Getting paid writing graffiti

How graffiti artists produce value within marketing

Malcolm Jacobson

Graffiti isn’t corporate so it gets no respect
Hasn’t made a billion dollars for some corporation yet

KRS—One in the rap tune Out For Fame, 1995

Abstract

In settings such as hotels, bars and boutiques, things like cars, sodas, clothes, and cities, are fueled with the symbolic capital of graffiti. The purpose of this ethnographic study is to understand how graffiti writers, through marketing, increase the value of their work, as well as that of other products, and how this commercialization affects the meaning of graffiti. Utilizing a perspective of social constructionism, the analysis shows how actors and social fields that are constructed as incongruous (e.g., art galleries and graffiti culture), are at the same time being mixed together to create something new, and thus create value. This study shows how practices that are considered marginal, or deviant, at the same time generate value within the general economy.

Deploying an abductive approach, and building on ample empirical material, this study shows that the narrative of graffiti as something illegal is one of the main traits that enables graffiti writers to exchange subcultural capital for economic. The results show that previous research, investigating graffiti from a dichotomous perspective of either art or vandalism, do not give a satisfactory understanding of this diverse subculture.

The empirical material consists of 30 participant observations in public events, in Sweden during the autumn of 2014, where graffiti is turned into a commodity embodied with subcultural capital. Moreover, four in-depth interviews were executed with graffiti writers who have sold their competence and art for purposes of marketing, and one group interview with three of their customers. Further, several documents were collected and analyzed.

Key words

Graffiti, marketing, commodification, symbolic capital, valorization, cultural criminology, urban sociology, authenticity, art worlds, subcultural capital, street art.

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Introduction

In an exclusive hotel in a gentrified area of Stockholm, a graffiti artist has set up a temporary studio. At a big table in the middle of the spacious lobby he sits and draws geometric figures all day long – the ink stains on his hands bear witness. Where the stains end, tattoos take up, epigraphs and names of fellow graffiti writers cover his arms, and continue under the sleeves of his black t-shirt, supposedly covering considerable parts of his body. The graffiti inscribed on his body is not limited to the skin exposed – it is an intrinsic part of his identity, his schooling and professional career. Graffiti represents knowledge and symbolic value possible to convert into economic capital. This is why hotels and others frequently hire graffiti artists to transform their commercial spaces.

A few visitors to the hotel interact with the artist, observe how his work progresses. A mellow jazz tune not impeding conversation plays in the background. The graffiti artist asks if I want a bottle of water, it’s a gift from a company he just discussed possible co-operations with. It is past lunch, the lobby and the integrated restaurant are quiet. The staff at the reception is uninterested, thus endorsing a relaxed atmosphere. At the same time – beyond restaurants, offices, apartments and hotels decorated with graffiti – the city of Stockholm has the ambition to erase illegal graffiti within 24 hours. The city spends considerable sums each year to extinguish what is perceived as vandalism.

Graffiti is a phenomenon of contested meaning in large parts of the world. Some regard graffiti as a costly social problem among adolescents while others appreciate it as a vital art form. While the debate on how to control graffiti in public space proceeds, graffiti is increasingly used to produce value within marketing and commercial space.

This ethnographic study examines how graffiti is used to engender value and what this value consists of. Value is here conceptualized as a form of capital, be it symbolic or cultural, as in the use of Pierre Bourdieu (1986), or subcultural, as in the use of Sarah Thornton (1995). In previous research, the opposites of art and vandalism are at the center (Ferrell, 1996; Macdonald; 2001; Snyder, 2009). None of these studies have marketing as their main focus. In contrast with other studies on graffiti I have found that the practice of writing illicit graffiti is crucial for the value generated with commissioned graffiti. Consequently, what is perceived as destroying property, in the prevalent discourse on graffiti, is also what produces value.
Thirty participant observations where performed during the autumn of 2014, in spaces where graffiti artists exhibit and sell their art and knowledge. These include art shows, public art works, performances and events in Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmo. The practices and results observed in these contexts served as a solid base for getting under the skin of graffiti artists making a living out of their skills. Five in-depth interviews were executed, four with individual graffiti artists and one with three of their customers from a municipal district.

**Purpose and research questions**

Studying graffiti will add to knowledge on how practices that are considered marginal or deviant may at the same time engender value within the economy as well as other parts of society. The purpose of this study is to understand how graffiti produces value within marketing and the symbolism of graffiti in this context. To reach this understanding two research questions were formulated: 1. *How does commercialization of graffiti produce value in relation to cultural and economic capital?* 2. *How does the meaning being constructed in different social contexts and interactions facilitate this value production?*

**Those were the days – background**

Graffiti was invented by kids and adolescents with limited economic resources striving to acquire recognition (Johnson, 2006). Now the worlds leading food and drink companies market sparkling water with designs made by graffiti artists and advertisement made with street art techniques. In this study marketing, or advertising, is understood in a wide sense, as practices with the purpose to valorize a product, brand, company or city. There is not enough space here, to further elaborate the distinction between art and marketing.

Artistic expressions from subcultures are abundantly used in marketing. The meaning and value of art in general is contested. I will show that the duality of the graffiti community, including both aesthetics and crime, is enhancing the symbolic value of freedom from, and rejection of, circumscribing social norms. I find that this is a cardinal element in the symbolic capital produced by graffiti. Social interaction is often shaped within commercial spaces where symbolic meaning is constructed. Building on Bourdieu (1986) I argue that this production of *symbolic capital* and its conversion into *economic capital* take place within *fields* where people in different positions struggle for power. In addition to Bourdieu I will stress that these processes are site and context specific. In the process of marketing, people of discrepant *habitus* are mixed to create an interesting setting where attention, and thus value, is generated. This study brings knowledge to how practices that are considered deviant, generate
Graffiti artists transform physical environments as well as provide new symbolic meaning to them. According to the dominant narrative constructing the role of graffitists within the art world, they are outsiders who enter and vitalize the establishment. Since they never really become assimilated, this can be reiterated time after time, over several decades. The contested meaning, that is one of the main departing points for this study, is at the fore at this moment. During the course of this study, the new political majority of Stockholm declared that they abolished the city’s “zero tolerance”, which included a prohibition for all divisions of the municipality to contribute to any activity that may lead to increased interest in graffiti (Kimvall, 2014: 105-149; Kjellmer, 2014). While writing, the debate is in progress, whether or not it is wise to make open walls available for graffiti painting.

**Now is the time – boundaries and limitations**

The choice to study the use of graffiti within marketing was based on observations of increased commodification of graffiti in recent years. However, this study does not include a longitudinal perspective. The focus is on present processes of value construction and the meaning producers aim to present to consumers. How consumers interpret marketing and are affected is beyond the reach of this project.

Graffiti is a global phenomenon, but globalization is not the topic for this particular study, and the setting is Sweden. I will not compare with other countries. Utilizing a qualitative approach, my results are not possible to map onto other phenomena, nor to marketing in general. I will show that graffiti, like marketing, is gendered, but given the size of this study, and the topic, neither class or race will be possible to explore in depth.

**Contested concepts – definitions and vocabulary**

Much on the previous debate and research on graffiti have focused on whether to understand graffiti as art or vandalism (Lachmann, 1988). I am not the first to claim that this dichotomy is a dead end in terms of understanding the complexity of society in general, and of graffiti in particular. Many have tried to answer what graffiti is. My point of departure is that graffiti has no intrinsic meaning. Instead, I study how the meaning and value of graffiti come to be in social practice. This social constructivist perspective is an understudied approach to graffiti, which has been conventionally studied as a form of art, crime or subculture. By framing my study on marketing I address one out of several contexts where the practice of graffiti is productive rather than destructive. Mark Halsey and Alison Young (2002) state that graffiti is
both art and crime and that graffiti’s sociocultural aspects are much more complex than social sciences such as criminology previously have grasped.

Since the meaning of graffiti is contested, so are the definitions and concepts. The graffiti that this essay discusses has been labeled hip-hop graffiti, subway graffiti and TTP-graffiti (Jacobson, 1996; Shannon, 2003). The latter term captures three of contemporary graffiti’s basic aesthetic expressions: tags, throw-ups and pieces which are respectively: signatures, fast paintings with few colors, and elaborated paintings. Street art is a term that is used as a synonym for graffiti or as an umbrella term that includes graffiti as well as other expressions. At other times street art indicates something distinct from graffiti, usually suggesting an aesthetic that is more communicative and open to the general public (Waclawek, 2008; Bengtsen, 2014). Even if career paths in street art have similarities with those in graffiti (Derwanz, 2013), street art is outside the scope of this study, other than the cases where this term is used about graffiti. In this essay I use the term graffiti artist when they sell their art and competence, and graffiti writer when discussing the subcultural community and practices of graffiti. These two concepts are to be understood as ideal types, used to describe different roles graffitiiists enter (see further in method section). I use the term graffitist for purposes of linguistic variation, and because this term does not point to any particular context.

