
The Role of Graffiti as an Expression of Youth Identity (Case Study on ROCE and BKRE Bombers)

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ABSTRACT:

Graffiti art has drawn pros and cons from the public and is considered a Form of vandalism or crime because it damages public facilities. However, for graffiti artists or bombers, graffiti is a place to express themselves. Even though it received a lot of negative responses from the public, graffiti was able to survive and continue to exist. Based on this, the author wants to know the meaning behind the activities of the bombers who chose graffiti art as a medium of expression. The author uses qualitative research methods. The data collection techniques used in this article are interviews, observation, and documentation. The theory used is the theory of self-expression through the symbolic interaction approach by George Herbert Mead. The research results show that graffiti perpetrators or bombers choose graffiti as a medium for self-expression and self-existence. Graffiti allows bombers to display their work to the broader public.

Keywords: *Graffiti, Bombers, Self Expression*

INTRODUCTION

On its journey the history of graffiti first began in New York City, the United States, and Europe, and it spread to other cities as a group identity. Street artists or groups create symbols or signatures (tags) that differ from other groups but according to their characteristics by adding various colors or motifs. However, the image of graffiti has become destructive because it is considered a crime. This is because graffiti is considered to provoke groups or gang wars. In

addition, graffiti is considered dirty or destructive because it often uses public facilities or walls as media to display their work (Aji, 2017).

Graffiti is an art that is inherent in people's lives. Every street, especially in big cities, displays various graffiti artworks, from street walls, shop rolling doors, traffic signs, and billboards full of graffiti. Although society considers graffiti negative because it is destructive or dirty, graffiti is able to survive, develop, and adapt to the surrounding environment. So graffiti is a form of artistic expression and strong visual communication in an art journey (Darisman, 2019).

Graffiti art has become a medium of expression for young people today. Young people today are starting to be more interested in graffiti art. They use graffiti art individually and in groups as a form of self-expression. According to Susanto in Winarno, graffiti means scratches or strokes from the Italian word "graffito" and is called demotic art, which gives function to scribbling actions (Winarno, 2016). Through graffiti, young people can freely express themselves without any limitations. So, graffiti becomes an ideal medium for young people to express themselves.

Graffiti is done by young people who are 'itching' to pour their creative ideas into the wall media to show their expression and existence (Kurniasari, 2013). Graffiti is often found on city street walls. Graffiti actors (bombers) can produce interesting works using spray paint with various colors. Every work they create is the result of artistic creativity that they pour into the form of graffiti.

The flexibility and freedom of graffiti art activities have made many young people interested in this art. Unlike other conventional arts that often have specific rules, in graffiti art, bombers can freely create their works without any rules. Bombers can experiment by mixing various colors, letter shapes, styles, and techniques in making them. This can be the reason why young people are more interested in graffiti art: It is free and fits the character of young people who are experimental and creative.

Not only as a visual language, graffiti art can also be used as a communication medium for young people. Through graffiti art, young people can build relationships by creating social groups or building interactions between groups with similar interests and talents in graffiti art. Young people can create work individually and in groups through these groups. In addition, social groups

can be a place to channel ideas, ideas and create collaborative works between one bomber and another (Anggraini, 2024).

Although graffiti has received considerable attention as a form of street art, discussions about its position as a medium of expression still need to be made. Most people consider graffiti a form of vandalism rather than a form of creative expression. The lack of discussion causes a gap in understanding the critical role of graffiti in young people's expression of identity.

This study discusses graffiti art as a medium of expression for young people using a case study of ROCE and BKRE bombers. This study is critical because it opens up an understanding of non-verbal communication and visual communication carried out by young people and explores further how graffiti is an alternative media for young people to display their work. Compared to previous studies, the novelty in this research is that researchers observe activities and are directly involved in making graffiti works (ROCE and BKRE) and how they use public space to show their existence. The method used in this study is qualitative research, which involves interviews, observations, and documentation. This study was then analyzed using the theory of self-expression through the symbolic interaction theory approach by George Herbert Mead. Through the symbolic interaction theory approach, it is then divided into 3 parts: mind, self, and society. This study aims to determine whether graffiti art is a medium of expression for young people.

