

“Hear Ye All, These Walls Really Talk!” Exploring the Communicative Functions of College Students’ Graffiti on School Campus Wall

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ABSTRACT. Although there have been extensive studies on graffiti in various disciplines and contexts worldwide, only a few contemporary studies are conducted on the classroom walls in higher education milieus. As such, this study explored the communicative functions of students’ graffiti found on the classroom walls of a Philippine state college. Employing Content Analysis (CA) as a method, the results revealed that graffiti was utilized by college students as their unique means of communicating their personal thoughts and feelings, as well as their antagonistic attitudes toward other individuals, groups, and even institutions which they could not express openly in public. Graffiti was also used by the college students to seek glorification among themselves, to show their intelligence or wit, and to express resentments or hatred, especially against the members of the LGBTQIA+ society. Indeed, graffiti performed a multiplicity of communicative functions, having anonymity as a very powerful and useful tool used by college students not only in concealing their identities and advancing their causes and rights as students but also in effectively protecting themselves from the harsh consequences which they might face when caught doing this highly forbidden act within the school premises.

Keywords: graffiti, communicative functions, content analysis, campus walls

A. INTRODUCTION

Language is man’s greatest and most vital invention. With language, man’s ultimate concern to express his thoughts and feelings has become easier and more successful. Language can be channeled in many ways, and one of these is graffiti. Graffiti comes from the Italian word "graffito," which refers to scribbling or images on the surfaces of buildings, parks, and restrooms, frequently with political or sexual themes, propositions, or obscene languages (Chiluwa, 2008).

For a long time, graffiti has been an important cultural and linguistic phenomenon (Blommaert, 2016). It is a map of a genuine portrayal of reality and an evolutionary tool for people to reflect on their cultural identities through artistic means (Sheivandi, Taghinezhad, Alishavandi, & Ranjbar, 2015). Mwangi (2012) argues that graffiti as a language entity incorporates both form and content and uses discourse to represent something other than itself.

Graffiti serves as a rallying force for discordant social and political communication because protest discourse is not guaranteed in all sociocultural and political environments (Obeng, 2000, as cited in Farnia, 2014). It is a second diary book that symbolizes people’s voices in public and private spaces, expressing their fury, ideas, love declarations, political announcements, and outcries, among other things (Farina, 2014; Raymonda, 2008). Graffiti is not only considered a

valuable source of knowledge, but also as a predictor of future intentions and acts (Zakareviciute, 2014). Furthermore, it is a long-established means of social communication in many countries (Peiris & Jayantha, 2015; Kariuki, Yieke, & Ndoro, 2016).

Scholars from all over the world have looked into graffiti. Ta'amneh (2021) reveals that students' graffiti transmits theological, political, and emotional sentiments in entirety despite its use of the plain language. While performing personally, socially, nationally, religiously, politically, and satirically, Al-Khawaldeh, Khawaldeh, Bani-Khair, and Al-Khawaldeh (2017) discover that students' graffiti language features are simplicity and variance. Further, El-Nashar and Nayef (2016) provide a list of common linguistic characteristics in Egyptian car graffiti, the majority of which contains religious references.

Mwangi (2012) finds out that students' graffiti use comedy, symbolism, irony, short forms, acronyms, and abbreviations, among other things. Al-Haj Eid (2008) discover that alliteration and rhyming are the prominent language techniques in students' graffiti. Sheivandi, Taghinezhad, Alishavandi, and Ranjbar (2015) reveal that graffiti have unusual language traits such as consonant change, proverbial alteration, parallel syntax, conditional patterns, and puns.

Dombrowski (2011) classifies graffiti found in university libraries into forms of advice, class, despair, drugs, and sex. Meanwhile, Sad and Kutlu (2009) categorize students' graffiti as to themes such as belongingness, romance, humor, sex, politics, and religion. Olaluwoye and Ogungbemi (2019) reveal that gay students, in particular, utilize toilet graffiti in order to connect with other gay students and sexual partners.

