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Graffiti: Communication Strategies for Secondary School Students in Kenya

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Abstract:

We present findings of a study carried out to establish the social messages expressed by graffiti as a means of communication by secondary school students in Nyandarua district. A sampling frame of schools was constructed from all the divisions in Nyandarua district. They were categorized as either Boys' or Girls' schools. Three schools were selected from each division. A sample of graffiti texts (both scribble and sketches) in the schools chosen were selected. Ten students from the selected schools were used to collect graffiti texts in their respective schools. However, only five students and two teachers were randomly selected and interviewed and their responses recorded on audio tapes. The data collected was analyzed by use of statistical measurements and presented in tables, graphs and pie charts. The Ministry of Education and Education Stakeholders may find such findings useful in detecting and stemming impending strikes in learning institutions in Kenya. It will also assist school managers and teachers in understanding the students in an attempt to create a conducive and peaceful learning environment and eventually improve performance.

Key words: *Adolescence, Discourse, Graffiti Messages, Minority, Privacy, Public places/surfaces, Sheng and Text*

1. Introduction

According to Nwoye (1993), wall writings have been used since time immemorial by various groups of people in the society who in one way or another feel muffled up. Such groups of people who are prohibited from, or denied, avenues of public expression seek other outlets, with graffiti on walls of public places a favored option. He goes ahead to single out student population in most parts of the world as one such group that does not enjoy the privilege of public self-expression. According to Rothman (2002), adolescence, the stage of growth that secondary school students are in is a natural time of resistance to authority. On their part, the adolescents are largely misunderstood in the dominantly adult-run society which dictates social structure. This consequently creates a distance between the adolescents and the adults, causing the former to act out in opposition to the authoritative adult society that restricts them. Students in secondary schools react and respond to the school authority in a similar way. They do not always have legitimate avenues of self-expression, and may often not even take part in making decisions on matters affecting them, leave alone air their opinions regarding such matters openly. One channel that affords them the chance and forum to do so is the practice of writing graffiti which enables them to express their thoughts, fears, interests, attitudes and opinions regarding the world around them. The fact that graffiti provide them the privacy and anonymity necessary to fully express themselves without fear of the likely consequences makes this alternative appealing. Writing graffiti therefore provides the author with the opportunity, safety and unlimited freedom to express him or herself on a matter of interest and/or concern. In this way, graffiti can be studied in terms of their being a portrayal of current social issues among students.

2. Objective of the Study

- To establish the social messages expressed by graffiti.

3. Research Question

- Are Graffiti texts used to communicate and express messages on social issues?

4. Literature Review

Gadsby (1995) makes the observation that graffiti abound in the world around us. It is visible on almost every conceivable surface, such as public places as toilet and bathroom walls, narrow corridors in offices and buildings, in vehicles and other property to

mention a few. Graffiti was found on walls and furniture in such places as classrooms, dormitories, dining halls and toilets. The study realizes the importance of studying those texts with a view to understanding the different social messages they communicate. These graffiti texts range from cryptic writings, sketches or drawings, lone words, a few words, single utterances and even conversations. There are negative and positive views that people hold regarding graffiti as discussed below.

4.1. Negative Attitudes

According to Crystal (1997), many people regard graffiti as an unwanted nuisance or as expensive vandalism that must be repaired. It is often suggested that its presence contributes to a general sense of squalor and a heightened fear of crime. Cole (1991) also mentions that graffiti are often considered aimless Ramblings on a wall. On his part, Nwoye (1993) expressing the point of view of Nigerian University authorities, states that graffiti are usually perceived as a sheer expression of youth exuberance and a manifestation of vandalism. Alonso (1998) also observes that since graffiti is seen to be more prolific under authoritarian systems, they are viewed as disruptive and subversive, a view also supported by Crystal (1997), that graffiti is sometimes seen as part of a sub-culture that rebels against extant societal authorities, or against authority as such. Studies conducted in the U.S and Britain depict the authorities spending huge sums of money in making attempts to combat and muzzle graffiti writing by restricting and banning the sale of aerosol spray paint, imposing hefty fines on writers as well as making graffiti writing a criminal act through legislation.

