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## Street Graffiti and Residents' Attitude: Izmir City

**Duygu Cinar Umdu** <sup>a\*</sup>, Faculty of Engineering and Architecture, Kastamonu University, Kastamonu 37000, Turkey.  
**Sevgi Ozturk** <sup>b</sup>, Faculty of Engineering and Architecture, Kastamonu University, Kastamonu 37000, Turkey.

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### Abstract

Humanity has always been in a struggle to express itself to others. They conveyed through marks and symbols on cave walls, head stones, clay tablets and papyrus before the invention of writing and society. Today urban areas and especially streets are places that carry social marks first-hand. They retain these semiotic signs and become a collective of symbols that link the past to the present and future. Graffiti, which is a part of such communication, is the way people express emotions and ideas to society through symbols. In this study, the attitude of the residents in Izmir City about graffiti, whether they see it as an art form or visual pollution, is studied. A survey was applied to 100 citizens, including fieldwork, photo-shoots and interviews done with 20 people. Part of the graffiti in Izmir urban identity is determined and the results are presented.

Keywords: Graffiti, resident's attitude, Izmir.

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\* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Duygu Cinar Umdu**, Faculty of Engineering and Architecture, Kastamonu University, Kastamonu 37000, Turkey.

E-mail address: [dcumdu@kastamonu.edu.tr](mailto:dcumdu@kastamonu.edu.tr) / Tel.:+903662802958

## **1. Introduction**

Today, freedom of expression becomes more exempt thanks to the media and communication tools all around the world, reflected more so in the urban setting. Both urban design and identity convey a deeper context both physically and symbolically (Erzen, 2010) and urban identity has reach a collective level along with its structural aspects.

Urbanity is the base of human culture, which affects humans in evolving ideology and art systems (Erzen, 2010). Urban life evolves with humans and society, and contemporary practices formed in streets are a first step in the relationship within the ego and society to raise a system of communication (Barlas, 2010).

### **1.1. Graffiti as a communication tool**

Communication is a system that has been in development and a need for humanity since her first days. This system is a result of humanity to express itself starting from cave paintings, writing on clay tablets and then paper. This ability is restricted with the alienation of self by the modernism (Candemir, 2008) and urban life converted into a free communication platform. As individuals experience urban life, they are not satisfied only with signboards and plates (Bilsel, 2010). Graffiti emerged from this longing to express oneself more boldly by those keen in arts, design, politics and the intellectual world along with the colours of the city (Habib, 2010).

The first examples of graffiti or street art dated back to ancient Egypt and Pompei and continued in the past century with the Berlin wall, which separated East and West Germany and was a part of colourful protests in the 1940s (Candemir, 2008). Arguments on the walls against the fast life and consumer society in Paris in the 1950s, the hip-hop culture in Chicago and Philadelphia in the 1960s, and in New York in the 1970s (Ersen, 2006; Merrill, 2015) are some more examples. Graffiti became an urban activity, with street rituals that use walls as large canvasses and colours as words and images (Barlas, 2010; Bilsel, 2010). Iraq Crew, who painted graffiti on metro wagons in the 1970s, was considered the 'rock n roll' of visual arts (Samancioglu, 2014).

### **1.2. Graffiti culture**

Graffiti can be considered as transient but mind-catching expressions (Claes & Vande Moere, 2017; Habib, 2010). It can be applied either by carvings, writing or painting on wagons, substations, stairs and walls. Environmental psychologists consider it beneficial for the community, as it offers a way to relax in the fast and intense social environment in cities (Claes & Vande Moere, 2017; Habib, 2010). Graffiti is considered to be derived from 'graphien' (writing) in Greek and 'sgriffo' (scratch) in Italian (Manco, 2002, p. 9).

