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“REAL” AND COMMERCIAL GRAFFITI: PERCEPTIONS AMONGST JOHANNESBURG COMMERCIAL GRAFFITI WRITERS

by

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MA DISSERTATION

submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

in

FUNDAMENTAL COMMUNICATION

in the

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

at the

UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG

SUPERVISOR: DR KM BURGER

Submission date: July 2015
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February 2001 as amended.
Acknowledgements

1. My mother, Bozena Rabiega, for being my rock and support throughout my study career and a large influence in my life, allowing me to always follow my passions and dreams;

2. My brother Paul, for being a great influence in my life and always being supportive in all that I do;

3. My grandparents, Siegmund and Helen, for allowing me the privilege of studying and pursuing my passions in life and in further education;

4. Lastly, my late father, Andrzej, who would have been proud to witness my hard work throughout my study career and the success I have achieved.

I would also like to acknowledge and show my great appreciation to the following persons for all their help and contributions towards this study:

5. Dr. Mariekie Burger, my supervisor, for all her efforts and advice in every aspect of this study. Her time, dedication and guidance during the study and my academic career are simply too valuable to explain. I am fortunate enough to have worked with her during my under-graduate and post-graduate years, and have enjoyed this greatly; I am truly grateful for everything she has done for me.

6. All the lecturers and scholars of the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Johannesburg who have added to my academic career and opened my eyes to many possibilities; I am very grateful.

7. I would like to thank the graffiti writers of the Johannesburg graffiti community, as this study would not have been possible without their invaluable input, ideas, thoughts and comments. I am truly grateful for all their assistance and participation.
Abstract

‘Real’ graffiti is a visual form of the hip hop subculture; young people who feel marginalised use it to express themselves by spray-painting on public surfaces. They do so to oppose mainstream society, from which they feel alienated and excluded; in the process they display a resistance identity. The original form of graffiti is illegal in many countries and is thus associated with danger and street culture. Graffiti writers who partake in illegal spray-painting feel a sense of solidarity within their group, especially when spray-painting to resist mainstream society. However, in contemporary society, using the visual style of graffiti has become popular in mainstream society – especially in music videos, advertising and merchandise – and in this way the subculture became mainstreamed. Commercial graffiti writers have been criticised for having forsaken the cause of graffiti, as they partake in the very mainstream society that graffiti is opposing.

This study investigates how commercial graffiti writers in Johannesburg make sense of the perceived contradiction between ‘real’ and commercial graffiti. Through in-depth interviews with Johannesburg commercial graffiti writers, it was found that they are acutely aware of the seemingly oppositional understanding of ‘real’ and commercial graffiti. However, they have very different ways of interpreting the tension between these two genres of graffiti. Even though some are graphic artists, most are engaged in commercial work part-time, often to support their studies or simply to supplement their income. One way of making sense of commercial graffiti work is to see the present commercial phase as a temporary phase in the lifetime of graffiti, which would not change the real essence of graffiti, because it is simply used to extract wealth from the very mainstream society which graffiti opposes. Some graffiti writers’ natural styles lend themselves to being simplified and adapted for consumption by the general public, and this ability is the envy of many other graffiti writers. Some graffiti writers said that they gained artistic skills by doing graffiti work.

Although the study provides an insight into and understanding of the seemingly opposing worlds of ‘real’ and commercial graffiti, the findings cannot be generalised to a larger population of graffiti writers and are therefore only specific in the Johannesburg context. It is recommended that these ideas are explored in further research by enlarging the sample size, in order to elicit a potentially wider range of
views or to test the depth of views elicited through quantitative studies. Possible recommendations for further research should investigate the wider spectrum of commercial graffiti opportunities, as well as explore the changing identity of graffiti and its subculture due to increased commercial interest and opportunities.
CONTENTS

1. CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION
1.1 Background to the study 3
1.2 Research problem 7
1.3 Research approach 8
1.4 Chapter outline 8
1.5 Key concepts 9
   1.5.1 Graffiti 9
   1.5.2 Roots of graffiti 9
   1.5.3 Graffiti crews 10
   1.5.4 Mainstream culture and graffiti as a resistance-based subculture 10
   1.5.5 Commercial graffiti, underground and selling out 11
1.6 Conclusion 12

CHAPTER 2: ‘REAL’ GRAFFITI
2.1 Introduction 13
2.2 Historic roots 13
2.3 Graffiti crews: expression, belonging and group dynamics 18
2.4 Relationship with mainstream society 23
2.5 Graffiti as art 32
2.6 Conclusion 35

CHAPTER 3: COMMERCIAL GRAFFITI
3.1 Introduction 38
3.2 Commercialisation and a market-orientated mainstream culture 39
3.3 The commercialisation and mainstreaming of the graffiti subculture 40

3.4 Ways in which graffiti is mainstreamed and commercially used 48
   3.4.1 Graffiti in art galleries 49
   3.4.2 Other forms of small-scale commercial graffiti 54
   3.4.3 Commissioned large-scale graffiti work 55

3.5 Old school vs. new school graffiti writers’ views on the commercialisation of graffiti 56

3.6 Conclusion 58

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

4.1 Qualitative approach 62

4.2 Method 64

4.3 Sampling 67

4.4. Data analysis 71

4.5 Ethical considerations 72

4.6 Conclusion 73

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction 74

Table 1: Chapter structure (Chapter 5 - Findings) 74

5.2 Theme 1: ‘Real’ graffiti 76
   5.2.1 Topic 1: Reasons why interviewees got involved in the graffiti subculture 76
   5.2.2 Topic 2: Mainstream culture and the graffiti subculture 78
   5.2.3 Topic 3: What graffiti writers gain from being involved in the subculture? 82
   5.2.4 Topic 4: The roots of graffiti 86
   5.2.5 Topic 5: Resistance identity 88
5.2.6 Topic 6: Identity, hip hop and street culture

5.2.7 Summary: ‘real’ graffiti

5.3 Theme 2: Commercial graffiti

5.3.1 Topic 1: Reasons why graffiti writers do commercial work

5.3.2 Topic 2: Commercial opportunities as benefitting or restraining graffiti

5.3.3 Topic 3: Commercial graffiti changing the ‘real’ essence of graffiti

5.3.4 Topic 4: The threat of a popularised image of graffiti

5.3.5 Topic 5: Changing graffiti dynamics due to commercialisation

5.3.6 Summary: commercial graffiti

5.4 Theme 3: Commercial graffiti practices

5.4.1 Topic 1: Graffiti, advertising and merchandise

5.4.2 Topic 2: Making graffiti accessible to a wider audience

5.4.3 Topic 3: Graffiti attracts youth markets

5.4.4 Topic 4: ‘Real’ graffiti, commercial graffiti and mainstream art

5.4.5 Summary: commercial graffiti practices

5.5 Theme 4: Emerging trends in graffiti

5.5.1 Topic 1: New trends and opportunities linked to graffiti

5.5.2 Topic 2: The impact of new trends in graffiti

5.5.3 Topic 3: New trends deviating from the roots of graffiti

5.5.4 Topic 4: The shift of graffiti writers into new avenues linked to graffiti

5.5.5 Topic 5: The end of graffiti’s ‘true’ nature through the pressures of monetary gain?

5.5.6 Summary: emerging trends in graffiti

5.6 Conclusion
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction 162

6.2 Purpose and findings 162

6.2.1 Perceptions of commercial Johannesburg graffiti writers regarding the ‘real essence’ of graffiti 163

6.2.2 The commercial graffiti practices of contemporary Johannesburg graffiti writers who do commercial work 164

6.2.3 How commercial Johannesburg graffiti writers make sense of their commercial graffiti work 165

6.2.4 Perceptions of commercial Johannesburg graffiti writers about the seemingly oppositional understandings of ‘real’ and commercial graffiti 169

6.3 Limitations of the study 169

6.4 Recommendations for further research 170

6.5 Conclusion 170

REFERENCES 172

APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE 184
## GRAFFITI TERMINOLOGY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Battles/wars</strong></td>
<td>Emerging conflict/competition between graffiti writers/crews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Crew</strong></td>
<td>A loosely organised and structured group of graffiti writers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dissing/going over</strong></td>
<td>The disrespectful and intentional act of painting over another graffiti writer’s name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fame/status</strong></td>
<td>The desire for recognition and admiration from graffiti-writing peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Getting up</strong></td>
<td>To build one’s reputation and standing within the graffiti environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Going commercial</strong></td>
<td>Graffiti writers that compromise their integrity in order to provide graffiti work that is able to be understood by ‘the uneducated public’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>King</strong></td>
<td>A highly respected and idolised graffiti writer within the graffiti environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mapping</strong></td>
<td>The dissemination of a graffiti writer’s name over large areas/spaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>New school</strong></td>
<td>A new and emerging generation of graffiti writers and styles that move away from traditional graffiti into various realms (such as producing commercial graffiti)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Old school</strong></td>
<td>A generation of graffiti writers who strongly maintain and exercise the traditions and practices tied to the origins of graffiti writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pieces/murals</strong></td>
<td>Larger, elaborate and colourful graffiti imagery which is legal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Popular culture</strong></td>
<td>A term used by graffiti writers to refer to the culture and practices of mainstream society, such as partaking in capitalist ideals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Respect</strong></td>
<td>Pieces of graffiti works that earn graffiti writers the most recognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Selling-out</strong></td>
<td>Graffiti writers criticised for abandoning the subculture for monetary gain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Style</strong></td>
<td>The personalised/unique visual imagery/lettering each graffiti writer practises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tag/tagging</strong></td>
<td>A graffiti writer’s signature executed with marker or spray-paint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Throw-up</strong></td>
<td>The larger and more colourful names/pseudonyms of graffiti writers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Toy</strong></td>
<td>Inexperienced and incompetent graffiti writer within the graffiti environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Underground</strong></td>
<td>A term associated with graffiti, referring to its uniqueness and the fact that it is secretive, unique and a mystery to mainstream society</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Graffiti writing\(^1\) is the scratching or painting of various symbols, codes and figures onto a variety of flat public surfaces and spaces – most often in urban areas in order to be noticed by other graffiti writers and the general public (Jorgensen, 2008: 237; McShane & Williams, 2003: 185). The media that are used to produce and spread graffiti include spray paints, pencils and inks (Grider, 1997: 424). Conventionally, graffiti is categorised into two categories: First, graffiti can serve as a language, where words become signifiers, statements and slogans that communicate on a variety of levels (Latorre, 2008: 108). Here, the content of graffiti writing may range from topical and current events to political trends and local issues (Grider, 1997: 424). Secondly, graffiti can entail writing one’s name in a public space with the intent of being noticed. Both categories of graffiti are practised by a vast collection of individuals spanning a diversity of races, generations and nations (Snyder, 2009: 159). Both categories of graffiti writing could either be done illegally or legally - when they are assigned by the owner of the public space to produce graffiti. It is important to note that not all graffiti writers are involved in both forms of expression and at times simply specialise in one or the other.

Over time, graffiti writing has developed into a number of styles or forms that are driven by different sets of motivations and meanings (Jorgensen, 2008: 237; Levesque, 2011-1212; McShane & Williams, 2003: 185). The most popular \textit{style} is where individuals write their unique names or pseudonyms in a tradition of signature graffiti called \textit{tagging}\(^2\) (Rose, 1994: 41; Waclawek, 2011: 12). These \textit{tags} involve stylised signatures

\(^1\) The term ‘graffiti writer’ is preferred over ‘graffiti artist’. This is explained in Chapter 2 (especially Section 2.5), where the tension between ‘high art’ and the graffiti subculture is explained.

\(^2\) This dissertation uses many terms unique to the graffiti subculture, signifying very specific meanings. These terms are explained in the beginning of the dissertation. In addition, these terms are printed in italics, rather than quotation marks, to distinguish them from direct quotations (from sources and interviewees’ answers). Single quotation marks are used to emphasise terms or ideas.
which are represented in an exaggerated or a more spontaneous style, with the sole purpose of being recognised by other graffiti writers and the public – especially those who manage to *tag* their names over a wide-spanning geographical area (Bocij, 2006: 51; Levesque, 2011-1212; Pereira, 2005: 34; Philips, 2011: 367; Snyder, 2009: 49). If a graffiti writer manages to spray his/her name over a wide geographical area, he or she would have achieved *fame*, or acknowledgement, amongst other graffiti writers. Found on almost all kinds of urban surfaces, *tags* remain an integral part of graffiti writing intended to be seen by large audiences (Snyder, 2009: 48-49).

A second style of graffiti is the *throw-up* (larger and more colourful names), which consists of figures and names with a less elementary look compared to *tags*; they comprise artistic characteristics, such as bright and multicoloured images (Levesque, 2011-1212). The purpose of this *style* is also to make the graffiti writer’s work literally visible (called *getting up* - building a reputation in the graffiti environment) and gaining recognition amongst peers. This graffiti *style* is, however, larger and more detailed than *tags*.

The third *style* of graffiti is the most technical and is referred to amongst graffiti writers as *pieces* (complex graffiti imagery requiring great deals of skill) - derived from ‘masterpieces’ (Philips, 2011: 367). This style is distinguished by more elaborate, larger, more detailed and multi-coloured works which span entire walls, are also known as *murals* (Levesque, 2011-1212; Pereira, 2005: 34; Philips, 2011: 367). Stylistically, these are challenging works that require vast amounts of time and earn writers most recognition (called *respect* in the graffiti fraternity) amongst their peers and the public (Philips, 2011: 367). Most importantly for this study, *murals* offer opportunities to support writers economically (Thomas, 2001: 165; Levesque, 2011-1212; Pereira, 2005: 34; Reinhardt, 1996: 88; Waclawek, 2011: 18) as they are usually legal and paid for by the owner of the particular space.

Another important aspect of graffiti writing is that it serves as discourse on both personal and collective identities; it demands public attention and disturbs mainstream culture – or the orderly nature of mainstream culture (Hojer, 2008: 243). Graffiti primarily
serves graffiti writing individuals with no real access or representation in the mainstream culture and its ‘legitimate’ media (as graffiti writers talk about the mass media) (Farris, 2009: 53; Jorgensen, 2008: 237; Kincheloe & Hayes, 2006: 108; McShane & Williams, 2003: 188; Mele, 2000: 228; Snyder, 2009: 23). For this reason, they often feel that their voices – in opposition to authorities, governments and conventional public institutions – should be heard through their graffiti writing (Farris, 2009: 53; Jorgensen, 2008: 237; Kincheloe & Hayes, 2006: 108; McShane & Williams, 2003: 188; Mele, 2000: 228; Snyder, 2009: 23). This resistance identity, which opposes mainstream society, provides meaning and a sense of solidarity amongst graffiti writers who often feel marginalised, disenfranchised, disengaged and lacking social power (Best, 2003: 836; Chalfant & Prigoff, 2003: 8; Ferrell, 1999: 232; Kincheloe & Hayes, 2006: 108; McShane & Williams, 2003: 188; Macdonald, 2005: 312; Pearlman, 2003: 100; Staiger, 2005: 558). Graffiti writing often critiques mainstream society, as it consists of individuals who refuse to take existing social structures seriously, and for this reason they embark on acts of chaos, disjunction and freedom of expression (Ferrell, Hayward & Young, 2008: 150; Hojer, 2008: 245). Furthermore, graffiti possesses distinctive traits such as values, norms, beliefs, behaviours and language that set it apart as a subculture that deviates from mainstream culture (Brake, 1980: 3; Gillborn, 1990: 47; Haviland, Prins, McBride & Walrath, 2010: 30; Ferrante, 2012: 72).

In recent times, an emerging trend among graffiti writers has been to increasingly do graffiti work for which they receive remuneration. This has transformed the once mysterious subculture into a commonplace ideal, as the graffiti subculture is increasingly being industrially and commercially exploited (Milnor, 2005: 277; Rahn, 2002: 9; Blume, 1985: 146-147). The implication of producing graffiti work that is paid for is that graffiti writing can be seen as losing its deviant nature and no longer opposes mainstream culture. In Johannesburg, graffiti writers who do commercial work are often seen as exchanging their position of opposition to mainstream culture by becoming part of mainstream culture and its capitalist ideas. In this way, graffiti is incorporated into mainstream culture by recycling its roots for commercial purposes (Gottlieb, 2008: 6). The incorporation of graffiti into mainstream culture takes place by using visual
elements of graffiti in advertisements, graffiti on merchandise, the selling of graffiti as artworks and in the graffiti designs on everyday objects (Gottlieb, 2008: 6-7). This has been severely criticised by conventional graffiti writers, who resist this very characteristic of mainstream culture (Rahn, 2002: 177). This new commercial focus emerged amidst traditional graffiti subcultural and ‘ethical codes’, which resist impetuses that steer away from street culture towards commercial mainstream culture (Rahn, 2002: 9).

Commenting on commercially based graffiti, Lewis (2009: 43) argues that the alluring nature of a subculture – the rebellious mystique of graffiti that feeds the ‘alter ego of mainstream pleasure seekers’ – makes it is easy to see why subcultures have sales and marketing appeal. Another market appeal is that subcultures emerge as a source of innovation of mainstream culture when some of the subculture’s beliefs, aesthetics, style and images are used (Blair, 2004: 579; Issitt, 2011: xiv). Hill and Ramsaran (2009: 16) argue that the relationship between the subculture, the graffiti writer and the dominant culture are dialectic, because the subculture confirms the dominant culture and also deviates from it. In the process of the commercialisation and mainstreaming of a subculture, some of the original subcultural meanings are transformed into a managed market purchase (Blair, 2004: 579; Rose, 1994: 41). The reason why mainstream culture incorporates subcultures is to capitalise or gain direct tangible benefits (Blair, 2004: 579; Hill & Ramsaran, 2009: 25). In the case of graffiti, it may be the image of ‘flirting with danger’ by being on the fringes of society and resisting mainstream culture that appeals to the general public (Hill & Ramsaran, 2009: 16). Marchart (2003: 86) adds that the underground (unique and hidden) image of a subculture often entices members of the mainstream culture. Furthermore, this ‘going commercial’ implies that graffiti writers compromise their integrity in order to provide graffiti work that is able to be understood by the uneducated public: the public that do not have insider information about what graffiti is about and what it means to the graffiti fraternity (Snyder, 2009: 167). Nevertheless, this view does not stop graffiti writers from producing commercial work. It is important to note that this means that the commercialisation of graffiti implies a shift from social and political commentary (Fedorak, 2009: 71) to mainstream culture.
that appeals to a multitude of audiences (Harmon, 2011: 2; Crane, 1987: 7; Creswell, 1996: 55).

This commercialisation of graffiti has not yet been explored in much detail in scholarly enquiries. The following aspects of graffiti are traditionally studied: the resistance roots of graffiti (MacDonald, 2001; Snyder, 2009), its artistic form and activities (Gottlieb, 2008), the graffiti subculture (Macdonald, 2001; Ferrel & Weide, 2010) and the understanding that graffiti provides an identity and a sense of belonging to graffiti writers (Carrington, 2009; Fedorak, 2009; Staiger, 2005). In South Africa, aspects of graffiti that have recently been scholarly explored focus on: graffiti as resistance art (Williamson, 2004) and graffiti as identity and a mode of communication (Thamm & Newsome, 2002) which revisits protest and demonstrative graffiti during the apartheid years (Hughes, 2006: 211; Williamson, 2004: 96). More recently, graffiti scholars have started to indicate that the nature of graffiti is not stable and that some changes are becoming evident in graffiti writing (Philips, 2011: 368). However, these changes are not spelled out and most certainly not studied in South Africa, let alone in Johannesburg. The National Research Foundation’s Nexus database confirmed that the commercialisation of graffiti in Johannesburg has not been studied before, with the implication that a study on the views of Johannesburg’s commercial graffiti writers would be unique.

1.2 RESEARCH PROBLEM

The objective of this study is to investigate the perceptions of Johannesburg commercial graffiti writers regarding the seemingly oppositional relationship between ‘real’ graffiti and commercial graffiti.

In order to achieve this objective, the following aims are set for the study:

- To investigate the perceptions of commercial Johannesburg graffiti writers regarding the ‘real essence’ of graffiti;
- To investigate the commercial graffiti practices of contemporary Johannesburg graffiti writers who do commercial work; and
To investigate how commercial Johannesburg graffiti writers make sense of their commercial graffiti work.

1.3 RESEARCH APPROACH

According to Flick (2007: 2), the prime characteristic of qualitative research is to explore new phenomena which consist of topics that have not been investigated or which require more investigation from a new research angle or perspective (Hays & Singh, 2012: 4). In this way, qualitative research takes account of a phenomenon, engaging and integrating new perspectives to understand its participants, contexts and various facets (Hays & Singh, 2012: 4). The main purpose of qualitative research is to provide an in-depth description and understanding of the human experience, which aims to describe, understand and interpret human phenomena, interaction and discourse (Lichtman, 2013: 17, Rubin & Babbie, 2013: 50). This study is exploratory in nature and thus uses a qualitative framework; the relatively under-explored field of commercial graffiti writing is the focus of this study.

1.4 CHAPTER OUTLINE

To achieve the objective and aims of this study, the following chapter outline is used:

Chapter 2: Real graffiti

This chapter investigates the roots and true essence of real graffiti and investigates the origins and nature of real graffiti as well as the resistance identity of graffiti.

Chapter 3: Commercialisation of graffiti

This chapter investigates the commercialisation of the graffiti subculture by exploring different ways in which graffiti has been incorporated into mainstream culture.
Chapter 4: Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological orientation, the specific method employed by the study and also the sampling, data analysis and the implications of the specific research design of this study.

Chapter 5: Findings

Based on in-depth interviews with Johannesburg commercial graffiti writers, this chapter presents and interprets the findings of this study.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The last chapter concludes the study.

1.5 KEY CONCEPTS

Key concepts, central to this study, are briefly outlined below.

1.5.1 Graffiti

Graffiti, also known as aerosol or spray-can art, is prevalent in most urban areas and is usually created by individuals or groups of young people (Wallowitz, 2008: 103).

1.5.2 Roots of graffiti

The roots of graffiti refer to the ideals that have been carried across from graffiti’s birth into contemporary graffiti. Graffiti gained widespread attention in the United States, especially in New York, with its proliferation in urban neighbourhoods in the late 1960s and 1970s (Christen, 2010: 233). Graffiti emerged as a rebellious art form capable of respect and admiration from both the public and other graffiti writers (Ciment, 2007: 232). In its purest form, graffiti writing requires that one creates a name for oneself by getting up and being noticed and building a ‘reputation’ amongst fellow graffiti writers (Snyder, 2009: 97). This takes dedication, courage, guile and style (Snyder, 2009: 97).
1.5.3 Graffiti crews

Graffiti writers often form groups that collaborate; called graffiti crews. Crews are structured and organised groups of graffiti writers. Graffiti crews are basically regarded as groups of urban youths where collective identity and social affiliations solely rest on creating a name for themselves (Latorre, 2008: 102). Graffiti crews also serve as educational organisations that promote valuable learning among their members, providing younger graffiti writers with knowledge, skills and values that are important for success in the mainstream and in their graffiti careers (Christen, 2010: 233).

1.5.4 Mainstream culture and graffiti as a resistance-based subculture

Culture exists in all societies and can be described as the way people live and the manner in which they do things which shape their everyday existences (Ayisi, 1992: 2; Brake, 1980: 6; Hawkes, 2008: 4; Kalman, 2009: 4; Nida, 1975: 29; Scruton, 2007: 1). The dominant forms of such cultural practices and beliefs are regarded as ‘mainstream culture’ (Berns & Schlobinski, 2003: 200).

Smaller groups exist within this mainstream culture and they usually adopt their own characteristics regarding language, values and norms (Kornblum, 2011: 67-68). Some of these characteristics conventionally stand in opposition to the dominant culture; such oppositional cultures are called subcultures (Kornblum, 2011: 67-68). Graffiti emerged as a subculture offering its members distinct values, norms, beliefs, traditions and behaviours (Covey, 2010: 24; Ferrante, 2012: 72; Griswold, 2008: 60; Harrison, 2011: 71; Haviland et al., 2010: 30; Kornblum, 2011: 68).

Subcultures usually display resistance identity, which refers to a form of identity generated by individuals who are in positions or conditions that are regarded as devalued or stigmatised or opposed to the mainstream culture (Castells, 2004: 8).

Graffiti writers use the term popular culture to refer to the culture of mainstream society, especially when referring to the mass media – mostly films, music, advertisements, newspapers, magazines and television (Sheumaker & Wajda, 2008: 355).
1.5.5 Commercial graffiti, underground and selling out

Commercialisation is the process of developing the production of items for trade and exchange, which were perhaps not previously intended to be for sale (Totu, 2002: 338). In this way, commercialisation is linked to capitalism and products that are produced for the purpose of profit (Milestone & Meyer, 2012: 18). Graffiti is usually opposed to practices linked to capitalism or commercial culture; these are linked to mainstream culture (also called popular culture within the graffiti fraternity; technically, this interpretation differs from the study field of popular culture which includes studying subcultures) and are viewed by the graffiti fraternity as superficial, simplistic and driven by profit rather than by skill and quality (Milestone & Meyer, 2012: 18). This means that commercial graffiti is frowned upon by graffiti writers: first, because it is a mainstream cultural practice and graffiti is per definition opposed to the culture of mainstream society; second, it undermines the reason why graffiti emerged in the first place – to oppose mainstream society, to provide a sense of solidarity, meaning and belonging amongst graffiti writers and to provide an opportunity for self-expression – and third, for its stylistic simplification.

Iveson (2007: 134) explains that commercially commissioned graffiti work typically requires graffiti writers to develop a style that suits the public taste, with the result that graffiti is more legible for those that are not familiar with the style (Iveson, 2007: 134). Importantly, negotiating a legal opportunity to paint also brings mainstream society firmly into the equation (Iveson, 2007: 135). Furthermore, commercial graffiti may help to make the subculture more visible in the public space, but often this is on someone else’s terms (Iveson, 2007: 135). This means that commercial graffiti writers are being dictated to by someone else and are thus not authentic – they have ‘sold their souls’ and are thus sell-outs. The term selling out, disregarding the roots and traditions of graffiti, refers to traditional graffiti writers who have lost respect for those graffiti writers who do commercial work (Rahn, 2002: 20); they are perceived to have betrayed the graffiti subculture (Farris, 2009: 49).
Traditionally, the graffiti subculture is *underground*, meaning that an individual participating in the subculture endorses the core values or core ideology of that subculture (Berns & Schlobinski, 2003: 200). This *underground* aspect and the mainstream culture exist as juxtaposed parts of a subculture – as found in graffiti (Berns & Schlobinski, 2003: 200).

1.6 CONCLUSION

In order to embark on commercial graffiti writing, the new trend is a practice that seems to be in direct contrast with the reason why graffiti writing emerged in the first place. Against this background, this study aims to explore the perceptions of Johannesburg commercial graffiti writers regarding the seemingly oppositional relationship between real and commercial graffiti.

The next chapter explores the current literature which explains what real graffiti is; this will form a backdrop for the rest of this study.
CHAPTER 2: ‘REAL’ GRAFFITI

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In order to achieve the main objective of this study, which is to investigate the views of selected Johannesburg graffiti writers about the seemingly oppositional views regarding ‘real’ and commercial graffiti, this chapter explains what real graffiti is. This is done by examining the early beginnings and thus the roots of graffiti writing and sheds light on the original purpose of graffiti writing. It furthermore identifies three sets of core values of real graffiti; namely, those that originated from amongst graffiti groups, those that originated from the relationship between graffiti groups and mainstream society and those that originated from not partaking in graffiti as a form of art.

2.2 HISTORIC ROOTS

Early graffiti, in the form of inscriptions and paintings, dates back to ancient Roman times and was used on public spaces to spread various political messages, literary quotations, curses and even spells (Hess, 2010: 151). Contemporary graffiti writing, however, is a practice that can be viewed as the scribbling, scratching or marking of words or images on various urban surfaces and spaces for several reasons (Ferrell, Hayward & Young, 2008: 101; Keith, 2005: 136; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009: 306; Staiger, 2005: 558; Young, 2010: 100). These reasons vary: competing and challenging other graffiti writers and literally crossing out the work of rivals, communicating to other graffiti writers and leaving initials and messages for larger audiences to see (Ferrell, Hayward & Young, 2008: 101; Keith, 2005: 136; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009: 306; Staiger, 2005: 558; Young, 2010: 100). Graffiti writing can thus be seen as the drawings, inscriptions and designs that make words, pictures and symbols visually accessible to the public and serve a particular group of individuals without too much effort (Brunell, 2001: 343; Gogerly, 2001: 4; Levesque, 2011-1212; Phillips, 2011: 366).
Graffiti writing serves to visually display graffiti writers’ identities as well as their existence, albeit anonymously (Carrington, 2009: 420). In this case, the identity of graffiti writers is exchanged and negotiated between different contexts (MacDonald, 2001: 189). In the context of the ‘streets’, the graffiti writer yearns to be recognised, respected and known – being famous in the graffiti fraternity – through gaining notoriety amongst fellow graffiti writers (MacDonald, 2001: 189; Waclawek, 2011: 13). In other contexts, the graffiti writer’s identity is not all that evident (MacDonald, 2001: 231). In order to retain this anonymity, graffiti writers would employ nicknames, codes, symbols and stylised systems to conceal their identities (Gelder, 2007: 140; Philips, 2011: 367). These nicknames, codes, symbols and stylised systems usually bear little or no connection to the actual graffiti writer (Gelder, 2007: 140; Philips, 2011: 367).

Historians describe the graffiti phenomenon as having emerged from the more depressed areas of New York and Philadelphia around the late 1960s and early 1970s (Pereira, 2005: 26; Philips, 2011: 367; Rose, 1994: 41-42; Whitford, 1992: 2). The first known graffiti writer – a Greek immigrant, TAKI 183 – was a bicycle messenger who began to write his signatures or tags all over New York City between the years 1969 and 1971 (Milnor, 2005: 271; Pereira, 2005: 26; Snyder, 2009: 23-24). These tags became calling cards, trademarks or brands which were imprinted on subway cars and later appeared on walls and buildings, which were suitable canvasses around the city (Milnor, 2005: 271; Pereira, 2005: 26; Philips, 2011: 367; Snyder, 2009: 23-24). In this way, TAKI 183 claimed territory around the city by showing his existence on these various surfaces and spaces.

Other graffiti writers followed suit and the spread of graffiti led to the development of elaborate individual styles, foci, complexities and widespread visibility employing various themes, formats and techniques designed to accentuate the individual graffiti writer’s identity and status (recognition and admiration) amongst fellow writers (Hess, 2010: 152; Rose, 1994: 41-42). At the time, the graffiti environment started to flourish and gain momentum when writers began to take advantage of the flat surfaces of subway trains (Chalfant & Prigoff, 2003: 8; Malone & Martinez, 2010: 536-537). Due to high visibility of the trains, their graffiti writing was viewed by large numbers of the public.
and also by other graffiti writers throughout the city (Milnor, 2005: 271; Waclawek, 2001: 48). Therefore, subway trains served, for many individuals such as TAKI 183, as important canvases to gain prestige and so-called fame amongst fellow graffiti writers (Waclawek, 2001: 48). This kind of graffiti writing was then associated with spontaneity, danger (since it was seen as illegal vandalism) and, of course, competition amongst various crews of graffiti writers living in different neighbourhoods (Waclawek, 2001: 48). In time, so many graffiti writers became engaged in the intensive and prolonged assault on trains that the sheer volume of graffiti frustrated all efforts to clean it off and defied most attempts at deference through law enforcement (Whitford, 1992: 2).

It seems that the intention of TAKI 183 and his followers was to write his name in strategic locations, hoping his tags would be noticed by his peers, by the public and, most importantly, by members of the media (Snyder, 2009: 23-24). This intention of TAKI 183 would become one of graffiti writing’s best known attributes (Snyder, 2009: 23). The actions of TAKI 183 had profound effects, as in time many of his imitators would invest in this tradition through competing in the geographical distribution of other graffiti writers’ signatures (Lanchmann in Milnor, 2005: 271). It seems that many writers who were inspired by TAKI 183 and spurred by the competitiveness of graffiti writing thought their names could be used to signify something specific (Gottlieb, 2008: 37; Rosenthal, 2011: 230-23; Snyder, 2009: 24). This could be used in a quest for recognition and status amongst fellow graffiti writers and to resolve conflict based on artistry, image and style (Gottlieb, 2008: 37; Jorgensen, 2008: 241; McShane & Williams, 2003: 185-186; Rosenthal, 2011: 230-231; Snyder, 2009: 24). In this way, the graffiti community came to produce targeted cryptic messages that only other graffiti writers could understand. This enhanced group solidarity through the seemingly confusing and unreadable messages of graffiti writing (Philips, 2011: 367).

Importantly, TAKI 183 and his followers came to discover graffiti as a tool which was adopted by those without power to negotiate relationships within the society by which they were disempowered (Staiger, 2005: 558). This tool was further used to visually talk to their peers, or at least some of their peers who understood their messages (Staiger, 2005: 558). Graffiti writing allowed early graffiti writers to express themselves through
marks that carried specific meanings and comments about society and social institutions of authority (Chapman, 2010: 226; Levesque, 2011-1212). During these early years, graffiti writing had served as an outlet for many writers to publish their thoughts, philosophies and ideologies through marks, signs, writings and even poems (Philips, 2011: 366).

Graffiti became a tool for expression for several sentiments. Importantly, the youth at the time had turned to graffiti writing as a means of literally ‘writing themselves’ into the world and in so doing shaping their own thoughts and experiences (Guzzetti, 2002: 211). Graffiti writing was a new avenue that allowed individuals to express themselves; it gave them a voice to express their feelings (Best, 2003: 828; Fedorak, 2009: 71). Early graffiti writers, who held no special positions in society and thus can be regarded as ordinary people, found their voice through graffiti. That allowed them to have an extraordinary position in society and make statements through messages that focused on social emancipation and political change or simply to change the attitudes of the public (Fedorak, 2009: 71; Martinez, 2011: 5). This means that graffiti writers had found an avenue for their voiceless community who experienced a growing sense of social displacement and marginalisation and hence felt disengaged from mainstream society due to various social, economic, cultural and linguistic barriers (Best, 2003: 849; Fedorak, 2009: 71; Kincheloe & Hayes, 2006: 108).

Importantly, graffiti served as an expression of the self, reflecting on several aspects such as the moods, ambitions, desires, tensions, pleasures, dreams, fears and ideas held by the various youth groups at the time (Best, 2003: 836; Carrington, 2009: 419; Mason, 2008: 111-112). Graffiti further served as a mechanism that allowed young people to feel empowered, creative and heard (Ensminger, 2011: 67-68). These writers used graffiti as a wakeup call to the public (often referred to as the masses in the literature about graffiti) to not be so apathetic towards social change (Walsh, 1996: 12). Many graffiti writers saw their form of expressing the self as necessary; they found no other space to express their views in public (Keith, 2005: 151). This meant that within the limits of permissible or legitimate communication, graffiti writers could not find a space to express themselves (Keith, 2005: 151). Graffiti writing had therefore provided
its participants not only with group solidarity and self-expression, but also allowed them to take on new roles which gave ordinary people the power to deliver messages and share their thoughts in a visual way (Fedorak, 2009: 67; Ferrell, 1999: 232; Gogerly, 2011: 4; Macdonald, 2005: 312; Pearlman, 2003: 100; Staiger, 2005: 558). Since graffiti writing was new at the time, it was seen as an open channel to be manipulated by its users and moulded to suit their needs (Philips, 2011: 367). It thus served as a communicative strategy that allowed these early graffiti writers to engage in visual dialogue with each other and with those in mainstream culture (Philips, 2011: 367).

Although graffiti writing had offered TAKI 183 and his followers several means to express their views on various topics it was, from the public perspective, socially unacceptable and illegal. In fact, graffiti writing was regarded as vandalism at the time and posed questions around the right and power to use public spaces for inscriptions (Rosenthal, 2011:231). For many, graffiti was regarded as an eyesore because it was something foreign and unknown that was seen as a chaotic obstruction to everyday organised living (KET, 2007: viii).

These early graffiti writers, however, strived to ‘create’ themselves in public spaces. It was only much later in history that some strands of graffiti writers became associated with violence, danger and destruction (Phillips, 1999: 311). In other words, the level or intensity of the deviance from socially acceptable behaviour differs amongst different groups of graffiti writers and in different periods of history.

Nevertheless, the roots of graffiti most definitely lie in the quest of graffiti writers to be noticed and gain status amongst their peers. For many, graffiti was simply regarded as blatantly disturbing the notions of order and doing things out of place (Cresswell, 1996: 42). However, this is often linked to conflict between different groups of graffiti writers which ultimately leads to a quest for dominance and clashes of expression that disrupt controlled spaces (Waclawek, 2011: 44-45).

