Current "street art" in the city of Bucharest

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Abstract: Street art is a complex and diverse art form. Its presence in the urban environment makes it possible for the public to see it quickly. Sometimes, the controversial approach to street art and how it is reported can lead to an attitude of rejection, especially from the resident population. However, the creativity and ingenuity shown within the street art movements have led some cities to implement legislation and urban planning rules facilitating a medium for such creations, aiming to beautify or even promote specific neighbourhoods and their cultural landscapes. In the Municipality of Bucharest, artistic street representations have recently exploded in frequency and size, even in areas previously dominated by socio-economic landscapes undergoing reconversion. In this context, this study aims to emphasise street art's influence on the socio-cultural space, both from its aesthetic contribution as well as the resident population's perception. The study's objectives consist of analysing the significance and purpose of the main artistic operas in their artists' opinions (motifs, colours, paintings) and the population's perception of street art. The research methodology comprised direct observations and the use of the inquiry method (semi-structured interview and questionnaire). The study's results compare the opinion of the artists who create specific street art and that of the residents as a direct result of a perception change about the city's aesthetics. A visual representation coexisting with local architecture is a modern trend that makes the city space attractive and adds cultural value.

Key Words: street art, perception, visual representation, Bucharest

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Introduction

Street art, known as urban art or public art, is an art form that includes all plastic-cultural manifestations, with its main location being the public space whose production frequently defies and challenges the legal framework (Merrill, 2015). Street art is considered a very complex social phenomenon that produces emotion in the people he encounters (Bengtsen, 2014). Initially, at the beginning of the 20th century, gangs, and especially their young members, used graffiti in American East
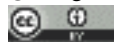
Coast cities' neighbourhoods to define their territories (Friedman, 2008). In the 60s, graffiti displayed messages on buildings criticising social inequalities among disadvantaged communities (Boscaino, 2021). If the young generations expressed themselves by sending messages that, in the opinion of the authorities, damaged the walls of public buildings, later, the practice turned into tagging, moving from a form of protest to an artistic and decorative representation (Lachmann, 1988; Currier, 2010).

This system of signs and symbols, taken together, informs and constructs collective identities and places where people habituate (Kendall, 2011). Research on street art has focused over time on topics such as urban identity politics, territorial formations, gang communication, political resistance, site-specificity subculture, spatial transgressions, and clashing images (Conklin, 2012).

Frequently, the issue of aesthetic evaluation of street art, especially concerning the value of the information it delivers to society, appears directly related to the perception of the concept of "art" from the perspective of the criteria associated with classical art (Chieffalo, 2018). In the 90s, it became a form of expression related to hip-hop music. It was also taken over by sports teams and entertainment media, which were used to create their message brands, images, or logos (White, 2018). During this process of development, graffiti has become much more complex. The styles, colours and subjects of modern graffiti differ now compared to the past, and the materials or methods of applying images have been improved, and graffiti now become a visual representation that reflects the character of the city (Dyomin & Ivashko, 2020; Cercleux, 2022). Representations use techniques such as templates, collages, posters, stickers, tags in the form of labels and signatures, etc. (Hansen & Danny, 2015). We often find them on buildings, facades, roofs, train carriages, bridges, public toilets, signs, tunnels, and sidewalks, becoming elements that belong to and characterise the urban landscape.

Many techniques and representations addressed within this phenomenon have gravitated towards new theoretical and methodological approaches in recent years. In the 2000s, a large part of the artists changed their practice, moving from outdoor exhibition spaces (walls, trains, tunnels, etc.) to indoor ones, namely art galleries. This represents a decisive transition from an often controversial artistic manifestation to an actual art form validated by the public. The best-known example, which has become current in the field of street art, is Banski, whose approach is considered expressive and, at the same time, profound when it touches on political and social themes (Gastman & Neelon, 2011; Hansen & Danny, 2015).

Thus, the difference between graffiti and street art derives primarily from the author's purpose. It is considered that graffiti is based on tagging; in this way, the author transmits a message and, at the same time, claims the exhibition space, often becoming the identity of a neighbourhood or a social group (McCormick et al., 2010; Forte, 2019). Perhaps the most significant change in the perception of this form of art came from the promotion made by the mass media, the works of urban art that present a meaning or a symbolism that the artist wants to convey, replacing the tagging with murals. The artists went from underground, unknown performers to famous street art stars who received requests to create murals or installations, which sometimes became the identity characteristics of the cities. (Irvine, 2012; Stilwell, 2017).