Streets become a performance stage, the entire city becomes a giant canvas for graffiti artists, and even though it is hard to work out there, it gives them an opportunity to reach an unforeseen number of people and becomes a part of visual culture (Austin, 2010; Samancioglu, 2014). Graffiti is a guerrilla movement that targets to communicate directly with the community about some themes and it has its own social rules, jargon and ethical rules like one shall not paint on others' work (Atione, 2016; Claes & Vande Moere, 2017). It is known that street artists can express their art and sign with their tags in their streets or regions to develop their career and publicise solo (one), in groups (crew) or in gangs (Atione, 2016; Ley & Cybriwsky, 1974; Valjakka, 2015).

It seen as a public menace, illegal activity and vandalism that threatens public order and authority for being applied in public spaces and devices mostly in low-income communities in its first years of development (Lachmann, 1988; Ley and Cybriwsky, 1974). Although it is not illegal now, its legitimacy is still a question (Halsey & Young, 2002). Besides this kind of negativity, most people accept it with

sympathy and acknowledge it as a community art (Halsey & Young, 2002). Today, several of these art objects are accepted through use by community, artists supported by income from their art and even conferences are organised to legitimise it by the authorities (Halsey & Young, 2002).

### 1.3. Graffiti in Turkey

Graffiti as we understand it was first started by Tunc Dindas, also known as Turbo, who quit a bachelor study in Mimar Sinan University Interior Architecture with his friends in the 1980s (Ersen, 2006). Yet it did not spread until the mid-1990s with the support of the hip-hop group Cartel and got a place in approved locations and galleries, as it considered illegal at that time (Candemir, 2008). Mr. Dindaş defined that period as 'hard times' (Ersen, 2006). Now he has obtained acceptance from the society with contracts from multinational companies like Adidas and municipalities such as Bursa (Dindas, 2017a, b) and is invited to art events and exhibitions (Yalcinkaya, 2014). He can be called the 'king' (master) by other street artists.

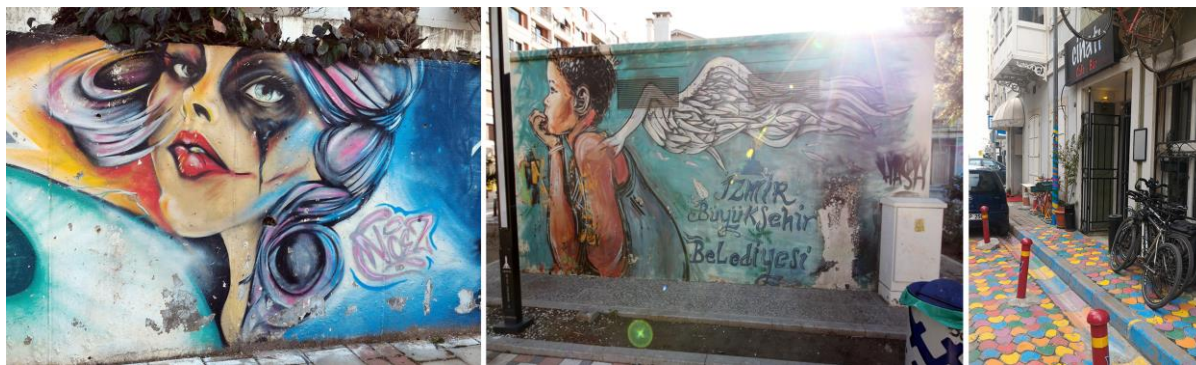
Graffiti is expressing itself as art with special messages and takes place in the streets after all major social incidents. Some of the most known graffiti artists are Turbo and his cute tiny monsters (Samancioglu, 2014), MET with his 15-year experience (Samancioglu, 2015), Leo Lunatic and his angry panda shown in Figure 1, which is selected as one of the best 15 graffiti in the world by the Guardian (Spencer & Guardian readers, 2013), Mies who thinks that the hijab do not prevent her art (Ozleyen & Ozdemir, 2016), Venus Sahin and Cagla Cansin who converted electrical transformer into pop-art and old Turkish movie posters (Tabak, 2017).



