

“Conversation Wall”: A study of anonymous texts written on the wall of a college building

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Abstract

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This article presents a study undertaken to investigate how effectively the “Conversation Wall” project serves to connect between students and the student support program at a Midwestern university. The Conversation Wall project has been launched by using the glass window space located in front of the Center for Student Support Program. It serves as a tool for learning about students’ perceptions and experiences related to their campus as well as social and cultural lives. To conceptualize anonymous texts written on the wall, graffiti studies are applied to this study. Both graffiti and texts written on the wall can be loosely defined as writing or drawings on a publicly accessible surface, and they are considered an important source of data for the analysis of cultural production and language use. A total of 1309 texts were transcribed and subjected to content analysis. The results reveal students’ social and cultural lives, the campus climate, the issues that the students care about, and what they need from their university. This article discusses findings and provides recommendations for further improvement to the Student Success Program.

Keywords:

Evaluation research, Textual analysis, Graffiti studies, Higher education, Self-expression

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Introduction

The Center for Student Success Office at a Midwestern university in the United States started the Conversation Wall project in summer 2015. The glass window space located in front of the office is used as the Conversation Wall. The project aims to learn about students’ experiences and thoughts and find better ways of helping students enrich their campus lives. Every week, student staff at the office post a question on the glass wall and invite students to write their thoughts and responses to the posted question. The physical wall platform is chosen because they want to create a space on campus where students can freely express themselves and share their honest thoughts, hoping that the wall would attract students whose expressions and interactions are often restricted in face-to-face classroom settings.

The Center for Student Success is a support program that helps students promote their social and cultural lives, particularly focusing on minority students and first-generation college students. One of the organizational goals of the Center is to help maintain a positive relationship between the university and diverse groups by conveying concerns of those students to appropriate officials. Because understanding students is at the forefront of the university’s goals, the director of the Student Success office hopes that the Conversation Wall would serve as a feedback tool to identify any issues that students encounter and be proactive to their needs.

At the request of the director of the Center for Student Success, this study was conducted to understand students’ thoughts and experiences through the examination of anonymous texts written on the glass windows. Drawing upon those written texts, a formative evaluation was undertaken to examine how effectively the Conversation Wall project served to connect students and the Student Success office and further identify ways to improve this project. As we started working with the director, two research questions were formulated for this study: 1) What attitudes, thoughts, and values are expressed on the Conversation Wall? and 2) How do text writers perceive their own experiences related to the university and social currents? We conducted a qualitative content analysis of the texts written on the glass windows. The results from this study were reported to the Center for Student Success to help develop future protocols that would measure how effectively the Conversation Wall serves to find any issues that students may encounter and offer them a quality of services.

1. Conceptualizing texts written on the wall

To conceptualize anonymous texts written on the Conversation Wall, graffiti studies are applied to this study. Graffiti has been long studied as a cultural phenomenon representing the voice of people (Abel and Buckley, 1977; Anderson and Verplanck, 1983; Farnia, 2014; Gach, 1973; Hanauer, 2004, 2011; Sad and Kutlu, 2009; Tracy, 2005). It is considered an important source of data for the analysis of cultural production and language use. The term, graffiti, translated from Latin, refers to essentially anything that is painted, drawn, etched, scratched, or written on any visible public surface (Anderson and Verplanck, 1983). Thus, the basic definition of graffiti is writing or drawing on a publicly accessible surface. In addition, graffiti is regarded as a form of self-expression and even “freedom of expression” (Tracy, 2005: 22). Because graffiti writers feel restricted from expressing free views, feelings, and frustrations, they often remain anonymous. In this sense, the anonymity of graffiti may motivate the writers

to express their personal voices publicly, allowing them to be liberated from social constraints and conflicts.

In his analysis of graffiti, Hanauer (2004, 2011) explicates three main functions of graffiti. First, graffiti allows individuals to make an entry within public discourse of messages considered as marginal by other types of media. Second, graffiti gives the individuals an opportunity to express controversial contents publicly. Third, graffiti enables them to express themselves publicly without constraints. Given these functions, graffiti adds the voice, attitude, and experience of marginalized individuals vying for public attention.

Grffiti can mirror the attitude of individuals in a given community. To examine students' attitudes, values, concerns, and patterns of communication, graffiti has been studied in educational settings (e.g. Anderson and Verplanck, 1983; Farina, 2014; Gach, 1973; Şad and Kutlu, 2009). As a pioneer of studying graffiti, Gach (1973: 285) explains that graffiti serves as a means of communication among students: "Through graffiti, students communicate attitudes and feelings they would hesitate to utter publicly." From this view, the analysis of graffiti in school settings enables us to uncover students' inner voices and hidden struggles. Furthermore, Şad and Kutlu (2009) report that the contents of graffiti are different, depending on locations/buildings. They conducted content analysis of graffiti from various locations, including men's and women's restrooms, laboratories, and classrooms. The contents of graffiti in labs and classrooms mainly consisted of "socially acceptable" topics such as "the need for belongingness, homesickness, romance, humor, or on the form of someone's name and signs" (Şad and Kutlu, 2009: 51). In contrast, the graffiti from restrooms were classified as anonymous inscriptions. The topics of the graffiti were associated with sex, politics, and religion, and those were typically considered taboo subjects. Therefore, graffiti in different locations may deliver different purposes and messages.

