"This Wall Does More for Mental Health than the Uni Does": Theorising Toilet Graffiti as *Safe House* for Students

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Abstract

Despite sometimes being considered unworthy of scholarly attention, the study of toilet graffiti, also known as latrinalia, has nevertheless garnered increasing interest among researchers. Graffiti writing still suffers from the stigma of being associated with transgression, vandalism, and a deviant subculture. However, findings from this study show that writing on the restroom wall can facilitate a unique form of communication among the writers. Drawing from semiotic linguistic landscaping and serendipity as methodological inspiration, this research explores data collected from a women's restroom at a UK university over a ten-month period. It examines how restroom users utilized the graffiti-covered wall as a *safe house* and a repository for their anxieties and concerns. The findings illustrate a palpable emotional connection to this specific wall, where writers seek and offer advice, share personal struggles, and provide mutual support to the extent that they see it as contributing more to their mental health than the university does. Through an analysis of the conversational threads present in the graffiti, this study underscores the potential for examining latrinalia within educational institutions to gain valuable and meaningful insights into the student body. The main implication is for educators to consider innovative, non-traditional ways of reaching out to students outside of the formal spaces of learning such as classrooms and libraries. This study, therefore, encourages us to reconsider toilet graffiti as potentially offering an additional or supplementary communication platform for individuals who might otherwise lack the confidence to express themselves openly through traditional means of soliciting feedback.

Keywords Toilet graffiti · Latrinalia · Higher education · Mental health, *safe house/* space

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Introduction

The aim of this exploratory study is modest — it seeks to investigate the transformation of a wall covered in graffiti within a women's toilet at a Scottish university. The focus is on understanding how this wall evolved into a vibrant and dynamic *safe house* seemingly contributing to the mental well-being of the students (Fig. 1). It is essential to clarify that the intent is not to propose a causal relationship between graffiti and student mental health. Instead, this article seeks to provoke reflection into how the writers (synonymously referred here as 'graffitists' and 'users' of the women's toilet) formed an emotional attachment with the graffiti-covered wall in a toilet stall which they considered as their 'wall of support.' It merits our attention to ponder why students would ask for and give advice on depression and other university-related problems by writing on the wall instead of using other available resource within the university environment. Even before the pandemic, the prevalence of mental health issues such as elevated levels of anxiety and stress among university students in the UK has seen a rise, with rates significantly surpassing those observed in the general population (Brown, 2018; Chen & Lucock, 2022; Spear et al., 2021). In the US, research shows a concerning trend of high prevalence of college mental health issues, particularly during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic (Lee et al., 2021). Despite these high prevalence rates, however, a majority of students
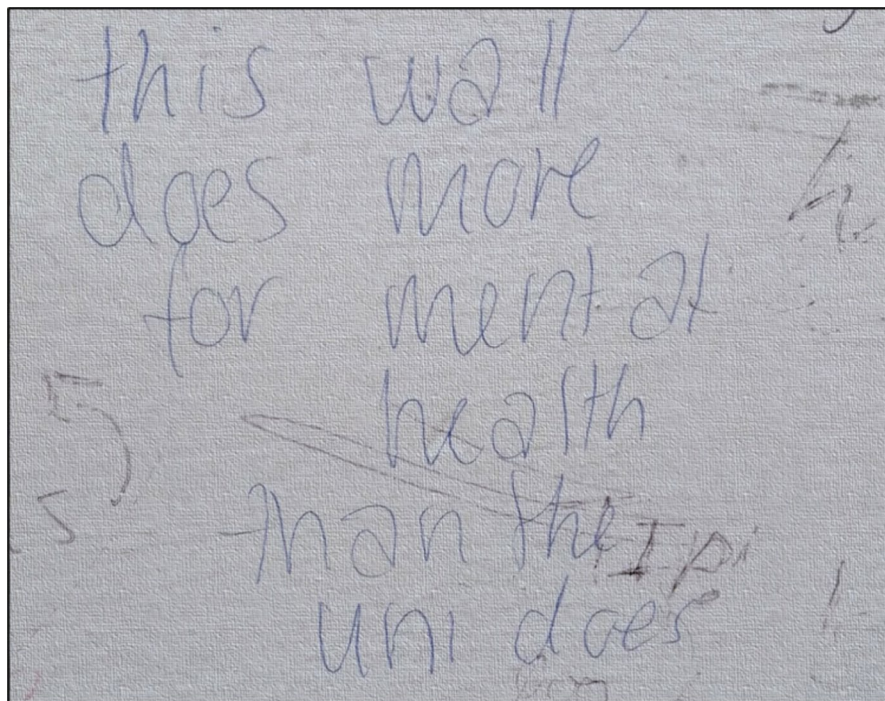

Fig. 1 Mental health

exhibiting moderate or severe mental health symptoms did not seek out mental health services (ibid.). The study underscores the urgent need to go beyond conventional methods to get student input. How can we enhance our support for students' mental well-being by harnessing insights from the writings found in restroom stalls, potentially offering an innovative avenue for gathering feedback?

While the university restroom is an odd location as a research site, given other formal spaces of learning and teaching such as libraries, lecture halls and classrooms, this research seeks to spark a provocative dialogue that focuses on non-traditional, informal, embodied, and multi-sensory learning spaces (Cox, 2018). Using naturalistic data in the form of graffiti, this study goes some way into challenging the "preconceived illegitimacy" of latrinalia research and its "relegation to a deviant, sub-standard class of discourse" (Marine et al., 2021). It is suggested that the restroom can be conceived of as a unique and unconventional space of sociality, solidarity, and mental health support for students.

During my visits to several UK universities and through my own studies, which encompassed both my master's and doctoral degrees completed in England, I have witnessed how universities have increasingly repurposed restroom stalls to advance institutional agendas. Toilet doors and walls are used as a platform, in the form of posters for announcing university-related topics such as student satisfaction surveys and calls for participation in staff research projects. However, my research highlights the relevance and significance of spaces that are or were organically created by students themselves, despite efforts to suppress such expression through measures like painting over graffiti. This raw, student-generated content, unburdened by institutional directives, carries a unique potency to inform our practice.

To illuminate how the graffiti writers utilised the wall as a distinctive communication medium, I first give a background of how the wider notion of graffiti has been researched. Then I narrow down my focus on toilet graffiti which was organically created by the writers. Then, I describe my data-driven theoretical framework of *safe house,* review related studies from various educational contexts, present my methodology, findings, and discussion. Lastly, I conclude by reflecting on the implications and limitations of this study.

Literature Review

Academic research has examined graffiti writing from a variety of perspectives from sociology, human geography, criminology, gender studies, visual communication, folklore, critical discourse studies and sociolinguistics. Unsurprisingly, scholarship in higher education pedagogy has little to say about the potential value of exploring the writings on the wall. Graffiti still suffers from the stigma of being associated with "dirt," "garbage," "danger and disorder" (Cresswell, 1996, pp. 37–40). It has been framed as transgressive, 'out of place' (Mcauliffe, 2012); a sign of sociological subculture, juvenile delinquency, anti-social behaviour and criminal activity (Halsey & Young, 2006); an "emotionally charged public order issue" (Mcauliffe, 2012, p. 189); "a fugitive set of illegal operations performed by semi-anonymous interacting bodies in motion" (Fieni, 2012, p. 75); and a "canvas of the disfranchised" and

the lawless counterculture (Stanley-blackwell & Blackwell, 1998, p. 67). However, other scholars argue that graffiti is not "reducible to this or that explanation" just because they "interrupt the familiar, the known and the already named" (Halsey & Young, 2006, p. 294). In this paper, I momentarily suspend the temptation to subscribe to the dominant social constructions of the unauthorised writing on the wall as "chaotic, untamed voice of the irrational" (Cresswell, 1996, p. 45).

Graffiti: From Cave Paintings to Urban Cities

Graffiti is as "old as humankind's desire to communicate" (Stanley-blackwell & Blackwell, 1998, p. 98) from prehistoric times in the form of cave paintings to modern day urban cities. However, it was not till the second half of the twenty-first century that researchers started to realise the potential value of the graffiti as an object of scholarly consideration. Scholars from wide-ranging fields such as archaeology (Merrill, 2011), tourism and sustainability (Seok et al., 2020), urban development (Sitas, 2020), and human geography (Chmielewska, 2007) turned their gaze in the direction of the graffiti. They began to recognise it as a reflection of the social and political order of the times, a medium of expression for those who have been silenced and as a tool for linguistic analysis (Marine et al., 2021). Offering insights from a sociolinguistics perspective and drawing from linguistic landscapes research, Blommaert (2013) posits that the physical space occupied by the graffiti is agentive; it "offers, enables, triggers, invites, prescribes, polices, or enforces certain patterns of social behaviour (p.3). The unauthorised writing on the wall can thus transform a grubby wall into a semiotic space laden with "codes, expectations, norms and traditions" (ibid.). Along the same line and drawing from Bakhtin, graffiti is also considered as a form of "tangible utterance," and "one that is uniquely visual, lexical, and time, place and space specific" (Lynn & Lea, 2005, p. 43).