Grffiti is also a frequent phenomenon in Philippine universities and colleges. However, this graffiti, which addresses important issues impacting both the school and the community, is sometimes overlooked. Writing on walls is even considered a crime, and people caught doing so are frequently prosecuted. Even though numerous studies on campus graffiti have been undertaken in various contexts, there is a significant research gap in a Philippine higher education context as only very few researchers have attempted to investigate it. Thus, this qualitative study explored the communicative functions of the students' graffiti written in an autonomous campus of the lone state college in Zamboanga del Sur, Mindanao, Philippines.

B. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Grffiti is a linguistic phenomenon that uses discourse (any segment of signs greater than a sentence) and sign (anything that stands for something other than itself) to combine shape and substance. Consequently, acknowledging and investigating the significance of graffiti as medium is vital, the nature and impact of the message/s being communicated, and human

verbal expressions. Gross (2005) claims that simply deciphering the texts without first identifying graffiti as a medium is insufficient to understand graffiti as a means of communication.

In a study on graffiti in Kenyan colleges, Yieke (2003) argues that individuals in authority should never overlook graffiti if they wish to know the students' opinions and needs. She goes on to say that, if properly channeled, graffiti can provide a place for students (who are a minority) to express themselves on a wide range of topics or issues while also serving as an expression of academic independence and ongoing intellectualism.

Nwoye (1993) reveals that groups who have been denied or disallowed channels of public expression seek other outlets, with graffiti on public walls being a popular choice; she goes on to name students as one of these groups in most regions of the world. The fact that students write graffiti at a location that promotes anonymity recognizes the vulnerability of the face (Goffman, 1967). Graffiti, like other forms of avoidance speech, insulates individuals from facing danger.

Mc Cormick (2003) states that graffiti provides possibilities to break away from rigidity and create a space for more organic conversation by enabling unconstrained and unfiltered discussions that are frequently unusual in scientific writing. Students are able to assert aggressive identities and oppose dehumanization since they are no longer bound by academic terminology.

Gadsby (1995) argues that it is understandable why graffiti is such a desirable mode of communication in the face of resource and power imbalances. Graffiti has been able to reflect the essence of the society that generated them by sharing people's ideas and values about critical social issues. However, these benefits may lead some people to believe that graffiti is used to communicate or reinforce unfavorable stereotypes about other groups (Gadsby 1995).

According to Bartolomeo (2001), while the use of publicly owned space is unquestionably deviant, the use of private areas for public consumption, such as graffiti, will also be regarded as a deviant by the general public. When the public disapproves of how an individual uses private space, the space becomes public. As a result, society frequently determines both public and private aspects, leaving little possibility for individual self-expression.

Furthermore, Gross (1997) concludes that the anonymity and accessibility provided by graffiti can be equally helpful to a student venting in the toilet stall about school rules or tuition rises as it can to a student venting in the bathroom stall about lousy administration. Graffiti is a form of self-expression and self-disclosure, yet it keeps the writer's anonymity. As such, anonymity provides one's privacy.

C. METHODOLOGY

This study employed the qualitative method, specifically Content Analysis (CA), in analyzing the communicative functions of college students' graffiti. Content Analysis is a systematic research method for analyzing and making inferences from a text and other forms of qualitative information (interview data, focus groups, survey questions, documents, videos, etc.) It also uses a variety of analytic strategies to categorize, compare, and contrast a corpus of data (Hawkins, 2013).

This study was undertaken in Dumingag Campus, one of the organic campuses of the Josefina H. Cerilles State College, the lone state college in Zamboanga del Sur, Mindanao, Philippines.

The study collected and examined 164 students' graffiti found on the walls of classrooms, offices, halls, and restrooms of an autonomous campus of a Philippine public higher education institution. When conducting ocular inspections within the school grounds, the researcher used a mobile phone camera, notebook, and pencil. The cell phone camera was used to photograph graffiti writings at their original locations, while a notebook and pencil were used to record notes. These graffiti were photographed in order to ensure the validity of the corpora. Furthermore, only understandable writings were taken into account. Drawings, drawings, caricatures, and other illustrations were not permitted.