In summary, it can be said that the roots of real graffiti lie in New York where graffiti writers wanted to catch the public eye and the attention of fellow graffiti writers when
they expressed their marginality and opposition towards mainstream society through spray-painting illegally on public surfaces.

In order to understand the interaction and relationship amongst different graffiti writers in greater detail, the core characteristics of graffiti, namely expression and belonging in graffiti groups, or crews, is discussed in the next section.

2.3 GRAFFITI CREWS: EXPRESSION, BELONGING AND GROUP DYNAMICS

TAKI 183’s quest for so-called fame and admiration amongst peers created a following that wanted to express themselves as a kind of in-group sense of solidarity amongst the graffiti fraternity. The meaning within the graffiti community stemmed from a graffiti writer’s desire for recognition from fellow writers (Phillips, 1999: 313; Schiffrin, De Fina & Nylund, 2010: 136; Waclawek, 2011: 43). This recognition, which writers craved so much, essentially played for two intended audiences: other writers and the general public (Ferrell & Weide, 2010: 51). The public’s and fellow graffiti writers’ awareness of a graffiti writers’ works served as affirmation and validation which boosted the self-esteem of graffiti writers (Arrington, 2007: 137; Walsh, 1996: 11-12).

At the same time, graffiti writers encouraged each other to be more active and make their mark in society; it was thought in this way the public spaces were democratised, because ordinary people could now communicate through spray-painting on public surfaces (Martinez, 2011: 5; Snyder, 2009: 5). Graffiti writers thus afforded themselves space with their creativity and audacity and in the process forced the public to ‘read’ and take notice of them and their opinions (Best, 2003: 849; Fedorak, 2009: 71; Kincheloe & Hayes, 2006: 108).

One of the motivating factors that spurred graffiti writers to use this form of expression was a longing to be ‘somebody’ in a world that was always reminding them that they were not (Chalfant & Prigoff, 2003: 7; Rose, 1994: 42; Waclawek, 2011: 43). In other words, the emphasis was not so much on the messages of graffiti writers, but the fact that their work could be seen in an ongoing war over space, voice and presence in the
streets (Chapman, 2010: 227; Fedorak, 2009: 67; Strickland & Boswell, 2007:193). Essentially, writing graffiti in any form, whether political, personal or gang-related, responds to a variety of needs, expressions and reactions or modes of protest over who gets the opportunity to be present in public spaces (Waclawek, 2011: 43).

This means that the public might not necessarily have understood graffiti writing, but could understand that there were other communities present in the public arena. Graffiti writing thus engages the public in an indirect way. However, by excluding mainstream society from their practices, graffiti writers built inclusive communities amongst fellow graffiti writers (Christen, 2010: 238). This created solidarity and definition among graffiti writers and fostered a sense of belonging amongst the group members (Best, 2003: 828, 836; Carrington, 2009: 419; Staiger, 2005: 558). Individuals learned to be part of something larger and more powerful than themselves by belonging to a group (and a public space) with whom they could identify (Ferrell, 2004: 37; Staiger, 2005: 567). This produced individuals who identified with the collective and recognised ‘we’ through the use of colours and symbols that they all shared – by producing graffiti in public spaces (Ferrell, 2004: 37; Staiger, 2005: 567). Through belonging to such groups, graffiti writers are exposed to factors typical of tightly-knit groups; for example, dedication, humility, courage, toughness and, most of all, hard work that allowed these individuals to build themselves into respectable graffiti writers (Farris, 2009: 43; Pennycook, 2010: 57; Schultz, 2008: 3; Snyder, 2009: 5; Waclawek, 2011: 26; Wallowitz, 2008: 107). Furthermore, through the belonging and group membership, other positive qualities such as loyalty and problem-solving emerged (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010: 148; Russell, Levesque, 2011: 1213).

Importantly, through this belonging and the practice of actual and symbolic group graffiti writing, graffiti crews were formed. The graffiti environment at the time began to grow and flourish as graffiti writers met up with more graffiti writers, forming graffiti crews that collaborated on designs and pieces (Ocejo, 2013: 228). This collaborative engagement undergirds group and individual identity formation (Ocejo, 2013: 228).
Another set of characteristics of graffiti groups has to do with small group dynamics. Graffiti crews create a collective context, in which writers can develop and grow by participating in collaborative graffiti projects and at the same time have the support and companionship of likeminded people (Christen, 2010: 235; Ocejo, 2013: 228; Pennycook, 2010: 57). Not only do graffiti crews offer members companionship, but they create the belief that their graffiti styles could improve, that they would learn group dynamics and that it is safer to practise illegal spray-painting if more people are present (Mason, 2008: 111-112; Waclawek, 2011: 43; Wallowitz, 2008: 107). Furthermore, the group could protect a member against physical attacks and attacks on their geographical territory from rival groups (Mason, 2008: 111-112; Waclawek, 2011: 43; Wallowitz, 2008: 107). Such characteristics offered strength in the form of safety when writing in dangerous areas while a number of graffiti writers were participating, as well as allowing graffiti writers the opportunity to cover large areas by working together. Furthermore, these group members enforced their own behavioural codes, allowing them to create their own right and responsibility in governing themselves (Christen, 2010: 236-237). These characteristics created significant organisations that promoted valuable opportunities to learn from the group and to acquire cooperative and democratic group interaction skills (Christen, 2010: 237; Waclawek, 2011: 26-27). This served as a bond that both empowered and challenged writers to produce their best graffiti work (Christen, 2010: 237; Pennycook, 2010: 57; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009: 306; Waclawek, 2011: 26-27). Serving as educational organisations, these crews played a strong role in motivating graffiti writers to write, cooperate and behave according to a newly formed group’s behavioural norms (Williams & Kornblum, 1985: 75). The formation of crews further fostered the formation of deep social bonds between members that share time and resources, construct collective artistic orientations and defend one another from enemies, both real and imagined (Ferrell, 2004: 38).

It is interesting to note that although graffiti groups offer members a sense of belonging, there is, almost contradictorily, competition amongst group members of the same graffiti group. This dual competitive rivalry aspect of graffiti crews that TAKI 183 began means that even though one is working in a group, one wants to outshine one’s own group by
saturating the urban environment with one’s tagging name (Christen, 2010: 237; Pennycook, 2010: 57; Snyder, 2009: 5; Waclawek, 2011: 26-27). This quest of getting up spurred individual graffiti writers and graffiti crews to produce even more graffiti (Christen, 2010: 237; Pennycook, 2010: 57; Waclawek, 2001:45). This led to many graffiti writers and crews attempting to create reputations through very ambitious projects and led to them writing in difficult accessible and dangerous locations (Bocij, 2006: 51; Whitford, 1992: 4). This duality between belonging and competition, or what is called in the graffiti environment, respect and disrespect or fame and infamy, came to be a central characteristic within graffiti groups (Halsey & Pederick, 2010: 90). The more notoriety a crew received, the more graffiti writers wished to be a part of that particular crew and this, in turn, stimulated more graffiti writing (Farris 2009: 43; Whitford, 1992: 4). Although fierce competition existed between crews in their search for recognition and fame, certain rules of reciprocity, support, respect and communication remained central forces between different graffiti groups (Riviere & Austin, 2001: 344). In other words, within a graffiti group the competition between group members is regulated and is subjected to group solidarity in the face of embarking on illegal graffiti writing and accessing difficult-to-reach public spaces; likewise, the fierce competition between graffiti groups is always subject to the subcultural norms.

The fierce competition existing between different graffiti groups is called graffiti wars (emerging conflict between graffiti writers/crews). This occurs through a symbolic conflict of styles rather than actual violence, often expressing a distaste for another’s work in a process known as dissing or going over (deliberately painting/defacing the name of another graffiti writer) (Farris, 2009: 44; Ferrell & Weide, 2010: 55; Schultz, 2008: 3; Waclawek, 2011: 27-28). This was either accomplished through defacing, completely repainting or literally writing over another crew’s work. This was regarded as an aggressive and disrespectful action which at times provoked the writing battles which existed conflict between graffiti writers and crews (Farris, 2009: 44; Ferrell & Weide, 2010: 55; Waclawek, 2011: 27-28; Whitford, 1992: 5). Graffiti crews can therefore be said to constitute a linguistic community in which political arguments and verbal debates are substituted by non-discursive battles between opposing crews (Keith, 2005: 150).
Graffiti crews would acknowledge good work and accept that the only way to gain recognition as a superior crew was to produce better quality work compared to that of opposing crews (Whitford, 1992: 5). Although a fierce and competitive environment was created through the need for recognition and fame, all crews did abide and run according to hierarchies and unwritten rules or codes created at the initial start of graffiti writing.

These codes were seated within group hierarchy and amongst different groups, making the path to success within graffiti writing neither spontaneous nor arbitrary. Acquiring status amongst other graffiti writers involves a slow process of graffiti writers convincing their peers of their status, whilst abiding to a set of unwritten rules and ethical codes (Waclawek, 2011: 27). Graffiti crews are highly organised and hierarchical in structure, varying in proficiency from highly skilled graffiti writers to beginners (Christen, 2010: 235; Ferrell, 2004: 38; Whitford, 1992: 4). Hierarchies also exist within crews, where several members are usually being led by a highly respected and experienced graffiti writer, or king. This person is at the top of the group hierarchy and well-known in the graffiti environment due to elaborate murals and high status amongst fellow graffiti writers (Farris, 2009: 44; Riviere & Austin, 2001: 344; Whitford, 1992: 4). A king would incorporate the image of a crown in one way or another in his or her work as this would demonstrate the writer’s status (Farris, 2009: 44, 47). The symbol of a crown would be used with great graffiti skills, displaying advanced knowledge of composition, colour theory, materials and creative capacity (Farris, 2009: 44, 47).

On the other hand, new and emerging graffiti writers entering the graffiti environment are referred to as toys (inexperienced and incompetent) due to their relative status of little reputation or skill (Farris, 2009: 47; Riviere & Austin, 2001: 344). In this sense, the term toy points to something to play with, a replica or a miniature breed (Farris, 2009: 47).

Typical of graffiti groups, the newcomer is immediately accepted and drawn into a group, allowing these toys to explore their styles and techniques under the guidance and protection of a king in a complex system of training new graffiti writers (Farris, 2009: 44, 47).
This remarkable group dynamic is an element for which graffiti writing is often praised, as this serves to illustrate how competition and cooperation can be employed within a group system (Farris, 2009: 47-48). However, this practice is not new; it seems to be a modern version of the age-old institution of writer or artist apprenticeship that focused on passing knowledge from one generation to the next (Farris, 2009: 39). This apprenticeship ensured the assimilation into the group and the transfer of knowledge and skills in a way that celebrates the creative freedom and individuality of the newcomer (Christen, 2010: 235). Essentially, this mentor-apprentice relationship raised graffiti crews from simply mere associations of writers to educational organisations that deliberately transmitted knowledge, skills, values and sensibilities (Christen, 2010: 235). Importantly, this process provided learning experiences for young writers; for example, planning and executing projects, collaborating, managing time and building self-confidence, resiliency, work ethic and an appreciation of craftsmanship (Christen, 2010: 235- 236).

In summary, it can be said that the workings within a graffiti crew are marked by duality: on the one hand, group members compete against each other for respect and fame, but at the same time graffiti crews provide a safe-haven for established graffiti writers and newcomers, or toys, to acquire new skills and to be physically protected against other crews. The same kind of competition-cooperation is evident between groups – amidst graffiti wars the subcultural code of resisting mainstream society is honoured.

The relationship between mainstream culture and the graffiti subculture is explored in the next section.

2.4 RELATIONSHIP WITH MAINSTREAM SOCIETY

At the beginning of this chapter, it was argued that graffiti writing played a critical role in the development of identity for individuals as well as communities through the production of graffiti texts. Graffiti texts therefore came to serve as important identity narratives that allowed graffiti writers to use their unsanctioned status to communicate
as a means of miniature autobiographies. Most importantly, this aspect of graffiti served
the youth at the time as a motivation to control their appearances and movements in
public spaces and a means to shape their identities and find meaning in their lives.
Against this background, it is important to remember that graffiti writers’ identities were
largely constructed through their seeking new avenues of expression instead of those
offered by society, as they felt marginalised and even excluded by mainstream society
(Kincheloe & Hayes, 2006: 107; Snyder, 2009: 2).

What lured many graffiti writers into partaking in graffiti writing is the solidarity of a kind
of secret society which opposes mainstream society, at the same time providing a group
of like-minded creative people. This shaped their identity and was very enticing for
many graffiti writers (Waclawek, 2011: 55). Experiencing a sense of solidarity was
further cemented by graffiti writers’ realisation that non-graffiti writers cannot understand
them or the purpose and meaning of their work (Waclawek, 2011: 55). This provided
writers with a sense of power to create a world of their own – neither easily penetrated
nor understood – and excluding mainstream audiences that reinforced the vitality of
their world (Waclawek, 2011: 55). The practice of writing graffiti therefore served as a
type of secret language, as the knowledge that most members of society could not
decipher or read graffiti’s visual images made graffiti writers part of an exclusive group
(Waclawek, 2001: 45-55; Whittord, 1992: 2). In other words, the use of graffiti as a
language which emerged as distorted and blurred became important in identifying these
graffiti writers (Rahn, 2002: 20; Waclawek, 2011: 43). Therefore, the creation and
circulation of the graffiti identity served as a camouflage from outsiders (Waclawek,
2011: 25).

Another factor that plays an essential role in identity formation within graffiti writing is a
location where graffiti is visible (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010: 148; Ferrell, 2004: 37-38;
Pennycook, 2010: 60). By positioning their graffiti in close proximity to each other,
graffiti writers are literally making their territories in urban areas – by mapping or
disseminating their graffiti names. Care is taken by graffiti writers who are busy mapping
an area to ensure that their styles are recognisable by other graffiti writers and the
public, in order to claim their urban spaces (Pennycook, 2010: 60; Rosenthal, 2011:
Through this process, an actual graffiti image could be seen as a fragment of a writer’s identity that revealed a part of him or her – from conveying attitudes to communicating how one is feeling about oneself and about the movement (Carrington, 2009: 420; MacDonald, 2001: 197).

In this sense, and typical of subcultures, the collective graffiti subculture provides a collective opposition or resistance identity against mainstream society and its associated devaluation (Castells, 2004: 8). This resistance is often identified as deviant behaviour within society and often seen as violating the norms of that particular society (Kornblum, 2011: 181). In this case, deviance is understood as conduct that does not conform to the expected behaviour of society and is often behaviour which is shunned or avoided (Leonard & Kenny, 2010: 29). This is the case with graffiti writing, which specifically conveys the identity of the graffiti writer and can be interpreted by the public as an expression of non-conformity (Clair, 2003: 222; Gottlieb, 2008: 5-6). Deviance can, therefore, be said to occur as a result of learned behaviour and exposure in which distinctive sets of norms are passed on in groups which exist on the peripheries of mainstream society (Leonard & Kenny, 2010: 30).

Groups, such as graffiti writers, that exist on the peripheries of mainstream society are regarded as non-normative and marginal through their particular interests and practices, and are considered members of subcultures that deviate from mainstream culture (Gelder, 2005: 1; Williams, 2011: 10). A subculture is a group within society that resists the values, attitudes and behaviours of the majority (Kornblum, 2011: 187). Usually well aware of their differences, such subcultures relish and exploit their deviance or difference from mainstream culture; they promote rebellion against mainstream culture and celebrate their uniqueness and self-expressive practices of graffiti writing (Gelder, 2005: 1; Lewis, 2009: 43; Williams, 2011: 10). Subcultures usually challenge the accepted norms and values of larger society and in so doing establish alternative lifestyles (Brake, 1980: 3; Bryant, 2011: 233; Kornblum, 2011: 68; Winge, 2012: 59). The fact that they differ from mainstream society is not only evident in their lifestyles, but also in the way they dress, speak and behave. In this way, they carve out an authentic identity that is in opposition to mainstream society (Williams, 2011: 9).
However, members of subcultures usually share certain values and norms with mainstream culture, but in order to remain unique and to celebrate their outsider status, they pursue values that oppose that of mainstream culture (Kornblum, 2011: 187-188). In this way, subcultures demonstrate a dislike of established middle-class norms, while reflecting on their desires, dreams and hopes (Jorgensen, 2008: 237, 242; Mele, 2000: 228). This dichotomy, which is seated in opposition, forms a strong bond or in-group cohesion amongst graffiti writers (McGahan, 1984: 47).

This means that graffiti deviates from mainstream society through being paradoxically and simultaneously resistant and subordinate to mainstream culture (Ferrell, 1999: 232; Macdonald, 2005: 312; Pearlman, 2003: 100; Staiger, 2005: 558). Their most visible differentiating characteristic is to distance themselves from mainstream society by their coded visual language (Waclawek, 2011: 55). Graffiti writers find themselves within this duality where their defiance of mainstream society is in fact bound with their search for recognition from that very same culture (Pearlman, 2003: 100). This dialectic relationship is used by graffiti writers to reinforce certain dominant values, while challenging dominant, legal, political and religious ideologies (Hill & Ramsaran, 2009: 16; Ferrell, 2004: 34). The act of writing graffiti serves as a kind of ‘rite of passage’ into resistance and serves as a voice for marginalised or alienated groups to reclaim their environments; they hence challenge the status quo and those in power (Christen, 2010: 237; Clifford & Valentine, 2010: 487; Fedorak, 2009: 71; Mason, 2008: 110). The graffiti subculture is composed of a marginalised population possessing few resources and lacking legitimate access to the media and means of expression (Chalfant & Prigoff, 2003: 10; Ferrell, 1999: 232; Harmon, 2012: 4; Levesque, 2011: 1213; Macdonald, 2005: 312; Pearlman, 2003: 100; Staiger, 2005: 558). In this way, the disenfranchised graffiti population feels relatively empowered in the wake of the perceived powerful mainstream society (Fedorak, 2009: 67; Keith, 2005: 150; Ferrell, 2004: 38). They achieved this by expressing their resistance in the form of graffiti writing (Fedorak, 2009: 67; Keith, 2005: 150; Ferrell, 2004: 38).

In other instances, graffiti writers existed with this deviant image by choosing to purposely alienate themselves from a society they viewed as misguided, doomed or
falling apart around them (Walsh, 1996: 12). The majority of graffiti writers had a common distrust and disrespect for the government and established authority; they blamed those in charge, lawmakers and those upholding the law for their marginalised position and thought that the governmental and economic systems had failed them miserably (Walsh, 1996: 12). To carve out their space and their identity, graffiti writers relied on factors such as the risk they took to produce graffiti, the visibility and challenges of their work to embody their ‘anti-relationship’ with society and its sensibilities (Phillips, 1999: 311; Pennycook, 2010:60). For many people in mainstream culture, this was clearly viewed as an invasive challenge as it opposed the middle-class and elite properties and also the established sense of security and conventional aesthetics (Christen, 2010: 233). For its users, however, graffiti served as a fight against laws and prejudice to establish justice and to achieve such justice that had to show society that they were unhappy with what it had to offer (Christen, 2010: 237). For many graffiti writers, having their name recognised in the urban realm meant they were disrupting the system and were rebelling against various social norms that made their presence felt (Waclawek, 2011: 48). In this way, graffiti writing could be viewed as providing individuals with the knowledge and skills that would enable them to empower themselves and turn their resistance into a positive alternative (Christen, 2010: 237). The act of writing on walls allowed writers to reclaim the public sphere through the essence of rebellion and reclamation, as scribbling on government or public property was an act of defiance these writers yearned to practise (Best, 2003: 836; Waclawek, 2011: 185).

The rise of the graffiti movement has been associated with hip hop since the emergence of graffiti, as both subcultures were locked in deviance in opposing mainstream society and both employed unconventional forms of expression. Many scholars see graffiti writing as one of the four core elements of hip hop alongside rapping or MC-ing (rhythmic poetic expressions in the beat of music), scratching or DJ-ing (mixing of musical beats or disc jockeying) and break-dancing or breaking (rhythmic street-style dancing) (Gottlieb, 2008: 35; Hess, 2010: 152; Martinez, 2009: 9; Pennycook, 2010: 57). Hip hop largely drew on the street style of the American black youth which was
centred on rap music, the blending of musical forms and clothing styles and a world consisting of its own values and cultural codes (McDonald, 1999: 139, 141). At the time, these elements were important ways of communicating that were, most importantly, rather lived than performed by the young inhabitants of New York (Alexander & Rucker, 2010: 805; Chalfant & Prigoff, 2003: 8; Hawisher & Selfe, 2000: 271; Milnor, 2005: 271; Waclawek, 2011: 56). Hip hop was initially associated with disenfranchised and rebellious youth as an alternative to gang membership; it promoted self-expression and served as a means to socialise and engage in creative endeavours (Waclawek, 2011: 57). The hip hop movement starting taking shape from the economic and social environment found in these New York urban communities of colour around the 1970s (Malone & Martinez, 2010: 532; Milnor, 2005: 271). Hip hop thus emerged from post-civil right urban ghettos situated in the Bronx (suburb of New York) through these economic and social changes that heightened racial and class tensions (Malone & Martinez, 2010: 535). Emerging from such urban struggles, hip hop had its origins in modern African American cultural innovations, becoming synonymous with artistic innovations, social analysis and democratic participation of disenfranchised populations (Barranger, 2006: 316; Malone & Martinez, 2010: 532; Walsh, 1996: 12). At the time, hip hop became an important space for addressing social and political issues at local levels, moulding into a potential vehicle for democratic participation, civic engagement and literacy for these historically marginalised populations (Malone & Martinez, 2010: 532).

This means that hip hop was nothing more than the aesthetic and cultural assertion of ‘the streets’, essentially ‘the good, the bad, and the ugly’ (Malone & Martinez, 2010: 535). Poor public services and few economic opportunities had also forced individuals – who had little hope that the state or mainstream society would help them – to rely on the support of their communities as well as their own resourcefulness (Malone & Martinez, 2010: 535-536). In this context, young individuals discovered that hip hop could serve as a vehicle to create reference points of knowledge, reclaim public spaces in marginalised and devastated neighbourhoods, critique existing conditions, define and salute whomever they felt it should and to empower and build their own communities.
(Malone & Martinez, 2010: 536). Importantly, this gave a voice to the frustration of marginalised youth and became a powerful forum for cultural and political expression among disenfranchised youth that addressed issues of race, police violence, drug abuse and sexism (Fedorak, 2009: 42). In time, this movement gradually grew and developed beyond its geographical and racial origins and spread far beyond even the wildest imaginations of its originators (Hawisher & Selfe, 2000: 271). Similar to graffiti writing, the hip hop movement was viewed as having plenty of substance, having evolved on street corners in the form of recreational, creative and good natured competitions or battles like those found in graffiti writing (Waclawek, 2011: 56). The various aspects that were required to partake in the hip hop subculture were easily accessible and relatively inexpensive for urban youths as they only needed ghetto blasters, turntables and cardboard boxes as the basics instruments (Waclawek, 2011: 56). These served as the building blocks for hip hop, fuelled by a range of modes of expression, energy and talent popularised through rap music, dance and fashion (Waclawek, 2011: 56). Rap music is the sound of the hip hop culture; dance and bodily movement its rhythms and moves; graffiti inscribes its spatial identity and presence, and fashion provides a further subcultural style for hip hop (Fedorak, 2009: 42-43). Encompassing style, fashion and attitude, the hip hop ethos became a way of life, a genuine subculture and a way of life for many youngsters (Fedorak, 2009: 42-43).

The explosion of hip hop was essentially the greatest agent for spreading graffiti writing beyond inner-city America; graffiti was featured alongside the rapid evolution of hip hop music (rapping) in films, music videos, images and books that described and promoted the various elements of hip hop as it took shape in New York’s streets (Chalfant & Prigoff, 2003: 8; Martinez, 2009: 9; Waclawek, 2011: 28-29). Many elements of graffiti were much appreciated by hip hoppers: graffiti’s connection with illegality and a sense of danger, its unreadable images suggested a secret society, and its reliance on the tagged name signified self-empowerment and its roots in New York (Waclawek, 2011: 57). Hip hop and graffiti became closely linked through their emphasis on innovation, technique and skill that symbolised energy. In fact, graffiti’s colours and lines contained the same energy that existed in other aspects of hip hop (Rahn, 2002: 3).
As with graffiti writing, the hip hop movement played an important role in creating identities that enabled African American youths in particular to express and value themselves and celebrate black culture and pride (Fedorak, 2009: 43; Hawisher & Selfe, 2000: 271). As found with graffiti, hip hop’s feelings of rejection due to undesired living standards caused many of its members to adopt an anti-establishment attitude (Lewis, 2009: 43). This attitude critiqued, opposed or ‘broke down’ mainstream culture in order to empower the low self-esteem and insecurity of these members (Lewis, 2009: 43). The hip hop community also based itself on codes defining order or conformity that created a resistance against systems of authority which remained expressed through its behaviours, manners of dress and language or its visual form, graffiti (Rahn, 2002: 3). The fact that many of hip hop’s activities, such as behaviour, manners and illegal graffiti, were frowned upon by mainstream society, gave the movement more self-value and this was used as a given reason for their marginalisation and alienation (Fedorak, 2009: 43; Hawisher & Selfe, 2000: 271). The deviant image of hip hop gained momentum through its one musical form – ‘gangsta rap’ – which was darker and represented a violent refusal of social roles, identity and the privileged white middle class of society at the time (McDonald, 1999: 139). Rappers cultivated the rebel or outlaw image through clothing, attitudes and behaviour and this has appealed to youths all over the world due to its rebellious tone (Fedorak, 2009: 43). This anti-establishment attitude became integral to hip hop (Hawisher & Selfe, 2000: 271). In a local context, the adoption of hip hop by South African youth also emanates from the recognition that pre-1994 apartheid ideas should be dethroned, while the search for alternative ideas has given rise to a ‘hip’, ‘tough’, ‘streetwise’ and ‘in-your-face’ attitudes (Hawisher & Selfe, 2000: 271). It can furthermore be argued that graffiti served as hip hop’s adopted language; both chose to break away from mainstream society which they believed had failed them (Walsh, 1996: 12).

The notion of street culture is strongly linked to the nature of graffiti writing and hip hop. Emerging literally from the streets (the homes of hip hoppers - or hip hop heads - were very small and they had to look to the streets to find enough room to enjoy their music), these individuals developed their own rules, norms, rewards and sanctions that not only
defined them, but helped them to physically and emotionally survive in hostile environments (Sandberg & Pedersen, 2011: 68). Street culture serves as a complex and conflicting web of beliefs, symbols, modes of interaction, values and ideologies that emerge in opposition to mainstream exclusion and offer an alternative forum for personal dignity and resistance (Sandberg & Pedersen, 2011: 43). In addition, street culture emerges as a spontaneous set of rebellious practices over time as it is oppositional and strives to serve marginalised people in what has been called a ‘search for respect’ (Sandberg & Pedersen, 2011: 44). Street culture is different to suburban culture; the latter is represented by achievements in school, responsible and respectable family and relationships, commitment to careers and a constructive use of leisure (Brake, 1985: 190). In contrast, ‘street culture’ emerges as a rough, desperate, anti-authority, raw and violent defence of symbolic territory in a quest to be recognised by mainstream society (Brake, 1985: 190). The nature of street culture thus lies outside the home in the urban street, a tough environment neither safe nor ‘nice’ and hence very attractive to many (Brake, 1985: 190).

As is evident from the discussion so far, graffiti is a subculture that is linked to both the hip hop movement and street culture. The relationship between this subcultural grouping and mainstream society is complex. Emerging as a means to oppose marginalisation and displacement, graffiti served as a voice for alienated youths. Graffiti writing serves as a type of secret society where individuals are able to create identities that oppose mainstream culture and resist mainstream society and deviate from it. This resistance emerged from a sense of feeling disvalued or neglected by larger society and is aimed at institutions and authority within mainstream culture. An alternative lifestyle is therefore established by graffiti members through their practices and interests. They resist mainstream culture, but at the same time seek recognition from that very same society. This can be regarded as empowering its members and showing dissatisfaction with mainstream culture and its norms. This deviance is closely linked to hip hop culture, which emerged as a means of communication and a platform among disenfranchised and marginalised youth. In this way, both hip hop and graffiti have become important vehicles for expression, deeply rooted in deviance and street culture.
that allows them to form alternative identities and oppose the practices and ideals within mainstream culture.

2.5 GRAFFITI AS ART

In some circles, graffiti is defined by being part of a subculture but is seen as art. In this section, it is argued that even though graffiti shares some similarities with the fine arts, it is not an art form in the conventional sense of the word.

Art plays an essential role in understanding and appreciating humanity (Berleant, 2005: 19; Boyd, 2009: 70-71; Richardson, 2010: 1). A work of art can be described as a man-made object which possesses a visual significance and consists of its own authenticity and energy regardless of the medium in which it is expressed (Kleinbauer, 1989: 1). In this sense, an artwork becomes a unique and irreplaceable object which is complex and mysterious in its own way (Kleinbauer, 1989: 1). The value of an artwork lies in its ability to create experiences and sensations in both meaning and action (Berleant, 2005: 19). Art is shared, it holds meaning for a particular group and it is integral in understanding the motives of certain groups and the purpose of its creation.

In contrast, graffiti writing carries its own set of motives and this section considers whether graffiti can be regarded as an art form.

Since graffiti’s birth in the late 1960s, this phenomenon has been regarded as a debatable and controversial art form by some scholars (Snyder, 2009: 47). Whether one enjoys, ignores, outlaws or simply exhibits graffiti ultimately depends on whether one thinks of it as art or vandalism (Levinson, 2003: 252-253). Even though many graffiti writers have considerable support for their work, society at large typically views graffiti as an urban epidemic that needs to be controlled, cleaned up and eliminated (Farris, 2009: 32). This image of graffiti writing, undergirded by its deviant nature, is often viewed as a visible reminder of urban decay, delinquency and degeneracy which is criticised to justify the fears and prejudices of larger society (Fedorak, 2009: 67). In other words, graffiti’s acceptance by mainstream society, in many cases, has been
hindered by the negative connotations associated with it; namely, the fact that it is labelled and placed in the realm of crime and deviance without full acknowledgement of its complexities (Farris, 2009: 36). In many cases, efforts have been made to try and bridge this gap between categorising its nature as an adolescent crime and viewing it as a serious art form even though it exists outside the art gallery (Farris, 2009: 36). Importantly, over the past 30 years a number of individuals in the fine art world have come to recognise the complex system of hierarchies, processes and crews that exist within graffiti (Farris, 2009: 48).

When placed in the context of the fine art world, graffiti writing would fall under the ‘outsider art’ category (Farris, 2009: 48). This form of art is usually created by untrained artists whose work is not viewed by larger society as something that constitutes art and is generally not socially accepted (Farris, 2009: 48). In this sense, ‘outsider art’ can be regarded as a pleasurable satisfaction for graffiti writers who participate in its nature, which acknowledges that graffiti does not conform to mainstream societal norms. On the other hand, fine art is a category comprising original paintings, sculptures and drawings (Duboff, 1999: 65). Essentially, the purpose of fine art is to enrich man and society in ways that it can be admired and interpreted (Thomas, 2001: 165). In this sense, fine art emerges as something exclusive, timeless, not practical or useful and not related or applicable as it retains its own thought, reasons, disciplines, history and traditions (Reinhardt, 1996: 88).

Labelling graffiti as an art form would draw many reactions from both the art world and the graffiti world (Farris, 2009: 48). If it was suggested that graffiti is an art form, a situation would occur where the art world could analyse and critique its nature in the same manner as fine art (Farris, 2009: 48). As discussed, this is not possible due to the complexities and context in which graffiti writing thrives, which Levinson (2003: 252-253) believes rests on the factor of permission given by graffiti writers. In many cases, the process of placing aesthetics and technique over graffiti’s street nature opens the door to the acceptance of graffiti as a serious art rather than the action of deviant individuals (Farris, 2009: 48). In recent times, despite the controversial nature of graffiti writing, many within mainstream society have come to accept the colourful murals as a
part of pop culture, regarding it as ‘art of the people’ and the visual artistic form of the hip hop movement (Farris, 2009: 54; Snyder, 2009: 47).

Graffiti writing as an unsanctioned practice associated with a deviant movement has challenged various art institutions and commissioned public art (Waclawek, 2011: 9). Labelling graffiti writing as an art form would trigger mixed reactions within the graffiti community, some viewing writers as *sell-outs* or betraying the movement when taking graffiti off the side of a building and placing it on a canvas (Farris, 2009: 48-49). In fact, a very small number of graffiti writers have embraced the mixture of graffiti with the fine art world and enjoy the practice of art galleries, which view such graffiti writers as artists rather than writers (Farris, 2009: 48-49). This has allowed many graffiti writers to turn to commercial or commissioned opportunities which are often rewarded monetarily, but not necessarily created for the sole purpose of making money but for art’s sake (Thomas, 2001: 165; Reinhardt, 1996: 88). This practice is discussed in much detail in the next chapter.

In addition, graffiti may be elevated to a category of art through its cryptic codes, generalised content and stylistic features (Philips, 2011: 367). The main unit in graffiti writing is the style of the basic letter which functions to communicate its visual language to convey meaning (Gottlieb, 2008: 43-44). In this case, graffiti writers incorporate certain attributes to express style which is generally regarded to be closer to technique than to its meaning in art (Gottlieb, 2008: 44). Graffiti is furthermore regarded as street art that is employed as a communication channel to identify certain problems, to question values, make certain claims and suggest alternatives (Lyman, 1993: 8). These various factors identify and announce events, social commentary and political agenda while preserving the vision of its writers (Lyman, 1993: 8). In this way, it can be argued that graffiti writing serves similar purposes as those found in fine art.
2.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter examines the emergence and development of the graffiti writing phenomenon by exploring various historical and technical aspects that outline what real graffiti constitutes. The origins of graffiti lie in a history that has been shaped through a need for individuals to express and voice themselves by using spray-paint. Started by TAKI 183, graffiti writers created a world for themselves in which they recognise each other and where they can gain fame within the graffiti community. However, for the rest of the population, they and their practices are anonymous. Through their spray-painting, graffiti writers create visible alter-egos for themselves and these are recognised and respected by other graffiti writers. Graffiti is also an instrument that allows self-expression and the expression of various views, thoughts and beliefs. Although in most cases the public do not have access to the full message of graffiti, graffiti is aimed at the public to attract their attention. Graffiti writers often feel marginalised and unable to have legitimate access to other modes of expression; they therefore use graffiti to express themselves.

The need for recognition and status of writers gave birth to well-organised collectives known as graffiti crews that offer and create solidarity, meaning, security, freedom and, most importantly, empowerment for its members. Graffiti is thus a powerful tool of communication and serves a wide variety of individuals. Its function is a symbolic arena for the expression of conflict, ideas, thoughts and emotions. Graffiti writers and crews are involved in battles that would gain them success, create rivals or add energy to the graffiti subculture. Within graffiti writing, the element of competition is fundamental, occurring both individual and group levels. In addition, crews are governed by codes and rules that give them structure, and also by hierarchies that govern motivation to paint, which is in turn due to the need for recognition amongst peers. Graffiti crews also signify social contacts, solidarity, meaning and a sense of belonging for those who partake in its activities. Graffiti writing is an essential tool that helps the youth to identify with a larger unit – the crew. Within such a crew, younger graffiti writers are taught a variety of spray-painting and life skills that can even be applied in mainstream culture.
Importantly, the resistance identity of graffiti offered a voice to these individuals in a society they believed had failed them. This led graffiti writers to counteract the norms and rules of mainstream society, with the result that graffiti writers established an opposition or an anti-relationship with mainstream society. This became a defining factor for the graffiti world. This break from society thus creates an identity for graffiti writers, stemming mostly from their dissatisfaction with and dislike of mainstream society. Graffiti writers are then afforded the opportunity to have their say in the public sphere.

Real graffiti was born alongside hip hop, which served disenfranchised and marginalised communities as a voice. Hip hop further sought to create awareness of social issues and to address such issues. Similar to graffiti, hip hop became an easily accessible means for the youth to interact and to express their views. Also linked to graffiti writing, hip hop created a deviant identity that retracted from mainstream culture. This street culture became an important defining characteristic of hip hop, similar to that of graffiti.

Whether regarded as an art form or not, graffiti writing holds a strong link to expressing and commenting on aspects of society. In contrast to fine arts, graffiti emerged as ‘the people’s art’; it is self-taught and emerges from the complexities of city life and the streets. A further distinguishing factor of graffiti writing is that, in contrast to art, it focuses primarily on lettering and unique styles of characters.

