Article

Street Art Participation in Increasing Investments in the City Center of Bucharest, a Paradox or Not?

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Abstract: This article analyses street art’s contribution to the current economic life in the city center of an Eastern European capital, Bucharest. The development of socio-economic activities in the Romanian capital has been strongly influenced in the last 30 years by a complex of effects generated by the transition to the capitalist economy in the early 1990s, the impact of globalization, and recently the COVID-19 pandemic. This study focuses on the investigation of those areas that through street art came to know processes of urban regeneration. By applying semi-structured interviews to providers of alternative guided tours, but also questionnaires among the population that is familiar with this subculture, including an organization of urban regeneration through street art, an important number of economically new spaces, next to reinvented ones, have been investigated. In these areas, street art ends up by supporting activities from hospitality, cultural, and creative industries, changing for the better the perspectives of economic and cultural development, along with the attractiveness of the Bucharest city center. Street art proves to be an important tool in the regeneration process bringing positive effects when involving active cooperation between the public and the private sectors.

Keywords: graffiti; street art; local investments; urban regeneration; Bucharest (Romania)

1. Introduction

The city center of Bucharest has changed in the last decade under the impact of the street art subculture. The purpose of this study is to analyze how significant is the influence of street art in the local economic landscape. First, it is important to understand the evolution of street art at an international level, its origins, and its relationships with the city’s economic transformations.

Hoboglyphs, graffiti, and street art are shaping an important subculture in the 20th century urban development. In general, the inscriptions on various supports in the urban landscape are related to the dynamics of economic processes in the urban areas. Hoboglyphs are related to the period of industrialization and railways system development in the early 20th century in the USA [1–3]. The graffiti phenomenon, developed in the context of cities pre-deindustrialization, started in the late 1960s in American cities [4] and in the 1970s in Europe, and was observed at a neighborhood level as a dark phase or “stage of mourning” because of the job losses, as Bertoncello calls it [5]. The assertion of broader rights among minority populations will continue to contribute to the transformation of graffiti worldwide as a means of expression in the coming years. The graffiti and street art phenomenon are evolving towards increasingly complex forms in the 21st century, a period of tertiarization, linked mainly to motivations based on social and economic issues [6], along with intensifying the role of creativity and technology in cities. It was noticed that for creative energy especially after the economic crisis in 2008, projects including street art actions became the attention of many European programs (e.g., Creative Europe Culture, Interreg Europe—Murals for Communities) and in 2020, starting with the lockdown [7].

Secondly, it is important to make the difference between graffiti and street art and to analyze the different contexts of development. The boundary between graffiti and street art may be imperceptible, but a clear difference of interpretation is standing in its legality:
graffiti is in general not authorized in comparison to street art. Street art may be seen as a derivation of graffiti or as adaptability and resilience of graffiti art within an institutional framework [8]. Sometimes, graffiti is not welcome because it hurts [9]: e.g., San Francisco has an official zero-tolerance policy on graffiti [10]. At the national level, the situation may be different, depending on local regulations.

This subculture, seen as a group that is part of a dominant culture, but which differs from it in some important respects [11], has been shaped over time and naturally reflects the cause for which its authors are fighting, with its source deriving from interacting with a city, a street, a wall, or a passer-by [12]. Thus, the meanings on the walls are more and more different and are not linked only to hip hop, but also to: (a) politics—freedom of expression: “Freedom” on the Berlin Wall in 1989; political slogans—in Bolivia, members of the group Mujeres Creando used graffiti alongside political action to make the voice of resistance heard [13]; political murals in Belfast or on The Walled Off Hotel from Bethlehem, opened in 2017 (100 years after the Balfour declaration) by the British street artist Bansky, with the aim to attract tourists to West Bank in Bethlehem and to encourage peaceful solutions; (b) economics—in relation to financial crises (e.g., in Athens); (c) social—prejudgments, social problems, abuse, at first graffiti being associated with urban poor areas, with various social problems, and not only ethnic in nature; (d) culture—in works for schools or cultural institutions to promote lost, unappreciated, or unknown values, messages against cultural manipulation, but also to pay homage to actors, films, cultural events, etc.; messages that encourage reading (books and libraries in miniature): in Lyon or Utrecht; cultural diversity: e.g., City of Versailles, a project from 2020, under the representation of unrelated but equally revered plants, with powerful medicinal properties, coming each from a different continent and hiding messages related to colonization, globalization, and mass migration, but under the general message of respect for diversity; (e) in relation to communication—the importance of the technological innovations reflected in the evolution of means of communication; (f) commerce—advertising for stores.

Many themes are inspired by ordinary life, tell the story of the everyday [14]. Last year, representations with a coronavirus thematic have become frequently addressed. The theme of the pandemic generated by COVID-19 can be found in many works during the worldwide lockdown, but also after that (e.g., Melbourne has a map of works done in lockdown). In November 2020, was published the book “Les murs du confinement—Street art et Covid-19” [7], with nearly 600 works from 50 countries of more than 400 artists, transmitting messages related to the social and political situations, along with medical and safety measures.

In relation to the media of these representations, there are various categories: fences, gangways, abandoned industrial areas (temporary uses in brownfield areas), walls, high walls, garages, shutters, billboards, cars, trucks, trains, cargo ships, and fire alarms [4]. In terms of occupied surfaces, there are multiple forms and sizes in smaller or larger open and visible spaces in urban communities [15].

The context of urban development has played an important role in the evolution of street art as a phenomenon within cities. The phenomenon of graffiti and street art is analyzed in various studies related to cities, from different perspectives and in relation to different urban processes. In the first stage, the abandoned areas, freed from the industrial activity, were invaded by graffiti representations [16]. There is a directly proportional relationship between the gradual increase of anti-graffiti laws and the decrease in interest in unauthorized representations in different urban places and on different media. Hocking Scott [14] talks about bad graffiti referring to “humorous commentary decorating urban landscapes” encountered mainly in neglected, depreciated, and abandoned areas. However, during the cities de-industrialization process, culture-led regeneration becomes more visible [17]. At the same time and under the influence of the evolution towards street art, this subculture gradually extends from the periphery to central areas. Depending on the rigor of anti-graffiti laws, the phenomenon has developed differently worldwide, respectively, in the form of more graffiti or more street art. In recent years, however, the
trend is to increasingly integrate murals into the urban landscape [17,18]. The question is how far to integrate either graffiti or street art? Some cities that already have an important history of graffiti representations become saturated with graffiti, but not always from a negative point of view: in some cases, graffiti and street art are full of positive meaning, as in Berlin, where graffiti became a way of visual communication [19].

