



Socio-Psychological Functions of Dormitory Graffiti: A Case of Zimbabwean Secondary Boarding Schools

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Abstract: Using the Social Cultural framework, this paper examines the functions of graffiti in selected secondary boarding schools in the Gutu District of Zimbabwe. It focuses on how socio-psychological functions of graffiti are created through informal spaces such as the dormitory in secondary boarding schools. The study followed a qualitative exploratory design in which the researcher observed the messages expressed in dormitory graffiti and conducted a social-cultural analysis of their functions on the moral fabric of their immediate society. A purposive total sample size of seven secondary boarding schools in the Gutu District was used for the study. Among the major findings of this study was the view that the messages conveyed through the graffiti expressed quite a number of issues that range from remembrances, loneliness, boredom, religion, and issues of bullying in the school. The study concluded that although graffiti tend to deform and deface some public utilities, their call for normative social behaviour in society shows there is a need to deconstruct some societal ideas that view graffiti as nonsensical. The findings of this research paper may contribute to the study of sociocultural in general and communication, particularly, in schools. It has been established that students use graffiti to communicate a lot of information that would be beneficial to the school authorities, student counsellors, policymakers, and other stakeholders.

Keywords: Socio-psychological, Graffiti, Sociocultural Learning, Dormitories, Function, Self-identity

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1. Introduction

Dormitories in Zimbabwean secondary boarding schools are memory sites within which students narrate the life courses that construct subcultural self-identity of shared experiences and temporal horizons among themselves. The analysis of dormitory graffiti revealed shifts of self-identity from the social community of family, school, religion, or individual experiences to the subcultural community. Suffices to say, those subcultural identities which are constructed and narrated are a result of social interactions and shared knowledge of adolescence where students reaffirm their identities with the graffiti subculture through recollections of shared experiences. DeNotto (2014) contends that memories of youth are active fundamentals for the present adolescent identity and biography in the dormitories. They are retrospective reflections where events are presented as meaningful from the present

horizon which also enables future actions. These are either socially, personally, or religiously constructed.

Subcultural identities, instead, constitute a legal podium for articulating their personal, social, cultural, religious, and political ideologies encompassing expressions of dignity, freedom, equality, and autonomy. These subcultural identities can be viewed as a human characteristic, which might imply that students have an intrinsic urge and obsession to leave behind a mark on the world, to proclaim one's existence, leave a mark of remembrance, and provide a sense of permanence and belonging (Christen, 2003). Self-identity and biographic constructions among students in the school, therefore, are a result of social interaction that takes place in various settings. An example of such settings includes the informal networks formed in the school among students through graffiti within the community of practice like in the dormitories.

2. Literature Review

Graffiti has had a long history, which scholars can trace back to Ancient Rome (DeNotto, 2014; Garrofoli & Laurence, 2013; Iddings, McCafferty, & da Silva, 2011). Previous studies reiterated that graffiti can be taken as an opportunity by students to air their views through signs, drawings, and statements on walls of buildings without permission from those in authority (Nwoye, 1993, Kan, 2006, Mangeya, 2014). Garrafoli & Laurence (2013) contend that authorities tend to overlook the rich meaning behind these writings because they view graffiti as a nonsensical language and some form of vandalism that defaces buildings. Thus, global rhetoric about students' graffiti tends to tie it to vandalism, moral decay in the school, and even obscenity. It is from such a background that graffiti has been associated with everything that is bad. Used by students when writing graffiti is not only understood by them but by the community surrounding them also.

However, regionally, students' graffiti can be helpful to school authorities in learning something about not only where students are, but also who and how they are (or ought to be or want to be). Following Massey's (1996) ideas, students consider how the spatial is constituted by the interlocking of 'stretched out' social relations, so that place, space, time, and identity become intertwined. In turn, Nwoye (1993) explains that places in the school give rise to personal identities where individuals are seen as belonging in or properly excluded from certain places, and entirely places develop identities. Finally, we note that the identity of a place, its social structure, its political character, and its 'local' culture are also a product of interactions (Massey, 1996). How students share space and develop practices in school can reflect, reinforce, challenge, and develop ideologically based common sense about who and what are perceived as socially acceptable and desirable. In Mangeya's (2018) words, the place is something produced by and producing ideology. Taking up these ideas, students aim to use graffiti in schools where they have lived to explore how graffiti can function pedagogically. Particularly, they are interested in how graffiti contributes to sociocultural learning, among themselves, about how contemporary social issues and relations are represented and reconstructed in the school, materially and culturally.

