

From Wall to Screen: A Study on the Generation, Uniqueness and Digital Secondary Dissemination of Winchester Graffiti Culture

Ziyue Xie^{1, a}

¹MA Communication Design, Southampton University, Southampton, SO17 1BJ, UK

^axieziyue2024@163.com

Abstract

This study explores the generation, uniqueness and digital secondary dissemination of graffiti culture, and selects the city of Winchester in the UK as the main case. Graffiti is usually regarded in the traditional sense as a form of urban visual expression related to subculture, spatial resistance and local visibility. However, with the popularity of smart phones and social media platforms in modern society, more and more people are taking pictures, uploading and sharing graffiti online, which indicates that it has widely entered the digital environment. This study examines the visual and spatial characteristics of graffiti in Winchester, explores how social platforms such as Instagram and Facebook have reshaped their dissemination methods, and analyzes the significance of their secondary dissemination. The research adopts a qualitative research approach, integrating visual text analysis with social media content analysis. It integrates, summarizes and analyzes approximately 20 to 30 graffiti works and 30 to 50 related social media posts from dimensions such as style, theme, color, spatial position, tags and user interaction. The research results show that graffiti has gradually evolved from a local street expression to a universal visual cultural phenomenon across media. In the process of digital secondary dissemination, it is transformed from urban spatial symbols into visual content that can be circulated online, and its meaning is continuously reconstructed relying on platform visibility and audience participation. This study combines three types of theories: subculture, space and mediatization, and builds a cross-media analytical framework for analyzing the dissemination phenomenon of graffiti in the current digital age.

Keywords

Graffiti culture; Digital secondary dissemination; Mediatization; Social media; Winchester.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

For a long time, graffiti, as a form of street art, has been widely regarded as closely related to subcultures, urban Spaces and public visual expressions. It not only reflects the recognition of the identity of the artist, but also represents the social and cultural practices in the urban environment.[1,2] With the wide recognition of street art by the public, graffiti has gradually evolved from a subcultural practice into an important part of urban visual culture.[3,4]

The way graffiti spreads has also changed due to the rapid development of smart phones and social media platforms. Digital media enables graffiti to become part of the online art form through means such as shooting, sharing and online dissemination.[5,6] It can be seen from this that graffiti has transformed from a local street practice into a cross-media visual cultural phenomenon that spans both physical and digital Spaces.

1.2. Research Problem

Existing research on graffiti includes not only subcultures, urban Spaces and street art practices, but also participation culture, mediatization and social media communication focused on in digital media research.[1-2,5-6] Although these studies respectively explain the cultural attributes and digital communication characteristics of graffiti, there is still a lack of research that integrates the two and analyzes how graffiti enters the digital space from the physical space. Furthermore, existing research in the UK mainly focuses on major cities such as London and Bristol, while paying limited attention to graffiti practices in medium and small-sized cities like Winchester. To make up for the deficiencies of existing research, this study takes Winchester as a case to explore the generation, visual uniqueness and digital secondary dissemination process of British graffiti culture.

1.3. Research Objectives and Questions

This research includes three main goals:

Examine the visual and spatial characteristics of Winchester's graffiti.

Explore how smartphones and social media platforms are reshaping the way graffiti is disseminated.

3. Analyze how the significance of graffiti changes during the process of digital secondary dissemination.

Based on the above research objectives, this study raises the following research questions:

Question 1: What are the visual features and spatial distribution patterns of Winchester's graffiti in physical space?

Question 2: How have mobile phone photography and social media platforms (Instagram/Facebook) changed the way graffiti is spread?

Question 3: How can digital media secondary dissemination reconstruct the meaning of graffiti?

1.4. Paper Structure

This article is divided into four parts. Introduction, Literature Review section, Argumentation and analysis section, Conclusion Section.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Graffiti Culture and Subculture

Graffiti, as a form of street art, is closely related to subculture theory in its development. Beezer (2003) pointed out in his interpretation of Hebdige's "Subculture: The Meaning of Style" that subculture groups identify with their identities through style, symbols and visual practices, and thereby form symbolic resistance against mainstream culture.[1] On this basis, Lachmann (1988) holds that creators construct group identity symbols through continuous creative activities, which further regards graffiti as a social practice.[7] Meanwhile, Castleman (1984) took the graffiti on the New York subway as the object and pointed out that it gradually evolved from individual expression to an urban phenomenon with collective cultural characteristics.[8] Ferrell (1995) also demonstrated that graffiti is not only a way for the youth to express themselves but also a response to urban governance and social order.[2]

Therefore, graffiti not only embodies the identity construction of subcultural groups but also reflects the continuous evolution process of urban culture. All these lay a theoretical foundation for exploring the relationship between graffiti and urban space as well as digital communication.

