



# The Socio-cultural Aspects of Graffiti Writings in Pakistan

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## ABSTRACT

Present study aims at exploring the phenomenon of graffiti and its presence in Pakistan. It also sets to investigate the frequency of different themes exhibited through graffiti and their corresponding relationship to socio-cultural and religious ideologies and attitudes of inhabitants of this part of the world. For given purpose the historical city of Lahore, which is also considered the hub of culture and education in country, was chosen as this practice is found in profusion there especially in areas under consideration locally named as Model Town, Centre Point, Hussain Chowk, etc. Graffiti is treated as a pliant feature of contemporary metropolitan setting and an ever-trendy researchable issue in academic research. Our contention here is not to label graffiti as a social territorial crime or a rebellious facet on the part of graffiti artists rather a social behavior and its relation to existing religious beliefs and socio-cultural norms of existing Pakistani social mosaic.

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## Introduction

The term graffiti finds its origin from the Greek lexeme 'graphein' that stands for 'to write'. It can be described as a permutation of adeptly created words and images, designed to influence over the thoughts of others. Sigel (2001: p.1) described that "the phenomenon, which we can observe all over the world, in colloquial speech, is called GRAFFITI". We can also find its roots in Ancient Egypt, Greece, and the Roman civilization. Before tagging, it appeared in the form of single hitting. In past, the people were accustomed of writing their names' description on the walls and underground passages etc. After the invention of spray paint revolutionized the form of graffiti because new tags were indistinguishable between some many others and that the graffiti work, called piece now a days, was born in this way. According to Sigel (2001) in 1973, the New York Magazine started the contests for best graffiti work. After 1976, there came another innovative change in this field and graffiti work took the form of wild style, it happened because letters were not comprehensible any longer. So, in 1976 a person called Caine painted a whole train.

In modern times, the graffiti work through paint, particularly spray paint, and marker pens founded growth so much quickly. With the passage of time, the graffiti writers separated into two different groups and i.e. real art (use of spray paint to show emotions and feelings) and traditional paintings on the walls.

However, controversies and disagreement still exist among artists, the city officials and owners of building/other places etc. Sometimes, it might be taken as a crime, defacement and vandalism, particularly if it is done without the consent of the authorities.

### Taggers vs. Writers

Most of the graffiti work is the creation of taggers and writers. Taggers keep themselves busy in the basic forms of graffiti and writers are generally responsible for the more artistic work and take significant risk for displaying their artistic work at the highly visible spot. Furthermore, in graffiti there is no matter of art and writers but the issue exists in the form of permission.

## Genres for Graffiti Style

In this respect publics, semi-public, wild style, semi-wild style, blockbuster, straight letter and abstract forms of graffiti are at the top. A good artist/writer frequently uses these above mentioned styles in his/her work of graffiti.

### Graffiti Work in Lahore (targeted areas of Lahore).

The graffiti work is found in large quantities in the different areas of Lahore (e.g. Model Town, Centre Point, Hussain Chowk, Defence, Goal Mandi, Sabza Zar Scheme, Ichra, Mozang, Shahdara, Allama Iqbal Town, Kot Lakhpat, Multan Chongi, Garden Town, Johar Town). In these areas the work of graffiti can be found at assorted rate but the work of graffiti in given areas of Lahore demonstrates that this artistic work is escalating in Lahore so much summarily.

### Accessible Areas for Research Project

This research project was designed to analyze the graffiti work by the researchers from the three accessible areas of Lahore.

- Model Town
- Centre Point
- Hussain Chowk

### Themes of Graffiti Founded in above Mentioned Three Areas of Lahore

Thirteen themes of graffiti were founded by the researchers within the accessible areas in Lahore. These three areas were chosen by the researchers because it was supposed that people residing in these localities belong to different social classes (upper, middle, lower). It is also assumed that people living in these areas are well sentient to the varied tribulations prevailing in Pakistani society. Total 110 snaps were taken by the researchers and 100 of them were chosen for the purpose of analysis. The observed themes of graffiti work are given below alphabetically along with their percentage.

### Grounded Theory Method (GT)

"Grounded theory is an inductive, theory discovery methodology that allows the researchers to develop a theoretical account of the general features of a topic while simultaneously grounding the account in empirical observational or data" (Glaser & Strauss 1967 as cited in Martin & Turner 2005: p.

