that no one else skates. You know, I find that way more challenging and gratifying than skating a contest at a skatepark.

Having an artistic eye for filming and finding spots that no one else can and actually skating them is very important within the subculture. It helps separate skateboarders from the rest of us and in the process increases their group identification. A common theme among skaters is that they see the world differently because they see something the rest of us do not. Where we see ugly concrete and obstacles they see a world of possibilities.

Nick: You go by a stair set what do you look at? What is a stair set to you?

Interviewer: They are stairs.

Nick: Yeah ok but for us, fuck, they are stairs, fuck we’re going to try a trick over it.

Tim: Is it skateable?

Nick: We look at everything and fucking think it is skateable.

Mary: I will be driving them somewhere and they will be turning around looking at this flat piece of pavement and I am like what?

Paul: Mary thinks I am checking out girls.

Mary: Well he turns around really hard.

Nick: Sometimes we are (laughing).
Mary: He is like oh that set back there.

Evan: I think about it all the time. Like I said it is like a love. You dream about it. You think about it all day long. You can just be driving on a road in a car on your way to work and you will see something on the street and you look at it in a different way. It could be anything. Every time you look at a stair set you count the steps. You look at a handrail. You see if it is doable. You look at a ledge you wonder if it is waxed. We look at the world completely differently.

The spot itself becomes the status symbol and symbol of belonging. The hardcore skaters of the Kingston scene leave the skatepark and hunt for spots in the street like the professionals do in their videos. In essence, they are mimicking the behavior of the experts of the subculture and symbolizing their belonging. It means that a skater has that creative eye like other skaters and thus reinforces group identification. All skaters within the Kingston scene have roughly the same basic tricks, but if a skater can see spots that no one else can that will give that skater the edge in terms of status within the group and be a good symbol of his belonging. The best way to symbolize using a spot is to be the first one to land a trick on it. By being first, skaters can also use the spot for collective self-verification because others will go there and see how hard the spot really is. Being the first to land a trick on a spot is called opening up a spot.

Matt: It is your spot. If you open a spot it’s yours. That’s what it is. When I skated that ledge bank that I was talking about earlier nobody had ever touched it. I waxed it up. I did a good trick on it and when I did that trick it was my ledge. I did the trick and I kind of owned the spot and that is why a lot of the spots in Kingston are now open that are
open because I skated them because that is what I look out for is those spots and I opened them all and they are still mine you know. Nobody has done anything on them yet so I still kind of own those spots and I can still go back to them. That is what is so special about it. I did the trick and I still got the spot. If somebody else does something better it is still my spot I found it but like they have now got the trick, the standard. Doing a better trick. If someone beats your trick that means they kind of own the trick on the spot right now. Say someone does a 50-50 grind on the box or something then somebody does a switch 50-50 grind or a five-0 grind that beats your trick so they kind of have the spot in their hands with the trick the standard. They set the standard, it is in their hands and then it allows for me and people to go there and try and compete and beat the trick and that is kinda how skateboarding progresses. Without that people are just riding around like chickens with their heads cut off. You have got to have a standard and you have got to let people try to beat it and that is how spots get opened and that’s how they get owned.

Interviewer: What do you get out of opening up spots?

Matt: Just allowing more people to realize that the city has spots I guess. It may look like crap. It may be hard to skate but still there are spots in the city. You just have to find them. It shows people to maybe look harder but at the same time find the same kind of style that I am looking for with those spots. That’s kind of what I get out of it. Plus it allows people to go there if you open up a spot. It allows them to go there and see what you have done. To see how hard it really is in person. Like film doesn’t do justice, sometimes you got to go see the spot.

Most self-symbols, that Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) describe, are rather static in that they are things individuals own or accomplish and the status of the symbol may change but slowly over time. Within the skateboarding subculture, however, the important self-symbols of belonging the tricks and the spots appear to be much more
dynamic and fluid. It is difficult to own a spot or trick for long because of the constant competition for belonging within the subculture. This leads to a desire to progress on a spot or learn a harder trick.

There is an inherent trade-off factor for any self-symbol that an individual cannot own and control. Skaters like innovators do not control the spot or tricks, but they need to have the symbol of the spot verified to feel like a creative skater or innovators. However, as more skaters adopt the spot over time, that collective self-verification ruins the cache of the spot as a self-symbol. This is similar to what happens to the innovators that use brands that go mainstream. Skaters like Tim and Matt call the collective self-verification of finding a spot gratifying, so when a spot or trick loses its cache, it pushes them to find new spots so they will continually be known as creative artistic skaters. The subculture is then in a self-reinforcing drive for progress, as seen in the skateboard subculture. The result in a small town like Kingston that has limited spots to skate, is an ever decreasing number of spots or self-symbols a skater can use to assert his belonging and as will be discussed later a belonging paradox for those within the Kingston scene.

As a result of the competition for the self-symbol of the spot in Kingston, Matt, like the other respondents, has two related strategic collective self-verification strategies for keeping the power of the self-symbol of a particular spot for himself. The first is to make sure that he does a hard trick on the spot, one that is worthy of the spot and representative of his ability as a skater. The second is to keep the spot secret until he produces that ideal trick and records it on film.
Interviewer: How do you feel when someone beats your standard?

Matt: You have got to expect it when you open up a spot, but in a small town if you do a good trick it’s you know... It can be really hard to beat and it can be easy to beat you just got to find out what you are good at and take it there.... If they beat it, they beat it, you know it is just the way it is. Like if I have a plan for that I will go back. If I have a trick for it I will go back and try to beat that. Usually that is the way it works. I just make sure that when I set a trick at a place I make sure it is a hard trick. I don’t want to do something easy that people can beat and they just go there. It has got to be a trick that is actually decent and actually worthy of opening that spot.

Interviewer: What do you mean worthy.

Matt: Actually decent towards standards of skateboarding or just like your skateboarding talent. I have been skateboarding for a while so I couldn’t just go there and do a 50-50 on it. I have got to do like a Kick-Flip 50 or I have to go do a Nollie Heel-Flip 50. You know, I have got to 360 50. You have to put combinations into it and you have got to make it to your full potential. You just can’t go there and do something that is going to be easy. You have to make sure that it is worthy of your potential and the spot. You find out what trick you have that is really good. You got to make sure you have a trick that is good. If you can do a good trick at a good spot that shows your talent then you just do it. Maybe you can’t beat it because that is the best trick you got but you still have the spot. You have gone to the spot and done to the fullest potential of that spot and your fullest potential of you.

Matt: I like to introduce new spots to the city. It is fun. I like to show my friends the spots and be like, yeah this spot is sick go skate it, you know, and then they will ask me what trick I did and I go, I am not telling you (laugh). They have to wait until the video comes out to actually do that or I won’t even show anyone spots until the video comes out. I
won’t show them the spots I did tricks at until the video comes out so they can ah... They see it when the video comes out and they go, “oh where is that? Where is that? Where is that?” you know. Then you tell them. You don’t tell them until when it comes out because then they can go there. You wait until the video comes out that makes it... it gives away the whole like fun factor of going to a premier or like going to see a video if you know the spots and if you know the tricks that have been done. Who the hell wants to go? Who wants to buy the video? Who wants to look at a magazine? Who wants to do any of that stuff? You got to let it build up in people, then that makes it that more exciting. Same with spots. Do the same with spots that is why it is kind of important to be the first one there too because then it is kind of your secret. It is your secret spot. You can go there any time and nobody else can. Maybe they have been by it a hundred times but they have not seen it. That is the way it is.

What is striking is the amount of effort the Kingston skaters put in because of the limited symbolic resources available in their city. If they find a new spot, then they have to practice until they can film the hardest most perfect trick for that spot. By waiting to tell others about the spot, the skater accomplishes two things. First, the skater has time to develop and perform a trick up to his or her talent to ensure the presentation of an ideal collective self-concept in the video. Second, the skater can also ensure that the standard established on the spot is as hard as it can get, hopefully allowing ownership of the spot or self-symbol while achieving collective self-verification at least for a while. By setting a high standard on a unique and hard spot, skaters are able to perceive ownership of the spot and perceive collective self-verification of both their ability and creativity that endures.
Interviewer: How does it make you feel when you show them that you can skate it?

Matt: That is probably one of the best feelings of that spot because they go, “as if you skated that spot it is really really hard,” and stuff. And then you take them there and they try things on it. I am not happy they can’t do tricks on it because like I want people to skate stuff but it makes it feel like it is a really good trick that you did if people can’t skate it or they find it really hard to skate. It makes you feel like you have got good talent when it comes to that spot.

Interviewer: What does it give you?

Matt: I kind of get more motivation. It sounds weird but I get more motivation when people can’t do stuff at my spots. I get more motivation to do more of that stuff so they can’t touch it. They can’t touch the spots because then it makes it even harder. It makes your parts better too. It gives me more motivation because I just realize that, you know, maybe that’s a style.... it just gives me more encouragement to do those tricks and I can sort of, I am not trying to be like cocky or friggin’, but it is almost like I can do it and you can’t kind of thing. And that gives me more motivation to do that trick because the more of those tricks I do the less people can follow you and that means you have your own style. That is how style is created in skateboarding. Style is really important, you can’t look like a West-49 goof like Frank.

Consistent with self-verification theory, once a skater achieves an enduring sense of collective self-verification and is known like Matt as being creative and able to skate hard spots that no one else can. That skater will want that collective verification to continue. The skater will focus on increasing group identification through the use of new self-symbols in the form of new spots that may endure in and maintain a sense of
belonging through further collective self-verification. Perceptions of a unique style is one way for a skater to maintain their individuality within the group while still achieving collective self-verification and a sense of belonging. For Matt, he uses the spots he finds to show his unique style but also to belong. Gaining a sense of belonging and individuality are not mutually exclusive.

Style and the spot go together in two ways. The spot can be an extension of a skater’s style or creativity. Recall that being creative and an individual is a key element of the subculture’s ethos. Within the skateboard subculture, being creative will actually increase a skater’s group identification. For the majority of the skaters, that creativity manifests itself in the need for style when doing the tricks. “It is about how you look doing them (tricks) nobody wants to look at a ugly skateboarder… Style is everything” (Ben). Style can be achieved through doing the tricks smoothly and making them look effortless but it can also be achieved by where you do the trick.

Jack: This year I am going to try.... because I try and do a video every year, so I am going to try and take to the streets this year. Not film as much in the skateparks, which is kind of what I have been doing the past couple of years. I will skate parks because they are fun to skate and everything is there and everything is perfect, you know, but street looks better on video. It is more original and you can find kind of cool stuff.

Matt: It is frustrating but it makes me happy to find a really good spot like that. Like a spot that is really kind of grimy and not perfect, it really adds to the effect of the video you are going for too. If you are kind of going for more of an urban video, you don’t want a perfect looking spot. You want more of rough spot with lots of spray paint on the
walls or lots of rough looking buildings around the spot or really rough ground that doesn’t look like it could be rode on. Really really old helps too. It makes you feel better when you are skating it, although the spot sucks you feel really good when you are skating at that spot because it feels that is where you should be at that spot. It is weird. It is kind of weird that skateboarding is a really urban sport. That is what it is. Makes it even better. It is fun that is for sure. To skate in those spots because it adds to the overall toughness of the trick and makes it look that much better when it is all put together.

Interviewer: So what do you get out of skating a spot like that?

Matt: Really good looking footage. That is what you end up getting. It looks really really good on camera and kind of helps with everything.... Like style and the way the spot looks, that’s important because if you got a trick at like a RioCan (big box stores) center it just looks ugly. It looks really crappy that brushed concrete with all those businesses in the background. It doesn’t look right with all those chain stores. It looks like crap and then you will go to an alley in Kingston. You will go into an alley with lots of spray paint, lots of sort of garbage bags around and just really really shitty looking stuff and you will find a spot back there that may not be the best spot and maybe you can’t do the greatest trick on it but if it is tough and it looks well... looks good on camera, then it’s the right spot to do a trick at instead of getting a trick at a perfect spot like a RioCan center.

Figure 16 contains screen captures of Matt in a video called All Defy. Matt sees his style as urban and he purposely chooses spots that are urban alleyways that are grimy and abandoned. The music is from a Hip-hop group Brand Nubian from a song called Probable Cause, which is about an African American who was driving a Rover getting pulled over just because he was driving a Rover hence the sarcastic name of Probable
Cause. The music has police sirens in the background and fits nicely with the urban gritty spots that Matt picked out for the video. The spot thus helps Matt symbolize his style and which subgroup he belongs to. The spot gives skaters like Jack and Matt that theatrical stage where they can present that ideal self-concept with the help of the elements of the spot and video production. What is important is a skater’s perception of the vibe he gives off, not necessarily the reality that exists. The presentation of the trick becomes just as important as the actual trick.

**Figure 16: All Defy Video** - Notice the rough ground, the alleyway, spray paint graffiti and the abandoned building all helping Matt self-symbolize his urban style.
Hugh: I like skating the stuff the pros skate but I don’t do it at the same level. It is kind of a way to separate yourself from the rest of the generic. A lot of people do the same basic tricks on the same handrail. So there is a lot of skaters now that do like unique tricks on really weird spots that nobody will think of to skate. So if you do that it is kind of like a way to have fun and be good.

Ben: I definitely feel that we (brothers Matt and Ben) are more creative because nobody in Kingston really likes to film or does anything and when they do film it looks like everything else, there is nothing really... no substance to it. Doesn’t really look different. They will just go to a spot that someone has already found and done millions of tricks at and then they will just add to the list or something like that. They won’t even do something original at that spot. They will just put another notch on their belt. You know what I mean? It is just not productive skateboarding. It is not creative or original. You are not looking or not expanding
or anything. You are not looking through anything with a new eye for spots. We are still finding spots that people walk by every day.

Finding new spots gives skaters back control of their self-symbolizing. By finding a unique spot, they are able to think of a way to skate that spot that is creative and that no one else could think of. New spots allow skaters to show their individual creativity in finding the spot and the way they make the spot skateable. This individual creativity is an important element of the ethos of the subculture, thus, by finding new spots or self-symbols, individuals are apt to feed their sense of group identification within the subculture. Even if a skater does not find a new spot, if he can think of a new way to skate a known spot, this will demonstrate his individual creativity.

4.2.9 A Virtual Belonging: Collective Self-Verification through Watching & Making of Videos

The idea of individual creativity for most skaters is, in part, an illusion. Skaters tend to get a lot of their creative ideas for spots and new tricks from professional skate videos they watch online and purchase at the video store. Recall that the companies who sponsor the teams generally produce professional skateboard videos. The videos are about the company’s current tour and are designed to make the watcher and user of the brand feel like they belong with the team and in the larger subculture. The tours and videos, along with the magazines that cover them, are thus an important source of knowledge and sense of belonging for the average skateboarder.
Nick: I wanted to research it, if you will, but ah watching the videos would get me pumped up. It would get me psyched you know. Like maybe I can land that trick today or maybe I can be like that guy someday maybe be as good as he was. When I was younger I looked up to different skaters and stuff like that. I would look at them in the magazine. I would read stories on how this guy grew up and, oh that is like me, you know. That is like me, or look what he is doing now but he was like me when he was a kid. He is traveling all over the world, you know, doing what he loves and getting paid for it.

Interviewer: What is the reason behind all the videos and magazines?

Nick: It is almost like an obsession almost. You want to have it on the brain because it makes you happy. You know it reminds you of going skateboarding or you can appreciate, wow look at that trick like that was amazing, or oh I want to try that. It is just like looking at the draft picks for hockey but it is like, oh I am going to look at the new tricks or the new video to see what kind of parts they got. It is the same thing.

Nick, by reading the magazines and watching the videos, connects on a personal level with the professional skaters who are just like him and feels as if he belongs to the team. Skaters in the Kingston scene also feel a sense of belonging through the videos. By skating the exact spot that is in the video or a spot that is similar in Kingston, skaters can feel connected to that skater and the larger subculture. Through skating the same type of spots as in the videos, skaters are trying to verify and perceive that they are just like the professionals and leverage the belonging of the team to feel like they belong to the larger subculture. It is like they create a virtual group using the company’s team and professional skaters to belong to in their heads.
Nick: Well if I see a thing. Say like an obstacle on the video or magazine, it looks similar you know. You can go like, “man I want to go skate that,” or “remember the time we skated that it was so fun,’ kind of thing. It is just constantly like that through an entire video there is always something your appreciating.... You see Montreal in skate videos right and you are like, “ah remember that time.” You can always talk about it. You can always laugh about it. It never gets hard to talk about or sick to talk about.

Hugh: I watch the pros because I know I could do what he could do almost but not quite the same level. Versus... I really don’t find I really don’t like watching skaters that skate massive hand rails or massive sets of stairs or even Vert skaters who skate half-pipes because I know that I can’t take any inspiration from what they do. Because I know I will never be able to do that or want to do that because that takes a lot of balls.... I kinda like the pros. I like skate a spot a certain way. Like they do a certain trick on a certain spot and there is like a similar spot that we have around here or even that I have been to. I can think of a trick to do on that spot or think of a way to skate that spot based on how they skate their spots and the videos they put out and stuff.

Watching skate videos gives Nick and Hugh a sense of belonging and pumps them up to skate more to once again feel that sense of belonging. For example Nick and his friends will go out at 3 AM to skate after watching a skate video, in part because they want to go find spots like those in the video and establish that they belong just like professionals in the video. In that way they can feel like they belong with the professionals to the larger subculture.

Seeing the videos also propels skaters into making their own just like the professionals do. The end result of a video seems to not be as important as going through
the process. It is the process or symbolic act of making the video and constantly throwing all of their money and time into it that a skater wants collective self-verification for.

Jack: Another buddy of mine who is a musician got into it too, so then there was the 3 of us and ah we were like .... I got a camera. I forget what year it was but anyways one Christmas I got a camera from my grandpa, and ah, so me and my buddies would like film or whatever and start filming making videos stuff like that. So that is kind of where that started and my buddy was suppose to do the editing for the video because he said he had a program that would do it. Turned out he didn’t or it did not work or something like that. So we waited, we had all this footage and wanted to edit it and nobody did. So I took it upon myself to go out and buy an editing software for my computer. I started editing so that is how I started making videos and stuff like that for YouTube and DVDs. I used to sell DVDs for like 5 bucks PBJ Peter, Bob and Jack that was the three of us. That is what we came up with because that was our initials. So on the DVD... I drew a big picture like a Peanut Butter Jam sandwich. It was pretty fun (laughing).

Although Jack does post a number of videos to YouTube, Jack does not seem to care as much about getting comments on the videos as he does about just making the videos and posting them or trying to sell them. In making the videos, Jack self-verifyes by watching himself over and over again. He also perceives collective self-verification because, through the act of making the video and putting it up for sale, he is doing something that the professionals are doing. What matters for collective self-verification is that a skater perceives that those in the scene know that he is filming, and thus is serious about skating. Being seen filming is more important than the actual film.
By appearing in a skate video like PBJ and Matt’s All Defy skaters also have the opportunity to create a virtual sense of belonging in their head. The typical skate video tends to last anywhere from 15 minutes to 30 minutes in length made up of a montage of tricks from different skaters. Each skater tends to have their own segment of tricks within the video, which lasts for 2 or 3 minutes. Skaters will send their footage to skateboard companies or a filmmaker they know to try and get into the videos. Within these videos they may not even know any of the other skaters in the video.

Hugh: It feels good to able to stand out and you can contribute to, like we film a lot. So we make videos and stuff. So when you do your own tricks it kind of makes you feel like you are contributing to the uniqueness of a video. If you can do a trick that no one else can do or even a trick that not many people in the entire world... can even think to do. It kinda contributes and we post these videos online or on BLOGS.

To get a part in a video, it is important that trick be hard and unique as seen in the above quote by Hugh. By doing so, a skater is contributing to the creativity of the whole video and feels like a part of the virtual group. They feel part of this group by self-symbolizing individual creativity and identifying with that part of the ethos. They then get that individual creativity self-verified by being in the video and they perceive or cognitively construct their own sense of belonging.

4.2.10 Collective Self-Verification: Summary of Findings

The respondents used many different ways to try to attain a perception of collective self-verification including contests, creating allies, selective interaction and...
videos. From the transcripts, some interesting implications can be drawn about collective self-verification. Individuals will use strategic collective self-verification and try to verify their ideal collective self when that self is important to whom they are and their sense of belonging. Such is the case for the skateboarders interviewed for this thesis. Collective self-verification can take place at more than one level of a group at the same time as demonstrated in the skateboarding subculture. Skateboarders use brands to verify their style of skating at the local scene but also within the larger subculture.

Research on self-verification assumes that an audience of at least one other person is needed to perceive self-verification but this thesis demonstrates that individuals can self-verify themselves through the use of videos. Most importantly, for this thesis, the research demonstrates how self-symbolizing, collective self-verification and group identification feed off of and reinforce each other to allow an individual to build a sense of belonging. In some cases self-symbols, like spots, also become opportunities for collective self-verification. When this happens, the power of the self-symbol may not endure because the resource gets challenged and used up during the collective self-verification by other members. That can help explain why filming plays such a central role within skateboarding. Filming helps self-symbols endure and be available at any time over and over again for collective self-verification.

The elements of the SCURB framework, group identification, collective self-verification and self-symbolizing work together to help create a sense of belonging for a member that can be dynamic and fluid. The elements themselves can be and often are
sources of both certainty and uncertainty. This dynamic sense of belonging is not necessarily a bad thing for a member because, as was demonstrated in this section on collective self-verification, it allows for individuality and belonging not to be mutually exclusive and, as will be discussed later, it motivates members to play with a sense of belonging when experiencing a belonging paradox.

4.3 SCURB Element III: Self-Symbolizing

The last element in the SCURB framework is self-symbols. Self-symbolizing is the uncertain individual’s implementation of symbols to build and retain the completeness of the self-concept (Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982). These symbols can be purchases (buying a skateboard, skateboard shoes that are hard to get), consumption (using the skateboard or wearing skateboard branded clothing) and/or displaying of possessions (doing tricks at the skatepark, posting videos or photos of a trick or new spot on the Internet). Symbols and symbolic consumption play an important role in the skateboarding subculture in part because they are seen as rebels by the rest of society and want to stand out from society.

Skateboarders, in general, are outsiders and distinct when compared to mainstream culture. Skaters embrace this outsider status and as a result the consumption of symbols and self-symbolizing of their identity is central to their sense of belonging as skateboarders. How a skater dresses is an important self-symbol as we saw in the collective-self-verification selection. There are self-symbols like the shoelace belt and
ripped up shoes that differentiate themselves from the general public, thus increasing group identification. There are also clothing self-symbols that separate skaters into subgroups according to their style of skating. However, within the skateboarding subculture there are many different self-symbols that the group utilizes to symbolize their belonging. They fall into three broad categories of effort, skill and artistry/style. These categories are not mutually exclusive and reinforce the sense of ethos within the group through the process of collective self-verification and group identification.

4.3.1 The Self-Symbolizing of Skill: Finding the Trick to Tricks

There are many elements of skateboarding that take skill, including making a video, finding different spots to skate, acquiring and using cultural knowledge, sponsorship and doing tricks. But by far the most important self-symbol of being a skateboarder is the skill of doing tricks.

Glen: Yeah. You can even just have a regular deck and skate. To an extent, I think it has something to do with how much you’re involved in the local community. And the skill definitely has something to do with it. If somebody comes to the park and they’re like 15 years old and they’ve never skated before and they’re attempting to learn, that’s totally cool with us. Using a skateboard as a status symbol or as a “hey, check it out, guys, I’m cool” sort of thing is not cool.

For Glen, being part of the group means coming to Polson Skatepark on a regular basis and skateboarding. Skateboarding involves at the very least trying to learn new tricks.
Chet: Good is if you can land all the tricks and you can do the hard ones and you're doing them consistently every try. If you watch it and everything, but you don't do it, you just kind of sit around..... I see people like that, and most people think of them as posers, trying to be skateboarders but they don't do it. You want to get beyond the basic ones (tricks), like your Popshoves and 50-50s on the rails and the box. You want to start doing switch tricks and Ollie tricks.

Tricks are what separate skateboarders from non-skateboarders and the respondents all agree that the best way to be a skateboarder is to do tricks and progress beyond the basic tricks. It is not enough to be able to flip a skateboard or grind a rail, they have to be able to also demonstrate progress. The skill they show in their tricks is the ultimate calling card of a skateboarder to the point that it can help skaters like Tim, who moved to Kingston in 2009, mold into a city’s scene.

Tim: Basically just coming here (Polson Skatepark), I guess. Louis knew me, apparently he seen me in Ottawa. He was like, “Oh, you gnarly Ollie Back-Heeled the double at Legacy (name of skatepark).”

I was like, “Yeah, man, that was me.”

He was like, “Tim?”

I was like, “Yeah.”

Just from being here like every other day, seeing the Kingston skaters come here. You get introduced. “I’m Tim.” It takes time. It really does. Skateboarders are weird, man. It’s always a different personality in a skateboarder. Your skateboarding represents your personality, I find. It takes a while to mold into the core scene in the city in Kingston. I say in any given city, there’s probably like 20 to 30 skateboarders that are tight-knit. So that’s why you can
go anywhere – if you’ve been skateboarding for six years plus and traveling a little bit – then you can go to Montreal, Vancouver, Winnipeg, Edmonton, Calgary, and you’ll see someone you’ve seen before.

Interviewer: What’s the core scene in Kingston?

Tim: It’s basically like the tight-knit group of people who, I guess, are skateboard nerds. [laughs] For a city of over 100,000 people, it’s awesome that a select few individuals can get together, skate together, we all exchange phone numbers, film, whatever. Talk skateboarding. We’ve all got that in common. It’s just a common interest. And I guess because being good often enough, I know it’s bad to say, but being really good at skating helps you fit into the clique, I guess. It’s a social scene.

Interviewer: Helps in what sense?

Tim: Like, “who’s this guy? He’s fucking good.” They want to know. It makes them curious. If you’re new in town and all the established people in the scene see you and are like, “This guy’s pretty good.” Then you go, “What’s up, my name is…” Whatever. And now I’m living with them. So it works out, man. I love it.

Interviewer: How do you show them that you’re good?

Tim: You just skate. You just skate how you skate. That’s it. And if they like your skating, they probably want to hang out with you. I guess that’s how it works.

Interviewer: Did you like it when Louis remembered what you did on the spot then?

Tim: Yeah, yeah. I was kind of like, “Holy fuck, I didn’t even see you there.” As if. I don’t know. I think that gives me kind of self-gratification. Like he’s remembering me because of a trick I did. If I just skated around, he wouldn’t remember me. But I did this gnarly trick. It makes you feel good. You get remembered for what you do do if there is
too much of something you just get sick of it. It is like that in the art world you know and that goes hand and hand with skateboarding.

This passage from Tim demonstrates that the effort of showing up at the park is a self-symbol, but that alone is not enough to become part of the core scene of a city. Tim’s ability to talk skateboarding and perform tricks is what helped him meld into the Kingston scene and perceive external acceptance from the group. The tricks provide skaters a personality in skateboarding and allow them to hang out with the guys. For example, Tim is known in the Kingston scene by a trick he did in Ottawa, which helps him to meld into the Kingston scene. Tricks give skaters status and a sense of belonging within each scene because within each core scene there is a loose social hierarchy related to the skill of tricks each skater can do.

Dan: Definitely just skating. If you can skate, you fit in. If you can’t skate but you try to skate, you probably won’t fit in that well….. If you’re not any good at it, but you try, your other buddies who are good, who are going to want to go hit spots that are tougher to skate and whatnot are probably going to be the ones who are more likely to fit in. The better you are, the more you fit in. Like the more higher up you’ll be on the social thing.

Interviewer: The social what?

Dan: The social – like hierarchy of your group of friends. Generally, the better skateboarders are more popular. But that’s perceived as being cool, if you’re good. So the better you are, the cooler you are, I guess.

Interviewer: So are you cool?
Dan: [laughs] I don’t know. I guess so. I was average. Cool people – like you definitely have an advantage. You’re not necessarily going to be cooler if you’re better at skateboarding, but you definitely have an advantage. You have that edge. Someone goes, “Hey, this is my buddy, he’s really sick at skateboarding.” He already has an advantage over, “Hey, this is my buddy. He sucks.” Like you don’t say he sucks, but you say, “Hey, this is my buddy.” And obviously it’s going to be the way they fit in, like, “Whoa, really, man, you did that? That’s cool. Shake my hand.” That’s how it works.

There is an external element at play in building the sense of belonging within the core scene. The skateboarding subculture is a competition for status and belonging within each city’s scene. The tricks are self-symbols acknowledged by other members and give skaters a sense of belonging within the subculture. However, the mantra of the respondents and subculture in general is that skaters do skateboarding for themselves and they define themselves as skateboarders. For example, Glen defines himself as a skateboarder because he does tricks and puts the effort in by regularly showing up at the skatepark.

Glen: Well, I don’t wake up, skate, go home and sleep. I skateboard more than just using it as transportation to get to the corner store or the bus station, and I skate less than many other people in the Kingston skateboard scene. But I would still call myself a skateboarder.

There is an interesting interplay between the internal definition of belonging and the external world. Glen bases his definition of self on going to the park where he does tricks and also compares himself to others at the park thus placing himself in the status
hierarchy of the scene by virtue of his effort. But there is also an internal element at play where the skaters have to perceive that they are good enough to be at the skatepark and display their tricks in front of the group. They have to be confident their self-symbol of a trick will succeed.

Jack: I think when I was able to start doing... I don't really know the age, but from when I was able to start doing tricks. It made it easier because I felt like I was able to get the respect, really, because you don't know what they're going to say or what they're going to do, but the more you're able to bust or do tricks, you feel like you're able to get that much more respect out of them, so that kind of makes it easier to approach.

For Jack, respect and a sense of belonging only came about when he felt he could “bust” tricks in front of the crowd at the skatepark. To build a sense of belonging requires the interplay of two perceptions, what he thinks of himself as a member and what he thinks others think of himself as a member. Jack said he always skated alone or on the edges of the skatepark until he felt he was good enough to keep up with the guys at the park and he felt he received respect. At the Polson Park I observed a number of the younger skaters either leave the park or retreat to the edges and corners of the park when the more experienced skaters came along (July 11, 2009 field notes).

Recall also that a number of the respondents will not self-symbolize a new trick at the park until they know that they have the trick dialed in.

Shawn: I wouldn’t really take a new trick out there to the public until I figured it out, until I had it down. I would practice it, but until I got really good, I wouldn’t show it.....
You don’t want to start practicing a trick and the guys are like, “That guy sucks, he hasn’t landed that trick in 30 tries.”

Chet: The tricks you should know are obviously to be able to do Kick-Flips, Heel-Flips, get your shoves down, all your 180s, Switch and Ollies. You probably want to do some big spins and 3 Flips, know hard flips that are Varial-Heels or Inward Heels. You want to be able to do some difficult tricks.

There is also an internal acknowledgement of being a skateboarder that happens even before an individual goes to the skatepark. Skateboarders define themselves by the tricks they can do. Like Glen said, “I skateboard (do tricks) that makes me a skateboarder.”

Andy: It’s just the mindset of being a skateboarder everywhere else. I’m a skateboarder. That’s what I do for fun, and that’s what I’ve done. That’s my attitude…. People may not view me as a skateboarder when I’m at work, but that’s what I feel like. I don’t feel like a trucker. I do drive a truck, but I don’t feel like a trucker, because I’m just a delivery driver….It’s just always what I’ve felt like being. Andy a skater. Like I always don’t have to skate and do as hard a tricks as I do. Eventually it’ll just be to the point where I go and skate down the sidewalks and that’s it. Or just go to park and roll around and watch everyone else. But I’ll always be skateboarding.

