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Ephemeral Inscriptions: Graffiti, Gentrification, and the Struggle for Public Space in the Indonesian Metropolis

Bimala Putri[1*], Omar Alieva[2], Henny Kesuma[3], Ifah Shandy[4], Ni Made Nova Indriyani[5]

[1]Department of Islamic Education, Enigma Institute, Palembang, Indonesia

[2]Department of Art and Cultural Education, Taraz Institute of Higher Education, Taraz, Kazakhstan

[3]Department of Primary Grade Education, Tara Institute of Higher Education, Medan, Indonesia

[4]Department of Mathematics Education, Enigma Institute, Palembang, Indonesia

[5]Department of Psychiatry, CMHC Research Center, Palembang, Indonesia

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***Corresponding author:**
Bimala Putri

E-mail address:
bimala.putri@enigma.or.id

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A B S T R A C T

The visual landscape of the contemporary city is a contested terrain where cultural expression and economic forces collide. This study investigates the complex relationship between graffiti practices and gentrification in Indonesia, moving beyond a simple resistance-versus-commodity binary to analyze graffiti as a dialectical force in urban transformation. It examines how graffiti functions as a mode of spatial inscription, a carrier of urban affect, and a critical barometer of the struggle for the right to the city in the Global South. This research employed a longitudinal, mixed-methods, comparative case study design, focusing on the Glok district in Jakarta and the Braga district in Bandung (2019-2025). The methodology integrated quantitative spatio-temporal GIS analysis of 1,250 graffiti pieces correlated with economic data, and a systematic content analysis of their form and themes. This was triangulated with deep qualitative data from 24 months of ethnographic fieldwork and 45 semi-structured interviews with artists, residents, and officials. A critical positionality statement reflects on the ethical praxis of the research. The findings reveal a clear trajectory where illicit, text-based graffiti, initially prevalent in peripheral spaces, created a subcultural "symbolic economy." This was followed by a spatial and formal shift towards large-scale, sanctioned murals in prime commercial zones. Quantitative analysis established a strong correlation ($r = 0.78$) between mural density and rising commercial rents, but this is interpreted cautiously to avoid assumptions of direct causality. Ethnographic vignettes and interview data reveal the affective dimensions of this transformation, highlighting how the changing streetscape is experienced as a loss of place by long-term residents and consumed as an aesthetic "vibe" by newcomers, while artists navigate complex issues of agency and co-optation. In conclusion, the evolution of graffiti from illicit inscription to curated aesthetic mirrors the process of gentrification. The study concludes that while the co-optation of street art is a powerful force in neoliberal place-branding, the practice remains a site of contested agency and meaning-making. The concept of "ephemeral inscriptions" is proposed to better capture the performative, transient, and deeply political nature of these markings as they chronicle the ongoing struggle for spatial justice.

1. Introduction

The walls of the contemporary city speak. They are palimpsests, layered with the scripts of commerce, the decrees of authority, and the murmurs of dissent. In the sprawling, dynamic metropolises of our time, perhaps no form of expression is more emblematic of the struggle over urban space than graffiti.[1] Originating in the subways and on the derelict facades of 1970s New York, graffiti's journey from a practice unequivocally condemned as vandalism to its current status as a global art movement is a complex tale of cultural legitimation.[2] This evolution, however, is not

a simple narrative of artistic acceptance; it is a story deeply entangled with the dominant urban process of our era: gentrification. This research delves into this entanglement, positioning graffiti not as a static object of aesthetic judgment but as an active agent, a critical barometer, and a deeply felt presence within the turbulence of urban change. Gentrification—the process of capital reinvestment into historically devalued urban neighborhoods, leading to the displacement of incumbent, often lower-income, residents—is driven by a confluence of global capital, state policies, and shifting cultural tastes.[3] Central to this process is the production of a particular urban aesthetic, one that prizes marketable concepts of "authenticity," "edginess," and "creativity".[4] It is within this aesthetic-economic nexus that graffiti has found its paradoxical and fraught role. The raw, unsanctioned markings that once signified neglect became, for pioneering gentrifiers, symbols of an authentic urban experience that distinguished these neighborhoods from the sanitized suburbs.[5] Foundational scholarship by figures like Sharon Zukin has theorized how such artistic "scenes" generate a "symbolic economy," inadvertently making deindustrialized spaces attractive for real estate development , while others have framed street art as a potent tool of resistance—a direct inscription of the "right to the city" against the forces of privatization.[6]

Yet, this dynamic is not a static binary. As gentrification advances, the visual character of street art itself transforms. Illicit, politically charged works are systematically "buffed" and replaced by large-scale, commissioned murals. These spectacular works often function as "artwashing," lending a veneer of creativity to development projects that displace local communities. The art that once challenged the status quo becomes a marketing tool for it. While this theoretical framework is robust, its application has been overwhelmingly concentrated in the post-industrial contexts of the Global North.[7] A significant lacuna exists in understanding how this nexus operates in the rapidly urbanizing landscapes of the Global South, where the very term "post-industrial" is fraught. Cities like Jakarta and Bandung are not simply shedding industry; they are complex patchworks of persistent manufacturing, vast informal economies, and splintering forms of urbanism. Engaging with theories of Global South urbanism is therefore essential.[8] The work of scholars like Ananya Roy on "urban informality" and AbdouMaliq Simone on how residents navigate precariousness ("people as infrastructure") provides a more accurate lens for understanding these contexts, which are defined by histories of colonialism, accelerated state-driven development, and unique traditions of public expression.

