

**Graffiti with a Purpose:  
Sexual Violence & Social Justice Conversations in University Bathroom Stalls**

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**Abstract**

In 2014, our university began posting educational fliers in bathroom stalls across campus in order to share resources and policies on sexual violence, which spurred numerous forms of graffiti commentary about sexual violence prevention and response. Since some scholars have argued that bathroom graffiti can be a unique form of social commentary and even resistance facilitated by the tension of doing semi-private things in semi-public spaces, we examined 429 bathroom stall fliers across 11 heavily trafficked campus buildings, and a total of 177 graffiti comments/images. We then analyzed the relationships between comments in order to answer research questions about the content of messages, if symbolic

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support was provided therein, and whether these messages about sexual violence suggested a need for further structural change at the university level.

*Keywords:* campus sexual assault, graffiti, sexual violence, content analysis

## INTRODUCTION

Although there is considerable debate about measurement of sexual assault, with some scholars arguing that the estimate of “1 in 5” college women is overstated (Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2007; Office of the Vice President & White House Council on Women and Girls, 2014), there remains strong consensus that sexual misconduct on college campuses is a significant and enduring problem for all genders, especially young women (Muehlenhard, Peterson, Humphreys, & Jozkowski, 2017). Such experiences with sexual violence are insidious, and can result in lasting trauma and negative health consequences (Widom, 2000), involvement in crime (Chesney-Lind, 1997), depression/anxiety (Au, Dickstein, Comer, Salters-Pedneault, & Litz, 2013), risky sexual behavior (Champion et al., 2004), increased vulnerability to future assaults (Gidycz, Coble, Latham, & Layman, 1993) and an upsurge in alcohol and substance abuse (Daly, 1992, 1994) among some survivors.

Both the incidence of campus sexual assault and its potential outcomes raise important questions about the responsibilities of educational institutions to prevent and respond to sexual violence when it occurs. For these reasons and many others, researchers, practitioners, and university administrators have increased their efforts to understand and prevent sexual assault and/or provide greater resources when it does occur. Despite these efforts, few survivors report incidences of sexual assault to universities, perhaps indicating a lack of trust or a perception of insufficient resources and social support (Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012; Sable, Danis, Mauzy, & Gallagher, 2006). In light of this long-standing problem, how university environments should optimally be constructed to provide safe and supportive physical and structural spaces, is still a matter of considerable debate. One potential site of social support emerged on our own campus in response to university educational fliers being posted as part of an institutional mandate to make Title IX required resources more readily available to students. We will argue here that a form of social support was discovered in conversations students were having via bathroom graffiti centered on these educational flyers. These bathroom graffiti conversations expressed both student frustrations around issues of sexual assault, as well as support for other students.

The current study investigates the spontaneous formation of this anonymous social support community, and an unconventional support system of disclosure and discussions about college sexual assault via graffiti messages in public bathroom stalls. We performed a content analysis of these graffiti messages to uncover whether their themes included supportive or critical messages around sexual assault and its prevention. Given that nearly 16% of undergraduate women and 2% of undergraduate men had experienced sexual violence prior to arriving on the campus being studied (Division of Student Affairs, 2015), this research makes an important contribution to understanding how discussions about sexual assault could serve to exacerbate or ameliorate trauma that many students have likely endured. While the goal of these flyers was to condemn sexual violence and advertise resources to respond to sexual violence if and when it did occur, we found that these fliers, in relation to the anonymity of the bathrooms’ “private” space, provided a unique forum insulating survivors from potential negative outcomes (such as victim-

blaming) that can occur when a survivor discloses their experiences of sexual violence (Ullman, 1996).

### **Sexual Assault on College Campuses**

In 1972, the U.S. Congress passed Title IX of the Education Amendments to the Civil Rights Act prohibiting gender-based discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance (Lee & Won, 2015), such as college residential life programs, health services, and counseling. In recent years, investigations into campus compliance with Title IX have brought to the forefront an awareness and discussion of sexual misconduct of all forms in college settings. Despite these renewed discussions, the 2014 release of the *Not Alone* report by the U.S. White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault highlights a wide-reaching epidemic of sexual violence on college campuses throughout the country, with few manageable evidence-based solutions to date (Office of the Vice President & White House Council on Women and Girls, 2014).