Although we believe that all graffiti, like all users of public space, functions socially, research has been interested in graffiti texts that seem intentionally pedagogical, that aim to spread a message, invite other students into contemplation or discussion, or call them to action. Grace (2016) recounts how such messages tell us something about the contemporary character of the places where students are or have been, how students who live in the school want to make and share their space, and how students see themselves in the socio-material context of space, place, and time. This is reiterated by Tett (2016) who argues that students' graffiti is based on their behaviour expectations for a

particular space and time and can be indicators of how students live in the dormitories.

Studies carried out in Australia and New Zealand established that graffiti was based on people's perceptions of their place and it carried cultural meanings of both the writers and the community. Furthermore, Clover (2016) recounts the idea that students' graffiti was some kind of tip-off on common sociocultural issues by students in their local community, full of cultural functions and meaning, as they create networks and alliances, vengeance, and power and personal identity in the school. Studies carried out in British Wales and America further indicate that the messages reveal that graffiti contains profound socio-psychological and cultural functions that cannot be ignored.

The current study, therefore, has been prompted by the fact that despite viewing graffiti as nonsensical and mere vandalism, students in Zimbabwean secondary schools have accorded graffiti a social and cultural function. It has come to the researcher's observation that secondary boarding students in the Gutu District of Zimbabwe are writing graffiti texts in the dormitories at an alarming rate. However, no matter how much the digital world platform networks offer avenues for people to express their opinions freely, the rate at which students in secondary boarding schools in the Gutu District continue to write graffiti in the dormitories, has given rise to a flurry of concern by the school authorities. The continued presence of graffiti in secondary boarding school dormitories in the Gutu District of Zimbabwe might be suggesting profound functions which the current research endeavours to cover. Mangeya (2014) and Makarati et al (2022) who studied Zimbabwean students' graffiti did not cover much on dormitory graffiti. Mangeya and Makarati widened their research on all the places where graffiti was seen in the school without an in-depth analysis of the dormitory graffiti leaving a gap that can be filled with the current research on the current research dormitory graffiti in secondary boarding schools in the Gutu District of Zimbabwe. The current research, therefore, is concentrating more on the socio-psychological functions of dormitory graffiti to bridge the gap.

The fact that there is scant research on graffiti written by secondary students in selected urban areas in Zimbabwe and selected secondary boarding schools in the rural setting so far, entails that there is still room for more graffiti research, especially on the functions in the Zimbabwean school circumstances. Like all graffiti, students' dormitory graffiti is inherently socially and culturally inflected, as it emerges from where students actually live their lives and where meaning is produced, assumed, and contested in the unequal relations of power that construct the mundane acts of everyday relations (Hickey, 2010)

3. Methodology

Data for the study was collected from the selected seven secondary boarding schools in the Gutu District of

Zimbabwe. The purposively sampled seven boarding schools from which data were collected are; Serima, Rufaro, Mukaro, Dewure, Alheit, and Mutero. The participants were secondary boarding students and staff. Dormitory buildings were chosen that were predominantly utilised by these students in the school. The researcher collected graffiti from the students' residential buildings across all the seven secondary boarding schools. The residential buildings were mainly dormitories alone. All data were transcribed, paying particular attention to the source of the inscription, from both a locational and gendered perspective. The inscriptions were then thematically categorised based on the specific functional issue constructed.