While graffiti and texts written on the Conversation Wall may not be identical with regard to the student office's posting questions, both forms are defined as writing or drawings on a publicly accessible surface. The glass wall is located inside a campus building where any individuals, not just students but also faculty, staff, and public visitors, can access. In terms of publicness, anonymity, and self-expression, the notion of graffiti is relevant to the examination of texts written on the wall. The Center of Student Success offers the glass window space in which students can freely write their responses to questions posed by the office, using a form of graffiti. The anonymity of respondents may encourage students to express honest thoughts, desires, and experiences. In this study, the texts produced via the Conversation Wall are studied to investigate a cultural phenomenon, which reflects individual writers' voices and attitudes within the campus community. The analysis of the anonymous texts on the wall may uncover hidden information to be unearthed, possibly giving insight into the population from which the text originated.

2. Theoretical framework – graffiti as a subculture and identity-construction

Sociological studies of graffiti explain its sociocultural meanings, legitimacy, and rise as a subculture (e.g. Brighenti, 2010; Halsey and Young, 2002; Lachmann, 1988; Lynn and Lea, 2005; Macdonald, 2001; Snyder, 2009). While graffiti is often associated with unlawful activities and rebellion against society, it has also gained the status of a subculture and popular culture as a form of art. The status of graffiti depends on how one views it, how it happens, and where it is located. Graffiti is not a simplistic practice; rather, it is a complex phenomenon. Lynn and Lea (2005: 43) state that graffiti is not just visual but also spatial and temporal:

“Location, timing, the influence of social, political, and cultural events, together with personal ones, and the elements of risk involved in executing the deed are all factors that need to be considered along with the subject matter itself.” Thus, the combination of all the factors constitutes a set of conditions that lead to a spontaneous act of writing graffiti. Moreover, Brighenti (2010: 316) describes graffiti writing as an “interstitial practice.” Different social actors who hold different conceptions create their own definitions and boundaries, depending on how graffiti is related to other practices such as artwork, commodity, law, and politics. Because interstitial practices result in conflicts and contradictions, such practices can be understood as “resistant” or paradoxical (Brighenti, 2010: 317).

Graffiti is a subculture, which represents a way of handling social relations and circumstances. Subcultures emerge from resistance, frustration, and oppression that form a group in opposition to the dominant culture (Hebdige, 1979; Williams, 2007; Yinger, 1960). According to Hebdige (1979: 80), subcultures are “symbolic forms of resistance.” The experience encoded in subcultures is formed in a variety of locales such as home, work, and school, and each locale imposes its own rules, meanings, and values. During the process of power struggles, members of subcultures confront hegemony by drawing on their particular customs and experiences, thereby exhibiting that social life can be formed in ways different from the dominant views of reality (Hebdige, 1979; Lachmann, 1988).

Graffiti consists of words, letters, and images, and all the elements in this form function as a means to convey ideas or conceptions. The words and images of graffiti are important symbols signifying not only the self but also one’s interactions with others and society. While graffiti is a symbol of separation from conventional society, it is also regarded as a connection to alternative social groups that appreciate this type of culture. In this sense, graffiti serves as a form of self-expression, which is a response to a set of circumstances, conflicts, and contradictions.

There is a significant link between subcultural practices and identity construction. Identity is a continuing phenomenon constructed by social relations and interactions among individuals, institutions, and practices (Fornäs, 1995; Holquist, 1990; Sarup, 1996). Graffiti offers a way of using coded meanings through everyday life interactions. Graffiti writers present themselves as members of a graffiti culture in which graffiti is a mark of self-expression. For those writers, graffiti writing becomes an essential experience and impacts their identity construction.

Drawing on the theoretical perspectives on subculture, this study explores the meanings of the words and texts written on the wall in order to understand the complexity of self-expression in the context of identity construction. The texts on the Conversation Wall are viewed as socially and culturally meaningful signs reflecting specific events in ongoing life experiences. Meanings, values, and norms are intertwiningly shaped by both external and internal worlds. By writing texts on the wall, students learn, understand, and reproduce norms and values through the symbols written on the wall. The act of writing on the wall becomes an event in the process of actual becoming, that is, part of constructing identities.

3. Research setting and method

3.1. Procedure and sampling

The Conversation Wall is a glass window space with the dimensions of 9.8 feet high by 14.4 feet long. On this surface, a staff member of the Student Success office writes a topic or question and keeps it for a week to receive any comments and responses from students. Each topic or question is discussed and determined by students who work at the office. To collect words and texts written on the wall, student workers take photographs every week, using a digital camera.

