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## **Burning Community Integration and Disability**

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Burning Community Integration and Disability

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Rehabilitation Counseling

by

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## **Abstract**

Individuals with anxiety and depression have always been marginalized and stigmatized. Individuals with “hidden” disabilities are encouraged by society to keep them hidden, or face ridicule and persecution. Society decreases their sense of self-worth, and self-efficacy by destroying any perception of normalcy. Social support resources are vital for individuals with anxiety and depression’s continued mental health. As time goes on the individuals experience a decrease in the amount of available resources, at the same time the need for them increases. These individuals need a way to quickly replenish their social resources and the Burning Man regional network creates a unique opportunity to rebuild in safe place free of societal judgements.

Despite this lucrative opportunity for social network understanding, there is a significant gap in the research. There is little research on the topic of social networking in festivals and even less so in regards to Burning Ban events. The limited research that does exist is specific to the origin event, Burning Man, with little about the regional network; comprised of smaller events around the globe.

This study employs ethnographic methods to examine the benefits of Burning regional Network and determined there are significant benefits for individuals with psychiatric disabilities. This project examined the social networking that occurred during and between events, and determined the most common resource is emotional support and it is indeed enduring, after and between events.

Social networks are built very quickly because of the 10 principle framework that guides Burn organization, activities, and behaviors. Burners approach each other with trust and compassion and allow each other to define themselves however they want free of judgement and

stigmatization. This allows honest intentions and communication. Each participant lowers their barriers and bonds very quickly with each other, without trying to show they can provide value, other than cultural enrichment. Relationships are not based on a system of reciprocity, unlike those in the default world. Everyone is equal and people are free to explore themselves and each other.

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This dissertation would have been just a dream in mind of a struggling researcher if not for the following people.

To the participants, thank you for your time and confidence in my project. As a Burner I now know how hard it is to sit down and answer questions, when there are so many wonderful things happening around you. I believe it was the Burner desire to make the world a better place and their helpful nature that made this project possible.

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to Diana Araiza, and Shannon Combs. To my girlfriend, Diana Araiza, for teaching me to believe in myself again and for staying strong during the most difficult months of my life. When I lost all hope, you saved me, you literally saved my life. You believed in me and gave me your strength when I needed it most. You helped me finish the journey.

To Shannon, when I needed something to believe in and did not know what, you introduced me into the Burner community. You also gave me a tribe to look after and to be looked after by. One of the most important needs in life is to belong and to be needed. You gave me a place where I was needed and where I would make a difference. You started my journey.



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## Chapter 1: Introduction

*“I had been driving in the rain for several hours and just discovered that I overshot the event because the only person I knew there was not answering his phone. He had left me several broken messages due to spotty cellphone coverage and I was totally lost. Then, in the distance, I noticed a carnival-like menagerie of lights and a young lady with pink hair in a raincoat approaching my car, waving her arms. She leaned in my window with a huge smile and said, ‘Welcome home, brother.’”*

*-C. S. Brace*

Individuals with disabilities have always faced discrimination and marginalization by society. Despite the best efforts of policymakers and social programs, they are significantly less integrated into their communities and have smaller social networks than individuals without disabilities. Social support resources are vital to continued mental health in all people, but individuals with disabilities have an even greater need for the buffer they provide against anxiety and depression (Chronister, 2009). Anxiety and depression have been widely studied, showing that individuals with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to stressors while also having fewer social resources and more limited social networks upon which to draw (Antonak & Livneh, 2005).

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine Burning Man and regional Burning events, smaller events sanctioned by the Burning Man Regional Network, and explore the methods by which they create a high level of community integration in communities that physically exist for less than one week per year. Specifically, it will focus on the experiences of individuals with

anxiety and depression when they attend these events to determine their level of community integration and how this compares with their typical social interactions.

While there is extensive information regarding the importance of social networks in a person's daily life, there is currently little academic literature examining the effects of the unique social networks formed during temporary immersive events such as Burning Man. This study will examine the nature of these social networks and the benefits they offer participants with mental health disabilities by evaluating the participant's social incorporation at the actual event, examining the social relationships that are established, and then investigating the impact these social ties have on the participant both during and after the event.

### **Research Questions**

- 1) **In what ways does attending a Burning festival impact individuals with psychiatric disabilities?** I will explore the ways in which attending Burning events impact individuals with psychiatric disabilities. The principles for Burning events, particularly those of Radical Inclusion, Participation, Immediacy, and Communal Effort, create an environment in which individuals should be integrated into various social networks quickly and with little resistance. The perception of social support this creates for the individual should act as a buffer against the effects of mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Cohen, 2004). The literature has suggested that attending Burning events may also facilitate healthy coping responses to existing stressors, including drastic shifts in paradigms, as well as increasing healthy functioning during non-stressful times (McRae, Heller, John, & Gross, 2011).
- 2) **Does entering new social networks at a Burning event provide meaningful social support after the event has ended?** I will evaluate whether entering new social

networks at a Burning event provides social support and what kind once the actual event has ended. This study will examine the instrumental, informative, and emotional support the participants encounter both during and after the events.

Burning Man is an inclusive event that takes place annually over 9 days in the Black Rock Desert of Northern Nevada. The event has been in existence since 1986 and now has over 70,000 in attendance (Devaul, Heller, & McRae, 2015). Participants camp with very little infrastructure or supplies other than what they bring themselves. Artists from many genres bring their exhibits and performances to share with the community. Attendees experience a temporary community comprised of like-minded individuals who often refer to themselves as “Burners.” The Regional Network was created by Burning Man Organization to oversee regional Burns and provide guidance to Burn-inspired events (The Ten Principles of Burning Man, 2017).

Regional burning events are experiments in establishing temporary communities that adhere to the ten guiding principles of the original Burning Man festival: Radical Inclusion, Radical Self-Reliance, Radical Self-Expression, Communal Effort, Civic Responsibility, Gifting, De-Commodification, Participation, Immediacy, and Leave No Trace (Doherty, 2004; Gilmore & Proyen, 2005; Jones, 2011; The Ten Principles of Burning Man, 2017). Building on this foundation creates a strong sense of communal belonging and egalitarianism. The principles of Radical Inclusion and Radical Self-Expression encourage the participants to celebrate individuality, diversity, and expression. One of the central ideals is that individuals are never labeled in terms of gender, disability, class, or ethnicity in any way, other than how they choose to identify. The principles of Gifting and De-Commodification eliminate traditional economic class lines because, once the event begins, there is no currency or internal economy. Every member, including event organizers and performers, pay for a ticket, with a few exceptions.

Tickets range in cost from free to \$1200. Neither sales nor bartering are permitted at any time during the burn. The remaining principles emphasize personal responsibility and cooperative coexistence (The Ten Principles of Burning Man, 2017).

A notable feature of the Burner subculture is that they speak of the community, both during the event and outside, as family. It is common for strangers to greet each other as “brother” or “sister,” and the Burn itself is referred to as “home” (Jones, 2011; Kozinets & Sherry, 2005). Bringing new members into the community is encouraged, but comes with additional responsibility. The veteran member is expected to ensure that their “Burn Virgin” remains safe and informed during their first event. This includes explaining the ten principles and helping introduce them to members of the community. However, those who join without a more experienced sponsor, find that any participant who hears that they are new, will enthusiastically perform these services for them. New Burners are often welcomed by people they pass in camp with hugs (after obtaining consent) and small gifts, ranging from food to handmade crafts. The relationships formed and developed during Burning events are social ties that continue long after the Burn is over; Burners rely on these networks for support in a variety of ways and often stay involved with the community (Quaak, 2016).

### **Justification**

There are three primary reasons that justify the need for this study: a) there is currently limited academic research available on the Burning subculture; b) the available research is not specific to the experience of participants attending regional burning events or to those with anxiety or depression; and c) understanding the effects of community integration at Burning events could help improve the lives of individuals struggling with anxiety and depression. It can be estimated from figures emerging from numerous Burns that the burning community is made

up of over 100,000 people worldwide. Furthermore, Burning events create a subculture that is very significant in the lives of its participants, but it is difficult to find peer reviewed articles that focus on this group. Most of those that exist are written by journalists, unpublished manuscripts, with a few others written as Master's theses.

### **Personal Justification**

In May of 2016, I was invited to participate in Interfuse, a regional Burning event. I initially experienced culture shock and was amazed by the cultural system that the ten principles create. People were immediately included by those they had never met before and participated in activities they had never experienced; systems of class and status seemed to disappear. The more I came to understand how the principles applied to the community, the more I was moved by the social integration and network building. I realized there was something unique about the event and wanted to determine how the social integration happened so quickly.

### **Research Assumptions**

This project is based on several assumptions that are necessary to understanding the importance of the project. These ideas are based on theoretical perspectives, methodological limitations, and a few personal insights into Burning. Each concept is sound and backed by research or, in some instances, common sense.

#### **Theoretical assumptions.**

There is significant literature that suggests social network resources are mitigating factors regarding stress. The presence of relationships has a positive effect on individuals with anxiety and depression. There is also limited literature that suggests certain relationships can exacerbate instead of mitigating external stress. While the negative literature is not as prolific, it would be remiss to not mention these resources. This research agenda is based on the assumption that,



overall, social resources are beneficial and mitigate against outside stressors. (McLaughlin et al., 2012; Chronister, Chou, Fitzgerald, & Liao, 2016).

### **Methodological assumptions.**

The full methodology will be covered in Chapter 3, but several assumptions need to be introduced here. When reviewing various methodologies, I have been drawn to both ethnographies and grounded theory. Burning by its very nature is inclusive and thus, it was necessary to engage in participant observation; attending the events firsthand became a necessity. There is limited literature on the topic and it quickly became clear to me that most Burners have never articulated why they do things or how the community functions. In many ways, this lacuna of understanding suggested to me that grounded theory might be the correct choice. It was a method with which I was not intimately familiar, but one I was prepared to embrace. After experiencing a few more events, I delved into the literature. It became clear to me that while most Burners were unaware of why the Burn functions the way it does and what the principles mean beyond past simple adherence, many researchers touch on various social resource areas related to my topic. Even after extensive experience with many Burn events, I would not have understood the nature of the cultural practices without having examined the literature available. I had developed insights into topics that even veteran Burners could not articulate and, without the literature, I would have missed many unique factors that will help in developing questions and pursuing a research agenda. It is because of this fact that ethnography was chosen over grounded theory.

### **Personal assumptions.**

While I am relatively new to the Burning social scene, I am also experiencing Burner culture at an accelerated pace, giving me the benefit of an emic as well as an etic perspective. At

the entry point of my Burn experience, I did not have any knowledge or understanding of Burning. I anticipated this project from the beginning and approached each event with academic interest. I have the benefit of beginning this project while still being barely out of my first year of exposure. On the other hand, I have had the benefit of attending ten Burns and several Burn-related events, which is more experience than the average Burner. In fact, my first data collection point was my 11<sup>th</sup> burn, which means I have attended more burns than 96% of Burners worldwide (Black Rock City Census Data, 2017).

Traditionally, an ethnography requires a more robust time schedule to complete, but most Burners attend only a few events each year. I am attending significantly more Burning events within a short time in order to achieve the same experiences and understanding as individuals who attend Burns less frequently but have done it for a longer period of time. By looking deeply into the Burner culture with academic rigor, I am more able to successfully determine the nature of social relationships and resources in the Burner community.

### **Anticipation of Outcomes**

It was my intent in this project to show how Burning events are able to quickly integrate people into social networks, with a focus on identifying what types of social resources are developed. At completion of the project, insights have been developed into the components that facilitate social network building as well as those that are detrimental to it.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Black Rock City:* Most Burns have a name for the temporary city that is built in preparation for the Burning event to come. Black Rock is the name for the city that the Burning Man in Nevada builds in preparation for the festival (Swan, 2013; Jones, 2011; Doherty 2004).

*Baby Burner:* The term is used in two different contexts. The first is to denote someone who is new to Burning, also referred to as a virgin Burner. The exact period that one is considered a baby Burner varies dramatically from attending a first Burn to possibly their first year. Baby Burner can also be used to describe a kind of ownership and responsibility. If you bring someone into the Burn community, they are your baby Burner.

*Burner:* A person who engages in the act of attending Burning events and/or leading a Burn lifestyle. It is interesting that many people believe that someone can be a Burner without ever attending a burn event. It has often been said “you might be a Burner and not know it,” implying that have traits that would make you ideal for Burning (Doherty, 2004; Jones, 2011; Swan, 2013).

*Burning Man or The Big Burn:* This is the event that started the community. Burning Man is the annual event in which approximately 70,000 people build a temporary community and enjoy a week-long retreat from the default world. Burning Man itself cannot be easily described, but many descriptions involve the phrase “experimental community” (Jones, 2011; Swan, 2013).

*Burning:* This is an adjective used to describe a variety of activities associated with Burning. It is used to discuss the act of attending a Burn event, but is also used in the context of when one first became a Burner. If the question is posed “How long have you been Burning?”, you are being asked how long it has been since your first Burn event (Doherty, 2004; Gilmore and Proyen, 2005; Jones, 2011; Swan, 2011).

*Burn-inspired:* These events may be Burns or other events that embrace the Burner culture, principles, and ideals. In some cases, organizers have not applied for Burning Man sanctioning and, in others, they have no interest in oversight. For the purposes of this study

events that arose out of Burning Man are also considered Burn-inspired. Wasteland Weekend is an apocalyptic event that started as a theme camp at Burning Man.

*Default World:* This is the way that Burners describe the rest of the world outside of the Burn (Burning Man Glossary, 2017; Jones, 2011).

*Decompression:* This is the time after a burn when you realize the default world is very different from that of the Burner world, and you begin to reacclimate to the default world. This time is often associated with depression and a sense of longing to return “Home” (Hocket, 2005; Jones, 2011).

*Effigy:* The effigy is a giant work of art that is Burned. This particular piece of art represents the pinnacle of everything that is Burn-related. The Burning Man effigy is always a man, and is sometimes referred to as “The Man.” People have a variety of ideas about why the man is Burned and, typically, both the structure and the Burning of it represent different things to different people. For most, it is similar to a religious experience. At the regional burns, the effigy varies from year to year based on that year’s theme. (Gilmore, 2004; Hocket, 2005; Jones, 2011).

*Participant:* This is an individual who attends and participates in Burn activities. It is often used in contrast to the concept of non-participant or observer (Swan, 2013).

*Playa:* The playa is the dry lake bed in the Norther Nevada desert on which the Big Burn takes place. It is often used when speaking about the physical location, although it is sometimes used interchangeably with Black Rock City (Swan, 2013).

*Regional Burn:* In addition to the Big Burn, there are many smaller burns around the world. These smaller Burns are sanctioned by the Burning Man Organization and are expected to follow certain guidelines, namely, the ten principles (Doherty, 2004; Jones, 2011).

*Ten Principles:* These are the guidelines that Burners embrace. The principles are to guide regional events to ensure they do not stray from the BM vision. While they were officially introduced in 2004 to provide structure for the regional network, many of the ideas have been in use since the inception. It should be mentioned that sometimes the principles, when applied, can conflict with one another and there is some room for interpretation. The ten principles are described in the literature review section in Chapter 2 (Doherty, 2004; Jones 2011; Burning Man Glossary, 2017; Swan 2013; Ten Principles of Burning Man, 2017).

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The purpose of this study is to examine Burning Man and explore the methods, norms and cultural practices that facilitate a high level of social integration in communities for individuals with anxiety and depression. This chapter will discuss the existing relevant literature on this topic and how it was compiled.

### **Search Strategy**

Upon starting this project, I had attended a single regional Burn event. I had very little personal experience and reviewed the literature extensively. As I mentioned, most of the literature on Burning Man is not of an academic nature and has not been vetted or peer reviewed. The Burning Man website has a section on Burner academic articles that provides references and links to relevant sources that are divided by topic and author. It is far from a complete list and some of the sources are unpublished manuscripts such as Master's theses and dissertations.

At the time of my initial review, I mistakenly believed the majority of existing literature was not relevant to my topic and rejected over 95% of that literature. If a source did not cover Burning Man and either disability or social support, it was rejected. After reviewing the literature a second time and having more direct experience within the community (attending ten Burns and four Burn-related events), I realized I had dismissed relevant topics. I have now been able to reassess the value and relevance of certain topics as they relate to disability and social relationships; my personal experiences have allowed me to see connections I missed previously.

This development has made me even more committed to my methodological approach of participant observation, without which this study would be incomplete. A common theme throughout the literature review is "understanding only comes from experience." That being

said, experience alone is not enough. It is only through the intersection of Burn experience and academic training that I was able to find useful literature on the relevant topics.

Additionally, the reference list on the Burning Man website gave me the names of people who devoted a significant amount of their academic careers to Burning Man. I have now been in communication with several authors and found them to be very helpful. I have posted some short, topical essays on various Burn forums and have gotten mixed responses from other members of the community. These posts have, however, prompted other academics to contact me, which has facilitated my search for resources. It was through those networks that an interested party facilitated a Burning Man ticket, which are usually difficult to acquire because of the limited number offered and the method of distribution. In 2017, Burning Man tickets sold out 35 minutes after going on sale (Hoffer, 2017).

While much of my experience has been at smaller, regional Burns, the papers on the Burner Academics page were almost exclusively written about the origin event, Burning Man. Assuming this was because the Burning Man organization-sponsored page provided the initial list, I conducted an extensive database search and came up with the same gap. Returning to the Burner academic site, I examined articles that I had initially dismissed for topic irrelevance more closely for references to regional Burning events; however, I only found one article that included a section about a regional Burn.

This lack of academic sources necessitated broadening my search. Books about Burning Man that have been published by reporters and journalists were well-referenced, but still not academic. In collections of essays and firsthand accounts about Burning Man, only one regional Burn was mentioned. The available literature on regional Burns is not elusive, but completely absent.

