



Integrating Graffiti into Local Culture-Based Art Education: A Case Study in Surabaya

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Abstract: This study addresses the increasing presence of graffiti as a form of urban visual culture that reflects local identity and holds pedagogical potential. It examines the visual characteristics of graffiti created by urban artist crews in Surabaya and explores its integration as an innovative medium in culture-based art education. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, utilizing an inductive case study method. Data were collected through visual observations at public graffiti sites, semi-structured interviews with artists and art teachers, and online surveys involving teachers and high school students. The findings reveal that Surabaya's graffiti incorporates symbolic visual elements, local narratives, and responses to social and environmental issues. Both teachers and students express a strong interest in graffiti as a relevant and engaging learning medium. The study proposes a practical learning model based on project-based and contextual approaches, emphasizing collaboration, ethical expression, and local cultural awareness. This research contributes to the advancement of art education by offering a structured framework that repositions street-based visual practices as legitimate pedagogical tools. It provides new insights into visual culture education, expands the discourse on culturally responsive teaching, and bridges the gap between informal urban art and formal school-based learning.

Keywords: contextual learning; graffiti education; local culture; urban art; visual identity

Recommended citation: Sutejo, A., Sunarmi., & Soewardikoen, D. W. (2025). Integrating Graffiti into Local Culture-Based Art Education: A Case Study in Surabaya. *Journal of Innovation in Educational and Cultural Research*, 6(4), 799-810.

INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, marked by rapid technological advancement and information saturation, cultural expressions are undergoing dynamic transformations. In today's urban landscape, visual art is no longer confined to galleries or formal institutions; instead, it has expanded into public spaces through forms such as street art, including murals and graffiti. These forms reflect the participatory, fluid, and expressive nature of contemporary visual culture (Hartawati, 2024; Heyd & Karnatz, 2020). As one of the most visible expressions in public space, graffiti functions not only as an aesthetic intervention but also as a marker of social identity, symbolic resistance, and spatial negotiation (Prayoga et al., 2024). Increasingly, graffiti serves as a platform for marginalized voices to reclaim visibility and articulate alternative narratives within contested urban spaces. Its raw immediacy and direct engagement with the public sphere position graffiti as a critical site of cultural dialogue and visual literacy. In Surabaya, graffiti has grown into a distinctive urban visual phenomenon, with artist crews transforming neglected walls into vibrant canvases (Sutejo, 2021). Wicandra and Angkadjadja (2005) revealed a differentiation between tagging and artistic graffiti, highlighting the latter's potential to beautify the city and challenge monotonous urban visuals. Similarly, Wibisono and Herdianto (2018) noted the increasing role of graffiti in shaping fashion, advertising, and urban iconography, suggesting that its identity has shifted beyond vandalism toward cultural legitimacy. Recently, Saputra et al. (2024) documented how the Surabaya government and creative communities collaborated in an anti-vandalism campaign using interactive media and spray-paint installations, demonstrating a growing institutional interest in using graffiti as a tool for public engagement. However, these interventions have focused more on public order and aesthetics, while the potential of graffiti in education remains largely untapped.

Although a limited effort to integrate graffiti into formal education was documented in a Surabaya high school (Masyhur et al., 2014), the initiative remained localized, technically oriented, and disconnected from cultural pedagogical frameworks. Based on a recent literature search, this study remains the only documented attempt to explore graffiti in the context of school-based art education in Surabaya over the past decade. No follow-up research or curricular development has emerged in the intervening years, indicating a long-standing and under-explored gap in both practice and scholarship. While studies in other countries have recognized the educational relevance of street art, research on how local graffiti can be systematically integrated into visual arts education in Indonesia remains limited and underdeveloped. This study addresses that gap by proposing a culturally grounded approach to graffiti-based learning rooted in the Surabaya context.

While several studies have addressed graffiti's role in urban aesthetics, fashion, advertising, and civic engagement in Surabaya (Wibisono & Herdianto, 2018), there remains a significant lack of scholarly attention

toward its pedagogical applications, particularly within formal education frameworks. Research on graffiti in other Indonesian cities has primarily emphasized either its legal implications or its aesthetic potential for tourism and city branding (Wardhana & Ellisa, 2024; Wibisono & Herdianto, 2018), without adequately exploring its function as a culturally embedded learning tool. Internationally, there has been growing interest in graffiti as a medium for critical pedagogy and youth identity formation in urban education contexts (Edy et al., 2024; Puspita, 2024; Setiawan & Utomo, 2022), yet such perspectives have not been systematically applied within Indonesian visual arts curricula. Moreover, there is an absence of comparative or regionally grounded studies that integrate local graffiti practices into culturally responsive teaching models. This conceptual and empirical void highlights the need for educational research that bridges street art practices with formal pedagogy, particularly in a way that reflects the urban realities and cultural expressions of students in cities like Surabaya.