Their actions would be understood in consideration of Austin's view (2001) quoted in Rothman (2002), that graffiti writing is not the cry of an anxious ego, eager to communicate joy or anger but the defiant snarl of a nuisance. In addition, Gadsby (1995) quoting Varnedoe and Gopnik (1990) adds that for some people, graffiti as a whole is a composite phenomenon, part childish prank, part adult insult and would therefore not be a serious enough field of study. For this group of people then, graffiti writing is simply a lifestyle, viewed as either just amusing, merely entertaining or plainly annoying. This might explain the reason why the field is still largely unexplored, and especially in Kenya where only a few studies have been conducted on the subject.

4.2. Positive Attitudes

Graffiti are viewed as an expressive medium, which, though unconventional act as an alternative form of communication that is both personal and free of everyday social restraints that prevent people from giving uninhibited reign to their thoughts. (Abel & Buckley (1997) in Gadsby (1995). According to studies conducted in the U.S.A, some universities now recognize the importance of graffiti in informing them of important social issues and problems at these institutions. They have thus formed "graffiti corners" where students can freely write graffiti without fear of being accused of vandalism. The authorities then take photographs and videos to keep as records for future action and then repaint the surfaces for fresh graffiti. Yieke (2003), in a study conducted on graffiti in Kenyan universities suggest that graffiti should never be ignored by those in authority if they want to know the sentiments and needs of the students. If well channeled, graffiti can provide a forum for students (who consider themselves a minority) to express themselves in a wide range of topics; and at the same time act as expressions of academic freedom and on-going intellectualism. In addition, while stressing the positive ways in which graffiti can be used, Yieke (2006) argues that graffiti in the context of workplaces can act as communication avenues for women who are often voiceless and are in constant search for a voice of their own. They are seen to use graffiti to voice opinions, solicit advice, support, console and encourage each other, and sometimes call male dominance into question in a society that otherwise silences them. These views guided this study in the interpretation of student graffiti not as expressions by idle people just wasting time, but as expressive modes for important issues among them. Alonso (1998) reiterates that graffiti is a tool of communication which is seen as constantly challenging the hegemonic discourses of the dominant. Nwoye (1993) on his part mentions that groups that have been prohibited from or denied avenues of public expression seek other outlets, with graffiti on walls of public places a favoured option; and he goes ahead to identify student population in most parts of the world as one such group. Mochama (2005) observes too, that schools, colleges, pubs, lodges and police cells seem to be the centre of institutional graffiti. These views are quite relevant to the current study which treats students as the minority and oppressed group who use graffiti as an alternative medium of communication where other channels are not effective.

5. Methodology

Data collection techniques comprised the sampling of schools, respondents and graffiti texts. Sample schools were randomly selected from across the different divisions in the district namely Ol'Kalou, Ndaragwa, Kinangop, Ol'Joro'Orok and Ndundori. The sample consisted of ten schools. Three schools were chosen from each of the categories Boys' and Girls' schools. Four were mixed schools. Some of them were day schools and others boarding and one mixed day and boarding. The schools were treated as a representative sample of the about one hundred schools in the district, and the results would be generalized to the entire province and to Kenyan schools in general. The target population was all the graffiti texts (both scribbles and sketches) in the selected schools. However, only two hundred texts were purposively selected (twenty from each school) for analysis, and the choices were dependent on the different message types they Teachers in each school visited sampled a cross-section of ten students from the different forms. After reading through a list of ten graffiti texts provided by the researcher, they were involved in the collection of graffiti texts from various places in the school, and recording them on manilla cards provided. They were instructed to record each of the texts in their original form. The sketches were drawn resembling the original one as much as possible, and tracings made where possible. This was necessary to help capture and retain the message intended by the graffitist. This was done alongside the researcher who not only also collected texts, but also verified them. This was done by randomly picking on a few texts collected by the students and re-visiting the places they indicated as the sources. The researcher also compared the texts with the ones she had to ascertain that they were similar.

Out of the ten students, five were randomly selected to take part in the subsequent interviews. Two teachers were also randomly selected in each school to participate in the interview that was recorded on audio tapes. Unstructured interviews were also used, with the researcher conducting the research in person. There were two interview schedules for students and teachers which had both open ended and close ended questions. The personal interview was advantageous since it involved physical contact and interaction with the respondent, Oso & Onen (2009). It created an opportunity for the respondent to clarify and elaborate on certain points, resulting in more information that was also detailed. The sample of five students and two teachers per school for the interview was also a convenient number and it was possible to work with them within the stipulated time. Field notes were made on the social functioning of the different schools, the inter- relationships between the school authority and students as well as among students. The data collected was analyzed by use of statistical measurements and presented in tables, graphs and pie-charts. Explanations were also given for the frequencies and conclusions drawn from the findings.