Disposition

I will first discuss how earlier studies have tended to treat the aspects of art and crime as dichotomies, rather than examining how these are intertwined. In method section I will explain why a qualitative approach and the perspective of social constructionism were decisive in answering the research questions. I will further describe the abductive approach and how it led to performing the analysis with the use of Pierre Bourdieu’s theories on capital, in combination with narrative analysis.

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1 When the term graffiti was popularized by archaeologists, it made distinctions between drawings and texts that were official, and others, such as political and sexual messages (Jacobson, 1996). This meaning of graffiti is still in use, nevertheless, what is examined here are the cases when graffiti is done on commission. Today graffiti is defined not only by the dichotomies unauthorized/authorized or legal/illegal. It is also defined within a cultural context, by its aesthetics, and by who performs it.

2 In Swedish ”klottrare” and ”graffitimålare” are the most common terms for graffitiiists (Kimvall, 2014). in English this would be ”scribbler” and ”graffiti painter”, terms that are not common in the English literature on graffiti. Within the subculture the term writer is most common and some see graffiti as a derogative. The title of Kimvall’s (2014) dissertation ”The G-word”, is an example on how the contested meaning of graffiti is reflected into the very naming of the practice.
Theory and previous research

With the use of ethnographic method the initial studies on graffiti in the US, tried to grasp what graffiti is, as a social phenomenon, (Craig Castleman, 1982) and as an art form (Jack Stewart, 1989). Of particular interest for this essay is that both these studies point out that graffiti was sold in galleries and executed on commission as early as 1972. But since graffiti writers have continued to write without permission, the tension between art and vandalism has persisted to be at the core of graffiti research. In this section I will present the prior Swedish and international research most relevant for this project.

Artists or vandals?

Sweden’s first dissertation on graffiti was submitted in art history by Staffan Jacobson (1996). Besides its focus on the aesthetics, it found that graffiti writers are creative boys from broken homes. Jacobson was followed by two dissertations in criminology: David Shannon (2003) found that graffiti writers are a heterogeneous group where some enter a long career of crime, while others do not engage in much crime apart from graffiti. Michael Johnson (2006) found that adolescents write graffiti to get recognition and excitement.

According to Richard Lachmann (1988: 231) much of the previous work on graffiti has ignored the differences within graffiti and has championed all graffitiists as either artists or vandals. Mark Halsey and Alison Young (2002: 166) are even more explicit, they question the possibility to even speak of graffiti as a “unified culture”. Halsey and Young (170) depict the general discourse on graffiti as characterized by “unchallenged assumptions” such as: graffiti is done by teenage boys; it is a result of unemployment and boredom; it is antisocial; it is associated with lower income areas and with other criminal activity. An assumption that I particularly challenge in this thesis is that legal and illegal practices of graffiti are in opposition with each other. I have rather found that they are intertwined, and support each other to produce value. This is consistent with Jacob Kimvall’s (2014) recent dissertation in art history, where he investigates the discourse of graffiti as either art or vandalism, depending on the context. Kimvall (156) points out that his study does not include graffiti in advertising, a kind of material that “very well may contain other statements and relations”. This study is about marketing, which includes advertising as well as other practices of valorizing.
Labeling and deviant art worlds

Lachmann (1988) argues that both Howard Becker’s (1963; 1982) concepts “art worlds” and “outsiders” are to be seen as careers where novices first must learn the motivations and conventions for engaging in these activities. Second, career opportunities are dependent on the people outside of their “social milieus”. Lachmann (1988: 229-230) writes: “Subway graffiti writers are involved simultaneously in an art world and a deviant subculture”. Furthermore, in line with Emile Durkheim’s ([1893] 1964) claim that crime is a social construction that creates a cohesive bond within society, Lachmann writes:

*deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an “offender.” The deviant is one to whom that label has been successfully applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label.*

The broken windows theory – graffiti as an indicator of disorder

When criminologists and other social scientists interpret the meaning of a place, graffiti is often used as an indicator, or variable, for crime and decay. To study “how places, and by implication other societal units as well, achieve and reproduce distinctiveness” Molotch et. al. (2000: 794-795) in their research strategy use graffiti as one of several “physical trace materials”. They argue that: “such environmental elements reveal to all” what Becker (1998: 44) calls “congealed social agreements”. Molotch et. al. connect this approach with “the famous ‘broken windows’ theory of crime” in which it is argued that by fixing broken windows, removing graffiti and prosecuting misdemeanors more severe crimes will decrease also (Kelling & Coles, 1996). This theory has been most influential in shaping both responses to, and the interpretation of, graffiti; thus it is a tool to study and repair society, as well as shape it.

Inspired by the broken windows theory, New York and several cities around the world have implemented “zero tolerance” strategies against graffiti, which in Stockholm also amounted to a ban of licit graffiti within the municipality (Kimvall, 2014: 105-149). This often led to graffiti being perceived as something criminal, even when painted with permission from property owners, or on canvas. Exhibitions have been closed and schools have painted over decorations by pupils with reference to zero tolerance (128). At the same time, this policy has been vital in constructing graffiti as something rebellious and, in accordance with my analysis and contrary to its aim, adding to the interest in, and value of, graffiti.
Subculture, resistance and commodification

According to Nancy Macdonald (2001: 151) subcultures are perceived as the sources of future trends within marketing, even if there is little consensus what subcultures actually are. To explain why some agents are accepted in the art world while others are labeled deviant, Lachmann (1988: 230-231) looks for support from the “Birmingham school” of cultural studies, according to these Marxist theorists subcultures are "symbolic forms of resistance" which challenge hegemony.

From the perspective of the Birmingham school commercialization of subcultures would be to appropriate “subcultural artifacts” for sale to the “mainstream”. This would be an effective way to neutralize the subculture’s resistance. Lachman (1988: 246) writes: “Thus, subway graffiti is reduced to a new fashion, fit to be sold on canvases, T-shirts, or coffee mugs.” Macdonald (2001: 151) and others have issues with the lack of empirical ground for the Birmingham school’s analysis of subcultures, which implies that they are restricted to the working class, something that is not true for graffiti.

No sell out – authenticity

A few dissertations on graffiti have been submitted in sociology in the United States and United Kingdom (Ferrell, 1996; Macdonald, 2001; Snyder, 2009). None of these studies have marketing as their main perspective. They do linger on it, often in the form of graffiti done for local companies. One informant pejoratively labels this “sign painting” and argues that “if they are telling you what to write (…) then that’s not really art” (Ferrell, 1996: 92-93). Here graffiti is presented as something that practitioners want to protect from outside influences.

Macdonald (2001: 175-176) concludes that when graffiti:

> enters commercial confines, the “powers that be” are given the reins to its definition. They can make it cool, “edgy” and popular, filling the shelves of department stores with products covered in its imprint. (...) Illegal writers are possessive of their subculture and they enjoy the power that comes from knowing only they understand and direct it.

According to this perspective graffiti appear to be essentially criminal and to move graffiti away from its illegal roots would tame the subculture, open it up to outsiders and position it in a world where writers will have to struggle for its ownership and control. Consequently, the use of graffiti outside of its perceived authentic setting is described as “sell out”. One of Macdonald’s (2001: 173-175) sources says he would accepts commercial success “within our scene” for “those who deserve it”, thus arguing it would require a certain position. Ronald
Kramer (2010: 48) finds that graffiti artists want monetary gains to end up within the subculture, not accepting graffiti to be appropriated by designers from the outside. Implicit in these arguments is a discussion of resistance on two levels – against hegemony in more general terms, and against specific appropriation of the subculture.

Too much too young

Previous studies that have been interested in the productive aspects of graffiti have often focused on graffiti as a learning process into a creative career, such as graphic designer (Jacobson, 1996). While Lachmann (1988: 238) discussed whether taggers quit by the age of sixteen or earlier, later studies discuss how adult graffiti artist can make a career also within the graffiti community, since graffitists now are older, they can spend money on graffiti art, books and tools (Johnson, 2006; Kramer, 2010; Shannon, 2003; Snyder, 2009). These studies point towards a more open attitude on commodification evolving over time.