Despite the increasing cultural relevance of graffiti in Indonesia, school-based visual art education continues to marginalize urban visual forms. Curricula remain focused on conventional or classical aesthetics, rarely accommodating expressions rooted in students' lived experiences (Amelia et al., 2024; Safitri et al., 2024). However, studies have shown that incorporating diverse art forms into the classroom increases student engagement, enhances creative freedom, and builds cultural literacy (Adela & Al-Akmam, 2024; Aznurwanti et al., 2024). In the context of local culture-based education, graffiti can serve as a reflective medium that embeds local narratives, ecological concerns, and youth identities (Fuadi & Noor, 2020; Jaga et al., 2023). Therefore, this study aims to explore how graffiti in Surabaya can be reconceptualized as a pedagogical medium that is not only creative but also culturally grounded. It addresses a significant research gap by connecting urban street art with local culture-based art education, an intersection that remains underdeveloped in both Indonesian and international literature. The study focuses on two main questions: (1) What are the visual characteristics of graffiti created by urban artist crews in Surabaya that reflect cultural identity? (2) How can Surabaya's graffiti visualization be integrated into local culture-based visual art education? Through these questions, the study contributes to the development of a contextual, culturally embedded, and pedagogically relevant model of art education rooted in students' urban realities and visual culture.

METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with an intrinsic case study design, aiming to investigate the visual characteristics of graffiti artworks produced by urban art crews in Surabaya and to examine their potential integration into local culture-based visual arts education. The intrinsic case study design was chosen because the phenomenon under investigation, graffiti as both urban expression and educational resource, is contextually bound and cannot be separated from the social, cultural, and spatial setting of the city (Marovah & Mkwanzani, 2020; Wardhana & Ellisa, 2024). A qualitative lens enabled the researcher to explore the lived experiences, intentions, and symbolic choices of graffiti artists, capturing the educational implications of these visual expressions (Charli et al., 2022). This design also enabled a flexible and in-depth engagement with diverse sources of data, including field observations, visual documentation, interviews, and student responses.

The study was guided by two central research objectives: (1) to analyze the visual characteristics and stylistic elements of graffiti produced by Surabaya's urban art crews that signify cultural identity, group dynamics, and local values; and (2) to explore the potential use of graffiti visualization as an innovative learning medium within the framework of local culture-based art education, emphasizing project-based and contextual learning strategies. These objectives were framed by the assumption that graffiti, though often marginalized in formal education, carries rich visual, symbolic, and social dimensions that align with the pedagogical principles of contemporary art education. To support these objectives, the study engaged three key participant groups. The first group consisted of six active graffiti artists representing different urban art crews across Surabaya, selected for their visibility in public spaces and consistent artistic output. The second group comprised five secondary school visual arts teachers who have direct experience in curriculum delivery and student engagement. The third group consisted of 47 high school students (from both public and private schools), who were recruited to provide insights into their perceptions, experiences, and openness to graffiti as a medium for learning. This triangulated participant structure allowed the researcher to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives across creators, facilitators, and learners.

To comprehensively address the research questions, the study employed a multi-method data collection strategy consisting of participatory field observation, semi-structured interviews, online surveys, and focus group discussions (FGDs). First, field observations were conducted at several well-known graffiti sites in Surabaya, including Kenjeran, Dupak, and areas under the Suramadu bridge. These observations were immersive and aimed at documenting the form, motifs, color palettes, compositions, and symbolic messages present in the graffiti artworks. High-resolution photographs and detailed field notes were taken to build a visual archive for analysis. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six graffiti artists and five art teachers, enabling a deep exploration of their perspectives on the purpose, symbolism, and relevance of graffiti to

education. These interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and thematically coded. Third, online surveys were distributed to 47 high school students using Google Forms, aimed at gauging their familiarity with graffiti, personal attitudes toward it, and perceived potential as a learning medium. Finally, FGDs involving selected teachers and students were conducted to discuss possibilities for integrating graffiti into the art curriculum, identify practical challenges, and co-develop hypothetical teaching strategies. This multi-pronged approach ensured data richness and methodological triangulation.