Hugh: It kind of feels dumb if you’re trying to do something that someone can do first try and it takes you 20 tries or 30 tries. It just kind of feels pointless. So then I’d rather do tricks that no one else can do. If they don’t want to do them because they think it’s dumb or something. Just do different tricks than people. Even someone with natural talent, sometimes they can’t think of a trick to do. Or they don’t want to do it. Maybe they can’t do it. Everyone just
has their own tricks that maybe someone else can do, but they can’t, but maybe you can. It kind of like separates people. People want to stand out and say that they can do something that no one else can do. However, it gets boring after a while, because people think those are the only tricks you can do, I guess. But it’s good. It’s a good feeling to do those tricks.

Unique tricks as self-symbols of individuality and belonging may over time lose their power because the member overuses them. They can go to the well one too many times giving the appearance that a skater is not progressing which is another key element of the ethos for group identification. Members must be very strategic when and where they use their tricks or self-symbols. This is one reason why style becomes so important with the skateboard subculture.

Skaters can also vary their style of skating along with the spots that they skate or film at. This sense of variety allows them to define their own sense of belonging within the subculture that appears to be unique to them. Their style allows them to carve out their own little niche of belonging in their minds.

Ben: You have to remember this is all really biased. Most people, I’d say, actually love the type of stuff that we’re hating on right now. Like stairs and rails, most people would say that’s all skateboarding is. So you just have to remember that. You’re interviewing two people that have a really focused perspective on what we like and hate about skateboarding. And just because we say that we hate it and it’s not for us, it doesn’t mean that it’s not a part of skateboarding or whatever. No less a part of skateboarding than what we like. It’s still a huge part. If you watch a video you’ll probably only see rails and stairs, goofy styles, and West 49-type shit. But that’s what skateboarding is. That
part of it is just not for us, really. I don’t like that; it’s ugly for me. If you ask me.

Ben: Yeah, everyone does. I went through — we both went through the long hair phase, skating stupid shit. Matt went through the only skating stairs and handrails phase because that was what he was into at the time. It was inspired because we were watching videos and stuff. Like Zero and all those guys.

Skaters believe that the type of clothing they wear affects their style of skating.

Ben: Style matters and appearance matters on skateboarding. You don’t want to look like a goof on a skateboard. Style is everything. And it’s not just clothing style. Like when you wear West 49 clothes, you start skating like a West 49 person.

According to Ben’s brother Matt, that style of tricks and skating did not suit either him or Ben. It was not who they were because it did not fit their personality. They were not into throwing themselves at obstacles and getting hurt easily. They were more into the flat ground tricks and art/style of each trick. So the brothers made a transition in the tricks they did by changing the style of clothing they wear and spots they skate because clothing and the spots are extensions of the tricks themselves.

Ben: It has a lot to do too, you (Matt) started skating different things. You started skating — like you moved away from handrails and stairs and you started skating more street obstacles, like natural things that you find on the street. That sort of like drew your attention to companies like Traffic and stuff. And then you started watching people like Bobby (Puleo) and those guys, and then you were like, they don’t look like a fucking goof when they’re skateboarding,
they look like this (points to himself). Then you started adjusting how you look.

There are well over a hundred different skateboard companies each sponsoring various degrees of professional skateboarders and teams. Thus, giving skateboarders the symbolic resources and room to construct their own sense of membership belonging within the larger subculture. The ethos of the skateboarding exhibits high group entitativity with a clear prototype for a member, but at the same time the variety of self-symbols in the form of tricks and styles allows individuals to perceive that they are defining their own sense of belonging.

By using the skateboard, brands skaters are not just looking for external collective self-verification of the brands and style that is recognized by those within the subculture. There is an internal comfort level that the individual has to feel with the self-symbol of dress. The clothing has to fit the personality of the each skater. If it does not they feel it even before another skater even notices. The end result can be an inconsistent style and ugly tricks. Matt was good at handrails and stairs but he did not feel comfortable wearing the West-49 clothing because it was not who he is as a skater.

Matt: When you’ve got long hair and shitty old shoes with holes and duct tape all over them, and you’re just jumping down stairs. If you look like a West 49, like packaged skater. Because basically, you don’t have a style.
When skaters find that match between themselves and that brand, they feel increased comfort in using that brand’s symbolic resources to symbolize belonging within the subculture. They gain a sense of belonging vicariously through the brand to the team of professional skaters and the larger subculture. At the local scene they also gain confidence that their symbolic resources will be verified because a team of experts already verified it. Conversely, if a skater does not identify with the brand through the group of professionals, like in the case of Jack (discussed later in the Belonging Paradox section) and Matt, it can throw their tricks and style off compounding a skater’s self-questioning within the subculture. If a skater is not one with his skateboard and feeling the flow, he may not be able to land or learn new tricks meaning he cannot progress.

4.3.2 The Need to Learn New Tricks: The Self-symbol of Progress

Due to the importance of tricks for belonging and status within the social hierarchy of skateboarding subculture, there is an inherent need to progress to maintain a sense of belonging.

Ken: It seems to be like competition basically, because everything seems to be pushed by – I mean, just being accepted by skaters and trying to do tricks to be like the best and all that kind of stuff, it always seems to be some sort of competition aspect behind it.

The pressure to progress not only comes from the group at the skatepark, but also from the larger subculture in the form of videos and magazines.
Shawn: Skateboarding was like seriously going into 7-11, picking up a new skateboarder magazine – which was our bible from California, because it was coming out of California, and flipping through. And again, there was no videos at that time, no videos or DVDs. Flipping through it and you’d catch a shot of a new trick. So you’re trying to figure that out by looking at frame-by-frame how that tricks going to go. And you’re not in California learning that, like I said. You’re up in Canada trying to learn by a sequential shot in a magazine how to learn that trick. So all your friends are looking at the same picture with you, and eventually, funny enough, we cut out the squares and put them into a flipbook and flip them to see how the trick was done. Put it into motion. And then we’d go back and try to learn that. Well, everyone who was flipping that thing had to learn it, and I was always the last one to learn it. But that’s how critical – it’s that trick was invented for the first time in front of you in the magazine.

Andy: Yeah. If somebody learned a new trick, everybody would go and get excited about it and go and try and learn something new that they wanted to learn. We learned a lot of stuff by watching skate videos too. You could learn how guys set up for tricks by watching them on skate videos. It would give you an idea of how to do tricks. We would watch everyone, whichever video. Go out and buy a bunch of different videos and watch whoever was skating on it.

Ken: I just wanted to learn that. I just wanted to skateboard. Going to school, I was doing it because I had to, not because I wanted to. So I didn’t care about all that stuff. I didn’t pay attention to it. I just thought of the tricks. And then about what I could do with the tricks. I thought about how everyone else is doing them. Or I watched the videos on how they were doing it to try to learn from the people who were already good, the people I liked watching. It was just a massive obsession, trying to perfect my own talent. And just the work I put into it was really all-consuming. I just wanted to get really good.
Tim: I had my influences. I kind of had the Jamie Thomas look going, Chris Cole. The Zero dudes. That was a big influence. The skate videos you watch, for any skateboarder, definitely influence the way you look and the tricks you do.

The skaters watch the videos of professional skateboarders or good amateurs on the Internet or read skater magazines to try to learn new tricks in order to gain status and maintain a sense of belonging within the group. Each skater tries to improve their symbolizing of their tricks either by increasing the difficulty of the tricks they can do or doing the ones they know better. Progress within skateboarding is seen by the respondents as the necessary end game of skateboarding.

Glen: Talk to people. Be here (Polson Park) on a regular basis. Don’t be a jerk to anybody. Make a conscious effort to improve, and people accept you. That’s the commonality. That’s the lowest common denominator right there, is everybody wants to be better. Because I think it’s the unifying or central element,..., it is what attracts people to skateboarding. If you don’t want to improve then what’s the point of continuing to do it?

Progress in one’s tricks is regarded as the central reason for skateboarding. In fact, the history of skateboarding and how it evolved over the decades demonstrates how central the concept of progression is with respect to tricks in the subculture. Back in the 1970s and 1980s, when Shawn was skating, freestyle was the predominate style of skating. According to Shawn, “Through my time period when I was a teenager learning all the tricks, the best thing you could do was how many 360s you could do.” Today
freestyle has evolved into street skating and the tricks progressed along with it. Recall this early quote from Tim on the rapid progress of the subculture over the years.

Tim: Skateboarding is still young, but it has matured a lot. It’s becoming more refined. It’s like street skating, like the type of skating we’re doing here, is 22 years old. Like street skating only came about like – of course there was like cruising sidewalks in the ‘70s and stuff. They did power slides and those whirlies or whatever. But like street tricks never came until like 1988. ’86 and ’88 it was just developing, and then in ’89, it started to explode. By ’92 people were doing everything. All the tricks we’re doing now. Like in ’92, but they looked ridiculous. Everyone did them low, not stylish. Old videos, now, like 8th Street, Plan B, Video Days, the Blind Video, it was like basically the baby stages of street skating. And then by mid to late 90’s, people were going fast, they were doing tricks really good. And now you’ve got this whole art thing. It is an art explosion of like you know how the music goes with it, how it is filmed, how you do the tricks, the spots you do the tricks at, you know there is a lot of art put into it. There’s a lot of thought.

The respondents are keenly aware of the progress of those at the skatepark but also from the subculture in terms of tricks.

Glen: Transworld Skateboarding is pretty much your bible in terms of progressions, the level that the pros are at. It really gives you insight into the industry, because it’s hard to know what’s going on in Southern California if you’re living in Kingston, Ontario.

The magazines report on new professional skateboarders, how they progress and the professional tours, as well as the competitions and new spots or tricks done. This focus on a narrative of progression by the perceived experts of the subculture, the
professional skateboarders, forces all skaters to continuously land new tricks to not only keep up and perceive belonging with their friends but also the whole subculture.

Paul: Just the feeling of landing – learning new tricks is the best feeling ever. When you land something in skateboarding, it’s just amazing. It feels better than any other feeling. And if it’s new, you’re so pumped on your stuff. You’re like, “yes, that was awesome!” You want to step it up, like learn it on a bigger and better thing. Get better at it. Because it just feels awesome to land tricks.

Jack: Oh yeah! You learn a new trick and you're like, “man, guess what I can do!” I even still do that, like, “man, let me show you this new trick.” Bust a new trick, and they're like, “cool!” So it's pretty exciting when you learn a new trick. It still pumps you up when you land a new trick for the first time, especially when you've been trying it and trying it and trying it – combination tricks especially, because you can get the first part, but you can't get the second part, or you can almost get the second part but you don't quite get it, and stuff like that. It's progression; that's how you learn.

For the skaters in the Kingston scene, landing new tricks is very important because the self-symbolizing asserts their status and belonging within the group. They want others to see what they have done for the collective self-verification. They can also place themselves in the subculture as a whole in their own minds because they know whom else in the videos has done a trick like that. When they land that new trick, they perceive themselves at the top of the hierarchy. Unfortunately those moments are fleeting and fragile for a number of reasons.
4.3.3 Effort: That is All it is!

Skateboarding is not easy and the trick with in the subculture is to make it look easy. The effort a skater puts in to make the tricks look easy and being a skater is an important self-symbol within the subculture. Effort can be in many different forms but probably the number one symbol is time. “Just from being here like every other day, seeing the Kingston skaters come here. You get introduced, ”I’m Tim”. (Tim) Time at the skatepark is seen as a way to demonstrate your commitment to the scene.

Glen: They’re just the people that are probably the best in the local scene, just by virtue of the fact that they skate more and they’re definitely who the younger kids look up to. And the community probably wouldn’t be as unified without them.

Interviewer: Who are these people?

Glen: You’d probably see them here about 5:00. Most of the better skateboarders. Louis, Jack, Carl Holmes, Nick Johnson, Scott. Most of them all skate together anyway. That’s just really who’s keeping skateboarding alive in Kingston. Sure these kids might all still skate, but they probably wouldn’t skate with the same frequency if they didn’t have those people to look up to………There’s an element of time put in, I think. Association with the scene makes you a skateboarder. It just kind of happens. A willingness to be friendly and show up and skate.

Interviewer: So are you part of that group?

Glen: I wouldn’t say so. I don’t skate enough. I’m friends with all of them. I hang out with them periodically. I skate here with them when they’re here.
Glen is not a good skater in his own mind because he does not put the time in like the core skaters of the scene, which he believes keeps skateboarding alive in Kingston. In his mind the only reason he is not as good as the core skaters is because he does not have the time to commit, given he works full time to pay the bills. There appears to be a myth and/or belief in the subculture that if you just continue to skate that you will improve. It does not matter who you are, if you put in the effort you will progress to any level you want to.

Paul: Just going to the skate park every day. I remember when I bought my first skateboard, I’d just go the skate park every day, ride around, learn how to drop in all the quarterpipes and the ramps and stuff. You progress from there. You see a sewer grate and you want to ollie it. You ollie back. You always just make – it always gets bigger and bigger. You always progress to the bigger thing. You may learn a trick on that thing, and then the next day you might want to make sure you can learn it on the bigger one. That way it’s like stepping up a little bit every day.

Nick: When you don’t progress? Sometimes it feels frustrating. Some guys want to give up and quit. But if you stick with it, you will progress. It’s kind of almost impossible not to progress if you don’t quit. If you don’t quit, you’re going to progress. Because they feel they aren’t progressing as quickly as some other guys. Some kids might be like, “Oh, I’m not as good as that guy. I’ll never be good.” Stuff like that. But if you know a kid’s doing that you say, “Listen, it doesn’t matter. If you’re having fun with it, you’re going to progress. If you keep doing it you’re going to progress no matter what.”

For Paul and Nick, just like Glen, practicing and showing up at the skatepark means that they can physically progress to bigger and better things which is central to
their self-definition of belonging as a skateboarder. All it takes is time and a skater will progress. As we will see later with the belonging paradox related to ability, this myth of always being able to progress, however, leads to a lot of frustration and uncertainty about belonging because there are times where the skater, no matter what they do, cannot progress for an extended period of time.

The self-symbol of time at the skatepark is much more complex and meaningfully within the subculture than just physical progress. Skaters can show their commitment to the subculture by showing up at the skatepark and demonstrating their willingness to improve and never giving up. As mentioned in the collective self-verification section, implicit in showing up to the skatepark everyday and trying to improve is the perception that others are watching you and can verify your effort to improve not just your improvement.

Ken: I guess it’s just time now. But it’s pretty much just being everywhere. And I think that obsession and the intensity of the skateboarding at first makes people a little more well-known. Like I just skateboarded all the time. I went everywhere around the city. I looked behind every building, every major building, to see if there’s spots that would be ideal for skateboarding. Found the KCVI skatepark down beside the school and it ended up being one of the best places to skateboard when it was still there. And the majority of the other guys who were the best in the city, and the majority of people who skated too, they found that spot because it was the best place to skateboard. So that’s why they kept going there. And just through time, always skating and always seeing the same people. It just takes something as much as someone trying a hard trick and you see them try that all the time. Like that’s this kid and he always tries that. And then them doing it, and finally
learning and finally able to do it all the time. You’re just like, “Whoa, that’s amazing. That was a really good trick. You finally landed it and it was awesome. That’s pretty sick.” And they’re like, “Yeah, I got it.” And that’s kind of like your introduction to them and how you meet. The next day you come there’s a tentative moment and then you both know each other, you start skating. You both skate around. You’re talking and like, “Oh, what are you doing today?” “I want to go skate street somewhere. I don’t really want to stay here.” And you’re like, “I want to go skate street too. We should just all go somewhere.”

Andy: We’d have like five or six people who wanted to get in the car to go to the skateboard park, and I’d choose who got to go. And this kid would come and he would try one trick that he absolutely had no right trying, like he wasn’t going to come anywhere near it. But he just made it look like a good attempt. And he would get pissed off that he couldn’t land it and then he would sit down for the rest of the day. So I just eventually stopped bringing him…. I skated with him every day too. Every time I was out skateboarding, I was with him. I knew exactly what he could and couldn’t do. And it’s understandable to try a trick and try to learn a trick, but you don’t give it two tries, come nowhere near it, then get pissed off, sit down, and start whining for the rest of the day.

Paul: You just skate with them and hang out with them and you just can tell. Like you have an idea that’s a good guy and I want to hang out with him, you can tell by the way they skate and stuff. It’s like if somebody doesn’t learn a trick and they’re like, “Fuck!” and they throw their board or something, you can tell they’re kind of an asshole and you might not want to skate with them or hang out with them. Some people are just a lot more calm. They’re just like, whatever mellow about it. They seem pretty cool to hang out with.

If skaters give an air of quiet confidence that it is just a matter of time before they learn a new trick, those are the skaters that people want to hang out because they have
perfected the slack I don’t care nothing bothers me attitude of a skateboarder. The key is not to show any doubt or uncertainty about one’s ability in order to hang with the group.

4.3.4 Real Skateboarders Never Quit

Skateboarding has passed through various popularity phases or waves of being cool over the years. When it is not cool it is perceived as anything but mainstream and is marginalized in society. In this context, a very powerful self-symbol in skateboarding is sticking with the subculture through thick and thin.

Nick: Nowadays skateboarding is really popular. I’ve met kids who came here, and people who just tried to be popular, and started it to see if they could get a clothing sponsor of something in the end. I’ve met a lot of people like that. That’s not what it’s about for me. I just like having fun. And, yeah, it is popular now, but I was doing it when it wasn’t. Like it’s going to go down again and not be as popular, but I’m still going to be skateboarding, because it’s fun to me.

Tim: Take it back to 1991, when skateboarding was dead. There was no money in it, and people did it purely because they loved it. That’s what it’s about. A lot of people are like, “oh, it’s just about money and sponsors.” And a lot of dudes get into it because, fucking, it’s just like the cool thing to do. Back then it wasn’t the cool thing to do, so you really had to fucking be into it and love it to be a skateboarder. Nowadays, anyone gets into it. And with all this shit that’s in the media about skateboarding, they can’t really get a good feel for what skateboarding should be like.

Nick: Yeah I can guarantee if skateboarding died out tomorrow, me and Tim would still be skateboarding. No matter what people think. We’d be doing the exact same thing.
Members who skate when it is not popular consider themselves the real skateboarders. Never quitting is more of an internal self-reflective self-symbol because unless asked it is not obvious a skater has never quit. The intention becomes the self-symbol not just the act. It is something the respondents use in their minds to separate themselves from the others and construct their own sense of belonging within the group.

4.3.5 Specialized Knowledge to Stay Connected and Show Passion

Knowledge is an interesting self-symbol because skaters can use it as a way to stay connected with the subculture when they are no longer skating. This is important to them because being a skater is central to their identity and they only quit because they did not have the time because of work or school requirements.

Chet: I’d even still read the magazines when I wasn’t skating just to look and kind of keep up with it. It was still an interest, something I didn't have time for anymore to do, but I could still read at night before bed or look at the magazines.

Glen: I read a fair number of magazines, but nowhere near what I used to. I’d say I kind of turned into a skate nerd when I wasn’t skating as much. I’d still watch a lot of videos and read stuff online even though I wasn’t buying magazines or really skating much.

By surfing the Internet and reading the magazines, both Chet and Glen can keep the bond with the subculture and keep their identities as skaters intact. Knowledge is also a powerful self-symbol at the skatepark. The respondents recognize that skateboarding is a social scene and that a component of feeling like part of the group is being able to talk
skateboarding with the rest of the skaters at the park. Knowledge gives skaters a feeling that they can hang out at the skatepark.

Tim: You just have conversations, get to know each other. The social aspect of skateboarding is really cool. It’s very unique. It’s not a regular social atmosphere such as school or work. I guess it’s specialized, you know?

Interviewer: What do you mean by specialized?

Tim: It’s like specialized knowledge, right? If you’re an engineer and you specialize in, say, mechanical fucking something, then if you meet with a bunch of other people who are into the same thing, you have all that in common. You can sit down and have a couple of drinks and talk your ass off about it. Just talk about it hard.

Interviewer: What’s the purpose behind the research then?

Nick: Just to, know, it’s to keep up with what’s going on in the skateboarding world. It’s like news, but for skateboarders. Or it’s like looking at the draft picks for hockey or something like that. Who got traded. They switch sponsors, they do the same thing.

Interviewer: Do you talk it over in the skate park with your buddies?

Nick: Oh, yeah. All the time. We’re even looking at magazines and stuff. I don’t know if you noticed it yesterday, but I came back with a magazine from the store and we were all looking at it. Oh, this guy is sponsored by this company. I can’t believe he changed. Or something like that. It’s just fun to even look at that.

Ken: Like I know people around who I’ve met, and they, “Oh, yeah, I skateboard.” But like I said, I can say something like, “Oh, gnarly,” but if I talk to them about
anything to do with skateboarding, they don’t know what I’m talking about. They don’t know something as obvious as like names of tricks. And they themselves are the ones talking about it. I don’t ask them questions. I don’t decide who’s in it or whatever. I’m just trying to think of another example outside of skating that I can relate it to. Because it’s more of kind of like a – I guess it is in general more of a group thing.

That specialized knowledge as a self-symbol helps build the ethos of the group. It is a key source of group identification by delineating those on the inside in the know and those who may use the subculture’s self-symbols to look cool but really don’t know anything. In essence, knowledge symbolizes a skater’s passion and commitment to the subculture and to the local skate scene at the skatepark. It is part of the all-consuming lifestyle and can supplement, enhance or reinforce a skater’s sense of belonging.

Ken: The knowledge base helps, yes. And if there’s no knowledge, the passion is kind of what makes you a part of it. You kind of just gain knowledge of it and you’re a part of it, or you kind of just have that passion and it brings you into it. And through that passion you’ll gain the knowledge. Through your experience in it, you’ll be a part of it.

Knowledge is a powerful symbol within the subculture and contributes to a common ethos and group identification because members are all sharing the same knowledge amongst themselves. However, as discussed previously, knowledge by itself is not sufficient to gain standing within the skateboard subculture.

Ken: I just skate to skate. I guess all those people who come to the park and try to talk to me, I’m just like, “I’m here to skate.” One guy came from St. Lawrence just didn’t say
anything and his skating was good. I talked to him, he’s always got his skateboard, he always wants to skate spots, he’s okay for filming. He wants to skateboard, so we’ll call him to skate with us. And there’s another kid who comes to the park all the time, and I never talk to him. He always says, “Hey, man, what’s going on?” He never skates, he can’t skate, but he’s got skater everything. He’s consistently at the park and he’s showing up and every time says, “Do you want to skate.” He has no interest in skateboarding. I mean, he has an interest, but he just tries the same two things and walks around and talks to people. He asks me what kind of board I have. And he’s like I have such and such board again.

4.3.6 Commitment to the Lifestyle

Videos are a key source of knowledge for a number of reasons. Skaters watch the videos to get new ideas for tricks and ideas for spots to skate. But the most important knowledge skaters get out of the video is an idea of the symbols associated with the lifestyle of skater and the attitude of a skater, which includes which brands and products to use in terms of clothing and equipment.

Luke: The first couple of times I watch it (a video), I just don’t pay as much attention to the tricks and to where I would study them. I just watch the video and watch everything in it. Just pay attention to everything.

By everything, Luke means the shoes, clothing the professionals wear and their attitude they have when skating. The Powell videos, which are classic skate videos from the 1980’s, is where Luke takes his cues.

Luke: Yeah. This is just mainly from the videos (his clothing) – all the guys in the 80’s wore this for reasons. Converse, since they’re so thin, you can feel the board
really well. And then new skateboard shoes, the huge tongue kind of gets in the way of some tricks for me. But the Converse, they’re so thin that you can feel the board really well. The socks because, for some of my tricks, the board is against my leg and it kind of gives me bruises and stuff, whereas the sock prevents it. The kneepads for safety. The shorts are just above my knees because long shorts kind of get in the way. They hook onto – it’s really weird. So I just wear shorts above my knees. I figured it was just the fashion back then, but they wear it all for a reason. Just for comfortability, safety.

Tim: I had my influences. I kind of had the Jamie Thomas look going, Chris Cole. The Zero dudes. That was a big influence. The skate videos you watch, for any skateboarder, definitely influence the way you look and the tricks you do. So whatever you’re into is probably, especially when you’re a teenager, you’re going to try to dress like them, you’re going to try to act like them, you’re going to say the same shit as them. You’re going to do the same shenanigans. They do retarded shit on videos. Like the whole CKY thing. Yeah, we went through a phase where we were jumping in bushes and, fucking (laughing), – oh, man.

The Internet also helps to perpetuate that the professionals are just regular guys that hang out at skateparks. For example, there is a website theberrics.com that is literally a skatepark in California. On this website skaters get to watch professionals hang out at the park and do the same competitions they do. For example, the website hosts this thing called “Battle of the Berrics”. It is where they get top professionals to have a skate tournament or games of SKATE for bragging rights. Not only do the professionals act like regular skaters but everyone gets to virtually hang out with them as well.
Andy: But skateboarding, I’m up for watching a skate video any day. Or the X Games on TV. Action sports, I don’t mind watching on TV, but the mainstream sports like hockey and stuff like that, it’s all boring to me. It’s all full of overpaid professional players who are just a bunch of bitches and whiners. “Oh, I’m only making $12 million this year. How am I ever going to be able to afford to live?” And the pros in action sports, like pro skateboarders, they’re not... Unless you’re Tony Hawk. Tony Hawk is making millions of dollars, but it’s because of the extra stuff that he’s done with skateboarding. But the average professional skateboarder isn’t making millions of dollars, so they’re still pretty down-to-earth, real people….. They’ve taken a hobby that they had fun doing and they’ve learned to make a living off it.

Paul: I remember reading Shane Cross interviews when I found out who he was, because I never knew about him until I met you (Nick). I was like, man, this guy’s intense. He just likes to get high, party with his friends and skateboard. And he likes John Lennon and shit like that.

Evan: I don’t care what anybody says, it’s always something. The best pro skater in the world is going to be scared of something. It’s going to intimidate them. Like if somebody falls out or do some trick over a 30 stair. Just not think about it, just do it every day, like it’s their job or something. Skateboarding progresses every day with it. Pros are just people learning and taking it to new heights.

Nick: There’s something called The Berrics, which every skater goes on. That’s like your daily thing. That’s where you find all the good stuff. It’s got all the best pros. It’s just fun, you know. It reminds you of what you do with your friends kind of thing. And they have neat little things on there. You can talk to them and talk to your favorite pros. They’ll give you tips. Or anything, anything you want, really. They’ll put out little videos, like “check this out” for free.
Travel is also an important self-symbol of the lifestyle. Most of the respondents travel in part because there is no indoor skatepark other than the Ruwa Indoor Skatepark, which is really considered too small, and not challenging enough for the hardcore Kingston skater. So, in order to overcome the winter weather, the Kingston skaters organize skating trips to the big cities that surround Kingston. Part of the fun of the trip is the bonding experience and doing stupid stuff away from the skatepark like the professional skaters do. It helps in building that sense of belonging within the group.

Nick: I can describe a trip a couple of years ago. I was 19 and we went to Montreal. There’s a lot of good spots there. When we got there it was a normal time, skateboarding and stuff. Then it got to nighttime. We got sick of skateboarding for the day, we were tired, but we weren’t tired. So we were just like, okay, let’s go out and see what Montreal has to offer. So of course we ended up at a strip club, drinking. I don’t want to get too far into it, but my buddy was getting lap dances and ended up a little bit more than that in Montreal. And then we lost two of our buddies; they took off drunk somewhere. We were looking for them, and the guy that took the – I guess he went to the hooker’s home, said, “I had the worst night of my life.” And he just turned 19. He’s a little guy too, so it was the funniest thing. And then we skated again. It was a really good time all in all, but it’s so funny, if you think about that. You see Montreal in skate videos, right, and you’re like, “Remember that time?” You can always talk about it, you can always laugh about it. It’s like not hard to talk about, it’s sick to talk about.

Traveling does more than just bring a group together through common experiences. Travelling is also a good symbol to show a skater’s commitment to the subculture. Professionals travel all the time doing demos, contests and shooting videos.
The videos usually include behind the scene footage of them traveling, partying and hanging out. If professionals travel all over the place then, if a skater is committed to the subculture, he should also travel.

Shawn: Well, a hardcore skater, to me, is somebody who lived and breathed it, the music of it, drove on road trips for four hours to go skate a location. Because again in the ‘70s, there wasn’t skateboard parks everywhere like there is nowadays. So a hardcore skater would have no problem taking the bus somewhere to get to a place to skate. Or jumping on a bus and going to Calgary on a 12-hour trip to skate a park there because they just opened a new park.

Travel as a self-symbol is seen as something only the hardcore skaters do just like the professionals. Traveling to different spots and different cities is also one of the best self-symbols to show progress.

Dan: How do you progress? You just get better, learn more tricks. Yeah. Hit more spots, go to places you’ve never been before.

If a skater travels and finds new spots that he has never skated, that forces him to learn something on that spot and demonstrate his versatility. By traveling, skaters also feel like they are part of the larger subculture because they have met, skated with and hung out with skaters in different cities. Urban cities like Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal are seen as the epicenter of the skateboarding culture within Canada.

Tim: It takes a while to mold into the core scene in the city. I say in any given city, there’s probably like 20 to 30 skateboarders that are tight-knit. So that’s why you can go anywhere – if you’ve been skateboarding for six years plus
and traveling a little bit – then you can go to Montreal, Vancouver, Winnipeg, Edmonton, Calgary, and you’ll see someone you’ve seen before. Because traveling goes hand-in-hand with skateboarding. You hit different parks, different spots. You hear of a spot in a different city, you want to hit it. Fuck, it’s just fun, man. The whole lifestyle, I’m so glad I got into it. I don’t know what kind of person I would be if I didn’t skateboard.

The symbol of traveling is a resume saying: look what tricks or self-symbols I can do, the places I have experienced and the progress I have made. In making a video a skater cannot only showcase his talent but also his cultural experience to the world demonstrating that they do belong because they made a video and traveled to different places to make the video just like professional skaters.

Ken: Wanting to see my face on some sort of videos. Wanting people to know – just wanting people to be like, “oh, I wonder what Ken did lately,” and where I have been kind of thing. Sort of the ego along with it. … That would be so gnarly if all the people I knew thought I was more cool because of it.

4.3.7 Style: The Art of Skateboarding

This brings us to the third broad type of self-symbol that is important within the skateboarding subculture, which is style. Skateboard is seen within the subculture not just as an extreme sport but also an art form. An art form that takes a lot of thought and style.

Tim: And now you’ve got this whole art thing. It’s an art explosion. How the music goes with it, how it’s filmed, how you do the tricks, the spots that you do the tricks at. There’s a lot of art put into it. There’s a lot of thought. If you go to a spot and look at it, it’s like, what trick could I
do, how am I going to do it. Is it going to look good? Would it look better at night or during the day?

As seen in the above quote, style plays a big roll in the subculture. Style within the subculture centers around tricks, filming/videos, spots and dress. Generally, all four of these elements have to fit together and be consistent with each other for a member’s style to be a successful self-symbol. It really does not matter if you are good skater if you don’t have style.

Ben: That’s what I’m saying. Someone with the most ability in skateboarding in the whole wide world, that’s amazing because this person has so much ability. But they could have the worst sense of style ever, because they just – they don’t do their tricks properly or something. It doesn’t look good. It looks like shit, they have no style. Style is everything!