Content Analysis was employed in analyzing the communicative functions of college students' graffiti. Communicative functions refer to the purpose for which speech or writing is used. These functions were first identified by Abdullah (2008) which were 1) Quoting religious expressions, 2) Expressing patriotism, 3) Expressing personal feelings, 4) Expressing sports loyalty, 5) Quoting lyrics, 6) Expressing expressions of wisdom, 7) Expressing proverbs, 8) Expressing human rights, 9) Quoting cartoon expressions, 10) Expressing humor, 11) Expressing political content, 12) Leaving memoirs, 13) Expressing resentment, 14) Expressing general insults, 15) Expressing challenge, 16) Recording cellphone numbers, 17) Expressing self-glorification, 18) Expressing sexual ideas, and 19) Expressing group glorification.

D. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Communicative Functions of College Students' Graffiti

This study endeavors to explain how college students' graffiti perform communicatively. Based on the table presented on the next page, the data vividly show that the students' graffiti perform varied communicative functions. Out of 19 identified functions, "Expressing personal feelings" ranks first with the highest frequency of 47; followed by "Expressing general insult,"

39; “Expressing self-glorification,” 12; “Expressing expressions of wisdom,” and “Expressing sexual ideas,” 11; “Expressing group glorification,” “Expressing challenge,” and “Expressing resentment,” 8; “Leaving memoirs,” “Quoting lyrics,” and “Expressing proverbs,” 4; “Expressing sports loyalty,” 3; “Expressing humor” and “Quoting religious expressions,” 2; and “Recording cellphone numbers,” 1. On the other hand, “Expressing human rights,” “Expressing patriotism,” “Expressing political content,” and “Quoting cartoon expressions” are not used by students in their graffiti.

Table 1
Frequency and distribution of students' graffiti according to communicative functions

Communicative functions	Frequency	Examples
Expressing personal feelings	47	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I live in this shit!!! • Galibog ko kai love pa nako siya.
Expressing general insult	39	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baho baba si Jeather. • Red Phoenix Gang, bayot ni.
Expressing self-glorification	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heidi Laride. Ang pinakagwapa sa Aurora. • Borikat ko! Pahibalo lang.
Expressing wisdom	11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't be afraid just BELIEVE.
Expressing sexual ideas	11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sex is truly gift of god. Amem!!!! • I love Porn.
Expressing group glorification	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • #CrimSamahangWalangIwanan • Camp Sawi
Expressing challenge	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't love to much because too much love will kill you.
Expressing resentment	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gikan sa China, Drug Lord. • Giatay mga Paasa.
Leaving memoirs	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • #BESTY13 • Taken na si Ser. Sakit kaayo. (By Secret Admirer)
Quoting lyrics	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paano bang magmahal? Kailangan bang masasaktan?
Expressing proverbs	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The only way is to be.”
Expressing sports loyalty	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bawi lang ta sa sunod SPURS!! • Kobe Bryant Idol!!!
Expressing humor	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I hate this guy, Joko. Joke ra daw ingon si Charey.
Quoting religious expressions	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic Information Before Leaving Earth (BIBLE)
Recording cell phone numbers	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NEED YOU TO TEXT HER – 0946655478 CRIM
Expressing human rights	0	
Expressing political content	0	
Quoting cartoon expressions	0	
Expressing patriotism	0	
Total	164	

Expressing personal feelings is the most dominant communicative function of students' graffiti. According to Abdullah (2008), personal feelings include sentiment, emotion, passion, and sensation. They also refer to joyful or painful consciousness experienced when someone is stirred to affection, hatred, etc. Based on data, students' graffiti are undeniably condensed with personal feelings. The students, as graffitiists, are fearless in expressing even the most sensitive feelings and opinions they have, which they cannot dare to express openly. Most graffiti talk about love and hatred toward other persons and subjects with the construction "I love X" or "I hate X," where X is usually a person, a course, or a thing. This is in congruence with Bates's (2014) study's findings that love, hatred, and anger as common themes conveyed in students' graffiti.

