

GRAFFITI IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY RESTROOMS: UNVEILING HIDDEN NARRATIVES AND SILENT MESSAGES AMONG STUDENTS

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Abstract

This research explored the graffiti in the restrooms to understand its functions in communication among university students, as these restroom spaces, which are easily dismissed in scholarship, give a peek into the well-being of students. Three objectives were raised for the study focusing on identifying the predominant category of themes and narrative in students' restrooms, the pattern of restroom graffiti and the extent to which restroom graffiti serves as a space for peer support, solidarity, and collective student identity. The study adopted the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). Using a quantitative method of observed graffiti in five selected restrooms of the Prince Audu Abubakar University, Anyigba, 132 inscriptions or graffiti were observed, identified, and content analysed thematically. The study revealed that dominant messages on restroom walls are mainly on sexual (13.6%), political (16.7%), romance (21.2%) and academic life (25.8%). It also revealed that students mostly used convergence, unifying, communal terms as their main non-verbal communication pattern comprising 27.3% and revealed that encouraging graffiti messages served as the most commonly expressed (21.2%) which by implication shows that restroom graffiti serve as emotional message channels that students provide psychologically supportive contents and share their collective challenges, burdens and fears in building group solidarity. The study therefore

concludes that although graffiti is an informal and mostly neglected channel of communication, it functions through silent means in creating an atmosphere for students to share a stronger group spirit and community identity, which provides an insight into the unexpressed thoughts, perceptions and opinions of students. It is based on this that the study recommends that universities methodically track restroom graffiti to identify and understand students' issues and to incorporate such concerns into the design of policies and programmes relating to students' needs, welfare and general development.

Keywords: Graffiti, Narratives, Students, Silent messages, University Library Restroom.

Background to the Study

Restroom graffiti known as latrinalia exists throughout the world. These messages within the educational system exclusively showcase socio-political opinions, cultural aspects which define the educational environment. University toilets have become significant spaces for students to use graffiti as an expression of their ideas, despite common perceptions that mark it as senseless vandalism. The written remarks found across restroom walls show different levels of social, personal, religious, and political discourse along with self-expressive thoughts that reveal genuine student opinion. Students without formal public communication options in their environment choose restroom walls as their outlet to share their thoughts on school matters and personal identities (Olaluwoye&Ogunbemi, 2022).

According to Nwoye (2023), graffiti has been visualised to a great extent as a means of expressing the condition of people who are not likely to be seen in public spheres and has been used over time to communicate deep thoughts. Though graffiti is situated in public places, like on walls and buildings, restroom graffiti exhibits peculiar characteristics of subcultures and social dynamics within given communities. To Kondakova and Shtifanova(2022), graffiti has traditionally been viewed as a form of subversive art or even rebellion; thus, it has been examined for its cultural, social, and political implications. It conventionally appears on public walls and in high-traffic areas in urban locations, but is also mostly common in more private or semi-private settings, such as university restrooms. Those hidden spaces offer a genuine insight into the experience and emotions of their users (Akande, 2020).

As submitted by Aguilar-Garcia (2022), university graffiti in private places are informal spaces that students express dissatisfaction, share personal revelations, and discuss a wide array of societal issues, leaping beyond the formal boundaries of academic discourse. From the restrooms, one can see graffiti related to personal confession, academic frustrations, broader social critiques, and declarations of solidarity. This provides an emotional release and cathartic outlet for students going through such pressures of life at the university, reflecting their individual and collective psychological states. The content and context of graffiti in Nigerian university restrooms open a window to the dimensions of the students' lives, which is often overlooked (Rioch, 2021).

Recently, the University of Ibadan and Kwara State University conducted research which demonstrated the many different subjects addressed in restroom graffiti. Analyses of this form of communication have mapped out three major areas, starting with individual philosophies and love messages and ending with university policy critiques (Akande, 2020). Graffiti examination proves it exists as an individualistic yet communal way of communication. Students use the anonymity of restrooms to speak freely without worries of retaliation, which leads to open communication that normally remains absent elsewhere (Okon, 2017). The direct exchange acts as an essential mechanism for university leaders because it reveals what students think about and what needs fixing at their institutions. The writings in students' restroom walls create community bonds through support messages and shared experiences, thus building mutual understanding (Awodipe, 2019).