Symbolism – what things mean

Bourdieu & Delsaut ([1975] 1993: 120-121) distinguish between two ways to raise demand for a product: technical and symbolic. The label, or signature, of a designer or artist will almost magically transform the status of an item by communicating symbolic value from the originator to the item. The product is thereby made scarce and desirable, as well as “holy” and “legitimate”. Anthropologists Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood ([1979] 1996) emphasize that the value of an item can not be limited to its ability to perform a certain function, an item will also create and preserve social relations. Similarly Sidney Levy (1959) writes: "People buy things not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean."

Pierre Bourdieu’s perspective on society is inspired by phenomenology (Månson, 1998: 405-407). I find his perspective – that concepts are not objective descriptions identical with the world they conceptualize – consistent with social constructionism. Our experiences from different social environments, which are inscribed in our bodies as “habitus”, will render us with unequal possibilities to interact in new social settings, i.e. to acquire “symbolic capital” in new social environments. Bourdie ([1979] 1993) argues that economists have neglected to study the economic and social conditions that produce different taste. He claims that distinct “fields” are necessary to generate symbolic capital that can be converted into other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). While Bourdieu’s main focus was on the upper strata of society where cultural capital is affluent – with the concept subcultural capital, Sarah Thornton (1995) has applied Bourdieu’s theories onto subcultures.
Method

I found that a qualitative research design, with ethnographic tools of face-to-face interviews and participant observations, was most rewarding in answering the research questions. This approach rests on the basic assumption that it is possible to take part in the experience of other individuals through language and observation (Ahrne & Svensson, 2011: 23). The perspective of social constructionism made it possible to understand how graffiti artists participate in constructing graffiti as something valuable for others. Utilizing an abductive approach I went back and forth between theory and data. This promotes results that are unexpected (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012: 169). Similar to grounded theory, the abductive approach rejects deductive method, since it would force the empirical material to fit a pre-formulated theory. But the abductive method also questions the inductive perspective of grounded theory that make-believe we can start our research without assumptions or theories at all. The abductive approach led to the use of Bourdieu’s and Thornton’s theories on capital, combined with narrative analysis as well as ideal types.

Constructing the world

A phenomenological approach is prolific in understanding the lived and shared experience of a phenomenon from the perspective of several individuals (Creswell, 2013). Here in-depth interviews with general open-ended questions and participant observations are common methods for generating data. To be able to describe how participants view a phenomenon, the researcher will need to “bracket” his or her own pre-understanding of the phenomena (Berger & Luckmann, 1967: 34).

I find that Berger & Luckmann’s (1967) perspective of social constructionism presents useful insights on the challenge, or impossibility, of entering a field without theory, nor pre-understanding. They underline that what appears to be objective in society are arbitrary agreements that have petrified over time. Consequently, situated knowledge is preferred before claims of objectivity. Feminist critique has formulated similar insight, arguing that sociology traditionally has been a male occupation that pre-supposes inarticulate differences between men and women and thus is biased (Abbot & Wallace, 1998: 17-18). Dorothy E. Smith (1974: 9) formulated this critique as: “He observes, analyses explains and examines as if there were no problem in how that world becomes observable to him”.

9
Narrative and ideal types

A narrative is a way for individuals to interpret and make sense of their own experiences, it also “elicits” meaning (Bryman, 2011: 530). Narrative analysis discloses roles, sequences and certain logics within stories (Boréus, 2011: 143). Typical roles are those of hero and villain. One way to describe narrative analysis is to say that focus is shifted from what happened, to how people create meaning in what happened. This perspective was productive in analyzing the role of graffiti artists within marketing.

I also found it rewarding to use ideal types to conceptualize some of the roles I observed. Ideal types are abstract terms conceptualized for the purpose of analysis: the actual world will seldom correspond exactly with them. According to Max Weber ([1922] 1978: 20-22) the sociologist must take into account that these are abstractions, but not let this prevent us from systematizing our results. I defined two ideal types that graffiti artists encounter while producing value within marketing – the graffiti enthusiast, which is a mediator, or broker, between social fields and agents, and the decision maker, who has the position to let the graffitiist exchange subcultural capital for economic. Further I found that graffiti artists are assigned the role of an outsider.

Case selection

The increased use of graffiti to apply value, rather than to deface property, is something I noticed while publishing several books on graffiti (Jacobson, 2000; 2011). In this study I did participant observations in 30 settings where graffiti artists exhibited and sold their art and knowledge. The observations took place at parties and events, in restaurants, bars, hotels, galleries and the streets of Sweden’s three major cities, Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmoe. These settings were chosen since they provided lots of information, which is consistent with the approach of purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2013: 154-157).

From observations, literature and previous knowledge, twelve graffiti artist who make a living out of their art were identified. Four of them, who frequently do shows and assignments, were approached, and accepted to be interviewed in depth in their studios. In addition one group interview was executed with three customers that recently had commissioned a graffiti piece. This case was chosen out of convenience, since it was performed close to the studio of one of the informants (Creswell, 2013: 158). Formal interviews resulted in 13 hours of recorded conversation. In addition, several informal interviews were performed during observations. The empirical data also includes documents that have been handed to me or found in mass
media. Because of a long interest in graffiti I was familiar with several of the informants previously. Since they are key actors in the process studied, as well as public figures, they also would have been considered for inclusion in a sample done by another researcher.

**Generating empirical data**

Thematic in-depth interviews with open-ended questions were performed as conversations around the topic of commissioned graffiti and marketing (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Ahrne, 2011: 40-41). This approach is adaptable with the intention to understand the perspectives of the artists. Open-ended questions allow for narratives and unexpected themes to emerge while structured questions instead would have locked the answers in relation to my presuppositions. Consistent with the qualitative approach and social constructionism, is the assumption that objective data about social phenomena is not something already present that you can go out in reality and pick. Instead the researcher is taking part in producing knowledge (Svensson & Ahrne, 2011: 19). This is also a process that the participants reflected on after finishing interviews. One said that participating in interviews with me and with journalists is part of the artistic reflection and thus a part of creating art. Another said:

> It also became an interview with me, for me. Because these are things that ... well, you ask questions that force me to think about things I haven’t thought about. (...) So then I guess this is added to (...) my persona as well.

**Analysis – a process in three stages**

To let the produced empirical material guide the analysis, the research questions and distinctions were put aside during the initial analysis (Becker, 1998: 123-125; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2011: 197). All interviews were listened to several times. Since the collected amount of data was large, and the schedule tight, I initially transcribed the cardinal content of three interviews. Then the most relevant parts in the remaining interviews were identified and transcribed. This resulted in 136 pages of data.

Themes that emerged during several readings of the transcripts were marked, or coded, to bring order and structure to the diverse material. Rennstam and Wästerfors (2011: 194) describe the second stage of analysis as reduction, with the intention to reduce the amount of material presented without compromising nuances and complexity. The aim of the reduction is to focus on the aim of the study. The third stage is to argue for the presented analysis in relation to previous research, which is performed in this essay.
Ethical considerations

This study has been implemented according to the code of conduct in social sciences as formulated by Vetenskapsrådet (2014) where the requirements for individual protection are the point of departure. Individuals may not be exposed to improper scrutiny of their private sphere nor be exposed to physical or psychical harm, humiliation or offense. This is formulated in four main requirements: information, consent, confidentiality and utilizing. These requirements should be weighted against the need for performing research.

For purpose of anonymity I have left out any reference to my informants. They have revealed information that might have implications on their career or even lead to legal aftermath. For this reason some of the descriptions of places, events and art works have been quoted in general terms. Furthermore, I have not used aliases for my informants since this would make it possible for a reader to combine several quotes and thus identify them (Hannerz, 2013: 94).

Validation and reliability

Since not all data is presented to the reader, transparency in method and analysis are crucial to obtain reliability for qualitative results (Creswell, 2013: 253-255). Quotes were chosen from the interviews to support my analysis. During analysis respect for themes that pointed in other directions were not compromised. When I translated quotes from Swedish to English my aim was to preserve the tone of the conversation. Within qualitative approaches the possibility to obtain objectivity is questioned. In this study triangulation of method and data has been used to validate the results as well to capture diversity (Ahrne & Svensson, 2011: 26-28).

When performing interviews and observations, respondent validation was a natural and integrated part. I instantly presented my interpretation of what informants told me, inviting them to comment. Erik Hannerz (2013: 85) formulates this as “an ongoing interaction with participants as a means of grounding the gathering of data empirically.”

