Talent & Tagging in Harmony:

A Study of Graffiti Art as Subculture & Aesthetic Expression of Urbanization in Malaysia

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss contemporary perspectives of street art by examining its influence on urban society and culture. Its research aims to understand social perceptions and awareness towards graffiti art, and how graffiti artists develop a youth subculture through building relationships between street art and the targeted audiences for graffiti. Primary research included interviews with Malaysian graffiti artists. Findings suggest that graffiti art in Malaysia is increasingly accepted as modern representation of cultural idealism through appropriation of local inspirational elements. However, the legitimacy of graffiti art in urban beautification projects is still an unsettled debate, unless shifts in perceptions could boost its positive value through greater acknowledgement of graffiti's aesthetic worth and its fulfilment of social needs. To resolve attitudinal issues, some strategies are proposed. In conclusion, this paper demonstrates why graffiti art has fought hard to earn its stature as subculture symbols by communicating cultural development, as a result of artists given freedom to express their visions of the modern urban condition.

Keywords: *Evolution of Graffiti, Graffiti Art, Malaysian Graffiti Artists, Subculture, Urbanization*

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Introduction

> "You're standing in the station… everything is gray and gloomy and all of a sudden, one of those graffiti trains slide in and brightens the place like a big bouquet." (Claes Oldenburg, cited by Lisa N. Howorth, 1989)

Graffiti art is a relatively new phenomenon in contemporary culture that arose fitfully to gain mainstream acceptance. Being universally once perceived as illegal and inflammatory, graffiti as a visual concept of human expression only found legitimate footing when examined by researchers working in fields of archaeology, urban culture, political science, and design. Street artists (known within inner circles as writers and style masters) increasingly document graffiti's growth in the context of urban development (Cortez et al., 2007).

The main objective of this study is to provide insights into graffitists' motivations. The primary research aims to answer the following key questions:

- *What role does graffiti art play in developing urban social fabric in Malaysia?*
- *How do positive and negative perceptions increase social awareness of graffiti art as symbols of urban social progress?*
- *How do graffiti artists influence the formation of youth subculture?*

The research concludes by discussing the implications of these findings in regarding graffiti's value as art, as well framing the significance of these perceptions in its unifying role as a form of creative, social, and political expression of the urban cultural landscapes of Malaysia.

Literature Review

The term graffiti can be traced to the Italian word, graffiare ("to scratch"), which describes any type of lettering or image that is scrawled, marked, or painted in any manner on a location, property, or object (Misiroglu, 2015:326). According to The Free Dictionary, graffiti is the plural of graffito, defined as a drawing or inscription made on wall or other surfaces, often done illegally, with intention to be seen by the public.[1]

Overview of Graffiti as Public Art

Graffiti can be traced to the very earliest written and drawn communication such as cave paintings, carvings on walls and ceilings, as well as on artefacts such as bones, stones, metalworks, and wood. As discovered by archaeologists between 1 B.C. to 4 A.D. in the Mediterranean regions, these "writing on walls" were commonly made by scratching images onto surfaces with sharp tools, chalks, coal, and ground-up paint materials (Daniell, 2011). These evolved into cultural calligraphy demonstrating human attempts to imprint their landscapes through etching their personal expressions and thoughts, thus giving insights into how ancient communities communicated or to gain public attention (Gross and Gross, 1993).

According to Janice Arnold, graffiti derives from an ancestral zeal for leaving a 'tag' of having been somewhere that led to the development of public art.[2] What-

ever materials, motives, and myriad skills involved, it was the technical intricacy of working outdoors, sometimes scaling walls of tall buildings, that takes mural artists from discontented provocateurs to public art professionals dedicated to serving a role as social conduit (Figure 1) in fostering audience relations (Lachmann, 1988).

Figure 1. F*ck The Tories graffiti in Manchester by Paul Wright.