At the time of this task force report, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) released a list of universities who were then under investigation for improper handling of college sexual violence and harassment complaints (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). By 2015, when our study began, OCR had begun 140 investigations at 124 universities. These investigations were not in response to an increased prevalence of sexual misconduct at specific institutions per se. Rather, they were launched in response to concerns that universities and local police were not properly handling the complaints or the needs and rights of students making them. For instance, among female students, only 20% of rape and sexual victimizations are estimated to be reported to police (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014). Further, Belknap (2010) has found that several factors influence whether women report sexual assaults; primary concerns include whether police or prosecutors will believe them, as well as how they will be treated (Kaukinen & DeMaris, 2009; Orenstein, 2007). In principle, this effort would help reduce the barriers to reporting and prosecuting sexual violence.

Despite increased efforts by universities to encourage the reporting of sexual assault and to provide greater support, research has found that approximately two-thirds of women only disclose to family or friends (Ahrens, Campbell, Ternier-Thames, Wasco, & Sefl, 2007). This relative silence indicates that various non-institutional sources of social support (in addition to medical care and mental health services) are key for survivor response and recovery. However, research has also found that survivors encounter blaming statements, attempts at distraction, and other responses that negatively impact their recovery when they disclose sexual assault even to close family and friends (Ullman, 1996; Ullman & Filipas, 2001). Thus, although informal disclosures may be beneficial in terms of increasing the likelihood of adjudication (Paul et al., 2013), survivors are also likely aware of potentially negative reactions from family and friends, as well as law enforcement. Clearly there need to be "more supportive environments for victims in order to help address concerns such as beliefs that [assault] is a private matter [as well as] worry about being blamed, etc." (Paul et al., 2013, p. 11). But how these environments should optimally be constructed remains contested among key stakeholders.

### **Graffiti in Private Spaces**

Research has suggested that the content of graffiti—illicit writing and/or drawing on a public surface—varies depending on the intended audience and its location; for instance, whether the

graffiti is for a public audience, such as a crowded New York City subway train, or for a more private audience such as in a library book (Fisher & Radtke, 2014; Scott-Warren, 2010). As one such setting where graffiti has been documented, bathroom stalls are unique locations due to their liminal existence as both a public and a private space. To explain, bathrooms, particularly individual bathroom stalls, are a semi-public location—many people use them over the course of a day—but they are also a semi-private location—typically, only one person uses an individual partitioned stall at a time, and the enclosed space feels private even if others are using stalls only feet away.

In contrast, Rodriguez and Clair (1999, p. 2) define *public graffiti* as “anonymous inscriptions found on public spaces” such as sides of buildings, and describe *private graffiti* as “anonymous inscriptions found within buildings.” We adopt a narrower definition here by defining *public graffiti* as anonymous inscriptions found on public places and *private graffiti* as anonymous inscriptions found in private places intended to be read by only one person at a time. By this definition, the graffiti written in bathroom stalls would qualify as private graffiti even as, to some extent, it exists in a public place. Such an existence permits bathroom stalls to act as a public/private “whiteboard” where community members engage in conversation, share information and thoughts, comment on current events, and edit or critique others. In such a space, each contributor can comment anonymously and privately during his or her time alone in the stall, yet all contribute to a public conversation available to many.

The nature of graffiti conversations, whether public or private, is generally similar. They often have a predictable structure and are meant to be interactive. Wolff (2010) suggests that conversations often begin with graffitiists commenting on the most intriguing comment or picture, which opens the door for dialogue. This initial comment can be negative (e.g., critical) or positive (e.g., encouraging). Sometimes, graffiti conversations can become overwhelming in response to an initial comment, with writing covering an entire stall. As a means of organizing this dialogue, there is often a predictable structure to these conversations that highlights an interactive intent. Rodriguez and Clair (1999) have found that arrows from one comment to another are often inserted to allow for outside readers (the intended audience) to follow the conversations more easily. Arrows also allow graffitiists to clarify whether a comment is meant for one particular previous statement or for the sequence of messages as a whole. But in either case, the intent is for the readers and those who contributed to follow the dialogue. Arrows appear frequently in bathroom stall graffiti, making it thoroughly interactive, dynamic, and responsive to other individuals who read and choose to contribute to a given discussion. Add-ons to graffiti conversations further allow participants to more effectively communicate with one another and with their audience.

