

IDENTITY AND IDEOLOGY: THE DIALOGIC NATURE OF LATRINALIA

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Abstract

Graffiti has been an important cultural phenomenon throughout history. However, research has yet to explore how the characteristics of the medium itself influence the graffiti for which it serves as a backdrop. One of the most unique mediums in which graffiti regularly appears is public restrooms, which offer potential graffitists almost complete anonymity. This study analyzed the content and communicative features of 323 graffiti in public restrooms and their relation to the nature of the space and larger socio-cultural values. The results show that no particular ideological paradigm is predominant among the graffiti. Rather, the anonymity of the medium acts to preserve an ongoing ideological debate where identity is formed and reframed throughout.

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Graffiti has been an important cultural phenomenon throughout history. It is visible on almost every conceivable surface from ancient Roman bathhouses to modern-day elementary school desktops (Tanzer, 1939; Reisner and Wechsler, 1974). With such a bounty of material to draw on, graffiti has been studied by a variety of scholars from different disciplines. What has been missing from scholarly debate, however, is an explanation of the “refracting power that the peculiar characteristics of any medium exercises on the value-system for which it serves as an outlet” (Gonos, Mulkern, and Poushinsky, 1976, pp.40). If we are to observe and analyze graffiti through the lens of culture, the specific context in which graffiti appears may be a powerful determinant of its content and purpose.

Dundes (1966) coined the term “latrinalia” to refer to graffiti that appears in public restrooms. Public restrooms are a distinctive medium because they offer the potential graffitist almost complete anonymity. This anonymity allows the opportunity to use language and express opinions and attitudes that are taboo in ordinary social life. It is plausible, then, that anonymous graffiti is a uniquely accurate and unrestricted expression of sentiment (McGlynn, 1972).

Literature

In one of the earliest empirical studies of graffiti in public restrooms, Dundes (1966) developed a taxonomy of the different topics commonly addressed in latrinalia. He found that latrinalia tends to center on five different topical themes. First, most latrinalia consist of advertisements and solitictations, most of which are sexual in nature. Second were requests or demands concerning bodily functions. The final three topical themes were directions, commentaries, and personal introspection. Dundes also found that graffiti was less frequent in women’s restrooms compared to men’s. Dundes’ study would come to characterize much of the subsequent research on latrinalia in that two areas of inquiry – topical content and gender disparities – dominate the extant literature.

Kinsey et al. (1953) were the next to empirically analyze graffiti in public restrooms. Their primary interest was in exploring the sexual content of latrinalia. Kinsey in particular posited that the sexual messages inscribed on bathroom walls could provide insight into the extent and nature of people’s suppressed sexual desires. He found that much of the bathroom graffiti, particularly in men’s bathrooms, were homosexual in content. Two possible explanations for the prevalence of homosexual content were posited: (1) homosexual individuals (men) are more likely to write about sexuality in public restrooms given that their audience are members of the same sex, or (2) interest in anatomy and function of organs. Findings also showed that men produced more graffiti than women.

This study was replicated in 1975 by Farr and Gordon. The purpose of their replication was to determine whether the gender gap identified by Kinsey had narrowed as a result of the sociocultural liberation women experienced during the 60s and 70s. They found that the proportion of latrinalia that appeared in women’s restrooms had increased from 25 percent to 44 percent. Furthermore, the overall quantity of women’s latrinalia had also increased. Despite observed increases in the absolute and relative

quantity of latrinalia in women's restrooms, however, men's latrinalia was still more common than women's.

The supposed gender gap in latrinalia was further investigated by Arluke, Kutakoff, and Levin (1987). Their data showed that, much the same as earlier research, women's latrinalia is comparatively rare and significantly less likely to contain sexual references. Even in instances when women did write about sexuality, their language tended to be less obscene and more conventional. The authors concluded that the cultural revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s had little-to-no impact on gender mores as expressed in latrinalia.