Evolution of Urban Graffiti

Graffiti has not always been historically valuable as a cultural artform. *Latrinalia* is a common graffiti observed in toilets, augmenting its negative associations with vandalizing behaviors. Nevertheless, graffiti provides both linguistic and visual novelty naturally favored by youths. As a medium, it draws youths who perceive graffiti as "speech" incorporating unrefined slangs, while expressing the energetic response of youth's resentments of being unknown social entities - as "so-called [underdogs]" (Werwath, 2006).

Modern graffiti art's lineage is associated with urbanization in the 1960s, developing into a subculture in the 1970s that became enmeshed with the emerging cultural scene collectively known as "hip-hop" culture (Blackshaw and Farrelly, 2008). Graffitists' rise to public fame began as an extension of the hip-hop culture during the politically active Seventies that was dominated by the mélange of art genres, music, dance, films, fashion, and live performance (Rocca, 2020). This subculture rapidly gained attention from urban documentarians, critics, and cultural artisans alike. Prominent art shows featuring Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Kenny

Scharf, and Lee Quinones, were organized in New York's downtown East Village where vacant buildings and disused lofts were intermingling spaces for musicians, filmmakers, artists, and other neo-expressionists like the punks. Basquiat and Haring, with strong stance towards racism and police brutality, quickly became anti-establishment heroes (Ren and Keil, 2018).

Basquiat's 1980 New York Times Square Show was a rousing success at a time when art was being criticized as being too formal, patriarchal, and intellectual, neglecting reactionary elements that mark genuine expressions of visionary, groundbreaking art (Rocca, 2020; Stephens, 2016). Keith Haring was America's commercial graffiti artist poster boy. Using vacant New York subways as his canvas, he provoked debates among audiences and within the elite art establishment with unapologetic political messages (Sawyer, 2019). A student at the New York School of Visual Arts (SVA), Haring was inspired by the streetwise creativity and youthful spontaneity of subway graffiti (Figure 2). Basquiat, Haring, Keith Sonnier, Joseph Kosuth, Barbara Kruger, Angel Ortiz, and others were huge influences on emerging pop styles that saw "artistic oscillation[s]" between various disciplines, from music to sculpture, filmmaking, live performance, poetry, fashion, etc. (Buchhart, 2022:14). These experimental artworks were mediums that framed each artists' search for a personal style.

Figure 2. Keith Haring's graffiti art on silkscreen.

According to Jon Naar, a photographer who documented urban culture of New York City in the 1970s, graffiti art's emergence in the 1960s bore characteristics identifiable as provocative expression *and* realism.[3] As street art became popular and accessible cultural language, some critics question sociopolitical and sociocultural concerns such as whether graffiti really adds aesthetic value in their depiction of "idealized communities" (Kizilkan and Ocakçı, 2020:945-950). Urban scholar Heather Mac Donald claims that graffiti is nothing but an ugly blight on public spaces and neighborhoods, not to be tolerated as a "grand political gesture" because, unlike legitimate advertising, graffiti commandeers *others*' rights, often on private property.[4] Stakeholders in residential neighborhoods, towns and urban areas may feel alarmed, confused, and uncomfortable if graffiti done by tagging crews are associated with gangs (Gómez, 1993; Kizilkan and Ocakçı, 2020).

In past decades, researchers have identified the factors which distinguish autho-rized, acceptable graffiti from socially irresponsible graffiti based on intention, message, content, permission, location, and geopolitical contexts (Crummey, 1998; Shively, 1997). The latter kind of street art, sometimes known as *hip-hop graffiti,* have been consistently found to produce negative perceptions of a place from their symbolic (implicit) or explicit association with criminal behaviors such as robbery, drugs, street fights, and assault (Gunnell, 2010; Tucker, 1999).

Nevertheless, the evolution of graffiti into the street art movement is a question of social acceptance as part of popular culture and urban adaptation. Studies show that adolescents from low-income or inner cities and suburban communities have shared commonalities of social pressures, morality dilemmas and cultural disenfranchisement (Shively, 1997). Urban graffiti and the process itself is a form of 'escape' with messages symbolizing youth's rejection of authority, norms, and mainstream values (Daichendt, 2017).

