

# COVID GRAFFITI AS A GENRE OF LITERARY WRITING

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The present paper focuses on COVID graffiti as a unique genre of literature. The application of Multimodal Discourse Analysis research method reveals the narrative potential of COVID graffiti texts. The results of the study point out that COVID graffiti mostly uses intertextuality as a literary discourse strategy to convey an efficient and persuasive message, alongside other strategies meant to express isolated people's existential fears and concerns, the experienced anxiety and discomfort caused by the "new normal." The empirical material comes to affirm the inextricable relationship between literature as verbal and the current harsh reality as non-verbal entities that complement each other in the complex process of meaning-making.

*Keywords:* graffiti, graffiti discourse, pandemic, COVID -19, COVID graffiti, literary genre

## 1 Introduction

Street art and street artists all over the world have been noticeable in depicting issues concerning COVID-19, and it seems reasonable to study and explore the role of street art in making public discourse during the pandemic.

Graffiti is a complex public practice which contains a large textual field of investigation. Here all the spheres of human life, people's desires and feelings, personal and mass problems are united. Graffiti is a broad system of texts, images, and various symbolic combinations in which personal and public issues, literature and art, daily life and customs are intertwined. From the Bible to the COVID-19 outbreak, from love confessions to political rebellion and resistance, the walls surrounding us carry all these problems silently and pass them on to others. All these characterise graffiti as a subject of multi-layered research. Today, along with the development of various branches of science, there is an obvious interest in the research of graffiti in sociology, psychology, visual anthropology, cultural studies, art theory as well as in the field of linguistics (Bloch 2021; Hanauer 2004; Marquez et al. 2018; Droney 2010; Philips 2015; Rafferty 1991; Lachman 1988). It should be noted that the perceptions of graffiti nowadays are radically diverse. A group of people regard it to be barbarism against cultural and religious

structures, some others consider it to be a form of modern art. The theoretical studies of graffiti gained an increasing interest mainly in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup> when, along with the development and promotion of various aspects of life, hip-hop culture with all its forms became highly successful. The existing studies on graffiti mainly dwell upon its discourse characteristics; in particular, theorists are interested in what social or physical (spatial and temporal) context graffiti is used in, for what purpose and with what social impact. There is also a tendency to consider graffiti as an indicator of urban identity and a practice inherent to a certain group of people; here researchers are particularly interested in the issues related to the identification of the most notable stylistic means that form this specific type of discourse (Abel and Buckley 1977; Al-Khawaldeh et al. 2017; Cassar and Cremona 2017; Farnia 2014).

Some scholars detail the causes of graffiti production, which range from extremely personal to speaking about political injustices (Graham 2004, 7). As Y. Zaimakis puts it, “[The topics...] range from the protest voices of outraged individuals to political comments and social criticism, and from obscene suggestions or vulgar expressions to utopian and existential quests” (2015, 374). An increasingly large number of researchers single out several social and psychological functions of graffiti, which is a challenge for the authorities and a means of informal communication for marginalised and neglected groups to express their discontent, needs and wishes to those in a higher rank (Mwangi et al. 2015, 3; Nwoye 1993). Speaking generally, graffiti mainly serves three purposes: a) it allows marginalised communities to express themselves publicly; b) it allows marginalised messages to enter public discourse that would otherwise be “dangerous” to be expressed by other media; c) it allows individuals to express contentious messages publicly (Hanauer 2004, 29).

It should be emphasised that when members of minority groups in a society utilise graffiti “to silence other marginalized groups” (Rodriguez and Clair 1999, 3), it may serve as both a form of resistance and oppression for disadvantaged social groups. J. Ferrel discusses the distinctive language that a group of individuals may use in graffiti writings in this context. According to the theorist, individuals may utilise codes that only the author and the intended audience can decode (1993). These codes might be both textually and visually embodied. The definition of the term *graffiti* itself in different theoretical works entails both visual and textual components that are believed to share different common features and complete the intended message for the audience. These two modes of introducing the message constitute the meaning-making process; accordingly, the interpretation of graffiti requires two

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<sup>1</sup> Graffiti as a way and means of self-expression has a long history: its earliest forms date back to 30,000 years in the form of cave paintings, pictographs or simple “wall scratches”.

different levels of analysis: visual and textual. Thus, Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), mostly applied in graffiti studies, is strongly believed to validate a more objective and clear comprehension of both the visual and textual components of any piece of graffiti (Rubdy 2015; Paudel and Naupane, 2019; Cassar and Cremona 2017; Stampoulidis 2016; Stampoulidis and Bolognesi 2019, Stampoulidis et al. 2019; Alshreif 2016).

