

What university bathroom graffiti tells us about university students

O que os grafitos em banheiros da universidade nos contam sobre os estudantes universitários?

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the meanings expressed through writings and graffiti found in student restrooms at a public university in the state of São Paulo, Brazil. It is a qualitative study grounded in Vygotsky's historical-cultural approach, which guided both data production and analysis. In order to photograph the graffiti, 76 women's restrooms, 71 men's restrooms, and 2 mixed-gender restrooms were visited. A total of 142 graffiti were photographed and categorized, 11 from women's restrooms and 131 from men's restrooms. The results point to three thematic units: politics; gender and sexuality; and coexistence at the university. More than senseless vandalism, graffiti are signs spread throughout the university that can provide deeper knowledge of students' contexts and lived experiences, which can be discussed and addressed in their educational process as university students.

Keywords: free expression; restrooms; undergraduate students; socio-historical psychology.

Resumo

Esse trabalho tem o objetivo de analisar as significações expressas por escritas e grafitos em banheiros de estudantes de uma universidade pública do estado de São Paulo. Trata-se de um estudo de natureza qualitativa fundamentado na abordagem histórico-cultural de Vigotski, que orientou a produção e análise dos dados. A fim de fotografar os grafitos foram visitados 76 banheiros femininos, 71 banheiros masculinos e 2 banheiros mistos. Os grafitos fotografados e categorizados perfizeram o total de 142 grafitos, sendo 11 do de banheiro feminino e 131 grafitos de banheiro masculino. Os resultados apontam para três unidades temáticas: política, gênero e sexualidade, e convivência na universidade. Mais do que vandalismo sem sentido, os grafitos são signos espalhados pela Universidade, que podem propiciar maior conhecimento do contexto e da vivência de seus estudantes, a serem discutidos e trabalhados no processo de sua formação, como universitários.

Palavras-chave: expressão livre; sanitários; graduando; psicologia sociohistórica.

INTRODUCTION

Grffiti are considered anonymous and culturally marginalized inscriptions, commonly produced by members of the general population. They differ from other types of inscriptions because they are created using any materials available (Barbosa, 1984; Beltrão, 1980; Feitosa, 2005; Garraffoni, 2005).

Public restrooms are spaces particularly conducive to this type of inscription, as they offer anonymity for self-expression without external censorship (Barbosa, 1984; Beltrão, 1980; Damião; Teixeira, 2009; Schreer; Strichartz, 1997). Consequently, in scientific literature, bathroom graffiti are often associated with social repression and with how society deals with taboos related to transgression, which such inscriptions evoke in restroom contexts (Barbosa, 1984; Beltrão, 1980; Damião; Teixeira, 2009). However, studies addressing graffiti in university restrooms remain scarce.

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Study conducted at Escola de Enfermagem de Ribeirão Preto (EERP), Universidade de São Paulo (USP), Ribeirão Preto, SP, Brasil.



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This type of production represents a rich source of data about the collective imagination of specific populations and constitutes an important tool for studying psychological phenomena (Teixeira; Otta, 1998). Research conducted under different theoretical frameworks has systematically focused on phenomena of interest to their populations, such as gender differences regarding sexual content and sexual taboos (Damião; Teixeira, 2009; Schreer; Strichartz, 1997; Silva; Saraiva, 2017; Silva; Saraiva, 2014; Teixeira; Otta, 1998), representations of ethnic-racial violence (Schreer; Strichartz, 1997), and various socio-political manifestations (Damião; Teixeira, 2009; Wolff, 2010).

However, these studies often remain at a descriptive level, emphasizing numerical comparisons between graffiti in women's and men's restrooms, frequently without discussing the meanings these writings hold for the populations who produced them.

Furthermore, there is a tendency to value phenotypic aspects, that is to say, analyze descriptive manifestations solely by their appearance, without explaining or understanding them in relation to historical-social phenomena and the cultural aspects of the populations involved (Vigotski, 2007).

Conversely, Garraffoni (2005), in her study of graphic productions related to gladiators in the Roman Empire, highlights the importance of such materials for understanding multiple interpretative meanings concerning social, political, and legal conditions, affective relationships, and the personal image their authors wished to project.