2.2. Graffiti and Urban Space

Graffiti culture can be understood not only from the perspective of subculture theory but also further analyzed from the perspective of urban space. Lefebvre (2014) holds that the urban space is a product of social production rather than a given by nature.[9] In addition, public Spaces carry both physical and cultural significance. Graffiti, as a visual practice attached to public interfaces such as walls, actively participates in the production of urban Spaces. Foucault (1975) further revealed that there is a complex connection between public space and power, surveillance and visibility.[10] The graffiti display on public surfaces such as walls indicates that the disciplined environment has been transformed into a place for expression. Meanwhile, de Certeau (2024) also pointed out that graffiti can be understood as a kind of daily spatial intervention to reshape the city.[11] Harvey (2020) holds the view that the cultural value of public Spaces has been redefined by postmodern urban culture, and Young (2013) also points out that contemporary street art has become an important visual resource in cities.[12,4] Therefore, urban space is not only an environment for graffiti creation, but also lays the foundation for its visual significance and cultural dissemination.

2.3. Graffiti and Digital Media Dissemination

With the rapid development of digital media, the dissemination of graffiti has expanded from physical urban Spaces to digital online environments. Couldry and Hepp (2018) hold that mediatization not only alters the process of communication of things but also reshapes social and cultural practices.[6] This indicates that the media is not only a channel for communication but also lays a foundation for constructing the real society. Hjarvard (2013) further pointed out that an increasing number of cultural activities are beginning to rely on digital media.[13] In the digital communication environment, the concept of "reintermediation" proposed by Bolter and Grusin (1996) provides another perspective for understanding the changes in the way graffiti is disseminated.[14] They believe that the media reshape each other by transferring content between different media. As a result, the graffiti originally created on the city walls was transferred from physical walls to digital screens through photography, social media sharing and digital dissemination. Furthermore, Manovich (2002) holds that digital media has redefined the production and circulation of visual culture by enabling images to be copied, edited and redistributed online.[15] Digital secondary dissemination not only enhances the visibility of graffiti and reshapes its cultural significance, but also lays the foundation for understanding the dissemination of graffiti in the digital age.

2.4. Graffiti and Social Media Communication

Visual content has now become a core form of digital communication. Mirzoeff (1999) holds that in contemporary society, people increasingly rely on images to construct the actual meaning of things.[16] Social media has not only transformed the way information is shared but also reshaped the role of images in daily interactions. Van Dijck (2013) further pointed out that various platforms have shaped different digital contents, and their production, circulation and visibility have become diverse and unpredictable.[17] For graffiti, platforms like Instagram and Facebook interact with users through algorithms and tags, making their audience broader. Highfield and Leaver (2016) also pointed out that in order to enable visual content to circulate rapidly on digital platforms, Instagram has established an image-centered communication model.[18] Meanwhile, Zappavigna (2016) holds that social media photography not only records reality but also constantly reconstructs the meaning of the recorded things through digital circulation.[19] Therefore, social media is not only a platform for the digital secondary dissemination of graffiti but also a space that continuously reconstructs its visual meaning.

3. Analysis

3.1. Fieldwork Data and Classification

This study first adopted the research method of organizing, encoding and classifying the visual data obtained from field investigations. According to the photographic records (Figure 1), a total of 35 pieces of materials that can be used for urban visual analysis have been formed. Each record was grouped and encoded respectively according to its dominant visual form, spatial surface, content features and main functions.

Referring to the classification logic in Rose's (2022) visual methodology, the photographic records were encoded into three categories: 16 text graffiti (45.7%), 14 symbolic urban markers (40.0%), and 5 image graffiti (14.3%).[20] The three types of materials show obvious differences. Text graffiti, including labels, signatures, short sentences, etc., have the widest distribution range, such as building walls, wooden fences, electrical boxes and other public infrastructure. Meanwhile, although the number of image graffiti is relatively small, due to their diverse expressions and large-scale display on the wall, they present the highest visual complexity. Symbolic marks are concentrated on the surfaces of sidewalks, roads, manhole covers and infrastructure, etc., and have practical significance such as construction and maintenance or spatial indication.