As mentioned I have a background in studying graffiti, in addition to this I have practiced graffiti myself. This provided me with trust from the informants and access to the field. According to Törnqvist (2013) going back and forth between the roles of researcher and participant, will enable a better understanding of a field. This also made it even more important than usual to review my interaction with the field. During the study I put my pre-understanding within brackets, accordingly with the tradition of phenomenology. My research diary was seminal for reflection on how I participated in production of knowledge and brought forth the empirical matter, as well as how I analyzed data and wrote this report.
While visiting disputation seminars where the researchers have a background in the subcultures being studied, I have noticed that the researchers reliability is a topic of discussion for the examiners (Hannerz, 2013; Kimvall, 2014). I would like to address this with a reflection: in other aesthetic disciplines such as literature, the practice of being both participant and researcher is common, and usually not perceived as problematic.

**Limitations and generalizability**

In line with the approach of qualitative research, my aim is not to generalize the results to all examples of graffiti artists within marketing. Instead I aim to display the complexity and diversity of social life (Creswell, 2013: 101). The possibility to generalize is on a theoretical level rather than on an empirical one. I intend to show that graffiti in marketing is an example of how subcultures and marginal phenomena are integrated within a commercial context.

Both female and male graffiti artists have participated in my study, the sample does not have the ambition to mirror the gender distribution within graffiti, where men are over represented (Macdonald, 2001). Given the number of interviews performed, I will not generalize on the artist’s individual characteristics, such and gender, class and race. These are most relevant for the practices studied, but in which way is for another study to answer.

Since graffiti culture is closing in on its 50th birthday, writers are older and more established within the economy, which has facilitated an economy within the subculture where graffitiists manufacture and market spray paint and other products (Johnson, 2006; Kramer, 2010; Shannon, 2003; Snyder, 2009). This productive aspect of graffiti is not the topic of this study. Moreover, the boundaries and interchange between different art forms and subcultures such as street art and skateboarding is not investigated, neither is the aspect of graffiti being a part of hip-hop. This study instead discusses boundaries between the graffiti culture and a perceived “mainstream” and the use of graffiti in marketing of such things as cars, hotels and cities.

The main focus of my study is on the perspective of the artists. Their customers are studied as well, through interviews, participant observation, documents, and indirectly through the graffiti artist’s descriptions of their assignments. Furthermore, the aesthetic ideals and the art objects produced by graffiti artists within different contexts are restricted to reference points in this study, since marketing is the main focus. Moreover I do not have any ambitions to describe how the targeted audience interprets and responds to the art, nor the marketing within which it is used.
Analysis

As described in the method section, the choice of theories applied in this analysis was guided by the empirical cases (Becker, 1998: 123-125). In order to fulfill the purpose of this study, I have, within the rich data, focused on valorizing and roles within the narratives of graffiti. Value is here conceptualized as a form of capital, uppermost symbolic, subcultural and economic, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and Sarah Thornton (1995).

According to the “broken windows” theory, graffiti makes citizens feel unsafe and leads to increases in other types of crime (Kelling & Coles, 1996; Molotch et. al., 2000). Since I did not find support for this in my data, this perspective will not be discussed in the analysis. On the other hand, this perspective is associated with zero tolerance, which is cardinal in the narrative of graffiti as an illegal activity, something I found adds to the value of graffiti. Consequently, I position the broken windows theory as part of the data rather than as a theoretical interpretation within my toolbox.

Furthermore, I reject the use of graffiti as an indicator, or variable, for crime and decay, as Molotch et. al. (2000) amongst many others. Contrary to this presupposition of what graffiti signifies, I intend to tear the eschar of such “congealed social agreements” (Becker, 1998: 44), thus showing that the relation between subcultures and establishment is ambiguous.

In review of previous research I found that a productive aspect of graffiti often acknowledged, is that of a learning process into a creative career (Jacobson, 1996). Again, this is relevant for the narratives of graffiti that are dominated by ideas of outsiders entering the establishment. Likewise age and careers are dominant themes in the narratives, in my data, as well as in most of the previous research (Halsey & Young, 2002; Johnson, 2006; Kramer, 2010; Lachmann, 1988; Shannon, 2003; Snyder, 2009). How careers develop over time is not the main perspective here, instead the topic is, what facilitate careers. Themes that are affiliated with this are, motivation, freedom, commercialization and resistance, which all are wired to ideas of what art and graffiti is (Ferrell, 1996; Lachmann, 1988; Macdonald, 2001). In the analysis I will primarily discuss these themes in relation to my data. Then, in the discussion I will further relate my findings to the previous research. In the first part of my analysis I will investigate the social contexts and their agents. When we have visited these places I will further look into what the symbolic capital of graffiti in marketing consists of.
1. Space is the place

The principal aim for the artists I have met is to be able to produce art on their own terms and at the same time make a living out of it. Further, they aspire to get other benefits that they connect to the role of an artist, such as traveling, meeting and communicating with interesting people, and eventually to be perceived as significant artists – quite contemporary ideas of an ideal life. To reach these goals several complementing practices are used.

According to Bourdieu (1986) value is constructed within a struggle between persons that share the view that something is important. In the case of marketing, as well as in graffiti, to be seen creates value (Macdonald, 2001: 69). This requires a space, a field, or a scene, with many potential viewers. These social spaces are constructed as specific places with symbolic meaning in relation to the agents present and the practices performed.

Space is capital – getting paid

To get your art exposed and spread in physical space as well as in social and traditional media is vital for getting recognition and to be able to make a living as an artist. An informant says:

_I want space and I want money, so I can survive. (...) Get enough money to escape economic stress, to be able to wake up in the morning and draw. (...) Everything actually comes down to buy me time, not needing to do other stuff. (...) You also want walls, because you want to show stuff._

Another artist refers to contemporary society as a visual culture. Hence, a visual artist will need exposure to get by. The need for space entails that this is often offered as payment, instead of money. When artists have enough channels for exposure they rejected this, but on other occasions the space offered is so desirable that they conform, such as when offered to paint the whole façade of a building at a street art festival in a Swedish city:

_Because it is so much fun, it is a dream assignment for me, and an extremely good opportunity to be seen if you want to get more such assignments. Since there are international artists the festival gets international exposure which might lead to invitations (...) abroad, which is also something I dream of. I really felt that I couldn’t decline. So on that occasion I didn’t bother to argue about payment._

According to my informants, graffiti artists are marketing themselves at the same time as they sell their art and competence for the purpose of marketing others.

Score a fast buck – transforming capital

Graffiti has traditionally been perceived as something done by kids (Halsey & Young, 2002). Graffiti has a lot of symbolic capital. But depending on the position of the artists within the
economy it is not easily transformed into economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). One artist says all graffiti writers have been “hustled” because of this. This is reasserted by others: “Kids want to make a fast buck. When I was young I wasn’t conscious of what I was up to. The deals were usually awful.” Another graffiti artist states:

Since you are doing this art that you treasure very much, but people hate it (...) it gives you some sort of weird double feeling that makes it difficult to understand that someone else can appreciate it.

There are so many who want space that they accept to work for paint leftovers:

It is a problem that in part has been created by the writers, because you are so bad at charging for your services. It is the same thing with the DJ-thing, there are so many people that want to spin at clubs, so they do it for free, or for beer.

The same person justifies arranging a party with artists for an international company with:

It will nevertheless be good for us to have arranged this event. (...) Now we have proved how good we are at this, how many people we can attract, how much nice art we can present, and so on. And how fun and great it will be. So the next time they will have to pay properly.

An individual selling canvases by graffiti artists shares that this is difficult. Even if the customers easily can afford the art, this graffiti enthusiast’s vague position within the art world makes the customers uncertain if the art is a good investment. An artist says:

The more respected I get, the easier it gets to get my ideas accepted. (...) And price! I notice, people can look skeptically at things and then they go closer and look at the price tag: “oh 33.000 kronor”, then they get interested. (...) It feels like people listen more to others than to their heart.

Adequate with Lachmann’s (1988) theories on labeling by others, another artist claims:

People need lots of knowledge to judge who you are, if they can’t get that valuation through someone else, like that you worked with [a prestigious customer] or because you did an exhibition at “that spot”. (...) But some just want a little graffiti, then it is a totally different pricing. [...] A tag on a canvas could be priced between 500 and 500,000 kronor, depending on the circumstances, on who did it, and on who will put it on his wall or sell it further. So it is very fuzzy what to charge.

