



Graffiti: Deviance or a sigh of and for suppressed expressions?

Muchinako, George Alex, Matsika, Abel Blessing,
School of Social Work, University of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe
&

Muchinako Mary

Department of Political and Administrative Studies, University of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe.
Communication: Muchinako, George Alex, School of Social Work, University of Zimbabwe, P.B.
66022, Kopje, Harare, Zimbabwe. E-mail: muchinakog@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study sought to explore graffiti art and messages in Zimbabwe and to interrogate whether graffiti art and message writers were engaging in a form of deviance or whether it was a way of expressing suppressed feelings or ideas. The study was based on the sociological theory of deviance. Field observation, review of literature and key informant interviews were the main methods used to collect information for the study. The study found that though graffiti was common in Zimbabwe it was practiced clandestinely due to fear of societal sanctions. It was mainly in the form of messages written, scratched or spray painted on various surfaces accessible to the public. The messages communicated issues of concern on various socio-economic issues. Graffiti writers and artists remained anonymous yet they wanted their messages to reach the public. This in a way indicated that graffiti was being used as an avenue to vent out suppressed ideas. The study reached a conclusion that while graffiti was despised, it was important to create an open platform, as was the case in some societies, to allow any and all members of society unfettered opportunities to express themselves through writing or drawing graffiti at sites set up for this purpose. Those messages would then be analyzed and, where necessary, remedial action taken.

Key words: graffiti, art, deviance, sigh, suppressed expression, Zimbabwe,

Introduction

Graffiti has been in existence in many societies from time immemorial but the reasons for its existence are largely unclear and unexplained. In the contemporary world graffiti continues to be found and is explained as 'unorthodox', unconventional and a deviation from established and acceptable social norms. The critical questions to ask are: "What is graffiti?" and "Why does graffiti continue to exist?"

The Macmillan English Dictionary (2009:618) defines graffiti as "words or pictures drawn on walls in public places". Wikipedia (2013) explains graffiti as "...writing or drawings that have been scribbled, scratched, or sprayed illicitly on a wall or other surface in a public place".

Wikipedia (2013) further explains that graffiti is known to range from simple written words to elaborate wall paintings, and that graffiti has existed since ancient times, with examples dating back to Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire. Graffiti has over time and with social changes occurring, such as colonization and modernization, spread to developing countries like Zimbabwe. In the Zimbabwean context, it has been understood and regarded just as in the western societies, that it is a form of deviance.

In Zimbabwe the most used graffiti materials depend on the surface upon which the message is placed. Most messages are seen to have been written using metal scratching materials like hard broken wires or other metal objects with sharp edges or points, felt marker pens and spray paint. Messages are often written discreetly and without the property owner's permission. No-one usually owns up to having put the graffiti message or art since it is regarded as a form of vandalism punishable under Zimbabwean law. Messages are in most cases placed in places where there is public view and the



messages are usually to communicate some issue of public concern or political messages. In the urban areas some of the messages communicated relate to issues among street gangs. In rural areas some messages are usually to communicate some issues of concern or issues that may be secret but which the graffiti artist or message communicator wishes the public to know, like issues of infidelity by married women and men or taboo issues like homosexuality, especially involving men. As pointed out earlier on, graffiti is illegal in Zimbabwe, this makes it a difficult area to study as people are not free to give information to researchers for fear that researchers could be law enforcement agents out to arrest the graffiti writers and artists especially in Zimbabwe where many law enforcement agents work in plain clothes so that they are not easily identified. In the Zimbabwean scenario studying issues such as graffiti requires researchers to collect information through observation in the field and attempting to interview or discuss with possible informants.

Theoretical Framework

People engaging in writing graffiti messages or drawings are seen as engaging in a form of deviance. This study was guided by the deviance, strain and social integration theories. According to Macionis and Geber (2010) and Douglas and Waksler (1982), Stark (2007) and Giddens (2006) deviance describes actions or behaviors that violate social norms, and formally enacted rules through engaging in behaviors defined as criminal as well as a violation of social norms, for example, rejecting folkways and mores.

The deviance theory

According to Goode (2004) and Stark (2007) there are several broad sociological classes which describe deviant behavior and these include structural functionalism, symbolic interaction and conflict theory. The structural functionalist theory put forward by Durkheim explains that societies are integrated because people are attached to societal groups and institutions that are regulated by norms and values. Deviance might occur when a society's members violate the norms and values due to personal selfishness or when the societal norms that control the individuals' behavior no longer have power due to society's corruption.

According to Macionis et al (2011:200) and Giddens (2006) the symbolic interaction theory advanced by Durkheim explained that deviance was a normal and necessary part of social organization that had four important functions which were that:

- Deviance affirmed cultural values and norms and any definition of virtue rests on an opposing idea of vice, that there can be no good without evil and no justice without crime.
- Deviance defined moral boundaries and people learn right from wrong by defining people as deviant.
- A serious form of deviance forced people to come together and react in the same way against it.
- Deviance pushed society's moral boundaries which, in turn lead to social change.