Real graffiti thus emerged from the need of marginalised individuals to create a platform in which they could forge identities and where they could express their dissatisfaction and views around mainstream culture. In this sense, real graffiti is tied to a group that opposes the everyday practices of mainstream culture and dwells in deviant activities by leaving a mark as well as imprint of themselves on public surfaces. Real graffiti is also associated with a sense of solidarity and belonging to a crew which serves as an important educational and social system to empower graffiti writers to make names for themselves, to understand the complexities of social groups (crews have hierarchies...
and have a competition-cooperative duality in search for respect amongst crew members and between different crews) and obtain public recognition.

In the next chapter, commercial graffiti – graffiti done for monetary remuneration – is explored and compared with real graffiti.
 CHAPTER 3: COMMERCIAL GRAFFITI

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 2, the roots of the graffiti writing phenomenon is discussed and real graffiti is described. It is argued that the roots of real graffiti are deeply anchored in self-expression and creating identity through graffiti writing. It is furthermore a subculture that is deviant from mainstream society and resists and counteracts it. However, typical of a subculture, graffiti remains part of that very same mainstream culture it seeks to criticise. In addition, real graffiti is marked by the intricate cooperative-competition dynamics amongst graffiti writers and graffiti crews. It would thus be a reductionist view to assume that graffiti is art, because only the visual stylistic aspects would then be considered.

In recent times, many graffiti writers started deviating from this vision of real graffiti, as an increasing number of graffiti writers were doing graffiti work for financial remuneration. If they receive money for their graffiti, it seems that they support the very aspect they resist and they are, in fact, honouring one of mainstream society’s defining aspects, namely, capitalism. The fear of many graffiti writers is that graffiti might lose its very nature, its resistance identity and other foundational characteristics and it risks becoming incorporated into the mainstream culture of capitalism. It is against this background that this chapter aims to explore the complexities of the commercialisation of graffiti by investigating the inevitability of the commercialisation of graffiti in a neo-liberalist regime, the process of incorporating graffiti into commercial mainstream society (the mainstreaming of a subculture) and ways in which graffiti is mainstreamed. This chapter concludes with the juxtapositioning of old school graffiti writers and the views of new school commercial graffiti writers about commercial graffiti.
3.2 COMMERCIALISATION AND A MARKET-ORIENTATED MAINSTREAM CULTURE

In this section, it is argued that the fact that the majority of the world’s countries accepted neo-liberalism as state policy largely led to the world being commercially orientated. In this section, the links between graffiti and commercial orientation are introduced.

The notion of neo-liberalism, according to Schneider (2007: 1), refers to the economic ideology which forms the constitutive basis of globalisation. Neo-liberalism is based on the philosophical grounds of proclaiming the idea of individual freedom, pursuit of happiness and self-determination, especially from an economic perspective (Schneider, 2007: 2). This economic ideology proclaims minimum state regulation and maximum individual freedom to expand economic activity and wealth (Schneider, 2007: 2). Neo-liberalism therefore emerges as a series of contemporary projects of capital accumulation that seek to reconstitute the social relations of production, such as the organisation of labour, space, state institutions, military power, governance, membership and sovereignty (Baubock & Faist, 2010: 117). Neo-liberalism allows for the creation of wealth by destroying and replacing previous relations of production, consumption and distribution, thus generating new capitalist forms of desire (Baubock & Faist, 2010: 117). The essence of neo-liberalism is that it ensures a free across border trade, which in turn accelerates globalisation.

Globalisation represents trade around the globe, especially in terms of the spread of investments, trade and production, accelerated through new communication technologies (Blossfeld, 2006: 4; Schneider, 2007: 1). Globalisation explicitly implies worldwide free trade and a global market economy (Schneider, 2007: 1). This is important for this study, as globalisation led to the world becoming more market-orientated as capitalism became the dominant economic form around the globe. This spread of capitalism was due to most of the strong economic countries – first the UK, then the US, the Commonwealth states and many other countries – adopting neo-liberal state policies that accelerated free trade and led to the largest part of the world
becoming market-orientated and appreciating commercial orientation. Commercial orientation means that the production, manufacturing, packaging, marketing and distribution of a product embody some aspect of innovation to support profit-making (Rogers, 2003: 167).

Nowadays, the mainstream culture of most industrial societies is undergirded by a neo-liberalist market-orientated ideology. This means that the consumption of products marks mainstream society. To satisfy the constant need for new innovative products, mainstream society is constantly in search of new fads and styles. In Chapter 2, it was argued that subcultures position themselves deliberately as deviating from a mainstream culture and in the case of a market-orientated mainstream society it would mean opposing capitalist expansion.

Members of subcultures deliberately reject mainstream culture and are sometimes even more acutely conscious of mainstream culture than people subscribing to the mainstream culture (Gabler, 2010: 33). Importantly, this relationship may be understood as a vertical relation posited between a subordinated group and the dominant group. It has also been described as underground versus overground, or authentic and innovative in contrast to what has been called the 'parasitic mainstream' in the graffiti fraternity (Marchart, 2003: 86).

When searching for new styles or visual stylistic elements to exploit commercially, it often happens that visual elements or the image associated with a subordinate group or a subculture are incorporated into mainstream culture because the profit market thrives on new innovations and fads. This process is currently visible with graffiti, as is explained below.

### 3.3 THE COMMERCIALISATION AND MAINSTREAMING OF THE GRAFFITI SUBCULTURE

The mainstreaming of subcultures can be viewed as a process where the mainstream or dominant culture incorporates certain subcultural elements and adapts those to suit
the taste of mainstream audiences. This section introduces three main ideas on the mainstreaming of subcultures described by Issitt, Fiske and Hebdige.

One view regarding the mainstreaming of subcultures emerges from Issitt. This view explores the nature of subcultures and their deviant characteristics in relation to the mainstream culture. As discussed earlier, a subculture may be viewed as the product of a group of individuals that forms an alternative set of norms and values to that of mainstream society (Issitt, 2011: xiii). The distinguishing factor of subcultures is that members see themselves as different to or separate from mainstream culture in definitive ways with members all sharing this difference (Issitt, 2011:xiv). Most importantly, subcultures experience meaning and significance only insofar as there remains a mainstream for them to be different from, because subcultures form whenever a group becomes sufficiently distinct or cohesive to be different to mainstream culture (Issitt, 2011: xiv). Members of subcultures choose to become part of the subcultural group on the basis of rejecting aspects of mainstream society (Issitt, 2011: xiv). Against this background, Issitt makes a valuable contribution towards understanding the commercialisation and mainstreaming of subculture. In the course of natural evolution, mainstream society may come to embrace the ideologies, values and aesthetics of subcultural groups, partially because subcultures serve as sources of innovation of mainstream culture (Issitt, 2011: xiv). In this case, when subcultures reach a certain level of popularity, these values, beliefs and aesthetics become absorbed into the mainstream, at times ceasing to be different or shocking as originally viewed, as they become assimilated in mainstream culture (Gabler, 2010: 33; Issitt, 2011: xiv). It is in this way that the subculture fulfils the role of being a source of innovation and changing the dominant culture (Forman & Neal, 2004: 579; Issitt, 2011: xiv).

A second view regarding the mainstreaming of a subculture is found in Dick Hebdige’s benchmark study of the 1970s youth culture, where style was symbolically used to resist the dictates of mainstream norms as subversive meanings and other elements of the subcultural style were infused into ordinary choices and behaviour (Bryant, 2011: 236). This means that subcultures were understood primarily in terms of style or patterns of consumption that created identity; style was seen as merely a matter of image, clothing,
hair, jewellery, demeanour or speech. With regard to deviant subcultures, Hebdige felt that certain subcultures represented an opposition towards society through anarchy and disorder, but most importantly, he argued that subcultures should never be underestimated with regard to their signifying power (Hebdige, 1979: 90). At first, the emergence of a subculture along with its stylistic innovations is invariably accompanied by a wave of hysteria within society which is typically ambivalent with the style of the subculture – fluctuating between dread and fascination, outrage and amusement (Hebdige, 1979: 92-93). Such stylistic elements are at first viewed as forbidden content or forbidden forms, as they represent characteristics that society does not deem fit; for example, disobedience or offensive manners of dress and behavioural codes (Hebdige, 1979: 91-92). Furthermore, by incorporating stylistic elements of a subculture in innovative ways, such innovations attract most of the attention. Subsequently, deviant or anti-social acts are discovered by members of society, and the media use these to explain the subculture’s original misbehaviour (Hebdige, 1979: 93).

The value of Hebdige’s idea for this study is that Hebdige tends to point to the slow incorporation of the deviant subcultural style into mainstream culture. Hebdige explains that young people who choose to inhabit a spectacular youth culture are represented in the media in a process known as ‘recuperation’, in which subcultural signs such as dress and music are converted into mass-produced objects (Hebdige, 1979:94). This process of ‘recuperation’ selects certain elements of deviant subcultures, such as graffiti and its rebellious nature, and portrays these positives through the media, after which it becomes desirable and is used for mass consumption of merchandise and other commodities. This characteristic is based on the relationship between the subculture and the various industries which service and exploit its notoriously ambiguous nature (Hebdige, 1979: 94). After all, subcultures are concerned first and foremost with consumption and communicating through commodities, even if the meanings attached to those commodities are purposefully distorted or overthrown (Hebdige, 1979: 94-95).

Once these stylistic elements signifying the original subculture have been translated into commodities and made generally available, they are once more removed from their subcultural contexts by small entrepreneurs and big fashion interests that produce them
on a large scale (Hebdige, 1979: 96). These innovations then become codified, more comprehensible and are at once rendered public property and are sold as profitable merchandise (Hebdige, 1979: 96). Ultimately, youth cultural styles may begin by issuing certain symbolic challenges, but they must inevitably end by establishing new sets of conventions by creating new commodities and industries or rejuvenating old ones (Hebdige, 1979: 96). Each new subculture therefore establishes new trends and generates new looks and sounds which feed back into the appropriate industries (Hebdige, 1979: 95). This idea of Hebdige does not rule out Issitt’s idea of the subculture providing mainstream society with innovation – providing non-stagnation as it renews the mainstream culture – but explains how this process takes place.

A third view regarding mainstreaming of subcultures is expressed by Fiske whose idea is that consumption is neither a passive nor purely an individual process; in fact, consumption remains part of mainstream society and hence popular culture (Fiske in Gabriel & Lang, 2006: 140). In this case, all that mainstream culture can do is produce a repertoire of texts or cultural resources for the general public to use and reject in an ongoing process of producing popular culture (Fiske in Gabriel & Lang, 2006: 140). Meanings and pleasures are therefore not conjured up by the merchandisers of culture, the trend-setters and other ‘hirelings of capitalism’, nor do they reside in texts such as TV programmes, shopping malls, designer clothes or advertisements; instead, meanings and pleasures emerge from the consumer’s active engagements with such texts or stylistic elements and the frequent attempts to undermine and subvert them (Fiske in Gabriel & Lang, 2006: 140). Essentially, all popular culture is a process of struggle over the meanings of social experience, of one’s personhood and its relations to social order and the texts and commodities of that order (Fiske in Gabriel & Lang, 2006: 140). In other words, Fiske outlines that mainstream culture creates the physical commodities that emerge in the process of mainstreaming of subcultures, but the meaning attached to these is essentially created through popular culture and consumers.

These three views of Issit, Hebdige and Fiske regarding the mainstreaming of subcultures outlined above illustrate how stylistic elements of subcultures are
incorporated and translated into mainstream culture and, in turn, people subscribing to mainstream culture subscribe new meanings to it. In this way, the incorporation of subcultural stylistic elements serves as new innovation for mainstream society’s quest to consume newness. The original meanings attached to subcultures, such as being shocking or offensive to the norms of larger society, become attractive and are quickly adapted and produced as mass-produced commodities by mainstream culture.

The absorption of such qualities into the mainstream culture may serve as a threat to such subculture – they essentially risk losing their original meaning through such a process of large scale production. Importantly, during this process, subcultural meanings are essentially changed and adapted by mass producers into more marketable, less radical meanings. The consumption habits of individuals are manipulated by the mass culture industries to transform the production of meaning by subcultures into a managed market purchase (Blair, 2004: 579).

The original style becomes ‘watered down’ to be more palatable (Bergmann, 2008: 41). This is done through the media and other outlets which sell subcultural style to the general population. They deflate the original subculture or movement in a way that robs its initial resistance and symbolic power (Harmon, 2011: 1; Snyder, 2009: 168). Winge (2012: 59) describes this process as a ‘commodity fetish’, which may lead to subcultures eventually becoming alienated from their origins, resources, productions and meanings. During this process of mainstreaming the stylistic elements of a subculture, it may become popular and fashionable and lose its subcultural primary value (Kobin & Allaste, 2009: 89). The dominant or mainstream culture will only incorporate dimensions of a subculture into the mainstream if the dominant groups can gain direct, tangible benefits and if the subculture becomes part of the mainstream culture (Hill & Ramsaran, 2009: 25). In most societies, there will always be groups that desire to distinguish themselves from mainstream society and produce meanings for cultural objects that are independent of the logic of exchange value and dominant cultural sensibilities. This means that mainstream society will have a constant supply of subcultural elements to incorporate and these will serve as new marketable innovations.
The media plays a noteworthy role in the commodification and consumption of subcultures by broadcasting images in media; for example, a news bulletin that visually communicates a subculture’s identity to the dominant culture is usually a consumable object (Winge, 2012: 58). The media frequently identifies subcultural groups to which it assigns sensational and often controversial names and labels, and it is precisely these elements which subsequently become the aspects that mainstream society incorporates as innovations (Winge, 2012: 58). Youth subcultures are important examples, endlessly reinventing themselves, partly in response to corporate culture’s commodification of its more commercially exploitable aspects, which is often softened and anaesthetised and also transformed and diffused (Corbett, 2003: 152, Storry & Childs, 2002: 167). Therefore, as explained earlier, subcultural symbols can be seen by mainstream society as new and innovatory subcultural symbols that become translated into commodities and made generally available to the rest of the public (Brake, 1985: 72). In time, these become ideologically and commercially incorporated into mainstream society – often seen as less than authentic by the subcultures, which relocate old symbols and signs or invent new ones (Brake, 1985: 72). Subcultures therefore emerge as the new times and places occupied by people, new sources of identity and thus the new signifier of difference (Jenks, 2005: 145). In many cases, the subcultural member essentially becomes the consumer in the consumption experience, as consumers – whether mainstream or subcultural – make purchases based on shared subcultural and social practices and institutions (Winge, 2012: 58). As part of the subculture becoming popularised, both the mainstream and subcultural consumers consume these subcultural products as ways of expression and identity negotiation (Winge, 2012: 58). As a result, the subculture, a form of visual and material culture, exists as a consumable object and plays a key role in the negotiation and construction of identities (Winge, 2012: 58). Deviant subcultural signifiers come to be exploited for profit and lose their subcultural appeal once they become well-known by the mainstream (Klein, 2011: 23).

Hebdige’s observations regarding the process of incorporation and the tension between mainstream society and its commercial exploitation and a subculture with its creative elements is quite relevant to graffiti writing. Hip hop has always been articulated via
commodities and engaged in the revision of meanings attached to these (Rose, 1994: 41). The various elements of hip hop, such as graffiti, rap and break-dancing, were fundamentally transformed as they moved into new relations with dominant cultural institutions and as hip hop signs and meanings are converted and behaviours are relabelled by dominant institutions (Rose, 1994: 41).

However, in recent times, mainstream producers have commodified and in some cases exploited hip hop, as elements of this subculture – such as rap music and graffiti – have some brief mainstream popularity primarily because its contemporary youth audiences like its rebellious social commentary (Browne, 2005: 351; Waclawek, 2011: 57-58). The so-called ‘black style’ of hip hop has contributed to the continued blackening of mainstream popular culture, as the contexts for the creation of hip hop were never fully outside or in opposition to commodities, but rather involved struggles over public spaces and access to commodified materials, equipment and products (Rose, 2005: 411). Ironically, hip hop has used graffiti as a way of exploiting the art form to sell numerous hip hop products; graffiti continues to be associated with hip hop as one-package entity (Waclawek, 2011: 57-58). Within the graffiti subculture, there seems to be a great deal of posturing concerning the preservation of hip hop ideals, with some graffiti writers pointing out that the culture has become too easy to discover as they want to maintain hip hop as a street culture where beginners have to learn about the tools, techniques and styles in the streets (Rahn, 2002: 9). In many cases, individuals within the hip hop subculture, and especially those deeply rooted in rap music who refer to themselves as purists, will hold hip hop artists accountable if they drift too far from their origins and become swept into the flood of money that comes from mainstream success (Browne, 2005: 352).

Like other aspects of the hip hop culture, graffiti was quickly discovered by the mainstream establishment which became interested not only in its visual representation, but also saw it as a commodified version of the ghetto experience: 'It is not talent but defiance that is being sold' (Kriegel in Milnor, 2005: 269). This defiance, which is luring for mainstream society with regard to the graffiti movement, is discussed next.
The graffiti subculture has built a stylistic resistance towards commercialisation and mainstream interests, emerging as a force that stands in opposition to mainstream society. Like any marginal group, graffiti writers are distinguished by a resistance to the norm of social consciousness and social order, built to resist complete assimilation through the trivialising of commercialisation and counter-publicity (Rahn, 2002: 161; Warner, 1992: 397). Within a commercial world, graffiti is increasingly used in advertisements and it is only natural that a graffiti writer will simply mix his or her name into the fray as a logical extension of the dominant commercial ideology (Waclawek, 2011: 48). Interestingly, this commercial practice has parallels with the roots of graffiti, where a graffiti writer would seek to be seen by tagging by spraying his or her name on public surfaces to literally mark his or her territory across the city (Gottlieb, 2008: 36). However, that is where the similarity between advertisements and graffiti ends. Whereas written messages and images of advertisements, which are arguably free and open to everyone, are permitted to cover up public spaces simply because somebody has the power and capital to buy up public space, graffiti writers argue that graffiti is punished as unauthorised vandalism (Rosenthal, 2011: 231). Graffiti can thus be seen as a parody for the mass media, as it appears almost everywhere and aspires to the placeless publicity of mass print and broadcasting (Warner, 1992: 398).

In summary, the mainstreaming of a subculture takes place in various ways, of which one of the most significant is when one or more of its characteristics are incorporated into mainstream culture. As in the case of graffiti, this could be when its visual style is used for commercial purposes. The consumption of subcultural innovations is initiated through the media and other forms of public interest which adapt and even alter subcultural meanings. Subcultures are therefore new arenas for identity, innovation and, importantly, trends that create interest, difference and profit. This is the case for the hip hop culture as well as the graffiti subculture which have been transformed due to increased popularity.

This often holds far-reaching implications for the subculture, as its ability to undermine and oppose mainstream society is impaired. Once a subculture loses its opposition or resistance identity, it has little reason to exist. However, mainstream culture often looks
for renewal in new fads and fashions; the usage of subcultural stylistic elements may only be temporary as the lure of the difference (mystique, forbidden) may become commonplace as mainstream culture looks for yet new sources of innovation. This will be discussed in the next section that explores the ways in which graffiti is mainstreamed and commercially used.

3.4 WAYS IN WHICH GRAFFITI IS MAINSTREAMED AND COMMERCIALLY USED

Graffiti intersects mainstream culture in countless ways, as its evolution from a street phenomenon to cultural artefact has much to do with its connection to hip hop culture, the increased popularity of street style and the incorporation of stylistic elements into mainstream society (Gottlieb, 2008: 6; Harmon, 2011: 1).

As was explained in the previous section, marketers recognise the graffiti subculture as a source of innovative ideas that could be used to enhance profit and for this reason elements of graffiti became adopted into mainstream culture (Folsom & Boulware, 2004: 86). This means that graffiti and its style come to signify ‘urban coolness’ through attaching its ‘street’ aesthetic to products (Iveson, 2007: 133; Snyder, 2009: 44). This generally appeals to the youth and other markets (Iveson, 2007: 133; Waclawek, 2011: 171).

Many graffiti writers, especially those who have been involved in graffiti for some time, have realised that graffiti serves as a means to produce an income. At some point in a graffiti writer’s life, financial concerns and a mainstream career may start to overshadow its subcultural counterpart (MacDonald, 2001: 87). The reasons for individual graffiti writers creating graffiti varies widely; younger graffiti writers often retain their driving motivation as a means of achieving fame and admiration from peers while older and established or experienced graffiti writers will turn their vision and talent towards creating a career (Snyder, 2009: 44; Walsh, 1996: 11). This is the case for many graffiti writers who have paid their dues on the street and turn their youthful graffiti success into adult careers for large corporations and institutions (Phillips, 1999: 327; Snyder, 2009:44).
In this sense, graffiti has provided graffiti writers with the necessary skills and knowledge to earn a living and opened many new opportunities which move from the streets into commercial avenues.

### 3.4.1 Graffiti in art galleries

So far, in this chapter it is argued that graffiti seems to succumb to the pressures of an increasingly capitalistic world. Various ways of mainstreaming and commercialising graffiti are investigated.

Graffiti's first introduction into the mainstream world came in the form of art gallery work. At the time, certain elements of graffiti were illegal. Ironically, graffiti was partially adopted by mainstream culture and its audiences as a popular phenomenon when galleries started to exhibit it as a subcultural art form (Schiffrin, De Fina, & Nylund, 2010: 136). This led to graffiti being marketed and disseminated through canvas work to become an international movement from the 1980s onwards, partly through its connection with hip hop (Schiffrin, De Fina, & Nylund, 2010: 136; Waclawek, 2011: 56).

Graffiti was subsequently transcribed from walls to canvasses and dislocated from dilapidated inner-city neighbourhoods into glittering art galleries and museums (Hung, 2002: 206). This marked a very important step that sparked increased interest in its style and more importantly in its subculture. The art world’s embrace of graffiti allowed graffiti writers to join the established art scene and respond to the influences of dealers, collectors, critics and other artists (Chalfant & Prigoff, 2003: 8; Snyder, 2009: 168).

Graffiti writers were also able to discover other motives to produce their art and evolve as artists; their work became in some ways more complex and subtle and at the same time more appealing to collectors in the fast-moving art world (Chalfant & Prigoff, 2003: 8). Within a short period of time, graffiti writing was celebrated within the art world and if it had not been for these galleries, the 'big players’ would not have co-opted the movement (Waclawek, 2011: 60-61). Consequently, the graffiti world’s cautious attitude towards art exhibitions in decades to come would lead to numerous and progressive exhibitions in art galleries; even art gallery ‘shows' that challenged traditional modes of
display as they involved graffiti writers as curators of graffiti (Waclawek, 2011: 61-62; 174).

In assimilating graffiti into the commodity-based art world market (Harmon, 2011: 1) this trend saw attempts made by the New York arts community to decriminalise graffiti by framing it as art. In the process, it comprised efforts that involved graffiti writers, art gallery curators and owners of walls where graffiti traditionally appeared, as well as high-end art dealers, to validate graffiti writing as an art form (Waclawek, 2011: 58). This new art trend was one of the leading instances that led to the commercialisation of graffiti (Waclawek, 2011: 58). Commercial art galleries caught onto the ‘downtown trend’ and attempted to market graffiti as a new art movement, completely ignoring its history and imposing limitations on the graffiti writers’ expressions (Waclawek, 2011: 60-61). These include being associated with the inner city and being understood as wild, lawless and incompatible with the rarefied confines of commercial galleries (Milnor, 2005: 269). Even though graffiti was originally seen as ‘black, poor, angry and regarded as primitive’, it was experienced in art galleries as ‘white, wealthy, sophisticated and civilised’ (Milnor, 2005: 269). In other words, where the one was raw and amoral in nature, galleries were viewed as pure and untainted (Milnor, 2005: 269). In this way, the graffiti art movement came to be understood within a highly gendered dichotomy of place, one opposing the masculine public spaces of the urban jungle against the civilised, pure, and feminine interiors of the professional art world (Milnor, 2005: 269). Graffiti was therefore argued to become acceptable at the time if viewed within the ‘art context’ (Schiffrin, De Fina & Nylund, 2010: 136).

In terms of absorbing graffiti into the art world, graffiti writers were assured economic value for their art which could be bought, compared to graffiti in the streets which was associated with devaluing property – the ordination of graffiti as art consciously subverted the subversive (Creswell, 1996: 55). Graffiti therefore became a canvassed commodity which responded to the demand of commercial galleries, offering writers the opportunity to meet, collaborate, realise and experiment their visual tradition and the potential of their work (Waclawek, 2011: 59). The graffiti work displayed in galleries during this period sought to communicate the liveliness of the escalating art movement,
importantly providing writers with the chance to explore their practices in legal settings (Waclawek, 2011: 60-61). Such legal spaces were vital for writers viewing themselves as artists, as gallery owners made graffiti writers comfortable with the idea of showcasing their work in more formal and permanent ways which connected the streets with the art world (Waclawek, 2011: 59). Practitioners of this graffiti style therefore plunged into the downtown New York art world, showcasing their talents in numerous large public exhibitions, nightclubs and spontaneous venues and executing collaborative street murals (Moore & Cornwell, 2002: 339). However, as graffiti raised new possibilities for both public art and painting by flourishing in galleries, graffiti as a commodity within the painting market was relatively short-lived (Moore & Cornwell, 2002: 339).

The entrapment of graffiti in the art gallery was a mirror image of the graffiti writers’ efforts to break out of the specialised art space, as the creativity which was once part of everyday life became reduced to ‘proper places’ through galleries serving as sites of legitimate creativity (Creswell, 1996: 55). The move of graffiti from its original urban locations to the walls of galleries and museums provoked endless controversy and raised the question whether such ‘vandalism’ could be considered art if produced legally (Philips, 2011: 367). Importantly, Creswell (1996: 55) points out that this displacement of graffiti from everyday spaces into a ‘specialised’ art space tells us something about the power of place in relation to ideological values. Importantly, seeking to insert graffiti into a ‘proper place’ ultimately robs it of its denaturalising powers and sense of dynamism (Creswell, 1996: 55; Waclawek (2011: 174). This was essentially the case for many graffiti writers who enjoyed greater popularity in the mainstream art world during the mid-1980s (Delgado, 2003: 81). By having space in art galleries, graffiti writers were able to gain financial compensation and employment opportunities in the commercial art business by designing art work and finding financial backing for their communities (Delgado, 2003: 81). As discussed earlier, the trend of purchasing urban-inspired art was temporary and eventually dwindled, leaving many graffiti writers with few commercial outlets for their talents (Delgado, 2003: 81).
The next phase of ‘graffiti-as-art’ that was even more remote from the streets, is encapsulated in the term ‘post-graffiti’, signifying art attention to legal canvassed work as just another painting style without analysis of its subcultural affiliations and status – graffiti displayed on canvas essentially lost the sense of movement, immediacy and energy it held in the public realm (Waclawek, 2011: 60). Importantly, Creswell (1996: 56) believes this removal of legitimate creativity from everyday life is connected to the rise of capitalism. Many graffiti writers argue that graffiti displayed on canvas is no longer graffiti – both literally and symbolically – as writing one’s name as the focal point of a canvassed artwork loses all meaning (Waclawek, 2011: 60). In other words, such pieces were no longer a transformation of the urban environment or a rebellious addition to the cultural landscape, as a writer’s name on canvas simply does not hold the same socio-cultural, personal or political weight which changes the purpose and central theme of graffiti writing (Waclawek, 2011: 60). Creswell (1996: 55) argues that ‘it is unnatural after all, for art to be in galleries; as if it is not in a gallery it is not art’. This is further expanded through the view that graffiti’s move into galleries ultimately stripped it of its meaning.

This argument is essentially based on the idea that the very ‘rawness’ that first attracted New York’s high art scene to graffiti was not transferable to a gallery context (Waclawek, 2011: 60).

Generally speaking, once graffiti writers exhibited in commercial galleries, their work began to lose resemblance on white gallery walls – part of the commodity market as its social context which gave it meaning was ripped from it (Crane, 1987: 79; Moore & Cornwell, 2002: 340). Graffiti-inspired works featured in major exhibitions and lavish catalogues were appreciated as a distinct art style. However, this style alluded to the surface images of graffiti but neglected its original bearers, context and messages (Hung, 2002: 206). The term ‘graffiti art’ also allowed for superficial groupings of many different styles into one category; what was labelled graffiti art in the 1980s was not real graffiti writing due to the difference between street and canvas graffiti (Waclawek, 2011: 60). In the case of the latter, the writer’s name is the central object and that undermines the purpose of real graffiti (Waclawek, 2011: 60). This furthermore stripped graffiti’s
most important characteristics which were establishing personal identity, winning respect and admiration and succeeding in the eyes of the world (Gottlieb, 2008: 36). On the street, the graffiti writer’s name is a form of self-affirmation which identifies them in the graffiti scene, whereas in galleries this name no longer functions as communication with a network of initiates, but rather represents a mysterious culture to a collection of outsiders (Waclawek, 2011: 60). The lack of commercial success and institutional ratification obscured the historical importance of graffiti as, at the moment of its ascendance, graffiti writing ‘let the world back into art, and changed our understandings and expectations of public art, reinstating art’s necessary public character’ (Moore & Cornwell, 2002: 339-340).

In summary, it can be said that the movement of graffiti into galleries was an important phase in the lifespan of graffiti, as this created and increased awareness and interest in the lives of many writers. Graffiti was seen as a new avenue for people outside the subculture to have some contact with the subculture in an attempt to understand it. However, the attempt made by many art gallery owners to confine this new art form into the gallery system failed, as the true nature of the art form ceased to exist when confined. Essentially, the gallery movement failed to capture the true meaning of the original form of graffiti (‘real’ graffiti) as the art gallery is removed from the streets that stand outside the money market. Real graffiti writers hold the view that graffiti and its deviant roots cannot be tamed and adapted to suit the gallery system. They feel that this makes graffiti unique when compared to other art forms. Real graffiti writers believe that the true essence of graffiti is that it is being created by the youth to serve the youth and in the process it serves a variety of needs that cannot be replicated in art galleries. However, the fact remains that ‘gallery graffiti’ represents a phase in the life span of graffiti.

More recently, graffiti has been mainstreamed through various forms of small-scale commercial opportunities.
3.4.2 Other forms of small-scale commercial graffiti

Among these new avenues, graffiti has been extended into the advertising world through graffiti style, text and imagery that adorns the packaging and advertising of various commodities (Iveson, 2007: 133). Graffiti techniques and styles are used in a variety of visual forms that pertain to the advertising of music albums and record label companies, specific shops signage, as well as large food and drink providers (Farris, 2009: 59; Iveson, 2007: 133). Today, graffiti serves as an important tool for businesses as well as advertising and marketing campaigns on a local, national and global scale (Iveson, 2007: 133; Snyder, 2009: 44,167; Waclawek, 2011: 171; Walsh, 1996: 11).

Linked to advertising and marketing, graffiti writers have pursued the avenue of design through becoming graphic designers (Snyder, 2009: 44,167; Waclawek, 2011: 171; Walsh, 1996: 11). According to Farris (2009: 59) this adoption and manipulation of the graffiti style into mass-marketing has co-existed with the movement of fine art galleries that declared graffiti as a form of art. In this case, art critics, along with some graffiti writers, argued that graphic designers and others who used graffiti-like styles or subculture in advertising were essentially damaging the claims of graffiti art’s stake in the fine art environment (Farris, 2009: 59). Modern commercial design has followed the framework of the graffiti subculture, as many new business designers approach graffiti in search of inspiration from its ‘weird’ and ‘wild’ nature (Wang, Zhao & Zhong, 2011: 921). Many graffiti writers now experiment with different technologies and design different consumer products, often launching their own companies and collaborating with numerous brands to infuse merchandise with their creations (Waclawek, 2011: 170).

The clothing and fashion industry has also emerged as a new and exciting avenue for graffiti writers to explore by taking their ideas and skills and applying them to the creation of colourful and fashionable clothing and shoe designs (Farris, 2009: 59; Iveson, 2007: 133; Philips, 2011: 367; Snyder, 2009: 44; Walsh, 1996: 11). This, in turn, has witnessed graffiti becoming visible in fashion magazines, clothing advertisements and on fashion catwalks (Wang, Zhao & Zhong, 2011: 924). Graffiti writers explore
these new prominent designer positions within fashion companies to add their creative and interesting aspects, as graffiti carries a strong fashion sense and important meaning in aspects such as innovation and change (Wang, Zhao & Zhong, 2011: 921-922).

Closely linked to the fashion industry, graffiti has also combined with other subcultural forms such as tattooing. This offers graffiti writers the opportunity to earn a living as tattoo illustrators and artists which is regarded by many as a fashionable trend (Philips, 2011: 367; Snyder, 2009: 44,167; Waclawek, 2011: 171; Walsh, 1996: 11).

Another lucrative market for graffiti writers is the sale of commercial aerosol paint, ink markers and other ‘tools of the trade’ which are specifically designed and marketed with graffiti writers in mind (Iveson, 2007: 133). This has also given rise to a great number of graffiti writers exploring new channels through the creation of commercial products for a variety of graffiti brands or founding their own graffiti companies and galleries (Snyder, 2009: 44,167; Waclawek, 2011: 169; Walsh, 1996: 11).

The marriage between graffiti and business has also given rise to a further set of opportunities for graffiti writers in other fields that allow for creativity and skill. Other fields may include journalism, photography and magazine publishing or editing (Iveson, 2007: 133; Snyder, 2009: 44,167; Waclawek, 2011: 171; Walsh, 1996: 11). Some graffiti writers will participate in smaller opportunities, often creating advertising murals for hire or to be used in film backdrops (Snyder, 2009: 44,167; Waclawek, 2011: 171; Walsh, 1996: 11). Graffiti has now become an integral part of the everyday visual world, not only on urban walls and spaces, but in a variety of industries including fashion, publicity, films, internet and the art world (Pereira, 2005: 6).

Another way in which graffiti makes its mark on the commercial world is by means of commissioned large-scale graffiti work.

3.4.3 Commissioned large-scale graffiti work

Commissioned graffiti is created when requested or permission is granted by building owners to paint a surface (Snyder, 2009: 97-98). Commission work, often called
productions, is usually a collaborative effort of writers that allows them to showcase their talents (Snyder, 2009: 98). In this case, legal or commissioned projects re-inscribe a respect for private property relations, as a consequent control is exercised by owners over the appearance of public spaces in which they are located (Iveson, 2007: 135). Iveson (2007: 135) suggests that to negotiate for a legal graffiti opportunity is to bring mainstream society firmly into the equation. It also involves accepting that private owners have the right to determine the ‘face’ their premises present to the public and in this sense it helps to constitute public space itself (Iveson, 2007: 135).

In summary, graffiti is used in various commercial ways, such as art, small-scale commercial pieces – namely, on merchandise, in advertising, fashion, tattoos, aerosol paints, ink markers and other ‘tools of the trade’ – is often seen in magazines and other photographic outlets and in larger graffiti work, such as productions, pieces and murals. Most critique of commercial graffiti comes from old school (maintaining graffiti traditions) graffiti writers that are close to the roots of graffiti. They claim that the original form of graffiti represents real graffiti. More pragmatic graffiti writers are new school (new generations of graffiti writers) as they have a more nuanced approach to commercial graffiti work.

3.5 OLD SCHOOL vs. NEW SCHOOL GRAFFITI WRITERS’ VIEWS ON THE COMMERCIALISATION OF GRAFFITI

The commercial opportunities and validation of graffiti writers by mainstream society have not been criticised by all within the graffiti fraternity. Old school and new school graffiti writers do not always share the same sentiments.

Old school graffiti writers want to ‘keep it real’, whilst new school graffiti writers embrace commercial opportunities.

This clash of opinion plays out in graffiti by following the rhythms of the graffiti subculture individuals, who are essentially perceived as being obsessed with being interviewed and photographed or claim to speak for the graffiti community at large, but
they will eventually be dissed by other graffiti writers (Rahn, 2002: 20). Another relevant unwritten code of graffiti is that traditionally graffiti writers who are seen as focused and committed to their work and acquire skills while downplaying their fame are held in the highest esteem (Rahn, 2002: 20), because they are ‘keeping it real’. They are being true to the goal of being famous within the hip hop culture and graffiti subculture and not necessarily outside of it (Rahn, 2002: 20).

These unwritten ethical codes of graffiti are understood by old school graffiti writers to mean that graffiti should maintain the traditions that were developed during the early years of graffiti, and that these should keep on being linked to graffiti as a street culture (Rahn, 2002: 20). Old schoolers also maintain that graffiti could be bastardised by commercialisation and popularisation (Pearlman, 2003: 101) and any graffiti writer who appears to have sold out is snubbed (Rahn, 2002: 9). Therefore, for graffiti writers to be involved in commission work and take part in media attention may, at times, play a negative role in their graffiti careers – albeit only in the eyes of most of their fellow graffiti writers.

