

Graffiti as a Tool of Students' Communication

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(Received: 28-11-12 / Accepted: 11-1-13)

Abstract

The word graffiti is Italian in origin, and is actually the plural form of graffiti which refers to unofficial writings and drawings often crude, obscene and humorous in nature on the walls of public places. Graffiti has existed since ancient times, however little attention has been paid to its relevance among the students of higher institutions in Nigeria. This paper attempts to examine the underlying social and political messages and also look at the use of graffiti as a direct expression of students mind on various national and international issues. This is expected to throw more light into students' activities and behavior on campus. For our data we have collected graffiti on the walls of classrooms, male and female lavatories and other parts of the two campuses selected for this work.

Keywords: Graffiti, Sex, Institution, Lavatory, South west.

1.0 Introduction

Graffiti, the plural form of graffiti is derived from an Italian word which means 'scratched.' It is the name given to an indecent, often disgusting writings or sketches found on the walls and doors of public buildings and places. The meaning of graffiti is very appropriately captured in the definition offered by Encarta Dictionary (2009) [1] as drawings or words that are scratched, painted, or sprayed on walls or other surfaces in public places. Graffiti have existed since ancient times, with examples dating back to ancient Greece and the Roman empire, when graffiti were made by incising or cutting through stones or scratches on walls. For instance, the research on latrinalia, according to Kinsley dates back to early 20th century. In modern times, we are aware that graffiti as used in this paper refers to the unrefined and offensive writings commonly found on the walls and doors of public buildings in higher institutions of learning. The paper highlights this aspect of students' life on campus that had hitherto evaded much attention from researchers. Majority of the current work on graffiti focused more on writings and drawings found in public toilets, [2, 3, and 4,] and the differences between the male and the female graffiti, Bates and Martins, [5] and Cole [6]. in Nigeria Jimoh,S.A, [7] wrote on the 'Significance of Students Graffiti', while Agboola,T.[8] wrote on 'Graffiti as Feedback Tool'. Precisely this current paper focuses attention on students' graffiti found in public places in two university institutions in the south west of Nigeria referred to here as campus A and campus B. We try to examine the underline messages which serve as avenues for the expression of the students' restless minds on important subjects that are of concern to them. The paper intends to go further to bring out the real intentions and the benefits students derive from these writings. The graffiti used in this

paper were gathered from the students' hostels' lavatories and other areas where such writings were found on the two campuses. All these were later categorized according to subject matters and analyzed. The content of the graffiti gathered for this paper suggests that sexual matters, insults, politics, school and international matters are considered common to the students' graffiti found on the two campuses. The issue of graffiti in our higher institutions has become a source of worry to the school management and other concerned staffers who condemned what they considered as defacement and mutilation of public property. Most of the writings and sketches were considered foul and offensive and regarded as punishable offence. No wonder the authors conceal their identity.

2.0 Methodology

The data for this research was gathered from two tertiary institutions from the south west of the country. For ease of reference we have decided to identify the two institutions as campus A and campus B. With the aid of some reliable male and female students selected from the various hostels, graffiti found on the walls and doors of all the lavatories in the hostels, libraries, lecture rooms student eateries and other available campus buildings were compiled. On the whole a total number of 152 graffiti was compiled. This figure does not account for those graffiti that did not make a complete statement and for that reason failed to convey any meaning. The diagrams were captured with the aid of phone camera. All the graffiti were later classified into six categories according to the subject matter; we try to distinguish between the graffiti collected from females and those from their male counterpart. Since it was not quite easy to identify the writings and the sketches as coming from particular contributor, we decided to group them in line with their relevance to the subject matter. To further validate our findings, few students, twenty in number, from each of the institutions, were randomly selected and specifically interviewed on their views, and feelings about such crude and often provocative writings and sketches on the walls and doors of public places on the campuses. Their response further corroborates some of the findings reported in this research.