It is assumed that text writers were students because of the wall location in front of the student office. In the building where this office was located, there were several student-service divisions, cafeteria, and conference rooms for public use. Although there was no office or gathering space facing the wall, text writers might feel they were being seen by others because the wall was publicly accessible. There might be nobody else when a single person was writing on the wall, but it was also possible that more than two people wrote together while having an ongoing conversation with each other.

For this study, we were given the photographs which had been taken for 13 weeks between late August and early December 2015. There were 13 questions offered by the office during the period. We transcribed all words and sentences in the photographs. We first identified what topics and questions were offered by the Student Success office, determined what forms of writing (e.g. words, phrases, and sentences) were inscribed on the wall, and counted the number of responses for each question.

This is an exploratory study aiming to glean general information about texts written on the wall. Because of the difficulty in inferring the thematic content of photographs relative to that of written texts, visual analysis of texts was not included in this study. Color, lettering style, and placement of texts on the wall can illustrate text writers' intentions, preferences, and habits. However, those are also influenced by situations in which individuals were writing (e.g., how many people wrote per week/question, how many of them were writing spontaneously, what color of markers were available to them, how tall they were, and how much space was open to writers when they wanted to write). Because of the impossibility of direct observation and interviewing, such situations cannot be identified.

A total of 1309 texts were reviewed and subjected to qualitative content analysis with elements of quantification. Qualitative and quantitative approaches were utilized to provide a more comprehensive understanding of texts written on the wall. The texts on the Conversation Wall were in the form of a sentence (e.g. "I want to be a nurse") and a single word (e.g. "Hello" and "Smith"). We counted one sentence or one noun as one text. Not every inscription on the glass was able to be recorded due to glare on the window, illegible handwriting, erasure, and being scribbled out. If writing or drawings were unreadable or identifiable, we excluded them from our analysis. Texts were primarily examined, but drawings (e.g. objects and signs) were also included as additional information to be used in the categorization. We adhered to the pattern of developing categories, retrieving meanings or themes of each written text, and categorizing the texts by theme. Coding was manually performed, and results were double-checked by the researchers.

In this study, both content and textual analyses were employed. Content analysis was performed to obtain general information on the wall and identify the number of appearance of texts. Textual analysis was conducted to examine what types of interactions took place, based on the posted questions. According to van Dijk (1991: x), the “detailed analysis of textual structures requires the more refined, qualitative, approach provided by discourse analysis.” That is, the coded data through the content analysis may be still limited to the representational meaning of the unit. Following this analytical approach, we first conducted content analysis to determine how many texts appeared in each of all the 13 questions and then employed textual analysis to focus on the content of the specific texts.

3.2. Thematic categories

In total, 19 thematic categories emerged from all texts: Communication, Location/Time, Education, Social Class, Political, Sexual, Gender, Disability, Philosophical, Self, Race/Ethnicity, Relationship, Romance/Affection, Religious, Social media, Medical, Occupation, Miscellaneous, and Humor. Based on these thematic categories, all the written texts were subjected to content analysis.

Communication was categorized as any comments or responses to a post, a dialogue between comments, and a statement or post asking a question that is presumably expecting an answer. Location was categorized when words, such as specific names of town, county, city, state, and country, appeared, and Time was categorized as words or phrases referring to historical time or events. Education was categorized as words and phrases such as names of academic institutions, majors, degrees, subjects, tips or techniques for study, and student life. Social class was categorized as texts reflecting one’s or group’s power, privilege and property. Political was categorized as names of politicians, political parties, policies, and standpoints favoring or disfavoring a political viewpoint, or is directly related to politics and political issues. Sexual was categorized when sexually explicit words or phrases appeared. Gender was categorized when sex/gender categories (e.g. male/female, men/women, boys/girls, and LGBTQ) appeared. Disability was categorized as words associated with physical and/or mental disabilities. Philosophical was categorized as words referring to the foundation of knowledge, reality, and existence, including famous quotes or sayings were written (e.g. failing/failure, dying/death, and life). Self was categorized as texts referring to self-reflections, goals, and aspirations of the authors. Race/ethnicity was categorized when racial and ethnic groups or individuals appeared. Relationship reflects words such as boy/girlfriends, spouses/partners, family, and single. Romance/affection was categorized as words referring to feelings or emotions associated with love such as declaration of love and intimacy without explicit sexuality. Religious was categorized when religious terms and phrases were used. Social media was categorized as words (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr). Medical was categorized as medical terms, and Occupation was categorized when types of jobs appeared. Humor referred to texts that expressed fictional figures and as names of comedians. Finally, Miscellaneous referred to all words, texts, and images that do not fit into any thematic categories above.