141). It is a logically organized research technique in the social sciences functioning in reverse manner from conventional social science research modes as Martin & Turner (2005) describe it as a research technique initiated open mindedly and predisposed to emerge from a specified inquiry. In current research method the first step is data collection by various means instead of establishment of a hypothesis. In order to invent theory from data, both inductive and deductive approaches, where the main objective remained on to devise a hypothetical statement, were employed. Secondly, the researchers tried to discover the participants and it is considered an essential feature of this type of research to resolve the problematic issues. Here, most importantly the researchers keep their focus on asking questions such as what is, what is main predicament of the participant? How they are making efforts to resolve that?

Grounded theory method cannot be regarded as a descriptive method. The sole use of description in this method is mainly to illustrate concepts. Mostly, GT studies are done through Qualitative approach and the data is not provided in numerical forms. The result of GT includes a set of probability statements about the relationship between concepts. Here, one of the most important points is that one cannot say anything about the validity of Grounded Theory in this type of research. It has more or less the characteristics of fitness, relevance, workability and modifiability. Present research project is actually the practical application of Grounded Theory. Martin & Turner (2005 p.142) also described that ...”researcher thus generate grounded theory when they are concerned, to use Glaser and Strauss’s (1967 as cited in Martin & Turner 2005: p. 142) somewhat provocative phrase with “the discovery of theory from data (ibid, 2005: p.142)” rather than with the testing or verification of existing theories”.

### **Findings, Characteristics and Discussion**

#### **Findings**

##### **Culture**

Culture accounts for approximately 16% of all graffiti reported in these three areas of Lahore.

##### **Education**

Education accounts for approximately 5% of all graffiti reported in these three areas of Lahore.

##### **Environment**

Environment accounts for approximately 11% of all graffiti reported in these three areas of Lahore.

##### **Frustration**

Frustration accounts for approximately 7% of all graffiti reported in these three areas of Lahore.

##### **Hope**

Hope accounts for approximately 8% of all graffiti reported in these three areas of Lahore.

##### **Humanity**

Humanity accounts for approximately 3% of all graffiti reported in these three areas of Lahore.

##### **Love**

Love accounts for approximately 5% of all graffiti reported in these three areas of Lahore.

##### **Modernity**

Modernity accounts for approximately 4% of all graffiti reported in these three areas of Lahore.

##### **Music**

Music accounts for approximately 3% of all graffiti reported in these three areas of Lahore.

##### **Patriotism**

Patriotism accounts for approximately 18% of all graffiti reported in these three areas of Lahore.

##### **Peace**

Peace accounts for approximately 7% of all graffiti reported in these three areas of Lahore.

##### **Religion**

Religion accounts for approximately 9% of all graffiti reported in these three areas of Lahore.

##### **Rural Life**

Rural Life accounts for approximately 4% of all graffiti reported in these three areas of Lahore.

### **Characteristics of Graffiti Work in Lahore**

The graffiti work in Lahore, whether indecipherable, dented, or sprayed illicitly on walls or other exterior surfaces in public places, illustrates different ideas. It also expresses underlying social, political, religious, educational, cultural, economic and moral values through its whole genre of artistic expressions. These expressions facilitate us in gaining perception of the lifestyle, social catharsis and cultural expression of the populace residing in varied areas of Lahore, Pakistan.

#### **Discussion**

The whole graphitic work in cultural and educational city of Lahore demonstrates the frequency of different themes that relate directly to masses’ social approach and their mental tendencies in terms of current prevailing cultural, religious and socio-political setting of the Pakistani society and how people express it.

Culture is taken as the totality of life and it differs from country to country and from region to region. People living at different places have their own notions and norms. Culturally, Pakistanis are very unique nation and their culture is very close to their beliefs. The artistic graffiti found in 1<sup>st</sup> part demonstrates indifference and isolation in its culture as it is prone to the Western culture. No doubt, menace to Pakistani culture is evident as cord of culture has slipped from the visible hands, however, it can be caught again to preserve the culture. The blue background in picture shows a sense of optimism in the work of artists despite hurdles lying in the form of pieces of stone. So rich local culture and traditions can be saved with tolerance, peace, harmony and consistent effort. The pixels 1.1 and 1.4 show that culture in this part of the world is rich in vibrant colors exceedingly illuminating the traditions of different areas of Pakistan. Different symbols are used such as a mosque as a representative of religion, a horse for the meticulous people, men dressed in traditional pallid garbs showing purity, dancing on the beats of ‘Dhol’ and the green colour representing the flag and love for others. The pixels 1.5, 1.6 and 1.8 exhibit the Sindhi cultural traditions, Khyber Pukhtun Kha decorated trucks illustrating norms and Shandur festival<sup>1</sup>. The pixel 1.9 and 1.11 are showing the artifacts of Pakistan painted in a map of country: its natural resources, the village life, livestock, fruits and vegetables grown in South Asia, agriculture and farming. The woman carrying clay pot on her head shows the typical village life of Pakistani women. The pixel 1.14 shows the urban culture of Pakistan. It also portrays modern infrastructure, however, signs of pollution and destruction can be deduced there as well. The artist most likely wants to convey that this annihilation and pollution is now becoming a part of living which should be seriously taken into consideration.