Considering different definitions of the notion of graffiti, we are inclined to admit the claim that any sort of public marking on the wall is called graffiti, regardless of the writer's motivation or the communication goals pursued when creating it. We agree with Ernest Abel and Barbara Buckley, who see graffiti as a form of communication and describe it as a personal activity free of daily societal constraints that prevent individuals from thinking freely and publicly. According to the authors, studying graffiti might provide "interesting insights" regarding the graffiti writers or the community in which the graffiti is made (1977, 3). It should be noted in this context that some investigators agree that not all types of graffiti are monologic in nature. Drawing parallels between graffiti as a kind of art and other forms of art displayed in galleries, Susan Hansen and Danny Flynn especially highlight the following characteristics: graffiti allows viewers or readers to elicit multiple reactions within the same spatial dimension (Hansen and Flynn 2016, 109).

## **2 COVID Graffiti as a Verbal Entity**

Within the framework of our study, COVID graffiti is viewed as a specific genre of literary writing that possesses a number of linguistic means, techniques and strategies that form the message and foster the overall literary character of the text. Among those means, techniques and compositional strategies, the most vivid ones that take part in the meaning-making process, foster the narrative potential of COVID graffiti, and characterise it as a unique literary genre, are intertextuality, visual and verbal metaphors, binary oppositions, and conditionality. The latter structure COVID graffiti as a text and help the authors to obtain their aim, that is, to express themselves and have a certain communicative impact on the audience. The need to study graffiti as a unique literary genre is drawn from the fact that COVID graffiti is laden with panicky, horrific, dystopic, dark and sarcastic overtones, which are meant to describe the lockdown from various perspectives: from the point of view of the safety measures undertaken, their advantages and the difficulties caused by them.

The factual material of the present paper is comprised of graffiti collected from diverse social and physical settings. The selection of the material is heavily influenced by the following factors: these graffiti contain both textual and visual components, as well as demonstrate quite skilled use of language, pointing out the distinctive features of graffiti creation as a discursive practice. The COVID graffiti introduced in the paper are representative of numerous others that share similar structural, semantic and pragmatic characteristics. The potential interconnectedness of textual and visual components as a unique feature of graffiti meaning-making process allows the application of Multimodal Discourse Analysis in this context.

The structure and the content of the present paper are predetermined by the multifaceted nature of graffiti discourse, its interpretative potential and analytical requirements, as well as the goals and objectives set. The first section below (2.1) examines COVID graffiti texts from a literary point of view and studies the embodiment of intertextuality in them, the second section (2.2) deals with the study of oppositions in COVID graffiti discourse as one of the crucial meaning-making strategies, the third section (2.3) analyses the application of visual and verbal metaphors in COVID graffiti that to some extent reflect its cultural and social setting, while the last section (2.4) studies the pragmatic features of the use of conditionality in COVID graffiti discourse.

### ***2.1 The Manifestation of Intertextuality in COVID Graffiti Discourse***

Intertextuality is defined as the shaping of a text's meaning by another text (Snyman 1996). The artists in graffiti discourse mostly choose easily recognizable personalities or objects in the visual domain and well-known phrases and quotes in the textual domain and modify them if necessary to convey the desired meaning. In this context, the connection between literary texts serves as a strategy to express one's thoughts, ideas and concerns. It is worth mentioning that within the development of the graffiti culture, intertextuality has broadened its scope of expression, involving various texts and narratives (both graffiti and non-graffiti) and connecting them to modern problems, issues and ideologies. Moreover, in graffiti discourse, intertextuality can connect not only two literary texts but also a literary text, on the one hand, and the ongoing reality considered as a unique text, on the other.

