

**The Meme Led Me Here:
The Impact of Nollywood Memes on Global Interest
in Nigerian Films**

-AND-

**The Walls Have Mouths Too:
Exploring the Social Communication Function of
Graffiti in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside**

by

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Declaration of Committee

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Abstract

Essay 1: Memes are seen as digital elements that incite laughter, and the politics and cultural influence embedded is largely ignored. The effects of globalization are not absent in the production of memes, and a large number of memes used worldwide are created from Western cultural vehicles. Nigeria's film industry Nollywood, one of the largest in the world in terms of output, boasts of its dominance in Africa. However, it has not garnered the same audience globally as Hollywood and Bollywood have. The introduction and consequent virality of Nollywood memes in 2016 have put Nollywood in worldview. On YouTube, Nollywood films containing popular memes record millions of views. Using viral Nollywood memes as cases, I studied the impact of Nollywood memes on Nigerian films previously unknown outside Africa, and if they led to global interest in Nollywood. I presented a framework that emerged from this study that not only pointed to interest in the films but charted the path from memes to interest.

Essay 2: The ubiquity of graffiti in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside has been condemned as a blight on the neighborhood. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the hike in graffiti tagging signaled that the neighborhood, reputedly the least desirable in British Columbia due to abounding socio-economic and health issues, was deteriorating further. This narrative of course, did not address the actual substantive content of the graffiti, but instead took graffiti as evidence of further social decline. The relatively few studies on graffiti have tended to focus primarily on the legal prohibitions or the aesthetic dimensions of graffiti. This study instead is concerned with the social communication function of graffiti as a framework and compares the artform to social media to establish its social communication function. A thematic analysis of seven samples of graffiti from the Downtown Eastside reveals that graffiti was used to communicate local social issues such as illicit drug use, and COVID-19 awareness. Furthermore, in the Downtown Eastside, graffiti performed social communication functions similar to social media, and is irrefutably and forcefully a medium of social communication.

Keywords: nollywood; memes; digital media; graffiti; downtown eastside; social media communication; illicit drug use; covid-19

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Essay 1:

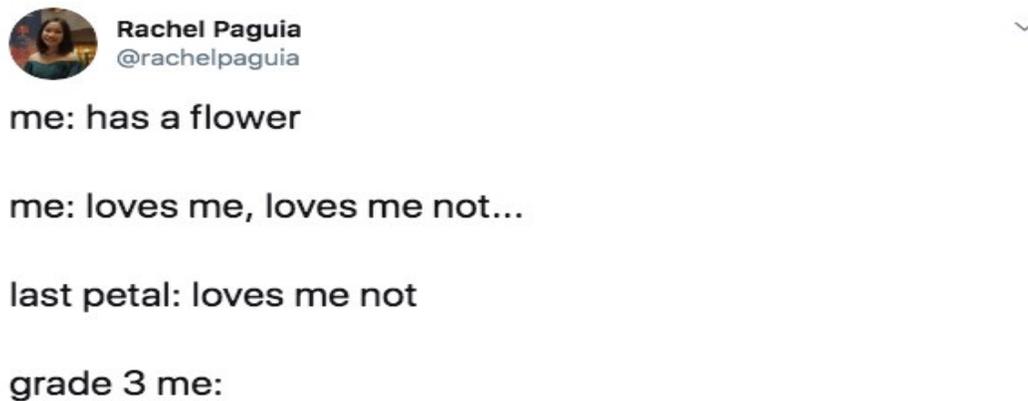
The Meme Led Me Here: The Impact of Nollywood Memes on Global Interest in Nigerian Films

Introduction

Memes. That's it. That's the tweet. An avid user of the microblogging and social networking site, Twitter will have recognised the insertion of a popular meme above. Although current popular discourse surrounding memes and meme culture focuses on the digital space, the term 'meme' was formed prior to the digital era. The term was coined by ethologist and evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins to mean pieces of cultural information that move from person to person and gradually become a shared phenomenon, taking on uniform meaning. (Dawkins, 2006, pp 192). Memes can take on any form as long as it can be imitated. Today, the word meme is more often than not used to describe internet memes which are shareable digital items generated from cultural vehicles and circulated and replicated on the internet. These cultural vehicles are the elements of culture that memes are taken from. They can be anything from popular catchphrases to films and can exist in the format of an image, video or GIF.

The concept of Internet memes began with the term proposed by a lawyer, Mike Godwin ("Internet meme," n.d.). He formed a glib statement called Godwin's law of Nazi Analogies that said, "As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one". He put this comment on any discussion or newsgroups where anything relating to the Nazi was mentioned and before long the idea was replicated over and over (Godwin, 1994). This is referred to by some as the first meme, however internet memes, while commonplace in online subcultures, did not gain popularity in mainstream social media until 2011 when more people began to take an interest in memes. Google trend searches show the peak of curiosity in internet memes was in February 2012 with the United States leading the search history ("Google Trends," n.d.). Subcultures however are often viewed negatively and Gelder explains that the common narratives around subcultures posit them as anti-normal and dissenting (2007, pp3). A subculture is a group built around a lifestyle that is not universally subscribed to. Internet subcultures are formed around a similar ideal and involve people who consider their lifestyle different enough to warrant its own space on the internet. Subculture sites like 4chan, Reddit and Tumblr, mostly avoided by the "normies" or dominant group, housed users whose created memes of inner jokes that would be misunderstood or frowned upon by the general public. These subculture sites in their early days were responsible for the constant flow of memes (Shifman, 2014).

Today memes are commonplace on mainstream social media sites like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube and are created and used by different subcultures. One of such subcultures is Black Twitter. This comprises of the users of Twitter who are mainly Black and are familiar with African American culture. In 2016, Brazilian woman Nicole posted a meme from a Nigerian film and it quickly gained virality on Twitter, especially on Black Twitter (Adikwu, 2019). Since then, the phenomenon of Nollywood memes has transcended the subculture to become firmly stamped in dominant internet culture.



11:03 PM · Mar 17, 2018 · Twitter for iPhone

Figure 1. The first Nollywood meme from the film *Intelligent Students*, 2008. It shows a child crying and is used to express childlike emotions.

Retrieved from [https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1542580-african-kid-crying-with-a-knife kid crying meme 1.1](https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1542580-african-kid-crying-with-a-knife-kid-crying-meme-1.1)

Nollywood is the name given to the Nigerian film industry by a New York Times journalist, Norimitsu Onishi in 2002. He decided that the blossoming film industry was to Nigeria what Hollywood was to the United States (Onishi, 2016). In this study, I explore

Nollywood and its influence within and without Africa. Although seen as a hegemon in Africa, Nollywood has not extended its influence on a global audience and lacks the international following that Hollywood and Bollywood have. Many have criticized the poor video and audio quality as the reason for its lack of fame among Western audiences. This study however seeks to find out if the presence of Nollywood memes has given Nollywood films some new eyes.

As this is an understudied research area, literature on Nollywood memes and the relatability of memes are quite elusive. The word meme will be used in this paper to refer to internet memes, that is digitally transmitted elements of culture. The focus of this paper will be on memes from Nollywood films and the cultural vehicles they are taken from on YouTube. This research will set a precedent by providing a framework that both academia and digital culture and communications can make use of. Nollywood films do not hold a position of awareness in the global north, but with the growing global use of Nollywood memes, this is changing. Many non-Africans from countries like India and Bali can name at least two Nollywood actors- usually the comic duo Aki and Pawpaw (Sarkar, 2019). In this study, I question whether these viral Nollywood memes have impacted global interest in Nigerian films. After analyzing the YouTube comments from five viral Nollywood memes, a major finding is that Nollywood memes contain relatable content and are used in contexts that increases its shareability which leads users to seek out the cultural vehicles they are created from that have piqued their interest.

Memes and the phenomenon of virality on the internet have become so commonplace that we fail to look into the effects they might have outside the internet. What is the power that virality holds over the original content of these memes? Do the conversations these memes spark end on twitter or do they transcend the online space? This project will inform internet culture studies by showing the correlation between memes and increased interest in the originating cultural vehicle. The aim of this project is to understand Nollywood memes and their impact on the Nigerian film industry to see how memes have driven the popularity of Nollywood globally. I will analyze five viral memes to see how the originating Nollywood films themselves have been impacted by the international attention. I will do this by analyzing the comments under the films on YouTube, the country of origin of these comments and the common themes of interest in Nollywood from the memes. The expected output of this project is the evidence of a

correlation between Nollywood memes and increased foreign viewership of the films as well as a show of interest in them.

This work has four chapters. In the next chapter, I thematically examine literature on the topic of Nollywood and memes presenting the history of both Nollywood and memes and the confluence of both today. In the third chapter, I outline my methodology, analyze the data gathered and answer my research question with a discussion of the result of my research, the CTMI framework. In the final chapter, I conclude the paper with by stating the parties who stand to benefit from this research as well as limitations and recommendations for future studies.

Literature Review

What are internet memes? Internet memes are often anonymously created, shareable and replicable digital elements used to convey and express meaning on the internet. They are commonly in form of visual/audiovisual content, catchphrases and snippets etc. Huntington (2017) explains that internet memes more often than not are comedic in nature and may also allude to pop culture. Kariko and Anasih (2019, p. 1) describe memes as “cultural aspects responsible for the flow of rumors, catchphrases, melodies and even fashion trends within any community”. They are crowd sourced and require little effort to create since many are taken from existing cultural vehicles. While on the surface, memes might appear as mere jokes, internet memes are one form of user-generated, digital media content that may have real world effects on those who view them (Huntington, 2017). According to Nissenbaum and Shifman (2015), they are distinctive pointers to culture especially digital culture and Henry Jenkins (2006) adds that these memes are products of participatory culture. Memes point to a concept of communal belonging on social media sites because creators, sharers and re-sharers must know the general meaning and idea contained in the meme and share it to show understanding and affirmation. Linguistically, there must be understanding to engage in a conversation using any language. This concept also applies to internet memes and social media users who do not understand the memes cannot use them and thus are excluded from the discourse. In this review of literature, I will discuss six key themes that inform this study.

Themes

Relatability of Memes

I have argued that memes carry within them an idea, regardless of whether it's a joke, a slang or political commentary. Viewers can either relate to the concept, that is the general idea the meme represents, or the context, that is the specific way it has been used in or captioned or both. A community of people who all relate to similar concepts and contexts of memes can belong to a particular subculture. A good example is Black Twitter, where ideas around blackness are shared. Sharing experiences such as parents who discipline kids, cookouts and dancing are common because members of the

subculture can relate to those experiences. When memes are created using these concept or specific contexts, the common knowledge allows for easy transfer of meaning. Amelia Tait (2017) explains that meme culture is essential to forming community bonds on the internet. This is due to like-minded individuals relating to the same memes. Sociologists Kariko and Anasih (2019) add that memes are given context by the creators, but it is its inherent relatability that makes it go viral. A major conclusion from a survey they carried out on college students in Jakarta was that meme users used self-reflective memes because they provided the most relatability. Victoria Storm (2019) affirms that internet culture is governed by the rule of relatability. Without relatability, ideas cannot be propagated and meaning cannot be passed across on the internet. There is no meme without a meaning, as the concept of memetics is based on the replication and transfer of meaning, in similar fashion to the transfer of genes, as propagated by Richard Dawkins. Before the transfer of meaning from the meme to the user can occur, the meaning of the meme must be fully understood. This is the concept of relatability; that the viewer comes in contact with the meme and based on personal experience, previous knowledge of the feeling evoked or a host of other factors, the idea inherent in the meme speaks to something in the viewer. For a meme to gain an audience, it must be relatable. It must carry a general idea or express an emotion that the audience is familiar with, even though they may have never related with the meme vehicle. Users can either relate to the content, the context or both.

Meme-Where is it from?

Imbalances in the production and distribution of knowledge on the internet have created a majorly one-way flow of information from the global north to the global south. Renee' Sylvain (2005) points out that globalization, instead of creating a level playing field has formed one-way hegemony, with local resistance opposite it. As world economies developed, goods, services and labour migrated from place to place and cultures moved with them. The effects of colonialism led to the global south relying heavily on importation despite large supply of raw materials. The global north became the main exporter and western culture moved at a greater rate into the global south in tangible form like media, food, dressing and intangible form like accents, religion and ideologies. This was theorized as globalization, the world becoming one, not with various cultures represented, but resembling the culture of the hegemon. (Munoz, 2015).

