

# Preserving students' subculture expressed through graffiti: A case study of University of Colombo Library

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Graffiti is an expression of culture that goes back thousands of years. Graffiti has been created using various techniques in graphical or written forms in public spaces without any permission or approval. Even though graffiti is an informal form of art, it conveys a great deal of information related to a particular society and its people. However, graffiti can disappear over time, and therefore, it is crucial to preserve it. Sri Lankan universities contain graffiti made on walls and furniture by the students. This research focused on the graffiti at the Main Library, created by the students of the University of Colombo. The objectives of the study were to identify and document the different types of graffiti present in the Main Library, categorise them into themes, and analyse the underlying meanings and significance of these graffiti connected to the students' lives. The Main Library consists of more than 1500 graffiti, and this research utilised a convenience sample of 308 graffiti found at the Lending Section (5<sup>th</sup> Floor) of the Library. The graffiti were transcribed into an MS Excel document and each graffiti was photographed separately. The dataset was thematically categorised based on content analysis approach into; Poems (n=10, 3.2%), Sentences (n=15, 4.9%), Verses (n=111, 36%), and Songs (n=150, 49%). Each category was further divided into sub-themes (n=286) such as Love (n=121, 42.3%), Broken Heart (n=107, 37.4%), Life Reality (n=24, 8.4%), University Life (n=15, 5.2%), Friendship (n=6, 2%), Family (n=3, 1%), Loneliness (n=1, 0.3%), Library (n=3, 1%), and miscellaneous topics accounted for smaller proportions. Sub-themes *Love* and *Broken Heart* dominate the data set, making up to 80% of the graffiti analysed. The popular song lyrics used in the graffiti showcase the students' awareness of contemporary popular culture and how they can be used to express their emotions, relationship struggles, rejections, and desires. The sub-theme on Life Reality (8.4%) reflects the hardship of life, resilience, and the actuality of human life, adding some philosophical dimension to this research. A limited amount of graffiti on University Life (5.2%) reflects insights into students' academic pressure, university relationships, and thoughts on the university system. The findings suggest that the graffiti in the main library serves as a key resource that expresses the emotional outbursts among youth, heavily shaped by popular music and cultural narratives. While love remains central, the dynamics of university life and social realities highlight the role of graffiti as a bridge between personal experiences and collective ideas. This research will be expanded by documenting all the graffiti at the Main Library of the University of Colombo and analysing them comprehensively to derive deeper insights into the subculture of Sri Lankan university students, while enabling librarians to fulfil their social responsibility of preserving this unique form of art for future generations.

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