



East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences

ejass.eanso.org

Volume 2, Issue 1, 2020

Print ISSN: 2707-4277 | Online ISSN: 2707-4285

Title DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/2707-4285>

ENSO

EAST AFRICAN
NATURE &
SCIENCE
ORGANIZATION

Original Article

‘Matatu’ Graffiti as An Avenue for Self-Expression and Social Commentary Among the Youth in Nairobi, Kenya

*Dr. Kamau Wango, PhD¹**

¹Kenyatta University, P. O. Box 43844 – 00100, Nairobi, Kenya; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0185-1355>.

*Author for Correspondence email: kamauwango@gmail.com.

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.2.1.208>

Article history: ABSTRACT

10 September 2020

Keywords:

*Matatu,
Graffiti,
Self-Expression,
Social Commentary,
Youth,
Nairobi.*

This paper seeks to examine urban Art in Kenya as an integral part of urban culture with particular emphasis on ‘matatu’ graffiti, (an off-shoot of ‘mural’ graffiti that is depicted on medium-sized vehicles used for urban public transport) as an avenue for self-expression among the youth in Nairobi, Kenya. It will also examine other forms of related art, such as the genre of painting referred to as *street art* and explore the genesis of themes and subject matter that interest the youth. In order to generate a chronology of thoughts, the paper approaches the above first from the broad spectrum of urban culture and what it entails and then breaks it down to one of the most critical and visible elements of urban culture which is *urban Art* which, in turn, encompasses many forms of visual creativity both in two dimensional and three-dimensional dispensations that manifest themselves within an urban environment. The paper delves substantively on the generation of broad themes that form the basis of varied subject matters that are regularly depicted in *matatu* graffiti. These broad themes often derive or emanate from sociocultural, socioeconomic, religious and political factors. The paper also examines the age bracket (herein referred to as *The Youth*) which embraces urban Art both in terms of its execution and its consumption as well as the underlying factors that seem to make it broadly attractive and acceptable as a means of self-expression, collective discourse and social commentary among the youth. The paper finally examines the relationship between *matatu* graffiti and *hip-hop*, a genre of music characterized by terse verbal symbolism and which is increasingly associated with urban culture and the complexities of social expression in the contemporary urban world.

APA CITATION

Wango, K. (2020). 'Matatu' Graffiti as An Avenue for Self-Expression and Social Commentary Among the Youth in Nairobi, Kenya. *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 2(1), 87-103. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.2.1.208>

CHICAGO CITATION

Wango, Kamau. 2020. "'Matatu' Graffiti as An Avenue for Self-Expression and Social Commentary Among the Youth in Nairobi, Kenya". *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences* 2 (1), 87-103. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.2.1.208>.

HARVARD CITATION

Wango, K. (2020) "'Matatu' Graffiti as An Avenue for Self-Expression and Social Commentary Among the Youth in Nairobi, Kenya", *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 2(1), pp. 87-103. doi: 10.37284/eajass.2.1.208.

IEEE CITATION

W. Wango, "'Matatu' Graffiti as An Avenue for Self-Expression and Social Commentary Among the Youth in Nairobi, Kenya", *EAJASS*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 87-103, Sep. 2020.

MLA CITATION

Wango, Kamau. "'Matatu' Graffiti as An Avenue for Self-Expression and Social Commentary Among the Youth in Nairobi, Kenya". *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, Vol. 2, no. 1, September 2020, pp. 87-103, doi:10.37284/eajass.2.1.208.

INTRODUCTION

Urban Culture, Urban Art and Graffiti

Whenever the term 'urban' is mentioned, cities, large towns, townships, urban neighbourhoods (or estates, as they are referred to in Kenya) and their peripheral informal urban settlements come to the fore. The sum-total of *urban life* including all urban-related activities, mindset, psyche, stereotypes, perceptions, economic and social status, generation of wealth, poverty, class struggles and intrigues, triumphs and failures all come together to constitute 'urban culture'. An integral part of urban culture is urban art. Urban art can be described as outdoor art that is executed on available public spaces by artists who have an affiliation with urban environments and hence have a passion or need for creative expression that emanates from and is reflective of urban life. It covers many forms of art including statues, sculptural forms, and installations but is often associated with murals and other smaller paintings or designs on walls. It is often also referred to as *street art* or *street art vandalism* though in certain contexts the two may vary in the content of their representation where one is seen as a subset of the other. A major component of urban art is 'graffiti', which is described as an urban art movement. Graffiti encompasses words, phrases and pictorial

images juxtaposed into creative artworks which express the subject matter that is derived from the thrills, frustrations or intrigues of city life. It is executed by painting, most commonly spray painting, drawing or marking and scratching onto running walls and other spaces like sides of buildings, particularly in urban neighbourhoods. At times the word *illicit* has been used to describe the nature of graffiti since it is traditionally often associated with rebellious youthfulness, vandalism or defacing where it is executed without due regard to urban by-laws or done on private property without authorized permission, hence making it punishable in law. However, in recent times in many cities of the world, it has begun to gain mainstream recognition as an aspect of popular culture particularly in addressing social/political, cultural and economic issues as perceived, experienced and expressed by the youth.