Cameron McAuliffe, professor of human geography argues that street artists today seek ways to negotiate moral geographies by normalizing "transgressional" graffiti as creative and politically acceptable artefacts with sociocultural value.[5] According to Daniel Hunting, graffiti is increasingly identified as public art form, a communal 'commodity' with aesthetic (ornamental), educational, and functional purposes.[6] For example, in Philadelphia, the mural capital of the world, commu-nity murals that bore creative and artistic expressions grew prominently in 1965 (van de Geer, 2021). Eventually, Philadelphia street art was embraced as part of the Anti-Graffiti Network, a public art program founded in the 1980s by mural painter Jane Golden (Mural Arts Philadelphia, 2021).

Commercial graffiti art appears in advertisements for lifestyle brands. Sandrine Pereira believes graffiti is increasingly adapted as aesthetic inspirations for fash-ion, media, and other trendy cultural products as it is perceived by consumers to be a dynamic representation of the clash between propaganda and commercial marketing possibilities.[7] These have helped to change perceptions of graffiti art from vandalism to sophisticated artform (Kizilkan and Ocakçı, 2020:944).

Graffiti Design Styles
As an art form, graffiti culture has received comparatively less research atten-tion because of the connotations of public vandalism. The act of spray-painting on public spaces is a sociological phenomenon often linked to low socioeconomic status of the writers and their need to mark their places in increasingly complex societies. Graffiti tagging are self-invented stylized letters fused with intricate emblems, logos, or monograms to mark territory. Taggers may use shared codes to make graffiti *meaningful* and thus, legitimate (Salchli, 2019).

Graffiti has evolved stylistically. Spray paints and markers have replaced chalks as tools and materials. With varied semantical forms and complicated hierarchy, street art writing styles run the gamut from quickly sprayed-on Tags to elaborate and often breathtaking Pieces. As cited by John Gruen:[8]

Graffiti were the most beautiful things I ever saw … [The kids] doing it were young and from the streets … [they] had this incredible mastery of drawing which totally blew me away. I mean, just the technique of drawing with spray paint is amazing, because it's incredibly difficult … [The] fluidity of line, and the scale, and always the hard-edged black line that tied the drawings together! It was the line I had been obsessed with since childhood!"

The basic types of graffiti are discussed and shown in the section below.

Tag
Tagging in the simplest type of graffiti, consisting of the writer's street moniker in monochromatic colors (Figure 3). It is basically the artist's signature. If they are associated with a crew, this may contain the crew's name or initials. Tags are commonly done with spray paint or markers. The abundance of tags on public spots and their low quality makes this the lowest form of art for the street artist community (Walsh, 1996).

Figure 3. Tagging by Zexor.

On the subject of tagging, painter Rene Ricard is renowned for highlighting graffiti art as essential to identify individual artists who are teasing out vernacular issues. Ricard claims:*"Graffiti refutes the idea of anonymous art where we know everything about a work except who made it: who made it is the whole Tag.[9] Overprotection is deadly; the stuff has to get out there to be seen. To […] covet one's own work, is professional suicide"* (Ricard, 1981).

Stencil
Stencil graffiti uses papers, cardboard, or other textural materials to create images. The desired design is cut out, the stencil held against a surface and the image is transferred (known colloquially as "thrown up") to walls using spray paint or roll-on paint. Sometimes, multiple layers of stencils are used on the same image

to add colors or to create an illusion of depth. Blek le Rat (Figure 4) and Banksy (Figure 5) popularized this graffiti style (Delena, 2009).

Figure 4. The Man Who Walks Through Walls by Blek le Rat.

Figure 5. Chalk Farm Maid by Banksy.

Wildstyle
Wildstyle is a highly intricate form of graffiti. It is befuddling for non-artists who aren't familiar with its raison d'etre. Wildstyle compositions typically feature 3D arrows, spikes, curves, and other elements that untrained eyes may find confounding (Figure 6). The 1980s Golden Age of Wildstyles intertwined decorative lettering with pop culture iconographs (Dennant, 1997).