Indonesia presents a critical case for this inquiry. Its cities are undergoing intense transformations, fertile ground for both a vibrant street art culture and aggressive gentrification. This street art culture is a direct descendant of the Reformasi movement of the late 1990s, which, after decades of authoritarian rule, opened public space as a vital forum for political dissent.[9] The visual language of protest from that era fundamentally shaped the generations of artists who followed. These artists draw from a unique well of influences—traditional motifs, post-authoritarian activism, and global hip-hop culture—creating a visual language that is locally specific yet globally connected. How this unique cultural production interacts with the universal pressures of urban capital remains a profoundly under-examined question. This study, therefore, addresses this critical gap. It seeks to move beyond a simple binary of graffiti as either "resistance" or "commodity". Instead, it examines its dialectical role as a process that unfolds over time and space, and introduces a third lens: graffiti as a practice of sociality and meaning-making that generates "affective atmospheres" which are central to the experience of urban change. It investigates how different forms of graffiti participate in the contestation over public space, exploring the motivations, perceptions, and complex agency of the artists, residents, and developers involved. By situating this investigation in the Indonesian context, this research provides a crucial new perspective on a global phenomenon, challenging the universality of Western-centric models of urban change.[10]

The aim of this study was to conduct a comprehensive, multi-sited investigation into the

dialectical relationship between the production of graffiti and the processes of gentrification in the urban landscapes of Jakarta and Bandung, Indonesia. This research systematically analyzed how street art, in its various forms, functions simultaneously as a tool for reclaiming public space, a marker of neighborhood identity, and an aesthetic commodity that is ultimately co-opted to facilitate urban redevelopment and social displacement. The novelty of this research is threefold. First, it offers one of the first in-depth, empirically-grounded studies of the graffiti-gentrification nexus specifically within a Southeast Asian context, providing a critical counterpoint from the Global South to a field dominated by Euro-American case studies. Second, it advances a novel methodological framework by integrating qualitative ethnographic methods with quantitative spatio-temporal GIS analysis, and foregrounding a reflexive ethical praxis through an explicit positionality statement. Finally, it critically develops the conceptual framework of "ephemeral inscriptions," theorizing graffiti not as a static image or monument, but as a performative, affective, and temporal process whose creation and erasure chronicle the ongoing struggle for spatial justice.

2. Methods

This study was designed to capture the complex, multi-faceted nature of the relationship between graffiti and gentrification. A longitudinal mixed-methods approach was adopted, grounded in a comparative case study design, conducted over six years from early 2019 to late 2024. This methodology was chosen for its capacity to triangulate data from multiple sources, providing both the rich, contextual depth of qualitative inquiry and the structural, pattern-identifying power of quantitative analysis. Two neighborhoods in two major Indonesian cities were purposively selected: the Glodok district in Jakarta and the Braga district in Bandung. The selection was based not only on their status as gentrifying street art hotspots but also on their value for a comparative analysis. The comparison was designed to explore how the graffiti-gentrification dynamic is mediated by different urban scales and governance structures. Glodok, a historic Chinatown within the megacity of Jakarta, represents a case of market-led, often contentious redevelopment, with a complex history of ethnic marginalization informing its street art scene. Braga, a heritage district in the provincial creative hub of Bandung, exemplifies a more state-managed form of gentrification, where municipal "creative city" policies exist in direct tension with a deeply rooted illicit graffiti culture. This contrast allows for a nuanced analysis of how different modes of urban governance interact with grassroots cultural production. A multi-pronged data collection strategy was implemented across both sites.

The qualitative component aimed to understand the lived experiences, motivations, and interpretations of the urban actors involved. Ethnographic Fieldwork: Over 24 months of cumulative, immersive fieldwork were conducted. This involved systematic observation, informal conversations, and participation in community events. Detailed field notes documented the physical environment, the social atmosphere, the life cycles of specific graffiti works, and the daily interactions between social groups, providing the "thick description" necessary to contextualize the findings. Semi-structured Interviews: A total of 45 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The sample was purposively selected to represent a spectrum of stakeholders, with detailed criteria for each group. The 18 artists interviewed ranged from highly clandestine taggers recruited through sensitive, trust-based networking to publicly known muralists contacted through their social media profiles. The 15 residents were stratified by tenure (long-term being 10+ years of residency) and socio-economic status to capture diverse perspectives. The remaining 12 interviews were with business owners, developers, and municipal officials to understand the institutional logic of the changes. All interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, audio-recorded with informed consent, and professionally transcribed and translated. The quantitative component was designed to map and measure the spatial and aesthetic changes over time. Spatio-Temporal GIS Mapping: A comprehensive visual survey was conducted annually, documenting 1,250 unique graffiti instances. Each piece was photographed and geolocated, creating a rich longitudinal dataset. This was overlaid with socio-

economic data layers, including property value data from municipal tax records and two leading national real estate aggregators, and an annual manual census of ground-floor businesses to track commercial turnover. Systematic Content Analysis: A detailed coding scheme was used to analyze the 1,250 images, with an inter-rater reliability of Cohen's Kappa > 0.85. The scheme categorized each piece by form, legality, thematic content, and production complexity.

Qualitative data were analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis approach in NVivo 12. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and spatial statistical techniques in R and GeoDa. A series of Geographically Weighted Regressions (GWR) were performed to explore the local relationship between mural density and gentrification indicators, with findings interpreted cautiously to reflect the correlational, not necessarily causal, nature of the results. This study received full ethical approval from the Enigma Institute's IRB. Beyond formal protocols, the research was guided by a commitment to reflexive and critical ethical praxis. The researcher, an academic affiliated with a formal institution, occupies a position of significant power relative to many of the study participants, particularly the illicit artists and residents facing displacement. Acknowledging this "outsider" status was paramount. Trust with artists was built slowly over months of informal engagement, without initially revealing the research purpose, and by demonstrating a genuine understanding of and respect for the subculture's codes. This involved learning the lexicon of the scene, recognizing artists' styles, and showing up at events without a notepad, prioritizing human connection over data extraction. The decision to use pseudonyms was made in collaboration with participants to ensure their security. The process of translating interviews from Bahasa Indonesia was treated not as a neutral act of transcription but as an act of interpretation. Specific attention was paid to preserving the meaning of slang, subcultural jargon, and culturally specific metaphors, with ambiguous translations discussed with a native-speaking research assistant to ensure fidelity. This reflexive approach recognizes that the research process itself is a political act of representation, and sought to minimize extractive tendencies and honor the complexity of the participants' lived realities.

