

# **The Institutionalisation of Graffiti in Higher Education Institutions: Saudi Innovation**

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## **The Institutionalisation of Graffiti in Higher Education Institutions: Saudi Innovation**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article is informed by the Fun Theory, a theory that calls for the institutionalisation of fun in social settings. It highlights how the academic and non-academic literature shows some individuals to find the practice of graffiti to be fun. It then attempts to build an empirical framework for the idea of institutionalising this fun practice in the social settings of the higher education sector. It addresses the research question: To what extent does the institutionalisation of graffiti in the societal culture of higher education institutions enhance public expression among members through their reflection on daily social and academic life? This question was addressed by a semester-long experiment, wherein graffiti was incorporated into the day-to-day social activity of a Saudi public university, by officially allocating certain walls that members could legally write upon and, further, draw whatever they wanted. The experiment appeared to be fruitful in the sense that the allocated walls were full of writings and drawings, enabling and promoting among members a sense of public articulation based on consideration of their own daily academic and social experience. Thus, it could be suggested that the Fun Theory in general and the institutionalisation of graffiti in particular could hold value for organisations in general and for higher education institutions in particular.

**Key Words:** innovation, higher education, graffiti, Saudi, fun theory

### **Introduction**

This paper is liberal with the word ‘graffiti,’ defining it as all the various types of writing and drawing placed on any public surface. The institutionalisation of graffiti that this article proposes involves the integration of this practice into the ‘built environment’ (Roof and Oleru, 2008) of higher education institutions. The term ‘built environment’ here refers to ‘the human-made space in which people live, work and recreate on a day-to-day basis’ (Roof and Oleru, 2008). The institutionalisation of graffiti in a higher education institution means the legal assignment of certain walls in the institution on which passers-by (be they students, support staff, staff or even guests) can write or draw whatever they want.

This article is informed by the field of social behaviour, in particular by ‘the Fun Theory’ (Volkswagen, 2009). This theory is a recent innovation that calls for the institutionalisation of fun in social settings. It highlights how both academic and non-academic literature show some individuals to find the practice of graffiti to be fun (Reisner and Reisner, 1971; Macdonald, 2001; Ganz, 2004; Lewisohn, 2008; Castleman, 1982; Hager, 1984). It subsequently attempts to build an empirical framework for the idea of institutionalising this entertaining practice in the social settings of the higher education sector. It addresses the research question: To what extent does the institutionalisation of graffiti in the societal culture of higher education institutions enhance

public expression among members through their reflection on daily social and academic life? This question was answered through a semester-long experiment. In this experiment, graffiti was incorporated into the day-to-day social activity of a Saudi public university, by officially allocating certain walls on which members could legally write and draw whatever they wanted.

The article first discusses the rationale for conducting the research, followed by a literature review. It moves on to the methodology and data analysis, then going on to interpret and discuss the findings. The article closes with a number of concluding remarks and recommendations. What should be made clear at the beginning of this article is that this study is not essentially about the art of graffiti per se. Rather, it is about organisations, particularly how graffiti can be exploited for the benefit of organisations. Thus, throughout this article, the focus is placed not on the artistic aspect of graffiti but rather on the organisational component of graffiti. This study is fundamentally, then, a study of organisations.

### ***Rationale and Literature Review***

Mary Poppins in a song (1964) advised two children that, ‘in every job that must be done, there is an element of fun. You find the fun, and - SNAP - the job is a game.’ This statement promotes a way of approaching life. That is to say a viewpoint that many of the existing social problems are problems not necessarily because they are actually problems but because of the way in which they are approached socially. Such problems may stop being problems if they are socially approached in a constructive way. An extensive body of literature, as well as social campaigns, have railed against graffiti in the Saudi context. Newspapers, YouTube videos, Twitter users and web-based discussions have presented the practice of graffiti as a social problem (Al Atan, *Al Riyadh Newspaper*, 23 November 2006; Al Qamed, *Al Jazeera Magazine*, 26 June 2007; Abduljabar, *Okaz Newspaper*, 11 November 2014).

Yet one might wonder if graffiti is truly a problem, or is merely socially approached as a problem. Some might suggest that, if Saudi society could have an attitude adjustment in relation to graffiti, this would accordingly turn this issue from being a social phenomenon viewed negatively to a positive aspect of the society. That is, the assumption is that if the behaviour of graffiti was institutionalised in communal settings, it would thus become art rather than vandalism (McAuliffe and Iveson, 2011). The more specific assumption is that, if the institutionalisation of graffiti were integrated into the societal culture of higher education institutions, it would consequently promote among members a sense of public expression based on reflection on their day-to-day social and academic life.

This article is intended as a contribution to the realm of organisational behaviour, enhancing the idea of the ‘learning organisation’ (Senge, 1991). A learning organisation could be defined as an organisation that continuously transforms itself, through ongoing de-institutionalisation and re-institutionalisation of its existing practices and the institutionalisation of innovations, with the purpose of seeking improvement and facilitating the continuing professional development of its members (Pedler, *et al.*, 1997). Three different yet complementary kinds of studies have been done to help organisations grow into learning organisations. First are studies intended to help organisations with the assessment of their own existing social and professional activities and dynamics (e.g. Griffiths *et al.*, 2006). Other studies seek to provide organisations with innovative practices (e.g. Rogers, 2010). The third category

are those studies that attempt to assist organisations with the implementation of new practices (e.g. Coronado and Antony, 2002).

