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Graffiti and Wall Writing as Informal Communication: A Socio-Communicative Analysis of Youth Expression in Algerian Public Space

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Abstract

Graffiti and wall writing constitute one of the oldest and most persistent forms of human communication, predating institutionalized media and continuing to function as a powerful expressive practice in contemporary societies. Despite the unprecedented expansion of digital communication platforms and social media technologies, wall writings remain visible, influential, and socially meaningful, particularly among youth populations who experience social marginalization, economic precarity, and symbolic exclusion from formal public discourse. This study offers a socio-communicative reading of graffiti as an informal medium of expression in Algerian public space, focusing on the motivations, identities, and symbolic contents produced by young wall writers. Drawing on sociological, cultural, and communication theories—particularly the concept of public space as articulated by Jürgen Habermas—the research conceptualizes graffiti as an alternative communicative arena through which suppressed voices articulate political criticism, social frustration, emotional distress, and collective aspirations. Empirically, the study examines wall writings documented across various public spaces in Tissemsilt Province, an agriculturally oriented region characterized by strategic geographic positioning but limited economic opportunities. The findings suggest that graffiti content varies significantly according to spatial context (educational institutions, public facilities, residential neighborhoods), while also reflecting broader structural conditions such as unemployment, housing shortages, and restrictive social norms. Ultimately, the paper argues that graffiti should not be reduced to acts of vandalism or deviance but understood as a symbolic, communicative, and socio-cultural practice that provides valuable insight into youth subjectivity, urban experience, and the dynamics of informal public discourse in contemporary Algerian society.

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1. Research Problem

Writing and drawing on walls are practices as old as humanity itself, emerging from an urgent need for expression and an enduring desire to document experience, resistance, and memory. From prehistoric cave inscriptions to contemporary urban graffiti, walls have functioned as surfaces of inscription where marginalized voices negotiate visibility and meaning (Ferrell, 1996). Historically, individuals have relied on rudimentary tools—charcoal, stone,

pigments—to record wisdom, narrate lived realities, protest oppression, and challenge dominant power structures that threaten freedom and existence.

Despite the profound transformation of communication systems in the digital age, graffiti continues to occupy a distinctive position within the communicative landscape. Paradoxically, while social media platforms offer instantaneous and borderless expression, wall writing persists as a localized, embodied, and spatially anchored form of communication that resists algorithmic control and institutional moderation (Iveson, 2010). Each city, neighborhood, and street generates its own symbolic language through wall inscriptions, transforming urban space into a living archive of collective memory and social tension.

In Algeria, and particularly in interior provinces such as Tissemsilt, graffiti has become increasingly visible across schools, universities, public restrooms, professional institutions, and transportation infrastructure. This province, although geographically positioned as a link between north and south and between east and west, has not benefited proportionally from economic development. Persistent unemployment, housing shortages, and conservative social norms have placed young people in a condition of structural frustration, limiting their access to formal channels of participation and recognition.

As a result, many young individuals have turned to wall writing as an alternative communicative strategy, using public walls as platforms to externalize psychological repression, social anger, political critique, romantic desire, and identity claims. While some social actors interpret graffiti as uncivil behavior or aesthetic degradation of public space, others recognize it as a legitimate form of cultural production and symbolic resistance—often classified within contemporary urban art.

Given this polarization of interpretations, graffiti emerges as a crucial field for sociological inquiry, particularly because it is authored by youth—an age group upon which Algerian society places significant expectations for social transformation and development.

This study is therefore guided by the following research questions:

1. What factors determine the themes and contents of wall writings?
2. How do graffiti characteristics vary according to the type of public space in which they appear?

2. Study Hypotheses

- H1: The motivations and socio-economic conditions of graffiti practitioners determine the themes and messages expressed in wall writings.
- H2: The content and form of graffiti vary according to the nature and function of the public space in which they are produced.

3. Conceptual Framework

3.1 Wall Writers (Graffiti Practitioners)

Wall writers constitute a social category—predominantly youth—that articulates its aspirations, frustrations, and symbolic resistance through unauthorized inscriptions in public space. Their practices reflect both individual subjectivity and collective social conditions.

3.2 Graffiti

The term *graffiti* derives from the Italian *graffito*, itself rooted in Latin, referring to writing, engraving, or drawing on surfaces. In contemporary usage, graffiti encompasses all textual, symbolic, and visual inscriptions placed on walls, doors, and public infrastructure, addressing political, social, emotional, artistic, or ideological themes (Austin, 2010).