Despite the growing interest in the broader field of graffiti research, studies specifically focusing on toilet/bathroom/restroom graffiti have not kept pace with the increasing investigations into graffiti found in urban public spaces such as building walls, bridges, and trains. As Marine et al. (2021) note, while more than seven hundred articles on graffiti were written in 2020 alone, latrinalia was overlooked, which is curious because toilet graffiti has "the same social, rhetorical, and communicative implications as the less intimate and participatory genre of graffiti writ large" (p.23). One reason for the paucity of toilet graffiti research, notes Haslam (2012), is that those engaged in latrinalia have gone digital. Indeed, he asks,

> why scribble scurrilous comments on bathroom walls for a meagre one-at-a-time audience when you can make the same remarks on a discussion board or chatroom to a large and simultaneous readership? Why solicit sexual partners with a crude drawing when websites can direct you to people who are more likely to be receptive to it than a random bathroom visitor seeking relief of a different sort? (p.135).

Contrary to Haslam's observation, this study shows that toilet graffiti writing is alive and well. It also goes some way into redressing the research imbalance

between the wider category of graffiti research and toilet graffiti (Marine et al., 2021). It is posited that the inscriptions on the wall can transform the blank canvas into a 'communal public diary' (Kurniawan & Anderson, 2008); a 'cultural text' (Mangeya, 2019). and a purposeful holding tank or safe 'repository' of "social anxieties about bodies, gender, cultural and religious differences, and health/death" (Schapper, 2012, p. 494). As a semiotized space, the writing on the wall is agentive which enables the writers to articulate and enact their multiple social, political, and cultural identities (Blommaert, 2012) that they might not be willing to show outside the privacy of the toilet stall. Based on the context-specific evidence from data, I attempt to demonstrate how toilet graffiti offers both a physical and a social space for the restroom users of the women's toilet at this Scottish university; a space where they can express their frustrations and anxieties about university life, politics, and offer each other advice and comfort and build solidarity, discuss personal problems, vent their anger and frustration about political issues, have humorous exchanges and express support for each other in the public/private contexts of the ladies room.

Toilet Graffiti: What It Is and Why Research It?

Toilet graffiti, also called 'latrinalia' (Dundes, 1966), refers to written messages, drawings, sketches, and stickers in the toilet stall. It can take the form of poetry, reflections, musings, and conversation threads that evoke qualities of a discussion forum or online chatroom. Indeed, written threads of conversation in the stall are "shaped by and located amongst other conversations in other spaces" (Yaziyo, 2018, p. 127). Whether in the form of writing, drawing or scratching on the toilet wall, latrinalia can "lead us to practices, and practices lead us to people" (Blommaert, 2013, p. 50). Simply put, the unauthorised and unwanted writing on the wall can transform the physical "faecal realm" (Inglis, 2002) into a "safe house" (Canagarajah, 2004, 2016; Pratt, 1991) through the repeated practice of using the wall as a unique platform of communication between interacting bodies. This is not vastly different from being part of an online chatroom where members discursively construct the metaphoric space into being. Over time, those who take part in the safe space, form their own norms and codes of conduct relatively obscured from the line of sight of the university panopticon (Amevuvor & Hafer, 2019).

Why study the writing on the wall? "We all shit and piss," (Slater et al., 2018, p. 951) and toilets while ubiquitous have not exactly made a reputation as a legitimate, scholarly research site. When educators think of learning and teaching, they think lecture halls, classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and spaces within the university where students meet for coffee/tea or a meal. However, it probably never crossed their mind that the "hidden confines of the lavatories" (Cassar, 2017, p. 2) can be transformed by the students themselves into a dynamic social and learning space through illegal writing on the toilet wall in the form of graffiti (Ferris & Banda, 2015). How can we enrich our pedagogy by exploring the students' sensory and embodied experience (Cox, 2018) of writing in the stall? If the walls could speak, what would they tell us about our students? The more important question is "would we care to listen"?

If we take it for granted that graffiti on the toilet wall of educational institutions is a form communication, then it is not so far-fetched to read it as an attempt by the writers to reach out not only to each other but to potential readers who inhabit the higher education setting. It can be seen as an attempt at starting a conversation, albeit a silent one. Indeed, the act of graffiti writing is a social act—an attempt at making a connection. Bruner and Kelso (1980) argue, "To write graffiti is to communicate; one never finds graffiti where they cannot be seen by others" (p. 241). They note that "A new person coming to a toilet stall who chooses to write a graffito must take account of what has previously been written, even in the minimal sense of choosing an appropriate location on the wall, and a message is left for those who will subsequently come to that stall"(Bruner & Kelso, 1980). Thus, latrinalia is undoubtedly an observable "materially evident participatory forum for public discourse" (Marine et al., 2021, p. 293).

Collecting student feedback has always been a priority for most universities. This feedback is used to inform policies regarding the quality of teaching, assessments and learning resources, as well as to enhance student experience (Shah et al., 2017). In most UK universities, students' opinions are often sought through online evaluation surveys, focus groups, and through student representatives or student associations. However, the type of elicited information gained through these means is limited and somewhat constrained by the questions asked, in addition to who is doing the asking. It is not likely that the students will reveal highly personal and face-threatening details about themselves which are important for understanding their contexts. The graffiti data found in this study are naturally occurring in real-world setting, not elicited by the researcher. For these reasons, latrinalia can be mined as a valuable source of insights into the world of students, their emotions and ideologies, and the immediate contexts in which they live. Toilet graffiti presents a way of "decoding and untangling the inner world of individuals as they keep to themselves their feelings and emotions which are then disclosed only through writings on the walls, chairs, tables and other surfaces" (Marquez et al., 2018, p. 178). As such, toilet graffiti, can be treated as "indicators of the interpersonal and intrapersonal self of individuals who are involved in the use of it" (ibid.). and thus can promote a cultural belonging for the anonymous members of the community (Halsey & Young, 2006).

Theoretical Framing

After iterative engagement with the data in the form of photographs and field notes, the notion of *safe house* emerged as a useful heuristic lens, offering a framework for understanding why the graffitists write on the wall. I use *safe house* to refer to learning and social spaces that are co-constructed by the participants to suit their own purposes and usually hidden from the prying eyes of institutional authority (Canagarajah, 1997; Canagarajah, 2016). This theoretical framing is a useful one for this study because the insights draw from educational research based on classroom investigations where students speak other languages besides that of the medium of instruction. It was found that these speakers use their 'minority' language to form a *safe house* that is free from the

teacher surveillance. Examples of *safe house* include those spaces obscured from the teacher's line of sight such as passing of notes, peer and small group activities and asides. In addition, there are other interactions such as the lounge, student accommodation, and school grounds (Canagarajah, 2004; Canagarajah & De Costa, 2015). Using language common to students but not known to the teacher can also be considered a *safe house*. Free from the authoritarian gaze of the teacher, students can construct this metaphoric and hidden space using their own discursive symbols and practices to communicate with each other. In so doing, they inevitably perform identities and employ unsanctioned linguistic resources that they might not use otherwise outside of the safe space (Canagarajah, 2004). Some of the affordances that *safe house*s offer to minority students include being able to fashion their learning strategies based on their perceived needs, using their own codes of communication and conduct—all these without intervention from authority figures.

Canagarajah's (1997) conceptualisation of this academic underground resonates with Pratt's use of the term to refer to "social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogeneous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, temporary protection from legacies of oppression" (Pratt, 1991, p. 40). Framing the classroom as a 'contact zone' for students, the *safe house* enables those from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds to construct a refuge, a makeshift shelter whereby they can collaboratively build in-group solidarity, shared understandings, and knowledge. For the purposes of this empirical study, Pratt's *safe house* is useful because it takes into consideration the sense of belonging, mutual recognition and camaraderie offered by the space.

The notion of *safe house* here, derived from the qualities of the students' social interaction in the ladies' room, contributes to moving the theorizing forward about informal learning spaces in educational settings. Firstly, this investigation deals with toilet graffiti in a UK university where graffiti writing is considered illegal and a form of vandalism. Beyond mere teacher reprimand in Canagarajah's *safe house*, there can be more grave consequences such as a heightened risk of participation and vulnerability. Secondly, given that toilet graffiti is anonymously done in the privacy of the toilet stall, the 'members' of the *safe house* are presumably not known even to each other. It would seem untenable to build in-group solidarity in the way envisioned by Pratt (1991). However, this investigation intends to show that the anonymous writers seemed to have established a palpable and visible connection embodied through the visual images, scratchings, and writings (pen, pencil and felt markers) on the wall.

Given the nature of the toilet, it is important to emphasise the agency of the graffitists. In these days of instantaneous communication afforded by digital technology, and the presence of counselling support in most universities, students still choose to express their feelings, opinions and ideas, albeit anonymously, "outside of the normalized environment" or the "university panopticon" (Amevuvor & Hafer, 2019). Indeed, in higher education contexts, students with opinions contrary to the dominant view supported by the university or society in general may feel silenced and intimidated. Toilet graffiti, written in privacy and anonymously become a *safe house* where 'safe' means being able to express oneself feely, in words or by visual means,

without fear of being judged or ridiculed. As Cox (2018, p. 1077) argues, learners should have the freedom to actively create their informal and multi-sensory spaces of learning.