The urban environment in Central and Eastern Europe is facing an explosion of this phenomenon after 1990, with cities as Sofia [20], Zagreb, Ljubljana, or Belgrade [21] joining others that have experienced mural art since socialist times, as Łódź, with its first large-format murals from the 1960s [22].

In the urban regeneration processes, culture, in the broadest sense, has an important contribution, many studies being focused on developing cultural strategies [23,24]. Among these strategies, street art may play an important role in urban planning as a transforming engine to regenerate public spaces [25]. Street art can be seen as a new vector of development that changes the dynamic forces, an urban dynamizer [6].

Street art is often called environmental art, which denotes a close connection with the environment and the place and, therefore, supports the development of some spaces [12]. The graffiti and street art phenomenon has the power to re-design existing places and re-imagine spaces, challenging future human behavior [20].

Graffiti and street art are, among others, urban design features [26]. The concept of colorful urban landscapes is often addressed in various urban regeneration projects in recent years in different urban environments, often former industrial ones [18,27]. In other cases, at the origins of these initiatives are projects that have as objectives the consolidation of a sense of identity in vulnerable environments (the low-income neighborhood Las Palmitas in Mexican city Pachuca, or Manshiyat Naser neighborhood in Cairo, home of the city’s informal garbage collectors) or the promotion of the local culture and tourism. Street art can thus be seen as a subculture that participates in the development of tourism (e.g., in Łódź [22]). In Calais, France, the facade of the former factory, one of the last collective lace factories typical for the end of the 19th century, transformed today into a fashion and lace museum, is covered by a lace mural realized by a renowned Polish artist, with a particular motif, from the institution’s archive, which dates back to 1894 [28]. Some settlements are entirely colorful, others only on some buildings. There are more examples in Latin cultures, often related to the presence of water (e.g., Burano and Cinque Terre in Italy), but they are also common to other spaces (Notting Hill in London, Havana, Lima, etc.).

As a form of contemporary art that flourishes in the urban environment [29], street art is today one of the most powerful artistic sectors of the creative industry [30] and a place-making tool in large cities [31]. Further, street art participates in city branding [32,33] by adding multifaceted values to the strength of street art tours [34]. Social, economic, symbolic, and thus image constructions of this subculture are possible thanks to street art tours. Street art is more than an artistic movement, it is an emerging art world [35] that can become an asset for cities when they find out how to capitalize on it.

Taking into consideration the street art interaction with different urban processes and its contribution to change the image of certain urban areas, as presented above, but also the fact that street art helps to better understand what is happening in a city, creating sometimes the illusion of another space, more attractive [12], the research hypotheses of the present study are: (1) Is there a relationship between street art and local investments in the Bucharest city center? (2) If yes, how do street art and local investments interact to participate in the development of the activities in the area?

This study is the first scientific geographical approach of urban regeneration through street art in Bucharest taking into account the analysis of street art and local investments relationships. Moreover, it is one of the few scientific types of research focused mainly on the street art phenomenon in Romania. The research is not intended to be an inventory of street artworks that emerged in recent years in Bucharest, but an in-depth analysis of their contribution to the dynamization of the economic life in Bucharest city center.
2. Materials and Methods

This research relies on qualitative analysis by applying, on one hand, semi-structured interviews to providers of alternative guided tours (associations, organizations, guides) in the central area of Bucharest, and, on the other hand, questionnaires to the population of residents in Bucharest and those familiar with this type of art, next to an organization militating for urban regeneration through street art. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in January 2021 and were adapted to the restrictions imposed by COVID-19. Under the need to respect certain limits of communication, semi-structured interviews by telephone were used. The research show that they contribute to similar results to interviews conducted in physical format [36] and can become a practice in the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond [37]. Therefore, nine telephone semi-structured interviews were applied to all providers of alternative guided tours who operate street art tours or include graffiti and street artworks in different categories of tours proposed (city center, historical, and cultural tours), promoted on TripAdvisor and Facebook. This positive feedback from all providers of alternative guided tours can be explained as follows. The telephone semi-structured interview brought advantages in comparison to the classic form of face-to-face format: possibility to interview all the respondents no matter the address they were at that moment (during pandemic times, a part of the population moved outside the city, working remotely), more flexibility and openness in obtaining clear answers and rich information. Furthermore, the chosen period corresponded to the winter months in which the number of tourist tours was lower due to the weather conditions and COVID-19 restrictions. The duration of the interview with providers of alternative guided tours was on average 30 min.

To obtain a stronger image of the perception of this phenomenon and its evolution in Bucharest in relation to new investments and urban regeneration, knowing the opinion of the inhabitants was also considered extremely important. Therefore, 120 questionnaires were applied between January and March 2021 using the online communication tools, respectively by email and social networks, to the resident population, born in Bucharest or moved to the capital for at least five years. The limit of at least five years was chosen because of two reasons: on the one hand, this phenomenon came to the attention of local authorities, businesses, and other territorial actors especially since 2018–2019, in the framework of more events organized starting from the idea to add more lights and color in the city; on the other hand, in order to have a firm opinion on the evolution of street art in relation to graffiti was important to consider at least some years before because this form of artistic expression becomes more effervescent since 2015–2016 in the local urban landscape. Among the respondents were identified people unfamiliar with the graffiti and street art subculture who could not provide valid answers to the study and, consequently, were excluded from the analysis. Among them, a negative perception of this subculture predominates due to the frequent confusion between unauthorized and authorized graffiti, but also between graffiti and street art, for which they see no difference and which they consider bringing nothing positive to the city. Besides these respondents, also some filling errors in the question boxes of some questionnaires were registered. Therefore, the number of questionnaires considered decreased to 94, including the questionnaire applied in the framework of a regeneration program through street art. The study considered all categories of age. The limitations regarding the receptivity of respondents in the qualitative analysis have been investigated in many research articles. For example, the resistance of elder generations in giving answers, and even more in the online format, may arise from different reasons: inability to retrieve information in a categorical response format, lack of familiarity with the standardized structures of the surveys, or closed-ended questions [38–40].