**The graffiti enthusiast and the decision maker – ideal types**

The meaning applied to agents and their practices by others (Lachmann 1988: 231), will decide whether graffitiiists can convert their subcultural capital into economic. This puts those graffiti writers who make a living out of graffiti in a precarious situation. In the process of getting permission to use a space for artistic purpose, and at the same time getting paid, it is crucial to convince the persons that control space and money, who I here will label decision makers, in accordance with the methodology of “ideal types” (Weber, [1922] 1978).
Between graffiti artists and decision makers I have identified that “graffiti enthusiasts” operate as brokers that enable graffitiists to create value. The ideal type enthusiast has a taste for graffiti and has identified writers as talented artists that have not “gotten the attention they deserve”, as one of them says. They are typically from outside the graffiti culture and have a lot of contacts, i.e. social capital. The graffiti enthusiast can be a creative director at a commercial company, or a gallerist that exhibits graffiti. Examples within the public sphere are art teachers, art curators and social workers as well as citizens within municipalities. Common for these agents is that they have understanding of the processes within their organizations that enables them to convince decision makers. According to an artist:

*Among communities and politicians it has become more accepted, they have realized that there is a lot to get. So I have gotten many assignments there, doing public artworks and such. Particularly in some municipalities, there is a great difference between the community clerks’ attitude towards graffiti. In [one city with 30.000 inhabitants] for example, there is a person at the culture administration who loves graffiti. (...) There I have gotten plenty of assignments.*

Assignments for municipalities around Sweden are quite common among my informants. Graffiti is used to transform cities perceived as dull and boring into urban and interesting.

**Corporate space and street level – conflicting habitus and logics**

Graffiti artists are offering their art and culture to companies that want to apply symbolic qualities to their business and products. This is performed in virtual space, when an artist thanks a company that has sponsored him or her with tools in an Instagram or Facebook feed, or in a commercial film on Youtube. In physical space, interactions between artists and consumers are typically set in restaurants, bars, hotels and boutiques, often including some free beverages. One of the graffiti enthusiasts says: “The art gets more dignified when you get champagne and exclusive canapés.” These events facilitate exchange of different forms of capital, subcultural against economic, fueled by the social capital of the host, or graffiti enthusiast. A successful graffiti enthusiast can bridge, mix and play with the different habitus of the people present and with the tension between art and vandalism. Conflicting habitus will thus be used as an asset, not as a disadvantage. The art buyer is presented with the possibility to acquire a raw painting embodied with graffiti symbolism, i.e. subcultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Thornton, 1995). The sponsors and hosts intend to infuse their brand, with the subcultural capital brought to these events, to raise future sales. I found that different logics operate in “fields” that one of the artist describes as “corporate” on the one side and “street level” on the other:
I got irritated with the people I arranged [the event] with, which I always get when I work with people that are corporate or companies in some way. They don’t really know the street level. (...) They don’t get how the world functions, but they understand that you have to report statistics upwardly in the company. (...) But when you rock a party, and create art it isn’t much statistics involved. Instead it is more a feeling, like: "was it a great night? Did people laugh and have a good time?"

To be, not to be seen – subtle marketing and power

An artist describes how graffiti enthusiasts, with understanding of the street level have to adapt to the corporate logic and report how many items will be sold through sponsoring of an event.

These big companies always want to get to what is new and cool. (...) But instead of trying to understand what it really is they always want to change it (...) so it fits in their format, which results in it not being as cool as it was. (...) For me it is about brand building, if you arrange something people really enjoy, it will automatically lead to great benefits for that brand.

Macdonald (2001: 175-176) found that writers paint illegally instead of selling their art, to retain the power of the culture. Contrary to Kramer’s (2010) discussion, my informants typically do not want to choose between these sides of graffiti, they are willing to sell their art and at the same time, some of them continue to paint without permission, something that engenders the subcultural capital they are providing, which I will show in this analysis.

According to Bourdieu and Delsaut ([1975] 1993) advertising tries to achieve the same goal as branding – selling products – but operates contrary to the logic of branding. This is because advertising reveals the secret, and discloses itself as a self-serving value raising operation, thus undermining the symbolic value of the product. One of my informants says:

These brands gain from only being present in an environment. When I use their tools to create art, it looks better for them [than in an advertise], because people are smart enough to get when this company has told me to do this, and then it loses value. (...) They just give me this stuff because they feel the same way [about me, as] I feel about [them], that they are cool and nice.

The frequent use of sponsoring is one way for a company to be subtle, at least in those occasions when they do not insist on having big banners at events.

Human and symbolic capital

Graffiti artists offer both material knowledge and symbolic value to practices of marketing. The material knowledge is about performing a certain function, while symbolic is connected to the ability to create and preserve social relations (Douglas & Isherwood, [1979] 1996). This
reflects the distinction between technical and symbolic items (Bourdieu & Delsaut, [1975] 1993: 107). When a graffitiist is hired to transform the façade of a building or the lobby of a hotel, the technical aspect consists of the know-how, or human capital, of rapidly transforming the appearance of a large surface. This human or educational capital has been acquired during a subcultural learning process (Jacobson, 1996). Sometimes this is joined with studies at art schools. Among the customers and artists I have met, speed and ability to work in large format are emphasized as qualities characteristic for graffiti artists. While talking about the benefits of being an experienced graffiti painter, one of my informants describes being hired to redecorate a hangar for a party introducing a new car model:

I can adjust very much and even do a painting in fifteen minutes, or I can do a painting in five hours. And I instantly know how to organize it. It is really superb to have that background, and I don’t have any problem with doing huge stuff, that’s only fun. (---) I have been invited to a lot of exhibitions and different context, only because I come from the graffiti culture.

Another artist also points out persistence and planning as capacities developed while writing graffiti. However, my findings show that the symbolic qualities are even more important than the technical skills and aesthetics. The symbolic value of graffiti aesthetics is intertwined with the image of the graffiti artist, which will be further discussed in the section on narrative. This is reflected in that graffiti artists often execute their art in front of a public, hence the performance or even the artist himself is being commodified. Upon a hypothetical question about if demand for the work would have been at the same scale if doing similar images without having a background in graffiti, an artist concludes: “No, I actually don’t think there would be the same interest at all. I think I should have had maybe half as many exhibitions and assignments.”

### 2. The meaning of the game – symbolic value

Both in marketing and as an artist, to distinguish your brand and yourself from others facilitates surviving the competition in the market. These distinctions are connected to taste, which according to Bourdieu (1986) is inscribed in the body as habitus. Further, what is good taste is a topic for struggle within a field, or a particular social space.

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3 Among the four graffiti artists interviewed in depth in this study, two have art or design degrees from universities.
Symbolic value is constructed when practices are interpreted and accordingly given meaning. According to Bourdieu & Delsaut ([1975] 1993: 123-124) this is performed through “social alchemy” which is typically connected to a “collective faith”, a denial of the arbitrariness of the produced value, which is recognized as objective rather than subjective. By applying a label or brand to a product, person or practice, you can radically change its social qualities without changing its physical form or content.

I found that the formula to mix people, art, and environments that are perceived as far from each other, is being used in marketing to draw attention and thus, create symbolic capital. Discrepancy in habitus is here an asset, not a hindrance. To be able to mix, you must have two or more distinct substances. My point of departure is that concerning humans and their relations, there are no distinct essences. Hence, according to the perspectives applied in this study, these distinctions are social constructions (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Within subcultures this is often referred to as something real, i.e. authentic, that is opposing the mainstream, consisting of those outside of the subculture (Hannerz, 2013).

In a commercial film on Youtube a car is used as a tool for a “muralist” (Bot & Dolly, 2012), the paint splashing over the brand new car is not presented as something that ruins it, which would be equivalent with the traditional discourse on graffiti as vandalism (Kimvall, 2014). Instead it raises its value. This, second part of my analysis will develop what this value is.

**Illegal is real – authenticity**

At a party arranged by a group of graffiti enthusiasts, some thirty dressed up visitors mingle on the premises of a company, temporarily decorated by canvases executed by graffiti artists. The mix of what is, or is perceived as, distinct social fields and people of different habitus is apparent, as well as outspoken in the invitation. One participating artist who does not feel able to connect with the guests argues that real graffiti is done illegally. But this won’t prevent him from participating in similar events in the future. According to this artist the paintings exhibited are not graffiti, but paintings that: “tell the story of graffiti”. Several photographers are present: one is working on a documentary film on this graffiti artist. I ask the filmmaker if it will be problematic for the artist to appear in a documentary at one time painting a train in balaclava and in the next scene appearing without disguise at a party. The filmmaker states that it is up to the artist to decide, and that he thinks that the illegal aspect will benefit the artist’s career. This would be in line with Becker’s (1963: 9) and Lachmann’s (1988: 229-230) statements that careers are dependent on labeling by those outside of the subculture.
In an exhibition I met a graffiti writer that joyfully concludes that there are graffiti events in Stockholm every week now. In contrast to some others, this writer considers canvases painted by graffiti artists to be a part of graffiti culture. This confirms that graffiti is a heterogeneous culture (Halsey & Young, 2002; Johnson, 2006; Lachmann, 1988; Shannon, 2003).