METHOD

Researchers use a qualitative case study research type. According to Suryono in Harahab, qualitative research is used to investigate, describe, find, and explain the quality or characteristics of social influences that cannot be explained or measured using a quantitative approach (Harahap, 2020). Qualitative research intends to understand the phenomenon of what is experienced by research subjects in terms of behavior, motivation, perception, and action. Case studies are used in this study to gain in-depth knowledge about a particular event by carrying out a series of scientific activities that are carried out intensively, in detail, and in-depth in a program, event, and activity, both individually, in groups and organizations (Rusli,2020). The qualitative approach was chosen because it provides space to understand the subjective experiences and

meanings behind the bombers' actions. This method emphasizes exploring personal experiences and interpretations of the social environment where the bombers operate. ROCE and BKRE were chosen as research subjects because both are active bombers in Yogyakarta. In addition, they are individual bombers and are not members of any graffiti group or crew. Using two sources in this study, namely ROCE, and BKRE, is not intended to be an object limitation but an in-depth approach to understanding more specific and contextual phenomena. Qualitative research using the case study method focuses more on the depth of information than the quantity of participants (Rusli, 2020). The data collection method used by researchers to produce data sources is through interviews, observations, and documentation. Researchers conducted interviews with graffiti actors in Yogyakarta, namely ROCE and BKRE, to obtain information as data per the research. Observations were carried out by observing the activities and images of the informants' work.

Furthermore, researchers conducted documentation by taking several photos of graffiti works on informants. The data collected were then analyzed using the theory of self-expression through the symbolic interaction theory approach by George Herbert Mead. Interviews were conducted by asking informants several questions, which would be studied in depth for each answer.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

History of Graffiti

According to HAI magazine No. 36/XXX/4 September 2006 in Wicandra, around 1970 was the beginning of the graffiti movement. The initial form of graffiti was only scribbled with the identity of a group, gang, or individual, school name, social criticism, and curses (Wicandra, 2006). In 1970-1980, most graffiti wrote gangs or groups. In 1980, graffiti that used the identity of the school name began to appear, replacing the form of gang graffiti. Graffiti began to find a new style in Indonesia around the 2000s when open access to information became the main factor in the development of graffiti.

Definition of Graffiti

Graffiti is a form of visual communication expressed through images or writing. It is created through an individual's creative thoughts. This art includes various styles and techniques, from simple to complex. Graffiti is a visual art in the form of images, writings, or certain symbols applied in various media, one of which is walls. Graffiti art initially took the form of simple scribbles in the form of lines, colors, and distinctive writing that adorned the walls of city streets, which were used by the community as a place to criticize the government, both social, cultural, political, and economic criticism (Kusrianto, 2013). However, with the influence of international graffiti artists, graffiti art has become a complex and varied work.

Graffiti art is a scratch that is poured into the wall. It is a contemporary art form that provides a place for young people to express themselves, so it is widely loved by young people today. Young people show their passion by making graffiti poured through the streets' walls (Rahmat, 2021). Graffiti has become a cultural and artistic phenomenon because it gives rise to various perceptions of pros and cons in society. This is because graffiti art involves making pictures or writing in places or through public facilities, often done without permission or illegally, and violates the law. Graffiti art involves techniques and media such as spray paint, stickers, or brushes. In addition, graffiti has various types and styles, so graffiti is a complex art form that can reflect cultural, social, and political values (Kaulam, 2015).

Graffiti Forms

Graffiti art is divided into several forms, including:

1. **Tagging:** Tagging is a type of graffiti in the form of a signature that functions as a marker for someone. Tagging is a form of graffiti in the form of a signature that has a certain symbol or meaning. Tagging can be interpreted as the artist's signature.
2. **Throw Up:** Throw Up is a form of tagging but more complicated. Unlike tagging which is only made with one color, throw up is made using various colors. The shape of a throw up usually resembles a bubble. Throw up is made quickly.
3. **Block Buster:** Block buster graffiti is a form of graffiti made on large media such as walls, tall buildings, ships, and trains. Block buster graffiti presents a form of graffiti in

- the form of large letter fonts so that it can be easily read. Usually block buster graffiti displays the identity of a crew or group as a form of their self-existence so that it can be recognized by the wider community.
4. Pieces: Pieces are a form of graffiti that is more complicated to make than tagging or throw up. Pieces provide a more complex but interesting form of graffiti because it combines many elements such as color, font, character and motif in one work. Making graffiti pieces takes a long time compared to other forms of graffiti.
 5. Character: Character is a form of graffiti that displays illustrations or images that have characteristics in the identity of each bomber. Characters are formed according to the creativity of the bomber, most of which represent their personal characteristics.