Thus, in the existing literature, the studies appear to be concerned with one of the following: assessment, innovation, or implementation. The current study is concerned with innovation, seeking to put forward a novel idea that might help organisations to better achieve their aim of being learning organisations. It concentrates on higher education institutions in particular, considering that such institutions are most in need of becoming learning organisations. That is, although such institutions are habitually recognised to be superior at generating knowledge, they, however, do not know how to learn from what they generate (Hammond, *et al.*, 1992; Cornford and Pollock, 2003). Thus, ‘the higher education sector needs to learn about learning’ (Al Lily, 2012: 30).

### **Data Collection**

The authors of the article are Saudi faculty members at the department of educational technology at a Saudi public university. They first conducted a pilot study in 2013. In this study, a 100cmx400cm paper board hung on a wall in the male-only wing of the department. Next to the paper board was written: ‘Write or draw on this board whatever you like.’ The main aims of conducting such a pilot study were to check the social acceptability of such an idea and to see the reaction of the leadership to such a political initiative. In less than a month, the paper board was covered with writings and drawings. In addition, the leadership reported liking this idea. The authors saw these as signs of success and accordingly decided to conduct a main study to examine further the ramifications of this innovation.

In the main study, five 100cmx400cm white paper boards were hung for a whole semester in 2013. Next to the first board was written: ‘Write on the paper board any criticism or idea that can help improve the department.’ Next to the second board was written: ‘Write on the paper board a tweet you read/wrote and liked most.’ Next to the third one was written: ‘Draw whatever you want.’ Next to the fourth one was written: ‘Write the name of a piece of software you would recommend.’ Next to the fifth one was written: ‘Write any advertisement of yours, such as selling a car or phone.’ By the end of the semester, the paper boards were replete with writings and drawings, to the extent that one person wrote on one of the paper boards: ‘It is so full; I cannot write anything.’

After the semester, the authors collected all the writings and drawings on the paper boards and categorised them. Five categories emerged: love, sports, advice, disappointment and communication. The authors, furthermore, interviewed some of those passing by the paper boards, i.e. 19 employees and 32 students. In these interviews, the writings and drawings on the paper boards were discussed with the interviewees. Moreover, a group interview with 34 students was done to help the authors understand more the reasons why people wrote or drew what they wrote or drew on the paper boards. That is, having considered the theory of ‘explanatory attribution’ (Seligman, 1998), the authors asked some of the target audience to make judgements as to what the causes of a certain finding were. Thus, the audience were used as the source of interpretation and discussion of the data, under the assumption that they must know themselves best.

### Data Analysis

As mentioned above, the writings and drawings on the paper boards were grouped into five categories (see Table 1 below). These categories are love, sports, advice, disappointment and communication.

**Table 1: Categories of What Was Written/Drawn on the Paper Boards**

Category	Number of Sentences	Percentage
Love	90	24%
Sports	37	10%
Advice	59	16%
Disappointment	61	16%
Communication	126	34%
Total	373	100%

Source: Authors

For the category ‘Love,’ it was found that 24% of the sentences written on the paper boards were about adoration, affection and similar topics. Table 2 below lists these sentences.

**Table 2: Categories of What Was Written on the Paper Boards about Love**

No.	Sentence	Remark by the Authors
1.	How come you love me and you love somebody else? How come you have in your heart two people at the same time?	
2.	[drawn heart with the name of a male professor in it]	This was found six times on the paper boards
3.	This is the end after you hurt me. What do you want from me now?	
4.	I wish you could care about my love to you	
5.	I die for you. If I could, I would f**k you	
6.	I die for you, beautiful	
7.	I die for you	
8.	I always f**k	
9.	The heat of my heart has burned me	
10.	I love you so much	
11.	Sheep	The term ‘sheep’ here is a nickname for someone who promises someone sex if s/he gets paid by him/her, but when s/he does get paid, s/he rejects sex
12.	So many sheep	The term ‘sheep’ here is a nickname for someone who promises someone sex if s/he gets paid by him/her, but when s/he