Next, the 19 thematic categories were sorted into five larger content categories: “Communication”, “Social/Intersectional positioning”, “Academic/Job career”, “Opinions/Ways of thinking”, and “Miscellaneous”. The content categories were developed by corresponding to the posted questions. Ten thematic categories (i.e. Location/Time, Social Class, Sexual, Gender, Disability, Self, Race/Ethnicity, Relationship, Romance/Affection, and Religious) were grouped as “Social/Intersectional”. Four themes (i.e. Education, Occupation,

Medical, and Social media) were categorized as “Academic/Job”. Three themes (i.e. Philosophical, Political, and Humor) were categorized as “Opinions/Ways of thinking”. “Communication” and “Miscellaneous” were kept and used as they were originally developed.

For textual analysis, the texts categorized as “Communication” were further examined. The texts in the Communication category were sorted into six subcategories: “Dialogue,” “Statement/Definition,” “Agree to the posted question,” “Disagree to the posted question,” “Rejection/question to the question,” and “Question to others.” Given the subcategories, types of comment and interaction were analyzed.

4. Results

4.1. Responses to the questions posted on the wall

The written texts by each question were categorized into thematic categories. Table 1 presents the weekly questions posed by the Student Success office.

Table 1. Weekly questions posted by the office

Q1. My goal this semester
Q2. Help save a life – Suicide prevention week
Q3. Do you have a dream?
Q4. Study tips
Q5. <i>Mizzou</i> – thoughts?
Q6. Advice to my younger self
Q7. My dream job is –
Q8. Before I die I want to –
Q9. What are you afraid of?
Q10. What stereotypes frustrate you?
Q11. Do Black lives matter
Q12. What is a disability?
Q13. What is your biggest regret?

While many of the questions (i.e. Q1~Q4, Q6~Q10, Q12 and Q13) asked about students’ academic and sociocultural lives, a few questions (i.e. Q5 and Q11) explored opinions and thoughts on social and political issues.

The number of texts ranged from 38 to 193 texts, depending on topics and questions. There appears to be a fairly regular fluctuation in the numbers of texts or responses. On the first week (Q1), the number of responses was only 38, but it started to increase, then decrease, and increase again. Table 2 summarizes the thematic distribution of texts written on the conversation wall.

Table 2: Thematic distribution of written texts on the Conversational Wall

Topics/questions	Q1. My goal this semester	Q2. Help save a life – Suicide prevention week	Q3. Do you have a dream?	Q4. Study Tips	Q5. <i>Mizzou</i> – thoughts	Q6. Advice to my younger self	Q7. My dream job is –	Q8. Before I die I want to	Q9. What are you afraid of?	Q10. What stereotypes frustrate you?	Q11. Do Black lives matter?	Q12. What is disability?	Q13. What is your biggest regret?	TOTAL
N=texts (%)	38 (3%)	45 (3%)	52 (4%)	93 (7%)	59 (5%)	81 (6%)	182 (14%)	142 (11%)	193 (15%)	149 (11%)	84 (6%)	59 (5%)	132 (10%)	1309 (100%)
Thematic categories														
Communication	–	12	5	7	18	10	35	12	11	40	92	54	38	332
Academic/Job career	22	11	12	32	3	14	84	25	29	4	–	1	14	251
Social/Intersectional positioning	8	16	22	4	33	18	22	33	100	123	19	5	48	451
Opinions/Ways of thinking	4	6	3	3	20	16	12	16	51	10	1	2	5	149
Miscellaneous	6	11	28	54	20	29	10	77	71	12	6	1	38	363

Note: Adding the subtotals of thematic categories do not match the total number of texts because some texts fall into more than one category.

The question that gathered the largest percentage of responses was “Q9. What are you afraid of?” (15%), followed by “Q7. My dream job is –” (14%), and “Q10. What stereotypes frustrate you?” (11%), and “Q13. What is your biggest regret?” (10%). A majority of responses were made in October and early November (i.e. Q7~10). Given these results, the numbers of responses starting slow may be related to the academic calendar. In addition, these fluctuated patterns suggest that the topics or questions offered by the office may have had an effect on the levels of response.