Examining the literature using the keywords, social support and psychiatric disability, required a significantly different approach as the resources are much more substantial. Initially, I focused on articles that spanned both categories and literature from the last five years, as well as a limited number of seminal pieces. While most of the discussion concerning social support for psychiatric disabilities was specific to age categories or ethnic groups, I did find some useful publications.

### **Academic Research on Burning Subculture**

The majority of existing research on the Burning community is dedicated to the original Burning Man event in Black Rock City, Nevada, which is often referred to as “the Big Burn.” I have not come across a single academic article that discusses regional Burns. In fairness to the academic community, Burning Man has been going since 1986, and the first regionals only gained momentum around 2003 (Jones, 2011). Because I have obtained literature on the Big Burn, as well as personal experience with regional Burns, discrepancies may simply be due to the differences in size.

There are over a hundred regional Burning events across the world on six continents. Burning Man has approximately 70,000 participants annually, and thus is very different from the smaller regional events that, on average, have between 100 and 11,500 participants. The sense of community varies due to the size of the events and the resources required for travel. At smaller events, it is easy to get to know everyone because participants have time to visit every camp. At Burning Man, there are hundreds of camps and art structures; it is impossible to see everything and interact with everyone. When the community is bigger, the individual is less significant. It is more likely a participant will not run into the same person twice (McRae, Heller, John, & Gross, 2011).



### **Burner Principles: 10 guiding points.**

Before the literature is reviewed a basis understanding of the Burning Man is relevant. Burning Man has ten different and separate principals that will be discussed throughout this paper in various forms. The principals are embraced and interpreted in a variety of ways across the spectrum. The principals are more likely to be embraced by veteran Burners and in many cases are taken to the default world and applied there.

*1 Radical Inclusion:* Burning Man tries to find a place for everyone. There is no stranger, no prerequisites for entry, everyone is welcome to participate in the community. This is principal is used to keep camps and people from excluding people. If there is an activity going on, people are welcome to join. If you walk by a camp and notice a three legged race, you are welcome to get involved (Burning Man Glossary, 2017, Ten Principles of Burning Man, 2017).

*2 Gifting:* Gifts are in many ways tokens of love. People give gifts without an expectation of reciprocation. You do not contemplate a return for your gift, which makes it much more honest. Gifting will be discussed in much greater detail below (Burning Man Glossary, 2017, Ten Principles of Burning Man, 2017).

*3 De-Commodification:* The Burning man community seeks to preserve Gifting and community by not allowing commercial sponsorship or transactions (Burning Man Glossary, 2017).

*4 Radical Self-Reliance:* Burning Man encourages individuals to discover and rely on oneself for survival. This encourages self-preservation, but also builds self-esteem and self-advocacy. At the same time it encourages people to find their own solutions and not rely on others (Burning Man Glossary, 2017, Ten Principles of Burning Man, 2017).

*5 Radical Self-Expression:* Everyone has unique gifts, and RSE encourages individuals to express them in an environment free from judgement. Individuals should share their talents with those around them (Burning Man Glossary, 2017).

*6 Communal Effort:* The community recognizes the value that cooperation can bring to the community. We respect and support the joint artist efforts and activities (Burning Man Glossary, 2017).

*7 Civic Responsibility:* We value the benefits of being a community. Event organizers must respect and obey the laws of the land. We also support the concept of public welfare. We all exist together and must take care of the environment and each other (Burning Man Glossary, 2017).

*8 Leave No Trace:* The community respects the environment. We understand that man has an impact on the land, and we want to minimize or remove the ecological foot print. Burners are expected to pick up all MOOP (matter out of place) at an event. If a Burner notices a piece of trash they are expected to collect it. Before individuals leave their camp they are expected to MOOP sweep their entire camp (Kehoe, 2011; Quaak, 2016; Swan, 2013).

*9 Participation:* Our community embraces a radical approach to Participation. Everyone is invited to join in, work, play, or other activities. On the opposite side, we see the spectator. Spectators are looked down upon, they watch everything, but never take part (Burning Man Glossary, 2017).

*10 Immediacy:* Stated as one of the most important principles. We seek to unlock the inner self. There are so many barriers in our society that make us second guess ourselves and keep us from participating or initiating an activity. We seek to eliminate those by jumping right in the middle. If someone has a spontaneous thought, we would like to see it followed by a

spontaneous action. In some ways it can be often thought about as adult play. You engage in activities that might seem silly, but do it free from judgements, internal as well as external (Heller, 2013).

**Style over substance: Theme.**

Burners are comprised of hippies, ravers, wastelanders, musicians, urban primitives, meth heads, psychonauts, artists, performers, and many more (Jones, 2011). Some consider the largest group membership is that of the hippies and ravers. It varies widely based on geography; for example, in my local area, there is a large wastelander and prepper (individual who prepares for a global, catastrophic event by living off the grid) presence.

Costumes, which are referred to as outfits, can be comprised of anything: Mad Max style armor, plush animal furry costumes, glitter suits, banana costumes, outfits that have their own power supply and light up, or no clothes at all. Costumes sometimes reflect what theme camp or group an individual belongs to as some theme camps require a dress code to participate, but this is not the norm (Doherty, 2004; Jones 2011; Quaak, 2016).

Theme camps are collections of individuals who camp together to experience and create an experience of a specific theme, more effectively manage resources, and distribute goods and services to the masses. Theme camps usually provide some combination of art, music, crafts, food and almost all provide refreshments (Burning Man Glossary, 2017). To qualify to be a theme camp, there must be some service to the community provided, even if that is just impromptu antics or ‘interactivity,’ as it is known at Burning Man. Registering as a theme camp gives priority placement geographically (meaning proximity to the effigy), as well as some social prestige. If a camp has an established reputation for providing quality services and a holistic experience, they have a higher prestige (Doherty, 2004). At a glance, this could appear to be

another class system where the established individuals with resources have prestige (Quaak, 2016). I would argue against this, since the focus is on providing for others. If an individual were to wear stellar costumes and play great music, but had developed a reputation for not being friendly and respectful of others or not adhering to the principles, any social status would be negated (Kehoe, 2008).

Art in the form of costumes, art cars and art installations is a very interesting element of the Burn, not only because of visual beauty, but because it also takes on an aspect of performance interactive art. Individuals take part in activities and rituals that would be considered strange in the normal, default world, and often refer to this behavior as “their art.” A group might drive around in art cars at 7am yelling about an imaginary missing dog through megaphones and refer to it as “their art.”

Burning Man is just that — spontaneous. The first day of a regional Burn, our camp’s mannequin was stolen from a display in front of the camp and was later found to be the groom in a mannequin wedding. A significant amount of the literature refers to this idea of spontaneity, also referred to in the Burn community as the principle of Immediacy. When you have an idea, you should immediately do it and consider the consequences later. If people overthink an action, they might lose their nerve or the opportunity present in that moment could pass. When one jumps right in, a situation can be created that could yield art or an experience that might not have ever existed (Heller, 2013).

### **Pilgrimage.**

Lee Gilmore (2005) discussed Burning Man in terms of a religious experience and pilgrimage. I think that this metaphor has power and relevance because of my personal experience, as well as the experiences I have observed in others. I have yet to meet someone

who was not moved on some level by the Burn experience. This is also important because of the diversity of experiences, with everyone taking something different away from the Burning experience (Gilmore, 2005).

Gilmore (2005) stated that Burning offers “an experience of ritual without dogma” (p.). He went on to describe the rituals at Burning Man as empty and waiting to be filled, meaning that one experiences a ritual that others join in, participate, but do not force a meaning on. This openness to interpretation allows everyone to draw their own meaning from the ritual and interpret it in their own way. A ritual that has something for everyone is a powerful tool for recruitment (Gilmore, 2005).

The “empty ritual” coupled with the principles of Participation and Immediacy ensures robust group participation from people with a variety of backgrounds and beliefs. People from traditionally marginalized groups, such as those with disabilities, participate and are included without any hesitation or regard to their group membership. They engage in a shared experience; although their interpretations of their experience are not related in the classical sense, in some cases, the take-aways are completely different.

Unlikely combinations of participants facilitate unique social network building in unpredictable ways. In the default world, people are likely to have similar experiences with those of a similar background. Primary network relationships are likely to exist with people with whom you have the most in common, but the empty rituals experience created among Burners encourages people with very little in common to bond (Granovetter, 1973). The default world segregates people into groups based on similarities; burns integrate everyone who attends.

Burns can be divided into three distinct categories; Burning Man, regional Burns, and Burn-inspired events. The journey to a Burn, especially Burning Man, is not unlike a religious

pilgrimage. To make the journey to Black Rock City, many fly from around the world with a collection of art and costumes (Black Rock Census, 2016). You are required to pack and transport all your food and water so each individual is self-sufficient, as stated by the principle of Radical Self-Reliance. You are also required to transport all of your trash with you out of the event, as stated in the leave no trace principle (Kehoe, 2011; Quaak, 2016; Swan, 2013).

Gilmore (2005) discussed the Turner model for pilgrimage as having three distinct phases: separation, liminal, and aggregation. In the separation phase, individuals begin to contemplate and subsequently embark on their journey. In this stage of preparing for the journey, Burners are making themselves a ready sacrifice to the Burn, by shedding thoughts and ideas from the default world and concentrating on Burner ideals and principals. During travel, they start separating and realigning their views of the world and what is expected (Kehoe, 2011; Quaak, 2016; Swan, 2013).

In the liminal stage, individuals are considered to be between the default world and the burn. Gilmore used Turner's description as it related to pilgrimages, but I feel that Burns go a step further because, in many ways, the default world is left behind. Pilgrimages cause the outside world to take on a secondary importance, but in terms of burning, the default world is completely compartmentalized, with participants rarely reflecting on that world. Cultural norms are replaced; perceptions are realigned; and what is considered abnormal temporarily changes during the Burn. What is considered to be abnormal at Burns are spectators, individuals who do not participate in activities, which goes against the principles of Radical Inclusion, Participation, and Immediacy (Gilmore, 2005).

In the last and final stage of aggregation, the individual returns to the default world, bringing new enlightenment and experiential knowledge. Many Burners believe that their

Burner ideals and principles should be taken to the default world and incorporated into default society. The ten principles represent peace, love and artistic expression, and are the pinnacle of the human experience to many Burners (Gilmore, 2005).

### **Gifting and community.**

Kozinets and Sherry (2005) discussed consumerism when citing an interview with Larry Harvey, one of the founders of Burning Man. Harvey suggested that corporations sell you a product that is based on what you think you want. “Once you get this product or idea, you consume it and are connected only to your own desires” (Van Rhey, 2002, p. ). Rampant consumerism causes a loss in human connection (Fortunati, 2005) because the connection to others is lost while the inexhaustible desires of the individual are extolled. In the Burning Man community, people focus on what they can give rather than what they can acquire. Every gift is significant because it was given freely with no requirement or expectation of reciprocation. It is sacred, as the object, idea, or service was given out of generosity and the pleasure of giving (Burning Man Glossary, 2017). Gifting is a token of caring for each other as a community, regardless of the material value of each individual gift. In the default world, Burners have their physical needs met; everyone has cellphones and various objects that may make life easier but are not really needed for survival and happiness. The human spirit needs love and community; gifts serve as physical tokens of those qualities. Burners have a saying “the playa provides: it might not provide what you want, but it will provide what you need.”

Van Rhey (2002) provided a unique perspective on gifts through his interviews with Harvey, suggesting that something meant to be given never actually belonged to you in the first place. Rather, it belonged to the recipient long before it was gifted. This suggests a belief in fate or destiny, i.e., that everything happens for a reason. This perspective also removes the idea of

charity; when those with resources provide assistance to those without, there is a sense of charity coupled with that generosity, as well as an implied power dynamic. The recipient is expected to feel gratitude, in the default world. Harvey's perspective eliminates the power disparity from gift giving. Harvey went on to compare the gifts given to those gifts such as artistic ability that are possessed. An artist's abilities do not belong to him; he did nothing to deserve them but they were given by god or by the universe. Harvey implied that it is the artist's responsibility to share his or her talents with the world (Van Rhey, 2002). In this way, theme camps, art installations, and even small tokens are the Burner's gifts to the world. It is this philosophy that inspires individuals to devote so many man-hours to art that will be burned (Fortunai, 2005).

Markets create a system where there are those that can provide and produce items in different quantities. This encourages market participants to seek out those with the greatest output potentials, creating a social stratification. This creates a disparity and differentiates the "haves" from the "have nots." Individuals with disabilities often experience additional hardships, including but not limited to reduced socialization opportunities. In the Burn environment, the market system is not present and those with limited production capability have the same status and socialization opportunities (Fortunati, 2005). For those with disabilities the social playing field is more equal than the default world. All of the research has shown that these relationships endure transition into the default world.

### **Community integration.**

One of the foundational principles of Burning focuses on integrating all participants and making them feel that they are part of a family (Jones, 2011; Kozinets & Sherry, 2005). Unfortunately, there has been no research regarding individuals with disabilities. Programs attempting to increase community inclusion could benefit from understanding how regional



Burns create such a strong sense of belonging and how those methods can be applied to the institutional paradigm. There is also a clear benefit to both the regional Burns and organizations with similar events to help them understand how well they are supporting the needs of individuals with disabilities within their communities.

Kehoe (2011) told us that a sense of community is “related to social capital, communitarianism, place attachment, community confidence, and community satisfaction” (p. 12). It is a sense of community that attracts individuals and it is important for us to understand how people become involved, what keeps them involved, and how those relationships continue after the Burn has ended to determine if the relationship is enduring (Kehoe, 2011).

Kehoe (2011) revealed that community isn’t necessarily dependent on organizational composition but is more tied to interaction; a traditional organization or structure is not required. There is no need for a leader to dictate the rules of the culture. Many people believe that Harvey wrote the ten principles and is therefore the guiding hand in Burner culture, while others believe that the ten principles came about organically and that Harvey was the first to put them to paper (Jones, 2011). The truth is probably somewhere in the middle. For example, there is another tenet that many Burners discuss and practice. If an 11th principal was ever to be chosen, it would likely be “consent.” The idea behind consent is that you should always ask before touching, hugging, or kissing someone. Some have taken this further in regard to taking pictures, or borrowing things. This process of behavior becoming a widely accepted norm is likely how the ten principles developed.

Jones’ (2011) *The Tribes of Burning Man; How an Experimental City in the Desert is Shaping a New American Counterculture* began as a collection of articles gathered over the course of seven years that evolved into a particularly interesting observation of the renaissance of

the Burning Man community in relation to the social, political, and economic struggles taking place in 2004. While not an academic work, it does provide an invaluable perspective on the history of Burning Man and the sociopolitical influences that have shaped the event. It chronicles the growth of the movement as counterculture and explores what this meant to the participants at that time. Additionally, Jones illustrated the development of sub-identities and hierarchies based on volunteerism, artistic participation, and other distinguishing factors (Jones, 2011).

In his auto-ethnographic book, *This is Burning Man: The Rise of a New American Underground*, Doherty (2004) offered an enthusiastic but direct narrative about his experiences at “the Big Burn,” ranging from idyllic artistic masterpieces to dangerous substance excesses. His work also includes accounts from over 100 interviewees conducted over his years of attendance. Additionally, Doherty (2004) placed a strong emphasis on the creative and artistic undertakings of different camps, and explored what these installations mean to the artists and to the Burning community.

### **Social Support and Disability**

Individuals with disabilities experience more difficulty building and maintaining relationships than those without disabilities (Rosenthal, Kosciulek, Lee, Frain, & Ditchman, 2009). This is due to a variety of reasons, but I will focus on increased isolation and social dependency.

#### **Isolation.**

In many ways, for individuals with disabilities, discrimination has gone from overt to covert. While it is not socially acceptable to openly discriminate, lower social status is still assigned to these individuals (Smart, 2009). The theories about status and discrimination are too

vast to adequately cover, so I offer a simplified summary that touches on the dynamics in more robust descriptions. Society focuses on an individual's ability and accomplishments when assigning social status. If an individual is deficient in some way, they are assigned a lower status, and treated accordingly (Switzer, 2003). Disability is undesirable and is therefore assigned a deficient label. To some, disability is a reminder of mortality, in that any of us could become disabled at any time. The most harmful dynamic is that people are, in effect, blamed for their disability, implying that they or their family are being punished in some way. These factors together contribute to a negative social status (Chan, Livneh, Pruet, Wang, & Zheng, 2009). Because of their diminished social status, many individuals are ashamed of their disability (Rosenthal et al., 2009)

Disabilities vary in their level of expression; some are obvious, such as the amputation of a limb, while others, such as autism, are not. Psychiatric disabilities are among those most easily concealed. Social isolation and negative social status make it more desirable for people with psychiatric disabilities to conceal them, while their internal nature makes it relatively easy to do so, often for as long as they can. Some go as far as to terminate relationships before the other person can discover the presence of a disability, instead of disclosing (Smart, 2009).

Because of the concealment of the disability, isolation increases and feelings of normality are lost. Societal stereotypes about individuals with disabilities are reinforced and individuals continue to look at themselves in a negative light (Switzer, 2003). This increases a sense of powerlessness and decreases self-efficacy. In this way, individuals have then defined themselves by their disability first, with other forms of identity taking on a secondary role. The primary identity is viewed in a negative light, which does major damage to self-esteem. As self-esteem

and self-efficacy decrease, individuals look at themselves as powerless and incapable of changing their situation.