Tricks need to have a certain flare to them as well as being effortless. Skaters can tell when a trick is effortless and collectively self verify the effortlessness. For a member’s own sense of belonging, it is important that they view their ability to be effortless. There are two elements of being effortless that are important to construct a sense of belonging. The first is being able to pull off and land a trick consistently at will. The second is being able to land tricks and look like it took no effort to land it and look like it is no big deal. In order for a skater to feel they are a good skater, and thus belong in the group, they have to feel that they can consistently land their tricks.

Jack: Just being able to do tricks, I think, makes you start feeling like a skateboarder. Where you're able to do Kick-
Flips and stuff, or being able to do something without thinking about it, that makes you really feel like you know what you're doing, that you're who you are.

Evan: That’s what skateboarding is. You learn it and you get consistent. Like when you get consistent, it’s muscle memory. That’s all it is. And that’s why you do your tricks every day the same time and they look the same every time when you get good. You don’t even really have to think about it once you learn it.

The other form of effortlessness is the ability to land tricks smoothly. It is being able to stick the landing and ride away without so much as a flinch or bobble. There is a flow and fluidity to skateboarding and a skater should be able to flow into the next trick without any trouble.

Andy: Just the way they hold their body and they way they set up for a trick. Like guys who – like that was a switch three-flip. That was a really hard trick, but it looks like he put no effort into it. So stuff like that, you can tell. Yeah, it’s just a smooth, effortless style that everybody develops after a while.

Paul: You’re just like glowing. I don’t know how to explain. You don’t even have to be showing off. Like, I just landed that. You can just tell it by their body movements and everything. It just smoothly happens and everything looks good, and you can tell by the facial expressions and stuff like that. Like it took no effort. Like it just happened naturally. That’s what a lot of those guys can do, actually. They can do hard tricks and ride away like it wasn’t hard at all.

The individuals are glowing because that is when they know they have the effortless style of skateboarder. They are able to project the nonchalant chill attitude of a
skater, which is consistent with the ethos. An attitude that he or she can do that trick any
time because it is an easy trick for him is essential for hardcore skaters.

Ben: If you don’t look good on a skateboard, who’s going
to want to see what you’re doing? Nobody wants to look at
an ugly skateboarder. Seriously, it’s the worst thing, a kid
that can do a million tricks but doesn’t have any style doing
it. You’re just like, ugh. It makes you want to regurgitate.

It is not only that Ben is perceived by others as doing ugly tricks if he does not
land them smoothly with style, but it is equally important that Ben perceive that the trick
he just landed was landed with style. It is that perception of style that allows a skater to
perceive that the symbol of the trick will work and allow him to perceive a sense of
belonging certainty.

As discussed previously in the section on collective self-verification, part of a
skateboarder’s style is also where they do the tricks and on what obstacles they choose to
do the tricks.

Ben: I honestly think that skateboarding – to me, I’m more
fascinated about the places that skateboarding, where
skateboarding takes place rather than the trick that is being
done or who is doing it. Sometimes it’s about the spot. To
me, anyways. I’d rather see an easy trick at a very unique
and eye-catching spot than a crazy-hard trick at the spot that
has just been blown out and everyone’s seen it and it’s old
and yesterday’s news…… Just because skateboarding is
like a very visual activity. A lot of people would even
consider it an art. If you consider it an art, it needs to look
good and it has to be pleasing to the eye. Think of like a
piece of artwork on a canvas. If it’s ugly, if it’s in a
museum, the really good looking ones with the good styles
is going to attract the most attention, whereas the ones with
the bad styles are going to be collecting dust and no one’s going to go over there and look at it. The same thing about skateboarding. It’s very much about how things look. If you consider it an art form, which most people do. I think it’s beyond a sport.

Given that a spot is the canvas for a skateboarder making sure that a trick is consistent with the spot is critical. Recall the quote at the beginning of this section by Tim where he is concerned with how the spot makes the trick look and the best lighting (See Figure 17).

**Figure 17: Style The Art of Photograph** – photo of Matt - Facebook Comments: Ben “the shadow casted on the wall looks dope”, Hugh “Sick shit u guys would be stoked on spots at the bayview plaza in Belleville, theres a kicker to fire hydrant at food basics and a gap over a fire hydrant on the other side”, Keith Garvin “So sick, things bigg”
Having a sense of style within the subculture with respect to spots is seen as an individual thing because there are so many variables that a skater has to deal with in the moment of doing and capturing a trick. Not the least of which is finding a spot that no one else has found.

Matt: Louis’s not artistic at all. He just goes where everyone else goes. The same with Frank.

Ben: He doesn’t film, though. Those guys don’t even film. And when they do, they just film anything and everything. They don’t have an identity.

Matt: Exactly. They don’t have an identity in skateboarding. And they should by now, They’re like 20 years old.

As can be seen in the above, quotes and photo style is seen as an individual characteristic and an important self-symbol that can be collectively verified in the pursuit of belonging. How does a skater build that identity as a skateboarder? An important component is that they perceive that they have their own unique style of skateboarding.

Style includes the type of tricks a skater does, the performance of the tricks, dress during the trick and the spot in the performance of the trick.

Ben: Your style is your theme. You want to try and be as consistently true to that style as you can, by going out and doing what’s true to yourself in that style.

For skaters to achieve a sense of their own style they have to be consistent in the type of tricks they do and film at spots that are consistent with what they think their style is and dress like the other skaters that skate their style.
Ben: Finding your style is probably the most important thing in skateboarding. To be able to – when you’re watching a video, you can tell who hasn’t found their style. If they put out a video part every year, and every year, they look like a different human being. You’re going, who the hell is that? I don’t recognize that person. Because they don’t skate the same, they don’t look the same. They haven’t found their style yet.

Matt and Ben believe they have an urban inner city style and they look for spots that have a lot of character and grittiness to them. At the same time they would never skate a suburban spot because it is inconsistent with their style, making it hard to build an identity as a skater. “The skateboarding style is very visual and very aesthetic. And once you’ve found your style then you throw yourself into things that mesh with that. If it doesn’t mesh, then it’s not you. Leave it alone. Leave it for someone else who wants to skate it. It has got to seem natural.” (Ben) If a skater finds a spot that is consistent with his style of tricks and how he views himself as a skater, then he is not afraid to put it on the resume in the form of video footage because then he knows he is putting his best foot forward. He is not only showing his ability through tricks but also his own sense of style and aesthetic. He is able to put his ideal self forward for collective self-verification.

Matt: It’s frustrating, but it makes me happy to find a really good spot like that. A spot that’s really kind of grimy and not perfect. It really adds to the effect of the video you’re going for too. If you’re kind of going for a more urban video you don’t want a perfect-looking spot, you want more of a kind of a rough spot with lots of spray paint on the walls or lost of rough-looking building around the spot or really rough ground that doesn’t look like it can be rode on. Like really old too helps. It makes you feel better skating.
Although that spot sucks, it makes you feel good when you’re skating it because it feels like that’s where you should be, that spot. It’s weird.

Interviewer: It’s weird?

Matt: Yeah, it’s kind of really weird. Skateboarding is a really urban sport, that’s what it is basically. It’s even better, it’s fun, for sure, to skate those spots. Because it ads to the overall toughness of the trick and makes it look that much better when it’s all put together.

Interviewer: What do you get out of skating a spot like that?

Matt: Really good-looking footage, that’s what you end up getting. It looks really, really good on camera. Just helps with everything. Also, if you can skate a spot like that, you have a better chance of skating in other cities too, because those spots exist everywhere.

Jack: I try to do a video every year, so I’m going to try to take to the streets this year and not film as much in the skateparks. That’s kind of what I’ve been doing the past couple of years. So still I’ll skate in the parks because they’re fun to skate and everything’s there and everything’s perfect, but the street looks better on video.

Matt: It just makes it that much harder to do. That’s a trick in itself, to get up the frigging thing if it’s really rough to ride through it. You’ve got to be able to skate that stuff. That’s what I feel I’m good at is skating that shit. And it also looks cool, too. That’s another thing. If it looks really smooth, like a skateboard park, you don’t want that, you know? If it looks rough, it’s like, cool, that’s sweet-looking…. I like it, because it’s difficult, it adds a lot of – makes the trick that much harder. If it’s really rough or just really hard. You don’t want a really perfect spot, because if a spot’s perfect then everyone gets tricks there. And tricks can be beat. A lot of spots around here, you go there and you skate them and they are really hard to skate, and then people go and they’ll find out how hard they are to skate.
It’s difficult for everyone to get the tricks and it just set the kind of a standard for a spot in the area.

Ben: And that, again, has to do about style. The spot adds to the style. The spot can make or break how a trick looks, how a skateboarder looks. Because style counts.

If a skater is the only one to land a hard trick because it is difficult, then they own that spot. It is a self-symbol that only that skater owns. Recall that owning a spot in a city can be a very powerful self-symbol and as Ken points out it can be collectively self-verified through conversations with other skaters from the area.

Ken: Like certain cities have certain spots, and a spot has certain tricks on it, and who are the people that have done those. And everyone just kind of knows around such a large area that it’s all that. “Oh, yeah, I know that kid. I heard about him in Montreal. He skated this trick down Esplanade.” And then my friend will be like, “I was there for that.”

Recall that once a video is out, spots become famous within the city and/or subculture. The other skaters love to challenge themselves at these spots in order to prove to themselves they can also skate those spots and establish their belonging. This forces skaters to be on the constant look out for spots.

Ben: It just shows, it’s sort of a separate world, different realm. The person that walks past a handrail sees that as just a support to walk up the steps, but a skateboarder walks past and says, I can grind down that and I can get a video, or I can get a photo of a grind down that handrail, and it would just baffle the average person who’s never seen skateboarding.
Skaters pride themselves in seeing the world differently than the rest of the world, which increases their group identification through an us versus the rest of world mentality. One of the ways they view the world differently is how they view the concrete jungle that is a modern city. Where we see ugly concrete they see a creative opportunity to show off their art.

Dan: I guess some of the things you do with a skateboard, like vandalizing – what they would consider vandalizing, like waxing the ledge or whatever. You’re obviously vandalizing someone’s property. But I’m just doing my thing, right? ….. So like some guy just thinks I’m bashing some piece of wood against his curb, but he doesn’t know that it’s a sport or anything like an art.

Every one of the skaters interviewed mentions how they have different perceptive on the world. Some skaters, however, have the ability better than others to find spots in cities that no one else can find. The ability to find spots not just skate them becomes an important self-symbol within the subculture. By finding unique spots that no one else can, skaters can view themselves as creative skateboarders that have their own unique style or viewpoint. This symbol of finding a spot helps them construct their own sense of belonging by differentiating them amongst their friends.

Matt: Yeah. Because looking for spots, you’ve got to have an artistic view and stuff like that, because if a spot doesn’t look good – you know. And plus finding different ways to skate a spot, you have to be in like a state of mind that is different than everybody else’s. Which can be hard, but we’ve been doing it lately.
Interviewer: How do you merge the artist and the skateboarder?

Matt: Like style, big thing. That’s really into it, like the most artistic thing. And the spots you choose, that’s the most important thing as well. You’ve got to merge your artistic views into your skateboarding views. Find a spot that’s of interest to you, but also say this looks really good on camera. This would look really good.

The self-symbol of the spot plays an important role within the subculture. It is the canvas where skaters demonstrate both ability and style. The spot makes it hard to do tricks compared to the perfect skatepark, so it demonstrates a skater’s ability to tricks. It also demonstrate a skater’s creative ability in having an eye for a spot that no one else sees and figuring out how to make the spot skateable and then skate it.

Matt: You can go to a spot that, maybe some of the other guys you’ve interviewed, you go to a spot that maybe they didn’t see it, but I would because I’d kind of dealt with that stuff before. Like it’s really rough or not skateable, but I skate it anyway because I’m used to skating that stuff. And I’ll end up getting something on it, and they’ll have a hard time even coming close to tricks. That’s why I kind of have an eye for that kind of stuff, to kind of see spots that maybe other people won’t see. They don’t think it’s even a spot, and I can kind of skate it. Or like maybe there’s a spot that’s kind of, maybe has to have something put into it to make it even better. So you might have to patch the spot or bring a sign or put a kicker up to it and skate it. Other people wouldn’t do that. So it’s, yeah, sure, whatever. But that’s kind of what I mean.

Ben: Really raw and rugged and really natural skate spots. Just terrain that you would find out there that there is a chance someone wouldn’t even look at. Like a skateboarder wouldn’t even look at it as a skateable spot, because it’s so
obscure. It’s pretty original. Just go out there and find something that’s really hard to skateboard and land a trick on it. Because skateboarding is so – there’s so much talent in skateboarding that now everyone can do anything. The point is to find a different spot, different things.

Finding the spot becomes a unique symbol of skater’s individual creativity and finding a way to make it skateable further reinforces that sense of creativity. The spot is part of a skater’s style and ideal self-presentation that he records on video for collective-self-verification later.

According to Shawn, with the advent of the Internet you can no longer tell where a skater is from because they all watch the same videos and do the tricks the same way, but back in the 1970a and 1980s he would have to learn the trick from a magazine. His friends and him would make a flipbook out of the shots in the magazine and try to learn how the trick was done. However, they could not tell how precisely it was done so they each developed their own way of doing the trick and thus each developed their own style of doing the trick.

Today, there is really an illusion of individual creativity because everyone watches the same videos. Everyone is doing the tricks relatively the same way, making the spot the video is filmed at and the combination of tricks on the spot very important self-symbols of belonging. Every obstacle is slightly different, even if a skater gets the idea from a professional video he still has to figure out how to make the spot skateable. The spot in the Internet age becomes an extremely important symbol because it adds to the uniqueness of the trick and helps the individual project his own unique style of
skating. This helps the individual in a strange way conform to the ethos of being creative and doing it for themselves. A skater perceives that he has his own style through the uniqueness of the spot. No two spots are ever exactly the same.

4.3.8 Self-Symbolizing Conclusion

Effort, ability, and style are the major self-symbols that skateboarders use to try to assert their belonging within the subculture. They are key inputs into the SCURB framework in that they are the symbolic resources that skaters use to perceive collective self-verification and group identification. Within the skateboarding subculture, not all self-symbols are equal. Tricks are at the top of hierarchy with knowledge, effort, spots and dress being poor substitutes for tricks. However, these self-symbols can be used in concert with tricks to allow a skater to project and perceive an individual style, which is even more powerful than just tricks. How and when self-symbols mesh together is important to consider. They can create a greater sense of belonging than just using the individual self-symbols by themselves. Self-symbols can be perceived as a great source of belonging certainty when they are successfully completed or displayed (for example, landing a new trick with style and no effort) which allows a skater to perceive collective self-verification and thus increase group identification. At the same time, when self-symbols go wrong, such as failing on a trick or not being dressed right, they can for even these hardcore skaters lead to feeling uncertain about belonging within the subculture. As will be discussed, this can create the back and forth tension of a belonging paradox.
Chapter 5

Analysis Part II: The Belonging Paradox

The SCURB framework developed in the previous chapter is a more dynamic and fluid view of belonging than previously described or studied in the literature. From the previous discussion, it is evident that the three elements of the framework, group identification, collective self-verification and self-symbolizing are reciprocal and feed off each other allowing members to build and maintain their own sense of belonging. This takes place through two related perceptions. These perceptions are how a member views his or her own sense of belonging and what he or she thinks others think about his or her belonging. Placing the focus of belonging at the individual perspective, allows for the consideration of how idiosyncratic factors, such as race, gender, disability or self-doubt, can affect the manner in which an individual perceives his or her own sense of belonging within a group.

One interesting insight from the development of the framework is that the elements themselves are often sources of both certainty and uncertainty. This dynamic sense of belonging is not necessarily a negative thing for a member because as the discussion in the previous chapter suggests, it allows for individuality and belonging not to be mutually exclusive. It also allows for an examination of the belonging paradox.
Recall that a belonging paradox is a recursive cycle of an unsolvable duality of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion that can result from the idiosyncratic factors like those mentioned above. A belonging paradox may lead to belonging uncertainties even after membership is granted and status is achieved resulting in an even more dynamic and fluid sense of belonging.

This chapter will build upon the analysis of the previous chapter by exploring three belonging paradoxes related to place, ability and style that hardcore members of the skateboarding subculture experience. Although these belonging paradoxes will be discussed separately, some respondents experience multiple belonging paradoxes, which are interrelated and feed off of each other. Therefore, after a discussion of each belonging paradox the findings will be integrated allowing for a more general discussion of what we have learned about a belonging paradox. This chapter will conclude with a discussion of how members use consumption to try to cope with the experience of a belonging paradox.

5.1 Belonging Paradox related to Ability

The ability to do tricks and progress with those tricks is at the heart of the ethos of the skateboarding subculture. The belief is that the skater subculture would not exist without the ethos of tricks and progress.

Chet: I guess it's kind of the social aspect where if you can't do the tricks, you'll kind of be shunned a little. Like, “that guy is no good” and “we're not going to skate with him.” So yeah, I guess it is important to be able to have tricks.
Interviewer: What do you mean by shunned?

Chet: There's no one that will go out with you, like if they skate at the other park they're not going to ask you to come out and skate on filming sessions and stuff if you can't skate it very good.

Glen: That’s the commonality. That’s the lowest common denominator right there, is everybody wants to be better. Because I think it’s the central element in what attracts people to skateboarding. If you don’t want to improve then what’s the point of continuing to do it? …..I suppose there are two common elements. One is the improvement portion of it, and the other would be the feeling of accomplishment from landing tricks.

Nick: Progression. Progression. You learn new tricks, you’re going to like it more. You’re going to go home and feel good about what you did. It boosts your self-esteem in a way.

Paul: It feels awesome. I remember learning how to Kick-Flip grip and grind. And front side grip and grind on this bench here. And just landing it and being like, “whoa! I did not expect to land that.” And being all pumped on it. Learning something switch or something, it’s just a feeling, like better than sex. I don’t know how to explain it….It’s just awesome. It’s more rare. It’s harder to do. Something that’s more fulfilling, like you accomplished something.

Learning a new trick is one of the best symbols to assert belonging within the subculture. Nick has a boost of self-esteem in part because he struggled with belonging in other subcultures but within the skateboarding subculture he is able to establish a sense of belonging and inclusion through his progression with tricks. But as Paul points out,
progress for the hardcore skaters of the Kingston scene is a rare and sometimes elusive thing.

Tricks and the lack of progress can also be a source of feelings of exclusion within the subculture and contribute to a belonging paradox. There are a number of reasons the symbolizing of tricks can lead to feelings of exclusion. These reasons are both external, such as the rapid progress of the whole subculture, or seeing other skaters at the skatepark landing hard tricks, and internal, such as general self-doubt about one’s ability to consistently pull of tricks or the fear of getting hurt. The internal and external reasons often feed off of each other to build feelings of exclusion.

Jack: It's just pretty crazy what people are doing nowadays. The videos you watch and stuff, it's just hard to keep up!

The videos on sites like theberrics.com and the magazines like Transworld Skateboarding are a double-edged sword. On the one hand, these sites and magazines keep the Kingston scene connected to the larger subculture and motivate the Kingston skaters to go out and skate.

Interviewer: What’s the connection between videos and skateboarding?

Chet: To get people hyped for skateboarding. And seeing how skateboarding is progressing as a whole. And that’s how you see it, is through video and magazines.

Interviewer: Is that how you two progress, seeing it?

Nick: It helps you progress. Because skateboarding gets more and more and more difficult every time. New tricks
and bigger stairs, bigger rails are grinded. And you’re going to see that. Like take me back to ’82, and I would probably be the best skateboarder that ever lived at that time. But skateboarding has progressed so much, it’s just – I don’t know.

Nick: We talk about the video. It’ll lead to other conversations. Most of the time it leads us to want to go skate. So we usually do that. To try, yeah. It just puts it really, really in your head. So you just think, oh, I want to go and do that. You get antsy. Sometimes it’ll be like 3:00 AM and we’ll do it. There’s lights. There’s streetlights. It’s a little bit harder.

On the other hand, while videos are a great source of motivation, knowledge and creativity for the respondents, helping them perceive their own sense of belonging within the subculture, the primary underlying message of a video is one of progress of the subculture compelling them to go out and skate. This underlying message, also constantly reminds them how far they are from the mecca of the subculture California that continues to progress at a much faster pace than Kingston.

Nick: Now I’m just – I don’t know. I’m decent. I’m a good skateboarder. But now people are so good. It’s just that pros, the tricks they’re doing, and they’re so consistent every time. People are getting unbelievable right now.

Glen: There is another benchmark and that benchmark would be the level that the professionals you are seeing in videos and magazines are skating at but that’s largely unattainable for the majority of the skateboarding community. That doesn’t really seem to matter to a lot of people but definitely comes from within you know.
For skateboarders, a sense of belonging is fluid and dynamic because the self-symbols needed to maintain that sense of belonging are always changing and for symbols such as tricks, they keep getting more difficult to emulate. The reality is that within the skateboarding subculture every source of self-symbol that can lead to belonging also has the potential to lead to feelings of exclusion even for the respondents that consider themselves hardcore members.

Despite his continued best efforts, eventually the subculture passed Shawn, “you were judged on how many 360s you could do and how well you could skate. Well, that has changed. 360s don’t even exist nowadays.” The progress of the subculture was responsible for Shawn eventually quitting professional skating. Shawn was arguably one of the best skaters in Canada for his era and had the certainty of knowing he was one of the best in Canada. However, at the same time he was always aware that the subculture was progressing at a crazy rate through reading the magazines, thus putting pressure on him to keep up.

Shawn: You could always do more. But I got to the point where instead of competing with my friends, I was competing with all the top guys in Canada. Again, no DVDs, no VHS, I was hearing, “oh, a guy in Winnipeg’s done 40, oh, a guy in Toronto’s done 50.” I moved my comparisons from Richmond to Vancouver to Canada to the world. In magazines things would get written up and it was just a tight community that seriously, if some guy in Minnesota or Milwaukee or whatever did 50 360’s, you’d hear about it.
The pressure for skaters to progress is immense because not only is the whole subculture progressing but their friends are too. At a skatepark, there are usually skaters either sitting and resting or standing around waiting their turn to take a run at an obstacle. These skaters are always watching each other and friends are aware of each other’s progress. What this creates is a status competition at the skate park where a skater’s sense of belonging is always in flux. On more than one occasion I saw skaters cheer and instantly react. When I was interviewing Nick at Polson Park a big cheer went up in the park and almost everyone that was sitting down on the sidelines got on their skateboards.

Interviewer: Tell me about the cheer?

Nick: He (Tim) did a really good trick, they cheered and got stoked, and they both got on their boards. Which makes them want to do things. It’s like, “I want to do that. I want to learn a new trick.” Because look at him, he’s got a smile on his face. He likes it. And then he does it. They cheer for him. But you screw up, that’s part of it. You still keep a smile on your face.

Interviewer: Did Carl do…

Nick: He did something different. Yeah, but it’s still – it doesn’t matter. He’s landed something.

Interviewer: But they almost came up instantly after the cheer.

Nick: Yeah, it got them excited.

Interviewer: Do you have to do the exact same thing?

Nick: No, no. You can do anything. You can go ride if you want. You want that feeling that he just got.
Interviewer: And what’s that feeling?

Nick: Accomplishment. He had a big smile on his face. Like that was awesome, I’m glad I did that. Let’s try something else. I’m having lots of fun.

Landing a new, unseen hard trick is perhaps the primary way to assert a sense of belonging. But for most skaters within the Kingston scene at the skatepark, that sense of belonging is fleeting and only temporary. Once Tim landed a difficult trick, other skaters wanted to demonstrate their tricks and progress to get collective self-verification (cheers) and to reestablish their status and sense of belonging within the group. The back and forth of the informal competitions for collective self-verification and a sense of belonging happens so frequently that the skaters at the park have a name for it.

Andy: When somebody lands a new hard trick it motivates you to go and learn something new and hard that you’ve wanted to learn for a while to show them up. Kind of if it does that, feed off each other and try to show each other up. Like the guys here, they’ll skate here. They call it “back up.” If somebody lands a trick, another guy will come right behind him and land a harder trick. They call it “back ups.”

Interviewer: Oh, really. Can that go on for like three or four tricks in a row?

Andy: Sometimes. Depending on who you have skating with you. When guys are just sitting around here skating, there’s always competition between them. Like one guy will land a hard trick and somebody who’s sitting down and be like, “Oh, I got an idea.” And they’ll keep trying to show each other up. It’s always competitive.
According to Ken, this competition for status and belonging even applies when the first skater does not successfully land a difficult trick. Others watching see this as an opportunity to progress past the first skater in the social hierarchy of the group and strengthen their belonging, thus, creating a sense of belonging that is always in flux. There is the constant tension of a sense of inclusion from landing a new harder trick and the sense of exclusion because they know that someone will land a better trick.

Ken: Motivation, too. Because your friend learns something, and he gets better than you. You do something better than him, and you kind of copy him, staying a trick or two ahead, and he’s always trying to do what you can do. It happens even now. We’ll all go to the park and we’ll have the same trick selection. And if he’s trying something and he’s not landing it, we’ll just randomly try to do it behind him and just perform.

Although most respondents admitted to like skating with skaters that are better than them because the competition pumps them up to try harder tricks and progress, there is also a downside to the informal competitions that takes place at the park. Every time a skater lands a difficult trick he uses that symbol to achieve collective self-verification of his belonging at the expense of another skater.

Evan: Still, every time I see them (the really good skaters in Kingston) do – like skate and do their tricks, I feel like the first day I started skating again. Every time you skate with somebody like that, for the first minute, honestly you’re thinking in your head, “I should just quit right now. Why am I even skating?”
Interviewer: How did that make you feel when you went to Toronto?

Ken: Nervous. Because a few things happened. I always remember going to the skatepark, and if people were not there and it was people I didn’t really care about, people who I didn’t associate with the Toronto scene, people then I didn’t care. But if there were people I would want to see, like Morgan Smith (up and coming professional skateboarder) and stuff were around, I wouldn’t want to fall. And I know what I can do, and I wouldn’t want them to think negatively about me, so I would try the tricks, but I would think more about the landing. And I guess the nervousness also made me uncomfortable, and feeling uncomfortable made the tricks I did normally more difficult. So it made me nervous, and I had more insecurities as a skater. I would skate less and be more afraid. Not necessarily afraid, but more uncomfortable in general. And I wouldn’t skate, so I would sit around and watch more. And when I’d skateboard with a bunch of people, I wouldn’t want to film as much, because I know they were more devoted to it, and they wanted to film. As where I would think it would be fun to film with my friends and I would enjoy it for that reason, I wouldn’t want to waste the time or I wouldn’t want people to just be like, “Whoa.” And if you had one trick you did, someone else would always do a better trick. So that would always put you off. Because you know if someone wants to film this, which I consider better, I’ll just let them go do it. I’ll skate on flat ground, don’t film me, I don’t want you to waste the film, don’t waste the battery. And I’d Skate with them, but I wouldn’t film as much for that reason.

The feelings of social exclusion is at times so overwhelming that it forces individual skaters to the side of the park because they don’t think they have the ability to keep up with better skaters at the park. The don’t want to risk simply performing their tricks which they perceive as easier because if they fail they risk collective self-
verification that they do not belong at the park. It is not that the skater is actually being judged, what matters is that the skater perceives there is a judgment by others.

Tim: You’re subconsciously thinking you’re being judged by people. When in reality, of course some people are probably looking at you like, “who the fuck is this guy?” Right? But most people just don’t even care. If you’re nice to everybody, it doesn’t matter.

Another example of a skater perceiving a judgment by others is that of Ben. Ben and Matt are brothers and they have been skating together their whole life. There has been a friendly rivalry and competition their whole life. Matt is the younger of the two brothers but according to Ben he turned out to be the better skater.

Ben: I have to admit, I was jealous. Like when we used to skate up in the barn? Remember we had the big two-set or whatever it was, and we used to do tricks down that? When you did a trick down that I hadn’t seen you do before, I was so jealous. I’m like, “oh, for fuck’s sake, I want to do that.” But I couldn’t. I never said it. I’d just take out my frustration out in some other way.

Matt: On me.

Ben: It was much more like, although I didn’t say it, I was really competitive about it. I wanted to progress at the same rate as Matt. For a while I was close, but then he just pulled away.

His peers acknowledge Ben as one of the better skaters in Kingston. But what matters most for Ben is the perception of how he views himself as a skater. Ben always skates with Matt meaning that Matt is the standard to which Ben constantly compares
himself. Because he does not consider himself as good as Matt, Ben does not consider himself a good skater and as a consequence will not film himself at spots because he feels he cannot meet Matt’s standards.

Ben: I mean if I want to film a trick, we have like high standards of how good a trick should be. Basically if I want to film a trick and get it into a video, I have to do a trick that would almost be good enough for Matt. I just mean like there are times that I wish that I was really good, and I wished I could go out filming and get recognition too. But it’s not for everyone…..I wasn’t able to produce. When I wasn’t able to go out and film a crazy trick and have a whole bunch of them and stuff. Like I said, I always sort of like set the skill level at Matt’s bar. I consider Matt to be a good skateboarder, and if I can’t make it to that level, then I don’t consider myself good, period.

Ben: I don’t even have a style. I don’t want to talk about my style, because I suck at skateboarding. I’ve been skating Lakai for a long time. I take my shop boards because I can’t afford pro boards.

Ben is not always uncertain about his belonging and does have moments of belonging certainty because others at the park do see him as a good skater.

Andy: Ben’s pretty good because he skates with his brothers all the time and they’re amazing skaters. He skates with them all the time, so he’s getting pretty good, pretty quick.

He also occasionally gets parts in videos.

Ben: Oh here goes the emotional stuff, I wish I was good enough to sponsored. I’d like to get some recognition too. That’s why I was really happy when we made a video and I had a couple tricks that were good enough to be in it.
Everyone saw it and they said, “Oh, those were awesome,” or whatever. And I was like, yeah, that’s cool. But for me that’s about as high as the recognition goes, just being in a video. But I have to work my ass off to get those tricks in the video, because I don’t want to have bullshit in it. I want my trick to be good, just like everyone else’s. So I have to work really hard to get into a video. That’s why I don’t film so much, because I have to really try hard to film. Matt, on the other hand, can go filming every single day if he wanted to, and get something that he wants, that’s good.

Interviewer: How does that make you feel, that you have to work that hard?

Ben: It’s kind of a piss-off. Because Matt, and other people like Matt, are more natural at it. I have to work so frigging hard to get a trick, because I’m not nearly as gifted. But when you do get that trick, though, and it gets in the video, it’s euphoria. It’s so fun. I love it. But, yeah.

Ben manages to have the feeling of inclusion or euphoria of being in some videos.

At the same time skating with his younger brother is a constant reminder of his perceived comparison to Matt and his doubts about ever being at or near the same level as him. He is constantly dealing with the back and forth of the belonging paradox based on his own perceived lack of ability to do tricks and hang with the group and his brother. In comparing himself to his brother, Ben ends up doubting his ability to do tricks and film, a key self-symbol within the subculture. According to his brother, Ben should be skating for himself not worrying about standards because it stops his progress. The belong paradox Ben experiences literally and figuratively forces him to the sidelines watching his brother. Even his brother comments on this.
Matt: I think he can film because I know he can film, but he lacks confidence. And when he does tricks, it takes him a while to get them because he lacks confidence in his tricks. And it’s true. You can land it, but you just don’t. You’re always like, “I couldn’t do anything on this spot.” But you could if you wanted to. If you put your mind to it, you could accomplish anything, in the words of what’re-his-name from Back to the Future.