Several researchers have also commented on how graffiti can allow marginalized voices to participate in meaningful and purposeful conversations (Oliver, 2014; Waldner & Dobratz, 2013). Graffiti provides participants the opportunity to converse anonymously within a relatively known structure. Since most public bathrooms are still single-sex, anonymous contributors to this ‘whiteboard’ would expect only same-gendered people to read and engage in these conversations. Women in particular may be more forthcoming because they assume the only people seeing these comments are others of their gender, who, it may be assumed, are more likely to understand the experience of sexual violence and empathize with it. In this way, graffiti can be a way for marginalized individuals in particular to voice their opinions freely, despite the

fact that they may have felt uncomfortable or unable to publicly share their opinions (Rodriguez & Clair, 1999; Wolff, 2010).

Marginalization is, of course, a continuing concern for survivors of sexual violence. According to the California Coalition Against Sexual Assault (CALCASA [2014]), survivors of sexual assault frequently feel ostracized by universities and other large institutions. For instance, the findings of the CALCASA summit, argue that survivors on college campuses often feel unprepared to face their university justice system, stating that they are generally unaware of services available to them (California Coalition Against Sexual Assault, 2014). Thus, settings like bathroom stalls can become one site of anonymous disclosure as well as a space used to express attitudes and emotions, and/or confront a dominant regime and ideology without fear. However, these spaces have also become a site for communicating official and institutional information on the part of the university to students about resources and interventions related to sexual assault, since bathrooms are frequented often by a wide variety of people and provide the opportunity to hold one's attention for a period of time. Thus, many institutions have begun providing fliers with prevention strategies and sexual assault resources in highly-trafficked areas such as bathrooms.

### **Current Study**

On our campus in particular—Indiana University, Bloomington (IUB)—student affairs administrators facilitated a sexual misconduct resource intervention that included posting fliers across campus with information about campus resources, tips for intervening, and the university's Title IX definition of sexual violence (see Appendix). These fliers were placed in every bathroom stall in heavily-trafficked campus buildings. Almost immediately after these fliers were posted, graffiti conversations began to appear on and around them in the bathroom stalls. While there are many graffiti conversations in campus stalls each semester, we observed that a large number of these comments and conversations occurred directly in response to the educational fliers about sexual assault. Thus these sightings began our interest in the current project. The current study explores three specific research questions:

*RQ 1:* What messages does the graffiti convey? In particular, what type of content is included in the bathroom stall conversations engaging with the sexual assault resources fliers?

*RQ 2:* Does graffiti appear to provide social/emotional support for writers or readers?

*RQ 3:* Among the graffiti messages that focus on sexual assault, are they suggesting a need for change? If so, what type of change?

A strength of the current study is that, given that it is confined to university students, it occurs in locations that are visited by both men and women, across gender identities and sexual orientations, racial and ethnic categories, and across ages and personal experiences, including knowledge about, attitudes toward, and experiences with sexual misconduct. Further, the current study presents a novel and timely investigation into a topic that brings together the fields of criminology, gender, sexuality, and physical space.

## METHODS

### Data Collection

All data were collected in 2015. The 11 buildings on the IUB campus selected for data collection were those with the most student traffic, which included all classroom buildings and the largest dormitories. A male and female researcher visited every bathroom stall in each building and photographed all observed graffiti, even if unrelated to sexual assault. The male researcher visited 194 men's stalls and photographed 52 graffiti comments. The female researcher visited 235 women's stalls and photographed 127 graffiti comments. In total, 429 stalls were visited and 179 comments were photographed.

