

Claiming a New Citizenship on Dhaka's Walls: Gen Z's Visual Self-Expression in July Movement Graffiti and Wall Art

By

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English

Department of English and Humanities

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at BRAC University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Approval

The thesis titled “Claiming a New Citizenship on Dhaka’s Walls: Gen Z’s Visual Self-Expression in July Movement Graffiti and Wall Art” submitted by Fariha Shahin (21303029) of Fall, 2025 has been accepted as satisfactory in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English on 20th January 2026.

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Abstract

During Bangladesh's July Movement, students employed graffiti and wall art as a dynamic form of communication and resistance, transforming it from a purely political tool to a means of individual and collective self-expression. During this period of change, Gen Z turned public walls into sites that represented their identities, complaints, and aspirations by incorporating wit, internet culture, and symbols into graffiti. Despite having all the critical attention on the study graffiti of July, a significant research gap exists in understanding how it functions as a deliberate performance of a new, self-authorized political identity by Gen Z, rather than just a reactionary protest tool. This research aims to fill that gap by analyzing the protest graffiti and wall writings of the July Movement to identify the ways in which Gen Z creates a new vision of being a citizen. Hence, this study uses qualitative analysis by drawing on images collected through field documentation in Dhaka (July-August 2024) and applying frameworks from Roland Barthes and Charles Sanders Peirce to analyze aesthetic, textual, and rhetorical shifts. The key findings reveal a fundamental transformation in Bangladesh's visual rhetoric of protest. The study identifies a shift from a tradition of centralized imagery to a new language of decentralized and culturally hybrid expression. This analysis shows that Gen Z's artistic expression performs three arguments. First, they assert political legitimacy through directly showing themselves in action as "Auditor-Citizens." Second, they lay out a proactive plan for an alternative nation by showing themselves as "the change." Third, they demand their hybrid cultural identity to be accepted as a valid foundation for political action. The study's conclusion states that their graffiti signifies the performance of a new, self-historicizing citizenship, signifying a departure from top-down political culture and reaffirming Gen Z's position as Bangladesh's future architects.

Keywords: Gen Z; graffiti, wall art; protest art; self-expression; visual rhetoric.

Table of contents

Declaration.....	2
Approval.....	3
Acknowledgements.....	4
Abstract.....	5
List of Figures.....	7
Chapter 1:.....	8
Introduction.....	8
1.1 Gen Z's Role in the July Movement.....	9
1.2 Creativity of July Resistance.....	10
1.3 Research Problem.....	11
1.4 Research Aim.....	12
1.5 Research questions: To help achieve the stated objectives, the study is guided by the following questions:.....	12
1.7 Limitations of the Study.....	13
Chapter 2.....	14
Literature Review.....	14
2.1 Historical Context of Graffiti.....	14
2.2 Graffiti as a Protest Art in the Modern World.....	15
2.3 Graffiti as a Documentation of Struggle.....	16
2.4 Graffiti as a Political Expression in the Recent History of Bangladesh.....	17
2.5 Social Commentary.....	18
2.6 Emergence of a New Function: Self-Expression.....	20
Chapter 3:.....	22
Methodology.....	22
3.1 Research Design.....	22
Chapter 4:.....	25
Direct Protest Graffiti: The Self-Expression of a Generation in Action.....	25
4.1 Performing Accountability- The Citizen in Action.....	25
4.2 Performing Commemoration: Redefining Heroism in Action.....	29
4.3 Performing Historical Legitimacy.....	32
Chapter 5.....	37
Indirect Protest Graffiti: Gen Z is the Change.....	37
5.1 Diagnostics of a Broken System.....	37
5.2 The Vision: Enacting "The Alternative".....	39
Chapter 6.....	46
Claiming Pop Culture as Gen Z's Identity.....	46
6.1 Elevating the Trivial: The Mock Heroic as Shared Cultural Code.....	46
6.2 Blurring the Lines Between High and Pop Culture Identity.....	50
Chapter 7.....	55

Conclusion.....55
Works Cited..... 57

List of Figures

Figure 1:..... 26

Figure 2:..... 28

Figure 3:..... 31

Figure 4:..... 33

Figure 5:..... 34

Figure 6:..... 35

Figure 7:..... 38

Figure 8:..... 39

Figure 9:..... 40

Figure 10:..... 41

Figure 11:..... 42

Figure 12:..... 43

Figure 13:..... 44

Figure 14:..... 47

Figure 15:..... 48

Figure 16:..... 49

Figure 17:..... 51

Figure 18:..... 52

Figure 19:..... 53

Chapter 1:

Introduction

During Bangladesh's July Movement, the catchphrase "Gen Z is the new revolution" became widespread and was posted on social media and on street walls at the same time. After being painted on protest locations, this slogan quickly entered discussions in several communities. That turning point was achieved in July 2024, demonstrating the power and impact of a whole generation. Gen Z turned city walls into living walls during and after the resistance. They covered them with poetry, drawings, and graffiti that powerfully conveyed their identity and their spirit of defiance. These visuals left a mark, becoming inseparable from the movement's identity. While street art and wall writings have long been part of social movements, no previous generation had so boldly used their personal style and cultural codes on the walls. Traditionally, such art aimed to be easily understood by the general public, but this time, the youth prioritized their own voice and left their identity on the walls. Therefore, through this research, this paper aims to show how Generation Z managed to showcase their emotions, intellect, wisdom, and wit through various forms of graffiti that marked the walls during and after the July Revolution.

1.1 Gen Z's Role in the July Movement

Generation Z, or Gen Z, often referred to as 'Zoomers,' includes those born between 1997 and 2010. They are often referred to as "snowflakes" or a generation that is too coddled; however, according to research by Roberta Katz, a senior research scholar at Stanford's Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (CASBS), Gen Z is entrepreneurial and adaptive (Witte, 2022). In Bangladesh, too, a common notion about Gen Z has been that it lacks political awareness, critical thinking, and understanding of historical struggles. The senior generation also doubts this new generation's ability to recognize the dystopian reality

they live in. However, the July uprising proved those assumptions wrong. Gen Z demonstrated that they are not passive spectators but active participants who can raise their voices against injustice. Their behavior demonstrated that they are well aware of how a fascist, dictatorial government is destroying Bangladesh. The Supreme Court's decision to reinstate a provision that reserved 30% of civil service employment for the descendants of Liberation War veterans in June 2024 set off a student-led demonstration that marked the beginning of it all (Huq & Miller, 2024). Students from Dhaka University protested the High Court's decision. Peaceful demonstrations gradually expanded over college campuses. When Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina disregarded the protesters' feelings by calling them "Razakars," a name used to describe traitors during the 1971 Liberation War, the movement was quickly received with disdain. As a result, the students started to move the discussion away from quota reform and organized a larger alliance that was unified in their fight for democracy and against fascism (Huq & Miller, 2024). Additionally, while being new to political activity, the Gen Z protestors were intelligent and proficient in technology, having a solid foundation in online networking via social media and online platforms (Digital, 2024). On July 15, the student branch of the ruling party, named Bangladesh Chhatra League, attacked protestors. Hence, violence soon broke out, and the situation quickly worsened. Violence erupted on July 16, which resulted in the deaths of at least six people. One of them was Abu Sayeed, whose courageous resistance against police brutality became a powerful symbol of resistance (Huda, 2024). Therefore, the movement's focus quickly shifted from quota reform to demanding the resignation of the current regime because of all the broader mounting discontent with the systemic problems suddenly burst out among the citizens.

1.2 Creativity of July Resistance

The voices of the youth felt that the massacre that occurred in July should not be dismissed as just another month. Therefore, one of the most important effects of this resistance was the emergence of street art and wall writing, which took over walls all over the country. For a long time, protest movements have used art as a method to express dissatisfaction and take part in resistance. It also has an immense effect on explaining difficult concepts and elevating voices that are not heard. Creativity was used in the July rebellion to draw attention to the conflict. Graffiti, a popular type of protest art, was welcomed by the students as a daring way to show dissent. Graffiti's unplanned appearance on the walls of Dhaka and other large towns was one of the uprising's most remarkable features. In a powerful gesture of defiance against governmental repression, students were even observed spray-painting police riot vehicles during the height of the uprising (Shuddhashar, 2025). As pro-democracy activists, including students from schools, colleges, universities, and madrasas, assumed the role of artists, city walls erupted with color (BSS, 2024). Strong sentiments conveyed by their graffiti aided in the advancement of the anti-fascist movement. Graffiti was not a common form of protest in the early phases of the movement. After the Chhatra League violently attacked Dhaka University protesting students, its use started to increase. Graffiti became more prevalent as protests and the Awami League loyalists' response grew more intense. The Anti-Discrimination Student Movement formally demanded a coordinated online and offline graffiti and wall-writing campaign on July 18, as the quota reform movement turned into a widespread rebellion. Under the careful eyes of police enforcement, this program was carried out throughout Dhaka and beyond by ordinary citizens and revolutionary students, risking their lives in the process (BSS, 2024). Protesters expressed their long-suppressed rage against Hasina's fascist government through their graffiti. The fight gained a unique dimension as a result of this innovative turn.