Ben: Sometimes skateboarding, I don’t like to be in front of the camera. Sometimes I do. It all depends on how comfortable I’m feeling with the trick or the spot or whatever. If I’m really excited about doing something on a spot, then I’ll go and do it. But I’m not just going to film everything that I could possibly do.

Matt: I think you’re good. I just think you don’t really – I don’t think that frigging…

Ben: Try as hard as I could?

Matt: Yeah. You don’t try as hard as you should. And you’ll also – I’m going to say it again, you lack confidence, it’s true.

Ben: Skating?

Matt: Yeah. If you wanted to progress, you could. But you don’t really feel like it. You do progress, though. That’s the thing.

Ben: But when I do film a trick, it’s usually pretty good. Like I have only – like when I was filming during that time for Neighborhood Watch, I only filmed twice and both tricks were used for the video.

Matt: Yeah, because they were good.

Ben: Because they were good. I only film like once in a blue moon. But when I film, I usually get something that’s decent. Usually.
Matt: Yeah. But you don’t have to be embarrassed or something if you want to film a trick that’s not that great. Screw it. Who cares?

Ben: It’s not right then.

Matt: It’s not?

Ben: It’s harder for me to film, because I have to think about if it would be good for or semi-usable for you, then I’ll do it. But to do a trick that’s semi-usable for you is really hard for me.

Matt: You can’t think about it that way.

Ben: Well, that’s what I do.

Matt: You’ve got to think about what’s good for you.

Ben: I have high standards. I’m not going to film a crappy trick. A good trick for me is usually a crappy trick for you. So an excellent trick for me is like an okay trick for you.

Matt: That’s not true.

Interviewer: How is that not true?

Matt: Everyone’s good in their own way. It’s harsh on yourself.

Ben: Whatever.

Matt: I don’t know. I think he could do some of the stuff I could, for sure. You could, if you wanted to. But I think you’re scared in some ways.

Ben: Scared? I don’t have the talent to do anything you do. All the stuff that you filmed this year, you’re saying I could do it.
Matt: No, but I think you could do some parts of the stuff I’ve done.

Ben: Sometimes. But not really.

Interviewer: So how did you come to develop this, lack of confidence?

Ben: Part of it is like – he has anxiety. And it’s like sort of genetic. So I’ve always been hard on myself, no matter what. Whether it’s like school. Like my biggest fear in school is failing a course, failing a paper, even though I have an A+ average. So it’s this senseless sort of anxiety. I’m always way too hard on myself. And skateboarding is just one more thing I’m hard on myself with. And plus, he’s really good. So because I always see someone skateboarding that’s really good, I have that type of standard, again. I know what’s good and I know what sucks.

The exchange between Matt and Ben also illustrates how multiple sources of doubt or anxiety can feed off of each other and built a compelling feeling of exclusion even in the face of strong evidence of inclusion and belonging. These sources of doubt even come from outside the subculture including a past experience or a personality trait an individual carries into the subculture. For example, Ben knows that Matt has problems with anxiety and an obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and feels he carries with him the same sort anxiety of wanting to be perfect. Combine his own anxieties about not being perfect with constantly comparing himself to someone he feels is always better and the result is constantly doubting himself as a skateboarder and his belonging within the subculture.
5.1.1 Fear of Injury and Old Age: Thinking Too Much

Ken: To get really good is to understand – well, first of all, how to do everything properly. But more or less getting used to the feeling. Some people learn it more than others. But I would say it’s the best part of it, or the main part of learning, is getting used to the feeling of what stuff feels like. Like rolling up to the bench, at first you’ll like ollie onto a bench to do a trick, it’s just like super-scary. It’s only because you don’t know what’s going to happen, you don’t know how it’s going to feel. You can imagine. You can imagine if I land on an angle I might lose my balance and slip back really hard. You don’t know what’s going to happen. Once you get used the feeling, you get good. And after that it’s just understanding. Some people can figure out better than others. Some people just learn the right footing placement. Some people just put so much thought into it that they actually don’t learn. They’re like, maybe if I put my foot at another three degrees of angle I might get this flip trick better.

Recall that for the symbol of the trick to be most effective it needs to appear effortless and the skater has to be nonchalant about it, he or she must achieve flow. In order to achieve flow a skater needs to forget everything that is going on in the world and just be one with the skateboard and obstacle.

Glen: In fact, if you think too hard rolling up to something, you usually fall. You have to kind of release everything and just be on the board.

Matt: And plus it (dirt) was on my shoes, maybe. And having OCD doesn’t help because you think about that nonstop and you can’t even skate because it’s in your head. Because the number one thing you want when you’re on a skateboard is to have a blank mind, especially when you go up and do a trick, because if you’re thinking about something, you’re not going to land the trick, you’re going
to fall. So you’ve got to have a blank mind. And whenever I would think about stuff…. I would fall. And that’s how I got hurt a lot of the time. It’s not fun. But I had to overcome that.

Clearly, any distraction, such as physically not feeling right or over thinking a trick, can throw a skater off. Matt is an interesting case because he suffers from OCD about germs and dirt yet he views skateboarding as an urban sport where his canvas and style is to skate some of the grimiest spots in the city. Consequently, even thinking about dirt getting on his shoe can throw off his trick because his mind is not blank. He has had to try to overcome his OCD to be successful in life and in a lot of ways skateboarding has helped him.

Matt: Like the obsessive/compulsive definitely kept me from landing tricks because I would think about hurting myself on the trick right before I’d do it, and I’d fall. Another way, if I would forget what I was thinking about, skateboarding helped because your mind’s completely blank when you’re skateboarding. You don’t frigging think about anything. You might as well be clinically dead when you’re doing a trick, because you’re blank. You’re not thinking about anything. Yeah, I can overcome it, but that’s why tricks take me so long to land.

Ben: Because it’s like a constant battle with yourself.

Matt: And it sucks too, because right before I do a trick I’ll be talking to myself inside my head right as I’m about to do a trick, and I might screw up and fall because I’m talking to myself in my head. You don’t want to think about it, because you do want your mind to go blank right before you do a trick.
In talking with the other skaters Matt is known as one of the best skaters in Kingston (field notes August 29, 2009). Even by his own accord,

Matt: I am starting to get in bigger videos, for sure. Right now I’m actually filming for another video….. I don’t have a part like I did in the last one, but I have probably 10 tricks. So that’s a lot of tricks. If they’re really good, that’s a lot of tricks to have in a video, and it’s really good to do.

His last video was sponsored by Color magazine and Krooked skateboards and featured skaters from all over North America. According to Matt the video,

Matt: Definitely got me a lot of credit. Definitely got me known out there, because there are people that I don’t know that are saying, “hi” and stuff. Adding me on Facebook.

The collective self-verification from his role in the video part makes Matt feel like he belongs to the larger skateboarding subculture. At the same time, however, Matt struggles with belonging because he knows he is from Kingston, which is “not on the map” for skateboarding within the subculture. In addition, he also struggles at times with landing tricks and symbolizing his belonging because he does not always have the blank mind needed to land tricks.

Matt: Like spots, big time. If I don’t get a trick within like a half an hour, I just completely doubt myself. I can’t do it. Which sucks, because it usually takes me like a frigging day to do a trick…..The doubt is annoying, because you keep trying and you fall because you’re not thinking about the trick. You don’t think about landing, you don’t think about committing….. And sometimes I don’t hear from anybody, so I get so sick and tired of it that I just say nothing is going to happen with it.
Matt experiences a belonging paradox related to his ability stemming from the constant tension between feeling inclusion (appearing in more popular videos) and feelings of exclusion (not landing tricks as a result of over thinking). While Matt’s OCD is an extreme example of not having a blank mind when skating, other respondents have similar issues. The fear of getting hurt is a common concern among the respondents especially as they age and their body does not hold up. This fear is often associated with self-doubt about completing a trick safely as they approach an obstacle.

Evan: Just to be able to do what you like. Like on the first or second try all the time. I’ve lost my consistency. I’ve broken a few bones. I’ve got older. And since I’ve been out of it, it’s just like overcoming fear. The fear. Yeah. It’s intimidation. Like skating on flat ground is not scary really at all. How are you going to hurt yourself? You might fall and break your arm, but that’s the same as like falling when walking right? Or when you’re going to do a grind on a box or something, you’re going fast and you could fall on that thing. Or you’re doing a set, you could… Like I’ve fell over a stair and hit my chin before. My chin and my face, skateboarding.

Ken: I haven’t been skating stairs because it would be rewarding to land them, just like it would be rewarding to learn tricks. But I’m thinking of the other aspects, like, well, I don’t want to fall on a set of stairs and die, or like not be able to walk or smoke my face on the ground. That kind of stuff goes through my head, where it’s like I see a lot of my other friends that skate and they don’t think about this stuff, they just think about landing it and watch their board. They don’t think of anything else around them. But I think of everything else around me, so I think it affects me more. Because I’m sure I could skate other things, but I get more fear than enjoyment when it comes to certain things.
Thinking about this fear and self-doubt also means they do not have a blank mind and suffer same outcomes experienced by Matt in not landing tricks. Some skaters, like Paul, even begin to question their ability to successfully perform tricks and progress as a skater.

Paul: Sometimes I feel like I was better last year or a couple of years ago than I am right now. But that’s only at certain things. I’ve obviously gotten better, but I’ve lost things too. You can lose tricks that you used to have if you stop doing it. I’ve always been skeptical about most of the things I’ve done in skateboarding, like jumping down big staircases and stuff like. It always kind of scared me. But when I was younger I always used to do it. I’m not even that old, but it was like I feel way older than I am. Like my back hurts now and I’m just more sore and stiff. But a couple of years ago I’d just go jump down the hugest staircase and ride away like it was nothing. And now I just haven’t skated a staircase in a long time. It just seems a lot harder than it used to be. Like I’ll land and it’s “Ahhh, that hurt.”

This quote clearly demonstrates the back and forth of the belonging paradox. Paul knows he is progressing at skateboarding, thus reinforcing his sense of belonging (group ethos of progress). However, Paul still remains skeptical about his ability as a skateboarder because of the loss of ability to perform tricks he once performed out of fear of injury. On days he feels he lacks ability to perform tricks (i.e., self-symbolize), he will leave the park or avoid certain tricks to avoid the collective self-verification of a negative collective self-concept that he does not belong at the skatepark.

Paul: You just start landing your tricks more consistently and start having more fun. Some days I just come here and sit down, try a couple tricks and won’t be able to land them,
not have so much fun, and go home. Some days I come here and get right into it and land everything I try, and just have lots of fun doing it and want to skateboard the rest of the day.

5.1.2 Not Practicing: Losing Tricks

Paul is not the only respondent to feel the back and forth of the belonging paradox because of losing tricks. It is common for skaters to lose the ability to perform certain tricks when they do not practice them after progressing on to other tricks. So while the skaters experience progression that enhances their sense of belonging, they are frequently confronted with the doubt of not being able to do the simple tricks they once could.

Andy: (Watching a Game of SKATE) I don’t win them a lot. I give up halfway through, because it just gets boring sometimes. And some people do stupid shit, too. Like the simple stuff that you first learn that becomes obsolete once you learn the hard stuff. It eventually becomes the hard stuff again, because you don’t have the muscle sense memory to do it anymore. And when you skate with people who aren’t as good as you and who are going through that first stage of skateboarding, learning the simple stuff, when you play a game of Skate with them, that’s all they do. And it’s become hard tricks for you to do. Like Pop Shove-its and things like that. Varial Flips. You just forget how to set up your feet to do them. You hate losing on the simple little crap that you just don’t do anymore.

Hugh: No, not really. I doubt my skills sometimes. I can do all these tricks that a lot of people can’t do that have been skating longer than I have, for a long time. But then I can’t Kick-Flip anymore. It’s the most basic trick, that even little kids can do. I don’t know why, it’s just that some people can’t do certain tricks. I used to be able to Kick-Flip, but I don’t think I could do a good Kick-Flip, that’s like your basic foundation trick that’s past the Ollie. So sometimes I doubt whether I’m going to get pissed off or feeling some
frustration at not being able to do basic tricks like that, when in the past I could. So, yeah, sometimes I doubt my skill.

Interviewer: Does it make you feel less of a skateboarder?

Hugh: No. Well, sometimes, yeah. When I’m playing games of SKATE. In the past I probably – I would never lose a game of skate against anyone. I used to practice only the hard tricks. So now if I’m in the park, I never play a game of SKATE against anyone. There’s probably a slim chance I’m going to win, because, I don’t know, either through injury or through me skating less, I’ve just lost a lot of my skills. Even doing fliptricks and skating flatground.

Jack: And it shows, the more you do it and the more you practice. I'm doing stuff now that I never dreamed I would be doing, and I'm still doing stuff and learning stuff all the time and doing different combinations and linking tricks together and stuff like that. Just today I did a trick that I haven't done in a while. That's another thing, too – the more you skate the more you learn stuff. You sometimes forget stuff just because you're not doing them as much to try and learn the new stuff, so it's kind of cool thinking of tricks that you used to be able to do, and then trying to get them back, like Heel-Flips. It's a really basic trick that I used to be able to do when I was a kid, before I could do Kick-Flips – or better than I could do Kick-Flips, anyway – and for a long time I couldn't even do them at all. It's ridiculous, and it's such an easy... well, not easy, but a basic trick, anyway. So I've relearned those again because I feel like I should have it in my bag of tricks, especially for things like games of SKATE. I like playing games of SKATE with other people just because you learn stuff. It makes you try things that you wouldn't normally try. With something like that, you don't want to get a letter on a Heel Flip, so you should actually have all the basics down so you don't get out on them. That can be embarrassing.
Jack, Hugh and Andy know they have progressed as skaters over time and that provides them a sense of belonging within the subculture, but at the same time Hugh and Andy do not like playing games of SKATE. They lose on the simple stuff, which brings up feels of exclusion. The purpose of a game of SKATE is well known at the skatepark.

Chet: It's to prove who's better. There's one guy there, it's all he wants to do is play SKATE, and the only reason I can think he wants to do it all the time is because he's proving to himself, after he's hit you with some bullshit tricks, the couple tricks he has on you proves he's better. I think that's why they do it.

5.1.3 Knowing That You Quit at One Time

Inability to successfully perform certain tricks after progressing can be frustrating for skaters. Quitting as a result of this frustration is easy, so it is not surprising that not quitting is an excellent self-symbol of a skater’s commitment to the subculture.

Tim: If you want to be a good skateboarder, all you’ve got to do is just put the time in. Skate all the time. Don’t stop. And if you can skate for a number of years without stopping, and always finding a place to skate during the winter, you’re pretty much golden.

Skaters may quit for variety of other reasons including the need to work to earn a living or school. If they ever return to skating they are aware of how the time off affected their skating.

Glen: I was definitely better than I am now, back before I quite skating….All those guys have been skating the same amount of time, they just didn’t have a three-year break in the middle. Therein lies the difference.
Glen no longer feels part of the core group of skaters at Polson Park even though he hangs out with them.

Glen: I wouldn’t say so (part of that core group). I don’t skate enough. I’m friends with all of them. I hang out with them periodically. I skate here with them when they’re here.

Chet is in a similar situation to Glen. Chet took two years off from skating because he was working two jobs and had no time to skate. When he did have time to skate he would skate by himself.

Chet: Mostly I wouldn't even go near the park anymore in those two years. I'd just go find somewhere to relearn on my own. I had this little concrete pad in my hometown where I could go and just practice before I went to the park, and that basically was the only time I skated, and that was maybe once a month I'd go there.

Interviewer: How come you wouldn't go to the skatepark?

Chet: Just because I wasn't as good anymore. I wanted to get good again before I went back to the park and skated in front of people…..you definitely want to be able to hold your own when you're there.

Chet is also the respondent who earlier felt that if he is not as good as the skaters at the skatepark, the group will shun him. During his time off, Chet felt he could no longer present his ideal self for collective verification so he did not go to the skatepark as he felt like he did not belong there.

Chet: I didn't really feel like I was 100% skateboarder. I was still a skateboarder, but I didn't really do it that much anymore.
Chet quit both jobs and is back at school now giving him more time to skate. However, Chet is well aware that the time off puts him behind the other skaters at the park.

Chet: I felt like I lost two years where I probably could have had some fun and learned some tricks and kept up with it. I just missed it in that time and that's definitely put me back….. It was just kind of frustrating, because I can't do many tricks anymore and they could do almost everything, and it was just like, oh shit, I used to be able to do that…. I guess there's a little pressure. I want to relearn them just for myself, but when they show up then I really want to relearn them.

Evan: Just to be able to do what you like. Like on the first or second try all the time. I’ve lost my consistency. I’ve broken a few bones. I’ve got older. And since I’ve been out of it, it’s just like overcoming fear.

Evan, like Chet, quit for a couple years; in Evan’s case it was to pursue a mix martial arts career. Both Chet and Evan are keenly aware that their friends who did not take any time off are further ahead of them in the ability to perform tricks. Moreover, both Chet and Evan feel that if they had not taken the time off they would both be at par or better than their friends. Both always feel one step behind their friends, which creates doubt in their minds about their ability to hang with the group.

When I met Chet one day at Polson Park he was sitting on the edge of the park watching the older guys skate. When we later sat down for the interview I asked why he was sitting on the edge of Polson Park?
Chet: I didn't really feel like I fit in and I was frustrated. I just felt like it was kind of embarrassing not to be able to keep up.

Interviewer: Describe that embarrassment?

Chet: The thoughts going through my head were like: I can't land that trick any more. I used to be able to. I'm going to go try an easier trick, and I'm probably not going to land it, but I tried. But they just did a really hard one that they can do almost every time, but I can't do this easier one. That's the kind of thought that goes through my head, and that's kind of the embarrassment. If I'm not landing it, it leads to just frustration, like I just want to give up.

What is interesting is that others at the skatepark see Chet as a skater. Others realize that Chet is a little rusty but they know he has the talent and has put in the time before. Although others clearly externally verify Chet as a skater, that matters little to him.

Nick: I think he's been away from it for a long time, but he's got some skills, from what I've seen. He's got some tricks up his sleeve. You can tell that he did do it and he had skill before, but now he's kind of rusty. I'm not going to lie. I'm not twisting anything.

Chet: Yeah, I know.

Nick: But he definitely has the potential if he keeps going.

Interviewer: How can you tell he had it?

Nick: Because people don't just get on a board and know what they're doing. Like the other day I seen him pretty much land 360s, but that's not just a fluke – that's somebody who's done that before. And some nosegrinds and stuff, he gets into them – he doesn't land them but I can tell he had
done them before. And he knows what he's talking about, too. If I talk, like, most of the skater shit to him, he'll be, oh yeah. He’ll understand…….

Interviewer: Do you feel like a skateboarder?

Chet: Not really; Not yet.

Nick: He's a skateboarder. He's dumb, but the guy's a skateboarder, obviously. He goes out and skates and lands tricks. That's what a skateboarder is. Just because he's still learning again doesn't mean shit. He's a skateboarder.

Interviewer: Okay, Nick defines you as one? How come he does and you don't?

Chet: I guess it's just my take.

Interviewer: Tell me your take.

Chet: I'd just feel more like a skater if I could start landing my tricks again and stuff. I'm just not at where I was before, when I was a skater.

This is an interesting exchange between Nick and Chet in that it illustrates the self-definition of belonging and the potential internal nature of the belonging paradox. Nick verifies that Chet is a skater and has always been a skater because he skates to land tricks and has the knowledge to hang out at the park. Both of these are important self-symbols of belonging within the subculture. However, what matters more to Chet is his own perception of his ability as a skater. Even though Chet is skating on a regular basis, he still carries with him the knowledge that he did at one point quit and continues to have doubt about his belonging. The belonging paradox Chet experiences stems from his perceptions of his ability as a skater.
5.1.4 General Self-Doubt

Ben: Part of it is like – he has anxiety. And it’s like sort of genetic. So I’ve always been hard on myself, no matter what. Whether it’s like school. Like my biggest fear in school is failing a course, failing a paper, even though I have an A+ average. So it’s this senseless sort of anxiety. I’m always way too hard on myself. And skateboarding is just one more thing I’m hard on myself with. And plus, he’s really good. So because I always see someone skateboarding that’s really good, I have that type of standard, again. I know what’s good and I know what sucks.

Ben is not the only person I interviewed that has constant self-doubts that affect perceptions of belonging within the subculture. General self-doubt within the skateboard subculture is not surprising given that the subculture tends to attract individuals who are typically “on the outside of the mainstream.”

Shawn: And it’s always appealed to those guys that, in most cases, have maybe struggled a bit with normal types of sports. Like the outsider kid. And that’s where skateboarding had gone over the years. The outsider kid usually picks up a skateboard.

Shawn never did that well in school and by his own admission when he played baseball and hockey he felt he was constantly going against other guys that are a hundred times better. For Shawn, skateboarding was “new, and we were all learning together.” Even after becoming a professional skateboarder and gaining the label of one of the smoothest skaters ever to live, Shawn continues to experience general self-doubt about his ability.
Shawn: I don’t know. As an athlete going through those times, I guess I’ve always put too much pressure on myself and felt that I just wasn’t as good as my peers. And I don’t know if that stems from childhood or not, but still today I don’t feel that way… I still have that self-doubt today. I just got back from Japan a few months ago. Totally went there with self-doubt. Because you’re looking at all these skaters from all over the world and you’re like, “oh my goodness, what am I doing here?” But it’s something that I guess I’ll always have. I don’t feel that I’m as good as other people think I am. It’s a weird feeling.

Glen mirrors Shawn in being critical of himself and is always looking for things that offer self-improvement.

Glen: I’m my own worst critic, for sure. So anything where self-improvement is possible, that I’m interested in. I tend to go pretty hard at it. Guitar would be an example. Photography.

Glen: I’m very hard on myself and very critical of myself. Sometimes when I can’t do something that I’ve been working at, I’ll get down on myself and drop it for a while. I like that sense of accomplishment a lot, and when I’m not getting it, I’m not very happy with myself.

Interviewer: Does that happen in skateboarding?

Glen: Oh, definitely. If I’m having trouble with a trick, sometimes I’ll just drop it for a while because I’m fed up with it. I wouldn’t say I’d necessarily get down on myself, but I’ll get mad at myself….. Coming from my perspective, I’ll never be good, because I always know I can be better. But there’s an element to that can be explained away by my self-criticism and pessimism and things like that.

Glen is trying to do these actives to try to boost his self-esteem through improvement in the individual activity. However, self-doubt appears to seep into these
activities and once he doubts his ability in the activity then he no longer progresses. Even though he hangs out with the hardcore scene in Kingston, he does not feel part of their group because he perceives that he does not have their ability. Self-doubt is a real problem in skateboarding because to be successful with skateboarding, skateboarders need to be comfortable on the skateboard and with who they are.

Tim: Being comfortable with being in those social atmospheres is something that comes with age, and your personality. If you’re insecure, then those things are going to be difficult. I’ve seen a lot of really good skateboarders that don’t come through because they’re insecure with themselves, they’re not comfortable with themselves. I guess it’s a combination of how you’re treated and how you view yourself.

The problem with self-doubt is that it seeps when a skater is trying to symbolize a trick and does not allow them to have that blank mind needed to land a trick and successful self-symbolize that they belong. It is in a way a self-fulfilling prophecy and recursive cycle. If a skater starts doubting himself that will cause him not land the trick he is trying which will then cause him to doubt himself even more. Even in the face of collective self-verification, in their minds they constantly doubt their ability to self-symbolize tricks, to progress and by extension belong within the scene.

5.1.5 Not Progressing Past Your Own Level

For skaters, doing tricks and learning tricks is what skateboarding is about. The flip side is that if skateboarders do not progress they do not feel like a skateboarder.
Nick: When you don’t progress? Sometimes it feels frustrating. Some guys want to give up and quit. But if you stick with it, you will progress. It’s kind of almost impossible not to progress if you don’t quit. If you don’t quit, you’re going to progress.

Interviewer: So why do you think they quit?

Nick: Because they feel they aren’t progressing as quickly as some other guys. Some kids might be like, “Oh, I’m not as good as that guy. I’ll never be good.” Stuff like that. But if you know a kid’s doing that you say, “Listen, it doesn’t matter. If you’re having fun with it, you’re going to progress. If you keep doing it you’re going to progress no matter what.”

In reality the belief that all a skater has to do to progress is put in the time is largely a myth. As skaters get better, the tricks they have to learn to progress become more and more difficult and most skaters tend to plateau. Even professional skateboarders like Shawn experience difficulty in progressing.

Interviewer: Was there a time when you didn’t progress?

Shawn: Yep. I’ve had huge dry spells for sure. Like months without progressing.

Interviewer: What does that feel like?

Shawn: It feels like crap, just like in anything else you do. It’s like an artist, writer, anything, where you’re into this… I’ve always looked at this too when I’ve talked to kids about it, there’s a certain point sometimes when you force yourself to skate and you’re not having any fun. You’ve got to pull back a bit and let time pass a bit, so you crave it again and you want to go get it done.
The norm among skaters is to keep attempting the trick because of the belief that it is just a matter of time before they will be able to perform it.

Glen: The doubt was always based on what I perceived I ought to be able to do. Based on my other skills. If I can do this trick, why can’t I do that other trick? For example, I can do front smith grinds in my sleep, why can’t I do tail slides?

Skaters know that the whole subculture is progressing and they also know what they should be doing in relation to that progress given their ability. This makes skaters very self aware of when they feel they should progress. When they have this feeling but perceive they are not progressing enough, it is a source of a lot of frustration.

Tim: Like if I couldn’t do a trick and I was trying to do a trick for a long time. I’d get super-pissed off and throw my board around. Like, “Fuck!” Me and Nick were talking about this the other day. He’s like, “man,” because I showed him my video, and he was like, “Dude, you fucking…” Breaking your… Like in Montreal, when I was filming for that video, you try a trick for so long and you get super-mad. I was just like smashing my board against a board, fucking breaking it, just getting super-mad.

Matt: If I don’t get a trick within like a half an hour, I just completely doubt myself. I can’t do it. Which sucks, because it usually takes me like a frigging day to do a trick.

Ben: Just getting frustrated in general, like I’d flip out, swear, break my board. I don’t know, stupid shit like that, that’s just retarded. It can get pretty bad. I think that I’ve even like punched myself in the face before. Like getting so mad at not making a trick that I smacked myself, giving myself a fucking bloody lip….Anger can get you hooked on a trick. Like if you’ve been missing something and it’s pissing you off, you know that you should take a seat, but it’s like, fuck, I’m going to get it next try. But you miss it
and you keep going. It can get really maddening at times. Skateboarding is really frustrating at times, but it’s awesome most of the time.

Doing the same old trick is not only boring for skaters but the trick loses its ability to be used as a symbol to symbolize belonging because it does not demonstrate progress. Progress means skaters belong in the subculture because they are able to keep up with the subculture. That progress allows skaters to use the symbol of the new trick to perceive collective self-verification and increase their group identification thus allowing them to feel like they belong.

Paul: Just the feeling of landing – learning new tricks is the best feeling ever. When you land something in skateboarding, it’s just amazing. It feels better than any other feeling. And if it’s new, you’re so pumped on your stuff. You’re like, yes! That was awesome. You want to step it up, like learn it on a bigger and better thing. Get better at it. Because it just feels awesome to land tricks.

During long dry spells of no progress, skaters start to doubt their ability to progress and their belonging within a subculture that is progressing. For those who do not quit, they are often motivated from past experience to believe that eventually they will progress and regain that feeling of belonging. These efforts, however, create another context for experiencing a belonging paradox through the euphoria of landing a new trick (feelings of inclusion) but also the seeping doubt of not being able to land a new trick (feelings of exclusion).
5.1.6 Summary of the Belonging Paradox related to Ability

The ability to self-symbolize tricks and progress in tricks is a central element of the ethos of the skating subculture. Anything that can disrupt progress will also be very disruptive to a skater’s sense of belonging and forms a basis for experiencing a belonging paradox. Doubt about one’s ability as a skateboarder is one such source. The sources of doubt about ability are not independent and feed off of each other to build the exclusion side of the belonging paradox. Furthermore, these sources do not necessarily have to originate externally or be directly related to skateboarding. Analysis of respondents’ transcripts illustrated several examples in which even hardcore and professional skaters doubt their ability despite strong external evidence to the contrary of which they are aware. This illustrates the experiencing of a belonging paradox related to ability.

5.2 Belonging Paradox related to Place

One of the sources of doubt for the respondents is the place they are from, Kingston, Ontario, Canada. Their unhappiness stems from both being in Canada and being in Kingston. Although the respondents love living in Kingston or the surrounding areas, they have a number of issues when it comes to Kingston and Skateboarding. These include the Polson Skatepark, the weather, the lack of skate shops in the area, its geographic distance from California and other major skating hot spots, and the lack of an urban downtown.
5.2.1 Canada: The Frozen North

Skateboarding originated in California in the 1960s and 1970s from the surfing subculture. California is considered the mecca of the skateboarding subculture. In California there is a vibrant skate scene, sunny weather year round and huge urban sprawl. This makes California the center of the skateboarding subculture. Compared to California, Canada seems like an unfertile place for skateboarding when you consider Canada’s wide open landscape and harsh cold winters.

Nick: In the winter we pretty much go nuts. I wish I could skate. It’s kind of limited. We have to break into places. Not really break in, but trespass. We go in underground parking and we’ll go in like the Memorial Center and skate inside there.

Respondents are keenly aware of this disadvantage specially when California professionals appear at the local skatepark and perform more difficult tricks on the obstacles Kingston skaters skate on every day.

Dan: I’ve seen a few pro demos and those guys are unbelievable. I like it. It actually like pumps you up.

Interviewer: To do what?

Dan: Just to get better, to skate more. It shows you what can be done on a skateboard. A thing that, like, the average Joe that lives in Kingston could do, type of thing. Or you see guys from Cali come in, like I saw last year. Those guys are unbelievable. It’s like, wow, those guys are so sick. I didn’t know anything like that existed. Like they came into McNabb (Skatepark in Ottawa) last summer. And they came in and hit the stuff that I hit every day. But they just did crazy-ass stuff on it that I’d never done before. And I was like, that guy just did the most unbelievable trick on the
box that I skate every day. It’s like, wow, that guy is sick. Because someone comes into your environment that’s just that good, it’s like wow. It pumps you up.

Interviewer: What do you mean, pumps you up?

Dan: It just gets you excited, wanting to skate more. It makes you want to push yourself more. Because you just see what they can do in your little local town. And you’re like, “wow, I usually do like an axle stall on that and that guy just did a blunt,” or whatever.

Interviewer: Are you able then to do a blunt?

Dan: [laughs] Do you know what a blunt is? …. I definitely tried a blunt. I almost landed a blunt the other day. They’re pretty tough. They’re probably the toughest stall to do. They look sick, though. Yeah, you just realize, this guy – look at this guy. His body looks the same as mine, his face looks the same. His arms and legs are the same, but he’s just doing it. And what the hell’s the difference between him and me? Nothing, really. I don’t think. He looks the exact same as me, he’s just had the opportunity… I know those guys, for a fact, through interviews with them, like they skate like 14 hours a friggin’ day when they were younger….If you have the natural ability, then I think that one guy versus another is just a matter of environment. Like the reason this guy got better is just because he lived, say, in California. He was able to skate every day, because 365 days of the year it’s 22 C degrees and warm weather. Here in Canada, it’s like the long winters, cold, rains a lot. There’s not as many parks. There’s shit all over the roads for half the season. It’s friggin’ winter anyways. So I think I could have been a really good skateboarder if I lived down there. A lot of my friends probably would have made it really far. But it’s just a matter of time. If you have that natural ability, it’s just about putting the time in.