Based on these theoretical approaches, this study draws on Vygotsky's historical-cultural perspective, which emphasizes understanding these manifestations through critical immersion in cultural contexts and historically produced social practices (Vigotski, 2007).

Vigotski (2001) argues that meaning and sense are part of the same process of signification, in which signs are attributed to objects, events, or people. Meaning represents the more stable and generalized component, such as dictionary definitions, allowing communication among individuals. Sense, however, is broader and encompasses affective and personal aspects attributed to the object, varying according to individual experience. Signification is therefore not individually constructed.

From this theoretical perspective, all human relationships are socially mediated and constituted through culturally shared signs (Vigotski, 2001, 2007), and physical presence of others, whether anonymous or known, is not required for mediation to occur (Vigotski, 1999b).

These signs originate in social and cultural relationships and play a decisive role in language as regulators of internal thought and behavior processes, constituting what Vygotsky termed higher mental functions (Vigotski, 2001). These include culturally organized psychological activities such as language, intelligence, voluntary attention, mediated memory, etc.

The process of meaning production initially occurs at the interpersonal (collective) level and is later transformed into an intrapersonal (individual) process (Vigotski, 2007). Vygotsky applies this explanation to aesthetic manifestations in art, stating that "art is the social within us" (Vigotski, 1999a, p. 315).

According to Delari Junior (2011, p. 192) "Vygotsky's proposition that mental functions assume different roles and meanings across cultures is particularly rich". The author also states that "[...] this is amplified, as the value of the mental function systems also change to people who assume different social roles within the same culture" (Delari Junior, 2011, p. 192-193).

Thus, the multiple figurative manifestations found in university restrooms reveal diverse trajectories through which authors register experiences originating in their surrounding environment. Studying this object can clarify the different senses attributed to gender status, social roles, and other aspects of student life.

From this perspective, the aim of this study is to analyze, based on Vygotsky's cultural – historical perspective, the meanings expressed in graffiti and writings found in restrooms of a public university in the state of São Paulo, predominantly produced by students.

This approach is justified insofar as analyzing graffiti in university restrooms can reveal significant meaning-making processes relevant to understanding students' experiences in the university environment—processes that might not be expressed in other social contexts lacking anonymity or privacy.

METHOD

Based on the theoretical framework adopted, this is a qualitative study grounded in the theoretical and methodological foundations proposed by Lev S. Vygotsky. For Vigotski (2007), formulating a research problem requires creating investigation and analysis methods which are appropriate to the phenomenon under study. Accordingly, this research seeks to apprehend meanings—composed of senses and meanings—through photographic images of graffiti produced by students in university restrooms. When the sense idea is aggregated, many forms are dealt with, under the significance dominion. (Góes; Cruz, 2006).

Vigotski (2007) states that research cannot focus solely on the object itself but must also consider everything that surrounds it; this is the social aspect of research. Rather than isolating the phenomenon under study, one should seek its genesis and its dynamic-causal foundations. In the case of this study, it can be said that it involves considering the relationship between the graffiti produced by students in university bathrooms and the historical-social moment, thus seeking to understand what these graffiti mean and the meanings they express. It is not a matter of the graffiti in isolation, but of the interface between students and the social environment.

Research site and data collection period

The study was conducted on a campus of a public university in the interior of São Paulo state. In 2016, the campus had approximately 7,000 undergraduate students and eight teaching and research units; this is the year in which these data were collected.

Authorization was obtained from seven academic units, as well as from the campus library and recreation and sports center. In total, graffiti were photographed in 76 women's restrooms, 71 men's restrooms, and 2 mixed-gender restrooms. Data collection took place between December 2017 and January 2018.

Ethical considerations

Permission was obtained from the university administration and unit coordinators who legally authorized data production. From then on, the units were visited and graffiti photographed. According to National Health Council Resolution No. 510/2016, studies using public-domain data are exempt from ethical review by the agencies CEP and CONEP. This is further supported by Brazilian Copyright Law No. 9,610/1998, Article 45.

