

Language Clues on the Surface: Behind the Message of Graffiti

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Received: December 9, 2024

Revised: April 1, 2025

Accepted: April 3, 2025

Abstract

This is a qualitative descriptive paper anchored with semiological analysis that investigated the graffiti that has progressed from an art form to powerful way of expressing thoughts; this aimed to understand the meaning and interpretation of the graffiti of schools in Ermita, Manila. The study analyzed the symbolic elements and artistic styles used in different graffiti works. The researchers included six (6) pieces of graffiti found in school surfaces that featured meaningful phrases, creative elements, and artistic expression. The graffiti analyzed in this study revealed themes such as personal struggles and ambitions to socio-political issues. The study discovered that graffiti is a multi-dimensional expression, revealing personal thought, social criticism, and cultural representation. These findings highlight the reality of university life, shedding light on the challenges, aspirations, and creative tendencies of students. Furthermore, understanding the implication of graffiti as a medium of expression is educationally significant, as it offers insights into the social and cultural dynamics within academic institutions. Educators and administrators can use this understanding to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment that values student perspectives. The study enhances the understanding of how graffiti conveys a wide range of messages and meanings to illustrate the role that art plays in constructing urban environments and reflecting societal values.

Keywords: Graffiti, urban art, self-expression, meaning

Introduction

Graffiti is an art of writing, painting, drawing something on the wall, or various other surfaces. Because the only form of public expression in ancient times was to scratch a solid surface or a wall, it gets its name from the singular Italian word "graffito," which refers to the act of scratching. Graffiti is one form of visual communication not permitted where an individual or a group marks the public environment without authorization (Ferrell, 1996).

Navitas (2008) affirms that graffiti exists in urban cityscapes and through time as a communication form, meant to register existence, thoughts, and experience. Although its forms are changing, its nature does not change from its primitive stages to the present time.

Wall art, including graffiti and murals, is one of the common modes of expression in urban settings. Murals can relate viewers to local history or culture and strengthen community bonds. There is a sense of involvement and connection, allowing the viewer to engage with the artwork and its message (RevArt Team, 2023). According to Fiveable Inc. (2024), graffiti often is created without permission and serves as a form of expression in public spaces. Graffiti also serves as an "illicit cartography," reflecting the social, political, and cultural landscapes of urban areas (Soergel, 2021). Despite the subjective nature of impact and quality of murals and graffiti art, they remain powerful forms of public art that continue to enliven, inspire, and provoke urban environments (Editor, 2022).

Furthermore, graffiti originated as a form of open expression of artistic reactions to conflict, injustice, and life's hardships (Castleman, 1982). Often the voice of unprivileged people, it is a powerful medium for people or organizations to express social, political, or personal issues (Chalfant & Prigoff, 1987). According to Eden Gallery (2021), graffiti can also be political, funny, illegal, or even beautiful.

Graffiti art has become a strong medium for the illustration of urban environments and telling city narratives (Zhang, 2024). It can be as simple as phrases and messages or as complex as murals and designs. Graffiti can be a protest, social commentary, or personal expression that can counter the marginalization trends in media and society (Alhatimi Aleessawi, 2024). It is split into many categories according to its style, location, and even medium of conveyance, which are classified as tags, throw-ups, pieces, murals, stencils, street art, wild style, and many more. According to some studies, even stickers and posters have been referred to as graffiti (El Sayegh, 2021; Albaik, 2023).

In addition, it is also a way of communicating in urban spaces that connects with and informs new viewers. Artists use stylized language to tell stories that both the creators and the viewers must interpret (Alhatimi Aleessawi, 2024). Meanwhile, as Albaik (2023) indicated, graffiti's perception varies based on its impact on the environment. According to El Sayegh (2021), citing Bates (2014), graffiti can evoke surprise, joy, and laughter, but its connection to cultural heritage is often overlooked. It is traditionally considered as vandalism related to an undesirable subculture, graffiti is nowadays appreciated by some artists as helping in the fulfilment of movement goals through disseminating information, setting events, and stimulating activism (Alhatimi Aleessawi, 2024). Besides its emotional and social effect, graffiti may be considered as markers for neighbourhood spatial memory (Albaik, 2023).