Data analysis was conducted using Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which involves three interconnected stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Frazer et al., 2023; Furidha, 2024). This model was selected for its iterative and flexible nature, which aligns well with the complexity of the data types involved: visual, verbal, and reflective. In parallel, the study applied Roland Barthes' semiotic framework for analyzing the graffiti images, focusing on both denotation (literal content) and connotation (cultural or symbolic meaning). This allowed for a layered interpretation of graffiti elements, such as stylized text, iconography, and spatial placement, about socio-cultural issues, identity, and urban critique. The visual documentation was systematically catalogued using digital folders and image-coding tools to group data according to themes such as identity, resistance, environmental commentary, and localization. Transcripts from interviews and FGDs were coded manually using thematic analysis to extract patterns related to perceptions of graffiti, pedagogical value, and implementation feasibility. The integration of semiotic visual analysis with qualitative coding of textual data provided a comprehensive lens for interpreting how graffiti operates at the intersection of art, culture, and education, and how its educational potential could be harnessed within localized, student-centered learning frameworks.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Observations and documentation of selected representative graffiti artworks across various sites in Surabaya reveal visual characteristics that are not only aesthetically engaging but also rich in identity, social critique, and cultural communication. These graffiti works were primarily created by artists affiliated with urban art crews, each demonstrating distinctive visual styles. One of the strongest features found in Surabaya's graffiti is its narrative tendency and focus on localized issues. For instance, a graffiti work by the artist Pennfruit in 2024 presents a visual response to marine pollution in the coastal areas of Surabaya. This artwork exemplifies how graffiti can serve not merely as decoration on blank walls, but as a medium for ecological expression and environmental awareness (Figure 1).



Figure 1. A graffiti artwork by Pennfruit depicting marine pollution in Surabaya's coastal area

A work by graffiti artist YZRL from 2015 features the iconic *Sura* and *Baya*, historical symbols of Surabaya, reinterpreted through a contemporary visual style (Figure 2). This suggests that graffiti in Surabaya is deeply intertwined with local narratives and could even modernize cultural symbols, transforming them into relevant visual communication for urban youth. Meanwhile, a piece by the artist Sleepyone, created in 2020, was a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting the graffiti community's sensitivity to global events with immediate local impact. Sleepyone's visual style tends to feature figurative characters, semi-caricatured mascots, neutral tones, and dense compositions, hallmarks of post-pandemic street art aesthetics. Additionally, graffiti by the Arcboys crew documented in the coastal Kenjeran area incorporates local landscapes such as the Suramadu Bridge, fishing villages, and sunset scenery. This reinforces the impression that graffiti communities in Surabaya maintain a strong emotional connection to the spaces they inhabit and are visually responsive to their urban surroundings.



Figure 2. Graffiti artwork by YZRL featuring the *Sura* and *Baya* icons (2015)

Several artworks also reflect social tragedies, including responses to the 2018 Lombok Earthquake and the 2022 Kanjuruhan Stadium Tragedy. Artists such as Kadilsaster and Pennfruit have utilized city walls as "canvases of consciousness," channeling empathy and shaping public opinion through powerful visual approaches. Technically, these works often employ spray layering techniques, utilizing high-contrast colors such as deep red, electric blue, and bright orange to draw attention and underscore meaning. Some artists have even developed distinctive color palettes and consistent lettering or illustration styles as part of their crew's visual identity. Furthermore, the social structure of the Surabaya graffiti community is evident in how visual territories are organized in public spaces: strategic locations, such as underpasses, coastal areas, and walls near public facilities, are transformed into "open-air galleries" (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Clockwise from top left: Pennfruit's artwork on the Lombok Earthquake, Pennfruit's response to the Kanjuruhan tragedy, Kadilsaster's graffiti under a bridge, and Sleepyone's graffiti on the COVID-19 pandemic

In-depth interviews with four active graffiti artists in Surabaya revealed that graffiti is perceived as a powerful form of personal expression, rather than merely a medium for conveying overt social messages. All four artists emphasized that their primary motivation in creating graffiti is to assert their presence and the identity of the crew or community they represent. Distinct visual features such as complex lettering styles (e.g., wildstyle), contrasting color combinations, and spontaneous approaches to spatial engagement are among the characteristics that define their artistic style. According to Pennfruit, one of the respondents, graffiti is marked by spontaneity and the use of spray paint, distinguishing it from murals, which tend to be more premeditated and typically use brush-based paints (interview, May 23, 2025). Beyond self-expression, graffiti is also regarded as a way of life, a consistent engagement with urban culture. Although their works may not always carry explicitly moral or educational messages, they often convey strong symbolic meanings such as territorial

markers, personal references, and visual codes recognized within the local graffiti community. Thus, even when interpreted freely, graffiti retains cultural dimensions and localized narratives rooted in communal and spatial experience.