Both categories of answers, obtained from providers of alternative guided tours, residents, and an urban regeneration program, are associated in the text with the number of each respondent: e.g., R1.

In the semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, was used the expression graffiti and street art for two reasons: (a) the street art concept is quite new in the Romanian vocabulary, so there is a high degree of unfamiliarity with this term and an important risk
in associating all representations with the term graffiti; (b) graffiti and street art expression use was important in explaining the purpose of the research, graffiti being considered the starting step of street art development, therefore referring to an art that can bring a plus of value to the city and is made on the basis of authorizations or the acceptance of the owners of the concerned places.

Although street art is perceived from the perspective of tourism specialists, together with residents, this research is not a study of tourism, but of urban geography and in relation to concepts associated with this approach: local economy, regeneration, and urban image.

3. Case Study—Bucharest City Center and the Context for Street Art Development

Starting in the 1990s, the cities of the former socialist countries faced the loss of their industrial function importance, which naturally had to give way to services [41–43]. The loss of industry reflects the normal course of urban economic development, but sometimes may be seen as a premature or rapid process that has intensified over time, occurring even earlier in the development process [44]. When talking about deindustrialization consequences, the approaches among the geographers are more focused on socioeconomic realities [45,46] and in a smaller number on the study of a lost socio-cultural landscape [47]. The chain of “deagrarianization–deindustrialization–servicization” that cities cross is very much influenced by technological progress [48]. Even if in the first years of capitalism, these countries had to make efforts in adapting to the technical innovation and the entrepreneurial spirit [49], the development of current services is more linked to much higher dynamics of innovation.

In Bucharest, the transition from industry to services was in general different from one case to the next, depending mainly on the history of the economic areas, industrial label, and localization. The strong development of industry in the 1970s and 1980s and implicitly of the new residential neighborhoods (so-called “bedroom neighborhoods” for the population moved to the city and labor force in the industry) meant an important stock of land still dysfunctional or in a state of change at the end of the communist era. Therefore, the tertiarization has developed in different forms: either on still non-occupied or in transformation parts of the city (described above), or has replaced other activities as the former service distribution structures (borough-sized shopping centers and, at a smaller scale, district-sized shopping centers) or, on the contrary, the former industrial enterprises [50]. Regarding the free areas, the existing rail and road infrastructure at the peripheral areas of Bucharest was considered [46]. A key challenge was the disposition and repurposing of the lands covered by shuttered heavy industries, but also by large old housing estates [51].

To better understand the evolution of the service sector in capitalist times, most of the services have been progressively incorporated by the mall concept, the first of which was opened in Bucharest at the end of the 1990s. An important component of the areas in transformation, which hosted the future malls, is represented by the unfinished buildings thought of as food complexes (“canteens”) whose construction had begun in the 1980s in convergence areas of population flows. Thus, the tertiarization after 1990 meant the development of large shopping centers in dense areas of population, advantaged by infrastructure, in which most of the commercial facilities are associated with social and business ones [52].

The general modernization of Bucharest was not carried out according to the principles of sustainable development [53]. Gradually, the interest for the city center, which is more expensive, declined. As a result, small businesses (workshops of hatters, watch-making, shoes, or televisions repairs, etc.) have gradually disappeared under the impact of capitalism and globalization. The inner-city started to be neglected by urban politics and the local economy [54]. Other decisions or policies had an important contribution to the city center changes: the decline of the cultural function by closing public cinemas because of small investments in their modernization and the relocation of these services into
private cinemas inside the malls [55]; low share of reconsolidated old buildings; difficult legislation or non-compliance with the legislation on the conservation of heritage buildings conducted to cases in which real estate developers have demolished heritage buildings without authorization [53]; the absence of legal obligations to maintain a proper degree of the condition and safety of buildings (some from the interwar period and nationalized, being occupied after 1945 by tenants for decades, including after the fall of the communist regime) and the fragile financial support through public programs of rehabilitation works or reconsolidation of those buildings with seismic risk. These realities underline an “urban chaos” that dominates the public discourse of planning professionals, activists, and media [53].

When the industry loss is doubled by the delay in developing services and, so, of new jobs, the drifting population will immediately face the negative consequences on a social level too (e.g., socioeconomic segregation [56], etc.). Life after losing jobs is synonymous with the reduction of purchasing power, which is further reflected in the instability, respectively, the fluctuation of different types of activities in the central area of the capital that leave the place to unoccupied spaces in the long run.

The lack of vibrant economic life in the central area of Bucharest in recent years, in which the reconversion of abandoned spaces is individualized as a difficult, delayed, and unfavorable process, in parallel with the sedimentation of a new subculture for the city (street art) attracted our attention in the present study. The correlation between street art and socio-economic dynamics is hard to estimate. Burkner and Totelec [54] demonstrated that it is not possible to verify the correlation between murals and increasing of residential market values in the real estate market in a district from Naples, but agreed that it has an impact on the social and physical sustainability of the place. Other authors focused, too, on their research on the sense of place and social capital [6].

In comparison to other parts from Central and Eastern Europe that were confronted with different forms of this phenomenon before 1990, in Bucharest, it cannot be stated that there was a subculture of graffiti and street art during communist times. However, a few examples can be cited. In terms of small representations, some repetitive messages related to political themes could be found on walls and fences in the direction of promoting a political movement in the elections from 1946. Winning the elections, this political movement participated in 1947 in the installation of the communist regime in Romania. Therefore, these messages stood out during the communist period but disappeared in time either by the demolition of those buildings in the process of rebuilding the capital in the following decades or by subsequent demolition and works of reconsolidation of the buildings after 1990. When referring to larger representations, the only colored walls belonged to some administrative, educational, or industrial buildings that contained in most of the cases thematic mosaic representations often connected to their specific context. The messages transmitted by these mosaic walls are about their profile and activity and make reference to the idea of economic status, prosperity, and progress of the Romanian people. Some of them are still present in the current local landscape, mainly those that did not convey a political message.