3.3 Public Space

Public space represents the foundational arena for the emergence of graffiti. According to Jürgen Habermas, it is the sphere in which public debate unfolds and collective opinion is formed around shared concerns (Habermas, 1989). Graffiti transforms public space into a communicative surface, enabling excluded actors to participate symbolically in public discourse.

3. Methodological Procedures

3.1 Study Fields

The present study was conducted across three complementary fields: spatial, temporal, and human.

3.1.1 Spatial Field

The spatial boundaries of this research are confined to the city of Tissemsilt (Algeria). The study focuses on graffiti as practiced within diverse urban public spaces, including residential neighborhoods, streets, squares, and institutional surroundings. To empirically support the analysis, 62 photographs of wall writings were systematically documented across multiple locations within the city. These visual materials constitute the primary corpus for content analysis and spatial interpretation of graffiti practices.

3.1.2 Temporal Field

The documentation of wall writings was carried out over a defined period extending from February 1, 2025, to March 30, 2025. During this timeframe, graffiti occurrences were monitored, photographed, and catalogued across different districts and streets of Tissemsilt, allowing for temporal consistency and contextual coherence in the analysis.

3.1.3 Human Field

The human field of the study comprises 16 young graffiti practitioners, aged between 17 and 32 years. These participants were identified as active contributors to wall writings in the studied spaces and were engaged through qualitative interviews.

3.2 Research Methodology

Given the exploratory and interpretive nature of the research problem, the study adopts a qualitative research approach, which is particularly suited to understanding symbolic practices, meanings, and social representations embedded in human behavior (Angers, 2004). Qualitative research prioritizes depth over breadth and seeks to capture the subjective meanings actors attribute to their practices.

As noted by Angers (2004), qualitative methodology constitutes "a set of procedures aimed primarily at understanding the phenomenon under study, with particular emphasis on the meaning of statements and observed behaviors" (p. 100). This approach enables the researcher to analyze graffiti not merely as physical inscriptions but as communicative acts embedded in specific social, cultural, and spatial contexts.

3.3 Research Tools

3.3.1 Interview

The interview was employed as a principal data-collection tool. In social science research, the interview is defined as a direct interaction between the researcher and the research subject, designed to elicit opinions, experiences, and interpretive frameworks (Ben Morsli, 2003).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with graffiti practitioners and organized around three thematic axes:

- Axis 1: General socio-demographic characteristics of participants (7 questions)
- Axis 2: Graffiti practices, motivations, and circumstances of writing (7 questions)
- Axis 3: Perceptions of wall writing in relation to public space (5 questions)

This structure ensured both comparability across respondents and flexibility for in-depth exploration.

3.3.2 Content Analysis

Content analysis was employed as an indirect research tool to examine the symbolic and thematic dimensions of graffiti texts and images. Content analysis allows for the systematic interpretation of written, visual, or audiovisual materials regardless of their temporal context and is widely used in the human and social sciences to study social meanings and behavioral patterns (Angers, 2004).

In this study, content analysis was applied to the 62 photographed wall writings, enabling the identification of recurring themes, linguistic forms, symbols, and communicative intentions across different urban spaces.

3.4 Study Sample and Sampling Technique

Due to the informal, unauthorized, and often clandestine nature of graffiti practices, identifying participants posed methodological challenges. Consequently, the study relied on snowball sampling, a non-probabilistic technique commonly used when research populations are difficult to access (Angers, 2004). This method begins with an initial group of participants who subsequently refer the researcher to additional individuals engaged in similar practices.

In parallel, a spatial sampling strategy was adopted to analyze the geographical distribution of graffiti within the city. Spatial sampling is particularly appropriate when the study population is dispersed across multiple locations and when spatial context is integral to the phenomenon under investigation (Al-Ghoul, 2009). The sample was single-stage, drawing graffiti texts from various urban zones, including:

- Al-Marja neighborhood
- Ain El Bordj neighborhood
- Castor neighborhood
- Hassan neighborhood
- Ali Bey Street
- Hospital Road
- Plateau area
- Laqab Square

3.5 Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Gender

The data indicate that 87.5% of graffiti practitioners are male, confirming findings in previous studies that graffiti is predominantly a male-dominated practice (Amer, 2006). This predominance can be attributed to gendered social norms within the local community, where males enjoy greater spatial mobility and expressive freedom than females. Female participation accounted for 12.5%, reflecting limited but significant engagement.

Moreover, graffiti activity often occurs at night, a temporal context associated with reduced surveillance and increased creative freedom, which poses additional constraints for female participation in conservative social environments.