Visually, these graffiti works can also be interpreted through Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, which distinguishes between two levels of meaning: denotative and connotative (Prasetyo & Masyhudi, 2024; Rudy, 2024). At the denotative level, visual elements such as figurative characters, lettering forms, and color palettes appear as literal representations; for instance, the image of a dead fish in Pennfruit's coastal work serves as a direct representation of marine pollution. At the connotative level, however, such symbols carry deeper meanings, alluding to critiques of environmental exploitation, industrial neglect, and local communities' anxiety (Jazeri & Susanto, 2020; Kusumawati et al., 2019; Permatasari, 2018). YZRL's graffiti, which features the iconic symbols of Sura and Baya, denotatively represents Surabaya's cultural identity, but connotatively suggests a process of negotiating cultural identity within the frame of urban modernity. The contemporary visual style chosen by YZRL reflects an effort to transform traditional cultural symbols into a more communicative visual language for younger generations, recontextualizing the city's historical narratives within a contemporary visual discourse.

Similarly, in the works of Sleepyone and Kadilsaster, the use of semi-caricatured mascots and dark color tones not only depicts concrete events such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the Kanjuruhan tragedy, but also connotes emotional atmospheres that represent loss, collective trauma, and community solidarity. Strong contrast colors, such as deep red, electric blue, and jet black, serve as both emotional intensifiers and visual codes, capturing public attention toward issues often marginalized in formal spaces. Reading graffiti as a system of complex signs through Barthes' semiotics clarifies how graffiti in Surabaya operates not merely as an aesthetic form, but as a "visual text" that communicates ideology, identity, and social critique in symbolic and collective ways. The strategic placement of these works in public spaces such as underpasses or coastal areas further adds semiotic significance, representing a spatial claim by communities that are often excluded from mainstream visual narratives. Additionally, there exists an unwritten code of ethics within the graffiti community, such as prohibitions against painting over others' work without permission and mutual recognition of crew tags. The visual character of graffiti in Surabaya, therefore, extends beyond aesthetic expression; it serves as a medium of identity representation, community solidarity, and socio-environmental awareness. This underscores that graffiti is not a sporadic act, but a form of visual art imbued with cultural value and contextual depth, making it a rich source for learning in local culture-based art education. Based on visual and thematic classification derived from field observation, Table 1 presents a summary of graffiti works categorized by theme, location, visual technique, and contextual meaning.

Table 1. Classification of Graffiti Visualization in Surabaya City Based on Theme and Visual Context

Graffiti Theme	Artist/Crew	Location	Visual Technique	Contextual Meaning
Environmental Issues	Pennfruit	Coastal area of Surabaya	Spray layering, figurative visuals	Critique of marine pollution
Local Symbols	YZRL	Central city wall	Illustration of Sura-Baya icons, bold lines	Modernization of local cultural symbols
COVID-19 Pandemic	Sleepyone	Public wall	Caricatured characters, neutral color tones	Reflection on social conditions during the pandemic
Local Landscapes	Arcboys	Kenjeran Beach	Local scenery, bright color palette	Representation of spatial identity and the fishing community
Social Tragedies	Kadilsaster / Pennfruit	Public facilities	Symbols of resistance, dark color tones	Response to the Kanjuruhan Stadium tragedy and the Lombok earthquake

From Table 1, most graffiti work in Surabaya addresses current local and socio-cultural issues. The visual techniques employed are relatively consistent, primarily relying on layering and the use of contrasting colors to emphasize the intended messages. Furthermore, the locations of the graffiti artworks reflect an emotional connection between the artists and the urban environment, particularly in coastal areas, underpasses, and other strategic public spaces. Notably, the emergence of responsive themes such as the pandemic, natural disasters, and the Kanjuruhan tragedy illustrates how graffiti has evolved into a medium for reflective social critique. This reinforces the notion that graffiti functions not merely as aesthetic expression but also as a form of communal narrative responding to local social dynamics. These findings strengthen the conclusion that graffiti visualization in Surabaya not only reflects the unique styles of specific crews but also carries localized narratives

with strong potential to be integrated into local culture-based art education. Accordingly, this analysis provides a substantive answer to the first research question: how the visual characteristics of urban graffiti in Surabaya reflect crew identity within the local cultural context.

A survey conducted with five art teachers and 47 secondary school students in Surabaya suggests that graffiti is perceived as a form of art with strong potential for integration into local culture-based visual arts education. From both aesthetic and educational perspectives, graffiti is considered relevant for engaging students with contemporary art practices that are rooted in their environments. The students generally associated graffiti with self-expression, bold colors, creative freedom, and its proximity to local social issues. Among the 47 responses collected, nearly all agreed that graffiti is a form of street art with aesthetic value, provided it is created using proper techniques and placed appropriately. Some students even expressed their interest in creating graffiti centered around themes such as environmental awareness, cultural diversity, and social commentary, reflecting their critical understanding of art as a medium of social communication. These findings suggest that students are not only receptive to graffiti as an artistic form but are also aware of its potential as a tool for dialogue and reflection in their everyday contexts. More detailed insights into these perceptions are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Student Responses to the Potential of Graffiti Visualization as an Innovative Learning Medium