After 1990, Romania knew the first steps of this culture with the transition to the capitalist system in which hope, freedom of expression, and action quickly established themselves in many activities. Graffiti appeared gradually in Bucharest as a form of expression, respectively, as an expression of a new way of life as it was at its origins, less artistic at its start, and in which authors seek to relate to a modern culture rather than to the idea of delimiting their territory and recognizing others. In the first years of transition, the evolution was slow. Romania’s accession to the European Union in 2007 opened new ways of asserting this subculture in the capital. Therefore, on one hand, graffiti is developing, capturing more and more territory, and on the other hand, street art develops through the experience of international artists who make murals in various projects (sometimes supported by the municipality, various institutions, or local businesses), inspiring the
Romanian street artists, which become a more visible group and among whom some become famous nationally.

Bucharest, together with large regional urban centers (Cluj, Timișoara, Iași, Sibiu, Brașov, and Bacău) has seen an explosion of street artwork in the last five years, thanks to a series of projects supported by the local authorities or different programs. In the present study, when referring to the central part of Bucharest it is not the historical one, but an enlarged area following the main transport axes that are connected to the city center, but also their evolution in relation to the stylized graffiti and street art phenomenon. It is an area that has complex economic activities, with tertiary education services, cultural and administrative ones, but also with a presence of buildings with a high architectural value that have withstood the communist period, some being listed as heritage buildings.

4. Results
The qualitative approach included a set of five questions in which the tangential reference to the tourism activity relied on the idea that it represents a part of the city’s economy (Table 1).

Table 1. Questions in the qualitative approach.

| Number | Questions |
|--------|-----------|
| 1.     | What do you think of when you hear graffiti and street art? |
| 2.     | Do you consider graffiti and street art as an added value for Bucharest tourism? (a) Yes. Why? (b) No. Why? |
| 3.     | Do you think that if the phenomenon of graffiti and street art will develop at least in the same proportion as until now, it will be able to participate in changing for the better the image of the city center and of the city in general? (a) Yes. Why? (b) No. Why? |
| 4.     | Do you consider that the graffiti and street art movement has a positive impact on the development of new businesses in the city center of Bucharest? (a) Yes; (b) No; (c) Yes and no. |
| 5.     | If the impact is positive, what types of activities did you find that have developed? (multiple choice, with concrete examples): (a) food and beverage services; (b) creative activities (crafts, fairs, workshops, etc.); (c) cultural activities (street theatre, other artistic performances in the public space etc.); (d) recreational ones (including play activities); (e) other (examples) |

Regarding the general profile of the respondents within the applied qualitative methods, 65% had postgraduate studies (bachelor’s and master’s) and the predominant age category was between 20–40 years (68%). Respondents in semi-structured interviews were between 25–45 years old, graduates of higher education, respectively 70% in social sciences and humanities. The questionnaires were addressed to all age categories: under 20 years, 20–40 years, 40–60 years, and over 60 years, people with different levels of educational training (from primary to post-graduate education), with different professional statuses (student, employed, unemployed, housewife, retired) and jobs in various fields (education, culture, arts, ICT, other services, industry, and trade), born in Bucharest or moved in Bucharest for more than five years. Respondents to the questionnaires came in the proportion of 64% from the category of 20–40 years. This important share can be attributed to the short history of this subculture in Romania and the fact that the 20–40 year-old generation has grown with its evolution and is more connected to this form of contemporary art. The share of respondents over 60 years of age is the lowest (5%) and the explanations could be related to various situations that may be common in patches for other groups of age, too: a low familiarity not with social media, but with the method of filling in an online format (and therefore the preference by email), reluctance towards this subculture because of the difficulties in the perception of the two components (graffiti and street art), or the lack of interest and/or information on the promotion of street art in the local landscape. The answers regarding the appreciation of the street art phenomenon in Bucharest reveal
interesting differences in perception. This was a key question, those with a perception impossible to quantify even after explaining the concept of graffiti as a precursor to the street art were not considered because they could not provide answers to other questions. Their perception was most often associated with attributes such as vandalism, disorganization, disappointment, and it being dirty and ugly.

At the level of providers of alternative guided tours and the urban regeneration platform through street art, the answers obtained were rich in information and conclude with the idea of knowing the difference between the two movements, graffiti and street art (Table 2). If the graffiti phenomenon takes place without relying on something organized, legal, and safe, street art is associated with an artistic movement that brings color and change for the better of the image of the city by involving the young generation.

| Table 2. Perception of street art among providers of alternative guided tours. |
| Answers                                                                 |
| "Street art is not that illegal phenomenon made by non-professionals." (R3) |
| "Sometimes, tourists have a negative impression about the city (or certain areas) because of graffiti/tags crowds. This phenomenon associated with delinquency phenomena or dangerous areas of the city (especially in the USA) can induce tourists the feeling of insecurity." (R8) |
| "It is an art with representations in places that can be easily followed by the young generation, focused on the visual." (R7) |
| "Street art is complex. It can be a drawing, no matter how colorful, but if you are wondering what it represents then it is street art." (R5) |
| "Street art transmits a message with a social or political impact, even if it is ephemeral art." (R1) |
| "Artists promoted progressively the idea of art in comparison to vandalism, with the help of solid teams of graduates from Arts faculty who developed in the graffiti areas an artistic movement through large-scale murals." (R2) |
| "In general, tourists ask about graffiti and street art because they notice that is not an organized phenomenon in Bucharest." (R9) |

The answers obtained from the residents highlighted the impact of street art on the urban image. Over 70% considered that street art brings color to the gray of the city. Unfortunately, no complementary information was obtained to better understand their opinion in relation to the street art phenomenon in Bucharest.

The graffiti subculture, seen as those unauthorized actions, is considered by the residents as destroying the image of Bucharest. On the one hand, it is about a lack of concern for the city from the part of those people who live and transit it and do illegal representations on different media, and on the other hand, a lack of an appropriate application of sanctions in the case of inscriptions without the consent of the owners. It should be noted that there is in effect one law on ensuring the aesthetic appearance of the capital and other localities, along with other normative acts related to social coexistence, public order, and tranquility, as well as behavior in public transport, and where reference is made also to consequences to writing or unauthorized drawing on different media.