		does get paid, s/he rejects sex
13.	Love Moon	This was found six times on the paper boards
14.	Love	This was found six times on the paper boards
15.	I love you	This was found six times on the paper boards
16.	Do you love me?	
17.	I love you, [name of a male professor]	This was found twice on the paper boards
18.	I love you so much	
19.	I love you, [name of a woman]	
20.	I love you, [name of a man]	This was found three times on the paper boards
21.	I love you, [the name of the loved]	
22.	I love mam and dad	This was found twice on the paper boards
23.	[name of a male love]	This was found four times on the paper boards
24.	I wish abandonment was banned	
25.	Anyone who looks like you is a perfect moon. Your cheek is ruby. Your lap is a jewel	
26.	I am next to my lover	
27.	If crying makes the heat of the love cool, I swear I would make it flood with tears	
28.	To my love, my wife, I love you so much	This was written in a poetic way
29.	I am announcing that, in [name of a city], there is a heart that sings and suffers for her	
30.	Teach me how to forget you	
31.	May God keep [name of a man] for me [smiley face]	
32.	I walked by the house, and the house is abandoned. It is written on the door that the people left the house. I did my best and was nice to them	
33.	She is crazy but I love her	
34.	[a drawing of a the male sex organ]	
35.	When I saw him with you, I became in a bad mood	
36.	One can see how much one misses one from the eye. Tears are the memories left among lovers. I am tired of loving him. When they ask me if I love him, I reply: 'I love him'	
37.	Forgetting you is difficult	
38.	God will be with me if you disconnect with me	

39.	[a sexual drawing]	
40.	For your eyes	
41.	[a romantic nickname]	
42.	I am a plus man [a man who likes to make love] and want a minus man [a man who likes to be made love to]	A 'plus man' is a man who likes to make love. A 'minus man' is a man who likes to be made love to
43.	[a slang way of flirting used among the youth]	
44.	[a drawing of a female eye]	
45.	[ a drawing of a crying eye]	
46.	This beautiful man has killed me, [the name of this man]	
47.	My love, how were you last night?	
48.	The best friend of all time, [the name of the friend]	This was found twice on the paper boards
49.	History will never witness a man like [name of a man]	
50.	[name of a singer]	
51.	My eye misses you	
52.	[name of a professor] is a great guy	
53.	[a big heart, inside which it is written: 'I love you [name of a man]]	
54.	How can I blame you?	
55.	I miss you to the extent that I am crying	
56.	Your eyes are my world	
57.	It is difficult to hold my tears if you are sad	
58.	Everyone follows what concerns him and I follow you	
59.	Ah, I destroyed my life for your love	
60.	When are we going to meet, so I satisfy myself?	
61.	[a drawn heart]	This was found twice on the paper boards
62.	[a drawn heart with an alphabetical letter inside the heart]	This was found five on the paper boards
63.	[a drawn heart, and written inside it: 'I love you, Sarah']	
64.	[a drawing of an eye with tears]	
65.	[a drawing of an eye]	This was found twice on the paper boards
66.	[a drawing of a face]	This was found three times on the paper boards

Source: Authors

Concerning the category 'Sports', football players, football teams and the same were found to occupy 10% of the sentences on the paper boards. Table 3 below lists these sentences.

**Table 3: Categories of What Was Written on the Paper Boards about Sports**

Sentence	Remark by the Authors
[name of a football team]	This was found four times on the paper boards
God, let [name of a football team] win	This was found twice on the paper boards
[name of a football team] is my soul	
[name of a football team] is the leader	This was found twice on the paper boards
[name of a football team] is the royal leader	
[name of a football team] is the best	
[name of a football team] is the worst	
[name of a football team] is the winner	This was found 11 times on the paper boards
[name of a football team] is the pride	
[a slang phrase to show a sense of support for a certain football team]	This was found six times on the paper boards
[name of a football player]	
[name of a football team]	This was found three times on the paper boards
[the logo of a football team]	
[name of a football player] must go away	
[name of a football player] shackled to the stadium of Iran. He is a player, a trainer and manager	
[a drawn heart, inside which is the name of a football team]	

Source: Authors

About the category Advice, it was found that 16% of the sentences written on the paper boards were words of wisdom, guidance and the same. Table 4 below lists these sentences.

**Table 4: Categories of What Was Written on the Paper Boards about Advice**

No.	Sentence	Remark by the Authors
1.	The human being was born from sand and will be burnt in sand. Praying is better than sleeping	
2.	If you are a friend of prayers, you will pray.	
3.	Do not live with half-friends. Do not live a half-life	
4.	The best thing to be said in the morning is: ‘God, if I cannot continue with my path, please give me patience’	
5.	No to Sports Intolerance	This was found three times



on the paper boards		
6.	Watch your ideas because they will be actions one day, and these actions will decide the path of your life	
7.	Do not let [name of a professor] go, as he is the best	
8.	Say peace be upon Prophet Muhammed	This was found twice on the paper boards
9.	Saying peace be upon Prophet Muhammed is the best one can do	
10.	No to drugs	
11.	It is impossible to always be happy	
12.	No religion without scholarship	
13.	There are many students who become better than their teacher	
14.	One's life will end. No life is permanent	
15.	If you gets beaten from the back, this means you are at the front	
16.	People at [name of a department] are creative	
17.	Do good as life does not last forever	
18.	Success requires patience	
19.	Be nice to your mother before she is dead, which is what has happened to me	
20.	We blame the time, and the one to be blamed is us	
21.	Do not worry about what people think of you	
22.	Live with whoever you want; one day you will be away from one another	
23.	Let destinies go where they are going, so when you go to bed, go with a clear mind	
24.	Glory be to God	This was found seven times on the paper boards
25.	God is the greatest. Praise to God	This was found twice on the paper boards
26.	I seek the forgiveness of God and repent to Him	This was found six times on the paper boards
27.	I seek the forgiveness of God and repent to Him. God is the greatest	
28.	In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful	
29.	May God grant peace and honour on Muhammed and his family	This was found eight times on the paper boards
30.	There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of God	This was found six times on the paper boards
31.	[name of a religious historical figure] is the best	

Source: Authors

Regarding the category Disappointment, it was found that 16% of the sentences written on the paper boards were about dissatisfaction and frustration. Table 5 below provides a list of these sentences.