Nevertheless, there is confusion among many regarding the distinction between vandalism and graffiti. Gomez (1992) reiterated that graffiti should not be stamped vandalistic or criminal-within itself but rather artistic expression. He believed that encouraging people to make use of authorized areas and equipment for legitimate uses while denouncing illegitimate acts could alleviate the concern for the negative effects of vandalism and distinguish street artists from taggers. More effort needs to be compelled in differentiating graffiti from vandalism within laws, public discourse, and the art community.

The study of Paudel and Neupane's (2019) explores the contents, and the language used in graffiti reveals its prevalence in urban areas worldwide, reflecting social, cultural, and political issues. The study uses Multimodal Discourse Analysis to analyze 44 graffiti artworks, revealing themes of culture, politics, gender inequality, and violence against women. The research is beneficial for scholars studying graffiti language and educators integrating it into teaching.

In addition, Hussien et al. (2024) study that analyzed textbook graffiti by UNRWA preparatory school students in Jordan from a sociolinguistic perspective, viewing it as an act of vandalism, and found that the student graffiti commonly addressed themes of love and hate, while faith and religion appeared less frequently. The analysis noted the use of antonyms, and a few swear words. These insights are crucial for understanding the social and cultural dynamics of the student community, helping educators create a supportive learning environment.

While there are a lot of insights to the graffiti as a wall art, the researchers observed that there are only limited research explores the role of graffiti in student self-expression and its impact on creativity, learning environments, and psychological well-being. Graffiti's potential as a meaningful form of self-expression and its effects for academic and personal growth are still not well understood, despite being frequently seen as an act of vandalism or rebellion. Additionally, there is a lack of research on integrating graffiti in educational settings to promote creativity and self-expression.

The research also points to the possibility of using graffiti as a means of bridging different disciplines and enriching learning, particularly art education that has to do with truly diverse and complex topics. This enables the students to learn more about art, improving their creativity and thinking skills; this also gives them the freedom of self-expression through making graffiti. It also provides an understanding of the skills and creativity of graffiti painters so that teachers can make use of graffiti types in the art education program. The study is a stepping stone for the research on the history and value of graffiti as an art form and contributes to our understanding of the cultural significance.

Research Objective

This study aimed to provide a semiological analysis of graffiti of schools in Ermita, Manila, focusing on its meaning and symbolic significance. This considers the stylistic elements such as the colors and words, which serve as a powerful tool of expression to reveal the underlying thoughts and intentions.

Methodology

This study employed qualitative descriptive research anchored by semiological analysis to comprehensively analyze various graffiti in schools in Ermita, Manila. Semiological analysis is a set of methods used to study of signs and symbols, both written and visual, with an emphasis on how they convey meaning. In this study, it was applied to search for the underlying messages and themes embedded in the graffiti, in line with the study's objective of exploring the social and artistic aspects of student expressions in the school environment. Following the comprehensive framework laid out by Dye (2021), the researchers rigorously applied the five steps of qualitative data analysis. These steps included the initial gathering and collection of qualitative data, the organization and connection of the gathered information into a

qualitative dataset, coding the qualitative data for systematic analysis, extracting insights from the analyzed data, and ultimately reporting these insights derived through meticulous analysis.

The data were collected using digital tools to visually document graffiti on surfaces like walls and barricades within the universities. This method of capturing images was a fundamental means of gathering and collecting qualitative data, aligning with the principles outlined by Dye (2021) in qualitative data analysis. The researchers included six graffiti found in the school surfaces. These pieces were chosen for their meaningful phrases, creative elements, and the potential to reveal personal expression and social commentary. Despite the seemingly small number of graffiti works, they were carefully selected to represent a variety of styles and themes, ensuring a well-rounded exploration of the graffiti culture present in the universities.

