An Analysis of Graffiti as a Communicative Strategy in Selected Public Boarding Secondary Schools

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Abstract

This study is an investigation of graffiti written by secondary school students on walls of school buildings and on top of desks. There has been rampant writing of graffiti by students despite the existence of other channels of communication in their schools. Analysis of these graffiti may be an opportunity to understand them with the aim of assisting them overcome the challenges they face. The study described the types of graffiti used by students. The study was guided by Critical Discourse Analysis as its theoretical framework. The research design adopted descriptive survey design. Simple random sampling was used to obtain the graffiti to be analyzed from each theme. Systematic random sampling was used to select two students in purely boys and girls schools. Stratified random sampling and systematic random sampling was used in mixed schools to select a boy and a girl from each form in a school to take part in focus group discussion. The study employed Critical Discourse Analysis approach to analyze the graffiti. The results indicated that the most common types of graffiti written by students were gang graffiti, tag graffiti and existential graffiti. The findings of this research contribute to linguistic knowledge in the area of sociolinguistics. In addition, this knowledge helps school administrators to make improvements in the management of the secondary schools by identifying new ideas which they may use to make communication effective and possibly control problems before they get out of hand

Keywords: graffiti, types of graffiti, text, communicative strategies

INTRODUCTION

Graffiti is viewed as freedom of expression whereby the writer is often anonymous and is restrained by personal inhibitions and social norms to freely express himself/herself (Tracy, 2005). In the Kenya context, graffiti is mostly written on a wide array of surfaces which include desk tops, billboards, walls, roadside signs and inside the walls of buildings in institutions like schools (Mwangi, 2012). According to Rothman (2002) adolescence is

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the stage of growth and development that most of the secondary schools students are in, and is mostly a time of resistance to authority. In their effort to express their wishes, the students are generally misunderstood and dismissed since adults dominate the scene and the adolescents feel oppressed when they lack chances to express their opinions. Many students opposing the school system may not come out openly but may express their anger in graffiti for fear of the consequences (Nwoye, 1993). According to Bartolommeo (2001) students rarely use legitimate avenues for self- expression, so they find graffiti as the only avenue that can provide privacy and anonymity necessary to express themselves for fear of the consequences of being noted. Through graffiti, students reveal their hostilities, unburden their grievances, express fantasies and frustrations or declare a socially unacceptable point of view on subjects ranging from philosophy to politics, humour, religion, drugs, sports and sex (Dickinson, 2008). Graffiti writing usually happens when students feel other channels of communication have been blocked or they are not involved in decision making on issues that affect them and they will always look for alternative ways of expressing their opinions on matters affecting them especially when they feel oppressed (Arcioni, 2003). Graffiti is a way of voicing dissatisfaction which should be taken seriously for they are one way in which otherwise muted individuals can express their feelings and concerns with others in the same situation (Yieke, 2004). In public secondary schools it is evident that students feel ignored and thus use graffiti to express themselves freely since they are safe from victimization. According to Waihenya in response to the incident of bullying in Alliance High school suggests that schools must open communication channels for students to freely air their grievances. These channels include holding barazas, well-secured suggestion boxes where students discuss their problems without fear of reprisals. Nwoye (1993) in his study revealed that graffiti is in fact a way for the minority group to express itself. In addition, the study reveals that politics is a topic in the graffiti written by the university students. This shows that in Kenya secondary schools students will likely write on topics like bullying, drug use in graffiti since the risk of being found out is almost non-existent. It is important that graffiti as an alternative communication method used by secondary students should no longer be dismissed as subversive and illegitimate (Chaffee, 1990). Baringo Central sub-county is a region where students undergo various hardships due to the terrain. This could be one of the reasons they engage in graffiti writing. In most secondary schools in this county there has been persistent writing of graffiti on the walls of classrooms, libraries, dormitories, toilets and laboratories. The issues they raise through graffiti if not addressed may lead to misunderstanding and conflicts in schools.

Statement of the Problem

There has been rampant writing of graffiti by students in public secondary schools in Baringo central sub-county as a way of communicating their issues despite the existence of other channels such as suggestion boxes and students 'barazas'. In addition, students may feel neglected and repressed in school. Therefore, the analysis of graffiti, as a channel of communication, may unmask issues that have led to students' unrest, drug abuse, bullying and general indiscipline among students. This study sought to analyse graffiti

written by students in public secondary schools in Baringo central sub-county in terms of types of graffiti.

Objective of the Study

The study was aimed at achieving the objective:

- To describe the types of graffiti used by students in public boarding secondary schools in Baringo Central Sub-county.

Research Question

- Which types of graffiti are used by students in public boarding secondary schools in Baringo Central Sub-county?