6. Discussions and Findings

The graffiti texts were obtained from classrooms, laboratories, dormitories, ablution blocks, dining halls and libraries as illustrated in the table below.

Source	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Classrooms	62	31
Laboratory	57	28.5
Dormitory	36	18
Ablution	24	12
Dining Hall	19	9.5
Library	2	1
Total	200	100

Table 1: Quantitative Analysis of Graffiti Sources

The highest percentage of graffiti, 31%, was obtained from here because classes were the most frequented areas. 28.5% of Graffiti was collected in the laboratories. 18% of the texts were found in the dormitories on walls, lockers and student boxes. Graffiti in the ablution block constituted 12% of all texts. Most obscenities and insults were found in those places. These include drawings of sexual organs, references to sex acts as well as abuses and threats to both fellow students and teachers. Texts collected in the dining hall constituted 9.5%. In the library, only 1% of texts were collected in the only two schools that had a library.

6.1. Social Messages in Graffiti

The research indicated students' preferences in terms of the topics that were popular amongst them. These were love/sex, response to school authority, student welfare, drugs, religion, celebrities and politics in that order. Table 2 below presents the quantitative analysis of social messages in the graffiti texts, followed by a discussion on each.

MESSAGE	FREQUENCY(f)	PERCENTAGE (%)
LOVE/SEX	57	28.5
SCHOOL AUTHORITY	56	28
STUDENT WELFARE	44	22
DRUGS	22	11
RELIGION	14	7
CELEBRITIES	5	2.5
POLITICS	2	1
TOTAL	200	100

Table 2: Quantitative Analysis of Social Messages

This research found out that issues related to love and sex got more wall space. They accounted for 28.5% of the total sample. Most of them were romantic in nature and the big majority sexual in tone and were quite embarrassing. Some were declarations of love for a member of the opposite sex and featured even the real names of those being talked about. Further analysis revealed that 71% of the graffiti sample on love and sex was found to directly talk about sex. Out of these, 8% commented on sexual organs. 57% discussed sexual performance, and 6% of these texts were about homosexuality. The remaining 6% were warnings of the consequences of engaging in sex. Common features noted by this research in sex-related graffiti were vulgarities and obscenities, and offensive language unlikely to be found in normal public discourse. Sex issues are taboo subjects in public debate, and words describing the act are mostly unmentionable. For example: I need a girl to ride ride ride, I nid a gal 2 screw at nite, I nid a gal 2 b ma wife This was a single text by three different authors, all male, sending out sexual invitations.

Sexual abstinence also popularized in the Kenyan media was a popular subject among student graffitiists; and even sounded warnings against sexual indulgences. For example; remember. AIDS KILLS (Which is almost poster-like and screaming for attention.) and Ni poa kuchil (It is good to abstain from sex) the research also established the existence of homosexual relationships among students evidenced by texts using a language characteristic of such affairs. Students in the interview also intimated that there was a possibility of their existence though they were not categorical about it. Such texts were as follows: We buy and sell assets and .You SK sucks. The lexical choice of asses is ambiguous; with a double meaning (donkeys or the human organ) and this word play serves as a disguise for non-conformists and shroud in obscurity a discussion on a topic that would receive public criticism. Sexual organs are described either graphically or in words, and in any of the languages previously discussed in this research. A comment on an individual's sex organs is a substitute for derogatory or insulting reference. Nwoye (1993) argues that "ethnic insults, achieved through the discourse strategy of lexical choice," are present in the graffiti, and the reference to an individual's private parts, for both teachers and students. Other texts glorified men and their sexual organs like the following text: Men are like gold.

6.2. Love Declarations

The remaining 29% of the graffiti sample on love and sex discussed love related issues, especially between the sexes.. Some love proclamations are poetic and riddled with exaggerated flattery, characteristic of love poetry as in the following examples: You are the only been in my githeri(mixture of maize and beans). An only bean in a plate is definitely very precious and cherished.

Others express the concentration and intensity of the emotion referred to as love as the following texts exemplify. The two texts were collected from different schools as follows: She is driving me crazy and Mad about him. Remain to luv ya.