From the above, it can be submitted that Graffiti in restrooms is a strong and exciting lens to examine in understanding the campus culture of Nigerian universities. Every university campus in Nigeria is one on which learning occurs, where students from different backgrounds all share space under one roof, with multifarious academic, social, and psychological pressures as part of their lives. This graffiti, in very innocuous locations, does turn into a means of both personal and collective expression. It mirrors the internal and external struggles students have to put up with in the course of their studies. Therefore, this research intends to lay bare the hidden messages or themes that come from this silent communication through documentary and analytical work on these inscriptions.

Problem Statement

Restroom areas in most university facilities are overlooked within the academic setting, yet often become canvases for graffiti. This hidden space from the public eye offers an area for discreet media of resistance and social commentary in the use of expressing self (Bellanaija, 2017). Within the dynamic, at times politically charged atmosphere of Nigerian universities, these graffiti on walls become a compelling subject for the study of ways in which students write out their thoughts and frustrations (Cassar & George, 2017). Though there has been research on motivation among students for the inscription of graffiti, this has not been very well analysed, particularly in the setting of Nigerian universities. One close look through those inscriptions will give the careful-minded person an in-depth look at what is brewing in the unconscious mind of these students, which concerns such matters as mental health, academic pressure, social dynamics, and cultural identity (Jombadi, 2018; Goba, 2019). This aspect of student life has remained relatively unexplored, particularly within the Nigerian university system, already beset with its unique socio-economic and political challenges. Messages in graffiti unravel hidden dimensions of well-being: academic stress, social isolation, and struggle with issues of cultural identity. It is within this context to consider the socio-political atmosphere in Nigeria, characterised by divergent student populations and institutional support at varying levels, greatly impacts both experiences and modes of expression of students (Lennon, 2022; Laffier & Bowman, 2021). By content, very little has been written on how restroom graffiti is related to larger socio-cultural and political themes in its environment. Besides, most universities have no systems in place to interpret or act on this kind of indirect feedback presented through graffiti. This study, therefore, aims to fill this gap. Therefore, this study attempts to understand the often-ignored graffiti in the restrooms of the Prince Abubakar Audu University (PAAU) as a means of expression by students, hoping to reveal hidden facets of student life from the silent messages and give recommendations that would lead to better institutional responses to students' needs and concerns.

Objectives

The study has the following objectives;

1. Identify the predominant category, the predominant themes and narratives present in restroom graffiti within PAAU.
2. Analyse the pattern of restroom graffiti as a form of non-verbal communication and its role in student expressions.

3. Determine the extent to which restroom graffiti serves as a space for peer support, solidarity, and collective student identity.

Justification

This research will thus provide insights into the unexpressed thoughts and lives of students in universities in Nigeria and pinpoint how students communicatively express hopes and frustrations, with a specific view and in-depth explication of an understudied aspect of student life. Ultimately, the findings will provide information for designing policies and practices that foster a more supportive and responsive academic community.

Literature Review

Traditionally, graffiti has been considered to be a rebellious and revolutionary form of art. In 2022, graffiti possessed a socio-political function in Nigeria, claims Adebayo (2020). In this instance, students used graffiti to voice the challenges they experienced in society and politics. According to Adams and Williams (2023), graffiti in learning institutions creates an opportunity for students to voice their concerns. Students typically feel invisible or unheard within the traditional classroom setting. These studies suggest that graffiti is not simple vandalism, but is instead one of the important vehicles for the expression of social relationships among young people within educational institutions.

Regarding graffiti in the educational context, including a university setting, it is an important tool in the attempt to understand some of the student behaviours and characteristics. In a recent study, Lennon (2022) used a qualitative approach in trying to understand graffiti within learning institutions and established that learners predominantly use graffiti to communicate stress, fear of stigmatisation, and rebellion against authorities within the learning environment. Their study showed that graffiti, especially in university restrooms, provides students with a chance to express their grievances without fear of authorities. This is in line with existing literature that aims to decipher the graffiti messages in Nigerian university restrooms.

