

**GENDER DIFFERENCES AND SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS'  
RESPONSE TO GRAFFITI WRITING IN SELECTED SECONDARY  
SCHOOLS IN KENYA**

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**ABSTRACT**

Graffiti take the form of written language whose authorship remains mostly anonymous. It precisely, refers to any wall writing, pictures and symbols or markings of any kind on any surface anywhere no matter what motivates the writer. Most graffiti are viewed as illegal or vandalism of property by those in authority. Secondary school students use graffiti codes as a form of communication when they feel other channels to express themselves, have been blocked by those in authority. This study aimed at analyzing the reaction of school administrators towards graffiti writing and establishes the gender difference in graffiti writing in secondary schools in Kenya. Graffiti texts were collected in ten secondary schools in Laikipia County in Kenya, and purposively sampled. Out of one thousand graffiti texts collected, two hundred were randomly sampled for analysis. Twenty English language teachers were purposively sampled to take part in an interview. One hundred students were randomly sampled to fill in questionnaires. A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was carried out with another group of five students randomly sampled across the classes, in each of the ten schools, making a total of fifty. The data collected were analyzed qualitatively to arrive at inferences and conclusions. The findings of the study were that some school administrators viewed graffiti as an important source of valued information while others viewed it as a nuisance and vandalism of school property. It was also established that boys wrote graffiti differently from girls in terms of the way each gender expressed itself. Students use graffiti to communicate information that would be beneficial to the school administrators, quality assurance and standards officers, students' counselors, policy makers and other stakeholders. Classroom teachers may also refer to graffiti to establish the unspoken students' problems, thereby preventing entropy of the school system.

**Keywords:** Codes, Graffiti, Message, Sociolinguistics.

## **BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

Graffiti (singular, graffito) refer to writings or drawings scribbled, scratched or sprayed on a wall or a public space. They are also any type of public markings or written words that appear on walls of buildings. Graffiti have existed since ancient times, with examples dating back to ancient Greece and Roman Empire. In the modern era graffiti have been used as a mode to pass socio-political messages in an artistic form. Its growth into urban culture has been fuelled by the evolution of hip-hop and other urban cultures. Though celebrated by many, graffiti are a constant point of disagreement between the artists and law enforcement officers. In most secondary schools in this region there had been persistent writing of graffiti on the walls of classrooms, toilets, libraries, dormitories and laboratories. Students sometimes used various coded and complex graffiti to communicate among themselves. Understanding these codes could help to clarify what transpires amongst students and also help in understanding them. If problems expressed through graffiti are not addressed, the situation could affect learning in schools as it could lead to unrest. According to Nwoye (1993), wall writings and drawings have been used for a long time by various groups who feel oppressed. People without avenues for self-expression seek other avenues. Graffiti on walls of public places becomes a favored option.

Nwoye (1993) points out that the student population is one such group that feels it does not enjoy the privilege of public self-expression. Students opposing the school system may not come out openly but may express their anger in graffiti for fear of reprisals. They may use unique codes that are understood by the writer and the targeted audience. (Ferrell 1993) claims that graffiti can be viewed as contemporary expressive opposition to authority. Though each graffito contains its own message, the implicit assumption is most graffiti opposes authority.

Rothman (2002) states that most secondary school students are in the adolescence stage which is mostly a time of resistance to authority. In their effort to express their wishes, students are generally misunderstood and dismissed. In the school hierarchy, students are regarded as the inferior and the voiceless group, while administrators are the dominant body. Students feel rules and regulations are imposed on them by parents, head- teachers, teachers, prefects and sometimes school workers. This scenario brings discontent and in an attempt to get themselves heard, unique ways emerge in which different genders express themselves.

Phillips (1999) claims graffiti are traditionally used by people who have little representation within the mass media. Nwoye (1993) also says graffiti are sheer expression of youthful exuberance, a manifestation of vandalism. The hidden identity of graffiti writers gives them courage to make sure they are heard. Students in Kenya are rarely involved in decision making

by those in authority. So graffiti provide the privacy and anonymity necessary to express oneself without fear of consequences. The above causes of graffiti writing are general and each case may have its unique reasons why students engage in it. Graffiti writing can be studied as a portrayal of social issues. They also have their special language which can be studied as forms of language in context. This study used a sociolinguistics approach to the study of graffiti. This entails taking a linguistic event (such as the writing of a graffiti) and then working outwards to incorporate other graffiti events, cultural facts, local customs, and anything that would have influenced the writer of that graffiti. It is only in this way that researchers can really come close to understanding the writer.