In addition to works for which the term of protection of economic rights has expired, the following also belong to the public domain: II – works by unknown authors, without prejudice to the legal protection of ethnic and traditional knowledge (Brasil, 1998, art. 45).

Data production instruments

Photographs of graffiti and writings in feminine and masculine restrooms were taken using a digital camera. A field diary was also maintained, recording locations, dates, and contextual observations, as well as the quantity of graffiti taken on the pictures and the discursive production.

Initially, 37 graffiti from women's restrooms and 239 from men's restrooms were recorded. After excluding illegible or damaged graffiti, 142 photographs remained: 11 from women's restrooms and 131 from men's restrooms.

Data analysis procedures

Data analysis occurred in three stages: (1) thematic analysis, (2) analysis of graffiti structure, and (3) genotypic analysis. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, starting with identification, organization and decoding of data present in the photographs. This approach in qualitative research is a strategy broadly used to identify patterns or themes among data.

Structural analysis examined content and form (Barroco; Superti, 2014). Content is understood as the references extracted from reality. Form, on the other hand, constructs the plot from

the content. Form considers references from reality, thereby denying or transforming it into a new production, a dramatic representation of reality (Barroco; Superti, 2014).

Lastly, we analyze the historical processes of these meanings. We emphasize that studying phenomena based on their genesis and on dynamic-causal relationships—focused on the dimension of symbolic value directed toward the countless representations and beliefs originating from the cultural environment—is compatible with and appropriate to biological, psychological, and cultural factors (Vigotski, 2007).

It is worth considering the variety of possible interpretations raised by the symbolism of the sign. We acknowledge the multiple approaches that these productions—bathroom graffiti—can provide. There is no single idea that encompasses everything, that unifies everything (Barros; Camargo; Rosa, 2011); rather, there are theoretical references and options that guide analyses. Thus, this work is grounded in the historical-cultural approach.

RESULTS

From the 142 photographs analyzed, three thematic units emerged: politics, gender and sexuality, and coexistence at the university.

Politics

Political graffiti included explicit expressions of support for or rejection of political figures, parties, and ideologies. Three graffiti were found in women's restrooms and fifteen in men's restrooms.

In the women's restrooms, in particular, few references expressing repudiation toward a politician were found, with explicit words of disapproval (Figure 1). It was also written on the wall of a restroom in a humanities program: "Out with (explicit name of the President of the Republic)".

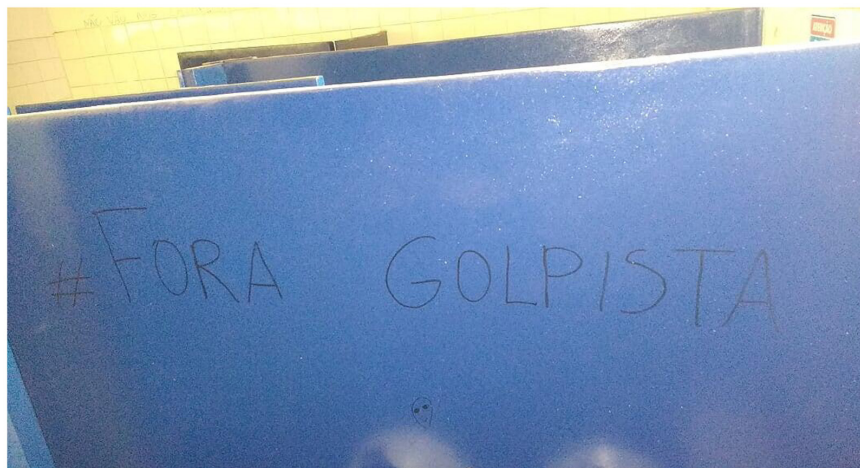


Figure 1. Photograph of the wall of a women's restroom at the University with political writing.
Source: Author, 2018.

In the men's restrooms, these representations are more common and more elaborate, referring to either support for or repudiation of a specific politician or of several politicians. For example: "(names of two left-wing politicians and one right-wing politician) corrupt M.F." (motherf***ers).