Framing toilet graffiti as a *safe house* can provide benefits to educators. The writing on the wall can be seen as a type of "needs analysis" with the potential to yield more authentic values and opinions than traditional ways of directly soliciting opinions from students via surveys or interviews which might make them feel hesitant and uncomfortable (Canagarajah, 2016). It is imperative to underscore that this proposition does not advocate for university administrators to embark upon endeavours of "latrinalia hunting" to gain insights into their students' concerns; such an approach would be imprudent. Rather, I contend that toilet graffiti can be used as an additional tool to learn about the prevailing sentiments and attitudes amongst the writers. While toilet graffiti offers a unique perspective, it has several limitations as a data source, which I discuss in the Conclusions section. Nonetheless, the writing on the wall can complement traditional approaches to provide a distinct perspective on student sentiments. The multifaceted nature of student experiences can be better understood by incorporating both unconventional and conventional methods, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the educational landscape.

Related Studies

Considering that latrinalia often occurs in gender-segregated restrooms, much of the research has contrasted the ways in which each gendered space is constructed (Amevuvor & Hafer, 2019). Consequently, most latrinalia studies do not reveal new insights besides well-worn gender stereotypes between the sexes (Haslam, 2012). Men's toilet graffiti tend to contain more vulgarities, insults, and libidinal remarks. The writings are claimed to be more competitive, aggressive and less interactive (Amevuvor & Hafer, 2019; Bruner & Kelso, 1980; Green, 2003; Haslam, 2012; Leong, 2016; Marquez et al., 2018). On the other hand, graffiti in the women's restroom tend to be more harmonious, friendly and supportive with more focus on love and relationships rather than sex and sexual acts (Amevuvor & Hafer, 2019; Bruner & Kelso, 1980; Green, 2003; Haslam, 2012; Leong, 2016). There is still disagreement with regards to the quantity of graffiti – some studies show that males consistently outwrite the females, whereas others show the contrary.

The studies reviewed in the next section will not focus on the gendered differences between men and women through graffiti; but rather explore how the users of this women's toilet employed graffiti writing as a form of self-expression and communication. I deploy *safe house* as a lens, an overarching theme that permeates the data. The notion of *safe house* emerged *after*, not before, my iterative engagement with the data and the review of similar studies. As detailed in the section on Theoretical Framing, the use of the term *safe house* refers to those social and learning spaces co-constructed by the students and usually free from institutional control.

Based on the related literature reviewed, toilet graffiti emerges as a unique and alternative communicative space where individuals transgress cultural norms to discuss taboo topics that are often restricted in public discourse. In various contexts

from different parts of the world such as China, Malta, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and the USA, researchers have observed three common themes: the creation of safe spaces in discussing taboo topics such as sexuality, ethnicity and political conflicts, the formation of literacy and learning practices, and the establishment of a supportive community.

In the creation of safe spaces, the restroom transforms into a platform where societal norms can be challenged, and sensitive topics can be openly discussed. In China for example, sex is widely considered as a taboo topic (Wang et al., 2020). However, inscriptions on the toilet wall show that young adults have found a way to transgress the cultural norm to discuss topics that are important to them. They transformed the loo into a no holds barred hidden *safe house*. Wang et al. (2020) find that the most common topics in bathroom graffiti were love and sex. The researchers conclude that despite the subversive nature of bathroom graffiti, as well as the taboo nature of the topic, it has provided college students in China a unique space to express themselves and discuss their concerns about sex. The fact that the females outwrote the males is revealing. Although discussing sex is considered un-ladylike and inappropriate for women, they nonetheless used the stalls to engage with the topic thus subverting tradition.

Sexuality, eroticism and romance were the main topics in the latrinalia analysed by Cassar (2008, 2017) found in the women's restrooms of Maltese higher education settings. The graffiti texts show how the writers made collaborative sense of their own gender identity, sexual activity, and romantic encounters within the safe confines of the toilet suggesting the importance of a safe space where sensitive and intimate topics are allowed, the kind of space that had no room in the formal curriculum. This subversive process of learning both reproduces and resists dominant discourses of sexuality and sexual conduct in the larger society. It is suggested that the invisibility, voicelessness, and non-representation of sexuality education issues in the curriculum have spurred the discussions on the wall. Toilet graffiti poses a challenge to the silences, secrecies and taboos that permeate the Maltese postsecondary sexuality education. The author contends that this reflects the limited opportunities for adolescents to hear each other's voices and to give and receive support regarding sexuality issues.

The theme of suppressed voices finding a home on the wall is evident in Yaziyo's (2018) investigation into the women's toilets at Stellenbosch University in South Africa. It is claimed that the opening of previously white-only spaces generated written discussions in the stalls that reflected the social, political, and cultural events of the time. It is suggested that a diverse group of students used the walls of the restroom to engage in sensitive communication about race, religion, and sexuality, which transgress the dominant institutional discourse of celebrating diversity and adopting politically correct language. An interesting example given was a conversation starter that says, "Thank God I'm not Black," which was followed by a response of "Jesus was black." This was the kind of exchange that would not have taken place using traditional forms of verbal conversation.

In a Midlands State university in Zimbabwe, the wall offered the male toilet users a 'refuge' whereby their group identity can be safely enacted (Mangeya, 2019) without fear of repercussions or conflict. Mangeye reports that an analysis

of the inscriptions in the stalls suggests tensions between the Shona and Ndebele ethnic groups. What was remarkable was that the conflicts revealed in the toilet graffiti were not the type students commonly discuss in the open as doing so might lead to accusations of instigating tribalism. Indeed, the study was conducted in a socio-political environment where public discussions of ethnicity were suppressed and criticised particularly in conventional media. The toilet walls provided a secure, alternative platform where politically charged issues of ethnicity can be explored without threat to the writers' safety.

Toilet graffiti, according to Ferris and Banda (2015), also offers restroom users a literacy space which involves repurposing language, font size, images, and sketches to evaluate the self and the other. Indeed, the research shows that linguistic and visual elements can be employed to amplify messages, which demonstrates a form of literacy that may be undervalued in formal classroom discourse. Ferris and Banda (2015) conducted their research on male toilet graffiti at the University of Western Cape. Drawing from more than 150 tokens of graffiti from ten male toilets on campus, they analysed how punctuation, capitalisation, linguistic forms, and visual images were employed by the graffiti writers to emotionally amplify politically charged statements. It was evident from their data that the writing on the wall also served as a safe space to discuss the political and social concerns of the times. At the time of their data collection, a major election was to take place, and there were many instances of xenophobic attacks. Discussions in the graffiti encompassed politics, race, culture, and religion The authors argue that the "secretive and personalised nature" of this space and the "material affordance" of the toilet wall appear to "spur the creative juices of the students who try to outsmart each other, in terms use of words, images, graphics and other devices to get their messages across" (Ferris & Banda, 2015, p. 259).

Of special relevance to this study is the research by Leong (2016) in five men's and five women's bathrooms at an east-coast university in the USA. Leong claims that "the anonymous, unmoderated nature of graffiti text and artwork give voice to individuals" (p.308). Although the author's aim differs to mine in that she was concerned with exploring the differences in communication patterns between men and women through the content and style of graffiti, the findings are still informative. Leong finds that latrinalia in the men's bathroom is hierarchical, competitive, and aggressive while the women's graffiti was cooperative, harmonious, and reflective, with replies to conversation threads demonstrating affirmation of another graffitist's feelings and experiences. Her study suggests that women use the bathroom stalls to build a supportive community.

Methodology

The studies reviewed in the previous section indicate that latrinalia in university settings, can be a potentially useful source of insights into students' lived experiences. The restroom is therefore viewed here as an alternative, innovative and transgressive learning space with 'social ambience' (Crook & Mitchell, 2012).

Positionality

Before delving into the specifics of my methodology, it is necessary to acknowledge the influence of my own positionality which informs the decisions made throughout the data collection and interpretation, inevitably filtered through the lens of my own experiences, beliefs, and biases. The catalyst for the study was a serendipitous encounter with toilet graffiti in a women's restroom. Along the lines of accidental ethnography, (Poulos, 2016) I had not realised I was inadvertently gathering data—taking photos and notes of the writing on the wall—until much later into the observation. Serendipitous or 'accidental' does not imply that this study lacks rigor or intentionality. On the contrary, as I shall attempt to show in the subsequent sections, it can yield valuable insights into social phenomena precisely because it emerges from authentic, unscripted encounters within natural settings.

Coming from an Asian background and navigating the linguistic landscape in a language that is not my first language, my experiences and perspectives are shaped by a complex interplay of cultural norms, linguistic nuances, and socio-historical contexts. My cultural upbringing was strict, and I have always adhered to rules and regulations, and this is why the transgressive, unauthorised nature of graffiti fascinated me. Being a cisgender woman in my fifties working as an academic in the university where data was collected, I recognize the profound impact that these intersecting identities have on my engagement with the research processes. I consider Applied Sociolinguistics as disciplinary home so linguistic landscapes and multimodal symbols never fail to pique my curiosity. As an interpretive study, my data analysis is admittedly subjective which I manage through reflexivity (e.g. Pillow, 2003), part of which is being explicit here about my research stance and using the first person 'I'.