Street art can be categorised as art, this being a form of a reflection on reality through artistic images, "museums without walls" (Foster et al., 2016), the ordinary urban landscape and outside of institutional contexts like museums and galleries (Bourdieu et al., 1997; Sequeira, 2017) or images, pictures and stories of the place (Ganz, 2008; Merrill, 2015).

Legislation and representation of street art in Bucharest city

Street art often represents a way to overturn the classic uses of public space, sometimes transforming it by undermining the laws and social norms in force. The legislation regarding street art is formulated to regulate the development of artistic manifestations in public space, and at the same time, to remove attitudes considered invasive or destructive manifestations that can affect the value of a city's cultural or built heritage. The need to introduce clear laws and rules arose because many artists use both public and private spaces as exhibition supports without the owner's consent or authorisation. The formal and informal rules applied at the level of a city regulate the visible in terms of what should be exposed or not (Baldini, 2018). There has always been a direct link between street art and illegality, its exposure becoming, in certain situations, incompatible with the way visual manifestation or appreciation of aesthetics is allowed in some cities (Chackal, 2016).

Romania brings similar rules and legislation to those in France, Germany or Austria, intended to protect the public and private built heritage from graffiti-type signs. Law no. 260 of July 21, 2022, regarding the amendment and completion of Law no. 61/1991, states in article 2, point 14 that "printing signs, inscriptions, drawings or images, without permission, by any means, on the walls of buildings, on fences or objects of common use in public places, as well as damaging them by any means" is punishable by a fine of 100 at 500 RON (equivalent to 100 euros) (Portal legislativ, 2022). Regarding legalising street art with subversive value until recently, we can identify a radical change in approach, especially from the perspective of the city authorities who started the urban regeneration project through art, Un-hidden Bucharest (2023); consequently, the presence of artists' works on the streets of Bucharest shows a very high density, with works located in all neighbourhoods, on buildings, walls, terminals, fences, schools, etc.

The promotion of this exhibition was done mainly through festivals, one of the most famous being the Outline Street Art Festival, now in its sixth edition, which has among its objectives: *reducing vandalism* by collaborating with street artists to create murals performed in an organised and legal framework; *the beautification of some urban areas,* the works causing passers-by to give up for a few moments the daily stress; *promoting Bucharest*, painting large walls in a city can create a positive image internationally, attracting flows of tourists; *facilitating cultural evolution,* the street art present on the streets of a city facilitating a form of cultural evolution that changes the mentality of the residents, the mural works becoming landmark points of the city, these being linked to the social, political, historical context (Outline Streetart, 2023).

Methodology

The phenomenon of street art represents a less studied socio-cultural phenomenon in the context of the representation area of Bucharest, which has shown continuous development in recent years. The research methodology was rather based on the field activity in the context of the existence of limited statistical databases as well as relevant studies regarding the visual representation of this current. The field investigation was developed in three stages; in the first stage, carried out between May 1-20, 2023, a semi-structured observation sheet was applied to identify the areas representing the street art phenomenon within the city of Bucharest. The semi-structured observation aimed to identify, at the level

of the city's six districts, the different types of visual art manifestation in order to identify them in terms of typology and representation of symbolism.

The second stage, held in June 2023, involved the application of a semi-structured interview, carried out with graffers, the aim being to understand the phenomenon from the endogenous perspective, that of the artist. Thus, ten interviews were conducted in which influential representative artists of the current took part. Within it, various open questions were addressed, among which we mention the emergence of the artistic movement in Bucharest, highlighting certain factors and currents; personal opinion regarding graffiti; presentation of the motivation underlying the works; highlighting the symbolism present in the works; emphasising the message the artist wants to convey.

The third stage used the questionnaire as the main investigation method, applied between August 1-27, 2023, at the level of all sectors in Bucharest. A qualitative, "funnel"-type questionnaire was used, which included 19 questions, which assumed the transition from the general to the particular. The first five questions included general aspects related to the respondent's profile (age, gender, education, occupation and area of origin). Their purpose was to identify the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents (Table 1). The following 14 questions address various topics such as knowledge of the term street art, identification of the themes present in street art, personal opinion regarding street art in the public space, the choice of specific themes and styles, the respondents' identification and knowledge of some graffiti artists, the use of street art as means of improving the city, informing about certain events, activities, contests or mentioning some promotion methods. 150 respondents participated in filling out the questionnaire, and the same number of answers were validated; for a better accuracy of the information, the interviewing was done face to face.