Informant Profile

The data came from direct interviews with graffiti bombers in Yogyakarta, namely ROCE and BKRE, on June 13, 2024. The following is the profile of informants taken from certain criteria:

1. Understand the art of graffiti.
2. Become a graffiti actor and have created graffiti works for at least 1 (one year).
3. Willing and able to work well together during the research/interview.

Table 1. Informant Profile

Information	ROCE	BKRE
Age	20 years	20 years
Sex	Male	Male
Pekerjaan	Mahasiswa	Pelajar
Domicile	Sleman, Yogyakarta	Sleman, Yogyakarta
First time being a bomber	2012	2021
Implementation time	19.00 WIB	21.00 WIB
Place of implementation	Semicolon Coffe	Semicolon Coffe

Source: Author (2024)

List of Research Questions

Here are some questions asked of informants:

1. What drives informants to be interested in graffiti art?
2. What form of graffiti art do informants display in each artwork they create? Why did they choose that form of art?
3. What is the informant's goal in creating graffiti works?
4. Are there any obstacles in creating graffiti works?
5. Does the work produced by informants reflect criticism, or is it just a form of self-expression?

Informant Responses

Based on the interview results, informants chose graffiti art over other arts because they were more interested in graffiti art. After all, it was considered more attractive than other arts. In addition, informants have been interested in drawing since childhood. The informants initially entered the world of graffiti because they were in an environment that had the same interest in graffiti and followed friends' invitations. Observing various forms of graffiti along the road is also a supporting factor for their interest in graffiti. The informant initially created his work using walls in junior high school (SMP) in 2012 and senior high school (SMA) in 2021. According to ROCE and BKRE, creating graffiti works is a more exciting experience than other arts because it has many challenges.

According to ROCE, *"The first time I dared to draw on a wall was when I was in 1st grade of junior high school with my friends, I still bought the pylox at a hardware store. Because my older brother was also a bomber, so I have known graffiti since I was little from my older brother."*

"Actually, I have liked drawing since I was little, but I entered the world of graffiti around 2021 when I was in high school." (according to BKRE)

According to informants, being a bomber is not just about displaying or creating works; many challenges must be faced. However, informants agree that these challenges make their adrenaline rush so that they have more interest and passion for graffiti. In the process of making

it, bombers can freely display the form of graffiti according to their wishes or as their trademark. The form of graffiti in graffiti art also varies in the interviews conducted. The informants use more graffiti forms such as throw-up, tagging, and stickers.

"When drawing on walls, I often do throw ups, because it's easier, faster and if you use 1 pylox you can produce a lot of work. In addition, sometimes I like tagging on the side of the road and sticking stickers according to my nickname (call it BKRE)."

Other informants most often use graffiti throw-up. However, on other occasions, such as attending sketch jamming events held by graffiti communities, graffiti is usually in the form of wild style, which uses more complicated designs by combining various elements of color, character, and motifs that match the design created. Graffiti throw-ups usually display their nickname or stage names so that the wider community can recognize them, like the informants who have the goal that the wider community can recognize the work they display.

According to ROCE,

"The main purpose of making graffiti, especially in open spaces, is so that it can be known by the wider community. At least it can be known by other bombers. It feels good when when drawing, people pass by or win a sketch jamming competition, so your name becomes better known."

In addition to channeling hobbies, creativity, interests, and talents, in the interview, graffiti aims to be a space for self-expression for bombers in displaying their work and as a medium for self-existence, where informants want their names (nicknames) to be known by the wider community. Although informants can freely channel their hobbies, there are obstacles to making graffiti. Like the experience of BKRE, *"Because it is labeled negatively by society, there are quite a lot of obstacles as a graffiti actor. Once, when making a mural on a wall, the police came and told me to go home."*

According to the informant, another obstacle is the lack of support from the closest environment. The negative stigma of society towards graffiti significantly affects the freedom of informants because their closest families also give a negative stigma to their activities. Another inhibiting factor is limited funds, which prevents informants from only graffiti consioccasionally

its creation, bombers displayed their characteristics in their graffiti works. Some bombers are known for their characteristics of voicing criticism through graffiti, but some display graffiti as their self-existence and form of self-expression. In the case of bombers, ROCE and BKRE have the same characteristics. Namely, they display graffiti art as a form of existence and self-expression through nicknames.