In contrast of the views of real graffiti writers, new school graffiti writers find this a restrictive view that disregards innovation (Rahn, 2002: 20). Progressive graffiti writers embrace the new commercial opportunities, even though they often have to adapt their style to suit the new commercial environment (Moore & Cornwell, 2002: 340). In fact, they feel that a graffiti writer must be willing to compromise some amount of artistic integrity in order to please the uneducated public (Snyder, 2009: 167). Most graffiti writers seem to want to earn a living by utilising their skills, but this may be at the expense of also their independence and the respect of their peers (Rahn, 2002: 161). This compromise is, of course, criticised by old schoolers - they feel that one should not be forced to change styles by the lure of success (Moore & Cornwell, 2002: 340). By implication, taking commercial opportunities means that some graffiti writers become assimilated into the commercial world, while real graffiti writers choose to remain detached from it, functioning more like members of a resistant subculture through forming collectives, while remaining separate from the larger graffiti environment and distrustful of commercial success (Crane, 1987: 79). The appropriation of the graffiti
subculture is unstoppable and like all forms of creative expression, once it has been utilised to the fullest extent it will be cast aside by the next generation of graffiti writers and something new will be created (Harmon, 2011: 2).

3.6 CONCLUSION

For heuristic reasons, the literature identified in Chapters 2 and 3 has juxtaposed real graffiti and commercial graffiti.

In Chapter 2, it is argued that real graffiti is a form of communication which was created by the youth to give prominence to their ideas and views through visual statements. Real graffiti allowed individuals to have their say in a public manner that was created amongst those who shared its technique and passion. In this sense, graffiti had intricately united individuals and communities that understood how the graffiti form of expression could serve as an important tool for communication. Graffiti allowed individuals to be heard and it served as a platform for many to put forward their views regarding social, political, and economic issues of the time.

Real graffiti writers form tight bonds amongst members of a crew, compete with rival crews and graffiti writers and create a name for themselves. The ultimate goal of graffiti is to gain fame, recognition and admiration of fellow graffiti writers. This serves as the driving force behind graffiti writers to expand their creativity and their geographic area. Real graffiti came to represent the youth of the time as a means of being noticed while participating in a secret society that was not really understood by the general public. The cooperative-competitive nature of real graffiti witnessed graffiti writers not only working together, but also competing against one another within their crews to ultimately gain fame within the community. Real graffiti was essentially established through a hierarchical system, which witnessed toys being recruited by kings into crews to establish their names and recognition. Furthermore, the nature and essence of graffiti remained alive and symbolic within its context of the streets, and this was essentially the factor that made it distinct and not recognised within the art world.
In Chapter 3, it is indicated that various aspects associated with the graffiti subculture are used to innovate mainstream culture in an effort by mainstream capitalist institutions to seek innovative ideas to enhance profit and to market goods. In this case, the mainstreaming of subcultural elements, such as graffiti’s visual style, serves to satisfy the public’s constant yearning for something new. When elements of a subculture are incorporated into mainstream culture, these are transformed into a variety of commodities and images which are created for the consumption of larger populations. Usually, the meaning contained within subcultural elements is softened from its original meaning (from real deviant graffiti to mimicking the stylistic elements of graffiti) during the process of incorporation to suit the needs of this wider audience. This transformation is a process of assimilation, which in many cases is viewed as a threat to the essence of subcultures and their original meanings. In this sense, the meaning found within real graffiti that was only shared by a small population of graffiti writers has been exploited since becoming a public interest and a means of advertising, making real graffiti on urban surfaces seem less powerful.

The attractiveness of the image signified by the visual elements of the graffiti subculture lies in its image of being deviant from mainstream society. The meanings of these elements are enhanced to become enticing, exciting and creative within the context of mainstream society. Interestingly, these are often the aspects that have been shunned by larger society and since they are the exact aspects so valued and referential to the members of subcultures, when they are incorporated into mainstream society, it may cause the subculture to lose its appeal.

In contemporary society, an increasing number of graffiti writers produce graffiti for profit, even though the true essence of graffiti opposes commercial work; it is, however, a prime characteristic of mainstream society.

One avenue of commercialisation of graffiti occurs with its introduction into the art world through galleries. The trend started when gallery owners in New York tried to incorporate graffiti within the confines of the art world. This was viewed as a very positive step at the time, gaining much interest and credit for graffiti writers. The new
and aspiring art form quickly gained popularity and gallery shows grew in size due to the mainstream public’s enticement to graffiti. However, this kind of commercialisation of graffiti was ridiculed by many, as the graffiti portrayed within these galleries was argued to have lost its original meaning. Gallery owners essentially failed to capture the true nature of graffiti which can only be understood within its true context: the streets. Graffiti as an art form thrives in the urban landscape – a canvas which is essential to its livelihood – instead of in money-driven galleries that take away what graffiti survives on: the freedom of expression. Many graffiti writers gained short-lived popularity. The debate over this kind of commercialisation spread and many writers were criticised for their move into the money world.

The spread and evolution of graffiti has also led to its popularity in more new and growing avenues. This, in turn, has created the opportunity for many graffiti writers to pursue various interesting careers – such as advertising – for a variety of commodities made available to the public which make use of graffiti through its attractive and colourful imaging. The various creative avenues created through graffiti have seen graffiti writers exploring its images through graphic design and different technologies. The fashion and clothing industries have also emerged as important avenues for graffiti writers to explore, applying their knowledge and skills to a variety of new mediums and innovations. Besides these avenues, graffiti writers have also concentrated on journalism, photography and have expanded to publishing and editing as a range of graffiti and art-related content used in magazines and books. Graffiti writing has expanded into a variety of fields and avenues, allowing graffiti writers various commercial opportunities.

The most common form of commercial graffiti may also be regarded as commissioned work, usually incorporating visual characteristics that are most appealing to mainstream society. In this case, commissioned graffiti work is a means for graffiti writers to create colourful and large murals under legal and often supervised circumstances in return for monetary gain. Such work is often criticised by the graffiti community, as its legal nature is questioned by those who partake in real graffiti practices. Furthermore, the images and content often produced in commercial graffiti work are downplayed, making these
more attractive to the public, which at times may be a risk to the integrity and creativity of graffiti writers. Commissioned graffiti emerged as the public form of commercial graffiti and was used for a variety of purposes, ranging from advertising to decorating various areas in a controlled and supervised manner.

In conclusion, it can be said that a chasm now exists between the roots of graffiti and commercial graffiti which has witnessed commercial graffiti writers forsaking real graffiti. The finer nuances of this identified chasm is investigated empirically in the rest of the study that investigates how selected commercial Johannesburg graffiti writers make sense of and feel about their commercial graffiti work and practices.
CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

The study investigates the perceptions of selected members of the Johannesburg graffiti community who produce commercial graffiti and examines the seemingly oppositional relationship between real graffiti and commercial graffiti work. This chapter outlines the research design of the empirical part of this study.

4.1 QUALITATIVE APPROACH

In order to achieve the objective of this study, a qualitative approach was used. The goal of qualitative research is to develop concepts that enhance the understanding of social phenomena in natural settings or contexts, emphasising meanings, experiences, interactions and views of participants (Flick, 2007: x; Neergaard & Ulhoi, 2007: 4). This approach falls within the context of discovery that seeks depth, investigates new practices, social organisations and structures, groups and cultures and new ways of thinking or interpreting processes of socialisation and social change (Ambert, Adler, Adler & Detzner, 1995: 880; Holloway, 1997: 1; Morse, Swanson & Kuzel, 2001: 244). The qualitative approach favours a humanistic tradition (Merriam, 2009: 19; Potter, 1996: 34) and is based on a naturalistic paradigm, represented by the view that reality is constructed by individuals (Houser, 2012: 36). The implication of using a qualitative approach for this study is that multiple interpretations or viewpoints would lead to a fuller comprehension of the graffiti phenomena under study. Qualitative research investigates how people construct their worlds in order to understand, describe and explain a social phenomenon by analysing, recording and addressing the everyday knowledge, perspectives, accounts, stories and interactions of individuals or groups (Flick, 2007: ix). This produces rich data and insight (Flick, 2007: ix). Furthermore, qualitative research relies on various data-gathering methods but conventionally analyses verbal explanations, images, objects or sounds that convey or contain meaning (Hughes & Hughes, 2008: 78). This research approach explores behaviours, perspectives,
experiences and social and material circumstances through in-depth and interpretive understandings and descriptions of individuals, offering detailed information and extensive data through opinions, attitudes, beliefs and knowledge of issues or topics that construct their worlds (Du Plooy, 2009: 148; Holloway, 1997: 1; Merriam, 2009: 5; Punch, 1986: 11; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003: 3-5; Yates, 2004: 138).

Dollar and Merrigan (cited in Lindlof & Taylor, 2011: 19) argue that qualitative studies thus validate and extend existing communication theory by generating new theories and recovering neglected topics. All these approaches represent meanings which can be reconstructed and analysed with different qualitative methods that allow the researcher to develop models, typologies and theories as ways of describing and explaining social or psychological issues (Flick, 2007: ix-x).

Several reasons exist as to why the qualitative approach has been selected for this study. A qualitative approach elicits new perspectives and insights into a topic not yet researched and will thus offer a new range of rich and diverse viewpoints from several Johannesburg graffiti writers. The qualitative approach is flexible, allowing participants to expand on their answers and uncover data that pertains to understanding this social phenomenon.

According to Daymon and Holloway (2002: 11), the implication of using a qualitative approach is that research faces a limitation with regard to generalisations. In fact, qualitative research studies are not supposed to be representative of a larger population; a common challenge is that they are too restricted in their conclusions. However, by providing rich descriptions of what goes on in a particular context, they help to illuminate important issues in a specific case or regarding a particular group of people (Daymon & Holloway, 2002: 11). It is not the purpose of this study to find conclusive answers about how Johannesburg commercial graffiti writers experience the seemingly ambivalent juxtapositioning of commercial graffiti work or how many of them hold a particular opinion. Rather, the purpose of this study is to elicit and interpret a wide range of views held by commercial Johannesburg graffiti writers about how they experience both forms of graffiti (real and commercial).
4.2 METHOD

A research method is a valid technique for conducting research in social sciences (Taylor, 2005: 4). These methods discover concepts and relationships in raw data and organise them to obtain intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes and emotions which are difficult to extract (Strauss & Corbin, 1998: 10-11).

Qualitative data collection usually employs the methods of in-depth interviews, focus groups, case studies, observations and documents, such as questionnaires, diaries, films and programme records (Houser, 2012: 36; Strauss & Corbin, 1998: 10-11; Taylor, 2005: 4). The specific qualitative method that was used for this study is in-depth interviewing, which is regarded as the most commonly used method of data collection in qualitative research (cf. King & Horrocks, 2010: 1).

Interviews extract different forms of information through their interactive and flexible nature and for this reason are somewhat unpredictable (Seale, 2004: 180). In-depth interviews require the collection of person-centred and contextualised data which use – as points of departure - individuals who have unique and important knowledge about the social world. The interviews are based on collaborated participant-researcher effort based on open-ended or semi-structured questions (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006: 119; Rowles & Schoenberg, 2002: 130). Qualitative in-depth interviews allow researchers to better understand experiences and to reconstruct events in which they did not participate, extending their intellectual and emotional reaches across ages, occupations, classes, races, sexes and geographical boundaries and describing social process and how and why things change (Rubin & Rubin, 2005: 3). In conducting and interpreting interviews, researchers become the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, expanding their understanding through non-verbal as well as verbal communication, processing information immediately, clarifying and summarising material, checking with respondents for accuracy of interpretation and exploring unusual or unanticipated responses (Merriam, 2009: 15).

Rubin and Rubin (2005: 5) explain that qualitative interviews are about eliciting understandings or meanings, the purpose being to describe and portray specific events
or processes. Hatch (2002: 91) agrees that qualitative researchers use interviews to uncover the meaning structures and experiences which are often hidden and taken for granted by participants.

The direction of the interview is guided by interviewee responses; interviewers probe each answer, using replies as the basis for further questioning (McDaniel & Gates, 1998: 118). Most of the qualitative interviews are relatively informal, semi-structured events, where interviewers engage in some planning but also respond flexibly to any unforeseen contingencies that arise (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011: 176). Green (2005: 54) explains that semi-structured interviews consist of a fixed set of questions, but respondents can be probed for more information and questions can be rephrased to suit respondents. In semi-structured interviews, the interviewer has a list of prompts or topics as a focus for the interview, but the conversation is guided by the priorities of the respondent (Green, 2005: 54). This has the advantage that similar data can be gathered from all respondents (Green, 2005: 54). Semi-structured interviews are exploratory and flexible in structure, obtaining insight and depth into topics being investigated, allowing respondents and researchers freedom, interaction and more personal responses (Du Plooy, 2009: 199; Hair, Wolfinbarger, Money, Samouel & Page, 2011: 191; Smith, 2010: 109).

The degree of structure of the interview is determined or guided by the interview protocol, the interview schedule or list of questions which the researcher plans ahead of time (Frattaroli, 2012: 224; Hughes & Hughes, 2008: 83). The interview schedule involves mostly open-ended questions for long and descriptive answers. If needed, closed-ended questions are used for short and validating answers (Frattaroli, 2012: 224; Hughes & Hughes, 2008: 83). In this way, respondents are allowed to tell their stories in their own words, giving a sense of their priorities and frames of reference, as the interviewer reconstructs these events through insights into other people’s categories, definitions, needs and desires (Desai, 2002: 24). Rubin and Rubin (2005: 4) explain that each conversation in the qualitative interview-based research process is unique, as researchers match their questions to what each interviewee knows and is willing to share. Qualitative interviews hold several strengths, such as the capturing of
participant’s own words, focusing on issues salient to participants rather than the researcher’s agenda, allowing opportunities to probe and explore in-depth, to be flexible in nature and require little specialist equipment (Holloway, 2005: 52). An important characteristic of the qualitative interview is the open-ended nature of the questions and the conversational style designed to encourage informants’ responses, which may be unanticipated by the interviewer (Frattaroli, 2012: 224). The qualitative method of in-depth interviewing holds the strength of exploring a relatively new topic, but this precise flexibility of the method implies certain limitations. In many cases, qualitative interviewing is regarded as being very time-consuming, especially in terms of transcription and analysis (Holloway, 2005: 52). In other cases, the interview format will vary between participants. Open interviewing is a complex skill, as interviews can only capture reconstructions of events rather than how people might actually behave (Holloway, 2005: 52). Interviews provide a window on what participants think and how they report their feelings and actions, but fail to capture actual behaviours and actions (Holloway, 2005: 53).

The reason why semi-structured in-depth interviewing has been selected for this study is that this method lends itself to extract detailed and rich personal accounts from the interviewees; the idea is that their views will shed new light on a relatively novel topic. The in-depth interview method can be used to explore areas about which little is known or which can lead to further understanding of complex social phenomena. The participants in the study hold a unique understanding and perspective on the topic; therefore, the in-depth interviewing methods seek to uncover and expand on knowledge with regard to commercial graffiti writing. This flexible nature of in-depth interviewing will unlock new meanings and add to the study’s aims in discovering the nature of the graffiti subculture and its commercial trends from a Johannesburg perspective.

Interviews are usually based on an interview schedule. For the purpose of this study, the in-depth interviewing was structured around themes derived from the literature study (Chapters 2 and 3) and each theme consisted of preliminary questions (see Appendix 1 for the interview schedule used in this study). These themes are:
‘Real’ Graffiti:

Theme 1: Graffiti as subculture
Theme 2: Deviance from mainstream culture

Commercial Graffiti:

Theme 3: The mainstreaming of graffiti subculture
Theme 4: Graffiti as a commodity
Theme 5: Emerging trends in graffiti

The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for flexibility when an interviewee wanted to offer more information on a topic than anticipated. In this way, participants were allowed to add information and open up new avenues of concern.

4.3 SAMPLING

In qualitative research, the sampling strategy is concerned with how ‘subjects’, ‘respondents’, or ‘participants’ are selected and how many are necessary for the study (Houser, 2012: 424). Qualitative samples are most commonly selected using a purposeful sampling method (Houser, 2012: 424).

Polit and Beck (2009: 318) explain that qualitative studies almost always use small, non-random samples. This does not mean that researchers are unconcerned with the quality of their sampling technique, but rather that they use different considerations in selecting study participants. The aim of most qualitative studies is to discover meaning and uncover multiple realities, and therefore generalisability is not a guiding consideration (ibid). The sampling design is emergent and capitalises on early information to guide subsequent direction (ibid). Houser (2012: 424) explains that a first consideration in determining the sample is the selection process, whilst the second consideration is sample size. Qualitative studies are not intended to be generalised to
populations and they are not tests of cause and effect (Houser, 2012: 424). Qualitative researchers usually avoid probability samples, as a random sample is not the best method of selecting people who would make good informants; that is, people who are knowledgeable, articulate, reflective and willing to talk at length (Polit & Beck, 2009: 319). When exploring a relatively unexplored topic, the population might not be known, and it is therefore not possible to draw a random sample. This study has made primary use of qualitative snowball sampling, which is discussed in greater detail.

Various non-probability sampling designs can be used by qualitative researchers; one such design or technique is snowball sampling (Polit & Beck, 2009: 319). Snowball sampling is one of the most interesting and useful techniques of sampling, as small groups who possess rare and unusual characteristics are the focus of the sampling (Riley, Wood, Clark, Wilkie & Szivas, 2000: 87). Rubin and Babbie (2010: 148-149) explain that snowball sampling is a non-probability technique; one that some researchers consider a form of accidental sampling. They argue that this method is often used if members of special populations are difficult to locate. During the fieldwork, snowball sampling is useful to compile a list of individuals sharing a particular characteristic and to collect data on the few members of the target population (Houser, 2012: 424; Rubin & Babbie, 2010: 149). Snowball sampling is essentially employed as follows: as participants are identified, they are asked to provide and identify others who meet the inclusion criteria (Houser, 2012: 424; Polit & Beck, 2009: 319; Rubin & Babbie, 2010: 149). Researchers start with one participant or member willing to be interviewed, and then use this interviewee to identify or recruit other potential participants who fit the criteria for the study (Macnee & McCabe, 2008: 121; Taylor & Lindolf, 2011: 114). The next few participants will then share more contacts that may have interesting experiences, thus ever increasing the sample and allowing the inclusion or growing pool of views or experiences (Macnee & McCabe, 2008: 121; Taylor & Lindolf, 2011: 114). The process of accumulation is prevalent in this sampling method, as each located subject suggests other subjects, which also results in samples that have questionable representativeness. It is therefore used primarily for exploratory purposes and used on minority and oppressed populations (Rubin & Babbie, 2010: 149). Snowball sampling
‘yields a study sample through referrals made among young people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest’ (Taylor & Lindolf, 2011: 114).

Essentially, snowball sampling identifies members of the population of interest and requests them to identify or suggest others with the required characteristics to be contacted and included within the sample (Riley et al., 2000: 87). Snowball sampling is especially useful for investigating controversial areas and identifying networks of respondents who might otherwise be difficult to find or identify or who might be reluctant to participate in a research project if this might expose their identities (Macnee & McCabe, 2008: 121; Riley et al., 2000: 88). Lindolf and Taylor (2011: 114) add that snowball sampling is well-suited to study social networks, subcultures or people who have certain attributes in common, as it reaches elusive, hard-to-recruit populations.

Houser (2012: 424-425) explains that saturation is the key consideration for the sample size in a qualitative study; saturation is reached when themes become repetitive, suggesting no new input is needed. The sample size is not predetermined, although the researcher may consider a general sample size as a goal at the beginning of data collection and once the study has been initiated, recruitment of informants and data collection continues until the researcher finds that no new information has been elicited (Houser, 2012: 424-425). This is referred to as the point of saturation and it is the standard for adequacy of the sample size. Saturation may be achieved with as few as five or six informants or considerably larger numbers of participants in complex or sensitive topics. Determination of saturation is up to the researcher, but it should be reported that it was reached (Houser, 2012: 424-425).

In this study, snowball sampling was used as this type of sampling technique aids in locating interviewees. The snowball sampling technique has a unique characteristic which benefits the study by increasing the number of interviewees. In fact, without this method it would have been virtually impossible to locate enough interviewees for this study. Therefore, the qualitative snowball sampling technique can be regarded as being the best possible method for this study.
The initial interviewees for the study were identified by the owner of a graffiti paint shop, called Grayscale, in Braamfontein in the centre of Johannesburg. He was asked to provide contact with graffiti writers in Johannesburg who are well-established commercial graffiti writers. At the end of each interview, the interviewees were asked to provide the names and contact details of commercial graffiti writers they thought might grant interviews.

A total of 11 interviews – each lasting about an hour – were conducted before the data set eventually reached saturation point. Although the snowball sampling technique offers an excellent means of recruiting new participants, certain limitations have been identified and are outlined below. Although snowball samples sound simple to create, these samples do not always roll toward satisfactory results, as locating people of low social visibility and training them to recruit respondents may be time-consuming and create uncertain work (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011: 115). It is also not uncommon for snowball samples to hit ‘dead ends’ and ‘freeze’ or ‘melt’ prematurely (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011: 115). On the one hand, a snowball can grow so fast that it creates backlogs of untranscribed material or accumulates problems with the quality of the interviews that go unnoticed until it is too late (Biernacki & Waldorf in Lindolf & Taylor, 2011: 115). Another weakness of this approach is that the eventual sample might be restricted to a rather small network of acquaintances and the quality of the referrals could be affected by whether the referring sample member trusted the researcher and truly wanted to cooperate (Polit & Beck, 2009: 319). However, these problems can be averted if researchers devote adequate effort to closely monitoring and occasionally fine-tuning the sampling process. It is also claimed that the use of snowball samples introduces ‘bias’ in the data due to the fact that the referrals tend to radiate in a social network (Biernacki & Waldorf in Lindolf & Taylor, 2011: 115). Since the researcher was aware of these limitations, interviews were structured to avert these, as is evidenced by the wide range of views that were elicited. Since the interviewees claimed that they only partake in legal commercial graffiti, they seemed not to mind providing names and contact details of their peers as long as all interviewees could remain anonymous. The interviewees were all males of different age, race, educational and socio-economic
backgrounds. In fact, some enjoyed an affluent upbringing whilst others did not, and some have more than one tertiary degree whilst others do not. They also claimed that in earlier years they were involved in illegal graffiti to differing degrees. The length of their involvement in commercial graffiti also varies, as does the extent of their commercial work – some are full-time commercial graffiti writers whilst others do so in their spare time or only occasionally. Interviews with the following commercial Johannesburg graffiti writers were held:

- BIAS (26)
- CFOUR (24)
- LUNAR (26)
- MARS (25)
- MURO (24)
- NAUS (23)
- NOSK (24)
- RIOT (28)
- SEAK4 (20)
- TAPZ (32)
- ZESTA (30)

4.4 DATA ANALYSIS

The interviewees were sound-recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The specific steps followed in the analysis of data were: to familiarise oneself with the data, by generating initial categories and searching for themes to reduce the data; to review these themes; and to name these final themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998: 11-12; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011: 12-13). In Chapter 5, these themes are outlined and their relation to the topics discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 is discussed.
4.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical considerations are important in planning and conducting interviews to ensure that interests are protected and confidentiality is respected (Durrant & Holden, 2006: 114). Marshall and Rossman (2011: 121) explain that qualities that make a successful qualitative researcher reveal themselves as an exquisite sensitivity to the ethical issues surrounding any moral act. The research design anticipates the array of ethical challenges that will occur and issues such as role, reciprocity and ethics must be thought through carefully in all settings, especially in those that are particularly sensitive or taboo (Marshall & Rossman, 2011: 121). Codes and ethics are then formulated to regulate the relations of researchers to the people and fields they intend to study (Flick, 2009: 36). Principles of research ethics ask that researchers avoid harming participants involved in the process by respecting and taking into account their needs and interests (Flick, 2009: 36).

Three ethical aspects needed to be considered for this study:

Firstly, the possible confidentiality wishes of interviewees who took part in the study. The identities of these interviewees will have to be protected if requested by the interviewees. Subject anonymity is commonplace in social research (Kimmel, 2007: 129). Sometimes, the issue of confidentiality or anonymity might become problematic when research occurs with several members in a specific setting (Flick, 2009: 42). Specific details should then be encrypted to protect the identities of such individuals (Flick, 2009: 36). Confidentiality essentially requires that the interviewer guarantees to keep the names and other identifying information associated with the interviewee anonymous. Due to highly personal information that might be shared, it is important that the interviewer assesses how much confidentiality they can compromise (Klenke, 2008: 149-150). In this study, all interviewees wished that their true identities be kept confidential as they wanted to remain anonymous. However, they did not object to their professional graffiti names being used, as they claimed that they were no longer partaking in illegal graffiti practices. Testimony to this claim is the age bracket of these
interviewees; older graffiti writers are generally linked to commercial graffiti as they would already have had the opportunity to develop stylistically.

The second ethical aspect to consider is the informed consent from interviewees. As Kvale (1996: 111-112) suggests, this is also common practice when researching social subjects. Some ethical issues are unique to qualitative interviews and informed consent must be obtained from interviewees after they have been carefully and truthfully informed about the nature of the research (Klenke, 2008: 149). Approval usually requires that prospective interviewees sign a consent form agreeing to participate, after being informed of potential risks and benefits. This gives the interviewee a chance to refuse to comply with the interview request. In this study, written consent forms could not be used; interviewees did not want to sign on paper as they thought that this might reveal their true identities.

A third ethical aspect that was considered in this study is the practice of illegal graffiti. The researcher specifically asked the owner of the Braamfontein graffiti store for the names of graffiti writers who participate in legal commercial graffiti only. Furthermore, during the snowball sampling process, interviewees were asked to offer names of other potential interviewees who only practice illegal graffiti.

4.6 CONCLUSION

Chapter 5 presents an analysis and interpretation of the findings of interviews with commercial Johannesburg graffiti writers.
CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the findings of this study based on the views of commercial Johannesburg graffiti writers and how they perceive the seemingly oppositional relationship between real and commercial graffiti.

As indicated in the previous chapter, an interview schedule was compiled based on the literature study (see Appendix 1). Since the interview schedule followed the same logic as Chapters 2 and 3, the data elicited from the interviews is presented in the same sequence.

Chapter 2 investigates the nature of real graffiti and explains that graffiti is a subculture that deviates from mainstream societal norms. These two ideas are investigated in Themes 1 and 2 of the interview schedule and the findings of the interviews are presented and interpreted in the Section 5.2.

Chapter 3 of this study investigates the mainstreaming of graffiti and the different new commercial practices. Based on this information, Theme 3 of the interview schedule investigates the mainstreaming of graffiti and the findings of these interviews are presented and interpreted in Section 5.3. Themes 4 and 5 investigate older and newer forms of commercial graffiti, and the findings are presented and interpreted in Sections 5.4 and 5.5 as indicated in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTERVIEW SCHEDULE</th>
<th>IN THIS CHAPTER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: 'Real' Graffiti</td>
<td>Section 5.2: Theme 1 - 'Real' graffiti</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Theme 1: Graffiti as subculture**  
  1. Graffiti writers and the graffiti subculture  
  2. Mainstream culture and the graffiti subculture  
  3. Various aspects of the graffiti subculture | 1. Reasons why interviewees got involved in the graffiti |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4. Real roots of graffiti versus contemporary graffiti subculture</th>
<th>subculture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5. The changing ideals of the graffiti subculture</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

**Theme 2: Deviance from mainstream culture**

1. Resistance found in graffiti writing
2. The link between graffiti and hip hop
3. Resistance in graffiti towards mainstream culture
4. Graffiti writers and mainstream culture
5. The deviant, streetwise and rebellious image of graffiti

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2. The relationship with mainstream culture</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. What graffiti writers gain from being involved in the subculture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The roots of graffiti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Resistance identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Identity, hip hop and street culture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chapter 3: Commercial Graffiti**

**Theme 3: The mainstreaming of graffiti subculture**

1. The impact of commercial interests on graffiti
2. Commercial opportunities as benefitting or restraining graffiti
3. Commercial graffiti changing the real essence of graffiti
4. The threat of a popularised image of graffiti
5. Changing graffiti dynamics due to commercialisation

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<tr>
<th>Section 5.3:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 2 - Commercial graffiti</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Reasons why graffiti writers do commercial work</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Commercial opportunities as benefitting or restraining graffiti</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Commercial graffiti changing the real essence of graffiti</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. The threat of a popularised image of graffiti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Changing graffiti dynamics due to commercialisation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme 4: Graffiti as a commodity**

1. Graffiti as an emerging good and product
2. The changing nature of graffiti as a marketed and consumable object
3. The change in graffiti practices due to emerging commercial trends
4. The image of graffiti as new and innovative
5. The fashionable characteristics of graffiti and differences to mainstream art

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<tr>
<th>Section 5.4:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 3 - Older commercial graffiti practices</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Graffiti, advertising and merchandise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Making graffiti accessible to a wider audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Graffiti attracts youth markets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Real graffiti, commercial graffiti and mainstream art</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme 5: Emerging trends in graffiti**

1. Various new trends and job opportunities linked to graffiti

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<tr>
<th>Section 5.5:</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 4 - Emerging trends in</strong></td>
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75
5.2 THEME 1: ‘REAL’ GRAFFITI

In this section, interviewees’ ideas about what real graffiti is, is investigated and interpreted against the background of Chapter 2 of the literature study. A total of six topics emerged as re-occurring ideas from the interviews.

5.2.1 Topic 1: Reasons why interviewees got involved in the graffiti subculture

This section explores why interviewees became involved in the graffiti subculture. Through the interviews, it became evident that interviewees were primarily enticed by a range of aspects associated with graffiti. It was found that factors such as the internet, magazines, books and other graffiti writers all played a role in luring these individuals into the graffiti subculture. However, the involvement of most interviewees in the graffiti subculture was influenced by their social circles and friends already partaking in the graffiti subculture:

… like the most important thing was like the people I was with (MARS, 25).

I started graffiti through friends of mine that either did graffiti or were interested in graffiti (LUNAR 26).
Many interviewees also explained that their introduction to graffiti writing occurred during their high school studying years (ZESTA, 30; NOSK, 24; CFOUR, 24; SEAK4, 20; LUNAR, 26) since they were naturally artistically inclined (ZESTA, 30; BIAS, 26; CFOUR, 24; NAUS, 23).

CFOUR (24) added that ‘the internet really helped a lot in terms of graffiti but maybe not as much as it helps the whole lot of people now’. The internet helped TAPZ (32) and MARS (25) understand the nature of graffiti, especially ‘ARTCRIMES’, a popular graffiti website which played an integral part in the emerging Johannesburg graffiti environment a few years back. Due to the small graffiti environment in South Africa, many interviewees (MURO, 24; BIAS, 26; CFOUR, 24; SEAK4, 20) resorted to shadowing other graffiti writers and crews as major influences. This was done through paying attention to the graffiti environment and exploring the city (CFOUR, 24), as well as ‘updating myself’ (NAUS, 23) through new and emerging graffiti within Johannesburg areas. As explained in Chapter 2, Section 2.4, other influences included movies and films revolving around deviant identities that helped to create an image for these individuals to aspire to. This is confirmed by MARS (25), explaining: ‘We like went to get cans and shit just to like fucking be like those guys on TV’. This indicates that media portrayals of graffiti played a strong influence in his involvement in graffiti writing.

Closely related to this portrayal of a deviant identity through the media was the hip hop culture which also sparked the involvement of several interviewees (the link between graffiti and hip hop was indicated in Chapter 2, Section 2.4):

… how I got involved … it was all the guys around me that were into hip hop and doing graffiti at the time (RIOT, 28).

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3 Transcriptions were made verbatim. Even though this might offend some readers of this dissertation, the original language has been kept to prove the authenticity of the answers given by respondents. Interestingly, it was noted that the older interviewees used fewer swear words than some of the younger interviewees. This may be due to the fact that the older interviewees were generally more settled in commercial graffiti and hence less oppositional to mainstream societal values and norms, of which one is not to use swear words. See elsewhere in this chapter evidence in support of this point.
… they sort of spoke about graffiti and because I couldn’t rap or DJ or you know break-dance then I was like well I’ll try graffiti (TAPZ, 32).

MARS (25) and MURO (24) indicated that the skateboarding culture had an impact on their involvement within graffiti. In this vein MURO (24) said: 'I became aware about it through skateboarding and skate parks; that’s the first place I saw it and thought it was cool’.

It thus seems that the commercial Johannesburg graffiti writers who were interviewed initially got involved in the graffiti subculture through various avenues such as hip hop, skateboarding, the media (including the internet) and acquaintances. It should be noted that this is not an argument that these avenues had an absolute influence on decisions to be part of the graffiti subculture, but it simply means that their natural artistic inclination and the deviant image of the subculture were supported by their experiences of hip hop, skateboarding, the media and social circles. In other words, aside from their artistic nature and their need for self-expression, the image of the subculture was appealing to them. This is an important finding, as it means that even though they were initially drawn to the subcultural nature of graffiti, it is this very element that they are nuancing or altering through their new commercial ventures.

This point will be elaborated in the following section, which explores their views on the graffiti subculture and the relationship with mainstream culture.

5.2.2 Topic 2: Mainstream culture and the graffiti subculture

In this section the views of interviewees about the relationship between graffiti and mainstream culture is explored.

For MARS (25), mainstream culture is: ‘Everything that’s just popular, I suppose it’s what sells ... it’s like commercialism what people buy, what people want to buy, what they buy to represent themselves’. MARS thus emphasises that mainstream culture refers to what the majority of the population appreciates, which is often market-orientated as indicated in Chapter 3, Section 3.2. NAUS (23) confirmed this idea,
associating the culture of mainstream society with the popular: the ‘media, magazines, and clothing, everything around you, like what's popular ... popular culture’.

ZESTA (29) believes that mainstream culture is always present:

> It is echoed and reflected all around us in marketing, the media, films, etc. How can one not be a victim? It is designed to be engaged with; we all receive different messages from these channels.

In order for these graffiti writers to differentiate themselves from the culture of mainstream society, MARS (25) says:

> … you sort of did graffiti to break away from that [mainstream culture] ... but you ended up actually sort of becoming part of it as well, you know ... like I don’t know if you can break away from mainstream culture ever, like 100% ... I think it will sort of always be there.

MARS points to the idea that a subculture is only significant if there remains a mainstream culture for it to differentiate from. This is confirmed in the literature study (Chapter 2 Section 2.4) where it is indicated that subcultures have a resistance identity, but this is almost contradictorily always linked to the mainstream culture which it criticises and from which it seeks to differentiate. Responses by interviewees identified the culture of mainstream society as an entity which could not be escaped, as it is often intrusive in their lives, while holding an influence over them regardless of their resistance to its existence (Chapter 2, Section 2.4). Elaborating on being unable to avoid the culture of mainstream society, NAUS (23) said:

> I don’t have a control over mainstream [culture], so obviously it affects everyone. That’s the point of mainstream, it’s supposed to affect everyone, it’s not supposed to affect the weak, it’s just supposed to attract everyone in ... what’s around me, what’s branded, what’s on signage, what’s on clothing ... anything that society like puts in my face ... it’s almost like they are in my face the whole time with everything and graffiti is affected by it, I guess,
because we don’t like that, it’s something like ‘us’ as a collective we have that in common - where we don’t like being pushed in our faces with something.

I don’t like it, but I have no choice, it’s there … advertising, music, and radio … down to everything (MURO, 24).

These commercial graffiti writers thus grapple with mainstream society, but they refrain from fully associating themselves with this mainstream culture. However, they remain influenced by mainstream culture. As MARS (25) pointed out, ‘Mainstream culture influences everything ... I mean even if you think it doesn’t, it does influence you’. MURO (24) emphasised that mainstream culture was in fact forced upon him: ‘Just living in this world you will come across somebody else trying to tell you something or sell you something ... tell you what you like’. TAPZ (32) regarded this as:

… general popular culture ... I think its bullshit. People need to eat I guess so you need to find clever ways of making money ... I like to visit it once in a while, I just don’t want to live there.

Importantly, this view identifies the crossing over of interviewees into mainstream culture at times. However, even if they ‘cross over’, they remain firmly rooted in the practices of their subcultures (Chapter 2, Section 2.4).