Individuals with a strong external locus of control feel their outcomes are largely in the hands of other forces. Since they believe they have little or no power to influence outcomes, they tend not to take responsibility for the circumstances in their lives or strive as diligently to improve them (Darnashani, 2014; Shogren, Bovaird, Palmer, Wehmeyer, 2010). This renders both positive and negative outcomes equally meaningless in their effect on the individual's perception of their personal empowerment, and contributes to a more pessimistic outlook. This increases their dependency on others, whom they view as the only catalyst capable of change. (Smart, 2009).

#### **Increased dependency.**

There is a pressing and immediate need to build and maintain social resources for individuals with disabilities. Chronister (2009) stated that social support has repeatedly been found to be “an important factor in preventing illness and reducing mortality rates” (p.149). Individuals with disabilities are in greater need of and require more from their social networks.

This inevitably necessitates the person relying more heavily on those still within their social networks, particularly on close friends and family, which places a burden on the caretakers. Many people with disabilities quickly discover how few members of their networks can sustain a healthy relationship under the weight of increased obligation (Rosenthal et al., 2009). Even when a contact is willing and positive about the support they must provide, the individual may still experience guilt and shame for their reliance on others. The feeling of burdening others, whether actual or perceived, can devastate the sense of self of a once proudly self-reliant individual.

In a normal reciprocal relationship, an individual taps a resource every so often and eventually reciprocates resources in exchange. If they call upon a social support resource too often without reciprocating, they run the risk of depleting and therefore losing the relationship. In cases in which the relationship is unlikely to be lost even if overtaxed, we see resentment follow the increased burden. This scenario is more common with familial relationships. Individuals with disabilities tend to require more resources while often not possessing the same capacity to reciprocate as the average individual. With a disability, need increases and more members of the network become taxed. Over time, the network decreases in size and the end result is social isolation (Rosenthal et al., 2009).

#### **Vicious circle of social support.**

The relationship between disability and social support can be described as a downward spiral. Individuals are taught to feel self-loathing for their disability, which encourages them to hide it and terminate relationships that risk exposure. When this is paired with the reluctance of others to go out of their way to maintain these social ties outside their pre-established patterns, the person can find themselves distressingly isolated in a very short time (Rosenthal et al., 2009). Concealing the disability causes additional strain as social resources start to become aware of an incongruity. Over time, the network decreases in size and existing resources become increasingly taxed. Damaged perceptions of independence and self-efficacy cause the person with disabilities to become even more dependent on their remaining network as people are exiting; social isolation peaks when only a few members of the network remain. The remaining members, which are likely family, spouses, and individuals with whom a long-lasting relationship was already developed, may become exhausted and resent the individual. Once at the bottom of this spiral, it is very difficult to reverse the harmful effects. As stated above, social

resources are vital to continued mental health in all people, but individuals with disabilities have an even greater need for the buffer they provide against anxiety and depression (Chronister, 2009).

### **Types of support.**

Cohen (2011) provided a foundational language that is effective when investigating the benefits of social relationships as it offers a useful language or system of clarification. He first divided the types of support a person can receive from a social network into three categories: instrumental support, informational support, and emotional support. Instrumental support is defined as the provision of material aid, or offering them financial assistance. Informational support is a more intangible form of assistance in which an individual is provided relevant information, advice, and guidance to help them overcome obstacles in their lives. Finally, emotional support is characterized by providing the person with expressions of empathy, a safe space to share their feelings, caring, comfort, and encouragement (Cohen, 2011).

It is important to note that it is unlikely a given social support resource will provide all three types of support. It is more common for an individual or social resource to provide assistance in a single fashion, whether that be information, instrumental, or emotional, than in multiple ways. People will, however, provide resources of different types to different links in their social network. For example, the same individual who provides instrumental support to his coworker is likely to provide emotional support to his spouse and children. The nature of each relationship dictates what kind of support is provided. It is necessary to correctly identify the nature of the relationship with the support provider because calling on a social resource for the wrong type of support is likely to lead to the support not being provided as well as the relationship becoming taxed.

Research has suggested that the size of a social network is not as important as the relevance of resources; if an emotional resource is needed, an instrumental resource is of little help (McLaughlin, 2012). I would argue that this idea comes with a caveat, i.e., as the network increases in size, it develops more social links of all types. In addition, some types of support are more likely to occur based on the strength of the link.

When considering the nature of social networks, it is necessary to discuss the difference between strong ties and weak ties. Strong ties are links that are very close to the individual: close friends, mentors, parents, children, spouses. Strong ties are likely to have similar social links and experiences to the individual and these are the support resources that are more likely to provide emotional support. They are also more embedded and can be called upon more frequently for assistance (Granovetter, 1973).

Weak ties comprise an extended social network. These are associates and friends with whom there is very little contact. They are also less likely to have similar experiences and more likely to have access to networks very different from an individual's own. Those who are close in terms of social network space and strength tend to have similar links, that is, they have a higher likelihood of being connected to the same people. Because individuals with strong ties have similar experiences and knowledge, they are unlikely to have much access to different resources or expertise. On the other hand, a weak tie is likely to have very different experiences and is more likely to be able to provide informational support (Granovetter, 1973). Consider that an Ivy League business executive needs to have some major renovations done on a new house. He is unlikely to have much experience as a handyman, but might reach out to his friends and family and ask if any of them know a contractor he can contact.

**Social support mitigation of stress.**

Cohen (2011) utilized the three different types of social supports previously discussed to describe the way social integration improves our health through two main models. The Stress Buffering model advocates that social support offers a way for people experiencing adversity to reduce the levels of harmful stress they experience. The perception that others will aid them appropriately has been shown to reduce the effects of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress. Proponents of this model theorize that social relationships do not reduce stress but instead mitigate stressors when exposed (Cohen, 2011).

There is a limited body of research that suggests that relationships can, in some cases, aggravate stress instead of alleviating it. These findings are often contradictory but should still be taken into consideration (Chronister, 2009). Research has shown that having social relationships is not enough; they need to be the right types of relationships. If we examine the literature on the stress and burdens placed on spouses and families by individuals with disabilities, it is easy to understand how that kind of relationship is stressful (Rosenthal et al., 2009).

Unlike the Stress Buffering model, the Main Effect model focuses on the health benefits and social integration provided when the person is not in a period of conflict or distress. It posits that individuals who are integrated into a social group will experience positive peer pressures and social controls that encourage normative health behaviors while also increasing a sense of responsibility to the group that promotes self-preserving behaviors. Simply put, group membership encourages individuals to take care of themselves for the benefit of others (Cohen, 2011).



### **Cognitive reappraisal and coping.**

McRae et al. (2011) explored the concept that the environment and interactions at Burning Man encourage participants to use cognitive reappraisal as a coping mechanism rather than expressive suppression, the suppression of emotions, when faced with stressors. Their research showed that burning festivals create a space where participants can more easily employ non-typical coping and emotional regulation strategies that have the additional benefit of increasing healthy functioning during non-stressful times. They observed that when stress arises in typical social interactions, outside of Burning events, individuals predominantly rely on the coping mechanism of expressive suppression, the inhibition of emotional response and expression, to navigate the situation. McRae et al. (2011) noted that, during Burning festivals, there is an increased occurrence of employing cognitive reappraisal, the reframing of thoughts to elicit a different emotional response. This is important to our topic because the framing of an experience is different in the default world than at a Burn. It is the reframing of experiences that creates a greater sense of community and deemphasizes the differences between those with and those without disabilities. This is the difference between a student with a low-test score bottling up their disappointment and anger to remain visibly calm in class versus viewing the score as an opportunity for growth and circumventing the negative emotions from forming. The authors noted that frequent use of cognitive reappraisal is associated with reduced symptoms of depression, improved interpersonal functioning, and general well-being (McRae et al., 2011).

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

#### **Dynamics of social worlds.**

Shibutani (2000) discussed the dynamics of social worlds and how they are defined. He stated that social worlds are comprised of individuals who all participate in a common activity or

set of activities and whose members develop their own cultural symbols, including language, identity, and discourse. By this definition, the Burning community is an excellent example of a social world. As in any organization, there are varying degrees of involvement among the members, ranging from intense and frequent participation to those who are either peripheral members or newly associated with the community. The extent to which social worlds demand loyalty and participation varies greatly, as do the methods groups use to secure them. The burning community does not require hierarchical involvement in event organization or participation in multiple events to convey organizational commitment. That being said, there is a level of social prestige gained through active, frequent participation as well as the avoidance of being perceived as a spectator (Quaak, 2016).

### **Identity symbols.**

Fine (1989) focused on the specific tenets of provisional theory and resource mobilization theory. Resource mobilization theory is based on the advantages that come from the organization of collective resources for the benefit of the entire group. Fine's provisional theory centers on the intricacies of successful organizations. He laid the framework, listing the three things that make an organization successful: first, distribution of knowledge about the leisure activity; second, opportunities for sociability; third, access to identity symbols. The opportunities for sociability and access to identity symbols are particularly critical to the exploration of Burning's link to the development of self. Burners are often members of other fringe societies. Fringe groups are often thought of as underdeveloped in interpersonal exchanges (Fine, 1989).

Fine's (1989) argument that people want to acquire symbols of identity as symbols of prestige is also relevant because the community itself promotes De-Commodification. In many

ways, Burning Man and the concept of Burning are the sources of identity. The community is littered with symbolism. The number and variety of a participant's Burning experiences is a badge of honor. If a Burner has attended ten Burns in five different locations, they are often given a higher level of respect compared to a new member attending a Burn for the first time (Fine, 1989).

### **Goffman: Frame analysis.**

Frame analysis serves to better understand the shared experience of Burning events through the concept of frame alignment. Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford (1986) stated that frame alignment occurs when an individual's frames become linked in congruency and complementarity. This is more commonly referred to as "getting on the same page" and produces frame resonance, a catalyst that aids individuals in making transitions from one frame to another. Participants often attempt to bring Burn culture home and use its benefits to influence their lives. The lack of frame alignment with people they encounter in the default world can make this difficult, which makes ongoing participation in the Burning community between events an important way to reinforce the shared experience and principles (Goffman, 1974).

### **Participation and participant observation.**

Hockett (2005) covered an important part of the Burning experience by applying an analysis of participant observation and ethnographic methodology. The Post-Modernist perspective suggests that researchers cannot provide any interpretation without including something of themselves in their reporting. Burning's emphasis on participation and the scorn shown to the spectator makes it vital for any researcher to participate while conducting a study. Because of the vast spectrum of possible experiences, it would be extremely difficult to gain any

meaningful interpretation of the Burning experience without seeing it firsthand as a participant (Hocket, 2005).

Hocket (2005) went on to postulate that in the default world, “you’re not even aware of your surroundings” (p. 78). People who experience the same things over and over in many ways have entered a trance. In the Burner world, one is unable to be lulled into this trance because everything is new and strange; there is never a moment that was just like the previous. As Hocket (2005) put it, “there is no routine” (p. 79). This constant novelty serves to keep one’s attention on the present moment. This fact also facilitates a sort of dissociative state where a person is not thinking about their lives outside of the Burn or things that are going on without them. This contributes to the Burn serving as a therapeutic and transformative vacation from the default world (Hocket, 2005).

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to examine Burning Man and explore the methods that are used to create a high level of community integration in communities for individuals with anxiety and depression. Chapter 3 will show how the methods were chosen and how they will be utilized to obtain the required data for this study.

#### **Sample and Data Source**

The study began on August 29, 2017, and continued until July 15, 2018. I attended six Burning events in the United States, three Burn-inspired events, as well as two decompression events. I have elected to attend the largest burning event globally – Burning Man – 70,000 participants. Attending that event provided me with a perspective on how the largest Burning community is structured, yet I anticipated this to be more rigidly segmented and less hospitable to newcomers. I attended Freezerburn, Resonance, Oblivium, Interfuse, and Loveburn, all of which are regional b\Burn events. I attended three Burn inspired events, Atomic Falls, Wasteland Weekend, and Aftermath. Finally, I attended two Burn-inspired decompression events, After the Falls, and OB decomp. Data was collected using in-depth interviews, engaging in participant observation, revolving focus groups, and offering auto-ethnographic insights. These tools allowed the flexibility, descriptiveness, and holistic perspective necessary to address such a multidimensional topic.

#### **Overview of Information to be Acquired**

##### **Theoretical.**

To effectively investigate social relationships and social integration, existing literature was consulted on three different topics: Burning festivals, disability literature, and peripheral festival literature.

### ***Burning Man Literature.***

First, I investigated the nature of sanctioned burning events and assessed the literature that already exists. The ongoing literature review suggests that this is extremely limited. Few articles published are academically rigorous, and even fewer delve into the social impact of Burning festivals or the festivals' influence on people with disabilities. The bohemian nature of Burning Man provides for an environment where new sources are likely to be discovered.

### ***Disability Literature.***

I have thus far reviewed existing literature regarding the impact of social networks on individuals with psychiatric disabilities. It has suggested that social relationships and social acceptance provide important buffers against depression and anxiety (Carveth & Gottlieb, 1979; Chronister et al., 2016; Travis, Lyness, Shields, King, & Cox, 2004).

### ***Periphery Festival Literature.***

Burning Man has not been studied in the context of relationship building, but several large and ongoing festivals have. Since this study explores areas not previously studied, peripheral research must be analyzed for relevant overlap. I focused on studies maintaining a degree of academic rigor to build a knowledge base. These sources did not provide the answers to my questions but will instead suggested where they deviate from Burning events, which is important for the implications.

### ***Methodological knowledge.***

I triangulate the data using interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. Each of these methods has its own advantages and pitfalls. Each method was examined to best mitigate the problems associated with the various methodologies (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

### ***Demographics.***

This study focused on individuals who have been diagnosed with depression and anxiety. There are three groups that were interviewed: individuals who self-report as having those disabilities, key event coordinators, and members of the community who participate in the focus groups but either have no disability or choose not to disclose their disability. In several cases interviewees fell into the first two categories simultaneously. Signs were posted around the camp asking for individuals who self-report to please notify me if they would like to participate. In many cases my camp mates made introductions and spread the word about my research topic. If an individual met the critical sample criterion, they were asked to participate in a one-on-one interview later. The event coordinators are easily identified because they have official titles and their contact information is posted on event websites (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). That being said, it was interesting to me that I managed to make so many acquaintances of people who were in fact key organizers of events, but not usually for the event I was actually attending. For example, JC contacted me about my project during Atomic Falls, and asked to camp with me at Interfuse in order to discuss my project more. He was an event coordinator at T.E.I.C..

### **Perceptual.**

Burning Man promotes an environment of Participation, Immediacy, and Radical Inclusion. Participation means that one is expected to actively participate in activities and conversations around the event. Immediacy is essentially a deliberate immersion in the moment, encouraging individuals to not hesitate or worry about social propriety; rather, Immediacy dictates that if you want to do something (within the bounds of safety and consent), you should do it immediately regardless of how it would be perceived in the mundane world. Radical Inclusion can be seen as the intersection between Participation and Immediacy. If someone tries

to participate in something you are doing (again, always keeping safety and consent in mind), you should accept them and encourage them to join you. No one is to be excluded. Not participating would identify me as an outsider and impede any data collection efforts (Ten Principles of Burning Man, 2017).

Through interviews and focus groups, I examined the perceptions about "burning" and the support it provides. Specifically, I inquired about levels of involvement and inclusion. Participants were asked about the perceived social support they are able to realize, and for examples of specific situations in which support was given (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

Many individuals are likely to become immersed in the exuberance of the festival. I attempted to closely witness the interactions of my key participant group to determine if they are being included and are developing relationships. These interactions allowed me to cross-reference their actions with their interviews. Through ongoing observation, I also attempted to determine if in times of need these individuals receive the support they requested of the community. A final observable indicator is Gifting, which is a tradition at Burning events. To a degree, I monitored the level of Gifting that occurred for individuals with disabilities and compared it to that of individuals without disabilities. This proved to be extremely difficult, the disabilities I studied were difficult to determine, both by me and by the individual giving the gift.

### **Contextual.**

In qualitative research, context is paramount. I investigated the level of integration and social support that occurs through individual interviews and focus groups. I wanted to understand what types of support are given, and if that support is real or perceived, and to determine if support is given equally to individuals with and without disabilities. Documents



social media interactions, and organization history was also examined to provide additional context (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected using in-depth interviews, engaging in participant observation, revolving focus groups, and offering auto-ethnographic insights. These tools allowed the flexibility, descriptiveness, and holistic perspective necessary to address such a multidimensional topic. Each tool provided its own insight, but also a gap in coverage. By utilizing the four different tools, I was able to more effectively address those gaps.

#### **In-depth interviews.**

I conducted a series of in-depth interviews with core members of the community as well as with individuals in the community with anxiety and depression. I used a semi-structured interview format to provide focus on specific topics, but also employed unguided sections of interviews that emerged from the guided questions. During these sections of the interview, I directed the conversation to areas that are important to the participants and relevant to their mental health.

I selected two groups of participants to interview for this study. First, I used critical sampling, which involved finding specific members that are considered key information sources. I identified key members considered to be archetypes that are representative of the larger group. I selected six Burners who are considered leaders in their local community. To qualify, each member of this group must have attended at least three Burning events each year; consider themselves an active participant in the Burning community for at least three years; and either be a staff head or a theme camp lead at a regional Burning event. These interviews were conducted

outside of an actual Burning event to facilitate a more complete and uninterrupted discussion and to allow me to focus on the second group of participants while attending events.

The second group of participants was selected by homogenous sampling, which is to say, each respondent must possess the traits and affiliations necessary to investigate the social integration phenomenon. This group of individuals must self-report to be diagnosed with depression, anxiety, or both and must attend Burning events.