Aspect Explored	Key Findings from Student Interviews
Student Understanding of Graffiti	Graffiti is perceived as an expressive, creative, and visual art form; differentiated from vandalism based on intent and context.
Aesthetic Perception and Appeal of Graffiti	Students are drawn to vibrant colors, distinctive lettering styles, and powerful social messages conveyed through graffiti.
Relevance of Graffiti to Students' Lives	Graffiti is viewed as closely connected to students' social realities, reflecting environmental issues, local culture, and youthful spirit.
Interest in Learning Graffiti at School	The majority express interest in learning graffiti at school, particularly through project-based activities.
Educational Value of Graffiti in Art Learning	Graffiti is regarded as promoting creativity, social discourse, and technical skills such as coloring and spray techniques.
Students' Experience with Graffiti in School	Most have not formally studied graffiti, but they show strong enthusiasm for engaging in it.
Benefits of Graffiti in Education	Enhances appreciation of local art, broadens understanding of contemporary art, and fosters positive self-expression.

Based on in-depth interviews with students from various school levels in Surabaya, the majority of respondents perceive graffiti as an expressive, creative art form with distinct aesthetic value. Students recognize graffiti as part of the city's visual landscape, particularly in spaces such as underpasses, railway walls, and other public areas. Many consciously differentiate between graffiti as art and graffiti as vandalism, emphasizing the importance of intent, location, and message. They believe that graffiti created with skillful techniques and strong social messages can enhance urban aesthetics and serve as a positive means of communication. Most students are attracted to graffiti for its visual impact, vibrant colors, and unique lettering or character styles. They associate graffiti with freedom of expression, courage in voicing opinions, and themes closely related to their social realities, including environmental issues, tolerance, local culture, and youth spirit. Some students even expressed a desire to create graffiti themed around motivation, environmental conservation, or diversity, reflecting their awareness of graffiti's potential as a social communication tool.

A survey conducted with five art teachers and 47 secondary school students in Surabaya suggests that graffiti is perceived as a form of art with strong potential for integration into local culture-based visual arts education. From both aesthetic and educational perspectives, graffiti is considered relevant for engaging students with contemporary art practices that are rooted in their environments. Students associated graffiti with self-expression, bold colors, creative freedom, and social relevance. Although most had never formally studied graffiti in school, they expressed a strong interest in learning through participatory, project-based methods. They believed that graffiti could help them develop both technical skills, such as spray techniques and color composition, as well as critical thinking about local culture and societal issues. These responses suggest that graffiti is seen not only as visually appealing but also as a meaningful educational medium closely connected to students' lived experiences. In parallel, interviews with art teachers revealed a growing recognition of graffiti's pedagogical potential. Teachers acknowledged its capacity to enhance student engagement and critical thinking, though they also noted technical and institutional challenges, such as limited facilities, concerns about vandalism, and the need for clearer curricular guidelines. Despite these obstacles, most respondents supported the inclusion of graffiti in visual arts education, particularly if approached through a structured, culturally contextualized framework. A summary of teacher insights across key themes is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Visual Arts Teachers' Perceptions on Integrating Graffiti into the School Curriculum

Aspect Explored	Key Findings from Teacher Interviews
Graffiti Presence in School/City Environment	Considered active but with limited legal spaces, the community tends to view it negatively as vandalism.
Artistic and Cultural Value of Graffiti	Recognized as having artistic value and reflecting local culture, primarily through symbolism and social messages.
Experience Using Graffiti as Teaching Material	Some have not used it, while others have linked it to typography lessons or thematic mural projects.
Challenges in Integrating Graffiti into Learning	Lack of legal media, low student technical skills, and persistent negative societal stigma.
Opinions on Graffiti as an Official Teaching Medium	The majority agree, provided there is proper supervision and a well-designed curriculum.
Relevant Pedagogical Approaches	Collaborative and project-based learning is recommended to encourage teamwork and contextual expression.
Potential and Risks in Graffiti Education	High potential for fostering creativity and participation; misuse risks can be minimized through controlled learning environments.

In-depth interviews with several visual arts teachers from secondary schools in Surabaya revealed that graffiti is understood as a two-dimensional visual art form with expressive, artistic, and educational value. Most teachers observed that graffiti is quite active in Surabaya, evidenced by numerous works scattered across various city corners. However, they also acknowledged that graffiti's existence still receives limited recognition from the general public and is often associated with vandalism, particularly when it occurs in unregulated or poorly managed spaces. Art teachers emphasized that this negative perception needs to be transformed through an educational approach, introducing graffiti to students as an art form that requires skill, imagination, courage, and an understanding of public space.