Pieces
Deriving from the word 'masterpiece', pieces are larger elaborate works with refined details often found on subway trains and subways. Style is important since they distinguish writers' abstract imaginations using vivid techniques, garish col-

ors, surrealism, symbolisms, and iconography (Figure 7). Pieces painted or applied onto both sides of a symbolic structure such as the former Berlin Wall, become especially meaningful during political protests or as social statements (Waldenburg, 2013). Pieces are hard to do illegally because of the time and effort involved. Therefore, a good piece will earn bragging rights for particularly competent artists.

Figure 6. Wildstyle graffiti.

Figure 7. A graffiti pieces.

Blockbuster
Blockbuster is used to cover maximum area (Figure 8). The style is a straight clean block of bold letters for people to see the work from afar. Its basic lines and colors are vividly compelling, expansive works usually roller-painted, sprayed or brushed on quickly (Anapur, 2016). Sylvester Graham (cited in Misiroglu, 2015) stated that graffitists who targeted whole swaths of railway cars, freight trains and subway trains with chunky letters did it for the "thrill of moving one's tag across the city or countryside, hence reaching potentially vast audiences."[10]

Figure 8. Blockbuster style graffiti.

Mixed Perceptions: Graffiti Artists' Roles

Graffiti has produced a varying scope of perceptions. Some lean toward legitimizing the movement as a true art form, pointing out its gritty, unrefined qualities, although perceptions of vandalism and criminal behavior persist, with graffiti tags (names of artists) covering walls of subways and sides of buildings often dominating mainstream perceptions as being defiant, ugly, and obscene (Bates, 2014; Bowen, 1999; Gómez, 1993; Tucker, 1999). The dictionary defines "vandalism" as an action involving deliberate destruction of or damage to public or private property. Applying this definition, graffiti is vandalism whereby there is no sense of craftmanship and poor execution. As defined by Daniel D. Gross and Timothy D. Gross, however, the commonly identified criteria for graffiti art includes, and is not limited by tangible elements that showcase a specific place, its history, and cultural significance.[11]

Claire Malaika Tunnacliffe theorizes that as part of the typology of urban culture, *Environmentally Engaged Urban Street Art* (EEUSA), has become a form of political activism by the "blurring, collapsing, and erasing" of accumulated dirt and grime layers.[12] Environmental art is not an act of vandalism and defacement but aimed at increasing property value, enhancing traditional heritage significance, providing fresh and compelling visual appeal for drab buildings and streets. In *Beautiful Losers* (2004), Aaron Rose and Christian Strike argue that where audiences once considered graffiti as trashy 'aerosol art' associated with crime and urban decay, the polished execution of varied styles enable artists to be recognized and praised for their enigmatic and eccentric art, contributing to urban phenomena that transcend vandalism.[13]

Graffiti artists are increasingly given the chance to exhibit their work in art galleries, instead of on trains or on subway walls. Some graffitists are recognized by the mainstream art scene. This recognition is important for two reasons. First, because of art's own ties to contemporary social, political, and economic influences, stakeholder recognition of street art helps increase awareness and overall value

for this form of cultural expression. Second, it mitigates the public's opinion that all graffiti is vandalism (Miller, 2002), although standards and guidelines was what is acceptable differs based on social awareness of its value.

Design researchers believe contemporary audiences are increasingly capable of discerning the aesthetical value of graffiti by studying the effort taken by street artists. For example, Doreen Lee studied how graffitists of Yogyakarta in Indonesia negotiate permission from building owners and street gangs.[14] Doreen Lee notes that aesthetically empowering graffiti messages enables street artists to be naturalized as "urban scribes" who advocate social change from a sense of pride in citizenship,[15] as opposed to vandals indulging in "ugly" and "meaningless" scrawls (cited by Strassler, 2020:27).

At the same time, graffiti leverages the media to discuss its controversial legitimacy. Media representations of graffiti as subculture questions its positive and negative effects on youth. Street murals that are part of community projects, with relevant messages and interesting aesthetics that prompt public conversations, are known as *bourgeois art* (Senie, 2003; Stephens, 2016). Spaces designated or needed for street art are contested by wider audiences as sites to showcase artistic talent, and as a symbolic expression of urban change (Ren and Keil, 2018). Hence, both public and commercial sectors attempt to legitimize the positive outcomes by 'commodifying' graffiti as lifestyle and cultural attractions.