Graffiti as a form of art is not a new phenomenon and related work has been in existence since ancient times. This includes inscriptions, figure drawings and elaborate wall paintings dating back to ancient Egypt, ancient Greece and the Roman Empire. The rise of modern graffiti, however, can be traced back to the latter half of the 20th Century, sprouting in the United States of America in the 1960s, featuring notable pioneering names such as *cornbread* in

Philadelphia, *TAKI 183* and *Phase 2* in New York City. These and other luminaries developed the various popular styles of modern Graffiti such as *tagging*, *bubble writing*, *SAMO*, *stencil graffiti*, and *OBEY Giant* among others. Graffiti tended to decline somewhat in the 1970s as it became more and more controversial in large cities as it struggled to gain acceptability. Subsequently, there was a period of suspicion and disagreement among city officials, who laboured to comprehend it and often resisted it, law enforcement officers who sought to prohibit its growth and artists who were determined to assert their freedom of expression. It picked up again upon the onset of hip-hop in popular culture in the 1980s and continued flourishing to different degrees towards the turn of the Century, as it gained recognition in various parts of the world.

Matatu Graffiti

Within the broader description of graffiti, Kenya has a unique form of graffiti that is executed, mainly through spray painting, on the body sides of medium-sized public service commuter vehicles or mini-buses known locally as *Matatus* which ply the urban network of roads within and around the outskirts of the capital city, Nairobi. This form of graffiti which can be described as an offshoot of the traditional graffiti found in the form of murals is often referred to as '*Matatu art*' or more specifically, '*Matatu graffiti*'. Matatu art may refer to the holistic creative rendering of the vehicle, including colours and the body modifications,

while Matatu graffiti refers to the application of the graffiti itself as well as its creative and expressive value. Although in its formative stages the graffiti on 'matatus' did not attract much attention and was only mildly decorative, it has in recent years taken on a new dimension not only as a strategic business tool used to attract youthful commuters but has become bolder as an avenue of social commentary and expression in the kind of messages carried as well as becoming increasingly intertwined with the bustling urban culture. Accompanied by booming music in the vehicles, the link between *matatu graffiti* and the hip-hop genre of music in particular and hip-hop culture in general, is undeniable and seems to have borrowed from the trend in America during the emergence of hip-hop culture in America in the 1980s.

The matatu graffiti lends a style that seems a juxtaposition of various styles with the graphical design of pictorials and wordings forming the core of the design and message. It is characterized by a blend of bright, attractive colours with pictorials or pre-designed stickers that underscore popular mannerisms, gestures and postures that are familiar and popular with the youth, particularly within the confines of the hip-hop culture. Matatu graffiti also predominantly features a wide spectrum of wordings, phrases, abbreviations and acronyms that are synonymous with hip-hop culture and are recognizable by the youth within the intricate hip-hop musical discourse. (Plate 1a, 1b).

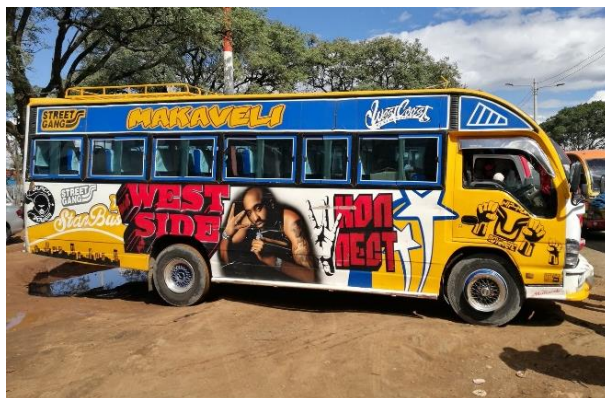


Plate 1a – *Matatu graffiti*



Plate 1b - *Matatu graffiti*

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to analyse *Matatu* graffiti, this study employed the concept of formal analysis that is used to analyse any work of Art. Barrett (1994) categorizes formal analysis into four levels namely: description, analysis, interpretation and judgement. Description refers to the fundamental visible nature of the Artwork including its form, technique and style and addresses itself to *what* the viewer sees. Analysis refers mainly to the execution of the work including the usage of elements and principles of art, composition, as well as generation of subject matter; it addresses itself to *how* the work was done. Interpretation delves into the meaning of the artwork or its broader thematic context and it addresses itself to *why* the artist created the work as it appears including the possible motivation or inspiration. To some degree, it also refers ultimately to anecdotes of self-expression. Judgement refers to the overall quality of work as well as its originality. This often gives rank to one piece of art against another. Judgement hence establishes certain criteria for evaluating a work of art and identifies evidence that meets each criterion in order to culminate in value judgement.