3. Results and Discussion

The quantitative analysis revealed a clear and statistically significant pattern of change in the visual landscapes of both cities between 2019 and 2024. At the study's baseline in 2019, the landscape was defined by illicit, low-complexity graffiti. As detailed in Figure 1, tags and throw-ups accounted for 85% of all documented pieces and were overwhelmingly illicit (92%). GIS mapping confirmed their spatial concentration in peripheral spaces: back alleys, derelict industrial sites, and along railway lines—areas of low visibility and low property values. By 2024, a dramatic inversion had occurred. Large-scale, sanctioned murals became the dominant form, increasing by 500% to constitute 60% of the visual landscape, with 65% of all works now being sanctioned or commissioned. This formal shift was mirrored by a spatial shift. New graffiti hotspots emerged on primary commercial streets and in newly developed public squares, while the original peripheral hotspots saw a 40% decrease in the density of tags and throw-ups, indicative of targeted abatement campaigns. The GWR analysis established a powerful link between these visual changes and the neighborhoods' economic restructuring. While no significant correlation was found between illicit tags and property values, a robust positive correlation was identified between the density of sanctioned murals and key gentrification indicators, including commercial rent (r=0.78) and the density of new, gentrification-associated businesses (r=0.82).

Pancoran Lane, Glodok: To understand this quantitative shift in human terms, consider Pancoran Lane. In 2019, it was a narrow, dimly lit service alley. The air was thick with the smells of cooking oil from five family-run food carts and the acrid scent of a small motorcycle repair shop. The walls were a chaotic tapestry of overlapping silver and black throw-ups and the quick scrawls of countless tags. For long-term residents, it was a familiar, if gritty, shortcut. For taggers, it was a relatively safe space to practice and communicate.[11]

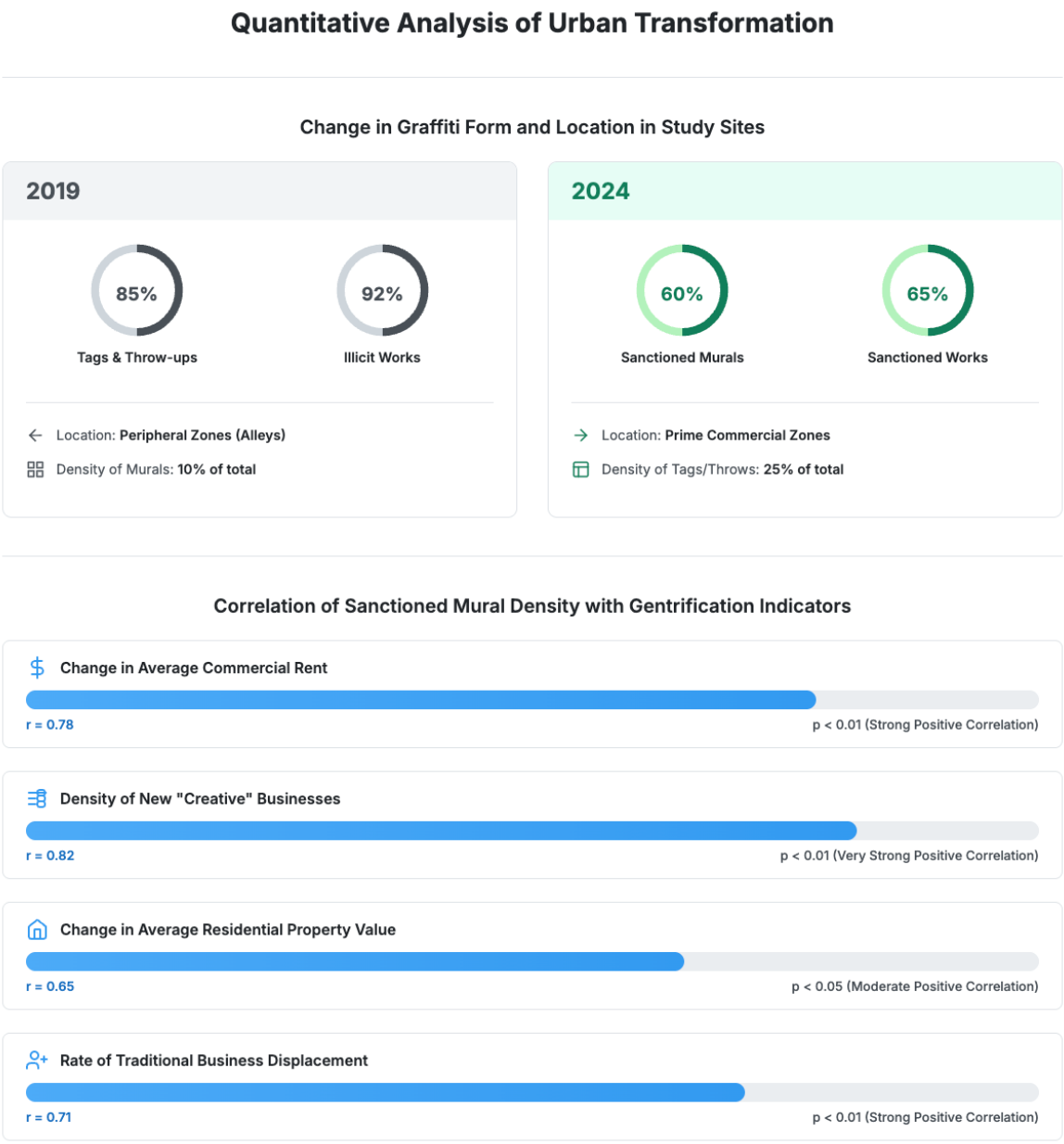

Figure 1. Quantitative analysis of urban transformation.