The development in recent years of street art has been confirmed in the proportion of 100% by the providers of alternative guided tours and the urban regeneration platform as truly bringing added value to Bucharest tourism. However, its development in the Romanian capital is at an early stage compared to other European capitals. Thus, the following ideas emerge from the answers: street art needs to find its place among other types of tourism, to attract all categories of generations, to send messages that have a positive visual and cultural impact, and to represent an important link in the regeneration process (Table 3).
Table 3. Perception of street art as bringing value to Bucharest tourism among providers of alternative guided tours.

| Answers                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| “Tourism has been supported a lot in recent years, but street art gives another note to Bucharest. Bucharest is not just Little Paris wrapped in tourist packages. If you want the tourist to stay longer, you must show him that he can do something else. The city is small and if the tourist stays for several days, he has to discover more in the same area.” (R3) |
| “It represents a new part of the urban heritage, which can attract especially the young people. But, if well promoted and explained, it can be appreciated and understood by elder generations as well, improving in the end intergenerational communication and interaction.” (R8) |
| “Street art can change the look of a city, visually speaking, and then it can attract tourists, but also from a cultural point of view because through street art qualified artists are aware of the importance of the message and are very attentive to what they draw. Once it becomes a representation in the public space, they have a responsibility and do not draw anything by chance.” (R5) |
| “It’s something new that brings color, makes you reflect, intrigues you about the author and the message, and arouses curiosity.” (R4)                                                                 |
| “In Bucharest, it is a combination of abandoned buildings with street art. Any stain of color that conveys a message (some are deep messages) adds value that is very difficult to weigh in terms of the city itself and tourism. We love a splash of color, and those who do not understand try to decode. And this provokes curiosity and brings discussions within those people. And this movement is suitable for young people.” (R2) |
| “Both graffiti and street art, next to the resulting regeneration increase the value.” (R6)                                                                                                                                 |

The same positive ideas are found among the residents of the capital whose perception is linked in a proportion of 73% to a direct contribution of street art in increasing the city’s economic sustainability, urban attractiveness (color and embellishment of spaces, especially abandoned ones) and, therefore, tourism. It is interesting how the role of street art in reviving the public space emerges again: “The city could gain color and beauty, especially in the context in which Bucharest is a city of contrasts, where unfortunately gray still predominates; street art will add a new dimension to the city and will invite to interactions and discussions.” (R55).

A total of 21.3% of respondents admit real participation of street art in local tourism but under certain conditions. It should be an art practiced in proper areas through planned actions and not on some walls at random without authorization. Street art helps tourism because it relies on an international language and represents the freshest representation of the society: “Most of the time it is uncensored, arising from the need to be seen and heard, and that makes it authentic. It is the representation of an alternative life, and the richer a street culture is, the more likely there are greater economic-social-cultural differences in society, of communities’ integration, mainstream, and underground, those with possibilities and those without, progressive and conservative people and street art tells the story of these differences. Street art is about novelty, standards, belonging to a world, and the international scene. There are things you can understand more easily and quickly from street art when you visit a city, which contributes to tourism, making the experience more complex and expressive.” (R47).

“The non-participation of the street art phenomenon in the development of tourism comes to the surface when it is synonym to vandalism of buildings, monuments, fences of some emblematic institutions or when the road signs or the bus stop plates are covered.” (R34).

Concerning the participation of the street art phenomenon in changing the image of the city center and beyond, the main conclusions after analyzing the answers coming from the providers of alternative guided tours are: there is potential for regeneration through street art, respectively, it supports areas that could be explored; murals have a pleasant visual impact; the phenomenon also presents certain challenges: street art should be part, along with other elements, of the built heritage, in the promotion process of the capital, that requires more institutional support and a coherent vision; street art cannot be more developed if the involvement of young people will not increase: “Bucharest has already received another loan. A lot of work has been done in recent years, it is a different city, with its good and bad. Many are surprised. It is a thirsty generation of expression. Let’s take advantage of this energy!” (R2).

The Street Delivery Festival is considered in the opinion of the majority of respondents as the pioneer of this new subculture in the Romanian capital, which spread in other cities as well during the last years and influenced the emergence of similar concepts. It is a certainty that the international context will always play an important role in the development of
street art in Bucharest. A total of 64% of the respondents agree that Bucharest has made significant efforts in aligning in the last years to the global trend in the field.

Among the inhabitants, the answers show a connection between street art and urban regeneration. A positive impact on social and economic life is noticed in the improved image of the city: “I see this phenomenon as one of urban regeneration and I hope that will promote the exploration, humanization, and understanding of this city through art.” (R55). However, the problem of the durability of these artistic representations arises because it is not a conserved art. The representations deteriorate in time and will remain in a state of degradation for years and, therefore, one cannot speak of a change for the better in the general image of the capital (R34 and other respondents). Despite this risk, it is obvious the evolution in increasing of this movement towards street art because “The public begins to reject conventional art and adopt unconventional art, which is most easily and authentically represented by street art. The fact that it is extremely sincere, involves a degree of danger and risk, especially when performed illegally, but also a certain technique acquired over time and an extraordinary level of skill, then it increases people’s appetite for graffiti and street art.” (R47).

Finally, it is tested whether there is a connection between street art and the development of new businesses in the city center of Bucharest. Although it may seem a paradox, the results show that the hypotheses formulated at the beginning of this research are validated. It is proved that there are different categories of relationships between street art and local investments and that street art really contributes to the revival of the central area of the city. About 66% of respondents are convinced of this positive impact. More than half of these answers obtained during semi-structured interviews and questionnaires emphasize that it is not just about one or another, but cooperation and mutual support in the sense that: in some cases, street art brings new businesses in the area thanks to the advantages introduced (colorful and refreshed places, areas frequented by young people etc.), in others, businesses opening in the area support street art for promotion and a good image. This cooperation is considered by the respondents to contribute to the sustainability of the economic activities, but also of the cultural life in the area.