Research Context

Data collection for this study was conducted in one stall in a women's restroom in a Scottish university in Edinburgh. While there were around eighteen women's toilets in the building, this toilet was the only one with graffiti and the men's toilet next to it. The university has approximately 16,500 students studying in three campuses across the city. It prides itself with being the number one university in Edinburgh for student satisfaction The toilet where I collected the data is in the most central and most easily accessible of the three campuses. It is in one of the most vibrant communities of Edinburg, surrounded by restaurants, cafes, and shops. It is home to students taking computing, engineering, acting, design, photography, advertising, creative writing, journalism, film, television, and publishing. This campus features a spacious computing centre capable of hosting up to five hundred students, operating around the clock, seven days a week during the academic term. The restroom where graffiti was discovered is situated within the same complex as this computing centre.

It is important to highlight that this university, has consistently ranked as number one in the Edinburgh area for student satisfaction. It has a wide range of initiatives aimed at enhancing student well-being. These include robust mental health

resources, economic support services, and various spiritual and counseling options. Additionally, the university places a strong emphasis on equality, diversity, and inclusivity programs. It offers numerous opportunities for students to connect with each other and share experiences. This is facilitated through mechanisms such as anonymous surveys, staff-student liaison meetings, and student-led associations covering diverse interests like LGBTQIA + groups, sports clubs, multi-faith clubs, and film societies, among others.

Despite the availability of these supportive resources and platforms for expression, it is perplexing why some students feel the need to resort to expressing themselves via toilet graffiti. Nevertheless, this discrepancy is precisely why this investigation can contribute new insights to the ongoing efforts to create a more inclusive and supportive campus community.

How it all Started: A Serendipitous Discovery

The figures shown below, *You go Girl!!* (Figs. 2 and 3) (drawing of a bee and a leaf – *I bee leaf in you*) initially caught my attention before I realised that there were other simultaneous conversations going on in the same wall. Using that serendipitous moment as research catalyst, I decided to explore how an unplanned
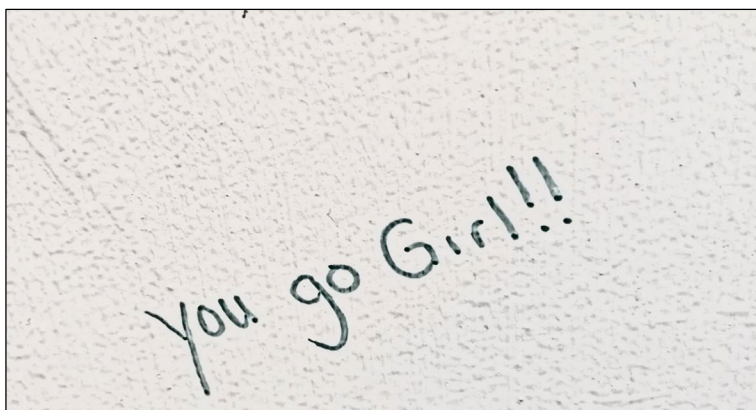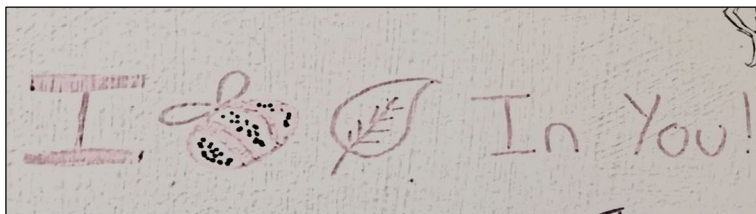

Fig. 2 You go girl

Fig. 3 I bee-leaf in you!

encounter with unique and naturalistic data, can be mined for meaningful insights through planned and systematic data analysis (Fine & Deegan, 1996). Upon further scrutiny of the wall that same afternoon, it came to my realization that the writings were not randomly written; they were part of different threads of conversations that are "restless, demanding, captivating and unquiet" (Cassar, 2008, p. 17) but also encouraging, empowering and supportive. The topics ranged from giving encouragement, asking for advice on 'coming out' or losing weight, and yet others demonstrate the urgent need to build a connection and interact with anonymous others. My researcher curiosity was set in motion –why do students resort to writing on the cold, grubby walls to document personal feelings and share their thoughts or make commentary about society? The serendipitous discovery of the 'data' propelled me to return to this ladies' restroom regularly from May 2019 to just before COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020. During the data collection, the wall was buffed three times – August 2019, January 2020, and early March 2020. The users' reaction to the cleaning of the wall impacted the dynamics of the written interactions in ways I had not anticipated, a point explained in the Findings and Analysis section.

At the time of data collection, the United Kingdom was experiencing several significant sociopolitical events. Notable occurrences during this period include the Brexit deadline extension. Initially scheduled for October 31, 2019, the UK's departure from the European Union was delayed to January 31, 2020, due to ongoing negotiations and internal political developments. Additionally, a snap General Election in December 2019 resulted in a significant majority for the Conservative Party. The Hong Kong Protests, spanning from 2019 into 2020, also stirred discussions in the UK, given its historical connection with Hong Kong. In the latter part of this period, the world grappled with the COVID-19 pandemic, and by March 2020, lockdown measures were implemented throughout the country. The toilet as the research site is tangible and physical, while graffiti is "anything but complacent and static" (Lynn & Lea, 2005, p. 59). Latrinalia reflects the immediate and surrounding context (Schapper, 2012) and thus, interpreting its significance cannot be detached from its place of occurrence.

Methods and Data Collection

As an unobtrusive participant observer who shares the same gender (as indicated on the door) as the toilet users, data collection was easily facilitated. The fact that I could close the 'assigned' toilet enabled me to take photographs of the inscriptions on the wall without attracting attention. I used my smartphone and digital camera to capture the data, which is consistent with established practices in Linguistic Landscapes research. For faded or blurry writing, or when light conditions are not ideal, I used a small notebook to record the data. The automatic date on the photos of my camera helped me keep track of when they were taken, which helped me make the link between the graffiti and what was happening in the outside world. For example, graffiti protests about Brexit surfaced just before the 30th of January 2020 which was when the UK left the European Union. The flurry of latrinalia on depression, help-seeking and anxiety coincided with stressful times at the university such as

during the end of terms when assessments were taking place. I was not based on this particular campus but was able to visit the site at least twice a week, several times a day, varying the times of my observation from early morning hours to afternoons and late evenings. The timing of my visits was dependent on whether I was teaching on that day or not but because I lived near this particular campus, I was able to visit during weekends and school holidays nearly every day.

This study draws inspiration from Linguistic Landscapes (LLs, hereafter), a branch of Sociolinguistics which is concerned with examining the interplay between language, society, and specific linguistic and social phenomena (Amevuvor & Hafer, 2019; Holmes, 2013). I embarked on the process by taking photographs of the graffiti in the stall which served as the foundation for my analysis. Next, I annotated each photograph to identify and describe the linguistic and visual elements present in the landscape. Once annotated, I analysed the photographs according to the frequency of recurring themes, reminiscent of Leong's (2016) content analysis. Since the study was based in one stall, in one restroom in one Scottish university, qualitative analysis proved to be more fruitful. It enabled me to focus on the immediate (university) and sociocultural (relevant issues in the society) contexts.

In LLs, the 'indexical' function of language is given prominence. Indexical refers to the way in which language is used to convey information about the context or the speaker's identity, social position, emotions, or relationships (Blommaert & Backus, 2011; Taylor-Leech, 2012). Indexicality involves the association of linguistic elements with specific contextual cues or social meanings. In other words, certain linguistic expressions or features can function as indices, pointing to or indicating aspects of the communicative situation or the speaker's background. For example, I do not have solid 'proof' that the anonymous graffiti writers were students (and not the teaching/cleaning staff or community members who just happened to use the restroom) but I make inferences based on linguistic data such as their mention of university life, exams, results (grades), studying and needing academic support.

This research focuses on latrinalia within a defined linguistic landscape of the women's toilet in a Scottish university. This contributes to existing LLs, the majority of which focus on the examination and analysis of the visible language elements in public spaces where multiple languages are present (Barboza & Borba, 2018; Ben-Rafael et al., 2006; Gorter, 2013; Leeman & Modan, 2009). Examining small group cultures within latrinalia is vital, given its operation within LLs and the graffiti context where identity and self-presentation are salient. In contrast to previous LL studies analysing public signs, this research focuses on unique latrinalia signs created under assumed anonymity and gender binary assumptions.

The political, social, and spatial dimensions of latrinalia make them worthy subjects of study, as they operate within LLs. The rhetorical choice of writing on a bathroom stall signifies a willingness to express thoughts not disclosed publicly, providing insights into identity and group membership that differ from texts authored in alternative contexts (Amevuvor & Hafer, 2019). The writing on the wall is dependent on socio-temporal and place-based contexts. Indeed, "location, timing, the influence of social, political and cultural events, together with personal ones, and the element of risk involved" play a factor in making sense of the graffiti (Lynn & Lea, 2005, p. 43). This approach is consistent with *safe house* as a theoretical lens. As

Blommaert ([2013]) argues, LLs is useful for describing the ways in which groups of speakers who dwell in physical spaces "pick up and leave, so to speak linguistic deposits, 'waste,' signposts and roadmaps" (p. 1). Consonant with *safe house* theorising, latrinalia can serve as another tool to analyse the transformation of physical space into a social space; a tool that has the potential to yield a 'needs analysis' type of insights as well as diagnostic instrument to peek into the social, cultural, and political concerns of the graffiti writers (Blommaert, [2013]; Canagarajah, [2016]).