<sup>1</sup> Shandur Festival refers to a Polo match festival that takes place annually in Shandur that is 12,200 feet high, located in Gilgit, Pakistan. This festival dates back to 1936 and its main attraction is mountain polo played there.

Themes of Graffiti Work in Lahore in Table

S. No.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Themes	Culture	Education	Environment	Frustration	Hope	Humanity	Love	Modernity	Music	Patriotism	Peace	Religion	Rural Life
%age	16%	5%	11%	7%	8%	3%	5%	4%	3%	18%	7%	9%	4%

The term modernity is associated with different movements and in present study it depicts the modernity towards life and novelty of ideas. For example, the pixel 2.1 and 2.2 depict cartoon and figure paintings. These paintings reflect the spirit of the young age. Similarly, the pixel 2.4 is a depiction of the novelty, vibrancy, and fleeting allure of the latest trends in fashion that proved seductive for a generation of artists and writers who sought to give expression to the pulse of modern life in all its nuanced magnificence.

Through the depiction of rural life in graffiti work, artists demonstrate the beauty and hardships of the people living in countryside. For example the pixel 3.1 portrays a typical scene of a mud house of a village with the lifestyle of the villagers, whereas, figure 3.2 is showing that a woman is grinding flour in a traditional manner. Behind her is a typical mud house and she is clad in a colorful dress with her head covered. The pixels 3.3 and 3.4 show that even no village life is free from pollution and a newly built road is a sign of the development taking place in villages.

Man has always required positive tone towards life because it is the only attitude which can make everything possible. Almost, whole of the graffiti work reflecting theme of hope shows the positive human attitude. The pixels 4.1, 4.2, 4.6 and 4.8 are beautiful expression of peace. The girl, fertile land and flowers in those samples are portraying the message of hope and peace. The painter seems to show that sense of hope and peace can never be obstructed for all the time. In pixels 4.6 and 4.8 people show hope that electing of political leaders by election can bring about a positive change in the society. In pixel 4.4 the artist wants to show the disturbing and discomfort situation by the facial expression and colour scheme applied on the girl. Black colour is very much visible on white landscape and it intensifies the message of hope. In pixel 4.5, the question "Where did HOPE go?" is very thoughtful. Man has to pass through the different shades of colors in his life.

The artist has transferred the message of peace quite artistically and critically. The scheme of colors inside the picture are also showing the enthusiasm for peace. In pixel 5.1 the symbol of peace is shown by the dove, the bird generally considered by the people as a symbol of peace in all the four corners of the world. In pixel 5.2 the smooth blend of colors like black for background, sky blue for cloud, more red and less yellow color for kite, red color for hands, and red color for the word 'vote for peace' indicates the requirement for peace as soon as possible. Though the background of the picture is ironic but it stands as a good execution for dynamicity. In pixel a duck has been shown moving breaking the inertia of stagnant life. However, red color is also prevalent as it is the symbol of threat and danger but duck is consistent to reach its destination. In pixels 5.4 and 5.7 the paintings are conveying a good political message where vote for Peace is a very evident message. 'Vote for peace' in diverse colours symbolizes different ethnic, regional and religious bands and they all contribute to collective peace. However, in pixel 5.6, man is shown striving for peace through adversities and unpredictable problems.