In a more recent study, Bartholome and Snyder (2004) analyzed both qualitative and quantitative differences in graffiti found in a men and women's restroom at a restaurant in Rochester, New York. Their finding revealed no significant difference in the relative quantity of men and women's latrinalia. Of the 269 inscriptions they transcribed, 52% were written by women and 48% were written by men. The overall content of the graffiti also differed little between men and women. Both gender groups wrote primarily about heterosexual attitudes and behavior. One important difference between Bartholome and Snyder's research compared to the studies that preceded theirs was that patrons were encouraged to write graffiti in the restrooms at the restaurant where they collected data. Thus, the graffiti included in their study did not represent an illicit or illegal act. Whether graffiti is an act of deviance or not is likely to have an impact on both the content of the messages and the frequency with which they appear in any given space (Ferrell, 1996).

What has been absent from scholarly research is an exploration of latrinalia as social discourse. Past research has treated latrinalia as a unidirectional communicative device. That is, studies either implicitly or explicitly assume that graffiti in public restrooms is a form of expression whereby the author makes a statement that subsequent patrons passively receive and interpret. This represents a somewhat inaccurate conceptualization of the operative features of latrinalia, which is a conspicuously bidirectional exchange of attitudes, identity, and ideology. Despite the absence of extant empirical research on the communicative features of latrinalia, two competing theoretical models have been offered that were used to guide the analysis presented here.

Stocker, Dutcher, Hargrove, and Cook (1972), in what has been termed the structural theory of graffiti content, argued that graffiti is an accurate indicator of the consensual values of the community in which it is written. They provide some specific examples regarding homosexual graffiti, principally that the frequency of homosexual graffiti will decrease as a result of the liberalizing influence of Gay Liberation. Gonos et al. (1976) challenged this theory by creating a framework which essentially alleged the opposite – that the communicative content (and frequency) of graffiti will vary *inversely* with relevant dominant values.

Central to Gonos et al.'s (1976) thesis is the assumption that as societal values undergo change, sentiments that challenge dominant values will manifest covertly as anonymous graffiti. There is a general consensus, best represented by postmodern theory, that society is currently experiencing drastic change (Best and Kellner, 1991). Thus, if Gonos et al.'s (1976) theory is accurate, now is the time when anonymous graffiti's challenge to accepted norms should be especially pronounced.

Data and Methods

What follows is the results of an analysis of bathroom graffiti recorded during approximately 21 hours of data collection. During this time, I visited 42 men's bathrooms in seven different buildings on a Division 1 university campus in the Midwest. The number of graffiti messages recorded totaled 323. Only eight pictures were observed. During data collection, I also conducted an unobtrusive observation of patrons' behavior in order to identify the socio-cultural rules that govern individual behavior and interaction in men's bathrooms. Doing so is essential to establishing a context for the analysis and interpretation of the results.

The 323 graffiti were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Thematic content analysis is a widely used technique for identifying and analyzing themes in qualitative data.² The six phase analytic procedure followed here involved reviewing the data to identify sweeping patterns and common elements. Once the patterns were identified, the internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity of all themes were assessed to ensure that the themes are reliable. Inter-rater reliability and Cohen's Kappa was also conducted to test the reliability of the results. This analysis yielded a Kappa score of .746, which was significant at the .01 level.

Results

During data collection, I observed four rules that governed bathroom behavior.³ Behavior that violated (or ignored) these rules was met on almost every occasion with unspoken disapproval or increased discomfort on the part of other patrons.

- 1) No talking – men do not converse in the bathroom.
- 2) No eye contact – men look directly ahead at the wall only inches from their face when using urinals and do not acknowledge each others presence at any time.
- 3) No lingering – men do not socialize in the restroom. They stay only the necessary amount of time.
- 4) No showing emotion – men's restrooms are generally impassive places

These rules seem to reflect dominant values that demonize homosexuality. In public restrooms, men are required to expose themselves in oftentimes crowded, close quarters. The fact that all four rules minimize interaction and individual identity (e.g., don't talk or exhibit emotions), suggest that they are intended to reduce homophobic discomfort. In this context, Stocker et al.'s (1972) theory would suggest that the graffiti messages would be homophobic, while Gonos et al.'s (1976) theory would postulate that homosexual content would dominate.