Klein (2019) explains the psychological and sociocultural aspects of graffiti, especially in bathroom spaces, which are at the same time private and public. His studies indicated that graffiti was a medium to express the individual's psychic condition and feelings of isolation. His findings suggest a tight connection with the psychological state of an individual, such as loneliness, stress, and cultural identity conflicts. This is particularly relevant in the context of Nigerian students, who have to grapple with socio-economic and political problems not very often

addressed by university authorities. This present study is based on such an understanding and proposes to discuss how silent messages in graffiti may speak volumes about students' mental health and well-being (Melbärde, Auguste & Zane, 2022).

Research into university restroom graffiti spans several cultures and parts of the world, but is similar. For example, Adebayo, in a 2022 study, expresses that in their sample, Restroom graffiti appears to be a representation of academic pressures, social dissent, and cultural issues at a Nigerian university. Adams and Williams, however, note that political messages and personal revelations have also been the usual themes in graffiti within American and European universities. It is here where students would depoliticise their experiences via graffiti, whether or not they are under psychological stress from university life.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) propounded by Howard Giles in 1971. It was initially known as Speech Accommodation Theory once, until it expanded to include full communication elements, thus adopting its present title. According to CAT, individuals modify their verbal and nonverbal communication to match their social surroundings and their relational goals. Individuals use different techniques to modify their communication to create social approval and build relationships. According to Lesh (2022), the usage of group-specific slang and symbols enables people to communicate in a way that does not directly impact their social status, especially when what is being communicated is not generally accepted or in aberrant with the power structure. In this context, acceptance of dissimilar or rebellious worldviews displays itself through controversial statements which challenge conventional standards of behaviour and show personal opposition. CAT, therefore, delivers significant understanding about adaptation in communication, but has received criticism due to its narrow examination of power structures and environmental factors that shape the choice of communication behaviour. Scholars have often challenged CAT because it fails to recognise social power relationships and organisational requirements which limit how much people can accept or turn down different communication approaches (Marovah& Mkwanzani (2020). In application to Prince Abubakar Audu University restroom graffiti analysis through CAT, this enables one to understand how students handle their social surroundings through their written statements while maintaining anonymity by expressing themselves freely according to either group mentality or independent thought without facing

immediate consequences. It is expected that the research into restroom graffiti will allow us to detect student social patterns regarding communication methods and the ways they connect or separate from each other.

Methodology

This study adopted qualitative methods in an attempt to explore the intricate socio-cultural and psychological dimensions of graffiti within Nigerian university restrooms. Observations in this field, coupled with photographic documentation of the graffiti, were used for detailed examination of recurrent themes and patterns therein. However, a focus group discussion session was held with students to determine the rationale for and implications of such graffiti. The purposive sampling process was adopted for this study. Descriptive analysis of the graffiti was conducted with thematic analysis of data to identify and analyse key themes. Ethical concerns, such as informed consent, anonymity, and cultural sensitivity, were handled properly at all stages of the study. Conducting this study in only restrooms in one university out of many limits its generalisation to the rest of the campus, although it is expected to result in worthwhile benefits relating to the psychological, socio-cultural, and institutional challenges that face students in Nigerian universities.

Data presentation

The data below is presented based on the objectives of your with each table presenting the categories or themes (options) infrequency, and percentage, reflecting thethematic analysis of graffiti messages.

Table 1:Graffiti Narratives and Messages in University Restrooms

Theme/Narrative	Frequency	Percentage
Academic Frustration	34	25.8%
Romantic Expressions / Loneliness	28	21.2%
Political Commentary	22	16.7%
Sexual Identity and Orientation Concerns	18	13.6%
Religious or Cultural Reflections	12	9.1%
Humour and Sarcasm	10	7.6%
Mental Health Cries (e.g., "I'm tired")	8	6.0%
Pattern of restroom graffiti as a form of non-verbal communication and its role in student expressions	Frequency	Percentage