1.3 Research Problem

As seen above, the July 2024 uprising contributed to the recent rise in popularity of Generation Z. By ultimately overthrowing an oppressive government, this new generation of youth showed their active participation in national affairs. They protested with more than just marches and yelling because they showed their voices through brushes and paint. Thus, this movement differed from previous protests in Bangladesh's history due to its use of visual language. Furthermore, a large amount of the writing and art mirrored the youth's perceptions of the world and themselves, even though the majority of it concentrated on denouncing the oppression of the government. Many Bangladeshi people were unaware of the term "Gen Z," let alone the unique ways this generation expresses itself. Even though it has only been a year, the July movement is already a noteworthy event that requires further study. Since visual rhetoric was so important, it needs to be considered an important type of protest art. There is still much to learn about the traits of Gen Z's visual rhetoric. Examining how this generation transformed protest art to become both a tool of resistance and an expression of their identity is crucial to comprehending the movement. We still do not fully understand how young people express themselves creatively and aesthetically using words, symbols, images, and visuals. As a result, neither the general public nor scholarly discourse has examined the underlying implications behind Gen Z's visual protest, the messages they sought to send, or what those pictures tell about their identity.

1.4 Research Aim

The July movement has attracted a lot of critical attention, generating volumes of critical essays and journal articles, including those on the wall art and Gen Z expressions. It is one of the most written about moments in the recent history of Bangladesh. By examining the July movement's graffiti and wall art as well as what Gen Z is trying to say with their visual

expressions, this study seeks to add to this growing discourse. It will investigate how their unique protest art style reflects and enhances the aesthetics of resistance. This study attempts to reveal how Gen Z has reinterpreted self-expression in political resistance by examining historical and contemporary graffiti, earlier research on protest art, and primary data gathered through field visits, photography, and interpretation. In relation to this analysis, it shows how the new generation, referred to as Gen Z, expresses itself through a variety of aesthetics and rhetorics in a form of resistance that has led to a significant change in wall writing and graffiti. The study employs content and textual analysis of graffiti drawn from July to August throughout Bangladesh, supported by field visits for documentation.

1.5 Research questions: To help achieve the stated objectives, the study is guided by the following questions:

1. How has the visual rhetoric of protest graffiti changed throughout the years till the July Movement in Bangladesh? What does the change imply?
2. How does Gen Z express itself artistically through the graffiti of the July Movement?

1.7 Limitations of the Study

This study might offer some effective findings on Gen Z's self-expression; however, it still possesses some limitations. As this research is primarily qualitative, some may view the analysis as subjective. Additionally, due to time constraints, it is not feasible to document and analyze every piece of graffiti across all districts of Bangladesh; as a result, some artworks may go unnoticed. Furthermore, the study's focus on the graffiti's reflection of generational self-expression may not be fully applicable or generalizable to other cultures or countries. The meanings, texts, and symbols analyzed are deeply rooted in the specific cultural and internet contexts of Bangladesh, and thus primarily represent the self-expression of

Bangladeshi Gen Z. The limitations of the chosen locations also matters because the study is based on Dhaka only, hence, the study only involved the areas in Dhaka, and it does not reveal the self-expression of this generation outside of Dhaka.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Historical Context of Graffiti

Graffiti has existed since ancient times of Herculaneum and Pompeii as a form of visual discourse offering diverse opinions on the state of politics, socio-economic life, sexual practice, and other aspects of Roman Society (Cappelli, 2020). White (2018) discusses how graffiti's origins may be traced back to ancient Egypt, the Mayan, Viking, and Renaissance cultures. It was used for a variety of purposes, including expressing love, revealing hidden brothels, and expressing political dissatisfaction. Thus, art has long been used to capture and convey history. Bijoor (2025) points out the political potential of the art form as he describes how historically, graffiti has been associated with politics, used in the Roman world to speak back to authority and ridicule officials. Creativity is often used as a coping strategy by people who consider themselves disregarded or powerless. Since it spills onto walls and the streets and becomes the collective voice of the people during chaotic and difficult times, it has never been contained on paper. Street art can be used to restore public space and give people a sense of agency, as was the case during the Egyptian Revolution. According to Bijoor (2025), this gives people the ability to rebel against state structures and acts as an actual illustration of citizen agency. Similarly, Teune (2016) discusses how art influences social movements and their action styles. While the 1960s saw more radical, avant-garde ideas shaping protest as a response to a perceived “moment of madness,” current activism, particularly in global justice movements, demonstrates “innovation at the margins”. Today’s artists are frequently more involved in movements, providing workshops and hands-on support, making it harder to distinguish between political and creative activities (Teune, 2016). The idea of “artivism” is gaining acceptance, in which artists use their art as a vehicle for political engagement and become increasingly active political activists.

2.2 Graffiti as a Protest Art in the Modern World

With the emergence of hip-hop culture in the late 1960s, modern graffiti became more well-known (White, 2018). Due to common techniques such as tagging and assuming unique street personas, street and graffiti artists are sometimes associated with gang subcultures (Hughes, 2009). There are differing views on whether street art is appropriate for mainstream culture or conventional art societies; some people think it is trivial. However, because it can provide chances for self-expression and show art as a more expansive area than traditional forms, there is support for its inclusion in high school art curriculum (Hughes, 2009). One of the key players in the development of contemporary graffiti is Darryl McCray, better known by his stage name Cornbread, who uses spray paint and his signature to draw attention to and criticize social injustices. He was dubbed the “Father of modern graffiti” for his inventive techniques and the use of spray paint as a portable and reasonably priced medium, which had a major impact on the development of graffiti art (White, 2018). Graffiti emerged as the visual language of hip-hop during this time, despite attacks and criticism. The development of graffiti in the present era was influenced by New York street art and the tagging movement of the 1970s. According to Bijoor (2025), on the other hand, graffiti has been used recently to voice discontent and hostility toward political figures, such as Russian President Putin. Thus, in addition to being artistic, graffiti is also, more broadly, symbolic and communicative. Furthermore, because art changes across time, space, and the viewer’s interpretation, its meaning is never fixed.

2.3 Graffiti as a Documentation of Struggle

Cappelli (2020) asserts that graffiti serves as a historical record of racial conflict by providing a platform for individuals to write their own narratives about America, in addition to reflecting the element of resistance. It serves as a platform to revise the world by shaping

how individuals think and act. Furthermore, graffiti acts as unauthorized visual rhetoric, demonstrating how the voices of the marginalized speak back against dominant, non-inclusive political structures (Cappelli, 2020). The author examines the George Floyd Protest Graffiti as a site to analyze how emotions come into play in its production. She says that the Floyd cultural graffiti production functions as a system of socio-cultural negotiations and a political call to arms to collapse structural racism in America (2020). Protest graffiti reveals how marginalized Black Americans successfully challenge and transform conversations of institutional racism in America.

As for the Graffiti artists, they remain mostly anonymous (McAuliffe & Iveson, 2011). In fact, for many graffiti artists, the risk of getting caught makes their work more exciting for them. The tougher the laws, the more determined some artists become. This fear seems to disappear during the time of an uprising. In the study of July Street Art, it is possible that this perception might change during revolutions, as people may see them as achievements rather than something illegal. The authors move on to explain that even those who strongly oppose graffiti sometimes admit that some graffiti artists have talent. However, they believe that this talent is being misused because it is applied illegally. The talent and illegality of graffiti did not matter during the July Movement because anyone from any background could draw and make wall art without any interference after the regime resigned.

The history of graffiti as a political expression style is very similar to what has happened recently in Bangladesh, especially during the July Movement. While graffiti has traditionally been studied in Western or Middle Eastern contexts, examples of protest graffiti in South Asia highlight how this global tradition is taking on new, localized forms. In Bangladesh, the use of graffiti has also evolved, taking on multiple overlapping functions over time. It has

long served as a tool for political expression and social commentary. However, during the July Movement, graffiti took on an additional, emerging role, that of self-expression, particularly among the younger generation. Besides, we see a convergence, a coming together of all the different aspects discussed above, in the protest graffiti of July.