METHOD

Research Design

Descriptive survey design was used in this study. A survey is used to collect original data for describing a population too large to observe directly (Shilubane, 2009). It obtains information about a particular issue from a sample of people by means of self- report, that is, the people respond to a series of questions posed by the investigator (Mugenda, 1999). This design is considered appropriate for the study because it provides an accurate account of the characteristics being studied. A descriptive research uses both quantitative and qualitative data analyses and this study adopted both. Qualitative research helps the researcher to obtain in-depth data on the study problem. Qualitative research also enables one to study things in their natural settings and attempts to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Human behaviour is also explained best using this approach (Mugenda & Mugenda 2003). Advantages of using the descriptive survey design also include the ability to accommodate a large sample size, generalizability of results, ease of administering questions and recording answers (Shilubane, 2009).

Target Population

Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) define target population as that population to which a researcher wants to generalize the results of a study. The target population for this research will be all the graffiti texts collected and the students in all the public boarding secondary schools in Baringo Central sub-county. This is the population to which the researcher wants to generalize the results of the study.

Sampling Procedures and Sample Size

There are fifteen public boarding secondary schools in Baringo Central sub-county. The researcher selected all these fifteen schools because it is a small population (Mugenda & Mugenda 2003). The research used systematic random sampling in purely boys and girls schools to select two students from each form in a school to take part in focus group discussions. In the case of mixed schools, stratified sampling was used to separate the boys and girls and systematic random sampling used to obtain a boy and a girl in each form to participate in the discussion. In each school, eight students formed the focus

group. The total sample which was considered for the focus group was one hundred and twenty students in all the fifteen public boarding secondary schools in Baringo Central sub-county. Graffiti was collected from different surfaces and entered in a graffiti collection guide according to the themes they convey. Graffiti from each theme was listed down to form the sampling frame from which the sample size was obtained. A sample size from each theme was obtained using the formula, below, developed by Israel (2009).

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N\,(e)^2}$$

Where   n   =   Sample size

N   =   Population and

e   =   Margin of error

This formula was appropriate for determining the sample for the study because it gave a good sample size that led to accurate results. A sample size obtained through the formula is neither too small leading to inaccurate results nor too large leading to wastage of time, resources and money. Simple random sampling was used to obtain the graffiti to be analysed from each theme. Care was taken to ensure that taggings, scribbles, symbols and drawings was written down or photographed in their original form. Writing the data helped to preserve it for later coding and analysis. The data elicited from graffiti texts assisted the researcher to establish the types of graffiti students communicate through writing of graffiti. A camera was used to record graffiti which the researcher found a bit challenging to sketch due to the nature of their location.

Data Collection Instrument

The researcher made use of photography in data collection. Graffiti was captured by photographing them. However, due to the instrument used to write some graffiti, the researcher was required to write them down in a book for further analysis.

Data Analysis and Presentation

The study employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyse the graffiti written by students in secondary schools. CDA according to Wodak (2009) is the method that one must employ to study ideas, values, and status behind the language used which are not always overtly stated. Through analysis of text and talk, CDA strives to get improvement in the society. According to Van Dijk (2006), Critical Discourse Analysis is primarily interested in and motivated by the endeavour to understand pressing social issues. McGregor (2010) argues that CDA challenges us to move from seeing language as abstract to seeing our words as having meaning in a particular historical, social and political condition. Hence, CDA analysis studies real, and often extended, instances of social interaction which take particularly in linguistic form (Blommaert & Bulcaen 2000). Therefore, CDA as a tool to be used in this study helped the researcher understand the graffiti secondary school students wrote, and their meaning. This was through analysis of the underlying meaning of the words used in the graffiti. This assisted in interpreting issues, conditions and events in which the secondary school students found themselves in. Translations were done for those texts that were not written in English, an explanation

given and interpretation of each done in terms of meaning of message communicated. The data collected was analyzed and reported in descriptive format as the study is descriptive in nature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Types of graffiti

Several authors have tried to make a distinction between different types of graffiti in order to be able to study the phenomenon from different angles. Grant (1996) notes that modern graffiti falls into one of the categories: 'Junk' graffiti, 'gang' graffiti and 'tagging'. Alonso (1998) adds two new categories to the classification of graffiti: 'political' and 'Existential'. Most of the graffiti collected were of the existential type.

Table 2. Types of Graffiti

Types	Frequency	Girls	Boys	Mixed
Tag	6	0	4	1
Political	5	0	4	1
Gang	4	0	3	1
Existential	23	8	7	4
Abusive	7	2	3	2
Poetry	5	2	1	3
Total	50	12	14	12

Tag Graffiti

Alonso (1998) describes tagging as a stylized signature that a writer marks on the urban environment; walls, buses and trains. This type of graffiti has often been associated with criminal activity and is an eye sore but what is important to note about this type of graffiti is that it gives the writer power- this power is exercised by the ability to make a personal claim to the surface that they have tagged. The writer of tag graffiti wants recognition and identity. According to Epstein (1998) quest for identity is greater at a young age, where the need to be someone is greater, and popularity among peers is fundamental.