In addition, in the men's restroom we observed the presence of many explicit manifestations of anti-socialist ideologies, such as graffiti that makes a derogatory reference to socialism (Figure 2).

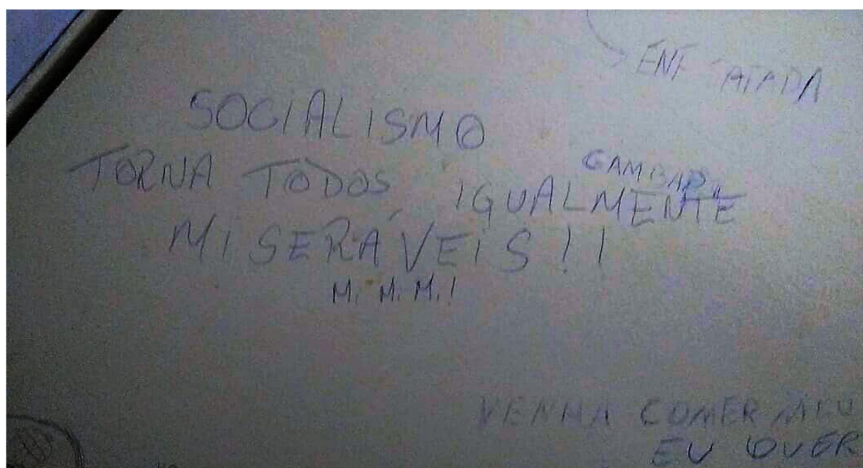


Figure 2. Photograph of the door of a men's restroom at the University with political writing.
Source: Author, 2018.

Gender and sexuality

This unit included politically infused inscriptions related to gender identities, sexual desire, erotic content, and representations of sexual and excrement organs.

Three graffiti were found in women's restrooms and 81 in men's restrooms. In the former, we found words referring to political ideologies that address gender relations as a form of resistance (Figure 3), as well as expressions such as: "Bisexuals, resist" and "Lesbians, resist". Such graffiti does not explicitly identify its political ideologies, but, through its themes, suggests a movement more characteristic of the political left. Other graffiti relates the topic in focus to criticism of politicians identified as right-wing.

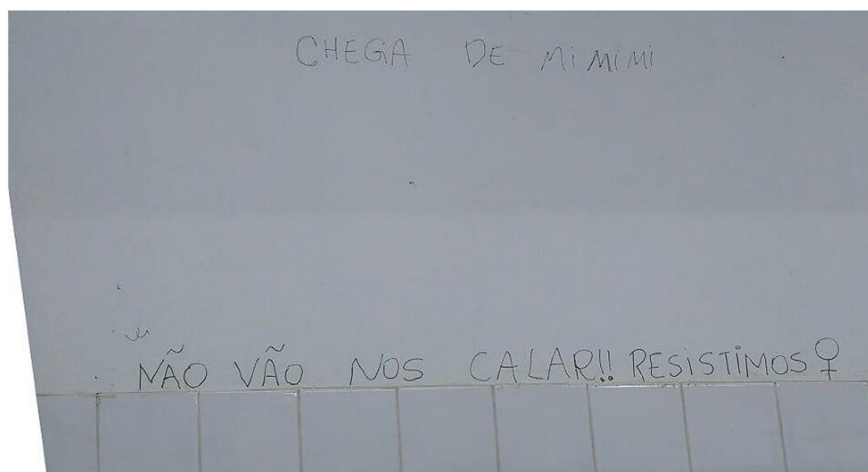


Figure 3. Photograph of the wall of a women's restroom at the University with writing related to feminism and resistance.
Source: Author, 2018.

In the men's restrooms, however, we observed multiple depictions related to various manifestations of sexual behavior, such as the pursuit of sexual pleasure, representations of the female and male human body, and right-wing political-ideological affiliations expressed through hostile words, mostly directed at groups that do not behave according to the heteronormative roles assigned to each gender.

The frequency of graffiti related to sexual pleasure was lower in educational units of exact sciences and humanities programs, compared to biological sciences programs and other spaces shared by all students, such as the library and the campus recreation and sports center.