The conflict theory, according to Macionis et al., (2011) and Stark (2007), states that society or an organization functions in order that each individual participant and its groups work to maximize their benefits, this inevitably contributes to social change such as political changes and revolutions. Deviant behaviors are actions that do not go along with the social institutions as what cause deviance. Society's right and ability to change norms, wealth or status comes into conflict with the individual because this usually involves ignoring legal rights of the poor. Those in the middle class usually accept society's norms and regulations and they side with the elites rather than the poor, thinking they might rise to the top by supporting the status quo. The conflict theory is based on the view that the fundamental causes of crime are the social and economic forces operating within society. This theory also notes that the powerful in society define crime. This raises the question: for whom is this theory functional? In this theory, laws are instruments of oppression: tough on the powerless and less tough on the powerful (Giddens, 2006 and Billingham, 2007). This then supports the view that deviance is the sigh of and for suppressed expressions, as the poor and powerless in society try to have their views and concerns heard and addressed.



Methodology

This study was on an activity considered “illegal” and this placed limitations on finding willing respondents (graffiti artists and writers) to provide first hand information. The researchers did field observations, held discussions with key informants and reviewed literature on graffiti. The field observations focused on locations of graffiti, types of graffiti, physical aspects to do with placement of graffiti, materials used to place the messages, messages carried, and types of art displayed and how graffiti was dealt with. Discussions with key informants sought to elicit information on who was involved in graffiti art and messages, why they thought this was done and when it was done (time of day).

Findings

Field observations were done in three cities in Zimbabwe – Harare, Chitungwiza and Bulawayo, one rural location/settlement in Nyanga District, Manicaland Province and along the major highways between the cities. The researchers found out the following:

Locations of graffiti

Most of the graffiti messages and art were found in public toilets in both urban and rural settings covered by the study. Despite the observation that most of the toilets lacked adequate cleaning and maintenance and were often smelly, somebody took time to write graffiti messages on the walls in these places. Some graffiti was found on the walls of residential flats, on outside walls of some school buildings and colleges and in old dilapidated buildings. Along the highways some messages were found scribbled at the back of the distance indicator sign (milestones) or spray painted on the tarmac. In many places graffiti messages were found written on car glass windows.

Types of graffiti

Most of the graffiti messages found were written and very few were in art form. The written messages were not presented in correct grammatical expressions but were rather messages with words (sort of key words) about an issue being communicated.

Physical aspects on placement

It was observed that many of the messages were placed at positions where the public could easily see them. Toilets were used probably because they are used regularly by the public and anyone using them would not miss a message written on the walls where they would not normally expect to find anything written. The same view could be held for messages placed on outside walls of residential buildings like flats and deserted offices.

Materials used to place messages/art

Most of the messages presented in the graffiti were scratched on to the walls or surfaces indicating that some sharp and firm object like strong metal wire or object was used to write the message. Some messages and art were written with felt markers using black or bright colours. Spray paint was used to write some messages and it was noted that spray painted messages required more space than the messages presented through the other methods. It was also observed that the scratching method of writing graffiti messages was not used on outside walls of buildings probably because visibility would be difficult to achieve and also that the chances of being caught (arrested) were high if they were found in the act. Messages found on car windows appeared to have been written using fingers.

Messages carried

The messages found written on the toilet walls in all areas observed carried a variety of messages. The messages included:



- Complaints about services like cleaning of public toilets. Some messages found read “Hamusuki matoireti kutambira mari mahara!” Translated to mean ‘You don’t clean toilets, you are paid for nothing’.
- Messages on some social deviance issues. One message found written on the walls of an old rural building in Nyanga read ‘Johwani (not real name in this paper) kuba wanyanya’ meaning ‘Johwani you are stealing too much’.
- Political messages were written mainly in paint and spray paint. Some messages were for campaigning and read ‘Vote for...’. These political messages were found in public toilets, on walls of public buildings, on durawalls (walls constructed as perimeter fencing), public roads and on rocks adjacent to public roads.
- Messages of ridicule and rebuke targeted at political personalities and their parties.
- Messages imploring people to be responsible, like on stationery cars with windscreens covered with dust researchers found messages like ‘wash me’ made by clearing part of the dust film through scribbling the message.
- There were also messages glorifying exploits of some personalities and cults or groups. Some messages found read ‘Bra donzi is chambiyon’ and ‘Jah spirit of Africa rastafari’.

Types of art displayed

The graffiti art displayed was varied. Some of it was of obscene nature like drawings of private parts of males and females. Some of the drawings were accompanied by obscene messages. Some of the messages were of ridicule while accompanied by words of warning and caution for example one message read ‘Mahure manyanya muchapera ne edzi’ translated to mean ‘you commercial sex workers your sexual activities are on the rise and you shall perish due to AIDS’.