Consider one of the earliest pieces of COVID graffiti (see fig. 1) created right after the outbreak of COVID-19 and the restrictions following it:



Fig. 1

The communicative aim of this graffiti is to advise the audience to “stay at home” (the most widely used expression at the earliest stages of the pandemic), hence the verb *stay* can be considered its communicative centre. One needs to pay closer attention to the verb identified as a hashtag (#), which is more typical of social media discourse. We strongly believe that this way of conveying the message is not random, if we take into account the social context graffiti appeared in (the COVID-19 outbreak), when a number of firm restrictions were implemented and most work was done virtually. The sign of a hashtag establishes a closer contact with the readers, thus ensuring the potential communicative impact the graffiti may have on them. Another example for intertextuality in COVID graffiti (see fig. 2) appeared in Colombia in mid-2020. It consists of a textual component and is placed in an area well visible to the public. The text is constructed by combining COVID-19 with George Orwell’s famous *1984*. The message of the graffiti is meant to inform the public about the ongoing social situation (outbreak of the virus – the social context), and to persuade them to act adequately. This aim is obtained thanks to the intertextual connection of the

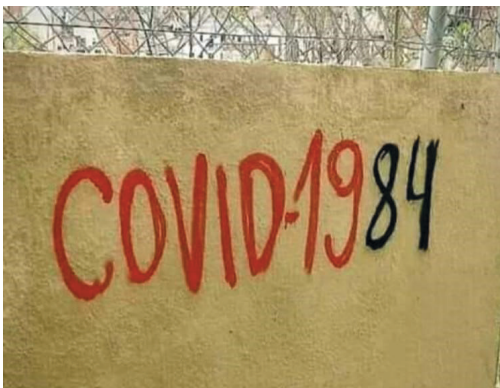


Fig. 2

graffiti with the widely known narrative (*1984* – the textual context). During the outbreak of the virus the supervision over the citizens who tested positive was raised and their personal contacts and location could be determined by the police in order to isolate them. This social situation is intertextually bound to the narrative of the book to which the graffiti creator alludes. Here the police is paralleled with Big Brother, who is “constantly watching you” (1961,

4). The sender of this message obviously meant to make his audience think of the ongoing social situation from the point of view of the safety measures undertaken, i.e. the measures to mitigate the risk of COVID-19, which seem to have become a must (the “new normal” as it is now accepted to say), whereas these safety measures still have a deep connection with the existential issues the author of the book *1984* raised so many years ago. The receiver can get this message properly only if they are familiar with the narrative *1984* and cognizant of the ongoing social situation. After all, the receiver of the message should be able to combine the two contexts (the reality and Orwell’s novel) in which the message is generated. Their inability to do so brings about communication noise, which may result in misinterpretations. Thus, the potential effect this message may have on the audience is dependent: a) on the social context (COVID-19), b) on the textual context (Orwell’s novel), c) on the way the message is conveyed (drawing parallels between COVID-19 and the novel, changing colours from red to black). The graffiti’s interconnectedness with Orwell’s classic may make the receiver decode it negatively and cause resistance to anti-COVID measures. We believe that the message can be also interpreted in a positive way, as a warning to undertake the safety measures that are meant to guarantee people’s life and health.

Graffiti exploiting the same narrative of “COVID 1984” are widespread (see examples in figs. 3, 4, 5 and 6).



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

These graffiti also reflect the socio-cultural context in which they appear. The first feature to be observed here is the intertextual reference to Orwell's novel based on the graphic similarity of the two components (the expression COVID-19 and 1984) – with the number 19 appearing in both expressions. Thanks to this association, these graffiti reflect the ongoing social situation, in which surveillance over citizens was boosted and their whereabouts and contacts could be legally traced.

Intertextuality is the interconnection and „interference”/mutual influence of two texts implying that no text exists in isolation and highlighting the ongoing dialogue between them. As we can see, intertextuality in graffiti discourse mainly performs the function of linking a graffiti message to a text in the broadest sense of the word (images, symbols or reality in general). Thus, the study of intertextuality in COVID graffiti shows how intertextuality has broadened its scope of expression involving various graffiti narratives and connecting them to current problems, issues and ideologies.

## *2.2 Contrast as an Attention-Seeking and Attention-Grabbing Device*

It is quite common to use contrasts between two or more concepts, ideas or phenomena to convey the message in graffiti discourse. Our research shows that unlike intertextuality, which mainly links two texts (as well as realities), oppositions mainly perform a separating function. They draw a distinct line in the readers' mind between the two notions that are considered in a certain graffiti.

