

## **GRAFFITI AS PROTEST ART IN STREET WORKS: A CULTURAL STUDIES THEORY ANALYSIS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Graffiti as street art has long been an effective medium of social expression to voice dissatisfaction with social, political, and economic conditions. In the Indonesian context, graffiti developed as a means of protest art that reflects the collective identity of society as well as criticism of controversial government policies. This research uses a cultural studies theoretical approach to analyze the role of graffiti in building protest narratives in public spaces. Using descriptive qualitative methods, this research explores the symbolism and expression patterns in graffiti from various cities in Indonesia. The results show that graffiti such as "Jogja Ora Didol" and "Forced to be Healthy in a Sick Country" not only reflect resistance to government policies but also depict the struggle of marginalized groups in seizing urban space as a medium for cultural expression. These findings confirm that graffiti can function as a powerful visual communication tool in mobilizing people to think critically and build social solidarity. Furthermore, graffiti is seen as a dynamic tool of subcultural resistance, allowing artists to reclaim public spaces often dominated by commercial advertising and government propaganda. This research provides insight into how street art can be a representation of cultural identity, a strategy of resistance, and a dynamic instrument of social change amidst the dynamics of contemporary Indonesian politics. Through the analysis of graffiti narratives, this study underscores the role of visual art as a form of public discourse that challenges hegemonic structures and amplifies the voices of the marginalized.

*Keywords:* Graffiti, Protest Art, Cultural Studies

### **INTRODUCTION**

Graffiti, as a work of art in the form of drawings and writings on walls, has become a form of protest art and a phenomenon that attracts attention in various parts of the world, including Indonesia. In this context, graffiti is seen as vandalism and a medium of social expression that reflects people's dissatisfaction with political and social conditions. From colonial times to the modern era, graffiti has served as a tool to convey critical messages

to the public, depicting the struggles and aspirations of the community in public spaces (Haniza, 2019). In this case, cultural studies theory provides a framework for understanding how this art interacts with broader cultural and social contexts and means of resistance to power and dominant narratives.

The history of graffiti in Indonesia shows that this art form has existed since the independence struggle. Artists used city walls to express their dissatisfaction with colonialism and social injustice. This shows that graffiti is a cultural product inseparable from its historical and political context (Bahtiar, 2021). Thus, graffiti can be seen as a form of visual communication that reflects the collective identity of society and a response to existing social conditions.

In previous studies, many focus on graffiti art's aesthetic and technical aspects. However, a research gap needs to be filled related to the social function of graffiti as a form of protest. Previous research shows that murals and graffiti can be practical political communication tools (Pramana, Gede Indra, 2019). However, few studies still examine how these works form protest narratives in the specific context of Indonesia, especially in the face of controversial government policies.

Street art in Indonesia is often perceived as vandalism, but this perception has changed over time. Many people now see graffiti as part of pop culture with artistic and social value (Saleh et al., 2023). In this case, for example, murals that appear in public spaces often criticize government policies or other social issues. This shows that graffiti is not just a picture on the wall but also an assertive visual communication that can trigger public discussion. Graffiti functions as aesthetic art and as a bridge to collective aspirations despite facing repression and restrictions from the authorities (Prasanti, 2023).

Cultural studies theory is a branch of science that talks about how culture is shaped and interpreted and how it influences social life. It also emphasizes the importance of local context in understanding protest art (Luzar & Monica, 2014). In Indonesia, factors such as the history of colonialism, contemporary political dynamics and social change play an important role in shaping graffiti practices. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of graffiti works needs to consider these local contexts in order to understand their meaning and impact more comprehensively.

In order to fill the research gap, this article will analyze graffiti works as a form of protest art with a cultural studies theory approach. Thus, it is expected to provide a deeper understanding of the role of graffiti in Indonesia's current socio-political context. This research aims to explain how street art is a medium of individual expression and reflects

broader social dynamics in society.

## **METHODS**

This research uses a qualitative method with a descriptive approach to understand graffiti as a form of protest art. Data was collected from various secondary sources, including journal articles, books, research reports, and visual documentation, such as photographs of graffiti works from various cities, especially in Indonesia. The data sources were analyzed to identify protest themes expressed through graffiti, such as social criticism, politics, or environmental issues. The data was analyzed qualitatively to identify patterns of expression, symbolism, and the influence of graffiti in voicing criticism or resistance to specific social issues. This approach allows an in-depth exploration of the role of graffiti as an alternative communication medium without the limitations of direct interaction with the object of research.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Graffiti in the Perspective of Cultural Studies Theory**

Graffiti, as a form of artistic expression that develops in public spaces, can be understood from the perspective of Cultural Studies theory. In this context, graffiti is not just a picture or writing on the wall, but also a medium of communication that reflects society's identity, ideology, and social dynamics. Cultural Studies theory emphasizes the importance of understanding culture in its social and political context, so graffiti can be seen as a form of resistance to existing norms and a tool to express the existence of marginalized groups.

