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Visible Voices: Street Art, Youth Identity, and the Aesthetics of Resistance

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Abstract:

Street art has become a visible and contested practice in many global cities, closely tied to the everyday experiences of young people. Rather than being treated simply as vandalism or decoration, street art functions as a cultural form through which youth negotiate identity, belonging, and resistance. This paper takes the case of graffiti in Manchester as a point of entry, positioning it within broader debates on subcultural expression and public art. The analysis draws on case study materials and theoretical perspectives to explore two central questions: how street art functions as a medium of youth identity and resistance, and whether it can be legitimized within the framework of urban civility. This paper suggests that while street art empowers young people to make their voices visible in the city, it also exposes tensions between grassroots creativity and institutional control. These dynamics offer insights into cultural policy, urban governance, and the role of youth expression in contemporary public life.

Keywords: Street Art; Urban Youth; Subculture; Public Art; Legitimacy

1. Introduction

Street art has become an increasingly visible feature of contemporary urban life, from the walls of Manchester to the streets of Berlin, New York, and São Paulo. Often dismissed as vandalism or celebrated as creativity, street art occupies a contested space where questions of legitimacy, identity, and governance intersect. For young people in particular, graffiti and other forms of street expression serve not only as aesthetic experiments but also as cultural practices that articulate belonging, resistance, and political commentary.

While previous research has often emphasized the artistic and political significance of street art, relatively little attention has been given to how it negotiates the concept of civility in public space. Recent studies show that local governments increasingly seek to regulate or erase graffiti in the name of urban order, while young people continue to reclaim walls as spaces of creativity and visibility [1]. This dynamic reflects what [2] describes as the politics of visibility in contemporary cities, where grassroots expression and institutional control remain in constant tension.

Using Manchester graffiti as a case study, this paper examines how urban youth engage with street art both as creators and as audiences. Rather than posing research questions in abstract terms, the analysis highlights two central aspects: the way street art

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functions as a medium of youth identity and subcultural resistance, and the degree to which graffiti can be legitimized within frameworks of urban civility. These concerns resonate with recent scholarship that frames graffiti as a vehicle of youth identity [3] while also pointing to the role of public art in shaping community perceptions of urban space [4].

2. Definitions: Graffiti vs. Street Art vs. Public Art

The terms graffiti, street art, and public art are frequently conflated in public discourse, yet their meanings and implications diverge in important ways. Graffiti is the most contested of the three. Emerging from New York youth subcultures in the 1970s, it is usually defined by tags and stylized lettering [5] points out that graffiti's purpose is less about addressing the wider public and more about asserting presence within subcultural networks. Its illegal nature and anonymity have rendered it a target of regulatory measures, yet for practitioners it represents a claim to visibility in urban spaces that often exclude them.

Street art, by contrast, is broader in both form and audience. It includes murals, stencils, stickers, paste-ups, and installations. Unlike graffiti's insular codes, street art frequently embeds cultural commentary that can be read by a general public. Riggle emphasizes its ability to "transfigure the commonplace," giving ordinary walls and objects new layers of meaning[6]. In recent years, scholars have also noted its therapeutic potential, as Mikuni et al. and Dehove et al. argue that street art[7], often dismissed as antisocial behavior in the West, can actually serve as a form of healing practice, allowing young people to channel social anxieties into creative expression. This demonstrates how street art occupies a liminal position—sometimes criminalized, sometimes celebrated, and often tolerated in ambiguous ways.

Public art differs more fundamentally. It is institutionally sanctioned, commissioned by governments or cultural organizations, and framed as an integral component of civic identity. Installed in parks, plazas, or official buildings, public art is meant to represent collective memory and shared values. Young reminds us that this distinction is political: public art reinforces the authority of institutions, while street practices disrupt or blur these official boundaries [8]. The Malaysian case studied by Poon illustrates this shift[9], where graffiti is gradually integrated into urban beautification projects, raising debates about whether incorporation into official frameworks strengthens or dilutes its subcultural edge.

Clarifying these distinctions is crucial for the present study. The boundaries between graffiti, street art, and public art are not fixed but negotiated through legality, audience reception, and power relations. For urban youth, navigating these categories is part of a broader struggle over recognition, legitimacy, and belonging in the city.

3. Street Art as Social Discourse and Urban Expression

Street art has always been more than a matter of aesthetics. For many young people, painting on walls is one of the few ways to interrupt the dominant narratives surrounding them and to make themselves visible in a city that often ignores their presence. In this sense, it is not surprising that scholars frequently associate graffiti with acts of resistance. Lefebvre's idea of the "right to the city" provides a useful lens here: to write or paint on a wall is, at its core, to claim a form of citizenship in urban space.