Figure 1. Angry Panda (see Spencer & Guardian readers, 2013)

## 2. Materials and Methods

Graffiti artists in Turkey acknowledge Izmir as a graffiti city (Ersen, 2006), with successful artists such as Nconen, Zero, Rask and Fein. Izmir is the third largest city in Turkey and has a rich archaeological and historical city fabric. Moreover, the city is known for people who express their ideas openly on social problems. Graffiti artists work in water channels, railways or such dangerous places, since there are very few legal spaces for street art, even though both municipalities and corporations support with different projects. There are also small scrawls such as 'GOZ-GOZ', 'Crazy' and 'KSK' which are classics for Izmir and graffiti in all districts from modern and historical Alsancak to suburban railways all around the city, as seen in Figure 2.



**Figure 2. Some samples of graffiti in Izmir**

In this study, residents' perception on graffiti, whether it is an expressional art or visual pollution in Izmir city, which is quite active in community life, was researched. A 20-question questionnaire evaluated 100 people and selected 20 people involved in fieldwork, photo shooting and deeper interviews. This study covers Gaziemir, Balçova, Göztepe, Kucukyali, Alsancak, Bornova and Karsiyaka districts and Gaziemir-Karsiyaka Izban suburban train line. The aim of this study is to understand the perception and attitudes of residents on street art, especially graffiti, in Izmir city, which has an urban identity and official colour 'blue' (Izmir, 2011).

Grffiti artists consider Izmir rich in street art (Samancıoğlu, 2014). Thus, a survey was inquired of 100 citizens with random sampling method to understand the perception and attitudes of residents on street art, especially graffiti. The survey was conducted both online and with face-to-face applications, and the participants were asked to respond to questions on graffiti, street art, and urban rituals without giving any information on these concepts.

The survey was composed of three parts and a total of 20 questions with five selective answers to each question. The first part covers questions (1–5) about general information about the participant (age, education, career, reason to be in the city and how long does the participant live in the city). The second part covers questions (6–13) about participants' attitude towards art, design and graffiti. The final part covers questions (14–20) to measure the level of their perception for the city and its streets, and the awareness to recognise changes in the streets. Furthermore, ANOVA of survey results was evaluated using the Minitab 17 statistical software.

A field study in streets in different districts of Izmir was evaluated with 20 people, where 16 of them took part in the survey to compare the results from parts two and three. After photo shooting and field observation, interviews were done with the participants. Questions in part two and three were re-asked after general information on graffiti was given. Additionally, the graffiti intensity was percept in the selected regions and their attitude for graffiti was also compared with the results of the survey after fieldwork.

### **3. Results**

Most of the participants (55 people) possessed a bachelor's degree, and this was followed by the second group with a Master's degree (40 people); there were only five people with a middle or high-school degree. People aged below 15 years did not participate in the survey, the participants were aged 16–25, 26–35, 36–45, and  $\geq 46$  are 22, 28, 15, and 35, respectively. 41% of the participants were currently employed, 22% were students, 21% academics and 13% were retired or unemployed people. Only 3% of the participants were employers. 73% of the participants currently live in Izmir and 75.7% of respondents lived or had been living in the city for more than 15 years.

Responses for the second part of the survey are summarised in Table 1: 48% of participants consider graffiti as a tool of communication; 47% of the participants respond to question nine as communicating with society; while 32% and 19% respond as performing art/improving 'making art/creating an aesthetic environment' and 'identifying streets', respectively. Moreover, none of the participants think that graffiti is written to damage the environment. 67% of the participants do not consider graffiti as vandalism and 26% partly agree while only 7% consider graffiti as vandalism. Yet a large majority, 89% considers graffiti as an art form.