Researchers believe that through this process, graffiti art would eventually be embraced as accessible cultural expressions. Commissioned works in the recent decades reflect this, though critical research to address the negative and positive implications on artistic copyright is still lacking (Daichendt, 2017; Kizilkan and Ocakçı, 2020; Rose and Strike, 2007).

Many graffitists face inevitable ethical conflicts since the question of copyright protection arises in balancing between free speech in the public domain and obtaining writers' permission in republishing or photographing for the purpose of display, appropriation, and media representations (Schwender, 2016:452-461).

Malaysian Street Art
Investigations and evaluations into the outcomes of public art on society has increased in developing countries such as Malaysia (Muhammad et al., 2016). Malaysian street graffiti are debated for its "empowering" effects on local society by questioning whether such urban aesthetics are relevant, how it creates social empathy for causes, or as iconography portraying political issues (Muhammad et al., 2016).

For Malaysia, graffiti is mainly perceived as a public visualization of "youth slang," conceived to narrow social class divides and increase racial harmony, besides being an element in the tourism economy (Chang, 2017). Paolo Mura et al. writing in *Perspectives on Asian Tourism,* argues that cultural appropriation is the dominant approach taken by graffiti artists and street mural artists in Malaysia who borrow

Western genres of expression but retain local heritage elements and placemaking imageries which positions each state in the country as a desirable "composite" travel destination for the domestic tourism market.[16]

Figure 9. Let's Art at Sawit.

For public art lovers, graffiti brightens otherwise dull commercial spaces or locales; large street murals are trendy and interactive architectural design elements that draw visitor interest toward buildings, while some are cultural and heritage inspirations. Over time, graffiti art in Malaysia is perceived as a positive contribution in enlivening and beautifying towns and cities. Some local artists are satisfied with using limited external spaces such as backstreets, doorways, side walls, and fences as visual communication platforms (Figures 9 and Figure 10).

Figure 10. KL Grafitti Mural @ Storm Drains.

Public art initiatives help bridge the gap between graffiti artists and their audiences, as well as showcasing their talent, skills, and styles. A Malaysian example is the KUL SIGN FESTIVAL 2012, organized by the Kuala Lumpur City Hall which transformed the image of Kuala Lumpur with a continuous mural wall fronting

the city's riverbank (ArtMapTV, 2012). Aside from knowledge of the economic and market value of street art, approval from authorities such as local town councils and permissibility are other critical factors behind social acceptability (Falihin Jasmi and Nik Mohamad, 2016).

Figure 11. *Tree of Hope* Mural art.

A good example is the 'Tree of Hope' mural at *Jalan Klang Lama,* Kuala Lumpur, the longest street mural painting singlehandedly by Fadzlan Rizan Johani (Rahman, 2020). The artist spent nine months and used 250 liters of paint to produce this mural stretch in an old residential area located near busy *Jalan Klang Lama* in Kuala Lumpur to showcase Malaysian nature and products of the palm oil industry, providing the artist a legal canvas to work on, as well as a chance to develop their distinct identities (Figure 11).

Research Methodology

Qualitative methodology was used for primary research in this research. Qualitative undertaking through the interview process is exploratory, descriptive, and useful in discovering outcomes based on human actions, situational experiences, and expectations, rather than definitive knowledge (Savin-Baden and Wimpenny, 2014).

The broader purpose of qualitative research is to generate critical perspectives leading to better understanding of the social issue studied. Qualitative research gives in-depth understanding of those with self-interest invested into the subject. From a researcher's perspective, conducting qualitative research is a rewarding aspect of academic practice, providing opportunities for interaction and exchange of views that surveys might not provide.