"More focused on nicknames so that they are known by many people, besides it is easy to combine many elements in graffiti drawings. But I have also participated in the Free Palestine mural with other bomber groups. But personally, I focus more on my initials." (according to ROCE)

Graffiti Art as a Form of Self-Expression

A form of self-expression to others through thoughts, feelings, and experiences is an expression. Self-expression is the process of expressing a feeling by showing one's feelings. In the context of graffiti, the form of feelings expressed is freedom (Renasti, 2023).

Graffiti is often referred to as a criminal act because it is considered to damage public facilities. Graffiti art is also referred to as a form of rebellion or vandalism. However, for young people, graffiti is a means to express their identity, emotions, and criticism. Graffiti can give young people an open space to express themselves freely without rules. Through graffiti, they can speak visually about social and personal issues directly (Umar, 2017).

Through graffiti, young people can express their ideas through the colors, images, and words they create. Bombers can freely combine elements such as colors, motifs, fonts, and shapes into their work. Graffiti can represent a young person's feelings, creativity, and identity (Auliai, 2023). In addition, graffiti can also form a personal identity. A bomber starting his career as a graffiti artist begins by creating a name or nickname as an identity marker. Through tags or nicknames, bombers can use their nicknames as a form of self-existence. Nicknames or identification marks become their identity when they are on the streets.

Case Study on ROCE and BKRE Bombers

Graffiti art forms a person's identity. Bombers use graffiti to express an identity or social or political criticism. One of the bombers is ROCE and BKRE. Both ROCE and BKRE use graffiti as a form of self-expression. They use graffiti to show their identity to the broader community.

ROCE Bomber

Roce is one of the graffiti artists in Yogyakarta. Roce started doing this activity around 2012 in junior high school. What drives ROCE bombers to do this activity is a sense of curiosity about graffiti, which is based on his love of drawing since childhood.

Works and Techniques

ROCE became a bomber whose works, mostly on walls, are in the form of throw-ups. Through throw-ups, ROCE wants his identity to be known by many people. Another factor is that making throw-ups is much simpler than other forms of graffiti.



Figure 1. Wildstyle ROCE's work on wall media

Source: Author (2024)

Bomber ROCE uses graffiti art as a way to express his identity. In addition to throwing up, ROCE creates his work through other forms of graffiti, such as pieces, tagging, and stickers. Graffiti works in pieces are usually poured into paper media by combining many elements of color and motifs. In addition to drawing on walls, ROCE participates in competitions such as sketch jamming and battle tagging held by graffiti communities in Yogyakarta. ROCE's goal in this activity is to gain relationships and exchange experiences and insights with other graffiti artists and bombers.



Figure 2. ROCE's Throw Up Work

Source: Instagram @rocerocc (2024)

Message and Theme

The theme of the work on ROCE bombers leads to a form of self-existence. Where ROCE highlights his identity in every work, be it throw-ups, pieces, tagging, or graffiti stickers. ROCE does this as a form of self-existence so that his name can be recognized by other bombers and also by the wider community. ROCE bombers also use graffiti as social and political criticism but with certain groups and not individuals.



Figure 3. Wildstyle ROCE on paper media

Source: Author (2024)



Figure 4. Free Palestine Mural

Source: Author (2024)

Bomber BKRE

Unlike bomber ROCE, who has been involved in graffiti since 2012, bomber BKRE has been doing graffiti since 2021. BKRE expresses himself through his work and also focuses on identity and self-existence. For BKRE, his identity is more important so other bombers can recognize him.

Works and Techniques

In creating his work, BKRE uses various techniques and media such as spray paint, wall paint, graffiti markers, and other media to support his graffiti work. The media used are usually through city street walls, electric poles, stickers, and paper. The work created by bomber BKRE is also a form of graffiti throw-up that focuses on his identity.



Figure 5. Throw Up BKRE

Source: Instagram @bkreeee (2024)

Message and Theme

Similar to ROCE, the dominant theme of BKRE graffiti refers to self-identity. Through throw up, BKRE can express itself. Throw up is able to represent its freedom. BKRE can freely express ideas and use colors and styles according to its wishes through graffiti.



Figure 6. BKRE Throw Up Activity

Source: BKRE (2024)

Analysis of self-expression theory through the symbolic interaction theory approach by George Herbert Mead

Self-Expression

Art is an ideal medium for young people to express themselves. Art is a creative expression carried out by individuals that can be channeled through music, dance, drama, and even fine arts. Art can also help someone find meaningful experiences amidst the pressures of life. Freedom in doing things in art allows people to create works according to their character and freely express themselves (Dylanesia, 2023).