The results revealed that both homophobic and homosexual graffiti were equally prominent. No particular ideological paradigm whatsoever "dominated" any other. Instead, the dialogue between ideologies was paramount. Virtually all graffiti messages that advanced some perspective were challenged by other messages. The graffiti

² For a detailed review of thematic content analysis, see Braun and Clarke (2006).

³ This specific point is applicable only to men's restrooms, the specific focus of this analysis.

represented an argument of sorts. These arguments typically involved multiple messages by multiple authors. Further, the messages were patterned in a temporal sequence. Most often, response statements (i.e., messages that were a clear response to other messages) appeared below the messages they were intended to respond to. Thus, an observer could read the graffiti dialogue as it occurred through time. This phenomenon appeared as illustrated by the following statement(s):

“Whoever draws a dick on the wall is not straight”

“Actually, they’re straight gay”

“So are you you fucking fag”

“Everyone loves a homophobe”

Responses also manifested as a circular pattern. Although this patterning was far less frequently pronounced than the temporal sequence, it occurred when the original statement, i.e., the message(s) being responded to, was unusually hostile and antagonistic. In these instances, an original statement appeared in the middle of response statements that literally encircled it. This manifestation suggested that response statements were responding not only to the substance of the original statements, but also to their tone. Circular patterning allowed multiple response messages to be leveled at one original statement. While temporal patterning only allowed one response statement to appear below its target, circular patterning was, on average, composed of one original statement and five response statements. Also, it is plausible that the “encircling” of the original message implied a desire to contain its sentiment. The following statement is representative of graffiti that appeared as a circular response pattern:

	(2)
(1)	“If you wrote this you’re gay, Bitch.”
“FUCK RELIGION”	
	(OS)
“Fuck all you homophobic discriminatory males”	“Homosexuality is a sin and all fags go to Hell”
(3)	“I will fucking rape all you fucking Jesus freaks.” (4)

This mosaic contains an original statement (OS) with two underlying elements – religion and homophobia. The response statements were leveled at (1) religion as an institution, (2) the author of the original statement, (3) homophobic men in general, (4) and religious people in general. They “contain” the original statement not only on the bathroom wall, but also by challenging all the outlets that religious homophobic ideology has in its arsenal – the institution of religion and its subscribers.

Thematic Content

Although the content of the graffiti observed and recorded ranged from poetic statements regarding human potential to lists of bathrooms on campus where the author had masturbated, three strongly pronounced themes emerged. The most common theme – sexuality – involved homophobic, homosexual, and heterosexual messages and pictures. Religious and antireligious statements and pictures were somewhat less frequent, but sometimes related to, sexuality graffiti. The least frequent theme observed was humorous graffiti. It is worthwhile to note here that pictures were rare. Over 97% of recorded graffiti were written statements. This suggests that advancing a certain ideology is a key intention of latrinalia. The meaning of any picture can be vague whereas it is far more difficult to misinterpret the meaning of, for example, this statement found on the inside of a stall door: “I hate Jews and fags.”

Sexuality

Although the total number of homophobic statements recorded was much larger than that for homosexual statements, the difference virtually disappeared when the anti-homophobic statements were added to the homosexual ones. Also, these messages were comprised of almost entirely antagonistic statements. The implication here is that “sexuality” statements are not expressions of sexuality per se, but ideological statements. Homophobic statements are, of course, inherently antagonistic, but they were countered on almost all instances observed by homosexual and/or anti-homophobic messages. Homosexual messages typically consisted of simple declaratory statements of homosexuality in response to homophobic statements. For example:

“Y U looking left fag?”