Age

The largest age group was 17–21 years (43.75%), corresponding to late adolescence—a developmental stage characterized by identity formation, resistance to authority, and heightened emotional expression. The 22–26 age group (37.5%) reflects early adulthood, marked by aspirations for employment and social stability. The 27–32 age group (18.75%) represents early to middle adulthood, a phase associated with increased responsibility and social role consolidation.

Educational Level

Participants exhibited diverse educational backgrounds: 37.5% secondary education, 25% intermediate, 25% university level, and 12.5% elementary education. This diversity is reflected linguistically in graffiti texts, which appear in Arabic, French, English, symbols, and hybrid forms, underscoring graffiti's multilingual and semiotic versatility.

As noted by Abell (as cited in Amer, 2006), wall writings function as indicators of not only cultural and educational levels but also the collective mentality shaping social tensions and dilemmas.

Marital and Economic Status

The majority of participants (87.5%) were unmarried, a condition strongly linked to unemployment, housing shortages, and the high cost of marriage within the local context. Approximately 50% were unemployed, 18.75% held temporary jobs, 25% were engaged in self-employment, and only 6.25% occupied permanent positions.

These socio-economic constraints generate feelings of frustration, exclusion, and dissatisfaction, which are symbolically externalized through wall writings. In Algerian urban discourse, unemployed youth are often labeled *"haitists"* or *"guardians of the wall"* (*les gardiens du mur*), highlighting the wall's function as both physical support and symbolic repository of collective suffering and protest.

6. Presentation and Analysis of Study Results

6.1 Socio-Economic Position of Graffiti Practitioners

Among the respondents, **18.75% occupy temporary employment positions**, the majority of whom are university students combining study with precarious work. This group demonstrates intermittent engagement with graffiti, often linked to transitional life stages. In contrast, the **6.25% holding permanent employment** constitute the most socio-economically stable segment of the sample. These individuals tend to engage in graffiti during public events and collective occasions, perceiving wall writing not merely as protest but as **an artistic and communicative tool intended to serve society and convey civic messages** (Amer, 2006).

Economic background further differentiates graffiti content and motivation. The data reveal that **43.75% of graffiti practitioners belong to families with a low standard of living**, a factor that exerts a direct psychological and symbolic impact on individuals. This condition is reflected in graffiti texts that articulate dissatisfaction, rejection of lived reality, and expressions of marginalization. Meanwhile, **37.5% originate from middle-income families**, and **18.75% from financially stable households**, a diversity that explains the thematic plurality observed in graffiti contents—ranging from socio-economic grievances to political critique, emotional expression, and identity assertion (Angers, 2004).

Spatially, graffiti practitioners from **popular neighborhoods** (informal housing areas and deteriorated urban zones such as Sabaa, Al-Darb, and Ain Loura) represent **56.25%** of the sample, while **43.75%** reside in newer urban neighborhoods (e.g., Al-Marji, Al-Weam, and Al-Balato). It is noteworthy that many residents of newer housing projects originally migrated from popular neighborhoods under social housing programs aimed at eliminating fragile dwellings. This continuity of social experience explains the persistence of graffiti practices despite changes in residential environment, supporting the argument that **graffiti is rooted in social positioning rather than spatial aesthetics alone** (Ben Morsli, 2003).

6.2 Analysis of Interview Data

Interview findings indicate that graffiti practices are motivated by diverse communicative intentions:

- **50%** of respondents write graffiti to **send a specific message** to society or authorities.
- **25%** use wall writing as a form of **psychological release and emotional discharge**.
- **18.75%** imitate **Hip Hop culture and Western artistic movements**.
- **6.25%** practice graffiti primarily as **artistic decoration and aesthetic expression**.

A minority (**6.25%**) explicitly view graffiti as a hobby or an artistic rebellion against static urban walls, transforming them into visual narratives that spread beauty and creativity. This aligns with interpretations of graffiti as **urban art rather than deviant behavior** (Al-Saidani, 2014).

The **18.75% influenced by Hip Hop culture** reflect the deep interconnection between graffiti and global youth cultures. Hip Hop, particularly rap music, has played a crucial role in the expansion of graffiti by providing symbolic, linguistic, and ideological frameworks for expression. In Algeria, rap has become a dominant outlet for youth protest and social critique, addressing themes such as unemployment, poverty, corruption, migration, drugs, and political exclusion. Graffiti frequently appears in rap video clips, while Hip Hop symbols are inscribed on walls, reinforcing the **mutual reinforcement between music and visual urban expression** (Issa, 2017).