Expressing general insult is the second most dominant communicative function of students' graffiti. Insult is defined as an offensive word or expression that aims to hurt others. In this study, graffiti have been basically used to censure and defame other students, teachers, officials, organizations, and other schools. Others also use graffiti to express hate to others, especially to those LGBTQIA+ members. Such a situation clearly shows that students still do not accept them, as the society is predominantly conservative and considers it a taboo or a violation of the norms of the society. Examples of these graffiti are "*Babo baba si Jeather.*" "*Red Phoenix Gang, bayot ni.,*" and "*I LOVE U sa mga Pangit!!!*"

Another communicative function performed by students' graffiti is *Expressing self-glorification*. Hezaveh (2016) defines self-glorification as a strategy employed by people in creating a positive representation or image among themselves. Millar (2010) adds that graffiti presents a means for asserting identity, power, and visibility within a social context where writers have been previously ignored. Self-glorification is illustrated in graffiti like "*Heidi Laride. Ang pinakagwapa sa Aurora.*" and "*Cute qob? Dili?*"

Expressing wisdom and *sexual ideas* are the two communicative functions which obtained the same frequency of 11. As defined by Grossmann and Kung (2017), wisdom pertains to particular ideals and practices – a set of behavioral patterns and individual attitudes through which people usually define virtuous individuals and actions as well as strive to use such actions in their lives. As a distinct human feature, it refers to a philosophical, scientific, and cultural capacity to discern or judge things wisely and apply knowledge, experience, common sense, or insight. It includes norms, principles, and criteria that control deeds and decisions. Examples of graffiti illustrating this function are "*AYAW TUWAD BISAG ASA KAI D KAI IRO DAY!!! TAWO KA!!!*" and "*Don't be afraid just BELIEVE.*" Meanwhile, some graffiti express sexual ideas. The data show that expressing sexual ideas is one of the top five most common

communicative functions performed by graffiti. Examples are “*Sex is truly gift of god. Amem!!!!*” and “*I love PORN.*”

Expressing group glorification, challenge, and resentment follow next to expressing wisdom and sexual ideas as they all have the same frequency of 8. Graffiti is used by college students as a means of expressing their group identity and affiliation to a group. Examples are “*#CrimSamahangWalangIwanan*” and “*Camp Savi.*” Meanwhile, some graffiti *express challenge*. Here, students use them to convince others to believe and act on something. This function is in this graffiti-writing “*Don’t love too much because too much love will kill you.*”

Some of the students’ graffiti also *express resentment*. Resentment is a hostile emotion qualified by the perception of having suffered a wrong. It is a legitimate anger (Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2017). They indicate that students find graffiti as an outlet to express their complaints and anger toward people or issues afflicting them. They may be used to express denial and disapproval over issues resulting from socio-economic or emotionally disturbing experiences (Abdullah, 2008). Examples are “*Gikan sa China, Drug Lord*” and “*Giatay mga Paasa.*”

Leaving memoirs, quoting lyrics, and expressing sports loyalty come next, as they all receive the same frequency of 4. Memoirs are narratives, written from the authors’ perspectives about the important parts of their lives (Dukes, 2018). The results distinctly show that students are fond of inscribing about the important events and persons in their life – their past, the memories of friendships they made and broken, failed relationships, etc. They usually include their names, nicknames, and the date of memoir. This function can be exemplified in “*#BESTY13*” and “*Taken na si Ser. Sakit kaayo.*”