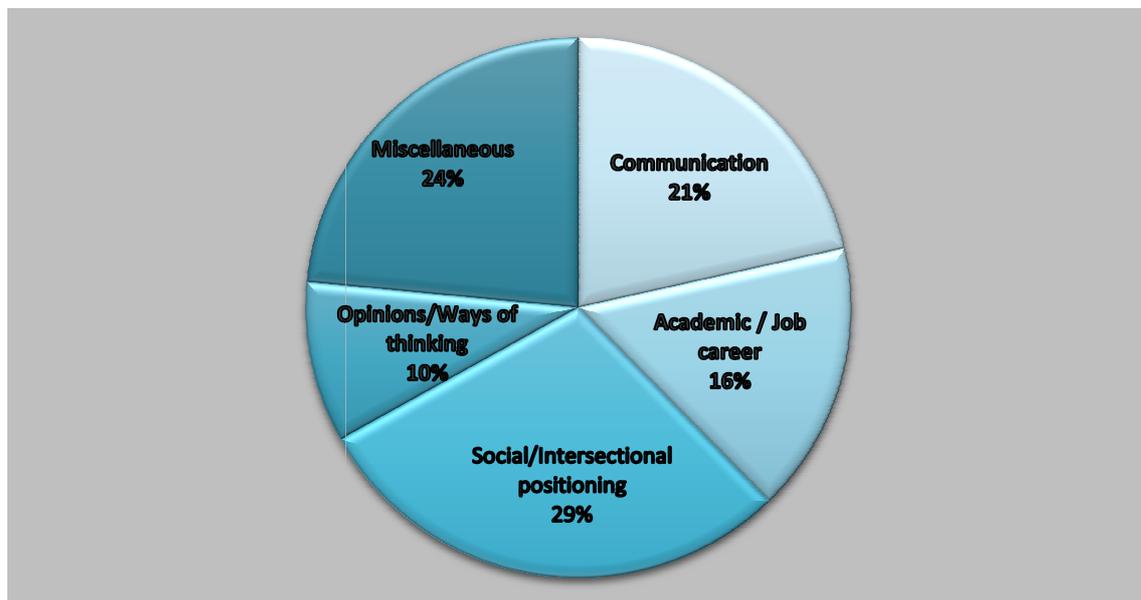
Regarding “Q7. My dream job is –”, many texts were found to fit into the “Academic/Job career” category (n=84), providing specific jobs such as “a news reporter,” “teacher,” and “psychologist.” The next category gathering most texts was “Communication” (n=35), and some examples of this category were “not to work at all I’m lazy,” “I want to make people happy,” and “help young people love their history.” In addition to their academic and job careers, students’ dreams were related to their future family. A total of 12 texts were related to family, which is categorized as “Social/Intersectional positioning” (e.g. “to be the best father and husband I can be” and “full time best lady and mom and wife”). Nine texts were related to their education (e.g. “to get a 3.0 gpa or better,” “to get into a dental program,” and “to teach around the world”).

The question “Q10. What stereotypes frustrate you?” gathered 149 texts in total. A total of 123 texts were placed into the Social/Intersectional positioning” category. Out of 123, 44 texts were associated with racial and ethnic groups (e.g. “Not all Arabs are Muslim,” “Are you Brazilian or are you white,” and “Only white can be racist”). Twenty-four texts were related to the issues of sex and gender (e.g. “All men are sexist” and “Just because theyre men doesn’t mean that they are the leader”). Some of the texts further led to dialogues. For example, “Feminist = man hater” was followed by “yeah why is feminism a bad thing?”. Seventeen texts were categorized as “Self” (e.g. “Im not a terrorist get your facts straight”). Twelve texts were categorized as “Sexual orientation” (e.g. “AIDS/HIV is not just a gay thing” and “Not all softball players are lesbians”).

When “Q13. What is your biggest regret?” was asked, 132 texts were written on the wall. The categories of “Communication” and “Miscellaneous” received 38 texts respectively, and the “Social/Intersectional positioning” category gathered 48 texts. When texts were related to the relationship issue, students tended to create dialogues. For example, the following dialogue was found on the wall: “Not spending more time with my dad” – “Listen to ‘cats in the cradle’” – “yup” – “agreed! Well my family in general when we were all still together.”

When “Q9. What are you afraid of?” was posted on the wall, a total of 71 texts referred to material objects, particular animals, and natural phenomena, which were categorized as “Miscellaneous.” Some examples included “spiders,” “Needles”, and “the dark.” In addition, it appeared that “Relationship” was a major concern for many students. In the “Social/Intersectional positioning” category, 14 responses reflected a sense of rejection: “being rejected,” “denial letter,” and “being unaccepted.” While 11 texts mentioned being single (e.g. “being lonely in life” and “being truly alone”), 10 texts reflected family (e.g. “my wife” and “my mom”). The third major category was “Opinions/Ways of thinking,” which gathered 51 texts (e.g. “failure,” “dying,” and “humanity”). Other major concerns that the students expressed were related to their “Academic/Job career,” and 29 texts were fitted into each category.

Figure 1. Frequency of appearance of texts grouped by thematic categories (%)



Among the five thematic categories, “Social/Intersectional positioning” obtained the highest percentage (29%), followed by “Miscellaneous” (24%), “Communication” (21%), “Academic/Job career” (16%), and “Opinions/Ways of thinking” (10%). While most texts written on the wall responded to the posted questions or others’ comments, about a quarter of the texts was unidentifiable or unrelated to the given contexts and thus counted as “Miscellaneous.”

4.2. Communication thread

Because the Conversation Wall aimed to connect with students and provide a space for creating dialogues between students, the written texts categorized as “Communication” were further examined and classified into six subcategories. Table 3 shows the texts categorized into Communication subcategories, corresponding to the posted questions.