By 2024, the lane is unrecognizable. Rebranded as "Glodok Heritage Alley," the walls now host a series of brightly colored, commissioned murals depicting a romanticized history of Chinese-Indonesian life. The food carts are gone, replaced by a specialty coffee shop with large glass windows, an art souvenir store, and a boutique selling modern batik.[12] The air now smells of roasted coffee beans and expensive perfume. Tourists and young Jakartans pose for selfies against the mural backdrops. The business census data for this specific block confirms the story: a 200% increase in commercial rent and the complete displacement of all five original vendors. The graffiti did not just change; the entire sensory and social atmosphere of the space was overwritten, in Figure 2. Jalan Braga, Bandung: In 2020, a walk down the iconic Jalan Braga at night was an exercise in navigating different worlds. The grand colonial-era facades, many in disrepair, were canvases for a vibrant, illicit art scene.[13] Stencils critiquing local politicians were tucked beside

doorways. Complex, multi-colored "pieces" bloomed on temporarily abandoned storefronts. The atmosphere was one of elegant decay and creative ferment. By 2024, following a municipal "revitalization" project, the street feels different. The building facades have been restored. The illicit art has been systematically buffed, replaced by a handful of large, officially sanctioned murals with historical themes, sponsored by a local paint company.[14] New, high-end cafes with minimalist interiors have opened, their patios filled with a well-dressed clientele. The street is cleaner, safer, and significantly quieter. The "creative" energy has been formalized, but in the process, the unpredictable, anarchic spirit that once defined the street's atmosphere has been lost, in Figure 2.[15]

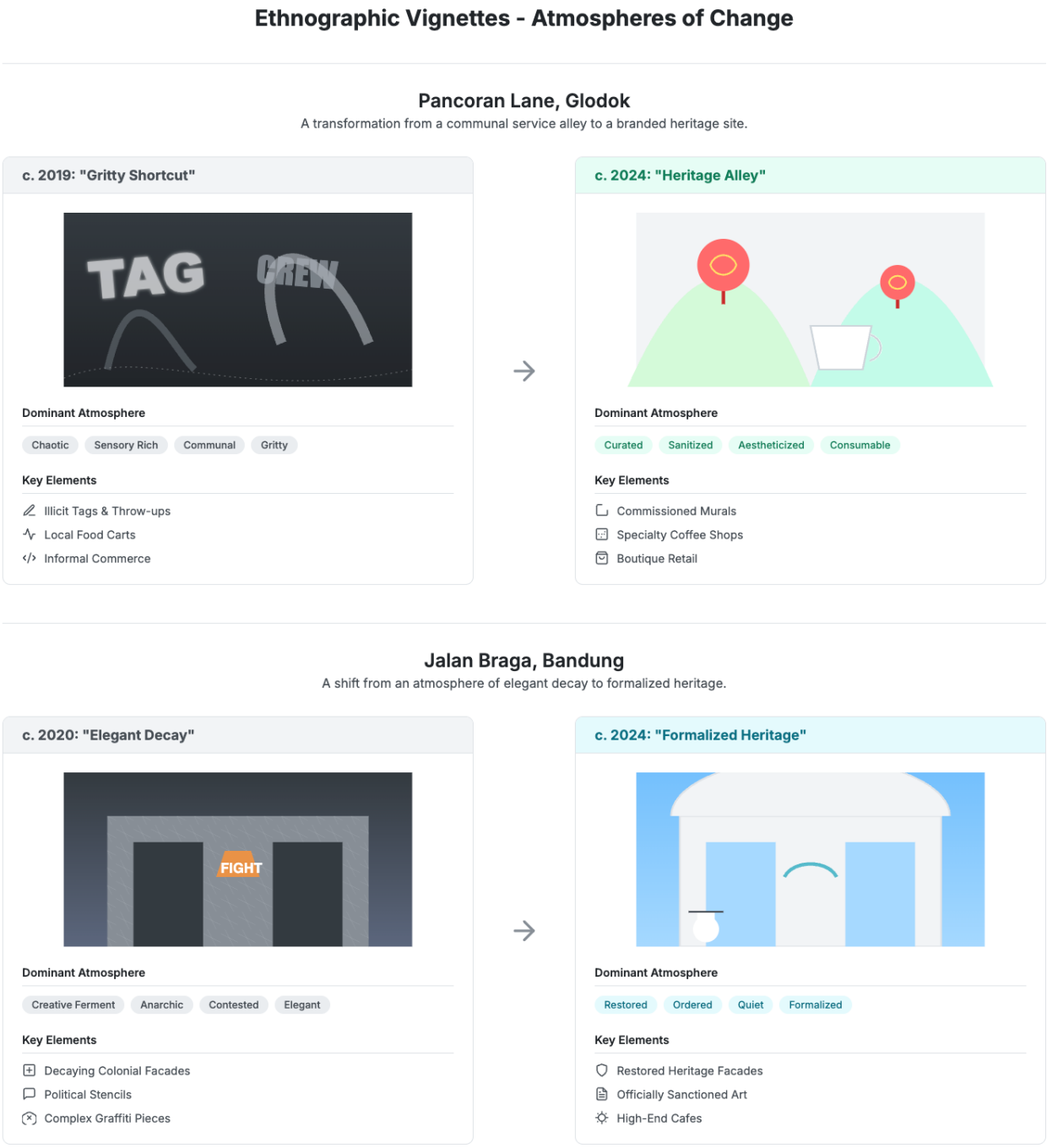

Figure 2. Ethnographic vignettes-atmospheres of change.