For **25% of respondents**, graffiti serves as a mechanism of **catharsis**, allowing individuals to externalize psychological burdens, frustrations, and socially forbidden desires. As Al-Anbi argues, wall writing often expresses personal truths that are difficult to articulate openly, particularly regarding taboo subjects such as sexuality or intimate emotions (as cited in Amer, 2006).

The largest group (**50%**) emphasizes graffiti as a **means of social messaging**, highlighting economic injustice, political exclusion, and the lack of spaces for free expression. As Al-Abbasi notes, graffiti scribbles may conceal collective anger and reveal what public opinion cannot express openly due to the narrowing of democratic spaces (as cited in Issa, 2017).

6.3 Typology of Messages in Graffiti

Analysis of interview responses identifies **three major axes of graffiti messages**:

1. **Youth Rights and Social Demands**

Graffiti frequently reminds authorities of youth rights—employment, housing, access to decision-makers, and fulfillment of political promises—reflecting dissatisfaction with local governance.

2. **Existential Assertion ("We Exist")**

Many graffiti texts convey existential claims, signaling a desire for recognition and social visibility. Through inscriptions such as names, signatures, or symbolic marks, graffiti writers assert their presence within a society that marginalizes them. This reflects what sociological literature identifies as **symbolic resistance by marginalized actors** (Amer, 2006).

3. **Collective and National Messages**

Some graffiti texts promote social responsibility, environmental protection, civic behavior, and national unity, indicating that graffiti can function as a **pro-social communicative medium** rather than solely oppositional discourse.

6.4 Results of Content Analysis

6.4.1 Quantitative Distribution of Themes

Content analysis of the **62 photographed graffiti samples** reveals the following thematic distribution:

- **Social content:** 20.96% (highest proportion), reflecting priority concerns such as unemployment, housing, poverty, and daily hardships. These writings are concentrated in popular neighborhoods (30.76%) and main streets (30.76%), followed by new neighborhoods (23.7%) and public squares (15.38%).
- **Name inscriptions and identity marks:** 19.35%, with the highest frequency near educational institutions and university surroundings (41.66%). These inscriptions reflect existential affirmation and the desire for symbolic permanence.
- **Emotional content:** 16.12%, concentrated in spaces with high female presence such as schools and universities, indicating the use of graffiti as a medium for romantic expression and emotional outreach.
- **Political content:** 14.51%, dominant in public squares (33%) and main streets (22.22%), where visibility and public confrontation are maximized. These writings include party names, slogans, and political critique.
- **Sports content:** 11.29%, primarily supporting local and national teams, particularly visible in public squares and markets.
- **Sexual content:** 6.45%, despite the conservative nature of the local community. These writings were mainly located near educational institutions (50%), suggesting a link between youth sexuality and spatial anonymity.
- **Religious content:** 3.23%, primarily invoking religious expressions such as *"Allahu Akbar"*, found on main streets and public squares.
- **Artistic content:** 3.23%, consisting of drawings and visual experimentation, mainly in commercial areas.
- **Ambiguous content:** 4.83%, often purposeless or playful, concentrated in educational and commercial spaces.

As Resimer argues, the more a graffiti message avoids taboo meanings, the closer it remains to the writer's immediate social and geographic environment; conversely, taboo-laden messages tend to appear farther from the writer's community and neighborhood (as cited in Amer, 2006).

6.5 Typology and Interpretation of Graffiti Content

1. Social Content

Social graffiti can be understood as the second, informal face of social reality, reflecting collective attitudes, frustrations, and everyday struggles experienced by individuals within their communities. The intensity and frequency of graffiti in a given locality often mirror the depth of social problems and the degree of dissatisfaction experienced by its youth (Amer, 2006).

In the case of Tissemsilt, wall writings prominently express rejection of lived social reality, disappointment with local living conditions, and a pervasive sense of hopelessness regarding the future. Phrases such as *"the country that gave birth to me," "we made a mistake in this land,"* and *"half a lifetime is a dream and the rest is loss"* reveal existential despair and the erosion of confidence in social mobility. Other inscriptions reflect the desire for escape and migration, such as *"escape, my brothers"* or *"you are not a tree,"* symbolizing uprooting as a survival strategy.

Some messages express withdrawal from social interaction (*"stay away from me"*), while others demonstrate civic awareness, calling for cleanliness and environmental responsibility (*"throwing dirt is forbidden"*). These messages are primarily horizontal in nature, addressed implicitly to peers and members of the immediate social environment rather than to authorities. Linguistically, social graffiti in Tissemsilt is overwhelmingly written in Arabic, reflecting its accessibility and proximity to everyday social communication (Ben Morsli, 2003).