Rivalry and competition for lovers is a common feature in the graffiti. While some writers simply declare their feelings and even name their targets, others sound warnings that interferences in their territory would result in dire consequences for the aggressors as shown in the following examples: Usilete compe kwa manzi wangu (translated as Don't try to compete with me for my girl friend), Felistus is my rising sun. Usimhanye (Felistus is my rising sun. Do not try to snatch her).

Commentaries on the consequences associated with a broken love relationship are also evident as in the following example: Tis painful to lose a boyfriend

Multiple loves are abhorred just like casual and non-serious lovers who do not show a sense of commitment. These are exemplified below respectively.

Wacha uhanyaji Diana, Peris Jenet monos and still you want to hook up with me. (Stop having multiple affairs, Diana, Peris, Jenet form ones and still you want an affair with me.)

Those students who don't have interest in such affairs have reasons for their standpoint as captured in the following one word graffiti.

- L - Lake of fire
- O - Ocean of tears
- V - Valley of death
- E - End of life

This is an acknowledgement that though the feeling of love is good, it has its negative side, not just the heart-breaks. It burns and consumes the individual like a fire, brings suffering and could even result into death. Unwanted pregnancies, poor performance, sexually transmitted diseases and death are just a few of such negative consequences that secondary school students in Kenya have had to deal with.

6.3. Messages on School Authority

Students were found to express various attitudes towards the school authorities, namely the Principal, who is the head of the institution, the deputy, teachers and prefects. Students who perceive themselves as a minority oppressed group use graffiti for mutual bonding, and they are in solidarity against an oppressed group, which in this research are the teachers and prefects. This agrees with the findings of Nwoye (1993:440) research on graffiti in Nigerian universities, which established that students use graffiti to articulate their views when they are denied the means of doing so. The heads of institutions are the symbols of supreme authority in the school. The school rules found in all schools visited spelt out the things the students should and should not do, and they expressed their displeasure that some were too draconian and they were not subject to debate let alone alteration. Punishments including suspension for a period of time were treated with hostility. As a result, the disciplinarian always had himself or herself targeted, and since the students could not openly express their sentiments for fear of worse consequences, they addressed them in the graffiti as exemplified in the following example: Muthaa must allow Colombos. Say no to Gathee's katiba (Muthaa must allow wide-bottomed trousers. Say no to Gathee's constitution). The choice of the lexical item katiba to mean the constitution and in the school context a set of rules was appropriately used. The data was collected at the height of the historic national debate on the referendum where Kenyans were fighting for a new constitutional order. Gathee borrowed from Gikuyu word Muthee meaning elderly has a derogatory reference. The suffix ga is diminutive and expresses disapproval. Muthaa derived from the Gikuyu word thaa meaning time was from his strictness on punctuality which they were not used to before. The graffiti which was written in the laboratory where all students went to at least once a week ensured a wide audience. In this way, then, graffiti serves a protest function, and the use of the word must be categorical that the protesters don't want it differently and are ready to fight against it if need be. Graffiti also play a threat function. They are used to give ominous threats and ultimatums and in this way warn that action will be taken if their demands are not met. Graffiti become a public forum which communicates social unrest, even among writers who may not know each other personally. Students were found to use graffiti to issue such threats as evidenced below.

We want a new bus by Jan. If not we strike

The text was found engraved on a notice-board outside the administration block where the daily newspapers and official notices were pinned for the students to read. The school only had a van and students had on earlier occasions expressed their wish to have a new bus. The use of want explicitly expresses their demand that has a deadline and a consequence if not met.

Graffiti was also found to be used to question the decisions and actions taken by the administration, and at times even the moral authority that teachers assumed over the students. This is shown in the following text: 2000 DIARY. On 25th Feb. Friday 2000 we are expecting a midterm, but it never been. This text was found in a classroom. It provides evidence to the fact that graffiti texts enjoy some relative permanence and is an indication that painting and repairs in public buildings are not undertaken regularly.

Wat da monkey seen da monkey das

Students treat the midterm break as a right. At the time, (before the Ministry of Education gave a policy guideline that students should be allowed to go home), parents were allowed to visit their children as an alternative, but students always preferred the former. A cancellation caused a lot of problems that saw the particular school close prematurely.