Table 1. Respondents profile—socio-demographic indicators (percentages).

Age		Educational status		Profession		Gender	
18–25 years	75.0	Secondary	1.3	Student	65.7	Mail	58.1
26–35 years	12.5	High-school	59.7	Employee	21.6	Femail	41.9
36–45 years	10.0	University	39.0	Freelancer	5.2		
over 46 years	2.5			Different situation	7.5		

Source: Analysis Results 2023

Analysing the significance/message that artists want to promote through their works

At the level of the urban landscape, the current street art represents a reality whose representation is dependent on the artists' manifestations in the public space. Polling the graffers' opinions regarding the message and symbolism they want to convey describes that their relationship to the aesthetics of the city is always a priority, the goal being oriented towards creating works that beautify the monotonous public space.

" I often like to choose a dirty place, with stained walls, garbage and make a clean, colourful drawing there, with fresh paint, and when it's done, there is a fusion between new and old, clean and dirty, the ugly becoming beautiful. I like contrasts." (Graffer 1).

" I also want my works to appear on abandoned factories and houses. I believe that such places hide secrets, stories, making everything more interesting and attractive. I can say

that such places represent an experiment that is about to be analysed and discovered by the brave because people can see them with other eyes, in a different light... these places become art" (Graffer 2).

Equally, it distinguishes as a unanimous goal, the representation within the works of the socio-cultural identity of the city, this being put in the foreground, valued and exposed through colours, lines, characters or even through one's own history.

„I started from the vibe of Bucharest. The challenge was to translate Bucharest as I felt it into images. This is how these diverse themes appeared: drawings related to underground music and culture, angel eyes and wings watching pedestrians move, emblematic buildings, neighbourhood names and personalities who marked the city's history..." (Graffer 3).

„The work represents a set of architectural forms based on perspective and optical illusions. Some geometries can be interpreted as letters to fit everything in an urban touch, specific to Bucharest." (Graffer 4).

„The Story of Bucharest" is written through the graffiti "language" present on one of the layers, in the form of "keywords" related to the city's subculture and culture." (Graffer 5).

„The work approaches the theme of diversity as a defining element of Bucharest in a decorative way and renders the heterogeneity and contrasting potential through the overlapping of forms and textures." (Graffer 6).

Photo 1. A (left) Throw-up style, Bucharest; B (right) Wildstyle graffiti, Bucharest

„As a subject, I played with the letter B and built it in various ways, each letter being somehow a "sample" from Bucharest. I also took a little inspiration from the modernist design; I integrated the mosaic texture specific to many buildings in Bucharest; I also thought about the lakes surrounding the city and integrated water textures" (Graffer 7).

These are the ones who propose various themes to the public, often the goal being to raise alarm signals, the works turning into real protests against socio-economic trends or political events.

„I generally protest against corruption; sometimes, I pick a place that I think illustrates corruption and leave a message there for anyone to notice. Somehow, the problems of a country are like ivy, and corruption is fixed at the root; it is useless to cut the branches, the real change would be to cut the root... that's what I want to show" (Graffer 8).

The ingenious projects, many of which bring art and residents face to face, are the ones that aim to transform the city, but also the residents' perception of street art in the context in which it is often seen as a form of vandalism.

„We are trying to make street art friends with the city's citizens, to whom we want to show that not everything drawn on the street is vandalism" (Graffer 9).

The use of public transport as a support for expression is a way in which art transforms from static to mobile and becomes accessible and visible throughout the city, transmitting messages as important as the aesthetics of beauty.

„As a rule, when we talk about means of transport, the eyes are those that look from the inside, the eyes of the people in the tram, for example. We propose, this time, that the eyes should be those of the machines that roam Bucharest and look at the neighbourhoods and not vice versa." (Graffer 10).

„The works are born from the personal searches of each artist; they create an intimate relationship with the public space of the Capital in an organic form. And this time, they come out on one of the means of public transport, the tram, to confirm their presence and to reach, in this way, more people" (Graffer 8).

Photo 2. A (left) Street art on trams; B (right) Representative work at the Veranda Mall

The revaluation of the drab architecture and the mitigation of the shades of grey dominant, especially in the communist districts, by transposing it into an imaginary world and representing the surrealist characters on the buildings is done in the context where people are part of this process of continuous transformation.