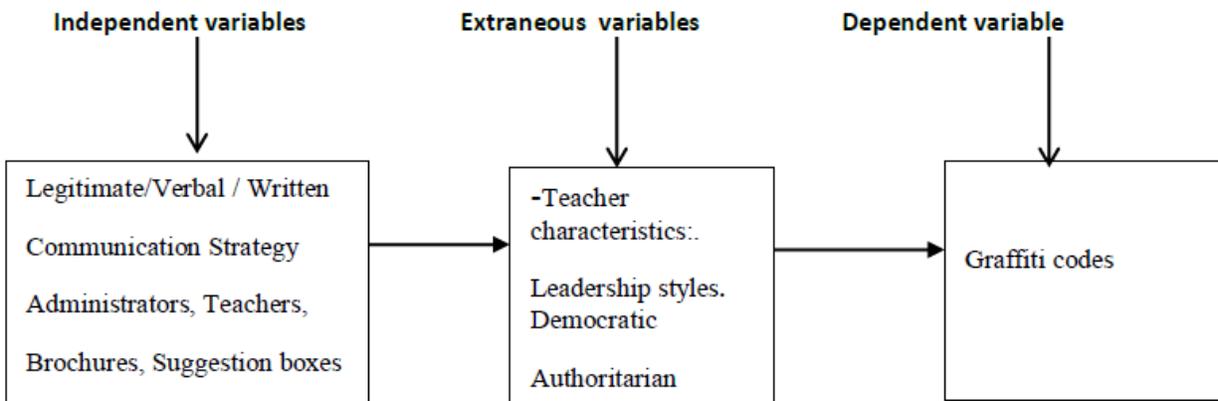
### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of the study was to find out what triggers graffiti writing among different gender in the sampled schools, how school administration responds to it and its consequences.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study was guided by General System Theory (GST) which was originally proposed by biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy in 1950's. Von Bertalanffy (1950) asserts that a system is a complex of interacting elements and that they are open to, and interact with their environments. In addition, they can acquire qualitatively new properties through emergence, thus they are in a continual evolution. When referring to systems, it also generally means that they are *self-regulating* (they self-correct through feedback). System thinking is both part-to-whole and whole-to-part thinking about making connections between the various elements so that they fit together as a whole.

According to Ayot & Patel (1987), a system could be broken down into its individual components so that each component is analyzed as an independent entity. The premise of the GST is to fully understand the operations of an entity and a school could be viewed as a system. The GST also operate on the premise that components or elements that make up a system are closely interdependent and actions or conditions that affect any one element will affect all others within the system (Powers & Hoffman, 1996). For the school to function efficiently, there must be communication among the interacting elements: administrators, teachers, students, parents and other support staff. Graffiti writing could have a negative effect on classroom learning if teachers and students do not understand each other's needs, no matter what environment is provided in school for learning. From the GST theory, the following conceptual framework emerged, which guided the study.



**Figure 1: Relationship between independent, extraneous and dependent variables of the study. Derived from GST.**

The conceptual framework shows independent variables are communication strategies used by school administrators and teachers while dealing with students. Communication could be through pronouncements, letters, posters, brochures and suggestion boxes. These are legitimate ways for students to communicate with school management. These independent variables were investigated to establish whether they existed in schools. The dependent variable was the graffiti written by students. This happens when independent variables are non-existent or are controlled. An example of these is lack of avenues to express their frustrations. Extraneous variables are teacher characteristics and leadership styles. These might be democratic, authoritarian, motivating or those that offer counseling services.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Research Design**

This study was a survey as factual data were gathered for decision making. A survey is an efficient method of collecting descriptive data regarding, for example, practices and characteristics of a population. Any study that deals with how people feel or how they behave is considered a survey study and it allows for generalization (Sherman,1988; Mugenda & Mugenda, 1999). A descriptive research methodology, using qualitative data analyses was adopted for this study.

**Target Population and Sample Sizes**

The target populations constituted students and teachers in all 67 secondary schools in Laikipia County, Kenya. This is the population to which the researchers wanted to generalize the results of the study. A major assumption of the study was that students are the authors of the graffiti and

that they and their teachers constituted the larger number of readers of graffiti. Ten secondary schools were purposively sampled from across the four divisions in Laikipia County. The research specifically targeted ten secondary schools that had experienced unrests or other forms of students' disturbances in the previous three years. One teacher, one head of school and 15 students were sampled from each of the 10 schools, making a total sample of ten teachers, ten heads of schools and 150 students.