Interviewees such as CFOUR (24) responded to mainstream influences as:

… it influences me a lot cause it’s all I’m exposed, to like in a way it’s like brainwash you can’t ignore what you see on a billboard, how people dress, the kinds of things people are into and obviously it influences me, but I choose what influences me.

In terms of wearing branded clothing and merchandise, several interviewees associated themselves with mainstream culture, such as MURO (24) who pointed out: ‘It’s brands, and that’s mainstream, I wear brands … I like brands, I have brands’. MARS (25) added to this association by making reference to ADIDAS and NIKE brands as being
mainstream culture. However, BIAS (26) believed that not wearing brands distanced individuals from being associated with the mainstream culture. In this case, these interviewees identified themselves with mainstream culture by wearing specific clothing brands as mentioned above. BIAS (26) further outlined that mainstream culture and its brands remain omnipresent, difficult to avoid; as MURO (23) added: ‘It influences me but … that doesn’t mean I like it’.

Interestingly, RIOT (28) explored the idea that, to a certain extent, mainstream culture held an influence over the hip hop subculture, but regarded graffiti’s existence as more *underground* and felt that it should remain relatively unchanged by the capitalist drive of mainstream culture influence. In Chapter 2, Section 2.4, it was argued that the term *underground* refers on the one hand to the subordinated position of a subculture when compared to that of mainstream culture, and on the other hand to the image of ‘darkness’. However, BIAS (26) thought that graffiti is seen as *underground* due to it being misunderstood by the uninformed members of mainstream society. LUNAR (26) held the view that the subcultural nature of graffiti is a natural outflow of the hegemony of mainstream society. However, it is not a one-directional influence:

> I think … graffiti is suppose be like … it’s an own culture in a way, but graffiti in itself is influenced by mainstream culture and it’s also being against mainstream culture … and … like people can use graffiti in mainstream culture because they think it’s cool and then in graffiti you can use elements of mainstream culture because its … you kind of influenced by it because you kind of surrounded by it and you can’t get away from it (LUNAR, 26).

This is an immensely valuable point by LUNAR, as many academic works neglect the mutual symbiotic relationship between a mainstream culture and a subculture. This interplay refers to the situation in which subcultures stand in opposition to mainstream culture and its ideals, at the same time relying on the very same mainstream culture in order to gain definition (Chapter 2, Section 2.4).
In summary, although in general most interviewees indicated that real graffiti is distinct and oppositional to mainstream culture, these views were nuanced and explained in different ways by the Johannesburg graffiti writers. It was identified that mainstream culture had an influence on these individuals through media and brands, but was not something they wanted to follow or be associated with. This was elaborated by one interviewee saying that mainstream culture is omnipresent and some graffiti writers may feel that mainstream culture is forced upon them. This explains why most real graffiti writers want to resist it. Another idea was that graffiti writers may want to differentiate themselves from mainstream society to form their own identity - an underground identity distant from a popularised identity shared by ‘the masses’. In other words, the interviewees’ responses were in accord with the conventional understanding of the relationship between mainstream culture and the graffiti subculture.

This idea is explored further in the next section, which investigates what the interviewed commercial Johannesburg graffiti writers have gained from the graffiti subculture.

5.2.3 Topic 3: What graffiti writers gain from being involved in the subculture?

In this section, the various aspects that interviewees have gained from participating in the graffiti subculture – such as a platform for self-expression, a different perspective on life, a particular lifestyle and identity – are explored.

The graffiti subculture was found to offer interviewees a platform to express themselves, confirming the views investigated in the literature study (Chapter 2, Section 2.2):

I found that it [graffiti] was an expression of the ‘self’ more than anything else, being creative, something different, and something new (NOSK, 24).

… it’s made me think about myself, who I am, where I am, what I can do with graffiti, what I can say because graffiti isn’t just limited to writing my name it’s also opened my mind to saying a bigger message (NAUS, 23).

[Graffiti] offered me a lot I mean just the chance to stick out from the crowd … to kind of have my 15 minutes of whatever in the spotlight, you know what I
mean? It offered me the chance to ... give others a different perspective or a different idea ... or just to enforce your idea on them (MURO, 24).

The graffiti subculture was also found to offer several of the interviewees a different perspective on the world around them. MURO (24) indicates that the graffiti subculture has offered him a unique outside perspective and a chance to express himself in a ‘very public kind of way’. BIAS (26) explains this as:

... a different way of thinking, I think it really tries to expose what’s really going on, it really tries to expose ... it doesn’t try too it just does kind of open up what’s really going on in the world ... because you see a lot more than most people do.

... graffiti just opened like a new world for me that I wouldn’t of thought existed, like I’d go to places I wouldn’t ever go to, I’d go to Joburg [Johannesburg] town and I’d paint there and I’d paint abandoned buildings, I would go to tunnels I would go to weird places (LUNAR, 26).

This is a significant finding in that the graffiti subculture allows these interviewees the opportunity to explore and discover new terrains and environments, offering a new and exciting perspective of the world around them. For CFOUR (24), the graffiti subculture becomes a means to engage with his surroundings:

... it’s [graffiti] actually broadened my insight, how I look at things and like it’s also influenced how I engage with the city like ... with my environment and what’s around me cause now it’s like you don’t just drive past spaces anymore, like spaces become like canvasses now.

In addition, BIAS (26) identified the graffiti subculture as a means to appreciate new perspectives:

... most graffiti artists I’ve met they pretty open-minded you know, not all of them but most of them ... and they like know a bit more about the world and how shit works you know, they a bit more like aware and observant and stuff.
What I’ve gained from graffiti is the open-mindedness of things, the bigger picture, that there’s something else out there then just living your day to day life (NAUS, 23).

Among the various attributes that the graffiti subculture offered these interviewees, identity (Chapter 2, Section 2.4) was pointed out by MARS (25), who felt that graffiti ‘just gave me someone that I could aspire to be … like people recognise me a little bit here and there and it’s like … it’s nice it gives you a bit of self-confidence, you know’ (Chapter 2, Section 2.3).

Confidence arose as an aspect several interviewees gained from the graffiti subculture, which NOSK (24) explained: ‘It’s given me confidence, it’s also given me how would you say a reason to take it an extra mile, to push it to a limit that other people haven’t reached to open that new door’. Furthermore, BIAS (26) identified the feeling of power that was achieved through writing graffiti anonymously (Chapter 2, Section 2.4), ‘it makes them [graffiti writers] feel powerful’. Interestingly, the response offered by TAPZ (32) uncovered the concept of a ‘pretend identity’:

… it’s sort of something that I can look at pictures or go around Joburg [Johannesburg] and see my stuff and then I can pretend that that’s me in a way and sort of people views of it … you know they wouldn’t think that it’s me … but yeah it’s like a pretend identity basically … alter-ego.

This view was further highlighted by RIOT (28) who importantly explained:

I’ve gained like an alter-ego of myself. You know to me graffiti like your name that you write is like an alter-ego of yourself you know you can be yourself but as a name … that’s just a reflection of yourself.

This *alter-ego* (or image or recognition amongst peers) that is created by graffiti writers is especially important in understanding the anonymity factor contained within the graffiti subculture (Chapter 2, Section 2.2), offering individuals the opportunity to build *famous* and recognised identities when compared to those held within mainstream culture.
Several interviewees also identified the graffiti subculture and graffiti writing as important coping mechanisms or escape from the stresses of everyday life. BIAS (26) outlined graffiti’s therapeutic and relaxing qualities as being a means which ‘helped him cure’. For TAPZ (32), the graffiti subculture and its dissemination allowed the release of anger: ‘if it wasn’t for graffiti I wouldn’t know what I’d do’. NAUS (23) also identified with graffiti as a healing property when saying:

… I actually release myself, and let out my emotions on paper or canvas or whatever our material is.

… when I do my graffiti it almost like calms me, gives me to time to think about you know life … um you know what’s happening in my life it gives me time to sort that out it also gives me time to think about decisions that I need to make (RIOT, 28).

This finding importantly outlines the positive attribute of graffiti writing as providing interviewees with an alternative means of relaxation or meditation, as NAUS (23) views:

… graffiti it’s just helped me become a more centred person in life, a bit more chilled, not too stressed or caught up in the hype, I take a step back from things now and just take a look at something else instead of just being narrow minded with things.

Another aspect offered by the graffiti subculture was the formation and nurturing of bonds and friendships, which ZESTA (30) identified as ‘belonging within a sort of community’. This aspect is directly related to the concept of graffiti crews (Chapter 2, Section 2.3) which serves as an important drive for interviewees. BIAS (26) believes that ‘in my crew they [fellow graffiti writers] influenced me to push myself harder’, while NOSK (24) identified that graffiti writers within crews ‘actually became more like brothers, where they [crew writers] became more than just friends’. Interviewees pointed out that the graffiti subculture had therefore allowed them to gain new companionships and friendships over the years (SEAK4, 20; RIOT, 28; LUNAR, 26). This kind of relationship has been described in the literature study (Chapter 2, Section 2.3), which
explains that graffiti crews serve as educational organisations that provide graffiti writers with valuable skills, behaviours, cooperation and, importantly, close bonds between graffiti writers that BIAS (26) feels so strongly about: ‘I live by it, die by it if I have to pretty much’.

In summary, it was found that Johannesburg graffiti writers have gained many aspects from the graffiti subculture, such as a voice to express their identities and their views publicly, to explore new ways of understanding and viewing the world and to gain confidence due to a heightened regard amongst their peers, providing a strong visible alter-ego. In addition, the significant aspect of anonymity serves to conceal the identities of graffiti writers within larger society but also to enhance recognition and fame within the graffiti environment. Interestingly, in the literature, the therapeutic and meditative qualities of graffiti have not been emphasised, although it has been mentioned by some interviewees. The interviewees, albeit in different ways, all referred to how graffiti aids them to cope with the stresses of everyday life by providing meditation, therapy, relaxation, release of anger and the ability to rid oneself of undesired emotions by expressing oneself. These creative expressions linked to release of undesired emotions are also linked to the ‘brotherhood’ and friendship which is part of being accepted by peers. Although these ideas add to the literature study chapters, they are in spirit in line with what has been described in the literature study section.

In the next section, the views of Johannesburg commercial graffiti writers about the real roots of graffiti are explored.

5.2.4 Topic 4: The roots of graffiti

All the interviewees identified the birthplace of graffiti back to TAKI 183’s activities in the 1970s in New York (Chapter 2, Section 2.2). This means that these graffiti writers, who have been part of the subculture for long enough, started engaging with it in a commercial way – in many cases up to the point that one can think of them as professional commercial graffiti writers, who seem to be well educated about the roots of the graffiti subculture. CFOUR (24) linked the roots of graffiti to hip hop, explaining that ‘it started with someone picking up a spray can and you know ... and rebelling and
saying this is me and I wanna get noticed as well, you know, like I exist’. The interviewees were prompted to explain what these roots are:

I think the real roots of graffiti would be just writing on things and getting your opinion or expression or thoughts out (LUNAR, 26).

It was pointed out by TAPZ (31) and LUNAR (25) that throughout human history, there has always been a need to leave some evidence or mark that a person had been in a specific location, and this is literally what graffiti does – perhaps just on a larger scale.

Interviewees were then asked to consider whether local graffiti still observes these initial ideas of graffiti:

... it’s not just one local thing, so Americans have their own history with graffiti and that’s the whole ‘against the government’...and we as South Africans kind of apply to that in a sense, we were also spray-painting for striking or sending a message. That’s where it came out, it was more like painting a census on a wall or something that’s meaningful to people to look at when they walking by or catching a taxi, or something that’s political, that’s where I see graffiti started here...we've kind of adapted to that side of America, we've kind of become westernised in a sense (NAUS, 23).

In contrast, TAPZ (32) explained that graffiti in Johannesburg differs from the original version of graffiti: ‘New York had a completely different vibe’. He therefore thinks that the original roots which originated in New York, as discussed in the literature study (Chapter 2, Section 2.2), have been adapted to suit the social needs of South African graffiti writers, even though certain basic aspects remain the same. NAUS (23) discussed this partial adaptation:

... for us here the roots started from a political but moved to an artistic side ... they’ll express ‘ourselves’ and our emotion and what we feeling and it starting
becoming more than just a census on a wall it started becoming an image, a visual that people can relate too.

SEAK4 (20) pointed out: 'If you look at those times, yes, there was like oppression and whatever so clearly, it was a sign of rebellion, but now in our current times ... I think it still has the same roots'. This interviewee points to rebellion as the root of graffiti. He is of the view that it remained the same in South Africa. It seems that in a post-apartheid democratic South Africa, the focus is not so much on a resistance identity with political messaging, but on individual self-expression. For LUNAR (26), graffiti in South Africa still serves as a powerful tool for reaching and educating poorer communities around various issues.

It can thus be said that all interviewees are familiar with the conventional history of the evolution of graffiti, but some pointed out that the history of graffiti in South Africa does not overlap totally with that of the United States, where graffiti was born. The idea was elicited that in South Africa the social needs of graffiti writers might have steered the history of graffiti writing in a different direction.

The finer nuances of graffiti’s resistance identity, which is pertinent to the graffiti subculture, are explored next.

5.2.5 Topic 5: Resistance identity

This section uncovers the various reasons for the resistance identity in opposition to mainstream culture.

The general conception (explained in Chapter 2, Section 2.4) about the subculture of graffiti is that it resists mainstream society and differentiates itself from mainstream society, but through engaging itself with mainstream society it, in turn, attaches itself to this very same mainstream society. This was evident in many interviews:

… graffiti is a form of rebelling or rebellion and that is against the mainstream [culture] (MURO, 24).
I like to think of graffiti as a means of saying ‘fuck you’ to any authority figure you know, to say ‘fuck you’, you can’t control me because this is what I’m gonna be, you not gonna stop me (SEAK4, 20).

I mean you’ve been told not to break the law, you told to listen to what your parents say, you are told a lot of things really ... just by going and doing it [graffiti] you causing that resistance in terms of ... like your morals and other people’s morals. [...] you know you need to live by the law, do everything by the law ... and then you realise actually the law is not for everyone and ... you start to bend the rules a little bit I think (MARS, 25).

... you know graffiti can’t be controlled; if graffiti was controlled there would be no graffiti (SEAK4, 20).

... this mainstream culture they just want to get something from you, they want you to be a regular with them, they want you to but something from them, they want you to keep coming back and that in a sense is what we against (NAUS, 23).

... when I think mainstream [culture] I think sheep you know, and everybody ... everybody like just follows that ... you know I wanna be my own person I don’t wanna be some sheep following ... anything that’s pop culture ... I like being different, kind of my rebellious side coming through you know (SEAK4, 20).

... we don’t try stick with the norm in a way. Yeah that’s the whole point with graffiti, we not trying to follow mainstream [culture] we trying to find ourselves, trying to find our identities and we deviate from mainstream [culture] in a sense that if you don’t want to do what they do by us putting our name up on their wall ... kind of like a ‘fuck you’ read this, doing our thing we don’t need to listen to you we don’t need to follow your rules. Because by us
following rules we wouldn’t be painting, we would be sitting at home going to work (NAUS, 23).

… it depends on every writer … to their level how they are actually going to take it to that level of being resistant, because basically it [graffiti writing] does hold power, you can kind of express and bring out things … very powerful and reach other people with graffiti (LUNAR, 26).

… to rebel against government purely because I do not like it … I personally feel that any government around the world you know whether it’s first world, third world whatever you wanna [want to] call it, they never do their people justice (SEAK4, 20).

… graffiti is in essence like a way of rebelling against that injustice that your government does to you … but on the other hand you know unfortunately it’s just the way the world works you know, you never gonna [going to] get everything as good as they [government] promise” (SEAK4, 20).

These interviewees described that this deviant behaviour emerged as a means for these individuals to differentiate themselves from larger society, creating an identity that was rebellious in the sense that it enabled them to create their own meaning among themselves. They objected to the constant bombardment of mainstream culture within the media:

… we can’t just live our lives; we don’t need to be flooded with adverts and branding and who we supposed to be and what we supposed to act like, and what you supposed to listen to. […] if you into radio and you just watch MTV and that you are a perfect person of the mainstream [culture] … you not trying to find your identity as a person, and that with graffiti … I’m actually trying to find different paths in life and that’s what helped me with finding graffiti and graffiti has opened my mind to something bigger (NAUS, 23).
Interestingly, even though respondents explained a resistance to mainstream culture, they were ambivalent and could not celebrate the subculture without opposing it to mainstream society and in this way engaged with mainstream thinking:

… I still follow mainstream [culture] but side-line on the parallel path, I’m following my own path (NAUS, 23).

I can see why people see it as deviance, its anti-social, you don’t really tell anyone you doing it you keep it sort of to yourself kind of like a secret (MARS, 25).

… primarily a rebellion that’s where it starts, it often for a lot of people it ends up in a place where it isn’t at all rebellious anymore but personally I think once that gets to that point then they should just stop because that’s the whole fun of it (TAPZ, 32).

To further indicate graffiti’s difference from mainstream society respondents revelled in its dangerous aspects:

… people do think of us as criminals and as vandals, as like I said you know but there is a bigger picture (NAUS, 23).

… like you notice how the media and everything portrays graffiti as like the people that do it … are like … there’s something wrong with them [graffiti writers] you know (BIAS, 26).

I think also young graffiti writers are the ones that are putting across that resistant message because they believe that graffiti is all about … destroying government property … I mean they huge into that and how we are causing destruction you know we defacing people’s property … when actually it just gives graffiti a bad name (RIOT, 28).
… just by being this character or being this graffiti writer is kind of saying I’m not like you MURO, 24).

Similarly, NOSK (24) elaborated on this formation of a resistant identity as serving to differentiate him from what he called ‘sheep’ or audiences of mainstream culture. Interestingly, SEAK4 (20) also refers to masses which follow mainstream culture as ‘sheep’, and emphasised on his individuality by saying: ‘You are your own person why do you wanna [want to] follow someone else? Why do you wanna [want to] be a sheep?’

… what I listen to, what I choose to read … the things I choose to watch … so I think in that way I differentiate myself” furthermore stating that “mainstream [culture] they not really big on subcultures and they into a standard form or way of doing things (CFOUR, 24).

One quality that ensured this differentiation was language, in which CFOUR (24) made use of the term ‘graffiti lingo’, emphasising its indecipherable nature and secretive terminology understood by a selected population within society (Chapter 2, Section 2.3). This had offered SEAK4 (20) a means to ‘distinguish yourself … you know when you talk graffiti you talk graffiti … yeah I think slang is a big part of it [differentiating] you know’. It was therefore found that language use in the form of graffiti colloquialisms and jargon established a resistance towards mainstream society. Other factors, such as dress, were also identified, as CFOUR (24) believed that shoes covered in paint were ‘very unacceptable in society’, as well as wearing ‘baggy t-shirts and jeans hanging below your ass’ (SEAK4, 20). LUNAR (26) importantly explored this idea:

… you know it’s kind of everything I’ve been through to get to that [differentiation from mainstream culture] and then that kind of builds me to who I am … and now in a way like you can’t run away or hide or change that or disguise yourself.
The motivation behind a resistance identity indicated by TAPZ (32) was the ‘boring’ nature of mainstream society and culture, which was compared to the ‘fun’ and interesting environment which graffiti has created: ‘I guess I spend a lot of time growing up in my own head so ... I like to spend my time doing the things that make sense to me and creating this sort of imaginary world in my mind’.

I still try act like a normal person, drive around like a normal person, and look like a normal person but ... I’m going out and doing things that shouldn’t be done ... that would be me breaking away from society (MARS, 25).

Importantly, this view emphasises the idea of living a double lifestyle, as explained that:

... I like to sort of separate my lifestyle as like two different people (MARS, 25).

Interpreting such a response importantly outlines the adoption of two different identities:

... you live a double life man that’s it, it’s like ... you fit in where you can and then you escape where you can I guess ... you have to be a part of society and escape whenever you can (MARS, 25).

For MURO (24), differentiating himself from mainstream culture was a complex procedure: ‘I still am a part of the real world, if you know what I’m saying, I’ve still got a job and family, and other friends’. This response indicates a participation in two worlds, straddling identity as a means to satisfy each context or situation. In the same vein, NAUS (23) identified himself as part of mainstream society and culture: ‘Without mainstream [culture] I wouldn’t be who I am. I’ve grown up with mainstream [culture], so in a way I’m part of mainstream [culture], but I’m my own person welcoming mainstream [culture]’. Importantly, this interviewee selectively retains certain aspects of mainstream society and culture, as well as being aware of its nature and having the choice to participate within it. NAUS (23) adds that: ‘I’m my own person, but I am part of mainstream [culture], because without mainstream [culture] I wouldn’t be who I am ... everyone is part of mainstream [culture], it’s what you wear, it’s what you are’, which
again describes its constant presence according to the interviewee who says ‘I follow my own path, I follow my own mainstream [culture] if you like to say’.

In this case, he believed ‘mysteriousness is what I think writers actually thrive on ... yeah that’s what sets us aside is that mysteriousness I mean people are always wondering who does that kind of thing [graffiti], but within the graffiti family we know who it is’. This explanation was directly linked to the ‘double lifestyle’ discussed earlier, ultimately creating an identity within the graffiti community, while simultaneously concealing this identity from mainstream society and culture. In this case, anonymity serves as an identity by remaining suppressed in certain environments or contexts, but serving as a purpose for identity within the practices of the graffiti subculture.

MARS (25) spoke about the ambivalent relationship that exists between the graffiti subculture and its deviance, regarding graffiti writing as ‘pretty much anti-social going out and spray-painting on walls ... so it definitely goes against the mainstream [culture] in those aspects ... but it also is part of mainstream [culture] in a lot of other aspects especially now ... in like a commercialism sense’. On the other hand, LUNAR (26) simply believed ‘people that don’t understand graffiti they kind of maybe can get scared of it because they don’t understand it’, and regarded this as the reason for their negative view of graffiti writing. According to MARS (25), mainstream culture views the practice of writing graffiti as:

… counter-productive in terms of society and ... you not really contributing anything like monetarily or you know nothing that pays tax ... you know you not part of the system, like the economy, you not part of the economy in essence.

In terms of graffiti writers distancing themselves from mainstream society and culture, MARS (25) interestingly identified the ‘graffiti lifestyle’ in its entirety as the primary motive ‘that actually is what makes one alienated I think like if that shit [graffiti] takes over their lives, you know they live like … they live really badly, dude, with like other people, crappy jobs, can’t keep jobs, I know a lot of writers that didn’t finish school’. RIOT (28) also held this view, but identified the graffiti lifestyle by saying: ‘we don’t do
things that everybody else does’. Exploring this response, it was found that various elements within the graffiti lifestyle, such as painting at night, listening to music different to that of mainstream society, participating in practices that differ from mainstream society and belonging to different social groups created this distance with mainstream society however: ‘we not aiming to do it … it just happens’ (RIOT, 28). Several graffiti writers were found to distance or remove themselves from conventional social norms this way: ‘Maybe because they themselves believe that graffiti writers should be alienated by society, so they do it themselves to themselves ... there’s a whole psychology behind it’ (MARS, 25). Importantly, linked to the literature, graffiti writers are found to socially distance themselves and their positions within mainstream society through acts of graffiti, accompanied by resistant beliefs or views which form part of their lifestyles (Chapter 2, Section 2.4). Interestingly, MURO (24) emphasised that distancing oneself due to practices often ‘alienated’ or ‘shunned’ within mainstream society remained the choice of every graffiti writer to pursue or not. CFOUR (24) elaborates on this choice: ‘I feel like it’s a choice, the mainstream [culture] is there if you wanna be part of the mainstream [culture] like you can be part of it’. Others like NOSK (24) believed one could only truly be accepted within mainstream culture through fully aspiring to integrate: ‘That’s the only way you can actually be accepted in the community [mainstream], accepted by people that you know, actually take an interest in it’. NAUS (23) indicates his position within mainstream society:

... like the black-sheep of society, like I’m not supposed to be there? No, of course I feel that, like there are lots of times when I feel like this is not what I am or who I am or what I’m supposed to be doing.

This response identifies the feeling of displacement by this individual within mainstream society, which resorts to him distancing himself as explained:

So then I am alienated in a way, like I’m not supposed to be here in a way ... it’s just that I don’t want to deal with what everyone else does, when I do something people feel like I’m the weird one, when in my own eyes it’s normal to me. It’s like this weird place I’m in when I think about it, like I’m not
actually supposed to be here but in a way I’m like welcome but then I’m the odd one out (NAUS, 23).

These views held by NAUS (23) clearly interpret his feelings of displacement towards mainstream society, as he identifies himself as the ‘weird’ one (Chapter 2, Section 2.4). A response by SEAK4 (20) justified his distant relationship with what he calls ‘popular culture’, due to his failure or lack of interest to ‘enjoy’ and ‘fit in’ to mainstream society which he believed simply relied on the imitation of ‘idols’. This interesting response again outlines the need for authenticity and originality by interviewees as a means of distancing and removing themselves from mainstream society.

For NAUS (23), a constant battle existed between legal and illegal graffiti, as he explored this idea by saying that:

… on our side [commercial graffiti] we still telling a message so we trying to do it in a more legal, more eye-attracting, more public, society accepting way of artwork, instead of showing just our names and revolting against the politics or whatever we still trying to show we are artists, we can do something better if you allow us.

However, and an addition to the conventional explanations of graffiti’s subcultural deviance from mainstream society, CFOUR (24) pointed out that this was in fact a controlled resistance:

Yeah, 100%, it does but it’s a controlled resistant you know, it’s not like totally rebelling or breaking the law … it’s … it’s artistic expression, so it’s like resisting normalities and being like one track minded or … seeing the world like we were taught we should see it. So I think yeah it does, but in a good way.

In a more reflective tone, TAPZ (32) believed: ‘Maybe it’s … romanticised by mainstream culture and a lot of people do it because it’s that you know, because they were influenced’.
Summarising the findings for this section, the resistance identity within the graffiti subculture is primarily aimed at institutions of authority and control, as well as opposing mainstream culture and the popularised elements existing within it. This resistance identity therefore serves graffiti writers with a means to differentiate from larger society, as indicated in everyday factors such as language, dress, music, behaviour and social groupings. Furthermore, this resistance identity is strengthened through the dangerous and destructive qualities attached to the graffiti subculture, as well as its mysterious nature that remains misunderstood by mainstream culture. The ambivalent relationship with society – that the graffiti subculture is oppositional and thus linked to mainstream society – came to the fore. Many interviewees expressed the view, albeit differently, that the graffiti fraternity can only exist if a mainstream society exists. In other words, without mainstream society, the graffiti subculture is not possible since it exists by virtue of its perceived and self-imposed marginalisation. They take pride in this marginalisation as this is a defining factor for them, but at the same time they oppose such marginalisation. One explanation offered is that such marginalisation from society is desirable; it provides an avenue for alternative forms of self-expression and alternative views to that of self-expression be put out in public. Even though this kind of reasoning is logical and is confirmed by the conventional understanding of the workings of graffiti in the literature study, this points to a sophisticated level of reflection about their position in society amongst many of the interviewees.

The subcultural relationship with mainstream culture is further explored through graffiti’s association with street culture and hip hop.

5.2.6 Topic 6: Identity, hip hop and street culture

The majority of graffiti writers identified graffiti writing as one element, alongside other artistic forms used for expression during the emerging hip hop movement (Chapter 2, Section 2.4), such as break-dancing or B-boying, rapping or MCing, and DJing (NOSK, 24; SEAK4, 20; MURO, 24; NAUS, 23; RIOT, 28; TAPZ, 32; MARS, 25; BIAS, 26). For MARS (25), the historical link with graffiti writing lay in:
… the original roots, New York, hip hop … it [graffiti writing] came part of a bigger package you know what I mean, there might not of even been graffiti if there wasn’t the hip hop movement you know within itself came with dancing, an art form, rapping … but it came with a whole bunch of stuff.

RIOT (28) pointed this out: ‘I think hip hop in a whole … you know you can put all those four elements of it into one thing … it’s a form of expression that’s what it is … all of the elements they all creative’. More importantly, two interviewees, namely NAUS (23) and CFOUR (24), explained that without graffiti, hip hop would not exist and vice versa, as NAUS (23) believed ‘they feed off each other’ which in turn identified the strong link existing between the two. NAUS (23) importantly explained this relationship as:

Hip hop in its day reflected your life story, what you lived through, real life experiences and that’s why hip hop is so common, so welcoming because people can relate to it. They can listen to it, they can feel it, they can breathe it … and the same with graffiti you can live it, breathe it, eat it, feel it … you know what I mean? That’s all linked together and that’s why they a part of each other.

However, it was identified by several of these graffiti writers that the graffiti subculture has over the years grown into its own independent movement, rooting out from its initial relationship with the hip hop culture. MARS (25) held the view: ‘It started with hip hop and then now it’s like its own thing out there. Definitely branched off and grown since then’. Similarly, MURO (24) believed: ‘It [graffiti] originally was to form part of the whole hip hop movement to work side by side … now it stands alone and is a thing on its own … so it’s very different because it’s growing into its own individual entity’. Therefore, this was a finding that identified graffiti as evolving into an independent movement, or as interviewees called it, an ‘entity’ (MARS, 25; LUNAR, 26; MURO, 24). It was further found by interviewees that graffiti writing was drastically different to other hip hop elements in terms of its nature, as explained by MARS (25):
... actually there’s a lot of like bad intentions involved in graffiti I mean starting off doing something seen as wrong you know what I mean? So … but then rap and break-dancing they not really breaking the law or doing anything wrong per say.

Like ZESTA (30), other interviewees believed that both movements remain established side by side: ‘But I do not believe graffiti is exclusively practised by people that are attracted to the hip hop culture’. This view importantly outlines the evolution of graffiti writing into a realm where the historical link and birth of graffiti through the hip hop culture are dissolved. SEAK4 (20) believes this was simply a matter of personal preference, because belonging to the graffiti subculture could be independent of the hip hop culture and its elements in contemporary times. SEAK4 (20) believes both the graffiti subculture and hip hop culture cross paths at times, but ‘to say that they both on a parallel straight line, no ... I wouldn’t go as far as to say that’ NOSK (24). He interestingly identified a similarity between them, saying:

    I would say the mindset, the state of mind are very similar ... like a graffiti writer about to take a blank canvas, take a wall, to a break-dancer about to get on the dance floor that’s his blank canvas, that’s something he’s about to create ... his style, he’s about to create his movement.

This view is especially important in identifying the creative and expressive qualities which are pertinent within graffiti, as well as hip hop elements of break-dancing, rapping and mixing of musical sounds (Chapter 2, Section 2.4). NAUS (23) identified the commonality that exists between the graffiti subculture and the hip hop culture, stating:

    ... we doing it [graffiti] all to hip hop, and it’s not just us like saying fuck the media or fuck politics it’s also just like the culture of hip hop, the way people are, the mind-set, the down to earthiness of hip hop artists or hip hop people, or hip hop listeners.

In fact, the street culture connection is identified by MARS (25) in media portrayals and depictions of the graffiti subculture and its practices by various media outlets, saying: ‘of
course ... 100% like I said in the beginning I saw fucking guys drinking beer and smoking weed ... and spray painting as well'. MARS (25) discussed the image of graffiti being especially appealing through its association with gang life, in this case graffiti crews (Chapter 2, Section 2.3), saying: ‘I mean it is like a gangster thing for me ... you have your crew, you join a crew or they pick you up’. Very importantly, the view by MURO (24) grounded the luring image of graffiti with the idea that ‘you can’t be “cool” until you doing bad ... or deviant [behaviour]’. In this case, the term ‘cool’ may be derived from the need to be accepted or noticed by participating in practices or trends associated with shocking and exaggerated meanings or portrayals, which eventually serve as new identity markers (Chapter 2, Section 2.4). Interestingly, this exact ‘cool’ image, which is so luring, questions the authenticity of emerging graffiti generations in terms of their participation and dedication within the graffiti environment. LUNAR (26) identified this image: ‘It [graffiti] is like a cool thing to do, or the in-thing to do or they [young graffiti generations] trying to be gangster or hard-core’.

I’ve always felt at home with them [graffiti writers] I’ve always felt like I could share things with people with the same mind-set as what I have, and it’s just something that I’ve always been drawn to like subconsciously, it’s something that’s luring ... subconsciously it attracts me, it just brings me in ... like a higher power or some other force it’s bringing me in, and it’s just I can’t help it but it is very luring to me (NAUS, 23).

Linked to this deviance, TAPZ (32) favours elements within graffiti – such as danger and violence – to be very thrilling and enticing for him and closely related to the concept of street culture (Chapter 2, Section 2.3). This concept is importantly adopted by populations that resort to identify with aspects such as danger and violence in an attempt to establish personal dignity and respect.

The findings for this section identify the historical link between graffiti and hip hop developing alongside one another, but also sharing the elements of creativity, expression and resisting mainstream societal norms. Both graffiti and hip hop were identified as providing environments for the creation of identities and are closely related
to the notion of street culture through luring aspects such as gangs or crews, danger and violence.

**5.2.7 Summary: ‘real’ graffiti**

In this section, it was confirmed by the interviewees that they entered the subculture via different routes. Their artistic nature and natural critical distance from and scepticism of mainstream culture provided them with a natural inclination towards subcultures. Some entered the graffiti subculture via hip hop; some were enticed via the media and the internet, some through skateboarding, the social circles in which individuals were involved and some started becoming interested by noticing the work of graffiti writers in various areas of Johannesburg.

The roots of graffiti were recognised by all interviewees as linked to the actions of TAKI 183 in New York in the 1970s, first as a means of expression, but later as validation of the self through being recognised by peers and the public. However, some interviewees mentioned that graffiti was translated locally as first being political – coinciding with the resistance against mainstream society during the apartheid time – and present indications are that politics play out on a personal level; namely, that of self-validation more than politics on a wider scale. However, this does not mean that street graffiti does not honour its resistance against mainstream society. Therefore, as some interviewees pointed out, a localised version of graffiti emerges in South Africa, adapted and moulded to suit the requirements of its graffiti writers.

Aspects of graffiti that are appreciated by interviewees are: the expression of the self in a public way; the help by graffiti to see the world in more than one way; confidence that is gained if they express themselves publicly and their peers validate their work; the ability to experiment anonymously with new styles without the fear of rejection and they find it therapeutic and stress-releasing to be creatively involved in expressing themselves through graffiti. In fact, many find graffiti relaxing and a mechanism to escape the stresses of daily life. Brotherhood or social bonds are also immensely important for affirmation, recognition and validation of the self.
Graffiti writers confirmed the resistance identity of graffiti and that it deliberately positions itself in a subcultural identity and differentiates members through practice and attitude. The nature of this resistance identity opposes institutions of authority within mainstream society and the popularised and idolised elements within mainstream culture. The graffiti writers interviewed had consciously chosen to lead different and separate lifestyles to those found within mainstream culture through elements such as language, dress, music, behaviour and social contacts. This means that these individuals have intentionally made the choice to distance themselves from feelings of displacement in a range of lifestyle practices and views that remain on the peripheries of mainstream society. In their graffiti crews, they find the acceptance of peers that they need, and they do not need to get affirmation from society – other than seeing them as different. For the Johannesburg commercial graffiti writers who were interviewed, the roots of graffiti lie in its opposition and resistance to mainstream society and its characteristics which are forced upon them. Some feel that they are fully at home if inhabiting the subculture, whilst some indicate that they lead a ‘double life’ and that is for them a prime differentiating factor. It seems as though many revel in their otherness, but they manage to keep it to themselves; this makes them more mysterious and secretive. It seems that graffiti writers are, albeit in different ways, conscious about the ambivalent relationship with mainstream society. One respondent indicated a mutual beneficial influential relationship between mainstream society and the graffiti subculture, as the one influences the other: mainstream society incorporates interesting visual elements of graffiti and graffiti writers use that to enrich themselves. However, this does not mean that the natural opposition to mainstream society is not honoured.

The Johannesburg commercial graffiti writers interviewed also confirmed the oppositional, deviant or resistance identity of graffiti that was outlined in the literature study. Interestingly, many interviewees revelled in the ‘double life’ they are secretly living, which adds to an allure of mysteriousness. However, they do not all live this ‘double life’ in the same ways; it seems that those closer to the resistance identity seem not to incorporate as many ideals of mainstream society into their identities as those who partake more avidly in commercial graffiti. Graffiti writers who are not so far on the
margins of mainstream society do not stand so close to street culture and the shared ideals of hip hop and graffiti. The link between hip hop and graffiti was confirmed in this study, although graffiti writers were quick to point out that there is not a complete overlap between the two subcultures. Common threads in creativity, expression and resistance tie both graffiti and hip hop, but the evolution of each over time has eroded the once close link.