Globalization ensures that culture is transferred horizontally from society to society as opposed to vertically, from one generation to the next in a society (Nwegbu et al., 2011)

Cultural globalization used power as its weapon and took on a new meaning as globalized culture came to be seen as the Americanisation of the world and how 'civilized' the world could become (Kraidy, 2005). Kema Irogbe (2014) states that a globalized culture is homogenous in the favor of the hegemon. Internet and meme culture tell the same story. The globalization of culture translates to the internet where most of the social media platforms and knowledge base sites are products of the United States, affirming the power imbalances. Meme production resides majorly in the global north. The position for the first internet meme is a heavily contested one, but all the competitors were created in the United States. When the rest on the world caught wind of these social media sites, these memes and the subcultures that produced them were already present, forcing new users to assimilate to them. The pattern has always been the same: a meme portraying western culture in a western cultural vehicle would be introduced. It would be used by the rest of the world and eventually replicated but still keeping elements of the western culture. On a 2019 list of the 50 greatest memes of all time, all of them are from western cultural vehicles and contain American ideas (Gil, 2019., Mahan, 2019). We see that internet culture although with more flexible borders is not exempt from the effect of globalization of culture (Éigearthaigh and Berg, 2010).

According to one of its numerous definitions, globalization is the “developing process of complex interconnections between societies, cultures, institutions and individuals worldwide” (Limor Shifman, 2014, p. 152). Shifman goes on to describe memes as powerful yet, unseen agents of globalization (2014, p. 151). Worldwide travel and television programmes have arguably decreased many of the differences that existed in the past between cultures and make crossing borders an easier experience for the contemporary traveller who is bound to recognize some of the cultural rules and values encountered. However, in true globalization fashion, this often times is the experience of majorly the global south who are more likely to be aware of information from the global north. This is a result of the one-way flow of information, which is also present on social media and with memes.

Nollywood

The name Nollywood evokes different reactions in different groups of people. To some Nigerians, it's a feeling of pride in Nigeria's film industry, arguably one of the country's biggest exports after crude oil. In others, it's a dislike of the portmanteau of the name Nollywood, which comes from "Nigerian-Hollywood" and the postcolonial connotations it calls to mind. To Africans, it is childhood memories of films filled with witchcraft, family values and rich culture. To some in the global north, it is an untapped pool of talent and to others, it draws up a blank.

Film was introduced to the country in 1903 by the British colonialists and the industry was dominated by these foreign merchants. (Uchegbu, 1992 cited in Onyenankeya et al. 2017). Local film production was birthed out of the need to localize the stories and display cultures (Onyenankeya, 2013 cited in Onyenankeya et al. 2017). The film industry was birthed from several pre-existing theatre traditions among various ethnic groups of Nigeria. These traditions included the various dramatic presentations in traditional festivals and ritual ceremonies. Yoruba Travelling theatres that moved from rural and urban areas of the country also contributed to the early concept of Nollywood (Alabi, 2013). Theatres performances like Hubert Ogunde and Baba Sala's were filmed and produced into celluloid features for resale by local producers in the 1970's (Ajibade, 2013, p. 265). These were filmed to reach a wider audience than could physically be at the shows (Onyenankeya et al. 2017). The first "hit" out of the industry was Kenneth Nnebue's blockbuster, *Living in Bondage*, and the fame of this 1992 film led to the formation of the film industry with Nigerian movies being exported to other parts of Africa by 1998 (Onishi, 2002). The industry was christened Nollywood by Norimitsu Onishi in his New York Times article introducing the Western world to the new filmmaking capital (Onishi, 2016). Ajibade (2013) cites Ekwuazi who notes that in the late 80's, Nigerian video films were not expected to survive because people were used to celluloid films. However, Nollywood video films did more than survive and today the industry produces 50 movies a week on the average (Moudio, 2013).

Nigeria's biggest export to Africa

Onyenankeya et al. (2017) establishes that Nollywood films and stars are popular in most African countries and their study of South Africa supports this claim. They go on to say that the aesthetics and content may not appeal to the Global North, but Africa has definitely been interested. Matthias Krings and Onookome Okome (2013, p.1) describe Nollywood as “The most visible form of cultural machine on the African continent”. They go on to explain that in at least five African countries, Nollywood is the model of film production. Nollywood films are also dubbed in different languages suitable to other countries (Ajibade, 2013). A Ghanaian friend of mine informed me that she grew up on Nollywood films, going on to say that due to the influx of Nigerian films, the Ghanaian government had to place a ban on them to grow the Ghana film industry. Friends from Uganda, Burundi and Zambia echo the same comments. These friends can list more Nollywood actors than I, a born-and-bred Nigerian can. African film industries in other countries have begun to emerge like Ghallywood from Ghana, Bongowood from Tanzania, Collywood in Cameroon, and Riverwood in Kenya, to name a few. Nollywood is a big deal in many parts of Africa. In Onyenankeya et al. (2017), one of the authors describe an experience at a South African friend's house where he went visiting and was not acknowledged by anyone for an hour and thirty minutes-neither the friend, nor the parents or siblings-because they were engrossed in a Nollywood film. Haynes (2007) as cited in Onyenankeya et al. (2017) says that Nollywood films have also gained a large community of viewers with Africans in diaspora. A 2015 article by The World Weekly affirms that “it is in Africa that Nollywood has had the greatest impact” and that to the African audience, the rise of a familiar film industry in opposition to the constant influx of Western films is important (“Nollywood, Nigeria's answer to Hollywood”, 2015).

Not So Much the World

However, the name Nollywood does not hold its own among majority of international audiences unlike Hollywood and Bollywood. This is not to say that Nollywood movies are not available in the global north or are not purchased by non-Africans. Ajibade (2013) explains that Nigerian producers and merchants believe that foreigners purchasing the films points to interest and viewership of Nigerian films, but he argues otherwise. He distinguishes between a Western audience and audience in the West, and he comments that video producers and merchants do not differentiate the

audience. Nollywood films can be purchased by foreigners for research purposes as the amount of research interest in the industry increases. However, an informal study showed that in the two years that Nollywood titles were available in the library at the Institute for Social Anthropology at the University of Basel, Switzerland, library records did not show that non-Africans were borrowing them. (Ajibade, 2013). He concludes that Nollywood films are viewed in academic circles in the global north, but it has not caught on with the rest of the population. He chalks this up to differences in telling stories, with the West using captivating imagery that require full attention and Nollywood relying on descriptive dialogue that can be retold over and over. One of the top Nollywood producers, Kunle Afolayan stated that the essential players in the global film industry knew very little about Nollywood and what it stood for (“Nollywood, Nigeria’s answer to Hollywood”, 2015). He insinuated that the art was not on par with what the global world had become used to looking at Hollywood. The conversation around what is up to par with international standards and what does not meet the standard is a necessary conversation to this research project. This is because the Nollywood memes that have achieved virality have mostly been from “Old Nollywood”. Moradewun Adejunmobi (2015) describes this old/new Nollywood phenomenon as waves, where the new wave of filmmaking distinguishes itself from the old.

The Old vs New Nollywood argument is one that has roped in producers, viewers, and the global film industry. Old Nollywood is characterized with everything bad about Nollywood films: paltry budgets, rapid production, laughable video effects, and straight-to-video marketing to make as much money as possible before notorious film pirates can reproduce them. The stars of these movies are household names today. Basically, they are old school Nigerian movies. The narratives were also very familiar: Traditional religions, Family Rivalry, Royalty, Romance (usually with the male love interest having arrived from outside Nigeria with a pinched “American” accent). New Nollywood encompasses directors making higher quality films that are readily available on international platforms like Netflix (Nollywood, Nigeria’s answer to Hollywood, 2015). Haynes (2014, cited in Adejunmobi, 2015) states that new Nollywood took off after 2010. It is known for its younger cast and directors, increased special effects, international locations, cinema premieres and an overall sense of proving that Nollywood movies can share the stage with Hollywood. But, as if in negation to the “globalized” feel of New Nollywood, the viral memes that resonate with global audiences are old Nollywood

memes. All the four films studied in this project are classified under Old Nollywood; marked with low quality productions that on no level compete with Hollywood movies from the same time.



Figure 2. A meme from a Nollywood film **Back from South (2013)**.

Retrieved from

https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fsoundcloud.com%2Fdjelectrobeats%2Fdj-electro-beats-gerara-here-official-remix&psig=AOvVaw3vh5mjE_S9jeE12Q5stkPP&ust=1603902558514000&source=images&cd=vfe&ved=0CAIQjRxqFwoTCLjw2eWY1ewCFQAAAAAdAAAAABAD

Old Nollywood has left the global north largely unaware, underwhelmed and uninterested. One can easily chalk it up to shoddy productions, little technical know-how or vastly different cultures. Nonetheless, this study shows that in recent times, global interest in Nollywood has increased, despite the inherent factors working against it. Even though the memes contain elements that keep Nollywood “local”, somehow the stories and the meanings in them have been able to transcend continental borders and resonate with non-Africans. It is important to note that although, these memes lead to instant interest in the vehicles they are taken out of, which happen to be old Nollywood, they ultimately lead to interest in Nollywood as whole, whether old or new.

Common Themes and Narratives and the Relatability of These Narratives

Babson Ajibade (2013) explains that a reason for the widespread fame and success of Nollywood can be ascribed to the narratives employed that resonate strongly

with Nigerians. I go a step further to say that these narratives resonate with the African audience just as strongly. Old Nollywood films were marked with narratives around spirituality, morality and the evils of immorality, migration, debauchery, success stories and a lot of comedy. New Nollywood according to Adejunmobi (2015) is set in a neoliberal Africa. It is cosmopolitan, modern, and globalized; one might even call it Americanized. This is however largely a generalization as there are New Nollywood movies that borrow narratives from old Nollywood like Ramsey Noah's remake of the classic, *Living in Bondage* and Genevieve Nnaji's *Lionheart*.

Old Nollywood gained a cult-like following-myself included-because its stories were either so close to home that it felt like one was a character in the film, or so hilarious that it was hard to stop watching. Old Nollywood existed at a time when Nigeria was going through economic and political hardship and laughter was much needed. Emily Witt (2017) says that Nollywood was born out of an economic recession and the inability to import foreign movies led Nigerians to tell their own stories. Nigeria is also a very religious society and as religion is tied to the occultic, society could relate to these narratives. The narratives of the four films sampled include *Back from South*, which follows the main character's return from South Africa; *Pretty Liars* that tells the story of women and morality; *Village Boys*, a comedy about two young men who cause a nuisance in their small village and go to the metropolitan city in search for wealth and *Intelligent student*, which follows the lives of two boys who face poverty daily. Africans who have grown up on the continent and witnessed the political, socio-economic, and spiritual influences in real life will relate to the films. However, this study seeks to find out if non-Africans get it as well. Do they relate to the scenes taken out of these films? Do they relate to Old Nollywood? What is the relatability of Nollywood movies?

Analysis of Content

Situations where Nollywood films have broken out of Africa

There have been some cases where Nollywood films have broken out of Africa and received global recognition. Genevieve Nnaji's *Lionheart* was the first Nigerian movie to be purchased by Netflix, making it the first Nigerian Netflix original. *Lionheart* however retains its old Nollywood flavor, even casting veteran actors. It was nominated and then disqualified from the Oscars for being shot in Nigeria's official language which

is English and for not being indigenous enough (Buckley, 2019). The Wedding Party, a Kemi Adetiba film was the highest grossing Nigerian film until its sequel took the spot. It premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) and was quickly snapped up by Netflix. However, these have not gained wide international audiences, so it is safe to say that Nigerian films on global platforms are still not being viewed by a sizable population of the West.

Mememes, virality and offline interest/activity

Some internet memes have such a high degree of relatability and command such degrees of interest that they can transition from the online space into our physical world. This is further enhanced by the virality of the memes. Memes go viral when they garner increasing amounts of attention, views, comments, and shares. A viral meme is a meme that has spread very widely on and off social media, much like a viral disease. These memes manage to break through subcultures and geographic boundaries on the internet and become widely used by a large population. A great example is the Don't Leave Me Challenge, which was started by Nigerian Comedian, Josh2Funny in June 2020 (Salaudeen, 2020). This meme gained attention for its clever use of word puns and a comic running scene at the end. The meme grew beyond the subculture of Nigerian Twitter and became a Twitter and TikTok sensation, with replicators coming from all parts of the world and even being covered by major news outlets like CNN and BuzzFeed. This was a mainstream viral meme, but some memes gain virality only in specific subcultures. The Birdbox meme is one of them.