4. Results and Discussion

Analysis of graffiti inscriptions that are written by students in the dormitories in secondary boarding schools has afforded them informal chats, interpersonal relationships, and everyday sense-making activities among themselves in their dormitory environment in the school. Students collaborate in constructing memories and experiences of being at school and perhaps construct a consistent subcultural self-identity using graffiti, which is passed from one group of students to another. It has become a culture in graffiti that students write about the years they join the school and the years they leave in such a biographic style that cherishes memories of being at school. For example;



Image 1: I came 2014 & I went 2017

The graffiti inscription in example 1 shows self-identification with the primary use of the repeated word “I” which sounds poetic. The meaning of the statement might be that the student joined the school in 2014 and left the school in 2017. It may also be viewed as a boastful statement of achievement to join the school and leave it without being called to repeat. Moreover, though not polite, it is interactive and somewhat argumentative as it illustrates how students personally feel and express their sense of accomplishment.

Such graffiti reveals memories of being at school that construct self-identity and support an “aesthetics of existence” where one elaborates one’s own years of being at an elite boarding institution and it gives a certain form of biography in which one could look back into the years of school life. Dormitory walls have become a suitable context for such memories since it has been a place that students have taken as a home during their stay at school. It is in such cases that the physical context is the major influencing factor for biographic scribbles. Commenting on this issue of biographic scribbles, participant 4 from group interviews at school D, in example 1 said;

Example 1...it was fun, to scribble about my years of being at school, but the whole thing for me was now I know it was a way to express something you function with because I did not

function in school, like, in the expected way. I was unfamiliar in football, and tennis, that was... no but I could never sit still or be like silent. So, I had to find an identity by myself so that those who come might know that I was there.

An analysis of example 1 implies that those with limited intellectual and sporting capabilities might actively participate in the social practice of graffiti so that they leave a legacy in the school. Implicit in Participant 4’s comment on the function of graffiti towards secondary boarding school students is that those who are intellectually capable do not waste their abilities on ‘trivial’ practices such as graffiti. The inscription in example 2 shows that only those individuals of low performance in all areas in the school who benefited from the economically-driven enrolment patterns in secondary boarding schools concentrate on writing on the walls. This negates Mangeya’s (2015) finding of the high school participants who believed that it is not only the academically challenged students who practice graffiti. The inscription in example 1 clearly indicates that lower-level students who may not be making it in the school might want to seek publicity in the school by writing on the walls.

Another factor coming out from the analysis of the inscription in example 1 that could be attributed to the

practice of graffiti, especially in secondary boarding schools, was that those low-performing students who may not be heard in the mainstream discussions because of their poor performance might find a platform to voice their presence. Ruto (2007) argues that it might not be a question of intellectual capacity but a lack of alternative platforms for some students to be identified. However,

dormitory graffiti sometimes takes the form of collaboration in writing, especially where insertions are featured. Insertion is an addition to the already given utterance and such is done only when there is a collaboration of students who are writing graffiti. For example,

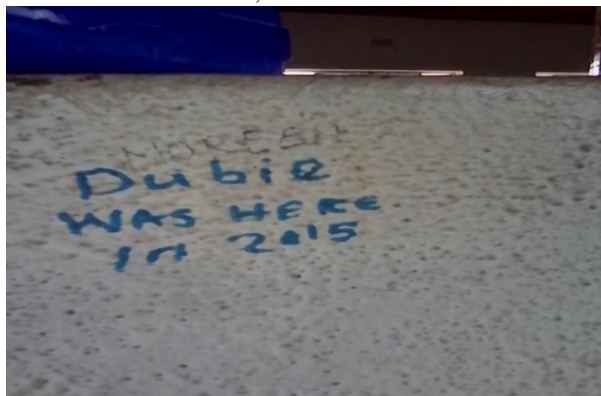


Image 2: A: Dubie was here in 2015

B: Norest

The above text shows that written language is less ephemeral than spoken language, therefore, Zimbabwean students' graffiti as a written genre, features rhetoric that is final and unimpeachable at least until the walls are cleaned. As a representational resource, an insertion enables a text to be changed, and the text producer's meaning in an utterance to be altered and adopted by another producer. In this respect, the graffiti above can be compared to some modern forms of communication like WhatsApp, email, Twitter, and wikis, in which knowledge is generated and disseminated collaboratively through addition to an existing entry. The penciled insertion (Norest) in image 80 is a process that occurs as a result of the collaboration of students who write graffiti to clearly self-identify the (Dubie) in question and leaves no conflicting ideologies as to which one is being referred to in this community of practice.