The qualitative data reveals the human conflict behind this transformation. The neatly summarized perspectives in Figure 3 mask a deeper complexity of emotions and strategies. Figure 3 provides a critical, multi-vocal synthesis of the qualitative data gathered throughout this six-year ethnographic study, presenting a thematic summary of stakeholder perspectives on the intertwined phenomena of graffiti and gentrification. This schematic is not merely a summary of findings but a graphical argument in itself, illustrating the profound schisms in perception, experience, and spatial belonging that define the contested urban landscapes of Glodok and Braga.[16] It visualizes the divergent worlds inhabited by three key urban actors—Illicit Graffiti Artists, Long-Term Residents, and New, Affluent Residents—demonstrating how the same physical changes on the city's walls are interpreted through radically different social, economic, and cultural lenses. The first column, dedicated to the Illicit Graffiti Artists, encapsulates a worldview rooted in resistance and spatial reclamation. For this group, graffiti is far from mere vandalism; it is a vital communicative practice and a performative claim to the "right to the city." Their perception of graffiti as a "voice for the voiceless" frames their actions as a necessary counter-narrative to the glossy, commercialized image of the city promoted by developers and municipal authorities. Their hostility towards neighborhood change is visceral; they experience gentrification as a direct assault on their subculture and community, a process of "sterilization" that erases the gritty authenticity from which their art derives its meaning. Consequently, their sense of belonging is paradoxical: a powerful, proprietary ownership of the streets they paint, which is simultaneously rendered increasingly precarious by the very forces of policing and privatization that their work resists. In stark contrast, the central column, representing the Long-Term Residents, portrays a narrative of anxiety and profound loss. Grounded in a lived history of the neighborhood, their perspective largely aligns with the sociological framework of "broken windows" theory, where unsanctioned graffiti is interpreted as a direct signifier of social decay, crime, and a breakdown of community control. For this cohort, the aesthetic changes heralding gentrification are not experienced as "revitalization" but as the tangible markers of their own displacement. The new murals and cafes are symbols of an alienating new order that brings with it rising costs, the loss of familiar social hubs, and the erosion of long-standing social bonds.[17] Their sense of belonging is thus characterized by a deep and sorrowful erosion; they are becoming strangers in their own homes, alienated by a new aesthetic and economic logic that holds no place for them. The third column, detailing the perspective of New, Affluent Residents, completes the triptych by illustrating the worldview of the gentrifying class. Their perception of graffiti is defined by a "selective appreciation," a crucial mechanism of class-based aesthetic distinction. They celebrate large, colorful murals as "public art" that enhances the neighborhood's "vibe" and "authenticity"—key components of the cultural capital they seek. Simultaneously, they condemn illicit tags as "vandalism," demanding their removal to ensure the area remains safe and clean. This group frames the neighborhood's transformation in overwhelmingly positive terms, using the discourse of "improvement" and "revitalization" to legitimize the displacement that underpins it. Their sense of belonging is not rooted in historical connection but is actively constructed through consumer choices and a feeling of entitlement to the curated aesthetic of the area. They see themselves as benevolent participants in, and beneficiaries of, the neighborhood's upward trajectory, often oblivious to the cultural and economic violence this process entails for the incumbent communities. Collectively, Figure 3 serves as a powerful illustration of the core conflict at the heart of this research: the battle for public space is fundamentally a battle of perceptions. It reveals how aesthetic judgments are deeply political, and how the struggle over the meaning of a painted wall is a microcosm of the larger struggle over who has the right to shape, define, and inhabit the contemporary city.

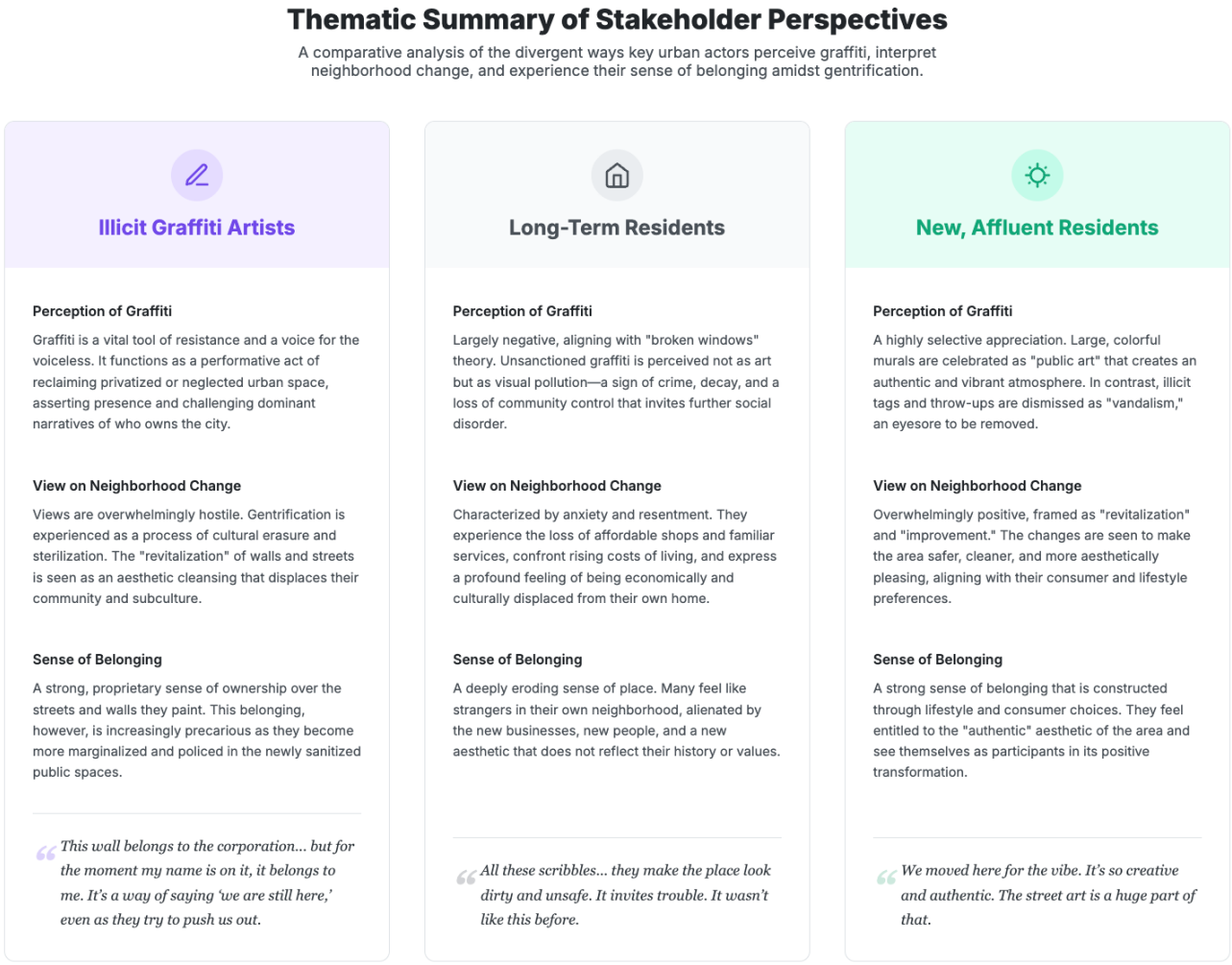

Figure 3. Thematic summary of stakeholder perspectives on graffiti and gentrification.