Mom: you didn't see the dishes in the sink?

Me:



Figure 3. A scene from the film Birdbox that is premised on lack of sight was used by the creator to give meaning to the context.

Retrieved from <https://cheezburger.com/7451653/23-hilarious-bird-box-memes-that-are-probably-better-than-the-movie-bird-box-meme>

In 2018, the Netflix original film Birdbox was released and images and clips from the film of the characters blindfolded and navigating life began to circulate on social media. It became a meme as more viewers gave it context. As it was gaining popularity on twitter, it led to more people streaming it on Netflix. This was a good instance of memes going offline and into the user's daily life. Soon, users began to upload videos of themselves blindfolded as they went about their daily lives. The internet meme quickly evolved into a real-world occurrence. It went viral online but offline interest was majorly from the global north. So, we see that viral memes have the power to evolve into affecting our daily lives, so this is not novel. However, what is novel, and a focus of this study is how Nollywood memes, which are taken from cultural vehicles that are unappealing outside Africa go viral within and outside the subculture of Nigerian Twitter and affect users' daily lives by leading them to watch the films.

Summary

I have discussed memes and their inherent capability to transfer meaning. I looked at how the Nigerian film industry unlike Hollywood and Bollywood has not garnered global interest due to its style of filming and the disconnect with global standards. I have also seen that some memes have the power to affect behavior offline. However, the reality on social media today is that memes from Nollywood films have become a viral phenomenon, used by people from around the world. This study seeks to find out if these memes are doing what Nollywood could not do on its own. In this situation of a relatively obscure movie industry's memes gaining popularity, and not from the global north, are these memes doing what the industry hasn't been able to do on its own, create global interest in Nigerian films outside Africa?

Methodology and Analysis

Methodology

This research project took the format of an observed study. I looked at Nollywood memes and its effect on Nollywood films. To answer my research question, I had the choice of either questioning social media users through surveys and interviews or observing their behavior. I chose to go with the latter. This study focuses on 5 Nollywood memes that went viral and transcended their subcultures on social media between the years 2016-2020 and the originating films/clips posted on YouTube. I chose to analyze the memes and the films on YouTube for some reasons. Firstly, YouTube is a free video streaming platform available globally, whether legally or by VPN. It is therefore accessible to most of the world's population. Secondly, the internet culture of commenting is one that greatly benefits this study. Therefore, a platform where users could watch videos and leave comments like YouTube fits perfectly into this study. Leaving comments or replies on social media is a main feature of participatory culture. Commenting on social media is favored because the users can hold on to anonymity and are more likely to say exactly what they feel.

I made use of both quantitative and qualitative research methods in analyzing the data. I gathered a list of Nollywood memes popular on Twitter and Vine and found the full films and clips containing the memes on YouTube. After taking into consideration the uploaders that allowed viewers the option to comment on YouTube and excluding those that didn't, I chose the films with the highest number of views and comments. I settled on five memes from four films and downloaded the comments into excel sheets with Exportgram. With Exportgram, I could download up to 5000 comments per video and only one video had more than 5000 comments. For this video, I could only gather 5000 out of the 37,000 comments. In total I collected 10877 comments from 9 videos consisting of full films and clips. I began a manual data analysis process of organizing the data. Using my research objective and question as guides, I created six codes with which I sorted the data. I analyzed the data manually to determine interest evidenced by:

- Viewers coming to see the memes having seen or heard about them elsewhere. These viewers seek out the film either to look at the bigger picture to grasp the meaning of the meme or they are viewers who already

understand the meme and are led to the film by their interest. Either way the meme led them there.

- Viewers showing interest in understanding the films and the culture by requesting subtitles, translations, and clarification of cultural elements.
- Viewers requesting the names of the films to seek them out (under shortened clips).
- Viewers engaging with the films in the comments by creating new contexts for the memes. They show understanding and relatability of the material.
- Viewers showing affection for the films, actors, Nollywood, and the country.
- Non-English comments.

Table 1. Data Set

MEME	FILM, DIRECTOR, YEAR
Why are you running?	Pretty Liars 1-Tchidi Chikere, 2010
Mama tell him o	Intelligent Students-Ugo Ugbor, 2008
Gerrarahere	Back from South-Evans Orji, 2013
Kid with calculator	Village boys-Chika Onu, 2005
Kids drinking beer	Village boys-Chika Onu, 2005

Analysis

I will be analyzing the films individually as well as wholly, interchanging as needed. I will be discussing the findings according to the codes I employed in gathering the data.

Viewers coming to Nollywood films to see the memes having seen or heard about them elsewhere.

The first code used to gather data was comments from viewers who came to the YouTube films for the memes. Included in this are viewers who came to see the memes having seen or heard about them elsewhere. This could be from any social media platform or messaging sites and a few viewers mention where they first encountered the memes. Some viewers seek out the films either to see the bigger picture and grasp the

meaning of the meme while other viewers who already understand the meme are led to the video by their interest. Having interacted with the memes and established relatability, they seek out the cultural vehicles the memes are taken out from due to interest in them. These viewers will also create time stamps, that is point out the exact time in the film where the meme occurs to guide others who come in search of them. Viewers who seek out the memes will usually have the word meme in their comments to show that they know the meme is here and they relate to it

Came here cause of #TwitterMomentsoftheDecade- Esperanza Katola;
(Back from South; YouTube)

Vines brought me here 🤔🤔 2019- sio sidon hii ni sidonyo (Back from
South; YouTube)

1:28:30 you're looking for this- Arpit Patel (Intelligent Students,
YouTube)

Who came here after seeing their memes in India ININININININININININ,
??please like. -Suraj Bedia (Village Boys)

For the film Intelligent Students, out of 226 comments, 61 were from viewers stating that they came for the meme and viewers creating timestamps for others to find the memes. Intelligent students had 99 related comments out of 3308. Pretty Liars had 1123 comments out of 5000. Village boys had 101 comments out of 1129 and 104 related comments on the shortened clip. Based on these comments, we can see that viewers sought out the films on YouTube to see the meme, either with prior understanding or to gain clarity.

Viewers showing interest in understanding the films and the culture by requesting subtitles, translations and clarification of cultural elements.

Viewers in the comment section under the films requested translations and subtitles for the films. However, it is important to note that two out of the five memes are spoken in English language, and both are very short and clear sentences:

"Why are you running? Why are you running?" (Pretty Liars, 2010)

"Mama tell him! If he doesn't... O my god" (Intelligent Students, 2008)

In the comments from these two films, 61 viewers requested subtitles. Two memes from the film Village boys (2005) are a display of different actions, the first of two

young men eating and drinking, with one assisting the other pour out his drink. The second meme is a young man adding up numbers with a calculator. These do not need translations or subtitles to explain the scenes. However, 165 comments are from viewers requesting subtitles. Although some requests for subtitles came from viewers whose first language was not English as their comments were in their first languages, other requests came from those who spoke English.

Please give subtitles in English- VJ ANAND B (Village Boys)

Give an Indonesian translation greetings from Indonesia 🙏- Andi LontonG (Village Boys)

ESPAÑOL POR FAVOR ESPAÑOL POR FAVOR ESPAÑOL POR FAVOR ☐
(Translation: Spanish Please) Mauricio Covarrubias (Intelligent Students)

Furthermore, since four of the memes contained either easy-to-understand speech for English speakers or no dialogue at all, I draw a connection between the request for subtitles and interest in the films themselves. Viewers request for subtitles because large portions of the films contain indigenous Nigerian languages and are not subtitled on YouTube. This is a marker of interest in the films beyond the memes. It is important to note that all five memes are taken from old Nollywood movies, and international viewership was not on the mind of the producers. Majority of the non-English requests for subtitles came from Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish and Hindi speakers.

Viewers requesting the names of the films to seek them out (under shortened clips).

The data set for this study included the full-length films from which the memes were cut and shortened clips that contained the scenes preceding and succeeding the memes. This means that viewers would gain full understanding of the meme scene simply by watching them. For this reason, there was need to note if viewers after seeing the memes and the context surrounding it still showed interest in the films. Data showed that the meme clip from the movie Back from South had 94 comments from viewers asking for the title of the film. Pretty Liars had 21 of such comments, and the two meme clips from the film Village boys had a total of 48 requests for the movie title.

Lmao what movie is this from?- Channel of Kool (Back from South)

What movie is this from I need to see it- Ganzel Variety (Back from South)

By asking for the title of the films, viewers display interest in the films spurred by the memes. One can clearly attribute the interest in the films to the memes they have watched.

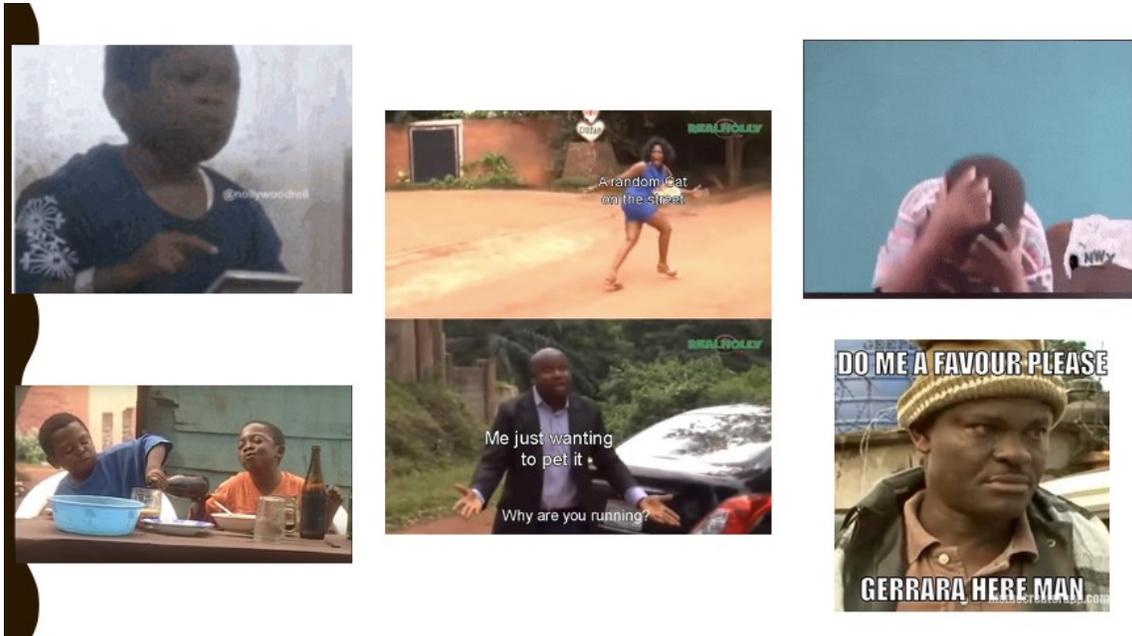


Figure 4. A snapshot of the five memes analyzed in this study. They are mostly used in GIF format.

Viewers engaging with the films in the comments by creating new contexts for the memes.

The contextualization of memes is of utmost importance to meme culture. It is how users display their understanding of the meme being used. A context is a situation that the viewer creates to justify the meaning inherent in the meme. It is essential to understand the meme to relate to the context it is used in. The relatability of memes plays an important role in contextualization as the user must relate to the meaning contained in the meme to use it in appropriate context. Even with understanding of the meme, without relatability, it is only information to the user, and it cannot be contextualized. The relatability lies in the meaning embedded in the meme and its relationship with the personal experiences or sum of knowledge the user has acquired.

0:50 Me: Running Away from The Spider on My Wall 0:55 The Spider:
Why Are You Running-ツツKing (Pretty Liars)

A relatable meme contains elements that the viewer not only knows about but connects to. This means that users cannot relate to every meme. By way of an example, as I do not cycle, I cannot relate to memes about cycling. This does not mean that I do not grasp the information that they pass, but that my experiences and lifestyle do not equip me to use such memes because I have no connection to them.