**Table 5: Categories of What Was Written on the Paper Boards about Disappointment**

No.	Sentence	Remark by the Authors
1.	God damn you all	This was found twice on the paper boards
2.	A university that makes me feel bad	
3.	God damn you and your university	
4.	Success = failure	
5.	Fear God and therefore be nice to us	
6.	What is the solution then?	
7.	[a slang sentence showing that one feels that professors were unfair and mean to students]	
8.	Be nice to us, professors	
9.	The exam was difficult	
10.	It is going to be okay	
11.	I am addicted to communication apps	
12.	Almost done – a semester to go and then I am released	
13.	You make it complicated although it is easy – why do not you allow students to change from one college to another?	
14.	[name of department] is a loser	This was found twice on the paper boards
15.	Shit at your mother	
16.	May God help me?	
17.	Grades are gone	
18.	Shut your mouth	
19.	I do not know how to use Twitter	
20.	The country needs us	
21.	[a slang phrase showing one to be miserable]	
22.	I have been scoffed	
23.	I swear that such professors do not deserve to teach in your universities. A professor does not know what he talks about and does not allow personal development inside the class. A professor who does not know his students except in the classroom. A professor who does not recognise office hours. I swear to God that he is the worst professor	
24.	F**k the security and the dean	

25.	I want to finish my studies	
26.	Damn the impossible	
27.	God is generous	
28.	[name of a professor], reduce the number of quizzes	
29.	Reduce the number of quizzes	
30.	Allow students to change professors	
31.	I wish that [name of a professor] comes back	
32.	Unblock Whasapp	
33.	Please change the way you dress, [name of a professor]	
34.	We want the monthly allowance to be increased and the exams to be easy	
35.	We want the monthly allowance to be increased	
36.	The monthly allowance is not enough	This was found four times on the paper boards
37.	The monthly allowance is not enough to meet the requirements of the university	
38.	Increase the monthly allowance	
39.	Damn you; increase the monthly allowance	
40.	We want money. We are broke	
41.	We want money	
42.	Give me money	
43.	No money. Please increase the allowance	
44.	[name of a professor], accept my late homework	
45.	I want someone to lend me money. I am broke, guys [sad face]	
46.	Please make the allowance 1000 riyals	
47.	Make the allowance 1000 riyals	
48.	There must be first aid kits at the college.	
49.	No no to controlling students by professors	
50.	Please do extracurricular activities	
51.	All the broken computers must be fixed	
52.	Please focus on the practical part of courses more than the theoretical part. Please do not make students feel that it is all about grades not about knowledge and learning	
53.	I have graduated. Please employ me	
54.	I wish professors were not tough	
55.	I wish for A+	
56.	No to [name of a professor]	

Source: Authors

As regards the category Communication, it was found that 34% of the sentences written on the paper boards were greetings, wishes and praise. Table 5 below lists these sentences.

**Table 6: Categories of What Was Written/Drawn on the Paper Boards about Communication**

No.	Sentence	Remark by the Authors
1.	Good morning	This was found twice on the paper boards
2.	Good evening	
3.	Hello	
4.	All best wishes to [name of a professor]	This was found twice on the paper boards
5.	Best greeting	
6.	What's up?	
7.	[the account of a communication app]	This was found seven times on the paper boards
8.	Wanted... [a car brand]	This was found three times on the paper boards
9.	In [the name of the movie], a relative of mine is an actor. God bless him	
10.	Falafel with Ketchup	
11.	Can you lend me money?	
12.	[a picture making fun of Sudanese people]	
13.	Don't write on the paper board!	
14.	I want to fart [a sad face]	
15.	Do you have one riyal?	
16.	I have no Twitter account. Ha-ha	
17.	I like pickle	
18.	The situation is good!	
19.	On the refrigerator	
20.	Samosa!	
21.	Second-hand curriculum for sale	
22.	[a funny drawing of a Sudanese person]	
23.	[a funny drawing of a man saying: 'Study hard']	
24.	[a funny drawing of a man who is presented as one of the college's departments]	
25.	Thank you for the pencils!	
26.	['I love you' in a Tunisian voice]	This was found twice on the paper boards
27.	May God bless the effort you have put in?	
28.	[name of a professor] is great – he is an example of change	
29.	[name of a professor] is the best	
30.	Thank you for the idea of paper boards, which allow the exchange of ideas between students and professors [drawing of a heart]	