2.4 Graffiti as a Political Expression in the Recent History of Bangladesh

Graffiti is a long-standing and deeply rooted form of public expression in Bangladesh. It has been referred to by a number of Bangla titles, including Dewal Likhon (দেওয়াল লিখন), Chika (চিকা), and Chika Mara (চিকা মারা) (Chowdhury, 2021). These native terms refer to a long-standing activity that has an unbreakable connection to the country's political and social crises, even though the English word "graffiti" has only recently made its way into the local language. Tracing the development of this medium through significant historical periods, including the Language Movement and the fight for independence, the post-independence era of nation-building, and the modern era, is crucial to comprehending its nature and purpose. Public writing was first used as a method of protest during the Bengali Language Movement, which demanded linguistic and cultural rights. Although there are few specific records, the culture of resistance that developed during this time provided a standard for claiming identity in public spaces (Chowdhury, 2021). The practice spread and grew more structured. Chowdhury (2021) also explains that it started in Dhaka University, where the students would use this as a cover story in order to trick the authorities. That is how dangerous this rebellious work, Chika Mara, was (Rahman, 2025). Moreover, graffiti evolved into a valuable weapon during the Liberation War as activists risked their lives to paint pro-independence slogans in the dark (Rahman, 2010). In this case, graffiti was openly revolutionary, serving as a vehicle for inspiration and advocating for an end to governmental violence. Chika developed into a vital site for public protest under Hussain Muhammad Ershad's military rule. With the words

“সৈরাচার নিপাত যাক” (“Down with autocracy”) and “গণতন্ত্র মুক্তি পাক” (“Let democracy be freed”), he turned his body into a living canvas. Graffiti evolved from a written protest into a potent visual representation after his death and the famous photo of his painted body. This incident emphasizes the grave dangers involved as well as the role of graffiti as a symbol that may unite and spark a widespread pro-democracy movement, which finally resulted in Ershad’s collapse in 1990. Graffiti’s function has continued to change in the twenty-first century in response to social movements, digital media, and new governmental structures. Its function has grown to cover the gaps left by a limited public sphere, and its nature is now a combination of the physical and the digital.

2.5 Social Commentary

A new genre centered on larger social critique through a uniform visual language emerged in the early 2000s, while a large portion of Bangladeshi graffiti has always been a direct reaction to political events. The Aijudin and Shubodh series was the first to do this. These individuals, who were shown in a straightforward, line-drawing style, were silent observers and commentators on the social hypocrisies and everyday absurdities of Dhaka’s urban life rather than being associated with any particular movement or party. Aijuddin’s graffiti first appeared while individuals were struggling financially and had nowhere to vent their frustrations. The “Aijuddin is in pain” (কষ্টে আছে আইজুদ্দিন) series from the 1990s is reminiscent of the Subodh series (Chowdhury, 2021). Because of the political content of the words, the anonymity, and the closeness in style of the graffiti, the anonymous artist for the Subodh series is known as the “Ted Banksy of Bangladesh” (Global Voices, 2017). They had a different objective. Shubodh’s drawings frequently depicted the protagonists in simple yet satirical situations, offering remarks on traffic chaos, corruption, or the generational division instead of calling for the overthrow of a dictatorship. As a result, Bangladeshi graffiti has a

new visual vocabulary that is cultural, accessible, and sarcastic rather than explicitly political. The show's larger purpose was to serve as a mirror to society at large, promoting reflection among viewers. Aijudin and Shubodh demonstrated graffiti's adaptability in interacting with the public on topics outside of the political platform by developing recurring characters and transcending text-based slogans, changing the medium from a means of fast mobilization to a type of ongoing cultural critique.

Shubodh was a well-known figure in all discussions and conversations. Sharmin (2023) asserts that the Subodh artworks' imagery highlights the effects of communal trauma brought on by recent sociopolitical events, such as the violence against bloggers and activists that followed the Shahbag movement. Subodh serves as a metaphor for urban traumatized people, such as blogger-activists, according to the artists. Subodh is a powerful symbol of resistance against repressive policies like the ICT Act because of the ambiguity of his image, which enables viewers to project their own meanings and anxieties onto the character (Sharmin, 2023). These messages are inspirational in their recent emergence, but they are vague in what they generally suggest. Therefore, these wall writings have the ability to address the ongoing crises that impact the socioeconomic and political aspects of contemporary Dhaka, despite their temporary and brief nature (Chowdhury, 2021).

2.6 Emergence of a New Function: Self-Expression

Public areas served as canvases for resistance art created by artists and students during the July 2024 uprising in Bangladesh. Wider social groups joined the movement as a result of the aesthetics of these creative efforts, which promoted togetherness, sparked a sense of agency, and simplified difficult political topics (Venkataswamy & Majumder, 2024). But the quota

reform movement's graffiti wave was unique in that it included a generation that many had assumed to be politically apathetic. This new generation's graffiti not only expressed specific political grievances but also raised broader issues of social justice and human rights (Rashid, 2024). Their work reflected deep emotions, stories of betrayal, hope, and resistance.

Anti-government and pro-democracy slogans covered walls and streets, while images of mosques, churches, temples, and pagodas called for coexistence and secularism (Rashid, 2024). In their empirical research on nationalistic wall arts, Chowdhury (2021) points out that these artworks indicate the homogenizing nature and tendency that the nation has taken on, where the indigenous cultures and languages have been systematically erased and disallowed from being taught at schools, for example, the Chakma, Marma, and Tanchangya languages. Portrayals of such extreme nationalistic graffiti or wall writings seem to have been removed in the July protest art, as Gen Z's most common graffiti of the July was about giving space and voice to marginalized communities.

As demonstrated in the existing literature, graffiti in Bangladesh serves multiple purposes, particularly as a vehicle for political expression and social commentary, and now as a medium of self-expression, I argue. The following chapters explore how Generation Z in Dhaka is using graffiti as a tool for self-expression and how they are asserting their generational identity through this evolving artistic form. However, it is also important to remember that these functions are neither mutually exclusive nor static. They evolve and may co-exist.

Chapter 3:

Methodology

3.1 Research Design

After exploring the context in which to study July graffiti and wall art in the previous chapter, this chapter outlines the research design and method. As the focus of the research is meaning, interpretation, and context, this research is qualitative in nature. Graffiti is a cultural text that requires interpretive methods to reveal its levels of meaning because it communicates through both textual and visual codes, making a qualitative approach especially appropriate.

The main focus of this study is the use of empirical data, i.e., images of wall art and graffiti, collected through inserting myself into the field by visiting and tracking multiple locations and taking pictures. The research period was flexible and took place from January 2025 to August 2025, when the researcher herself collected data by visiting the places where the graffiti was visible. The places include Jatrabari Bibir Bagicha, Dhamondi 01, Bailey Road, Siddheshwari Road, Mohammadpur, Hatirjheel, Badda, Gulshan, Mirpur, Motijheel, Shahjahanpur, Kamlapur, Kurmitola, and Moghbazar, focusing solely on areas near educational institutions. The researcher has limited her research to these locations, as these are the most visible places intricately covered with wall graffiti that were found through online research. Before choosing the locations, the researcher conversed with their friends, family, and colleagues to track the most visible places with wall graffiti, and after listing the places, the researcher fixed the exact locations before visiting them. The graffiti has been identified as the work of Gen Z, as the artists have signed their names and are students from nearby schools, colleges, and universities. All photos were taken using a mobile phone. In addition to the photographs, site visit observations and reflections were recorded as notes in a journal.

The total number of pictures that were collected was 554. As the wall art and graffiti of July are heavily repetitive in nature, hence, the researcher did not use all of them for analysis. All the photos were divided into multiple albums based on their functions of the graffiti, for example, direct protest, indirect protest, and pop cultural ones. Each sections were further observed until the researcher found the suitable and common ones to include in the analysis. Hence, in the analysis, a total of 19 images of wall art and graffiti were used. Even though the study and field trips took place approximately a year after the July movement, the wall art's date is nonetheless noteworthy. There were wall writings created both during the movement and after the fall of the regime, when artists enjoyed greater freedom of expression. The researcher took photographs of wall writings which were made during the July movement, and also the ones made after August 5. Works created by other organizations are not included in this study since they are unrelated to Generation Z and do not capture its feelings. In addition, the researcher contacted photographers and painters on social media to ask them to share their graffiti pieces to complement the empirical data gathered from field visits. This addition expanded the study's geographical scope, as it was impossible for the researcher to document all locations on their own. It helped the empirical data by allowing the researcher to examine whether these extra sites contained any useful materials. These photos are included in the study with the consent and due credit of the artists and activists who voluntarily offered their work.

The study also included previous academic research as a secondary source, which further supported the analysis. The qualitative approach, moreover, allowed the identification of themes and a comprehensive analysis of empirical data. The data were categorized into different themes and aspects based on the functions of the graffiti and wall art after an interpretive study. For example, for the first analysis chapter, the focus was on the direct

protest graffiti, and this function was analyzed to reveal how the visual rhetoric has changed from previous graffiti and what it expresses about the Generation Z. The analytical chapter is therefore organized thematically, with each chapter focusing on a different aspect of self-expression. The analysis chapters, hence, explore subjects like slogans, wit, memes, and slang through semiotic and visual analysis. Also, the research mostly uses semiotics to read the images; the study included Charles Sanders Peirce's explanation of symbols and Roland Barthes' theory of signs to get deeply into the analysis in order to uncover deeply rooted ideological views. Lastly, there are some limitations of this study that should be considered, as it only considers location within the city and ignores nearby districts; hence, the results only show how Gen Z expresses themselves in Dhaka. Graffiti is ubiquitous and repetitive throughout the whole city, and some is also out of sight. It is nearly impossible for the researcher to reach out and find every single one of them. Hence, the researcher has used only those who are publicly visible and accessible.