Discussions with key informants

Seven key informants were identified, who included two municipal workers from Harare Municipality, one Municipal worker from Chitungwiza, two workers from Bulawayo Municipality, one private car park attendant and one security guard from a private security company guarding premises in Harare. All the key informants expressed their desire to give information anonymously as they felt that they could be at risk of reprisals by the graffiti writers or the authorities. Graffiti writers reportedly did not want their art or messages erased and threatened to deal harshly with anyone who crossed their path while Municipal authorities expected the workers to clean and clear any unsanctioned displays of messages in whatever form.

The municipal workers from the three cities concurred on who was involved in graffiti art and messages in their areas. They thought that it was the work of men, both young and middle aged who had hooligan tendencies, and those who abused drugs (especially marijuana) and alcohol especially illicit brews like kachasu and ‘zed’. On why they thought these men engaged in graffiti art they thought that some of the actions were spontaneous acts done without reason as a result of drug influence, peer pressure and following encouragement from their cheer leaders. Regarding the time when the graffiti messages or art was written or drawn, the municipal workers indicated that they were not certain because they always found the messages or art already written and could not know who had done it. At times they could find someone or a group of people drawing or encouraging one of their members to draw but they were threatened with reprisals if they raised alarm or they removed the messages. This they indicated usually happened when it involved some political players. They gave the example of a message deriding one of the political leaders that was spray painted at the entrance to a ladies toilet in one of the cities. They indicated that they could not do anything about it.

The car park attendant explained that their experience with graffiti at their workplace was that some cars brought for safe keeping at their premises gathered dust when they were parked for prolonged durations and some people, especially teenagers, often scribbled messages like ‘wash me’ on the dust collected on the car’s windscreen or windows. They explained that it was done out of mischief and the writer would usually do it when the park attendant’s attention was distracted by something else. The artists were usually known to mean no harm but regarded it to be an act of humour



and a reminder that the car needed washing. The private security guard explained that some people who live on the street, mainly males were involved in graffiti art and that they targeted premises which were not guarded or those that were abandoned. The guard explained that sometimes when they are on night guard duty they would be approached by some of the people living on the street and they would ask for matches to light a fire to keep themselves warm in the cold season. In discussion with them they are known to explain their hopes in life and that at times they engage in graffiti art and messages as a way of expressing their views since they cannot afford to have their views expressed through the conventional news media. They are also said to have expressed their fear of arrest and punishment if they were caught doing graffiti art or messages. At other times especially during national general elections time, some graffiti artists travelling in unmarked top of the range cars, spray paint political messages and quickly drive away. This was reportedly done in the early hours of the day.

Dealing with graffiti messages and art

Municipal workers indicated the dilemma they had in dealing with graffiti in the course of their work. Their employer required them to remove any unsanctioned messages but they faced the threat from graffiti artists and writers who would like their messages to be seen and read. They indicated that some of the graffiti was of political messages which the writers claimed they were denied space in the print and electronic media by authorities so they resorted to graffiti messages. Municipalities and other public entities seem not to have the capacity to provide security to its employees to deal with graffiti in public places, hence the issue continues. Some private entities seem to be able to avoid or limit graffiti by employing private security guards to secure their properties. Sometimes as a solution messages written or painted on walls were painted over to obscure the messages or the art. At times attempts were made to 'edit' the graffiti message to mean the opposite for example, for political messages reading 'Vote for X', the X would be replaced by the name or symbol of a more powerful or influential political group.

Discussion

The findings from this study have shown that in Zimbabwe, as it is in other places, graffiti messages and art are regarded as a form of hooliganism and deviance. Those found engaging in graffiti risk arrest and punishment. This is in agreement with the structural functionalist theory of deviance which has it that deviance occurs when society's members violate the norms and values due to selfishness or when societal norms can no longer control an individual's behavior because of society's corruption (Giddens, 2011; Macionis, 2012; MacNamara and Karmen, 1983 and Stark, 2007). The deviance theory however, also says that deviance is necessary for societal change and development. In this study it was shown that graffiti, a form of deviance, continues to exist in Zimbabwe. The question then is on why it continues to exist despite the laws in place to control it. The study established that due to lack of space to express themselves, some societal members in Zimbabwe engage in graffiti activities secretly and could probably openly discuss issues of concern if given the space.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study sought to explore the issue of graffiti messages and art in Zimbabwe and whether those engaging in those activities were mere hooligan law breakers or were genuine people who felt denied the space to express their anger and frustrations about how issues of concern were handled in society. The study found that people providing information on these activities were not willing to be identified for fear of reprisals by both the authorities and the people generating the graffiti art and messages. The graffiti messages were generated and placed or written discreetly, in places accessible to the public and the messages communicated issues of concern to the writers or the community in general. Given the foregoing observations, it could be concluded that graffiti is indeed not a form of hooliganism but a sigh of and for suppressed expressions.

It is recommended that graffiti art and messaging be given unfettered space, like in some countries there are places designated for everyone to write their graffiti message or art. It is important



as well to have a clear public policy regarding issues of concern to the community and clear actions of dealing with them and implementation plans followed in word and deed.

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