From the data analysis, I found that under the film Pretty liars, of 5000 comments analyzed, 459 comments were from viewers giving context to the memes or creating scenarios where the portrayed emotion is needed, that is creating new memes in the comments. This means that although Nollywood and especially old Nollywood has been decried as being polarizing to Western audiences, there is relatability to these memes. The audience understands the meme and relates to the point of giving it new context in which that meme would apply. In the meme from the film Pretty Liars, we see a woman running from a man she is indebted to, screaming and looking back at him. The camera cuts to show the man stepping out of a car, shouting at her saying “Why are you running? Why are you running?” The meme has gained over 4 million views on social media platforms and the clip chosen had over 37,000 comments. The other films had a total of 63 comments giving new contexts to them memes.

Further in this analysis, I will introduce a framework that emerged from this study which shows how the relatability of memes leads to interest. The creation of contexts around memes is essential to the Context-Transfer-Meaning-Interest (CTMI) framework.

Viewers showing affection for the films, actors, Nollywood and Nigeria.

Literature reviewed in the previous chapter has shown that the Nollywood style of filming and the films themselves are not desirable to the non-African audience, dare I say even some African audience. The audio-visual quality, the settings and the language might be deterrents. However, the stories resound. In my data analysis, I gathered comments that relayed affinity for the film, actors, the industry, and the country at large. This showed that Nollywood movies themselves could lead to interest in the Nigerian culture as seen in African countries. A total of 559 comments from all five memes analyzed professed affection for the films, the actors, and the industry.

I like this two boy. From India💖- Silpa Kaayum Doley(Village Boys)

Nigeria places looks amazing nature friendly like to visit🏡-Cricket Bat (Village Boys)

I love Nigerians 😊👍-Backyard Farming (Back from South)

I love African cinema- JollyGrapefruit (Pretty Liars)

I swear without Nigeria we would barely have any memes- Belize Spearfishing (Back from South)

Viewers gain interest in the films on YouTube from the memes they come across and, in some cases, the viewers develop affinity for the films and characters. To a viewer who has had no prior contact with the Nigerian film industry, we can see how the relatability of Nollywood memes leads to interest in the films and beyond. In my analysis, I came across hundreds of comments professing the renowned fame of two Nollywood actors Osita Ihome and Chinedu Ikedieze also known as Aki and Pawpaw in India, Bali, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Brazil. Viewers came across them in the memes and went in search of more content from them. They star in the movies Intelligent Students and Village Boys.

Non-English comments:

In my data collection process, I gathered 631 non-English comments. Languages like Spanish, Arabic, Portuguese, French, Finnish, and Korean were among the many that were represented in my data set. Relying on Google Translate for accurate English translations, I sorted the comments into the codes above. However, I also decided to code them separately to point out that these non-English speakers are most likely non-African. These comments were usually from viewers asking for subtitles for the films or stating the popularity of the actors in their home countries. In the Nollywood films and memes chosen, the language used in 4 out of 5 memes is English but with variations of the Nigerian accent. To Nigerians, this is very easily understood. To foreign listeners with a keen ear, the accent is somewhat understandable. However, the language of the memes and the entirety of the films to non-English speakers sounds like a different language. Viewers in the comments on YouTube requested subtitles and translations. This is a pointer to the degree of interest in the films, enough to desire understanding of it.

To further show that this interest extends beyond the memes to the films, memes from the films Village Boys and Intelligent Students were both in non-accented English. In the former, the character punches digits into a calculator while repeating the amount to himself. At the end, he screams excitedly “I’m Rich!”. In the latter, the character is seen crying and picks up a machete and declares “Mama tell him. If he doesn’t bring... O my god”. However, in the respective comments sections, the former had 40 comments requesting subtitles and the latter had 44. In the comment sections of a different meme of the film Village boys, 125 viewers requested subtitles, however as noted previously, this was in reference to the rest of the film and not the meme.

The simple relatability of Nollywood stories makes the memes very effective in gaining a large following and neither English language nor indigenous Nigerian languages deter viewers from understanding the emotions portrayed in the memes. Perhaps it is because Nigerians are very reactive and act with exaggerated movements.

CTMI Framework

While analyzing the data to determine the impact that Nollywood memes have on the global interest in Nigerian films, it was revealed that Nollywood memes contain relatable content that spark the interest of social media users and lead them in search of the cultural vehicle the meme is taken from. This can be for several reasons. One of such is the desire to fully understand the meme and make better use of it on social media while engaging in meme culture. Another reason is the desire to simply engage further with the meme and the cultural vehicle it is taken from.

In trying to understand the correlation between memes and interest, no framework or theories were found to support or inform the process. However, a framework does emerge from my study and that is the Context-Transfer-Meaning-Interest (CTMI) framework. The data analysis revealed a four-step process of how memes move from being uploaded on the internet to creating interest in the cultural vehicle they are extracted from. This framework serves as the result of my study. It answers the research question of if Nollywood memes lead to interest in the films and it explains how this happens.

Context

As earlier discussed, the context of a meme is the situation in which it functions. Memes in themselves carry meaning, but this meaning is fully realized when the meme is applied in a befitting context. Memes can be used on their own, but in those instances they only function as elements of digital media (if audio-visual) or mere statements (if text or phrase). However, when memes are given context by users, they become an element of language, spoken, and understood by the subculture the meme arises from. On social media platforms, users give context to a meme by providing scenarios or situations where the meaning inherent in the meme is most applicable. The meme gives rise to the context and in turn, the context further displays the meaning contained in the meme. When a meme is posted on social media, it is captioned or given context by a user.

Transfer

The transfer of memes is the movement of memes within a context by social media users. Transfer describes every action that moves the meme from the creator to other social media users. This encapsulates actions like retweeting, liking, and sharing, which allows the sharer's followers and friends to see the meme that has been engaged with. The transfer of memes is what allows for the virality of memes, as the more a meme is shared, more people are exposed to it and if they relate to it, they also share it. Rapid transfer of memes and increased interest in it leads to virality. As all the memes analyzed in this study are viral memes, we can conclude that they were transferred extensively. Social media users transfer content to allow others see what they think is worth seeing.

When a captioned meme is posted by the creator, followers and friends transfer the meme if the meme and context are relatable. The more social media timelines it is shared to, the higher the chance of being seen and transferred to others.

Meaning

Every meme has inherent meaning, and without meaning, memes cannot be useful. Just like words in any language, every meme must pass across a message.

When a meme is viewed, the meaning is received by the viewer if there are no hindering factors like language and personal experiences to name a few.

As the memes are transferred on social media, users who relate to them and understand the meaning gain interest in the source of the meme for various reasons. They either want to see more of the meme or want to see the cultural vehicle itself. They trace the meme to the cultural vehicle on YouTube and use the comment section to engage with the meme and express its appeal for them which could be the actors, the culture, the humour, or an encounter with the meme itself. Users who do not understand the meaning behind the meme also have some interest in the source, but for a different reason. They also go in search for the full videos on YouTube to further understand the meme so as not to be excluded from engaging in the language of the internet. Their interest is piqued, and they go in search of meaning. Either ways, meaning or the lack thereof is an important process in developing interest in the cultural vehicle memes are taken from.

Interest

Interest can be expressed in so many ways but at the depth of it is a desire and intention to engage. In search for the meaning of memes, users exhibit a desire and willingness to engage with the memes and the cultural vehicle they are taken from. When the meaning behind the memes is gained, users who relate to them display a desire to see more of the memes especially when they are extremely pleased with them.

I started watching the movies by memes-Rahul Gowda (Village boys, YouTube)

Summary

In this chapter, I have presented the data gathered and the result of the study. Using 6 codes, I analysed the comments gathered and from this analysis extracted the framework that is the result of the study. The CTMI framework affirms that Nollywood memes lead to interest in Nigerian films and lays out this process. Using the comments as evidence, I have shown the validity of this study.

Conclusion

This research project has explored Nollywood as an Afrocentric film industry with a slowly increasing presence among global social media audiences. I looked at memes and the impact they have on viewer behavior. As a case study, I presented memes created from Nollywood films and how they led to interest in the films they were taken from among non-Nigerian viewers.

Using the CTMI framework to study the life of a meme, it was revealed that some viewers came in search of the films to further understand the context of the meme they had come across on social media while some came after seeing the memes on social media to engage with them further by viewing the films. Both scenarios show interest in Nollywood films brought on by the meme and outline the process of the CTMI framework from contextualization to interest. This study concludes that Nollywood memes lead to interest in Nigerian films among audiences who would usually not go in search of a Nigerian film without having been led by a meme. It also provides a framework that shows how internet memes lead to interest in their originating cultural vehicle.

The major discovery of this research is the CTMI framework which explains that context around the meme makes it relatable which in turn leads to virality of the meme. The relatability of the context of the meme impacts the viewers interest in the meme and the cultural vehicle it is taken from. This chain reaction ends with interest in the originating cultural vehicle. This framework explains that both high and low levels of relatability lead to interest in the cultural vehicles from different perspectives. High levels of relatability lead to interest in the cultural vehicle fueled by the need to see more of the meme and to affirm understanding of the meme. Low levels of relatability of a viral meme leads to interest fueled by the fear of social exclusion and curiosity.

This framework is of use to and can be applied by different groups of people. For one, Nollywood producers and marketers. According to Ajibade (2013, pp 267), Nollywood producers believe that Western audiences show a demand for their films. However, he goes on to say that these producers have not been able to distinguish between the Western audience and an audience in the West. This explains that the audience in the West is mostly the African diaspora, with the exception of foreign academic viewers. Nollywood films are usually not top of mind for people who have no

business with Nollywood or Nigeria. However, this research has shown that Nollywood memes are changing this. Therefore, Nollywood producers and marketers can carry out meme-focused digital campaigns that showcase relatable memes in relatable contexts to specific audiences with the goal of driving interest in their films. Of course, it goes without saying that these memes should be as organic as possible, that is without the obvious feel of a promotional material. This is a highly recommended path as the CTMI framework maps out the result of this course of action.

Secondly, Digital Communications as an industry stands to benefit from the results of this research. This framework can be applied to cultural vehicles outside Nollywood and film which makes it an essential tool for digital communications professionals. Since memes have been shown to create interest in originating vehicles, organically derived memes can be used as a link to the product or service being advertised. Taking into consideration the demographics, memes can be contextualized and deployed on relevant social networks to resonate with the target audience and lead to virality and interest.

This framework also benefits the academic community by way of information. While carrying out this research, I did not come across any framework or theory that spoke to the process of how memes led to interest and I am certain that this will come in handy to support research on internet culture, memetics, digital media and Nollywood. The production of this work is a valuable addition to digital media studies. This framework equips communications professionals with a tool to impact human behavior. However, individuals can also use the framework to interrogate their engagements with memes and the products and services they point to. Knowledge of the CTMI framework will help individuals be aware of how the memes they engage with impact their behavior and who benefits from this engagement.

Limitations and Recommendations

As with all research, the following issues are limitations to this study. Firstly, the data gathered could be described as secondary as it was not collected directly from the viewers. For this reason, further questions for clarifications to truly map out their behavior was not asked of the viewers. Secondly, the study presents no theories or

frameworks in critique of its position which might come across as biased. However, this is because of a lack of theories and material in general on the impact of memes.

For further studies on the use and impact of memes, future research design should focus on surveys and interviews to collect the data first-hand from respondents to understand viewer behavior. Open ended questions will help researchers chart out the exact behavior of the viewers of the films on YouTube and see if that has led to long lasting change in behavior. Also, the phenomenon of transfer and virality of digital elements, its causes and its impact on social media should be further studied as the concept was introduced in relation to the CTMI framework but not fully delved into.

Finally, this framework will be subject to further testing and critique to solidify its place as digital communications theory.

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Essay 2:

The Walls Have Mouths Too: Exploring the Social Communication Function of Graffiti in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

Introduction

While “digital communication” is unquestionably the major focus and concern of current and emerging commentary and analysis of contemporary media, this study is concerned with a particularly ancient medium—writing (or drawing) on the wall quite literally—in modern urban expressive culture. It is argued in this essay that graffiti has been and continues to be a powerful graphic medium, one that offers critical insight into socio-political currencies and controversies, and that merits examination and analysis as a non-digital medium which exhibits social media functions.

The definition of what can be accurately categorised as graffiti is a contested one (Ross, 2016). Terms like street art, public art, and murals have been attached to the art form, and the differences in the images conjured when these terms are used point to the power relations that exist in the art space and through whose lens graffiti is viewed, including activists, artists, scholars, and critics. Although used interchangeably to mean public art, the use of these terms on the streets differs contextually. Street art curator, Lois Stavsky explains that street art was born out of graffiti and is posed as a gentrified version of the authentic art form (Lu, n.d.). Graffiti is done at the discretion of the artist while street art is most likely licensed and tagged as illustrations or murals (Jonas et al., 2015). However, the terms overlap and there is no single authoritative definition for either graffiti or street art. For this research, the term graffiti will be used to describe licenced or unlicensed public art created by authentic graffiti artists. Authentic artists are described as taggers whose work has been considered unauthorized in the past.