Referring to the emphasis on system classification in the visual social media research by Highfield and Leaver (2016), and in order to conduct a comparative analysis in a broader urban visual environment, this study distinguishes functional symbolic markers from non-functional graffiti.[18] After eliminating 14 functional markers, among the remaining 21 non-functional records, text doodles accounted for 76.2% and image doodles accounted for 23.8%. This indicates that the Winchester sample is mainly characterized by small-scale, scattered, and text-dominated visual practices. The above classification provides an empirical basis for the subsequent analysis of visual form, spatial distribution and communication potential.

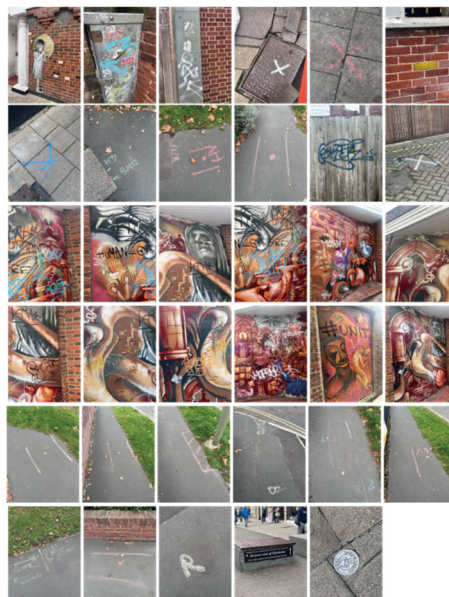


Figure 1. Photographic Records

3.2. Visual and Spatial Characteristics of Graffiti in Winchester

It is not difficult to find from the on-site materials that the most prominent visual feature of Winchester's graffiti is the dispersion, repetition and superposition of the written words. Labels, signatures and short sentences occupy walls, fences, electrical boxes and other public surfaces

and gain urban visibility through repeated appearance. Combining Beezer's (2003) interpretation of subcultural styles with Lachmann's (1988) analysis of graffiti as an identity practice, these can be understood as a form in which creators construct identity expressions through symbols and signatures.[1,7] Some of the text is directly superimposed on the existing mural, leaving different visual traces on the surface of the same object. This fully demonstrates that Winchester's walls are not stable display Spaces, but rather visual fields that are constantly being used, modified and re-occupied.

In contrast, image graffiti presents a stronger visual coherence. Figurative works, religious images and large color compositions in field records are presented on continuous walls or building facades with clear visual centers. Ferrell's (1995) discussion on urban visibility and space competition helps explain this difference.[2] Fragmented text graffiti gains a sense of presence through repetition and superposition, while image graffiti creates a more concentrated visual impact through scale, color and composition. The difference between the two types of graffiti lies not only in their distinct visual styles but also in their different ways of occupying public Spaces. There is a further connection between visual forms and spatial surfaces. Text graffiti can occupy small, scattered and temporary urban surfaces, while coherent images require more stable and continuous Spaces. Combining Lefebvre's (2014) assertion that urban space is social production and de Certeau's (2024) emphasis on daily spatial practice, this model indicates that graffiti creators will use different visual expressions according to different restrictions.[9,11]

The historical environment of Winchester City further intensifies these visual differences. Meanwhile, contemporary graffiti seeks common ground while reserving differences with historical buildings. As Young (2013) pointed out, street art can change the way viewers perceive in urban Spaces.[4] In this case, the coherent mural can be regarded as a public art work with aesthetic value, while the fragmented text retains the characteristics of temporariness, anonymity and informality. Therefore, the uniqueness of Winchester's graffiti is presented through two interrelated features. Textual practice creates dispersed visibility through repetition and superposition, while image works achieve concentrated visibility through scale and composition. The above findings respond to RQ1 and also provide a basis for examining why certain graffiti forms are more likely to spread on social media than others.

3.3. Social Media Engagement and Digital Secondary Dissemination

To investigate the dissemination of Winchester street art on social media, this study analyzed eight publicly accessible Instagram and Facebook posts using keyword search (Table 1). The obtained sample generated at least 3,228 visible likes, 347 comments and 39 shares. As some posts do not display all interaction metrics, the above data represents the lowest observable interaction volume.