2.1 Results

A total number of 152 entries was made. This figure did not account for the total number of graffiti anticipated if the research had been conducted earlier. Many of them have been lost to the painting of the walls as a result of the renovation that was going on, in one of the institutions. In addition to this, some of the entries submitted {forty in number} were discarded due to the fact that they are dangling and for this reason conveyed no meaning. This is due to the fact that they have lost the original core statements from where they derived their meanings. Also an attempt to classify and relate the graffiti to the individual initiator was not possible, this is because the students were found not to follow any organized pattern in their contributions; it appears they were just making their own contributions when they felt so or probably fascinated by any of the graffiti they came across. A greater number of the entries submitted were from the boys. We gathered from the ladies interviewed that the ladies were not particularly as aggressive as boys in the writing of graffiti. They attributed some of the reasons to religion, lack of time and bravery to engage in what they regard as odious and repulsive task. On the whole, 112 entries, approximately 74% of the entire figure received, were from the boys. There was no known particular writing implement used for the writing or sketching of the graffiti. However, the commonest materials used for this purpose were markers and chalk. Others were, pencils, and ballpoint pen. It is also observed that the writings were either in good English language or pidgin language expressed in phrases or complete sentences. There was also the use of code mixing which, in some cases betrayed the tribe of the writer. For ease of analysis, all the data received were classified along subject matters and the sex of the contributors indicated. Those that were so few to be categorized under the major headings were collectively classified as 'others.' At the end we came out with the following five major categories:

- a) Politics and national issues
- b) Religious issues
- c) Institution and staff issues
- d) Sex and sexual issues
- e) Other matters

Table 1: Graffiti classified along the subject matters and sex of the contributors

Subject matter	Male frequency	Female frequency	Total
a) politics and national issues	15	05	20
b) religious issues	10	06	16
c) institution and staff	30	13	43
d) sex and sexual issues	52	15	67
e) other matters	05	01	06
Total	112	40	152

Table 1 above shows a brief summary of the classifications of the students' graffiti according to subject matter and their frequencies of occurrence between male and female contributors. This method of classification has the shortcoming of not capturing those that reflect multiple categories as a member of the same class. However we eventually settle for headings that accommodate as far as possible all the contents reflected under the classification. Of the total number of 152 graffiti received, the male had the higher figure of 112, representing 73.68% of the total number received. Their female counterpart submitted 40 accounting for 26.32% of the total figure and representing 35.72% of the male figure. These figures show that the male students were more active than the female in this exercise. Out of the total number of 152 graffiti received, the boys had 52 on sex and sexual issues. This represents more than 34% of the total figure received and over 46% of the total male figure of 112. The females had 15 which accounts for 9.9% of the total figure and 37.5% of the female total. Looking closely at the table we found that sex and sexual issues attracted the students' attention more than other matters. It is equally interesting to note that both male and female students were favorably disposed towards this subject matter. Next to this in the frequency of occurrence, were the institution and staff matters. On this, the boys accounted for 30 representing 19.74% of the total figure and 26.79% of the male total figure. The female posted just 13 graffiti on this subject. This represents 8.6% of the total figure and 32.5% of the female total. It is observed that this subject matter ranked next in the students' scale of preference to the sexual matters. It is important to note too that this position is shared by both boys and girls. The third one to be considered are the ones on political issues. The frequency of male graffiti on this subject matter was 15; this represents 9.9% of the total figure and 13.4% of male total. For the female, 5 graffiti were recorded on this subject matter. This accounts for over 3% of the overall figure and 12.5% of the female total. While this was the third in the frequency of occurrence of the subject matters in order of preference for the male students, this subject matter stands as the fourth in the females' preference order. Next to this is the subject matter of religion. On this, the male recorded a total of 10 graffiti, representing 6.6% of the total figure and 8.9% of male total. The female provided 6 graffiti accounting for more than 3.9% of the total figure and 15% of the female total. This result shows that students in the two institutions were not favorably disposed to religious matters. Finally, we look at the category labeled 'other matters,' here, the male recorded 5, which accounts for more than 3% of the total figure and 4.5% of the male total. The female provided just 1 graffiti under this category. This represents 0.66% of the total figure and 2.5% of the female total. The category regarded as other matters received the least figure from both male and female students. What this means

therefore is that students enjoy and pay more attention to matters that amuse, stimulate and promote their socio interest than any other matters. We try to replicate some of the graffiti gathered for this paper as samples to enhance a better understanding of the paper. The sketches and drawings are not replicated here because they were not used in the paper.