Upon collecting the visual data, the researchers systematically organized and classified the images based on their characteristics. Each piece of graffiti underwent a detailed examination to uncover its hidden meaning, considering aspects such as the words used, font styles and colors employed, elements incorporated, and symbolism conveyed. Subsequently, the researchers conducted an in-depth analysis of the graffiti, examining its visual and contextual elements, thematic expressions, and educational significance. By identifying patterns among the graffiti across various areas, they derived meaningful insights, offering a comprehensive understanding of the artistic and social landscape of schools in Ermita, Manila.

Results

This section displays the collected data, presented, analyzed, and interpreted using figures and tables. It highlights the words, symbols, styles, and messages conveyed by six graffiti pieces which were organized and categorized.

Table 1

Personal Expression Graffiti

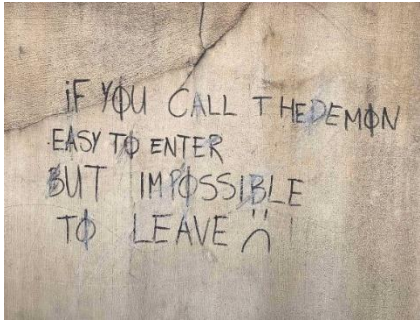
Graffiti	Symbolism and Style	Analysis
<p>Figure 1.1 <i>"IF YOU CALL THE DEMON EASY TO ENTER BUT IMPOSSIBLE TO LEAVE"</i></p> 	<p>Color: - Black - represents boldness</p> <p>Word: - Direct - Vulgar - "Demon"- in the graffiti, this word - symbolizes a negative trait that causes a great deal of grief or harm, effectively acting as an evil spirit torturing a person from within.</p>	<p>The artist wanted to convey a darkness of soul that becomes impossible to get rid of. The graffiti conveys a feeling of isolation that brings negative emotions, such as feeling of loneliness and suffocation.</p> <p>The graffiti can be related to students who have low self-esteem and tend to</p>

Table 1 (Continued)


Graffiti	Symbolism and Style	Analysis
	Other details: Sad face emoji - represent the whole context of the graffiti, it adds up to the vibe that the artist conveyed, which is the feeling of hopelessness.	face inner struggles and feel like they are living in darkness. In addition, the artist also used a black letter and capital lettering to fully highlight the warning that the artist wanted to present and to show boldness in the message.
Figure 1.2 "FAUSTO" 	Color: - Blue - blue as the dominant color can represent both calm and introspection, suggesting the depth of human emotions and the quiet moments we experience in our journey through life. - White - white highlights add a layer of contrast, bringing light and brightness to the piece. - Black - The black outline around the letters provides structure and definition, offering a sense of stability and order. Just as humans need boundaries and frameworks in their lives.	The artist intends to use bubble letters that evoke playfulness and innocence to symbolize the "FAUSTO" graffiti. Blue is a color that symbolize calm and introspection, white can represent hope and clarity, and black serves as a reminder that although life can be fluid and unpredictable, it is also necessary to have clarity and direction. The conflict between ambition and constraint, desire and consequence, and the pursuit of purpose in life can all be represented by this graffiti art. Fausto (lucky and fortunate)

Table 1 (*Continued*)

Graffiti	Symbolism and Style	Analysis
	<p>The black lining acts as a reminder that while life can be fluid and unpredictable, there is also a need for clarity and direction.</p> <p>Word: “FAUSTO” - Symbolize as “Lucky” and “Fortunate”</p>	<p>represents the struggle between desire and fate as well as the pursuit of life's purpose. Hope for a fortunate break is often the source of desire for happiness or success, but the results can be unanticipated and bring with them unanticipated expenses or difficulties.</p> <p>Although ambition frequently results in "lucky" or "fortunate" outcomes, it frequently fights with internal and external constraints, exposing the disconnect between our aspirations and realistic objectives. Consequently, the pursuit of meaning is influenced by the interaction of aiming higher, facing constraints, and negotiating the unpredictable influence of chance in our destiny.</p>