Within the educational context, teachers agreed that graffiti holds significant potential for integration into the visual arts curriculum. Key values teachable through graffiti include typography design, color application, and engagement with social issues. Graffiti is regarded as an effective medium for developing students' critical thinking, free imagination, and interactive skills, especially when implemented as group projects such as thematic graffiti within the school environment. Some teachers have begun utilizing graffiti in basic forms, for example, introducing letterforms in visual communication design classes or organizing collaborative mural painting during national commemorative events. Nonetheless, most teachers admitted that graffiti has yet to be formally integrated into the curriculum due to limited media availability, low student technical skills, and a lack of curricular approaches supporting the use of spray paint and large-scale visual formats.

Other challenges identified by teachers include limitations in using public or school spaces for graffiti practice and concerns about potential misuse outside of supervision. However, many believe these risks can be mitigated through structured instruction, the promotion of social responsibility, and context-sensitive pedagogical approaches. Collaborative, project-based learning was frequently recommended, as it not only builds technical and creative skills but also fosters teamwork, critical reflection, and communication as the key elements in socially responsive art education. Overall, Surabaya art teachers expressed openness to incorporating graffiti into the curriculum, provided there is adequate infrastructure, institutional support, and alignment with students' cultural environments. These findings reinforce the argument that graffiti holds substantial potential as a culturally relevant and innovative learning medium. To further contextualize this potential, interviews with six active graffiti artists in Surabaya revealed valuable perspectives. As primary practitioners, they emphasized graffiti's role as a medium of self-expression and cultural commentary, while also supporting its integration into school curricula. However, they cautioned against losing the authenticity of graffiti when formalized and stressed the importance of maintaining its rootedness in community identity, spatial dynamics, and youth culture. Table 4 summarizes their insights regarding opportunities, obstacles, and recommendations for embedding graffiti into formal art education.

Table 4. Artists' Responses to Graffiti in the Art Education Curriculum

Artist Name	Perspective on Graffiti as a Teaching Material	Challenges and Recommendations
Pennfruit	Graffiti can be taught in schools as practice for drawing, learning color, form, and perspective.	The main challenges are public understanding and securing a legal space. The solutions are education and legal spaces.
Sega	Suitable as a foundation for learning letter design and coloring, especially for students who struggle with realistic drawing.	Major obstacles include vandalism, stigma, and a lack of awareness. Collaboration between teachers and artists is essential.
Kadilsaster	Supports teaching graffiti with historical and value-based approaches; it can shape attitude and visual techniques.	It should begin with an introduction to graffiti ethics and values, rather than immediately proceeding to practice. Gradual education is necessary.
Noel	Strongly supports graffiti as it develops a logic of color, form, and expression, making it suitable for student expression.	Social challenges include community rejection and social risks. Requires legal platforms and dialogue with local communities.
Losek	Expressed support for introducing graffiti in school education, although it is not yet considered an urgent necessity.	Did not provide specific recommendations regarding its implementation.
Karz	Strongly supported the integration of graffiti into education, viewing it as a means to foster artistic freedom of expression among youth while aiding in the discovery of personal identity.	Recommended creating engaging and enjoyable learning experiences, such as introducing typography development using simple media like paper.

Most of the artists interviewed expressed their support for incorporating graffiti into the school art education curriculum. They viewed graffiti as having high educational potential in areas such as lettering design, color exploration, visual composition, and student self-expression. Graffiti was even considered effective in reaching students who might not connect well with realist art approaches. However, they also emphasized several challenges that cannot be overlooked. The main challenges include the stigma of graffiti as vandalism, social resistance from local communities, and the limited availability of legal spaces provided by educational institutions. The artists recommended that graffiti education be implemented gradually, beginning with an introduction to the history, values, and ethics of graffiti, accompanied by active collaboration between teachers and the graffiti community. With this approach, graffiti would not only serve as a visual art subject but also as a contextual learning tool that fosters students' aesthetic, social, and cultural awareness. These insights suggest that integrating graffiti into art education is not only feasible but also contextually meaningful, particularly when grounded in Surabaya's urban visual culture and supported by a culturally responsive curriculum that reflects students' social environments and local artistic practices.