Before moving onto the analysis chapters, I want to give an overview of the chapters and how I have divided the data into three major categories. First one, direct protest graffiti. Second, indirect protest graffiti. The third one is linked to indirect protest but it is so huge that it can be one category on its own. It is pop cultural graffiti.

Chapter 4:

Direct Protest Graffiti: The Self-Expression of a Generation in Action

The images studied fall into two broad categories. This chapter discusses the first of these, direct protest graffiti through which Generation Z shows itself in action. Gen Z's contribution during the July movement challenged the notion of viewing them as an apolitical or disengaged generation. However, the generation that only says that 'they know' is not enough; hence, they have to showcase that they know and care about the well-being of this country. Therefore, through wall art and graffiti, they show how deeply involved they are, which reflects their collective struggle and belonging. As they show themselves in action, their outbursts seem like strong acts of resistance that go beyond language. Each piece of graffiti is an assertion of accountability, remembrance, and historical ownership. Through these images, they show a strong sense of power and political consciousness. Therefore, this chapter rejects the idea that Gen Z is an apolitical generation and instead presents itself as a real, active, and conscious force for change by examining direct protest graffiti as a way to understand how Gen Z creates and manifests its political identity.

4.1 Performing Accountability- The Citizen in Action

Direct protest graffiti is a public forum that Gen Z uses to assume the role of the "Auditor-Citizen." When authorities fail to publicly account for their responsibilities and appear not to intend to, citizens can audit the authority with a view to exacting the answer that should be given (Laden, 2023). These pictures not only convey their grievances but also act as a symbolic judgment of the government and its establishments. The study reveals two layers of activism involved in their protest. One that is in direct confrontation with individuals in positions of authority, and then a deeper examination of the structures that support those authorities. In the first layer, those considered responsible for the violence that

occurred during the July Movement are boldly accused. It calls out names, places blame, and transforms public walls into forums for group condemnation. Roland Barthes' (2000) theory of the visual message offers a useful perspective through which to view how such graffiti conveys its critical accusations. His model demonstrates how text and image combine to produce meaning that is more powerful than either could express on its own.



Figure 1. Student Killer Sheikh Hasina.

For instance, the demonic representation in Figure 1 serves as a cultural shorthand for disfigurement and evil. A better comprehension of how meaning functions within it, by using Peirce's (1935) model of the sign, such as icon, index, and symbol, where he explains icons, which resemble what they represent, indexes, which are directly related to what they indicate, or symbols, which are arbitrarily connected through cultural or learned meaning. Therefore,

Hasina's demonic image serves as a symbol because it is a familiar likeness that has been culturally coded to represent evil and inhumanity. This image subsequently becomes a representation of evil due to the demonic modifications made to it, such as the addition of scary eyes or sharp teeth. The text, "student killer," serves as a direct index, clearly pointing to the cause of the bloodshed and the charge against the figure portrayed, while the red background is a symbol of violence. The text works here as linguistic "anchorage" as it establishes the image's unsaid, ambiguous meaning and directs the viewers towards a conclusion (Barthes, 2000). There is a use of bilingual repetition, which makes sure that the message reaches a variety of audiences, intensifying the effect. This reflects how Gen Z engages in such a bold act of political conflict. Their graffiti is a visible display of their discontent rather than a silent form of protest. They reject formality, fear, and silence as they directly hold the highest authority accountable. Through these actions, they establish themselves as a generation that uses their own visual language to demand justice and speak the truth with fear of power. Despite using an identifiable icon, an unbreakable semiotic relationship is created by the equal, merged presence of the accusatory text and the demonic icon on a shared red canvas, where the words give the image an undeniable political charge, and the image provides the words raw feeling. By weaponizing the state's own iconography to express a generation's collective judgment and guaranteeing their allegation of "student killer" cannot be disregarded, erased, or muted, this combination turns the walls from a passive surface into an active, shouting witness.

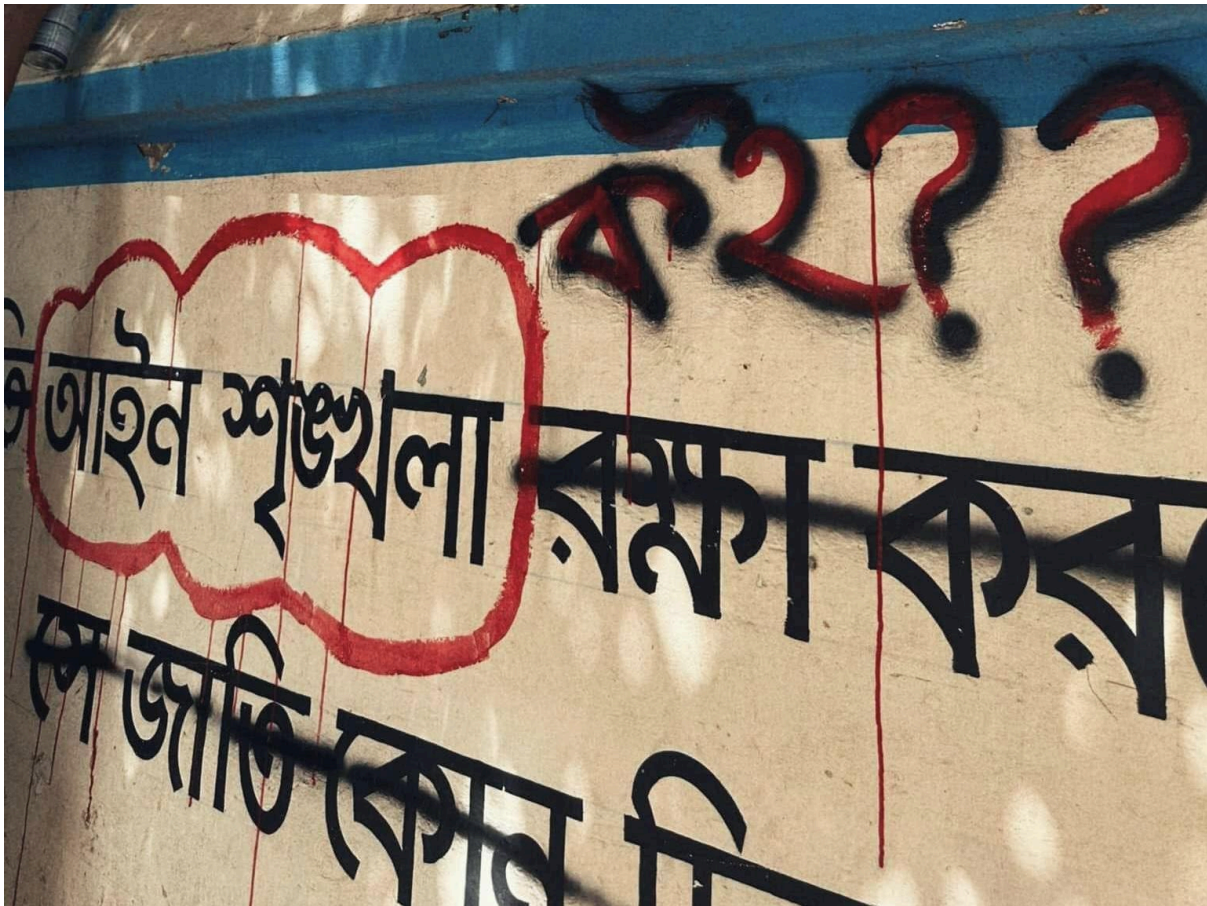


Figure 2. Where is the ‘law and order’? Photo by Ishana Iftekhar, used with permission.

In their second layer of activism, the focus shifts from targeting specific leaders to the broader system that keeps and follows the regime in power. Here, Gen Z graffiti exposes the tension between the state's declared values and its oppressive realities. Figure 2 is a powerful example of a semiotic disruption. The scene of resistance is the school wall itself, which represents authority. As the students are painting over the established rules of the school, they are also committing more than just visual disobedience. They are visually going against forced obedience. In what Barthes calls “linguistic relay, where a text interacts with its surroundings to make a new meaning, the word “কই?” is an excellent example of this. It not only names the state but the word also actively questions its moral and legal legitimacy. Their question is “where is the law and order you tell us to follow?” which converts the authoritative word “law and order” into a thought-provoking challenge. The multiple question

marks intensify this problem by converting that straightforward question into an allegation. The graffiti highlights the regime's basic conflict with this minor alteration. The regime's pretense of upholding law and order when they are causing a massacre is exposed by the civilian aggression. The students, hence, symbolically regain control over the language of morality and discipline by repainting and rewriting on the walls. They redefine what it means to be a "good citizen" as someone who holds those in authority accountable, as opposed to just following orders without any critical thinking. Therefore, Gen Z shows a unique combination of political awareness and philosophical understanding in this behavior. Their graffiti turns into a critique and a reconstruction of meaning, showcasing their resistance is morally and intellectually sound as well as sympathetic. Through showing themselves in action of holding the authority accountable, they demonstrate a generation capable of moral courage and systematic understanding.