Aside from using memoirs, students also *quote lyrics* of their favorite songs. Music is undeniably a part of every Filipino student life. Songs that have been sung by local and international artists have gained immense popularity among students. In college, it is observable that most students are updated of new and popular songs, which then supports Abdullah’s (2008) finding that a great deal of attention has been devoted to common lyrics performed by celebrity singers and poets. A sizable number of students enjoy listening to lyrics immensely. In some instances, they enthusiastically use graffiti to share this national passion. Lyrics have also become the music of students. Some sing them orally; others resort to school property to express their lyrical sensation spontaneously by writing chunks of lines of their favorite lyrics on different school surfaces. This function can be shown in “*Paano bang magmahal? Kailangan bang masasaktan?*” and “*NOW ONLY FOR SURE I REMEMBER THE NAME BUT DON’T REMEMBER THE FEELINGS ANYMORE!*”

Meanwhile, *expressing proverbs*, is also shown in students' graffiti. As defined by Ehondor (2017), proverbs are used to convey commonly-accepted precepts, often considered as points of wisdom, and may be employed to summarize or finalize the presentation of a claim or thesis. They are also viewed as concise statements, in general use, expressing a shrewd perception about everyday life or a universally recognized truth. The data reveal that graffiti articulating this function gives advice on love, faith, and student life.

The next communicative function is *expressing sports loyalty*. It is a common fact that sport has a key role in developing and promoting values and beliefs. It is also undeniable that many Filipinos are sports fanatics. The data show that college students use graffiti to indicate their loyalty or fondness in a sports icon or group particularly in basketball – a game that is mostly loved by Filipinos. Examples of graffiti include “*Kobe Bryant Idol!!!!*” and “*Go Cavs!!!!*”

Next to sports loyalty are the two least used communicative functions which are *expressing humor* and *quoting religious expressions*. Humor is a psychological response that is described by the positive emotion of amusement, the appraisal that something is funny, and the tendency to laugh (Warren & McGraw, 2016). With many concerns and responsibilities, students still often find ways to relax and entertain themselves. Some of the students have resorted to writing their amusing personal stories, expressions, and jokes on the walls. An example is “*I hate this guy, Joke. Joke ra daw ingon si Charey.*”

Meanwhile, religion indicates a belief in a particular faith system, whereas spirituality involves the values, ideals, and virtues to which one is committed (Vitell, King, Howie, Toti, Albert, Hidalgo, & Yacout, 2016). It is also regarded as an integral part of people's entire traditions (Abdullah, 2008). It has a great role in shaping people's lives. The study shows that students use graffiti to express their religious beliefs. In the studies of Bates (2014) and Abdullah (2008), religion is one of the themes found in students' graffiti. Examples include “*Basic Information Before Leaving Earth (BIBLE)*” and “*R.I.P (Rest in Peace).*”

Furthermore, the results show that *recording cellphone numbers* is the communicative function least used. This function supports the well-known fact that almost all Filipino students have cell phones. With advancements in technology, cell phones have become a necessity for every individual to communicate with one another. The data show that students use graffiti to look for text mates and prospect love interests. What is more interesting is that the writers may specify their preferred text mates, whether they would want to have a boy, girl, or gay text mate. An example for this is “*NEED YOU TO TEXT HER – 0946655___ CRIM.*”

E. CONCLUSION

This qualitative study explores the communicative functions of college students' graffiti written on the walls of a state college in the Philippines. An in-depth analysis reveals that college students' graffiti performs a multiplicity of communicative functions inside and even outside the school campus. In particular, graffiti is mostly used by college students to express their personal feelings toward themselves and to others. However, college students often use them to express general insults to other people, particularly to those who are members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Graffiti is employed by college students to glorify themselves, to show how witty or intelligent they are, and to express their sexual desires toward others, especially those coming from the opposite sex. Graffiti is likewise utilized by college students to take pride with their groups or affiliations, to challenge themselves and others, as well as to show resentment toward others. Indeed, graffiti is used by anonymous student writers as a powerful tool not only in communicating about who they are, but also about other people and situations within and outside the school community where they belong.

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