These inscriptions included, for example, email contacts: “bottom looking for top at [followed by email address],” or phone contacts: “Suck me [followed by mobile number] GOOD DICK”. Because they were located in strictly male spaces, their authors were seeking affective relationships with individuals of the same biological sex.

Depictions of the human body, such as penises, were given jocular names such as “caralhossau” (Figure 4), on the left at the bottom, and “pintodactilo” (Figure 4), on the right at the top, with wings on the penis’s body. Another graffiti presented the “rei caralinho” (“little dick king”), a drawing of a smiling penis with a crown on the glans, drawn on the door of a men’s restroom in the campus library.



Figure 4. Photograph of the door of a men’s restroom at the University with drawings of male genital organs.

Source: Author, 2018.

Very frequently, representations of the female body were also found, with and without a head, explicitly showing breasts and sexual organs. These representations were most often observed in biological sciences programs, in the library, and in the campus recreational and sports centers.

Still within this unit, graffiti in the campus central library included hostile depictions toward the feminist movement and groups that do not belong to heteronormativity. They featured expressions such as: “Nazigayzists, feminazis shall not pass”, alongside an inscription “[name of right-wing politician] 2018”, which was rebutted by another graffiti with the following phrase: “13-year-old autistic child”. Likewise, those referring to non-heteronormative behaviors received an intervention by another author, who crossed out some words and added another, giving a new meaning to the inscription: “Death Life to LGBTs homophobia is my communist dick”.

Coexistence at the University

This unit encompassed inscriptions related to interpersonal relationships, course rivalries, political dissatisfaction and personal difficulties, demonstrating the daily relationships in the university environment. Five graffiti were recorded in women’s restrooms and 35 in men’s restrooms.

These writings in the women’s restrooms convey a sense of criticism and denunciation regarding aspects experienced in relationships within the university environment. In one piece of graffiti, there is mention of the country’s political situation, criticism of students’ alienation, and a reference to a professor as a “hypocrite” (Figure 5). Relationships among the different academic programs are also highlighted, with specific cohorts explicitly mentioned, such as: “Nutrition class [class number]”.

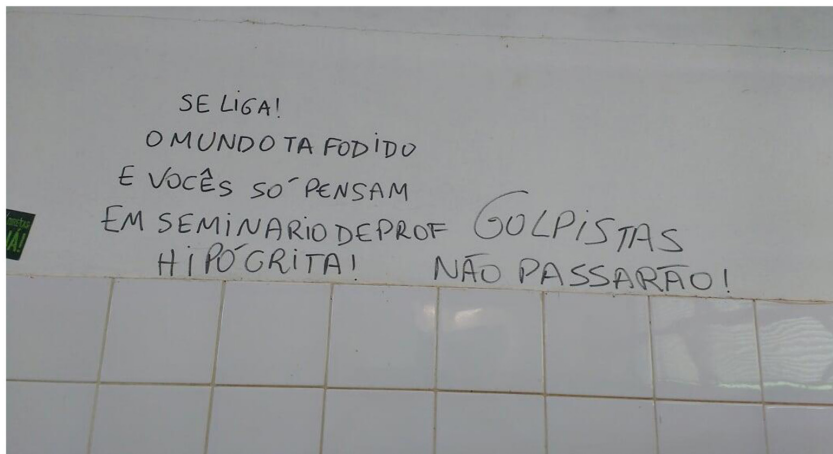


Figure 5. Photograph of the wall of a women's restroom at the University, with criticism of a course instructor and of the country's politics.

Source: Author, 2018.

On the wall of the women's restroom in the Biological Sciences building, graffiti was found denouncing aggressions, sexual advances, and sexually abusive behavior experienced on social media and in other interpersonal spaces at the university. These depictions seem to refer to harassment by men with whom they share the same campus environment.

In the men's restrooms, there are more inscriptions referring to the medical program, which are usually accompanied by one or more responses or interventions written onto the inscriptions (Figure 6). It is worth noting that the medical program is the most competitive at the campus entrance exam.