At the level of the fields of activity developed in relation to street art, food and beverage services (cafés, restaurants, bars) stand out in a proportion of 61%, followed by cultural activities (cultural hubs) and creative ones (concerts, crafts), with 39%. Cultural and creative activities were taken together in the analysis because it is very difficult to make a clear distinction, a series of creative activities taking place in cultural hubs and vice versa. The recreational activities were mentioned in isolation and in association with the above ones, because there are no examples of spaces intended only for leisure. This reality can be explained by the fact that in the city center, green areas are insufficient and street art representations are mainly associated with large parks from Bucharest (e.g., in the north part of the capital, but not only).

The detailed analysis of the answers confronted with field research observations and documentation led to the identification in the central area of Bucharest of four categories of situations described below (Figure 1).
representations are mainly associated with large parks from Bucharest (e.g., in the north part of the capital, but not only).

The detailed analysis of the answers confronted with field research observations and documentation led to the identification in the central area of Bucharest of four categories described below (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The relationships between street art and local investments in Bucharest city center. Source: author’s own conception, 2021.

(1) A strong direct relationship between street art and local investments is encountered in the food and beverage services and at micro-scale. Thus, the first steps towards an area with a street art subculture started from a restaurant (Grano), which is an example of cooperation in the territory between local investment and street art. Initiated in 2017, the business was from the beginning open to the street art movement. At the end of 2019, the first mural was inaugurated on the wall of the neighboring building to which the restaurant terrace extends as part of an urban regeneration project (buchARTest) that “aims to inject life into the city and its community through mural art”. (R10). In 2020, the restaurant wanted to enhance more color in the area and with the support of the Street Delivery Festival, it commissioned its wall to another mural that makes it nowadays the only terrace in Bucharest between two murals. This creates a “mural art dialogue” as it is called, by buchARTest (Figure 2).
first mural was inaugurated on the wall of the neighboring building to which the restaurant terrace extends as part of an urban regeneration project (buchARTest) that "aims to inject life into the city and its community through mural art". (R10). In 2020, the restaurant wanted to enhance more color in the area and with the support of the Street Delivery Festival, it commissioned its wall to another mural that makes it nowadays the only terrace in Bucharest between two murals. This creates a "mural art dialogue" as it is called by buchARTest (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Murals at Grano: (a) on the left—"I’m not sure how, but I will" by Wanda Hutira, 2019; (b) on the right—"Love them as they love you" by BTACREW, 2020; (c) overview of the two murals. Source: author’s own photos, 2021.

(2) Strong indirect relationship between street art and local investments characterizes cultural, creative, food, and beverage businesses, situated in an area from the city center composed of two main streets, Arthur Verona and Dionisie Lupu, and from which street art spreads in several streets connected. Arthur Verona Street was the start of street art
in Bucharest and can truly be considered the core of the street art story in Bucharest and Romania. The phenomenon began with its inclusion in a project called Street Delivery. The initiative took place in 2006, under the name of “Art Delivery—Arthur Verona Street is your street!”, being the first urban event that aims to draw the attention of residents, but also of the local authorities on the notion of the cultural route, the area comprising a series of historical buildings and of important architectural value.

Transformed gradually into an act of social responsibility, the Street Delivery festival, which involves closing the street for a few days, included street art in the following years along with workshops, exhibitions, and concerts. It was from the very beginning a collaboration between the public sector (City Hall) and the private actors (Cărturesti Library and the Order of Architects of Romania), gathering in time other organizations and volunteers. In a short period of time, it became a vibrant area preferred by all generations and renowned through creative, cultural, and recreational activities in which street art has found its place; in the past, the area already benefited from a rich cultural life: a children’s theatre (Tândărică Theatre) from 1945, a cinema from 1935 (unfortunately nowadays dysfunctional), an important bookstore hosted in a heritage building, etc. The impact was progressively noticed in the buildings’ restoration, development of food and beverages sector, creative and cultural activities, next and other small businesses emerging with the phenomenon of Street Delivery. The following examples were cited by respondents: Lente (Figure 3), more than a bistro from 2008, but also an unconventional office or place for spending time in a creative area, has wonderful street art representations inside and outside since 2016, within the Painting Walls project, made by well-known Romanian street artists; this was a start for murals in spaces “where different events and street art workshops can be organized, in the attic or in the yard.” (R3); Shift Pub, from 2010 and situated across the street from the children’s theatre, was reinvented in 2015 relying on the idea of creativity; The Film Garden is an initiative from 2014 of the Creart Center (Center for Creation, Art, and Tradition of Bucharest) as a part of the reviving process of the concept of summer gardens in Old Bucharest. The place that offers a unique atmosphere for projecting movies, concerts, theatre plays, debates and improvisation shows, has a thematic mural from 2015 (Figure 4); Point Hub is an independent cultural hub, whose program explores performative artistic creations with an interdisciplinary character, participatory, emerging art, educational initiatives and research of issues of general interest (visual arts exhibitions, concerts, workshops, film screenings, cultural conferences, and a restaurant and bar). The cultural hub has a mural from the inauguration in 2015, made by a famous street art team in Romania in a house from the end of the 19th century, rethought architecturally through restoration and extension (Figure 5); El Pato, a restaurant opened in 2016; CoOperativa, a garden with restaurant from 2018, organizes regularly events involving local artists, and not only, integrating on its walls street art for several years; Since 2016, Scena9 works as an online platform (with a publication about the cultural life in Romania and internationally from 2018), but also as a cultural hub (BRD Scena9 Residence) which deals with various cultural topics, hosting exhibitions and various events, including in relation to street art (Figure 6). In 2020, on the 100th anniversary of the first Romanian animated film, the Animest International Animation Film Festival organized in Bucharest an exhibition dedicated to the most important moments in the history of local animated cinema, hosted by the cultural hub BRD Scena9 Residence (described above in the second category of the relationship between street art and local investments). In the courtyard of the location, the fences became support for street art and a way for transmitting Romanian cultural values. There were represented Romanian cartoon characters in relation to the history of the Romanian cartoons: its start in the 1920s (Pâcală—the first cartoon character), the stage of bringing to life some story heroes during World War II (e.g., The goat and her three kids, a well-known old children’s story transposed in animation) and the evolution in communist times (e.g., Gopo’s Little Man, the creation of Ion Popescu-Gopo, a prominent personality in the Romanian cinematography and the founder of the modern Romanian cartoon school, or Mihaela and Azorel, a cartoon series from the 1970s and 1980s—Figure 6). To emphasize the
importance of the Romanian animated movies and their place in the international animated filmography, the mural includes the names of some Romanian painters and illustrators, but also representations of some international characters (e.g., Pinocchio). Teatrelli is a new performance hall from 2013 in the Bucharest cultural landscape, a project of the Centre for Creation, Art, and Tradition of Bucharest (theatre performances, music, debates, etc.).