While the described levels of analysis are applicable to any work of art, when it comes to the analysis of graffiti and particularly *Matatu* graffiti, this study asserts that these levels are significant to different extents and that one of them, interpretation, becomes of critical importance. A conventional work of Art, for instance, a wood sculpture or an oil painting, may be primarily examined in terms of the finer details of its individual nature, technique, style, execution, composition and overall value; yet the interpretation of its subject matter or the message it conveys may be secondary, purely subjective and at times inconsequential. In the case of *Matatu* graffiti, by its very nature of being mobile art, it lends its significance in disseminating a message instantly yet effectively and hence loading more significance not on its nature, style, technique or

execution, but on its interpretive impact. Subsequently, in this regard, this study borrows from Barrett's principles of interpretation as primarily important in analysing *Matatu* graffiti and although these principles cut across all artworks, some strike an element of specificity to *Matatu* graffiti. Some of the principles as outlined by Barrett (1994) that underscore this specificity state that; 1). *Interpretations are persuasive arguments.* 2). *Interpretations are not so much absolutely right, but more or less reasonable, convincing, enlightening, and informative.* 3). *All art is in part about the world in which it emerged.* 4). *No single interpretation is exhaustive of the meaning of an artwork.* 4). *The meanings of an artwork may be different from its significance to the viewer. Interpretation is ultimately a communal endeavour, and the community is ultimately self-corrective.* 5). *Good interpretations invite us to see for ourselves and to continue on our own.*

FINDINGS

Genesis and generation of themes and subject matter

The study sought to examine the genesis of themes that form the basis for the subject matter featured in *matatu* graffiti. This was based on the premise that *matatu* graffiti, like any other creative undertaking is a legitimate form of artistic expression that delves into pertinent societal issues, be they economic, political, social or cultural. The study sort to determine whether *matatu* graffiti fits into this kind of description and whether the youth use it adequately to express their views, ideas or feelings that are informed by careful observation of society or emanating from their own experiences

Wider Inquiry into *Matatu* Graffiti

From the study of *Matatu* graffiti in Kenya, it emerged that the artistic creativity evident in the graffiti is intricately intertwined with hip-hop *music* and hip-hop *culture* that has taken root among the youth in Kenya. This relation is so intricate that it

can, indeed, be referred to as 'symbiotic' in nature because it exists almost in complete harmony. It can be concluded that the stage of development where matatu graffiti in Kenya currently stands, it is fed to a significant extent, by hip-hop music and culture making the symbiotic relationship somewhere between 'commensalism' and 'mutualism' for purposes of clarity. Commensalism is advocated by those belonging to the school of thought which argues, in this case, that matatu graffiti draws *significantly more* from hip-hop music and culture than hip-hop music and culture benefits from the graffiti. 'Mutualism' is advocated by those who belong to the other school of thought that believes that the two creative disciplines benefit mutually from one another. In order to put this in perspective, this study identified a number of categories from which one may view and analyse matatu graffiti and which helps to underscore this symbiotic relationship in terms of 1.) Emergence of themes and 2.) Generation of subject matter. These categories are *portraiture and other pictorials, catchy words and phrases, expressive captions, graphical designs and intricate bright colours*

Portraiture and other pictorials

One of the most striking aspects of matatu graffiti is portraiture (and other pictorials) which are executed through spray painting or are guided by stickers. Many of these were well executed and covered a big portion of the side body and often covered the entire rear screen, meaning that the screen no longer served its purpose as a rear see-through. It was evident that while portraiture covered some emerging issues or less known individuals in given contexts, it was predominantly applied to certain individual global icons or luminaries who appealed to certain persuasions or were uniquely outstanding in their crusade for social/political or economic justice. Portraiture also

featured selected celebrities who tended to resonate particularly with the hip-hop psyche or had emerged as megastars in other disciplines like reality TV, Cinema and sports and subsequently became part of popular culture. Some of the global political leaders whose portraits were featured often included Martin Luther King Jr, Marcus Garvey, Barack Obama, Abraham Lincoln, Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Muammar Gaddafi, Nelson Mandela and in some cases Mahatma Gandhi and even the Pope. The study found that these individuals were not just merely featured but were also mentioned in some lyrics that tended to propagate certain themes and hence reflected a particular pattern of thought. These themes were such as liberation, freedom and equality, resistance, revolution, emancipation or memorable transformative occurrences such as the election of Barack Obama. Barack Obama (Plate 2) was, in this case, identified not so much because he was a U.S. President, but because his election in November, 2008 as the first African American President was a milestone in America and was particularly significant for the psyche of African peoples throughout the world and the youth in particular in terms of what was indeed possible if one chased their dreams. In Kenya, he became particularly idolized because of his Kenyan ancestry as well as his visit to the Country in July 2012. Abraham Lincoln was exalted for ending slavery in America and emancipation henceforth became an important turning point in the history of slavery in America and elsewhere. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a renowned American civil rights leader whose work and leadership through the American civil rights movement changed the dynamics of race relations and civil rights forever. Benjamin Franklin (Plate 3) was one of America's founding fathers and has a strong political and scientific legacy that earned him the title 'First American'.



Plate 2: Portrait of Barack Obama

One would probably be surprised to find the portrait of Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara in graffiti (Plate 4) on a matatu in the heart of Nairobi. The Argentine Marxist revolutionary and guerrilla leader who was also a key figure in the Cuban revolution that overthrew the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista has been over the years been idolized as a countercultural symbol of rebellion over fifty years after his death in October, 1967. Exalted in lyrics, it becomes possible to comprehend how his exploits were ultimately synergized into contemporary heroism making him a global insignia in revolutionary thinking or just the feeling of rebelliousness among the youth. The featuring of Pablo Escobar is perhaps the most puzzling of graffiti portraiture and raises serious questions about whether there exists some philosophical or intellectual rationale in the minds of graffiti artists or the youth who consume it as a basis for thought or choice of the subject matter. However, upon enquiry, it was evident that contemporary youth view such individuals with completely different lenses from those that other people perhaps would.



