

How men and women express masculinity and femininity in bathroom graffiti

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A new article recently published in *Gender, Place & Culture* examines how men and women express masculinity and femininity in the seemingly private and anonymous spaces of public bathrooms.

Bathroom [graffiti](#), in both its text and pictorial form, represent viable means for strangers to communicate with each other. The text or drawings in the bathroom stalls, while written or drawn in a private space and presumably during a very private moment, are meant to be public, as they transmit ideas, images, and even responses. Using data collected in 10 bathroom stalls at a university (five men's bathrooms and five women's bathrooms), this study examines differences in communication patterns in women's and men's bathroom stalls through an analysis of graffiti content and style.

Findings reveal that while communication patterns tend to be supportive and relationship-focused in women's bathrooms, the graffiti in men's bathroom walls are replete with sexual content and insults, in the course of the construction of hegemonic masculinity. In addition, an analysis of the response-and-reply chains suggests that, in the bathroom stalls, hierarchies of power are established and reinforced even in anonymous, unmoderated spaces, and even when no humans are physically present.

The first major study of bathroom graffiti was produced by the famous academic Alfred Kinsey in the 1950's, which found that many wall inscriptions were highly sexual, but sexuality was defined quite differently among [men and women](#). Whereas men's bathroom graffiti

centred on sexual acts and sexual organs, women's graffiti referred to love and relationships in non-erotic terms. Further studies in the 70's and 80's suggested that women's graffiti was becoming more sexual and political, suggesting a lowering of female sexual inhibitions.

In this curious study, 60 years on from Kinsey's work, Pamela Leong - an assistant professor of Sociology at Salem State University - monitored graffiti in 10 single sex bathrooms; 5 male, 5 female in a US university serving many disadvantaged and low-income students. The text or drawings in the bathroom stalls, while created in a private space and presumably during a very private moment, are meant to be public, as they transmit ideas, images, and even responses.

Leong found that women were more prolific, accounting for 70% of graffiti, at first glance bucking expectation of higher moral conduct. However male graffiti was often overtly sexual, crude, competitive and aggressive; references to sex acts, male and female genitalia and homophobia were frequent, but also more humour as well as some insults. Female graffiti was less sexually explicit; messages were more relationship oriented, confided private thoughts and feelings, as well as messages of support to fellow writers. (See Fig.1) Women often referred to bowel movements, indicating a need to discuss such things privately for fear of being judged 'dirty' or unfeminine; a contrast to social acceptance of male lavatorial behaviour.

It is known that extreme and irreverent voices are often channelled through graffiti in the absence of a physical audience. Bravado aside, Leong has highlighted stark differences between male and female graffiti which reinforce heterosexual masculine power and female subordination. She notes:

"...even in anonymous spaces some people are more equal than others...graffiti... serve to discipline gender through the intolerance of

anything feminine...and...reveal relationships of power".

More information: "American graffiti: deconstructing gendered communication patterns in bathroom stalls." *Gender, Place & Culture*, 2015, www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0966369X.2014.991705

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