Recent studies remind us that youth subcultures are not marginal but central to how cities are lived and imagined. As Wardhana and Ellisa Tracy shows in her study of the institutionalisation of graffiti and street art in US cities, subcultural practices are strategic in shaping urban identity, precisely because they negotiate visibility and legitimacy across both criminalisation and museum display—graffiti being a prime example of this ongoing negotiation[10]. What is often dismissed by city authorities as vandalism is, for practitioners, a way to speak back to power. Recent work also points to the therapeutic effects of participatory art-making[7], giving young people an outlet to work through anxieties about exclusion and precarity . It is worth noting, however, that this positive potential rarely finds recognition in official policies, which continue to criminalize youth practices.

At the same time, resistance does not always take the form of open defiance. The Malaysian case discussed by Poon shows how graffiti can be appropriated into urban beautification projects, where artists negotiate between self-expression and state approval[9]. This shift complicates the usual dichotomy of "resistance versus co-option." While some might see institutional recognition as diluting graffiti's critical edge, others argue that such recognition can provide youth with new platforms and resources. Manchester's Northern Quarter offers a similar illustration: what began as grassroots expressions of social critique has also been incorporated into the city's cultural tourism industry.

These examples suggest that the political power of street art lies in its instability. It resists, but it is also re-used; it challenges authority, but it can also be embraced by it. For urban youth, this tension is precisely what makes street

art meaningful. It is not only an act of rebellion but also a constant negotiation of how identity, legitimacy, and power are distributed in the city.

4. Rethinking the Civil Integration of Graffiti

Street art occupies a complex and contested niche in urban efforts to pursue "civic order". Different stakeholders—artists, municipal authorities,and residents— often hold divergent conceptions of what defines a "civically ordered city". Therefore, it is crucial to develop a framework that fosters broader consensus and achieves a balanced integration of creativity, regulatory order, and public interest.

Artists typically seek autonomy and creative inspiration. In their work, color functions as a form of visual language and line as a medium of expression; each detail conveys the artist's inner expression, effectively infusing the urban environment with renewed vitality. However, as Evans observes, when artistic practice becomes institutionalized, its critical potential risks being diluted, gradually absorbed into the aesthetic logic of urban economic development[11]. Consequently, artists continually navigate the tension between collaboration and independence, underscoring the importance of legitimizing street art without allowing political or commercial agendas to silence marginalized voices[12].

In practice, the primary objective for urban administrators is not to eradicate graffiti but to keep it manageable. Many cities therefore rely on soft legalisation: permitting work in delineated zones so rules are easier to apply and downstream disputes are minimised. Drawing on Stockholm's experience, Centea shows how legal graffiti walls create a pragmatic balance between tolerance and control—a kind of managed openness that also lowers maintenance and administrative costs[13]. Consequently, councils tend to privilege soft, symbolic regulation over intensive enforcement.

Moreover, citizens' perceptions of graffiti also play an influential role in how urban policies are shaped. As Kühnapfel et al. and Garrido-Castellano & Raposo note that, public acceptance of street art often depends on the extent to which it enhances—rather than disrupts—the overall experience of urban public space[14]. Many residents seek a middle ground: they prefer environments that remain clean and orderly, yet still allow them to encounter creative and visually engaging artworks in everyday settings. This interplay suggests that the governance of graffiti is not merely an issue of administrative control, but also a continuous negotiation over aesthetics, order, and cultural meaning within public life.

5. Conclusion

Upon departing Manchester Airport and traveling into the city centre, the researcher observed several individuals creating artwork along a roadside wall—animal-protection icons and brief slogans. In the city centre, four organizers had been at it for hours. Viewed from the car window, the messaging did not convey a sense of detachment; it slipped into the ordinary traffic and daylight and became present. That small scene distills the larger claim of this paper: street art sits in the pull between creative expression and civic order. A wall piece is not just a personal statement; it is a way for young people to imagine—and cautiously occupy—their place in the city, turning plain surfaces into points of pause and address. In this sense, graffiti is both fleeting and persistent, informal yet deeply social—an improvisation folded into the city's rhythm.

On the policy side, the rise of soft legalisation suggests a preference to accommodate rather than simply erase. Yet full institutional absorption can dull the critical bite that makes street practices matter. This is why governance aimed at managed openness tends to be more workable: designated, rotating walls refreshed every 8–12 weeks, supplemented by basic on-site information and routine maintenance, keep creativity visible while lowering friction and administrative costs[13].

In short, the Manchester case points to coexistence rather than control. Treating graffiti as part of urban culture is a choice for dialogue and for leaving room—especially for younger voices that seldom sit at the centre of official discourse. A city's life is built not only in its architecture and policies, but also in these layered, everyday marks. They are covered and return, and in that cycling the city keeps growing.

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