The text may also serve as an attention-getter from a student who might be signaling a positive evaluation of the identity in question. Owens (2003) contends that personal identities serve as the pegs upon which social identities and personal biographies can be hung. If an individual could not be recognized from one occasion to another as the same person, no stable social relationships could be constructed, and therefore there would be no social identities at all. The insertion is essential for identification and vitally important in the process of students' graffiti interaction since it provided the personal side of identity. Such identities are part of a student's self-internalized position and designation in the school among the peers, which exist insofar as the person is a participant in the subculture.

Or, it could be only a declaration that (Norest) nicknamed (Dubie) in question was there in 2015, which could be just a classic presence issue. It can be observed

from the inscription in image 2 that Zimbabwean students' graffiti use names as manifestations of graffitiists' creative way of indicating their presence or referral to any other person or event. These findings can be corroborated by the argument from Hutson (1985) that relational understanding of students' graffiti production can also provide grounds for considering innovation and transformation in the medium of self-identity expression. Although the use of names can be vaguely understood as means of expression, these can be considered as alternative means of self-identification.

The same text also reveals that the writer relies on the audience seeing the utterance as a re-contextualized identity label for an individual, having the effect of identifying 'Dubie' as leaving a legacy. This both signals support to groups that identify themselves with legacy labels and may also seek support from other individuals that use this particular wall. However, an insertion (Norest) foregrounds the conceptualization of Dubie's identity as a living legacy, with the new force of having permission to physically stamp his identity and legacy in the school.

The graffiti "Tariro, Div, 20/10/2017 Sig" reveals the identity of its writer who was a student of Divinity attending school in 2017. The graffitiists' signature signifies their authority or presence. The findings showed that students enjoyed the earnestness to openly write for remembrance, which dabbles on people's nature that urges one to want to reminisce and not be forgotten through time.

Religious identity, intertwined with many Christian beliefs and life in Zimbabwe, is characteristic of dormitory graffiti writing in secondary boarding schools. Graffiti under the category of religion included verses from the bible, salutations to God or help requests

to Jesus the son of God, preaching, prayers, and supplications. The vast majority of these expressions are supplications in which the students seek help, support, and mercy from God but all the same give a particular religious identity to individual students. There are some instances where religious identity in students' graffiti was expressed through mere religious words; 2, 3, and 4 such as;

2. Jesus
3. My Saviour
4. The Messiah

There were also a few occurrences of preaching statements on praising God and His power, forbidding what is wrong in examples 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 such as;

5. Thank you to God
6. My Jesus is alive
7. Jesus the Son of God protects us
8. We are bound by the Spirit of God
9. The Lord is my shepherd
10. Fear not. Sin not.

Religious moral recollection in students' graffiti showed distrust towards the outside world and in their biographic scribbles, they argued that they needed divine protection, in this case through the path of the subcultural identity. They used the most common religious expressions which might be ascribed to the fact that Zimbabwe is mainly a Christian community. It is worth noting that no occurrences of African Tradition expressions were spotted in the students' dormitories.

As indicated previously, moral recollections construct students' dormitory graffiti as a sacred world; a religious community of students who have recollected a generational distrust of the outside world. Students who adopt this religious identity tend to interpret graffiti subculture as giving solutions to problems associated with the fear of the unknown. Perspectives on subcultures as solutions have been criticized for drawing on structuralism and not acknowledging subcultural autonomy. However, these recollections are not objective representations of events happening in the school, they were performances of communicated religious differences that had meaning and function within the presently situated religious practice where life courses were examined. Through religious identity in the practice of graffiti, students constructed narratives where they had overcome obstacles, and hence present their school life as successful and graffiti as precious. Some of the expressions were a sort of reiteration of faith, either through using the bible verse citations; both a whole bible verse or part of it, such as;