### Target Campus

As noted earlier, IUB has undertaken a series of multi-level activities related to preventing and responding to sexual misconduct, including a resource awareness campaign. The IU Bloomington campus is the flagship and largest campus of the Indiana University system. The campus, located on approximately 2,000-acres in Southern Indiana (USA), is a large Midwestern public University that enrolls nearly 50,000 students in total (approximately 40,000 undergraduates). The ratio of male-to-female students is roughly equal, with a large proportion of the undergraduate student body identifying their race/ethnicity as white and deriving from the same state. The campus reports that students come from throughout the U.S. and the world, with over 125 countries represented in the student body, and roughly one in five students being a person of color. The campus is also home to approximately 12,000 staff of varying ages and demographic backgrounds.

### Data Analysis

Graffiti was analyzed following the thematic analysis approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). In the absence of previous research on bathroom graffiti specifically related to social justice or sexual violence, themes were data-driven rather than theoretically-derived. Our themes were semantic in nature, describing the content of each graffiti comment in order to highlight overarching ideas and patterns. Themes were generated based on whether the graffiti comment was about sexual assault, sexual violence, or a related social justice issue; the valence of the comment; and whether and how the comment interacted with other comments in the same bathroom stall (i.e., whether graffiti contributors were conversing with one another with arrows or otherwise). We created 18 categories for the graffiti comments. Nine categories were objective descriptors of the graffiti comments (i.e., gender of the bathroom in which they were found, whether the graffiti was written on the flier or elsewhere). The remaining nine categories were focused on valence and specific content (i.e., attitude toward the flier, whether the graffiti related to sexual assault or sexual violence). See Table 1 for a listing of categories and specific codes within each.

To ensure adequate interrater reliability, two authors first coded a small subset (10%) of the comments across all 18 categories. Kappa estimates ranged from .73 to .99, with the average being .88. As this exceeded  $k = .70$ , the standard for interrater reliability, these authors proceeded in coding all graffiti comments individually and then met to discuss their choices and resolve discrepancies.

**Table 1. Coding categories and schemes for graffiti comments**

Category of Codes	Coding Scheme Used
<b>Structural/Descriptive</b>	
Gender of the bathroom	0=Male; 1=Female
Whether comment is in response to flier	0=No; 1=Yes
Whether comment is written on flier	0=No; 1=Yes
Level of interaction with words on flier	1=Strong (arrows, underlining, directly in response to specific phrase); 2=Mild but obviously related to flier; 3=None
<b>Valence/Content-Focused Codes</b>	
Attitude toward flier/message	1=Positive; 2=Neutral; 3=Negative; 99=Unrelated to flier
Whether comment is related to sexual assault or sexual violence	0=No; 1=Yes
Content of comment	1=Reporting or exposing an assault/assailant; 2=Recommendation for action or change; 3=Providing support; 4=Providing additional information; 5=Criticizing, critical, or disappointed; 6=Misc. comment or opinion; 7=Quote-like recommendation or advice; 8=Social commentary or quote on social problems (not sexual assault)
Focus of comment	1=Race; 2=Sexual assault; 3=Mental health; 4=Sexual activity and relationships; 5=Misc.
Comment is in response to another written comment	0=No; 1=Yes
Valence of opinion on how university handles sexual assault	1=Supportive; 2=Neutral; 3=Critical; 99=Unrelated
Content of critique on how university handles sexual assault	1=Focuses on prevention; 2=Focuses on response; 3=Focuses on neither; 99=Unrelated
Type of additional markings	1=Underlining; 2=Crossed- or scratched-out word; 3=Non-sexual drawing (e.g., heart, smiley); 4=Arrow or line connecting comments; 5=Sexual drawing; 99=None
Relationship of additional markings to other comments	1=Reacting to another comment; 2=Reacting to writing on flier; 3=Reacting to commenter's own words; 99=None

## RESULTS

### Summary Descriptors of Bathroom Stall Graffiti Comments

Of the 177 graffiti comments photographed, the majority (70%) came from women's bathroom stalls. On average, graffiti comments were 1.6 sentences in length, and contained an average of eight words. Most comments were between one and ten words (70%), and included neither curse words (90.7%) nor additional markings (e.g., arrows, underlining; 58.8%). Of the 74 comments that did include additional markings, 18.1% of the markings were arrows or lines connecting one comment with another; 11.3% were non-sexual drawings (e.g., a heart or smiley face); 6.2% were crossing or scratching out another comment or word on the flier; 4.52% were underlining of another comment or word on the flier; and 1.7% were sexual drawings.