Contrasts are constructed in various ways. Mostly the speaker creates two ends of opposition with concepts that can be either connected semantically or not connected at all. The use of the oppositions in graffiti discourse is largely determined by the factor of persuasion too, since graffiti itself is a form of persuasive speech. As a first step, its creator needs to grab the readers' attention and make them think over the issue raised. Consider the following example:



Fig. 7

This graffiti (see fig. 7) clearly reflects the social context it is created in, the COVID-19 outbreak, when there were a number of restrictions on the economy too, particularly on the businesses that were supposed to host mass gatherings (cafes, restaurants, etc.). Also, some small and medium-sized industries had to be closed for the same reason. The graffiti raises a rhetorical question for the readers, who are supposed to choose whether to open the economy and endanger people's lives or to keep it closed for the sake of their lives. Restricted by time and space, as well as aiming at conveying a logical and a brief message, the author makes use of two nouns, "ousting" the other parts of the sentence. The two nouns (*economy, life*) constitute the two ends of an opposition and make the text more illustrative and easily decodable.

The message of the following graffiti (see fig. 8) is also conveyed through a contrast based on the combination of verbal (textual) components, the concepts *plans* and *humanity* being the two ends of the opposition. The verb *cancel* is used metaphorically to convey the communicative force of the message (cancel plans, *not to cancel humanity*), the word *humanity* is used in both of its meanings (literal and metaphorical): 1) people in general (referring to the restrictions implemented after the outbreak of COVID which cancelled people's normal way of living), 2) the quality of being (referring to the safety measures that kept people apart, thus killing the "humanity" in them) (*Oxford* 2005). As we see, the word *humanity* may be decoded as both the whole mankind as such and humane treatment with kindness, care and dignity.

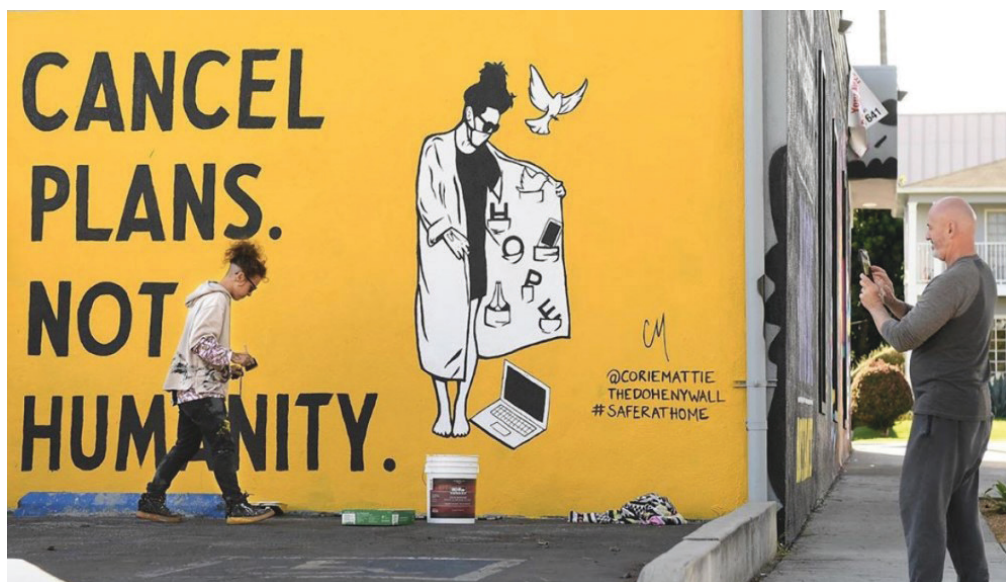


Fig. 8



COVID graffiti, as a specific literary genre, frequently conveys a strong sense of negativity through such devices as irony or sarcasm. The following piece (see fig. 9) is one example for that, in which a parallel is drawn between COVID prevention



Fig. 9

measures (*6 feet apart* – social distancing) and death (*6 feet under*) through a use of an opposition. The metaphorical transference of meaning in this example is achieved through both the text itself and the accompanying pictorial component, the image of death staring at the text. The communicative aim of this graffiti (as well as that of the others) is to urge the audience to comply with the safety measures imposed on them by the authorities for the sake of personal and public health.