Firstly, the samples exhibit selective visibility. Hendog's "Missing Bear" post received 1,111 likes and 28 comments. Another user-generated street art post received 23 likes and 1 comment. Meanwhile, the post showcasing Julian Beever's 3D street art received only 11 likes and no comments. The over hundredfold gap between the highest and lowest visible likes indicates that street art has not received the same level of attention after entering social media. This confirms the view of Highfield and Leaver (2016) that visual social media content is shaped by user choice, publishing practices and platform connectivity.[18]

Secondly, the subject of communication transcends the artist himself. A Facebook post showcasing Hendog's turtle works received 845 reactions, 253 comments and 37 shares, generating the highest discussion rate in the sample. The concept of engagement culture proposed by Jenkins and Deuze (2008) explains that creators, audiences, and online communities all participate in communication together.[5] The viewpoint of Van Dijck (2013)

has also been further verified. Platform connectivity is also a way to shape visibility and interaction.[17]

The post "Hendog Winchester Walking Route" further demonstrates how digital media reorganizes the relationship between street art and urban space. This project connects scattered works through a walking route of approximately 11.5 kilometers, enabling users to discover the works online and participate in the digital dissemination of graffiti together by shooting and Posting. Just as Couldry and Hepp (2018) and Hjarvard (2013) hold, the media not only conveys cultural content but also reshapes the way cultural practices are organized.[6,13] That is to transform scattered physical works into searchable, experiential and shareable urban cultural routes.

Overall, the sample identified three characteristics of the digital secondary dissemination of Winchester street art: selective visibility, multi-subject participation, and a circular dissemination mode from online to offline. Referring to Zappavigna's (2016) view that social media actively shapes visual objects, it is not difficult to find that framing, posting and interaction all participate in the different presentation of visual objects.[19] Therefore, RQ2 can be answered as follows, smartphones and social media jointly organize the secondary dissemination of street art through the selection of works, the connectivity of platforms, and user engagement, forming a circular model of physical works, digital release, interaction, redistribution, and physical experience.

Table 1. Social Media Engagement

Winchester Street Art: Social Media Engagement

No.	Platform / Account	Content / Artwork	Likes / Reactions	Comments	Shares / Reposts	Notes
1	Instagram / hendog	"Missing Bear" street artwork	1,111	28	Not displayed	Highest Instagram engagement
2	Instagram / flaneuse_in_the_uk	Winchester street art	838	17	2	Urban exploration content
3	Instagram / tuttonandyoung	Girl and flowers street artwork	23	1	Not displayed	User-generated content
4	Instagram / miss_winchesteruk	The Hendog Winchester Walk	Not displayed	8	Not displayed	11.5 km urban walking route
5	Instagram / mattanzamfedora	3D street art in Winchester	11	0	Not displayed	Artwork by Julian Beever
6	Facebook / Account not visible	Hendog's sea turtle artwork	845	253	37	Highest discussion level
7	Facebook / Jacqueline Ridout	Hendog street art photos	7	4	Not displayed	Visitor-generated content (UGC)
8	Facebook / Alton, Hampshire-related post	Hendog street artwork	393	36	Not displayed	Discusses the anonymous artist
Total	—	Visible engagement	3,228	347	39	Undisplayed metrics excluded

Note: Metrics not displayed in the screenshots are excluded from the totals.

3.4. Meaning Reconstruction from Wall to Screen

The secondary dissemination of digital not only alters the reach of works but also changes the conditions under which they are viewed and interpreted. When graffiti is transformed from wall works into mobile phone photos, its architectural surface, location, surrounding traces and public viewing conditions may be cropped or weakened. As Rose (2022) holds, the significance of visual materials is closely related to their production, content, and viewing context.[20] Therefore, photographic documentation is not merely about preserving graffiti; rather, it reorganizes the relationship between visual objects and urban Spaces through framing and composition. Bolter and Grusin's (1996) concept of "reintermediation" further explains this process.[14] Graffiti initially existed on the physical urban surface and was transformed into digital images through mobile phone photography before entering the interfaces of Instagram and Facebook. These works are not replicated exactly as they are, but are presented to the viewers again through new media forms. Manovich (2002) also demonstrated that digital

media make visual content replicable, editable and reconfigurable.[15] This precisely indicates that platform dissemination may enhance visual and narrative characteristics while weakening the original spatial context.