4.2 Performing Commemoration: Redefining Heroism in Action

The movement period's wall writings were mostly text-based, but they were eventually taken down. After the government fell, Gen Z carried out the removal of the wall writings to provide room for new graffiti that was more visually oriented and wall art oriented. Through direct commemorative graffiti, Gen Z actively reimagines what it means to be a national hero. Not only are there two kinds of activism, but there are two phases of this visual journey. This second phase is more crucial, as it voices Gen Z's direct involvement in constructing new narratives that they could be part of. They shift focus from state-approved leaders to common people, honoring individuals whose bravery and kindness come out of the blue. This type of visual recollection is an active act of remembering that produces new icons that represent the identity of their generation. The next image (Figure 3) serves as an effective illustration of this redefining. We can better comprehend how meaning functions within it by using Peirce's

(1935) model. Mir Mugdho's image functions as an icon because it is a direct resemblance to him. However, the visual context of his act of offering water changes its meaning, making it an index that suggests humanity and community care in the face of protest violence. This is the bravery of maintaining life with a small gesture rather than leading armies with weapons. Mugdho's death while carrying out this act of kindness is a cruel irony. The red splash that surrounds him intensifies this significance since it represents sacrifice and the conversion of caring into martyrdom rather than actual blood. So, the loss might feel pointless, but it is immensely significant because the red color links his kind deed to the violence that put an end to it. The language relay is shown through the accompanying text as it describes the image and also transports viewers to Mugdho's last, selfless moment. Hence, it is transforming a spoken word into a timeless moral declaration. These elements of the graffiti come together to create a new standard of heroism and bravery, which is based on compassion and understanding, rather than leadership. Gen Z rewrites the historical narrative of heroism, which was previously limited to the armed freedom fighters facing a foreign enemy in 1971. It has been shifted to facing the local government system that is seen as repressive and unaccountable. The vulnerable body, exposed chest facing a bullet, and the hands clutching the water bottles, establish a new visual language of protest. It redefines heroism in our contemporary context, rather than the use of weapons. By claiming that bravery in the face of one's own government is the modern version of liberation war bravery,

Gen Z establishes its crucial role as citizens whose voice and sacrifice matter.



Figure 3. Wall art of Abu Sayeed and Mir Mugdho.

Another iconic moment of the movement, Abu Sayeed facing the aggressors with his bare chest and extended arms, found its way onto many walls (Figure 3) across the city. This act in itself becomes an expression of how Gen Z sees the futility of a politics dependent on violence. Abu Sayeed's gesture is the ultimate expression of Gen Z's new heroism. The hero is not a distant leader, but a vulnerable being among us whose power lies in selfless sacrifice, not authority. His pose mirrors the iconography of past martyrs, visually claiming their place in Bangladesh's struggle for freedom.

The image makes another statement about the idea of the cultural and intellectual world that Gen Z is popularly known to inhabit. The inclusion of the famous anti-colonial poem by the rebel poet Kazi Nazrul Islam in the background mixes the highly regarded national history imbued with high culture with today's graffiti. It suggests that Abu Sayeed's heroism is not

unique but rather a part of a long history of rebellion by tying his sacrifice to the history of Bengali resistance. This visual rhetoric establishes historical legitimacy for a new definition of heroes. Gen Z additionally creates a dual picture of heroism by connecting Abu Sayeed and Mugdho. These young people are not national leaders talking from any platform in order to motivate people. Their courage comes from their resistance and compassion, which move and inspire people. The hero of resistance who fearlessly went against the police is Abu Sayeed, whereas Mugdho is the hero of compassion, having died while caring for others. No one would have thought an ordinary citizen and a stranger could have a heart to sacrifice themselves for the sake of justice. One offered his body, and the other his compassion. The black backdrop that binds these two together is not a black space; rather, it is a symbol of their shared sorrow, rage, and the political gloom that reflects the conflict. Therefore, Gen Z carries out a significant act of self-definition by commemorating the heroes through this image. They show that heroes are regular people whose deeds of resistance and kindness capture the spirit of the country.

4.3 Performing Historical Legitimacy

Gen Z also shows itself actively in action by connecting their struggle to Bangladesh's liberation history. They are not just referring to the revolution, but this gesture is their confirmation of their rightful claim to be the descendants of the 1971 revolt. By imaginatively reinterpreting well-known national slogans, they show their disapproval and transform language into a platform for protest and self-expression. An illustration can be Figure 4, which functions on multiple semiotic levels. Its combination of red and green makes it an influential national symbol. The artists frame their message within the historical and emotional framework of the Liberation War by employing these recognizable colors. For example, the text in the Figure 4 is a reworking and extended slogan of Bangabandhu Sheikh

Mujibur Rahman’s famous speech, “রক্ত যখন দিয়েছি রক্ত আরো দেব, এ দেশের মানুষকে মুক্ত করে ছাড়বো ইনশাআল্লাহ” (“I have given blood, I will give more, I will free the people of this country. In Sha Allah”). The phrase, “Freedom is in my blood,” has undergone an important conceptual change in Gen Z’s reworking. This edition reinterprets it as a generational value, whereas the original focused on the leader’s personal commitment of sacrifice. The emphasis shifts from the leadership of a single individual to a collective resistance identity. In this case, the language serves as a linguistic anchor, ensuring that the national colors have revolutionary significance in the political struggle of Gen Z. It claims that their protest is a continuation and a break from history as they renew the same struggle for freedom, equality, and justice.



Figure 4. Independence in my blood.

Furthermore, the phrase (Figure 5) provides more explanation of the statement, extending national slogans. The term “brought independence” is traditionally used to honor the leaders

and heroes of the liberation in 1971. Gen Z loudly states, “We brought independence.” This is a dramatic re-signification. The pronoun “we” takes back control of history by explicitly involving their generation in the national narrative. They have no desire to be the defenseless children of heroes. They present themselves as active members of the current liberation struggle. This argument is covered in more detail in the second phrase, “we will bring reform.” It implies that the current generation is working for systemic change, or Independence 2.0, in the same way that the first generation battled for political freedom (Independence 1.0) (Faisal, 2024). By connecting previous and present conflicts through language, the phrase itself relays that the current movement is the historical and moral legitimacy of the initial struggle for independence. Through these acts of rewriting, Gen Z is both inheriting and repeating old catchphrases. Each syllable becomes a declaration, combining memory and action. In their graffiti, the walls themselves act as links between 1971 and the present, uniting generations in what they call the “eternal struggle for freedom.



Figure 5. We brought independence; we will bring reform as well.

Gen Z creates new historical markers of their own in addition to reusing previous slogans in order to completely claim their place in history. Their creation of the “36-day calendar of July” is among the most notable examples (Bushra, 2025). This calendar is symbolic rather than factual, and an examination of it shows how they manipulate memory and time. The fictitious date “July 36th” (Figure 6) is an extreme example of cultural symbol manipulation. The point is that it is not possible for such a date to exist according to any common logic. It claims that time itself was disrupted by the July events because they were so important and upsetting. As a result, the martyrs’ deaths are presented as important events that altered the country's chronological order rather than as singular tragedies. Barthes would characterize this creative intervention as a linguistic message that conveys new meaning.