Figure 4 presents a stark, quantitative visualization of the core argument at the heart of this manuscript: the systematic transformation of the urban visual landscape as a mirror to the processes of gentrification. This figure chronologically maps the dramatic shift in the thematic content of graffiti across the study sites of Glodok and Bandung, comparing the baseline data from 2019 with the endpoint data from 2024. More than a simple data summary, this graphic serves as a scientific testament to a process of cultural and political overwriting, illustrating with empirical force how the raw, subversive voices of the street have been progressively sanitized, commodified, and replaced by a curated, commercially-aligned aesthetic.[18] The left-hand column, representing the state of the urban canvas in 2019, depicts a landscape dominated by grassroots, subcultural expression. A staggering 70% of all documented graffiti fell under the "Self-Promotional" category. This was the visual language of presence—the tags, throw-ups, and crew names through which marginalized individuals and groups inscribed their existence onto a city that often rendered them invisible. Critically, 20% of the content was explicitly "Political/Social Commentary," a direct legacy of Indonesia's *Reformasi* era, where the city's walls served as a vital medium for dissent against corruption, inequality, and state power. In this early stage of gentrification, the commercially safer

categories were nascent: "Abstract/Decorative" works constituted a mere 5%, "Local/Cultural Heritage" was functionally negligible at 2%, and "Corporate/Branded" content was entirely absent at 0%. This was a visual environment defined from the bottom up, characterized by a high volume of raw, unfiltered, and often oppositional voices. In stark contrast, the right-hand column, depicting the visual landscape in 2024, illustrates a near-total inversion of this order—a testament to the successful aesthetic and economic restructuring of these neighborhoods. "Self-Promotional" works have been more than halved to 30%, largely displaced from prime commercial zones to the peripheries. Most strikingly, the voice of dissent has been almost entirely silenced: "Political/Social Commentary" has plummeted from a significant 20% to a statistically marginal 3% (a 17 percentage point decrease), a clear indicator of systematic erasure and the "buffing" of contentious content. In their place, a new visual regime has ascended. "Abstract/Decorative" works have surged by 25 percentage points to constitute 30% of the landscape, providing a politically neutral and aesthetically pleasing backdrop for consumption. "Local/Cultural Heritage" themes have exploded from 2% to 25%, a 23 percentage point increase that speaks to the strategic deployment of a sanitized, marketable nostalgia as a tool for place-branding. Finally, and perhaps most tellingly, is the emergence and rapid growth of the "Corporate/Branded" category. From 0% in 2019, this form of "artwashing" now accounts for a significant 12% of all public inscriptions, demonstrating the final stage of co-optation where the aesthetic of the street is fully integrated into the machinery of corporate marketing. Ultimately, Figure 4 provides the quantitative backbone for the study's central thesis. The dramatic decline of self-promotional and political content, coupled with the meteoric rise of decorative, heritage, and corporate themes, is not an accidental aesthetic evolution.[19] It is the visual record of gentrification itself—a process that systematically displaces not only people but also the forms of cultural expression that give voice to their struggles, replacing them with a sanitized, consumable spectacle that serves the interests of capital.

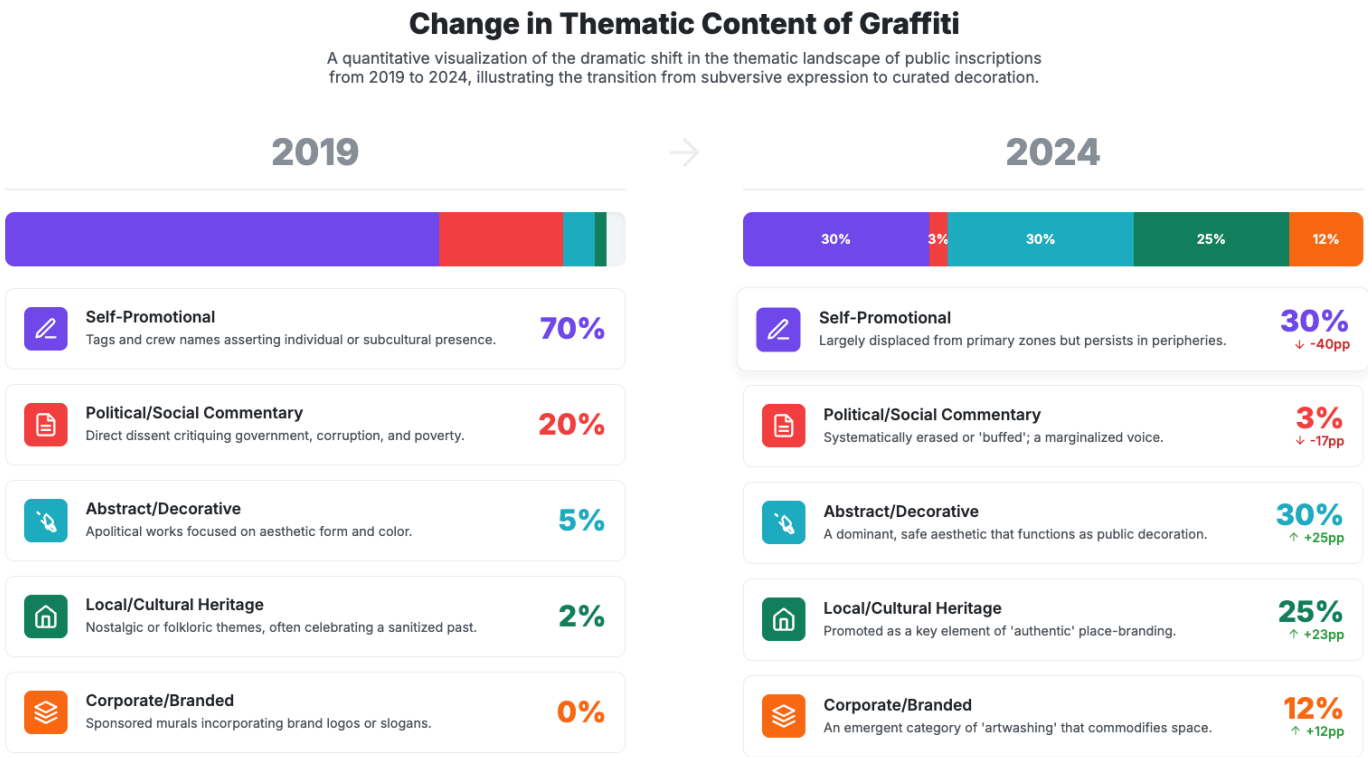

Figure 4. Change in thematic content of graffiti (2019 vs. 2024).