When Dan sees skaters doing harder tricks on the obstacles that he skates every day, it pumps him up. It motivates him to skate more and to learn the same harder tricks.
He ends up skating as much as he can, which he uses as a symbol of belonging. However, he also knows he cannot put in the same amount of time into skating because he lives in Canada. This creates doubt about his ability and his belonging within the subculture.

Shawn had a similar response about Canada.

Shawn: So I was able to keep up on the whole worldwide scale and keep up on that level. And again, being from Canada, where skateboarding at that time was just really focused on Southern California, really nervous about – because to us, the Southern California skaters, the pros, were like the gods. And we were stuck up here in freezing-cold Canada, not being able to show our talent here down there. So it took me three years before I was able to start competing on more of an international level.

Interviewer: How did that make you feel, the fact you were from Canada?

Shawn: At first it was a negative. It was, “oh, you’ll never go anywhere with skating.” And I never looked at skating to make money or have a career out of it, I just did it because I loved it, and everything happened because of that. So in the early years I looked at, man, if I really want to get better, I should live in Southern California. That was my initial thought, was I’m in the wrong country to be good. Because remember, the bible of skateboarding and the color magazines coming out at 7-11 were all Southern California-based. So being in Canada, nobody’s going to send anyone to Vancouver to cover anything; we’re too far out of the way and too expensive to get up there to cover it. So there was a long part there when I felt that I needed to be in Southern California.

Shawn did eventually make it down to California with the help of his father and started winning events but even after winning the events there was still doubt because he was Canadian.
Shawn: Well, you go down there to a major international contest where guys are coming from all over the world, now you’re looking at seeing 200 or 300 of the top guys. So it’s mind-boggling right away, because there’s so much good skating going on in front of you. I felt about this big (pinching his fingers together). I felt super-small in the scheme of things, because I was from Canada, going down there and competing against guys from all over the world. Especially the California guys. So, yeah, you kind of step back, going, “am I in the right league?” as far as, “should I even be here representing Canada?” And again, I go back to what I said before, is it wasn’t until I started winning events that I felt like I was representing Canada properly. Even though the funny thing is, winning events for Canada down there, and unlike any other sport when you come back to Canada you’re kind of recognized as, “Whoa!” It was still like skateboarding. Like it wasn’t on the planet. Like it wasn’t – the media still wanted to see you run over some grandma in White Rock and do media coverage on that. Shawn Wilson travels to San Diego and gets first in an international contest, that wasn’t on their minds. You didn’t get covered for that a bit, but down there you were kind of like a rock star, because, whoa, a guy from Canada comes down and wins an event. Then you come back to Canada and nobody cares. It was just one of those weird things. Because skateboarding was so out there.

For Shawn, being from Canada was both a plus and a negative. He was treated like a rock star in part because he was winning contests and he was a foreigner from Canada. Being from Canada made him different and unique.

Shawn: Since I was Canadian, I was called the Ice-Man, since I was so smooth.

At the same time, however, he was getting no recognition in Canada. He had moments of feeling like he belonged in the larger subculture, so feelings of inclusion and
also moments where he felt feelings of exclusion from the larger subculture. Those feelings and tension would manifest themselves simultaneously around the same event.

Shawn (From Interview he gave to skateboarding magazine): In the ‘70s, it wasn’t how high can you Ollie or how many stairs. It was “How many 360s can you do?” How you were judged as a skater was down to how many spins you could do. This was before airs on ramps. I read in the magazine how Steve Cathey spun 65 two-board 360s, one on each foot. I was trying to keep up in my garage in Richmond with my friends counting. Then the next magazine would come out and announced that he’d spun 155, but by then I had spun 200. Somehow the organizer at the Canadian National contest heard about it and he invited me to try and break the world record at the contest. I went into the Vancouver Coliseum with 5,000 plus people in the crowd thinking it was going to be a sideshow, but the lights dimmed and two spotlights came on me. I was super nervous but I started to spin. Monty [Little], the organizer, announced how the record was 155 and after I beat that, I thought I should stop so they could get on with the contest—I was taking up the whole friggin’ floor. At around 200 spins the crowd started stomping their feet and chanting “One thousand! One thousand!” In my mind, I thought, Are you friggin’ kidding me? But the crowd kept pushing me. I wore full safety equipment and was sweating like a sprinkler. I could see the circle of sprayed sweat on the ground. It took fifteen minutes and I finally stopped after 1,032 spins. I could barely walk—all the moisture was gone from my body. That was talked about a lot until skating changed and 360s didn’t mean the same thing. I imagined I’d get a full-page color shot in SkateBoarder, but it was just a little black and white picture. If I was in California, it might have gotten more coverage. It emphasized the second-class identity of Canadian skaters.

The 1,032 spins, according to Shawn, is in the Guinness Book of World Records.

But even with the record Shawn does not feel he received the status and recognition
associated with belonging because he is Canadian which he classifies as a second-class identity within the subculture. This self-doubt he felt because he was from Canada continued even when he turned professional and joined the top professional team of the time Powell-Peralta.

Shawn: Okay, so just to give you a little highlight, Powell-Peralta from 1981 on, was the number-one team that everybody tried to get on. So name any other sport where you’re trying to get onto that number one team, Powell by far, hands-down, was the team you were trying to get on. Through the ’80s it was still known in the heyday as the best team in world. And that’s the team you wanted to get on. So when I first got asked to be on that team, it was a shock. Because I came from a smaller company to that company and I couldn’t believe it. I’ll never forget it. It was the very first summer tour in ’83. I was gone on the road with like Tony Hawk and Steve Caballeros and Mike McGill. Huge, huge names for that time in skateboarding. And still today they’re big names. And, boy, talk about intimidation. Here I am from Canada, getting to know these guys for the first time because I joined their team, and traveling with these rock stars. It was absolutely insane. Just to travel with a guy who brings tens of thousands of people to any event, a guy like Tony Hawk. I didn’t feel through that time that I was deserving of being on that team. Again, it goes back to whatever’s in my brain to think that I don’t belong at that level. I felt all the sudden I was traveling with these rock stars and I wasn’t one of the rock stars.

Even though he is proud to be Canadian, Shawn has always carried with him the double edge sword in the back of his mind. Being Canadian made him unique and gave him a unique style of skating. At the same time he was and is always aware that he is Canadian. As he progressed through the subculture he was always questioning: What is a
Canadian kid doing here? Do I really have the ability because I am from Canada not the mecca California?

Shawn: And I look back now at my career and how I’ve been written up and talked about by some of my peers, and to have that title –which I got the title from so many people in their books and stuff and in magazines: “The Smoothest Skater That Ever Lived – Shawn Wilson.” That is huge to me. That’s what I was striving to do, and for people to recognize that now, it’s like I set out to do it and I did it.

Interviewer: Can you believe it?

Shawn: No. And the people who have said it were my idols. And I’m just like, “holy crud, you’re kidding me, he said that about me?” And it’s in writing, it’s in print. It’s out there for the general public, and I’m just like, “whoa.”

On the one hand, Shawn has a number of self-symbols that demonstrate that he is a good skater and that he belongs within the subculture. He won or placed top three in many contests and was part of a professional team. He has his own professional model skateboard, which is the dream of all skaters, and other professional skaters gave him the label of the smoothest skater to ever live. Still, in the face of overwhelming symbols of belonging, Shawn continues to doubt his place within the subculture and also his ability, in part, because he is Canadian.

5.2.2 Cities in the Middle of Nowhere

The place-related self-doubt does not just occur at the national level, but it also extends down to the city level as well. Within the subculture, bigger urban cities that have a skate scene and are close to California are preferred. These locations provide the
spots or canvas on which to display one’s art and the potential connections to getting sponsored. Skaters are very conscious of the city they are from and how that puts them at a disadvantage.

Shawn: It was crazy. There was a guy from Winnipeg. There’s a lot of good skaters from Winnipeg, because there’s nothing else to do. The good skaters got really good really fast. But now they’re completely out of touch, because Vancouver at least was a little bit more in touch with Southern California than Winnipeg. So a quick story, there is a guy named Spencer Hinkle who worked for VIA. He would come all the way to Vancouver once a week. So he was coming to Vancouver, seeing all of us skate – he was a skater from Winnipeg. He would go back to Winnipeg and lie. He would go back to Winnipeg and go, “Oh, my god, Shawn Wilson did this! Lyle Tumilty did this! Greg Mercer did this!” And completely lie. The guys in Winnipeg would have to learn it because, oh, my god, the Vancouver guys are doing this, this, this, and this. And the Winnipeg guys got incredibly good incredibly fast. And they were written upon – Rodney Mullins is another top skater. In his book, it’s actually written up in there. Because when those guys competed down in California for the first time, people were blown away. Because they were doing stuff one better than everybody else. They couldn’t land it consistent in the contest to get top three, but they were doing stuff like, “What?!? Do that again.” Because they were lied to. It was amazing. Maybe they could land it a couple times. But it was so ridiculously hard that nobody could get it consistent. I’ll give you one example. When you flip the board underneath you, that is called the Kick-Flip. The most ever done at that time was three. I was doing three out of Vancouver. A couple of the guys in California were doing three. He goes back to Winnipeg and goes, “Oh, Shawn’s doing four.” So the guy in Winnipeg learns four. [laughter] And it’s like, “Four? I can barely do three!” So anyway, this guy named Bruce Smith at the contest was pulling off Quad Kick-Flips that I’d never seen before in
my life. Didn’t pull it off in his run, but I watched him do it like two or three times. It was like, holy smokes.

Winnipeg is in the central part of Canada meaning the winters in Winnipeg are cold and at least 6 to 7 months long so skaters can only skate in the city for 5 or 6 months of the year. In Vancouver, skaters can skate year round. Vancouver is a city on Canada’s west coast and is geographically considerably closer to California. This motivated the Winnipeg skaters to try and at least keep up or beat the skaters from Vancouver to show the subculture that Winnipeg does have a skate scene and skaters do exist in cold climate cites. The key is that this self-doubt was to a large degree manifested and exaggerated in their own heads.

The skaters interviewed in Kingston Ontario Canada perceive even more issues than the skaters in Winnipeg or Vancouver with respect to Kingston as a place to skate. The primary concerns, other than the winter weather are its geographic location, lack of skate shops, or skate scene, size of the Polson Park Skatepark and the lack of an urban landscape to practice their art. These perceived disadvantages sow doubts of uncertainty about their ability to progress and belong within the larger subculture, even though Chet who just moved to Kingston had no doubts after seeing the Kingston skaters.

Chet: I've seen lots of tricks. Some of these Kingston skaters are a lot better than some of the guys I've seen in Ottawa. When I go to the park here, they're all really good, but when you go to a park in Ottawa there may only be like one guy there like that…..When I moved here, yeah, I was very surprised by that level of skating. I didn't think
anybody was really going to be good at all and it surprised me.

Chet’s surprise that the Kingston skate scene is good, however does verify that even skaters outside of Kingston have doubts about the Kingston scene. Even when Kingston skaters know they have talent, for example when Matt lands more difficult trick on film than those he sees in other videos, they feel the duality of the belonging paradox simply because of being from Kingston.

Matt: Oh, it makes you feel happy (filming a hard trick). But at the same it, it makes you depressed because no one’s recognized me. People are starting to recognize me. It’s not fun when you get ignored because of where you live. It’s not fair. It should be your talent.

Matt continuously pursues recognition outside of Kingston because he has been told that he is good. At the same time he perceives that even when he does get some recognition outside of Kingston, Kingston still holds him back.

Mat: I’ve always tried to get recognized with skateboarding, but it’s hard because of where I live. Because really I don’t live in Kingston, I live in Moscow Ontario. And that’s really kind of out in the middle of nowhere. It’s hard to even get recognized. Like a lot of people will say, “You’re good and everything, but you live too far away. We’re kind of more local, towards our own town.” They want people that are sort of around them and not out in the country. That’s the downfall.

In order to establish belonging and status within the larger subculture and outside a local skate scene like the one at Polson Park in Kingston, skaters need to have
connections. To have connections skaters need a vibrant skate scene with lots of local skate companies that are willing to sponsor them in terms of equipment and travel to skateboard competitions to get exposure.

Andy: You get to a certain skill level and you get sponsors, or whatever. Like they could probably get sponsored, but – I don’t know how to explain it. We’re in a shitty area to get sponsored and make money from skateboarding too. We’re in one of the worst areas that you can be in. That’s why people go to Montreal, because there’s a huge skate scene there and there’s big money corporations there. There’s some good clothing and skateboard companies there. The same with Toronto. The bigger the city helps. And just where we are in Ontario, in Canada, it’s just a shitty place to be. There’s no big companies here, there’s not even really any contacts with the little companies that are here. There’s not any good contacts between them and the big money companies. Probably out west is the best place to be if you want to be sponsored by a skate company, probably out in B.C.. They just have a better skate scene out there. Any Canadian skateboard company that is a big company right now, like Maple Decks or Premium Wood Decks or whatever clothing, ES Shoes, they all are from the West Coast. They’re all from BC and Vancouver and some of them are from Edmonton and stuff like that. And just the big, huge population cities. And the West Coast of B.C., you drive south for five hours and you’re in Southern California, which is where skateboarding started. It’s the mecca of skateboarding. It’s where the skateboarding world was invented.

Stores in Kingston include: West 49, a chain aimed at beginners and posers according to the respondents; Ruwa Board Shop, just getting off the ground and is rather small; and Rockit Boutique, which does sponsor a small shop team but is more focused on the fashion side. West-49 does sponsor a national skateboard team of professionals but
most skaters need to rely on local shops to give them equipment and money to travel to the different skating competitions.

Matt: It’s a small town. There’s nothing here except a West 49. It’s stupid too, because it’s stupid how West 49 moves into a town and takes over all the skateboarding. There’s been skate shops that come and go, but because of West 49 they all fail. And that’s true. A local shop definitely helps you get more recognized. Usually local shops know the people that distribute to them, and if you can get in good with the distributors, they know people that own companies, and then you get in good with them. West 49, however, is just people they hire randomly, and they don’t know jack-shit about anything. They’re just there because it’s a job.

Ben: It’s held us back for one, there’s no skate shop to help you out, so you’ve been sponsorless forever. Everything that we’ve done we’ve had to pay for ourselves. That’s why skateboarding is so expensive. Number two, it holds us back because Matt is the only one that’s serious about skateboarding in the city. Everyone else does it for fun, so there’s no connections in the city. You can’t go anywhere in the city.

Kingston skaters do not have the infrastructure to support local skateboarders’ participation within the larger subculture. Even when Kingston skaters do get a video part in prominent videos or are able to travel outside of Kingston to skate competitions, they feel handicapped by their hometown. Many times the other skaters have never heard of Kingston and if they have, all they know is that it has a small skate scene. The perception held by the Kingston skaters is that they may be at the same level in ability but they are lacking the collective self-verification of the self-symbol of coming from a true urban
skate scene. They experience a belonging paradox of knowing they have ability but at the same time feel exclusion because of where they are from.

Matt: Kingston has held me back because it’s a small community. It’s a small community of skateboarding. It’s not a big one like if I was in Toronto or Ottawa or New York, I think I could have achieved my goal to be in a big video and get the good sponsors. I think I could have been a pretty decent, well-known amateur. But I didn’t. That’s the way it is. Local skateboarding for sure. That’s the way it is.

Interviewer: How does that make you feel?

Matt: Kind of upset….It kind of bothers me that some people that I’m better than, they’re getting free product and they’re getting sponsored big time. But they live in the big cities. What are you going to do? I live in the middle of nowhere, so it’s hard to get anywhere. It’s hard to get known.

Interviewer: By upset, what do you mean?

Matt: Just depressed or angry. You’ll see someone who’s done something on a spot I have, not even close to the same talent as the trick I did. I’m not being cocky or anything. I’m just stating the point. But they got the big sponsors and they’re in the big videos and they’re getting free everything. And here I am like stuck in the middle of a frigging West 49 deck toss, fighting kids for a frigging board. It’s not fair….It’s hard to recognized in a small town.

Matt perceives no collective self-verification of his ability in part because he comes from Kingston and lacks the connections for him or the Kingston scene to be known outside his local area. One of the reasons Kingston is not known for its skating is that it also lacks the physical infrastructure to attract other skaters and enable local
skaters to progress. Both the Polson Park Skatepark and the Ruwa Board Shop/park are small and not adequate for the hardcore members of the Kingston skate scene.

Evan: There’d be days when I felt like I hadn’t learned anything in months, and then someone older then me would come to the park and I’d be like 15 or 16 years old, and they’d be like, “Hey, there’s this new park in Trenton opening today. Do you want to go for the ride with us?” And I’d go to Trenton and I’d learn eight or ten tricks in that day, just because of the obstacles. Where I live, some people have the advantage – it’s like in Kingston we don’t have everything we can skate, we don’t have everything we want. We have to go skate in Queen’s, where you’re going to school, to skate sets. That’s the only place in Kingston that has anything that’s really decent. There isn’t one set in this park right now, if you look at it. It doesn’t have anything. It doesn’t have a pyramid. There’s just so many things. Those hubba ledges are shit. So we’re forced to skate in the street.

Interviewer: What do you mean forced?

Evan: If you want to – it’s the only option for a lot of people. Not everybody has gas to drive to a big city. Or like go travel the world to skate this one spot. Not all skateparks have everything you want. Look at Kingston, for example, it’s twice the size or three times the size of Belleville at least, and Belleville has a really nice park. Like really nice. So does Madoc, so does Trenton. Madoc is out in the boonies, and it has a waterpark there and all this stuff. Kingston’s got this little thing for us. It’s a park for little kids. It’s like a learning ground.

Interviewer: So you like going to bigger parks?

Evan: They just have stuff, more obstacles, yeah. More room…. But, oh, I haven’t seen a lot of people go other places to skate. I haven’t. The biggest park I’ve ever been in is fucking Madoc. And that’s what I was talking about before. Like you can go to see a certain obstacle or skate a
certain obstacle at a park and just learn a different trick. Because it’s easier than the one you skated in. Like in Napanee, our quarterpipes were shit. We had one quarterpipe that didn’t have any coping on it. It was a piece of crap. So if you learned a trick on that, you could go anywhere else and it would be so easy. Like our flat bench and all that stuff.

Andy: It’s just getting boring. Everything here is little, and you skate the same two things over and over and over again. It just gets boring.…. Like Belleville’s got a couple handrails in their park, just different obstacles and stuff like that. It gives you different ideas of stuff to do.

The type and difficulty of the obstacles in a local skatepark will dictate what type of skater an individual who uses the park is, in terms of ability and style of skating. Skating the same object over and over again is not only boring for skaters but it means that over time it becomes harder to do a new trick and progress on. With limited obstacles at the skatepark, every skater is performing on the same obstacle thousands of times. If a skater keeps landing the same trick on an obstacle, that trick eventually loses its power as a symbol because the trick does not demonstrate continual progression, a key part of the ethos within the skateboarding subculture.

According to the respondents, skaters need to keep skating different obstacles to keep progressing with their ability. Therefore, skaters need to travel but Kingston’s geographic location and the fact that none of the skaters have much money limits their ability travel. They feel cut off from the subculture at times because they are geographically isolated and they lack physical and cultural infrastructure to progress.
Furthermore, Kingston as an urban center for skateboarding also has its limitations.

Kingston’s downtown consists primarily of only two streets and lacks the concrete urban sprawl that facilitates skateboarding.

Ben: Mostly it’s just boring. You can only go so far with Kingston skateboarding, especially since the city’s really small. The city only has so much to offer for skateboarding. There’s not as many street spots. There’s not as many places to skateboard out on the streets as there is in Toronto or in New York City especially. So with that knowledge, you should shake it up a little bit and go around. Nobody wants to watch footage of someone just skateboarding at Polson Park, or just skateboarding at, I don’t know, some spot in Queen’s, or something like that. That gets old fast.

Ben: Kingston doesn’t have that much to offer. I love Kingston, but it doesn’t have that much to offer in terms of street spots. Especially at Queen’s. Everything’s being rearranged now, with construction and security guards who were not favorable to skateboarders before, and especially now when there’s new architecture and new changes and stuff like that, they’re definitely not happy about skateboarders grinding ledges and things like that. Security is a major obstacle in Kingston. Because the spots that are there have security guards, and it’s tough. And everyone knows you because it’s a small town. That’s why you’ve got to go elsewhere, because Kingston doesn’t have the opportunity that you need.

Interviewer: What opportunity do you need?

Ben: More skateboard spots in the streets. The larger the city, the more skateboard spots.
Kingston skaters perceive that the perception within the subculture is that Kingston does not have a very good skate scene. They believe this perception hinders their ability to get collective self-verification for the scene and, by extension, themselves.

Matt: I like to show Kingston. I know it’s a small town and stuff. Maybe people think there’s not skateboarders from this town. Maybe that’s why it’s important to me, to show there is a skate scene here. That’s always important to me. It may not be the best, but there is a skate scene…. They (skaters outside Kingston) know it’s a small town and stuff. They know there’s not much to skate here, because they’ve seen my footage. They see it and they know there’s not much to skate here. I just want people to know that. It’s important. It’s fun. We may not have the best spots, but – you know.

Interviewer: How is that important to you?

Matt: I just want to – that’s a good question. I just want to show Kingston has a skate scene. I think it’s important to show that there is talent that came out of a small town. You can have talent out of nowhere. It’s important to show that.

5.2.3 Summary of Belonging Paradox related to Place

The place-related belonging paradox associated with Canada and Kingston centers on the cold Canadian weather, and the lack of support and urban infrastructure within the community. This gives the respondents the perception that others within the subculture consider Kingston as a skateboarding wilderness where nothing good relating to skateboarding occurs. Kingston skaters that know they have the ability feel moments of inclusion but also perceive exclusion from the larger subculture simply as a result of being from Kingston. The back and forth of this belonging paradox leads skaters to try to
continuously demonstrate through various forms of consumption that there is
skateboarding in Kingston and good skaters do live in Kingston.

5.3 Belonging Paradox related to Style

Style goes hand in hand with ability to do tricks, and skaters need both.

Interviewer: What about your style?

Ben: I don’t even have a style. I don’t want to talk about my style, because I suck at skateboarding. I’ve been skating Lakai for a long time. I take my shop boards because I can’t afford pro boards.

Matt: Ben’s a lot like an actual Lakai guy.

Ben: I can’t skate as good as Matt, but I sort of like what he likes.

Interviewer: What do mean, you suck at skateboarding?

Ben: I don’t know, I’m not good at it. I’m not that good at. I enjoy doing it, but I’m not that great at it.

Having ability is not enough to perceive a sense of belonging within the
subculture. A skater must also feel like he has style to his skating. Style within the
skateboarding subculture comprises many elements, including landing the tricks, the spot
at which a skater performs a trick at and the skater’s dress. The hardcore skaters
interviewed saw skateboarding as more than just an extreme sport. They saw it as
lifestyle and an art form where style is everything.

Ben: The people that say that style doesn’t matter, they
don’t know what they’re talking about, especially in
skateboarding. If you don’t look good on a skateboard, who’s going to want to see what you’re doing? Nobody wants to look at an ugly skateboarder. Seriously, it’s the worst thing, a kid that can do a million tricks but doesn’t have any style doing it. You’re just like, ugh. It makes you want to regurgitate.

Interviewer: How is style important?

Ben: Just because skateboarding is like a very visual activity. A lot of people would even consider it an art. If you consider it an art, it needs to look good and it has to be pleasing to the eye. Think of like a piece of artwork on a canvas. If it’s ugly, if it’s in a museum, the really good looking ones with the good styles is going to attract the most attention, whereas the ones with the bad styles are going to be collecting dust and no one’s going to go over there and look at it. The same thing about skateboarding. It’s very much about how things look. If you consider it an art form, which most people do. I think it’s beyond a sport.

One of the reasons that style is important is because no one wants to look at ugly art, and by extension, ugly skateboarding. The underlying message is that if skateboarders want to perceive collective self-verification and gain a sense of belonging they need style.

Matt: If you don’t have a good style, it doesn’t make you fun to watch…. Style is probably the most important thing. Because if you’ve got shitty style, you’re a shitty skateboarder.

Within the subculture, style as an art form is an individual choice and reflects the identity of the artist.

Ben: That’s the thing. Now that you (Matt) have style and you know what you like, then you go filming with that in
mind and your footage won’t look sporadic and all over the place. There’s like a focus, there’s like a common thread going through all of your footage, because of your interest. You’re not jumping down a set this minute and the next minute you’re skating, I don’t know, a trap door or something like that. There’s a focus in your footage.

Matt: It doesn’t look all over the place.

Ben: There’s an identity to it. It has character. It’s not like fucking – it’s not all over the place.

Interviewer: What do you mean, character?

Ben: Like it has personality. There’s a common thread going through all the footage, so you’re not all over the place. It’s together; there’s substance to it.

Matt: Like if you were doing an essay on something and you frigging just skip to something else. Well, like it’s focused halfway, and then just in the middle it jumps to something else really quick.

Ben: It’s going to be distracting, ugly, it won’t have the good style. You want everything to be tight. You want everything to be focused and all linked together. There has to be an identity to it, a central theme. The same thing with skateboarding. Your style is your theme. You want to try and be as consistently true to that style as you can, by going out and doing what’s true to yourself in that style.

Given that style is a part of a skater’s identity, it plays an important role in establishing and maintaining a skater’s sense of belonging. Consistent with the research on collective self-verification, skaters have a real problem when they perceive that something is disrupting or is inconsistent with how they view their collective self. Their goal is to have a consistent collective self in order to perceive collective self-verification
and a sense of belonging. To achieve this, skaters feel there must be consistency among their dress, tricks, spots they skate, and music they listen to and that each must mesh into one coherent collective self, otherwise disaster can strike.

Ben: You care about – style matters and appearance matters on skateboarding. You don’t want to look like a goof on a skateboard. Style is everything. And it’s not just clothing style. Like when you wear West 49 clothes, you start skating like a West 49 person. It’s hard to explain.

Matt: Ugly tricks, ugly – you just start being ugly from that style.

When a skater is either inconsistent among their style elements or adopts a style that is inconsistent with how they view themselves, this can cause them a lot of discomfort. This discomfort often goes hand in hand with the questioning of their collective self-verification, their ability to be a skateboarder and their sense of belonging as a skateboarder. Matt is a perfect example of this. When Matt first started skating he dressed like everyone else did which was using clothes from West-49.

Matt: I used to dress like a West 49 kid …. the hat and the clothing, I used to dress like that. He looks like he (pointing to another skater) just went to West 49 and bought clothing and came here to skate. I used to dress like that and I used to have – I used to do handrail sets, I used to do that. And really I found out a couple years after I did that stuff that I didn’t like it. It was just kind of forced. Within the skateboarding world, that was hot.

Matt skated handrails and dressed in West-49 because that is what he saw in videos, on television, and at the skatepark. He did it because he wanted to fit in. He was,
by his own admission, good at doing handrails but he was not really that comfortable with it.

Interviewer: What was the influence?

Matt: Skate what you saw on TV. And I know I was comfortable with it for a bit and I was pretty good at it, and I would have been really good at it if I’d kept with it, but it wasn’t really something I was truly comfortable with, because I was always scared.

Matt did not like the West-49 style because he felt he could get hurt throwing himself down a set of stairs. But more importantly he did not feel this style is consistent with how he views himself as a skater. It was not his own style and he felt uncomfortable skating like a West-49 skater. Rather, Matt views himself as an urban skater performing more technical tricks on different obstacles around the city.

Matt: I didn’t want to look like a little kid anymore. Because our footage just started looking too young. And you don’t want to look immature anymore, because looking immature is not… You wouldn’t go around dressing like,,,, it’s not a style. They make your style, West 49. It’s weird, because you end up looking like an idiot on camera. It looks like garbage. It doesn’t look right.

For Matt he was not comfortable with the West-49 style, which affected how successful he viewed his videos to be, and by extension, his belonging. While he could perform West-49 style tricks and felt inclusion to that group, he also felt uncomfortable about his skating and questioned his ability to achieve the collective self-verification of
how he saw himself as a skater leading to simultaneous feelings of exclusion and, thus, a belonging paradox around a skater’s sense of style.

For Matt and Ben the self-symbol of dress has to mesh with the style of tricks and skating done by skaters. Skaters know that they are being watched and they don’t want to be misconstrued during their collective self-verification. Jack is another good example of how conscious skaters are about their style to the point where Jack also developed a belonging paradox around style. For him, it was centered around the fact that he felt he could not project the skater he felt he was on the inside in part because of forces outside the subculture.

When he was in the sixth grade, Jack needed eyeglasses because his eyesight was terrible. He hated the eyeglasses because it was not who he was as a skater. No skater wears glasses because they are considered too nerdy. So he,

Jack: …grew out the hair covered the glasses but then that look wasn’t me. I knew what I wanted to look like....Short hair no glasses but I couldn’t because I had to wear the glasses so I had to wear long hair and so ah it was always in the back of my head.

Even when he became a good skater he always perceived that the glasses kept him from being who he perceived he wanted to be (See Figure 18).
During this time period he received a sponsorship from a local shop, Ruwa, won a number of skate competitions at the local skate parks and produced skate videos, which he posted on the Internet. These self-symbols and collective self-verification allowed him to feel like a skater and the inclusion of belonging. At the same time, however, Jack felt like he wasn’t the skater he wanted to be. The glasses and long hair did not allow him to project the style of dress that was consistent with how he views himself as a skater. This created self-doubt based on his looks and style.

Jack: I have never really looked like a skater… If you looked at my old footage it was bad, it was bad. I had the baggy pants and crazy hair it was not good, not good. I like where I am now. Back in my baggy pants days you would not know that I watch Zero and stuff like that. I FEEL like a skater the way I am now… but at the time I did not… I felt
like a skater… but you would have not known I liked Zero I am more comfortable now.

Jack experiences a belonging paradox because he has feelings of inclusion from being sponsored, videos and winning contests. But at the same time he also has the self-doubt due to an inconsistent style and look and concerns that others do not see him as the skater that he thinks he is. He considered himself a Hesh skater, which is a group of skaters that skate fast and throw themselves at objects or down sets (stairs) and that is why he likes the brands Zero and Fallen. However, due to his long hair and glasses he did not care much for his physical appearance and did not dress in the Hesh style. As a consequence, he perceived that other skaters did not know that Hesh was the style of skating he liked and felt he was being misconstrued by others. He wanted to be viewed in a certain way and felt he could not consistently give off that vibe.

Jack: Just like how I view... I want them to view me how I wanted to be viewed. Like a skater. JUST what I think skating is. I know I think skating is kind of fast paced, hardcore. So I want to be viewed like a fast paced hardcore skater, you know? So I want to give off that vibe when I am skating. Just like the way you skate is the way you skate and that is how you want to be I guess portrayed. But there are days where I don’t feel like it is me skating. I don’t feel like I am on point or something like that and those days I don’t feel like I am being viewed the same way as I was the day before and that throws me off.

Interviewer: What do you mean by fast paced and hardcore?