Table 3. Samples of Tag Graffiti

Tag	Translation (if any)
1.Team maqwela	
2.Mafisi sacco	
3. # I was here buh	# I was here but I have left a few-------
Nimeleft a few ….	Damn you bitches!!
damn you bitches!!	

4 Gravity flag

we shine from

Ad controls

5. David de surgeon

   Ricardo

   slyme G.Rock

6. No stains

   No learning

   Rem.Nicki

7. Menace II society

Graffito 1 was found on a wall of a classroom in a boys secondary school and also on a wall of a dormitory in the same school, shows the tag or nickname the writers used in order to be visible and recognized within the school. They have used this to present themselves to other students. The Focus Group discussions revealed that this tag is a name of a group of comedians located in the coastal region of Kenya which the authors seem to identify with. Graffito 2 according to the focus groups refers to a group of students who enjoy flirting with many girls whenever they get opportunities to meet them like during games, drama and music festivals and other outings made by students. This group is notorious when it comes to making sexual advances to girls. Graffito 3 which is in the form of a symbol was found on the wall of a classroom in a boys school implies the freedom the students enjoy in that school. They can do whatever they wish to yet they suffer no consequences- in short they are their own masters. From the Focus Group discussions, they enjoy that state of affairs. From the Focus Groups, the students indicated that the upper classes, that is, form 3 and 4 students do whatever they wish to, for instance, watching TV for as long as they wished without any restrictions whatsoever. The participants of the Focus Groups in form 1 and 2 distanced themselves from the activities of their seniors. Graffito 5 found on a wall of a dormitory in a boys school must have wanted his presence in that school to be felt. The author uses this writing as a way of releasing a certain state of mind. He could have had a bad feeling about his school and wished to release his anger and leave it there, on the wall. Students, as it clearly came out in the Focus Group Discussions use graffiti writing to communicate, express their anger, discomfort, and even happiness. Graffito 6 is in form of nicknames of the authors and was found on a wall of a classroom in a boys school. The author being comfortable with the names given to himself and his friends wrote them on a wall. This graffito is like the author is saying that "we are there". The Focus Group further explained that due to boredom students occasionally make marks on walls.

Political graffiti

Obeng (2000), notes that politicians are not the only participants in the domain of politics. Graffiti writing is generally used by artists to express underlying political messages.

Secondary school students in Kenya, also engage in graffiti discourse which at times is political discourse. Political groups use graffiti as a communication tool because it is the safest, most economical as well as a highly efficient way of reaching a desired audience.

Table 4. Samples of Political Graffiti

Political grafiti	Translation (if any)
1. NASA	NASA
V√te	Vote
muhimu	valuable
2.JUBILEE	JUBILEE
Tuko	we are
pamoja	Together
3.Buzeki Kiprop	
4. JUBILEE	JUBILEE
tena	Again
5. Twasimama kidete	We stand firm
Kupinga ukabila	to resist tribalism

The writer of this graffito 1 supported the opposition coalition in Kenya-NASA and termed a vote for this party important. The graffito was found on a wall of a classroom in a boys school. The graffito2 shows that the author identified with the ruling party Jubilee. From the Focus Group discussions it emerged that students had their preferred parties and candidates in the 2017 General elections in Kenya. This was found on top of a desk in a boys secondary school.

The author of graffito3 identifies himself with the personality, Buzeki Kiprop, a gubernatorial aspirant in Uasin Gishu County in the 2017 General elections. This graffito4 found on the wall of a classroom in a boys school, indicated the author's wish to have one of the two main political parties in Kenya in 2017 to take over the country's leadership again. In August, 2017, Kenyans went to the polls but the Presidential winner from Jubilee Party who was declared winner was disputed by the other party – NASA. This made the NASA flag bearer to make the petition against the win, and the Supreme Court ordered the IEBC (The Electoral Body) to conduct another Presidential Election after 60 days. The year 2017 in Kenya was a campaign period, therefore, the author, who understood that Kenyan politics is characterized by tribalism, preaches unity in this graffito.

Gang Graffiti

Gangs use graffiti to mark their turfs, and also to glorify the gang. They also use graffiti to publicize their power, status, success and threats. The Focus Groups indicated that gangs existed in their schools because of too much unsupervised free time and also due to lack of positive outlets for the students (Alonso, 1998). This type of graffiti was found mainly

in boys schools, possibly because they would like to create a sense of fear and intimidation in the school. Examples are captured in the table below

Table 5. Samples of gang graffiti

Gang graffiti	Translation (if any)
1.Mafisi sacco Ltd	Hyenas Sacco Ltd
2. #Team silento	
3.#Qwala zone	
4. ✡Caution!! out of bounds to............	