### Content of Graffiti Comments

First, we examined the content of the comments and the types of messages being conveyed. Forty-five percent of all comments (79 of 177) were related to the content of the flier. Graffiti in men's bathrooms were more likely to respond to sexual assault issues (50.9%) than graffiti in women's bathrooms (41.9%). For example, we observed comments from men such as "Lies." or "BULLSHIT" on the flier if responding negatively. Or, if responding positively, they might write, "Don't sexually assault people." Similarly, when positive, women wrote, "Don't rape." When negative, women would write, for example, "IU doesn't care," perhaps highlighting the more direct experience women on a campus may have had with both sexual assault and the process of reporting and adjudicating of sexual violence on campus.

Among all graffiti comments (177 comments), we identified five themes (see Table 2). In women's bathroom stalls, the majority of graffiti comments were about sexual assault (41.9% of 124 comments). This was followed by comments about mental health (14.5%), sexual activity and relationships (11.3%), and race (9.7%). An additional 22.6% of women's comments were coded as "miscellaneous." These include comments that were unrelated to the flier or social issues (e.g., "Our butts have touched the same seat" or "Time goes by so fast. Live it up!"). In men's bathroom stalls, approximately half (50.9%) of graffiti comments were about sexual assault. The remaining comments in men's stalls were about other types of sexual activity (20.8%) or were miscellaneous (28.3%). Men did not discuss mental health topics via graffiti.



**Table 2. Categories of graffiti themes, with examples**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Women’s Stalls (n=124 comments)</b>	<b>Men’s Stalls (n=53 comments)</b>
<b>Race</b>	9.7%  *IF You DO NOT GET THAT THIS IS ABOUT RACE, YOU ARE AHISTORICAL. FERGUSON REBELS!! RIP "MIKE MIKE"	0%
<b>Sexual Assault</b>	41.9%  *Just don’t rape. *You mean IU is actually doing something about sexual assault? That's new.	50.9%  *Don't sexually assault people. *If you make out with a chick at sports you're a rapist *I was assaulted by a 215 lb female *That's fucked up. Rape isn't for anyone to do, asshole.
<b>Mental Health</b>	14.5%  *I Need somebody to talk to... *Make an appt with CAPS! It always helps to talk to an unbiased professional, and doesn't mean you're anything less than strong, sane, or stable *We support you.	0%
<b>Sexual Activity and Relationships</b>	11.3%  *My boyfriend of over 3 years ended our relationship. I am heartbroken. And I don't know what to do. I thought I was going to marry him.	20.8%  *write # for \$5 blowjob *[drawing of a penis] *suck my cock
<b>Miscellaneous</b>	22.6%  *reading this stall makes my day *unlearn internalized misogyny	28.3%  *How’s your poop going? *A great band name *I read this wall while I poop.

**Relationship of Graffiti Comments**

We examined the relationship between the comments: Were comments isolated or were conversations taking place? Were the comments and/or conversations supportive, or something

else? We found that most graffiti comments did not include strong interaction with the information on the flier. That is, only 30.5% (68.5% in women’s stalls, 31.5% in men’s stalls) of the comments included underlining, arrows, or other markings that would pinpoint specific phrases or words indicating a conversation between writers about the flier itself. However, although comments were most often not in conversation format, there were notable examples of conversation and/or community occurring (see Table 3).