31.	The idea of paper boards is excellent	
32.	(a thank-you message in a funny way)	
33.	The idea of paper boards is excellent, thank you	
34.	I die for [name of a professor]	
35.	[a thank-you letter to a professor]	This was found three times on the paper boards
36.	I would like to thank [name of a professor] for trying to bring western culture	
37.	I would like to thank [name of a professor] for dealing with students as friends	
38.	Thank you for the idea of paper boards	
39.	I see an awareness project by [name of a department]	
40.	Remember [name/nickname]	This was found 24 times on the paper boards
41.	Remember [name of a mailing list or online community]	This was found 21 times on the paper boards
42.	[a signature]	
43.	[the first letter of a name]	This was found four times on the paper boards
44.	You should make me your head of department, and I will show you how things best work	
45.	Niger	
46.	[his name] is a man	
47.	Who wrote on these paper boards are pathetic	
48.	[name of a tribe]	This was found six times on the paper boards
49.	[name of town]	This was found four times on the paper boards
50.	[a car brand]	
51.	The Knight of the Desert	
52.	Whoever says that I am not a man, he is not a man	
53.	[a name of a city] is the country of Islam and will stay forever	
54.	I have graduated	This was found three times on the paper boards
55.	I am about to graduate	
56.	I have a heart that is hard to the extent that it makes me look grey	
57.	Shoo, shoo; I see no one	
58.	I am the best	
59.	One religion, whether you are Sunni or Shia	

Source: Authors

It must be acknowledged that the inclusion of the raw data (inventory of postings) in the body of the paper may be seen by the reader to be a little unusual, but the authors thought that it would both make the paper more *fun* to read and anchor what otherwise would be a somewhat abstract discussion. The categorisation of postings in five themes has limitations. One is that some postings could be moved from one category to another. However, the authors placed postings in the category that was most suitable for them. This categorisation ignored the division between the original five boards, categorising the psychological motives across these boards. Ignoring the division between the original five boards was done because those who wrote on the boards ignored and went beyond, above and against this division.

### ***Interpretations and Discussions***

What became clear during the data analysis was that this innovation of institutionalised graffiti helped the authors to get closer to the inner minds of the participants and to look deeply into the local ways of thinking. For example, any reader of the paper boards would immediately know that 'sports' was a synonym for football and that this sport was dominant in the Saudi discourse, given the entire absence of any sports but football. Institutionalising graffiti and therefore enabling individuals to freely write or draw what they want could help us to grasp how people think in a particular culture and to capture the discourse in a certain context. Institutionalised graffiti could act as a methodological technique for data collection, capturing the thoughts of people on certain issues. It could also be an effective way to look closer into 'territorial' issues that could not be singled out and 'drilled' by other means of investigation. Ley and Cybriwsky (1974: 491) agree that 'wall graffiti can be indicators of attitudes, behavioural dispositions, and social processes in settings where direct measurement is difficult.'

The institutionalisation of graffiti in the university was found to have provided members with the opportunity to reflect on their academic and social life. Nonetheless, investigations showed that members at the university were found to have been already provided with opportunities to assess their academic and social experience. For example, students were sent a web-based survey at the end of each semester to evaluate the modules taken in that course. One limitation of this survey is that it is structured in a formal and quantitative way. Yet the formality and quantitativism of such a survey might be overcome if students were allowed to assess their courses through institutionalised graffiti. Another limitation in the web-based survey was that it was conducted only once and at the end of the course, whereas the institutionalisation of graffiti in the college could enable students to assess their courses throughout the semester. Thus, institutionalised graffiti here could help students continuously reflect on their academic and social life. An additional limitation in the online survey was that only students were asked to complete it, but institutionalised graffiti could be open to staff, support staff and even visitors, although it is of course not strictly possible to tell whose voice is being heard at any moment. In short, the institutionalisation of graffiti in a higher education institution could be said to foster a culture of critical reflection among higher education actors.

In this university, another method through which members could assess their social and academic life was also present. That is, there was a formally established web-based forum in which members could express themselves. However, a limitation of this online forum is that it is formally regulated. Institutionalised graffiti could overcome this limitation, acting as a 'freedom square' (in the words of an interviewee) involving hardly any explicit formal regulation.

Participation in the online forum required a planned action, i.e. to go online, to subscribe, to log in, to participate and eventually to log out. With institutionalised graffiti, however, one could simply 'write on the go' (an interviewee). Some interviewees thought that participation in institutionalised graffiti was thus better than participation in online forums, referring to their belief that 'humans tend to like to practice art [considering graffiti an art] and thus to get their hands dirty' (in the words of an interviewee). Another thing to mention is that the online forum was elaborate in the sense that it needed to be programmed, to be designed, to be run by a team and to run in line with the law of copyright. Institutionalised graffiti, however, enjoyed a high level of simplicity. Participants in the online forum further had to be 'anonymous', whereas participant in institutionalised graffiti could enjoy a high level of anonymity.