Other than the base ticket price for admittance into the events, Burning communities do not require licensing or dues. The admittance ticket grants both space and permission to set up a research facility, provided I follow all rules regarding De-Commodification, consent, and Civic Responsibility. Conducting this research activity falls within the principles of Radical Self-Expression and Gifting to the community. However, I contacted the City Planning Department of each event, provided them with a description of my research, and requested permission to conduct research at their event, to ensure there are no objections. There was no additional requirement to obtain access to the population because the nature of Burning events allows for artistic endeavors to be explored at the participant's leisure. Nevertheless, event planners are the closest thing to gatekeepers for the community. The Burning community polices itself, and I received no resistance from event organizers. I was transparent with my purpose, conform to the Institutional Review Board's standards, and obtain informed consent from the participants.

I set up a rest area during Burning events with comfortable seating and provided food and drinks to the participants. Concessions of any kind will not be sold nor, will they be offered as a reward for speaking with me; to do so would violate the Burning principle of Gifting (Doherty, 2004). The interview area had a large sign that explained the purpose of this study, requirements for participation, and copies the consent form. This clear display of intent and acquisition of

consent is not only required for Institutional Review Board purposes, but also critical to uphold the Burning values of consent. If an individual elects to participate, I obtained a signed consent form and proceed with the interview.

Each interview was audio-recorded, and notes were taken. Each Burning event lasts three to seven days and all interviews with the second group of participants was conducted during the events. The audio recordings were reviewed and transcribed after the Burn ended. They were tracked using the participant's playa or Burner name, which is an alias that members of the community use during burning festival and when interacting within burning communities (Burning Man Glossary, 2017). This differentiation provides a level of anonymity that some participants prefer while also creating a distinct separation between the mundane world and Burner society. As such, many members of the Burner community do not know the legal names of their Burner family.

The interviews being semi-structured drove certain topics to be discussed while leaving other topics neglected. Some of the neglected topics could be of key importance to the participants; to mitigate that problem, subjects will be altered based on topics covered in focus groups. It was necessary to allow people to speak, but also to direct topics of conversation.

### **Open-door focus group.**

I used a variation of focus group interviews due to the unique environment in which the research will take place. Radical Inclusion is one of the core principles of Burning Man-sanctioned events. To conduct a focus group in this environment, it is necessary to allow spectators the opportunity to participate should they be interested in doing so. There is already a significant amount of distrust with academics because the focus and attention is shedding light on and explaining something considered mystical and sacred to many. It

I conducted two open-door focus groups for initial research. As previously described, our camp will have signs that explain my research as well as a copy of the consent form. Individuals self-selected if they wanted to participate in the discussion. Additionally, due to the Radical Inclusion principle, any person may join or leave the group at any point in the proceedings.

Focus groups are effective at tapping into group think topics, as well as delving deeper into more specific subjects. The conversations had a much more natural flow, which increased the comfort of the participants. The focus groups were recorded, and the notes taken were reviewed immediately following the interview (Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2016).

There have been limitations with the focus group I had not anticipated. First, I attempted to conduct two focus groups but were unable to acquire more than 3-4 participants. I conducted one and canceled the other. Second, Upon the third attempt, I had four participants, but the session did not reveal much new information. I observed some obvious unease and the conversation was disjointed. The participants were not forthcoming and very unsure of their answers.

The last focus group was much more successful, but at this point findings were firmly entrenched. The focus group was more being used to confirm findings and observations. It allowed for a limited analysis and critical thinking to take place after the bulk of collection had occurred. During this period of reflection, topics were examined and adapted for maximum efficiency. New information came to light and findings and analysis were adapted. The last focus group was far more informative, than the previous two.

The drawback of focus groups is that there may be some inclination for individuals to agree with the group because they do not want to publicly disagree with the majority. They can

feel peer-pressured to give false statements in agreement with the socially strong members of the group. As stated above, participants in the initial groups defiantly had reservations about speaking too strongly about certain topics, but in the final focus group, that was not the case. Participants were divided on two topics right down the middle, and not afraid to speak their mind in spite of opposition. In the revolving door focus group, individuals are allowed to leave the discussion and return at any time if they wish to share additional information or modify their previous answers more privately. Individuals were also offered the chance to participate in a semi structured interview if they would like to add details or discuss new topics in privacy.

### **Participant observation.**

While interviews were the primary data collection method for the study, I also augmented these results with participant observations. The Burning Man principles of Participation, which state that everyone is invited to join in activities as fully as desired, and Immediacy, which encourages participants to exist in the moment and explore their role in society, within the community contribute to an environment where there is a definite stigma associated with “spectator” behavior (Jones, 2011). To prevent this perception, it is not only suggested but necessary to participate in the event fully as described under the principle of Immediacy (Jones, 2011).

Many critics of participant observation are quick to point out that the presence of a researcher will alter the behaviors observed. Although I agree with this statement, it is important to note that the observations of someone participating in the event are far less disruptive than passive observations made by an outside observer. I engaged in the event and its activities as completely as possible to ensure that I was considered part of the community while conducting my research.

**Auto-ethnography.**

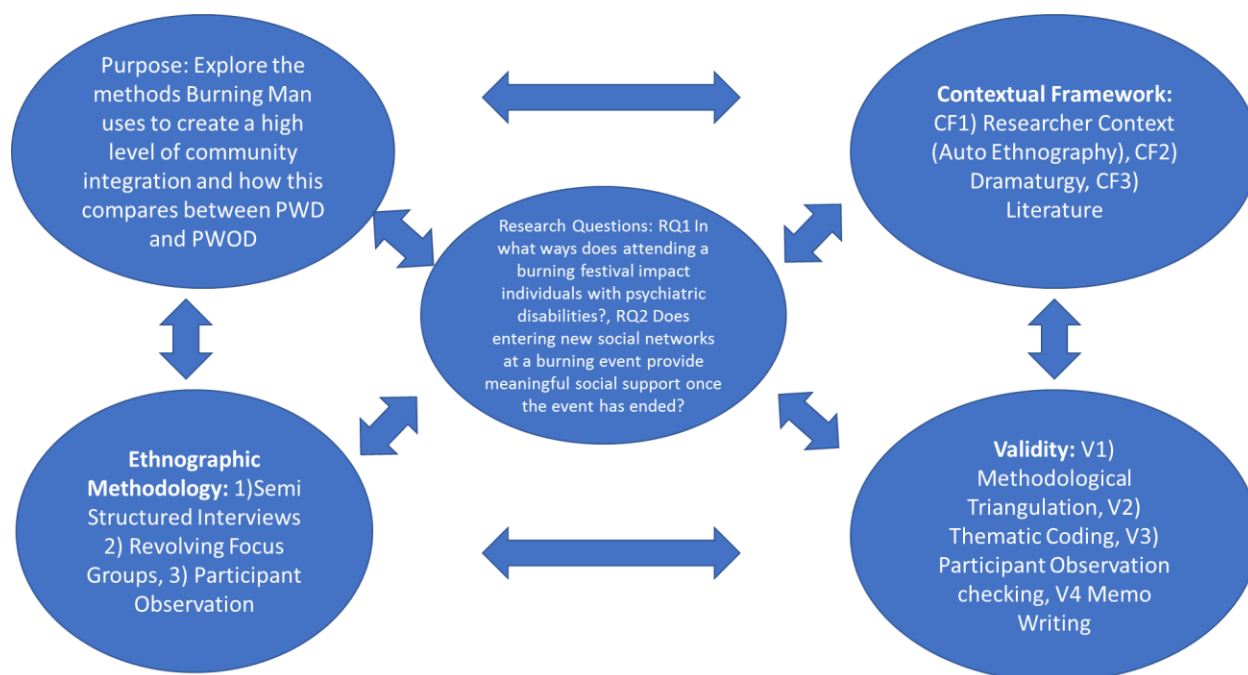
In addition to semi-structured interviews and "revolving door" focus groups, I also augmented results with perceptions and interpretations drawn from my own experiences within the Burning community via the auto-ethnographic method of research. This was only used as a supplement to fill in data gaps that might arise. My status as both a new Burner and a member of the disability community provided insights and perspectives that may prove useful to the study. Additionally, my role as an event organizer within the community granted me access to resources that might otherwise not be available.

**Research Design**

I employed an ethnographic approach as the primary methodological tool to evaluate the effects of instrumental, informational, emotional, and perceived social support within Burning communities, as well as the effects of this support on the mental health of the participant. Ethnographies are holistic longitudinal studies that investigate "shared patterns of behavior, beliefs and language that develop over time" (Creswell, 2014, p. 462). The social integration that is being investigated has developed over time because of the culture with which it is associated. To investigate the culture, we needed a methodology that provides triangulation from multiple data types. Ethnographies are also excellent forms of investigating issues in which the overall group needs to be studied rather than placing an emphasis on the individual.

Data was collected using in-depth interviews, engaging in participant observation and offering auto-ethnographic insights. These tools allow the flexibility, descriptiveness, and holistic perspective necessary to address such a multidimensional topic.

To illustrate how the design works together, I have included an interactive model of design in Figure 1 (Maxwell, 2012, p.77). This should help clarify the connections between my methodology, frameworks, and research questions.



*Figure 1:* The interactive design shows the way in which the methods, research questions, and framework interacting with study.

## Analysis

Analysis can be viewed as a transformative process by which the actual raw data becomes truly usable. The same techniques employed in analysis are also used when considering a topic. It is necessary to document how your categorization and contextualization are working while also being able to articulate the progress to the reader (Anderson, Loftland, Loftland & Snow, 2006). As the data was collected, the interviews as well as my personal observations were transcribed, coded for common themes and then categorized.

While I had not yet defined the overarching themes, as recommended by accepted qualitative practices that encourage allowing the data to speak for itself, I know that some of the broader categories regarding social support will be monitored. These will include perceived, emotional, instrumental and informational support (Cohen, 1988). Each of these categories will provide its own framework for analyzing the degree and effectiveness of support for the participants. Each interview and observation has been coded individually and had their own unique codes. The coding was developed and expanded upon after each review of the data. This effectively creates multiple levels of coding and replaces a system of precoding by using a constantly evolving system of coding.

At the completion of all interviews, there were over 300 codes. These were then systematically reviewed and compared, combing similar categories and eliminating redundancies, which brought the number to 80 codes. At this stage not all 80 codes were relevant to the research, but it was necessary to include them, because they could become relevant later.

As the coding developed, I maintained note cards explaining the meaning and important points of references to the coding. The note cards were arranged on a board to create a map of coding themes. Additional cards referencing specific events, research texts and participants had also been collected were placed on the map.

In order to provide triangulation, the observational data I recorded were compared to the interviews. To support the validity of the interviews, I asked two participants from the community leader group to review the data and share their impressions. The goal of this exercise will be to help identify obvious gaps between what a participant perceives as their level of support within the community versus the community's perception of the support they offer that individual. All of these sources were compared for final analysis to determine the key themes.



Twenty themes, divided into six categories were identified and will be covered in the final interpretation of results in a narrative style, and include a discussion of the limitations of the study as well as implications for future research.

### **Trustworthiness and Validity**

Triangulation is important when determining validity because it allows a wider range of methods, data, frameworks and analysis to be applied to obtain a more accurate and bias-free interpretation of the findings. Like increasing data sources, triangulation similarly improves validity. However, triangulation alone is not enough to ensure trustworthiness.

The Maxwell interactive research design requires that the methods, purpose, questions, validity and framework must all be accurately paired. In the pairing process, as one category shifts or changes, it affects others as well. It becomes necessary to compare all categories at the same time. Qualitative research, by its nature, can often not be replicated; therefore, it is necessary to show how each source was chosen and how they relate to each other. The study must be described with as much transparency as possible without jeopardizing the anonymity of the research participants.

Conceptual frames are not chosen early in the proposal process, but rather emerge through an organic process (Wolcott, 2001). I selected Goffman's (1974) frame analysis because it explores the complex relationship between the participants' experiences in their default and "Burner" worlds and emphasizes the importance of situational context as well as the way background, roles and even props can alter the scene. I chose an ethnographic approach to gain a more holistic comprehension of the subject matter. Without personal experience in the Burner culture, I could easily misinterpret or entirely omit significant observations and responses.

While this precaution increases confidence in the literal accuracy of the statements, it is important to acknowledge that there are always limitations based on the listener's interpretations (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Trustworthiness is more difficult to establish in participant observation sessions without photographic records. However, photography is culturally frowned upon at most burning events.

During these sessions, I have had frequent conversations regarding my impressions with a trusted participant observation partner, which assisted in validating my process. I also collected my thoughts about isolated experiences by using analytic memos. These memos reflected immediate experiences. On occasions in which I attended specific events or activities, I collected my thoughts and transcribed them in a memo. The memos were collected and reviewed throughout, to provide an additional level of validity.

Even under the most deliberately controlled circumstances, the interpretation and analysis of qualitative research remain highly subjective. To minimize my personal biases or changing expectations, I wrote frequent memos to illustrate my background thoughts and interpretations on the topics I pursue. These were written in an informal manner without any censorship.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study has observations of three different levels of events; Burning Man, Regional Burns and Burn-inspired events. I attended all three to gain a holistic perspective of the community. It is possible that the inclusion of Burn-inspired events can cause a deviation from the norm in terms of experiences. Burn-inspired events, for one reason or another, have not been endorsed by the Burning Man Organization, BMORG; either they have not sought sanction, or BMORG has not sanctioned them. One of the most common reasons for not achieving sanctioning is making the event open to all ages. BMORG feels that to not include people of all

ages is against the principal of Radical Inclusion, which states that all people are to be included. Many event organizers feel that because of some of the activities that take place, such as nudity, make the event unsuitable for children, in the eyes of some participants. Without such an endorsement and strong adherence to the rules of BMORG, deviations are likely to occur.

On the other side of the equation, limitations exist because of the inclusion of the Burning Man. I have mentioned in previous sections that Burning Man has become so large and unwieldy that it is difficult to obtain the same kind of social integration as smaller events. I have personally attended Burning Man and can say that it is a justifiable concern. The experiences of people attending Burning Man vary greatly. However, as the parent Burn to the community, culture and regional events, it must be included and, hence, omitting it would have the potential to miss context that is vital in ethnographic research.

There are also limitations inherent to any methodological approach. Focus groups can polarize respondents or allow stronger personalities to influence the tone of the conversation. Participant observation can immerse the researcher to such a degree that they do not offer an unbiased perspective. Interviews are limited regarding the depth of data they can offer. The researcher may find themselves unable to empathize without also agreeing with an individual's perspective, and possibly, resulting in leading the interviewee. Each methodology has limitations that must be examined in detail. Using triangulation of methodologies is the most effective way to mitigate these limits. (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

One of the ways I am mitigated the possibility of group polarizing is offering individuals the opportunity to speak in private, if they desired. The fluid nature of a Burn, enhanced by the mobility an art car provides, gave me many opportunities to socialize with people that have been

part of the focus groups. If they express interest or feel that something was not said, I made each aware, I will be available to talk in a more private setting.

### **Questions Section**

In this section, I discuss the list of questions used during the semi-structured interviews and focus groups. These interview questions differ from the overall research questions of the study. While this is typical in qualitative research, on the assumption that the participants will not be able to provide direct answers regarding the study's central focus, I also find it interesting and relevant to ask participants my research questions and compared their answers to my own findings.

Each interview question was selected for one of three reasons. First, the question directly pertains to my research questions and is necessary to gain explicit responses on those topics. Second, it relates to an indirect topic of interest that may or may not yield relevant information supporting the core focus. Third, the question engages the participant in familiar social patterns and customs through the art of conversation. These are intended to create a comfortable and, in some cases, lighter mood during the interview. I believe this helps develop rapport with the subject, which encourages richer and more honest responses.

The interview questions function as guidelines for conversation rather than specific data points. In qualitative research, it is necessary to approach the core concepts with a more fluid and adaptable information collection system. Not every respondent answered every question, and the focus groups covered an even broader and more diverse range of topics. Similarly, if a respondent essentially answered questions out of order as part of their exposition on another topic, I did not force them to revisit that subject when it reappears on my question list.

I have coded the interview questions based on the three categories above. R1 & R2 refer to my two research questions. P1 designates the indirect, peripheral topical questions and C1 designates the conversational question meant to put the respondent at ease. Additionally, I have subdivided the questions into eight categories and labeled them Type 1 through Type 8. The categories are: 1) What are we observing; 2) Frequency; 3) Magnitude; 4) Structure; 5) Process; 6) Causes; 7) Consequences; and 8) Human engagement. These categories are intended to provide an additional level of trustworthiness and assist the reader in understanding the purpose of the question.

## Chapter 4: Findings

In the findings section the various topics have been broken apart and presented in the three different sections. After breaking down the data the findings have been presented in the natural order of occurrence. The first section taken by itself might seem irrelevant, but the following section explains why the previous section is significant.

When investigating the various thematic codes, it has been important to go back to the codes repeatedly to determine what has been important. When a new conjecture is identified the next question of origin will quickly follow. By continually digging deeper, more meaningful information eventually leads to the conclusions, and the decision about what findings to be included.

Themes used in the findings have been derived in three ways. The first category has been those related to prior research themes. The literature on Burning Man is not extensive, as I have discussed previously, and it is not specific to the research questions or to regional Burns, which is emphasis of research presented.

For example, it did seem immediately obvious that the principles guide the regional network. Because of this each one of the principles receives its own code from the very beginning. These codes continued through to the final round of coding.

The second category are those related to the research topics. This project is guided by two research questions, some of the coding was somewhat obvious, because of the questions. A few codes related to social networking and disability were developed early on. Because I have been investigating the types of social resources and how long they endure, I use social resources, and enduring relationships as codes.

The majority of codes come from the data itself, qualitative practices encourage the data to speak for itself. Each interview, observation, conversation, and personal reflection is coded individually and have their own unique codes. The coding was developed and expanded upon after each review of the data, occurring a few days after each data site. This effectively created a huge collection of codes. These codes were added to a spreadsheet where redundancies and similar codes were defined and combined.