2.1.1 Politics and National Issues

- 1a) It is now time to introduce corruption into the school curriculum (m)
- 1b) Go and tell our legislooters (legislators) in Abuja (m)
- 2a) This Jonathan come get shoe now he no remember his former colleagues (m)
- 2b) Don't worry, he still de under patience (m)
- 3a) GEJ is a donkey providing free rides to corruption and ineptitude (m)
- 3b) But Patience don become patient in Germany now o (m)
- 4) "Posted to the North for Youth Service Corp? Don't forget to say your last prayer."(m)

2.1.2 Religious Issues

- 1a) Brethren, heaven is real. (f)
- 1b) How do you know professor-pastor preacher?(f)
- 1c) He received the message according to St. crook (m)
- 2a) Sinners will not go unpunished (f)
- 2b) Thank God I am not a sinner (m)
- 2c) Error! We all inherited sin courtesy of Rom. 15:12-22 and 1Cor. 15: 22-45(m)

2.1.3 Institution and Staff Matters

- 1a) If heaven should fall now it will fall on all of you in this buka (m)
- 2a) All those who defaced this beautiful wall shall end up in Hell Fire. (f)
- 2b) You have just succeeded in sentencing yourself into hell fire. (f)
- 2c) Only idiots can attempt to correct blunders through their own blunders.(f)
- 3a) Breaking news: professor x has now retired. (m)
- 3b) A good news to all the carryover students. (m)
- 3c) The bad news is that he has been offered a contract appointment.(m)
- 4a) I hear say Dr. x don contact HIV. (m)
- 4b) Dat na bad news for Bukky in room x and Chioma in room xx.(m)

5a) I will marry Kenny because she is a combination of beauty and brain (m)

5b) Kenny will NEVER marry you because are a combination of ugliness and emptiness (m)

2.1.4 Sex and Sexual Issues:

1a) Lola is the third girlfriend to jilt me sake of my big rod. Please advise me.

1b) Simple Go for plastic surgery.

1c) Na where he go get the money. I beg no mind am, check Ngozi in room 5, and a trial will convince you because she can handle all manner of rods.

1d) Don't forget to wear your rain coat to forestall all manner of AIDS.

1e) Dirty minds u better be born again (m)

2a) Keep off! ECCO 302 is now in patrol of Rosaline's territorial integrity (m)

2b) Who no go surrender after two carryovers (m)

3a) Vacancy: a beautiful girl who can supply me 5 times a day. Apply immediately (m)

3b) Don't forget to prepare your will. (m)

4a) I am 19 and still a virgin (f)

4b) Old school, u have been missing a lot (f)

4c) You must be talking from experience, please flash me your number.(m)

4d) Better face your studies Mr. gigolo (m)

2.1.5 Other Matters

1a) Get high to go high (m)

1b) Don't mind him, you only go down when you get high (m)

2a) The fear of boko haram is the beginning of wisdom in Nigeria (m)

2b) Each time book haram strikes, Jonathan is on admission (m)

3a) Do you know brilliant students don't have girlfriends? (m)

3b) I don't know o! So brilliant students are reverend fathers(m)

3c) Don't mind him, I am brilliant and I have girl friendsssss (friends)(m)

4a) Do you have girls' hostel? No, what we have is childless mothers' hostel (m)

4b) You are right, it is adjacent to the baby-less fathers' hostel (f)