A rather important finding in this section of the study is that some commercial graffiti writers in Johannesburg are acutely aware of their seemingly ‘outsider’ perspective or critical reflection on the practices of the younger illegal graffiti writers. It seems that some of the older and commercially established graffiti writers think much about the influence of commercial work on stylistic elements of their work and that a subculture always remains part of the mainstream culture (albeit establishing itself on the margins due to deliberate resistance-oriented attitudes, behaviours and practices). In this vein, one respondent thought that some graffiti writers may actually have romanticised mainstream society due to their inward focus on their own subculture.

Theme 1 established that the sample of graffiti writers indeed supports the conventional understanding of ‘real’ graffiti; in fact, as a collective, they are quite knowledgeable about the history and true essence of graffiti. Their insights are significant and nuance the existing body of knowledge in the field. The rest of this chapter is devoted to presenting this group of graffiti writers’ views on commercial graffiti.

5.3 THEME 2: COMMERCIAL GRAFFITI

This theme explores how Johannesburg graffiti writers view the fact that they now engage in commercial graffiti. The information gathered here is translated into the interview guide to elicit the views around the mainstreaming of the graffiti subculture. This theme investigates the reasons for participation in commercial graffiti work, commercial graffiti opportunities as benefitting or restraining graffiti, commercial graffiti
as changing the real essence of graffiti, the threat of a popularised image of graffiti and the changing dynamics of graffiti due to commercialisation.

**5.3.1 Topic 1: Reasons why graffiti writers do commercial work**

Since all the interviewees in this study engage in commercial graffiti opportunities, this section has the opportunity to explore, from an ‘insider’ perspective, the reasons why they take on commercial work. As expected, all interviewees confirm that they do commercial graffiti work for financial reasons. As SEAK4 (20) said: ‘I’m just doing it because I need the money, there’s no alter motive to it, I just need that cash’, and NAUS (23) suggested: ‘I get an income from it now; I can pay my bills, debts and everything ... that’s why I love it’. In fact SEAK4 (20) said: ‘It’s grey in the terms of like, shit, I don’t know a single writer that wouldn’t pick a commission job as soon as it’s offered’. LUNAR (26) believed some commercial writers ‘just themselves think that they like ... they actually shouldn’t be doing what they doing but then in a way I don’t know like now everyone ... money is kind of what drives everyone these days’.

However, the matter is not that simple as all of them nuanced this view in different ways. ZESTA (30) thought that one cannot always resist mainstream culture: ‘If you can’t beat them, join them’, which may be argued to emphasise the increased number of graffiti writers turning to commercial opportunities. Although TAPZ (32) admitted that his participation is purely based on taking advantage of the growing trend of the marketplace incorporating the visual elements of graffiti, he said: ‘I do commissions because I feel like at least if I’m gonna be in that culture [commercial] I should ... I should be getting rewards from it and then sort of grow’. In other words, he does not necessarily see commercial work purely for financial gain, but he is of the opinion that it might be an opportunity for personal growth. This idea is extended by MURO (24) who aims to ultimately establish a commercial name for himself through his artistic abilities. This is not altogether dissimilar from the initial idea that graffiti writers want to get up and make the public aware of them and, of course, achieve fame amongst their peers. On the other hand, no freelance ‘artist’ without a name would be hired, and it is thus necessary to make a name for oneself in the marketplace. However, this is not always
easy, and neither is it easy to do commercial work, especially large-scale commissioned graffiti work. BIAS (26) noted: ‘A lot of work actually to be involved in the commission thing ... it’s not the easiest thing’, and this was further complicated as he believes; ‘not everyone has the talent even if they think they do’.

In other words, reasons to do commercial work range from the dire situation of not being able to make ends meet if one does not earn a living, to seeing opportunities of growth, and realising that commissioned work is only available within the constraints of the clients’ requirements and that it is not all that free – and therefore not so easy.

Another very interesting point of view is that excelling in commercial work may actually be rewarding. In this vein, CFOUR (24) believes that society would be more accepting of graffiti through clothing brands largely influenced by graffiti styles and fonts, stating: ‘It [clothing] becomes something beautiful, something you can sell to someone and you know ... something someone can appreciate’.

Expanding on this idea, commercial graffiti may positively change mainstream society’s perception of graffiti as mere vandalism and destruction (as was argued in Chapter 3, Section 3.4). NAUS (23) further outlined the importance of educating and creating awareness of graffiti practices within society:

... we not trying to follow like a brand or sell something to you, we trying to send a message, and that’s where the line is for myself, that’s where I create. We not trying to get money out of you, we just trying to get some awareness from you, to understand what we do, where we from, like what we about pretty much.

This is a significant viewpoint for this study as it adds to the existing literature about graffiti in the sense that NAUS feels that recognition, understanding and appreciation may be gained from commercial graffiti work. Again, this is not altogether different from the acceptance of peers that real graffiti writers are after.
In addition, with regard to the relationship with mainstream society, NAUS (23) strongly believes that purely participating in commissioned graffiti work could serve to educate the mainstream public:

People just think graffiti is just spray paint on a wall, but commission work is actually like artistic for me it’s something more than just spraying, it's more painting it’s just that I’m using aerosol as a my brush ... and I’m creating my art, the walls are my canvas.

This means that NAUS engages with the idea that commercial work may perhaps in some ways educate society to ‘understand what graffiti is about’, and that might suggest that society recognises graffiti as valuable, not only in a commercial sense. This might change misleading and negative perceptions of graffiti to more positive outlooks; RIOT (28) believes graffiti would simply be gaining the ‘recognition’ and ‘acknowledgement’ it deserves.

In summary, the findings of this section confirm that graffiti writers undertake commercial work for financial reasons. However, commercial work may provide opportunities for growth, but it is not always as easy to do commercial work. It may also sharpen artistic skills, alter the public’s negative views of graffiti and even afford commercial graffiti writers with public recognition and appreciation. The latter are elements which are also valued in real graffiti crews, but this time it is the public and not only shared by an in-group or ‘secret society’.

The next section explores the nature of commercial graffiti as either benefiting or restraining the practices of graffiti writers, ultimately changing the meaning of their work.

5.3.2 Topic 2: Commercial opportunities as benefitting or restraining graffiti

This section explores the advantages and disadvantages of commercial graffiti work to determine whether the interviewees think the meaning within graffiti is essentially impacted or altered.
MARS (25) thought that commercial graffiti ‘opened new doors’ for him. Various such new opportunities exist.

One such gain is that commissioned and commercial graffiti creates meaning for interviewees like CFOUR (24), who says that: ‘People appreciate my work other than graffiti writers … people who aren’t into graffiti appreciate what I do’. TAPZ (32) added to this view: ‘I feel like I’m giving something different, I’m giving a different point of view to the world then what’s already there’. LUNAR (26) identified commercial graffiti as a passion, stating: ‘I wouldn’t do commercial graffiti if I didn’t want … like if I had a job I would just say no if I didn’t want to do it’, further identifying the nature of commercial graffiti as more pleasurable and enjoyable.

NAUS (23) identified the benefit of commercial graffiti work in increasing his exposure:

I’ve met people, I’ve networked, I’ve done jobs for ADIDAS and all around, like companies and bedrooms and even from that heading to corporate designs, and graphic designs and illustrations … so it’s opened up doors for me by doing commission work.

… when you painting at that stage [commercial] like people … you do their ideas … you know that’s like the difference between a job and your own stuff, you know no one’s gonna pay you to do your own name (MARS, 25).

Expanding on the exposure created by commercial and commission graffiti, RIOT (28) had an extensive list of commissioned work for clients like Sprite, Coca Cola, Nik-Naks, and Edu-Loan, as well as interesting opportunities in the ‘Tsotsi’ movie, and various other spaces ranging from offices, clubs, pubs, schools and crèches.

Interestingly, the response elicited by MARS (25) identified commissioned graffiti work as a means for providing him with an alternative lifestyle he discussed:

… you wanna be like working and living at the same time … and that’s sort of what graffiti jobs allow you to do that this present time … it’s opened up some
doors ... and closed some doors like 9-5 [everyday common job] it closed that
door, ha-ha.

This finding is important in understanding the flexible nature which commissioned graffiti
work provides, essentially allowing this interviewee more freedom in managing time, as
well as distancing himself from the everyday common job in mainstream society.
ZESTA (30) describes his involvement in various challenging and complex projects
funded by extensive budgets and large corporations, which offered the opportunity to
expand on graffiti skills and techniques and participate in unique work situations:

I also feel that the work I do by request helps me to keep challenging myself
with new subject matter and the different things that people ask for. I have to
say that it has liberated me and that it makes everything I paint more
meaningful.

In considering the various responses, commercial and commissioned graffiti exposes
these interviewees to a variety of challenges, ultimately satisfying their graffiti talents
and adding to their graffiti passions. NOSK (24) expanded on this finding by saying:

… when I do commission work it’s like ... I still have every part of my art, my
soul, my everything it’s still there. It doesn’t take anything away from me
because I’m still doing originally what I enjoy doing ... what I’m passionate
about.

LUNAR (26) believes commission graffiti work was an important opportunity to learn
about himself and his strengths and weaknesses; it built personal and business
relationships and expanded one’s own ideas and those of other individuals: ‘So in a
way, it’s broadening my graffiti … talent I guess. I like graffiti commissions but I can see
if you do it all the time, you’ll hate it’.

Other beneficial qualities gained from commercial graffiti work emerged: the acquisition
of new techniques and skills, expanded knowledge and creativity (NOSK, 24; SEAK4,
20; RIOT, 28; MURO, 24; LUNAR, 26) and development of one’s style (SEAK4, 20;
RIOT, 28). TAPZ (32) indicated that commercial graffiti allows individuals to expand and challenge existing graffiti skills and techniques:

… push start the artistic side via the financial gain really. But the money in it, it’s just … it’s just a bonus really. I find it more … more challenging and more rewarding to do the commissions for an artistic side than anything else really, a bit more widely than the money actually.

In terms of acquiring new skills, RIOT (28) maintained the view that one’s capabilities were always tested by the expectations and requirements of a job: ‘If you are not learning new things then what’s the point of painting? You know you gotta learn new stuff every time you paint’. Adding his view, SEAK4 (20) regarded this process as expanding his horizons and broadening his perspective through practising things he had never done before. NOSK (24) importantly identified the nature of commercial graffiti as playing a beneficial role in one’s creativity and imagination:

It [commercial graffiti] sort of takes you somewhere else for a moment, it takes you away from what you would normally do and you sort of opening up a new era, a new door, a new space to something that you wouldn’t normally have thought of.

This finding is significant as it indicates that commercial graffiti writers are growing in creativity, skills and various capabilities. Further expanding on this finding, TAPZ (32) emphasised that commercial graffiti pushed his imagination and boundaries: ‘It sort of gets you painting things that you wouldn’t otherwise be painting’. ZESTA (30) adds: ‘Personally the commissioned graffiti work I do enables all the work I do for myself and continually upgrades my abilities or skills’.

On the downside, many interviewees indicated that it is hard to balance real and commercial graffiti, but on the upside, it seems that many are consciously working to understand this duality. The creative and artistic elements made available through commercial graffiti production are described by TAPZ (32), who very importantly stated: ‘In my brain it’s [commercial graffiti] a completely separate thing … it helped me do
better graffiti and the graffiti helped me do better … commissions [commercial graffiti]'. Similarly, NAUS (23) also explored his understanding of this notion, adding that:

   I love getting my name up [building a reputation] but still there’s that other half of me that wants to progress is that I’m dealing with like a split personality in a way … in the old way of graffiti but I’m still trying to move into the new way and accommodate both sides at the same time.

TAPZ (32) describes his participation in commercial work as the one side of his brain having no influence over his traditional graffiti skills: ‘It’s a different side of my brain basically’. This is a significant finding, as this research project had the opportunity to explore this ‘split-personality’ of commercial graffiti writers when they straddle the divide between their clients’ prescriptions and their own individual expression, skills and creativity.

Another negative impact of commercial work is that one can be stylistically weakened when compared to real graffiti which allowed a greater creativity, explaining commercial work as:

   … nothing to do with you, not your style, not your input, not your concept (MARS, 25).

   … it’s like I’m being forced to do something for someone and I can’t relate to it (LUNAR, 26).

   It’s not an expression of myself; it’s an expression of myself for someone else and why should I give them that? (BIAS, 26).

   … so in a way the guy who brings the style that’s wanted by the business will get the job in the end” (LUNAR, 26).

Similarly, CFOUR (24) identified this restraint as aiming to please the expectations of his market, while continuing on his own path of creativity: ‘My work changes a lot … it
doesn’t become me anymore’. BIAS (26) importantly added his view and felt even stronger as he thought commercial work was ‘de-motivating’:

If someone asks me to do something and I have to paint something for them that isn’t me. Like painting someone else’s thing I don’t see it as a challenge even, I don’t even feel like amp[ed] [excited] to challenge this or like take this on and do it, it makes me withdraw more.

This may even be that: ‘In a lot of ways, graffiti jobs, commercial shit is like … I don’t see it as graffiti’ (MARS, 25), which is linked to LUNAR (26) who explained:

… the more I’ve been doing commercial graffiti the more I’m losing myself … like I’m losing the love for it.

… why I paint now it’s not just for fun anymore and in a sense it’s impacted me that I’m starting to lose myself in a way. But I’m not losing myself because I’m aware of what’s happening, so I don’t lose myself fully but I am losing myself in the sense that I need to make money and I need to live off my art, and as an artist that’s what we do (NAUS, 23).

In contrast, more positive views of two interviewees identified commercial graffiti as never limiting their creativity:

It has always been luckily … it’s been … I’ve been given the freedom of sharing my art (NOSK, 24).

If you are lucky enough to have those people that are just like do whatever you want, let your thread of inspiration just let it run, just do whatever (SEAK, 20).

MARS (25) strongly believed a graffiti writer should be involved in both commercial and traditional graffiti practices which only add to one’s experience. NOSK (24) importantly added his view to the limitations of commercial graffiti writers, saying that:
I find that a lot of commercial writers, if you paint with them and you actually go and do art with them it’s almost like ... they limited. They got a set image in their head ... and like real graffiti writers they don’t, it’s almost like they haven’t set any limitations for themselves so there’s always space for them to expand.

This view importantly implies that commercial graffiti writers are restricted in terms of their creativity and imagination due to the nature and requirements of participating in commercial graffiti work.

Another aspect of commercial work is that complex and difficult relationships are often established between clients and graffiti writers. NAUS (23) at times felt pressured, explaining that clients may dislike the final work and often refuse to pay:

So you always have to accommodate people, and you always have to tip-toe and walk on eggs shells around people, and it’s only because money is involved. If money wasn’t involved the passion would be there and nothing would matter because that’s all you would care about is your art.

MARS (25) added to this relationship by saying: ‘I can honestly say, I don’t even put a 100% into my graff jobs, it’s not ... you’re not excited about it, you got some asshole telling you what to do and that’s it you know’. In terms of certain jobs MARS (25) undertook, he says: ‘It’s tedious, the people are never happy because the lines were never straight enough’. NAUS (23) strongly contested that: ‘Graffiti writers will always be taken advantage of; they will always be walked over’. However, he offered a solution by stating:

... it’s how you apply that knowledge of knowing that you could fail and knowing how to adapt to that and change it to your advantage and make sure that you know it’s not just about the money.

Other restraints tied to commercial graffiti work emerged as forms of payment, which NAUS (23) at times was forced to compromise due to ‘the price is high for what you do
and people don’t wanna pay for that’. Importantly, NAUS (23) describes the challenging situations found within commercial graffiti work due to the issue of money:

… because money is involved there’s certain things I gotta do, I gotta word things right, I gotta approach situations differently, I got to manage things, I got to … even just drawing from … even just the visual like draw has to be right otherwise the client will decline me and I lose the money and at the end of the day.

LUNAR (26) was quick to stress the planning stages essential for commission graffiti, which involve the careful detailing as well as client input for their guaranteed satisfaction. Holding this same view, NAUS (23) stated: ‘I put that extra effort in to show people what their wall could look like because money is involved’.

Other interesting responses explored the general public’s lack of understanding for commercial graffiti work in its entirety; a point ZESTA (30) emphasised strongly:

I must admit that every time I have received a graffiti brief I have been asked to ‘tone it down’ and ‘make things more legible’, and that is always even after I thought I had made it very simple and minimally styled. So it seems that people don’t actually know the first fucking thing about graffiti. Even if the brief is ‘graffiti’, most of the time it ends up being more design oriented.

The view expressed here is a very important finding for understanding the image of commercial graffiti created by mainstream society, which interviewees LUNAR (26) and TAPZ (32) refer to as ‘cliché graffiti’ through maintaining a particular look aimed at mainstream consumption and enjoyment. This is in line with arguments presented in Chapter 3, Section 3.4.3, around how the process of mainstreaming of stylistic elements of a subculture work. This look of commercial graffiti is identified by BIAS (26) as simplistic in nature with bright colours and bubbles that satisfy clients as he explains: Seriously, that’s because they don’t get it’. The fact that mainstream culture did not have a clear idea around the visual nature of graffiti writing was pointed out by LUNAR (26) who said: ‘Whoever the client is all they want is graffiti so it doesn’t matter who you
are and what graffiti you give them, as long as you give them graffiti they’ll be happy’. In terms of certain types of graffiti writing, MARS (25) indicated that a large portion of graffiti is regarded as ugly, except for the big colourful murals’, clearly pointing to the lack of knowledge and interest for other aspects of graffiti writing. Adding to this lack of understanding by mainstream culture and its masses, SEAK4 (20) stated:

... that’s kind of a sad thing to talk about because you know why is it only that a certain section of our society can actually understand and appreciate graffiti, compared to those that just know it and they like ‘oh it’s just vandalism’.

For TAPZ (32), commercial graffiti requirements differ according to the requirements and preferences of clients, ranging from requests he called ‘ridiculous’, to ‘really easy for me to do and I thought it was shit and they [clients] loved it’. This interviewee found a large portion of commercial work to be irritating, but he explained: ‘It never works out like that, like you have to do the annoying stuff as well’ (TAPZ, 32).

Many interviewees spoke about the scale of financial reward. In most cases, interviewees thought that commercial graffiti would not be a viable career path, but rather a temporary means of survival (SEAK4, 20; MARS, 25; TAPZ, 32). In terms of creating a career through commercial graffiti opportunities, TAPZ (32) explained: ‘You can’t only do it [commercial graffiti work], you know it’s sort of ... it ... puts in a little bit here and there that you need financially but it will never be a replacement for ... doing other work ... you don’t get that much financial reward out of it’ (TAPZ, 32). MARS (25) explains that: ‘For me I just keep them separate, you know I got my graffiti ideas ... and then there’s like my job and I got to fulfil it for that’. This means that commercial graffiti cannot purely be relied on as a means of generating a fixed income.

This finding is significant in highlighting the seemingly ambivalent relationship that exists between real and commercial graffiti. It identifies that adaptations like this ‘split-personality’ serve as mechanisms for graffiti writers to justify and survive their dual passion. This helps them balance the will of their clients and of their own creative
impetus. Interestingly, this coping mechanism is consciously used and enables some interviewees to consider the benefits of commercial graffiti; for example, financial payment and an enhanced self-worth due to being able to sustain oneself, increased exposure and business opportunities, expanded graffiti skills and techniques, an alternative lifestyle and flexibility, and expanded and developed creativity and imagination. Another significant finding is that commercial graffiti is only a temporary means of generating and income and such contract work does not compare well to a fixed income. It is also a very competitive market in which to work. In addition, graffiti writers need to down-tone their creativity and make it more ‘pretty’ to satisfy their clients. However, this may, in the long run, influence their style negatively. Other difficulties experienced by commercial graffiti writers are the complex and difficult relationships with clients, tedious and exhausting work, unrealistic requests and a general lack of understanding by mainstream society about graffiti. Graffiti as a medium for income was found not to be sufficient for survival, leading many graffiti writers to accept full-time work elsewhere. From the answers given in interviews, it is clear that commercial graffiti may impact drastically on the technique of practising graffiti. However, the techniques used in commercial work should not only be seen as negative, but in fact, as an opportunity to develop new styles. In other words, it is an oversimplification to think that commercial work is oppositional to real graffiti.

The next topic will explore whether these commercial graffiti opportunities change the true essence of graffiti writing.

5.3.3 Topic 3: Commercial graffiti changing the ‘real’ essence of graffiti

This section focuses on the perceived impact of commercial graffiti on real graffiti. The majority of interviewees believed commercial graffiti opportunities altered the true essence of graffiti writing. SEAK4 (20) believes graffiti writers are now primarily focusing on commercial jobs and earning incomes. BIAS (26) disagrees:

It’s just another way of making money ... commissions are something that are so separate from the graffiti thing, like the graffiti thing is so underground, it’s
so like between graffiti artists, but as soon as you start moving over from doing underground ... it’s like totally not graffiti, it’s like separate completely.

TAPZ (32) argued that the major cause for the decline in the presence of graffiti is that large numbers of graffiti writers are *selling-out*. In this vein NAUS (23) said:

So, though it’s [graffiti writing] changed and that it’s progressing into something bigger ... but not better. It’s growing but for me like the real writers are staying in the underground and they not trying to make a loud noise [expose themselves] about who they are in a way, they just want their artwork to speak for itself. Interestingly, CFOUR (24) referred to the essence of graffiti as ‘back in the day’ which he believed was solely based on self-expression and ‘making a name’, explaining:

... nowadays you get a lot of writers doing jobs or like writers who make their work more appealing to the public ... like in order for them to get like commissions ... which there’s nothing wrong with commissions I mean we all have to eat we all have to make money, but at the same time, it’s like you have to look at what it does to the subculture.

A rather important view was held by SEAK4 (20) saying that the more senior real graffiti writers (typically the *kings*) increasingly do commercial work and neglect their role-modelling and inspirational roles for newcomers to graffiti; in fact, many seem to totally leave the *underground* world of graffiti. SEAK4 (20) added that this makes an impact on the emerging generations within the graffiti environment:

I’m a bit torn with the subject because you know I have a bit of loss of respect for guys [graffiti writers] that only you know ... do commission work to get by because I think if they using their talent with the paint can and they can do whatever ... they totally stray from the whole graffiti scene [environment].

This response identifies commercial graffiti opportunities as becoming possible threats to the essence of graffiti through witnessing experienced and established graffiti writers
who are pursuing commercial interests in a manner he called ‘follow the leader’, ultimately straying from their graffiti roots (SEAK4, 20). Very importantly, this identified the process of graffiti writers at some point in their lives, relying on their skills to produce an income. TAPZ (32) argued against this commercial pursuit:

I wish, in fact, if I could say anything, I wish more people would not ... I wish that more people would be graffiti writers that they claim to be and leave the commercial side, because honestly you not gonna make that much money. So, if you not gonna, do it for your own fun, then don’t fuck around.

This view by TAPZ discourages the trend of graffiti writers, who regard themselves as real, from moving into the commercial realm of graffiti. BIAS (26) strongly agreed with this view:

… you get so stuck into working ... and it’s not working, graffiti it’s not work, it’s fun’ and “It just feels like, by doing commissions and that kind of stuff you are filling yourself into the mainstream [culture].

… it’s almost like a 24 hour job, you take it up and soon you’ll have no time for yourself, and it will be all about money and about doing it for commercialism (NOSK, 24).

… it’s almost like branding yourself but then in a way you don’t move yourself into commercialism because now you keeping the love for it and the passion because you still expressing yourself ... I’m scared to do graffiti as a job because I think I would start to hate it (LUNAR, 26).

NOSK (24) takes the argument further: ‘I guess if you can get paid for doing what you passionate about you ... might have to sort of sacrifice a bit of yourself in order to do it’.

Considering the various views, it was also identified that the move into commercial graffiti was not necessarily all negative. The views of NAUS (23) identified this as a natural move from the historical graffiti messages into a more acceptable form of art
within society. In this case, he gains a greater meaning from simply *getting his name up* and obtaining so called *fame*, into creating something that people enjoy and appreciate, namely, ‘a bigger picture in my eyes’ (NAUS, 23). The response by RIOT (28) positively identified this move as ‘some graffiti writers think that … it takes away … depending on how many jobs you do … it’s like you selling your creative side, but I don’t believe that at all’. Similarly, TAPZ (32) emphasised that as long as the need to create a name through *getting up* remained, then the impact of commercial graffiti on real graffiti would not be an issue. SEAK4 (19) justified his need to pursue commercial graffiti opportunities:

... it kind of baffles me to see graffiti artists that are like 'no, we won't do commercial work because you know it's deviating from the roots of graffiti' ... yes it is, but at the end of the day, its survival of the fittest, you know.

A very important response by NAUS (23) identified the situation in which graffiti writers abandon true graffiti ideals in search of commercial opportunities; they are often labelled as *sell-outs* for pursuing such opportunities. This is discussed in greater detail by NAUS (23):

I'm maybe considered a sell-out, but at least I'm doing something with myself, I don't care what people say, I got into this for myself ... it's myself upgrading, it's myself progressing in life ... commercial or commission graffiti is what I am and for me it's an eye opener, I love to bring that feeling to people that [they] don't understand what can be done with graffiti.

The move of graffiti writers into commercial environments is greatly debated and often criticised. NAUS (23) admits to his participation and focus on commercial graffiti, justifying his involvement as a means of expanding and growing within his own creativity and educating others in the process.

In response, MURO (24) pointed out that graffiti could not be exploited: 'It changed the quality and for me the type of person I want to present myself as ... or the kind of image of graffiti so ... it hasn’t changed graffiti'. Adding to MURO’s view that commercial
pursuits cannot change a person and thus have no impact on graffiti – ‘graffiti is people, not paint – NOSK (24) did not consider commercialisation as a serious threat to graffiti:

It’s like ... yes the outside world has their version of it, their thought on it but from the commercial side of it. I guess it does have impact on it and those that actually really try and stick to the roots will try and push harder. But I do think there is a lot of people that will not allow it to become a serious impact to them.

LUNAR (26) believes that the motives or intentions of graffiti writers in commercial work varied, some being primarily focused on financial aspects: ‘You could say they milk [drain] it, well they just get into that and then they lose the true art form’, but identified that other graffiti writers would use this option to make money alongside their personal work which enabled both aspects to benefit. Furthermore, RIOT (28) and LUNAR (26) both believed that graffiti writers who cannot make it in the commercial world are jealous of those who can and this inflamed the idea of sell-outs even more.

This envy is explained by RIOT (28), who points out that certain graffiti writers have ‘visual differences’ which make their graffiti work more appealing to the tastes of mainstream masses:

It comes down to people’s work ... is liked as visual difference commercially and others aren’t ... and the people that aren’t are more likely to be jealous because the guys that are becoming more commercial and are more seen and more used for advertising are getting recognised more.

This finding identifies that the styles of specific graffiti writers can be more appealing to a commercial market, offering these graffiti writers more recognition and exposure compared to others who follow more traditional graffiti practices.

In summary of the key findings, a number of views identified commercial graffiti as a risk to the essence of graffiti, especially by graffiti writers focusing on commissioned graffiti while sacrificing their graffiti talent and creativity to appeal to commercial audiences.
They expose and make the once secretive and underground graffiti subculture more accessible to the masses and the assimilation of established graffiti writers, often kings, who cease to be role models for newcomers to graffiti. It was found that graffiti as a daily job would ruin its nature and meaning with graffiti writers forming part of mainstream society they originally opposed and resisted. Significantly, the term sell-outs brands and criticises graffiti writers who move into commercial graffiti. However, it is believed to be a process of upgrading oneself through expanding and growing in creativity, whilst educating society. The move into commercial graffiti was simply viewed as evolving from a historical expression into a more artistic and educative role for society. It was furthermore identified that the ability to juggle real and commercial graffiti practices and talents was essential in gaining a balance between creating a name for graffiti writers while being involved in commercial graffiti work. A very interesting finding is what one interviewee said, when explaining why the term sell-outs is used out of jealously, that some graffiti writers’ styles lend themselves naturally to commercial work when compared to the graffiti styles of others.

The next topic explores the existing threat for graffiti writing which has emerged in recent times as being associated as hip and cool through its commercialisation.

5.3.4 Topic 4: The threat of a popularised image of graffiti

This section explores the possible threat to graffiti through a remoulded hip and cool image made more acceptable to mainstream society audiences. In the literature (Chapter 3, Section 3.3), it was argued that mainstream culture incorporates certain dimensions of subcultures that are perceived as new sources of identity or that signify difference.

MARS (25) points out that the deviant graffiti identity which opposes mainstream culture values and norms is essentially transformed through commercial graffiti:

… they [mainstream society] marketing that exact thing of breaking away from that [mainstream society], you know so they using it to get kids to buy their products so like - go out there and be a bad-ass.
… that ‘bad-ass’ style, that street style is being pushed and has a market (MURO, 24).

I’d hate it to be killed and become mainstream [culture] because then it loses its meaning of being an art form that’s against mainstream I guess (LUNAR, 26).

… absorbing the parts of it [subcultures] without really caring about what it is, or giving back to it, just using it for your own intentions basically (TAPZ, 32).

LUNAR (26) believes this was simply consuming the meaning contained within graffiti writing: ‘Some people just commercialise graffiti too much and then it’s gonna become just a cool thing, just to be cool and then there’s no meaning behind it there’s no thought process’. This means that mainstream society and culture essentially sell back the deviance-from-mainstream characteristic of real graffiti that wanted to break away from mainstream norms and values. By implication, the process of mainstreaming here results in subcultural meanings being essentially changed and adapted through mass producers. This illustrates the process of mainstreaming indicated in Chapter 3, Section 3.3. TAPZ (32) identifies this as a process that would never give back or allow subcultures to grow, instead: ‘They just abuse it in that way’. In this case, the values, beliefs and aesthetics of subcultures are absorbed into mainstream culture and marketed, and they eventually cease to be different or shocking as originally viewed. Importantly, this finding is traced back to the notion of ‘commodity fetish’ in the literature, which eventually leads to subcultures becoming distanced from their origins, resources and meanings due to their commercialisation (Chapter 3, Section 3.3). As was argued in Chapter 3, Section 3.3, this can take power away from the subculture.

It was further identified that prime mainstream interest lay in the visual attributes of graffiti rather than the meaning contained within the graffiti subculture (Chapter 3, Section 3.4). In this sense, the literature outlined the graffiti style as playing an
important part in transmitting a sense of ‘urban coolness’ and ‘street aesthetic’ into a variety of visual aspects incorporated into merchandise and commodities (Chapter 3, Section 3.4).

A most significant point for this study was made by NOSK (24), who argued that the fascination with the interesting visual aspects or the look of graffiti is but temporary:

… it becomes the hip, the new, it’s in now … it’s cool I guess, that’s their frame of mind … it’s cool for now.

… you know it’s cool at the moment because we see it on billboards and shit so … they [mainstream culture] are digging [enjoying] it at the moment (MARS, 25).

TAPZ (32) believed this fascination stage with graffiti has essentially reached an end:

It’s not fresh anymore I think it’s … it’s getting to a point of staleness. But then once again it gets to that point where the media is like you know what … it’s boring now.

The key finding of this section is that the processes of mainstreaming a subculture discussed in the literature have been confirmed by the interviews; namely, that the very aspects that differentiate real graffiti writers from mainstream society are used to attract markets through graffiti’s visual elements. A nuance of the literature is that the mainstreaming process cashed in on the fact that graffiti positioned itself to deviate from mainstream society; the image of deviance is now sold through graffiti’s visual elements, even though they are made ‘pretty’. In this, graffiti has become a marketable and consumable product for mainstream audiences. This was identified as being negative, as the meaning contained within such deviance was under threat of being lost due to its commercialisation. It was found that mainstream interests lay in the visual attributes of graffiti more than anything, which transferred the coolness and street nature of graffiti without considering its meaning.
One of the most important findings of this study is that the fashionability of graffiti is seen as a temporary phase in the history of graffiti and even this will pass as mainstream markets will become tired of it and want yet another new innovative look – probably by using visual elements of another subculture.

The last section for this theme explores the changing dynamics in the graffiti environment due to such increasing commercialisation.

5.3.5 Topic 5: Changing graffiti dynamics due to commercialisation

This section explores the changing dynamics in the graffiti environment due to increased commercial interests, and the way in which real graffiti writers perceive commercial graffiti writers participating in commercial graffiti work.

One viewpoint that emerged was that South Africans are nowadays more accepting of graffiti than before:

… they [mainstream culture] embrace you [graffiti writers] and they like you more adding to this changing perception as South Africa is quite accepting of it (MARS, 25).

… people are starting to buy the artworks, they starting to bring it into their homes and that’s where the change is whereas before people wanted to paint over any graffiti they see (NAUS, 23).

NAUS (23) believes this changing perception allows graffiti writers to do something for themselves; bettering themselves and at the same time society:

… now that writers [graffiti] are starting to pop up and show what can be done people are buying it and there’s actually a profit in painting and becoming an artist instead of just being known as a street writer.

In summary, the key finding for this section is that it is thought that South Africans are more accepting of graffiti than before – perhaps due to mainstreaming of the visual
aspects of graffiti. They would even buy graffiti in art form for their private homes. One positive spin-off of this acceptance is that it affords graffiti writers conceptually the position to better society through spreading their graffiti message.

5.3.6 Summary: commercial graffiti

In this theme, it was established that the interviewees thought that many graffiti writers are nowadays involved in commercial work as the income helps sustain them. However, in most cases, the interviewees indicated that the income is not the equivalent to a full-time salary. It could be the equivalent of a full-time salary if graffiti writers adapt their styles sufficiently to fall within the boundaries of the broader society, meeting ordinary people’s tastes or where the graffiti writers naturally have a style that is rather appealing to a larger population and not only too other graffiti writers. Many interviewees pointed to the fact that the general population is not well-developed regarding graffiti, as graffiti writers need to tone down their style or make it pretty in order to appeal to the wider population.

Interestingly, this study indicates that as some graffiti writers are more commercially successful, this may stem either from jealousy or from a genuine loss of respect for fellow writers or former friends still in the underground world of real graffiti. The contempt of commercial graffiti writers stems from their forsaking their oppositional identity towards mainstream societal norms, as they now exploit graffiti to serve in the ideals of mainstream society; namely, that of a capitalist pursuit. However, some interviewees indicated that for commercial graffiti writers, the crossing over to mainstream society is not new. In fact, they always needed an income to sustain themselves unless they lived with someone who supported them. In other words, they never totally lived in another world and they always had to inhabit two worlds at once. Producing commercial graffiti made this straddling of two worlds all the more pronounced, and many struggle with this split personality or double life.

Producing commercial graffiti may hold real benefits. In fact, some interviewees said it could sharpen their artistic skills, whilst others indicated that they might grow in their artistic skills and techniques by producing commercial graffiti. However, one interviewee
indicated that commercial graffiti could impact negatively on his graffiti style. Another idea elicited is that commercial graffiti writers enjoy gaining public recognition and appreciation, but this is not in the same way as graffiti crews, who would provide them with a sense of solidarity and belonging. They also have increased business opportunities and can explore new lifestyles. Some interviewees indicated that they also learn new forms of creativity though commercial graffiti. Surviving in the commercial world is not easy, as it is competitive and not always easy to provide the graffiti needs of clients. Some interviewees said that the requests are often unrealistic and tedious and sometimes too easy for graffiti writers.

Ideas elicited about the impact of commercial graffiti on real graffiti include the loss of leaders or kings and the fact that role-models may impact negatively on graffiti crews as educational organisations.

Another significant idea that was elicited was that commercial graffiti is only a temporary phase in the lifespan of graffiti. Some interviewees said that they are already seeing the signs that graffiti is losing its novelty appeal and that capitalism works in this way and will soon turn towards yet another new idea, perhaps incorporating another subculture’s stylistic elements. For this reason, he is not concerned about the future of the graffiti subculture and graffiti itself. However, another interviewee pointed out that the general population seems to be more accepting of graffiti now than ever before. One interviewee actually said that he can use graffiti to spread his message. This means that it is an oversimplification to say that real graffiti is simply oppositional to commercial graffiti. The commercialisation of graffiti seems to be a natural process and it might in fact be a temporary phase of graffiti. This argument refutes the alarmist argument that commercial graffiti signals the end of the real graffiti movement.

The next theme explores the various ways in which graffiti has become a commodity due to the commercialisation of elements of graffiti.
5.4 THEME 3: COMMERCIAL GRAFFITI PRACTICES

This theme investigates the different commercial graffiti practices of Johannesburg graffiti writers. This is achieved by exploring graffiti in advertising and merchandise, the graffiti image serving a wider audience, the strong connection of graffiti with youth markets and the distinguishing elements of graffiti compared to mainstream art.