6.4. Attitudes towards Prefects

Graffiti expressing such sentiments was found, and they were also characterized by threats and warnings,

For example: Cruel prefect – Be aware. This is an ungrammatical version of cruel prefect beware is an ominous and stern threat to a strict prefect who though not named is well understood. This always angered the students who accused prefects of fraternizing with the authorities, further supported by the following text. Graffiti as seen was used by the students to articulate their views on the power hierarchy. While prefects were expected to be the link between them and the administration, they were seen as enemies of the student fraternity and were objects of their frustration at the oppression they felt they suffered in the hands of the administration.

6.5. Messages on Student Welfare

Students' views regarding the services provided by the school in terms of food, accommodation, and recreation among others accounted for 22% of the graffiti collected. School infrastructure had its share of criticism in graffiti. Some of the labels given to certain buildings expressed the attitudes, students had about them. The following text found in an ordinary class used as a lab is evidence: The lab is fake. The choice of the word 'fake' shows disapproval and is a factual comment on the state of the object.

6.6. Messages on Drugs

Graffiti to the effect that some students abused drugs was found, and constituted 11% of the total number of texts collected. Drinking alcohol and smoking (especially marijuana) and even peddling it were evidenced in the graffiti as illustrated in the following text: Drink keroro n na ufil difference (Drink keroro and you note the difference) Keroro is a general term for the cheap brews available on the market which are affordable and readily available. It now refers to all alcoholic drinks. The graffitist encourages others to sample it and find out for themselves that it is different, may be from and better than other alcoholic brands taken before.

6.7. Messages on Religion

7% of the graffiti expressed the students' religious beliefs. Some were plain declarations of love for Jesus who they considered the founder of their faith and the reciprocal belief that Jesus loves them as illustrated in the following texts respectively, which were collected in different schools: I love Jesus and Jesus loves you. Others were seen to acknowledge divine presence and supremacy in the life of the believer for example: God is good and God's above everything. Yet others sent warnings though the specific reasons why were not given for example: Remember God is a burning fire! Watch out!

6.8. Messages on Celebrities

Student graffiti was found to be characterized by names of events, games and personalities they adored. 2.5% of the graffiti was on these and included names of musicians, wrestlers and the popular teams and their players. However, only a representative sample was collected since it was not possible within the constraints of this research to incorporate all these names. A few examples are cited for example: Man U is da name Man U is a shortened form of Manchester United, one of the popular English Premier League football teams, and the graffitist acknowledges it is his favorite. A lot of writing on, not only this team, but also of others like Arsenal, Vodafone, Mathare United and Chelsea featured with a very high frequency. This was interpreted to mean that students were influenced and affected by events happening outside the precincts of the school and in the wider society. This also influenced associations and relationships among the students who at times got together because of their common interests. Names of musicians that were popular among the youth on both the local and international scene also featured in the graffiti, for example: Harry Kimani and Nonini handsome Best musicians.

6.9. Messages on Politics

Graffiti discussing politics was a meagre 1%. The prevailing political event at the time data for this research was collected was a debate on the constitutional review and the referendum. Inevitably, it found itself as a subject for discussion in the graffiti though not in a big way. Very few secondary school students have reached the voting age. The fact that they were also in school limited their active participation in the debate outside school. As a result, the topic wasn't given the time and wall space that other previously discussed topics got. It is evident from the findings of this research that graffiti cover a wide range of issues and topics. Student

graffiti is a genuine effort to reach out to the world, and reading them would help to decipher some of the youth styles, their likes and dislikes, and in the process improve the relationship existing between them and the adults. Graffiti are therefore not student rubbish and nonsense, (Mochama 2005)

7. Conclusion

The research concluded that students wrote on the wall as a way of articulating genuine concerns and issues that they would never openly discuss with the school authority. The study revealed that issues and events that affected the students were prevalent in graffiti. Sentiments of love and sex were dominant, considering the fact that the majority of secondary school students are in the adolescent stage characterized by sexual maturity and awareness. Further, rebellion and resistance against any established authority are also common features of this stage. Graffiti captured this through messages of protest at what students considered forms of oppression by the school administrative hierarchy. Other issues raised included student welfare, drug and substance abuse, religion, hero worship and the prevailing political climate in the country at the time. It is strongly felt that paying attention to them can go a long way in understanding student thinking and improving the interrelationships between them and the administration.

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