**Table 3. Examples of Bathroom Stall Graffiti Conversations**

Men’s Bathroom Conversation	Women’s Bathroom Conversation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) RAPE IS FOR GDI'S! AND BOWLERS</li> <li>(2) That's fucked up. rape isn't for anyone to do, asshole.</li> <li>(3) Our ancestors raped and pillaged the indians. So we are all descendents of rapists and murders. It's not entirely our fault. It's in our blood.</li> <li>(4) Some of us are not white.</li> <li>(5) yeah, you're right, whites are the only rapists</li> <li>(6) FUCKING IDIOT</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) They're getting investigated by the US Dept. of Education for this shit :).</li> <li>(2) My friend was raped in her dorm room. Instead of sending her rapist to jail, IU just sent him to a different dorm. What about that? If you claim you're going to help us, IU; back it up.</li> <li>(3) That is not up to IU, Rape is a criminal matter and should have been taken to the Police department</li> <li>(4) My rapist works [on campus].</li> <li>(5) Men can be raped, too.</li> <li>(6) My rapist lives in the [apartment building name].</li> </ul>

Further, we observed conversations that did provide some emotional and material support, even if not addressing sexual assault specifically. For example, this conversation in a women’s bathroom stall:

*When I leave class to pee, I actually come here to cut myself.*

*...darling you're not alone. let's stick together. School is rough, we're all on this struggle bus [heart image] love in you*

*You are loved, and those that love you would hate to see you hurt yourself. God made you valuable and worthy. He gave you life. Love yourself.*

*You have worth. You have a beautiful soul. Love yourself. Visit CAPS. They're great.*

Thus, although the majority of messages were not conversational, conversational messages were indeed present in bathroom stall graffiti.

## Graffiti Messages about Sexual Assault

As the focus of this paper was on sexual assault, we examined in greater depth the 79 graffiti comments related specifically to some type of sexual violence. First, we examined valence of comments (positive, negative, neutral toned). In women's bathroom stalls, the majority of comments related to sexual assault were negative (54.9%). For example, "You mean IU is actually doing something about sexual assault? That's new" and "Thanks for pretending to care, IU." The remaining comments were neutral-toned (45.1%). For example, "OR Middle Way House (off-campus)" written as an addition to the resources listed on the poster. It is important to note that no comments related to sexual assault in the women's stalls were positively valenced (e.g., encouraging sexual assault behavior). In men's stalls, in contrast, the majority of comments were neutral-toned (59.3%). For example, "A great band name," written to the right of "What Is Sexual Violence?" printed on the flier, and "Our ancestors raped and pillaged the indians. So we are all decedents [*sic*] of rapists and murders. It's not entirely our fault. It's in our blood." The remaining comments were mostly negatively valenced toward the flier (37.0%) such as "BULL SHIT" accompanied by the author's underlining of the inclusion of "sexual coercion" in the definition of sexual violence on the flier itself, and "If you make out with a chick at sports you're a rapist" accompanied by an arrow pointing to the word "impaired" in the definition of sexual violence on the flier itself. And one comment was positively valenced (3.7%), wherein the author crossed out a negatively valenced comment, "BULLSHIT," and underlined the sentence on consent.

Next, we examined the content of the sexual assault related messages. Specifically, we examined whether women's messages were focused on prevention or other responses to sexual assault. In women's stalls, 17.7% of comments focused on *preventing* sexual assault:

*Just don't rape.*

*Don't sexually assault other people.*

*Also, make sure you are always respecting other people's boundaries!*

*Lock men up at night! Problem solved.*

An additional 9.8% of comments focused on appropriate ways to *respond* to sexual assault:

*Demand Justice*

*My friend was raped in her dorm room. Instead of sending her rapist to jail, IU just sent him to a different dorm. What about that? If you claim you're going to help us, IU; back it up.*

[Response to comment]: *That is not up to IU, Rape is a criminal matter and should have been taken to the Police department*

It is also worth noting that 38% of sexual assault graffiti commenters in women's stalls engaged with other comments in women's stalls, as conversation, providing a diverse array of opinions and information about sexual assault.