Research Design
The research was performed in three phases. In the first phase, an extensive literature review regarding subculture content creation strategies was undertaken to guide the research direction with relevant theoretical frameworks. For phase two, qualitative interviewing was used to gather data. Interviewing was selected because it provides depth information of art in the process of social development as opposed to deterministic data from quantitative inquiry (Wang et al., 2017). Interviews help researchers delve into the issue and to explore solutions to specific social problems such as negative public or cultural perceptions. Qualitative methods are suited and useful in designing research approaches that seek correlation between the arts, social engagement, and community relations (Wang et al., 2017). The process begins by sourcing literature and books, journals, videos, online publications, digital and multimedia.

The subjects of research are four local graffiti artists working and based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Qualitative research enables researcher to meet the study objectives which is to critically analyze and interpret the relationship between graffiti art and graffiti artists in urbanization development in Malaysia. The instrument used is interviewing to collect information through self-administered questions to local graffiti artists. To study the perceived value of graffiti art and artists' views on graffiti commercialization, interview questions pertaining to their situational experiences were asked, and each interviewee was invited to expand their perspectives or to address issues important to them.

The interview questions were as follows:

1. *When did you start being a street artist?*
2. *Where did your interest in graffiti come from?*
3. *Would you consider graffiti a form of art or a crime? Why or why not?*
4. *What motivates you to be a graffiti artist?*
5. *The younger generation today has a high respect for graffiti. This has created a new youth subculture (fashion or lifestyle). What is your view on this?*
6. *In what ways does graffiti affect the younger generation of today?*
7. *Graffiti has evolved from street mural paintings to being a design element in commercial advertising. Do you think this will cause graffiti to lose its value as art?*

The four male graffiti artists were from different ethnicities, social backgrounds, and experiences. Two artists manage design studios; the other are full time graffiti artists. All four artists participated in the KL City Council's KUL SIGN Street Art Festival 2012.

Participant 1 (P1), known as Escapeva, was a talkative and energetic youth. Escapeva gives credit for his art pursuit to inspirational teachers. With a local graphic design degree, he freelances as a professional graffiti artist. Escapeva also runs a T-shirt designing company.

Participant 2 (P2) graduated with a diploma in multimedia and runs a studio providing wall art designing and printing services. He self-describes as "genuinely passionate about art and the act of painting large-scale pieces in public spaces."

Participant 3 (P3), a fine arts lecturer, describes himself as "interested in developing a career as a professional artist." P3 was articulate about graffiti culture, his experiences, and confident about his abilities to be a professional artist.

Participant 4 (P4), an illustrator who goes by the handle Cloakwork, describes himself as 'street-savvy', who has a full-time job as an in-house graphic designer.

Results and Discussion

The data collected was processed in response to the research problem based on qualitative descriptions of the interviewees' personal experiences. This section presents the transcribed replies and quotes provided by the interviewees.

On the first question on whether graffiti should be considered art or vandalism, P1 explains that to him, it is both a form of art and visual communication in public areas. *"It is a weapon to voice out particular messages (protests, threats, crime, artwork) to society. Graffiti art alone has truth in its own. It depends on how individuals perceive the meaning of graffiti."*

According to P2, graffiti itself is not a crime. *"It is an art using different mediums, mainly spray paint and paint. It depends on the artist's direction itself. Some keep their lines clean, but others present their art in forms to mirror vandalism."*

P3 says *"It is a form of art, as it made on public space, just as how big billboards are built in public space. If corporations are allowed to advertise, then everyone should be able to."*

P4 considers graffiti to be neither art nor crime. *"As the wise man says, 'Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder.' Different people have their ideas and opinions about this subject."*

On the motivation to consider graffiti artist as a career, each believed their passion must translate on commercial platforms before the subculture becomes an income generating pursuit. P1: *"My T-shirt design business is based on graffiti artwork style. Graffiti alone is not enough to sustain my living. Setting up my company has made me realize the younger generation today appreciates and respects the graffiti culture."*

According to P2, *"Art is all about innovation and creating new styles and it is great if they can find inspiration from every different form of art in the world."*

P3 views graffiti as part of lifestyle. *"It shapes youth's attitude and way of thinking."*