**Table 1. Survey part 2 questions and answers**

Questions	Answers	n	%n	d.f.	p.v.
6. Is art and design important enough in Izmir?	Strongly agree	1	1	4	0.00
	Agree	39	39		
	Partly agree	32	32		
	Disagree	26	26		
	Strongly disagree	2	2		
7. How often do you participate in art and design activities such as exhibitions, biennials and fairs?	Always	4	4	4	0.00
	Often	16	16		
	Sometimes	17	17		
	Seldom	61	61		
	Never	1	1		
8. Is graffiti a communication medium?	Always	24	24	3	0.00
	Often	24	24		
	Sometimes	43	43		
	Seldom	9	9		
	Never	0	0		
9. For what purpose is graffiti written?	Identifying streets	19	19	3	0.00
	Communicating with society	47	47		
	Making art/creating an aesthetic environment	32	32		
	Damage to the environment	0	0		
	Other	2	2		
10. Is graffiti the king of vandalism?	Strongly agree	1	1	4	0.00
	Agree	6	6		
	Partly agree	26	26		
	Disagree	40	40		
	Strongly disagree	27	27		
11. Is graffiti an art and design form?	Strongly agree	43	43	3	0.00
	Agree	46	46		
	Partly agree	9	9		
	Disagree	2	2		
	Strongly disagree	0	0		
12. Do you follow graffiti artists?	Always	1	1	4	0.00
	Often	8	8		
	Sometimes	13	13		
	Seldom	55	55		
	Never	23	23		
13. What kind of graffiti do you like?	All	36	36	4	0.00
	Simple/just with writing	7	7		
	Colourful/with tribal symbols and shapes	43	43		
	Like landscape pictures	10	10		
	None	4	4		

Responses for the third part of the survey are given in Table 3. The 14th question, which measures the richness of communication symbols, had 46% positive responses while 32% negative and 21% partly agreed. The 17th question which asked for the intensity of seeing graffiti had the highest responses for seldom and often for 46% and 32% respectively. Most of the participants partly agree to questions 18, 19, 20 at 48%, 47% and 40%, respectively.

**Table 2. Survey part 3 questions and answers**

Questions	Answers	n	%n	d.f.	p.v.
14. Are the streets of Izmir rich in terms of communication symbols and urban rituals (wall writings, street plates, panels, posters and various urban events)?	Strongly agree	3	3	4	0.00
	Agree	43	43		
	Partly agree	21	21		
	Disagree	29	29		
	Strongly disagree	4	4		
15. Where are the most examples of graffiti in Izmir?	On old buildings	21	21	4	0.00
	On transformer buildings	33	33		
	On modern buildings	1	1		
	Backstreets	36	36		
	On store shutters	9	9		
16. Which lines do you see the most in Izmir?	Kak-sin-kaf (KSK)	28	28	3	0.00
	GOZ-GOZ	39	39		
	Izmir	16	16		
	Dünya Türk Olsun	4	4		
	Crazy/Crazie	13	13		
17. How often do you see examples of graffiti in Izmir?	Always	4	4	4	0.00
	Often	36	36		
	Sometimes	16	16		
	Seldom	43	43		
	Never	1	1		
18. Is graffiti important enough in Izmir? (According to other cities in Turkey?)	Strongly agree	2	2	4	0.00
	Agree	14	14		
	Partly agree	48	48		
	Disagree	28	28		
	Strongly disagree	8	8		
19. Is graffiti a street ritual in Izmir?	Strongly agree	1	1	4	0.00
	Agree	14	14		
	Partly agree	47	47		
	Disagree	28	28		
	Strongly disagree	10	10		
20. Is graffiti identified with Izmir city?	Strongly agree	2	2	4	0.00
	Agree	14	14		
	Partly agree	40	40		
	Disagree	31	31		
	Strongly disagree	13	13		

All of the 20 people who attended photo shooting and fieldwork complied that they did not observe the city with enough attention before the study and they notice some of the graffiti in their area during fieldwork. When 16 participants who already responded to survey are re-asked for their response to questions 18, 19 and 20 their results change to absolutely agree for seven participants



and agree for nine participants. It is also observed that 75% of participants did not have clear information on graffiti. 68.8% of the participants responded that they perceived street art with a pattern as graffiti where they do not perceive scrawls as graffiti, and their given answers in the survey without considering definition of the term.