We can observe the same regularity in the following COVID graffiti (see fig. 10). Here *the character of death* is even scarier than in the previous case (see fig. 9), where

*death* was a scary and threatening figure with big eyes and a mask-covered face. In this example, the pictorial component has an intertextual link with the current reality: we see the figure of the then US president Donald Trump holding a scythe in one hand and a mask in the other, symbolising the government's surrender to the spread of COVID (for details, see the newspaper article in *Bloomberg* titled “The White House Surrenders to the Pandemic”; Sample 2020). The accompanying pictorial component,



Fig. 10

which is one end of the contrast, raises the voice of helplessness, hopelessness and incompetence in terms of fighting the virus properly, when nothing is left but to advise the public “not to be afraid of COVID,” which introduces the second end of the contrast textually.

### 2.3 Metaphor as a Crucial Meaning-making Tool in Graffiti Discourse

Metaphors are applied in literally every sphere of life. Considering their functional significance in the attention-seeking strategies, authors employ metaphors in different types of discourses. Zoltán Kövecses outlines the following basic features of a metaphor: a) a metaphor is a property of words, b) a metaphor is a “conscious and deliberate” use of words, c) the purpose of metaphoric transference is both artistic and rhetoric, d) the metaphoric transference is conditioned by the resemblance of two units that are compared, e) a metaphor is something “we can do without”: it is not an unavoidable part of human communication (2010, ix–x).

Though Kövecses states that a “metaphor is something we can do without,” we can say that it has become so closely interlaced with our everyday communication that we simply cannot do without it. People usually use metaphors not only because they want to sound more artistic and illustrative, but also because metaphors are so pervasive in our language and thoughts that the speakers do not have any other choice than use them.

1. The use of metaphor in graffiti discourse particularly pursues the following aims:
2. to have an aesthetic, artistic, emotional impact on the addressee,
3. to be much closer to the everyday informal language, which is abundant with all types of metaphors,
4. in the case of visual metaphors, to be more illustrative and to create messages with a much condensed meaning,
5. to convey the main communicative aim of the text implicitly.

So far, all the COVID graffiti examples introduced were of negative nature. COVID graffiti at times can be positive as well: since the start of the pandemic different people in different national and cultural settings tried to express their solidarity both online and offline (see fig. 11).

This graffiti is a combination of visual and verbal components, the visual component being a metaphorical one: the dandelion shaped like the microscopic view of the virus represents the ongoing social situation – the COVID outbreak. The spreading of dandelion petals in the air symbolises the rapid spread of the virus by airborne means. The textual aspect, which is part of the visual one, implies the communicative aim of the message – to guide the audience to comply with the safety measures and not to spread the virus.

Consider another example (see fig. 12):

Judging from the figures given at the bottom (*confirmed, recovered and death cases* – around 88,000 cases in total compared with more than 600 million cases as of September 2022) this graffiti was created at an earlier stage of the pandemic. The content of the graffiti is quite aggressive and emotional (expressed through the

imperative mood of the verbs – *wash your hands, stop touching your face...*, incomplete, elliptical sentences, a correlation of the pictorial and textual domains). The textual and pictorial components used both literally, metaphorically and often implicitly together create an atmosphere of protest, complaint, danger, threat, fear, suspicion as well as dissatisfaction with the COVID situation. Communicatively, the graffiti demands the audience to comply with the safety measures, however hard they may seem.



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

## 2.4 Conditionality as a Basis of Graffiti Communication

Conditional sentences are usually believed to emphasize the real or factual condition of a statement and make the understanding of the message easier. In graffiti discourse they can be explicit (with the if-clause) and implicit (without the if-clause). The use of this type of sentence helps the graffiti creators make the communication through graffiti more dynamic and thus urge people take measures instantly and act without delay.

By means of conditional sentences authors fulfil two main purposes:

1. They imply that their potential reader agrees with the statement made and arrives at a certain conclusion after a logical and gradual development of the ideas conveyed.
2. They put the reader in a hypothetical context to achieve persuasion.

The speaker tries to cooperate with their potential readers by putting the latter in an assumed situation. Irrespective of whatever purpose or content the sentence conveys, conditionality makes the connection between the addresser and addressee stronger and more intimate. Such a connection is firstly determined by the integrity of the text (often expressed through the generic pronouns *you*, *we*, etc.), secondly, by the situation that a conditional sentence creates making the reader an immediate and involuntary actor in it.

Graffiti conveying their message through conditional sentences primarily have the following communicative aims:

1. to advise the audience,
2. to make the audience reason around different events and phenomena,
3. to make the audience question various ideas instead of blindly accepting them,
4. to interpret the meaning of different facts that at first sight might have not been grasped by the potential audience,
5. to force the audience not only to think but to act the way the author prompts.