Culture in Cultural studies always performs two functions: the object of study and the location of political action and criticism. Cultural studies aim at both pragmatic and ideal endeavours. It seeks to be understood theoretically and seen as an arena of struggle for social change (Astuti, 2003). In other words, Cultural Studies "studies" culture and uses culture as a tool of criticism and political action to create a better world.

Furthermore, communication with cultural studies is beneficial because it brings innovation, new perspectives, and creative breakthroughs in communication research. Cultural studies seek to examine communication as a practice of meaning production and will always read it within the framework of the Critique paradigm. This means that communication in the realm of cultural studies will be seen as a practice linked to power relations (Darisman, 2019).

One important aspect of graffiti is its ability to convey social and political messages. Many graffiti artists use the medium to respond to social injustice, racism, and the environment. Artists can invite people to reflect on existing social conditions through the symbols and images they create. For example, graffiti often appears in areas that are considered marginalized, giving voice to communities that are rarely heard in public discourse. As such, graffiti is an effective communication tool in delivering critiques of power structures.

Graffiti, as an art of protest, often functions as a medium of subversive expression that resonates with cultural studies theory, particularly about Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony. In this context, graffiti is used by marginalized groups to challenge the dominance of certain ideologies imposed by the ruling class. For example, anti-corporate murals or political messages on city walls can be seen as a direct response to social inequality, capitalism, or political repression. Cultural studies see graffiti as vandalism and a form of cultural communication that challenges mainstream narratives. This art represents how subordinate groups seize public space to voice their identity, resistance and aspirations while revealing the power dynamics in society (Efendi, 2021).

Furthermore, protest art through graffiti is a form of resistance with dynamic creative actions and has distinctive aesthetic elements. One of these forms of resistance, street art, is used as a tool for social protest and revolution. Street art differs from fine or high art in that it is usually collective, performed anonymously, has a unique aesthetic style, and often has a disruptive impact or is deemed "socially inappropriate." Through illustrative examples, street art is understood as a form of creative resistance that bridges the relationship between revolutionary "artists" and their audiences, including authorities and the general public. Moreover, these strategies of resistance in street art evolve, with opposing parties responding to each other's tactics. These interactions create tensions that birth new resistance actions and strategies (Sarah H. AwadBrady Wagoner, 2017).

From a cultural identity perspective, graffiti also plays a role in shaping a city's image. Many big cities are known for their graffiti works, which become a tourist attraction and part of the local identity. Graffiti is not just a visual art; it creates a narrative about the history and character of the local community (Cahyadi, 2023). In this sense, graffiti artists reclaim urban spaces often dominated by commercial advertising and formal institutions, turning city walls into canvases to express cultural diversity.

However, while graffiti has many positive aspects, it is often perceived as vandalism. The controversy surrounding its legal status creates tension between artists

and authorities. Many argue that graffiti ruins the aesthetics of public spaces and should be removed. On the other hand, graffiti enthusiasts argue that their work is a legitimate art form and should be respected (Ardiansyah, 2020). This debate reflects the conflict between traditional aesthetic values and contemporary cultural expressions.

Ultimately, graffiti can be seen as a representation of a youth subculture that seeks ways to express themselves amidst social pressures. As a visual communication medium, graffiti presents visual elements that attract the attention of the audience. Through colours, shapes, and words, graffiti artists can convey profound messages about their identity and the experience of living in an urban society. Thus, graffiti functions as a visual art and a medium to establish social relationships and build communities in public spaces.

### **Manifestation of Graffiti as Protest Art**

Graffiti is a straightforward tool for fighting oppression. Graffiti art has high accessibility compared to other art forms, such as paintings in galleries or museums. It allows anyone to enjoy and interact with the work without cost restrictions. Graffiti artists utilize walls, bridges, and other public spaces as canvases to express their ideas. Through this medium, they create a visual dialogue that invites people to think critically about various issues.

Graffiti in Indonesia has grown rapidly and has appeared in various cities, one of which is Yogyakarta. Its presence triggers various responses and becomes a matter of debate, both as an expression of art and an act that is often considered to disrupt urban planning. As in the picture below:



Fig 1. Graffiti Jogja Ora Didol. Source: Kompasiana

"Jogja Ora Didol" is a slogan that emerged as a form of protest against the

development of the city of Yogyakarta, which is considered not in favour of the community and has the potential to damage local cultural values. This slogan became a manifestation of protest art in the form of graffiti that spread in various corners of the city. "Jogja Ora Didol" graffiti shows resistance to the commercialization of the city and the eviction of residents for the sake of property development and tourism. This slogan symbolizes resistance to government policies that are considered unfair and ignore the people's aspirations.