2. Name Inscriptions

Graffiti commemorating names appears in both Arabic and French and may include real names, nicknames, initials, or pseudonyms. These inscriptions function as existential markers, allowing individuals to assert their presence symbolically within public space while sometimes concealing their identity to avoid accountability. Such practices align with what sociological literature describes as symbolic self-assertion by marginalized actors (Amer, 2006).

3. Emotional and Sexual Content

Emotional and sexual graffiti were documented across multiple urban spaces and appeared in Arabic, French, and English. These writings function as outlets for emotional expression and sexual repression, particularly within a conservative social context where such topics are considered taboo. Through metaphor, suggestion, and symbolism, graffiti writers challenge normative boundaries and express sentiments often silenced in public discourse.

Examples include romantic phrases such as *"There are a thousand people on my path, but in my eyes, you are alone,"* written on the walls of Mohamed Bounaama High School, suggesting that walls serve as substitutes for interpersonal communication. Other inscriptions reflect cynicism toward romantic ideals (*"money is better than love"*), indicating the growing commodification of emotional relationships.

These findings support the argument that graffiti provides a psychological release mechanism, allowing individuals to articulate intimate feelings in contexts where direct expression is socially constrained (Amer, 2006).

4. Political Content

Political graffiti constitutes one of the most significant uses of wall writing as a form of informal political communication. In Tissemsilt, graffiti was used for political endorsement (*"Vote 33," "FLN 22"*), opposition, mobilization, and protest. Political parties have historically relied on wall writing as a low-cost, high-visibility communication tool aimed at influencing public opinion, particularly in contexts where institutional political engagement is weak (Issa, 2017).

In addition, graffiti articulates youth dissatisfaction with local governance through messages such as *"No to false promises"* and *"Free the prisoners."* These writings represent vertical communication, directed from marginalized youth toward political authorities, reflecting the absence of effective dialogue between citizens and decision-makers.

The emergence of political graffiti thus signals restricted political freedom and the erosion of participatory channels, compelling youth to seek alternative means of expression (Habermas, 1989).

5. Sports Content

Sports graffiti is widespread and primarily celebrates the national football team, with slogans such as *"With you, Dzair"* and *"Champions of Algeria."* Other inscriptions express loyalty to local and national clubs (e.g., *JSK, MC*). These writings reinforce collective identity, national pride, and emotional solidarity, particularly during major sporting events.

6. Ambiguous Graffiti

Ambiguous graffiti contains encrypted or obscure meanings, comprehensible only to the sender or a limited audience. Such writings may serve playful, experimental, or identity-marking purposes and highlight graffiti's role as a closed communicative code within youth subcultures (Ben Morsli, 2003).

7. Religious Content

Religious graffiti, though limited in frequency, carries strong symbolic weight. Phrases such as *"God is great,"* written opposite the Tissemsilt courthouse, function as moral reminders and symbolic confrontations with injustice, positioning divine authority above institutional power. These inscriptions reinforce ethical values and express resistance to corruption through spiritual symbolism (Amer, 2006).

8. Artistic Graffiti

Some graffiti practitioners approach wall writing as an aesthetic and artistic practice, using color, form, and composition to transform urban surfaces. Black ink dominates some works, while others incorporate symbols associated with Hip-Hop culture, which historically intertwines graffiti, rap, and social protest. In this sense, graffiti operates as the visual extension of rap discourse, translating musical resistance into spatial imagery (Issa, 2017).

Conclusion

This study has sought to uncover key dimensions of the phenomenon of wall writings within the local context of Tissemsilt, focusing on the conditions of their production, the motivations behind their practice, and the diversity of their themes across different public spaces. The findings demonstrate that graffiti constitutes a socio-communicative practice deeply embedded in social structures, power relations, and youth experiences.

Graffiti functions as a public, unrestricted medium of communication, unconstrained by property ownership, institutional authority, or formal censorship. It enables young people to articulate social grievances, political critique, emotional needs, and cultural identities in a context characterized by shrinking spaces for free expression. Importantly, the phenomenon is not limited to unemployed or marginalized adolescents; it extends to educated youth, including university students, confirming its widespread social relevance.

The study also shows that graffiti varies in intensity and thematic focus according to spatial context, reinforcing the idea that public space actively shapes communicative practices. Ultimately, graffiti should not be reduced to vandalism but recognized as a diagnostic tool for understanding social tension, youth marginalization, and the dynamics of informal public discourse in contemporary Algerian society.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based on non-intrusive observation and documentation of publicly visible wall writings. No personal identifying information was collected, and no interaction occurred with graffiti practitioners. The research respects ethical standards of anonymity, non-harm, and contextual interpretation.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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