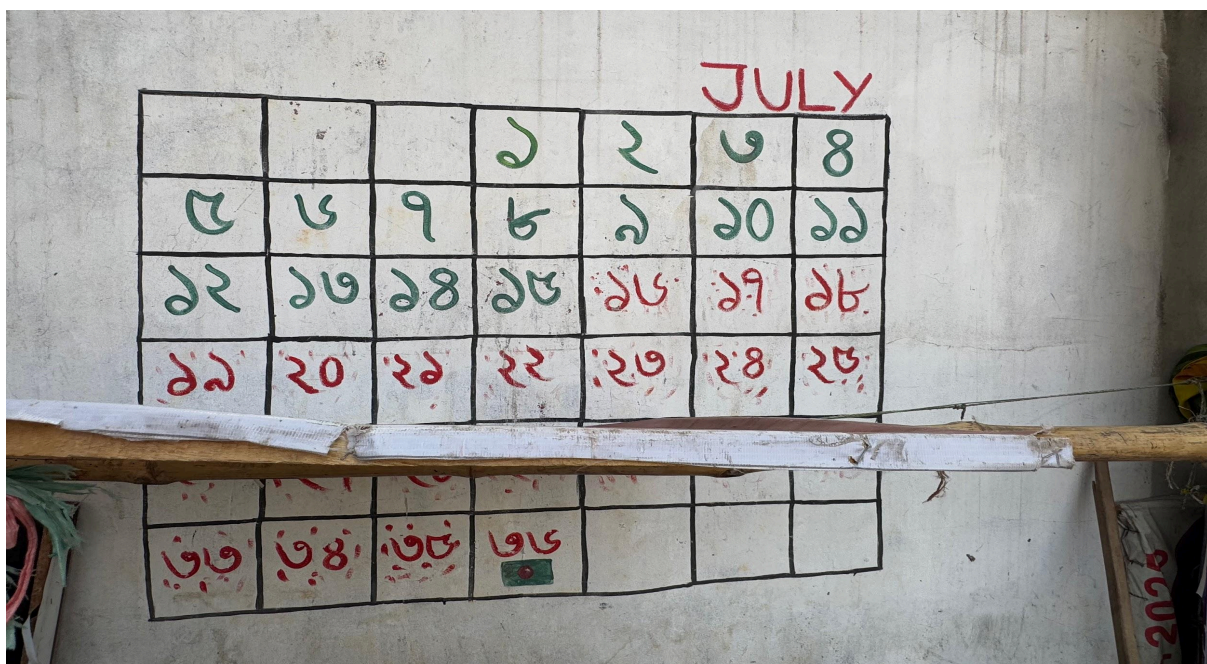


Figure 6. 36th in the July calendar.

Hence, Gen Z successfully ‘freezes’ time through this act of symbolic rewriting, transforming mourning into a lasting historical presence. They gain authority over how history is remembered and told by rewriting the calendar as a semiotic act of resistance. This deliberate omission reflects their larger assertion of “Independence 2.0.” The imagined “July

36th” represents the revival of communal consciousness, much as December 16th, 1971, represents the nation's political birth. As a result, the 36-day calendar represents the start of a new period and, in a symbolic sense, their own liberation struggle.

Chapter 5

Indirect Protest Graffiti: Gen Z is the Change

This chapter examines the second major category, indirect protest graffiti. Gen Z goes beyond simple grievances to demonstrate the depth of their political imagination through indirect protest graffiti. Indirect protest graffiti is the term used to describe graffiti produced during the July movement that has nothing to do with the July massacre or the movement. These are produced by indirectly linking the quota to the broader problem of discontent, which goes beyond its immediate context. This chapter examines how their work both diagnoses Bangladesh's structural problems and graphically offers a model for a changed Bangladesh. They saw themselves as a change for two reasons. Because of this, Gen Z uses these multi-layered images and texts to communicate its core identity as the generation that sees and embodies the “বিকল্প” (Alternative) and the change-makers.

5.1 Diagnostics of a Broken System

Gen Z positions itself as a societal critic and keen observer of the broken system. Their indirect protest graffiti goes beyond immediate issues of quota and reveals the underlying ‘failures’ of the nation’s system. This is how a protest against a single injustice develops into a more comprehensive analysis of the problems affecting the political system as a whole. This makes a way for the public to diagnose and voice their disapproval. Rashid (2024) claims that “painting graffiti in public spaces gave life to people’s frustration and desperation,” emphasizing how this outburst of rage was more than just a reaction to political injustice because it sparked larger conversations about social justice and human rights. Thus, it proves that Gen Z’s dissent had both moral significance and emotional depth. This function is demonstrated by the illustration (Figure 7), showcasing the repression of free speech.



Figure 7. Freedom of Speech.

According to Peirce's semiotic concept (1935), the upside-down microphone turns into an effective symbol. When it is properly positioned, the microphone represents "voice" and "expression," but when it is inverted, it assumes a new meaning that signifies silence and captivity. A caged bird is a universal representation of the loss of freedom. The accompanying text anchors the image's meaning through what Barthes refers to as linguistic anchorage, making it clear to the audience that this is the cage of government surveillance rather than a general cage. In this case, the bright yellow background, which usually inspires hope, amplifies the discomfort. It turns into a warning tone that highlights the distinctive features of a repressed, silenced society.



Figure 8. Polythene must be banned.

Moreover, Gen Z also points its finger at Environmental issues to diagnose the problem. The universal prohibition symbol, the red cross-circle, advocates for a ban on polythene bags, and it also acts as a symbol of refusal (Figure 8). The text's deliberate use of color enhances the message, as the artist has highlighted “forbidden” as the primary visual and center point of the piece by rendering it in red. This red means danger and in this case, urgency, implying that banning polythene is just a necessary step they must take, but also a moral necessity to save nature. Through these layers of textual and visual messages, Gen Z presents itself as a conscious public that demands change and acknowledges ecological and societal issues. As a result, their graffiti gives the protest's language a call for accountability and rebirth.

5.2 The Vision: Enacting “The Alternative”

Gen Z steps beyond diagnosis as they actively contribute to the “change” they desire. Their graffiti evolves from pointing out failures to visually creating that alternate reality that they

desire. They transition from protesters to architects at one point, boldly claiming to be the alternative or “বিকল্প.”

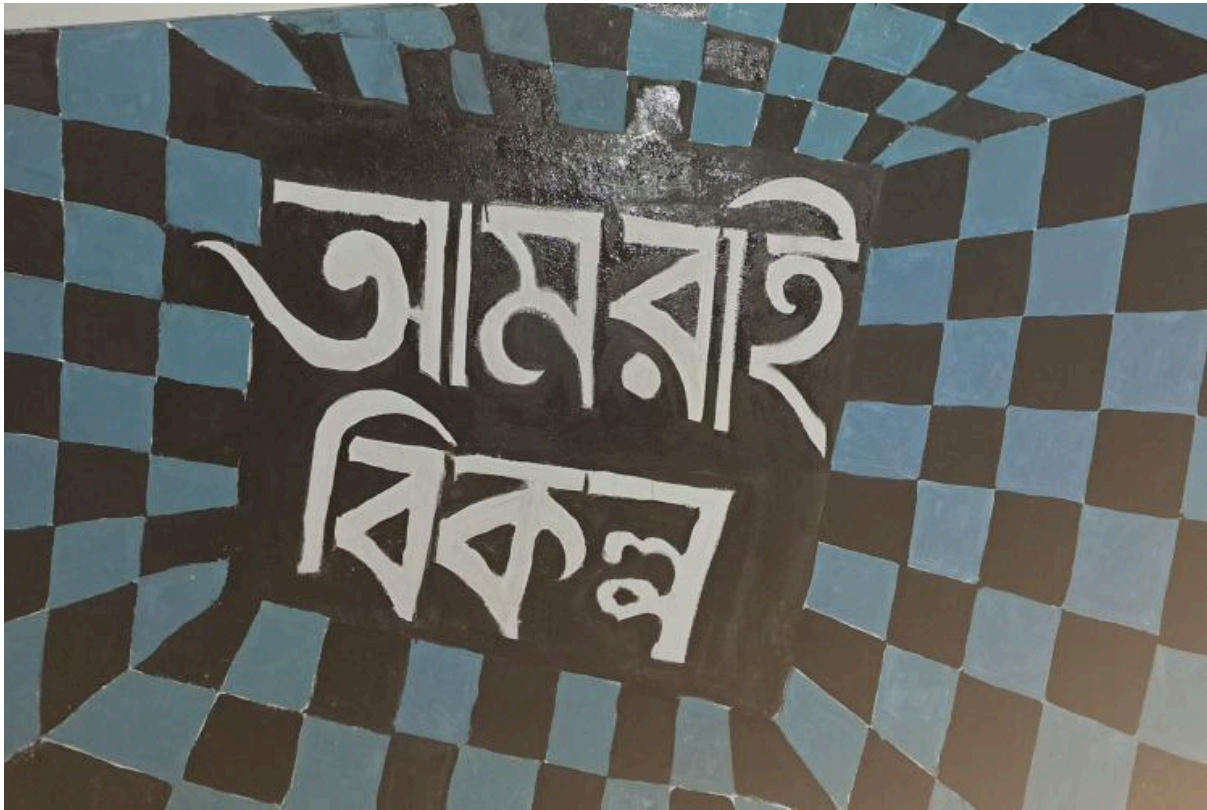


Figure 9. We are the alternative.

This innovative act of self-expression is effectively expressed by the graffiti that reads, “আমরাই বিকল্প” (We are the Alternative) (Figure 9). The sentence itself functions as an act of identity and intent in declaratory speech. The background represents the creation of something new. In and of itself, this tiled pattern is a powerful symbol. The black symbolizes melancholy, resistance, and the political struggle that characterizes this movement, while the green immediately conjures up the green of the national flag. Within this grid, the white text acts as linguistic anchorage, tying the complex symbolism of the background to a clear message. The words are not merely inscribed on the wall; they have been incorporated into the very fabric of a rebuilt Bangladesh. By focusing this visual and symbolic framework on the collective identity of “We,” the graffiti challenges the system from a distance and declares that Gen Z is not an outsider. They are necessary to reconstruct the country’s system. By

using the wall as a model for the Bangladesh they aspire to create, they go beyond merely advocating for change to actually putting it into practice.