Moreover, all the participants agree that graffiti is relaxing and entertaining, unless it is written in a historical site. And even 50% of these participants do not find it objectionable in insignificant or not restored old houses if graffiti is in harmony with the building structure. Else they even find this mutual existence of new and old attractive, where one participant explains this as 'As Izmir is...'

#### **4. Discussion**

According to ANOVA, when the age range and the 11th question were compared, it was determined that 95.5% of those aged 16–25, 85.7% of those aged 25–35, 100% of those aged 36–45, and 82.82% of those aged ≥ 46 think that graffiti is an art form. Except for the age range of 36–45 years, it was observed that the view angle of graffiti changed positively and it was described as an artefact when the interval between the ages decreased.

Most of the exhibitors who stated that they participated in the exhibition-biennial-fair participation always and frequently, 35% of the participants were students, while the retired people with 10% were the minimum. 46% of the retired people and 36.4% of the students responded positively when asked about the value given to the arts in Izmir. This shows that close to half of the retired participants are aware of the artistic events in Izmir, but they are less involved in these events. Students are more likely to follow these organisations, they even do not find it sufficient. It is not surprising that there are 60 participants who think that artificial events such as the exhibition-biennial-fair are not given sufficient importance in Izmir because only 20 participants follow these events. It is not possible that society will notice many art events that are not followed because participation is low. If people join these types of organisations, they can see the importance of art and design for the city and reach a fair judgement about it.

54% and 53.3% of people living in the city for more than 15 years claim that graffiti is a communication medium and a city ritual, respectively. It can be thought that the city perception of people who live there for more than 15 years is more developed than others. Besides, 84.7% of these people say graffiti is vandalism and 71.4% partly agreed that graffiti is an art form. This result is evidence that even people who think graffiti is a crime see it as an artefact.

According to feedback after fieldwork, photo shoots and the interview, it was concluded before the survey was conducted that if participants were informed enough about graffiti and they observed and experienced the city enough, many of the 'Partly agree' and 'Disagree' responses to questions 18, 19 and 20 could shift to 'Agree' and 'Partly agreed', respectively. Unfortunately, the chance of people seeing many beautiful graffiti samples is little because these samples are generally on water channels and on the Izban suburban line.

#### **5. Conclusion**

In conclusion, survey data and fieldwork show that the people of Izmir want to see more graffiti in their streets, although they have difficulty in observing the city and feeling the urban texture. As a matter of fact, at the end of 'Talking Walls Project' of Bornova Municipality in the winter of 2017, still adorning graffiti on the buildings and wall claddings on which various artists' drawings of Bornova, as the request of local people is a sign that people of Izmir own the street art (Izmir, 2017a). Not only artists or authorities but also people of Izmir, one of the 5 cities of candidates in the World Art Capital Award in 2020 (Izmir, 2017b) need to give the value this art form deserves. For this, legal areas can be increased and graffiti can be applied to highway viaducts and to the idle areas of the city. In addition,

while heroes of crazy designs on the walls make people of the city with the slogan 'Life is on the street!' feel that street art belongs to everybody, special graffiti days where local people, artists and authorities participate and have high participation can be organised. Thus everybody in the city can play an active role in becoming a city ritual of graffiti.

It should not be forgotten that even now Izmir is a city where in every social event its name is decorated with colourful letters on the shutters of the stores on Kibris Sehitaleri Street and the 2nd Kordon, on the famous stairs of Kucukyali and Goztepe, in some regions the number of steps can be up to 60, are cheered with mosaic works and colourful paints. Moreover, Izmir is one of the rare cities in the country where you can see graffiti on not only primary schools, but also on buildings of the university (Figure 3), hospital, municipality and other government offices.



**Figure 3. Rectorate building of 9 Eylul University**

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