Plate 3: Lincoln, Benjamin Franklin and Obama

Pablo Escobar Gaviria is considered to have been in his prime the richest criminal in history, supplying about 80% of all cocaine smuggled into the United States at the height of his infamous career. In this regard, it can only be imagined the millions of young lives that were destroyed in their prime through drug addiction, related crime, loss of education and ultimately the related social decadence. Emanating from the Narcos web-television crime drama series on the life of Pablo Escobar, for instance, it is evident that the youth viewing the series interpreted Escobar’s rise not from a brutal criminal perspective or the consequences emanating from the activities of the Medellin cartel, but from that of a heroic and cunning generator of wealth; hence seeing his life as being heroic rather than criminal or that the accumulation and attainment of such colossal wealth, somehow justified the means. His depiction in graffiti (plate 5) therefore suggests that he is viewed as a cult hero, pointing to exaltation rather than condemnation.



Plate 4: Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara and Marcus Garvey
 Source: Getty images



Plate 5: Pablo Escobar Gaviria

Apart from political figures, graffiti portraiture also prominently features music legends. Robert Nester Marley was a favourite of graffiti artists for a long time. The study found that what may be termed as ‘mainstream reggae’, propagated by Marley and others like Peter McIntosh of the original Wailers, who highlighted issues that underscored social justice, freedom and equality, had some resonance with the youth mainly because Marley (plate 6) had already become a legend. In this regard, reference could still be made to the lyrics of his music though

many of the youth were not even born when he died in 1981. There was evidently also some fondness for reggae as a musical genre particularly among the youth who prescribed to what is described as the ‘ghetto culture’. It was unclear, however, to what extent the youth fundamentally associated with or even comprehended the depth of the ideals propagated by Bob Marley and the other major figures in mainstream reggae particularly in view of the emergence of musicians like Vybz Kartel (Plate 7), another significant Jamaican musician.



Plate 6: Bob Marley



Plate 7: Vybz Kartel

Adidja Azim Palmer, better known as Vybz Kartel, is a Jamaican musical artist and dancehall icon, who is the leader of the Portmore Empire (known as GAZA), an alliance of dancehall artists. Unlike mainstream reggae, dancehall lyrics are predominantly inclined towards rebellion,

affluence, money, cars and women (which have in many instances been termed as vulgar) as opposed to the more traditional themes revolving around social justice, freedom and equality articulated by Bob Marley. The study found that the youth generally had a high level of resonance with this

kind of music, lyrics and dance styles which for some reason seemed to underscore their own utopia in terms of wealth and affluence as well as reflecting their sense of youthful restlessness that seemed to translate into a naïve and at times, reckless feeling of individual liberty. The Gaza influence in Kenya is apparently associated with the notorious GAZA gang in one of the neighbourhoods in the outskirts of Nairobi and it is therefore noteworthy that at times, graffiti can feature negative foreign influence by virtue of what youth interpret as heroism no matter how misplaced or counter-productive it may be to their lives and aspirations. Connected to the GAZA phenomenon in Nairobi, is another rival gang known as Gully side, thought to be influenced by the Gully (side) Empire headed by Jamaican musician, 'Mavado'. The feuds and gangster culture expounded by the Jamaican rival empires seems to find an intriguing connection to the formation of rival gangs by the same names in Nairobi and it is clear to all that the subsequent spillover effect of this influence has nothing to do with the quest for social justice or the advancement of youth issues and does not therefore augur well for the wellbeing of the lives of the youth in the short as well as in the long term. The inclination towards this kind of influence is, however, quite clear in the expression found in Matatu graffiti.

Other musicians featured in graffiti include American musicians Tupac Shakur and 'Notorious

B.I.G.' or 'Biggie'. Just as in the case of the cold war musical rivalry between the Jamaican musical 'empires', the same kind of gangster rivalry was seen to play out between Tupac and Notorious B.I.G, both now deceased (Plate 8). It is significant that their portraits should still feature prominently in Kenyan matatu graffiti emphasizing once again the kind of influence and grip these musicians have held and continue to hold over the lives and psyche of Kenyan youth; psyche here referring to the way the youth perceive themselves consequent upon what they interpret as being an adorable yet intriguing lifestyle, rewarded by money, wealth and affluence; and more so, doing whatever it takes to reach that threshold by any means necessary. Other American musicians in this genre, which can be referred to as 'hardcore' Gangsta rap or old school hip-hop and whose portraits are also often featured included 'Snoop Dog' (plate 10), 'Dr Dre', 'Ice Cube', 'Eazy-E', Fifty Cents, Eminem and Jay Z among others. These musicians had their lyrics centred on resistance, rebelliousness, police brutality and racial issues.