Table 1 (Continued)

Graffiti	Symbolism and Style	Analysis
<p>Figure 1.3 "DEAD"</p> 	<p>Color:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- The white letters stand out clearly against the black background, it represents mental clarity, which can feel overpowering or isolated during times of emotional distress.- The color black represents sadness, isolation, and problems related to mental health. Dark colors are sometimes associated with sadness, disorientation, or even negativity, which reflects the weight or finality that the word "DEAD" conveys. It could also represent a lack of hope when the future appears unknown and academic or personal stresses overshadow any feeling of positivity or possibility. <p>Word:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- "DEAD" - in the graffiti, it represents a perceived lack of passion or drive, implying a struggle to remain positive in the face of challenges	<p>The word "DEAD" was artistically painted near the entrance to the campus, adding another layer of interpretation. The artist's work is focused on students and serves to address issues in academic life.</p> <p>It has more than one connotation in the student's language. These are the tiredness, burnout, and life-altering happenings that students go through when pursuing academic success under severe pressure.</p>

Table 2*Social Commentary Graffiti*


Graffiti	Symbolism and Style	Analysis
<p>Figure 2.1 “SUICIDAL THOUGHT” “SIN”</p> 	<p>Color:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Black- signifies the dark and gloomy undertones behind the words. It emphasizes the intensity and seriousness of the message, particularly the phrase “SUICIDAL THOUGHTS” and “SIN.” The use of black reflects a heavy tone, effectively revealing the depth of the emotions connected with the words. Its bold presence ensures that the message is both visually striking and emotionally impactful, drawing attention to the weight of the subject matter being expressed. <p>Word:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “SUICIDAL THOUGHT” (suicidal thoughts)- it is an explicit expression of mental anguish. - The word “SIN” refers to a behavior that diverts from accepted moral standards, frequently in a religious or ethical context. 	<p>The graffiti is located near a university gate, adding an additional layer of meaning. It may reflect not only the personal emotions of the creator but also their response to the pressures or challenges associated with academic life. The word “sin” may be connected, as in many cultural and religious contexts, suicide or even suicidal thoughts are often perceived as sinful, creating a conflict between the emotional distress expressed and the moral judgment implied.</p> <p>It could suggest that the artist himself is struggling with feeling of guilt as he added an exclamation point in the word “sin.” This combination shows a conflict between the person’s emotional pain and the pressure from society or religion to follow certain moral rules.</p>

Table 2 (Continued)


Graffiti	Symbolism and Style	Analysis
	Other details: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- The “:(“emoticon, it is simple, yet it visually conveys sadness, in the graffiti it was placed after the words that could symbolize the emotional weight of the message.- “!!”, the exclamation points after the word “SIN,” emphasizing the strong point of the word.- The misspelling of “THOUGST” (instead of 'thoughts') could also carry significance. The creator may have intended to add a word or combine words, which could further connect to the meaning of their work.	
Figure 2.2 “SEGGO!!?” 	Colors: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Black - this often symbolizes danger or death which aligns with the gas mask reflecting themes of survival.- White - this represents clarity or emptiness and highlights the graffiti resembling metallic tones. Word: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- “SEGGO”	<p>The word “seggo” can be considered an abstract signature, a common detail in street art to express a coded or hidden message.</p> <p>The graffiti could be a call to awareness about global threats such as environmental issues or pandemic because of the gas mask that symbolizes the need for protection and the</p>

Table 2 (Continued)