Modern graffiti has been viewed with multiple lenses dependent on a host of socio-environmental factors. Ancient graffiti was not underscored by negativity or rebellious ideology and Baird and Taylor (2010) explain that artists often spoke to one another through graffiti. Very often, it also appeared in the context of satire or as artists marking their presence in the location because they found the surfaces convenient for writing.

Modern graffiti is described as urban graffiti since it is mainly situated within urban dwellings and addresses issues relating to its immediate surroundings. Speaking on modern graffiti, Avramidis and Drakopoulou (2015) explain that to some audiences, graffiti is used to reclaim public space, and because this is highlighted by its varying

undertones including political ones, modern graffiti is often seen as pushing back against authority. Macias (2014) suggests that an aesthetic form like graffiti is an expressive culture, because it is used to reclaim public space. Expressive culture embodies and presents culture within the social production of aesthetic elements such as graffiti (Burstein, 2014). The view of graffiti as an urban expressive culture holds the idea that graffiti is an expressive and public way to respond to the immediate society (Cathcart-Keays, 2015).

Graffiti can also be viewed purely as vandalism (Gomes et al., 2017; Mac Donald, 2014; Zsako & Janssen, 2011) and followers of this school of thought reject the idea that it can be art. The broken window theory credited to James Wilson and George Kelling suggests that graffiti is a signifier of disorder and decay in a society and if allowed to remain, marks that neighborhood as one that is uncared for, which can lead to more serious social issues (Vedantam et al., 2016). City leadership in neighborhoods with prevalent graffiti believe that the presence of graffiti has a causal link to increase in the occurrence of violent crimes (Shobe, 2019). Viewing graffiti from this lens, one can infer that the presence or absence of graffiti can be seen an indicator of which parts of society are allowed to sink into disorder and which parts are carefully curated to protect and present order and authority.

Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

No conversation on graffiti in Canada can begin without the mention of the Vancouver Downtown Eastside. The many complex and daunting social issues in the Downtown Eastside and the presence of graffiti in the area make it an easy target for groups that describe the graffiti as a sign of social decline and some have argued that with the multitude of social problems in the area, the overwhelming presence of graffiti is not at all surprising (Mackie, 2021). The "Downtown Eastside" is a descriptor for the seven districts around East Hastings Street, and the area is known as one of Canada's most impoverished neighborhoods and ground zero of its opioid crisis. This is an area that has long been challenged by intractable social issues such as homelessness, substance abuse, rampant crime, unemployment, racism, violence, poverty, and general insecurity (Newnham, 2005., Bilefsky, 2021). The Vancouver Police department has described the neighborhood as one of the most difficult areas to police in Canada

(Kurucz, 2019). The neighborhood is occupied by a range of groups, including small businesses, illegitimate setups, volunteers, and residents (Szöke, 2015).

Globally, March 2020 marked the beginning of a departure from normalcy as the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the regular functioning of industries, individuals, and institutions. The outbreak of the pandemic uncovered global and local social dysfunction. Complex and pervasive social issues became foregrounded including, unemployment, job insecurity, homelessness and substandard living conditions, inaccessibility or absence of adequate healthcare facilities, erosion of basic human rights and racial and gender inequality. The pandemic also highlighted the disproportion and disparity present in the systems that societies had come to rely on. The pressure on the labour industry, criminal justice, healthcare, education, technology, and finance industries revealed that the systems in place were unfavourable to most of the world's population, especially the poorest, the disenfranchised, the most vulnerable, and beneficial only to a select few. These issues overwhelmed already marginalized communities like the Downtown Eastside to a greater degree. In an environment where the living conditions were clearly detrimental to good health, strict safety measures brought on by the pandemic were harder to apply. With a population that is significantly low income or unemployed (Linden et al., 2012), and as this in turn impacts homelessness, social distancing measures could not be effectively adhered to. Among drug users, access to safe supply of drugs trumped conversations around the virus (Ditmas, 2020).

In this community that has limited access to traditional forms of media (Vancouver Foundation, 2020) and whose residents are scarcely represented in the creation and transmission of news content, the increased presence of graffiti-style commentary on the local impact of the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that conversations around these issues are going on, and this suggests that graffiti be viewed through a different or more expansive lens. It can be argued that in the Downtown Eastside, graffiti is an authentic medium of social communication employed by individuals to communicate the reality and impact of relevant social issues as well as opinions around it, although it is not restricted to this. The aim of this research is to explore the use of graffiti in the Downtown Eastside as a medium of social communication in response to local issues arising during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social commentary depicted in a sample of graffiti is identified and analyzed to present the context, relevance, and currency of the issues in the Vancouver Downtown Eastside. Ultimately, this analysis will

consider the function of graffiti as parallel to, or equivalent to social media, albeit writ large on walls rather than digitally rendered and disseminated.

This research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically from April 2020 to August 2021. As earlier discussed, the pandemic adversely impacted the already existing social issues in the Downtown Eastside, making them top of mind both for the residents and the media. Reviewing graffiti in the Downtown Eastside created from April 2020 to August 2021, two major themes emerged stemming from the social issues aggravated by the pandemic to inform this research. These are illicit drug use, culture, and lethality in the Downtown Eastside and second, COVID-19 awareness and precautionary health measures in a vulnerable community. This analysis uses a thematic approach to dissect the local issues faced by the community as presented in the graffiti, and a social media communication framework to display the similarities between graffiti and social media.

With the objective to find out how graffiti in the Downtown Eastside occupies space as a medium of social communication, this analysis examines how the similarity between graffiti and social media prompt a rethinking of graffiti as a medium of social communication. This research lends its voice to the school that seeks to present a different view of graffiti, which while understanding its illegality, admits its socio-cultural relevance.

In the next section, the literature on graffiti will be explored, in particular, its illegality and its social communicative function. In the third section, the methodology and data gathering process will be detailed. The fourth section holds the thematic analysis of the data gathered, a discussion of the results of the research and a presentation of a social media communication framework as the guiding framework for this research. In the final concluding section, recommendations will be put forward for future studies as well as a discussion of the limitations of the study.

Literature Review

Scholars of communication history categorize hieroglyphics on stone and papyrus and inscriptions on clay tablets as significant and instructive mediums of communication. This can be accredited to the fact that the principles underlying these pre-modern mediums are inscribed in our modern communication methods. We can draw clear lines of similarity between ancient pictographs on walls and the prolific use of emojis as one example in the present context (Robinson, 1995, as referred to in Crowley & Heyer, 2012, p. 63).

The advancement of technologically based and enabled mass communication is characterised by transient messages publicly transmitted to a large anonymous audience (Severin & Tankard, 2001). While it is well beyond the scope of this essay to offer a comprehensive history of communication and technology, it is important to emphasize that advancements in communication have always been deeply embedded in and determined through technological advance. With the prominence of technological foundations of communication in profound social transformations of the digital age, it is important to have an expansive view of communication to include non-electronic, or non-digital forms of communication.

A proper communication history needs to engage with the ancient and compelling concept and expressive practice of graffiti (McCormick, 2011, as referred to in Ross, 2016, p. 1). What then is graffiti? Is it simply the defacement of public space or is there more? The word graffiti translated from the Italian word *graffio* means to scratch (Lexico, n.d.). Contrary to ideas that graffiti is a modern concept, the creation of the art form has existed as far back as 13,000BC in the form of ancient cave paintings (Carey, 2006). Ross (2016) explains that graffiti is simply humans expressing their thoughts and ideas on the spaces they occupy. Abundant across the ancient Mediterranean, elements categorized as graffiti are seen from the era of the invention of writing to the end of the classical antiquity era (Baird & Taylor, 2010). In addition to markings on walls in various locations, early graffiti also appeared on moveable objects like pottery, another expressive art form (Baird & Taylor, 2010). Modern graffiti, typically employing spray paint or ink, is often created in locations with scant human traffic like alleys, or in hard-to-reach and low visibility places like rooftops and high structures. They

have appeared in a range of contexts from protests to celebrations and cover a variety of topics as intended by the artist.

The illegality of Graffiti

Much of the conversation on graffiti has been focused on whether it is to be categorised as art or crime (Young, 2014). Writers and admirers of the form maintain that it holds immense value in the context of art, and critics advocate for the removal of graffiti from the walls, and artists from the streets, categorizing it in terms of the damage it causes and not in its aesthetic value (Halsey & Young, 2006., Carroll, 2019). Although it could be positioned as free speech in a similar fashion to political riots, its unpopularity denies it such favourable designation (Carroll, 2019). Young (2014), explains that although graffiti culture has found its way into mainstream culture and has become a bankable staple in advertising, social media content, tourism, and representations of urban living, all of which have improved its bankability, the artform is still illegal. Since graffiti inherently opposes authority, it is characterized in certain quarters as rebellious, criminal, and morally bankrupt. However, its illegal status is not explained entirely with its opposition to authority and involves its significance as a form of unwanted aesthetic expression in the urban landscape (Shobe, 2019). Graffiti is displayed in public spaces on public or private property, and this clashes with the ideals of property managers who would prefer marking-free exteriors (Carroll, 2019). This illegality makes graffiti a crime of vandalism (Jonas et al. 2015., Bloch, 2020).

Philipps (1999, as referred to in Shobe, 2019) explains that the word graffiti translated in Korean, Chinese and Bengali is a negative word suggesting that the act of writing on public spaces is among other things, thoughtless and purposeless. This view of graffiti as a signifier of disorder is championed by theories like the broken window theory (Vedantam et al., 2016) which is accepted by governments, media, and academic scholars alike (Mac Donald, 2014). In some cities, lawmakers have taken zero-tolerance approaches and have responded to the artform as a malignant cancer in society, using the broken window theory as a policing framework (Halsey & Young, 2006., Cresswell, 1996, as referred to in Shobe, 2019). The theory suggests that communities that appear to be neglected and in disrepair breed an environment that leads to increased criminal activities (Kelling & Wilson, 1982). This means that the presence of graffiti signals a lack of enforced public order, which can lead to more members of the society disregarding

other laws, believing that their actions will also be ignored by law enforcers. Halsey & Young (2006) explain that the assumption that graffiti is a result of the artist's boredom and need to deface public or private property influences the ways that it is viewed and policed. The links made between graffiti and crime further work to put graffiti in a bad light. The criminality of graffiti is heightened by the fact that it is viewed as a steppingstone to increasingly illicit activities like rioting, arson, and drug use (Halsey & Young, 2006). Prominent politicians especially former New York City mayors Giuliani and Bloomberg warned that graffiti was used primarily by gangs and signalled to citizens that the government doesn't care about crime and personal safety (Carroll, 2019).

The communicative function of Graffiti

A commonly held narrative concludes that graffiti is a criminal activity, and although at times, the artistic dimensions of graffiti are acknowledged, Halsey & Young (2006) argue that graffiti cannot be categorized simply in terms of good or bad art and illegal or legal activity. They advocate for graffiti to be considered in a manner that takes in all its aspects. One understudied but undeniable capacity of graffiti is its communicative function. While there cannot be bypassing the fact that graffiti mars property in ways other modes of speech may not, it should also be recognized that some graffiti carry within it a voice and identity absent in other modes of speech (Carroll, 2019). Lennon (2015) poetically explains that graffiti-marked walls speak and enter a collective conversation that expresses the identities and revolutionary desires of the people who occupy the streets.

Graffiti has shown itself to be an effective medium of communication especially in politically conflicted areas. For example, in Palestine and Israel where representation in and access to media is unequal, and in the unrest around Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, Palestine's key tool, graffiti, was called the "print weapon" (Peteet, 1996, as referred to in Peteet, 2016., Peteet, 2016). Viewing graffiti as both a communication medium and an act of communication, Peteet (2016), explains that it is an act of informing the viewing public and can take on various tones as needed, whether comparative, satirical, warning, or mocking. As a medium of communication available to marginalized communities with disparate access and representation in media, it can also be used to challenge dominant narratives.