Kanye West and Beyoncé (Plate 9) are both renowned hip-hop superstars. Beyoncé and her husband, 'Jay Z' are an idolized musical couple often referred to as the hip-hop 'power couple'. Kanye West is not only renowned for his music, but also for his flamboyance and his marriage to American reality T.V. star Kim Kardashian.



Plate 8: Tupac and The Notorious B.I.G



Plate 9: Beyoncé and Kanye West

Within the hip-hop genre, there are also other musicians whose appearance in graffiti portraiture draws some measure of interest. The study found that the sub-genre generally referred to as ‘commercial hip-hop’ or ‘new style’ was attractive to the youth who associate with graffiti portraiture. This featured musicians like ‘Birdman’, ‘Lil Wayne’ (Plate 11), ‘Migos trio’ and ‘Rick Ross’ among others whose lyrics revolved around

affluence; women, money, cars or generally life in the fast lane. The obsession with these musicians by the youth in Kenya can be viewed from the perspective that most of these individuals are extremely wealthy, making their lifestyles something not only to behold but also to aspire to. The point at which the youth reconnect with their own reality and emerge from delusions of grandeur has long been a subject of concern and debate.



Plate 10: Snoop Dog
Source: Getty Images



Plate 11: Lil Wayne
Source: Getty Images

The obsession with successful individuals also extends to other high-profile sports disciplines like football, W.W.E wrestling and basketball, particularly the N.B.A. where certain individuals are accorded the level of adoration like they were some demi-Gods. The late American basketball star, Kobe Bryant (Plate 12) is particularly idolized, so are Soccer greats in premier league competition such as Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo as well as prominent managers such of former Manchester United Manager, Sir Alex Ferguson, or ‘Fergie’ (Plate 13). Others are U.S. wrestling superstars John Cena and ‘Roman Reigns’ among many others. Many ‘Matatu’ vehicles will be adorned with graffiti that features colours and emblems of various clubs, like ‘Manchester United’ ‘Arsenal’

and ‘Chelsea’ football clubs of the English Premier League as well as others in Italy, Spain, Germany and France among great footballing nations. This is extended as well to American Basketball clubs whose members are probably better known in Kenya than the Country’s cabinet. It is important to note that the youth who subscribe to hip-hop are generally the same block that also is obsessed with the apparent affluence associated with the other disciplines mentioned and hence there exists a convergence of different spheres of influence from which the youth draw their fascination. The common denominators in all these influences are predominantly the flamboyance, prestige, money and sense of ‘achievement’ that is portrayed by these superstars.



Plate 12: 'KOBÉ' referring to Kobe Bryant
 Source: Getty Images



Plate 13: 'Fergie' referring to Sir Alex Ferguson
 Source: Matwana - matatu culture

There are other types of pictorials and portraiture which may not necessarily be related to any particular individual but are expressive of the culture of rebelliousness or unruliness often associated with Matatu culture, and which the youth tend to subscribe to. This is mainly because it is viewed as 'trendy' or even 'fashionable' to be

rebellious. The element of misplaced anger in hip-hop tends to fuel such grandstanding. Pictorials such as the one shown in plates 13 and 14 depict this 'macho' pause, through expressive faces of 'meanness' or 'getting blown' and are greatly admired by the youth.



Plate 13: rebellious 'macho' look
 Source: Getty Images



Plate 14: 'Getting Blown'
 Source: Getty Images

Catchy words and phrases

The other aspect of graffiti art that is common is the use of words and/or phrases. These tend to emanate from the wider hip-hop culture of expression,

particularly as belted out in hip-hop lyrics or contained in hip-hop 'psyche'. This aspect of graffiti features single words, catchphrases, expressive captions and even quotes from famous

individuals. Words that feature are such as ‘Eurobond’, ‘Galacticos’, ‘Ferrari’, ‘Lamborghini’, ‘Versace’, ‘Catalyst’, all which are connected to some aspect of hip-hop hype as contained in the lyrics of a variety of songs or as propagated in the wider hip-hop stereotype. Some like ‘Ferrari’ and ‘Lamborghini’ (Plates 15 & 16)

obviously underscore the glamour of affluence and wealth and are often associated with the kind of wanton display of wealth mainly by hip-hop artists and other stars who happen to be fabulously wealthy. This flamboyance catches on with the youth who soak it all up as part of their fascination and obsession with these superstars.



Plate 15: Catchy words: *Ferrari*
Source: Getty Images



Plate 16: Catchy words: *Lamborghini/Maddskilz*
Source: Getty Images

Catchy phrases are such as ‘Street King’, ‘Hot Wheel’, ‘Total Pain’, ‘World Boss’, ‘Portmore Empire’, ‘Iggy Azalea’, ‘West Coast’, ‘Cash Money’ and ‘Let’s get blown’ among many others. These catchy phrases are not just empty words, they are embedded within a specific aspect of mainly hip-hop background whose context is well understood among the youth who follow this genre. The ‘Portmore Empire’, (Plate 17) for example, is an alliance of dancehall artists from Portmore (a town in Jamaica) identified with musician Vybz

Kartel. These music groupings or alliances have their history of rivalry, for instance, that between GAZA and GULLY (Side). ‘24: Legacy’, (Plate 18) actually refers to a popular American television action series about a returning military hero. Ordinarily, the common passer-by may not recognize the message on the matatu graffiti but hip-hop fans who are most likely also television action drama enthusiasts will readily understand the association.