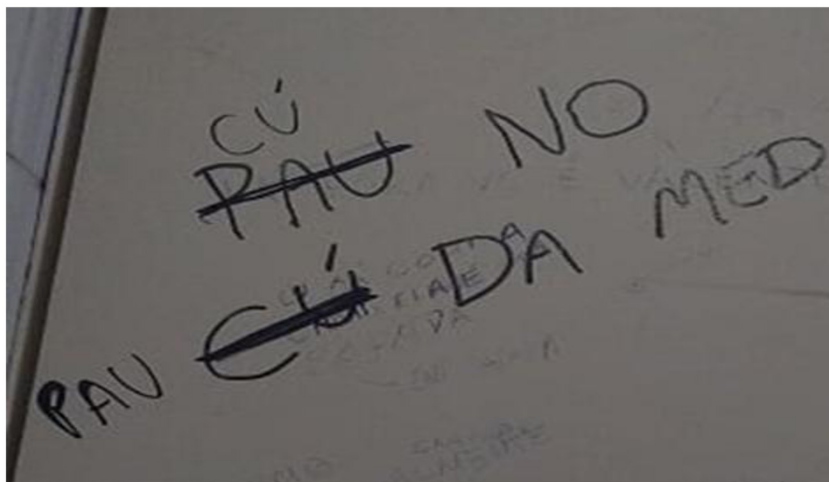


Figure 6. Photograph of the door of a men's restroom at the University with offensive writing.

Source: Author, 2018.

We also found inscriptions such as: "Out with [name of the university chancellor]—he had to come from [name of his own home unit], SOB". These inscriptions in the men's restrooms seem aimed at targeting the program rather than a particular student.

DISCUSSION

This study primarily established three thematic units that express meanings related to students' lived experiences, who are the predominant public in this environment. These are: politics; gender and sexuality; and university coexistence (campus life).

In the thematic unit called **politics**, graffiti found in women's and men's restrooms expresses ideological preferences and political activism. From a historical-cultural perspective, the university environment proves to be an important place for political socialization, as it incorporates major social impasses in the country (Costa et al., 1994; Leite, 2010; Palassi; Martins; Paula, 2016).

Thus, this graffiti reveals meanings linked to political figures or political parties that symbolize social values and conflicts, showing students' ways of acting and thinking as citizens. This politically oriented graffiti is not limited to such differences, as it also appears in connection with sexual issues and taboos.

The **gender and sexuality** unit addresses moments of human development experienced in the university context and their relationship with the socio-historical and cultural environment. It was observed that graffiti in women's restrooms contains many words referring to sexual emancipation, mentioning feminism and groups that do not fit within the idea of heteronormativity. These depictions point to symbolic values, socialization practices, and conflicts that are understandable to their audience within the cultural environment in which it is situated (Raboni et al., 2019).

Historically, within this theme of gender and sexuality, studies point to the marginalization of sexuality as well as of the female body, considered inferior in relation to the male body. In this sense, men with homosexual behavior were attributed an inversion of masculine values toward values considered feminine, which also diminished them in the eyes of society. The marginalization of the female body justified women's inferior position in political, economic, and social spheres (Barbosa; Matos; Costa, 2011; Muribeca, 2010; Pinheiro; Couto, 2008; Silva, 2000). Thus, the meanings of this graffiti are linked to female social emancipation, with phrases of resistance.

In men's restrooms, we observed depictions of desire related to the body and political-ideological expressions in hostile words, mostly directed at groups that do not conform to heteronormative roles. In general, the visual signs that appeared most frequently in this context were depictions of the penis. These drawings may take on various forms, such as anthropomorphic representations or portrayals as weapons and exotic animals, carrying different meanings depending on the context in which the population is situated (Barbosa, 1984; Feitosa, 2005).

In various societies of the ancient world—Egyptian, Roman, Greek, and ancient Etruscan culture—drawings, statues, amulets, and other representations of the male sexual organ symbolized fertility, potency, protection, and apotropaic power, that is, power that brings goodness and good luck and aggressively wards off the evil eye (Costa; Bonfim, 2014; Bonfim, 2014; Feitosa, 2005).