Various scholars have shed light on the communicative function of graffiti. In a study of the use of graffiti for political expression by youth in Cairo, de Ruiter (2015), explains that graffiti can be a medium of communication especially when certain voices find that they have no place in traditional media, and that graffiti is an appropriate medium to spread awareness in such cases. He further argues that the artform has the potential to transform public space into a communicative arena. Miladi (2018), agrees that graffiti writings in public spaces have become a significant means of effective communication and Lee (2000, as referred to in Miladi, 2018) argues that graffiti is an alternative system of public communication. One can deduce that in situations where the media is highly censored, graffiti may serve as a substitute to mainstream communication mediums to express opinions that cannot be articulated anywhere else (Miladi, 2018).

The functionality of graffiti is discussed further by Bloch (2020), who argues that individual and public responses to relevant issues can be found on walls, especially when the mainstream media does not communicate those issues. Although research on graffiti that focuses on its illegality and artistic qualities is substantial, Carroll (2019), explains that scholars have often left its communicative function undiscussed, despite evidence of its use and efficacy in promoting marginalized voices.

The social communication function of graffiti

Even less explored is graffiti as a medium of social communication and its likeness to social media. Simply put, social communication is communicating the society to the same. Fiedler (2007) explains that there is barely a form of spoken and unspoken expression that cannot be classified under social communication. He presents social communication as any process that includes a communicator, a receiver, a topic, and a symbol system. Every social communication process begins with an encoding and ends with a decoding of the message being passed to achieve a desired outcome. The communication process between the communicator and the receiver is social, based on an inferred interpersonal relationship, no matter how obscure or defined. The process involves the communicator encoding a topic in symbols and inviting the receiver to decode and understand the message by drawing on their shared knowledge of the symbol. Based on this understanding, it is no hardship to see how social communication occurs on social media.

In proffering a definition of social media, Carr & Hayes (2014) explain that although all social media are mediums of social communication, not all mediums of social communication are social media. I present graffiti as a medium of social communication, sharing functional similarities with social media with the exception of a digital presence. Social media brings together public media and personal communication (Meikle, 2016) and the same can be said for graffiti. An acceptable definition of social media describes it as a label for digital technologies that host the connection, interaction, production, and transmission of user-generated content among persons (Lewis, 2010, as referred to in Carr & Hayes, 2014). In view of this definition, social media clearly demonstrates a social communicative function, as it assumes the characteristics of social communication. Firstly, it points to a relationship between/among persons, which highlights the presence of a communicator and receiver. On social media channels, the position of communicator and receiver is fluid and dependent on which user is generating content and which is receiving at any moment. Secondly, the production and transmission of user-generated content in social communication speaks to the process of encoding the topic/object of conversation in symbols to be decoded upon transmission. On social media, this can involve the use of slangs, memes, emojis, and GIFs. More importantly, social media is aptly named as users engage in the self-expression of the social, which is anything that stems from and relates to interpersonal relationships. Social media exists for the expression of sociality. Silk (2001, as referred to in Crosier et al., 2012) explains sociality as the relationship between the advantages and disadvantages of dwelling with other members of a species. When used in reference to human sociality, the social can be understood as expressions that are emitted by people living in proximity, whether geographical or digital. These expressions can take the form of cultures, conversations, and issues. Sociality is the essential behavioral adaptation for humans (Crosier et al., 2012). Carr & Hayes (2014) explain that the ability to maintain social interactions among users is inherent to the nature of social media. The platform is designed to connect individuals and be the site for social interaction, and any communication among users is inherently social. Likewise, graffiti also serves as a site for the social to be communicated as artists create these pieces to speak. Most critical to social media, and likewise graffiti, is that users/artists perceive they are interacting with others (Rafaeli, 1988, as referred to in Carr & Hayes, 2014). In this interaction lies the sociality of the medium.

Social Media, Graffiti, and communicating the social

In his classification of urban graffiti, Alonso (1998) explains that socio-political graffiti is strongly connected to, and communicates critical social occurrences, containing salient themes such as working conditions, unemployment, housing issues and poverty. Graffiti is a medium of social communication, not solely because the process includes the transmission of a message, but because of the social nature of the conversations, and the presence of reception and feedback in the communication process. The idea is supported by the social media communication framework put forward by Sasser et al. (2014). Graffiti, like social media is not just used to communicate human sociality, it is inherently social in nature because it is designed from and for human communication (Bruner & Kelso, 1980, as referred to in Rodriguez & Clair, 1999). This is demonstrated in certain factors inscribed to the art form such as its occupation of public places to attract attention and create conversation, its facilitation of social interaction among artists, and its mass-personal mode of communication, which allows artists to target individuals or a large, unknown audience. Social media and graffiti share common features and functions, one of which is blurring the lines between mass, interpersonal, and peer communication processes (Walther et al., 2010). Describing mass communication as transmission of messages from a single identifiable source to an unknown mass, and interpersonal communication as the transfer of messages and feedback between two or more participants, Walther et al. (2010) explain that mass, interpersonal and peer communication occur simultaneously on social media and graffiti. This is illustrated in an untitled graffiti piece captured in the Vancouver Downtown Eastside, in which the artist addresses Vancouver Sun contributor, John Mackie (Fig. 6). The artwork demonstrates interpersonal communication being transmitted through a mass-consumed medium. This process can be likened to posting a personal message on a friend's Facebook wall. Although the message conveys a personal relationship, the public nature of the medium makes the communication process a mass personal one.

Similarities between Social Media and Graffiti

Self-expression

Using graffiti, artists can publicly present their identities and how they want to be addressed. By creating throw-ups of their names or aliases, or simply signing a graffiti

piece, they determine the extent to which they want to be anonymous, protecting themselves against potential retribution (Rodriguez & Clair, 1999). In a similar way, Harding (2019) explains that young people on the internet can create and test out different identities. Self is presented through real names or usernames, display pictures and carefully curated content, whether user-generated or shared content. This is likened to how graffiti artists use monikers. In both social phenomena, the social actors can be as visible as they desire. Graffiti and social media platforms provide an outlet for social actors to present themselves (Harding, 2019) and their thoughts on issues they consider worthy.

Alternative site of urban resistance

Campos et al. (2021) describe graffiti as an inherently democratic medium of expression for counter institutional communication. Common in urban spaces amidst social upheaval, this aesthetic tool of communication transforms street walls into platforms for grassroots dialogue (Zaimakis & Oikonomakis, 2021). Dialogue through graffiti can include commentary on social issues, policy suggestion or refusal, and highlighting ignored issues. Zaimakis & Oikonomakis (2021) explain that the purpose of protest graffiti is for social mobilization. Graffiti is used to hold discourse in opposition to stated authority, (Chaffee, 1989, as referred to in Rodrigo & Clair, 1999). Although the notion of social media as wholly democratic is hotly contested (Lokot, 2021), platforms have become a site of democratic demonstration. This means that arguments for all sides of social issues can be expressed. Social media affords users an alternative outlet to express dissent, especially where freedom of speech and access to mainstream media are controlled (Lokot, 2021). Since 2008, social media has been a common feature in social mobilizations (della Porta & Mattoni, 2014), particularly in anti-establishment movements (Gerbaudo, 2014). As sites of resistance and participation, social media and graffiti afford users a “wall” on which local and global social issues can be addressed.

Visibility-driven culture

A salient function and benefit of both graffiti and social media is its affordance of socially mediated visibility. Brighenti (2010) explains that visibility requires a viewer, an object, and the strategic placement of the object. For both graffiti and social media, displays created/posted on “public walls” are the objects of which the members of the

community are viewers, and these communities can be virtual or offline. To ensure visibility, graffiti artists create pieces and tags on/around culturally relevant edifices, and in places associated with high human traffic (Ferrell, 2016) as this guarantees the work's visibility to swaths of people. The danger factor of extremely high locations, like billboards or bridges also ensure street credibility, ultimately increasing visibility (Ferrell, 2016). The visibility of graffiti pieces depends on viewers' attention and ensuing conversations, which can potentially draw more attention. On social media, likes/retweets/shares are highly coveted as it transmits the content to the sharer's online community, increasing its visibility. For effective visibility on social media, hashtags, a pound sign accompanied by a word or phrase (Tekobbe, 2018), are used to organise, and annotate posts, ensuring that appropriately tagged posts are displayed together when the hashtag is searched for, increasing its visibility.

The Vancouver Downtown Eastside

One of the oldest neighborhoods in Vancouver, the Downtown Eastside area has acquired a global reputation over time as a site for mobilization around varying social issues (Newnham, 2005). Although it started out in the mid 19th century as a residential area for British Columbia's resource labour force, including fishermen and loggers, as family units grew and began to migrate to other parts of the city, the area became firmly associated with the working class (Newnham, 2005). The slow but steady decline of the area was inevitable as issues of unemployment, loss of infrastructure (the public library and street cars, for example), poverty, racism, and marginalization, and increasing substance abuse became more prominent (Newnham, 2005). As evidenced by the review of literature, graffiti can be used as a platform for dialogue, and individuals in marginalized communities with little access or representation in the media turn to the art form as a medium of communication. This study seeks to explore the walls of the Downtown Eastside for social commentary depicted through graffiti. This analysis will ultimately examine graffiti from the Downtown Eastside as a medium of social communication.

Social Media Communication Framework

The social media communication framework presented by Sasser et al. (2014) highlights four key factors that make up the communication process on social media. These are the sender, the receiver, the message and the community, and the elimination of any of these renders the communication process incomplete, unintelligible, or ineffective. This research has explored graffiti as a medium of social communication and its social communicative function, alongside social media. Employing this framework, I present the communicative characteristics of social media, in parallel with graffiti, highlighting their similarities and further cementing graffiti as a medium of social communication.

Sender: The role of the sender on social media and in graffiti art is interchangeable. This is because a tenet of social media communication is the creation and sharing of user-generated content. On social media, user generated content are media elements designed by web users and made publicly available (Moens et al., 2014). The transmission of content including tweets, videos, photos, memes, and GIFS, categorizes such users as senders. The social media communication process can be described as fluid because unlike the mass media process, the role of the sender is not fixed, and can be transformed into receiver once their initial communication garners a response. Graffiti artists also create user generated content and encode meaning in their unique and original pieces. By creating public graffiti art bearing socially relevant messages, the graffiti artist begins the social communication process, occupying the role of sender.

Receiver: In the social media communication process, the recipient is tasked with decoding the intended meaning of the message. The direct receiver(s) are targeted, or in social media terms, mentioned by the sender, and the indirect receiver(s) are users of the platform who happen to come across the message as a mass-personal communication on their timeline, based on their social connection with the sender. Similarly, the recipients/viewers of graffiti pieces could either be specified groups, neighborhoods or individuals mentioned by the artist i.e., John Mackie (Fig. 6), or the largely unknown public who will come across the piece, whether physically or virtually.

Message: It could be argued that the message is the essence of the communication process. Sasser et al. (2014) explain that originality is a salient feature that messages must incorporate to validate the social communication process. Originality refers to the ability of the message to generate and sustain authentic conversations, and a high level of perceived originality of the message generates greater attention from receivers. The social communication process on social media can be regarded as successful based on the ensuing mass-personal conversations on the recipients' digital walls. Sasser et al. (2014) explain that carried out effectively, messages tend to achieve virality, that is reach many users. The graffiti medium is also based on originality and graffiti artists tend to create pieces bearing messages that not only draw and sustain the viewer's attention, but also have the potential to lead to conversation. These ensuing conversations can take various forms, from mass-personal messages on a physical wall (Fig. 4) to being shared digitally on social media or mass media platforms and commented on.

Community: The transmission of messages from sender to receiver in the communication process is not guaranteed and can be interrupted by a range of factors. In the traditional communication process, this interruption or interference is described as noise (Buchanan & Sparagowski, 2022). However, on social media, the social communication process is impacted/interrupted by the community, whether positively or otherwise (Sasser et al., 2014). The community determines if and how the message is received. Micro and macro influencers with sufficient knowledge of the subject matter and significant numbers of followers determine if the message is received positively or not, based on their personal opinions. Large groups of supporters of a subject, also known as fans, can push the message further by commenting on the issue or obstruct the message by promoting a different topic. Social media platforms are a part of the community and can affect the social communication process positively by highlighting messages i.e., the Twitter algorithm's display of relevant trending topics on the user's explore page. They can also impact the process negatively by censoring messages and banning users.