„ A symbiotic relationship is produced by mixing the fragments of buildings with the characters proposed by us, illustrating the continuous dynamic of the city" (Graffer 1).
„ Seen from the perspective of urban culture, it captures the fusion between graffiti and city architecture, dominated by grey cubes" (Graffer 3).
„ I wanted to make a character as easy to remember as possible from simple lines, a kind of logo, simple and expressive. She is a strong creature, has a lot of energy, who writes her own story" (Graffer 6).

According to the interviewed artists, most of the time, street art does not mean only sketches that are displayed on the street, but actual ideas transposed into an artistic act that is wanted to be accessed by all the inhabitants, and finally, a representation that becomes an identity of place. According to the respondents, street art is not only dependent on artistic trends but has become a representation that tells the city's story, often highlighting its problems or strengths.

The population's perception towards the current street art

The population's perception of the presence of the street art phenomenon in the urban space shows us extremely diverse opinions, which generally reflect personal preferences, the reference to urban aesthetics as a result of previous experiences or simply ignorance of the phenomenon.

According to the respondents, the characterisation of the street art phenomenon shows us the highest frequency of words such as expression and art, which demonstrates a change in perception regarding the manifestation of this current in the public space (Figure 1). However, some respondents quite often identify vandalism, disorder and subculture with graffiti, considering this a problem that must be solved at the level of the urban space. Other opinions associate street art with a form of protest, with the identity of the place or beautification.
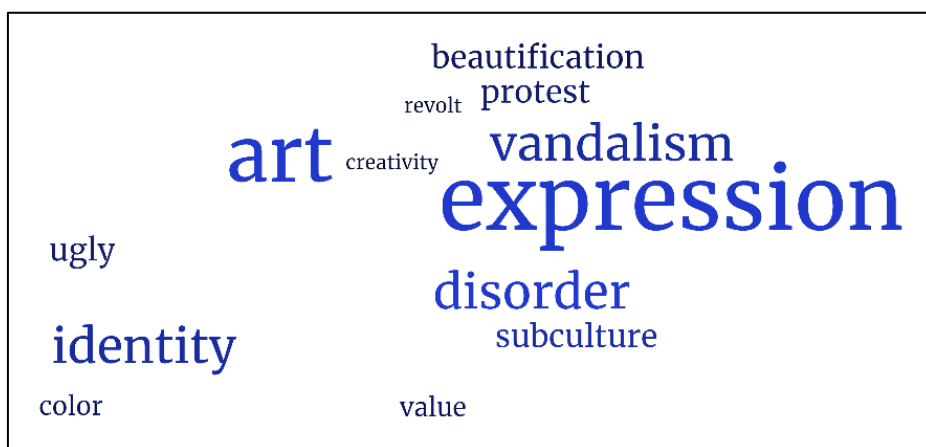

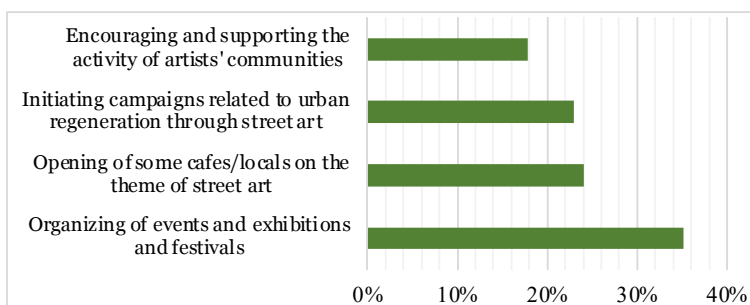**Figure 1.** How the respondents define street art in one word