Jack: I don’t know, just the way I skate. I like going fast and busting huge indies. Hardcore is ridiculous tricks. Hardcore is busting huge indies over massive quarter pipes
That is hardcore man. I watch guys that guy is hardcore man. Busting a hand plant backflip you know that Trevor guy. That guy knows what he is doing he is comfortable on his board. He has got his own look you know. There are certain people that just give off a really sick vibe. I want to be able to give off that vibe. Just people that are comfortable on their boards there are tons of people that are.

He did not feel comfortable on his board and felt like he was not projecting his own look and that skaters were not understanding him the way he wanted to be understood. In short, he did not perceive collective self-verification of how he saw himself as a skater causing a belonging paradox. Recently, Jack finished in second place in a local contest and shortly after that he dropped out of college. In response to the uncertainty of the belonging paradox, Jack used $3500 from his student line of credit to have Lasik eye surgery to get rid of the glasses. This, despite the fact that he only has a minimum wage job at a national retailer and the loan, by his own admission, will take years to pay back.

Jack: But in this last year and stuff when I did this whole transformation with the glasses and hair, I care a lot more about how I look when I skate and I do that too because I know that people watch me when I skate. So I want to know that what people are looking at is how I want them to view me, right? I want to look like how I want other people to see me right? I don’t want to just look like what I did. Like how I did look. I wouldn’t want, like now, thinking about what I looked like before, it yeah it was bad it was bad. I am more comfortable now with how I look which then translates into how you skate, right? Because the more comfortable you feel in the way you look the more comfortable you feel on your board and so there is definitely a huge connection.
After the surgery Jack cut his hair and changed his look using the brands Zero and Fallen and their professionals Chris Cole and Jamie Thomas as models to redo his look. He now feels more like himself (See Figure 21 at the end of this Chapter) and more comfortable as a skater. For Jack it was a

Jack: …big confidence self-esteem boost kinda thing and that really pushed me to start caring about what I look like. That is when I started wearing skinny jeans. I would never wear these back when I was younger but now this is what I think fits my style of skating and how I want to look.

With his skating and style/look meshing, he perceives that he is able to give off the vibe that he wants other people to see, which makes him more comfortable about his skating and belonging.

Jack: Oh yeah, I definitely feel that there are days where I am on point and that I am giving off a vibe that I want. That is the thing right? You don’t know what other people are thinking so you just try to…. It is almost like because you don’t know because you don’t know what other people are thinking you are just trying to think of what other people are thinking to make you feel better so that you skate better. That is kind of what it is like. It doesn’t even matter what they think but because of what they think or what you think they think it makes you skate better. I think it all comes back to making you skate better, what makes you feel better, what makes you feel more comfortable, stuff like that. I don’t think it matters what other people think but it does.

A key for Jack after the transformation is that he now perceives that others will collective self-verify his belonging as a skater in Kingston as he sees it. Interestingly,
Jack seems less concerned with the actual collective self-verification than the perception of what he thinks others will think of him. He wants others to understand him as he understands himself. It is what he thinks they think about him that matters the most not what they actually think about him. This also pushes Jack to be a better skater so that he can perceive that he is putting his best foot forward and allowing him to feel more comfortable with his belonging.

Dress or “looking the part” plays a big part in reducing Jack’s doubt. The brands that he perceives connected to his style help to project who he is. However, when he wore eyeglasses he did not wear those brands because he felt he could not complete the image.

Jack: I grew up watching ZERO and those guys. Anybody who looks at me would be like, “that guy definitely like watched Fallen and ZERO” those companies and those videos because of how I skate and what I look like.

Jack clearly feels more comfortable with who he is as a skater and feels that the brands he uses project the right image and, more importantly, he perceives that other skaters will see him and understand his skating the way he sees himself. Yet, the unease about his look and feeling that others are misconstruing who he is still persists today. The feeling of not looking how he wants to look and the resulting belonging paradox still drives his consumption today. He is obsessed with the way he looks to the point where he is worried about wearing the right shirt, which can define a good day for him.

Jack: Like, it is little things in skateboarding too because there is so much going on when you are doing tricks and skating, that little things that could bother you, you don’t
want. You don’t want those little things to bother you when you are trying to Kick-Flip down like a 10 set or something. If the smallest thought like, I wonder what I look like to somebody else? Or something like, or is my shirt tucked in right? or something like that, when you are doing a trick it is going to throw you off and you are going to fall which you don’t want to happen. So you try to, like, make sure you are comfortable and I think that is what defines a bad day and a good day. I found that from just skating a lot that like my good days, I am just like wearing the right clothes. I am in the right mood and I just stepped on my skateboard the right way the first time I throw down my board. Stuff like that. All that stuff like sets you up for a good day. A bad day, you put on the wrong shirt at the beginning of the day and you know you are going to have a bad day. It is weird things like that, I don’t know, but it is how it works you know, so you got to do what you got to do to make it work. I never thought when I started that wearing the right shirt or something like that would affect my skating but it does. It affects you mentally, which affects your skating right? If I am wearing something or if I am skating a certain way, like my legs are not bent the right way, something like that, and I notice it something like that, and I don’t feel right on my board.

Jack is clearly one of the better skaters in the Kingston scene given the fact that he always places at the local skate competitions, however he still experiences a belonging paradox based on style. The belonging uncertainty of feeling like he can be misconstrued based on his look is a constant that Jack must deal with as he constructs his belonging within the Kingston scene.

The interesting thing about the belonging paradox based on style for both Matt and Jack is that others in the subculture do not trigger it. The uncomfortable feelings and doubt are internal manifestations or disconnects created by Jack and Matt. They are
regarded as two of the best skaters in Kingston and I am sure the rest of the scene would be shocked to learn that they constantly deal with the tension of a belonging paradox based on style. However, their reality is very real to them and that is all that matters to them.

5.4 Integrating the Findings of the Belonging Paradoxes

When looking across all three instances of the belonging paradox: place, ability and style, there are some common threads that emerge. A wide number of the respondents experience a belonging paradox of simultaneous feelings of inclusion and exclusion. The tension and belonging uncertainty they feel is not a one time occurrence but an on going reality or struggle for the skaters. Even if they have in the past successfully coped with the belonging paradox, the effects can still linger. For example, in the case of Jack and the Lasik eye surgery, he still carries with him the uncertainty because it has been such a big part of his reality that it is still affecting his consumption today in the form of how he dresses. It is important to note that the belonging uncertainty felt by respondents is not crippling. It still allows for moments of belonging that creates the back and forth of the belonging paradox and perpetuates the consumption in response to the belonging paradox, which will be discussed next.

Jack wins local skate contests and puts out YouTube videos providing moments of inclusion. He clearly identifies himself as a skater by aligning his self-concept with that of other skaters through self-categorization leading to group identification. He
attempts to have this group identification collectively self-verified through the use of self-symbolizing and consuming the symbolic resources such as skateboard brands, tricks and subculture related knowledge. What matters in this process, in order to perceive a sense of belonging, is Jack’s own perceptions of his belonging which can take two forms: how Jack views himself, and how Jack believes others view him as a member. His felt idiosyncratic difference of having glasses makes him continually question if other skaters view him as he views himself as a skater. At times he is obsessed about it, always questioning the little things in his self-presentation even though he knows he should not be doing this.

Feelings of exclusion can be from external sources like the general self-doubt that skaters experience in school and other mainstream sports. However, these feelings can also manifest themselves in terms of internal self-doubts or questions skaters have about themselves (e.g., Jack’s belonging paradox based on style). Most often others within the subculture are not aware of the internal doubt or exclusion felt by the individual. These idiosyncratic differences are consistent with a belonging paradox and only need to be perceived by the individual skater to be disruptive in a skater’s perception of belonging. For example, Chet, a relatively newcomer to the Kingston scene feels the Kingston skaters are really good and does not realize the belonging paradox related to place felt by skaters like Matt and Ben that grew up in the Kingston skate scene. What matters is how each skater self-perceives and constructs his own sense of belonging including any uncertainty he may perceive whether it is real or not. Often times, like in the case of Matt
and Shawn, there can be multiple sources of the belonging paradox that feed off of each other as individuals try to construct their own sense of belonging.

The belonging paradox can be disruptive at any point of the SCURB framework. The elements of the framework, group identification, collective self-verification and self-symbolizing are reciprocal elements of an individual’s sense of belonging that reinforce each other, building an individual’s sense of belonging. A belonging paradox can throw this reinforcing process off kilter. When one element is disrupted individuals tend to feel uncertain about their belonging while at the same time knowing they are still members. Jack perceives at times that others do not perceive him as he sees himself, which affects his ability to perceive collective self-verification. The fact that for a critical collective self-concept he perceives that he cannot get others to know him as he knows himself is important for order within his world. According to collective self-verification theory, he should be motivated to take action to restore order and certainty to his world in terms of sense of belonging.

Chet carries with him the knowledge that he at one point quit, which he feels affects his ability to successfully perform tricks or self-symbolize. When he perceives he cannot successfully self-symbolize his belonging by performing tricks, it negatively affects his perceptions of himself as a skater (group identification). Even Nick telling him he is a skater because “he can tell” (collective self-verification) is not enough for Chet to maintain certainty about his belonging. He needs to perceive that his self-symbolizing (landing tricks) works, which would then help with his group identification and collective
self-verification in order for him to perceive like he belongs. Symbolic Self-Completion Theory states that when one self-symbol is perceived as not working, an individual will move on to another self-symbol in order to restore their sense of belonging. This, however, is particularly difficult to do in a group where specific tricks are important and what is considered an acceptable self-symbol is always changing. As a result, skaters are constantly trying to find new tricks or improve in order to avoid the disruption of their own perception of the belonging.

Paul is another example of what happens when skaters are uncertain about their belonging as a result of doubt about their ability to symbolize their belonging. When this happens, Paul leaves the skate park. Other skaters react to their uncertainty by sitting on the edge of the park when they feel their tricks or symbols are not working. In both cases, skaters are trying to avoid risking collective self-verification of a negative collective self-concept. For Paul and the other respondents, skateboarding is all they know and a critical part of who they are and what they are known for. When individuals cannot verify their ideal self through self-symbolizing (i.e., performing tricks for skaters), Self-Verification Theory suggests that avoidance is a natural outcome. That tactic can only be temporary, however, because without the symbolizing of tricks, a skater’s perception of their own group identification and belonging will wane. The insights in this thesis demonstrate that the three elements of the SCURB framework all work together in a reciprocal manner to help an individual build his or her own sense of belonging within the subculture or group.
When the back and forth of inclusion and exclusion of the belonging paradox is introduced into the SCURB framework, the result is drastic consumption in order to try to cope with the paradox. This can be seen with Jack going into debt in order to have Lasik eye surgery to get rid of the glasses. No matter how hard these skaters try, the internal state of mind and the self-perceived idiosyncratic differences, which cause the uncertainty, will always be present to some degree inside them. Shawn got to the pinnacle of the subculture by being on one of the top professional teams and having his own professional model skateboard, both sources of belonging. At the same time, he carries with him to this day the feelings of exclusion because he is Canadian and general self-doubt about his ability, which leads him to continue to experience a belonging paradox.

5.5 Coping with a Belonging Paradox related to Place

In trying to cope with the belonging paradox related to place, the respondents have a number of different strategies centered on filming, traveling, spending money and knowledge. Most of the effort focuses on trying to overcome the perceived limitations of being from Canada and Kingston and trying to get themselves and Kingston and/or Canada noticed within the larger subculture.

5.5.1 Abundant Traveling: In search of a Place Within the Subculture

Although travel is a normal symbol within the subculture, respondents in this thesis appear to take it to extremes. The act of traveling considerable distance becomes a self-symbol all by itself. Respondents have no issue with
Shawn: taking the bus somewhere to get to a place to skate. Or jumping on a bus and going to Calgary on a 12-hour trip to skate a park there because they just opened a new park.

The mecca of skateboarding is California. Shawn felt that given where Canada was that the only way he was going to progress within the subculture was to make trips down to California. He felt also that it was the only way he could get recognized and achieve collective self-verification within the larger subculture.

Shawn: I looked at it, “man, if I really want to get better, I should live in Southern California.” That was my initial thought, was I’m in the wrong country to be good. Because remember, the bible of skateboarding and the color magazines coming out at 7-11 were all Southern California-based. So being in Canada, nobody’s going to send anyone to Vancouver to cover anything; we’re too far out of the way and too expensive to get up there to cover it. So there was a long part there when I felt that I needed to be in Southern California.

With help from his parents, Shawn was constantly traveling to different skateparks and skate competitions around North America, especially Southern California. Shawn and his parents would regularly drive over 24 hours to participate in a contest. The constant traveling became the self-symbol that helped him demonstrate that he belongs within the subculture. It was a way to cope with both his belonging paradox of being from Canada and also his belonging paradox based on ability. He was winning events in California against skaters that he saw in magazines, thus confirming his ability. This allowed him to perceive a sense of collective self-verification and build up his own sense of belonging. By travelling to Southern California and winning events, he put
Canada on the map for skateboarding and also verified his ability, thus coping with his belonging paradoxes.

Shawn: Even though the funny thing is, winning events for Canada down there, and unlike any other sport, when you come back to Canada, you’re kind of recognized as, “Whoa!” It was still like skateboarding. Like it wasn’t on the planet. Like it wasn’t – the media still wanted to see you run over some grandma in White Rock and do media coverage on that. Shawn Wilson travels to San Diego and gets first in an international contest, that wasn’t on their minds. You didn’t get covered for that a bit, but down there you were kind of like a rock star, because, “whoa, a guy from Canada comes down and wins an event.”

The interesting thing about the trips to Southern California is that Shawn did not experience the same recognition or collective self-verification from Canada. As a result, Shawn used the symbols of brands bought in California to broadcast that he was in Southern California. Through the brands other skaters knew he was in Southern California allowing him to perceive collective self-verification of both his commitment to the larger subculture (travel) and his ability (placing well in the contests).

Shawn: Vancouver, at that point, was not anywhere near California. We were back about 6 to 8 months. Vancouver wasn’t completely up to speed with what was going on in California. So when we went down to Southern California, we would see stuff that hadn’t been in Vancouver yet and probably wouldn’t hit Vancouver for six months. So we were just on a shopping spree every time we went down there as amateurs, going, “That’s new, that’s new, that’s new. Holy crap, they got this, I can’t get that in Vancouver.” I’ll give you an example. In Van’s shoes, you could only get one particular style in Vancouver, but down there you could get 50 different styles of that skate shoe. So
of course when you’re not in California… But it was funny, when you came back up here from being down there, people knew you were in California. “Oh, you must have been to California last week. Where’d you get those?” Because we didn’t have them up here. …… It helped me feel that, I guess when I came back up here, that I was able to go down on that California level and people knew I was in California because of the stuff I had brought back from the States, and knowing that I was there competing. So it would start them asking questions like, “What place did you get? How’d you do in California?” So they knew you were in California by the stuff you were wearing.

Shawn would always look for brands when he was down in California because the brand allowed him to perceive the collective self-verification of his group as it relates to his ability. The numerous trips to Southern California and the buying of brands that his friends did not have access to gave Shawn a way to cope with his belonging paradoxes through self-symbols and collective self-verification. However, using symbolic consumption in response to the belonging paradox does not resolve the belonging paradox. Even though the traveling helped Shawn achieve collective self-verification through recognition and turning professional, he always carries with him the belonging paradox.

Shawn: When I switched to be a professional, now I’m traveling with guys I really don’t know and starting to get known. And again, you’re leaving the New York Islanders and going to the Canucks. You’re starting to get to know those guys, and hanging out with them. And certainly not thinking I should be here. I’m the Canadian guy. A little bit awkward….. I didn’t feel through that time that I was deserving of being on that team. Again, it goes back to whatever’s in my brain to think that I don’t belong at that
level. I felt all the sudden I was traveling with these rock stars and I wasn’t one of the rock stars.

Shawn is now 47 years old, way past the age for most skaters, but continues to travel doing skateboard demonstrations and contests and even though he has won the last five contests he entered and paid a concrete company almost $40,000 to create his ideal skating surface, in his backyard he is still dealing with a belonging paradox. The consumption of traveling to contests and brands allows him to perceive the inclusion part of the belonging paradox. At the same time even today on these trips he carries the self-doubt and exclusion part of the belonging paradox, which perpetuates the consumption.

Shawn: I still have that self-doubt today. I just got back from Japan a few months ago. Totally went there with self-doubt. Because you’re looking at all these skaters from all over the world and you’re like, “oh my goodness, what am I doing here?” ….. Yeah, yeah. So I’ve always been like that. Even today when I read the stats of the contests, I’ll be like, “okay, in seventh place this, in sixth place this.” I’m always thinking I must be out of the top eight. And then I get to the top three and two – and the last couple of contests when I got first, I thought I should have been like fourth.

Shawn is not the only one of the respondents to do extensive traveling to try and overcome a belonging paradox related to place. Tim is another example of how skaters try to overcome the belonging paradox by dropping everything and just traveling. The focus for Tim was just skateboarding because he was on a mission to show that he belonged within the larger skateboarding subculture.
Tim: Ottawa was purely just a mission. I slept on a couch, skated. Skated my ass off all summer, 2007. I’ve been around, man, I guess.

Interviewer: What do you mean skated your ass off?

Tim: I mean it was just a skateboard mission, pretty much. Before that I was living at my mom’s and I just peaced out to Ottawa and lived on my buddy’s couch. I got picked up by a company called Jalopy Skateboards. They were out of Ohio. I was the only Canadian rider. They flew me out to a couple places in the States to do contests and stuff. Yeah, and then I just got broke, hungry, and sick, and moved back home to Cornwall. That was two months of just pure, raw living. Skateboarding, couch surfing.

Interviewer: What do you mean by raw living?

Tim: Living on a couch, barely having any money. No support. No health insurance. My tooth got fucked up and my face was to here (holding his hands few inches from his face). I had no coverage. I had to weave my way through to get antibiotics to fucking get it out of my mouth. I never got it fixed either.

Tim committed all his money and time to the effort and only stopped after encountering health concerns and financial constraints. He had some success getting sponsored and travelling to the United States for contests, which gave him that feeling of inclusion, and belonging within the larger subculture. However, the feeling was only temporary and did not last because he moved back to Kingston to find work and is living in Canada once again. Although he used up all his resources in the process, in talking to him it is clear that he would do it all again if he could.
5.5.2 Living to Travel: Spending All of Your Money

Matt and Ben also use travel as a way to overcome the perceived limitations imposed by Kingston/Canada and their belonging paradox.

Matt: I just traveled. That’s the way I kind of overcame it. I just kind of traveled. I went and met people. Took off from there. I decided to try to expand my name beyond Kingston.

Matt and Ben do more than just the normal travel for the members of the Kingston scene of going to the bigger cities of Toronto, Montreal or Ottawa. They traveled 6 times to New York City and many other places. Travelling to New York City takes a lot of time and effort in the planning and money, which is in limited supply.

Matt: Just because they (the other skaters in Kingston) don’t want to go on trips. They want to spend their money right away. They don’t want to save up and go somewhere to skateboard. They want to spend it. You have to save and plan it and make sure you do it. Commit fully to what you want to do. And that’s what we do, we commit fully to it. If we’re going on a trip in a month, it may not be the day we planned it on, but it’s that month. We just go. And if we go in debt a little bit, we pay it back. Like these guys, a lot of them just spend money on beer and stuff. They want to go skateboarding, but they don’t want to pay for it. If you want to go somewhere, you’ve got to save your money. And that’s what commitment is about, being responsible and smart with your money. Putting money away from your paycheck for the trip. Half of these people are like, “Can I go to New York next time with you?” And we say, “You know it’s expensive, right? “ And they say, “Yeah.” But the thing is, what they don’t understand is if we went in a month, they’d have to start saving now from every paycheck. They’d have to save like over $100 each paycheck. And I don’t think any of them would do that,
because they get their paychecks and like blow it right away.

Ben: When I mean committed enough, I mean willing to spend tons of money to basically jump headfirst into this lifestyle. And that means spending money to travel. Spending money on making movies, which is crazy, because we’ve made videos that we don’t even cut even on with the sales. But it’s not about that. It’s about showcasing what you’ve done to your friends and that sort of thing. And a lot of people in Kingston aren’t committed to spend the money. If they have to spend money to go to Toronto, they won’t do it. I don’t know. You have to be committed to take some time off work and stuff like that, which a lot of people don’t want to do either. They’re missing out, you know? Work’s always going to be there. And if you’re committed at work, then your employer should be able to give you some times off, one day off, and then go and make a weekend video. Yeah, that’s what I mean by committed. Skateboarding, it’s a pretty inexpensive activity, but you can make it extremely expensive if you’re committed enough to it.

Ben: I think that really has a lot to do with the level of commitment a lot of them have for skateboarding. That’s why a lot of them don’t want to go to New York City and film. They’re all good enough, they’re just not – some of them are lazy. Laziness is like a plague. Money’s a big thing too. It’s not exactly cheap to go to these big cities all the time.

Matt and Ben are both college students who have part time jobs in the summer so as a consequence they don’t have a lot of money. In the end they spend most of their money on skateboarding, including traveling and making professional-like videos as a means of self-symbolizing and a form of collective self-verification.
One reason for the numerous filming trips is to showcase the Kingston scene as a way of addressing Kingston as a source of feelings of exclusion.

Matt: There is not much in Kingston it is hard to create stuff that is not there. People (in other cities) say that’s nice that I am from Kingston but nothing much ever comes out of Kingston, skateboard wise. I can’t get known. I land a hard trick and get happy but also get depressed.

Matt: I like to show Kingston. I know it’s a small town and stuff. Maybe people think there’s not skateboarders from this town. Maybe that’s why it’s important to me, to show there is a skate scene here. That’s always important to me. It may not be the best, but there is a skate scene. I just want people to know that. It’s important. It’s fun. We may not have the best spots, but – you know. I just want to show Kingston has a skate scene. I think it’s important to show that there is talent that came out of a small town. You can have talent out of nowhere. It’s important to show that. Like I’m not even really from Kingston, like I said I am from Moscow Ontario. No matter where you’re from, you can have talent as long as you actually want to do something with it. I’m trying to do my best with it, but it gets hard. Skateboarding is definitely one of the hardest things to get recognized in, for sure. That’s it. I just wanted to show people.

The trips are more than just a way to show their commitment. It is a way to cope with their belonging paradox related to place. The immense effort to plan and just go to New York City is a symbol of their commitment to the larger subculture outside of Kingston. The amount of money that goes into these trips is also another powerful symbol they use to demonstrate their belonging. The two brothers are obsessed with
traveling to skateboard especially to New York to the point that all of their money goes to these trips and they cannot remember a non-skateboarding trip.

Ben: We don’t take vacations, we take skateboarding trips. I don’t remember the last vacation we took, but I remember the last skateboarding trip we took…… I’ve never gone on a trip with my mom and dad in like a long time. Which is too bad, but… That’s the thing. We haven’t had too much money to go on vacation and stuff like that, so we sort of took it upon ourselves to just go on skateboarding trips. If we can’t go to Canada’s Wonderland, fuck it, we’ll go to Toronto and take nothing with us and just skateboard and be dirty.

What they get out of going to New York City is tons of film or video footage. They can bring back this footage and show the Kingston scene that, look they are serious about skateboarding and that they did actually go to New York. They also feel that travelling and filming is the way to get recognition and a sense of belonging within the larger skateboarding subculture.

Ben: For variety. And to show your level of commitment. If you make a video part that is solely in Kingston, then you’re not going to strike the attention of someone that lives in New York City or San Francisco or something like that. But if you make a video part that’s a video part that has maybe half of Kingston, then you represent where you’re from. But then you go all around, all over the place, and you’ve got footage from here, here, here, here, here. Then not only does it show people that, yes, you’re willing to travel and you’re actually serious about getting stuff done, but you’re pretty experienced with skateboard culture. And not only that, but culture all over the place. You’ve been to New York City, you’ve been here, you’ve been there. It looks good. It’s almost like a resume. You wouldn’t hand in a resume to an employer having just worked at one place.
You want some variety, you want some diversity in experience. And the same thing with skateboarding culture. If you’re looking for recognition, whoever that target audience is, you want some diversity in your profile. You want your video part to be diverse. Not only what you can showcase in your skill level, but where you go.

Ben: You don’t necessarily have to leave Kingston to be a good skateboarder, but you should. You should just for variety. If you plan to make a video part, basically if you want to showcase yourself to the world, you can’t just stay in Kingston. You’ve got to go around, you’ve got to make trips. You’ve got to show everyone that you’re committed to the sport.

To produce professional-like videos they also need the right equipment. The equipment itself becomes a powerful symbol. Again, spending large sums of money is used as a symbol to demonstrate their belonging.

Ben: You have to have a very good camera. You have to be professional about it. You have to have an excellent camera, which right now, the best camera for it is the VX 1000. If you don’t have a VX 1000, then you’re not serious about filming skateboarding. Because that’s the best camera that you can get for it. That’s like the standard. And you have to get a fisheye lens. The best one out there right now is the Mark One for the VX 1000. And if you don’t have that in your setup, then I wouldn’t call you a filmer. You need that to complement skateboarding.

According to Ben, the only way to demonstrate that he has experienced the skateboard culture is to travel and make videos. It also helps Ben and Matt in perceiving collective self-verification beyond Kingston and Canada. Matt did get a part in a video
sponsored by Color magazine. The video was released all over North America and did allow him to perceive collective self-verification from the larger subculture.

Ben: We know that we fit in when people from New York City complemented Matt’s part in All Defy and liked it and thought it was good. And when he’s being invited into doing another video. And he’s going to be in a New York City montage, when he’s not even from New York. To me, that’s pretty much that you’re identity meshes with that. When someone from New York City is saying, “Come on in, hang out with us in this montage.”

Matt: I want to be in videos that go all over in Europe. That kind of thing. Because I’ve only been in a video that’s gone to the States and Canada, which is still really good considering I’m from Kingston and Moscow. [laughs] I want to set that goal, and I think this video that I’m filming for right now has a lot of famous people in it, like a huge number of really famous skateboarders. I think that is going to help me big time, because me and some other guy from Canada are the only Canadians in the section. Everyone else is from New York City. So that’s really a big deal, especially that gets you more motivated because that shows me I have a talent and I’m pretty good at it. If it’s just me and some other guy and we’re the only ones from Canada in that front section, it makes you more motivated, it makes you more happy. Of course I’m going to try my best for it.

Once again we can see how important it is for skaters to present only their ideal self in the video because skaters get so few opportunities for breakthroughs especially when they are from Kingston. The importance of the collective self-verification of being in the video can not be understated for Matt because it shows him that he has talent even though he comes from Kingston and Moscow Ontario. Ben and Matt do not even personally know nor have they met any of the other skaters in the video. But by Matt
having a small part in the video, they feel like they are hanging out with the other skaters and belong to the New York skate scene, achieving a sense of collective self-verification and belonging beyond the Kingston scene. In a sense, Ben and Matt actively play with their sense of belonging by constructing this virtual group in their head consisting of other skaters in the video and perceiving that they belong to this group as if they are actually hanging out with them. In reality, they are only virtually hanging out with them in their head.

Ben and Matt are typical examples of over consuming the self-symbols of the subculture. The traveling and filming allows them to cope with the belonging paradox in two ways, first by increasing their chances of collective self-verification within the larger subculture and second by allowing them to play with their own sense of belonging by mentally constructing their own groups. However Matt and Ben recognize that these strategies are only temporary.

Ben: Traveling’s a way to overcome it, but it’s just a temporary solution to a permanent problem. Because you always come back to the same place, right? It’s like we’re going to New York City to try to beat that, because Matt has to film for that video. That’s like a way to fight it, go film at the best place in the world. But then you’ve got to come back to this place, so you’ve got to do it all again.

Interestingly, Matt and Ben always come back to Kingston because that is home and that is where their family is. When they come back they are reminded of the exclusion they feel because they are from Kingston Ontario Canada.
Matt: If I ever do go somewhere with skateboarding, I’ll still just be like a skateboarder from Kingston. I don’t think I’ll ever be bigger than I am now, although I’m not even big in skateboarding. I just think I’ll be the same.

Kingston is always in the back of their minds creating doubt and feelings of exclusion. Therefore, Matt and Ben are always planning their next trip. They spend all their free time either going on skateboard trips or saving and planning for the trips to go filming. The consumption of travel, spending money and filming to try to deal with the back and forth of the belonging paradox becomes recursive in nature and all consuming to the point that it is stressful.

Matt: Into videos, there’s a lot of money and trips. A lot of money. And a lot of injuries. A lot of skateboarding hours put in and a lot of mental stress.

Even for hardcore members, belonging can be and often is a continuous struggle of symbolic expression through consumption.

5.5.3 Specialized Knowledge: “Nerding Out”

Knowledge is one way in which skateboarder’s demonstrate their passion and their commitment to the lifestyle. The respondents, when not at the skatepark, spend their free time talking skateboarding and watching videos on the Internet. If you are a hardcore skateboarder you have to be “the guy who truly skateboards, who lives it and breaths it”. (Shawn). Part of breathing skateboarding is consuming everything skateboarding including industry and product knowledge. It is the icing on the cake and shows the other
skaters at the skatepark that you are a “real” skateboarder and belong to the hardcore Kingston scene. For hardcore members, knowledge can bring you status and enhance your belonging amongst your friends.

Knowledge can help a skateboarder demonstrate that they have completely “mastered” the lifestyle. While hanging out and chilling at the skatepark, the competition also includes who can demonstrate their passion through their knowledge. By demonstrating insight into the industry and knowledge of what is cool, skaters like Tim show their mastery of not only the tricks but also of the subculture and affirm their belonging and status within the subculture.

Tim: Fuck! I nerd out every day man. I hit all the websites, like the blogs the websites, magazines, websites, magazines, videos. I am always stoked to the see the new video that comes out. You know I am a fan A BIG skateboarding fan.

Interviewer: What is the reason behind nerding out?

Tim: Nerding out! It is just like I can talk to other skateboard nerds you know it’s like, “Did you hear that Josh Kalis quit Alien Workshop for DGK?” It is almost like celebrity gossip [laughs]. Or like, “Aw did you see that trick, it was fucking sick.” From a skateboarding perspective if you study it well enough you can do it well. I’ve heard before that it takes 10 years to master something. If you spend 10 years on something, you’ve mastered it. I guess I didn’t necessarily master skateboarding. But, fuck, I’m good enough. I’m satisfied. I’ve reached a level of satisfaction and appreciation for skateboarding.
Tim wants to master skateboarding in the form of ability but he realizes that he will not be a master in terms of tricks. He is just “good enough” in terms of tricks. Not being able to master tricks can lead to a high degree of doubt about belonging within the subculture. As a result, Tim turns to another symbol to define his belonging within the scene. That self-symbol is knowledge which he “nerds out” on and believes he is ahead of everyone on.

Tim: Like I’ve watched skateboarding for years. I’ve done it for years. I dare say I fucking study the shit. I guess I’m like a fucking guru of some sort. [laughs]

Tim believes that he is a “chillin dude” and that his knowledge of skateboarding allows him to feel like he can bond and chill with the other “select few” nerds in the Kingston skateboard scene. For Tim, knowledge is a self-symbol that he perceives is easily self-verified because he feels comfortable in the conversations at the park, is given phone numbers and invited to go filming. Knowledge can be verified more easily than tricks that might take months to learn which can help to explain why he goes to extremes of “nerding out” on knowledge.

Tim: It’s basically like the tight-knit group of people who, I guess, are skateboard nerds. [laughs] For a city of over 100,000 people, it’s awesome that a select few individuals can get together, skate together, we all exchange phone numbers, film, whatever. Talk skateboarding, we’ve all got that in common. It’s just a common interest.
“Nerding out” lets skaters define their own groups in their head within a skate scene. Tim believes by “nerding out” he is able to hang with the other skateboard nerds or hardcore skaters at the skatepark.