Findings and Analysis

The graffiti writers used pens, pencil, and colour felt-tipped markers. The corpus consists of 195 writings and twelve drawings collected from May 2019 to March 2020 in one women's toilet. To give a sense of perspective, Leong's ([2016]) graffiti research yielded 143 inscriptions collected from five women's bathrooms. Given the higher education setting, the topics range from discussions about coping with university life, mental health, relationships, politics, and social issues. Of the five stalls in this ladies' room, the one closest to the door was the popular choice for graffiti. When it became full, a few scribblings were found in the stall farthest from the door. Adorning the wall was a poignant inscription: "Wall of Support vol 2," accompanied by an illustration featuring two hearts and a star. Implicit in this display is the suggestion that the other wall, positioned nearest to the doorway, might aptly be deemed "Wall of Support vol 1." It can be interpreted that Wall of Support serves as a symbolic gesture, indicative of a collective desire to foster solidarity and encouragement within the community. It may also be an assertion of the importance of mutual aid and acknowledgment (Fig. [4]).

Following Leong ([2016]), I conducted a content analysis of the graffiti to gain insights into the thoughts and opinions of the writers. This approach illuminates the processes by which meanings are generated and perpetuated, both by the creators (the graffiti artists) and the audience (other graffiti artists), elucidating how these interactions contribute to the construction of meaning within graffiti culture (Leong,
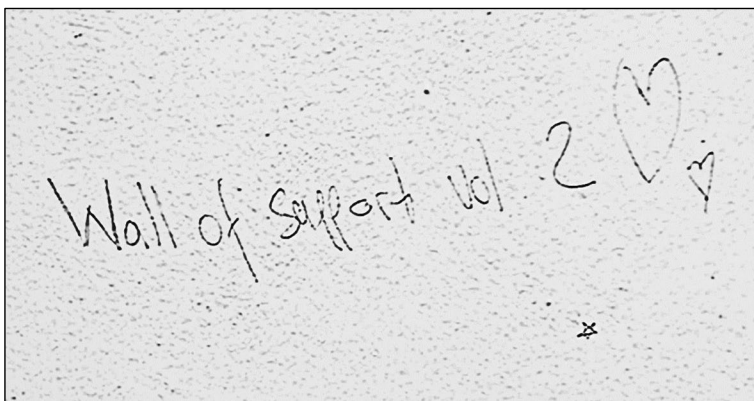
Fig. 4 Wall of support

2016). When the data collection was halted due to the pandemic lockdown, I categorised the photographs and field notes to find common themes. However, this 'cataloguing approach' is not exhaustive and is inherently flawed because of overlaps in the categories. One graffito can convey multiple sentiments (Haslam, 2012). How should a question- and -answer type graffiti with the thirty-two replies be countered – as thirty-three discrete entries or as one conversation? What about heart emojis or drawings of flowers accompanying such expressions such as 'I love you guys' – should the visuals be counted separately or as part of the whole expression? Deciding on whether to count individual entries vs conversation threads was not straightforward in many cases. In some, the writers wrote arrows to signal responding to a particular thread; when the wall became full of graffiti, connecting ongoing conversations became harder to detect. Making regular visits to the particular stall helped me in capturing how the discussions were taking shape. I varied the hours of my visits from off-peak hours and weekends to busy times in the morning, afternoon, and weekends, which was also dependent on my teaching timetable.

Consistent with linguistic landscape studies, I categorised the topics from the whole data set and counted the occurrences of each topic. I focus on the top four themes with twenty or more occurrences and one theme on reactions to the cleaning of the wall. The main themes are giving support and encouragement (N=36), personal disclosure (N=28) and giving/asking for advice (25) and socializing (N=20). Other linguistic content includes political issues (e.g. Brexit, the UK election in November 2019 and the protests in Hongkong), poetry, scatology, favourite bands/songs, beauty tips, menstrual cramps, and humour. Visual content consists of flowers, hearts, stars butterflies, and smiley faces. There were twelve entries pertaining to the cleaning of the wall. Despite what looks like an infrequent occurrence (out of 195 entries), the context needs to be taken into consideration in that they are a protest to the wall being painted over which happened three times during the course of this study—around August 2019 before the start of the trimester, between December 2019 and January 2020 during the holidays, and March 2020 just before the lockdown when the data collection came to a halt.

Below are photographs of latrinalia based on the main themes of giving support and encouragement, personal disclosure, giving/asking for advice, socializing and protests over the cleaning of the wall.

Giving Support/Advice and Encouragement

Figure 5, below, from a short question 'How's everyone doing?' is revealing. I would argue that the same question asked verbally in a more public space such as the classroom or the university cafeteria, is not likely to get the type of replies as shown here. The question was not interpreted as small talk but one that merits sincere answers. When one person, answered 'personally having a rough time,' there were suggestions posted such as talking to a university staff, doctor, or mental health advisor. Support is also evident in the two hearts and the writing 'You're not alone and you will find support. Hang in there'. The expression 'stressed oot ma nut,' was unfamiliar to me because of my different linguistic background. I had to look it up in

Fig. 5 How's everyone doing?

an online dictionary and consult a Scottish colleague. 'Stressed oot ma nut,' which means feeling overwhelmed and distressed, is indicative of Scottish identity. Identity construction through the writing on the wall can be said to be more liberating because the writers are able to express themselves freely, in any language variety they prefer, without fear of ridicule or rejection.

Figure 6 is an extension of the conversation in Fig. 5. The three entries all come with exclamation marks and drawings of a smiling face, a cat and what looked like
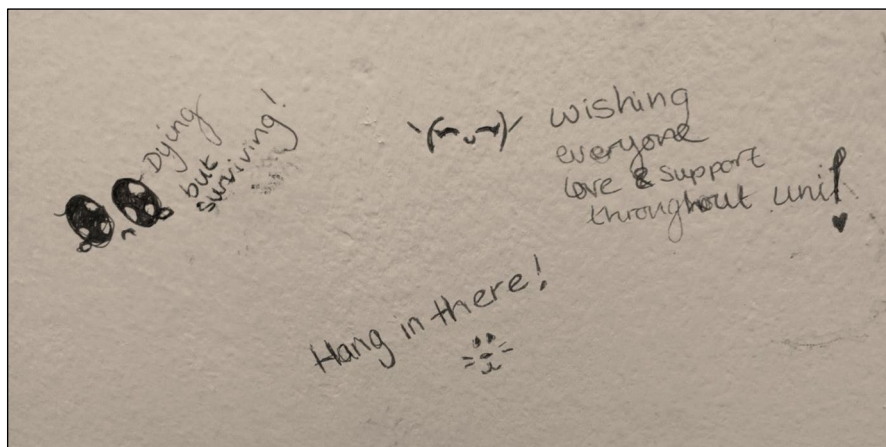
Fig. 6 Hang in there!

two turtles or fireflies. The visual elements add liveliness, creativity, and sense of humour to the conversation—demonstrating a repertoire of literacy practices (see Mangeya, 2019, 2020). Indeed, besides anonymity and privacy, the written aspect of graffiti provides affordances not offered by face-to-face verbal encounters. It can be argued that writing on the wall produces a different kind of social interaction – more intimate and sincere. There is also less pressure on the individual to participate actively in the verbal exchange or even accept the advice given such as 'talk to someone at university or your doctor' and 'mental health' advisor.

Figure 7 below adds to the supportive and encouraging atmosphere. The two pieces of graffito, demonstrate empathy and uplifting messages "You are amazing. You got this. I believe in you!" The conversation thread also reflects the first writers' need to connect and feel less alone: "Anyone else get months where it is so hard…" and the last sentence "Need to TALK!" with the word 'talk' in capital letters followed by an exclamation point. It looks like the writer might have tried to sign her name at the end of the graffito and then changed their mind. The reply by the second writer validates the first one's feelings by saying she feels the same way 'a lot' and so does everyone else from time to time. In this short exchange, it can be argued that a bond between the two strangers has been established.