Figure 10. Religion is for the individual, but the country is for everyone.

Gen Z's perception of being the alternative appears deeply inclusive. For example, each element in the graffiti (Figure 10) has multiple levels of meaning, as the linked hand represents a country constrained by its own systems. The bird's release becomes a moving metaphor for the freedom that Generation Z seeks. Religious symbols tied around the fingers symbolize faith, but when they are placed on the same hands, they create a new, secular symbol of unity. The image's meaning is solidified as a confirmation of inclusivity and shared belonging by the accompanying phrase, which serves as a linguistic anchorage.



Figure 11. Let the mountains be free.

Furthermore, in addition to human solidarity, Gen Z also seeks justice for marginalized people of Bangladesh, who struggle to live due to their indigenous identity. For instance, the woman's figure in Figure 11 symbolizes empathy, while the mountain becomes a symbol of identity, birthplace, and nature itself. The embrace symbolizes the land and its indigenous people's liberty, which, according to Gen Z, is essential for the full liberation of Bangladesh. Until all oppressed groups are free, Gen Z will not consider themselves free. Hence, their body of work frequently features issues such as gender equality, corruption, and educational reform, transforming the city walls into a comprehensive visual message. They portray themselves as a progressive generation through these pictures, holding that justice, inclusivity, and accountability are all intimately related to freedom. Because of this, their artwork demands both change and offers a powerful example of what a reformed Bangladesh could look like.



Figure 12. We will be the ones to create a new Bangladesh.

Lastly, Figure 12, in a most effective and straightforward way, illustrates the main idea of this chapter. Its strength is in creating new national symbols for their generation by reimagining old ones rather than reusing them. The color usage and selections are thoughtful and significant. Gen Z engages in a silent act of artistic reinterpretation and resistance by substituting blue and red for the national flag's iconic green and red. As the color blue offers something completely new, it could symbolize their digital world, their limitless global perspective, or an intentional break from traditional political colors. Hence, the color red anchors their vision, which is based on the ageless ideas of passion, struggle, and sacrifice. These colors, when paired with the text, create a powerful visual statement that the “New Bangladesh” they envision is a nation that is reimagined based on new ideas rather than just a continuation of the past.

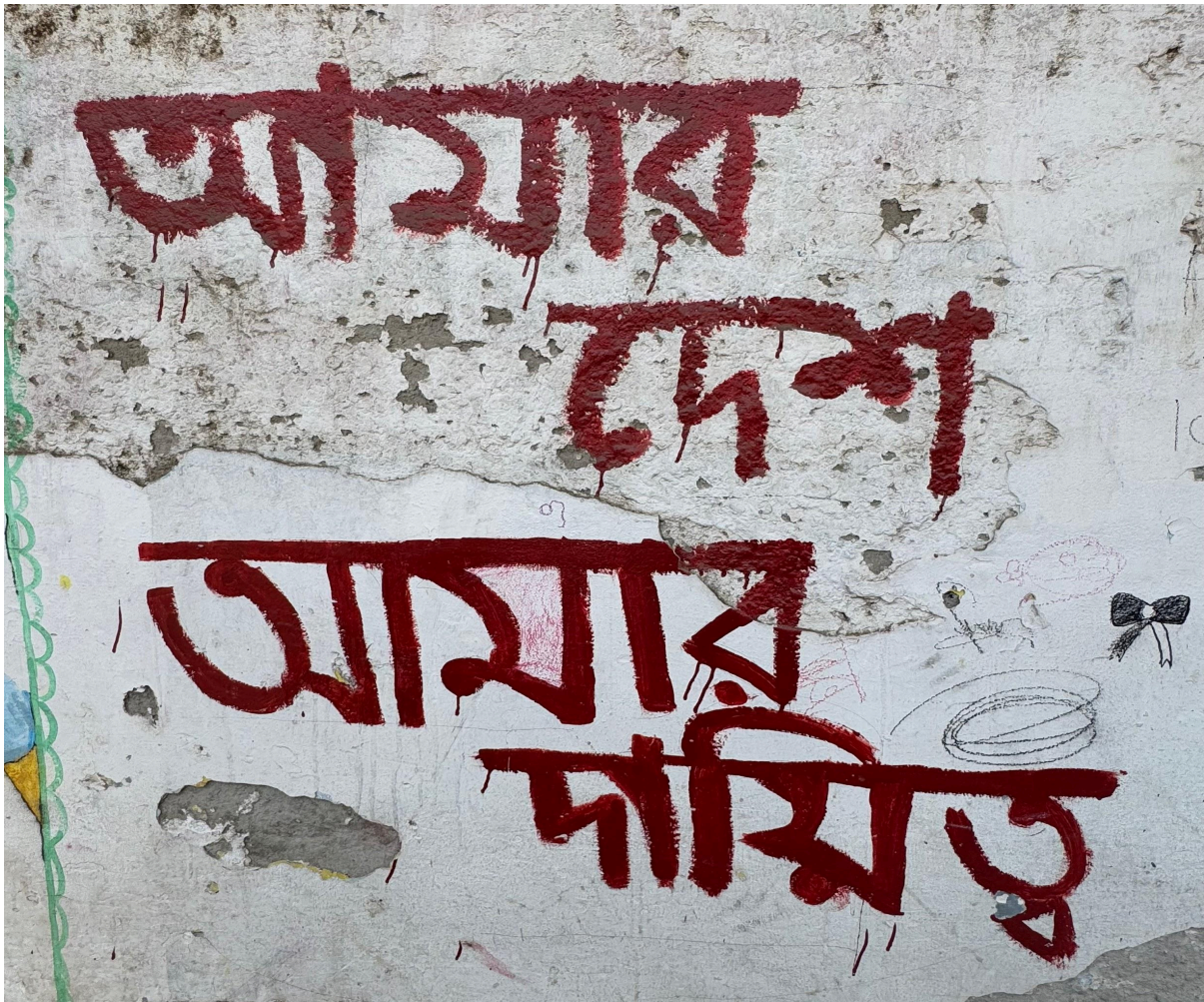


Figure 13. My country, my responsibility.

Additionally, this shared objective reinforces the claim (Figure 13) that the predominant meaning of graffiti's visual language is one of sincerity and urgency. The term "responsibility" indicates a shift in the consensus. It represents a change from a passive to an active form of citizenship. The statement is therefore quite intimate due to the usage of the possessive "my." It changes national duty from a state obligation to a personal commitment made by each and every person. Red both evokes and reinforces the blood of the martyrs and the blazing passion of those continuing the struggle. It graphically links the previous communal sacrifice to each person's accountability. When set against the white background, the words seem to be an oath. Together, these statements paint a picture of Gen Z as a generation that has transcended basic protest.

Nevertheless, this graffiti transcends criticism as an act of creativity. By declaring “We are the Alternative” and picturing a society based on justice and inclusivity, they are defining change rather than merely requesting it. They utilize the nation's walls to claim that their generation is creating a new system in the public's mind rather than just opposing an outdated one. This is the highest level of their belief that they are the change agents who can create the Bangladesh they deserve.

Chapter 6

Claiming Pop Culture as Gen Z's Identity

Within the category of indirect protest, one key aspect is Gen Z's use of pop culture in protest graffiti. Cultural connection is an assertion of identity. Sociologists refer to this shared web of experiences, symbols, and meanings created by culture as the "lifeworld," which is how people constantly make sense of their reality and express themselves (Conti, 2024). This lifeworld is greatly impacted by worldwide popular culture for Generation Z. It serves as a common language, establishing trends and creating a sense of community (Trends, 2025). Their identity is heavily influenced by a variety of sources, including web series, memes, anime, and K-pop. Within the July Movement, this cultural identity turns into an influential political instrument. Thus, this chapter makes the argument that Gen Z is defining itself as a generation by deliberately merging global pop culture with protest graffiti. Pop cultural icons that are usually viewed as "trivial" are transformed into a distinctive, hybrid speech of resistance by them. Hence, this act accomplishes three main objectives. It reclaims their frequently underappreciated cultural identity as a source of power, fosters togetherness through shared symbols, and challenges the long-standing distinction between "high" and "low" culture. By doing this, Gen Z makes it obvious that "This is who we are" and centers the protest around their complete, genuine selves. For the serious work of political transformation, their voice, language, and culture are sufficient.