Table 3: Text distribution in the Communication category, corresponding to the posted questions

Topics/questions	Q1. My goal this semester	Q2. Help save a life – Suicide prevention week	Q3. Do you have a dream?	Q4. Study Tips	Q5. <i>Mizzou</i> – thoughts	Q6. Advice to my younger self	Q7. My dream job is –	Q8. Before I die I want to	Q9. What are you afraid of?	Q10. What <u>stereo-</u> <u>types</u> frustrate you?	Q11. Do Black lives matter?	Q12. What is disability?	Q13. What is your biggest regret?
N=texts	–	12	5	7	18	10	35	12	11	40	92	54	38
Subcategories													
- Dialogue		12	5	6	14	9	7	4	11	31	24	17	30
- Statement/definition				1		1	28	7		9	32	35	4
- Agree to the posted question											26		4
- Disagree to the posted question											3	2	
- Rejection/question to the question					3						6		
- Question to others					1			1			1		

Among all the questions, the following five questions created most dialogues: Q10. What stereotypes frustrate you? (n=31); Q13. What is your biggest regret? (n=30); Q11. Do Black lives matter? (n=24); Q12. What is disability? (n=17); and Q5. *Mizzou*–thoughts? (n=14). The question “Q11. Do Black lives matter?” solicited the most various types of communication: “Dialogue,” “Statement/definition,” “Agree to the posted question,” “Disagree to the posted question,” “Rejection/question to the question,” and “Question to others.” Three types of communication were found in four questions (Q5, Q8, Q12 and Q13). When the questions asking about social, political, and racial issues (Q5, Q11 and Q12) were posted, strong reactions appeared, including rejection to the posted questions as well as disagreement and question to other comments on the wall.

The stereotypes that frustrated students (Q10) were mostly related to the issues of race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. For example, one person wrote a racial/ethnic stereotype: “Asians are either Chinese or Japanese.” This response was followed by the other two comments: “agreed” and “thank you.” It appeared that all the comments confirmed this stereotype. Another dialogue was found, and it was related to gender.

1. Men cant have feelings
- ^yes
- ^agree
- ^we should be free to express when we feel vulnerable
- ^they have feelings too!! My brother cries and says his feelings

This excerpt shows an outlet of expression of one person’s feelings and support by several others.

Many responses to “Q12. What is your biggest regret?” were categorized as “Communication-dialogues”. While some dialogues were related to “Self” (e.g. “Nothing all my mistakes have made me the person I am and I love being me”–“dido”), others reflected relationships with: Boy/Girlfriend (e.g. “Dating an abuser for so many years. Youth wasted”–“get out now!”); Family (e.g. “I forgot to tell my grandfather ‘I love you’ the last time I saw him before he died” – “sad”); and Friends (e.g. “not making more friends in school”–“don’t do it people”–“agreed”).

In addition to the types of response above, various interpretations about the questions posted by the Student Success office were also found. When “Q11. Do Black lives matter?” was posted, some comments such as “All lives matter” and “It shouldn’t matter your skin color” were

written, showing a broader view of the Black Lives Matter movement. Several other comments indicated pros and cons about this question. For example, “Why is this even a question?” led to the following communication:

- 2. Why is this even a question?
- ^What are ‘Black Lives’?
- ^But what does this question mean?
- ^You really thought this was a safe thing to ask?
- ^its not like it’s going to cause death threats
- ^really?! most, if not all, blacks have received some sort of death threat
- ^We, minorities find this to be a very valid question
- ^I had no idea you spoke for all minorities
- ^The fact that you question this specific question means that you already took a stance against the question.

This communication shows a wide range of emotional responses as well as objective view about “race.” It appears that some anonymous writers criticized the posted question itself and the other writers’ comments because they felt unsafe to discuss the “Black Lives Matter” movement and “race” in general.

When “Q12. What is disability?” was asked, four types of communication were found: “Dialogue,” “Statement/Definition,” and “Disagree to the posted question.” The question generated a wide range of responses:

- 3. Anything that keeps you from doing your best!
- ^Not being able to learn and live the same way your peers do
- ^Put your self in their shoes
- ^Be accepting of EVERYONE!!!
- ^How dare the Student Success office give us a place to voice our opinions and practice our freedom of speech?!
- ^Freedom of speech is not freedom from criticism
- ^Why does the Student Success office frame questions that invite vile responses and hate speech?
- ^why are you so booty hurt?
- ^hate speech (does not equal) ‘opinions’
- ^A disability is only in the mind, if you believe it then its true. If you don’t, then you have yourself a great discussion
- ^Something that should not stop you from achieving your dream. Always strive to be the best you!
- ^Something that wont present me from fulfilling my dream and reaching my goals!

The topic of “disability” triggered several emotional comments and was extended to a debate over free/hate speech. The first two comments above directly respond to the posted question by defining the term, “disability.” A strong emotion or rejection to the given question was observed in the use of an imperative form, capitalized letters, exclamation marks, and “How dare.” While some comments might be considered a warning or criticism directly to the Student Success office, others were insightful and positive interpretations of “disability.”