The skaters within the Kingston scene also “nerd out” to try to deal with the feeling of exclusion caused by being part of the Kingston skate scene. The Kingston skaters are more vigilant in acquiring the self-symbol of knowledge in attempting to cope with a belonging paradox related to place.

Glen: I choke down skateboard magazines at a furious rate. I would go to Indigo after school at the beginning of the month and try and pick up every new issue of every new magazine every time. I would use them as a bible. Transworld Skateboarding is pretty much your bible as far as the level of progression of the pros are at, and really gives you insight into the industry and what is cool because it is hard to know what is going on in Southern California if you’re in Kingston Ontario. That is really the epicenter of the industry Southern California.

Like Glen, other respondents are keenly aware of the perception of Kingston as a small town with a small outdoor skatepark that is far away from Southern California. Knowledge gained through Internet and magazines, like Transworld, allows them to stay connected to other skaters that they may have only physically met once and feel like they belong to the larger subculture.

Ken: That’s another good thing about skating, that if you skateboard, you know other people that do. Because I’ve stayed with people – like I have a friend who came here for school, and he’s from Montreal. Even before that, I know some other people from Montreal that I never really hung
out with and had known. But because I met them once or skated with them once for a day or a weekend and we talked about skateboarding over the Internet. It’s a similar interest. And there’s such a small group of things to talk about skateboarding. You can talk about tricks, you can talk about who you know that skates, spots that have been skated around cities. Like certain cities have certain spots, and a spot has certain tricks on it, and who are the people that have done those. And everyone just kind of knows around such a large area that it’s all that. “Oh, yeah, I know that kid. I heard about him in Montreal. He skated this trick down Esplanade.” And then my friend will be like, “I was there for that.” Just talking about tricks that are done in spots in the city, it’s like we’re good friends. So now I have people I can go see in Montreal. Like San Francisco, Vancouver, Toronto. I have lots of friends I’ve never hung out with for more than like a day that I’m actually better friends with than people I’ve known for a really long time, just because of skateboarding. Just because the passion was there for me and the passion was there for them, and we both skateboarded so much.

Through talking to these other skaters on websites and forums, skaters are able to demonstrate their knowledge within the larger subculture, which allows them to show others their passion for skateboarding. In essence, gaining knowledge allows them to transverse geographical boundaries and construct their own sense of belonging through virtual relationships with other skaters. They are able to play with their sense of belonging and construct a group that is only in their heads of which no one else is aware.

The Internet, which allows skaters to construct their own groups, is also a double-edged sword. Just like with the tricks there is a one upmanship competition with knowledge as nerds compete to be the first to bring new knowledge to the group. However, with the speed and global reach of the Internet knowledge becomes old fast.
Nerds and others have to continually consume knowledge at a furious rate (i.e., “nerd out”) in order to stay one step ahead of others and feel like they can belong. Knowledge as a self-symbol of belonging like the tricks is fleeting.

Knowledge does demonstrate an individual’s passion for skateboarding. By demonstrating insight about industry and knowledge about what is cool, skaters like Glen and Tim show their mastery of the subculture and affirm their belonging within the subculture. But the use of knowledge can also create doubt because everyone is looking for the newest piece of information to share with group. So, if a skateboarder does not keep up and “nerd out”, they risk feeling left behind in the conversation and could face feelings of exclusion and a belonging paradox.

Jack: It's just pretty crazy what people are doing nowadays. The videos you watch and stuff, it's just hard to keep up.

Just like the self-symbols of tricks, knowledge also demonstrates how belonging for the respondents can be dynamic and fluid. Belonging uncertainty can arise at any time even for those that consider themselves hardcore members.

5.6 Coping with a Belonging Paradox related to Ability

When it comes to coping with a belonging paradox related to ability the respondents had a number of different strategies at their disposal. These strategies included continuous effort and consumption of not only their equipment but also their bodies to the point of almost complete breakdown of themselves financially and
physically. The more productive coping strategy seems to be an active reconfiguring of their sense of belonging but then that comes with baggage.

5.6.1 Continuous Effort: Never Giving Up

Skaters can go through huge dry spells where they cannot progress or perform tricks they were at one time able to perform. This creates a belonging paradox for some skaters based on ability. It is an ability they know they have but, for the moment, perceive they no longer possess. A common response to this belonging paradox is to try to continue to land the trick and never give up on it.

Glen: No, the doubt was always based on what I perceived I ought to be able to do. Based on my other skills. If I can do this trick, why can’t I do that other trick? For example, I can do front smith grinds in my sleep, why can’t I do tail slides?.......I’d skate for eight hours after school every day. I’m sure you’ve seen it happen here when somebody’s trying a trick over and over again and they don’t get it and they toss their board at a fence or something, or stomp on it and snap it.

Ben: If I work really, really hard and I’m sweating and bleeding and pissed off, I feel like breaking my board or something. And finally I get it, and it’s almost out of the blue. And I got it on camera and it looks good, that’s awesome. Because I had to work for it.

Over time, skaters have many experiences like the one described by Ben of finally getting a trick and being able to symbolize the trick at the skatepark. These feelings, according to the respondents, are the best feelings one can experience. It is the reason that they skate.
Paul: It feels awesome. I remember learning how to Kick-Flip grip and grind on this bench here. And just landing it and being like, “whoa! I did not expect to land that.” And being all pumped on it. Learning something switch or something, it’s just a feeling, like better than sex. I don’t know how to explain it.

The experience of the euphoria of finally getting a trick reinforces to skaters that they should never give up on a trick because they will eventually get it and it will be worth it in the end. The outcome reinforces the idea that all it takes is continuous effort to belong. The difficulty that occurs during the process is that skaters can have long periods of time of utter frustration leading to self-doubt and feelings of exclusion from the subculture.

Ben: Yeah, sometimes. Anger can get you hooked on a trick. Like if you’ve been missing something and it’s pissing you off, you know that you should take a seat, but it’s like, “fuck, I’m going to get it next try.” But you miss it and you keep going. It can get really maddening at times. Skateboarding is really frustrating at times, but it’s awesome most of the time.

This idea of never giving up and continuous effort was also the strategy for Shawn. According to Shawn he was “always the last one to learn it (a trick)” among his friends. This made him feel

Shawn: …like crap. But I guess I had revenge on them later because – I mean, it was all fun. But still you’d go to bed at night, like, “crap, how come I can’t learn that as fast as the other guy learned it?”
Shawn’s response to the uncertainty of a belonging paradox related to ability was to put more effort into learning the trick and to not perform the trick until it was ready.

Shawn: I had revenge on them later because when I learned it, I learned it better. I’ll give you an example on that. Through my time period when I was a teenager learning all the tricks, the best thing you could do was how many 360s you could do. So we were reading in magazines that guys could do like 15 and 20. We were doing like twos and threes. All my friends broke the five mark before I did, so they were all showing up on a Saturday, “Oh, I just did four-and-a-half,” or “I just did five-and-a-half.” Which for that time, the more you could do, the better skater you were. That’s how you were judged. It was like a scale of how well you could skate by how many spins you could do. But when they were doing five and six and seven, and I was twos and threes and fours, eventually they went to 8, 9, 10, and I went to 13, 15, 15, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60. And they never kept up. So I was way down here as they learned 10, but I hit 100 way before they even hit 15. I was one of the first in Canada to break that 100 category. I think I was always one of those kids that in my mind, when I was going to bed at night, it was basically, “hey, I’ll show you, I’m going to be better than you.” Even though I couldn’t keep up with them when they were learning, I surpassed them in the long run. Let’s just say there was 300 hours into learning five 360s. I had three hundred hours into it, but I was only three and they were at five. So I put in another 300 hours to get higher than them, and they got to a point that they felt like they couldn’t keep up, so they stopped pursuing that trick. They kept practicing, but they didn’t try to practice it as – I got so far ahead of all my friends. They shifted into a different realm. And I would focus on what I was trying to get good at.

Hardcore members seem to have a single minded focus on learning tricks. They are relentless in the time and effort they continually put in to try and achieve progress. However this path is not for everyone.
Ken: For a while I was – I think that’s what kept me coming back to skating. For a while I was frustrated – well, I wasn’t frustrated. I don’t really know how to describe it. It was more annoying. Because it took me so long to do certain tricks. I think that’s why I got so good at fliptricks. It’s because it was so hard for me to land my first one. It took me months. And I know that most people say, “Oh, it took me a month to pick it up.” And I’m like, “It took me six.” Because I couldn’t do it. I didn’t put the right effort into it.

At first, at the initial starting, it was annoying. But that annoying was also part of the challenge. It wasn’t too challenging, so the fact that I could do it is great. Because if I had never been able to Kick-Flip, I probably would have dropped it right away. Because the people I skated with, I’d learn something and they’d learn with me. I’d learn and they’d learn with me. And then I would learn six things, and they wouldn’t. And then they’d try one of the things that I could do that they wanted to learn it next and they’d keep trying but they couldn’t do it, then they’d become frustrated because they weren’t progressing with me. And I’ve seen a lot of people quit and stop skateboarding just because every time they came out they would compare what they could do to what I could do, and we would start at the same time.

And now suddenly I had more tricks and more of a trick selection than them, and they’d quit.

Ken, Ben and Glen are typical of the skateboarders I interviewed. They all experience extended periods of time where they perceive little progress compared to other friends or even to their own perceived level of skating. Their response to that self-doubt and feelings of exclusion is to continue the effort to learn the new trick and in the end surpass their friends even if their friends would move on to other tricks. What makes these hardcore skaters unique is that belonging to the skateboard subculture is so central to their identity that they develop a belonging paradox of having both strong feelings of inclusion and strong feelings of exclusion simultaneously. For them, there is no escaping
this paradox by quitting or moving on because that would be in some small way admitting that they are not who they think they are. Skateboarding is central to their identity. Their response is simply to up the effort to extreme levels.

5.6.2 Consuming Themselves and Their Equipment

In continuing to throw themselves at obstacles and never giving up on a trick, the respondents are hard both on their bodies and skateboard equipment. They are constantly injured and battling with their bodies. When their bodies wear down, it is sign of total commitment to the subculture.

Jack: You know, in skateboarding you're going to get hurt. Luckily, when you're younger you don't get hurt as much, or you can take it more. As you get older you can get pain. Like, my knees are so bad from skating. It's like I get hurt a lot easier now and it's kind of harder to get up after a fall, which is pretty bad at the age of 19. I can only imagine where I'm going to be.

Andy: I’ve always skated, there’s just been gaps when I couldn’t. Like when I had my two back surgeries, there was eight months where I couldn’t skate. Actually I did skate while I was healing. I wasn’t supposed to, but I did. I just went to the park and rolled around. I didn’t do anything intense. So there was the eight months during my two back surgeries, and then there was – let’s see, I broke my ankle in April. And I think skated September of that year. ….Yeah. He broke his ankle severely (pointing to Matt). I broke my ankle. Hey, Nick, did you ever break your ankle skateboarding?

Nick: Yeah.

Andy: Yeah, he broke his ankle.
Even though their bodies are breaking down, the respondents claim they will always be a skater until they die.

Jack: I think until the day I die I'm going to be a skateboarder….I'm going to try and skate as long as I can, until I can't, until my knees blow out, and even then I'll get surgery and keep going. That's pretty cool to get both knees replaced.

Respondents are proud of their injuries and perceive this self-symbol like a badge of honor. Injuries are obstacles to overcome and demonstrate their commitment to the subculture. Battling through injuries goes hand in hand with never quitting.

Andy: I see myself skating until I can’t walk anymore. There’s not going to be a “too old” for me. I’ll always go out and skateboard.

Respondents treat their equipment much the same way they treat their bodies, smashing into obstacles with reckless abandonment. The two main pieces of equipment for a skateboarder are a skateboard and a pair of skate shoes. The skateboard consists of the deck (usually made out of wood), wheels, bearings for the wheels and trucks to attach the wheels to the deck. The speed at which skateboarders consume equipment is rather phenomenal.

Shawn: Remember back in the day we used these plastic things on each end of the board call skid plates. So we made the board last incredibly long. Well, today they don’t want it because of the extra weight and doesn’t Ollie as high blah, blah. So the quickness and the weight on the boards, a good skater will go through a board in a week for sure.
Paul: The trucks usually last me a long time. I just got a new deck. Decks don’t usually last too long for me, probably like two weeks and I should get a new one, but I never do. Usually like three weeks. Wheels probably last a month or so. Bearing, my bearings seem to go pretty quick. Those ones are okay, but this one’s really shot. I have new ones, I just haven’t put them on yet. It’s pretty expensive.

Interviewer: How much does a new deck cost?

Paul: This is just like a shop board, so it’s like $50. But if you want a pro deck, you’re looking at $100 for just the deck.

Evan: I broke five boards in one day……It’s so expensive once you get good. You can go through a pair of shoes in a week easily, if not less than a week. And a board will last you for a matter of like – you have to go day by day if you’re good. Every day you break your board. So it’s expensive.

Matt: Like I bought these shoes about five days ago, and they’re already starting to wear out big time. I’m going to have a hole in like four days. It’s getting expensive.

This speed of consumption is also a symbol of how good a skater an individual is.

In some sense, the speed of consumption becomes a goal for the individual skaters. This provides insight as to why individuals toss their board around in frustration when they don’t land a trick. It is not a bad thing that a deck breaks because only good skaters that are putting in the effort to progress break boards quickly.

Matt: In a month I probably go through almost three. Times it by 12. 36. That’s expensive. Boards are like $100. They range from like $50 to $100. So $3,600 a year.
This is remarkable given most respondents earned minimum wage at best and had limited financial resources. Matt, at the time of the interview, was a student and had no summer job.

The perception is that money spent on the professional deck helps skaters deal with a belonging paradox related to ability in two ways. First, is the connection it creates to professional skaters and, second, is the ability to display and use current technology.

Within the skateboard subculture there are three levels of brands. There is the generic brand, which is the cheapest in terms of price and quality. There is the company brand (Zero skateboard, Flip skateboard or DC shoes) and then there is the professional (pro) brand skateboard or shoe. The pro brand generally has the company brand on it along with the name and graphics of a professional skateboarder. Professional skateboarders usually have input into the design and make of shoe and skateboards that display their name. A good example of this is the PJ S LX, which is a shoe designed by P.J. Ladd, who is a professional skater sponsored by DC Shoes and is part of the DC team.

To get leather soft you have to use the really really good leather. Full-grain leather you can’t beat it you know. Leather is just the other side of suede so if you have a good leather that is soft, then it is like it lasts long and it’s broken in right out of the box. I mean, I could talk about the hidden laces for hours. Dude like I have had so many arguments with skaters about this since the shoe came back with the hidden laces and I have been skating them with the hidden laces because now I don’t have to hold 4 pairs of shoelaces in my pocket. And it just makes so much sense for a skate shoe to have hidden laces. Molded foam collar is really
good. I didn’t want the shoe to have the tongue straps, which is the elastic bands in the tongue because it always felt like it was pushing down on the top of my foot. They need to be kind of looser. I like my shoes looser on my feet. At the same time, I hate when they slip off so that is where the molded collar came in because I wanted to really like suck my foot like into the shoe. Heel clip 101 makes the shoe stable. Gives the shoe a shape. Just gives the shoe a defined shape and stability. I mean, we did not want the shoe to be too thin but we wanted the comfort to be there.

What we tried to do was a way around that was with the insole we added gel so it’s a little thicker, then we made the fore foot of the shoe kind of thin so you are getting board feel with the insole, you know what I am saying with the sole? But then you are getting the support with the gel. While I think with the airbag I think the airbag ties into the hidden laces, which ties it back into DC heritage, which was a big part of this shoe. We actually put a really good airbag in there and then instead of just wrapping it around rubber they put it around polyurethane PU so it just makes it light which is good. It just serves such a purpose. No heel bruises. You don’t have to worry about that ever because those things don’t go away. At the end of the day I just tried to make a shoe that I could just skate in and not think about.

(Transcript from video 3:08 minutes long

Skateboarders tend to be very particular about the equipment they use and see the equipment as an extension of themselves. Within the subculture, skaters view pro brands as extensions of the professional, each with a different unique style of skating. The professional skaters design their own branded models adding features that they like and are unique to their style of skating. This creates a physical and technical connection to the professional skater and the team to which the skater belongs. Skaters facing a belonging
paradox based on ability are able to use the professional models to help cope with the paradox.

Ken: A board sponsor, like Girl, will have several pros. If there’s some pros on there where I don’t even know why they’re still skateboarding, the one guy’s so old. The other guy, when he comes on, I don’t really like his video parts. I don’t like his personal style of skating, like his arm/body movements, the way his tricks look. That style and technique I don’t like. So in all honesty, when I look at boards and there’s all the pros, when I see the ones I don’t like, if they were the only brand names left, I’d be like, well, I like Girl and I know I’m getting Girl, but, shit, I wish there was another pro deck here other than that guy’s name, because I don’t like that guy.

Interviewer: What is it about wanting the other professional?

Ken: It’s just in my case, it’s a personal preference. I’ll still buy it, because I like the quality of that deck, and the graphic’s gone in hours anyway. But at first I’m like, “Aw.” I’m getting the Girl anyway, but I wish they had an Eric Koston one instead of an Alex Olson.

Interviewer: What is it about Eric Koston?

Ken: Because he’s got a great technique, finesse in his style. He’s a really nice guy. His video parts are always entertaining. He’s been a huge part of the skating scene for like 10-15 years, and he still skates like he’s a kid, because he just has great style and great effort. Overall, from what I’ve seen from him and his videos, and what interests me – because there is different styles. There are people who like the ramps, people who are just about massive stairs and handrails and other ones are technique with fliptricks. And he’s more kind of in what I associate myself with in skating. I’m more of a technical type skater and so is he. I’m interested in all the stuff he does, and the stuff I wish I could do, that I don’t want to take the time to put into that
progression to get past my plateau. Because I do it more for fun instead of just getting to be the best. He does, he is doing it. So all the stuff where, “Oh, man, that would be cool,” and then I see a video part and I’m like, “he did that.” I am like, “that’s amazing.” I wanted to see what that trick would look like, because it hasn’t been done yet. And he does that. That’s awesome. And everything else about him. So you get to like the pro in general, and the pro becomes a brand. And it’s a brand on top of a brand and it’s better. Because now that Girl deck, let’s say that Girl decks are blanks and they’re Girls, well, they’re all brandless because they’re all Girls. But you have Eric Koston on a Girl and it is like a brand on top of a brand. I’m getting the exact same thing. There’s the no-name Girl and there’s the Eric Koston Girl, and they’re both the same quality and the same thing, but I can get that extra brand on top. And I like that guy. I’m like, sweet, I’ve got an Eric Koston deck that’s awesome. I like that.

Interviewer: What’s it like skating an Eric Koston deck?

Ken: I think honestly, on a subconscious level, if I’m having a good day of skating and I just bought an Eric Koston deck, I feel like it’s because of the Eric Koston Pro Girl Model. Instead of just the Alex Olson one. Or if when I buy there is only the Alex Olson left and I want Girl because I know they have good quality, and I buy his deck and I have a bad day, I’m like, I hate Alex Olson. I don’t like him as a person and now I’m skating, magically, the decks that I like and I’m not skating well. It’s the completely ridiculous association of skating bad with his name and not liking it to skating good and liking the other guy.

Ken, for example, buys the skateboard brand of a professional skater he likes and who has a similar style to him. Ken’s logic is that if the skateboard designed by Eric Koston works for Eric Koston then it should work for him as well given Ken perceives Koston’s style to be similar to his. Even though Ken knows that the association is
completely ridiculous, he truly believes that the pro model helps him out. In a way he lives vicariously through the brand or professional because the professional can do tricks that are in his style but that Ken can only dream of doing. Living vicariously through brands is nothing new but Ken takes it a step further believing that the professional brand actually physically helps his ability and day-to-day belonging within the subculture. Ken attributes this to the confidence he achieves knowing that board is meant for his style of skating.

Ken: Just like confidence, really, I guess. Because you’ve pre-set a goal and you’re achieving it, basically, because of the brand already creates that. You had an idea and you look around and your idea has pre-existed in the form of this brand. You’re able to achieve what you thought possible and kind of accomplish your goal because of the existence of this brand. You wanted this style, you like this sort of person, you want to project yourself as this and the same sort of mentality and you look around. And you’ll grab it when you see something. You’ll go, “wow, they’re doing everything that I was hoping some company would do.” And then if you like all the people that are pros for it, it really stays in your mind, and you can’t ignore that. If you go to buy boards and stuff and there’s stuff, like I said, that’s quality that you got to look at, but when you find two things the same quality, if that brand is the same quality of the no-name, that brand’s going to win ten fold just because of whatever it gives you, however it strokes your ego. Whatever sort of thing it does for you, it’s just going to win, because of exactly that route it is taking.

What the pro brand gives skaters, like Ken, who constantly face a belonging paradox based on ability, is the confidence to believe that they too can land tricks in that style of skating. However, if they do not land the tricks, the brand still gives skaters the
confidence to project that style of skating because they perceive others in their scene will assume they have done the tricks or similar tricks as a result of using the professional brand. The professional brand decks are generally at least double the cost of a no name brand but for skaters like Ken who are facing a belonging paradox that does not seem to matter. What the professional team of skateboarders is selling for these skaters is a way to feel confident about their ability and by extension to feel like they belong to a team and the subculture as a whole.

Skateboarders who doubt their ability to do tricks also turn to technology to try to improve their ability. Typically, these are skaters who are putting in the constant effort to try to progress with limited results. Consequently, anything that could theoretically help them with this effort is welcomed with open arms. For example, to improve their ability, skaters often look for shoes that are lighter and give them more feel for the skateboard while lasting a while.

Paul: Just that they feel good, pretty much. If they feel good on your feet, then they’re probably going to be a good shoe. They might not last very long, but sometimes they’ll last a long time. You just have to be comfortable with them. I’m having a hard time with these shoes right now, because the last shoes I had were so thin. They felt like an extra pair of socks. And these just feel like winter boots or something, because they’re so much bigger. There’s not as much feeling, so it’s hard to flip certain tricks or grind certain grinds.

In decks, skaters are looking for durability so it lasts a while. They also want decks that are lighter and have more pop or give to them which makes the deck easier to
flip and provides more height in the performance of tricks. All of this is in an effort to symbolize their tricks better and reestablish their sense of belonging in their own minds.

Glen: So brands that I would appreciate are brands that have been – either have pretty good longevity as a brand or have some kind of feature that I perceive as preventing me from getting injured or improving my skateboarding in some way, or durability is the key.

Interviewer: Improving your skateboarding how?

Gen: Shoes that are going to help you feel your board are going to improve your skateboarding. A deck with deeper concave, or grip tape with better grip. Wheels that are not going to flat spot or cause you to slip out.

In response, a number of skateboard brands do try to position themselves as technically advanced in helping the skateboarder do tricks. DC Shoes for example, introduces many innovations in its skateboard shoes to make them more durable and last longer. This includes, Dynamic Grip Technology designed to give the skater more grip on the board, and Mega Suede, a material that also has more grip, more flexibility and lasts longer than tradition suede. Its latest innovation introduced in 2011 is called Unilite Technology, which is a specially designed injection molded foam for the sole of the shoe that is lightweight while providing long-lasting cushioning. This technology is supposed to make the shoe lighter and more flexible compared to the traditional rubber sole shoe.

Returning to the previous example of the ad copy for the PJ Ladd shoe, during the promotional video P.J. Ladd performs several difficult tricks successfully with the camera focusing in on the shoes. The video leaves the impression that the technology in
the shoes can help a skater land tricks especially if he has the same style of skating as PJ Ladd. Implied at the end of the copy is that the shoe is so light but durable that it is like it is not there, giving skaters the ability to feel the board and do their tricks. This is exactly what Paul wants in his shoes when he says his last pair of shoes felt like socks. Of course, skaters pay a premium of $130 for these technically advanced shoes designed by a professional skater.

Skateboard deck companies also use technology to gain an advantage in the market. Brands like FLIP, Zero, I: PlanB and Creature introduced a P2 technology, which is an oval shaped Kevlar reinforced maple veneer. This technology makes the decks thinner and lighter and gives the deck more spring pop, which should make tricks easier to do.

Nick: And with my boards, Thunder makes low medium to really light trucks. Flip, they have a smoother, not so much like curvy, they have a smoother concave in them with more pop. And the size and the shape, which is better for me. And Globes, I like them on my feet. They’re perfect for the way I like to skate. They give me more feel. I am wearing Globes right now.

Again, skaters pay a premium for the P2 technology but feel it is worth it because it helps them land their tricks and learn new ones. Recall, tricks are one of, if not the most important symbols of belonging within the subculture. Consequently, it is understandable how skaters facing the constant back and forth of a belonging paradox based on ability may go to extremes in trying to cope with the paradox. Even with more durable
equipment, skaters end up consuming the equipment as fast as they can in an attempt to self-symbolize they are good skaters. They are eager to spend their limited financial resources on expensive skateboard equipment in an effort to gain ability and a sense of belonging through an attachment to a professional skater and his team or to gain technology in the equipment, which they perceive, helps with their ability to do tricks.

5.6.3 Playing with the Definition of Belonging

When facing a belonging paradox, one of the strategies members use is playing with their own sense of belonging. They look to alter this sense in ways to make it more secure and, thus, cope with a belonging paradox. The two most common strategies are to merge the skater collective self-concept with a more secure self-concept or to change the definition of belonging within the skateboarding subculture.

Jack copes with a belonging paradox based on ability and style by merging his skater self-concept with a stronger more secure self-concept. Jack’s family is into art and he is always around it making him very comfortable with the idea of being an artist.

Jack: I'm into art and stuff like that. I've been doing drawing and painting since I was little, little. My dad was an artist and there's art in his side of the family, and then my mom wasn't an artist, but there was art on her side of the family as well, so that was kind of what I did for my whole life. So if I wasn't skating, I guess I would be an artist – graphic design or something like that.

According to Jack, “art is always his thing.” Although he realizes that he is good at skateboarding and enjoys when his skating progresses, he knows it is hard to go
anywhere with his skating. He perceives he cannot get the desired recognition for his ability from the larger subculture. This doubt causes him to bring in the stronger self-concept of him as an artist.

Jack: I think I'm going to look into tattooing. I think that's my new path because skating is fun and all, but it's hard to go anywhere with that, so I'm going to try and incorporate my art and skating into one, and I think tattooing is a good place to do that.

Although Jack is not currently doing tattooing, the local Ruwa Board Shop currently sponsors him and as part of the deal Jack designs decks for the owner of the shop. The sponsorship means Jack gets a free deck of each one of his designs. See Figure 19 for examples of his designs.

Jack: I am an artist skater. I am designing graphics for decks…. Well this was done on three sheets of 8 ½ by 11, taped together, and I drew it at actual size on that deck. So all the skulls, all these guys are all hand done. I drew these on the computer. This was a painting. I painted the tree and then put it in the computer and took it in, and stuff like that. I always thought it would be cool to be able to design boards, and now I am, so that's kind of cool, too. So that's definitely incorporating both.

Jack gets a lot more out of designing the decks than a free deck from the shop. It allows Jack to merge his collective self-concept as a skater with his other self-concept of an artist. It is a natural fit because there is a perception of skateboarding as an art within the Kingston skate scene. This merged self-concept of an artist skater is a much stronger self-concept than just “Jack the skater” because Jack has far less doubt about being an
artist. He even perceives collective self-verification of him as an artist skateboarder by seeing other skaters at the skatepark using his designs.

Figure 19: Sample of Jack's Deck Designs for Ruwa Board Shop

Jack: Oh, it's cool. There are tons of kids who come skate and they all have one of them anyway. There's a lot of them out, and these are really popular (pointing to the one with the skateboard tree).

The stronger self-concept props up and supports the weaker collective self-concept allowing him to cope with the uncertainty of the belonging paradox and feel like he belongs in the skateboarding subculture.

Ben also constructs his own sense of belonging within the skateboarding subculture. Recall that Ben experiences a belonging paradox related to ability by
comparing himself to his brother Matt. He feels that he can never be as good as his brother and therefore he believes that he has no talent, sucks as a skateboarder and has no style. This constant self-doubt can be very frustrating for him when he perceives he cannot progress and keep up.

Ben: Just getting frustrated in general, like I’d flip out, swear, break my board. I don’t know, stupid shit like that, that’s just retarded. It can get pretty bad. I think that I’ve even like punched myself in the face before. Like getting so mad at not making a trick that I smacked myself, giving myself a fucking bloody lip. I mean, it gets really bad. I have a bit of a temper.

Ben’s strategy is to accept that he will never be as good as Matt even though other skaters consider Ben to be a good skater. As a result, like Jack, he defines his belonging not by focusing on the skating or tricks part but rather by focusing on key support roles within the subculture.

Ben: I’ll point it out, and he’ll (Matt) find something. In Ottawa, I’ll like skate around and I’ll look for spots and he’ll film them and it’ll look good in the video. Because I have the exact same eye for spots that he does.

Ben also helps with connections, filming and organizing trips down to New York City. This allows him to live vicariously through his brother.

Ben: I am just a skateboarder from Kingston. I’m nobody, though. I don’t have enough talent, whatever. Like if we’re talking about skateboarding, now I just do it for fun. I do it for fun and I support Matt. I help out with the making of skateboard videos and stuff like that. But as for me, I just do it for fun. I just skateboard around now. I never think of
going anywhere myself with skateboarding. Yeah, for Matt it’s always been support for him…… I accept that I’m not good enough to have a full part, like Matt. And that’s cool. That’s why I think I try to back him up and support him so much. It’s like I’m living vicariously through him, through supporting him. It’s like because I can’t do it, I want to see like – if Matt has the potential, which he does, I want to see him do that, because that would be like a dream for me, to be able to do that.

Ben defines himself a skater by focusing on the support role of being involved in the filming of Matt’s videos. In fact, it was Ben’s connections and hanging out with skaters in Ottawa that got Matt into his biggest video All Defy. Through Matt’s participation in videos and accompanying Matt on the trips to New York City, Ben is able to experience skateboarding culture through Matt.

Ben: Because I don’t really film that much, if anything at all. I just like being there when he lands tricks. Because he’s my brother, it’s just fun to be there and experience it all. It’s just sort of like taking a seat and watching it happen is pretty fun. Plus, I like to be involved in the editing and all that stuff, I really enjoy. I like helping out Aaron with filming, even though sometimes he doesn’t take my suggestions or anything like that. It’s still cool. But, yeah, if I don’t have a trick for the spot to film, then it’s always fun to take the passive seat and hang back and watch it happen.

When Matt gets invited to film or go to different spots, Ben is there in an important support role. Ben hangs out with the skaters and gets to skate with them gaining a sense of belonging through the experience. Matt does the tricks, but without Ben, Matt would not have the opportunity to appear in videos. In Ben’s mind, this elevates the importance of his role in the subculture and gives him a sense of collective
self-verification for how he defines and self-symbolizes his belonging. When Matt gets a video part in a New York City montage it is not only Matt that virtually gains a sense of belonging to the larger subculture.

Ben: WE know that WE fit in when people from New York City complemented Matt’s part in All Defy and liked it and thought it was good. And when he’s being invited into doing another video. And he’s going to be in a New York City montage, when he’s not even from New York. To me that’s pretty much that your identity meshes with that. When someone from New York City is saying, “Come on in, hang out with us in this montage.”