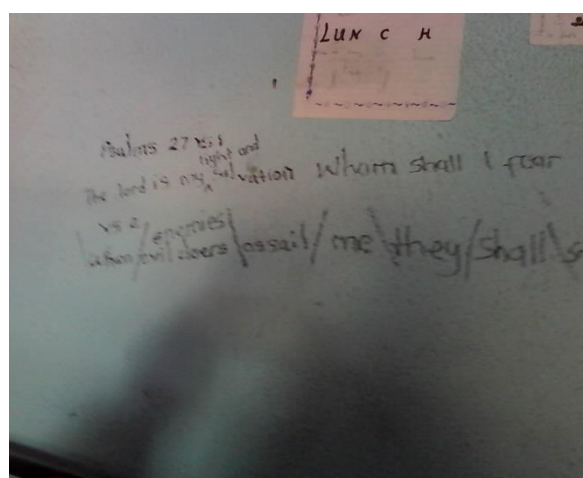


Image 3: Psalms 21 vs 1: The Lord is my light and my salvation whom shall, I fear. Even if enemies assail me, they shall fall.

The above texts and image revealed that students had transformed their dormitories into religious communities of practice where students aired their fears, trust, confidence, and encouragement from the word of God. Although students' graffiti in the dormitories had various religious contents such as references to God, references to the power of Jesus, lines from the bible, and prayers; it also indicated that the language of correspondence for all Christians is biblical. Stocker, Dutcher, Hargrove and Cook (1972), viewed graffiti as a reflection of the attitude of a given community and as such, students' graffiti reflected one of the goals of

Christian boarding schools in Zimbabwe, which is to spread the word of God. The findings of this research were, therefore, a good example of this assumption. Students' graffiti with diverse Christian contents in which religion was intertwined and twisted with the majority of the students' minds and souls, has been found in all the seven boarding schools in Gutu District of Zimbabwe which explained their Christian background. Those special pieces of graffiti with religious themes have also been the mark of Christian identity in Zimbabwean boarding schools.

The prevalence of such religious expressions in students' graffiti can be ascribed to the fact that Christianity is considered an integral part of Zimbabweans' entire life. It plays a noteworthy role in every aspect of their life and is intertwined with many people's beliefs, which are transmitted into the school by the More Knowledgeable Ones. It is intrinsic in the Zimbabwean education systems and teachings of the bible that guiding people to behave well is the duty of every Christian secondary boarding school. This implies that graffiti is a vehicle used to convey messages that urge their viewers to follow the acceptable code of conduct. It should be noted that some of these religious expressions reveal some other concerns of the students, such as intrinsic fear of the supernatural power of envy. In everyday life, students use these expressions with the names of Jesus (the son of God) to beseech divine

sources of help. They have a strong belief in the power of God that can ward off the evil eye from them, especially during the night, hence seeking God's intervention in the dormitories. Thus, using the exact words from the bible in their graffiti would make students feel closer to God and spiritually connected to Him. This implies that students' dormitory graffiti exhibit religious self-seeking identity and biography that can be viewed as a product, reflection, and propagation of the wider society's ideologies.

They also reflect certain psychological motives that drive students to write graffiti, such as friendship, conflict, revenge, depression, oppression, poverty, hate, emotional, and health problems. The following notice on the door to users of the dormitory is among the examples;



Image 4: Be a visitor not a spy

Within the context of students' graffiti discourse, such notices function to represent individual student's assessment of the place, which results in a significant construct of the dormitory as a multicultural, authentic, and distinctive territorial place. Thus, the student creatively writes a notice for 'visitors' in example 11;

11. Be a visitor not spy

While fellow students or boarding school workers are the audience for this notice, here referred to as 'visitors', in the dormitories students might feel threatened whenever they suspect that their privacy is being invaded. Such notices might adopt a contextualized interdisciplinary approach that considers the extra-linguistic and linguistic environments in which particular signs are located.