Figure 8, below, continues the theme of giving support and encouragement. The catalyst was the graffito about being so depressed because of so much studying to do and the active solicitation for help. This was accompanied by a 'sad' face and a
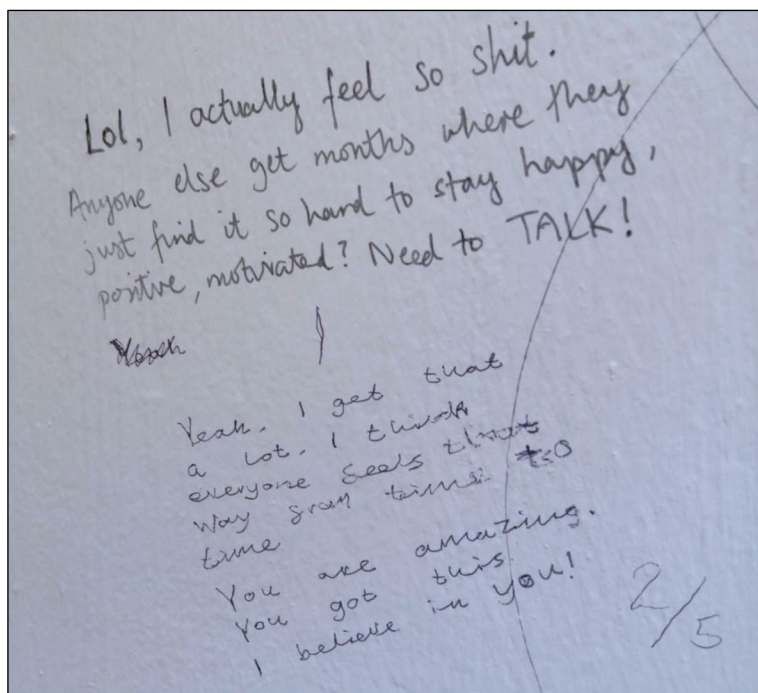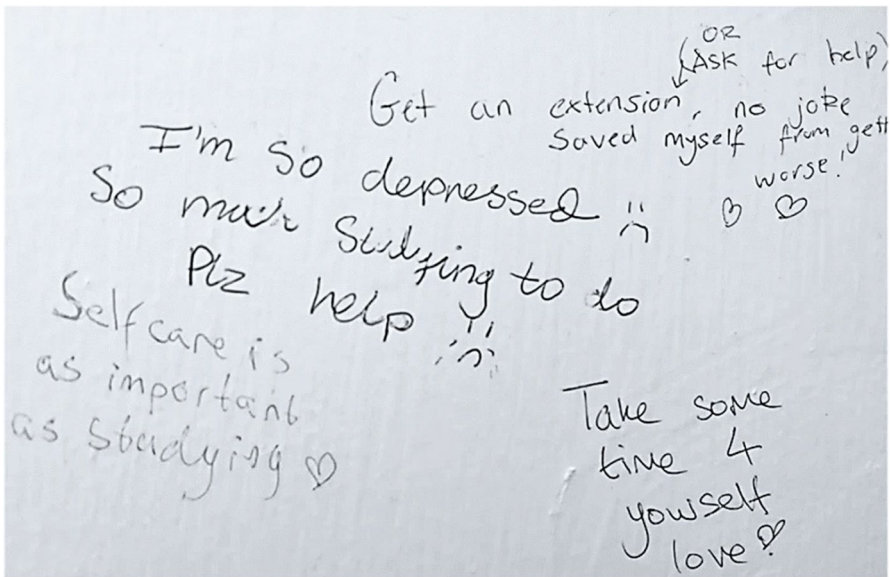

Fig. 7 Need to talk

Fig. 8 Plz help

'crying face' drawings. Four hearts came with the reply and some suggestions on how to manage the depression—from asking for help/extension to self-care to taking time for oneself.

The guidance provided to the initial writer seeking support amidst feelings of depression may appear commonplace and reminiscent of conventional wisdom. Similar sentiments are echoed through posters distributed across campus, offering avenues for assistance through designated contact numbers. I would hazard a guess that the writer has already thought of what they could do about their situation. My interpretation is that the writer is not really seeking advice but rather a safe and discreet platform for sharing personal struggles. The act of writing graffiti may serve as a cathartic outlet for those who are experiencing distress. The physical act of writing on a surface, coupled with the knowledge that others may eventually encounter and potentially respond to the message, can offer a sense of release and connection; by leaving their 'mark' in such a space, the writer may feel less invisible and less isolated—in the company of other students who 'get it', who know what it is like to experience such feelings.

The graffito depicted in Fig. 9, titled "Prayer Circle," is executed in bold, capital letters using a purple marker. The individual who created this graffiti finds themselves in a similar position to other students, amidst the stress of examinations or awaiting crucial academic results. The timing of the graffiti's creation, in the third week of January 2020, aligns with the period when grades are typically released. While the primary intention may be to initiate a collective prayer circle, the act transcends mere spiritual or religious symbolism. Rather, it serves as a beacon of hope and reassurance, timely in its delivery. January marks the commencement of the academic term, a period laden with anxieties regarding
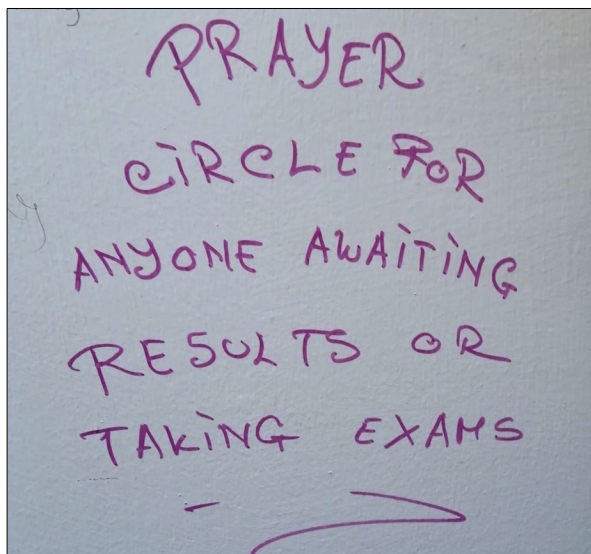
Fig. 9 Prayer circle

exam outcomes and the prospect of delving into new subjects and adapting to unfamiliar instructors. The "Prayer Circle" graffiti not only symbolizes communal support but also actively contributes to fostering a sense of unity, solidarity, and mutual aid, thus fortifying the bonds established in the preceding year. This underscores the power of words, as they not only convey meaning but also enact tangible effects, shaping perceptions and fostering connections within the community.

Personal Disclosure

The category "personal disclosure" overlaps with 'giving support and encouragement' as shown by the disclosure on being depressed. Graffiti depicted in Figs. 10, 11 and 12 below portray university as 'literally stupid' in how stressful it is, a kind of 'hell' that the writer 'needs to be over' forever as it 'drains the fucking life out of ya!' I consider these exasperated voices as using graffiti writing on wall as an emotional outlet, allowing the writers to vent frustrations and anxieties in a safe space. It is not hard to imagine that the act of expressing these feelings through graffiti may provide a sense of relief. Similarly, the writer might find the validation they seek from others who may share similar sentiments about the stressors of university life. By writing graffiti with such a message, they may be able to feel a connection with peers who can relate to their experiences. Another interpretation is that the writers might be using their personal disclosure as a form of social commentary or feedback to the university management,
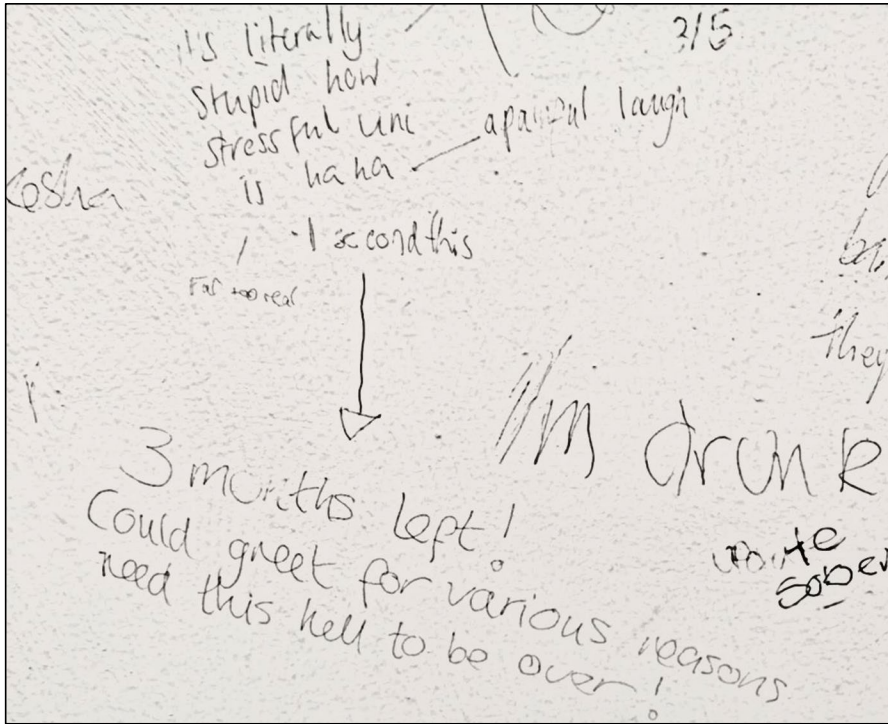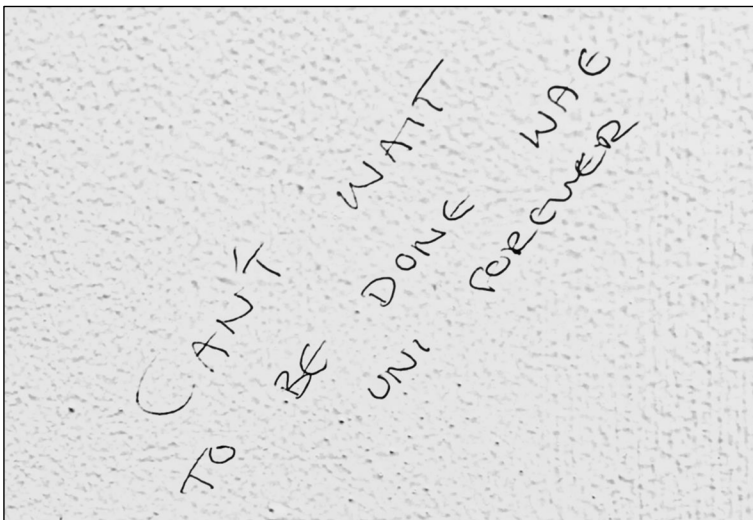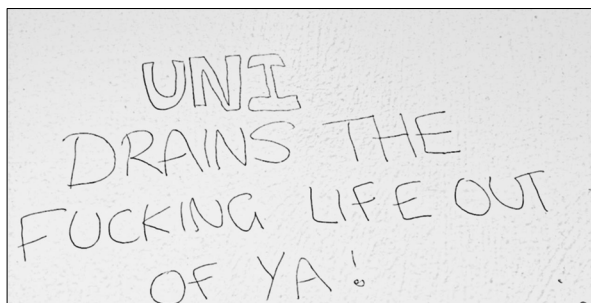
Fig. 10 Literally stupid


Fig. 11 Can't wait to be done

Fig. 12 Uni drains

highlighting the intense pressure and challenges that students face in the academic environment. Given the anonymity offered in the *safe house*, the writers can potentially initiate discussions or advocate for changes in institutional policies or support systems.