**Young, new and daring – transforming space**

Most of the artists I have interviewed have painted in hotel lobbies. One of them says that the hotel used him to distinguish themselves from their competitors in the same, upper-price sector. They wanted the atmosphere in their lobby to attract a certain type of people that appreciate creativity, cool drinks, DJing and interesting happenings. Another artist says:

> I have painted several hotels (...) the latest year and you really notice a difference that these hotels demand street art now. (...) You notice that their thought is that they will make the environment cool, that it should be new and daring. And then they bring in graffiti artists. (...) They want to show that they know what time it is, that it isn’t an old tired [hotel]. (...) Graffiti is hot at the moment, you can see this both in marketing, in hotels and in the art world.

The same artist often paints for youth centers and kindergartens and sees himself as a part of the established art world, but experiences being perceived as an “underground” artist:

> I have noticed that graffiti and my art symbolize lots of things, for example youth. I am still invited as a youth artist, (...) since I am 36 it feels, (...) it is beginning to reach a verge. I imagine that 15 to 20 year old kids look at me as an old man. And still you symbolize their culture.

The spray can and the aesthetic of sprayed and dripping paint materializes graffiti’s symbolism as something illegal:

> Yes, very strong symbolic value. It is such a classic thing, that if you are in the city and produce a spray can, people call the cops. If you instead put up posters that might include a tag, no one cares.

To paraphrase Bourdieu’s (1986) argument that cultural capital of the upper strata of society is materialized in items such as books – spray paint is instead materialized subcultural capital. The narrative of graffiti as an illegal activity is present also when executed with permission:

> It is quite obvious if I meet a journalist or someone that shall write about me and my exhibition, then it is always that [criminal aspect] they stress. It has happened that I had an exhibition with textiles, and in the newspaper headline it says that: “the convicted former vandal exhibits”. 
**Destroy and educate – discrepancy in motivation**

According to the narrative that will be further analyzed, authentic graffiti is illegal and, besides artistic talent, it is one of the principal constituents for the subcultural capital of graffiti. In a classic conversation in the film Style Wars (1983), Skeme says to his mom:

> I’m out here to bomb, period. That’s what I started for. I didn’t start writing to go to Paris, I didn’t start writing to do canvases. I started writing to bomb, destroy all lines.

“Bombing” and to “destroy” a subway line is to paint a lot. The amount of subcultural capital connected to illegal activity will also raise the value of legitimate art. The corporate level wants the “street knowledge” they lack, in marketing as well as in the art world:

> If someone that doesn’t know who Nug is, has bought a canvas for loads of cash and are told from a graffiti writer that Nug is dope, you know because he has painted so many trains (...), that only boosts the piece of art for them. (...) It is his reputation, much more than the visual that sells.

Graffitiists consider it prestigious not to adapt their art in order to make it easier to sell:

> [The writers] thought he did a delicious piece, they thought he did not care to do something super perfect just because it was this kind of event. (...) You might think he would stand there and, “well, this will sell”, and fiddle and do something with perfect lines, but he didn’t give a damn, very nice!

I have not found univocal support for Macdonald’s (2001) conclusion that writers want to retain control over their culture by not letting outsiders understand it. My informants also strive for acceptance and inclusion. Several of them state that they feel a calling to educate their audience about graffiti and art in general:

> People want to label things, so a lot is about explaining what it is really about. And then depart from that, and kind of exceed and get out of defining concepts, to be able to retain art free and outside of the frame. (...) Not many are trained in reading art, instead it’s often: “well, that was beautiful, and that was ugly”. It is that border you want to break with. So people will be able to take in art like a language. That’s a medium lacking in society, people need to think more on their own terms.

**Art and crime – two aspects of freedom**

Among my informants several express that decision makers often are worried that they will get critique for employing graffiti artists. Because of this, assignments have been cancelled or the labeling of the art has been altered. “Urban art” and “outdoor life painting” are terms that have been used instead of graffiti. Today the label street art is the most frequent reformulation. One artist says that it is not always positive to be a graffiti artist:

> It depends on where and when. (...) Sometimes you get deselected because you have that background. I have heard that people discuss my background without me participating. (...) Graffiti still has an
air of coolness and sometimes it is an advantage, but occasionally a disadvantage. [...] People are afraid that if I have done illegal paintings teenagers will look up to me and start painting without permission. Because of that connection I have been denied assignments.

Another artist says that most major companies cannot cooperate with someone that obviously is breaking the law. Notwithstanding this, illegal painting is intertwined with ideas of youth and freedom, and one of the principal findings in this study is that the illegal activity also is what constructs graffiti as something valuable:

*An observation I have made is that graffiti culture runs together in different groups. Within the cultural world I have always felt they love it and think it is very fascinating. There it is absolutely no problem if you have painted illegally, contrary, it is almost an asset.*

During a lecture on the initial years of New York graffiti, a 60 year old writer revealed recently having put a tag in the restroom of a local café. This was by far the statement most appreciated by the audience, which burst out in applause and delightful cries. Graffitiists are more concerned about artistic freedom than law. One artist argues that juice bottles in local stores are a good way to display art to a wide audience. But at the same time, this artist reckons that artistic freedom is compromised, when personal aesthetics are considered appealing by marketers. Another says that commissions sometimes are too limiting:

*Sometimes I can feel it is a tiny fuck up with some nerve of innocence in my body. That you have let in something of what everybody else is doing all the time, like letting someone else control your life very much, and work for money.*

Graffiti symbolizes and thus manifests freedom in two ways, as art and as crime. This tension is cardinal when constructing graffiti as something valuable both within and outside of the subculture. Hence, to settle the debate on whether graffiti is art or crime is not in the interest of graffiti artists, nor for marketers or those who commodify graffiti.

**Narrative – from the street to the gallery**

The dominating narrative of graffiti that I have identified makes it possible to, year after year, present graffiti as something new and rebellious. One graffiti artist states:

*Now [graffiti] has survived, well it is almost 40 years (...) but it is still perceived as youthful. I think it is because it is still illegal that it still has an underground stamp and never really gets housebroke. If it hadn’t been illegal I believe it would have died out earlier.*

I use the perspective of narrative analysis to show that graffiti is presented within a particular story that shapes practice and interaction between graffiti artists and others (Bryman, 2011:}
Narrative analysis is interested in the logics of how we interpret our experiences and which roles people are ascribed.

During the autumn I got an invitation to a commercial space to witness “the last untouched form of art – protected by the strong culture of freedom and nonconformity”. One of the graffiti artists was presented as coming from “the urban reality” of a rough suburb. According to this narrative graffiti is something alien. Because of this construct you can bring in writers from “the street”, a mythic place outside of society, to vitalize the petrified establishment.

Graffiti in galleries and on commission has always been a part of graffiti culture and increasingly so over time (Castleman, 1982; Snyder, 2009; Stewart, 1989). Despite this, it is rather rule than exception that graffiti in other places than in the street or within the transport system is presented as a novelty (Kimvall, 2014). Swedish newspaper Svenska Dagbladet in their lifestyle and fashion supplement Perfect Guide (2014) writes:

> Graffiti has looked away from the street and into the fine galleries – and now it wants to take over our wardrobes as well. The just enough rebellious Zara-dress is an artistic bargain at budget price.

**Bite the hand that feeds you – distance to customers**

The documentary film “Style Wars” (1983) includes scenes where graffiti is introduced as a novelty in the art world. In one scene a visitor to a gallery describes paintings as they were ripped from the trains, understood as their original, raw milieu, and pasted onto a canvas, thus able for the art buyer to carry home. This film was essential in raising interest for graffiti outside of New York and was part of the narrative when adolescents in Europe, Australia and other countries learned about graffiti, thus defining for generations of graffiti writers what true graffiti is (Caputo, 2009).