“Q5. *Mizzou*–thoughts?” sparked race-related conversations. A total of 14 texts or responses to this question were followed by other comments. For example, one wrote “Just because it’s not happening here, doesn’t mean it’s not happening at all. Wake up,” and another reacted by stating “preach.” Interestingly, the same phrase, “All lives matter,” were used in five texts, and one of them was followed by others (i.e. “All lives matter”–“stop erasing the problem”–“interesting”). The following communication was categorized as “Question to others”:

4. We need to talk about racism on our campus. Why won't our university talk about the violent hate speech written on this wall?
^What is our university hiding?

These comments pointed to a lack of dialogues on prejudice and discrimination on the campus. It seems that those anonymous writers were eager to discuss issues on campus, including what had been written on the wall.

5. Discussion

The Conversation Wall project provided an open space for students to express their views, opinions, and feelings. The questions prepared by the Center for Student Success asked about students' perceptions of their own lives, careers, and social movements. The texts written on the wall revealed students' social and cultural lives, the campus climate, the issues that students cared about, and what students needed from their university. Based on the results, the goal of the Conversation Wall project was accomplished in terms of obtaining responses to the posted questions and identifying concerns and interests brought by text writers.

A number of texts written on the wall were categorized into “Social/Intersectional positioning,” “Academic/Job career,” and “Opinions/Ways of thinking.” The content of text was largely shaped by what topics were chosen and how they were asked, but it also depended on how audience interpreted and viewed the posted questions. While the majority of the examined texts followed the posted questions or others' comments on the wall, about one quarter of them was categorized as “Miscellaneous” because they were either unidentifiable or unrelated to the given contexts. This shows that some writers ignored the questions or comments posted on the wall but still needed a space for their own self-expressions. In this sense, the texts categorized as “Miscellaneous” were nonreactive signs of human attitudes, and they were “socially uncontrolled manifestations of thought” (Şad and Kutlu 2009: 40).

Many texts and contents clearly drew writers' attention and resulted in conversations. Particularly when one's social statuses such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and disabilities were asked, text writers were more likely to express their thoughts and opinions and/or follow others' comments. It appeared that topics or questions related to stereotype, prejudice, and discrimination triggered emotional comments and expressions. Some texts criticized the questions or topics offered by the Student Success office, and others suggested there was the need of opportunities for discussing problems raised on campus. Moreover, many texts showed concerns, desires, and interests related to “Academic/Job career” and “Social/Intersectional positioning.” Because those text writers were presumably students, many of the texts reflected their college lives, concerns and anxieties about their coursework, academic achievements, future careers, and relationships with family members, significant others, and friends.

Through textual analysis, power relationships between the authority (i.e. the student office) and text writers as well as between text writers themselves can be observed. The examined texts show not only acceptance of the posted questions and comments on the wall but also disregard for and resistance to the given contexts. All these attitudes are shaped by individuals' knowledge as well as life experience. Knowledge generates power, constituting individuals themselves and governing others. Given the knowledge that they have earned, text writers might challenge or even break the existing power relations.

Despite the above-mentioned findings, the results from this study should be carefully treated because of the following limitations. First, the sampled texts were assumed to be written by the university's students because the data were collected from the glass windows located in front of the Center for Student Success office. However, other individuals such as faculty, staff, and visitors possibly wrote those texts. Second, the number of texts does not necessarily match the number of students participating in the Conversation Wall. One person might write more than two comments at a time. Third, text writers could remain anonymous and hide their identities. Because of this anonymity, those writers' social and cultural groups such as race, ethnicity, and gender cannot be identifiable. Although the Center for Student Success wished to provide supports and services especially for minority students, there was no way to confirm who wrote texts, if minority students participated in this project, and how many of them actually wrote their comments or responses on the Conversation Wall. Finally, the questions originally prepared by the Student Success office might promote but also possibly limit students' writing, depending on how those questions were interpreted and viewed by audience. Since all weekly questions and topics were discussed and determined by student staff at the office, the question contents were considered relevant to students at the university. However, elaborating words and expressions may be needed when questions are formulated in order to solicit more specific responses or comments.

While recognizing the aforementioned limitations, this study offered the Center for Student Success a better understanding of students and further assistance for developing assessment protocols to evaluate the impact of the Conversation Wall project. Through this project, the office was able to learn about students' experiences related to their university and perceptions about social issues. The comments and responses varied. Some of them were positive, but others appeared to be negative and even provocative to the office and the campus community. To resolve issues raised from the wall, the Center for Student Success may need to take further action. Besides textual dialogues on the wall, the office can organize open face-to-face conversations with students, faculty, and staff in order to discuss how to tackle negative and provocative comments. This extra step would greatly help the office staff develop a strategy for securing an open and safe space where students are able to freely express themselves while promoting social and cultural resources on campus.