At the completion of all interviews, there were over 300 codes. These were then systematically reviewed again and compared, combining similar categories, which brought the number to 80 codes. For example, I combined the original codes, Art Cars, Theme Camps, Artistic Ability, costumes, under the category of “Art”. While these topics were frequently mentioned, they are not relevant to my research topics.

In the final review stage, not all 80 codes were relevant to the research, but it was necessary to include them, because some would become relevant later. As I have mentioned throughout the paper, there were insights developed after a point to which I thought I was finished with the topic. For example, I almost missed the importance of the “innocent intention” relevance. It took a significant amount of time switching between topics to effectively ask “why” many times before I concluded that it was relevant to relationship building.

### **Theme: Social Networks**

From the minute individuals pass through the main gate and processes their ticket they are met with greeter personnel/volunteers, usually with a “welcome home” introduction. “Welcome Home” reminds one from the beginning to be yourself, be at home- this sets the tone for the rest of the event. A greeter team provides a Burner their event education, checking on supplies, understanding of the principles and letting the ticket holder know that whatever the

default world might be like they now have a place to feel completely welcome. The normal anxieties of attending an unfamiliar event and not knowing anyone does not really apply here.

Table 1

*Thematic Coding Social Networks*

Findings	Thematic Coding
Intensions	Adult Play, BP: Immediacy, Innocent Intention, Shared Experience, Safe Place, Consent
Burn Virgins	BP: Radical Inclusion, BP: Participation, Culture Shock, Introduction by a friend, Veteran Obligation
Instant Networks	Acceptance, BP: Radical Inclusion, Innocent Intention, Safe Place, SN: Family, SN: Instant Shared Experience, BP: Participation
Types of Networks	SR: Emotional, SR: Instrumental, SR: Informative, SN: Change, R: Friendships, R: Romantic, R: Enduring, R: Facebook
Enduring Networks	SN: Enduring, SN: Change, R: Enduring, R: Facebook, SN: Family, Acceptance, R: Romantic, Introduced by Friend
Social Network Changes	SN: Change, SN: Burner Dominated, SN: Enduring, SN: Family, Shared Experience, Acceptance, Utopian Expectation
Unlikely Social Links	Acceptance, Adult Play, BP: Radical Inclusion, BP: Participation, BP: Community, BP: De-Commodification, Shared Experience, Safe Place, Variety of People

**Intentions.**

Before we discuss how Burner social networks have been formed and what they have been made of we need to discuss intentions. Much of communication has been subject to interpretation. When we exchange words with another, part of the communication comes from the direct meaning of the words and some comes from nonverbal cues. In addition, there has been still a large part of interpretation based on various other factors, location, context and the unique person you are communicating with.

“When you meet someone for the first time and in our society, that when you meet someone for the first time you’re always kind of like ‘what are they about, what are



they trying to sell me' whereas if you take that away which is De-Commodification at burning man within two minutes you can have the most intimate conversation with someone. You're telling someone a life story you wouldn't tell in everyday life. You wouldn't be at the grocery store and meet someone and have an intimate conversation but at a Burn because we have taken that away and we aren't wondering what people want out of us we get to have that intimacy with everybody." (Gingersnap)

According to the interviews I have conducted, and my own observations, people have not been worried about being judged or proving worth or gauging what a person could or can do for the while at the Burn event. The normal patterns of assessing value does not occur, at least not to the same extent.

During Burns people often give the benefit of the doubt regarding the intention of an exchange. For example, it has been very common to say, "Fuck your day", and in some events it has been common to give each other the middle finger. In the outside default world these exchanges would likely be met with hostility, but in the context of the Burn, people often reply with a smile.

Interactions occur without people trying to guess if a complement is meant or they were being put down in some way. "For a lady for no front teeth you are super beautiful" (Nasa) I was witness to this exchange in a group of people and was surprised at the honesty in the comment as well as how it was received. The young lady that has been discussed, replied with gratitude to the complement.

The raw honest intention lowers people's barriers and very intimate conversations take place quickly. People do not attempt to show what they could offer or prove their status. "You

can tell someone you love them without them saying what do you want from me.” (Spicy)  
Interactions occur and people express love and friendship in a very honest fashion.

“It’s easier to talk about anything here. I’ve opened up to people here about things I haven't opened up to even my own romantic partners in the past to perfect strangers.” (Dani)  
People often open up about things they have wanted to talk about, but never found a time and place.

“Consent, is all about, you know, I'm a hugger, but that doesn't mean you just walk up and throw yourself on me. Consent, asking a person "Can I hug you? I would love to embrace you." But, my excitedness does not excuse your personal space, so I'm going to ask you, "Can I hug you? I would love to express that to you." I'm excited that I'm here, I'm excited that you're here, in this... you wearing this weird wrinkly shirt, and me in this crazy weird shirt that might say something odd, that in the default world people would ordinarily stare at and have to break down. But here, it seems like it's water on a duck's back. People are just more receptive to the fact that anything goes as long as it respects my boundaries.” (Trainwreck)

While individuals lower their barriers, consent is an important part of the burn. It is stressed all throughout the various events and expected from all. In my own observations consent is truly liberating to people. I have witnessed people asking to touch, hug, kiss, and even perform sexual acts with another person. I personally have been asked several times by strangers if they could kiss me. Sometimes these requests are veiled in a thin layer of mischievous adult play. It is all taken very lightly. A kiss or a hug does not imply that something more would happen. A kiss between strangers, will most likely not lead to anything else. This fact allows more people to be more open and after such experiences they are more likely to repeat it.

When antics are afoot people usually give others the benefit of the doubt and assume the pranksters have no ill intentions, but they are just playing adult fun. In some cases, however, the pranks might take a darker turn and people can become very upset, I have observed this occurring several times in regard to theft of property, which to my knowledge in all cases turned out to be just pranks. Nasa, a relatively new Burner had the top half of her mannequin stolen. Fortunately, it was returned to one of the regional event warehouses and is awaiting passage home. I also know of several flags and other camp specific memorabilia being stolen, in those cases the thief made sure the appropriate camp knew who had possession of their property. “Where the line crosses from snark to harassment is open to interpretation” (Pants)

### **Virgin Burners.**

Radical Inclusion suggests that all people should be made aware of the Burner community, but this has not been the case. “I would be cautious to who I would invite to a Burn in the sense that not everyone that I could run into right now, that I would invite to a Burn... I wouldn't walk up to everyone and say "Oh this Burn, it's awesome, you should come." Because first I feel like they would need to get an understanding of what the idea was.” (Trainwreck)

Every Burner I have spoken with has entered the community because he or she has been brought by a friend. Not every Burner has been brought by a friend just the Burners I spoke with. Several knew of other Burners that have not been part of a theme camp and camp alone, but they consider the experience very different.

Radical Inclusion suggests, Burn culture has a place for everyone, and yet most Burners are more pragmatic and believe that Burning is not for everyone. The Burning principles do not require adherence or obedience but have been difficult to follow if one does not believe in their

importance. If you cannot embrace the spirit it is difficult to maintain the Principles; which become the foundation of every event.

Burners do not invite just anyone into the community but have been selective about it. Burners invite friends that they think will enjoy it, but also people they perceive as being potential good Burners. “I would say so, I am cautious about who I invite in.” (Pipes) The community has an unspoken selective process at a micro level about who is included and who is invited.

Attendees are considered responsible for their “Baby Burners” or people they brought into the community. It has been implied that if you invite an individual to a Burn you are also inviting them to camp with you. To bring in a new member you are effectively vouching for them with your fellow camp mates. Each camp usually has a lead or group of elders much like a tribe that make most of decisions for the group. If the individual is difficult or does not contribute it reflects poorly on you and your camp mates could likely be more restrictive on your choice in the future.

“Are they going to be a liability to have around or are they actively contributing to your Communal Effort of camp? Taking care and looking after someone at a burn but you shouldn't have to watch out. I won't invite someone I can't trust to handle their selves in a decent manner. Yeah, you just, you got...events with all ages. I'm not comfortable inviting someone inappropriate or out of control.... if there's someone who is reckless that isn't safe for me anymore. If I put that out there for people to be affected by, I would feel responsible” (Trainwreck)

Your baby Burner reflects on you and you are expected to show them a good time but also what it means to be a good Burner. You are the primary agent responsible for educating

them both in the ten principles as well as being a good camp and Burner citizen. You are also responsible for leading them by example and reinforcing the principles during the event.

If your Baby Burner acts out, or gets into trouble, you are expected to intervene. The community in most cases polices its own. This has a trickle-down effect. If someone gets into trouble the camp lead is often contacted first, in cases where it does not require immediate intervention. The camp lead usually discusses the problem with the Burner, but in the case of a baby Burner, vouched for then the veteran member is expected to intervene. If for example, an individual gets altered or intoxicated their friend/handler is expected to ride out that experience with them. “If you bring somebody, you need to help handle them” (Star) There is Sanctuary that serves this role if it has escalated to the point of event intervention or health concerns are present.

Individuals usually feel responsible for their baby Burners, and some would say it goes for long periods of time, but not all feel that way. A few Burners share the sense that if an individual has a few Burns under their belt and were properly educated, they are on their own to a certain degree. “Maybe the 3<sup>rd</sup> year its horrible and its altered and its mental or a process that causes them to do something they didn’t mean to do or they did something negative. I don’t know I would feel responsible for that.” (Pipes) Some go as far as to believe that radical self reliance, a Burner principal meaning that people need to be able to take care of their own emotional as well as physical needs, but this is the exception to the rule.

### **Instant social networks.**

As stated in the previous section, a significant number of Burners are brought into the community through invitation. They have a guide and are often brought into a camp and plugged into a camp and social network. “To say, hey, these people, they don't know me from Adam, but

they already act like I'm their friend.” (Crotchguard) People approach each other like they already know each other.

Individuals see a strange menagerie of lights, music, and art. They witness a variety of activities but Burns differ from normal events as most activities witnessed, will also be an experience or immersion of sorts. As you walk through the community, people will attempt to drag you into whatever adult play activity they are engaged in. “That’s the one thing about people at burns is when you walk in a door everyone loves you it’s just that way.” (Dani) They might sing to you or dance for you. You will likely receive gifts or trinkets of some sort, people are constantly engaging with strangers, and bonding happens very quickly. Individuals participate in unorthodox activities: Strangers will flirt and have drinks together, people complement and discuss different costumes and art. People make instant friends in many situations.

In my personal experience I have witnessed people bond and build a relationship over the most random topics. I have some limitations with hearing, that are exacerbated by loud music. Many of my companions are used to me asking what someone said. Frequently when I was unsure about a seemingly random conversation, I would ask friends for clarification. In the earlier days of Burning I would hear a random topic from someone who briefly stopped to speak with us. I would ask a friend for clarification because of my confusion. After repeating or paraphrasing, I would often follow up with “Why?” or “Yeah but what did she want?”. I often got a shaking head, or shrug and smile. Sometimes the response was simply “Burners”. This has been extremely confusing in the beginning of my experiences.

### **Social network changes.**

As time goes on a Burners increasingly strengthen their social circle with a majority of the circle being likeminded Burner individuals. “How quickly did your social circle become Burner dominated? Immediately, Immediately.” (Trainwreck) This happens in three ways. First, Burners tend to select new Burners to develop tighter bonds with. They spend more time with them, engage in more shared experiences and hold them in higher regard. Fellow Burners become more central to the social network.

Second, individuals tend to convert other close members of their social network into Burners. “my closest circle of friends over the last few years has been made up of a lot of Burners. They introduced me to the lifestyle. So, outside of those I don't have a very large circle of friends. I try to bring that mindset to those old friendships, that whole Burner mindset of community and openness and love,” (Crotchguard)

As has been stated, Burners have been almost exclusively brought into the community by friends. This means that Burners are always recruiting their own, also discussed previously, Burner individuals are extremely selective. The initial prospects for Burn indoctrination are the closest members of the social network. I have discussed people, bringing in brothers, sisters, cousins, spouses, and even children, and rarely you will hear of someone bringing in their parents. Relatives tend to be insular to a social network in that they might not be the closest links but are also some of the strongest and most enduring. Longtime friends tend to be a good example of those first considered, and the network moves out over time.

“at this point because the Burn community has been a vortex that dragged in everyone I know, I only know Burners socially. If they aren't a Burner they will be one.

We apparently gain members by kidnapping and Stockholm syndrome. Burnholm syndrome” (Fury)

Third, once the network has effectively been built through new links, and through the conversion of old links, we see social network house cleaning taking place. “I don’t have the same friends I had before attending Burns. I almost call it the life of Gingersnap before Burning man and then the life after.” (Gingersnap)

Many people have social network links that have been developed over time and do not seem to serve a purpose. These “close ties”, are often removed or downgraded to “weak ties”. With social networks ever changing, it appears evident that the social network of a Burner becomes more and more centralized with like-minded individuals. Burners who have the propensity for longer social endurance are given preference and exchange of social resources are extended.

### **Types of social resources.**

There are three types of resources but emotional and informative are the most often utilized; part of this is likely because of the distance between Burns. Burners are often supportive but can be very cynical. People may give each other a lot of “Hell” but for the most part you see an overwhelming amount of support.

Burners tend to be active on social media and have a desire to present themselves in a way consistent with Burner principles. This activity on social media causes the individual to react and act accordingly including be supportive. I noticed a woman recently came out openly discussing her desire for love and disclosing having an STD. She received overwhelming support, which has not been something that would often occurs in everyday society or social media.



***Informative.*** This is a common form of resource that Burners often provide assistance with; since Burners come from all walks of life it is easy for them to have varying degrees of information. This can come into the form of equipment, employment, or a location of specific services. It can also come as reviews of other Burns, events, or theme camps. Surprisingly only one person mentioned utilizing the Burner network for information, and it was in regard to finding out information about Burns. “If I have a question about something there’s people I can reach out to even if I don’t see them I met them once at a burn and there was a connection on that level.” (Baroness) Information is of very little cost to the provider because the resource is already possessed and distributing does not decrease its value or take a significant amount of time to transmit. A caveat, Burns are never advertised to the general public and are only made aware via word of mouth or social networks.

***Emotional.*** Social media has infiltrated our schedules to an unprecedented degree. It is used to stay in touch with people across great distances.

“I would say the majority of my social circle, I will say, all of my closest confidants are Burners. The most interaction that I get day to day, in the sense of personal self-development, is with someone in the Burner community. Someone that doesn’t live here.” (Trainwreck)

It is not surprising that Burners use social media to do the same. Social media allows people to express their feelings and interests, in a way that often gives people confidence not exhibited in person. When individuals express strong emotional reactions, negative or positive, they usually experience a significant amount of support, publicly in a thread or privately in a message or text. Emotional support has also been expressed in person, if members live near each other or travel will sometimes occur. It also occurs at reunion Burns or decompressions.

Emotional support has been by far the most commonly expressed social resource in the Burn community, based on both interviews and direct observation. It has a variable cost to the provider in terms of time and emotional investment. If an individual expresses stress on Facebook, giving a generalized but reassuring statement is of little cost to the reader. However, if an individual requires a more personal touch, a significant amount of time might be required to partake in a dialogue.

***Instrumental.*** Instrumental has often been in the form of physical or tangible assistance. This kind of support is usually not very common, because it represents a significant investment by the individual, and often only utilized by the closest of links. If an individual were to loan a friend \$200, he would be effectively limiting his own resources by that amount.

Despite the significant investment, and close-proximity limits, instrumental resource distributions were frequently mentioned in interviews.

“Going through a divorce now, and um, the network of Burner friends I have, have really come together and made sure that I was okay, through every time I hear or see them or talk to them, assistance is offered by friends that I have. I've been offered a place to stay, help moving, people to talk to about situations” (Crotchguard)

It is worth noting that instrumental assistance was usually mentioned as being provided for by a tribe or theme camp, in this way social distance still plays a role.

“We had a recent tribe member in California who isn't in our tribe just an allied tribe who had their house burned down. I know several tribes across the U.S. and gathered donations and several of us donated and I would have a hard time putting the face to the name.” (Fury)

The most common investments listed involve time, for example, helping someone move, or helping them build something.

### **Enduring social networks.**

Social networks have always been changing at an accelerated rate, therefore it is likely that mistakes will be made by individuals and growing pains are experienced. The most obvious concern would be that while a person is given higher access in a network, the relationship might have been misjudged and not reciprocated. Most of the individuals I have spoken with as well as my own observations suggest that the relationships are in fact enduring.

Many of the relationships exist only through social media where geographic distance is present, but the relationship still endure. “I stay in contact with several of them even though we have only hung out a few times. We keep in contact in Facebook.” (Baroness) People spend a significant amount of time nurturing these relationships and seek to protect them as well as their reputation in the community.

However, in some cases, the relationships at first glance, do not seem to endure as people have very little contact with people they “made a connection” with at the event. There is very little contact between Burns, but even in those situations once the person has been seen at the next event, an instant connection is rebuilt upon being united with each other again – like no time has passed. “I’d say so it’s more of a see you next time thing. You might not contact them until you see them at the next burn.” (Lucky Bastard) The relationships endure, even if regular contact is not maintained.

### **Intersection of unlikely social links.**

A fascinating thing at Burns has been that people meet and form relationships that would be unlikely to flourish in the real world. People bond and have shared experiences with each other with nothing else in common other than the shared experience. People of drastic different outlooks, political and religious affiliations, from all walks of life get along - existing societal barriers are not present at a burn.