- 5a) Breaking news! Obama has killed Osama(m)
- 5b) Rest in peace 9/11(m)
- 6a) Messi or Ronaldo who is better?(m)
- 6b) Messi of course.(m)
- 6c) Ronaldo is all rounder, he uses the two legs. Messi is limited to one leg.(m)
- 6d) Continue to waste your time. The two are world stars and millionaires.(m)
- 7) A friend of my enemy is my enemy and an enemy of my friend is my friend.(m)

3.0 Data Analysis and Discussion on Findings

3.1 Political and National Issues

The total graffiti submitted under political issues was 20. The content of information provided under this category suggests that no national affair escapes the students' attention. Although it was not easy to determine whether the comments were designed to represent genuine agitations from the students or simply their usual way of trivializing almost any issue for their own amusement, it was clear that the students were alive to current national issues. With comments such as:

4) *“Posted to the North for Youth Service Corp? Don't forget to say your last prayer.”(m)*

This comment is a hint at the present insecurity created by the constant bomb attack by suicide bombers from a Northern Muslim sect popularly referred to as Boko Haram. This group has reduced the northern part of the country to a battle front daily terrorizing, killing and maiming innocent Nigerian citizens and destroying valuable properties. A large amount of graffiti on political issues took the form of satirical attacks on government policies and government institutions.

The first thing to note is that all the political comments are made by male students, a likely indication that the female students are not bothered about the political situations around them. This is probably due to the fact that females are, by nature taciturn while their male counterparts are characteristically garrulous, confrontational and restless. The comment in 1(a):

1a) *“It is now time to introduce corruption into the school curriculum” (m)*

is a tacit reference to the alarming rate of corruption in Nigerian. The statement is made to point out the fact that corruption has become an open affair and by calling for its inclusion in the school curriculum, the students indirectly campaigns for its legalization. The comment received a reply from an unknown male student in 1(b):

1b) *“Go and tell our legislooters (legislators) in Abuja” (m)*

This response demonstrates a complete alignment with 1a with a more scathing remark. The word legislator was deliberately written as “legislooters” to drive home his total condemnation for the Nigerian legislators who legislate to enrich themselves to the detriment of the entire ‘common people’ of this country. His effort is vividly captured in the spelling derived from bending the normal spelling rules to achieve a satiric effect.

The graffiti in 2(a):

2a) *“This Jonathan come get shoe now he no remember his former shoeless colleagues” (m)*

derived its origin from President Jonathan’s frequently expressed statement in appreciation of his present high office to highlight his very poor background. The writer was probably trying to express his disappointment over the president’s bellow expectation performance. What we have in 2(b):

2b) *“Don’t worry, he still de under patience.” (m)*

represents a reply from another student who shared the view expressed in 2(a). He did not only bring in Jonathan for condemnation he also cast aspersions on his wife.

3.2 Religious Issues

Commentary on religious graffiti deals with a wide range of topics from biblical to terrestrial issues. Religious matters ranked number four in the students’ scale of preference. On the whole, there were a total of 16 graffiti. Out of this, 10 were submitted by male and 6 by female. The following examples are selected for our analysis:

There is no doubt that the writers of these commentaries were quite conversant with the bible.

1a) *Brethren, heaven is real.(f)*

2a) *Sinners shall not go unpunished (f)*

While 1a and 2(a) could be regarded as a genuine admonition, it is clear that other conversations that follow were to create fun and amusement for the writers and others who will read them.

1b) *How do you know professor-pastor preacher?(f)*

The word ‘professor’ in 1(b) appears to remind 1(a) that he was in an academic environment and not in the church. In 1(c):

1c) *He received the message according to St. crook(m)*

The writer in 1(a) has been condemned as a fake as seen in the use of St. crook for St. Luke. Example in 2(a) was a reminder of the punishment awaiting sinners. However the seriousness of the message was trivialized by the comments of other contributors. While 2(b) appears to understand the basics of the message through his comment of self justification,

2b) *Thank God I am not a sinner (m)*

2(c) calls him to order, citing bible verses to remind him that all human beings are sinners.