Polluted environment is a worldwide problem and is considered the biggest menace for human beings today. Pakistan is also facing environmental problems. The graffiti work on this

issue shows that the artists have raised this world damaging issue very critically. For example, 6.1 pixel is a beautiful sketch of an octopus who is displaying its love for clean environment. The artist has beautifully conveyed message of marine creatures' quest for clean healthy environment that must be free from every sort of pollution. In pixel 6.2 animals, struggling to survive by wearing masks and oxygen pipes, have been shown. The artist satires the human beings that marine creatures have to suffer because of man's in human activities. The pixel 6.7 also is very vivid and comprehensive in convincing the artist's desire for sanitation. The artist has emphasized the importance of cleanliness by relating it to religion. The purpose of relating worldly phenomenon with religion is to persuade the viewers to maintain cleanliness as a matter of religious obligation. In pixel 6.8 the artist has ironically depicted the idea of neglecting environment issues by the concerned authorities. White collar with black suit is the symbol of those who serve government. The artist has criticized the authorities by using expressive and ironical words to show his/her quest to look into environ issues.

Frustration among Pakistanis because of political, moral, economical, social and religious impatience/disorder is another immense issue, aheading towards a bleak future. Pixels on the theme of frustration have also drawn very ironical and critical point of view about the current scenario by the artists. For example, in pixel 7.1 the painter has shown a gagged boy, frustrated from life's hardships and sufferings. Whereas heart is the symbol of love in this picture which depicts the person's desire to enjoy his life. A line drawn in the middle of the image is the indicator of the intensity of his frustration which may lead him to a pathetic end. In pixel 7.2, the faded facial expressions, mismatched size of pair of glasses and the way the man closes his fists best conveys the intensity of his frustration. Black and grey colours are frequently used to reveal the signs of panic and gloom. In pixel 7.6 reflection of extreme frustration and the element of red colour is very dominant. The image painted by the artist convinces the viewers that the society is facing serious disorders and developing death phobia.

Love is all about a passionate attitude towards others and it is an indispensable prerequisite of life because without it life seems tiresome and monotonous. Though the ratio of love pixels found in the areas of Lahore is very short but the artists have conveyed their messages very logically depicting an important feature of life among the people to uplift the standard of life and to create harmony among them. For example, in pixel 8.1 the artist has described the strong feeling of love in a striking manner. Natural beauty (winging of butterfly and birds, rainbow, setting and rising of sun) influences the lovers more than anyone else. Love in itself is a source of enjoyment even when the lovers stay apart. The picture is very inspiring and depicts the desire of love. In pixel 8.2 though the girl stands alone yet her emotional involvement with someone describes her deep desire to be loved by her beloved.

The basic aim of education is to bring reformation in a society. The artists have drawn the painting over the issue in a very critically way. Thiers pictures show that the people of Pakistan are lacking in this field very much and they are immediately required to bring about improvements in it, one of the most important fields of life. For example, pixel 9.1 is an

attempt to transfer the messages that the young generation is not focusing on their education rather they are wasting their time. In contrast to painting 6.1, the artist in pixel 9.2 has transferred the message that innovations can only be brought in our life through proper education. In pixel 9.3 the word "ilm", meaning knowledge in English, has been painted in very prominent color scheme. Good relations between human beings are considered one of the important elements for the existence of life and it is another important issue in the society of Pakistan. The people have become materialistic which is deteriorating moral values. The artists have depicted this deteriorating situation among the people quite artistically and their work is showing that society requires more harmony than before. For example, in pixels 10.1, 10.2 and 10.3 the chief emphasis of the artist is on the importance of good relationship among people. In pixel 10.3 "we are kids" motivates that sharing and treating fellow human beings with consideration and thoughtfulness as an indispensable fraction of a fine moral conduct. However it is one of the least themes found in the work of the artists.

Religion of a group, community or nation is considered the fundamental code of life for them. Almost, 90% people living in Pakistan are Muslims. The artists, through their graffiti work, have also tried to depict the current religious situation in country and image of Islam. For example, the pixel 11.1 calls for establishment of global ethical order, moderation, and fulfillment of man's social responsibility for living a peaceful religious co-existence. In pixel 11.2 through the association between "Kalma and Masjid", two rudimentary representations of Islam, artist is showing the fundamentals of Islam. In pixel 11.4 the artist has shown "Sectarian violence in Pakistan" referring to show aggression against people and places in Pakistan motivated by antagonism toward their sect, usually a religious group. The color scheme of this image criticizes the sectarian aggression and hostility in Pakistan because green color is usually taken as the symbol of peace. In the given picture, there are two colors showing people of all sects living in Pakistan. Similarly, 11.7 pixel shows the consideration and empathy for other sects in Pakistan.

