

A Changing Canvas: Messages Conveyed by Illegal Art in the West Bank

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Introduction

The striking presence of graffiti in the West Bank has been studied throughout the years as a glimpse into the cultural and political views of those living there. The current study takes pictures of graffiti from various locations throughout the West Bank and assesses what is said about the current political, societal and economic realities. Data was gathered using Google searches and personal photos from travel. Open coding was utilized to find four themes within the data: the prevalence of international and political narratives, the desire for freedom and liberation, peace despite the conflict, and children and youth as powerful agents.



Theory

Robert K. Merton's Strain Theory fundamentally states that individuals within society have varying degrees to which they can achieve their goals, which creates strain.

- Strain is an event or condition, how an individual interprets an event and the emotional response to the situation.
- Examples of strains include wealth, status, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, mental capacities, etc.
- Graffiti one illegal action that can result from strain, and can point to current frustrations and fears of those who are writing them.

Methodology

- This qualitative study used unobtrusive methods of data collection.
- Digital photos were collected from online sources and personal photos from travel to the West Bank. Samplings were spread around major cities in the West Bank, including Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron, Nablus and Ramallah in efforts to create a representative sample.
- A total of 37 photos of graffiti were chosen based on relevance, popularity and accessibility.
- Open coding was utilized and eight codes were found: reference to land (sometimes symbolized by a key), international support (including the mention of other countries or the presence of different languages), U.S. policy, freedom and liberation, satire, public figures, peace, and youth involvement.

Literature Review

- Graffiti research has global reaches, including studies performed in Brazil (Iddings, McCafferty, & Silva, 2011), Indonesia (Lee, 2013), Tel Aviv (Klingman & Shalev, 2001) and more.
- Research on graffiti has approached the topic from various viewpoints including gender studies (Green, 2003), the interplay with globalization (Gould, 2014), its relationship with social media (Li & Prasad, 2018), urban citizenship and empowerment (Lee, 2013), graffiti in response to trauma and loss (Klingman & Shalev, 2001) and transnational politics (Toenjes, 2015).
- In 1996, Peteet researched graffiti related to the first intifada, (Li & Prasad, 2018; Peteet, 1996) which provided valuable data on "how and under what conditions graffiti [is] produced and what their production means for their writers and audiences" (Peteet, 1996, p. 140). Since 1996, minimal research has been done on the graffiti in the West Bank post-intifada.
- This research contributes a lacking sociological perspective on graffiti post-intifada in the West Bank. The ever-present political issues, the overwhelming number of people with refugee status, and those subject to physical confinement due to the separation barrier make this topic current and relevant.

Results



Prevalence of International and Political Narratives

- International support was shown through the mentioning of other countries, and the representation of different languages and flags.
- There were 27 references to international narratives
- There were mentions of Puerto Rico, Mexico, France, Algeria, Ireland, European Union, China, Germany, Canada, Spain and France.
- Many images politically position themselves in solidarity with the Palestinians, Germany and Mexico which both have experiences with a separation wall.

The desire for Freedom and Liberation

- There were 27 references to freedom and liberation.
- Freedom referred to the desire to return to their homelands, freedom of movement, and freedom to express beliefs and opinions
 - "freedom" was found in the data set 3 times, and "free Palestine" was found 6 times.
 - Power over land is symbolized by a key, which signifies what the Palestinian people call, "the right of return." A key was symbolized 3 times.
 - One piece of graffiti displayed different names of Palestinian villages written in Arabic and English, along with the symbol of a key.



Peace Despite Conflict

- There were 27 mentions of peace.
- The word peace was mentioned 7 times, the peace symbol was drawn 4 times, the hand symbol for peace was depicted once, a dove was shown 6 times, and an olive branch was portrayed 5 times.
- Banksy's "Armored Dove of Peace" was a graffiti included in the data set.

Children and Youth as depictions of vulnerability and victimization

- There were 14 references to children/youth
- Children are portrayed as vulnerable, but also brave.
- Youth were seen as being the victims of violence.
- Children are depicted playing with war equipment, like missiles, torches, and guns.
- One graffiti displays the names of over 250 children who were killed in the West Bank in 2014 by Israeli soldiers.



Discussion & Conclusion

In reflecting on the research process, and what can be learned from the changing canvas of the West Bank, there is a multitude of stories that can be drawn from this art. There is still a movement for peace and liberation, with backing from countries worldwide. The varying views and messages which are displayed on the wall contribute to the depth and reaches which translate not only to those living in the West Bank but to international audiences.

From a Christian perspective, we are called to pray and struggle with our brothers and sisters around the world. Though the physical distance between us and fellow believers in the West Bank makes their struggles harder to comprehend, we can "bear with one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:2, New International Version). Miroslav Volf, a Croatian Protestant theologian, talks in his book titled, *Exclusion and Embrace*, about the evil of otherness. He states that the message of the gospel urges us to consider the deep-rooted hatred that we hold for the other. As Christ-followers, we are to reconcile with others and learn to genuinely seek empathy with those that are distant, unreachable, or even just unrelatable. While a futuristic outlook points us towards the glory of God, for the time being, we must suffer here on earth with our brothers and sisters around the world.

Moving forward, graffiti as a cultural production is a means of resistance and a way to make your voice heard. This study correlates with previous research findings in the West Bank, which shows how graffiti has positioned itself in a place of power within the social structure. The intentionality behind the illegal action proves that its intent is more than just to beautify the West Bank but serves as a political symbol that synthesizes international narratives. Each layer of graffiti tells a story, and the current narratives urge us towards what action can be taken.

Selected References

- Peteet, J. (1996) The Writing on the Walls: The Graffiti of the Intifada. *Cultural Anthropology*, 11(2), 139-159.
Rosenfeld, R. (1989). Robert Merton's Contributions to the Sociology of Deviance. *Sociology Inquiry*, 69(4), 453-466.
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