Convergence (e.g., shared slang, collective frustrations)	36	27.3%
Divergence (e.g., personal or rebellious statements)	30	22.7%
Identity Assertion (e.g., gender, religious, ethnic claims)	26	19.7%
Resistance to Authority (e.g., anti-institutional remarks)	20	15.2%
Satire and Irony (e.g., sarcasm or humorous critique)	12	9.1%
Code-Switching/Mixed Languages	8	6.0%
Extent to which restroom graffiti serves as a space for peer support, solidarity, and collective student identity.	Frequency	Percentage
Encouraging messages (e.g., “You’ll be fine”, “Keep going”)	28	21.2%
Shared academic struggle expressions (e.g., “We all fail sometimes”)	24	18.2%
Mental health solidarity (e.g., “You’re not alone”, “Me too”)	20	15.2%
Affirmations of identity (e.g., gender, religion, ethnicity)	18	13.6%
Advice or coping strategies (e.g., “Skip the 8 a.m.”, “Talk to someone”)	16	12.1%
Group slogans or student movement symbols (e.g., “End ASUU strike”)	14	10.6%
Replies and dialogue graffiti (i.e., chains of student responses)	12	9.1%
Total	132	100%

Discussion of findings

This study examined graffiti in university restrooms to ascertain hidden narratives and secret messages of students. The first objective of the study, which seeks to identify the predominant category or themes of restroom graffiti, reveals that the dominant messages on restroom walls are mainly on sexual, romantic, political, religious and academic life. This finding resonates with Akande’s 2020 (2015) that students frequently resort to restroom spaces for privacy to discuss romantic and sexual content, which turns out as the most common theme in restroom graffiti. This also concords with Lesh (2022) that Nigerian youths express

their suppressed sexual concerns through informal media outlets, starting from social media to graffiti. Also, the presence of political and religious themes, although less frequent, points to an undercurrent of sociopolitical engagement among students. This finding resonates with the argument of Lennon (2022) that private platforms such as restroom graffiti allow people to demonstrate their discontent regarding governmental leadership, university management and social pressure as the students use restrooms as a location to express alternative viewpoints because they can communicate outside institutional observation. Likewise, the academic content within graffiti walls validates that students choose these unofficial channels to express their academic stress. These messages deliver sarcastic remarks or motivational messages that align with Goba (2019), who described “subtle resistance and cathartic expression” within university student communities. Here, students use humorous expressions and cryptic messages to express their academic frustrations toward lecturers and examinations while building a collective feeling of identity among readers. Emphatically, this finding closely follows the theoretical approach of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), which was applied to the study; through CAT’s explanation of social interaction, individuals’ uses drawings and inscriptions within restroom graffiti spaces to develop communication pattern or social symbolism which people who read them reevaluate or recast into new meanings. Therefore, graffiti grants students the chance to maintain a verbal conversation without spoken words, which results in a symbolic fellowship within a space designed for privacy. In all, this finding suggests that the main themes found in this graffiti indicate widespread psychological and cultural issues facing Nigerian university students.

In line with the second objective of this study, which sought to analyse the pattern of restroom graffiti as a form of non-verbal communication and its role in student expressions, showed students mostly used convergence, unifying, communal terms as their main non-verbal communication pattern, which appeared with 27.3% of the entire data analysed. The communal character of graffiti reveals its utility for group members to share communal issues through their use of slang terms. This finding resonates with Ogungbemi (2020), who submits that students utilise restroom walls to share typical university-related experiences that extend from academic challenges to romantic and social conflicts. This equally supports his earlier finding that graffiti mirrors the unified student community because it develops symbolic connections through shared language expressions. Also, among all observed patterns, the

second most prevalent type was divergence, with 22.7 per cent (22.7%) of the graffiti expressing rebellious or personal statements against societal norms and expressing unique individual opinions. The results echo Olaluwoye&Ogungbemi(2020), who maintained that public spaces serve as a platform for people to use graffiti as personalised protests combined with branding expressions. The varying restroom messages indicate how students express their individuality and challenge mainstream societal beliefs while using the restroom walls to share safe personal statements. Also, among the patterns of identifiable graffiti is identity assertion, with 19.7% through messages that declared gender affiliation and religious beliefs, as well as ethnic origins. Through their graffiti, students create instances to declare their marginalised or silenced identities. Research by Sharaf(2015) showed Nigerian youth express suppressed identity elements through graffiti, and this finding corresponds to our study. Identity-related messages in restrooms serve to establish them as places students can express their affiliations to certain beliefs without fear of identification. Subversive functions of graffiti become clear through resistance to authority patterns, which appear in 15.2% of the cases alongside satirical and ironic messages noted in 9.1% of the data. By this, people express their hidden opposition through statements targeting institutions while they manage to convey playful criticism about staff members as well as university administrative procedures. These mirror Olaluwoye and Ogungbemi (2020) observation that humour and satire in students' graffiti serve both as psychological relief and as a critique of hierarchical systems. Students use mocking words to challenge power dynamics indirectly while protecting their identity, thus influencing academic dialogue at the university.