“So yeah I have the most amazing relationships. They’re like my family. There’s many marriages and relationships and deep friendships happened from playa that wouldn’t have met in real life. I meet people in this community I never thought I’d connect with outside of the community.” (Spicy)

Part of the reason for this have been because of the interaction of three Burner principles, Immediacy, Participation and Radical Inclusion. The principle of Participation encourages people to not just watch festivities, but to participate in them – experience them. Immediacy implies they should do so immediately before they overthink it or let all the default worlds guidelines for social behavior encourage them not to. Radical Inclusion ensures that people will be accepted into activities.

“Our tribe is known to get out there into the festival and aggressively instigate and make things happen and extrovert aggressively at people. Have been known to physically actually kidnap people back to our camp and strap armor on them and you’re a wastelander now. You should join us. I will, he said he kind of considered himself to be a satellite member of the tribe and literally chef nitro, Christina, saw him and said ‘ooh pretty, I want him, eye candy’ and make it closer over here and some of our introverts went and aggressively got him.” (Fury)

These embraced all together, fosters an environment where people have been bonding and having fun with people they would be unlikely to spend time with in the default world.

### **Theme: Functions of Burning**

Participating in the Burning community has value to attendees; however, individuals differ in opinions about the type of participation, and strength of the impact. Many have not been sure about the nature of the therapeutic or healing effects, they know only that they are there. “I think this place is so healing” (Dani) This section of the findings has been divided into three sections as follows: Disability and the rate of manifestation of anxiety and depression, accommodations for individuals with disabilities, and therapeutic benefits (escape, identity, self-efficacy, and social wellbeing).

Table 2

#### *Thematic Coding: Functions of Burns*

Findings	Thematic Coding
Disability	Acceptance, BP: Participation, BP: Immediacy, BP: Radical Inclusion, D: Disclosure, D: Hidden, D: Not defining
Anxiety & Depression	Acceptance, BP: Participation, BP: Immediacy, BP: Radical Inclusion, Disability, D: Support, Therapeutic, Acceptance, Compartmentalization, D: Frequent, D: Hidden
New Experiences	Experience, Adult Play, BP: Participation, BP: Immediacy, BP: Radical Inclusion, Dark Play, Shared Experience
Accommodations	Disability, D: Sanctuary, D: Support, BP: Participation, BP: Radical Inclusion, Safe Place

## **Disability.**

One of the great things about Burns is that everyone is looking for a place to not be judged and not have labels put on them. It would seem that in this environment people feel they can be whoever they want. People can define themselves in anyway, and disability is not always part of how people see or define themselves. In many cases disability is, but not defined in the same way as in the default world.

An individual with a disability is no different than any other participant.

“They really found a big puzzle piece in no spectator only participants. I think that really is positive with people with all kinds of disabilities. I think a lot of disabilities either sideline you physically or emotionally you want to participate but you’re embarrassed to ask for the conditions you need to participate and they’re like ‘no no we only want the participants we don’t want guests or audience to jump in and get involved.’”

(Fury)

The stigma that has been associated with a disability in the default world, does not apply at Burns. People do not need to hide it, and do not fear discussing it. Even in cases where one is suspected of having a disability it doesn’t really have a significant impact on interactions.

## **Anxiety and Depression.**

As mentioned in the section on methods, initially it has been thought that it would be very difficult to sample a certain number of individuals with anxiety or depression. After a few rounds of interviewing it became evident that the amount of people at Burns with one or the other was very high. If an individual did not have one of the qualifying conditions, they likely

knew someone at the event who did, that openly discloses. Crotchguard highlights this point in his interview.

“Several. Just about... everybody that... almost everybody that I've camped with has some level of anxiety. Multiple people I've met at the Burns have some level of anxiety. A lot... I do know quite a few people with anxiety and depression.” (Crotchguard)

From the interviews it became clear that not only are more people present with anxiety and depression, but they disclose more frequently. “There's definitely a higher rate of disclosure in the Burning community than there is in the default world.” (Crotchguard). Some participants engage in activities such as membership and easily identified disability related cultural symbols. “Seems to me in the Burner community the spoons are a common thing. That’s where I first heard about it was at a Burn.” (Honey Badger) Many of the interviewees discussed membership as a Spooky (Person who openly discloses that they have a hidden disability) and saw this as an outward display of a hidden disability. There were also workshops that explained what the spoons were about.

Interviewees unable to agree on if individuals with disability are more common in the Burner scene or do they just disclose more. Most agree that it is a combination of the two.

“I would say that in my experience, it seems the Burner community is sanctuary for people who battle anxiety and depression. Social anxieties of any kind, mental illness of any kind, imbalances of any kind, challenges from what we consider a “norm,” whatever that is. It seems we find this soothing source and this comfort in the Burning community.” (Trainwreck) The two points suggest individuals with disabilities feel more supported and/or accepted, because of higher attendance, and higher disclosure.

### **Accommodations.**

The Burner community has several specific facets that pertain directly to individuals with disabilities. “I haven’t seen it too much at regionals but at Burning Man they have the camps for disabilities and a great system out there for mental health.” (Gingersnap) The Big Burn has camps that specialize in serving the needs of specific disabilities; some providing mobility services, others cater to individuals with hearing impairments, just to name a few.

In addition, every Burn has a place designated as Sanctuary, where an individual who needs someone to listen, just a place to sit, or just escape the event for a few hours can find solace.

“Sanctuary, whether somebody has just found themselves unable to cope emotionally, or they’re just under the influence and unable to cope, there’s Sanctuary. There’s the huge tribe effect, or there’s the huge event effect, that there’s people everywhere - I can feel immersed when I’m ready, but I can find a safe space when I need it.” (Trainwreck)

Sanctuary provides a safe place, that even if individuals do not utilize it, they know that it’s there if they did, like a safety net. Green Dot rangers are trained mental health professionals and another form of support for not only individuals with disabilities, but also the event as a whole.

“They’re specifically for anyone that has a mental health issue while out there. They’re specifically for counseling, if you have any kind of mental breakdown or if something happens and you need a counselor or if you have any kind of anxiety they’re there specifically for that.” (Gingersnap).



Green Dot rangers are the mobile equivalent, checking up on camps and letting everyone know that help is never far. Burners support each other and there have been a certain amount of Communal Effort that is expected.

"oh, well you didn't perform a duty that you said you were going to, for whatever reason." The community really, again, steps up, and kind of fills that, and understands, is very understanding about what you may be going through at that point" (Crotchguard)

If an individual is unable to perform his duties, whether it be camp duties or those of a volunteer shift, understanding is generally shown. The individual is given the benefit of the doubt in these situations.

### **Therapeutic.**

Burning can have a therapeutic value. For many, the playa represents an opportunity to escape from normal life. Burns are like vacations in that people forget and do not think about their normal lives. Participants experience an increase in social wellbeing. Through new experiences individuals also develop an increase in identity and self-efficacy.

Table 3

*Thematic Coding: Therapeutic Functions*

Findings	Thematic Coding
Escapism	Escape, Persona, Persona: Burn Confidence Adult Play, BP: Immediacy, Compartmentalization, Default, Disappointment, Default Sheds, Role Conflict
Social Wellbeing	R: Enduring, SN: Instant Acceptance, BP: Communal Effort, Shared Experiences, SN: Family, SN: Enduring
Identity	Burn Confidence, P: Discovering, Acceptance, Adult Play, BP: De- Commodification, BP: Radical Self, Expression, Persona: Discovering, Persona: Burn Confidence, Adult Play, Dark Play, BP: De-Commodification, Burning Changes People
Self Efficacy	Self-Improvement, Accomplishment, BP: self-reliance, BP: Leave no trace, BP: Communal Effort, Persona: Burn Confidence, BP: Radical Self Reliance

**Escapism.**

Burns offer a unique environment that is very different from the default world. “All around, in my daily life, but also I think, kind of being able to shed that default world for a little bit.” (Crotchguard). I have observed people turning off cell phones and leaving them at camp, in fact, this is encouraged. I believe this is important because I have observed many people asking if anyone has a camera or cell phone to take a picture. This tells me people are aware of the desire to take photos but still decide not to carry phones.

An interesting observation that occurred has been that many individuals don’t believe that anxiety or depression has the same hold on them during a Burn as in the default world.

“So, with depression I mean you’re out there and with people in crazy colorful costumes acting crazy and seeing people doing really silly stuff and it’s hard to stay in

that depression hole when you're watching people have such a good time. And so, it makes you...it may not be...its temporary but it is a relief from the depression because you're watching it." (Baroness)

The effects of depression and anxiety have been decreased for many. Many can use coping skills to compartmentalize their anxiety or depression.

"I'd say both. I can put depression and anxiety on the back Burner and put on a smile if I have the smile for a while I can usually move into a happy headspace. The fake it till ya make it. "I feel like there's a lot of fake it till you make it thing. I'll just leave my anxiety and depression as far away from me as possible." (Star)

This compartmentalization is not always intentional and is often suppressing issues to be dealt with another time. Some people have said that their Burn persona might not exhibit anxiety or depression. This is not the consensus by all but has been observed. A few participants have made comments about forgetting to take medication with little or no effects. "It's almost like a different world you can put behind you and there may be a day or two at a Burn that you forget to take your anti-depressant and you don't even realize it because you're in a utopian environment" (Gingersnap)

### **Social Wellbeing.**

The section on social networking covers a lot about the social wellbeing, but somethings need to be emphasized beyond the growth of a network: Many Burners have never felt like they belonged to a group. Finding a place to belong where one does not feel alone is very important. "I have never felt like I belonged anywhere. I am so happy we found you guys. You guys are my family and I will never leave" (Dram)

Several interviews discussed finding a place or group to belong to. Many had never felt like they were socially accepted before. It is important to feel belonging to maintain a sense of normalcy. The individual above, Dram, married his girlfriend at a burning event a few months later. It is worth noting, the ceremony was performed by an ordained Burner in his tribe, and only Burners were invited.

Being part of a group eliminates some feelings of loneliness, but also knowing that others are like you is important. “Yeah I know Burners with disabilities, even one with the exact same disability as me. In fact has been a big inspiration to me.” (Dani) Because many Burners disclose hidden disabilities, it is easy for people with disabilities to connect. Many find solace just knowing that they are not alone in their struggles and they are able to connect with others that have the same trials and tribulations. It restores a sense of normalcy.

“After my first Burn I had a purpose, to contribute to the community. It gave me a purpose, to build something to give back to the community” (Nasa) Many people feel they have found a place to use their talents for the better of a community. Some of the people I have spoken with have tried to use their artistic talents for economic gain and have been met with difficulty and failure. Others have found a renewed desire to pick up all new hobbies.

### **Identity.**

Burners get a chance to explore new things and come away from the event with a more confident understanding of who they are. There are a variety of activities that mainstream society labels as deviant - to participate or to be perceived to participate could cause damage to social capital. If individuals want to experiment with BDSM, illegal drugs, costuming, art, or just want to engage in adult play, they will not be judged.

“The most common attraction I would say is that you can shed any idea of what society thinks you're supposed to dress like, sound like, talk like, act like, smell like. You can put all of that aside and show up in your raw authentic form however you please, as long as you respect other people's space and boundaries. And it's so well received”

(Trainwreck)

Without the schemas others hold about them, some Burners become another more authentic version of themselves. People struggle to figure out who they are or how they are defined as a person. When you take away commodification, and the potential to accumulate capital, you have a blank slate. People get a chance to be the person they want to be instead of what society has said they should be. They discover this about themselves and take it back to the default world with a firmer idea of who they are and who they want to be. “It feels like that’s how they live their life. There may not be art or the people to experience like at a Burn, but they have the mindset.” (Crotchguard) They change group affiliations and engage more with people that have things in common with, this was also discussed under the social networking section.

Some of the participants rediscover or remember things about themselves.

“I love Burning so much. It’s like part of me was asleep, the artist and musician part of me. Going to my first burn awakened that part, and I am so grateful. I describe myself as an artist now, but I have not painted in years. The simple dumb art sculpture we did was so much fun. It gave me a reason to play around and do something practical, well practical in a impractical way. It has changed me.” (Nasa)

People remember the things they did and find they have a purpose.

In my personal observations, I have witnessed several new Burners discover more about who they want to be and make changes to be that person. In addition to the changing social

networks, Burners take up new hobbies, often performance art. One of the biggest changes that I have noticed is a downgrading of the importance of money. “I hate my job. I have become accustomed to the money. I think I could do without it. I just want to find something in event planning for a non-profit. I want to make a difference in people lives” (Pants) Several people I have kept in contact are moving toward careers that may offer less economic incentive, but more job satisfaction.

### **Self-Efficacy.**

Many people feel that the Burning experience is a challenge. The event has been an emotional and physical challenge, and upon completion feelings of achievement are often experienced. “You get challenged. It makes you stronger. It makes you more resilient in a way.” (Spicy) Each Burn is a fantastic and unique experience that gives one accomplishments and experiences from which to draw strength.

“I made everything happen and I can’t believe I accomplished this and I didn’t give up’ and it was a great feeling inside of me that I didn’t give up when it could have been so easy to do that and so it actually made me feel stronger in my everyday life knowing that if I get through that Burn which was the hardest environmentally than the other ones are going to be a piece of cake. I can definitely do it.” (Gingersnap)

That strength is often carried over into the default world giving people the ability to make a difference in their own lives.

The Principle of Radical Self-Reliance encourages everyone to take care of their own physical needs. The principle of Communal Effort, encourages people to take care of the needs of others. “No matter what’s going on with you, we will find a place that you can help out. It is important for everyone to contribute to the Burn” (Rissi)

At the completion of an event individuals often have a feeling of pride, stemming from the feeling that they not just took care of their own needs but also contributed to a community as a whole and assisted others in the process.

**Theme: Utopia**

Once individuals enter the Burning community there has been both internal and external pressure to embrace the Burner ideals and to see the event as a utopia of sorts- it is in fact often referred to as such.

“It is a festival with theme camps, live music and lots of Gifting. No money transactions inside of it. Just a giant utopian weekend of pure amazingness.” (Lucky Bastard) In order to effectively reinforce the image, Burner education is reinforced at every opportunity. While the word utopia comes up frequently in casual conversation about the theoretical nature of Burning, it is not a term that came up in casual conversations.

“We have a perfect environment that’s there- that we love and there’s so many people who say they wish they could do that 365 days a year, but you know you can’t do that so it’s just the perfect environment of love and accepting that you don’t get in everyday society.” (Gingersnap)

Some are much more realistic about their perspective on Burns rather than it being a temporary Utopia.

Table 4

*Thematic Coding: Utopia*

Findings	Thematic Coding
Status	Persona Burn Confidence, Status, Veteran Obligation, A: Ability, Car, Costumes
Authentic Self	Acceptance, Adult Play, Dark Play, BP: Immediacy, Default Disappointment, Home, Innocent Intention, Persona, Persona: Discovering, Safe Place, Vulnerable, BP: Self Expression
Frame Reinforcement	Burner Principals, Adult Play, Dark Play, Experience, Utopian Expectation, Innocent Intention
Difficulty Removing Burners	Acceptance, BP: Radical Inclusion, Burner Principals, Buzzkill, Frame Shatter, Innocent Intention, P: Anything Goes, Predator
Burn Out	Burner Principals, BP: Variable, Frame Shatter, Status, Buzzkill, Honest Intention, SN: Burner Dominated, Utopian Expectation
Phoenix	Buzzkill, Frame Shatter, Predator, SN Change, SN Burner Dominated, Utopia Expectation

**Status.**

Status is very different in the Burner community verses daily life. It is not based on ability to acquire economic gains or on the potential for material wealth reciprocation, or how successful one end up being. At a Burn, some that believe a certain amount of status is awarded to the participants with the best costumes, camps, and art, but for the most part people believe status is only acquired through participation. “At the end, everyone is equal” (Crotchguard) This goes back to the depth of participation in the experience, where a spectator is the only person that is looked at negatively.

There has been some status awarded to veteran Burners based on total burns attended, and whether you have made the pilgrimage to the Playa aka the Big Burn. “I think there’s a lot of people that think just because they’ve been to Burning Man that makes them a better Burner than people like me who haven’t been to burning man” (Baroness)



To a certain extent it has been assumed that if you have been a veteran you have also been helping the community or volunteer many hours to the cause. This became evident in the last focus group, and in a Facebook thread where people argued over volunteering with a department vs. doing work on art or performances during the event. Some believed that even artists should spend time volunteering at the event instead of devoting all time to performances. It would seem that though a DJ might perform and bring joy to hundreds, which does not excuse him from a position as earth guardian or gate greeter in the eyes of many. While this may seem an inefficient system, it does reinforce equal status. Everyone is expected to participate in some volunteer activity keeping those from having what in the default world would be perceived as exceptional skill set, from attaining status.

### **Authentic Self.**

In our daily lives we play different roles and each of those has its own set of peculiarities. Some people believe that at Burn events people are allowed much more freedom to explore in ways the default world rarely provides. “People are like wearing a mask in the default world and at the Burn you don’t have to wear a mask” (Pony) Without judgement, people often find themselves exploring things they would not even consider doing before attending a Burn. “You got people driving around in cars that look like they should not even be running. Everything is so radically different from the default world its put them in a different mindset and allows them to open up even more.” (Bloodshot)

Rarely does a place outside of one’s home exist where one can truly let their hair down and not worry about existing judgements. People follow the rules of society and project a certain image as they are expected in the default world. “People see Burns as a safe place to express themselves” (Pants) A Burn event is safe place where people are respectful to each other and

recognize and celebrate their differences. “There’s all kinds of people at these events and they are well accepted which isn’t always true in the world” (Honey Badger)

People are not concerned with looking silly or odd, some want to appear silly or be odd at all times, basically, they are not concerned about being judged. “There's no fear of judgment because I know I will be met with love and acceptance with whatever I say as long as what I say is not rooted in hatred” (Dani) The mind wanders, and people find themselves engaging in seemingly erratic behaviors for no reason. It is like day dreaming on the outside.