5.4.1 Topic 1: Graffiti, advertising and merchandise

Confirming the literature study, interviewees indicated that graffiti is nowadays commercialised in the advertising and branding of various products or services (MARS, 25; LUNAR, 26; RIOT, 28; CFOUR, 24). In terms of advertising, RIOT (28) pointed out that graffiti may occur in aspects such as CDs, billboards, cars, buses, trucks and logos which are visually grabbing compared to traditional forms of advertising. It is also seen as visual foci on merchandise, such as T-shirts, caps and shoes (NOSK, 24; MURO, 24; CFOUR, 24; TAPZ, 32; RIOT, 28; MARS, 25). These are not only targeted at the general public, but also at skateboarders (TAPZ, 32; MARS, 25). Another way in which graffiti is commercially exploited is graffiti writer merchandise in the form of customised spray cans and canvas work that is not only bought by graffiti writers but by the general public (CFOUR, 24). Graffiti is also seen in large-scale commissioned work (MURO, 24; NAUS, 23; SEAK4, 20), and such commissioned graffiti is only viewed as a product that was purchased by clients (MURO, 24; SEAK4, 20).

Many interviewees emphasised two main reasons for the popularity of visual graffiti-like images used in marketing and to decorate products. The first is the visually interesting quality which is perceived as unique or one of a kind. For BIAS (26), graffiti had become an everyday tool for catching attention: 'I mean they use graffiti for everything, like I’ve seen it on wine bottles, car adverts, loads of stuff ... it’s like design you know and design is growing in big ways'. LUNAR (26) also identified the design aspect of graffiti by referring to 'images in graphic design where people use graffiti influenced and graffiti style fonts and graffiti style backgrounds' which pointed to the increased popularity of graffiti in various fields, such as that of design. NOSK (24) identified graffiti as a ‘visual stimulant’ that demands attention, while CFOUR (24) made reference to graffiti’s new
role as a ‘very powerful ... consumable product in the marketing world and in the industry’. BIAS (26) believed: ‘I don’t think people need it. Like I need it ... but the general public ... they would be fine without it’. ZESTA (30) agreed to this by seeing graffiti from a consumer’s point of view as something that is not essential, but a luxury. MARS (25) said ‘The actual art work ... yeah that’s not a commodity. Can never really be I suppose, because it’s not mass produced’. It was found that before graffiti’s rise to popularity in recent times, graffiti could not even be considered an aspect of advertising (RIOT, 28), whereas now people have started welcoming graffiti into their lives, homes and businesses (NAUS, 23) due to its novelty effect.

The second reason is that the lure of the ‘forbidden’ attracts attention. In this vein, NAUS (23) believes that people are primarily attracted to graffiti due to its anti-social image or negative stereotyping. He said: ‘So as a commodity like with any other branding, if it’s thrown in their face they will react to it, so whether it’s good or bad they will still react to it’. In this sense, the negative attributes of graffiti discussed in earlier sections, such as its deviance, is regarded as a selling point but depends on how it is portrayed through various commercial interests, which TAPZ (32) believed: ‘So yeah, basically ... my opinions on that are, if they have any clue of what graffiti is and if they sort of push it forward in a correct way then I’m all for it’.

In other words, the presence of graffiti in advertising and merchandise ranges from advertising on numerous levels to fashion and customised merchandise. Graffiti’s strength in these markets stems from its visual qualities, perceived to be unique or one of a kind, as well as appealing in the allure of anti-social characteristics – for example, forbidden, dangerous, mysterious and rebellious qualities which fascinate and entice mainstream consumer populations.

The next section identifies whether this rise in graffiti’s popularity as a marketed object does in fact hold any implications.
5.4.2 Topic 2: Making graffiti accessible to a wider audience

This section explores the ways that graffiti has become a mass marketed and consumable object and the implication of this trend for the true nature of graffiti writing.

Several interviewees believed that graffiti had, in fact, become exploited through various commercial interests. Interviewees identified graffiti as ‘over-played’ (RIOT, 28) and ‘overused’ in the selling and advertising of products (CFOUR, 24; LUNAR, 26).

Yeah it’s ... created an entirely different like you could call it a subculture within graffiti of people ... that want to consume it you know what I mean; it’s become a consumable thing in that ... it’s something where you can like buy the image (TAPZ, 32).

... in that sense it changes graffiti because then the true nature of graffiti is about the writer progressing himself and getting onto their own level in a sense. It’s more about the art form as an individual more than as an art form as a society. The ideals are changing now from the individual to impact a mass group of people (NAUS, 23).

... some of those people they don’t even take any part of it, they don’t even try and take any part in it, they don’t try really get involved in it, but yet they like ... they show it off as if it’s like a fucking trophy (NOSK, 24).

So now I guess you have people making all this graffiti shit, and I guess it is kind of taboo because no one understands what it is exactly you know (BIAS, 26).

Importantly, SEAK4 (20) believed that graffiti consists of various elements and is consumed primarily for its image: ‘You can’t put graffiti in a box it’s not possible because there are so many aspects of graffiti and that’s the thing to the common man they do not understand’. 
The possible negative aspects for the true nature of graffiti lay in the meaning that was ultimately changed. ‘By working with the brand, it changes the whole vibe [atmosphere] of being rebellious, outcast into a wanted commodity or artist’ (MURO, 24). This was taken further by LUNAR (26), who viewed the deviant image of graffiti as more accepted:

… some people view it as a rebellious thing and in a way to make [profit] off it you just taking some of its trueness away because it’s supposed to be just a way of rebelling and getting your name up and being on your own and not actually having commercial people buy you.

In this sense, the true essence is altered and indicates that subcultures are becoming a source of innovation for the mainstream which changes subcultural meanings, making them more accessible to the larger population (Chapter 3, Section 3.3). This may lead to graffiti writers rebelling:

They will be rebellious to it [mainstreaming of subculture] because it’s like someone has taken something from them in a way, and now taken the actual bit of meaning from it, and now used it in such a way that it’s become like … the ‘big look’ […] They not really expanding on the idea of it, they just creating more of it, they not going in more into it to try and find out what is the graffiti scene, what is it about. They not trying to bring out that real essence of it, instead they just bring out what attracts people (NOSK, 24).

NOSK (24) argues that mainstream cultures ‘have taken it now to a point where they’ve like groomed graffiti and make graffiti pretty’. This was an apt example of subcultures losing their essence due to commercial interests (Chapter 3, Section 3.3) which he views as ‘a slap in the face for a graffiti writer to see graffiti being taken in the commercial world’. He further adds that:

… commercial doesn’t do that, there’s no more sharing the passion, they just taking the image of the people that are passionate about it and they using it for their reasons, they using it to sell as any other product. I mean these days
you don’t buy a shirt without a label on it, without a brand on it, because as long as like the brand is there it’s their look (NOSK, 24).

… so like when they [mainstream culture] start to see it as ‘cool’ then it’s good you know but … for the graffiti writers that are trying to keep it true then it’s a struggle with it being annoying. It does change for me by not being educated by what it is; if you don’t know what it is then it won’t even have any meaning for you just make it up on your own (BIAS, 26).

BIAS is thus of the opinion that the true nature of graffiti is lost through an uneducated public which simply consumes graffiti without understanding or considering the meaning or significance attached to the aspects they consume (as was argued in Chapter 3, Section 3.3).

In terms of the negative impact on the true nature of graffiti, it was identified that a stereotypical image of graffiti has in fact been adapted or altered to suit a mass audience (Chapter 3, Section 3.4.1). In this sense, the majority of the interviewees argued that these images – in many cases having no relation to actual graffiti – were found to catch the attention of consumers. CFOUR (24) explained this as the exploitation of the graffiti image: ‘It just becomes about money and like gaining now and that’s when it becomes watered-down it’s not graffiti anymore it just becomes something that’s just repetitive’. Furthermore, CFOUR (24) and his knowledge of ‘softened’ graffiti added that this changes the nature, as people involved in this process in many cases are not graffiti writers but graphic designers using images he called ‘over-done concepts’. In this case, it was identified that any ordinary individual could now become a graffiti artist: ‘Like anybody with Photoshop [editing programme] on their computer’. According to (CFOUR, 24), this alters the graffiti talent through technology. He further pointed out:

So for me it affected it very badly because it’s not done by the right people it’s not done by the people who started graffiti or who are doing graffiti and
the true medium is graffiti ... it’s just done by people in suits [mainstream culture and media] who are taking advantage of the culture (CFOUR, 24).

Agreeing with the statement that graffiti has been taken advantage of, NOSK (24) pointed out the characteristics of commercial graffiti, stating that:

You would be able to see the difference. The picture that has been photo-shopped, you can see where ... you know you look at it but it’s almost, you get that sense of feeling that ... that’s not how it is, that’s not how it should be and that’s not how it was before. I guess to the commercial world they look at it and because they have no understanding of it, they don’t see it.

Therefore, it was identified by interviewees that commercialised images of graffiti were in fact not graffiti in essence; this is explained: ‘You wouldn’t use that word graffiti in it’ (TAPZ, 32) as it is produced for the masses. ‘All it is ... is design basically, its designs using ... using that feeling whatever ... yeah it’s not, I don’t even consider that anything close to being graffiti you know’ (TAPZ, 32). Other interviewees identified these images as ‘not made by someone who knows what they doing’ (BIAS, 26), 'literally design' or 'stereotypical' (SEAK4, 20). TAPZ (32) believed this played a large role in the loss of graffiti’s nature by explaining:

But not only the essence, it loses everything, it puts you in a place where now you a designer you not a graffiti artist ... as soon as you there no - it’s a field, the graffiti side of it completely disappears and you become that you know designer.

Strongly linked to this view was the argument by MARS (25) who that stated:

Yeah of course, it’s taken out of context I mean ... it’s stuck on a billboard, done on a computer by a graphic designer, it’s fucking printed it’s got nothing to do with graffiti really except for how it looks you know. And usually it’s just like a fucking arrow, the bubbles, the drips ... it’s what people fucking notice.
Therefore, these views serve as apt examples of the graffiti image being manipulated to suit the masses and leaving the true nature of graffiti due to its modification (as was argued in Chapter 3, Section 3.3). Importantly, the various responses identified commercial graffiti images through a clothing label identified by NOSK (24): ‘You got ECKO, which is a very simple form of graffiti art’. He expressed his concerns over this:

… but did they [commercial graffiti brand] try and know who that graffiti writer is? Did they try and get to know about graffiti? No they didn’t, they just wanted the image. They wanted the image for themselves, that’s their reason. People buy it and they don’t know shit about it. People that actually know about it don’t end up buying it.

This view is important in understanding the nature of commercially produced graffiti images which have little or no concern in understanding the background or nature of graffiti producers in such images, but focus on primarily reaching large populations of consumers. Furthermore, SEAK4 (20) described ECKO as a large commercial brand:

… it [ECKO brand] is in essence a commodity when you look at it from that point of view, but that’s just to sell shit to the random dude on the side of the street you know ... that doesn’t really understand the whole concept of graffiti and whatever. So to a certain extent I think the whole corporate world has actually exploited the essence of graffiti in a sense that like ... I think it strays greatly from actual graffiti you know.

Interviewees therefore identified this commercial graffiti image as ‘over-done’ (LUNAR, 26), or as described by NOSK (24): ‘They take one style and now ‘this is graffiti’, which according to him was a simplified font, from which ‘you get that feeling of graffiti from it … but they haven’t gone further than that’. This point is significant in understanding the simplified look of graffiti, which is used for commercial brands such as ECKO to capture the image of graffiti for mainstream consumers, while straying from the actual meaning contained within it. CFOUR (24) identified such an image as negative towards his personal designs, which he believes must be altered to be more legible for such normal
audiences. LUNAR (26) believed: ‘Even if they can’t read it they just like the colour or the shapes’. This finding is significant in understanding the stereotypical image of graffiti consumed by mainstream society and culture. In this case, ECKO was an image that interviewees immediately identified as commercial.

The various responses also identified the nature of commercial corporations, which were identified as: ‘greedy, so the more money they can make the better’ (LUNAR, 26), as well as using ‘whatever resources they can find to generate themselves money’ (SEAK4, 20). Linked to the literature, a resistant element is pertinent within the graffiti subculture and this stands in opposition to corporate undertakings and commercialisation (Chapter 3, Section 3.3). SEAK4 (20) aired his concern over the nature of corporations:

... if you are exploiting us graffiti writers just to make money it’s not right you know. Some of us take it a bit more serious than others but to completely take the graffiti culture and commercialise it is ... to me it’s an insult.

Similarly, TAPZ (32) had his view of commercial graffiti writers working for corporations:

... at no point have I seen a writer do like ‘great I’m gonna get into this commercial part of it, and I’m gonna thrive and that’s where I’m gonna be ... you know I’m gonna adopt the commercial kind of aspect of it ... and very quickly they lose their inspiration because they realise it’s not ... they not gonna get meals out of it because the company is just using their artistic impression.

LUNAR (26) believes that corporate branding and advertising has ‘jumped on the graffiti bus’ and used this graffiti look to their advantage. Other interviewees, however, did not consider graffiti’s true nature to be in any way affected: As RIOT (28) explained: ‘I don’t think it changes its true nature, I think ... the marketing and advertising world is just capitalising on a great advertising avenue’, which he regarded as becoming more recognised through its increased popularity. Lastly, LUNAR (26) explained that although graffiti is changing due to its involvement with the corporate world, ‘it’s kind of giving
graffiti another image … but then at the same time graffiti is always going to exist as more than one thing, it’s always gonna be commercial graffiti and actual graffiti as what it is’.

Concerns were raised that commercial graffiti may impact graffiti on the streets:

I think a lot of other guys, yes, I mean … there is people that you’ll notice their art work does change so they can reach more sort of mainstream culture … more society-friendly in that sense. (MARS, 25).

… there’s certain things with like characters [graffiti] where people … will automatically just love it as soon as you do it, but then … to me now I kind of at the same time … you don’t wanna do what’s in [popular] … just because it’s selling … but at the same that does actually influence you (LUNAR, 26).

Very importantly, this finding identifies the strong influence of commercial graffiti, requiring the softening of graffiti and making a visual difference. These interviewees further indicated that they fear that graffiti will become a more legible and popular adjustment, identifying that graffiti writers now increasingly engage in this kind of a commercial style or format to further gain commercial opportunities.

The key findings of this section circled around the negative perceptions of commercial graffiti. However, many ways in which the commercial use of graffiti has been experienced was uncovered. One interviewee indicated that it was originally interesting to the public that graffiti is unique, but its commercial application erodes this very distinguishing characteristic. Another point of view is that graffiti is watered down and made pretty, so that it is accessible to a wider audience. It is now reduced to bubbles, arrows, shapes and colours and is more design than graffiti; in fact, almost any general artist using computer technology can now produce these flat graffiti-like images. This is the opposite of its original intention: to be inaccessible to the public, exclude the public and only allow insiders to access its meaning. The example of the ECKO brand was found to neglect the background and nature of graffiti, and identified such corporations
as being greedy and using graffiti to its advantage. However, some views did not view this entirely as a serious threat, with commercial graffiti being viewed as evolving directly alongside real graffiti, which remained a graffiti aspect on its own. Most interviewees thought that commercial graffiti might influence hard core graffiti by softening its image. In fact, they consciously put in an effort to give it some deeper meaning.

The next section investigates the popularity of the image of graffiti in the commercial world: graffiti representing the new and innovative.

5.4.3 Topic 3: Graffiti attracts youth markets

It was found that many interviewees considered the market of commercial graffiti as the youth population that loves new and innovative ideas.

They try brand it [graffiti] as something ‘hip’ and ‘cool’ because it’s underground, they bring it above-ground you know just by advertising it (MARS, 25)

... every kid wants to pick up a can you know and put their name out ... that’s what they think it’s [graffiti] about (CFOUR, 24).

It has become a new image and it’s only because the youth are starting to revolt in a way and graffiti has that history of revolting against something so that’s where I drew the link, because why else would they use graffiti as a branding tool to sell their products? As in a way to maybe try and relate to the youth on their level ... and try and sell their products and gain through shoving their products down the throats of consumers. So it’s just how they are adapting to their surroundings to make their business carry on growing (NAUS, 23).

ZESTA (30) explained that graffiti and its *underground* image appeals to or communicates to specific youth markets, as the youth was found to gravitate towards:
… wearing something that’s over-stated, something that you know makes you ... noticed in a sense (SEAK, 20).

So in a sense, the youth is associated with colour for clothing, colour for branding, colour for everything, and that’s why graffiti is used to style these things [...] it’s become more popular culture to be associated with graffiti so we use it as a selling point to bring in clients or sell ideas to clients (NAUS, 23).

… people not wanting to grow up ... I think the whole graffiti sensation is a sense of youth you know ... it’s a sense of staying in touch with your youthful side (SEAK4, 20).

I guess they do soften it [graffiti] because then people that say graffiti is a bad thing will have ... they hear stereotypes of graffiti ... then they see this and they like ‘oh graffiti can actually be used for this’ ... and then people kind of change their stigma about what graffiti actually is ... so then it does kind of help, but then there’s always gonna be like more than one stigma about what graffiti actually is (LUNAR, 26).

NOSK (24) believed that the image of commercial graffiti had become stagnant, having been created for the sole purpose of attracting audiences for commercial interests:

If I think about what they have been putting out in the commercial side of graffiti, it hasn't changed, and that’s what makes you get the idea that they haven't tried to really get into that scene and really find out more about it or they would, they would adapt to it and then they would start remoulding it from there ... but they don’t, they've got this set image and that's the way people like it so that's how they gonna put it down, why must they change it if people like it that way.
In summary of the key findings, this section identified the move of graffiti’s exclusive and underground status into a more popularised and commercial environment that regarded its image as innovative. This innovative element is embedded in graffiti’s deviant and rebellious image and its link to the hip hop culture which is importantly directed at various youth markets. Furthermore, this innovative element was directly related to the young, vibrant and colourful nature of graffiti. The graffiti image was found to be altered in order to serve a more legible and positive function, as well as being distanced from stigmas of vandalism and destruction. Significantly, it was found that corporations identified real graffiti as a threat to their specific brands and images which were involved in commercial graffiti that primarily portrayed their specific interest and motives. Lastly, the innovative element which commercial interests have capitalised on was found to simply be a temporary trend.

The next section explores the differences between graffiti, commercial graffiti and mainstream art.

5.4.4 Topic 4: ‘Real’ graffiti, commercial graffiti and mainstream art

Many shared characteristics between mainstream art and graffiti exist, as was pointed out in the literature study (Chapter 2, Section 2.5). It was identified that both art and graffiti remain driven and motivated by the reputation of writers/artists (MARS, 25). In addition, NAUS (23) feels that both are abstract in the sense that they often break away and neglect established norms and proportions. However, this was found to be more prominent throughout graffiti. This does not mean that all art is abstract but if it was, it would share this characteristic with graffiti.

MARS (25) feels that one of the primary differences found in the messages and social commentary contained within mainstream art is more understandable and enriching for larger society, but he said of society: ‘They don’t understand what the message is that graffiti keeps’. In this sense, MARS feels graffiti is more private or self-orientated:

    … a lot of writers do it for themselves, they not really trying to make other people notice this or change other people’s minds it’s more of like an ego
thing … I’ll be like the ‘king’ in my little circle of people you know whereas like a commercial artist would have some sort of value to society (MARS, 25).

This view of graffiti is in line with the literature (Chapter 2, Section 2.2) which argues that graffiti primarily excludes the general public, due to its private codes, symbols and inscriptions practised and disseminated by graffiti writers.

A further difference is seated in graffiti’s realism and cartoon-like characters which facilitate a unique street sense humour and lettering (ZESTA, 30), compared to mainstream art which encompasses numerous aspects, including scenery, portraits and sculptures just to name a few (MURO, 24).

Another difference is in the intention and lifestyle, as CFOUR (24) argues:

… you know, because mainstream art is about the work you put out that goes through gallery space … someone might buy it you know … or someone might read into or write an article about it, with graffiti you put out work and you might get beat up for it … or you might have pissed off [angered] someone or you might get arrested for it so it becomes like a way of life, it becomes a lifestyle … it becomes you know a culture more than art itself.

This graffiti lifestyle is extended to a meaningful practice in everyday experiences and in identity formation, which constantly plays a major role in the lives of these graffiti writers as was (argued in Chapter 2, Sections 2.2 and 2.3). This means that a significant difference between graffiti and mainstream art lies in the lifestyle offered and practised to those participating in it, as well as the social bonds that range from cohesion, codes, rules and hierarchies (see Chapter 2, Sections 2.2 and 2.3).

RIOT (28) felt that mainstream art lacked flexibility to express issues and ideas in comparison to graffiti:

They [mainstream art] constricted to certain ways … okay fine you’ve got different like things like acrylic art, oil painting, different ways of expressing you know in terms of art whereas graffiti you not constricted. You know you
… it’s out of the box … you can go crazy I mean there’s no actual … borderlines to it.

It thus seems that RIOT argues that graffiti, as a means of expression, is associated with more freedom and fewer restrictions than conventional art, due to the nature, practices and dissemination of graffiti as was confirmed in Chapter 3, Section 3.4.2.

A significant difference between art and graffiti was identified by SEAK4 (20) in that graffiti emerges as highly authentic through it being self-taught:

… fine art is … it’s a technique it’s … something that you learn, it’s something that you have to practice, it’s something that you have to go to school for. There’s no graffiti school, there’s no graffiti textbook, there’s no … so to compare graffiti to fine art it can’t be done, they [are] two separate boxes.

In terms of stylistic differences, various interviewees argued that graffiti is more colourful, has a colour personality, is bold, eye-catching and visually different to mainstream art (ZESTA, 30; NOSK, 24; NAUS, 23; RIOT, 28; LUNAR, 26; MURO, 24).

There’s a reason why it’s hated and it’s loved, it’s because of colour, everyone reacts to it no matter how they feeling … whether you like it or not, subconsciously you are affected by it [...] by seeing artwork or stunning graffiti, people are attracted to that, they not attracted to signage and boards and stuff, they attracted to artwork on a wall, someone that paints something [...] I think its attracted people because if graffiti was just straight, plain, boring and stuff people wouldn’t react to it and that’s the whole reason why we are graffiti writers is because we like to break the rules because we know the rules in a way, like we already understand them so we know how to break them (NAUS, 23).

TAPZ (32) added elements such as ‘griminess’ and ‘grittiness’ are found in the dirty and harsh environments that distinguish graffiti from art. Graffiti is also found in the streets,
and removing it from this context ultimately alters its meaning (see Chapter 3, Section 3.4.1). In terms of graffiti existing within the streets, TAPZ (32) strongly believed this remained a different experience when compared to graffiti produced in the studio: ‘Even when I do a canvas I have to put it in the street so that I feel like I’m … there’s that noise … that’s like a comfortable space for me’. Significantly, this finding points to the production and practice of graffiti as being linked to the workings and atmosphere of the streets, the natural environment in which graffiti covers public spaces and surfaces (see Chapter 2, Section 2.2). Other responses further justified that graffiti deserved to be situated in the city and its streets for everyone to notice (SEAK4, 20), as NAUS (23) strongly believed:

… graffiti for me is supposed to be in the streets, on wall, it’s not supposed to be locked up in your house or somewhere you can’t find somewhere where someone else makes money off you. Graffiti started out being in the streets and there’s a reason why it’s in the streets, and that’s the whole history behind it is that it shouldn’t be locked up in a cage, graffiti is supposed to be let out to be crazy and go wild. And for me, like seeing artwork in the street is more powerful than seeing it on canvases in a gallery. If you take graffiti out of its natural form it loses its meaning.

The lawless and wild nature of graffiti which was associated with the workings of the city and streets was unable to be replicated within the walls of art galleries, and essentially lost its meaning through this process (Chapter 3, Section 3.4.2). MARS (25) believed that gallery spaces created a different manner of graffiti, explaining that:

… like if you do a thing for a gallery it can’t be like … you can’t paint the same you can’t … the way you do it has to be different … like if you gonna paint something on a wall you got a lot more freedom, a lot more things you know plan as much … if you on canvas you gotta like really sit down and plan it and actually have like something to say.
NAUS (23) further added his view on this finding, identifying that: ‘Graffiti is just ... the placement of where it is, is more true, it’s more real, it’s more lively, it’s got more life in a way than what it would be if it’s locked up on a canvas in a small bordered area’. This importantly emerged from the understanding that graffiti did not cost anything to be viewed, remaining free to the public and large audiences (Chapter 3, Section 3.4.1). Lastly, TAPZ (32) held the strong view that once graffiti is taken off the streets and placed within gallery confines without an understanding of gallery art, it would lose its value: ‘I wouldn’t call it graffiti I would call it you know inspired by that but there has to be some kind of art input into it to make it a gallery work, but it’s not graffiti’ (see Chapter 3, Section 3.4.2).

The key findings established that graffiti breaks away from the fine arts in many ways. It was found that graffiti holds a different form of social commentary by neglecting mainstream audiences and remaining largely secretive. The graffiti aesthetics and imagery differs dramatically when compared to fine art categories. Interestingly, the lifestyle attached to graffiti writing offers its users a number of distinctive qualities which cannot be found within fine art circles. Other aspects that separate the two were found in the expressive, self-taught and stylistic characteristics of graffiti writing. Graffiti was found to be more colourful, eye-catching and urban in its nature, which was free to the public realm.

5.4.5 Summary: commercial graffiti practices

In summary, it was confirmed in this study that the rise of graffiti’s popularity is evident throughout advertising and graffiti-inspired merchandise. Most interviewees thought this results directly from its unique and easily discernible visual qualities and that it appeals to mainstream consumers mostly because of its forbidden allure when associated with rebellion, deviance and mystery. This commercial image of graffiti was indicated by some interviewees to alter, water-down and soften the visual elements of graffiti to suit mass populations. In such cases, this softened visual appeal is replacing the former ideal of real graffiti that is created to exclude the public. Another complex issue was mentioned by an interviewee – that user friendly digital platforms enable almost anyone
who has artistic abilities to become a graffiti writer. The problem with this is that such a person would not have the insight of the essential elements engraved within the graffiti subculture.

Most interviewees said that graffiti is especially lucrative in the youth market as they seem to associate it with rebellion against mainstream society being exclusive and secretive. Furthermore, it was mentioned by some interviewees that graffiti is especially visually appealing to the youth due to its vibrant and colourful images. Again, this points to the altering of the graffiti image to portray a positive energy and distance itself from negative associations. Furthermore, the fascination with graffiti commercial groups and corporations was simply indicated by interviewees as a temporary phase that will eventually fade.

Interviewees identified a vast number of differences between art and graffiti. One reason elicited from the interviewees is that social commentary of graffiti is more exclusive and self-directed than art. Another reason offered is that graffiti’s visual features, such as characters, street humour, imagery and lettering, drastically differ from mainstream art. Another distinguishing factor offered by an interviewee is that the lifestyle of graffiti writers plays a crucial role in the everyday behaviour, identity and visual elements of graffiti. It is precisely this which is absent from graffiti art. Importantly, a defining difference elicited during the interviews is that some interviewees thought that graffiti is self-taught and art is mostly not, and that graffiti should be independent of mainstream art educational institutions. Another idea elicited in this study is that a range of visual characteristics within graffiti, ranging from its eye-catching, visually attractive and colourful personality to its particular version of abstractness differs from that of mainstream art boundaries and foundations. One interviewee mentioned that graffiti is linked to dirty and harsh environments and the streets as fundamental to its existence and he thought that somehow this would be evident in graffiti. Some interviewees further indicated that graffiti is dynamic and thrives in urban settings and spaces – most definitely not in art galleries – and that urban spaces are its canvases, rather than surfaces associated with art.
The next and final theme for this chapter explores the emerging trends within graffiti, with regard to its recent commercialisation.

5.5 THEME 4: EMERGING TRENDS IN GRAFFITI

In this theme, views regarding future practices and new opportunities that are emerging through commercial graffiti are investigated.

5.5.1 Topic 1: New trends and opportunities linked to graffiti

According to NAUS (23), due to the growing need for graffiti in the market, there has been a rise in the number of individuals becoming ‘designers’ in popular culture, where graffiti skills and knowledge have been applied to various commercial opportunities (MURO, 24). New applications of graffiti include: photography, character work and animation, placement and lettering, illustration, graphic design, gallery work and tattooing. These are possible new trends and opportunities emerging from graffiti (MARS, 25; ZESTA, 30; MURO, 24; CFOUR, 24; NAUS, 23; LUNAR, 26; NOSK, 24). Other views included shoe and clothing design, sculpture and even film work (mostly backdrops) (MARS, 24), as well as canvas work and different typography (ZESTA, 30). It was also found that trends emerged in the fields of marketing, merchandising and increasing opportunities in graffiti competitions and overseas travel (CFOUR, 24). Furthermore, technology has opened many doors that allow graffiti to be transferred from physical surfaces or walls onto computer screens (MURO, 24; NAUS, 23).

In reflecting on these many new graffiti applications, ZESTA (30) explained that: ‘I think there will always be a need for humans to communicate visually, and therefore there will always be a way for designers, illustrators, etc. to make a living’. The response by CFOUR (24) identified such new trends in graffiti, stating that:

… it’s growing and it means graffiti is growing and then at the same time I don’t know I’m not sure where it’s heading because it depends how the new generation of writers will practice it you know … whether we see it as
something that is solely for commercial gain or we still see it as a culture ... so it all depends on I guess the future of graffiti writers.

NAUS (23) importantly identifies all these trends and opportunities emerging from a commercial perspective, as interconnected:

… it all feeds off somewhere and graffiti writers are not known to just paint on a wall there’s many other mediums that we can explore. Even just the fact of us as artists branding ourselves, you can brand businesses or brand ourselves into businesses, you know what I mean it’s helping ourselves with identity because we know what we are, we are able to sell it and we are able to give a service or a product to someone and it helps with that.

Interestingly, this view of NAUS identifies graffiti as a means to establish oneself within a variety of avenues, as these graffiti writers brand themselves through expanding and exploring numerous avenues linked through graffiti. It was found that such opportunities hold a positive direction for many graffiti writers, as RIOT (28) believed one should take full advantage of the situation:

If we didn’t take advantage of them they’d [commercial interests] be taking advantage of our subculture.

The significance of this response identifies the twofold relationship in which both commercial interests and graffiti writers simultaneously benefit from the arising graffiti trends and opportunities.

LUNAR (26) expanded on the positive impact created by these trends:

And I think like graffiti now with the commercialisation of it, there are more people doing it … where you might think it’s selling out the market and making less job opportunities available but the thing is now everyone is kind of creating their own jobs.
In this sense, the various new emerging trends and opportunities have established and provided graffiti writers with platforms and expansion of ideas in a new and modern context when compared to the birth of graffiti. They are creating names or branding for themselves, which was not possible before. However, TAPZ (32) believed that expanding into these various trends was more complex and complicated than originally perceived:

I think people have a greater ... have a greater expectation of what is really there ... I think you gotta have a lot of other input in terms of business and ... you gotta basically think like a company in order to make money out of graffiti.

Expanding on this idea, MARS (25) believed this was not entirely an easy process:

... it’s specialised as well because not a lot of people can do it, there’s not a lot of jobs, not a lot of people that would be able to do the jobs so ... the market sort of weighs itself out at the moment it’s not like flooded with graffiti writers.

In summary, it was found that a variety of new – such as photography, animation, illustration, graphic design, gallery work and tattooing – have emerged recently due to the increased commercialisation of graffiti. Technology has played a significant role in the development and accessibility of these various creative and artistic trends, with graffiti writers emerging as designers in contemporary society due to their creative knowledge and backgrounds in a range of trends. These emerging trends expanded over a variety of avenues, but are all interconnected and importantly push the growth of graffiti in the modern era. Furthermore, such trends importantly served to brand graffiti writers through their exploration along these various avenues. Significantly, it was found that both commercial interests and graffiti writers gained benefits from such trends by taking advantage of the emerging situation. It was further found that due to the nature of these emerging trends, graffiti writers themselves have also created their own platforms to expand in their creativity. It was found to be a complex pursuit to establish oneself
within these trends; one required knowledge of business and employment experience in specialised trends.

The next section will explore the nature of these various emerging trends and the impact this holds on the Johannesburg graffiti environment.

### 5.5.2 Topic 2: The impact of new trends in graffiti

This section aims to identify the positive and negative impact that the new trends have on the Johannesburg graffiti environment and on its graffiti writers. These various new graffiti applications emerged from what MURO (24) calls the ‘commercial machine’; he regarded the nature of such trends as a means to ‘entertain the commercial mainstream’ which allowed him to gain an income through his skills (as was essentially argued in Chapter 3, Section 3.3).

Most respondents were positive about these new emerging trends that involve graffiti. These new avenues do not hold ‘things that are synthetic and boring” (CFOUR, 24). This significant finding points to the stimulation of creativity and various graffiti skills in new and exciting directions for these graffiti writers and directly benefits the graffiti subculture and its graffiti writers in expanding in interesting and often thrilling directions. In this vein, NAUS (23) believes that: ‘Well the thing is its positive in the sense that you start progressing and you might be something greater instead of just painting, we are moving onto greater things’. MARS (25) added his positive viewpoint:

> … it helps you live life normally which will help your graffiti in general … you know if you struggling living like a cockroach your graffiti’s not gonna help you at the end of the day … you need the balance I think so … in terms of opening these aspects I mean I think it’s a good thing man a lot of graffiti guys wouldn’t know what to do with themselves if it wasn’t for trends and advertising actually.

However, not all responses were entirely positive; a negative implication was pointed out by CFOUR (24) who thought that ordinary individuals could now become digital graffiti artists without any prior or true experience. He said: ‘Like if you never started like
picking up a spray-can you just started like doing stuff digitally for me that’s when it’s affected negatively’. NOSK (24) said that computerised graffiti made it easier to apply colours, draw the design and it is quicker. The simplified nature of digitised or computerised graffiti essentially neglects the fundamental elements learnt only through a graffiti writer’s participation and experiences in the graffiti subculture and its practices. NAUS (23) thought that the emphasis of financial gain is essentially negative:

… it becomes more of their [graffiti writers] responsibility of paying bills and that can take over because they lose their passion of why they [graffiti writers] really started, but negative in a sense that people lose their thoughts, they lose their trail, they get blocked and they just start getting tired of it because they need to start making business or doing something that creates money for them.

In this case, the various trends emerging from the contemporary graffiti environment are viewed as becoming a priority that would eventually overshadow the personal work of graffiti writers as they move into the business world (Chapter 3, Section 3.4). NAUS (23) viewed this as graffiti writers ‘losing who they really are, they losing why they started in the first place, the reason why graffiti attracted them, they losing that and becoming that sell-out that real writers are saying they are’.

According to TAPZ (32), this was determined by what he called an ‘age thing’, whereby graffiti writers at some point in time will have to create job opportunities for themselves that do not necessarily ‘have anything to do with graffiti itself, it’s just that you know people get older and they need to get jobs’. In this sense, TAPZ (32) viewed this as negative for the graffiti environment as he believed ‘too many people run away to do work and they don’t stick by doing real graffiti or actual graffiti’.

In other words, one way of viewing graffiti, when entering the commercial world, is that it is only natural that older graffiti writers start earning an income. However, if younger graffiti writers follow suit, it might have negative implications for graffiti, the movement and the culture. Nevertheless, many new graffiti applications are nowadays available and it seems that many graffiti writers are using those opportunities and they frown
upon non-graffiti writers who make use of these opportunities. The diverse interviewee responses identified that the new emerging trends of graffiti applications hold both positive and negative implications for graffiti. Positive impacts on graffiti include new opportunities such as creativity and skills for graffiti writers who progressed and expanded into avenues that challenge and progress their talents. In turn, such trends cater for individuals that solely rely on graffiti practices to produce income. However, negative impacts were also identified by interviewees, such as digital graffiti practices lacking true graffiti experience and skills, which simplify and accelerate the production of graffiti. These, however, neglect fundamental elements of graffiti writing. Other negative impacts pointed to graffiti writers focusing primarily on financial compensation and steady employment, in time neglecting personal as well as meaningful graffiti practices.

The next section investigates whether such new trends emerging from a commercial perspective have neglected or abandoned the original roots of graffiti.

5.5.3 Topic 3: New trends deviating from the roots of graffiti

Closely related to the previous section, the aims are to explore whether such new and emerging trends in graffiti have in fact deviated from the original roots of graffiti writing.

