The Nature and Extent of Desktop Graffiti Among U.S. College Students: An Exploratory Study

By

Daisy Barbara Ball

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Science in Sociology

Committee Members:

William Snizek, Chair
John Ryan
Kwame Harrison

December 10, 2004
Blacksburg, VA

Keywords: culture, graffiti, sociology, desktop
The Nature and Extent of Desktop Graffiti Among U.S. College Students:
An Exploratory Study

Daisy Barbara Ball

Abstract

This study investigates classroom graffiti by U.S. college students. The data analyzed were collected in nine classrooms randomly selected from two buildings at a major land grant university. In all, 1,758 examples of identifiable pieces of graffiti were collected and analyzed from 419 desktops. Using data supplied by the University Registrar, the types of students who attended classes in these classrooms by major, gender, and class composition are correlated with the quantity and quality of desktop graffiti found. These graffiti are analyzed in order to gauge what some of the pressing issues are for students, and are useful in informing the university of what issues are most important to those students who engage in this activity. The findings suggest a strong interest in four main areas: sex, the University, drugs, and Greek organizations. One pattern that stands out is the large amount of sexual graffiti an anti-homosexual nature. A larger amount of graffiti appears in the liberal arts building compared to the engineering building. Student major and gender, as well as professor’s gender, do not appear to be correlated with either amount or content of the graffiti studied. Instead, it is suggested that the course being taught and the room in which the class is held may be more strongly correlated with the amount and content of the graffiti found on classroom desktops. Notable in its absence is virtually any student graffiti of a racist nature.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank first and foremost the members of my committee. Thanks to Dr. Bill Snizek for being an integral part of this project from its conception, as well as insisting upon the highest quality of work throughout the process. Thanks to Dr. John Ryan for enhancing the project in numerous ways, notably with his knowledge of the sociology of culture. Thanks to Dr. Kwame Harrison for his invaluable comments regarding the possible implications of my findings. Additionally, thanks to all three members for their constant support and friendship.

I would also like to thank Ty Brady for his help with the supplementary photographs. Thanks as well are due to my parents for their love and support.
## Table of Contents

Abstract……………………………………………………………………………………………………...ii

Acknowledgements………………………………………………………………………………...iii

Table of Contents…………………………………………………………………………………….iv

List of Figures…………………………………………………………………………………………..vi

Chapter 1  Statement of the Problem……………………………………………………………1

  Purpose of the Study………………………………………………………………………………1

  Overview of the Study…………………………………………………………………………1

Chapter 2  Survey of the Literature…………………………………………………………3

  General Overview of Graffiti Research……………………………………………………3
  • History of the Study of Graffiti………………………………………………………..3
  • Components of Street Graffiti……………………………………………………….4
    --Identity…………………………………………………………………………….6
    --Street Graffiti as a Tool for Building Masculinity………………………………6
    --Art Worlds and Street Graffiti………………………………………………….8
    --Deviance and Street Graffiti………………………………………………….9
  • Components of “Indoor” Graffiti…………………………………………………………10
    --Students as Graffitists…………………………………………………………….12
    --“Demographic” of the Graffitist…………………………………………………12
    --Anti-homosexual Graffiti……………………………………………………14
    --Summary…………………………………………………………………………15
  • The Present Study………………………………………………………………………..16
    --Expectations………………………………………………………………………..16

Chapter 3  Research Design……………………………………………………………………17

  Ecological Fallacy………………………………………………………………………………17

  Sampling Design…………………………………………………………………………………18
  • Classes Held………………………………………………………………………………18
  • Student Major……………………………………………………………………………19
  • Gender of Students………………………………………………………………………19
Chapter 4  Analysis……………………………………………………………………………21

Descriptive Data Analysis: Quantity and Quality of Graffiti………21

- Categories of Graffiti…………………………………….21
- Analysis by Room…………………………………………23
- Summary of Analysis…………………………………….28

Chapter 5  Summary and Conclusions……………………………………….29

Overall Trends……………………………………………………...29

- Graffiti According to Course…………………29
- Content of Graffiti………………………………29
- Quantity of Graffiti………………………………30
- Focus of Sexual Graffiti…………………………30
- Racist Graffiti……………………………………31
- Conclusions……………………………………….31
- Future Research……………………………………33

References…………………………………………………………………………..35

Appendixes………………………………………………………………….............38

Appendix A: Course Key……………………………………………………38
Appendix B: Classroom Demographic Information…………………43
Appendix C: Classroom Profiles…………………………………………70
Appendix D: Graffiti Content Analysis………………………………………89
Appendix E: Photographs of Desktop Graffiti…………………………104
List of Figures

Figure 1  Potential Fallacies and Pitfalls Stemming from the Errant Fit between Theory And Methods…………………………………………………………………..17
Figure 2  Analysis of Graffiti by Room………………………………………………………...24