The graffito 1 seems to identify the gang the author belongs to. The name of this gang translated in English means hyenas sacco ltd. The author of graffito 2 belongs to a gang referred to as team silento. Their main characteristic is silence-they rarely voice their issues. The author of graffito 3 identifies with a group of comedians located in the coastal region of Kenya. The graffito was found on the wall of a classroom in a boys school and the author seems to idolize the lifestyles of the members of that group. Graffito 4 which was found on a wall in a cubicle of a boy's dormitory shows that this gang exists in that school and specifically in that cube. The members are hostile to non-members. From the Focus Group Discussions, it was apparent that students felt comfortable in their various groups, which they named according to their prominent actions.

Existential graffiti

Alonso (1998) describes existential graffiti as the ones that can be consistently found in public bathrooms. They express personal comments, and are most commonly racial and sexual ones. This type of graffiti can be divided into several sub-categories depending on the thematic content such as tribalism, gender, love, sexual, philosophical and humorous. Regardless of the content, existential graffiti represents outward manifestations of personality. These inscriptions depict ideas and sentiments that are usually taboo in the social life of the writer. The anonymity affords the writer to challenge the normative values of the setting (i.e. university, school, neighbourhood) without risking impeachment from the locale. This type of graffiti includes:

Table 6. Samples of Existential Graffiti

Existential graffiti	Translation (if any)
1. I have nothing to do with the past	
2. Don't lower your dignity	
3. Don't live a life of regrets	

4. One organized head is better than one
million disorganized

5. Quote

   Work hard

   Answer easily

6. Shhhhhh-silence

   Minds at rest from work

7. I ♡ u

   I love sme I special

8. I ♡ u

   #believe me

   Am hot sh*t

9. #hot cally

      Hot shit

10. Brain at work

11. Am going to succeed/ fail

12. Do u have a future

13. Brains at work

   Form 3 2018

14. Vic the Dope boy!!!   Victor the boy who abuses drugs

15. Have desire & Believe in yourself

16. Go out with what you came in with

17. Out of bounds to intruders especially

18. I am busy

   No disturbance

19. My handwriting isn't bad

   I have my own font

In the selected samples above, graffiti 1,2 and 3 all found on walls of dormitories of girls schools shows how secondary school students use writing on the walls as a way of expressing emotions and experiences. Through the Focus Group Discussions, students reveal that they express their frustrations, their beliefs and they try to paint a picture of who they are. The other graffiti (6, 8, 9, and 10) are examples of existence of romantic relationships among secondary school students. This type of graffiti is common and is attributed to the age of the authors-secondary school students. The sample graffiti which

talk about determination, focus and hard work reveal how secondary school students use the wall to encourage one another to succeed. The Focus Group Discussions informed that there were some students who abuse drugs and they were known to others.

Abusive types of graffiti

Table 7. Samples of Abusive Graffiti

Abusive graffiti	Translation(if any)
1. # I was here	
Buh nimeleft (but I have left)	
A few………	
Damn you bitches	
2. # Believe me	
Am hot Sh*t	
3. #hot cally	
X hot shit	
4.Lamba lolo	
5. Stupid guy	
Good guy	
If you read all these	
Writing you are stupid	

The Focus Group Discussion revealed that the above data graffiti writing offers students an easy way to register their frustrations, hate feelings without being identified. It is for the readers to disapprove of the insults these authors write.

Poetry type of graffiti

Songs, lyrics and even poems were found on walls. This type of graffiti were common in all boarding secondary schools, be they mixed, boys or girls schools. Examples include the following:

Table 8. Samples of Poetic Graffiti

Poetry type of graffiti	Translation(if any)
1. Battle	
It's all about	
Believing in God	
And that someone	
Called yourself	
2. The refrain of this	
Flavourish # my shoe	
lemme tie like shoe lace	

when you see the ghetto bird
when you have the shots
Slyme-kirk-xban
CU-Rock
3. *This could be us in few years*
FELL everybody we love each other
Am kicking up and you have kept
ME for goings like credible x 3
4. Love me or hate me,
I still remain   hate free
Man-plan
Young wasafi.
5. We belong together
Live together
Die together
6. Ones a soldier
Always a soldier

The data above includes quotes of love songs, love verses and basically short literary fragments. Focus Groups Discussions indicated that these graffiti are acts of love and sometimes they express rebellions, like graffito 4. They also employ poetic devices like repetition and rhyme as shown in graffito 2, 4 and 5

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