“Fuck you I’m gay”

Interestingly, although most anti-homophobic messages were simple defamations of the ideology and its subscribers (e.g., “Fuck you and your homophobic shit”), many were attacks leveled against “frat boys.” These messages were not necessarily responses to homophobic statements written by fraternity members.⁴ Rather, they are likely a function of fraternity stereotypes whereby fraternities become symbols of male heterosexuality and, arguably, homophobia in a university setting. It seems some authors of anti-homophobic statements assign an identity to the ideology they are attacking.

Although quite rare, heterosexual statements were typically expressions of sexuality. They sometimes contained minor levels of antagonism, but even in these instances the sexually expressive component was forefront (e.g., “I cumed on your mom’s tits). Also, they were typically not involved in the dialogue – they were not response statements nor did they evoke any.

⁴ There was not one instance where such statements were accompanied by fraternity symbols or any other indication of membership in a fraternity.

Religiosity

The majority of religious messages recorded were short declaratory statements such as “trust Jesus” and “Jesus is lord.” This does not, however, mean that religiosity does not have its place in the ideological battles occurring on the bathroom walls. Religious messages were often backdrops upon which these argumentative debates appeared. For example, the phrases “TRUST JESUS” and “JESUS IS LORD” were literally written across debates concerning sexuality.

Religious graffiti manifested as a response to entire debates. The “backdrop” it provides seems to suggest a context in which the debate should occur. Each one of these messages contained some indicator of its pertinence to a set of other messages. The general theme religious graffiti took on the bathroom walls was evangelical. Virtually all religious statements seemed to suggest to the homophobic and the homosexual that they both need to “Give your life to Jesus,” as one graffitist wrote. The authors of religious messages are advocating their ideology as strongly as others because, as one statement appeared, “without Jesus you’ll be in HELL.”

Humor

Humorous graffiti had many unique characteristics. It was the only style of graffiti that appeared outside of the toilet stalls. It was also the only style that did not include any dialogic component. Humorous messages were never response statements, nor did they generate any. Rather, they manifested in two distinct ways. Humorous graffiti most often appeared inside bathroom stalls and were almost always short (i.e., two to four lines) rhyming jokes that reflect the nature of the space. Public restrooms have a very specific purpose – to provide a space for the dispensing of bodily waste outside the home. The focus of virtually all humorous graffiti that were recorded inside stalls was urination, defecation, or genitalia. For example:

“I’m sitting on the shitter and feel so bitter because my asshole’s
so tight I can’t squeeze one out tonight”

Humorous graffiti also appeared outside the stalls on the walls of the bathroom itself. The walls of the bathrooms observed were all constructed using large brick-like objects bounded with grout. In almost most every case where graffiti appeared on these walls, the statements were written on the grout and were a play on the word itself.

“The grout wall of China”

“Grout expectations”

“Alexander the grout”

“Oscar the grout”

Thus, humorous graffiti seem to be poking fun at both the physical environment and the nature of the space. They are statements that mock the bathroom itself and what the author and observers’ presence in it indicates. As previously mentioned, the rules that govern bathroom behavior seem to be mechanisms with which to minimize discomfort. This discomfort is a function of the nature of the space, the same nature that humorous

graffiti is addressing. Perhaps then humorous graffiti serves the same purpose as these rules. By making fun of the space and the behavior that occurs within it, discomfort is relieved.

Conclusion

Public graffiti has long been afforded cultural significance (Cohan, 1975; Castellon, 1978; Ferrell, 1996). However, the specific characteristics of the medium and its' role in shaping graffiti has been relatively ignored (Gonos et al., 1976). Also, ongoing debates have been concerned with graffiti's reflection of societal values. In the context of latrinalia, this often takes the form of homophobia vs. homosexuality (Stocker et al., 1972). This study analyzed 323 graffiti in public restrooms and concluded that no single theme – homosexuality or heterosexuality – dominates. Rather, the dominant theme is best characterized as an impassioned dispute where no single ideology prevails. The debate is clearly ongoing. It does, however, reflect, as do the rules of bathroom behavior observed during data collection, a general discomfort regarding the nature of the space where it appears. It seems the medium sets the agenda and the authors take position, using the bathroom stalls as a battleground on which to express their ideology.

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