Graffiti	Symbolism and Style	Analysis
	Other details: - "!!?" - the exclamation and question marks at the bottom convey a tone of surprise, disbelief, or confusion. - Central gas mask symbol - Symbolized the threat of war, pollution, and the lengths humanity would go to for survival (The Nevard, n.d.).	"!!?" as if demanding immediate action or questioning about the current issues like threats, pandemics, and societal issues.
<p>Figure 2.3 "MAD"</p> 	Color: - Monochrome Palette - The graffiti applies only black outlines without any fill colors, meaning either simplicity or that it is not complete. Word: "MAD" - implies raw emotions inside a school by students like frustration, anger, or the pressure of dealing with feelings academically and socially.	<p>This graffiti is rendered in obnoxious bubble letters on a wall, possessing elements of rebellion, individuality, and urban decay. The simplistic single-color scheme indicates that it was done spontaneously probably because of the covert and unauthorized nature of graffiti art, highlighting more on the aspect of putting one's signature rather than doing good art.</p> <p>Furthermore, the graffiti word represents growing up as a haywire phase when students feel 'mad' at the rules,</p>

Table 2 (*Continued*)

Graffiti	Symbolism and Style	Analysis
		expectations, or the mishaps they bear in that process. Yet another touch to graffiti would be self-expression, reflecting how the students want their voices, emotions, and individual tendencies to be seen and heard.

Discussion

Personal Expression Graffiti

The Figure 1 focuses on the graffiti artist's self-expression, which could be philosophical or literal. According to Alonso (1998), it is classified as "existential" or "expressive" graffiti that includes unique personal commentary. These graffiti pieces tend to be created by students as they are found close to schools. Figures 1.1 and 1.3 illustrate the difficulties students have in their academic lives; they are nervous and tensed, and they struggle in today's collegiate environment. It expresses their emotions, focusing most often on their academic lives, using crude language. However, Figure 1.2, which is blue in hue and conveys the word "Fausto," which translates to "lucky and fortunate," is seen as a positive message about a student currently improving their education. There is also a more complex meaning for "Fausto," as it may also mean "shabby" or "worn out," which presents a more pessimistic perspective. A more balanced understanding of the term is required considering of this duality, which highlights the personal nature of graffiti interpretations and how it can change based on the viewpoint of a viewer.

Stylistically, Figures 1.2 and 1.3 are written in "Throw-ups," which are composed of bubble letters filled in with solid colors, frequently accompanied by shadows or 3D effects (Albaik, 2023). Both graffiti integrate the usage of bubble lettering and sharp edges, which create a depth in appearance and a dramatic contrast. The former makes a nice contrast with the blue background by employing black as their first outline and shadows with white as their second outline. The lettering is partially filled in with white, giving it a light blue fill. The latter has a simpler design, with only white outlines and the subtle elements of the "D" being inverted crosses, which could give the piece an anti-Catholic connotation, revealing a deeper cultural or ideological issue. The graffiti in Figure 1, on the other hand, is categorized as "Tagging" since it is written in plain English with all letters capitalized except for the first one, which is ironic. This indicates that the creator prioritized the message over aesthetics. Crossing the "O"s is a stylistic decision that has no specific meaning. Additionally, it included the sad emoticon that establishes the tone for the entire piece.

This is in line with the conclusions of the study of Al-Khawaldeh et al. (2017) about the exploration of graffiti on university walls that showed how students utilize graffiti to convey humor, symbolism, irony, short forms, acronyms, and abbreviations to convey their feelings. Most of the graffiti in the research often depicts personal subjects like oneself, family, and friends. They are expressions of the artist's emotional, mental, or physical condition. For students, some of the graffiti represents the difficulties and achievements of living at the university. The researchers will be able to study the core recurring themes and contextual meanings of students' graffiti by first classifying the "raw" data into meaningful concepts and then putting them into appropriate categories using thematic analysis.

Social Commentary Graffiti

The second table presents graffiti that depicts a social commentary theme. In Figure 2.1, it directly addresses the significant issue of suicidal ideation, underscoring the stigma surrounding mental illness and the importance of seeking help. As stated in the study of Delaware (2024), graffiti like that alleviates the negative perceptions surrounding mental health. Meanwhile, the Figure 2.2 signify a symbolic drawing-the gas mask-to draw attention to pressing global issues such as pandemics and environmental concerns. The design around "Seggo," especially with the gas mask, could signal themes of survival, anonymity, or critique of environmental and societal crisis. It serves as a call to action, urging people to consider the implications of these challenges. The nature of this graffiti highlights the urgency and intensity of the message, implying that the artist or the environment are unsecure of collapse or notable change. Like the goal of the second graffiti, many other graffiti works often described to make public statements and as a form of art for expressing ideas and emotions (Zolner, 2007).