Thus, conditional sentences help the graffiti text creator to promote cooperation between the addressers and addressees of the message. They place the readers in a presumable context and through well-organised “conditions” direct the readers’ attention to the main communicative aim of the text as in the following graffiti samples: “If I had the right word I would have nothing to say”; “If you were waiting for a sign this is it”.

The most widespread quote at the start of the pandemic, “Stay at home, save lives,” can in a loose sense be considered an implicit condition. This sentence can be regarded as one of the slogans of the pandemic that “travelled” in various ways and forms, including graffiti. One of its striking instances is the graffiti below (see fig. 13). This graffiti is multimodally marked: the figure of death on the right side

spreads the bacteria into the air that infect the world and are fought against by the doctors. The text on the top of the visual component of the graffiti cites the sentence under analysis. Graphically the first part of the text (*Stay at home*) is rather big, more brightly coloured and more visible than the second part (*save lives*). The former represents the imperative part of the utterance, the latter – the purpose. The image and the text are multimodally interconnected: the visual component covers much more space than the text itself and shows the rapid spread of the virus and the efforts of doctors to fight against it. The use of an implicit condition in this graffiti aims to make the audience think about the rapid spread of COVID and the least of the efforts regular people can make to curb the spread of the virus.



Fig. 13

We would like to sum up the analysis of COVID graffiti with an optimistic note. The following two COVID graffiti (see figs. 14 and 15) are contentually more optimistic than the others discussed in the paper. They do not contain conditionality in their form or content, but rather show that COVID graffiti as a public discourse is an ongoing and rapidly evolving public practice that contains both positive and negative, as well as neutral messages and obviously has a long and significant way to go .

The start of the pandemic in 2020 is also known among people as a period of lost dreams, lost hopes, lost optimism and trust. Viewing COVID graffiti as a special genre of writing, we cannot ignore these facts: the voice of support, empathy and understanding is well-marked in most of the pieces.

The first of the two relevant graffiti (see fig. 14) refers to the existing social reality through the expression *stay home*, which was quite common at the start of the pandemic in different slogans and social ads. The author of this graffiti does not

want to lose their hope and optimism towards the future and the happy ending of the pandemic, so they have added *Life is beautiful*, which shows that even during isolation “imprisonment” at home, life can indeed be beautiful.



Fig. 14



Fig. 15

author puts it, and to *travel*, which bears a metaphoric weight that stands for the freedom and overcoming of the pandemic.

A number of graffiti created during the current year inspire great optimism and allow us to conclude our paper on a positive note. Here is one such example (see fig. 15). In this graffiti we do not see words like *virus*, *pandemic*, *infection*, or anything that refers to the disastrous period directly. This piece of graffiti reflects the COVID situation through the ease of several travel restrictions implemented during the pandemic. The graffiti reads *Let us travel*, which encourages the audience to take advantage of the retreat of the virus, of the *freedom 2022*, as the

## Conclusion

COVID graffiti is a constantly evolving discourse. Since the beginning of the pandemic (March 2020) multiple pieces of COVID graffiti have been created, and even now, in the post-COVID period, we frequently come across some new pieces that either express feelings of relief and liberation or highlight the advantages of a COVID-free existence. Given that COVID graffiti is still a continuously evolving discourse, we cannot confine our empirical material to any limitations (physical, social, thematic, etc.) and can only make inferences about its linguo-textual structure and genre features based on samples generated up to this point.

Hence, summing up, we can state that COVID graffiti as a genre of literary writing, in our opinion, shares some characteristic features with other literary genres such as fantasy or horror, literary realism, creative nonfiction but mostly science fiction. As in science fiction, it is also typical of COVID graffiti to have dark, dystopic and sarcastic content to inform and impact the “readers.” It is characterised by imaginative and futuristic overtones and at the same time by a strong sense of reality depicted in the sincerest and the most genuine way, which allows us to consider it to be a sub-genre of science fiction, as it is usually believed that “science fiction writers often seek out new scientific and technical developments in order to prognosticate freely the techno-social changes that will shock the readers’ sense of cultural propriety and expand their consciousness” (Sterling n. d.). Graffiti in all its visual and textual forms uses the constantly evolving reality as an indispensable component of any literary writing and produces messages that are realistic and rational, and imaginative, fictional and futuristic at the same time.

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**Appendix: Graffiti texts**

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