### **Instrumentation**

Research instruments should be validated and their reliability established (Niemann, 2002). Assessment of reliability and content, construct and face validity was conducted. The main statistical measure to determine reliability was the Cronbach's alpha coefficient, whose average for the students' questionnaire was 0.87. This was acceptable as 0.7 and higher is an acceptable reliability coefficient, (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003; Mugenda & Mugenda, 1999).

A questionnaire was administered to the sampled students. It sought information on the type of graffiti they wrote and the purpose for writing them. It also sort their views on how the administration responded to graffiti writing. Information elicited helped to estimate the extent of graffiti writing in the schools and motives for them. The instrument also helped to get insights on the nature of problems the students were facing in schools and also their needs. The questionnaire data assisted in the interpretation of graffiti writing in individual schools.

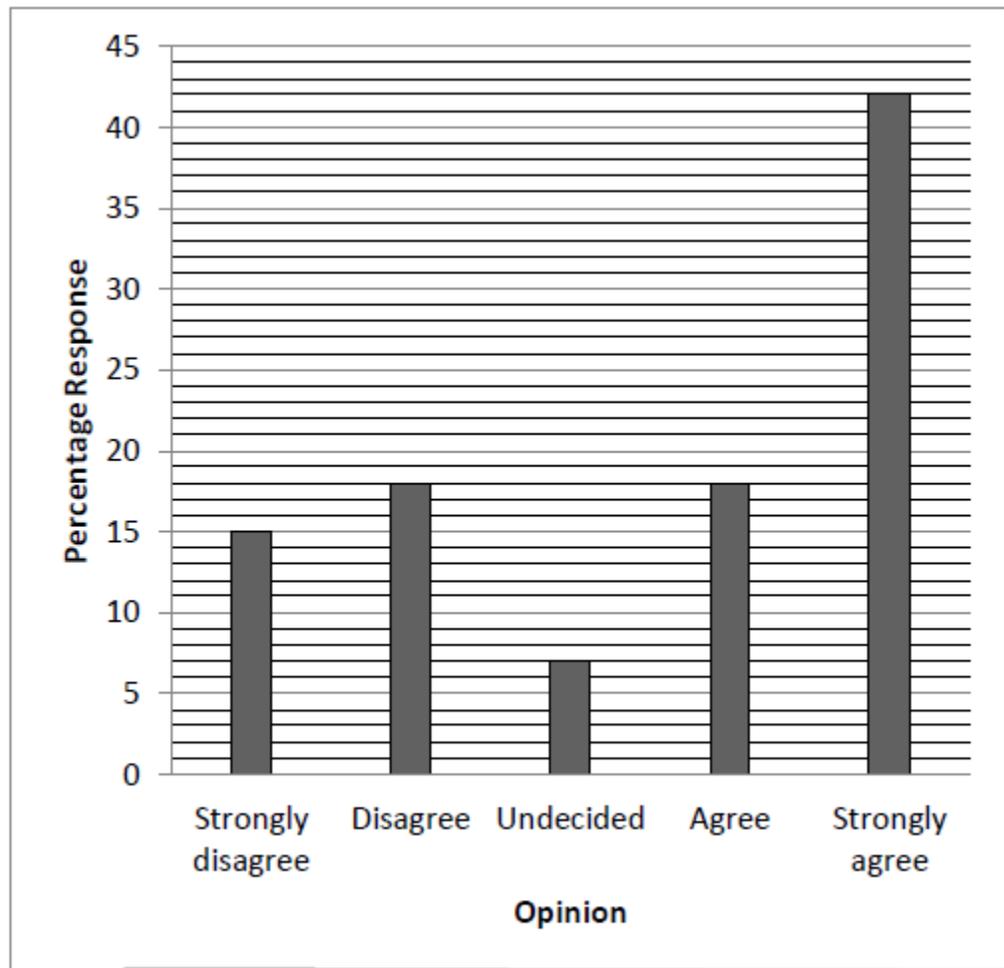
A semi-structured interview schedule was administered to head teachers. The purpose was to counter check the information collected through other instruments. The interview sought their opinions about graffiti writing. Data elicited helped to give an insight on graffiti writing as a form of communication, and the role head teachers played to encourage or stop it.