Figure 3. Street art in Lente Garden: (a) The Leopard by Aitch, 2016; (b) Totem by Pisica Pătrată (Square Cat) and Screen Printed Mural by Sorina Vazelina & Primitiv Print, Un-hidden 1st edition, 2017; (c) The Rain by Aito Kitazaki, 2019. Source: author’s own photos, 2021.

Figure 4. The Film Garden by Sweet Damage Crew, 2015. Source: author’s own photo, 2021.
Medium indirect relationship between street art and local investments is a distinct category, specific to creative, cultural, and hospitality activities. The Creative District, located in the central part of Bucharest, gravitating around the oldest Park of the capital (Cismigiu Garden) and important boulevards, is an urban regeneration project that aims the capitalization and the empowerment of creative industries, initiated by non-governmental organizations, but which along the way became supported by the City Hall through subordinated cultural institutions. The area has a vibrant cultural history due to famous publishing houses in the past and nowadays through a series of national museums, universities of arts, architecture, and music, the Romanian Athenaeum, etc. In the area is located the Universul Palace, which has become, through the rehabilitation of the Universul newspaper editorial office (a building from 1884 and expanded in the 1930s), an important hub for creative industries that includes architectural offices, an advertising agency, art galleries, cafés, and an independent theatre, Apollo 111. The area nearby is “decorated” with murals and other representations of graffiti and street art, “becoming a kind of local Montmartre” (R2). Also, the Epoque Hotel, although a new construction, but in Romanian neoclassical style designed to preserve the authenticity of old Bucharest, has since 2020 the Aurora mural, about which the author of the work, Cristian Scutaru, says that “it is part of the collection entitled “Openness”, started in 2019 and having at the basis the beauty of the childhood represented by a portrait of a little girl with big and pure eyes and having next to her many flowers and bright colors” [57]. Food Hood connects from 2015 street food with street art. In 2021, Food Hood organized the event Black Gallery, where an exposition of some pieces of a
renowned artist and images that tell the story of street art and graffiti in Romania could be discovered. In 2021, the Irish Embassy in Romania sponsored a mural for the fast-food restaurant, which included elements from the Irish culture, among which were the green color, the harp, and St. Patrick’s image. Other examples for this category that have been provided by respondents are Food Container Buzeshti, a fast-food restaurant opened in 2020, and J’ai Bistrot, a bistro reopened in 2015 and which emphasized creativity and the importance of socialization, hosting a series of artistic events (e.g., Bucharest Stickerz Fest, the first festival of this kind in Romania organized in the first part of 2021). The dynamic cultural and creative life in the area is also confirmed by the answers received: “There are many studios in the Creative District area and artists live here.” (R5) After the field research, other examples of small investments were identified in the Bucharest central area, which calls for street art and graffiti works. It is about businesses in the field of public catering or small neighborhoods’ services (hair salon, printing, or other small services). As a mention, other small businesses appear in the nearby central area as street art culture spreads in the territory and commission murals or other works: e.g., Forma Coffee, with a mural from 2018 done by a renewed Romanian street artist, became a place included in the street art tours: the tourists stop here during the tours and drink a coffee while admiring old buildings architecture; Alhambra Summer Theatre is one of the first places in the central area of Bucharest with a larger mural drawn on the metal doors from the entrance in the theatre in 2008.

(4) We also meet the fourth category, respectively, weak relationship between street art and local investments. In this case, it is not about a propagation of street art in association with different investments but rather insular examples of businesses in different areas of Bucharest that are open to street art interventions: e.g., Expirat Club (organized by converting old industrial spaces with a special architecture) includes an urban art workshop since 2013; Fabrica Club (Club Factory), arranged in the buildings of a former socks factory has a restaurant, recreation space, with graffiti and street artwork.

From a temporal point of view, although it is an ephemeral art form, there are situations when the mural remains after the investment leaves. Closed today, Bistro Atelier, located on an important street in Bucharest that was for a long time the main road of the capital, Calea Victoriei (The Victory Avenue), gave to the area beautiful representations of street art. In 2015, the walls of the terrace were painted exactly as the restaurant was decorated inside, and today the location is included in some tourist tours.

5. Discussion

The results of the present research led to the assumption that in Bucharest the street art as a subculture that really coagulates is relatively new but is supported by thematic tourist tours since 2019. An important role has had its promotion through various networks, being known that the attention of the media is essential [58]. Thus, media can highlight its contribution when street art brings positive effects in some territories or is used as an alarm signal for certain spaces (abandoned, deteriorated, squatted, etc.). The involvement of the population is essential through actions of support and participatory involvement, being able to become a way of citizen action for urban change [6].

The study aimed to highlight not only the direct impact of the street art on the local economy development or more precisely in relation to new businesses, but also the indirect impact of murals on other types of activities, such as cultural ones or tourism: “Some of these murals have even come to symbolize the city: they are reproduced in tourist guidebooks, souvenirs, and, most notably, in other forms of street imagery, such as shops signs or cafés designs” (R43) . . . “Local and international artists have turned the streets into an open-air gallery.” (R55). However, it is important that the insertion of a mural in the local landscape does not produce functional or image discontinuities, generally in this subculture being central to take into consideration the shapes and colors on the streets and to interact with the city surroundings [13].
The connection with the sustainability principles can be found not only at the strict level of the contribution to urban regeneration and sustainable economy, but also in terms of reducing pollution because street art can be eco. Thus, in 2021, the *Eco Graffiti—Rebels with a Cause* project is underway, being supported by a private investor and artists using 25% air-purifying paint, 75% ecological paint, green moss, and solar-charged lamps. This campaign supports young artists in creating murals that, in addition to the messages transmitted, are also aiming to achieve a common goal for protecting the environment and the community of which we are part, by using eco and natural materials.