As regards the third objective of the study which aimed at determining the extent to which restroom graffiti serves as a space for peer support, solidarity, and collective student identity, the finding reveled that encouraging graffiti messages appeared as the most commonly written expressions such as "You'll be fine" and "Keep going" (21.2%) which shows that restroom graffiti serve as unattributed yet emotionally helpful messages that students provide to one another as students use bathroom walls to maintain psychological support between their peers through writing encouraging messages. This finding plays alignment to Alabi (2015), who argued that informal media such as graffiti enable emotional rapport to form between stressed students while addressing academic anxiety, thus providing therapeutic bonding among the student community. Likewise, academic camaraderie expressions (18.2%) and declarations of mental health support (15.2%) take up a major portion of

graffiti writing at the university. The messages inscribed on the walls record shared emotions which capture distressing situations among people who faced academic failures and mental health issues like depression or anxiety. In the same line of thought, Marovah and Mkwanzani (2020) submitted that students utilise casual channels such as restroom graffiti to communicate solidarity with their peers with statements such as "We all fail sometimes", which offers them silent companionship as their community sends messages of resilience that make them less isolated in their struggles. Also, further findings reveals that two essential dimensions in their composition is affirmations of identity (13.6%) and advice or coping strategies (12.1%), as people express gender-related or religious-specific or ethnic-specific messages as well as offer practical advice like "Skip the 8 a.m." and "Talk to someone." Online expressions serve two roles that include personal affirmation and social guidance toward peers. According to Aguilar-Garcia (2022), formal university communication platforms typically restrict students' representation along with their voices, so students take informal restroom spaces to express their culture and religion or basic needs. However, the collective nature of restroom graffiti appears through both group slogans and dialogue graffiti, providing students with channels for protests and voicing their challenges. This finding also echoes Jombadi (2018) conclusion that graffiti functions through silent means to create an atmosphere for students to share a stronger group spirit and community identity. In agreement with the tenets of the theoretical framework, restroom graffiti functions as a communication space which students use to create meaning and build solidarity and maintain their group identity, in addition to symbolic communication through written messages which express their collective knowledge derived from lived experiences and school culture.

Conclusion

This study examined how university students utilise restroom graffiti to communicate. It established that graffiti in restrooms contains multifaceted symbolic narratives and messages which allow students to communicate their feelings of frustration and challenge institutional systems as well as define their identities while supporting their peers. It also concludes that students use graffiti as a platform for informal communication, along with anonymous messaging, because they lack spaces where they can express themselves as freely in traditional academic environments. The analysis also showed that students used four

distinct graffiti communication patterns, which revealed various complex meanings in this expressive form, demonstrating its ability to create community support networks through its encouraging statements and academic challenges, which help in understanding students' lifestyles. The study data confirms past research reviewed and connects well with the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) that shows how shared communication symbols control human interactions and identity development. In all, it concludes that the academic world and institutions should view restroom graffiti as a significant social-cultural channel of communication which merits serious in revealing students' emotional states to promote university understanding of non-institutional students' connection and communication systems as the university will benefit from student experiences when they study these subtle message for enhancing campus safety and communications.

Recommendation

The following recommendations are made based on the findings of this study;

1. Universities should methodically track restroom graffiti as an unstructured method for identifying main student issues during their needs assessment process.
2. Student services units need to establish confidential communication channels that respond specifically to two common student challenges found within restroom graffiti which include academic stress and feelings of emotional isolation.
3. Educational institutions should launch mental health awareness programs together with stigma reduction efforts because these initiatives decrease psychological factors which lead students to express themselves through graffiti.
4. Educational institutions must create open discussion spaces and culturally aware peer dialogue sessions, which serve as official venues for complaints from students.
5. University leadership should accept graffiti writing as meaningful communication so they can develop monitored areas for authorised graffiti or artistic community projects.
6. The education offered by Communication departments together with student leaders should demonstrate to their peers how forms of alternative communication through graffiti expose large social patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

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