The results present a compelling narrative of graffiti's role in the gentrification of post-industrial Indonesian cities. The findings illuminate a dialectical process in which graffiti acts as both a catalyst for and a casualty of urban restructuring. Figure 5 presents the theoretical synthesis of this research, serving as a conceptual map that articulates the dialogue between our empirical findings and established urban theory. This model is designed to be read as a process, visually narrating the trajectory of graffiti within the cycle of gentrification, from its initial role as a grassroots cultural practice to its eventual absorption into the logic of capital. The figure is structured to demonstrate not only how foundational theories frame our analysis but, more importantly, how the specific context of our findings necessitates a theoretical extension, culminating in the framework of "Ephemeral Inscriptions." The model begins with two Foundational Theories that provide the initial lens for understanding the phenomenon. On one hand, Sharon Zukin's concept of the Symbolic Economy is paramount. It posits that urban spaces possess a value that transcends the purely economic; they are rich with symbolic capital, such as authenticity, artistic expression, and cultural grit. Our research identifies the initial proliferation of illicit graffiti (Phase 1) as a textbook example of this symbolic production. Artists and marginalized groups, operating in devalued urban peripheries, generate this cultural value organically, creating the "edgy" atmosphere that becomes the raw material for future redevelopment. On the other hand, Henri Lefebvre's The Right to the City provides the political framework. This theory argues for the fundamental right of inhabitants to not merely consume urban space but to actively produce and shape it. The act of illicitly painting a wall is, through this lens, a powerful and direct assertion of this right—a performative reclamation of public space from the homogenous control of state and commercial interests. These foundational concepts are bridged by the Empirical Axis, which represents the core findings of this study. This axis depicts the observed transformation as a two-phase temporal progression. Phase 1: Illicit Inscriptions (c. 2019) is characterized by the dominance of unsanctioned, often political, graffiti in peripheral zones. This phase is the empirical manifestation of both the Symbolic Economy in action and the active claiming of the Right to the City. The arrow signifies the temporal and causal progression to Phase 2: Curated Aesthetics (c. 2024). This later stage is defined by the rise of sanctioned, decorative, and corporate-sponsored murals in prime commercial areas. This shift represents the critical turning point where the organic cultural value identified in Phase 1 is systematically co-opted. This co-optation is explained by the consequential theory of David Harvey's Accumulation by Dispossession. Harvey's framework, which describes how capital expands by enclosing and privatizing formerly public or communal assets, is extended here to include the realm of culture. The transition to Phase 2 is a form of cultural dispossession: the authentic, subcultural capital of the street is seized, sanitized, and redeployed as a tool for real estate speculation and corporate branding, converting its symbolic value into tangible economic profit for a different class of actors. Finally, the model culminates in This Study's Contribution: Ephemeral Inscriptions. This framework is not merely another theory but a synthesis of the entire process. It argues that to fully understand the significance of graffiti in this cycle, we must see it not as a static object (like a "monument") but as a performative and temporal practice. The power of this concept lies in its focus on the dynamic of creation and erasure. The constant cycle of illicit inscription (Phase 1) and its systematic replacement by curated aesthetics (Phase 2) creates a living, layered archive on the city's walls. These "ephemeral inscriptions" thus function as a powerful counter-memory, a visible record of the ongoing urban conflict and the enduring, if often fleeting, struggle for spatial justice. The framework moves beyond a simple narrative of defeat to recognize that even in its erasure, illicit graffiti chronicles the contestation that defines the contemporary city.[18,19]