Source: Analysis Results 2023

The perception of the resident population was analysed from several perspectives, the first referring to the way in which street art is received and accepted in the public space (Table 2).
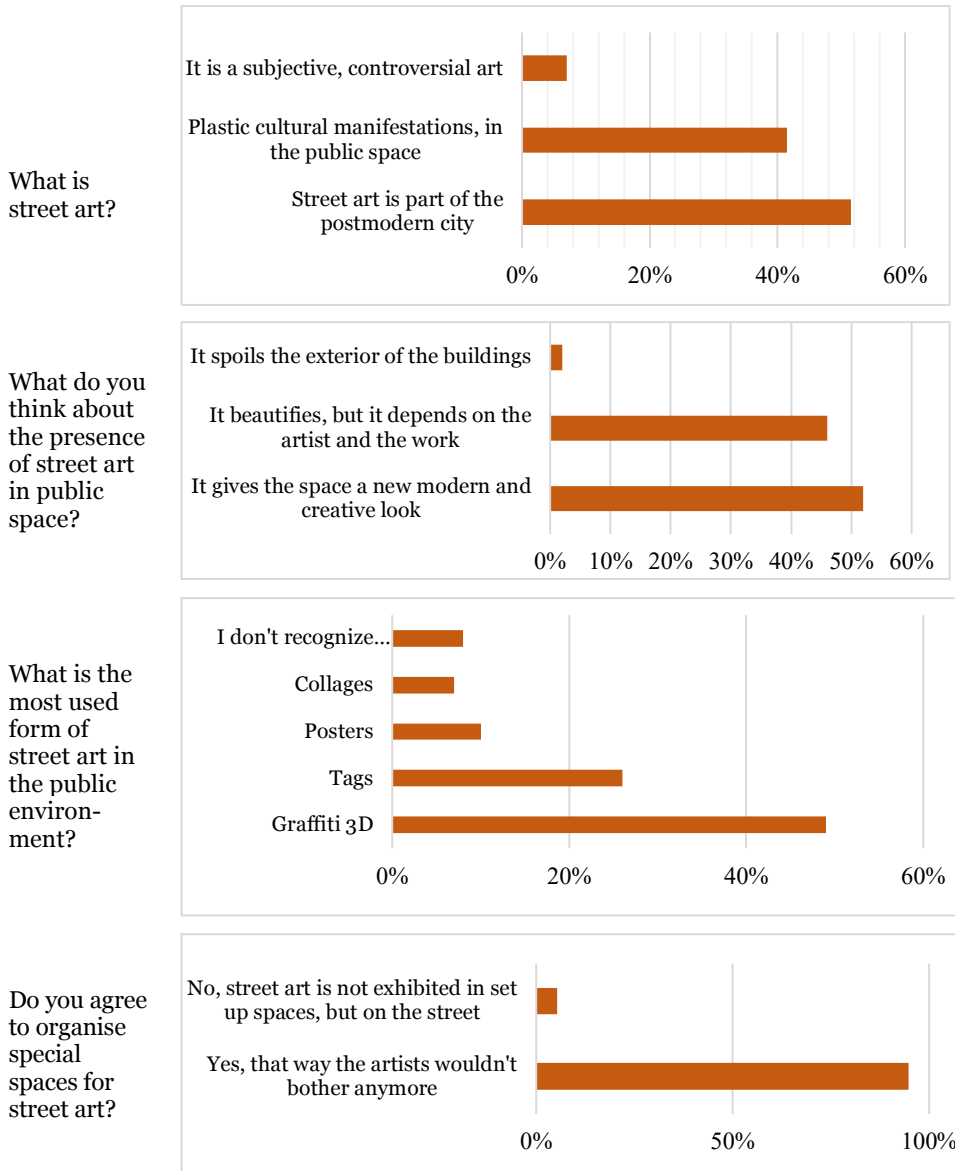
Table 2. Perceiving street art (percentages).

Promoting street art

Street art in public space
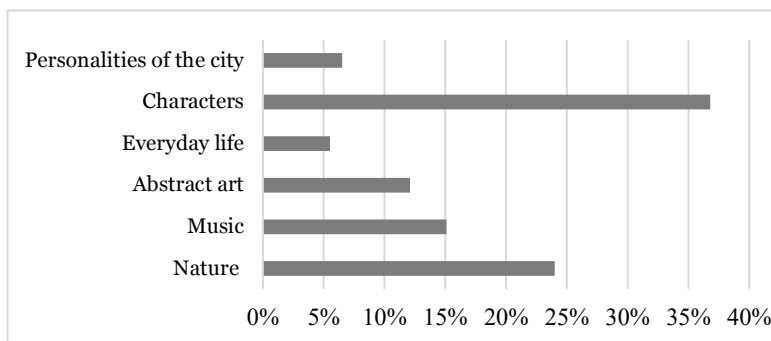
What is street art?

It is a subjective, controversial art	
Plastic cultural manifestations, in the public space	
Street art is part of the postmodern city	

(0% – 60%)

What do you think about the presence of street art in public space?

It spoils the exterior of the buildings	
It beautifies, but it depends on the artist and the work	
It gives the space a new modern and creative look	

(0% – 60%)

What is the most used form of street art in the public environment?

I don't recognize…	
Collages	
Posters	
Tags	
Graffiti 3D	

(0% – 60%)

Do you agree to organise special spaces for street art?