P4 agrees that the younger generation has interest in graffiti art. However, he feels that graffiti is losing its essence. *"Artists can acquire some basic skills of graffiti, but their passion towards art may not be visible. I think genuine graffiti artists have long lasting passion."*

The next question delved into the potential of street art for mainstream acceptance and how graffiti as a subculture was perceived by society in general. P1 agreed that graffiti has evolved from the offsides to gain respectability as part of popular cultural trends which includes hip hop music, skateboarding and un-

derground fashion. *"Graffiti art has come full circle. Once, it was considered trash and frowned upon. However, I observe that in recent years, our country has seen the growth of respected names among Malaysian graffiti artists."*

P1 adds, *"Graffiti artists today are like viral commodities. They get praised as if they were Hollywood celebrities."* In view of this, he appreciates that graffiti art is being respected by the modern generations. *"It has been a constant pursuit of my passion."*

However, unless they undertake commissions, P1 thinks full time graffitists should be mentally prepared for the challenges of generating revenues. *"Parents might not like the idea of their children being artists. The government, society, and the public may not accept your art if it violates public policies or spaces. They have to gain that level acceptance."*

P2 mentioned the freedom of expression that graffiti represents, when legitimized in brand marketing and commercial advertising - has the most effect on the younger generation. *"This has created a youth subculture, integrating street art into trends, fashion, lifestyle. For instance, Nike graffiti-inspired branding campaigns exemplifies what graffiti symbolizes."*

P3 said the way street art and graffiti was promoted affects the way the younger generation perceive art, leading them on their own journeys to explore, discover and appreciate art. *"There is higher respect for graffiti among youths. Most artists today are well educated. They want a way to express themselves, so this is a healthy platform for them."*

On the issue of whether graffiti's evolution from being a street design element to mainstream art will cause graffiti to lose its value as art, some concerns were raised.

P1: *"Graffiti used in branding and advertising may reduce its true value as art."* However, it is undeniable that encouraging street art is a good platform to help new audiences engage into graffiti culture. P1 adds: *"It will give graffiti artists a chance to gain fame. On the other hand, artists might lose their identity to marketers who leveraging their skills for profit."*

P2 disagrees. *"I don't think that commercializing graffiti will devalue the art form."*

P3 thinks advertisers' usage of graffiti elements shows the involvement of Malaysian communities and corporate businesses to expose society towards street art appreciation.

P4 felt that promotion was important for the public to differentiate the styles of graffiti. *"Graffiti art is no longer in the streets. It has mainstreamed into interior architectural and exterior built designs. Graffiti aesthetics will maintain its essence as a symbol of revolt in discussing society's freedom of expression."*

Analysis of Findings

To interpret findings and understand their significance, coding analysis was performed to determine a pattern of data from participants' input. The results were then divided into two themes for critical analysis: first, the role of graffiti art in influencing social development in Malaysia and second, graffiti art as a local subculture practice.

Findings showed a strong interest in producing Malaysian graffiti as statements of 'belonging' to acceptable subculture. None of the interviewees perceived the art as a self-promotional tool or channel. All spoke of its function as a social communication medium, perceived to have positive effects on youths. This concurs with Syafril Amir Muhammad et al., that street art were studies of design composition, color, style, and inspirations that suits local conditions.[17] Each artist was drawn to the genre through personal interest, their perceptions about graffiti as aesthetic artforms that are entertaining, thought-provoking, trendy, and enjoyable, and less about making political statements. One of the participants (P3) strongly emphasized the need to promote acceptance of art forms that are meaningful to youths.

Malaysian mural arts are heavily associated with the tourism agendas of heritage locations such as Ipoh, Kuala Lumpur, Melaka, Johor, and Penang, resulting in positive economic spillover, promoting social connections and community engagement. Furthermore, commercial advertising has brought graffiti subculture into the media spotlight. Malaysian graffiti artists are aware that word-of-mouth is insufficient; they need to boost personal status by increasing their media presence on websites, blogs, and social media (BASKL, 2021).