Collectively, these graffiti pieces utilize public spaces to address pressing social issues, challenging societal norms, and provoking thought (Grosz, 2001). By doing so, they provide insight into the struggles of individuals in urban environments, touching on issues such as mental health, environmental concerns, and systemic neglect. This graffiti, often dismissed as vandalism, emerges as a powerful medium for social commentary (Tsilimpounidi, 2015; Zhang, 2017).

The first graffiti, categorized as "Tagging," is a contrast to the other two. According to Poon (2023), "Tagging" is the most basic form of graffiti. In Figure 2.1, it features the bold message "SUICIDAL THOUGST," its handwritten style, bold lettering, and the use of black ink create a sense of urgency and despair. The misspelled term "thougst" adds to the raw and unfiltered emotion of the piece and the added religious connotation with the word "SIN" draws attention to the depth of the artist's emotional turmoil. In contrast, Figures 2.2 and 2.3 exhibit a more stylized and playful approach. Both are "Throw-ups" that employ bubble letters. This style is the popular technique in graffiti art since it allows the artists to leave a recognizable mark quickly (Archambeau & Kagan, n.d.). Figure 2 portrays a gas mask, a symbol often linked to themes like environmental pollution, warfare, and public health crises. Its intricate and exaggerated design, along with the stark black-and-white color scheme, creates a striking and unsettling effect. The third graffiti with its simple, monochrome palette, and bold lettering of the word "Mad" reflects common graffiti elements often associated with rebellion against societal norms and rules. This act of unauthorized expression

symbolizes a form of resistance, challenging societal structures while asserting a voice that cannot be ignored (Wrest, 2012).

This aligns with the findings of the study that explores the evolution of street art from graffiti to social commentary by Wanjiku (2024). It examines how graffiti has developed from its origins into a compelling medium for social discourse. Despite being perceived as vandalism, graffiti evolved into a valid art form that subverts social conventions and reclaims public areas. Das (2023) asserts that street art and graffiti are effective means of elevating underrepresented voices, challenging established social systems, and fostering social change.

These findings highlight the reality of university life, shedding light on the challenges, aspirations, and creative tendencies of students. Understanding graffiti as a medium of expression is educationally significant, as it offers insights into the social and cultural dynamics within academic institutions. Educators and administrators can use this understanding to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment that values student perspectives. However, this paper is only limited to selected graffiti landmarks of the schools in Ermita, Manila. The findings of this study may not be generalizable to other contexts of graffiti.

Recommendations

The researchers recommend further exploration and analysis of graffiti to uncover the messages they convey. Appreciating such works can help promote creative expression and contribute to a broader understanding. Future research should examine the impact of graffiti on university communities across National Capital Region, potentially leading to initiatives that celebrate and integrate student creativity into the educational landscape. Further research could expand on this study by using different research framework and approach of the graphical representations not only on its aesthetic aspect but also to the framework and dimensions. This could also enhance exploration and appreciation of graffiti as a legitimate art form and cultural expression. Deeper understanding of the social, emotional, and cultural importance of graffiti may be possible through research methodologies such as mixed methods, ethnographic approaches, and qualitative interviews. Furthermore, examining graffiti's role as a medium for cultural expression and social commentary beyond its visual characteristics using frameworks like semiotic or discourse analysis may reveal more.

Additionally, institutions could encourage inclusiveness and encourage students to express themselves through programs, such workshops or academic courses that appreciate graffiti. In ultimately, further studies on graffiti might contribute to its perception as a significant cultural activity and a tool for societal change.

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