A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) is best suited for obtaining data on group attitudes and perceptions (Mwiria & Wamahiu, 1995). The researcher carried out an FGD with five students who were randomly selected from each of the ten secondary schools. The researcher acted as the facilitator. The main purpose of FGD was to establish the gender orientation of graffiti writing. The discussions were based on the graffiti texts collected in each school and individual students were given an opportunity to respond to the questions. The FGDs were tape recorded to enable the researchers to replay the tape during data analysis. The discussions helped to clarify the information found in the collected graffiti texts.

### **Research Results**

Students in secondary schools wrote graffiti to express various opinions on matters that affected them. These ranged from personal problems, boredom, identity to issues affecting them as a

group, especially problems that have to do with the school administration. Graffiti messages to do with love, territorial markings, food, sex . remembrance of persons and dissatisfaction with school authority were prevalent in most schools. The figure below shows their opinions on whether problems to do with their welfare are well expressed through graffiti.



**Figure 2: Graph showing opinions about whether problems are well expressed in graffiti**

A majority of the students (60%), (42%+ 18%) agreed that they express their problems in graffiti while 33% (15%+18%) disagreed .These findings agree with those of Yieke (2003), in a study conducted on graffiti in Kenyan universities. She suggested that graffiti should never be ignored by those in authority if they wanted to know the sentiments of students.

**How the Administration Viewed Graffiti Writing in Schools**

Opinions from heads of schools on how they viewed graffiti writing in their schools showed the majority (60%) believed graffiti were a nuisance and that it made the walls of the school appear dirty. Graffiti writing should be stopped as it causes schools to incur a lot of expenses in repairs. However, 40% gave a contrary opinion by saying graffiti writing was a good channel for communication between the students and teachers. This is because students could express their thoughts freely and administrators could address their problems. They were of the opinion that there should be a designated place for the students to express their feelings and views instead of defacing the walls. When asked to indicate other avenues through which students could express their grievances, the majority (90%) mentioned the following: class meetings, class teachers, prefects, writing notes, news briefs during assembly, writing on the chalkboard, support staff and student informers. Thirty percent revealed they use student informers to get confidential information from the students. The majority of the school heads (70%) described the relationship between the administration and prefects as close and cordial. The school heads also gave varied reasons on why they believed students resorted to graffiti writing. These were: Fear of the head teacher and teachers, administrators' indifference to their needs, high-handedness of school heads and teachers, isolation in decision making and lack of alternative solutions to their grievances.

From this information, it can be concluded that a majority of school heads were aware that students write graffiti but did not recognize it as an important communication strategy. This made them punish students who wrote graffiti in schools due to cost implications in repainting the walls.

### **Gender Difference in Graffiti Writing in Schools**

In observing gender involvement, 60 (30%) of the 200 sampled graffiti texts were written by girls while 80 (40%) were written by boys as they had been collected from single sex schools. The rest 60 (30%) were collected in areas frequented by both genders, in co-educational secondary schools. This variation occurred due to having few separate gender schools in the locale. Six teachers out of 20 (30%) agreed that girls and boys wrote graffiti on the same issues but four disagreed. Ten teachers did not respond to the question, because they were not aware of the different types of graffiti.

The collected data showed both boys and girls write graffiti on similar issues, but slightly differ on style of communication. Issues to do with individuals (love, sex, nicknames, hobbies and attack on school administration) appeared to recur in both genders' graffiti. Girls seemed to be better in expressing personal feelings than boys. The major differences between them were captured in the use of language. Girls' graffiti appeared to be more interactive and interpersonal. One would raise an issue or a question and other girls would provide a series of responses. Out

of 100 graffiti written by girls, 60% were in dialogue form and only 5% used symbols and drawings. On the other hand, 95% of boys' graffiti used symbols and drawings.

The research also found that the content of graffiti regarding love, sex and relationships written by both genders differed. Those written by boys appeared to refer to sexual act, sexual organs in a rather open, crude and direct manner. They also attacked or made jokes about administration directly and individually. However, the same type of graffiti written by girls were interpersonal and seemed to prefer expressing themselves and their relationships in a romantic and gentler manner, using euphemisms instead of taboo words. The researchers did not find it fit to include the actual graffiti seen due to the derogatory nature of some of them.