In the social communication process of graffiti, the community comprises groups that impact the transmission and reception of the message, and the message itself. This can include graffiti crews and independent artists who influence each other's black books. A black book is a sketchpad in which friends and respected colleagues of the

artist can create original pieces or review the concepts being worked on, and this influences the artist's message (Brafman, 2021). Other graffiti artists can also disrupt the social communication process by covering up an original work, thereby censoring the artist. City authorities, lawmakers, law enforcement agents, and property managers also have a significant impact on the communication process, and they do this by approving and permitting graffiti pieces or censoring the artists and erasing their work.

Methodology

Carter et al. (2014) explain that data collection methods are chosen based on their ability to provide in-depth answers to the research questions posed. Based on the research questions designed to guide this paper, I conducted a thematic analysis of the graffiti captured from the Downtown. Thematic analysis is an interpretive process where data is rigorously searched to identify patterns and so provide an illuminating description of the phenomenon being studied. This process ensures that the researcher develops salient themes without forthrightly generating theory (Tesch 1990, as referred to in Smith & Firth, 2011, p. 3). As a procedure, it encapsulates the identification, analysis, organization, description, and reporting of themes found in the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006, as cited in Nowell et al. 2017, p. 2). Thematic analysis, when utilized effectively, can produce insightful understandings of multifaceted happenings, and can be used alongside a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

However, researchers have criticized the method for its subjective nature which can present issues when judging the strength of the findings (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Therefore, the task of the researcher is to detail the data collection and analysis process as transparently as possible to establish trustworthiness and as Joffe (2011) explains, the result of any thematic analysis should expose the meanings hidden in the raw data. Themes are relevant patterns of meaning in the data and the aim of this method of analysis is not to simply summarize the content of the data set, but to identify, and make sense of the data, guided by the research question (Clarke & Braun, 2016).

Iddings et al. (2011) explain that graffiti uses written language and semiotic signs to provide access to understanding social and cultural events. This research explores the categorization of graffiti as a medium of social communication by exploring the sociality of the content of graffiti and comparing the medium to an already established medium of social communication, social media. Since graffiti in the Downtown Eastside is produced by members of the community, this art and communication form bears elements of the environment. Therefore, in analyzing graffiti, one will have to look beyond the surface both literally and figuratively to further understand the factors that contribute to meaning creation including color, material, text, image, and location.

The site of this research is a 16-block area bordered by Clark drive, Keefer Street, Carrall Street, and the Waterfront. To create a sample size, I divided the larger Downtown Eastside area into 7 neighborhoods based on a City of Vancouver map of the area (DTES Vancouver, n.d.). Putting together a comprehensive list of streets within the neighborhoods, I randomly selected 3 streets and 3 adjoining alleys per neighborhood to photograph graffiti from. This ensured that some neighborhoods were not excluded in the selections. To create a list of themes to guide the selection of graffiti, I analysed news articles for the topics most reported on the Downtown Eastside from April 2020 to August 2021 and narrowed down to the two most common topics. I collected graffiti that contained elements relating to these topics. These images were then thematically analyzed within the context of current social issues and news reporting on the community. The objective was to explore the social communicative significance, and function of graffiti on issues related to the Downtown Eastside. The recurring ideas found in the sampled graffiti included tainted supply of drugs, solo drug use, overdose, COVID-19, homelessness, social distancing, unemployment, and underlying health conditions.

Due to the transient nature of graffiti, which is rooted in its disruptive and unsanctioned production, artworks are quickly covered up by the city or private businesses. The sample chosen was supplemented by using images of graffiti captured by other photographers. Seven graffiti images were chosen for this research and assigned titles for ease of analysis, as they were untitled. The six-phase process defined by Nowell et al (2017) was used to understand and analyze the data. To organize the data, a descriptive analysis of each artwork was created. With emphasis on the content, context, style, and location of the artworks, a general description of the elements present in the images was developed. The next step was to create codes for the images through a coding table as follows.

GRAFFITI	CODES
666	Human death, numeral mark of death, drug paraphernalia.
Attention	COVID-19 Vaccine, Precarious living situation, Downtown Eastside Residents, Vaccination information.
OPS	Drug paraphernalia, Drug nicknames, East van pride, Haggard characters. Safe drug use.
Instructions	Covid -19 safety instructions, Drug paraphernalia, Homelessness, Drug addiction.
Smokey D Callout	COVID-19 information, statistics and safety instructions, Virus visualization.
Who not what	Drug paraphernalia, gang violence, warning against illicit drug: fentanyl.

Two dominant themes emerged from this coding of the graffiti and news articles: first, illicit drug use, culture, and lethality in the Downtown Eastside and second, COVID-19 awareness and precautionary health measures in a vulnerable community. The next section elaborates on these themes and examines the graffiti in-depth.

Analysis

As noted in the previous section, the six-phase method of thematic analysis devised by Nowell et al (2017) was employed here. They explain that these steps do not determine the order the researcher will work in as there is flexibility to move between phases in search for relevant patterns and to use some phases and not others that might not be relevant to the analysis at hand.

The graffiti is first described making note of significant markings, words, use of color, and language in the text. Next, codes are drawn from the visual texts and these codes and overarching themes are organized in a tabular format. The analysis will speak to the themes and answer the research questions. For clarity in this analysis, untitled artworks were titled but of course, these titles cannot be attached to the work outside of this research.



Figure 1. 666

Photo by Author, taken on 2021.07.30

Artist: Unknown

Location: Overdose Prevention Site, Abbot and West Pender Street, Vancouver BC.

This artwork features the ubiquitous image of a skull with the numbers 666 inscribed into its vacant eye sockets. However, the artist replaces the well-known bones crossed in its mouth for a syringe with a needle and a pizzo or an oil burner pipe. There is a conspicuous letter X in the center of the forehead and the work is done in black and white.

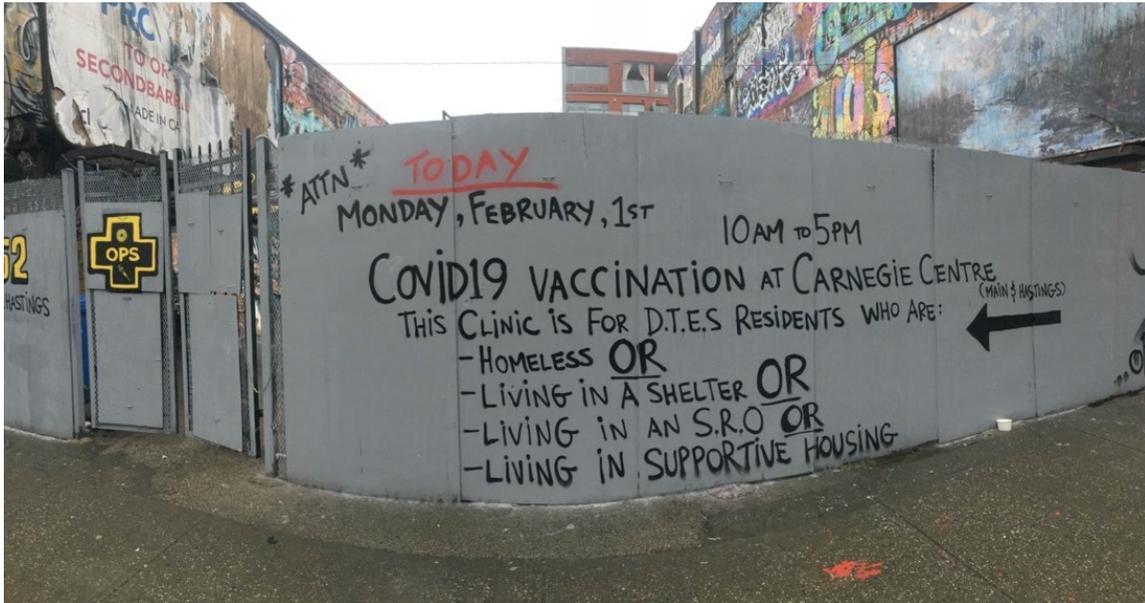


Figure 2. Attention

Artist: Unknown

Location: East Hastings and Columbia Street

Source: Photo by Trey Helten. Retrieved

from <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/02/05/vancouvers-street-artists-respond-to-columnists-graffiti-gripes-with-painted-letter-to-the-editor>

The installation takes the style of a text-based announcement. With large black and orange lettering on a grey background, it details the date, time, and location of a vaccination centre available to various categories of residents of the Downtown Eastside.



Figure 3. OPS

Photo by Author, taken on 2021.07.30

Artist: Smokey D

Location: Overdose Prevention Site, *Abbott and West Pender Street, Vancouver BC.*

This multi-image installation sits at the entrance to the Overdose presentation site, one of the many locations dedicated to preventing harm among drug users. Like many in this research, it combines textual and image-based graffiti styles. It holds three images and a string of text. A stitched-up teddy bear with a blister pack of pills labelled ETC covering its left eye and a cigarette in its mouth. The second image is a person with the letters ETC and V6A inscribed on their face as well as the phrase East Van on their shirt. Behind the character are two syringes. The third image is the Overdose Prevention Site sign superimposed on the image of a bong emitting vapor. The text includes a nickname for Hastings, a gang violence callout, and the artist's signature.



Figure 4. Passerby and Instructions

Artist: Unknown

Location: Unknown

Source: Photo by Jesse Winter. Retrieved from <https://thetyee.ca/News/2020/11/19/Vancouver-Poorest-Neighbourhoods-Highest-COVID-Rates/>

Although this image features two separate pieces, the proximity and context present them as a single conversation. The art on the left shows a Smurfette, an animated character from the Smurfs franchise. In pop culture, the character is often featured holding a caterpillar on an outstretched hand, but this piece replaces that with a text bubble that reads “stand back 6 feet”. The image also features a call to practice physical distancing. The tone comes across as cheery and light. The piece on the right starkly opposes the former work in tone and content but it also contains some similarities. It features Sylvester the cat, a well-known cartoon character from the Merry Melodies and Looney Tunes series of cartoons with his signature phrase “Suffering Succotash”. However, the character is presented as bloodied, with spinning eyes and a needle in hand. The accompanying text speaks to the pandemic and presents issues that prevent health orders from being followed.



Figure 5. Smokey D Call out

Artist: Smokey D

Location: Unknown

Source: Photo by Andrea Reimer. Retrieved

from <https://globalnews.ca/news/6785128/vancouver-murals-coronavirus/>

Dated April 2020, this installation was created a month after the province-wide lockdown issued in British Columbia in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Designed as a public service announcement, the piece features text-based exposition on the virus, preventive measures, and infection statistics as well as number of deaths and recoveries. The image includes a character coughing and representations of the covid virus flying around him.



Figure 6. The Vancouver Scum

Artist: Unknown

Location: East Hastings and Columbia Street

Source: Photo by Trey Helten. Retrieved

from <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/02/05/vancouvers-street-artists-respond-to-columnists-graffiti-gripes-with-painted-letter-to-the-editor>

This vivid image takes the form of a newspaper front page and parodies the Vancouver Sun, referring to it as scum. In a headline style narrative, it responds to an article written by John Mackie, a reporter at the Vancouver Sun on the presence of graffiti in the Downtown Eastside. It also features a bold font and distinct colors, making it almost impossible to ignore.



Figure 7. Who not what
Photograph by Author, taken on 2021.07.30
Artist: Unknown
Location: Alley, West Pender and Abbott Street

This artwork features a single bold image and short text against a color rich background. The image is a pizza emitting vapor and the text is succinct with a plea for safety attached, ironic considering the previous suggestion to shoot informants [sic] not Fentynal [sic].

Thematic Analysis

Illicit drug use, culture, and lethality in the Downtown Eastside (666, OPS, Who not what)

The meteoric rise in substance-related deaths in Vancouver can be traced back to 1988 (Campbell et al., 2009). This suggests that the conversation around illicit substances in the Downtown Eastside is unfortunately not a recent development. It is an increasingly troubling one which has only been more aggravated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic. This is evidenced in graffiti from the Downtown Eastside and in news reporting. The CBC reported 2020 to be the year with the highest cases of drug overdoses, seeing a 74% increase in deaths compared to the previous year (Ross, 2021). Fentanyl, a highly potent, addictive, and dangerous opioid used to increase the potency of recreational drugs was detected in 80% of overdose cases (Ross, 2021). In 2012, the substance was detected in about 5% of overdose cases, a pointer to the increasing toxicity of illicit drugs on the streets. (Larsen, 2020). As over 400 lives were lost to drug overdoses in Vancouver alone, graffiti in the Downtown Eastside conveyed the same message of drug toxicity and the danger of substances like fentanyl.