Music is the art of sound that expresses ideas and emotions in significant forms through the elements of rhythm, melody and harmony. This theme is also found in a very less average in the work of artists like that of humanity. Pakistan is country where the great Indus civilization, rich in art, music and dance, flourished. Pakistani music has evolved in many historic phases as various Invaders from whole world brought their bits of spices to the music, culture and art of sub continent. The revolution of Islam and Sufism made music more mature and gave it a new-fangled distinctiveness. The pixel 12.3 shows different types of genres of music like classical, romantic, religious, pope, and folk, etc.

Patriotism is the most abundant theme found in the artistic work of the graffiti. Graffiti work depicting this theme demonstrates that it is an imperative social matter in the context of Pakistan. The graffiti artists have also shown disparaging state of this theme in the country.

The pixels show that these are not the pictures; rather these are deep emotions of painters' hearts which they transferred on the walls of Lahore through their brushes with the help of diverse colors. These pictures depict different themes and all these themes come under the major theme of love of country, patriotism. The pixel 13.1 reminds us of a historic decision taken on 23 March 1940. The leaders from sub continent gathered in Minto Park Lahore and decided to make their people a free nation, from the slavery of the English. The background diversity of colours shows that there were all types of people in

that meeting, and they have diversity in their opinions but their sole motive was freedom from the slavery. In Pixel 3.2 the painter has written the words "love Pakistan" and "one nation" on the wall. The background of the picture shows that even people of all provinces have their cultures but they are all knit together yet. The pixel 13.3, 13.4 and 13.5 are showing different historical and distinct monuments of Pakistan situated in different provinces and is emphasizing on the must required unity for their existence rather enmity among themselves. In contrasting to above pixels the pixels 13.6 and 13.9 are showing the gloomy situation. The color scheme and background like cloudy atmosphere, leaves painted with red colour and the words written with black colours are showing destructive elements. The pixel 10.18 is a painting bearing the famous couplet of great poet Allama Iqbal. Iqbal tells us that one nation whose youth has an iron will; need not any type of arms for fighting the war of life. They can turn every unattainable into attainable through strong will.

### Conclusion

Graffiti is the description of words, images and objects to influence the thoughts of general public. This type of research study is done under the umbrella of Grounded theory involving data collection, analysis and generation of concepts. Moreover in this work 13 themes (in the form of street painted pictures) are analysed. The artist work is the reflection of the particular society's good or bad image where one resides. He tries to depict every prime issue prevalent in contemporary society. As in Pakistan, (Lahore) the artists love to draw the public attention towards their distinct culture, rural life and religion. They reveal their society's ardent desire to get rid of frustration and to know the value of healthy environment, education, humanity, peace and patriotism. They also offer hope and love as remedial measures to overcome their frustration. They reflect society's passionate yearning for modernity and love for music as a source of entertainment. In short the chief objective of an artist is to draw public attention towards social realities and generate perception and ideas in a conspicuous manner.



























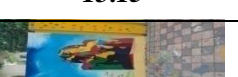



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## Appendix

Collage Of One Hundreded Pixels Being Used as a Text for Different Themes				
1-Themes of Culture				
1.1	1.2	1.3	1.4	1.5
1.6	1.7	1.8	1.9	1.10
1.11	1.12	1.13	1.14	1.15
1.16	2-Themes of Modernity			
	2.1	2.2	2.3	2.4
3-Themes of Rural Life				
3.1	3.2	3.3	3.4	4-Themes of Hope. 4.1
4.2	4.3	4.4	4.5	4.6
4.7	4.8	5-Themes of Peace		
		5.1	5.2	5.3
5.4	5.5	5.6	5.7	6-Themes of Environment.6.1
6.2	6.3	6.4	6.5	6.6
6.7	6.8	6.9	6.10	6.11
7-Themes of Frustration				
7.1	7.2	7.3	7.4	7.5
7.6	7.7	8-Themes of Love		
		8.1	8.2	8.3
8.4	8.5	9-Themes of Education		
		9.1	9.2	9.3
9.4	9.5	10-Themes of Humanity		
		10.1	10.2	10.3

11-Themes of Religion				
11.1	11.2	11.3	11.4	11.5
				
11.6	11.7	11.8	11.9	12-Themes of Music. 12.1
				
12.2	12.3	13-Themes of Patriotism		
		13.1	13.2	13.3
				
13.4	13.5	13.6	13.7	13.8
				
13.9	13.10	13.11	13.12	13.13
				
13.14	13.15	13.16	13.17	13.18
				
Areas: Model Town, Centre Point, Hussain Chowk				