In addition, this study has also brought further insight into the interdisciplinary study of subculture and popular culture in educational settings. Educators seek meaningful ways to connect with students and understand student culture. To uncover students' hidden voices and struggles over education, many researchers (Gach 1973; Giroux and Simon 1989; Luke 1993; Şad and Kutlu 2009; Tuzel and Hobbs 2017) emphasize the importance of studying subculture and popular culture in the field of education. For example, Şad and Kutlu (2009) point out that producers of graffiti are often students who are under pressure or socially disadvantaged. They are not necessarily committed to education and would not speak publicly. Graffiti, as a free form of self-expression, allows socially oppressed individuals to express their views and thoughts that would otherwise be unacceptable in society. Therefore, the analysis of students' narratives or their inner voices is critical for both teachers and students themselves to reconstruct meanings of life. Given this perspective, the examination of words and texts written on the wall is meaningful in order to fully understand students' social and cultural lives.

The words and texts written on the wall express multifaceted meanings that represent students' social and cultural environments, and they reflect historical, social, cultural, and ideological manifestations. The written texts are significant signs for students to convey their messages to others and to their campus community. Those texts reveal not only acceptance and agreement

but also resistance and frustration, challenging authorities and conflicting between conventional views and new concepts. Such challenges and conflicts are important signs to recognize the complexity embedded in a form of self-expression.

Texts, discourses, and images represented in subculture and popular culture are important sources as the authentic or “raw material of social existence” (Hebdige, 1979: 80). From this view, the words and texts written on the wall are considered authentic, uncensored, or free/pure expressions. Those are symbols and signs of self-expression and self-determination, which express a hybrid sense of the self. Participants interpret the given questions by reflecting their particular experiences as well as social currents and then provide their own thoughts and perceptions about social worlds in which they live. Their writing experiences become part of the process of identity construction.

Symbolic self-expression of students is a complex phenomenon, which emerges from the intersection of social and cultural meanings. Self-expressions among students may be misleading. To acknowledge intersectionality of identity, researchers need to pay attention to the complexity of self-expressions among various types of students in terms of gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, class, age, religion, and so forth. Such symbols may demonstrate deeper cultural meanings and uncover clashes of conflicting meanings. Further research on intersectional identities and forms of self-expression among students would offer a more complete understanding of the complexity of student culture.

6. Recommendations

The following six recommendations were made after this evaluation was completed. Based on the results from this study, we concluded that the Conversation Wall was a good start and served as a feedback tool to find students’ issues and concerns. However, some concerns did emerge from the data analysis, and these would provide the Center for Student Success office with some insight to consider how more effectively the Conversation wall could be implemented.

Create more purposeful topic prompts

The topic prompts made on the Conversation Wall could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the needs of the student body. Because anonymous messages can be promoted or limited by questions posted by the office, these questions need to be more elaborated for identifying specific student needs and campus issues. In addition, descriptive questions (e.g. “What” and “How?”), rather than the yes-no question (e.g. “Do you think...?”), would be useful to get more explanatory responses.

Expand more locations on campus

Previous studies on graffiti in university settings (e.g. Anderson and Verplanck 1983; Şad and Kutlu 2009) suggest that the content of the graffiti significantly differs among buildings with different student populations. To learn what students need and what they are concerned about, the Conversation Wall can be implemented at various locations/buildings on campus such as student housing, cafeteria, and international student lounge. This way, the Conversation Wall would receive more comments and different responses.

Provide accommodations for students with disabilities

The Conversation Wall needs to be easily accessible for all students, including students with disabilities. There appeared to be a limited space on the wall for students in wheelchair to write their responses on the wall. Accommodations should be provided for blind students who wish to contribute their feedback to the Conversation Wall. For example, staff members could read posted topics and reactions to those students and ask them about their feedback.

Use a social media platform

The Student Success office may want to consider using a virtual platform such as Facebook and Twitter to replace with or in addition to the physical wall platform. A virtual conversation through social media would attract wider audience and retrieve more various comments on posted questions. Especially in a COVID/post-COVID world, virtual settings become imperative. The use of social media would enable the student office to stay connected with students and further reach out to wider student body such as non-traditional and parttime students who are not always on campus.

Create a mechanism to tackle negative comments

The Student Success office may want to discuss how to tackle provocative and hurtful comments on the Conversation Wall. For example, the office can host an open dialogue to discuss the content of texts written on the wall and explore how controversial issues can be expressed in a civil way. Valuable insights and suggestions can be solicited by potential audience on campus such as students, staff, and faculty.

Create an ongoing process that allows for data collection on the project goals and outcomes as it relates to students

This will allow for a more thorough evaluation that may benefit the office and potentially add to the development of the Conversation Wall project. Many graffiti researchers (e.g. Brighenti 2010; Halsey and Young 2002; Lachmann 1988; Macdonald 2001) conduct ethnographic research and collect data via field observation and interviews. A longitudinal study would benefit the office in order to observe shifts and trends in written words and texts over time. In addition, interviewing participants in the Conversation Wall would be greatly beneficial, because it would allow the office to directly listen to their voices and learn about their motivations, reasons, and desires for writing words and texts on the wall.

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