2c) *We all inherited sin courtesy of Rom. 15:12-22 and 1Cor. 15: 22-45(m)*

3.3 The Institution and Staff

Graffiti on institution and staff cover a wide range of subjects ranging from academics to insults. A close look at the contents reveals that even when the students pretend not to be aware of the goings on around them, they actually monitor all the underground activities of the lecturers, the management and even other students.

For instance the news of a lecturer infected with HIV provided under 4(a) and 4(b), is expected to be a subject of sympathy.

4a) I hear say Dr. x don contact HIV. (m)

4b) Dat na bad news for Bukky in room x and Chioma in room xx.(m)

However, it turned out to be an avenue of amusement and also provided an opportunity for the students to real out all the Dr,'s secret love affairs. We also get to know through item 1a that the students eat at buka.

1a) If heaven should fall now it will fall on all of you in this buka (m)

The contribution of female under this section offers another opportunity of amusement. For instance, 2(a):

2a) All those who defaced this beautiful wall shall end up in Hell Fire. (f)

was trying to correct what she genuinely considered an act of vandalism. Of course, she did not hesitate to pronounce her judgment which is hell fire. What we have in 2(b) and (c):

2b) You have just succeeded in sentencing yourself into hell fire. (f)

2c) Only idiots can correct blunders through their own blunders.(f)

appears to be a just reprisal for the same crime she was out to condemn.

3.4 Sex and Sexual Matters

It is of interest to note that all the items on sex and sexual matters were collected from the lavatories of the two institutions. One other point of interest is that this is the graffiti with the highest frequency. A total number of 67 were recorded giving 52 to males and 15 to females. Some of the writings and drawings were found to be obscene and offensive to conventional standard of decency. Here are few examples for our analysis:

1a) Lola is the third girlfriend to jilt me sake of my big rod. Please advise me.

it is inferred that the writer had had sexual intercourse with all the girls. It is further understood that his girls left him because they could not cope with him. His source of worry now is how to get other girls that will satisfy his sexual appetite. However, whether his lamentation was genuine or not, comments from other writers trivialized the whole matter. Their comments introduced different dimensions into the subject. The idea of plastic surgery in 1(b):

1b.) Simple. Go for plastic surgery.

reminds us of the medical surgeons.

1(c), after considering the financial implications involved in the advice offered in 1(b) offered what he considered a better option:

1c). Na where he go get the money. I beg no mind am, check Ngozi in room 5, and a trial will surely convince you because she can handle all manner of rods.

1(d) appears to reinforce the campaign against aid.

1d). Don't forget to wear your rain coat to forestall all manner of aids.

1e introduced a religious dimension by advising them to accept Jesus.

1e). Dirty minds u better be born again (m)

A close look at other graffiti under this subject matter reveals some of the secret affairs between lectures and students and between one student and another.

2a) Keep off! ECCO 302 is now in patrol of Rosaline's territorial integrity (m)

2b) Who no go surrender after two carryovers (m)

We also have the warning against indiscriminate sexual intercourse in 3(a) and 3(b)

3a) Vacancy: a beautiful girl who can supply me 5 times a day. Apply immediately (m)

3b) Don't forget to prepare your will. (m)

There were those that brought into ridicule the well cherished virginity among young ladies, as seen in 4(a) and(b)

4a) I am 19 and still a virgin (f)

4b) Old school, u have been missing a lot (f)

3.5 Other Matters

The category classified as other matters covers a wide range of both national and International issues and various subject matters, from drug to world figures such as Barack Obama and Osama bin Laden. What we have on drug:

1a) Get high to go high (m)

appears to encourage the taking of drugs. However, this position was roundly condemned and denied in 1(b).

1b) Don't mind him, you only go down when you get high (m)

The terrible issue of Boko Haram was revealed in 2(a) and (b).

2a) The fear of Boko Haram is the beginning of wisdom in Nigeria(m)

2b) Each time Boko Haram strikes, Jonathan is on admission (m)

These comments brought to fore the unpleasant effects of the activities of these suicide bombers on the nation. They also revealed the helplessness of the government in handling the situation. The scathing condemnation of girls in 4(a) received an appropriate retaliation from a female in 4 (b).