By constructing his own sense of belonging Ben is able to effectively cope with an ability belonging paradox. Shawn used the same strategy when he was part of the Powell-Peralta team. Recall, that Shawn says,

Shawn: I didn’t feel through that time that I was deserving of being on that team. Again, it goes back to whatever’s in my brain to think that I don’t belong at that level. I felt all the sudden I was traveling with these rock stars and I wasn’t one of the rock stars.

Shawn felt that, based on ability alone, he could not hang with these rock stars so he would do anything to stay on the team.

Shawn: So I was doing whatever it took just to make sure that I was doing everything right and competing as hard as I could.

This included being the team driver and logistics person on the trip.
Shawn: I was convinced that the only reason they kept me on the team was that I was the only person that cared about the logistics and keeping the tour organized. Everyone else was living the lifestyle.

He belonged because he was good at the logistics of traveling which again is another important element of the subculture.

Through playing with their sense of belonging and shifting their definition of belonging away from ability, Shawn and Ben are effectively coping with the tension of the belonging paradox related to ability. They are not getting trapped in the continuous effort of trying to learn new tricks, which provides them both feeling of inclusion by occasionally landing new tricks and feelings of exclusion when they do not.

Ben: It kind of frees your mind up, really. Like if you change your mind, thinking like, “oh, I’m no longer going to think super-competitively and wonder about how good I am or how good this person is or whatever,” it kind of liberates you. You don’t have to worry about how you look anymore. You don’t have to worry about what other people think of you. You can just do it for the sake of doing it. It’s just fun. It’s just an activity then. You can progress at your own level then. You don’t have to worry about going to a skatepark and seeing the guy across the way skating, and be like judging him and analyzing and all that stuff. You’re no longer thinking like that. It just lets you do your own thing and progress at your own level and not keep trying to shoot for something else. You can just do what you want. It’s much better that way, I find. For me anyways. It gets rid of a frustrating edge. If you’re no longer comparing yourself to other people, number one, you’re no longer being a dickhead because you’re not judging people anymore, and you can just have fun with it. And number two, I don’t know, it just like – like I said, you can progress at your own
level and you don’t have to worry about what other people are doing.

In constructing their own sense of belonging by playing with the definition of belonging, Shawn and Ben are able to, at least temporarily, escape the tension of the belonging paradox. It is important to note that even though they have a new found freedom, both skaters still carry, in the back of their minds to this day, the original self-doubt and the fact that they had to play with their sense of belonging in order to belong.

Ben: Oh here goes the emotional stuff I wish I was good enough to be sponsored. I’d like to get some recognition too.

For those coping with a belonging paradox the freedom in some sense is illusory because the devil is in the details. In Ben’s case he is always aware that he does not construct a sense of belonging the way he would want to. For Shawn, to this day when he enters contests, he still doubts his ability. The belonging paradox is always in the back of their heads.

5.7 Coping with a Belonging Paradox related to Style

When it comes to coping with a style belonging paradox, skaters seem to be obsessed with perfection in order to project their style for collective self-verification. Recall, skateboard companies and brands tend to be organized around a team of professional skaters that tour around the world doing demonstrations and contests.
promoting the company’s products. The key for the companies is to sponsor skaters that all have the same image.

Shawn: Unless they’ve got the right image, the right graphics, the right pro skaters, the branding of the whole entire company, they’re dead in the water. If me and you started a company, I’m going to help you with that image. I’m going to get you the right riders, I’m going to make sure all these guys are paid right and get the image created, and our company is going to be successful. But if you don’t have all those elements of the product going for you, you can’t create a superior product. It’s not going to work unless it has the consistent image going.

Skateboarders are keenly aware of who is on every team because articles appear about why skaters change teams and advertisements appear in skateboard magazines put out by the companies to welcome new members to the team. At the skatepark there is always a lively debate about who belongs on which team and why.

Tim: Nerding out, it’s just like, I don’t know, I could talk with other skate nerds. It’s like, “Did you hear that Josh Kalis quit Alien Workshop or GDK?” It’s almost like celebrity gossip. [laughs]

In fact, as part of their daily ritual, skaters at Polson Park actively debate whether a professional skater’s style fits or belongs with the team he is on.

Matt: Yeah. You have to have the same style. If you’re sponsored by DC and you’re skating the stuff I skate, it doesn’t look right. Because most of the DC guys are big handrail skaters and frigging….

Frank: Intense ledges and shit.
Matt: Yeah, it’s just not right.

Frank: Lizard King’s on DC.

Matt: That’s doesn’t suit him at all. He’s like a dope addict. He should be on Duffs. If they even exist anymore. He should be on something like that. It doesn’t look right. A guy with like hippie hair and really dirty-looking and stuff, he belongs on a company that has that style and that look.

Interviewer: What do you mean by look?

Matt: Like if you’re wearing clothes or the way you look? You’ve got to look – if you’re sponsored by people that you’re not… Say if you dress like West 49th style and you’re sponsored by Van’s or something, it just doesn’t look right. Because Van’s are known for more of a style like mine. The style that I explained to you. And if you look like a West 49 skater, you’re out of place, because you wear those logos and those hats and big bulky shoes and ugly pants.

Part of the reason skaters want the brands to have a consistent style is so that each brand can appeal to different groups within the subculture and project a clear positioning. Within the skateboarding subculture, brands help define the accepted groups or styles that are allowed with the subculture. For example, Hesh and Gangster are two distinct styles or groups of skaters that have brands specifically targeted to them. In the process, brands provide the symbolic resources skaters use to help define and defend their belonging.

Ben: Like everyone still follows to some extent. Everyone still has influences. What they think is good. It’s kind of hard to escape it. You’re going to buy skate shoes, you have to choose some company that you think represents you or that you could find comfortable skating in. Like we’re skating Lakai footwear, although everyone does too. It’s
like the only company that I really enjoy nowadays. So to some extent, you put yourself in a style.

Matt: In a certain style that is a good fit.

Ben: You pick a company that represents you. Certain companies appeal to different types of skateboarding. Like if you want to skate crazy almost near-death type stuff where you’re jumping down steps and handrails, you’ll probably do like, I don’t know, Zero skateboards, or Toy Machine or Fallen footwear. There are all these different brands that have teams. Like their teams are that type of skateboarder, that’s what they do. Or if you want to do something more like Matt, where there’s – like some of the Lakai skaters are more like Matt. Van’s guys are more like Matt. Traffic skateboards, those guys are a bit more in Matt’s style now.

Skaters like to use the brands and companies to help to define not only their style and the type of tricks they perform but also their dress. By having a consistent image, it allows skaters to pick the type of skater they want to be and allows them to self-symbolize their skating style and define their belonging. Recall Ken’s quote from earlier.

Ken: Just like confidence, really. Because you’ve pre-set a goal and you’re achieving it, basically, because of the brand already creates that. You had an idea and then your idea has pre-existed in the form of this brand. You’re able achieve what you thought possible and kind of accomplish your goal because of the existence of those brands. You wanted this style, you like this sort of person, you want to project yourself as this and the same sort of mentality. And you’ll grab it when you see something. You’ll go, “wow, they’re doing everything that I was hoping some company would do.” And then if you like all the people that are pros for it, it really stays in your mind.
The companies and brand are very strategic in how they build a sense of style or belonging with their brand. The videos and advertisements put out by skateboard companies show the group or team of professionals not only skating and traveling but also chilling or hanging out just like the average skater. So, by using the symbols of the brand, skaters not only obtain an image but also a sense of belonging. The skaters that use the brand can feel like they are part of the team in their own minds because they skate the same style as the team. So, when they discuss which professional should be on a team they are in reality debating the ethos of their group and their standing within it.

Chet: We all had our own favorite brand and we'd fight over why that [other] brand is stupid. Like, none of the skaters on that team are any good. Why would you wear that? The product isn't any good. The shoes suck. The boards suck. The wheels suck. You know, we were like fighting over our favorite hockey team or something…..I wanted to skate. If I liked the way the skaters on that team skated, then usually the teams kind of have a similar style. I guess I could kind of relate to the guys on the team maybe a little more than some other ones.

Interviewer: How could you relate to the guys?

Chet: The same taste in music and liked the same style of skating as them. I kind of dressed the same, whereas with other brands it would be more concentrated around gangster guys who I didn't really relate to as much.

Interviewer: Relate in what sense?

Chet: Like I didn't really enjoy, at the time, hip-hop. I found in interviews they kind of made themselves sound like idiots. They always talked about drugs and just stuff I didn't personally relate to.
The self-symbols of well-recognized brands like Zero and Powell enable skaters to assure themselves a sense of belonging in their own minds. The professional skater is at the pinnacle of the subculture and no one questions that skater’s belonging. In the minds of Kingston skaters, these professionals are believed to be just like them because they travel, party and just skate. So by extension, no one should question the belonging of a Kingston skater that uses a brand of a professional team.

Use of these brands also helps a skater’s sense of belonging at the local scene. Using brands like Zero or Fallen justifies a skater’s outlook and style of skating to the other skaters in the scene. The skaters at Polson Skatepark, through their conversations, are all aware of the brands and professional teams on the market. Through using the brands that are widely accepted in the subculture, skaters can perceive collective self-verification of their belonging because everyone recognizes the brands as self-symbols. The professional skaters on the team legitimize their belonging.

Nick is a good example of how skaters use brands to gain a sense of belonging. Nick is a skater who is very laid back.

Nick: There is this few, this group of skaters like me that are really, really laid back, and it's like everything's got to be chill. Everything. You want to be comfortable, but you want to look like your style, but be comfortable.
The group or brand he is talking about is Flip, which according to him has a brand attitude of

Nick: …just be yourself and skate. Don’t hate, just chill.
Like look at this graphic. How simple is that (the world FLIP)? It’s not like a picture of a fucking gold skull or the devil. They just show them (the pros). They put little quotes of relax. Graphics. Simple. Keep it Ja. Like the hand of Ja.

The brand has the same outlook and attitude on skateboarding and life as Nick and also celebrates diversity. As a consequence, Nick finds himself in the brand and team and gains a sense of belonging from being part of the brand’s team.

Nick: That team is like filled with different styles of guys. Like so many different styles. You’ve got your Hesh guys, you got your G-unit guys, you got your guys in the middle. You got your guys that you don’t even know what the fuck they are by the way they dress. But everyone’s like chill just like me. Why shouldn’t there be variety. Why should there be one set opinion?

5.7.1 Extreme Emulation of a Professional Skater

When skaters face a belonging paradox related to style the response of using a professional team’s brand to belong tends to go to an extreme. They use symbols of the brand to emulate precisely the style of the professionals on the brand’s team.

Ben: I don’t even have a style. I don’t want to talk about my style, because I suck at skateboarding. I’ve been skating Lakai for a long time. I take my shop boards because I can’t afford pro boards.

Matt: Ben’s a lot like an actual Lakai guy.
Nick: Like I said, I look up to Appleyard (on Flip) because he’s Canadian and he skates all-around. He’s one of the best that ever lived, in my opinion. He can skate all-around and skate everything good. Like I said. And he’s got a style that I like. It’s smooth. It’s a chill style. It’s not like skate hard and fast, or skate like G. It’s like skate everything smooth. Exactly. Because we’re identical in look…. Like it’s Mark Appleyard, it’s one of the best. But the Nollie big spins and the Nollie Back-180s and quarters. I like to skate a lot of things he does. Like weird bank things you can find. And we listen to the same type of music. But just the way I started my style is just like his. It happens with a lot of Canadian skateboarders, a lot of them have his style.

Nick emulates Appleyard so much that even the other skaters in the Kingston scene have noticed (See Figure 20).

Paul: Because they fucking are identical. Shoelace White tee, got scruffy-ass hair all the time.

By emulating Mark Appleyard to a tee, Nick is able to put himself in a group with the rest of Canadian skaters that have the same style. This emulation allows him to construct in his mind his own sense of belonging.
Figure 20: Emulation of A Professional Skateboarder

Above: Nick  Below: Professional Skateboarder Mark Appleyard
Jack also deals with a belonging paradox related to style. Recall, Jack considered himself a Hesh skater, which is a group of skaters that skate fast and throw themselves at objects or down sets (stairs) and that is why he likes the brands Zero and Fallen. However, due to his long hair and eyeglasses he did not care much for his physical appearance and did not dress in the Hesh style. As a consequence, he perceived that other skaters did not know that Hesh was his style of skating and felt he was being misconstrued by others. He wanted to be viewed in a certain way and felt he could not consistently give off that vibe. His first response was to spend all of his money on Lasik eye surgery to have the eyeglasses removed. But even after a successful surgery he is very self-conscious of being misconstrued by the other skaters at the skatepark.

Even today there are times when he is at the skatepark and he feels he is not on point which means he feels he is not giving off the vibe he wants to give off as a skater. He attributes this to something being off with what he is wearing that day. He is obsessed with the way he looks to the point where he is worried about wearing the right shirt, which can define a good day for him. He calls them the “little things” that can throw him off and cause him not to land his tricks leading him not only to doubt his style but also his ability. His response is to try to be as consistent with his look as possible, always using the same brands and professionals as role models (See Figure 21). Even on the hottest days I have never seen him out of his trademark toque, wristbands and skinny tight jeans (field notes August 22 2009).
Figure 21: Emulation of Professionals by Jack

Jack: Yeah, you know, I'm rockin' the wear. I've got the shoes and stuff like that, the skinny jeans. The kind of skating that I grew up watching, this is kind of what the guys were wearing, the tight pants and big shoes. So I try to
kind of emulate that a bit. You can tell, if you looked at a bunch of people who were skating, what they grew up watching and stuff they like just from what they wear and from how they skate. I can really see it. I grew up watching Zero and some of those guys, so anybody who looked at me would be like, that guy definitely watches Fallen and Zero and those companies and those videos, because of how I skate and what I look like. For sure, this look is definitely based off what I grew up watching. Zero, those guys, Jamie Thomas for sure. Cole, got to go with Cole. Everybody has their favorite skater.

Jack clearly tries to emulate professional Jamie Thomas with the toque and Chris Cole with tight jeans, wrists bands and style of a Fallen t-shirt, which is the brand and team he identifies with. Even today, years after the surgery he is very conscious that others can tell that his style signals that he is with that group of skaters so that he can perceive that he can achieve collective self-verification of how he sees himself.

When skaters have to deal with a belonging paradox based on style like Jack, Nick and Ben for example, they aim for their style to be as precise as possible and in perfect harmony with the chosen brand. They want to be able to perceive that other skaters will not misconstrue them. Unfortunately, as Jack knows all too well, it is hard to maintain such a consistent look all of the time. This means the skaters will continue to over consume the symbols of the brand and associated professionals to try and maintain their perfection in their style to perceive the potential for collective-self-verification of how they want to be viewed.
Chapter 6

Contributions

The first five chapters of this thesis led to the development of a conceptual framework (SCURB) of belonging based on individual self-concept perspective. The framework, while not ignoring the perceptions and contributions of other members, clearly places the individual member at the center of constructing his or her sense of belonging. In essence, it is the perceptions of the individual member that matters most when it comes to his or her sense of belonging. Approaching belonging in this manner provides a fluid and dynamic view of belonging that paved the way for introducing the belonging paradox to the literature and to the study of belonging. The analysis of the belonging paradox in the context of skateboarding subculture suggests that members use consumption to try to cope with the duality and constant tension of this paradox, thus leading to a number of theoretical and managerial contributions to the literature.

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

This research makes a number of theoretical contributions to the consumer behavior and marketing literatures as well as the general literature focused on group membership and belonging. The existing marketing and consumer behavior literatures tend to adopt a somewhat static view of membership and belonging with a primary focus on the status uncertainty that surrounds new group aspirants. Through the introduction of
the belonging paradox to this literature, a more comprehensive understanding of uncertainty and belonging emerge. Specifically, the belonging paradox suggests that beyond the initial stages of striving for group membership, uncertainty of belonging can continue to be a pervasive, continuous struggle even for committed group members. Respondents in this thesis demonstrated the extensive experience of a belonging paradox. Even a professional skateboarder that arguably reached the pinnacle of the subculture still experiences belonging uncertainty and struggles with the belonging paradox.

By complimenting the work on member status, this thesis extends the current work in marketing by developing a view of belonging that is more dynamic and idiosyncratic. This view of belonging is at the individual self-concept level, thus allowing the investigation of how individual members construct and shape their own belonging experience within groups. Placing the focus of belonging on an individual perspective allows for the consideration of how idiosyncratic factors, such as race, gender, disability or self-doubt, can affect the manner in which an individual perceives his own sense of belonging within a group. In addition, these idiosyncratic factors may also raise self-questions about belonging, producing membership uncertainties even after status has been achieved. The sources of doubt or uncertainty are not independent and feed off of each other to build the exclusion side of the belonging paradox. Furthermore, these sources do not necessarily have to originate externally or be directly related to skateboarding. This thesis illustrated several examples in which even hardcore and professional skaters doubt their belonging despite strong external evidence to the contrary.
of which they are aware. In their own minds, members fall in and out of groups suggesting that membership and especially belonging can, in part, be defined in an individual’s own subjective terms, as a result of group identification, collective self-verification and self-symbolizing.

This research also goes beyond the view that belonging is a step-by-step process ending when membership is “granted” by others in the group. Marketing currently also assumes that status at the end of this process leads to a secure feeling of belonging. This thesis demonstrates that this is not always the case. The view of belonging emerging from this thesis is one in which belonging is a never-ending journey of symbolic expression through consumption. Respondents clearly demonstrated how belonging uncertainty can arise at any time for individuals within a subculture, thus making belonging a fluid, dynamic and idiosyncratic process for individuals. That source of belonging uncertainty is not just other members rejecting a member or failing to grant status, but can also be an internal perception a member brings with them into a group. Some examples of this in the thesis include respondents believing that being from Canada and Kingston holds them back, doubting their own ability to do tricks or their style and perceiving that the way they “look” affects the extent to which they feel they belong at any given time. All of these are perceptions from members who others would consider to be hardcore and secure in the subculture.

With the introduction of the Self-Concept Uncertainty with Respect to Belonging (SCURB) framework, this research reinforces the importance of internal perceptions of
membership as key in building a sense of belonging. This research is the first to examine how group identification, collective self-verification and self-symbolizing are reciprocal elements working interactively together to help an individual build his or her own perceptions of belonging. Any form of belonging uncertainty, such as self-doubt, that disrupts this process can put a member’s sense of belonging in flux, thus reinforcing the notion that a sense of belonging can be dynamic and fluid.

Although the granting of membership in a subculture by its hardcore members can be a significant milestone in a member’s sense of belonging to the subculture, it is only part of the story. The focus on self-concept in this research provides a more comprehensive understanding of the importance of self-perceptions and how members can continuously construct his or her own sense of belonging. Based on the research in this thesis, there are two types of self-perceptions that are important: how an individual views himself or herself, and how an individual believes others view him or her as a member.

Interestingly, belonging is such an important human motivation that individuals experiencing a belonging paradox are able to use these perceptions to create virtual groups and their own sense of belonging in their heads when necessary. For example, some skaters created their own groups in their heads at the skatepark by ignoring those that they perceived as better while others were able to feel like part of a professional team just by using the brands or skating the same style as the team. Self-perceptions, however, also create belonging uncertainty when individuals perceive they have no style or ability
to self-symbolize. Belonging uncertainty also occurred when skaters felt that others did not see them as they saw themselves.

This research also demonstrates the importance of progress within groups and subcultures. The majority of subcultures studied in the literature to date evolve at a relatively slower pace than the skateboarding subculture. When constant progress is part of the ethos of a subculture like it is in the skateboarding subculture with the evolution of tricks over time, it means that within those groups belonging has the potential to always be in flux. In the case of the skateboarding subculture, the ability to self-symbolize tricks is central to gaining a sense of belonging. But since the inception of the subculture in the 1970s, skaters, driven by professional skateboarders, are always pushing the envelope leaving the potential for them to constantly feel some sort degree of uncertainty about their belonging. At the same time, when a subculture celebrates creativity, art and individuality like the skateboarding subculture, individuality and belonging are not mutually exclusive. In fact, to build a sense of belonging within the subculture, skateboarders try to develop and perceive a unique individual style that is their own.

Within the collective self-verification and symbolic self-competition literature there is an assumption that if one symbolic route does not work to reduce uncertainty, the individual can easily choose another symbolic route to replace the one that is not working. This is not the case within the skateboarding subculture. Tricks and the ability to progress are clearly at the top of a self-symbolizing hierarchy. While knowledge and dress elements also appear to be important, they are clearly below the tricks and the
ability to progress in the eyes of most skaters. In some subcultures like skateboarding when it comes to belonging, there are not an infinite number of symbolic routes that members can use to demonstrate belonging.

When it comes to a belonging paradox, members who face the uncertainty of the belonging paradox tend to focus on a limited set of self-symbols that appeared to work for them in the past and to over consume this limited set of self-symbols. The members’ over consumption also tends to focus on the self-symbols of experts, which in the case of the skateboarding subculture are the professional skateboarders.

Typically, collective self-verification discusses verification at one level within the group at a time. The findings within this thesis demonstrate that collective self-verification can happen at multiple levels simultaneously. For example, videos posted to the Internet allow skaters within the Kingston scene to perceive collective self-verification both within the local scene and the larger subculture at the same time. Interestingly enough, collective self-verification assumes that a member needs an audience to perceive verification but with the advent of cheap digital video cameras this is not always the case. Skaters can film themselves symbolizing tricks and then watch the film by themselves later or when needed to verify that, yes, they can do the tricks. In essence, they are verifying themselves.

Due to the fact that group identification, collective self-verification and self-symbolizing are reciprocal elements working interactively together to help an individual build his or her own perceptions of belonging, this research demonstrates that the same
symbolic resource can be used for all three elements. For example, within the skateboarding subculture spots and videos are self-symbols, opportunities for collective self-verification (skaters skate the same spot another skater found or comment on a video posted on the Internet by one skater) and increases group identification (making videos and finding spots is what professional skaters or the experts of the group do so this brings a skater’s collective self-concept closer inline with the group prototype). The problem for using symbolic resources for multiple elements is that they tend to get challenged more and over used by both the individual and the subculture, and thus lose their power as a symbolic resource. This forces, in some ways, the constant progress of the skateboarding subculture and demonstrates how consumption of a symbolic resource both creates uncertainty and certainty.

The uncertainty of the belonging paradox and the constant tension it creates for members is clearly a motivator for those members experiencing it. By introducing the concept of the belonging paradox to the marketing and consumer behavior literature we can begin to get a more comprehensive understanding of the role consumption plays in how members attempt to cope with belonging paradoxes. For example, members experiencing a belonging paradox are definitely more vigilant about their sense of belonging. Skaters perceiving that there are better skaters around or that they are having a bad day performing tricks will either leave the skatepark or sit on the edges not wanting to risk losing their sense of belonging through their self-symbolizing.
Another tendency associated with the belonging paradox is the tendency to over-consume a limited set of self-symbols of a subculture because the inclusion part of the belonging paradox reinforces the symbols that worked in the past. These include tricks they successfully performed in the past, certain brands, dress, equipment, travel, spending money, “nerding out” on knowledge and focusing on trying to progress. Pursuing things that worked in the past does increase the certainty of belonging of skaters temporarily. The reality, however, for most respondents is that the consumption of these symbols does not eliminate the source of the belonging uncertainty but is rather a short-term way of coping with it. The source of the uncertainty tends to constantly reappear in the form of remembering how Kingston or Canada has held them back and how much of a struggle it is seeing others better their self-symbols or tricks. Skaters experiencing the constant uncertainties of the belonging paradox tended to spend all of their money and time on skateboarding to the point where some individuals were going paycheck to paycheck waiting to buy their next deck or pair of skate shoes. The belonging paradox is a powerful motivator as it relates to the overconsumption of symbolic resources such as brands.

In this research, overconsumption assumed many forms including the symbols of the team or company brands, but also time, money, their own body (injury), and place. In the consumer behavior and marketing literature overconsumption tends to have a negative connotation whether from a physiological, moral or psychological standpoint. However, from the standpoint of this research, overconsumption was not entirely pejorative. While frustrations were evident, especially those associated with coming from
Kingston, at the same time the respondents felt very positive about showing that skaters can come from a small Canadian town in the middle of nowhere and there is nothing else they would rather be doing. Nick had the words “One Love” tattooed on his arm and when I asked him what it was about he responded without hesitation “Do I really have to tell you? It's for skateboarding.” The overconsumption may be all consuming but it is the thing they know and love.

The expense of overconsumption led a few respondents to quit at one time or another but they always came back to skating because it is the reality they know. The belonging uncertainties of a belonging paradox are just part of their reality which they deal with on a constant basis. One could make the argument that skaters like Shawn and Matt became as good as they are because they had the belonging paradox motivating and pushing them to demonstrate to the subculture that, “Kingston has a skate scene. I think it’s important to show that there is talent that came out of a small town. You can have talent out of nowhere. It’s important to show that” (Matt).

The uncertainties of the belonging paradox also motivate members to be creative in constructing their own sense of belonging. In addition to constructing their own groups in their heads and using the team brands and skating styles, some respondents also defined their own role within subculture by merging it with another stronger self-concept such as artist as the case with Jack or filmer/organizer as the case with Ben. Belonging uncertainties and belonging paradoxes motivate consumers to play with their identity in order to try to deal or cope with the uncertainty.
6.2 Managerial Implications

When trying to capitalize on a subculture or group, marketers should first investigate the nature of the group. Understanding the ethos of the group can go a long way toward successfully marketing to the members of the subculture. In the case of the skateboarding subculture, the subculture is always progressing in the form of tricks or the symbols a skater requires to feel like he or she is a skater and belongs to the subculture causing belonging uncertainty. The use of experts to help establish a group ethos is very important for marketers. Advertisements targeted at the skateboarding subculture at first glance appear to be like every other celebrity endorsement ad with the implied message that if you buy this product you can be like the professional skaters endorsing the product. However, the ads have a much more important goal that is not only to establish a brand identity in terms of style of skating but also to develop a sense of belonging with the brand’s team. Skateboarders are not just aspiring to be like the professional skater they idolize, they are buying the brands to also gain a sense of belonging within their local scene and the subculture as a whole. To a large extent, skateboarding brands are about consuming belonging. This is due, in part, to the group ethos focused on progress in which tricks are the most important self-symbol tied to demonstrating this ethos. When skaters experience moments of lack of progress, brands assist in helping to reduce the resulting belonging uncertainty through the team of skaters to which they are mentally able to belong. Understanding what drives the ethos of a subculture appears to be an important means of helping brands to meet the belonging needs of members.
Marketers also need to better understand how the reciprocal elements of group identification, collective self-verification and self-symbolizing help build a sense of belonging in targeted communications. This thesis demonstrates how symbolic consumption and brands play an important role in this process. Recall, there are two self-perceptions that are key: how an individual views himself or herself, and how an individual believes others view him or her as a member. The key is for the brand and/or the communication to help address any belonging uncertainty that may arise within those two self-perceptions. Products and brands positioned to reducing strong sources of uncertainty are the ones that will do well in the market. For example, skateboard companies like DC Shoes or FLIP Skateboards that claim to have a technology that will help with tricks, thus potentially reducing belonging uncertainty for skaters, continue to be very successful.

Skateboard brands or teams tend to have high group entitativity meaning they have clear prototypes, providing a clear potential route to reducing uncertainties about belonging. Skaters within the team tend to all project the same image, have the same attitude about skating and do the same style of skating. Within the skateboarding subculture and its members, there are very clear distinctions between the brands and the type of skaters that use those brands, thus providing a clear roadmap for reducing belonging uncertainty. Therefore, marketers may want to encourage brands and brand communities to have high entitativity. This may attract individuals experiencing belonging paradoxes, thus inducing greater sales and usage of the marketer’s brand.
Also, in order to induce the purchase and consumption of symbolic resources, such as brands, marketers may find it profitable to subtly remind members of their belonging and membership uncertainties, which can be ever present. The brand-related purchases and consumption by individuals experiencing a belonging paradox tends to go to extremes. Because these individuals tend to focus on and over consume the same set of self-symbols, this could prove to be very positive for a marketer if their brand is part of that limited set of self-symbols.

High group identification can yield different outcomes for different committed members, which, in turn, has implications for the targeting of brands. For example, in this thesis within the parameters of a belonging paradox, even some committed members who experience strong identification with a group appear to engage in excessive self-symbolizing. Consequently, the use of symbols or group rituals does not necessarily indicate the level of an individual’s membership certainty. Members, who do not engage in the use of symbols or group rituals, may actually be the most secure members. This may have important implications for how marketers segment or target members of brand communities. Members who appear not to be members, based on their lack of public, symbolic use of the product, may, in fact, be one of the most loyal and profitable segments. Appearances can be deceiving and marketers may want to place more emphasis on the psychological aspects of belonging in addition to its physical manifestations.
Marketers should also be aware of the potential role that co-production can play as a way of dealing with belonging uncertainty. Given the importance of self-perceptions in helping an individual define his or her own sense of belonging, it is likely that most individuals tend to believe that they are finding their own unique self within the group. This could be especially the case in Western or North American cultures. Respondents in this thesis tended to want to make the point that they are the only ones skating a particular style in Kingston or that they were skating a particular style and using the related brands long before it became popular. Members clearly want to believe that within the subculture or group they have the freedom to be themselves and are not just blindly following a prototype.

Respondents also want to believe that when faced with belonging uncertainty they have the ability to define their own sense of belonging and what symbols such as a brand means to them. Marketers can encourage this by emphasizing the uniqueness of a brand and allowing the brand to be combined with other brands at the will of the consumer. There are only a few major skateboard companies but they all own several unique and distinct brands catering to different groups or segments within the subculture. Skateboarders are then able to use the different symbolic resources of these brands to create the perception of their own sense of belonging and self within the subculture. For example, skateboarders are able to buy the different parts of the skateboard from different brands and combine them as they see fit making the skateboard their own while still leveraging each brand’s sense of belonging. Skateboard brands also give away free
product to the good skaters in the local scenes allowing the skaters to feel that they are part of the team and directly involved in producing the image or ethos of that brand. Allowing members the freedom to co-produce their own sense of belonging, using the symbolic resources of a brand, is an important way of dealing with belonging uncertainty for members.
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Appendix: Research Ethics Board Approval

June 9, 2000

Garth E. Harris
PhD Candidate
School of Business
Queen's University

GREB Ref # GBUS-229-09
Title: “The Consumption Experience of Skateboarding”

Dear Garth Harris:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled "The Consumption Experience of Skateboarding" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS) and Queen’s ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (article D.1.6) and Senate Terms of Reference (article G), your project has been cleared for one year. At the end of each year, the GREB will ask if your project has been completed and if not, what changes have occurred or will occur in the next year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB, with a copy to your unit REE, of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (details available on webpage www.queensu.ca/ose/research_funding.html#Adverse ). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also reminded that any adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example you must report changes in study procedures or implementations of new aspects into the study procedures on the Ethics Change Form that can be found at http://www.queensu.ca/ose/research_funding.html#Change. These changes must be sent to Linda Frid at the Office of Research Services or FRIDL@queensu.ca prior to implementation. Ms. Frid will forward your request for protocol changes to the appropriate GREB reviewer and / or the GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

Joan Stevenson, PhD
Professor and Chair
General Research Ethics Board

copies: Chair, Unit REE: Dr. Jane Webster
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Peter Dacia
QSB Research Office: Amy Marshall