The findings of this study indicate that graffiti visualization in Surabaya reflects not only the creative agency of urban communities but also the symbolic and cultural meanings tied to space, identity, and collective voice. Works by artists such as Pennfruit, YZRL, Archboys, Losek, and Kerz exhibit a strong relationship between imagery, spatial placement, and community expression. This perspective aligns with the view that street arts, such as graffiti and murals, form part of cultural visibility, shaped by interactions between individuals, communities, and their socio-spatial environments (Chernyavskaya, 2021; Luvera, 2021). The recurring features in Surabaya graffiti, such as local symbols, responses to social themes, and ecological narratives, share similarities with community mural projects in other Indonesian cities. Examples include educational murals in Kampung Warna-Warni Jodipan, Malang (Salam, 2019), thematic murals in Semarang (Astuti et al., 2023), civic murals in downtown Surakarta (Abiyoga et al., 2024), and social commentary murals in Yogyakarta (Pamuji et al., 2025). On a global scale, graffiti practices in Lisbon (Raposo, 2023), Sudan (Obłuski & Maczuga, 2021), and Bogotá (DeShazo, 2023) have evolved from informal street activities into recognized forms of public art and cultural education media. These parallels suggest that Surabaya's graffiti scene holds similar potential to be developed as a visual learning tool grounded in experience, locality, and critical reflection.

Previous research on the use of graffiti in schools in Surabaya is very limited. The only documented study, conducted by Masyhur et al. (2014), explored how graffiti was introduced into the high school art curriculum. That study focused on technical implementation and student creativity but did not develop a broader pedagogical framework or cultural perspective. Over a decade has passed without a significant scholarly follow-up. This study revisits the topic with a different orientation, placing graffiti within the context of local culture-based education and treating it as a visually rich material with both symbolic and educational relevance. The use of semiotic analysis in this study revealed that graffiti reflects not only stylistic trends but also collective

ideas, urban memory, and public critique. These visual elements can be transformed into learning resources through carefully designed instructional strategies.

The integration of graffiti into the classroom requires instructional models that support exploratory and experiential learning. The results of this study confirm that project-based learning and contextual teaching are the most appropriate methods. These approaches promote active student involvement and emphasize learning through investigation and community engagement. In this research, students expressed interest in art practices that relate directly to public space and contemporary urban culture. Teachers recognized the potential of using graffiti to teach typography, symbolism, and visual communication. These findings support the development of instructional models that are responsive to local culture and urban contexts. International studies reinforce the idea that graffiti and street art have educational value when used intentionally in schools. [Aporbo \(2022\)](#) examined graffiti writings by students in the Philippines and found that these writings contain layered expressions of emotion, resistance, and identity. [Jaga et al. \(2023\)](#) explored classroom graffiti in Ghana and concluded that student inscriptions reflect cognitive tendencies and socio-cultural perspectives. Similarly, [Zimuto et al. \(2023\)](#) showed that different levels of cognitive maturity and social context shape the form and content of student graffiti. In a school-based mural program in Canada, [Boydell et al. \(2021\)](#) introduced graffiti walls to engage students in discussions around mental health. This program encouraged reflective and emotional responses through visual expression. [Shaw and Noa \(2021\)](#) also demonstrated that student participation in mural projects can enhance empathy, social awareness, and critical thinking.

Compared with these international examples, the findings from Surabaya add a distinct contribution to the discourse by connecting urban street art with culture-based pedagogy. These findings collectively indicate that graffiti, when approached through a structured and culturally grounded pedagogical framework, holds significant potential as a legitimate educational medium in formal school settings. By integrating semiotic analysis with visual culture theory and contextual pedagogy, this study offers a new perspective on the academic discourse surrounding art education. It introduces a practical learning model that repositions street-based visual practices, which are often viewed as marginal or informal, as structured tools for student engagement, social reflection, and cultural literacy. This approach not only addresses a long-standing research gap since [Masyhur et al. \(2014\)](#) but also advances the conversation within the fields of visual arts education, critical pedagogy, and culturally responsive teaching. The research affirms that integrating urban visual culture into curriculum design can enrich students' educational experiences, stimulate critical awareness, and promote a more inclusive understanding of contemporary visual expression in Indonesia's art education landscape.

Based on the integration of research findings and theoretical analysis, this study proposes a contextual graffiti art learning model applicable in schools. The model begins with collaborative planning between teachers and students to formulate themes rooted in local culture or relevant social issues. This stage encourages participation and ownership, and can be enriched by involving local graffiti artists or organizing community visits. Students then proceed to develop visual sketches on paper or digital platforms as a way to refine their ideas before executing them on final media. Teachers guide students in composition, typography, and color use, often supported by technical insights from practitioners. Material selection is emphasized, prioritizing student safety and sustainability. Alternatives such as plywood or canvas, combined with water-based paints, are suggested to support ethical and legal creativity in school settings. During the experimentation phase, students explore graffiti coloring techniques, including gradients and shading, while supported by practical instruction in color theory. The execution stage is conducted gradually under supervision, with rotating tasks to promote teamwork and ensure quality. Upon completion, students apply finishing touches and participate in group reflection to evaluate both the process and the meaning behind their work. Finally, students are taught to manage and preserve their artworks, including digital documentation as part of a creative portfolio. This final stage supports appreciation, assessment, and the potential for public exhibition or online sharing. Together, these stages form a comprehensive framework that transforms graffiti from an informal art form into a structured and meaningful learning experience within local culture-based visual arts education.