Bring Back the Wall of Support

The wall in this university was painted over three times with a coat of white paint during observation from May 2019 to March 2020.The outrage against the violation and elimination of their *safe house* became evident through the following graffiti shown below. There was a total of twelve graffiti entries collected during the data collection. Only four are shown (Figs. 13, 14, 15, and 16) here to give the readers an idea of the wrath and indignation felt by the students, and importantly the crucial importance of this wall to their mental health.

The repeated instances of the graffitied wall being painted over at the university, accompanied by expressions of disapproval from the students, reveal a profound attachment to the wall that extends beyond its physical presence. This attachment likely stems from the wall's symbolic significance as a space for self-expression, connection, and community among the students. Over time, the wall became more than just a surface for graffiti; it became a reflection of student identity and experience, imbued with personal and collective meaning. As a result, the act of painting
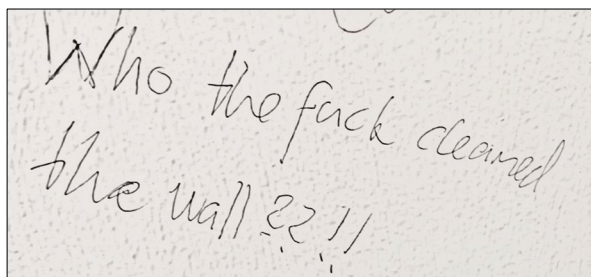
**Fig. 13** Who the fuck cleaned the wall?
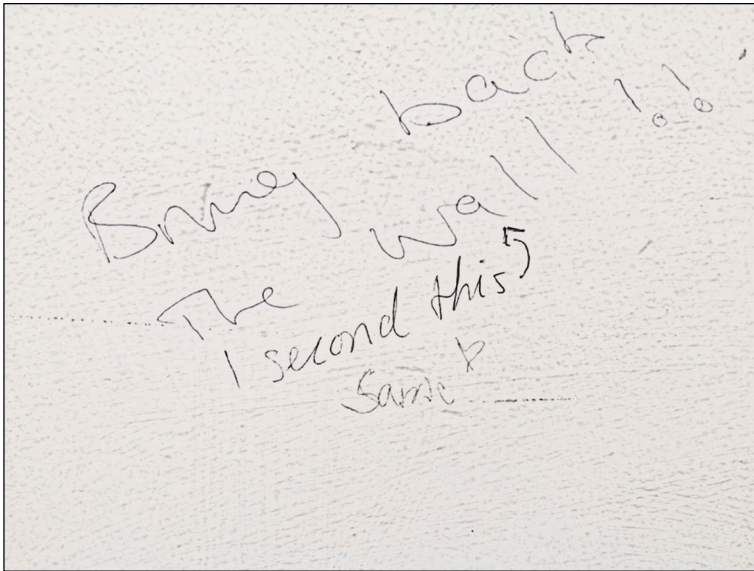
Fig. 14 Bring back the wall
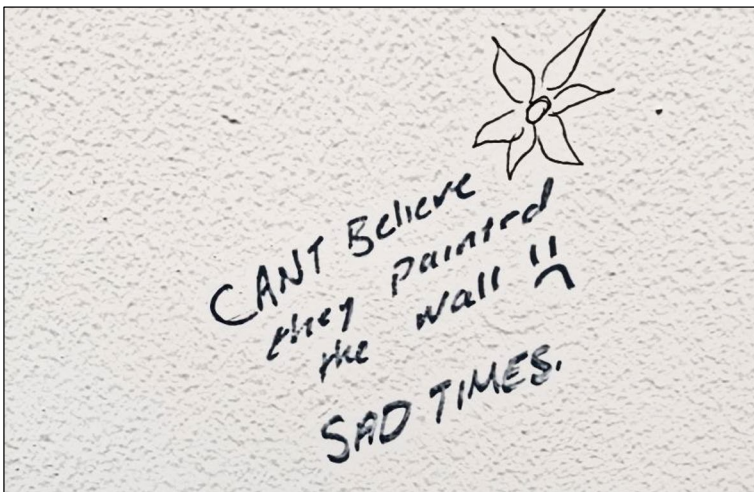
Fig. 15 Sad times

over the graffiti can be perceived as erasing a part of this symbolic space, leading to feelings of loss and disconnection. Moreover, the students' reactions may reflect their sense of ownership and autonomy over the wall, as well as their emotional attachment and resistance to institutional control. In expressing disgust, students assert their right to shape and define their environment, challenging attempts to suppress their voices and expressions within the university setting. Having been an
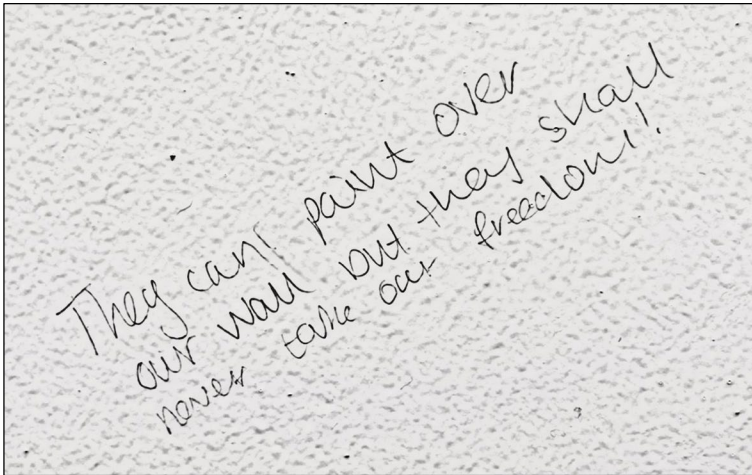
Fig. 16 They shall never take our freedom

unobtrusive part of this community, I, too felt a sense of anger and loss at the dismantling of the *safe house*.

Why the particular location for the *safe house*? In this women's restroom, there are five stalls. The stall nearest to the door contains what is referred to as the 'wall of support'. Between the three middle stalls, there are partitions made of dark yellow solid plastic material. The corner stalls, positioned at each end of the row, have only one concrete wall painted white, indicating they share a side with the restroom's structure. Interestingly, despite the farthest stall having a similar white concrete wall that could serve as a canvas for graffiti, it was not as appealing to writers. I observed fewer than ten instances of graffiti, one of which referenced 'Wall of Support Vol 2.'

One possible explanation for the preference of the wall closest to the door for graffiti may be that the writers seek to ensure their voices are heard, deliberately flouting conventions and utilizing this distinctive platform for communication. This behavior aligns with the concept of "fronting" (A.S. Canagarajah, 1997), where students indirectly express dissatisfaction with the university. Although primarily used by students due to its proximity to the library and computing centre, staff members like me (the researcher) also utilize this restroom. Another explanation could be that graffiti artists prefer writing on white concrete rather than yellow plastic partitions. However, this does not clarify why the corner wall, which shares similar structural qualities, was less utilized for graffiti.

What I Did Not Find

When Scottish universities opened in mid-2021, I had intended to continue collecting data but to this day there has hardly been any writing on the wall. I counted three separate inscriptions written in pen: 'trans rights,' 'boycott Starbucks' and 'Free Palestine.' Unlike the pre-pandemic latrinalia where there was evidence of writers 'conversing' and replying to each other, this was not the case this time. I had expected

to find walls full of graffiti in the same women's toilet with writers seeking to connect with others to somehow recreate the wall of support. The dramatic decrease in latrinalia activity might indicate a shift in student behavior and priorities. The heightened stress and uncertainty caused by the pandemic might have led students to seek alternative outlets for expression or coping mechanisms, aside from graffiti writing in restroom stalls. Furthermore, the pandemic's impact on mental health might have manifested in diverse ways than anticipated. Moreover, it is worth noting that the university has been even more vigilant in monitoring student mental health and has added additional university- and community-based resources. These efforts could have provided students with alternative avenues for support, reducing the need for a *safe house* and anonymous expression through graffiti.