The piece covering the walls of the Overdose Prevention Site and titled *666* for the purpose of this research, shows a skull with a syringe and a pizzo in its mouth. Symbolically, the skull can mean death (“Human Skull Symbolism,” n.d.) and a skull with crossbones may represent poison. In this case, the black and white image of a skull with drug paraphernalia in place of crossbones positions drugs as poison and the cause of death. The artist situates this piece on a site dedicated to preventing death among drug users and this alludes to the harmful nature of drug abuse. The syringe and the pizzo are items commonly known to drug users and positioning these with a skull relays the message of the artist. Exploring the image further, one notices the numbers 666 penned into the vacant eye sockets on the skull. In Christian literature, the numbers 666 are referred to as the mark of the beast (Milton, 2019). This number also signifies people set apart for destruction. This number on the skull in this piece can allude to drugs as the beast that brings death, and the artist relays the gravity of damage and the unfortunate consequence of toxic drugs.

A second piece titled OPS showed a patched-up teddy bear with a blister pack of pills over its eye and a cigar in its mouth. The nickname, teddy bear, is used to signify ecstasy, a recreational drug (DrugWise, 2016). More specifically, the blister pack on the image carries the letters “ETC”, which is a street name for ecstasy. While this piece does not point directly to the harmful nature of substance abuse, it does highlight a few ideas, a first of which is the haggard and well-worn state of the teddy bear, its one vacant eye and the other obstructed by drugs and the human character who bears behind him what seems to be drug paraphernalia, specifically syringes. Etched on his face is the street slang for Ecstasy “etc” and V6A, the postal code for a good portion of the Downtown Eastside. The characters do not exactly display an enjoyment of drug use or any positive aspects to it and the human character looks as if they bear a burden, which one can suggest are the syringes.

The third image is titled “Who not what” and is both text and visual based. The image is a pizzo emitting vapor which suggests active use of a substance. The text reads: “Shoot informants not fentanyl [sic]... please be safe”. With the understanding that fentanyl is not the drug of choice for many users and that it is cut into common opiates, the artist is pointing out that fentanyl is present in street drugs and that these drugs are therefore unsafe. The artist also refers to gang culture and activity in the area and perhaps surrounding drug supply. The concept of the safety of drugs is one that has been heavily discussed especially during the COVID-19 pandemic as this period saw the highest number of drug related deaths in BC. The artist calls out fentanyl, the substance responsible for the largest percentage of deaths in the province and specifically the Downtown Eastside (Wyton, 2021). Media reporting of drug safety also calls out the extreme concentration of illicit fentanyl as the major cause of drug related deaths and amplifies voices speaking for safer supplies of drugs that are verifiably free of fentanyl (Larsen, 2020., Ross, 2021). The CBC in November of 2020 reported BC chief coroner urging clinics to provide safe drugs to users who risk overdose by relying on street drugs (Larsen, 2020). Although the artist does not mention the phrase “safe supply”, the underlying idea that street drugs are tainted, extremely harmful and should be avoided is found in graffiti in the Downtown Eastside.

COVID-19 awareness and precautionary health measures in a vulnerable community-Attention, Instructions and Smokey D call out)

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted more than the lapses in global health systems; it uncovered the precarious living situations that exist among the marginalized communities and the lack of access to life saving information affecting people who are not traditionally plugged into mainstream communication channels. The Downtown Eastside exemplifies these deficits. Along with the pandemic came non-negotiable health and safety instructions and as gatekeepers in media-dependent/ enabled communities found mainstream ways to transmit this information, some residents of the Downtown Eastside did the same. In April of 2020, a month after BC announced the shutdown of non-essential businesses and closure of schools, the CBC published an article listing closures and event cancellations, but more importantly, the latest COVID-19 statistics and safety instructions (CBC, 2020).

In the same month, popular Vancouver graffiti artist Smokey D, created a piece with very similar information. The art contained the latest infection, mortality, and recovery numbers as well as the safety instructions that would come to be echoed globally: stay home, wash your hands, don't touch your face, and keep six feet apart. Using graffiti, Smokey D explains the global reach of the virus, including the world death count at the time, relaying the severity of the issue. Visually, the image chosen by the artist is of a person coughing with their mouth wide open, and pictorial representations of the virus floating around the person. Through this image, the artist tries to communicate the infectious nature and transmission method of the virus and presses home the need to stay safe by keeping a distance.

The importance of health and safety messaging around COVID-19 being related to the Downtown Eastside cannot be understated as some residents live with pre-existing conditions that leave them more vulnerable to the virus (Baker, 2020). The dissemination of accurate and adequate information is non-negotiable. However, with limited access to mainstream sources of information, non-traditional methods are legitimized if they perform the same functions as the former.

Grffiti in the Downtown Eastside has been used to capture social commentary as well as to reflect the lived realities of the residents of the community. Such graffiti functions not unlike a mainstream opinion piece. In the piece titled *Instructions and*

Response, the image captures two separate works that are analyzed as one as they tell a singular story of COVID-19 in an already vulnerable community. In the image on the left, a friendly animated character reminds people to practice physical distancing, one of the tenets of the pandemic. Making use of bright colors, cheery text bubbles and lively fonts, the elements of this piece give off an optimistic tone, stating the fact of the pandemic in a positive voice. However, this piece stands out of place in this setting and another artist's response to it tells us why. The work on the right can be accurately described as opposing the instruction piece, visually and textually.

Unlike the previous use of bright, cheery colors, this piece is done in black and red, known across cultures to connote darkness. In this work, the use of black and red feel poignant, sneery and snarly. The artist names the health issue referred to in the former piece and begins with a phrase that replaces curse words but passes the emotion across. "Suffering Succotash", a derivative of suffering savior, was used in the Victorian era to avoid swearing on holy names ("Suffering Succotash," 2010). The phrase is commonly ascribed to Sylvester the cat, a well-known cartoon character, whose likeness is seen in the graffiti work. The artist's rendition of Sylvester portrays him with glazed eyes and a smile, surrounded by needles, betraying the illicit substances responsible for his irregular demeanor. Speaking through the cat's text bubble, the artist confronts the health order to isolate at home with the reality of homelessness and addiction.

The artist draws attention to the inability of the Downtown Eastside residents to comply with health instructions regarding COVID-19 because their lived realities make it an impossible task. Plainly put, people without homes cannot isolate at home, and people dependent on illicit substances cannot stay away from their source without harmful consequences. This sentiment and message are shared by mainstream news reporting on COVID-19 in the community. In March of 2020, a week after the province wide lockdown was initiated, the CBC reported the lack of social distancing in the community among the homeless population due to lack of housing facilities and shelters (CBC News, 2020). Fiona York, a co-ordinator with the Carnegie Community Action Project was quoted saying there was just nowhere for people to go, and the reporting suggested that the city close off some of East Hastings Street to traffic and provide room for physical distancing among the resident population. In April 2021, CTV news also reported the Vancouver Coastal Health authority explaining that the high population of

homeless people in the community made adherence to pandemic protocols like self-isolation and physical distancing almost impossible (Nagy, 2021).

The urgent need to eradicate the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that all information around it be passed to the audience in the fastest way possible and this has been through mainstream news media. However, the reception of this information is dependent on the community in question. As traditional media transmitted timely information on where, when, and how to get vaccinated, graffiti bearing the same messages emerged in the community, proving itself as one of the mediums of social communication available to the Downtown Eastside.

Attention is a textual piece, and the artist uses big black lettering against a white background to attract eyeballs. Providing a date, time, and address, the piece informs viewers of the COVID-19 vaccination clinic catering specifically to residents of the Downtown Eastside who were homeless or in precarious housing situations. Since several residents have underlying health conditions that could aggravate the effects of the virus, complying with pandemic protocol was necessary. However, as discussed earlier, barriers to isolating and physical distancing still existed, so vaccinating this population to reduce the risk of the virus was necessary. *The Tyee* in March 2021 reported that Vancouver Coastal health was making increased effort to set up vaccination clinics in the downtown, however beyond mentioning the locations, the article gives little information pertaining to getting the vaccine (St. Denis, 2021). With little access to phones or computers among the homeless population, information about pop-up vaccination clinics or booking a vaccine appointment can be extremely difficult to come by, and this graffiti piece brings all the necessary information into the community in the most accessible way possible.

Summary

The use of graffiti in the Downtown Eastside as a medium of social communication, although illegal, is functional and well received by the community. Non-members of the community however have not always seen it in this light. Vancouver Sun reporter, John Mackie, published an article decrying the conspicuous presence of graffiti in the Downtown Eastside and this warranted the response of the community, ironically via graffiti (Mackie, 2021., Ditmars, 2020). The piece titled *Vancouver Scum*, a play on

Mackie's employer, calls out Mackie's concern with the removal of graffiti in the community rather than the public health crises faced, namely the COVID-19 pandemic and the overdose crisis. As if anchoring this research, the artist states that pertinent information concerning the pandemic and contaminated drug supply can only be communicated to some members of the audience through graffiti. The artist suggests that Mackie and the Vancouver Sun review their priorities and they reinforce the message with the succinct phrase "Graffiti saved my life".

This research has explored graffiti in the Downtown Eastside and its functionality as a medium of social communication and a social medium of communication. By analyzing the content of the graffiti, this work highlights the two cardinal themes present: Illicit drug use, culture and lethality in the Downtown Eastside, and COVID-19 awareness and precautionary health measures in a vulnerable community. This work has shown how social media communication framework can be applied to graffiti as a medium of social communication, thus presenting the similarities between social media and graffiti function as mediums of social communication. Finally, this research reveals what graffiti artists and viewers in the Downtown Eastside have always known; that in a uniquely positioned community like this one, with social issues buffeting an already vulnerable population, graffiti is a critical, powerful, and consequential community-based medium of social communication.

Conclusion

This research has explored the social communication function of graffiti using the Vancouver Downtown Eastside area as a case study. By analyzing the social function of social media and graffiti, and observing the content of graffiti from the area, I sought to present the similarities of both mediums, and solidify the argument that graffiti can be understood as a social communication medium.

Viewing graffiti from the Downtown Eastside through the social media communication framework presented by Sasser et al. (2014), this study reveals that the social communication process of graffiti bears strong similarities to that of social media communication.

This study concludes that although graffiti in the downtown Eastside is illegal, its performance of social communication functions affords it credibility as a medium of social communication. This research has shown that where voices in marginalized communities are absent from platforms and lack agency, graffiti can serve as a tool of resistance and dissemination. This study reveals the conscious nature of graffiti from the Downtown Eastside, showing that although the area has often been scrutinized or ignored based on its myriad of social issues, it takes responsibility for bringing awareness and providing information on these issues, a result of the absence of its own voice in mainstream media.

This study is of importance to media and communication researchers who can further study graffiti, acknowledging its social communication function, an idea introduced in this work.

Furthermore, this study affords lawmakers a lens with which to view graffiti, and therefore rethink its strategies used to police the medium. Where graffiti has been policed based on its illegal nature on public or private property, the understanding of the content and social function of the medium can better inform the actions of community leadership to either create space for the social communication tool or introduce novel methods of communicating the social, especially in marginalized communities.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study was limited by the following issues. Firstly, the transient nature of graffiti in the Downtown Eastside, where property owners are advised to erase the tags as soon as they occur, rendered my task of collecting graffiti difficult (City of Vancouver, n.d.). This meant that some pieces I had come across in the initial phase of my study had been covered up when I went to gather data. Although I was able to capture some of the artwork on the walls myself, I ultimately had to source others from photographs uploaded to the internet. This research therefore can function as a mode of preservation of graffiti art from the Downtown Eastside which may have been permanently erased without preservation.

A second limitation to this study was the lack of input from the graffiti artists whose works I reviewed, and from the residents of the Downtown Eastside, who are the primary audience of the works. I believe that an analysis of the graffiti that included the artist's perspective and the audience's response to it would have helped me better explore the social communication function of graffiti and its efficacy as a medium.

In view of this study, I recommend that future exploration into the social communication function of graffiti consider the perspective of the graffiti artists. Interviews with the artists will help researchers understand the intended meaning behind the pieces and the artists thoughts on the social communication medium.

This research has emphasized contextual, aesthetic, and of course, sociocultural dimensions of graffiti, and further research must take all these determinants, qualities, and capacities into comprehensive account of the significance and power of graffiti as social and political communication.

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