In addition to the survey and forum, a regular face-to-face meeting took place between the authorities and students for organisational assessment. However, once again a meeting happened just once a semester. This limitation could be overcome in institutionalised graffiti, which was available '24/7' (an interviewee). Such a meeting was not popular among students, and only a few attended it. Yet students clearly supported institutionalised graffiti, given that the paper boards were full of writings and drawings. Such a meeting entailed a hierarchical and formal atmosphere; institutionalised graffiti, on the other hand, could offer students a hierarchically flat environment and a formality-free atmosphere. Such a meeting required students to talk in front of others, thus discouraging shy and unconfident individuals from expressing themselves. However, institutionalised graffiti, as reported by some interviewees, enabled shy and unconfident people to express themselves anonymously. Moreover, the meeting was merely procedural, in the sense that it was something that the college was obligated to do every semester as a scheduled task. The institutionalised graffiti acted as an innovative idea, breaking up such a routinised approach to personal expression.

In the absence of a students' union, the allocated walls were used as a space where students could gather and act politically. These walls were found to have existed as 'the public sphere' (Habermas *et al.*, 1974), i.e. as an area in social life wherein people can gather to single out and debate public matters and therefore influence political action. The walls promoted a 'communicative' (Habermas, 1991) culture (in comparison to authoritarian, representational and other kinds of cultures). In a 'representational' culture, for example, one political party acts actively and seeks to 'represent' itself for its audience by overwhelming its subjects. In a communicative culture, however, there occurs a public space outside of the organised control of the authorities, where individuals can freely interchange knowledge and express views on public issues and matters through newspapers, journals, reading clubs, web-based forums and, as found in the present article, institutionalised graffiti walls.

After the experiment, links were made between the graffiti postings and the more formal evaluation mechanisms. In formal meetings (and informal gathering), the authors and other members of the university referred to the graffiti postings so as to support their points and to provide 'real-life' evidence for their arguments. Many university members and authorities saw the graffiti postings as a 'genuine', honest and trustworthy way of assessing the university and wider society. The authors have written short reports based on the graffiti postings and submitted them to the concerned authorities for consideration. These authorities were academic and moreover social outside the university. In this sense, the authors (i.e. the ones in charge of the



graffiti walls) acted as the 'spokespersons' for the graffiti to the formal processes. The experiment turned out to be an effective institutional feedback mechanism.

It could be said that the key reason for institutionalising the practice of graffiti in an organisation is to enable and promote a sense of expression and articulation among members and thus to help them be psychologically healthy. That said, there were nonetheless certain difficulties and challenges that affected the effectiveness of institutionalised graffiti. What follows discusses these difficulties.

Some passers-by reported writing or drawing on the paper boards not necessarily because they wanted to achieve something essential. Rather, they wanted to merely kill time between classes or 'tease' (an interviewee) those who wrote or drew on the paper boards. Some passers-by expressed frustration by using impolite wording. A passer-by, for example, wrote: 'F\*\*k the security and the dean.' This passer-by did express himself here but delivered no constructive criticism, indeed, he arguably used wording that did not fit with 'the academic atmosphere' (an interviewee) of the wider organisation. There was concern among some passers-by that the existence of offensive wording on the walls of an academic organisation could undermine the seriousness of the paper boards and the organisational life. The institutionalised graffiti also involved gossip and threats of revenge against certain figures. Two students, for example, said that, '[a name of department] is a loser.' Such messages could, on the one hand, be meant as political means of placing pressure on others and controlling society (see Ball, 1987). On the other hand, however, they could involve no political intentions at all and be done as an innocent way of passing the time (see Hope, 2007). Alternatively, they could cause unjustified mental distress through bullying.

It was difficult to control or even merely direct what passers-by should or should not write/draw on the paper boards. For instance, although one paper board was assigned only for writings/drawings that could help the development of the college, individuals mostly wrote or drew things irrelevant to the aim of the paper board. Indeed, they hardly wrote or drew anything that could help with the development of the organisation. They actually turned this paper board mainly into an 'arena of sports' (in the words of an interviewee), with many of the writings and drawings concerned with sports. The paper board was also utilised as a place for tribal fanaticism. Instead of using the paper board to make suggestions for the development of the College, passers-by chose to use it to meet psychological needs. For example, some used the paper board for drawing, thus overcoming their 'artistic hunger' (in the words of an interviewee), which was caused by the absence of art education after middle school. Those postings intended to meet psychological needs remind us of Maslow's hierarchy of basic human needs (Maslow, 1943) wherein basic needs must be met before higher order needs are possible. The current experiment shows that this level of need (e.g. love, human connectedness and identity) is always present, and therefore it must be given space and consideration in order for the wider organisation to develop.

As referred to above, some of the paper boards were hung to serve certain purposes, e.g. by asking passers-by to write or draw things that could help with the development of the department. Yet many of the writings and drawings expressed frustrated emotional relationships, adding no contribution to the development of the organisation. A student wrote: 'This is the end after you hurt me. What do you want from me now?' Although this can be useful for physiological analysis, it does not help with the development of the department. In other words,



the institutionalisation of graffiti in a higher education institution could result in writings and drawings that are not relevant to the development of the institution. One might suggest that institutionalised graffiti be directed, then, so as to ensure discipline; however, this direction means imposing control over what is written/drawn, thereby killing the 'soul of graffiti' (an interviewee), i.e. the spontaneity of expression. Besides, institutionalised graffiti seems to be a place wherein things are to be written/drawn in an unorganised and thus unregulated way. Ultimately, the 'art of graffiti is in its messiness' (an interviewee).