In the educational context, graffiti does not necessarily have to be realized on urban walls to be considered graffiti. Its essence does not lie solely in the medium but in its distinctive visual characteristics, such as the expressive style of lettering, contrasting colors, spray techniques, and the spirit of voicing personal or social ideas. When these elements are maintained, graffiti applied to alternative media, such as canvas, plywood boards, or digital media, can still be categorized as forms of graffiti. This aligns with the view that graffiti is a "concrete manifestation of personal and communal ideology that is visually striking, urgent, and provocative," and can function as a "visual language" that expands the space for expressing identity and diversity ([Chang, 2020](#); [Khan, 2024](#)). In this context, the shift of graffiti from public walls to controlled media within educational spaces is not a form of compromise but an innovation in transforming visual communication spaces. Graffiti serves as an alternative medium that is not only adaptive to changing spaces but also to educational systems that prioritize ethical values, safety, and critical learning based on visual experience. Thus, the integration of graffiti into contemporary art education can be explained through the principles of visual culture pedagogy,

where art is not taught merely as a technical skill but as a tool for critical understanding of the world (Riley, 2021; Yang, 2024). As a form of visual art that grows from urban spaces, graffiti in this study demonstrates transformative potential as an alternative medium in art education (Kruzhkova et al., 2024; Zhang & Jia, 2024). This transformation occurs not only in its physical medium, from city walls to canvas, plywood, or other surfaces within the school environment, but also in its meaning and function. Graffiti, once regarded as an informal or even subversive expression in public spaces, can become a powerful pedagogical tool for fostering creativity, visual literacy, and social awareness among students in the context of art learning (Cappelli, 2021; Martins et al., 2023). This approach opens new possibilities for art education, moving beyond conventional media such as drawing paper or watercolor paints, to also embrace contemporary forms of expression that resonate closely with students' lives. Within this framework, graffiti functions as a dynamic, participatory, and contextual alternative medium that bridges the space between urban visual cultural experiences and formal classroom settings, expanding the scope of art education into socially and culturally relevant realms. With this model, art education in schools not only broadens students' expressive domains but also fosters more contextual cultural and social engagement, providing a strong foundation for developing art education that is more adaptive, relevant, and meaningful amid the dynamics of contemporary urban visual culture.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research objectives to understand the visual characteristics of graffiti by urban artists in Surabaya and explore its potential as a local culture-based art learning medium, this study concludes that graffiti produced by Surabaya's graffiti community possesses a distinctive expressive power. It reflects a collective visual identity, responds to social issues, and demonstrates symbolic connections to local culture. Observations of visual forms and survey responses from teachers and students indicate that graffiti is perceived as a relevant, inspiring, and contextual medium for art education. Both teachers and students support the integration of graffiti into the curriculum through project-based and contextual learning approaches, encouraging collaboration and critical engagement with real-world issues. Furthermore, this study presents a practical graffiti art learning model designed explicitly for school contexts. The model emphasizes collaborative planning, visual sketch development, ethical media selection, color experimentation, guided execution, reflective evaluation, and artwork documentation. This structured approach ensures that graffiti can be implemented as a meaningful pedagogical tool that aligns with the values of character education, local identity, and social awareness. The impact of this study lies in its contribution to bridging urban street art with formal art education, an area that has been previously underexplored in Indonesian academic research. Scientifically, the study contributes new insights to the fields of visual culture studies, critical pedagogy, and culturally responsive education by recontextualizing graffiti as a legitimate and structured component of school-based learning. This research offers both theoretical advancement and practical innovation, positioning graffiti as a dynamic educational medium that fosters student engagement, cultural reflection, and creative empowerment within Indonesia's evolving art education landscape. However, this study is limited by its geographic scope, which focuses solely on Surabaya, and by its qualitative design, which may not capture broader statistical trends or represent all perspectives from other regions. The participant pool was also limited to selected teachers, students, and artists within specific networks. Future research could expand the scope to include comparative studies across different Indonesian cities, analyze long-term impacts of graffiti-based learning programs, or explore the reception of such models in rural or cross-cultural school contexts. Further investigation may also consider interdisciplinary approaches involving sociology, psychology, and media studies to deepen the understanding of graffiti as an educational and cultural phenomenon.

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