Plate 17: Catchy phrases – ‘The Portmore Empire’
Source: Getty Images



Plate 18: Catchy phrases – ‘24: Legacy’ series
Source: Getty Images

Expressive Captions/quotes

Expressive captions are aimed at expressing some form of grievance or dissatisfaction or highlighting frustration. These also often refer to some events or occurrences from where the caption ultimately caught on and became a counter symbol of all related grievances. The caption ‘*Man eat man society*’ (Plate 19) was derived from the notion of the perils of *capitalism* and how capitalist Kenya was perceived by neighbouring Tanzania which embraced a Socialist system then known as ‘Ujamaa’ in the 1970s. The notion propagated then was that a Socialist society is caring and considerate while a capitalist society is that of ‘man eat man’. This perception of class exploitation has generally lingered for many years and all situations that seem

to underscore this perception are readily expressed in such captions in whatever current context they may be referring to. The caption about *haters* (Plate 20) is derived from hip-hop ‘hater songs’ whose lyrics are often an obsessive diatribe against haters (perceived personal enemies) who are accused of all manner of transgressions and are, subsequently, dismissed in equal measure. This particular aspect of rap is very popular with hip-hop lovers because it is a way of hitting back at those who are perceived, rightly or wrongly, to be stumbling blocks to the success of others in the never-ending culture of competition and rivalry. These ‘haters’ are hence taunted for their ‘jealousy’, ‘hatefulness’, ‘envy’, ‘meanness’, ‘ill will’ and musicians can rap all day about this and how they will ultimately prevail upon them.



Plate 19: Expressive captions
Source: Getty Images



Plate 20: Expressive captions – against haters
Source: Getty Images

Short quotes, carefully selected, are often quite well known and are already in the public domain but serve the good purpose of reminding all who care to read. Most of these are often accompanied by appropriate portraiture of the individual associated with the quote. The motivation behind this is probably what one would refer to as '*populist iconism*', which is the tendency to popularize the words of selected world icons as contained in their quotes, which by association, subsequently popularizes the matatu as a moving source of 'knowledge' and 'inspiration'. The display of such famous quotes may vary from those associated with leftist revolutionary or resistance rhetoric, propagated by the likes of 'Che' Guevara, Fidel Castro and Malcolm X, to peace based transformative pragmatism propagated by visionaries ranging from Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela to Barack Obama. It remains a subject of deep controversy and even scepticism in this regard, whether indeed the graffiti fraternity, which includes the graffiti artists who execute it, the clients (matatu owners) who commission the work or the youth who consume it, prescribe to or even comprehend the depth of contribution to humanity of these people they so often idolize in their graffiti; or is it that their portraits and quotes are easily recognizable and are therefore merely trendy. In reviewing basic interviews with various groups of youth who view or are associated with graffiti, the study found out that in many cases, they were aware of some of the political icons, as cases in point, but only in superficial terms. In this regard, they were aware, for instance, of Nelson Mandela or Martin Luther King Jr, and that these were greatly exalted individuals in their theatre of influence, that is, South African and the United States respectively; and that this influence transcended the world; but the interviewees had no concrete understanding of the content of this influence in philosophical or ideological terms. The appearance of the portraits and quotes of these icons was, therefore, mainly

because it was trendy and the faces easily recognizable. However, it was observed that the youth seem to have a much more insightful perspective when it came to iconic musicians and other categories of superstars like film stars, football players, boxers and wrestlers; particularly about their careers, personal lives, wealth and escapades almost as if these individuals' lives formed some kind of soap-opera or reality TV entertainment.

Execution

Matatu graffiti is predominantly spray-painted with the use of appropriate stickers. The graffiti artists use spray cans to paint the matatu side bodies with flashy, bright colours which together with the catchy words, phrases and pictorials, as well as the loud music and fancy body work, can make the vehicle quite a sight to behold (Plates 21, 22). Some of the graffiti work is an attractive combination of techniques; using portraiture, catchy words and phrases as well as attractive colours all laid out in an inclusive design (Plate 23). It is also evident that there is an admirable level of finesse in many of the graffiti particularly the portraiture which closely resembles the real-life likeness of the individual under study. One cannot miss noticing the good sense of composition in the way the portrait is fitted well within the body surface as well as the use of foreshortening to emphasize the gesture as shown in the depiction of Tarrus Riley, a Jamaican-American reggae singer (plate 24). All this is deliberately done to ensure that heads are turned when that matatu flashes by and more so, that those who comprehend what the graffiti is all about get the message loud and clear. From an artistic view, graffiti art can be described as attractive to the eye, specifically designed for mobile public communication, using realism and graphics to create a holistic piece of artwork that can be termed as an 'emerging artistic culture' in its own right.