The paper boards were used to explore issues of conflict unrelated to the institution. For example, some passers-by used the paper boards to criticise others' favourite football teams and/or to defend their own. This added no value to the development of the organisation and might, moreover, take members away from their educational or professional life and make members hate one another. It seemed that, in such a collective, religious and 'angry society' (interviewee) as that of Saudi Arabia, any small ideological disagreement could lead to cruel and long debates. For example, it was found that if any one expressed on the paper board any small religious or moral disagreement, this would lead to long vitriol-filled arguments, thus taking the paper board further away from its aim of collecting students' views on how to develop the department. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, such conflict should not be controlled, regulated and thus prevented from taking place on the boards, as the essential idea behind graffiti is to allow individuals to write whatever they want.

In theory, institutionalised graffiti can be used to enable members to assess their organisation. Yet it was found that, in our experiment, passers-by used the paper boards to assess merely some aspects of the organisation while forgetting other components. In order to overcome this uncomprehensive assessment of the organisation, one might suggest the categorisation of the paper boards so as to ensure that the organisation is comprehensively assessed. Yet, again, the beauty of graffiti is that it cannot be organised according to strict rules. After all, it is quite difficult to direct what passers-by write or draw. That said, it must be acknowledged that the authors, as mentioned earlier, did attempt this categorisation, but it did not work out well.

It could be said that communities who describe themselves as religious will use any existing tool to promote a sense of guardianship. This is perhaps why passers-by sought through the paper boards to direct and advise one another. The paper boards were seen as tools through which social, moral and religious values could be promoted, delivered and reinforced. Thus, it could be said that the institutionalisation of graffiti in a religious society could make the paper boards less about self-expression and more about social orientation and about ideological representation and presentation. Although the institutionalisation of graffiti was meant to help people express themselves, it was in the end used to merely direct society and reinforce common socio-political views. Members of this society are accustomed to directing and to being directed by one another and indeed by social norms and regulations, more than to expressing themselves. Therefore, it is a normal sequence that the paper boards were used to continue this orientation. It appears that, when members of a religious society encounter any medium, they, perhaps even subconsciously, utilise it for direction of themselves rather than for expression of themselves. Thus, a challenge of institutionalised graffiti in a religious society is that citizens more likely exploit it for direction of themselves toward certain ideologies, rather than for self-expression.

It was also found that the paper boards promoted a sense of politicisation and de-politicisation in Saudi society. For example, a passer-by sought to politicise Saudi society through the promotion of the idea that the Sunni and Shia parties should come together and act as one. In his words, 'One religion, whether you are Sunni or Shia.' Yet this attempt at politicisation was deactivated (i.e. de-politicised) by another passer-by who erased this sentence. Indeed, one might say that it is essentially confrontational to erase the message. Some may wonder if erasing a statement with which one does not agree is de-politicisation or rather the opposite (i.e. re-politicisation). It is difficult to make a recommendation as to whether there should be ground rules that permit people to erase statements with which they do not agree. It would be useful in such an experiment to see more scope for self-expression, but erasing others' statements and comments goes in the other direction.

Some parts of the paper boards became political 'battlegrounds,' in the sense that individuals were replying to, criticising or even damaging the writings or drawings of one another. For instance, one drew something, on which another commented: 'The worst drawing ever.' One drew the sex organ of men, and another person re-shaped this drawing to make it look meaningless. Thus, a possible challenge (or advantage) when institutionalising graffiti in an organisation is that institutionalised graffiti may start and/or promote political activities and conflict within the organisation.

Communication is considered an essential feature of any collective community. It should therefore not come as a surprise that the 'communication' category contains the majority of what was written or drawn on the paper boards. In addition, Saudi society as a religious community particularly sees social communication and interdependence as religious and moral virtues. Thus, a challenge facing the institutionalisation of graffiti is that some of our participants wrote or drew something with no intention to convey any information, i.e. to convey anything that *informed*. They perhaps chose to write or draw on the paper boards merely for the sake of communication and to maintain the social and religious norms of social collectivism and interdependency. Nineteen passers-by merely inserted their signature on the boards with no text or drawings attached. A more clear example is that some students wrote on the boards such sentences as 'Good Morning,' 'Good Evening,' 'Hello' and 'Best Greeting.' What we could see here is that individuals in such a collective society were interested in merely registering their loyalty to the community, even if this registration was done in a low key. Put theoretically, when institutionalising the practice of graffiti in a collective and interdependent society, the challenge is that graffiti could be used to merely promote a sense of 'linking' (i.e. linking up society together), even if this linking delivers hardly any useful constructive information or no information at all.