Winchester's field research provides a comparative perspective. During The visit to Mark Jones' Mapping the Familiar exhibition at The Arc Winchester, researchers observed the artist Mark Jones creating and had an informal conversation with him. Jones explained that his creation originated from the daily dog-walking route. Through repeated movement, observation and memory in his personal experiences, he transformed actions into visual representations of Winchester. This process echoes de Certeau's (2024) discussion on everyday spatial practice, where urban meaning is generated through movement and the reuse of space.[11] Lefebvre's (2014) theory of spatial production also indicates that urban space is constantly reconstructed through social practice and visual representation.[9] Further analysis through Bengtsen's (2014) discussion on the institutionalization of street art reveals that Jones transforms daily spatial experiences into institutionalized visible artworks obtained through exhibitions, while graffiti directly intervenes on the urban surface and directly gains visibility in public Spaces.[3] However, once both are captured and digitally disseminated, they both become replicable and shareable visual content.

Therefore, the response to RQ3 is as follow, Digital secondary dissemination reconstructs graffiti through de-contextualization, re-mediatisation and platformization. Referring to the visual culture perspective of Mirzoeff (1999), this transformation from the wall to the screen is further explained, which also indicates that the meaning of graffiti is not fixed to the work itself, but is constantly disseminated and reconstructed through urban space, photographic practice, platform mechanism and audience participation.[16] This transformation is not merely a shift between media, but also a process of reproducing the cultural significance of graffiti.

4. Conclusion

This study examines the visual and spatial characteristics of Winchester's graffiti culture and explores how smartphones and social media are involved in its digital secondary dissemination and meaning reconstruction. Through the joint analysis of on-site shooting, visual classification coding and public social media content, this study connects graffiti in physical space with its digital dissemination.

There are three main findings. First, text graffiti dominates in non-functional samples, while image graffiti is less common but has stronger visual coherence. At the same time, the meaning of graffiti is closely related to the surface of a specific city. Secondly, physical frequency does not directly determine digital visibility. Works with more unique or narrative visuals receive more interaction, and the dissemination of graffiti involves multiple subjects participating together. Thirdly, the transition from walls to screens has altered the spatial context and viewing conditions of graffiti, transforming it into digital content that can be saved and shared. This study offers a perspective of small and medium-sized cities that connects graffiti, urban space and digital communication. The sample size is limited. In the future, cross-city comparisons can be expanded to examine the shaping effect of the platform algorithm on the visibility of street visual culture.

References

- [1] Beezer, A. (2003). Dick Hebdige, subculture: The meaning of style. In *Reading into cultural studies* (pp. 110–127). Routledge.
- [2] Ferrell, J. (1995). Urban graffiti: Crime, control, and resistance. *Youth & Society*, 27(1), 73–92.
- [3] Bengtsen, P. (2014). The street art world.

- [4] Young, A. (2013). *Street art, public city: Law, crime and the urban imagination*. Routledge.
- [5] Jenkins, H., & Deuze, M. (2008). *Convergence culture*. *Convergence*, 14(1), 5–12.
- [6] Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2018). *The mediated construction of reality*. John Wiley & Sons.
- [7] Lachmann, R. (1988). Graffiti as career and ideology. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94(2), 229–250.
- [8] Castleman, C. (1984). *Getting up: Subway graffiti in New York*. MIT Press.
- [9] Lefebvre, H. (2014). The production of space (1991). In *The people, place, and space reader* (pp. 289–293). Routledge.
- [10] Foucault, M. (1975). *Discipline and punish* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Gallimard.
- [11] De Certeau, M. (2024). The practice of everyday life. *Contesti. Città, territori, progetti*, 2.
- [12] Harvey, D. (2020). The condition of postmodernity. In *The new social theory reader* (pp. 235–242). Routledge.
- [13] Hjarvard, S. (2013). *The mediatization of culture and society*. Routledge.
- [14] Bolter, J. D., & Grusin, R. A. (1996). Remediation. *Configurations*, 4(3), 311–358.
- [15] Manovich, L. (2002). *The language of new media*.
- [16] Mirzoeff, N. (1999). *An introduction to visual culture*. Routledge.
- [17] Van Dijck, J. (2013). *The culture of connectivity: A critical history of social media*. Oxford University Press.
- [18] Highfield, T., & Leaver, T. (2016). Instagrammatics and digital methods: Studying visual social media, from selfies and GIFs to memes and emoji. *Communication Research and Practice*, 2(1), 47–62.
- [19] Zappavigna, M. (2016). Social media photography: Construing subjectivity in Instagram images. *Visual Communication*, 15(3), 271–292.
- [20] Rose, G. (2022). *Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials*.