Plate 21: Use of catchy words and phrases

Source: Getty Images



Plate 22: Use of bright, attractive colours

Source: Getty Images



Plate 23: Combination of techniques and styles

Source: Getty Images



Plate 24: Finesse in portraiture

Source: Getty Images

The communicative capability of Matatu graffiti to the general public

The communicative capability of Matatu graffiti to the general public can be described as significant from the onset, particularly viewed from the world of ‘content’ and the use of attractive ‘images’. The old saying, “A picture is worth a thousand words” emanates from Statistics that show that 93 percent of communication is nonverbal and that people process visuals 60,000 times faster than text. In this regard, it was seen as imperative that graffiti Artists used what would be described as ‘rapid pictorial images’ on the bodies of moving vehicles as a strategy for content dissemination. Mallon (2012) asserts that from clip art to photography to illustrations to screenshots, attractive images add punch and power to your content. ‘Rapid pictorial

images’ in this context refer to images that must be viewed, processed and internalized within the split moment that a *Matatu* passes by or slows down in a traffic snarl-up in a time span that is neither constant nor guaranteed. In view of this, it was evident that most viewers of these images, be they fellow road users, passengers riding in other *Matatus* or other public transport vehicles, commuters standing at bus stops or passers-by in the streets were exposed to a passing glimpse of the content of the images and that the images were effective in drawing their attention to a significant extent. What was not necessarily clear was whether this exposure time was sufficient to process the images adequately so as to internalize the intended holistic message of the Artist. It was quite obvious from the study that matatu graffiti is targeted towards the youth who already have an inclination

towards the kind of messages being propagated and that these messages make very little sense to anyone outside this youth bracket. The effectiveness of the graffiti done on a passing vehicle, even though well executed may be of little value to someone who has no idea about the genesis of the graffiti art and cannot therefore decode the message. To the youth, however, a quick glance at the passing graffiti is all that it takes to comprehend the message and move on. In this case, the graffiti is effective as a communication tool.

CONCLUSION

Drawbacks of graffiti creativity

The basic question that remains unclear is the extent to which the youth in Nairobi have the opportunity to express themselves through graffiti as an avenue of Artistic expression that meets the artistic scrutiny of mainstream art. The question is whether the youth actually express themselves or is the expression done on their behalf by a few who are engaged in the matatu graffiti world who, hence, become 'proxies' or who form a small group of 'opinion shapers' that all others henceforth follow. It appears that this could, indeed, be the current trend that explains the phenomenon of hip-hop influence in matatu graffiti where there exist a few opinion leaders who channel out what they perceive as 'trending and current' in the graffiti work that they execute. The rest of the entire youth fraternity, subsequently, become the 'consumers' of the information and messages contained in graffiti art. The true concept of an emerging artistic genre or discipline entails the wholesome involvement or participation of a significant segment or body of society in the execution of related works in order to gauge the effectiveness of individual and collective expression. If matatu graffiti is channelled out by a small group of renowned matatu graffiti 'artists', as seems the case currently, then the concept of self-expression will be stifled and will subsequently be retarded.

The youth and their enlightenment

As has been mentioned earlier, the study concludes that the influence of matatu graffiti upon the youth in Nairobi is significant enough to affect perceptions and therefore influence attitudes and general outward behaviour among them. To appreciate the magnitude of this matter, it is crucial to note that the youth form the bulk of Kenya the populace. Approximately 74% of Kenyans are 34 years and below (Forti & Grace, 2012) and further, 64% of this population is 25 years and below. The debate now is whether matatu graffiti and its thematic genesis and nature of subject matter have so far contributed to youth enlightenment or whether it has merely provided a convenient smokescreen through which the youth see nothing else but hip-hop. There is the school of thought that subscribes to the view that matatu graffiti, particularly seen through the influence of hip-hop has not contributed much to youth enlightenment and idealistic self-expression based on tangible and concise thought patterns, critical thinking or generation and synthesising of ideas. This study found too much leaning and dependence upon the influence emanating from hip-hop culture, particularly from America and Jamaica, the epicentres of hip-hop music, at the expense of tangible self-expression emanating from subject matter that seeks to address burning issues in society as would be perceived and/or experienced by the youth in their local environment. It had been envisaged that the emergence and development of subject matter in matatu graffiti would reflect what youth experience or think in regard to pertinent socioeconomic, political and cultural issues affecting them. This apparent gap in matatu graffiti can be traced back and linked to the general suspicion that hip hop as a music genre has had negative influence upon the youth through lyrics which are derived from negative themes. Gitonga (2009) asserts that hip hop and rap music have been criticized as being a bad influence on the youth. She further states that 'This is because hip hop culture

focuses on topics such as beer drinking, misogyny, violence, drugs, sex, and hate'. Further, 'These themes are seen to feed into the youth's need for self-indulgent instant gratification, rather than encourage the kind of ideals that society as a whole would consider more worthy' (Gitonga, 2009, p.3). This view remains very pertinent and is still held by many people including parents and teachers who believe that their children's sometimes delinquent behaviour at home or in school emanates from the influence obtained from musical lyrics. However, Gitonga (ibid) states that recent research has shown that this may not necessarily be the case in all circumstances and that hip hop, particularly local-based hip hop and rap can be used for youth sensitization, peacebuilding and positive thinking. In singling out Kenyan hip hop, Gitonga (ibid) asserts that in Kenya, hip hop culture has been an integral part of the social and political discourses through themes like activism, contestation of political injustices, peace, and cohesion that is enshrined in the hip hop lyrics. Keyes (2004) concurs and argues that 'much of the hip-hop community is socially and politically conscious and that as time has progressed, rap has become increasingly inclusive to contribute positively to the humankind' (Keyes, 2004, p.272). What seems evident is that hip hop as a genre seems to have its own categorization generally divided into two broad sources of inspiration. There is that which advocates moderate themes based on more traditional themes such as enlightenment, political consciousness, liberation, freedom and equality, activism, cohesion and human rights as a response to pertinent societal issues. There is that which breaks away from this to concentrate on themes which focus more on affluence and money and all the indulgencies that accompany great wealth, which can be very confusing and distracting to the youth as they attempt to ape mannerisms, attitudes and behaviour that ultimately is of no use to their lives and wellbeing in the real world that they live in. Matatu graffiti seems to be still transfixed in the awe and glamour of the second category themes.