It was indicated by BIAS (26) that the roots of graffiti writing varied among graffiti writers, with some establishing themselves as designers in the contemporary graffiti environment, but upholding and remaining true to the roots of graffiti. In this sense, it can be said graffiti has simply moved into a new era in terms of opening many doors for writers to explore the world of design and creativity. However, this is only a natural process that cannot be viewed as leaving the original roots and simply adapting to modern times. RIOT (28) identified this as simply an evolutionary process:

I think … that changes from graff [graffiti] writer to graff [graffiti] writer you know that their … their opinions and views of the roots … they either leave it behind or they follow the roots or they keep it with them. That’s got nothing to do with the subculture as a whole and it being commercial.
SEAK4 (20) also held the view that this ultimately depended on individual graffiti writers deciding whether to distance themselves from the roots through their various career paths or remain true to graffiti:

… it all depends on how you view the scene [graffiti environment] and how you ... take your influences and how you relate every outside experience to yourself, you know.

MURO (24), on the other hand, viewed this differently: ‘Yes a lot of writers have given up on it [graffiti writing] completely, because it’s easier to be a designer’. He believed this was the primary motivator for graffiti writers deviating themselves from the roots of graffiti. This response identifies the simplified and accelerated nature of digital graffiti design, which has in recent times become popular. NAUS (23) holds the view that the roots of graffiti are neglected through graffiti writers pursuing careers, explaining that:

… from being a street artist and becoming a tattoo artist or becoming a graphic designer or an illustrator, and they [graffiti writers] move into that avenue but then they don’t get time now to paint or do what they wanted to do originally because they so caught up in that 9-5 office job.

In exploring this view, it was found that the roots of graffiti were abandoned due to the various opportunities and trends that arise in these graffiti writers’ lives. NAUS (23) discussed this in greater detail:

… that is generally what happens, that people tend to move on with life and they have to make something of themselves to sustain themselves. And in a sense in graffiti you don’t make any money out of it unless you focused on doing work for money. You lose who you are as a person or as a writer because you need to make money, whereas before no matter if you were dead broke as long as your artwork was expressed that’s all that was important, that was payment enough for you whereas now people are actually leaving their artistic flair for money.
Lastly, ZESTA (30), amongst others, believed that such trends could be positive in terms of creating incomes, while improving skills in a range of different avenues; this could ultimately be aimed at the ‘streets’ while upholding the graffiti roots through participating in commercial aspects.

In summary, the argument was made that graffiti writers turn to commercial graffiti trends as an evolutionary process and are simply adapting to contemporary times. Other significant findings identified that the roots of graffiti are abandoned due to graffiti writers becoming designers; this identified the accelerated and simplified nature of digital graffiti. Furthermore, it was found that graffiti writers who pursued such commercial trends often neglected their graffiti roots and practices. Therefore, pursuing a career and income was found to be a major motivation for graffiti writers deviating from their graffiti roots. However, graffiti writers can support the graffiti roots while producing an income if balanced correctly.

The next section will explore the personal impact on graffiti writers by these trends with regard to applying their skills and knowledge to new avenues.

5.5.4 Topic 4: The shift of graffiti writers into new avenues linked to graffiti

This section examines the personal impact of the new and emerging trends in graffiti on commercial graffiti writers in Johannesburg.

In terms of applying their skills and knowledge to new avenues, the responses varied. It was identified that new avenues such as fine art, graphic design and photography (LUNAR, 26), as well as career paths in animation, comic book and graphic novel illustration (MURO, 24) were interesting avenues to explore. Other interviewees identified that they are currently involved in the creative industry; for example, MARS (25), is pursuing a career in graphic design. Similarly, ZESTA (30) chose to make a living from his creative skills in any way he could, whether this meant painting canvasses, illustrating or sign-writing, but ultimately graffiti in general was his path to follow:
They all increase my skills; they can bring me paint that I can use to paint pieces and characters with on the street. At the end of the day it means I get to pursue my creativity every day, and it provides a means for me to live my art and the lifestyle that comes with that decision.

Other interesting responses further identified new avenues such as architecture. CFOUR (24) explains that: 'Nowadays I'm into architecture because of graffiti because of looking at walls like spaces and how you would paint on them or like how you would mould them to make your image'. This interviewee also identified producing vinyl toys as a new avenue to pursue and this was influenced by graffiti to a large extent. He would also continue to study digital work. He explained: ‘I enjoy doing digital work and I believe that graffiti is about exploring a whole lot of mediums you know' (CFOUR, 24). This graffiti writer added that this had also opened opportunities in galleries: ‘It's exposed me to gallery spaces, and like what gallery you going to, gallery is meant for just rich people you know like sophisticated people and stuff' (CFOUR, 24). These various responses outline the link that graffiti has created for a variety of creative and interesting career avenues and opportunities that graffiti writers now have the chance to pursue.

Another future line discussed by two graffiti writers is the idea of teaching graffiti to others, which NOSK (24) believed would be an excellent opportunity to re-establish graffiti writers with their graffiti roots, as well as allowing graffiti writers to learn from one another:

… give them [graffiti writers] the knowledge of the roots of graffiti and build them up the right way so that they can bring it out the right way for the new generation that will follow along the commercial side of it that follows along the roots side of it.

Graffiti writer, TAPZ (32), importantly recognised the teaching of graffiti as his avenue to pursue for several reasons, as he explained:
A lot of people have this image but don’t know, you know the actual, physical, practical things that you need to do to actually produce work [graffiti] you know … I’ve always wanted to be more about the actual painting than the image or the clothing or … designs or … for me getting my hands dirty is what it’s all about and that’s … if there’s anything that I wanna teach people it’s that part of it you know, not the … not the lifestyle or the commercial or the … just literally every week painting something.

This significant finding points to the meaning that lies within the nature of producing and creating graffiti for this interviewee. He describes the physical and practical aspects which are fundamental in understanding the nature of graffiti writing, rather than focusing on the commercial or lifestyle aspects.

In summary, a number of new and interesting avenues were identified, where graffiti writers could apply their graffiti skills and knowledge. Among these various responses, avenues such as the fine art, graphic design, photography, architecture, vinyl toys and gallery work were identified. Significantly, it was found that regardless of the diverse choice of new avenues, the nature of practising graffiti and its creativity essentially remained the driving force behind the pursuit of graffiti writers entering these avenues of opportunity. Another significant finding outlines the teaching of graffiti as a means to restore graffiti writers to their graffiti roots, as well as to develop and educate new and emerging generations. Furthermore, the teaching of graffiti was found to hold significant meaning through its physical and practical aspects, instead of focusing on the numerous commercial and popularised aspects of graffiti that are taught. Graffiti writing is therefore found to hold many interesting and exciting avenues for graffiti writers.

The last section for this theme, and for Chapter 5, aims to explore the various views surrounding the nature of money as marking the end of graffiti’s historical and true nature.
5.5.5 Topic 5: The end of graffiti’s true nature through the pressures of monetary gain?

This last section of the chapter on findings examines whether commercial opportunities would in any way impact on the true historical nature of graffiti. This section therefore aims to identify whether monetary influences would end or alter true graffiti.

It was identified by the majority of responses that the nature of money and financial gain could not possibly end the true and historical nature of graffiti. Significantly, the response by graffiti writer MURO (24) implied that money had in fact created and established more avenues and opportunities for graffiti writers to pursue and had also improved the graffiti environment. However: ‘money is the root of all evil … so … it will kill … I can see a point where money and commercialism and selling out will kill graffiti as a rebellious, fucking elite, top, hardcore thing’. This finding is significant in understanding the alteration and softening of the deviant identity carried within graffiti, which is directly linked to the mainstreaming of subcultures (Chapter 3, Section 3.3). In this case, the deviant and rebellious image of graffiti is placed at risk through the aspect of monetary gain. The response by NOSK (24) strongly identified that graffiti would be affected, but only to a certain extent, as this will simply be played out by graffiti writers moving into opposing sides of commercial and real graffiti: ‘It will never end the real roots of graffiti either, because there will always be people that follow it’. For CFOUR (24), the situation would be determined on how graffiti writers would respond to gaining money and as he explains: ‘How we deal with the suits [commercial interests] who try to take advantage of us like we should take advantage of them’. A significant finding was found in the response by NAUS (23), who identified the need for graffiti writers to sacrifice their talents and skills at times in order for money:

And as an artist there are times when you have to sacrifice yourself and become that ‘sell-out’ to make money so that you can survive. That’s why you’re an artist because no matter what you are gonna [going to] survive, it’s in you to survive, it’s in you for your art to survive. So that’s why for me it will
be the end of graffiti if people start painting stuff for money, because then it’s not a personal gain it’s more a financial gain.

Significantly, the view which regards the nature of monetary gain within the graffiti environment, points to the understanding that at times graffiti writers risk their reputations and talents for financial gain. Furthermore, this view may also serve as a rebellion against the view of real graffiti writers, who can sometimes only earn an income through their graffiti practices. In this case, this interviewee accepted the fact that in certain cases, such as commissioned graffiti opportunities, he needed to sacrifice his talent or skills to earn some sort of income, as he explained:

… at the end of the day I’m doing my thing you doing your thing and I’m trying to better myself for some money and I know that it’s wrong but it’s what I need to do to survive and it’s what I do as a passion as well as on surviving (NAUS, 23).

This facilitates understanding the sacrifice graffiti writers often make in pursuing commercial/commissioned graffiti opportunities as a means of practising what they are deeply passionate about.

In other views, it was found that money played a major role in contributing to the current graffiti environment (RIOT, 28), which was not necessarily negative as graffiti writers entered the world of the commercial mainstream (MARS, 25). Importantly, TAPZ (32) pointed out that real graffiti ‘will continue to exist regardless of … of the money in it or … if anything what the money does is … is make it pretty in a way, it gives it make up you know but true graffiti will exist’. Therefore a different version of graffiti was found to be created for the masses and mainstream culture (Chapter 3, Section 3.3), but as a movement, true graffiti will never cease to exist, as TAPZ (32) explains:

… it will and can exist forever regardless if money does like I say put the make-up on. And besides all the negative aspects of commercialism, in a way it’s still good because it makes it acceptable and it makes it … it gives it a bigger voice you know.
Importantly, this response identifies the effect of money on graffiti as a stimulant to expand, allowing graffiti to grow in different avenues and make graffiti more acceptable to the larger society. This cannot be viewed as completely negative. Other interviewees, such as SEAK4 (20), believe money could not end the nature of graffiti, but still regarded this as a major influence on graffiti: ‘As such that it’s [money] gonna influence writers as to what they do, and where they do, and how they do it’. Other interviewees did not view money as having a major influence on graffiti, as MARS (25) explained: ‘A lot of guys that I met … they don’t start for that reason and they won’t stop because of that reason and I think it hasn’t changed them to much really’. Importantly, LUNAR (26) pointed out: ‘I think there’s gonna always be people who are in graffiti that are gonna kind of go towards money because I guess it’s in human nature … people are greedy and people want money, people think about themselves’. MARS (25) identified a finding that points to the temporary nature of commercial/commissioned graffiti in Johannesburg as he explains that:

I don’t think it [money] will kill graffiti … I think it will probably end up dying down a little bit, I mean, people will lose interest in it and the money will stop rolling and … like you know advertising will jump on to the next thing. Yeah it will be like all blown out you know in the advertising world, and whoever’s left you know I guess is the people who … who are supposed to be there, who wanted to be there and who still will be I guess … if you just make money off it, then fuck, you already in it for the wrong reasons.

This finding is significant in outlining the passing nature of commercial/commissioned graffiti as held by this interviewee, indicating its current popularity and commercial identity as simply a stage which will eventually cease to exist. This is very important in understanding the nature of commercialisation and the mainstreaming of subcultures as discussed in Chapter 3, Sections 3.2 and 3.3.
5.5.6 Summary: emerging trends in graffiti

In summary, it can be said that most interviewees thought that commercial graffiti work would not mean the end of the true nature of real graffiti. They explained this in different ways. One view is that money and its implications could not possibly end real graffiti. In contrast to the conventional critique of the commercialisation of graffiti, an idea elicited from the interviews is that commercial graffiti draws the public attention to the value of graffiti; namely to criticise mainstream culture and offer an opportunity to reflect on mainstream society. This means that commercial graffiti may improve the graffiti environment and create a positive image of graffiti.

However, interviewees confirmed the conventional critique against commercial graffiti; namely, that money ultimately posed the risk of altering graffiti by softening the deviant and rebellious identity of graffiti. It was further found that the two opposing sides of graffiti, namely real and commercial graffiti, would always exist and ultimately depend on the motivations of individual graffiti writers in pursuing either one. Many interviewees said that at times, graffiti writers sacrifice their skills and talents to pursue financial gain as a means to survive. This places graffiti writers’ reputations for integrity within the graffiti environment at risk. In other instances, interviewees indicated that the participation in commercial/commissioned graffiti is the only means to gain financial support. Even though some are doing commercial graffiti as a profession, it does not mean that their view of real graffiti does not conform to the conventional understanding of real graffiti. Most interviewees simply think of real and commercial graffiti as two separate ventures; skills can be transferred between these two separate ventures.

5.6 CONCLUSION

In addressing the aims of the study, this chapter explores selected Johannesburg commercial graffiti writers’ perceptions regarding the ‘real’ essence of graffiti and the range of commercial work. It also investigates how they make sense of their commercial graffiti work. Five themes emerged from the interviews and are briefly discussed below.
From the various responses, it was realised that real graffiti in the contemporary Johannesburg context is primarily understood in the same way as it is in the rest of the world. Although emphasising different aspects, all interviews traced the origins of graffiti back to the same person and place: TAKI 183 and New York. They all referred to the fundamental ideals of the early beginnings of graffiti, which include deviance, rebellion, competition, *fame*, *battles*, *respect*, hierarchies, codes and *getting up*. Elaborating on the existing literature on graffiti writing, this study found that real graffiti may not only serve as a platform for the self-expression of ideas and views, but also offer graffiti writers new perspectives and adventures by exploring landscapes in their graffiti quests. Of more significance is the fact that interviewees expressed the idea that, for many graffiti writers, graffiti offers therapeutic and meditative opportunities for escape from the monotony and stresses of ordinary daily life. The idea was also elicited that graffiti may serve for some graffiti writers as a mechanism to relax, release anger and rid themselves of undesired emotions.

The idea of *alter-ego* is elaborated on in this study, as the mysterious and secretive nature of real graffiti leads to the development of an *alter-ego* through which graffiti writers can hide their true identities from mainstream society. However, their *alter-ego* becomes their graffiti identity since there they are highly recognised in the subculture. Elaborating on this *alter-ego*, a form of double identity was explored. Real graffiti was found to provide interviewees with a double-life, allowing them to camouflage their identities appropriate to the context in which they chose to place themselves in.

This study also explored the intricacies of the cooperative-competitive nature of graffiti *crews*. Confirming the literature, the formation of close-knit graffiti *crews* was found to nurture bonds and transfer priceless knowledge, skills and behaviours. Furthermore, the need for recognition and *fame* was found as the primary driving force that at times led to competition and non-aggressive graffiti *battles*. Competition was pertinent within the graffiti subculture, occurring between *crews* and on an individual level within a *crew*. Interviewees strongly associated themselves with a deviant identity, opposing institutions of authority, a consumer driven society and population, whom some respondents referred to as sheep, because ordinary people allow the media and the
business sector to lead almost all aspects of their lives. The media, the fashion industry and business marketing were the main vehicles to change the general population into following like sheep. For this reason, interviewees said that graffiti writers in general disrespect mainstream society and the government for allowing this. Mistrust and dislike of mainstream culture led to deviant behaviour amongst graffiti writers. This study confirmed that such deviance was enacted through the use of slang, distinctive clothing and dress styles, nocturnal graffiti practices, belonging to outsider social groupings and general behaviour that challenges mainstream norms and values. It was found in this study that interviewees thought graffiti writers in general are reluctant to be fully assimilated into mainstream society as it carries limited meaning, belonging and authenticity for them.

More recently, graffiti’s movement into the commercial realm has been sparked by a need for graffiti writers to earn a living and they often choose to survive by relying on their graffiti skills. Through the interviews, various positive aspects derived from commercial graffiti were identified. These include financial gain, increased business opportunities and exposure, building one’s reputation, expanding one’s creativity, while graffiti writing remains enjoyable and rewarding. Interestingly, interviewees took it upon themselves to educate society through commercial graffiti and positively alter societal perceptions of graffiti, rather than just seeing it as mere vandalism and destruction. Commercial graffiti was found to offer interviewees an alternative lifestyle compared to the common everyday mainstream job, allowing more time flexibility. However, in most cases the income from commercial graffiti work rarely served as a means to fully sustain these individuals. There are only a few commercial graffiti writers who rely on their artistic skills, shaped by their former life of real graffiti, to sustain themselves fully – almost as if they had a full-time job.

This study identifies various disadvantages of doing commercial graffiti work. One interviewee indicated that commercial graffiti work limits his artistic freedom and creativity. Another idea elicited is that commercial work sacrifices artistic integrity. This highlights complex and often difficult relationships interviewees experience with their clients. They had to quickly learn to negotiate payments when clients were not satisfied
with their work – perhaps it was not palatable or pretty enough for the general public. Interviewees often pointed to the general lack of mainstream society’s knowledge of what graffiti really constitutes. In explaining the reductionist view that mainstream society holds about graffiti, one interviewee said mainstream society holds a cliché view. Generally speaking, interviewees indicated that they need to make stylistic adaptations to their commercial graffiti work; they had to make it more visually appealing, society-friendly by making it pretty and simpler. This enhances the conventional critique from real graffiti writers, namely, that commercial graffiti writers are sell-outs.

Interviewees confirmed ideas expressed in the literature study that the contemporary public fascination with graffiti is its secretiveness, mysteriousness and street cultural appeal. Another idea elicited was that the move of graffiti into the commercial realm takes it out of its natural environment – the streets – and that alters the meaning of such graffiti. However, one interviewee pointed out that this fascination is nothing but a temporary phase. He said that the profit machine will soon find yet another fad or subculture that can be used to interest the monotonous lives of mainstream society, and then society won’t be interested in using the image and visual elements of graffiti in marketing efforts anymore. He thought that commercial graffiti work would not threaten real graffiti, as it is simply a phase in the life span of graffiti.

In exploring the range of commercial opportunities currently available to commercial graffiti writers, this study found that graffiti images are often used in fashion and clothing design, the skateboarding culture, in branding, advertising and personalised graffiti merchandise. Other outlets include photography, animation, lettering, illustration, graphic design, vinyl toys, gallery work, tattooing, architecture and the teaching of graffiti. They confirmed that graffiti now serves a mass audience as it is consumed by an uneducated mainstream population. Objection arose to commercial graffiti artists who had had no real graffiti background in their formative years and who are using visual elements of beautified graffiti to produce commercial graffiti. It was pointed out that this practice is enabled through digital platforms. These digital graffiti artists, and in fact real graffiti writers, who turned to commercial graffiti writing soften, groom and
water-down graffiti for general public consumption. Many interviewees said that such beautified commercial graffiti holds little resemblance to actual graffiti.

Many interviewees elaborated about the market of commercial graffiti. One considered that the devious image of real graffiti, along with rap music, break-dancing and the whole hip-hop culture, appeals to the youth market. Graffiti’s visual appeal also appears to be young, vibrant and colourful – elements enjoyed by the youth. One interviewee pointed out that the cartoonish style, unique sense of street humour, colourful and eye-catching personality, abstractness and the grimy and harsh environments give it significant market appeal.

A very interesting point about graffiti is its many dualities. Real graffiti writers live so-called double lives since they might be writing graffiti by night, but by day they live normal lives – go to school, study or work. Although they don’t all necessarily geographically move to remote secluded locations, graffiti writers live within mainstream society even though they dislike doing so. Another duality is that they are fully emerged in mainstream culture, while honouring the subculture. Their deviant identity is, in fact, linked to that of mainstream society; without mainstream society they cannot deviate from it. Living this double life is even more pronounced in the lives of the Johannesburg commercial graffiti writers, because it seems doing commercial graffiti adds yet another dimension of duality – that is the general conception. Without totally refuting this, some interviewees pointed out that commercial graffiti work can actually be beneficial, at least to themselves. They find that their commercial graffiti work affords them the opportunity to reflect on society and to explore new creative avenues. These avenues are to brand themselves and establish names for themselves in commercial work, usually as graffiti artists. In fact, one interviewee landed a job as a graphic artist due to his commercial graffiti work. He said that he had simply adapted to modern times. Many interviewees also said that they gained artistic skills from doing commercial graffiti work.

However, by no longer being involved in real graffiti and shifting to commercial graffiti, the interviewees said that in their private identities they have a split-personality which
affects the way they see themselves. The impression gained was that real graffiti writers are partially envious of their commercial success, but still see them as sell-outs.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Graffiti is intimately linked to the youths’ need to express themselves publicly, partly as individuals to project self-expression and partly as a collective to resist mainstream society. Graffiti that was born out of a need to be heard created a platform for young individuals to communicate and spread their messages across urban borders. Furthermore, graffiti is an emotional home to graffiti writers and is marked by strong social ties amongst fellow graffiti writers. These are coupled with elements such as competition, fame and respect. In resisting mainstream society, graffiti takes on a resistance identity that is a defining image for the graffiti subculture globally and, recently, this allure of deviance has become an attraction to mainstream society. The incorporation of graffiti into commercial practices is frowned upon by traditional or old school graffiti writers, mainly for forsaking its traditional or true roots and undermining the subculture itself.

6.2 PURPOSE AND FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of commercial Johannesburg graffiti writers about the seemingly oppositional relationship between ‘real’ and commercial graffiti.

In order to achieve the purpose of the study, the following aims were set:

- To investigate the perceptions of commercial Johannesburg graffiti writers regarding the ‘real’ essence of graffiti;
- To investigate the commercial graffiti practices of contemporary Johannesburg graffiti writers who do commercial work;
To investigate how commercial Johannesburg graffiti writers make sense of their commercial graffiti work.

To indicate that the objective and aims of the study have been reached, the findings of this study are summarised below.

6.2.1 Perceptions of commercial Johannesburg graffiti writers regarding the ‘real essence’ of graffiti

In broad terms, this study found that all the commercially active Johannesburg graffiti writers who were interviewed were acutely aware of the generally accepted conception of what constitutes real graffiti. They thus confirmed the literature study while emphasising different aspects and each nuanced their understanding of the subculture of graffiti differently.

The interviewees said that they were initially attracted to graffiti for different reasons, but all of them highlighted that it created opportunities for self-expression. They were able to apply their creative talents through graffiti to create an identity that is different from or opposing mainstream society. They used strong terms to indicate their opposition to mainstream society, by calling them ‘the masses’ and ‘sheep’ and generally described them in negative terms. It seems that the commercially active graffiti writers who were interviewed still associated themselves with the original deviant image of graffiti. However, the older and more established commercial graffiti writers contradicted themselves by associating both to the deviant image of graffiti and indicated that they enjoy consumerism and mainstream culture through their consumption of brands.

One respondent emphasised the ability to convey messages and another pointed out that graffiti is a mechanism used to instil or even enforce ideas onto masses. Interestingly, a number of interviewees outlined real graffiti as offering them a new perspective on various geographical contexts. This was nuanced by one interviewee who believed real graffiti provided adventure and engagement with one’s physical surroundings. Another interviewee identified that real graffiti essentially offered graffiti writers confidence and an opportunity to establish an alter-ego for him- or herself, as
graffiti offers anonymity. Significantly, several responses by interviewees valued the therapeutic and meditative aspects of real graffiti in coping with everyday situations and challenges. Elaborating further, one interviewee emphasised this role as a purely relaxing and soothing practice. Lastly, real graffiti was found to be essential in fostering a community amongst graffiti writers, which provided valuable and close relationships.

Significantly, one interviewee said that real graffiti is adaptable and was, in fact, adapted to a South African context to protest against apartheid, but it never lost its original meaning of deviating from mainstream society. Interestingly, another interviewee pointed to the educational advantage real graffiti possesses in teaching poorer South African communities and young newcomers to the graffiti fraternity. Although real graffiti was found by interviewees to be strongly linked to hip hop, one interviewee said that it is even more dangerous than other hip hop and adds to its dark identity. Many interviewees found this deviant image of real graffiti luring, enticing and attractive. It was suggested by another response that violence and danger are linked with real graffiti and are magnets for graffiti writers in general. In fact, one interviewee described this resistant element found within real graffiti as incredibly intriguing and entertaining.

In their dual lives, interviewees still kept to the image of real graffiti, but are now producing commercial graffiti. Many interviewees referred to having a double lifestyle as straddling between two conceptual worlds. It seems that, even after leaving the life of conventional graffiti behind, they still conceptually have allegiance with that world; these individuals seek the authentic identity that real graffiti provides, rather than one imposed upon them by society.

6.2.2 The commercial graffiti practices of contemporary Johannesburg graffiti writers who do commercial work

Interviewees identified a number of commercial graffiti practices of which, as expected, the primary reason for participation is to survive financially from their graffiti skills. Another interviewee believed that his participation in commercial graffiti was simply to take advantage of commercial graffiti practices that had become popularised in recent
times. Interestingly, one response was that commercial graffiti is produced because the interviewee has a passion for graffiti.

Graffiti extends into a number of markets, but is most apparent in advertising, branding and in the music industry. In addition, a small number of interviewees create small-scale custom graffiti works and canvasses. Other applications are found in photography, animation, lettering, illustrations, the clothing industry and tattooing.

However, the most common form of commercial graffiti is large-scale commissioned graffiti – mostly murals – due to their attractiveness and eye-catching elements. Digital graffiti is also a popular form of commercial graffiti, but the downfall for graffiti writers is that it is relatively easy for a graphic artist to produce digital graffiti and graffiti writers harshly object to this practice.

6.2.3 How commercial Johannesburg graffiti writers make sense of their commercial graffiti work

The interviewed graffiti writers explained that they started producing graffiti for monetary gain. The move into the commercial realm was explained by one interviewee as simply following the emerging trend by joining graffiti writers who are already involved in these commercial practices. Another interviewee said that he was simply taking advantage of the growing trend by partaking in commercial practices purely for reward as there was a demand for commercial graffiti. Interestingly, more than one interviewee identified the factor of personal growth in their artistic abilities and skills. Another view was to create a name in the marketplace as this would attract even more commercial opportunities. One interviewee did, however, identify the strenuous and often complicated nature of commercial graffiti work, which he believed was not as easy as it seemed to real graffiti writers.

Many respondents mentioned the relationship between mainstream society and commercial graffiti. One interviewee said that society is now more accepting of graffiti than ever. In this sense, commercial graffiti practices were found to play a positive role in society, accepting and ultimately altering the once negative connotation of graffiti as
simply vandalism. Another interviewee thought that commissioned and commercial graffiti play important roles in educating society and they identify a value to what they once viewed as a nuisance. In this way, commercial graffiti offers society a different viewpoint, something new and exciting, and society tends to understand graffiti better than before. More than one interviewee mentioned that commercial graffiti opened up many new creative avenues for him.

Some of the graffiti writers interviewed are full-time commercial graffiti writers, often working as graphic designers, whilst some are producing commercial graffiti part-time on a freelance basis to earn a living whilst studying or simply to supplement their regular avenues of income. Graffiti writers’ responses in the interviews correspond with the level on which they produce commercial graffiti. In general, those who produce commercial graffiti full-time are more positive about their commercial graffiti, especially with regard to their stylistic development and the transferability of their artistic graffiti skills from the real graffiti environment to the commercial world.

However, part-time commercial graffiti writers were not all that positive. One interviewee said that he would not take up commercial graffiti as a full-time job, as this would curb his enthusiasm and general passion for graffiti writing. Another view from a part-time commercial graffiti writer is that he simply enjoys freelance work, as it offers him additional time and flexibility. Another interviewee said that he is steadily making a name for himself and he deliberately uses his former real graffiti name in the commercial graffiti environment as this betters his commercial work opportunities.

An interesting aspect that both full-time and part-time graffiti writers mentioned is that commercial graffiti offered these graffiti writers the opportunity for large-scale complex projects that they would not have been able to do if they were not paid for it. In general, commercial graffiti practices were found to satisfy the graffiti talents and passions of interviewees. One interviewee identified the benefit of commercial graffiti in building on his strengths and weaknesses, as well as expanding his creativity and imagination.

Several disadvantages of commercial graffiti practices were also mentioned. One disadvantage is that commercial graffiti practices consisted of ideas and projects that
were not necessarily graffiti writers’ original pieces of work. This was nuanced by several responses, outlining the limited creativity and artistic freedom which occurs in commercial graffiti work, at times altering their graffiti stylistically. In fact, many respondents said that commercial graffiti work was primarily someone else’s concept, their idea and ultimately not authentic to the graffiti writer. Interestingly, it was mentioned more than once that some of the graffiti writers’ graffiti styles simply lend themselves more to commercial work than others, and that since the natural inclination of the graffiti writer is closer to what the client imagined, he would receive the commercial graffiti job.

Many respondents mentioned relationships with clients, mostly indicating that these relationships are complex and difficult to manage, simply because many clients do not have the same mental picture of what the graffiti piece would look like and they would not pay graffiti writers unless they are happy with the work produced. For this reason, an interviewee thought that commercial graffiti practices are de-motivating and not at all exciting, but the money is still welcome.

Significantly, another interviewee identified his participation in commercial graffiti practices as losing himself, his graffiti passion and his graffiti skills. This was nuanced by another response that identified commercial graffiti as not being graffiti at all, but simply pretty paintings that look a little like graffiti since some stylistic elements of graffiti are used. Furthermore, many responses identified the tedious and often monotonous nature of commercial graffiti work. One significant response was that graffiti writers will always be taken advantage of, as monetary gain will always be the primary issue in their engagement and negotiation or compromise with clients. The response by one interviewee identified the lack of understanding by society regarding commercial graffiti and its meaning and visual characteristics. Another interviewee explained this idea as cliché – which referred to a particular simplified look of graffiti aimed at mainstream society and its consumers.
However, one interviewee pointed out his luck when being involved in commercial graffiti work, saying that he never had to change his graffiti style or technique to accommodate the requirements of clients.

Many interviewees thought that commercial graffiti practices had in fact changed the true essence of graffiti. One interviewee identified that this occurred through graffiti writers focusing primarily on commercial work, rather than engaging in traditional graffiti practices, with the implication that well-established real graffiti writers are no longer producing real graffiti in public spaces.

One interviewee said that commercial graffiti effectively changed the public’s image of graffiti: once graffiti was to move from its underground status, it was essentially not graffiti anymore and the distinction between commercial and traditional graffiti writer would simply increase. A significant opinion held by one interviewee was that although commercial graffiti was in fact growing into something larger, the selling out of graffiti writers was on the increase. Another respondent believed that commercial graffiti work was simply the way that graffiti writers are assimilated into mainstream culture, since they are sacrificing their abilities and techniques in order to gain an income. Another interviewee pointed out that traditional graffiti writing was established to make a name for oneself, whereas today it is simply a means of making one’s graffiti more appealing to the public.

In contrast, one graffiti writer believed that commercial work had enabled him to produce graffiti that society could only enjoy and appreciate on a larger scale. Another interviewee said that real graffiti would essentially never end, despite the popularity of commercial graffiti practices. Another respondent said that certain graffiti writers’ natural styles are more appealing to ordinary people and the critique of traditional graffiti writers sprouts from jealousy that they did not hold this quality.
6.2.4 Perceptions of commercial Johannesburg graffiti writers about the seemingly oppositional understandings of ‘real’ and commercial graffiti

The interviewed commercial graffiti writers in Johannesburg offered different interpretations of the seemingly oppositional understanding of real and commercial graffiti work. One strong view that emerged out of the interviews was that commercial and traditional graffiti are two separate genres that require different mind-sets and skills, even though some of the traditional graffiti artistic skills can be transferred to commercial graffiti. However, mostly these need to be downplayed and adapted to suit the taste of the general public. Almost all commercial graffiti writers use the two different parts of their brains to occupy two different conceptual spaces; referred to as a double life by one of the interviewees or described as two genres that are so different. In other words, they can bear their commercial work to sustain themselves and to imagine themselves to occupy two different spaces. Another interviewee explained that this results in what he referred to as a split-personality.

Consequently, graffiti writers straddle the bridge between the two worlds for monetary reasons and for their love of artistic expression and creativity. This is despite the often complex relationships with clients. Another interviewee said that commercial graffiti is simply a hobby when compared to his everyday job and it makes his day interesting and exciting. In conclusion, for most of the commercial graffiti writers, the income from their commercial graffiti work is not enough to sustain them, but it is a welcome extra income.

6.3 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This is a small-scale qualitative study with the purpose of providing insight into a relatively under-researched topic. This means that even though these findings open up new understandings of how some graffiti writers feel about inhabiting two seemingly opposing worlds, these findings cannot be generalised to the larger population of all graffiti writers in the country or around the world. By implication, the findings of this study are specific to the chosen interviewees of the Johannesburg graffiti environment.
6.4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In order to counter for the fact that the findings of this study cannot be generalised to all graffiti writers around the country, and to build on the new insights elicited by this study, the following recommendations can be made for further research:

It was found that the seemingly oppositional understanding of real and commercial graffiti is an oversimplification. In fact, the point was raised that the commercial phase is only a temporary phase in the evolution of graffiti and will soon be replaced by another phase. One recommendation is thus to investigate the possible emergence of such a new phase.

This study also found that a wider range of commercial opportunities than those outlined in the literature on graffiti exist. Further studies should investigate the existence of a yet wider range of opportunities.

Another recommendation for further research is to explore the changing identity of graffiti, the subculture and its writers due to increased interests in seeing graffiti as art.

Another option for further research is to explore the various views around new themes, such as competition amongst graffiti writers and crews resulting from aspects such as fame and respect within the graffiti subculture.

Lastly, the extent to which the findings of this study hold amongst a substantial larger sample of the commercial graffiti writers in Johannesburg, or perhaps in a larger environment, could be investigated. This would necessarily imply a quantitative study to test whether these findings are applicable to commercial graffiti writers in other South African cities and perhaps in other parts of the world.

6.5 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be said that the conventional view is that real graffiti and commercial graffiti are oppositional; commercial graffiti embraces mainstream practices
– the very practices that real graffiti opposes. However, even if this view is largely true, it is an oversimplification that negates finer nuances around this phenomenon. In fact, it is argued in this dissertation that such a simplified view does not value the different ways in which commercial graffiti writers in Johannesburg make sense of these oppositional ideals of real and commercial graffiti.
References


Houser, J. (2012). *Nursing research: reading, using, and creating evidence*. Sudbury: Jones and Bartlett.


Appendix 1: Interview schedule

1.) Subculture of graffiti

1. How did you become involved/find out about graffiti? And what influences do you think played a major role?

2. What do you think mainstream culture is and does it influence you?

3. What do you believe you have gained from the graffiti subculture? What has it offered you?

4. What do you think are the real roots of graffiti? Are they still the same today in the contemporary graffiti subculture?

5. Do you think that the graffiti subculture and its true ideals remain the same or has it changed?

2.) Graffiti and hip hop as deviant

1. Do you believe that the practice/lifestyle offered by the graffiti subculture holds a resistant element?

2. Do you think the hip hop and graffiti subculture are linked?

3. Do you differentiate yourself from mainstream society, and in which ways?

4. Do you feel alienated from the mainstream? If so, why?

5. Is the deviant/streetwise/rebellious image of both hip hop and graffiti subcultures luring for you?

3.) Mainstreaming of subculture

1. Are you involved in commercial/commission graffiti? Can you explain how commercial work has impacted on graffiti?

2. Has your participation in commercial graffiti benefited or restrained you?

3. Do you believe that money and commercial opportunities have changed the ‘true’ or ‘real’ essence of graffiti?

4. Do you believe that this holds any serious threat to graffiti which is viewed as ‘hip’ and ‘cool’?
5. Have the current dynamics within graffiti changed due to commercialisation, and how do 'real' graffiti writers now view commercial writers?

4.) **Graffiti as a commodity**

1. In which ways do you think graffiti has become a commodity (product/commission)?

2. If so, in which ways is graffiti being used as mass marketed and consumable object, and does it change the ‘true’ nature of graffiti?

3. Does graffiti as a commodity change the way that you personally practice it now?

4. Do you think graffiti is viewed as ‘hip’ and innovative or a new image?

5. How does graffiti differ to mainstream art, and what do you think are its ‘fashionable’ characteristics?

5.) **Trends in graffiti**

1. Do you think there are new trends/opportunities/jobs emerging in graffiti, and where are they heading?

2. Do you think such trends have emerged from a commercial perspective, and affected the scene negatively or positively?

3. Has commercialisation created new carriers or opportunities leaving the original roots of graffiti?

4. Have such trends personally impacted on your work, and have you ever thought of taking your graffiti knowledge and skills and applying that to new avenues?

5. Will money mark the end of graffiti and its historical 'true' nature?