Craig Castleman (2004:59-60) describes how he, in the early 1980s, together with the graffiti artist Lee visited a party at an art dealers “immense mansion”, held to “celebrate” Lee’s “entry into the real world of art”:

> Lee’s paintings hung on every wall, looking a little out of place among the marble columns, crystal chandeliers, and Greek statues. (...) Lee and I stood in a corner, gawking the crowd tuxedoed and gowned swells. (...) [The art dealer] announced that Lee would perform for [the guests] and produce a master piece just for them. (...) People made comments (...) the gist of most of which seemed to be, Look at him go! Isn’t this young savage remarkable! (...) Lee was being treated like a performing monkey and he and I both knew it.
One scene in a documentary for Swedish national television, “Nug – Vandal in motion” (2013), has some striking similarities with the party described by Castleman. In the film Nug decorates an exclusive bar in Stockholm with his prolific chaotic black spray paint. One person in the crowd, assumedly the owner of the establishment calls out: “More wine for Magnus”. Two of my informants spontaneously brought up this scene in discussions on commercialization of graffiti. The conclusion from one of them was: “Nug is mocking them”. According to this graffitiist’s view on graffiti, Nug couldn’t be considered a true graffiti writer if he did not intentionally make fun of his customers. This view expresses that the graffiti artist cannot remain a graffiti writer without the customer being mocked.

This position outside of the mainstream is a dialectic process, where graffiti writers are labeled deviants, as well as identifying with and praising this position. One artist thinks that the art world is elitist and marginal and rather labels the work commercial art, thus aspiring to communicate with a wider audience.

**I love this company – identification and masculinity**

In contrast with the statements above, in the cases of sponsoring and executing commissions, several artists testify that identification with brands is central. They only sell their name and prestige to companies that they want to be associated with.

*I have made lists on the companies I want to be surrounded by, (...) I love *[this company], it is the stuff I buy, so if they want to send me sneakers a couple of times a month it is cool with me. (...) I have no problem with my name being associated with them.*

Most of the branches that use graffiti within marketing, as well as marketing in general, are distinctly gendered. Graffiti is often conjoint with qualities that connote masculinity, which Macdonald (2002) has showed. The frequent use of graffiti in marketing of cars is to be understood as connecting the shared symbolism of cars and graffiti – masculinity, freedom and velocity. Lines of business frequently incorporating graffiti, other than cars, sneakers and hotels are: beverages (soda, alcoholic and bottled water), computer games, and clothes (preferably for boys). I do not imply that work performed by graffiti artists is sexist in general: indeed, it is easy to find examples of this. But in this study several of the artists express strong commitment in using their art to challenge stereotypical gender constructions.

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*Nug is a secretive artist that has inscribed himself as a reference point in the narrative of graffiti. As an art school student he was filmed when he destroyed a subway car, this was a crucial part in the ignition of a successful artist career (Jacobson, 2011). See photo on the preface.*
An artist who does recurring assignments for an international company has an ambiguous relation to the customer. The artist likes their designs and that they pay well, but rejects that they push a development where sneakers produced in sweatshops are collected, instead of put to practical use. This artist finds it problematic to be part of a process that emphasizes symbolic value over technical (Bourdieu & Delsaut ([1975] 1993: 120-121). When artists sell their skills to companies they do not like, they will not present this on their web page, nor let the customer disclose their artist name, occasionally they also change their aesthetics, to elude liaison with their customers:

I have been quite concerned about that, I made another job for [a car manufacturer] and then they asked if I wanted my name to be present, and [...] I didn’t want it to be seen I had done it. (...) I have some issues with the car industry. I don’t think it a sympathetic line of business. On the other hand it might not matter whether I participate, there will probably be cars made anyway.

**True to the game – engendering subcultural capital**

Since the principal aim for the participants in this study is to practice art on their own terms, they find ways to both get paid and stay true, to themselves and their subculture. To be true to the subculture’s ideals with which you identify is also about preserving autonomy and self value, something my informants do not want to compromise.

It feels like it is sort of forbidden to do such things within art. There were also reactions from our crew that he would stand there painting live on a [commercial] event. It was like: “it gonna be a lot of hipsters”. But he will not do anything different, he will just do his piece. It doesn’t matter who he does it for, I guess it is just to share what you love, and he has love for graffiti. (...) But some are like: “graff shouldn’t be connected to that, or whatever”. But if he is out bombing and then one evening he is drinking for free and does ONE piece, I don’t see the problem.

The graffitist who arranged this event argues for a balance to be preserved between corporate, and street level. One commercial painting is OK, since the artist is true to authentic graffiti. To paint illegally is a way to show your loyalty to the subculture, and accordingly produce subcultural capital. This graffitist also refers to a gala for Swedish hip-hop where one of the nominees for the prize “graffiti artist of the year” wrote a big tag in the restroom:

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5 The claim for authenticity is not unique for graffiti and marketing, it is rather a theme within art in general, this theme was not possible to develop in this study. I did not find the univocal rejection of “selling out” that Macdonald (2001: 173-175) and others see. But several artists stated that the amount of payment will affect their decision upon accepting commissions.
Of course [the host] were mad, and also the owners of the establishment. But, hey, they had to get someone there to clean it for a petty sum, and if they shall have a graffiti award they will have to cope with a tag in the bathroom. I think it is kind of fun that they arrange something that is supposed to be graffiti, but they choose not to include bombers (...) and then one of the nominees rocks a tag in the bathroom. (...) It’s a small punishment, because they don’t bring it in wholeheartedly. (...) It is something that brings back the balance, that it isn’t only cheerful commercials. Everyone that is interested in the bombing aspect of graffiti thought it was dope, and that shows that he did it for them, it’s kind of a proof: “well it was fun I was nominated, but that is not why I am doing [graffiti]”.

Some artists say that they would never change their artistic expression, other are willing to compromise, but instead keep their authenticity in another sphere, by continuing to paint in the subcultural context parallel to their assignments:

I think you only need to keep them separate in your mind. One thing doesn’t need to exclude the other. The illegal part usually backs up the gallery part. (...) It is not the same thing (...) but they are not in conflict with each other, I don’t believe it is wrong. (...) We got to drink some alcohol together and laugh, and he did a painting, that doesn’t make it less real, on the other hand it wasn’t a piece along the line or on a train.

Further, this graffitiist gets more motivated to paint illegally each time he paints on commission, which I find is about achieving balance between “street” and “corporate” scenes. Some argue that if you develop your art further and do not stick to a traditional graffiti aesthetic it is more accepted not to prove your commitment to the subculture: “He also took the responsibility to take it further from only being a copy of graff, that should be on a train or wall.” Here it is appropriate to add that not all the artists I have met paint illegally.

As long as it is kept separate – split identity

As described, being part of a subculture also demands that you pay tribute to its logics. My informants have a complex relation to their culture. It is an important part of their identity. At the same time, the norms of the subculture are often apprehended as limiting:

We have grown up with a certain attitude. (...) What graff is. The same persons that squealed on this (...) don’t feel it is that disturbing when Kaos paints a lot of canvases, and then he paints trains and so on. But when it comes to our crew, it is very strict rules within the crew. Which has led to that many are very talented, because they have felt the pressure from the crew. But this has also encapsulated people in a certain state of mind.

I have heard several examples of graffiti artist who do not tell their customers that they paint illegally. Moreover, the subcultural community, the art world and the customers within marketing, are presented with different identities and stories about the artists. Since the logics
of these fields aren’t compatible with each other, they are kept separate, at least in mind and narrative. One artist paraphrased the diverse interest in assignments and free art with parts of a computer, the RAM-memory would represent assignments to forget as soon as finished, while the hard drive, would be where the artist keep the constant work that expressed the identity of the person as an artist. This artist also says that, not identifying as a graffiti writer, but instead as an artist or illustrator, makes it possible to charge more for the work.

A common way to manage this is by using different names in different situations. All my informants have an artist name that is more or less connected to graffiti. When they exhibit art they sometimes use their civil name. But several who also paint without permission have separate aliases, or tags, for this. This play with roles, narratives, and aliases, includes a splitting of identity:

_to paint graffiti and at the same time be a person with your position within society, that is quite a conflict of identities. I experienced that for several years, am I my alias? And why can’t I possess the same rights [as others] because I crossed a line far outside of the norm?

There are borders between the subculture and the “mainstream” as well as between illegal and legitimate painting, but I have found that they are not as solid as previous research expects (Ferrell, 1996; Kramer, 2010; Macdonald, 2001). This rather points to the heterogeneous aspect of graffiti that some researchers point out (Halsey & Young, 2002; Shannon, 2003).