However, it is a potent tool for social discourse and just needs to be better directed towards themes that are more mainstream and that are geared towards youth enlightenment and empowerment, social political awareness and intellectual growth. There is, however, those who have argued that the youth will always be youth and that their youthful associations, indulgencies, escapades, naïveté and even mistakes should be left to play themselves out within the period of their youth. This argument has great pitfalls though and bad influences, however glamorous, can be counter-productive, outright destructive and in some instances irreversible.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Currently, the matatu graffiti seems confined within the hands of very few graffiti artists who influence information flow and the content of the subject matter. It is therefore recommended that

- graffiti as an art be introduced to the numerous youth groups who will use the skills imparted on them to make a living through their creativity where creativity will provide them with an opportunity to express themselves
- graffiti as a sub-genre of art be taught in a formal manner in institutions that teach the fine arts at various levels, in order to introduce other key facets of artistic training and knowledge
- matatu graffiti should be introduced to the wider fraternity of artists in order to expand the potential for exploration of a wider spectrum of themes and subject matter.
- the current crop of matatu graffiti artists, though talented, should be encouraged to explore and study other sources of themes and subject matter that affect the youth; and not confine themselves to the influence of other musical sub-cultures
- matatu graffiti should be interrelated with other aspects of societal enlightenment or 'positive

activism' in order for it to play a more significant role in enlightening and educating the youth as well as sensitizing them and highlighting issues that are pertinent to their lives

REFERENCES

- Barrett, T. (1994) *Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary*. Mayfield Publishing Company, Mountain View, California.
- Chang, J., Forman, M., Neal, M. A., Perry, I., Quinn, E., & Chang, J. (2006). *Keeping It Real: Interpreting Hip-Hop*.
- Forti, D., & Grace, M. (2012). *The danger of marginalisation: An Analysis of Kenyan youth and their integration into political, socio-economic life*. Nairobi
- Ganz, N. (2004). *Graffiti World*. New York: Abrams.
- Gitonga, P. N. (2009). Music as social discourse: the contribution of popular music to the awareness and prevention of HIV/AIDS in Nairobi, Kenya. *Unpublished M. Mus thesis, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Port Elizabeth*.
- Gray, S. (2015) *Graffiti History – 10 important moments*: retrieved from <https://www.widewalls.ch/graffiti-history-10-important-moments/>
- Herd, D. (2009). Changing images of violence in rap music lyrics: 1979–1997. *Journal of public health policy*, 30(4), 395-406.
- Hess, H. (2015, January 20). *African Graffiti Art - Raising Awareness*. Retrieved November 12, 2017, from Widewalls: <https://www.widewalls.ch/feature-african-graffiti-raising-awareness-2015/>
- Keyes, C. L. (2004). *Rap music and street consciousness* (Vol. 394). University of Illinois Press.
- Ley, D., & Cybriwsky, R. (2009). Urban Graffiti as Territorial Markers. *Tucson*, 22-32.
- Mallon, S. (2012) *Visual Content Creation Ideas to Add Punch and Power*: retrieved from <http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2012/12/add-power-visual-content-creation/>
- Manco, T. (2005). *Lost Art & Caleb Neelon*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Nganyi, W. A. (2009). *Kenyan hip-hop as a site of negotiating urban youth identities in Nairobi*. Gottingen: Sierke Verlag.
- Oniang'o, M. (n.d.). How Graffiti Artists Are Driving the Matatu Industry in Nairobi. Retrieved from: <https://www.africa.com/how-graffiti-artists-are-driving-the-matatu-industry-in-nairobi/>
- Oyserman, D. (2004). Self-concept and identity. In *Self and social identity*, eds. Brewer, Marilynn B., and Hewstone, Miles. Blackwell.
- Perkins, W. E. (1996). *Droppin'science: Critical essays on rap music and hip hop culture*. Temple University Press.
- Tagg, P. (2000). Analysing Popular Music: Theory, Method and Practice. In R. Middleton (Ed.), *Reading Pop: Approaches to Textual Analysis in Popular Music*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Umeogu, B. (2013). The Aftermath of Globalization on African Identity. *Open Journal of Philosophy*, 174-175.
- Wambugi, J. (2017). An Introduction to Nairobi's Matatu Culture. Retrieved from: <https://theculturetrip.com/africa/kenya/articles/an-introduction-to-nairobis-matatu-culture/>