Other notices seem to be more threatening like the one in example 12;

12. Lady Fire... *Ukarwadziwa nesu haupori* (If you dare bother us, you will not like it.)

Such threatening notices in the dormitory seem to be scaring other fellow students. They seem to depict some public notices on private property like, "Trespassers will

be prosecuted". In a school setup, threatening texts of this nature might be coming from bullied students who may be beating up other students which seems to point out issues of bullying that are normally reported in boarding schools. Reports on bullying in Zimbabwean boarding schools are scary, especially to newcomers in the school. Some new students would end up running away from the hostels in fear of being bullied. If the culture of bullying goes unchecked in boarding schools, it may go bad to the extent of students hurting each another.

Bullying cases in boarding schools are normally secretive and such graffiti statements in the dormitories might be sending information to those in authority that bullying is taking place in the hostels. In this case, graffiti plays an important role for those in authority to check and eradicate bullying culture among students. Therefore, graffiti notices of this nature need to be checked and analyzed, since they may point out something big happening in the school.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The paper argues that dormitory graffiti aims to reach other students with a social message and that, as it does so, it performs a socio-psychological function. Not every graffiti text accomplishes this in the same way, though, or tries to convey the same kind of message. Certainly, there are examples of dormitory graffiti meant to offend and conjure hatred through expressions of bigotry, examples meant to intimidate other students and rivals by marking territory as gang-controlled, and examples meant to do little more than boost the egos of other graffiti writers. The paper also presented examples of dormitory graffiti that intend to invite fellow students into responses conceptualized as contemplation, which brings the gaze inward, reflection, which relates the individual to the social, and into action.

The paper analyzed how the various surfaces on which graffiti are inscribed in the dormitories of secondary boarding schools in the Gutu District of Zimbabwe offer functional spaces for the construction of knowledge. The analysis focused on the multiple functions of the social practice of graffiti on which attention was directed at participants' collaboration and social interaction in the occurrence of graffiti in secondary boarding schools. Participants' collaboration and social interaction in graffiti writing revealed a predominant socio-psychological function of dormitory graffiti. Students used dormitories as a site for sharing deep experiences, remembrances, autobiographies, and their fears of the unknown. The function of graffiti as a tool for self-identity construction among students has created a serious dormitory discourse in schools. Students, in this case, portrayed the practice of graffiti as reflective of inhibited sociocultural and mental capacity on the part of the writers.

Biographies and religious identification have taken much analysis of dormitory graffiti where knowledge of nostalgia and the need for God's divine protection occupied the mental capacity of boarding school life.

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The various surfaces on which the inscriptions were made have shown that knowledge among students in secondary boarding schools is created through collaboration, social cohesion, and interaction among social peer groups. Inscriptions in secondary boarding schools revealed an active construction of knowledge on sociocultural identities and issues by students.

5.2 Recommendations

The paper recommends that dormitory graffiti should be studied since there is something that students are communicating. Students' dormitory graffiti might imply that something is not well in the school dormitories and reflect a strained level of interaction among students. This research calls for teachers and authorities in education to enforce immediate action on the behaviour of students. Mangeya (2014) has deduced that people are emotional and manifest emotional outbursts; which is typically exhibited by our adolescent students in their dormitory graffiti in secondary boarding schools. Therefore, teachers and those in authority in boarding schools should take their time to understand the emotional levels of their learners and offer appropriate emotional therapy so that students understand the reality that surrounds them before emotional outbursts in graffiti writing. All these ideas increase awareness and the importance of graffiti as an interesting topic for further investigation.

Above all, the research has not been exhaustive in terms of its breadth in the study of students' graffiti inscriptions in schools. There are several areas where further development through thesis and research papers can be envisaged. The research can be duplicated in pre-schools, primary schools, or tertiary institutions in Zimbabwe. There are some other possible avenues for gender-based differences besides stylistic, textual, and semantic features of graffiti writing in pre-schools, primary schools, and private boarding schools that future research may work on. The analysis of students' graffiti elements from a different theoretical perspective goes a long way in yielding more interesting results and insight into understanding graffiti inscriptions in schools.

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