The graffiti shows how street art can effectively voice disagreement and protest policies that are considered detrimental to society. The slogan is a form of non-physical resistance by the people of Yogyakarta, showing that they will not remain silent and will continue to fight for their rights. "Jogja Ora Didol" goes beyond just a slogan. Graffiti, with this slogan, became a powerful and meaningful form of protest art. It symbolizes resistance and unites Yogyakarta citizens who care about the future of their city.

The "Jogja Ora Didol" graffiti shows that street art can effectively build political and social awareness. It is a clear example of how graffiti art can effectively manifest protest art. It demonstrates the power of street art in uniting communities and strengthening resistance to injustice.

"Jogja Ora Didol" is an example of how graffiti art can be a meaningful and practical manifestation of protest art. It demonstrates that street art can be a powerful tool to unite communities and drive social and political change. Through "Jogja Ora Didol", we can see how graffiti art can be an effective tool to voice people's aspirations and protest against policies that are considered harmful. It shows that street art can be a powerful tool to unite communities and drive social and political change.

Like the graffiti above, which a group of people created to express their opinions, these images are often humorous, cynical, or even mocking. Because it is easy to create and understand, graffiti has become a popular way to protest and convey messages to many people. Especially in times of economic crisis, like now, many people use graffiti to express their dissatisfaction (Mouzakiotou, 2020). In addition, graffiti art, in some people's interpretation, is a form of vandalism but also acts as an art of protest and even as a form of communication between fellow citizens.

The relevance of "Jogja Ora di Dol" graffiti to cultural studies theory is that graffiti is a form of resistance to the hegemony of power, which wants the city of Yogyakarta as a commodity that is considered to ignore the little people (Putra & Munir, n.d.). Cultural studies theory helps us see that art, including graffiti, is not just an individual expression



but also part of a broader social struggle. Some graffiti showing protests was also found in areas such as Pasuruan, East Java.



Fig 2. Graffiti "Dipaksa Sehat di Negara yang Sakit". Source: CNN Indonesia

Graffiti "Dipaksa Sehat di Negara yang Sakit" in Pasuruan, East Java, is a clear example of how graffiti can manifest protest art in the Indonesian context. This provocative writing, displayed on the wall of an empty building on the side of the main road, criticizes the country's condition that is considered "sick" but forces its citizens to be "healthy". This mural not only displays a critical message but also uses strong visual language to convey the message.

In the context of the Covid 19 pandemic that occurred in 2020 and impacted all aspects of both health and socio-economic "Forced to be Healthy", where this sentence criticizes the health policy or discourse imposed by the state. During the pandemic, many policies such as lockdowns, mandatory masks, or vaccinations were imposed without considering the ability of the little people, who still have to work to survive. Furthermore, the meaning of the phrase "Sick Country" describes dissatisfaction with the state system, which is considered to have failed to handle the pandemic reasonably. Criticism is directed at aspects such as corruption in aid distribution, lack of health facilities, or overlapping policies. The two animal-like characters, depicted alongside the words "Forced to be Healthy in a Sick Country", provide a broader visual interpretation and raise questions about society and the country's state.

Although the sub-district removed the mural on the orders of the Pasuruan Regency Satpol PP because it violated the local regulation on public order, this incident shows the power of graffiti as a tool of protest. The mural "Forced to be Healthy in a Sick Country" attracted public attention and sparked discussions about Indonesia's social and political conditions.

Furthermore, the graffiti viewed from the analysis of cultural studies theory wants to reveal how the state often imposes norms or policies that ignore the actual conditions of its people. Namely, there were health campaigns, especially during the Covid 19 pandemic, which were not supported by proper health infrastructure or policies (Farran, S. Smith, 2021). This shows a form of hegemonic power, where the state determines how people should live, without providing adequate support.

This incident also shows that protest art through graffiti has become an increasingly common phenomenon in Indonesia. Despite the risk of prosecution, graffiti artists in Indonesia continue to use this medium to convey their messages. They realize that graffiti can effectively build social awareness, criticize government policies, and push for change. The mural "Forced to be Healthy in a Sick Country" clearly shows that graffiti can mobilize communities and provoke discussions on important issues facing the nation.

## CONCLUSION

Graffiti, as an art of protest, manifests the social, political, and cultural dynamics that develop in public spaces. From the perspective of cultural studies theory, graffiti is not only understood as a form of visual art but also as an effective medium of communication to convey criticism and aspirations of society. In Indonesia, graffiti often reflects the struggle against injustice, the domination of certain ideologies, and government policies that are not in the community's favour. Examples such as "Jogja Ora Didol" and "Forced to be Healthy in a Sick Country" show how this art can mobilize social awareness and build narratives of resistance to power. Thus, graffiti has the potential to be a creative and transformative tool of social change despite still facing the stigma of being an act of vandalism.

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