Discussion

The findings of this study lend support to previous latrinalia studies that compare the differences between male and female graffiti. The wall was full of warm and loving support (indicated by heart emojis) primarily about university life. Unlike research by Cassar (2017) and Wang et al. (2020) there was little discussion on sex, romance, or relationships. My interpretation is that the graffitists have many opportunities to explore these topics with classmates, friends, family and even via online discussions. Besides, they are not considered taboo or sinful compared to other cultural contexts such as China (see Wang et al., 2020) or Malta (see Cassar, 2017). The absence of graffiti related to race (Yaziyo, 2018), ethnic tensions, tribal conflicts, and xenophobia (Mangeya 2020; 2019) at the Scottish site, may be attributed to the differences in the student body's composition, as well as disparities in sociopolitical contexts between Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Scotland. According to data from the Edinburgh university website, over a quarter of students identify as Black, Asian, or belonging to a minority ethnic group. However, further interpretation is challenging without oversimplifying the complex factors at play. Ferris and Banda's (2015) notion of literacy practice is evident in the use of playfulness and creativity of drawings and illustrations as part of the communicative repertoire.

Lynn and Lea (2005) emphasise that graffiti is a spatial, visual and a temporal experience where factors such as "location, timing, the influence of social, political and cultural events, together with personal ones, and the element of risk involved in executing the deed" should be considered in the analysis (p.43). The findings echo Leong's (2016) observation that toilet graffiti in the women's toilet is supportive, cooperative, and harmonious. Beyond Leong's (2016) results and those of the related studies reviewed, this study captures, via photographic evidence, the graffitists' strong emotional attachment to the wall over time. This study responds to the invitation presented by Marine et al. (2021) for longitudinal studies of bathroom graffiti.

Most latrinalia studies have examined gender from a binary perspective, which may be inevitable because biological sex is made salient by the sign on the door that instructs users which door to enter, making it an ideal context for comparing gendered language and stereotypes (Green, 2003; Trahan, 2016). What might graffiti

in a non-gendered context look like? Green's (2003) investigation of gendered toilets and study booths finds that the topics in the all-gender study booths combined those from men's and women's restrooms. Determining the nature of graffiti that may emerge in an all-gender toilet presents a challenge, indicating a need for further research in this area.

Why do the graffiti writers use the wall to offer/seek advice, express personal thoughts, and convey feelings? How has this space become so seemingly important to them that they express strong disapproval each time the wall is painted over? First, there is the issue of anonymity and privacy. Graffiti provides a degree of anonymity that online platforms or university counseling sessions do not offer. In the stalls, users can express themselves, in any language or visual image they prefer, without the fear of direct attribution. The physical separation of restroom spaces by gender, coupled with the assumed privacy within these spaces, may contribute to the perception of these areas as more secure and less exposed than sharing personal thoughts on online platforms. Second, the wall might allow for an immediate and localized connection for some users. When they inscribe a message on the wall, students assume that the other users belong to the same gender and are also members of the same university community. Let us imagine that I, as an academic staff member, decided to write on the wall about the stresses of teaching. I could assume that the next user of the stall will have an idea of these 'stresses' and be sympathetic. In other words, I can continue to be a member of the community without coming forward and risking being thought of as whiny or incompetent. Third, graffiti represents a traditional and transgressive medium of expression. In a world increasingly dominated by digital communication, opting for an unconventional, tangible medium may serve as a deliberate choice to break away from the norm. The fourth is related to the former – the writers want a breathing space from the digital world of smartphones and computers. As stated earlier, the data collection site is adjacent to a 24-h computing centre that is open seven days a week during term time. It is plausible to think that some of those staring at the computer for extended periods, through the night, might find relief by reading or writing on the wall. The physicality of creating something on a surface, even if temporary, might be a more appealing mode of expression than typing on a keyboard. Others might feel that writing on restroom walls will allow them to express themselves within a controlled, safe, and tangible environment; use of online platforms can be unpredictable, given that reactions can vary widely from supportive to hostile. Furthermore, the mere act of creating graffiti, whether through words or images, might hold an aesthetic or artistic appeal for some individuals.

Conclusion

The main aim of this small-scale investigation was to examine the transformation of a graffiti-covered wall into a *safe house* for users of a women's restroom at a Scottish university. Using the notion of *safe house*, the study explored how the active engagement of anonymous participants within this co-constructed "mental health" space fostered the emergence of an underground community. Through their written

and illustrated expressions, the participants imbued the wall with significance, utilizing it not only as a platform for voicing challenges and resistance without fear of reprisal but also as a conduit for candidly exposing personal vulnerabilities and negative emotions, free from apprehension of disapproval. The investigation aligns with prior research that indicates how students utilize restroom graffiti as a space to engage with sensitive subjects, establish peer communication, and cultivate a supportive network.

Using *safe house* as a theoretical framing with which to analyse the data presents certain analytic limitations in capturing the dynamics of this unique context. *Safe house*, as employed by Canagarajah (1997, 2016) was used to analyse language use and cultural interactions in the more formal classroom setting. Unlike the structured environment of a classroom, where interactions are often regulated and moderated, graffiti in restrooms unfolds without direct dialogue or negotiation. Messages can change rapidly, and the spatial constraints of the restroom may not align with traditional notions of enduring safe spaces. Most importantly, the assumption that restroom graffiti emerges within a *safe house* overlooks the reality that many graffiti writers may not perceive the restroom as a safe or sanctioned space. On the contrary, part of the allure for some individuals may lie in the very fact that restroom graffiti exists outside the bounds of social acceptability and is therefore unsafe. The risk of being caught and facing consequences for vandalism adds a layer of thrill or subversion to the act, challenging the notion of safety altogether.

Implications and Recommendations

The results of the study suggest that university resources at the time of the data collection were somewhat insufficient in addressing students' need for expression and community. While this Scottish university offers formal systems in place for gathering feedback and providing mental health support, the results suggest further exploration of innovative approaches to reach out to those who might feel marginalized or silenced, as well as those who seek alternative modes of expression. This study points to the need to consider an alternative communication platform that may encourage some students to give feedback beyond conventional communication channels. The anonymous nature of toilet graffiti may highlight the importance of promoting inclusivity and providing platforms for all students, including those who may feel less comfortable expressing themselves openly. This might require non-traditional creative methods such as the use of graffiti walls or boards for students to anonymously share their thoughts and concerns and some form of interactive art installations to enable students to contribute their feedback through drawings, writings, or other creative means. A well-designed interactive community board with provisions for coloured pens and stickers can likewise be constructed close to the restroom; the board can also be used to keep students informed of resources, and support services.

When implementing unconventional methods, it is essential to prioritize anonymity and inclusivity, ensuring that diverse voices are heard and that students feel comfortable participating. Drawing from the gendered notion of restrooms, the

university may very cautiously experiment with discussion groups that are gender segregated. However, this might be at the risk of inadvertently reinforcing gender binaries and perpetuate exclusionary practices.

This study and other investigations reviewed in the Literature Review suggest a need for the students to have a space away from institutional surveillance. I mentioned in the Introduction that there is a trend observed within UK universities whereby restroom stalls have progressively been repurposed as platforms for advancing institutional agendas. This is evidenced by a proliferation of informational posters affixed to restroom doors and walls in high-traffic student areas such as the vicinity of the library, classrooms, and cafeteria at the research site. These materials, often featuring QR codes, serve various purposes, including cautionary notices regarding plagiarism, updates on faculty-led research endeavours, as well as invitations for participation in surveys. However, results of this study indicate that students may perceive restroom facilities as private sanctuaries where they can seek refuge from institutional discourse. This prompts consideration of alternative venues for disseminating pertinent information within the university environment.

This research explored the notion of toilet graffiti as a form of safe space and examined its affordances. The broader significance of this study lies in urging universities to extend their focus to comparable informal and non-traditional spaces where students can freely express themselves and find emotional and mental support without apprehension or scrutiny. As emphasized by Cox (2017), such spaces ought to be multi-sensory, co-constructed by learners, and foster a social dimension. It falls upon educators within their specific university settings to engage students in the co-creation of these *safe houses.*

Limitations of the Study

Given the focus on one women's restroom within a UK university, the findings should be cautiously interpreted, and generalization is discouraged. While this research presents valuable insights about the inner world of the graffiti writers, there are limitations in the use of graffiti as a data source. Firstly, the anonymous nature of graffiti may contribute to ambiguity in interpretation. The writing on the wall may not necessarily represent the views of many students, potentially excluding the perspectives of more reserved (or more law-abiding) individuals who do not use such spaces for communication. Some of the handwriting on the wall exhibits similarities that suggest it may have been produced by the same individuals, yet definitive confirmation cannot be obtained. Findings from one restroom may not be applicable to other locations or institutions, as the nature of graffiti is highly contextual and influenced by the specific culture and dynamics of a given environment. Secondly, the dynamic and transient nature of graffiti content means that certain insights can be lost over time. The evolving nature of graffiti makes it difficult to establish long-term patterns, limiting the depth of analysis. The fortuitous opportunity to document the reactions to the repainting of the wall can be attributed to serendipity, a convergence of circumstances that found me at the opportune place and moment.

Despite these limitations, latrinalia has the potential to offer insights that educators may overlook. Drawing inspiration from Moerman (1993), the findings may appear insignificant amidst the tumultuous global landscape of today. Yet, "did not a wise philosopher instruct us to each cultivate our own gardens? Small gardens can teach us about the wider world" (Moerman, 1993, p.88).

Declarations

Financial Interests The author declares that they have no financial interests.

Non Financial Interests None.

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