In this study, representations of the penis seem to signify the role of the active male—the one who has the capacity to penetrate and dominate—symbolizing figures of power.

Offenses related to homosexuality in restroom graffiti may be considered a form of contempt for feminine attitudes in men and vice versa (Teixeira; Otta, 1998). However, graffiti in both restrooms uses historically constituted political-ideological discourses in order to socialize opinions, protests, conflicts, resistance, social contradictions, and impasses that may not be acceptable through other forms of communication in other spaces at the university.

In the third thematic unit, **university coexistence (campus life)**, students project their interpersonal experiences at the university through depictions in both men's and women's restrooms.

This graffiti expresses their relationships within the campus social environment and the projected image of their own academic program in comparison with other programs at the university.

Regarding the expression of denunciations in the women's restroom related to harassment and the multiple forms of aggression experienced, the graffiti reveals communication aimed at protecting women and serving as a form of reporting and protest. These writings show that the interpersonal conflicts experienced by these women go beyond the physical space

of the university campus. These students come together through graffiti, seemingly sharing political affinities and similar experiences at the university (Soares et al., 2016).

In men's restroom, writings involving insults between programs may reveal, together with the program's social status, the conflicts and impasses present among students. Thus, this graffiti may reflect power relations among subjects and their ways of confronting and resisting (Barbosa, 1984).

Finally, the restrooms in which the most graffiti was found within this unit were the men's restrooms. These data are consistent with other studies in the university environment (Damião; Teixeira, 2009; Schreer; Strichartz, 1997; Silva; Saraiva, 2014; Teixeira; Otta, 1998).

The importance of the social and political context in the creation of this graffiti is evident, as is its origin in the various impasses and conflicts experienced by the populations involved.

CONCLUSION

What do graffiti in university restrooms tell us about university students? Seeking to analyze the meanings expressed through writings and graffiti in student restrooms at a public university, three thematic units stood out that may help us understand students in terms of their context, experiences, and conflicts.

In the first thematic unit, *Politics*, students assign different meanings to their political ideologies. In general, graffiti in women's restrooms seems to identify with the partisan left, while graffiti in men's restrooms, for the most part, aligns with the right. Far beyond preference for political figures, these writings indicate a discursive identification.

In the second thematic unit, *Gender and Sexuality*, we found many differences between graffiti in restrooms intended for women and those intended for men. The former links its sexual expression to feminist discourse. The latter exposes erotic desires, and in some graffiti prejudice and aggression toward non-heteronormative groups are made explicit, accompanied by political ideologies.

In the third thematic unit, *Campus Life*, various clashes between students and reports of multiple forms of harassment stood out. Female students use this graffiti as a means of communication among themselves, whereas male students direct their writings predominantly toward power relations between university programs.

The analysis highlights themes present at this stage of students' education. These were the themes that stood out in that private environment, which students used to leave behind marks of their main concerns or focal points during this period of training. Such themes bring to the surface the strong presence of the country's social reality at that time, involving partisan political issues as well as conflicting aspects of gender and sexual development, and coexistence with peers in this space of learning and social interaction, which is called the University environment itself.

These are also issues faced by professors and administrators of higher education programs in their efforts to overcome institutional taboos regarding graffiti, which is generally treated exclusively as meaningless vandalism. This represents a new perspective: viewing the signs spread throughout university spaces as something meaningful for understanding the context and lived experiences of students, that is to say, issues to be discussed and addressed as part of their development as university students.

The results of this study must also be interpreted considering its main limitations: the date and period in which the graffiti was produced, and technical issues such as difficulty capturing graffiti that was illegible, unintelligible, or erased over time or due to cleaning. In addition, illegibility may be intentional or may result from the use of highly stylized forms, which can function as internal codes or jargon specific to certain groups.

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MFSR: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Collection, Data Analysis, Writing, Review.

MMN: Methodology, Data Analysis, Review. LSA: Methodology, Data Analysis, Review. MFCG:

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