## **DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS**

The study attempted to find out how school administrators responded to graffiti writing by the students. The results showed that school administration mostly relied on, teachers, prefects, class meetings, suggestion boxes, student informers, and support staff to communicate with students. Most of the school administrators did not view graffiti writing as an important means of communication between the administration and the students. Consequently, they did not take keen interest in addressing students' grievances. They took this behavior as students' uncalled for rebellion to authority; doing what they were forbidden to do. Majority of the administrators viewed graffiti writing as a nuisance, adolescents' jokes and lack of discipline.

Hougan (1972) asserted that when some events or problems trouble the community, the anxieties manifest themselves in graffiti. He also suggested that people in authority would learn more "from reading restroom walls than by taking a poll." It is for this reason that school administrators should have keen interests in the kind of graffiti written in their schools, so as to address the issues raised by the students.

There were also some school administrators who viewed graffiti as a positive strategy for the students to express their needs and interests. The study got varied opinions on how the administration viewed graffiti writing in their schools. This finding agrees with that of Varnedoe & Gopnik (1991) who saw graffiti as a composite phenomenon, part childish prank and part, adult insult. This assertion was contrary to Abel & Buckley (1977) who took a different stance on graffiti writing by describing it as a psychological phenomenon, "a form of communication that is both personal and free of everyday social restraints, that normally prevent people from giving uninhibited reign to their thoughts."

## **Gender Difference in Graffiti Writing in Schools**

The study found out that both boys and girls wrote graffiti on similar issues but differed in the style of writing. Most of the graffiti texts written by boys were written in declarative form (statements) while girls' graffiti were conversational. One girl would write a question to seek the opinion of others, and a series of responses would follow from different readers, giving their own opinions. This was evident by the graffiti writings with different handwriting that came below the question posed by the first graffiti writer. It was also found that girls appeared to be careful in the use of offensive words in their graffiti writing while boys appeared to be direct and uninhibited in the use of taboo words. One interesting finding of this study is that in both genders, the majority of the sex related graffiti and use of vulgar words were found in the laboratories and not in the toilets.

This study also established that graffiti written by girls were rarely accompanied by drawings as was the case with graffiti written by boys. These findings concur with those of Bruner & Kelso (1980) who reviewed various quantitative studies on graffiti in restrooms. In their study, they found women's graffiti were more of a dialogue and about their friendships and relationships. Men wrote about their sexual conquests. Cole (1991) and Hentschel (1987) also used the gendered approach to analyze latrinalia and came to much the same conclusions.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The findings of this study indicate that there is no unison in the views of teachers and school administrators, as far as graffiti writing is concerned, as they view the vice differently. Students write graffiti using commonly understood coded messages to communicate among themselves and the school administrators. The causes of graffiti writing in schools ranged from personal problems, boredom, identity to issues affecting them as a group, especially problems that have to do with the school administration. This happens when they are unhappy about the school administration or when they want to communicate among themselves. Most of the graffiti are written in privacy as some writers prefer anonymity, either due to fear of reprisals or because what they write is derogatory. In most cases, it is difficult to identify the writers.

It was also found there were striking gender differences in the way girls and boys expressed themselves through graffiti writing. It would be prudent for the school administrators to take keen interest in how students express their sentiments, decode the messages and address issues raised, to avoid entropy of their school systems. It is recommendation that graffiti writing be recognized by school administration as an important communication strategy, and designate places for graffiti writing. Genuine issues raised which cause disharmony should be addressed, to avoid students' unrest. Derogatory graffiti or that which cause hatred should be stopped.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **QUESTIONS FOR FOCUSED GROUP DISCUSSION**

1. What makes students write graffiti?
2. How useful is graffiti communication?
3. Does the authority take notice of the messages communicated through graffiti by students? If yes, how does it react?
4. What other channels of communication do students use in school?
5. Do boys and girls use different styles for different messages when communicating in graffiti? If yes, what are the different styles
6. When do you have rampant graffiti writing in your school?
7. Does graffiti writing done by both boys and girls?
8. Which main issues are recurrent in graffiti writing in your school?

**APPENDIX B**

**INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR SCHOOL HEAD TEACHERS**

Please respond to the questions below honestly. Confidentiality will be maintained.

1. How does graffiti written by students in your school benefit the administration?
2. What kind of messages are expressed in graffiti in your school?
3. What is the role played by students in selection of school prefects.
4. What issues appear recurring in graffiti in your school?
5. How do you react to students' graffiti that are offensive?
6. How does information reach you from students?
7. What kind of graffiti are prevalent in your school?
8. Are there graffiti codes written in your school that you cannot decipher their meanings?