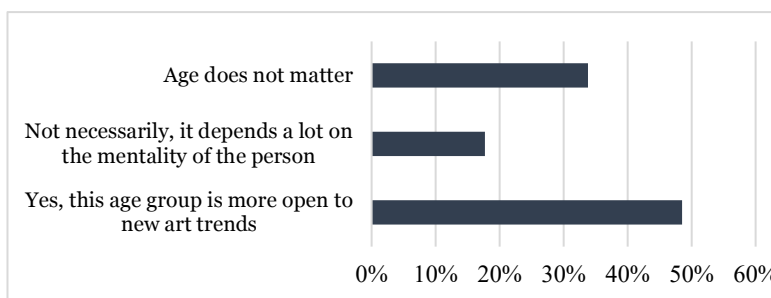|	
No, street art is not exhibited in set up spaces, but on the street	
Yes, that way the artists wouldn't bother anymore	

(0% – 100%)

The expected theme

What themes would you like to see reflected more in street art?
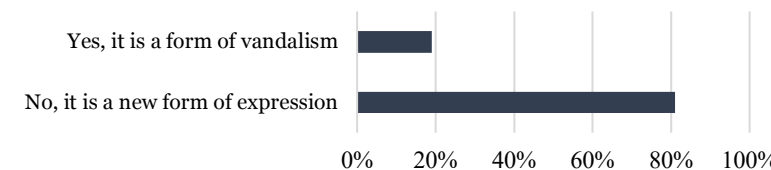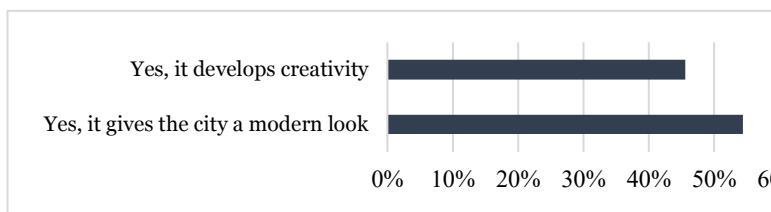

Impact

Do you think this type of art has a significant impact on young people?

Do you consider this form of expression disturbing?

Could street art help improve the look of the city?

Source: Analysis Results 2017

A majority proved knowledge of the as 51.1% of the respondents affirm that street art is part of the postmodern city, and a significant proportion overlaps the current with a plastic cultural manifestation in the public space. However, 7% of residents say it is a subjective, controversial art. Regarding the presence of art in the street, the perception is predominantly positive, so most respondents affirm the positive implications of the phenomenon, such as giving the space a new modern and creative look or beautification. Those who consider that street art destroys the external appearance of buildings are in a small proportion (Table 2).

Regarding the types of representations present in the public space, a large proportion identifies graffiti (49%), which shows its popularity due to the controversies created over time, with other forms of street art being little or not at all known. In the case of more than 94% of the respondents, artistic manifestations are seen as suitable for specially designed spaces, not outside them.

The second section targeted by the research refers to the expected themes, these being often related to characters, nature, music, abstract art or essential personalities of the city. The impact of street art on the values of the community shows us that it predominantly affects the category of young people (48.5% of the answers), but it depends equally on the person's mentality. The effects of this form of artistic expression on life space are positively perceived by 81% of the respondents, who consider it a new form of expression (Table 2). The positive impact perceived from the perspective of improving the city's look is fully affirmed; street art upgrades the city's modern image and develops creativity.

Responses showed that within the city, there were events that prioritised street artistic manifestations, the most important being the organisation of events, exhibitions or festivals and the opening of some cafes/locals on the theme of street art, the purpose being that of urban regeneration of some areas dominated by contrasting socio-economic structures, of valorising or beautifying the public space.

Conclusions

Street art has become an increasingly well-known and accepted phenomenon in the Bucharest urban space, the direct consequence of the high density of works of art in all city districts. The popularisation of the phenomenon represents a continuous concern of professional associations and the authorities, raising awareness of the artistic value of street art through festivals or large-scale projects.

The opinions of the artists converge in the same direction, supporting the fact that their goal is to change the negative perception of the population regarding graffiti. At the same time, the works presented in the city want to convey messages and emotions or reflect the identity of the place, becoming an integral part of the socio-cultural space.

On the other hand, in the case of the resident population, there is an increasingly pronounced dominance of the positive perception towards street art, with the majority of respondents knowing the phenomenon. The respondents identify the role of street art in beautifying the city or emphasise the opportunity to get out of anonymity or even the promotion it brings to the living space.

The negative opinions regarding current street art are much less represented, which shows that the trend of street visual representation is positively integrated into the life of the modern city.

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