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study is to understand the meaning of graffiti within marketing, and what value graffiti artists produce in this context. An observation that has guided this study is that graffiti is a social phenomenon that is perceived as productive and destructive at the same time. As I have shown, graffiti has been understood as a subculture but is also part of the general economy. Graffiti writers join in a social community formed around creativity and excitement, or simply: art _and_ crime. Since the graffiti community is heterogeneous, different graffitiists typically emphasize one or the other of these two aspects. Furthermore, I have throughout my material found a strong emphasis on freedom, or autonomy. I find that this is another formulation of what several researchers conceptualize as resistance. Graffitiists are not typically in opposition with society, I find that they embrace norms as well as challenge
them, which I argue is a common human behavior. Norms that they adopt are, among others, conventions for trade within the economy and individually built careers. On the other hand, by whom and how public property can be used for communication is challenged. They are creative in obtaining power over their lives and acquiring a position within the society in which they are situated.

Research questions and key findings

My key findings are here presented in relation to the stated research questions. 1. *How does commercialization of graffiti produce value in relation to cultural and economic capital?* 2. *How does the meaning being constructed in different social contexts and interactions facilitate this value production?*

Painting graffiti without permission generates subcultural capital and constructs graffiti as something authentic which marketers lack in their constant hunt for the latest “hype”. By offering the symbolic value of graffiti to companies, graffiti artists exchange subcultural capital for economic. I used Bourdieu’s (1986) and Thornton’s (1996) concepts of capital to capture its production as well as how settings and agents facilitate its exchange. I claim that subcultural capital functions similarly to cultural capital but in settings that are perceived as less prestigious and are associated with popular culture. This will most likely make subcultures easy to incorporate or appropriate within marketing, a sphere dominated by economic capital. In contrast to Bourdieu I found that different habitus are mixed and played with, hence there are no distinct fields. With this said I do agree with Bourdieu that power struggles within fields render individuals with unequal possibilities. I found that graffiti artists perform an intricate cruise, navigating between striving for autonomy and conformity, managing a precarious economic situation, captured in a narrative as outsiders entering the establishment. At the same time, they identify with this role and benefit from the idea of graffiti as freedom in a double meaning: as art and rejection of norms.

Artist and criminal

I found that graffiti is used in marketing to symbolize youth and innovation. In this, freedom from social norms is associated with both art and being an outsider or criminal. In line with Lachmann (1988: 231) I found that instead of the distinction of graffitiists, as *either* artist or deviant, artist *and* deviant is more correct. While Kramer (2010: 249-250) argues that previous scholars have neglected to make a distinction between those who paint with and without permission, he himself forgets that they can do both, something that several of my
informants do. Macdonald (2001: 174) writes: “In detaching themselves from these illegal roots to market themselves for public consumption, legals disarm the subculture of this distance.” When investigating this either/or perspective on commodification and crime within graffiti, I have instead found that artists, depending on context, either disclose their illegal painting or use it to apply value to commodified graffiti. That graffiti is connoted as illegal makes it exciting, and thus creates attention and value in marketing.

Macdonald (2001) finds that upon becoming an adult you leave the illegal activity and join a more mature masculine identity of responsibility and rationality. My study shows that those who make a living out of their graffiti have a more complex relation to responsibility. Further, rationality is by several of my informants regarded as something limiting their freedom and aesthetics. At the same time they do conform to demands from customers, but they do not connect that work with their identity. My analysis shows that graffitiists when making a living of their art, split their identity into different roles. They do not necessarily reject illegal painting in favor of selling their talent: they rather want to have the cake and eat it.

Social context and interaction – conflicting habitus

I found that in particular social spaces different practices operate parallel to each other, implementing separate logics, described as corporate and street. I found that instead of perceiving fields as incompatible with each other, like Bourdieu (1986), they are constructed as different so that they can be mixed. For marketers it is an asset if the participants’ social backgrounds or habitus are far from each other – since this creates an interesting occasion. This is not compatible with the idea that subcultures are distinct from, and thus compromised, when included into the mainstream (Lachmann, 1988; Macdonald, 2001). I have instead found a dialectic relationship where the narrative of conflict engenders value. Even if graffiti since long ago has been produced on commission, graffitiist can, repeatedly year after year, be presented as outsiders. This can be related to other formulations of marginalization, like Georg Simmel’s ([1908] 1971: 143) “the stranger”, and Edward Said’s (1978) “the other”.

Ferrell (1996) and Kimvall (2014) focus on how agents outside of graffiti, such as “moral entrepreneurs”, and a huge graffiti removal industry, have interests in describing graffiti as a crime. In addition to this, I show that the dichotomy of art and crime also is used in the interest of graffitiists and for several it is a part of their identity. With this said, graffitiists do not think that graffiti is possible to equate with other crimes, but for several, breaking the law is deeply intertwined with freedom and autonomy, i.e. to paint what and where they want.
Research and ye shall find – why results differ

As I have showed graffitists simultaneously argue that commodified graffiti is a part of their culture, and that it is not real. I would like to connect this to Howard Becker’s (1998) perspectives on sampling, arguing that it is the sample that leads to your result. Initially I did not define what graffiti is, which also some of the graffiti artists I interviewed hesitated to do. Similarly to Halsey and Young (2002: 170), I find that the image of graffitists as teenage boys is persistent but not adequate. My informants were in their 30’s and 40’s. Younger writers may have other views on careers and commercialization.

In most of the previous research I have reviewed, graffiti writers are quoted by their tags, an alias that make many of them possible to identify (Macdonald, 2001; Snyder, 2009; Kramer, 2010; Ferrell, 1996; and several others). This may restrain writers from speaking freely about illegal activity and commissioned work at the same time. Such as the use of different tags for different situations, which was common among my informants. I have not seen this theme in other studies. The differences between my results and previous research also reflect that graffiti culture is not static. However, the amount of data is too small to judge whether my results mirror changes over time.

Planet rock – global implications and generalizability

Much of the graffiti research performed in the United States has been incorporated into the narrative I have described. Documentations and analyses of graffiti from the US inspired and constructed graffiti as a culture in other countries. There is still not much research performed that acknowledges that this process also goes in the other direction, from younger local graffiti scenes, to the US, and between local scenes within a globalized subculture. It would certainly be interesting to study how development of subcultures and their self-understanding has interacted with the research on them.

The artists I interviewed referred to assignments and exhibitions in Asia, the US, and several European countries. One artist argued that the concept of street art festivals is much more common in other European countries. Sweden is still on the runway compared to countries in other parts of Europe. The zero tolerance that has been strong especially in Stockholm has been a practical hindrance for artists (Kimvall, 2014: 105-149). But at the same time it has contributed to constructing graffiti as something exciting. Since Stockholm during the course of this study has abandoned its zero tolerance against graffiti, it will be interesting to monitor what happens now, in terms of political decisions, as well as attitude and discourse. The
previous attitude towards graffiti reflects a will for politicians to keep control over the city they are mandated to govern, and is most likely an aspect of a strong tradition of consensus in Sweden. This tradition does not facilitate the processes of contrasting meaning as a means to produce value. My results point in the direction of consensus being increasingly difficult to retain in a small country like Sweden during times of globalization. This perspective was not possible to develop in the study: I hope to be able to come back to this.

**Resistance & autonomy**

Resistance and influence over urban landscapes are distinct topics in my analysis as well as in previous research, (Castleman, 1982; Ferrell, 1996; Johnson, 2006; Lachmann, 1988). This would be well worth further research. One hypothesis to examine might be that subcultural phenomena that are or have been marginalized, such as graffiti, skateboarding and tattooing, are easy or rewarding to commodify. Concerning graffiti, this is in line with the statements by some of Kramer’s (2010: 248) informants. It would be interesting to compare graffiti with other subcultures, which share its air of coolness, rebellion, freedom, and even danger. Heike Derwanz, (2013) has studied career paths in street art, since it is not possible to make an absolute distinction between street art and graffiti it would be interesting to compare career opportunities between these practices.

The point I make is that graffiti is one example of how companies use marginalized social phenomena to make. This can be used by some of the actors within a subculture, supposedly those with a position both within the subculture and the established economy. It is not certain that all writers will benefit from the situation analyzed. As Ferrell (1996) argues moral entrepreneurs are pressing to define the subculture as deviant and this debate is not settled.

**Looking for the perfect beat – additional future research**

There has been quite a lot written and speculated on what happens to graffiti writers in the form of life chances and career opportunities (Jacobson, 1996; Kramer, 2010; Lachmann, 1988; Shannon, 2003; Snyder, 2009). I found that careers are built on actions that are labeled deviant. I have not investigated how these careers develop over time – network theory would be an interesting approach to further investigate this. A common view is that graffiti is mainly about self-promotion, but my material shows that several artists express distinct political visions. I found the theme of identity prevalent in this study as well as in graffiti and marketing in general. These themes as well as the common practice of graffiti artists to produce music, as an outlet for creativity and autonomy, are other topics for future research.
References

Print


**Electronic**


**Film**