### **Frame reinforcement.**

In the last section I discussed some of the facets that go into people viewing the Burn as a utopian ideal. Burners often make excuses to justify or overlook poor Burner behavior. Burners want to see the good in people, and often fail to see the negative. “Every once in a while, we will get the wolf in sheep’s clothing. Some of us will know who that is but no one will believe us when we try to tell others. They don’t want to see the dark negative in anything they want to see their safe environment.” (Spicy)

When Burners encounter a negative member of their community, they tend to overlook it for a variety of reasons. They make excuses, not to justify their actions, but because they don’t want to see the darker side. “You have to understand I have known them along time and that is just them getting into their character” (Pants) Some Burners are aware that not everyone is what they present themselves but are still able to make honest connections.

The Burning community tries to find a safe place for everyone. Unfortunately, bad people do sometimes infiltrate the community. These people take advantage of the openness of the community and the hospitality of people. In some cases, individuals will take advantage of their position in the hierarchy attempting to assert control, but these are the exceptions not the norm.

### **Difficulty removing Burners.**

The negative side of Radical Inclusion has been difficulty to justify removing an individual from your camp and especially the Burn if a situation occurs. Once an individual is invited to camp with a certain camp societal pressure makes it socially unacceptable to not allow that individual to camp with that said group in the future. Even if the individual takes actions that are very un-Burner like, people will make excuses for them.

To remove an individual from a Burn altogether is almost unheard of. It takes violations of consent or something egregious. "There are cases where we had to get rid of individuals but they had to do something really dark and get caught legally." (Spicy) This is both to the testament and detriment of Burner values. The community itself is divided on providing a place for all people, but also not infringing on the community's experience, similar to the default world's ostracization of those not perpetuating community norms. What is considered normal and acceptable, is far wider in the Burner communities as a whole and individuals are much more forgiving.

The idea of removing someone from the Burner community definitely never came up organically in observations or conversations. It has been such a rare concept people usually don't have any kind of clear or concise answer, usually relying on the leadership to handle such issues. It is common for the individual to self-select out of the camp, usually moving to another camp, effectively displacing the problem but not actually removing it. "I have seen firsthand people who are great in the real-world but as soon as they Burn they turn into a sparkle pony and don't get invited back." (Lucky Bastard) As Lucky stated in most cases the best one can do is to not invite a person back. In those situations that have been observed, if the problem individual makes a big enough issue they would likely be allowed back, at least on a temporary basis.

In side conversation I had with numerous Burners, I tested knowledge as well as practicality of removing a problem Burner. Even among veterans most have no knowledge of an actual Burner being removed from an event. It is exceptionally difficult and basically unheard of to remove an individual.

### **Burn Out.**

Most Burners have drunk the Kool-Aid so to speak and embraced the lifestyle all out. In many ways it is necessary to go full-time Burner to maintain the perceptual frame and somehow incorporate it in their daily lives. Upon initial conversations most believe they will continue Burning for their entire lives, as the study progressed, four of the interviewees became disillusioned with the scene and withdrew from it all together. “People want to be able to relax and let their true persona come out and be safe and as soon as there’s an indication that it isn’t 100 percent safe it ruins the dream.” (Spicy) When people do leave, it is not a slow transition but a fast break for the majority it seems.

Burns have been great because of people, and they have not been great for the same reason – people. After all, while it is viewed as a Utopia, we are human and we have flaws. The individuals I spoke with left the scene due to disillusionment over relationships, usually a significant break up, and division of friends. “My whole Burn life I realized I was giving away more than I ever received.” (Gingersnap) Some realized they did not get what they put into the event and to the people. Also, it would appear that in the Burning scene a common occurrence is the dissolution of marriages. Of the four that left the scene three of them involved bad breakups/dissolution of marriage.

**Phoenix.**

This project involves one year of actual field work and writing. In the beginning four of my original participants proclaimed to be Burners for life, but by the following year these four left the Burner community altogether. I stayed in contact with three of the individuals, and they have been considering a return to the community.

“When I was on the board for Pyromancia, the veil was lifted on stuff and I saw the inner workings and the ugliness and that kind of muddied it for me whereas before it was a beautiful thing but then after being on the board and dealing with the bullshit I’m going to have to figure out a way to separate that and just become a regular Burner again.” (Baroness).

All three left because of some disillusionment. One has already returned in a different capacity. The second one has opened lines of communication and loosely discussed potentially coming back. The third individual is reaching out to her tribe members to reconnect.

## Chapter 5: Conclusions

### Organization of Chapter

This chapter serves as a synthesis recombining all of the component parts in the findings section and drawing conclusions based on them. The next section is the implications, which covers relevance and actionable items, followed by the limitations of the study. The conclusion section is finished by some after thoughts about my personal journey.

Table 5

#### *Research Questions, Findings, Conclusions*

Research Questions	Findings	Conclusion
Does entering new social networks at a Burning event provide meaningful social support after the event has ended?	Intentions Virgin Burners Instant Social Networks Social Network Changes Types of Resources Enduring Social Networks Unlikely Social Links Status Frame Reinforcement Difficulty Removing Burners Burn Out Phoenix	Burner Networks Perception Frame Cultural Cultivation
In what ways does attending a burning festival impact individual with psychiatric disabilities?	Intentions Disability Anxiety and Depression Accommodations Therapeutic Escapism Social Wellbeing Identity Self-Efficacy Utopia Authentic Self Burn Out	Therapeutic Gains Disability

## **Burner Social Networks**

Individuals with Anxiety and/or Depression require more emotional social resources in order to mitigate against stress. (Antonak & Livneh, 2005, Chronister 2009, McLaughlin et al., 2012). At the same time, they often have the capability of hiding their disability. As time progresses social resources become more taxed, at the same time some resources are being shed in order to keep knowledge of the disability hidden. Individuals enter a downward spiral of declining resources and increased need (Chronister 2009).

The Burning community creates instant and enduring social network resources. These social resources are meaningful. Burners tap their resources when needed and are rewarded with support. The resources are experienced by individuals with anxiety and depression at the same rate as those without.

These networks continue to hold strong even if individuals are not in the same geographic area through social media. In some cases, individuals don't correspond, but when they are reunited they feel the same connection even after significant time might have passed (Quaak, 2016).

Overtime the Individual's social network becomes dominated by Burners, for three reasons. 1) Burners make new connection with like-minded Burners, finding that they have more in common with them. 2) Existing social links that are highly valued are often converted into the Burner lifestyle in their daily lives. 3) Overtime Burners have less in common with Non-Burner individuals and tend to shed or downgrade primary social links that do not embrace the lifestyle (Granovetter, 1973).

This study utilizes Cohen's division of social resources to embrace a common language (Cohen, 2004) It is important for the right resource to be utilized for the right need.

(McLaughlin, 2012). Individuals with anxiety and depression have an increasing need for emotional resources. Out of the three types of social resources, Emotional is the most prevalent mentioned; Emotional resources play a very heavy role in the social network and are particularly important for and apply directly to stress mitigation (Antonak & Livneh, 2005, Chronister 2009, McLaughlin et al., 2012). Burners frequently mention as well as utilize emotional support. This can be easily observed using social media but is also frequently discussed by Burners. In the case of emotional support individuals utilize the low-cost version, social media. This version could have a difference in perceived support and real support. Feelings of support are almost as important as actual support and could be easily misconstrued. The higher cost version requires a more intense time commitment. Both are present in the Burner resource network that suggests the level of commitment is at the very least close between the two.

### **Perception Frame**

Social networks are built because of the honest intention of people. People continue to bond quickly because of their belief in the Burner frame of perception. They constantly engage in discourse and reinforce each other's versions of the situation (Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford, 1986). When individuals meet and talk they do not attempt to prove or measure value in the other person as done in the default world or everyday life. Status for the most part does not apply in the Burner interaction, because it is considered taboo to discuss money or professions- two concepts that are, key defining factors in current socio-economic status.

Burners continue with this form of personal interaction because they believe in and practice the principles and they believe others are adhering to the Principles as well. When a new interaction occurs, people believe in the honest, almost naive, intent. In communication it is easy to transmit a mixed signal, instead of wondering if someone had ill intent, they are trusted and



assume that no harm was meant. This also means that Burners don't overthink their messages and communications. They understand that if they were to accidentally say something offensive it will likely not be taken as such.

The perception frame is reinforced in a variety of ways. 1) Burners are very selective in who they recruit to take part in the Burner lifestyle. They invite people they believe will embrace Burner principles and make a good community member. 2) Virgin Burners have a position that encourages others, especially veterans to make sure they have an enjoyable time, but also understand the principles. The principles are considered the guidelines for Burner behavior. 3) Starting at the entry gate, people are educated about the principles and almost submersed with the principles throughout the event.

If the frame of perception is damaged individuals might walk away from the Burner community completely. The frame is what allows people to believe in the utopian ideal. People embrace and believe in the principles and believe other people embrace those as well. If this frame is damaged or shattered, people no longer trust one another. They no longer trust the intent of others in the community or the community itself. Once this happens, the sense of community has lost its appeals.

Unfortunately, the frame perception can be broken by a very small number of interactions and/or people. Because the community tries to find a place for everyone, sometimes people infiltrate the community and sometimes even leadership positions. Leadership can take the form of an event staff member, theme camp leader, or even a veteran Burner, respected by the community. This is particularly damaging as these people are not only Burners but also looked at as archetypes or members that represent the community.

It is both advantage and disadvantage that these people are trusted. People will not attempt to discern their true motivations, people will not visit their intentions, and when faced with the truth will often make excuses. Burners often don't want to see the dark side of their community. If they admit a person in an authority position, or a highly respected member of the community does not embrace the principles or using their position for personal gain, they must admit the utopia is not the same as the vision projected.

### **Disabilities**

Burners with disabilities are common place, both in terms of expression and disclosure. One of the initial problems with the study methodology was a concern in identifying Burners with disabilities. It turns out, that it was not a problem at all. Most people I spoke with about my research either disclosed or introduced me to a person to be interviewed with some physical or mental disability. A significant number of people have or have had depression and/or anxiety. Anxiety was discussed much more often.

Because of the unique environment, "hidden disabilities" have the capability of withheld. The whole environment is chaotic, and most participants spend very little time at their own camp. It would be easy to hide in a tent or RV. It would also be relatively easy to explain away any seemingly odd behavior. But at a Burn, odd behavior is accepted and almost embraced. Because of Immediacy it is common to drop an activity to go do something else. People often refer to "Burner Time", which effectively explains away people being late, early or not showing up at all. People don't expect you to make rendezvous, hold you to a meeting time and certainly don't expect you to explain yourself.

Despite the ease of hiding a disability, people disclose disabilities fairly frequently at these events. They are spoken about in a very neutral tone and received the same way.

Individuals would tell me about anxiety in much the same way they might describe any other topic of interest. Many get excited when they hear someone else has the same disability, as a sense of normalcy is retained (Switzer, 2003). They make jokes and discuss hardships, but none of it is discussed in a negative light. They are not defined by their disability, unless they choose to be. Burns you can describe yourself however you want. You can be whoever you want.

There are a variety of services and supports to assist individuals with disabilities but in reality, they provide a benefit for everyone. 1) Stated previously, individuals are trusted and it is assumed that individuals will work to the benefit of their community as a whole. If an individual is not able to meet his perceived obligations others will step up to provide assistance. 2) Certain camps have specific themes that provide services for individuals with disabilities. The most common type of service is mobility. You can register with a mobility camp and they will provide transportation around the Burn. 3) It is standard operating practices to provide a Sanctuary spot at each Burn. This is a place where one can speak to individuals or just retreat to a safe place. Sanctuary staff will contact theme camp members at the request of the participant. If the participant doesn't want his camp to know his location for whatever reason, they will not disclose. They will also not allow the individual in Sanctuary to be contacted, providing security if need be. 4) Burns also provide Green Dot Rangers, which are trained mental health professionals. These staff members are always available by radio and are walking around the event. They are constantly checking in with camps and explaining what they do as well as watching for potential escalating situations.

### **Therapeutic Gains**

Attending Burning events has a positive effect for individuals with anxiety and depression. It provides immediate benefits during the event that provide for a relaxing and

comfortable event, but also longer-term benefits. Participants learn that they are not alone and have support of others with similar experiences as well as those without. They are also equipped with positive experiences that contribute to self-esteem, a sense of accomplishment, and learn positive coping techniques better equipping them to better adapt to the default world.

Mental health services are provided for the benefit of all, and are not designated for any certain individual, apart from the mobility and other specialized camps. There is no stigma from using these services. People do not harbor the same concerns about being labeled as “disabled” or “crazy”. Because of the lack of judgement people are more likely to use the services and more likely to utilize alternative coping mechanisms that are healthier than bottling them up (McRae, Heller, John, & Gross, 2011). They are encouraged to speak about their trials and tribulations.

Burners with anxiety and depression quickly learn that they are not alone in their struggles; just hearing another person has the same disability is affirmation (Switzer, 2003). Disclosure of a disability with another individual can happen at an event or via a social network conversation or an online relationship. Sometimes disclosure occurs online and sometimes in person. During the course of my study I have witnessed hundreds of people disclose their disability and are met with words of affirmation. As individuals with anxiety and depression realize they are not alone, a sense of “normalcy” returns to them.

Burning provides a safe place for people to explore and reinvent themselves. Upon arriving at an event, many of one’s daily roles do not apply. Most interviewees feel very heavily defined by their jobs, socio-economic status, and even their clothes; because of De-Commodification and Gifting, these definitions do not apply. People with the absence of these defining concepts, accumulated over a lifetime, have little to draw on – almost a blank slate. People look around the chaotic art filled environment and are forced to examine and sometimes

reinvent themselves – filling the blank slate with new ideas and revelations. People attempt to define themselves in completely new terms, see themselves with new eyes and have the chance to start over, so to speak (Kehoe, 2011; Quaak, 2016; Swan, 2013).

The examining of oneself can be very enlightening, as it will often lead people to question all the things they thought and believed to be important. In the absence of wealth accumulation or modern day society status quos, they begin to ask themselves: what is really important to an individual in their daily lives? This thought provoking examination is often taken back to the real world and allows an individual a fresh look at their life. Much of the default world assigns value and worth to individuals based on their ability to accumulate wealth. Many individuals embrace that fully, but when wealth no longer becomes the central focus of day to day operations, what will replace it?

They get a break not only from the default world, but often their default selves, and their disability. Because of the paradigm shift and the lack of labels, individuals often do not feel their anxiety or depression. Their Burn persona might have strength of will and confidence that they do not feel in the default world, therefore, many individuals do not experience anxiety or depression in the same way and a few individuals claim to not have it at all while at a Burn event.

After a certain point, individuals develop repetitive thoughts about anxiety and depression in everyday life. It becomes difficult to get away from these thoughts because environmental factors remind people of the sources of stress. Individuals without disabilities often expect individuals with disabilities to take on a “suffering” or “mourning” role regarding their disability. If they resist this role, they are often met with negative attitudes. The narrative that is created by society is constantly reinforced without any input or control of the disability

community. Without the pressure to conform to that role, people don't experience disabilities in the same way. (Chan, Livneh, Pruett, Wang and Zheng, 2009) Burns can effectively break the chain of thoughts that lead to anxiety and depression. Individuals get a chance to experience their disability without others telling them how they should feel.

Some of the pressures of having a disability, particularly disabilities that manifest later in life, are associated with the uncertainty and not being able to predict what will happen. Individuals have a set of wants and needs and are often uncertain about their ability to achieve those outcomes. Burns are chaotic and there is a high degree of uncertainty about so many things, but their needs will be provided for no matter what. Individuals who have never experienced a Burn often have a degree of culture shock. I have witnessed people at the entry gate for the first time just stare unmoving. They often laugh and a degree of relief washes over them.

At the end of a Burn there is a sense of accomplishment. Participants made new friends and had new experiences. They also triumphed in a paradigm shifting environment. They were exposed to a new environment, where so many things did not make sense. They effectively existed in a vacuum of understanding and learned at least to some degree not to fear it. Most attendees will experience a feeling of "I did it" or "I survived." This lesson will also be taken home and applied to assist in effective coping responses. In many ways they learn more effective ways to deal with uncertainty.

### **Cultural Cultivation**

The last point in the conclusion, The Burning Man community has carefully cultivated its culture over the last 32 years, with the major shift in 2004, when Larry Harvey officially introduced the principles. There are three primary agents of cultural reinforcement that occur 1)

selectively choosing who to bring into the culture 2) the constant reminder of the 10 principles with education, and 3) the subtly encouragement toward Burner social isolation.

Most of the Burners I have spoken with believe that BM offers a place for everyone. This is simply not the case. People are very selective about who they bring into the community.

People are chosen carefully based on the likelihood they will be able to adapt to the culture and rules of BM. They are also invited based on their likely participation and quality of character. If someone were selfish for example, they would likely not be invited.

The Burning community engages in constant education and re-education about the ten principles and what they mean. From the very beginning when entering the event people are quizzed on what the ten principles mean, often engaging in playful games. As one experiences the event there are subtly reminders in the form of art exhibits, and constant discourse with people often citing principles as they apply to various situations.

As mentioned previously overtime Burners build stronger links and networks within the Burner community while simultaneously neglecting those outside of the network. No organization would officially or even likely overtly encourage social isolation, it does often occur covertly. People are encouraged to embrace an outlook that is often inconsistent with other values and perceptions. If an individual assigns a high value to Burner perspective others that have contrary views are less likely to be engaged on a social level. Over time the network changes with Burner connections being strengthened. At saturation, when the majority of the strong relationships are Burners, any new link is likely to either have been made in the Burner community or to be quickly converted.