Despite the planning, time, effort, and costs involved, it is undeniable that graffiti in Malaysia have gotten its fair share of societal perceptions as unsightly defacement and some run into legality issues with property owners. Public art installations are appreciated by society at large, yet its contribution to Quality-of-Life improvement as functional urban landscape elements have been challenged as lack of authorities' guidelines to maintain public art would negatively impact or even ruin the community image. In analyzing perceptions of graffiti's impact on Malaysian audience, this paper concurs with Muhammad Falihin Jasmi and Nik Hanita Nik Mohamad, who suggest that increasing social acceptance legitimizes street art and increases public appreciation.[18] For the most part, Malaysian graffiti art is not inflammatory, but are inspired design works. However, graffiti artists must adhere to public art guidelines by city councils. They must also secure the permission of building owners before painting murals.

The idea of integrating artistic and design talent to beautify public surfaces and buildings is part of local cultural preservation of urban heritage. These findings concur with Cameron McAuliffe,[19] Gözde Kizilkan and Mehmet Ocakçı[20] and Jane Rocca,[21] that higher social tolerance for graffiti as subculture legitimizes its expression as sophisticated folk art, as it encourages graffiti artists to confidently portray the unique Malaysian identity on concrete walls and street canvases, in a public exploration of talent and tagging working in harmony.

Overall, findings indicate that Malaysian graffiti artists are passionate, and strive to earn positive reviews and media recognition, although they acknowledge there are legality, public costs, and acceptance issues to grapple with (Cilisos, 2020). Research showed generally positive perceptions relating to the social functions of graffiti. Graffiti artists clearly distinguish street graffiti as artform and not vandalism. Malaysian artists' perspectives on the commercialization of graffiti shows a healthy balance between its value to advertisers, community stakeholders, as a social trend, and for local heritage placemaking.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The intention of this study was to understand Malaysia's graffiti subculture and how it affects urbanization. Artists interviewed highlighted a need to consider the realities of urban identities, how street art and graffiti influence Malaysia's social development, and especially its impact on youth. From primary research, two major conclusions were derived.

First, there is a growth of positive perceptions towards street art with distinct elements of history, heritage, and culture in Malaysia, improving social acceptance while promoting domestic tourism and ensuring tourism development activities are sustained.

Second, a liberal approach is needed to expose Malaysian street artists' works to the public realm and to showcase their talents to energize town and city landscapes. Their main aim is to establish creative personas that identify them as artists, but their collective visions and role is to take society behind the façade of rebellion that graffiti may seem to be, to reveal the method behind their imagined worlds.

Towards this goal, opportunities must be offered for graffiti artists to use walls and building fronts as canvases. Young artists can be invited to participate in dialogues with stakeholder publics, as well as increasing youth audience awareness. This can be done by inviting school students, art club members and art institutions design and execute murals, setting up street art workshops and programs in collaboration with corporations, as well as partnering with state-level public cultural promotion agencies. Art educators and urban culture researchers in Malaysia need to encourage students to express themselves with an emphasis on practical challenges, including learning about the challenges of becoming professional street mural artists. They should guide students toward positive applications of styles that fit their ideologies.

The rise of graffiti culture in Malaysia are legitimate efforts to curb vandalism. Local authorities can promote community ties with graffiti artists while popularizing the art form and ensuring graffiti's visibility. In concurring with Shu Fen Chang, street art endorsed by town and city councils must be well planned since street mural initiatives could implicate substantial spending of taxes for the purpose of "beautification" or "uplift."[22]

Media plays a key role in creating better understanding, appreciation and awareness of visual messages communicated by graffiti artists. Media enables local

stakeholders and international communities such as tourists to value self-expression as a civic freedom, while shaping a critical mindset in distinguishing the aesthetic and economic value of street art.

Social progress begins when graffiti and street art is appreciated and experienced meaningfully among every generation. In the context of urbanization, as captured by the spirit of Malaysia's street art, graffiti represents the freedom of cultural expression where there is a constant ebb, flow and intersection of ideas and society's collective memories of an ever-changing urban landscape.

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