According to the non-profit organization Graffiti Hurts [9], neglecting a place is a message sent to vandals that business owners are not attentive or do not care. This means that the area will lose value, which is not in the interest of the local investors, residents, and local authorities. In our case study, the development of street art in Bucharest demonstrates that taking care of the space may be beneficial to a business and makes the area better known and appreciated. For positive examples to grow, real public–private cooperation is looked-for, in which cultural associations and various NGOs play a major role in encouraging the whole range of actors to cooperate.

Even though currently street art actions are initiated more by formal and informal groups, the beginnings in Bucharest are due to the involvement of mainly public cultural associations, NGOs in arts, urban development, and other fields. *Street Delivery Festival* has a significant role in promoting street art in Bucharest. Starting with 2006, a street art festival is organized annually and brings to life one street from the central part of Bucharest (Arthur Verona Street), an event where artists are invited to put their work on the walls of several buildings in the area with messages transmitted for the city and changing every year: “Most of the tourist come to visit this amazing street of Bucharest and we should be proud and preserve Arthur Verona (R5). The festival days are a conglomeration of events: a fair near the exhibition, cultural events, concerts, crafts and leisure areas (including recreational activities).” (R4). In time, Street Delivery was extended into other neighborhoods of Bucharest and other cities from Romania.

The way this artistic phenomenon evolved in Bucharest shows us a connection between the organization of important events, institutions, and associations that support street art. Street art becomes an asset for some areas of the city and may act as a tool for the cultural promotion of Bucharest (e.g., *Animest International Animation Film Festival*, described above).

The involvement of this subculture in changing for the better the image of the capital was achieved by the participation of both public and private investments. The results of the research show, however, the idea that funding programs belong to local public institutions, but they rely heavily on the creativity coming from street artists or private associations that promote this artistic movement.

*Un-hidden Romania* is an urban regeneration program co-funded by the National Cultural Fund Administration, an autonomous public institution, subordinated to the Ministry of Culture, focusing on a series of actions conceived to promote and encourage street art interventions. Through open calls for artworks and street art workshops, investing in artistic productions and community participation, the program aims at increasing the quality of urban public space. This multiannual program is also important because it produced the first street art map of Romania, updated over time.
Bucharest—Open City 2021 is the first mechanism launched under the 2021 Financing Program for the creative sector in Bucharest dedicated to supporting creative activities and initiatives, organized by the multidisciplinary cultural center ARCUB, an institution subordinated to the Bucharest City Hall. Along with other projects, Street Art Bucharest program benefited from funding this year. Among the proposed objectives, the support of artistic interventions in public spaces and free tours of street art were included.

buchARTest is a private urban regeneration project started in 2019 that aims to bring art closer to people. The main goal of this project is not only to improve the image of some areas or walls of the buildings that have become dysfunctional or need color to get out of the negative or indifferent image they emanate, but also to strengthen the connection between inhabitants and place and, consequently, the identity consolidation.

A series of art and design competitions are financially supported by the private sector (e.g., the project “A New Now” Street Art Challenge by George BCR in 2020). Encouraging new works in the city, street art becomes a more general promotion tool.

In recent years, an important number of cafés or creative hubs from Bucharest have chosen a decor consisting of representations on the walls that resemble paintings, but use urban art styles, being on the border between classical painting and street art. More recently, symbols or representations of street artists are embedded on marketed canvas and become part of contemporary art galleries. These are clues that lead us to the conclusion that the phenomenon of street art in its legal form is beginning to be widely perceived as an integral part of the urban environment and therefore included in events dedicated strictly to this subculture or in association with music (Hip Hop Street Market, One Night Gallery, Art Safari Bucharest, etc.).

Street art has advantages of developing in an organized and aesthetic environment. Starting from the principle that murals or smaller representations can beautify dirty, abandoned, unsightly, or unsecured places, a series of initiatives were born in Bucharest, as well as in many other cities in Romania, some of them embodied in projects: e.g., We are looking for the dirtiest wall in Bucharest, a Make a Point project from 2017. In addition, the street art subculture seems to have won in the pandemic times, when art in open spaces is more sought and the one from the inside (art galleries, museums, etc.) has moved in part into the online environment. In no circumstances, the phenomenon shouldn’t affect the local heritage and should not be a synonym for causing damages in places. In the online environment, the graffiti and street art communities support this subculture as an art, not as an act of vandalism.

Examples in which street art is transformed through participatory approaches into an instrument that raises an alarm signal regarding the architectural heritage of Bucharest are starting to see the light of the day more and more in the last years. One positive example is encountered in our study area: Alhambra Summer Theatre (described above in the medium indirect relationship between street art and local investments category), a historical monument from the beginning of the 20th century that was restored this year. In 2009, a mural was painted here being among the few colorful spaces at that time in the city center. A rare case of mural restoration took place in 2016 (Figure 7), an intervention that brings street art closer to conventional art where restoration works are mandatory.
The present study demonstrates the multidimensional importance of the street art subculture in Bucharest, on economic, cultural, urban image, and perception levels. The results emphasized that murals should be more integrated into the local urban landscape because they became an important urban component, evolve in relation to investments, and have an impact on activities from cultural and creative sectors. To increase the positive impact of the street art phenomenon in the future, more regulation is needed, from two perspectives: (a) artistic interventions must be carried out in an organized and legal framework; (b) a clearer separation between the two currents, graffiti and street art, could lead to a better acceptance of the works by the city and its inhabitants. Even if nowadays
street art is a more organized creative movement as it was ten years ago, it cannot be considered a phenomenon that achieved its maturity. This explains why the use of a complete expression in the qualitative research, graffiti and street art was considered more relevant.

If in the future the number of more visible actions leading to the possibility of those mentioned above do not increase, the impact will be negative, too: e.g., in the case of increasing unauthorized representations, chaotic spread, and no future areas dedicated to this form of contemporary art that could add value to the local economy.

The limitations of the study can be associated with the measures imposed by COVID-19 and, thus, the impossibility of conducting qualitative analysis during events dedicated to street art or in connection with this subculture and, therefore, having a more inclusive approach in the research.

The analysis of street art in Bucharest will continue with future research that will include approaches from a touristic point of view, the sector which proved to have an overwhelming role in making known this subculture among citizens, not only to travelers.

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