Individual identity is formed through social interaction, one of which is using symbols. In the context of graffiti, both ROCE and BKRE bombers form symbolic communication using their graffiti works. Each symbol used will produce a meaning. ROCE and BKRE bombers, in creating symbols, use wall and paper media as symbolic communication, which can be interpreted as self-identity.

The works of ROCE and BKRE bombers reflect their identity by displaying works in the form of their identity names. In displaying their identities, ROCE and BKRE bombers use striking and free colors and designs that can attract public attention. ROCE and BKRE also both choose striking places, such as on roadside walls and terraced houses, to attract attention and show their existence to the wider community.

George Herbert Mead's Symbolic Interaction Theory

Mead's symbolic interaction theory divides it into three parts: Mind, Self, and Society.

1. Mind is a process where individuals interact with themselves using symbols of meaning. Individuals can produce their thinking abilities and pour them into meaningful symbols. Through the mind, a bomber can pour ideas, thoughts, and creativity into graffiti. ROCE and BKRE bombers can freely pour their creativity and self-expression into a symbol displayed through graffiti. These two bombers use graffiti as a form of visual communication to express themselves. Each work from ROCE and BKRE displays graffiti using a combination of colors by prioritizing their identity design. They show this as a form of communication and expression of identity.
2. Self, which can be connected to self-expression displayed by informants, including subjective awareness and interaction dynamics. ROCE and BKRE graffiti can show the process of self-formation by creating creative ideas. The resulting graffiti can create their visual identity and represent their personality.
3. Society: Society responds to the content they display. Society is formed through symbolic interactions formed by individuals. So that it involves symbols that are then recognized by society. ROCE and BKRE bombers are in a community environment that is full of symbols and specific social values. Graffiti art can interact with the social environment in which they live. Like the ROCE and BKRE bombers, they display graffiti in busy urban areas to make public spaces more lively. ROCE and BKRE display their works in urban areas so that their names become the center of attention by the community. The community can appreciate their works as a form of artistic expression

and creativity. In addition, they not only convey a visual message, but with their work, the community can interpret the work (Derung, 2017)

CONCLUSION

This study shows that graffiti is significant as a space for young people to express themselves, especially in the context of self-identity and freedom of expression. Through in-depth interviews, it was found that ROCE and BKRE use graffiti as their free space to channel their creativity, feelings, and interests in the field of graffiti. According to ROCE and BKRE, graffiti is not just scribbled on the wall but is a medium of self-expression for ROCE and BKRE Bombers to convey their identity and self-expression. Through graffiti, they can find their identity and can explore various things. Graffiti is a medium of communication for ROCE and BKRE bombers.

ROCE and BKRE bombers both have the same goal, namely that the wider community can recognize their identity or nickname. In addition, they use graffiti as a medium of exploration to channel their work and self-existence. In addition to using walls to display their work, ROCE and BKRE will consistently participate in various events in graffiti communities in Yogyakarta to continue developing and getting many more relationships.

Graffiti invites us to see, understand, and appreciate works that are broader and deeper. George Herbert Mead's symbolic interaction approach with three forms, namely Mind, Self, and Society, helps us understand how graffiti functions as a meaningful communication tool.

This study is limited to observation and in-depth interviews with a few graffiti perpetrators, namely two people. The main focus of this study is to collect individual experiences in a particular experience, so these findings may not represent the experiences of other bombers. In addition, this study does not consider the impact of legal policies and public perceptions towards graffiti.

The limited number of subjects selected is a weakness in this study. The qualitative method used provides an in-depth understanding, but the results cannot be generalized to all graffiti perpetrators. In addition, this study did not explore the perspectives of other parties, such as law enforcement officers, the government, or the community affected by graffiti.

In future studies, it is hoped that more graffiti perpetrators from various social backgrounds and broader areas can be involved, bringing the characteristics of their respective works that are more diverse to gain a more complex understanding. In addition, it is also recommended to take an approach involving law enforcement and studying public policy and more comprehensive socio-cultural studies. This research can also deepen the analysis of the social impact of graffiti art, which can be seen from the perspective of the perpetrators and the broader community, to provide a more complex and comprehensive picture of the role of graffiti art in public spaces.

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