It is not completely clear if social isolation was the intent, but it defiantly happens. These three factors together facilitate strong Burner culture. Burners are encouraged to transmit their

culture to others. Burners have their own language, symbols, and mythos. The meanings to vary from Burner to Burner and it is not necessary for everyone to have specific meanings.

## **Implications**

### **Discover a method of removing or re-educating bad Burners.**

In order to maintain the Burn perception, it is important to minimize the effects of negative individuals. One bad experience can potentially ruin Burning for a person. Burners and event staff need to remember that all Burners are equal and a Burner who has moved up the hierarchy is not above reproach.

Burners who are not embracing the principles or are taking advantage of the community, need to be re-educated. The Burner principles are emphasized almost to the point of absurdity, and yet it is easy to skip the education process through recognition or Burn fame. In addition, people who are running an event often skip the education all together. It is assumed they are well versed, and if they do not attend other events they might not get education at all and fail to see the true perspective that is emphasized in the principles they teach.

In extreme cases individuals have been removed from an event. These are so rare and far between most people that are not event staff could not tell you about a specific person that has been removed, but many can tell you about people they believe should. If an individual is causing a significant number of problems and all attempts to bring this person under control have failed, the person should be removed.

The removing of an individual effectively communicates that there are still rules and guidelines for behavior. Unfortunately, removal also suggests that there is not a place in Burning



for everyone. I believe it more important to remove one individual who could potentially affect several people's experiences.

**Festivals could replicate the experience.**

There are definitely key things that make Burns unique from other type of festivals, but some teachings could be borrowed. The most important factor is managing perceptions of socioeconomic status. The root of status is capital and the ability to acquire capital. Burns regulate this by making sure everyone purchases a ticket, everyone participates in volunteering, and activities are not commercially sponsored. In some Burns attendees are able to apply for a hardship ticket, based on economic need. There are a few exceptions to this rule, certain BM staff are provided tickets on the basis to make sure they attend or gift the ticket to an individual that will further the community agenda.

The Burn is considered owned by the community, instead of by a select individual or small group because of these three factors: 1) At Burns everyone purchases a ticket, including event staff and the event promoters, with few exceptions. In this way no performer or staff member is perceived as having a higher position or skill set worthier of another and qualifies for a free ticket. During a Burn event all are equal; at some other events or festivals performers or volunteers receive a free ticket. 2) At Burn Events, people are encouraged to volunteer to help the event flow but not actually compensated in anyway. 3) Events or activities are rarely sponsored by the actual event but most of the time sponsored by a theme camp. The community is encouraged to provide entertainment.

Burns provide a variety of services that are of particular importance for individuals with anxiety and depression. Sanctuary, provides temporary relief for people who are overwhelmed, or under the influence. Because Burns don't have security in the traditional sense, people are

much more willing to engage with the Rangers, who are fellow participants. If individuals need assistance in just about anyway, they can trust that the Rangers will help them, and not police them. The law enforcement power dynamic differential doesn't exist.

### **Global community impact.**

From the moment I entered my first Burning experience I knew that there were lessons to be learned that could be likely translated to the wider community and would likely provide a benefit, not only individuals with disabilities, but everyone. Many of these lessons are echoed above in the festivals section, but some are broader. Burning does a great job at building relationships and communities very quickly. I would sum the lessons for the community into three categories 1) Emotional Support. 2) Trust and Accept. 3)Egalitarian

We have seen that Burner social networks are strongly built upon emotional support. In the default world people are often afraid to show emotion, and emotional displays are seen as unprofessional. As a society we must start showing support and stop stigmatizing disability.

We have to accept each other as human, and accept that nobody is perfect. We must not only judge others, but trust that we will not be judged as well. The Burner model even with its flaws still works. Even if some of the trust is misplaced, the belief or perception of support allows more people to be open, and not guard themselves.

As we see others in a more authentic light it helps everyone achieve a sense of normalcy. We realize everyone has struggles. There is a power exchange in charity, gifts, and favors. If we see ourselves as equal, assistance and/or gifts are not expected to be reciprocated, those that receive them can maintain dignity and not feel a sense of debt. Feelings of debt and of being a burden create power differentials, and feelings of inadequacy. Neither in quantity are good for self-esteem and locus of control.

Expecting society to change is probably an unrealistic goal. Instead, I would ask that people who review my dissertation think about the insights and success that Burns have. You don't need to attend a Burn to experience the success. Be nice to each other, don't judge, and don't worry that others are judging you. Believe that Burner Utopia can be adopted by the default world. It doesn't matter if it's true, the belief alone will make the world a better place.

It all starts with destigmatizing individuals in general and specifically individuals with disabilities. We must stop stigmatizing an individual for showing emotional need, and allow them to receive the support that will increase their overall happiness. As the stigma declines, more people will reach out to each other to provide support and to be supported. As a whole our society will grow and flourish.

### **Burning Man, heal thyself.**

During this project I attended a large variety of Burn events and have acquired a wide berth of knowledge on the subject. Larry Harvey committed the ten principles to paper 15 years ago, in an effort to ensure the spirit of BM would continue in the regional network. Burning Man has almost tripled in size and become widely commercialized, since then.

The benefits I have seen and written about are much more prevalent in the regional network. Tickets are given to some staff and volunteers. The BMORG itself has created a disparity between the Burn inspired and Burn sanctioned events. They ask that Burn sanctioned events give a portion of their proceeds to the home event, much like a franchise fee.

The biggest problem is the so called "Plug and Play" camps. These camps have a membership fee or camp dues that can be as high as 25,000. Attendees can fly in and get VIP, no wait, service and be ferried to their camp. They will have air-conditioned accommodations, and gourmet food. They will also have art cars, and costumes on hand to enjoy. Some even have

Sherpa's that will provide a guided experience. The whole concept of "Plug and Play" is against several principles and fosters an increased environment of social status disparity.

Because of the prohibitively expensive ticket and the long journey, individuals with disabilities will continue to be marginalized in Burning Man. While it is true that some camps offer special services, and low income tickets can be purchased, the economic impact is still too great for most individuals, and even greater so for those with disabilities.

I feel, the Big Burn has lost its way, and fails to embrace the principles guiding the regional network. Burning Man has become a commercialized event, seen as an exotic vacation spot for celebrities. The spirit of community at BM is dying. At this point, I am afraid people will not read my work in its entirety, and make false assumptions about the Big Burn. The founder died a few weeks ago, and I fear for the organization.

The first thing that BM needs is to stop the presence of plug and play camps. They create an obvious disparity with any they encounter. There needs to be rules or guidelines that discourage this kind of behavior. BM needs to return to an environment where everyone participates. In many ways members of these camps are just spectators in costumes. Theme camps should be required to provide something for the entertainment of the masses. If a camp does not provide for everyone a service, they should be expected to stay in open camping.

The second thing is to create more opportunities for people to gain tickets. Tickets are both hard to acquire and prohibitively expensive. More efforts should go out to hardship/low income tickets. The majority of tickets sold on the open market, are few in number, in reality theme camps purchase tickets in bulk. In addition a true lottery should exist if tickets are to be limited, and the tickets not used should be returned to BM, instead of being sold on the market.

The third item of importance is the re-education that has already been discussed. It is even more important for BM. While in attendance at BM, I never experienced anyone discussing the principles after gate entry. If someone declares they are an experienced Burner they are not asked questions and are not expected to go through the normal rituals of ringing the bell and laying in the sand. In short the principles are not reinforced nearly to the same extent.

**Individuals with anxiety, or depression should try out Burning.**

Individuals will likely experience an increase in social network resources, a fresh perspective, and vacation from existing paradigms, all in an environment free of judgement and stigmatization. At first glance, Burns could appear to exacerbate anxiety and depression but with most individuals, it is actually the opposite. People with disabilities often flourish, likely because they have been stagnant in the default world.

As stated previously, attending Burns can help build a social network very quickly. Individuals with disabilities have likely experienced a decrease in their social network, possibly because of increase demand for social resources, or because of attempting to hide their disability (Chronister 2009). Burns have an abundance of people that disclose, embrace and discuss their disability.

People are able to get a therapeutic vacation from their default life. This often allows time to heal, even if it is just brief time. The removal of constant default pressure allows individuals to reexamine their life upon returning to the default world.

The time away from the default world is often experienced as time away from their disability as well. In some cases they may be able to examine their situation and find suitable alternatives to improve their situation, because it is society that pushes the disability label on

them. In the absence of the same people every day, and in the presence of understanding people, the disability doesn't matter.

### **Limitations of Study.**

Qualitative research has the inherent limitation that it lacks generalizability. The research presented provides insights into a community but can only speak to the experiences of a tiny portion of the Burner demographic. When selecting such a tiny demographic to represent a much larger population, steps must be taken to get as diverse population as possible, and still generalizability is not possible.

There are also limitations based on the listener's interpretations, even when using recording technique, there are still variations based on determining the meaning and seriousness of a statement. (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012) Particularly with a group that is prone to pranks and sarcasm, correct interpretation is extremely difficult because the meaning is different to everyone, based on a variety of factors, from education to ethnicity.

When presented with the same comments it is possible that someone with a different background would interpret the data based on their own experiences. This point is highlighted by the fact I had slight variations in the way I interpreted some of the findings at the beginning, middle and end of the project. As a single individual with the same experiences, my interpretations were not 100% consistent throughout the project. As my understanding advanced my perspectives shifted. Symbolic Interactionism teaches us that the interpretations will shift based on our environments and who we are engaging with (Blumer, 1969.)

This project also found conflicting information between the main Burning Man event and regional Burns, Burn inspired, and decompression events. The smaller events are all consistent with each other, but the parent organization provides the rules and the template the others follow.

More information need to be gathered, but this is a major limitation in the study, as most of the findings do not apply to the parent event. Burning Man only happens once a year, and it would be a mistake to extrapolate the findings to the origin event.

### **Personal Reflections.**

As this project ends, I reflect on the journey that has brought me here. The truth is I went into this project with a pretty good idea of what I would find. While researching for the proposal I attended fifteen events. At one point, I became concerned that I had completely gone native. I was worried I had lost perspective. I had devoted a significant amount of time working with disability, I am a disabled veteran and I believed I had a firm idea of Burning and disability- I was wrong. It would take something drastic to teach me a lesson in humility and understanding.

The original research proposal designated Loveburn, to be my last data collection point. While walking from the car, I attempted to jump a small creek and dislocated my shoulder breaking off the bottom of the socket. I spent the next five days at Loveburn, and then spent three days driving home, most of the time in excruciating pain.

At the time of the Burn and for months after I was very upset and disillusioned because of my perceptions of a lack of support by my social network at the Burn. I was in many ways self-isolating on a micro scale, and then angry when people did not go out of their way to engage. I had experienced a lesser form of disability onset, while at a Burn, and was very unhappy with the outcome.

My experience reflected the experiences of the interviewees I discussed in the Burnout section. I became so disillusioned with Burning that I thought I would never attend another event. My perceptual frame of Burning had been shattered. It was only through reflection that I

was able to come back. During that time, I was contemplating not just my own experiences but those of a few other individuals who had left the community all together.

Through this journey I gained valuable perspective and developed the insights about Burn out and frame perspective. I was able to find a neutral space for me to be objective about Burning. I have since come full circle, but it will likely never hold the magic for me that it once did. I have attended three burns since the surgery, and still find enjoyment in it, but more enjoyment comes from bringing others and watching them. I live vicariously through their experiences. It is a reminder of my first early experiences.

After extensive reflection, I conclude that my negative experiences have much to do with the breakup. I had an immediate injury, but when compared to the emotional pain from the break up coupled with other physical pain, back and neck injuries, my partner experienced it seemed insignificant. I believe they had a choice about which person to support and they choose the greatest need. I am also, the more level headed (in my own opinion) and am quick to forgive.

In many ways my injury was vital for this project. It provided insights and made me be more objective about the experience. I will never have the same strength and mobility, in my right arm. I have visited some of the darkest corners of despair in my mind, and barely returned. I understand that this research would likely have not been possible without the experience, but I am not yet ready to thank the universe for the lessons learned or insight gained. When I contemplate the cost and the benefits of my research, it seems like too high a price, I only hope my research will actually provide knowledge to the community. That is what I tell myself each day, and each day it gets easier.



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## Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Q1 What is your Burner Name? How did you get it? P1, C1

Q2 Tell me about Burners that you know with disabilities. R1, R2: Type 1

Q3 Do you know any Burners with psychiatric disabilities? Anxiety? Depression? R1: Type 2

Q4 Tell me about how having disabilities interacts with the burning experience. Does burning increase or exacerbate those conditions? R1: Type 6 & 7

Q5 Do you know of any relationships that originated at a burning event? Tell me about relationships that originate at a burning event. R1, R2: Type 4, 5, & 6

Q6 What do those relationships look like after the event ends? What purpose do they serve? R2: Type 4 & 7

Q7 What do you think people get out of attending a burning event? R1, R2: Type 7, P1

Q8 I saw a funny picture the other day on the Flipside Facebook page and it was a meme of the word Impish (inclined to do slightly naughty things for fun), and it made me think about burning. What do you think about that observation? P1: Type 4, C1

Q9 If I was an interested person but told you that I am kind of depressed and just want to stay at home this month. I also mentioned that the lights sound and music might cause me higher anxiety. What would you say? R1, R2: Type 8

Q10 Tell me about what makes people interested in burning. P1: Type 8

Q11 What advice would you give an individual with a disability, who will be attending a burn for the first time? C1: Type 8

## **Appendix B: Focus Group Topics**

**FG1: What is Burning about?:** Burning Man can be defined as a music and art experience, or an experimental community. It can also be defined a million other ways. It means so many different things to so many people. This is worth examining to determine why people attend and to examine common themes in what drives them to participate.

**FG2: People with Disabilities at Burning Events:** This is the bread and butter of the study. This topic is likely not to be approached without some prodding because people likely don't see disabilities and pay so little attention that it isn't worth talking about. There are not PWD and PWOD, there are just people in the minds of Burners.

**FG3: Burner Families:** The concept of Burner families is important because of the references to family and home that are often made by its participants.

**FG4: Radical Inclusion, Participation and Immediacy:** Burning Man is founded on ten principles and these guide operations and organizational culture. These three principles are of special significance because they relate to the obligations of participants to include and be included in activities. The last one helps to reduce some apprehension by encouraging individuals to participate immediately, and not overthink it.

**Appendix C: Timeline**

<b>August</b>	<b>Data Point 1: Burning Man</b>
<b>September</b>	<b>Data Point 2: Resonance</b>
<b>October</b>	<b>Data Point 3: Wasteland Weekend</b>
<b>November</b>	<b>Data Point 4: Decomp Event</b>
<b>January</b>	<b>Data Point 5: Freezerburn</b>
<b>February</b>	<b>Data Point 6: Loveburn</b>
<b>May</b>	<b>Data Point 7: Interfuse</b>
<b>May</b>	<b>Data Point 8: Atomic Falls</b>
<b>May</b>	<b>Data Point 9: Oblivium</b>

## Appendix D: Informed Consent

Title: Burning Community Integration and Disability

Researcher(s)	Administrator
Christopher Brace, Doctoral Candidate	Ro Windwalker, CIP
Brent Williams, Faculty Advisor	Institutional Review Board Coordinator
Program in Rehabilitation	University of Arkansas Research Compliance
College of Education and Health Professions	University of Arkansas
Department of RHRC	109 MLK G Building
303 Graduate Education Building	Fayetteville, AR 72701-1201
Fayetteville, AR 72701-1201	479-575-2208
479-575-4910	

**Description:** The purpose of this study is to examine Burning Man and regional burning festivals, which are events sanctioned by the Burning Man Regional Network, and explore the methods they use to create a high level of community integration in communities that physically exists less than one week per year. Specifically, it will focus on the experiences of individuals with anxiety and depression attending these burning festivals to determine their level of community integration and how this compares with their typical social interactions.

**Risks and Benefits:** There are no risks in the study from the topics covered in the focus groups and interviews. By identifying elements present that facilitate social relationship building in regard to individuals with disabilities, other festivals and intuitions can apply those elements. Training programs can be developed to facilitate social skill learning.

**Voluntary Participation:** If you do not wish to participate in this study you may discontinue participation. You will not be punished, discriminated against, or in any way suffer consequences if you refuse to participate.

**Confidentiality:** All data will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by State and Federal Law and University policy.

**Right to Withdraw:** Your participation in this study is completely optional and you have the right to not participate or to withdraw from the study at any time.

**If you have questions about this study:** You have the right to contact the principle Researcher or the Faculty Advisor at any time. Contact info is listed below.

Christopher Brace, Principle Researcher	Brent Williams, Faculty Advisor
Telephone: 479-575-4910	Telephone: 479-575-8696
Email: <a href="mailto:cbrace@uark.edu">cbrace@uark.edu</a>	Email: <a href="mailto:btwilli@uark.edu">btwilli@uark.edu</a>

You may also contact the University of Arkansas Research Compliance office listed below if you have questions about your rights as a participant, or to discuss any concerns about, or problems with this study.

Ro Windwalker, CIP  
 Institutional Review Board Coordinator  
 Research Compliance  
 109 MLK G Building  
 Fayetteville, AR 72701-1201  
 479-575-2208



irb@uark.edu

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**Informed consent:** (please print)

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have read the description, including the purpose of the study, the procedures to be used, the confidentiality, as well as the option to withdraw from the study at any time. Each of these items has been explained to me by the investigator. The investigator has answered all of my questions regarding this study, and I believe I understand what is involved. My signature below indicates that I freely agree to participate in this study and that I have received a copy of this agreement from the investigator.

I agree to participate in this study.

Yes

No

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**Participant Signature**

**Date**