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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A Qualitative Analysis of Tehran's Urban Murals: Classification of Thematic Content and Visual-Expressive Forms

Mohammad Rezaei ¹  | Mohammadreza Rasouli ^{2✉}  | Sepideh Samadzadeh Yazdi ³ 

1. Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Communication and Media, Tehran Central Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran. Email: rezaemoh@gmail.com
2. Corresponding author, Professor, Department of Communication and Media, Tehran Central Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran. E-mail: moh.rasouli@iauctb.ac.ir
3. Assistant Professor, Department of Architecture, Khatam University, Tehran, Iran. Email: s.samadzade@khatam.ac.ir

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction:

The aim of this research was to identify and analyze the themes of Tehran's urban murals, as well as to determine the types of visual and expressive forms employed in their creation. In this manner, an objective depiction was constructed through an in-depth examination of the conceptual and visual-expressive nature of the city's significant murals. Art is inherently intertwined with meaning, and the art of urban murals - as a form of media - can be purposefully produced and organized to serve specific objectives. Consequently, exploring these dimensions constitutes one of the principal goals of the present study. The detailed objectives are as follows: identifying the

visual elements, colors, symbols, and texts utilized in the murals, as well as extracting and comparing the dominant themes across different urban districts.

Urban murals constitute a type of media; although their reach is considerably more limited than that of mass media, their imagery can be projected through mass media outlets in proportion to their significance. The messages embedded in murals are projected and reflected through artistic innovations and tactical choices in composition, color usage, form, scale, and other visual devices, as well as through distinctive expressive modalities. Symbolism, simile, and abstraction are among the visual strategies that mural creators employ to convey messages. Each of these visual elements possesses specific capacities for influencing audiences. The institutions responsible for commissioning murals typically utilize this artistic medium for particular purposes; accordingly, the messages of murals are organized into domains such as the social, the cultural/religious, and the political.

Method:

The method is determined by the research objectives. Given that the goal was exploratory and required in-depth investigation, a qualitative approach—specifically, qualitative content analysis—was adopted. Under interpretive paradigms, numerical counting of data is not the objective; rather, the researcher seeks to interpret texts, images, and all human-produced content as forms of communication. The unit of analysis was each individual mural installed in Tehran, and the research population comprised all murals installed in the squares and main thoroughfares of Tehran between January 10, 2019, and May 15, 2025. For sampling, criterion-based purposive sampling was employed. This entailed first including all samples that met the initial criteria relevant to the research topic—such as installation date, urban location, and theme—in the analysis, thereby enabling comprehensive classification. Accordingly, the murals of Vali Asr Square, Islamic Revolution Square, Palestine Square, Jahan Square, and Vanak Square constituted the research sample. MaxQDA 10 software was utilized for data analysis.

Findings:

In the social domain, the highest frequency of meanings pertained to themes of population and family, wherein large families were represented as happy and cohesive. This was followed by themes such as social participation, national unity, and the celebration of athletes' achievements, often infused with nationalist sentiment. In the cultural/religious domain, the highest frequency of meanings belonged to religious relations, followed by national rituals. In the political domain, representations included threats to Israel, displays of Iran's missile and military power, and criticism of the West, among others. In terms of expressive forms, in both the social and cultural/religious domains, sloganistic expression was more prevalent, whereas written expressive methods were employed less frequently. Regarding visual forms, in the social domain both simile and symbolism were utilized to a significant extent; in the cultural/religious domain, the symbolic mode was the most commonly employed visual method. In the political domain, the Persian-Hebrew bilingual writing method was extensively used, and symbolically coded imagery predominated. Vali Asr Square emerged as the epicenter of discursive representation. In Palestine Square, nearly all messages were political in nature, while Revolution Square exhibited a mixed but comparatively more limited representational scope. Jahan Square and Vanak Square played a more peripheral role.

Conclusions:

Urban murals in Tehran are not merely sites of entertainment or vehicles for satisfying the aesthetic sensibilities of audiences; rather, they are purposefully employed to establish and promote specific cultural, religious, social, or political policies. At the core of their existence lies a hidden yet recognizable semantic center, which is mobilized to shape the attitudes and perceptions of the public. For instance, murals function to represent happiness in large families, thereby encouraging population growth in society, or to emphasize national and religious solidarity. In this regard, expressive and visual methods, alongside artistic tactics, have been deployed to render the messages effective for audiences. In Tehran, the majority of murals have been concentrated on audiences in Vali Asr Square, and sloganistic and poetic expressive methods have been more frequently utilized, while written expressive approaches could also contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the imagery. Although the visual methods of symbolism and simile are useful, the technique of abstraction could also prove effective in deepening the audience's philosophical reflection.

Data Availability Statement

Data available on request from the authors.

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Ethical considerations

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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