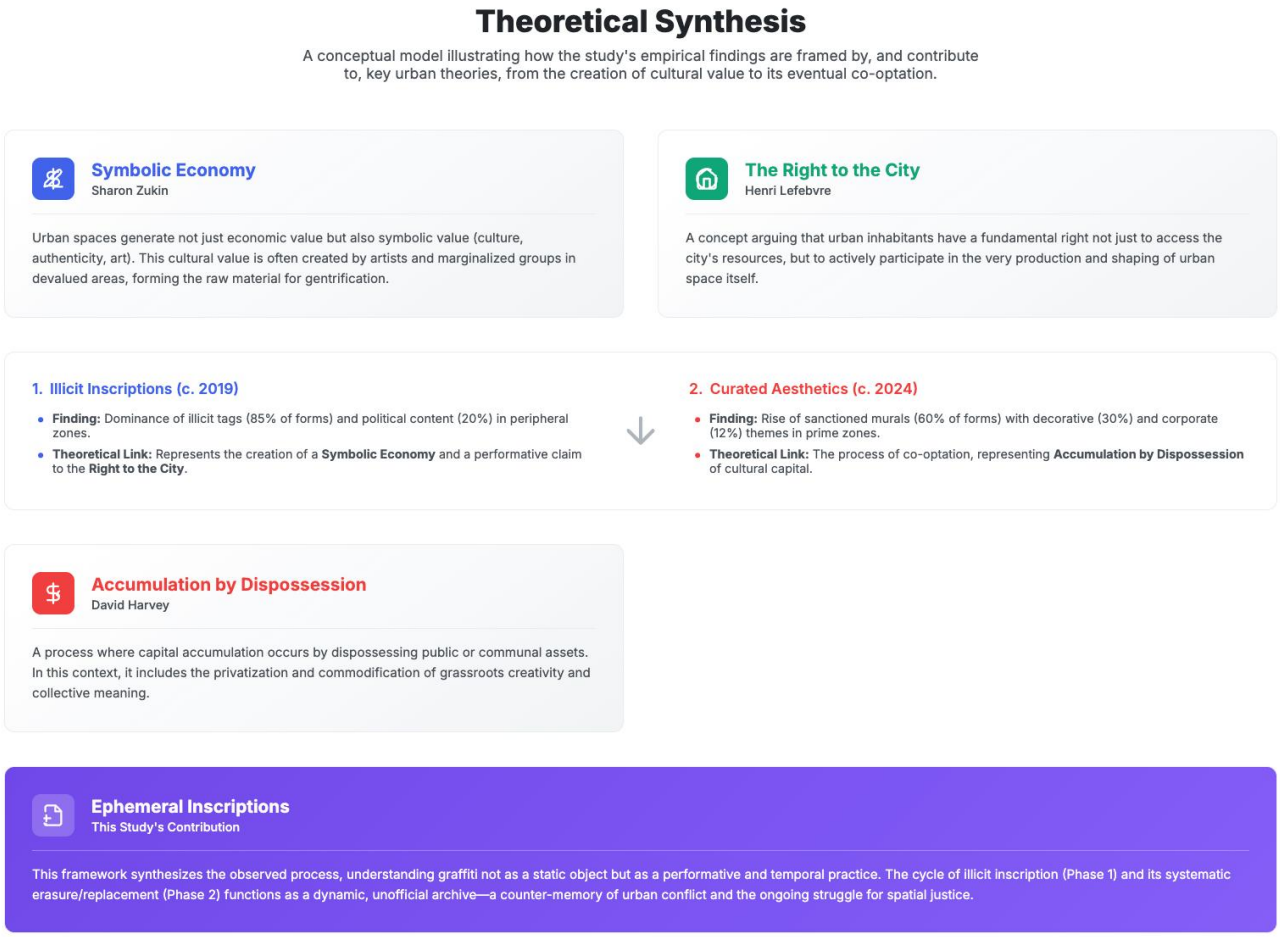

Figure 5. Theoretical synthesis.

The findings provide strong empirical support for the dialectical model of art-led gentrification, from Zukin's "symbolic economy" to Harvey's "accumulation by dispossession." The initial phase of illicit graffiti clearly functions as an unintentional production of subcultural capital, creating the "edgy" aura that attracts pioneering gentrifiers. The subsequent phase of co-optation, quantified by the rise of sanctioned murals and their correlation with economic displacement, demonstrates how this symbolic value is harnessed by the "urban growth machine". However, the Indonesian context complicates this model. The speed of co-optation and the direct involvement of corporate branding (12% of all murals by 2024) suggests an accelerated process, where the "artistic phase" is compressed and more rapidly instrumentalized by capital, a hallmark of development in the Global South. The process is less an organic evolution and more a strategic deployment of culture for place-branding. A purely political-economic reading, however, is insufficient. The gentrification narrative often risks eclipsing the fact that graffiti is also a lived cultural practice, a mode of communication, and a producer of urban affect. The "vibe" that new residents consume is an "affective atmosphere"—a tangible yet ethereal quality of a place that is shaped by its sensory inputs, including its visual landscape. The replacement of chaotic tags with aesthetically pleasing murals is not just a commercial strategy; it is a strategy of atmospheric control, designed to produce feelings of safety, creativity, and order that are comforting to the new middle class, while erasing the visual cues that signified a different social order. Furthermore, for the artists themselves,

the practice is a form of sociality. The walls are a space of conversation, competition, and community-building that exists partially outside the logic of capital. Eko's act of hiding his crew's name in a commissioned mural is not just resistance; it is an act of maintaining social connection, of keeping a conversation alive, even if it must be done in a whisper. This study initially employed the term "ephemeral monuments" to capture the transient yet significant nature of graffiti. A critical re-evaluation suggests a more analytically precise term: "ephemeral inscriptions." Inscription emphasizes the act of writing, of marking a surface, which is closer to the etymology of graffiti ("to scratch"). It highlights the individual, bodily act of leaving a trace. Performance captures the temporal and processual nature of the act. A tag is not just an image; it is the result of a performance that is often risky, athletic, and highly skilled. Its meaning is derived as much from the act of its creation as from the resulting mark. Memory, these inscriptions function as a form of counter-memory. In a city eager to present a sanitized, forward-looking image, the layered, overwritten surfaces of a graffiti wall serve as an unofficial archive of the city's conflicts, subcultures, and forgotten voices. Its very ephemerality—the constant cycle of inscription and erasure—is what chronicles the ongoing struggle, rather than monumentalizing a concluded one. Finally, it is crucial to resist a deterministic narrative that declares capital the victor. The research shows that while the dominant trend is towards co-optation, agency persists in nuanced and evolving forms. Eko's "subversive compliance" is one example. Another is the use of digital media. While social media platforms like Instagram can accelerate the commodification of street art, artists also use them to create digital archives of "buffed" works, preserving a memory of what has been erased. They use them to organize and communicate, creating transnational networks that operate outside the purview of local developers. This ongoing cat-and-mouse game, where strategies of control are met with new tactics of subversion, is central to the story. The struggle for the right to the city is not over; it has simply moved across multiple fronts, from the physical wall to the digital screen.[19,20]

4. Conclusion

This research set out to investigate the intricate role of graffiti within the processes of gentrification in Jakarta and Bandung. The findings confirm that graffiti is far more than an aesthetic byproduct of urban change; it is a potent force that actively shapes and is shaped by the struggle for public space. The study documents a clear trajectory, from the creation of a subcultural symbolic economy by illicit graffiti to its systematic co-optation as a tool for neoliberal place-branding, which accelerates the displacement of the very communities that generated the initial cultural value. The core contribution of this manuscript, however, is its effort to move beyond this structural narrative to present a more nuanced, multi-dimensional account. By situating the analysis in the Indonesian context, it highlights how global processes are inflected by local histories of political expression and unique forms of urban sociality. By integrating ethnographic methods and an analysis of affect, it shows how urban change is not just an economic process, but a felt, lived, and sensory one. And by reframing graffiti as a practice of "ephemeral inscription," it offers a new conceptual lens for understanding how these transient markings function as a powerful, performative archive of the ongoing contestation for the city's soul. The implications of these findings are significant. For city officials in Indonesia and across the Global South, they serve as a caution against simplistic "creative city" policies that champion public art without addressing its role in displacement. Fostering an inclusive creative ecosystem requires policies that are contextually grounded, such as protecting the informal housing of the *kampung* alongside formal affordable housing, and empowering communities to have a genuine say in their neighborhood's future. For activists and artists, this work highlights the constant challenge of resisting co-optation and developing new strategies for spatial justice. Ultimately, the walls of Jakarta and Bandung reveal that the struggle for the right to the city is a battle over aesthetics and atmosphere as much as it is over property and capital. It is a story told in layers of paint, in fleeting inscriptions that appear overnight

only to be erased, a testament to the enduring power of the human need to leave a mark.

5. References

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