6.1 Elevating the Trivial: The Mock Heroic as Shared Cultural Code

As much as pop culture defines Gen Z, it is also something that is just deemed as merely entertainment and often assumed as "just for kids" by the older generation of people. Cooper (2025) describes how older generations view Gen Z habits, including the kinds of media and entertainment they consume, as "reckless, entitled, or just plain confusing." Hence, their form

of media does not get taken ‘seriously’ in any scenario of its implications. This is what Gen Z has challenged with the inclusion of pop culture in July graffiti. They recover and revalue their own cultural identity by purposefully elevating their pop culture to the level of serious political conversation, since, to them, it is not something insignificant.



Figure 14. Pookie nation.

The “Pookie Nation” graffiti (Figure 14) effectively illustrates this reclaim. The pink color of the map of Bangladesh, a traditional representation of the nation-state, is altered by the Hello Kitty images around it. According to Peirce’s theory, Hello Kitty is a symbol of commercialism and cuteness, qualities that are typically seen as apolitical. Gen Z makes a mock-heroic statement by superimposing this symbol on the national map. The country is not being treated with somber, governmental admiration. With the loving, witty language of their own culture, they are reclaiming it. Barthes fixes this new, hybrid meaning by using the text “Pookie Nation” as his linguistic anchor. It proclaims that the genuine “nation” they are

creating is a joyful, pink, and politically defiant group united by a common digital vocabulary and aesthetics.



Figure 15. Gen Z slang.

Additionally, this tactic includes fostering unity through a common cultural code. The list of seemingly random Gen Z slang in the “Skibidi Rizz” graffiti (Figure 15) serves as a secret message. It is incomprehensible to an outsider. It represents common digital literacy and a sense of belonging to the group for members of that generation. The message is conveyed by the little Bangladeshi flag that is attached, connecting their local battle to the worldwide internet culture. Whether or not the older world can comprehend it, it is a visual declaration that they are fighting in their own true language.



Figure 16. Wings of freedom.

Additionally, Gen Z appropriates resistance stories that already exist in popular culture around the world. Both the “Straw Hat Jolly Roger” from One Piece (Figure 17) and the “Wings of Freedom” (Figure 16) from Attack on Titan are strong icons. In their original contexts, they represented the emancipation of the oppressed and the struggle against horrible oppressors. Gen Z engages in a clever act of cultural relay by transferring these symbols onto Dhaka’s walls. In addition to employing a great visual, they are immediately connecting these epic, worldwide tales of rebellion to their local struggle against governmental repression. A demonstration in Dhaka becomes a chapter in a global struggle for freedom because young people around the world instantly build a bond of solidarity due to their shared knowledge of the meanings of these symbols. They believe that the universal symbol of opposing

oppression is global, with Batman, Pikachu, and anime heroes serving as its most recent and colorful protagonists.

Gen Z clearly rejects the necessity of code-switching by introducing “Skibidi,” “Pookie,” and “Pikachu” into the high-stakes world of political protest. They claim that their language of anime and memes is not only legitimate but also strong enough to challenge the government. The “Pookie Nation” graffiti is a protest against older generations’ cultural arrogance. Additionally, a common cultural code that serves as a barrier against outsiders and a badge of membership is created through the usage of specialized language and particular anime symbols like the “Wings of Freedom”. They are not here to transform their struggle into a universal language. Their pop culture serves as a lens through which they perceive freedom and injustice. It is not something they wish to outgrow. They will use their own words to construct a reformed Bangladesh.

6.2 Blurring the Lines Between High and Pop Culture Identity

Gen Z's ultimate form of self-expression is the purposeful mixing of “high” and “low” culture, which creates a hybrid visual language that overturns traditional cultural hierarchies. This synthesis declares that their identity covers the whole cultural spectrum rather than rejecting conventional wisdom. They contest Mathew Arnold’s definition of pop culture as anarchy and high culture as something to be supervised by competent individuals (2022). Gen Z stands by proving that the creative interaction of seemingly unrelated forms can provide meaning and value.



Figure 17. Van Gogh's *Starry Night* and *One Piece*.

Graffiti depicting the anime character Luffy next to Van Gogh's *Starry Night* (Figure 17) effectively illustrates this. The painting serves as a representation of high-cultural, classical accomplishment. A symbol from a widely read manga, Luffy represents the relentless quest for liberation. A new combined sign is produced by their juxtaposition. The message is conveyed because the struggle for justice (Luffy) is just as significant and timeless as the most renowned works of human art (Van Gogh). This elevates their struggle to a timeless, global level by claiming that their pop culture narratives should be placed in the same conceptual area as well-known masterpieces.



Figure 18. ‘Hero can be anyone’ and ‘Come on, Bangladesh, let's go for victory.’

The combination of a patriotic song lyric (Figure 18), which is a coded message derived from the country's “high” cultural collection and inspires collective effort, further demonstrates their knowledge of this hybrid language. Pop culture figure Batman has been interpreted as a representation of commonplace bravery. “Hero can be anyone” is a linguistic message that unites the two by serving as an anchor. The argument that follows is that the patriotic spirit exists in the anonymous, heroic deeds of everyday people rather than being limited to state-approved narratives; this idea is effectively conveyed by their hybrid cultural language. This intellectual synthesis demonstrates their cultural fluency and serves as a means of self-expression.



Figure 19. Anime art style.

The expression (Figure 19) is a brilliant application of cultural coding in another work. The visual grammar of anime, a fundamental aspect of their identity, frames the formal, political call to action. It means that their generational voice and the resources of their own culture will be used to carry out the serious work of national reform. Lastly, the artwork's anime-style stylistic combination, which draws inspiration from Debashish Chakrabarty's activist aesthetic, is a commentary on this particular topic. The silenced voice, a sign common to political art, is used by the anime-style figure with several hands covering his mouth. They are not abandoning the "high" art of political commentary; rather, they are redefining it through their generational manner of execution. They insist on expressing themselves through the aesthetic that characterizes them while conveying a whole, self-assured identity that they are mentally capable of engaging with significant artistic

traditions. The line between high and low is blurred in this advanced, new system, which favors a stronger and authentic form of self-expression over cultural anarchy. Therefore, the graffiti of the July Movement shows that pop culture is much more than just something that Generation Z enjoys; it is the keywords that define their political identity. As seen in this chapter, they employ two key strategies to transform this cultural language into a powerful tool for self-expression. In a final act of defiance, they declare, “This is us.” They assert that their identity, politics, and art are all complete and self-affirming. They are constructing their new Bangladesh using the full and open tools of their own culture; they do not need to adhere to outdated definitions of what is “serious.”

Chapter 7

Conclusion

In order to express a new, self-authorized political identity, Generation Z staged a change in Bangladesh's visual rhetoric of protest, which is represented by the July Movement. The research concerns that drove this study are clearly addressed by the outcomes. The analysis shows a fundamental change in the visual rhetoric. A new language of decentralized, peer-to-peer, and culturally hybrid expression has replaced the tradition of centralized, leader-centric imagery in rhetoric. This is a shift in the very center of political power, not just a change in style. The implications are significant because Gen Z has visually created a new concept of citizenship. It is self-historicizing (taking its place in the national narrative), communal (identifying its own heroes), and auditing (keeping power directly accountable) citizenship. The shift suggests a generation that values its own voice above all else and a profound break with top-down political culture. Furthermore, the solution to the question of how Gen Z expresses itself artistically is found in the three ways that their identity is performed across the thesis's chapters. They respond to the accusation that they are a “lost” generation through their artistic expression. They first exhibit themselves in action as a way to express themselves. They acted as Community Guardians and Auditor-Citizens through direct protest. They demonstrated bravery, historical awareness, and political legitimacy by putting the state in question and redefining heroism in the image of their fallen heroes. They did not only claim to be political. Secondly, they embody transformation as a way of expressing themselves. By using indirect protest, they went from responding to injustice to proactively identifying structural flaws and imagining a revised “Alternative.” Their work evolved into an outline, expressing their view of themselves as capable designers of an equal and inclusive country rather than as angry young people. Lastly, they claim their entire identity as a means of self-expression. They released their most rebellious declaration, “This

is us, and it is enough,” by fusing pop culture. They rejected the need to dissect their identity in order to be taken seriously by elevating the “trivial” and blurring the distinction between high and pop culture. Asserting that their culture is a legitimate and powerful basis for political action, their artistic expression evolved into an open declaration of their whole, hybrid identities.

These arguments come together to make a coherent whole. As Gen Z uses direct action to prove their political legitimacy, their artistic manifestation is a descending argument (“We are here”). The core of their vision for the country is then outlined (“We are the change”). Lastly, they set forth the conditions of their involvement, insisting on the acceptance of their full cultural identity (“This is who we are”). They want to demonstrate that they are, not just claim “we know.” They are the architects, the healers, the auditors, and the heirs. The July Movement’s graffiti is a lasting honor to a generation that has taken to the nation’s walls to proclaim its existence, its vision, and its unquestionable right to exist rather than asking permission to speak.

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