4a) Do you have girls' hostel? No, what we have is baby-less mothers' hostel (m)

4b) You are right, it is adjacent to the baby-less fathers' hostel (f)

5(a) To 6(d) discussed international affairs:

The death of Osama and his killer, as well as the reason for his death was made known to us through breaking news in 5(a) and (b)

5a) Breaking news! Obama has killed Osama(m)

5b) Rest in peace 9/11(m)

The question in 6(a) sought to know who is better between two prominent world footballers.

6a) Messi or Ronaldo, who is better?(m)

However, 6 (d) saw the question as unnecessary as he does not see any pushover between the two of them.

6d) Continue to waste your time. The two are world stars and millionaires(m).

We have an insight into the linguistic knowledge of the students in their use of words.

7) A friend of my enemy is my enemy and an enemy of my friend is my friend.(m)

4.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

The present paper has not attempted an exhaustive account of items involved in the phenomenon of students' use of graffiti on the campus. It has only provided what can be regarded as a tentative explanation that could serve as basis for further investigation. In Nigeria, for instance, there is the need to explore other aspects such as the trend in writing style, the linguistic studies of discourse or even the sentence patterns involved in the writing of graffiti. We have tried to take a look at certain activities through which students unburden their mind on various matters that are of interest to them. Although there are several channels through which students can express their opinions on any matter of interest, there also exist other unofficial channels which students have created to convey their feelings. One of these is the use of graffiti. Our data for this work were collected from two universities from the south west zone of Nigeria. The institutions were labeled A and B. The quantitative analysis indicates that sexual matters and comments about religion, politics, sports, insults and international matters are considered common to the graffiti collected from the two schools. Apart from the commonalities in the subject matter, the writing style also shares the same trend. Almost all the graffiti found in the two institutions were expressed in simple sentences. The only use of phrase; *Messi of course.(m)*, is found in campus A under other matters. We also found that the writings demonstrated good sense of orthography and grammar. However, there were occasional deliberate use of unorthodox or deviant forms of language to foreground attention and meaning. Examples such as: 'legisloters' for legislators, 'St. Crook' for St. Look and 'friendsssss' for friends to emphasize and indicate 'so many.' We also have the use of words such as: 'professor pastor preacher', 'beauty and brain' to achieve the effect of alliteration. The writers in the two institutions adopt the use of English language, pidgin, or code mixing in expressing their message. What we also found common to the two schools was the high occurrence of sexual matters. This position is understandable if we consider the fact that young people all over the world are characteristically sexually active. Feyisetan and Robly [9], lend credence to this claim when they confirm a high rate of premarital activity among Nigerian adolescents. We also have on record the position of Rene, [10] and Orubuloye, et. al, [11] postulating the erosion of tradition of African values and the Nigerian deteriorating socio-economic condition as explanation for this high rate. The high occurrence of male graffiti over their female counterpart is found in the two schools. This indicates that the boys are more active in this exercise than the girls.

On the basis of the content and the tone of the graffiti sampled, this paper concludes that the students from the two institutions engage in this act as a means of expressing their mind on major issues bothering them. It may as well be that the students were not provided freedom and enough avenues for making their views known. In this way graffiti serve as mass media through which the students reach out to their fellow colleagues and other outsiders who visit the institutions regularly. They also serve as a positive therapeutic effect on the students who

are daily occupied with tedious academic activities and other diverse arduous campus matters. In view of the fact that these sketches and writings are made on public properties without the authority's consent, coupled with the fact that they constitute nuisance in defacing and vandalizing the walls, doors, tables and other objects where they appear, the writings and sketches are considered a punishable crime. No wonder the writers are always faceless. In the light of our observations in this paper, we provide the following recommendations:

The institutions should provide notice boards on which students are free to express their mind on any matter of concern at various strategic locations. Various student magazines should be encouraged to serve as the students' means of communication. A body comprising of representatives of the management and the students should be set up to take students complaints and suggestions on all matters.

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