## **Conclusion**

This article has shown fun to be an emerging field of social science and innovation research. It has been concerned with the promotion of innovation. It has established empirical evidence for the innovative idea of institutionalising graffiti in higher education institutions. It has stressed the importance of channelling socially uncomfortable forms of action and behaviour. It has been intended to add to theory development. It has shown how, in such a context as that of Saudi Arabia, having a formally-authorised and politically-peaceful space where there are no

constraints on personal expression could be a source of innovation. It has provided some credit to a recently developed theory (i.e. the Fun Theory), which calls for the institutionalisation of fun in social settings. It has pointed out that the academic and non-academic literature alike show many individuals to find the practice of graffiti to be fun and has built a theoretical and empirical framework for the idea of institutionalising graffiti in the higher education sector. It has addressed the research question: To what extent does the institutionalisation of graffiti in the societal culture of higher education institutions enhance public expression among members through their reflection on daily social and academic life? This question was answered by an experiment that stretched across a whole semester.

In this experiment, graffiti was integrated into the day-to-day social and academic activity of a Saudi public university, by officially identifying certain walls as spaces where members of the university could legally write and draw anything they wanted. The experiment appeared to be efficacious, with the allocated walls awash with writings and drawings. Passers-by, be they students, support staff, staff or even visitors, stopped by to check what was written or drawn on the allocated walls. A faculty member described the walls as ‘Mural Twitter.’ To another interviewee, the area assigned for institutionalised graffiti existed as a ‘street party or corridor party’ wherein passers-by stopped to contribute to or watch the event. The institutionalisation of graffiti at the university was found to have enabled and promoted a sense of expression and articulation among members. Thus, it could be suggested that the Fun Theory in general and the institutionalisation of graffiti in particular could hold value for organisations in general and for higher education institutions in particular.

There is a concern that the institutionalisation of graffiti in organisations (i.e. making something like the graffiti boards a *permanent* part of the institution) would make this facility simply part of the institutional woodwork which may be then taken for granted and become ineffective. Bearing this concern in mind, the question then would be how much the findings in the paper reflect the simple novelty of the experiment. Another concern is that universities may institutionalise graffiti merely to ‘show off’, showing their interest in democracy and self-expression, showing their engagement with innovation and enhancing their public reputation.

Although graffiti is a practice normally perceived as irrelevant or moreover hostile to the progress of humanity and society, this article has attempted to examine its relevance to the domain of institutional development. It has argued for the idea that fun could be a subject of serious discourse and enquiry and moreover a method for such enquiry. That being said, there is a certain contradiction integral to the approach. Graffiti by its nature is essentially concerning breaking norms and behaving outside comfort zones. But, the approach developed by the article involves a controlled trial within formally-sanctioned regulated contexts. Moreover, the idea of institutionalising graffiti is itself a contradiction in terms, entailing the two concepts of institutionalisation (i.e. about formality) and of graffiti (i.e. about *informality*). The attempt to connect these two words could be said to be a source of innovation.

Further research should be done to compare the proposed graffiti wall with electronic social media, particularly forms that involve ‘anonymous’ posting of comments. The graffiti wall trial is more anonymous, with no identification of those who have made the postings, unless there are surveillance cameras or observation of posters in the act. This is unlike electronic postings, which are retrievable, although not always straightforwardly. The innovation approach developed

in this study would benefit if other studies did the same experiment yet in other contexts and then compared their results with the results of the current study. This comparison would help ensure and examine the balance between an approach that represents innovation with universal application and innovation within a specific setting (i.e. the specific context of Saudi Arabia, or the specific context of academia).

The idea of institutionalising graffiti in organisations is, as the current study has shown, an innovation that could hold value to the sector of higher education. It triggers innovative ways of assessing the organisational activity of higher education and enables higher education actors to continuously be politically involved with their institution. Yet, the challenge is that the higher education sector is not good at fundamentally and freely changing its practices to embrace innovations. Higher education activity is known for being conventional in its organisational and academic dynamics, and hence the structure and infrastructure of the higher education system as a global concept act as ‘one of the most stable institutions in our civilization, surviving for a millennium through wars and plagues and technological change with its values and roles largely intact’ (Duderstadt *et al.*, 2002: 1). Because of this conventional nature, the university system has attempted to shape many innovations (e.g. information and communications technologies) to fit within its traditional activities instead of fundamentally reforming them so as to better exploit the potential of these innovations and to maximise organisational rationality, efficiency and progress.

It must be acknowledged that there appear to be efforts that have been put in to promote ‘innovations’ in higher education, but these innovations must not be called ‘innovations’ as they have been developed from *within* the constraints and limitations of the traditional university, seeking to fit innovative ways of thinking into existing concepts, arrangements and infrastructures (Cornford and Pollock, 2003). Hence, the integration of innovations into academia has not fundamentally affected the essential nature of its organisational and academic process. Although innovations appear to have been commonplace in higher education, they are developed in a way that serves as a complement to existing organisational and academic tools. Although higher education institutions appear to innovatively change their procedures and practices, this change is usually slow and consistent with the ‘spirit’ of the existing system, evolving alongside the ‘back-to-basics’ approach, so remaining somehow within conventional protocols (Al Lily, 2012).

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