Next, we categorized sexual assault comments into themes. There were eight themes identified for content of sexual assault messages: expressing critical opinions, providing recommendations for change, offering advice, giving additional information, supporting survivors, reporting or naming an assailant, providing social commentary, and miscellaneous. Comments could be coded as multiple themes. Specifically, 17.4% expressed critical opinions about the treatment of sexual assault survivors or handling of sexual assault cases, while 15.3% provided recommendations for action or change in the handling and treatment of sexual assault-related issues, and 8.9% gave additional information about sexual assault on campus. Another 15.3% were providing support to others who had experienced sexual assault, while 1.6% of comments reported a sexual assault or named an assailant. The remaining comments provided social commentary on a related social problem (8.9%) or were coded as miscellaneous (25.8%).

In men's stalls, only 3.8% of comments focused on preventing sexual assault (e.g., "Don't sexually assault people", "Don't rape", or other). Further, comments in men's stalls were not as diverse in scope as were women's, with the majority coded as miscellaneous (58.5%), with many of those comments discussing bodily functions, i.e. "How's your poop going?...", "I Peed...", "I READ THIS WALL WHILE I POOP.", "sit, all broken hearted your butt only farted are you retarded?", or completely random, i.e. "GOD", "KKK", "Sad dey", "wonder who you are", "INDIGO." The remaining comments were mostly expressing critical opinions about the handling of sexual assault cases (32.1%), while a few provided recommendations for action or change in handling sexual assault (3.8%), provided support for sexual assault survivors (1.9%), reported a sexual assault or named an assailant (1.9%), or provided social commentary on a related issue (1.9%).

Finally, we coded sexual assault comments in a separate category that examined whether the sexual assault-related comment addressed how the university specifically responds to sexual assault on campus. For example, are students expressing a need for change on campus? Of the 79 comments, 29% of those in women's stalls and 22% of those in men's stalls expressed negative or critical opinions about the university's efforts.

Flier in women's stall: *IUB does not tolerate acts of sexual violence.*

Graffiti: *Except when it does. Which is often.*

The majority of comments (71-78%) were neutral toned toward IU's handling of sexual assault or completely unrelated to it, for example, in a men's bathroom, this conversation:

*Suck my cock.*

*I'm trying to shit. Fuck off.*

*This is serious. Fuck you guys.*

*Looks like we have our next suspect.*

[Drawing of penis ejaculating onto first comment in conversation.]

In the above conversation, the third commenter attempts to focus the conversation and point out the serious nature of sexual assault, but does so without endorsing or criticizing the university. This is typically the tone of most comments addressing sexual assault. Despite concerted university efforts to respond to sexual violence and make resources more readily available to students, no comments expressed positive or supportive opinions of the university.

## DISCUSSION

Adding to the research literature, we discovered five themes in the graffiti messages: sexual assault, mental health, sexual activity, race, and miscellaneous. Both men and women were most likely to post graffiti messages about sexual assault. Framed as an informational intervention, the fliers were successful in making the campus community aware of resources and in initiating dialogue about sexual assault. Consistent with previous research which has established that differences are likely to exist between the content and quantity of graffiti in men's and women's bathroom stalls, in our study, men were more likely to discuss sexual activity and less likely to discuss mental health. Alfred Kinsey and colleagues (Kinsey, Pomery, Martin, & Gebhardt, 1953, p. 69) predicted that women would produce less graffiti than men because of cultural expectations of feminine behavior, in this case manifesting in a higher respect for private property. The prediction was borne out when they found that "90% of men's bathroom graffiti were erotic, with the majority containing homosexual references, while only 25% of women's graffiti were sexual, and rarely homosexual" (c.f. Fisher & Radtke, 2014). In their study of both men's and women's graffiti, Fisher and Radtke (2014) also predicted that there would be differences of content, if not in quantity, between the graffiti in men's and women's bathrooms. After collecting data from Canadian restaurants and bars, the researchers found that women's bathroom graffiti was indeed most often about love and heterosexual behavior, while men's bathroom graffiti consisted most often of "tagging" a "person's name/nickname, thought to indicate territoriality or a self-proclamation of status" or about heterosexual sex in general. Also consistent with our findings, Leong (2016) found some key differences between the graffiti in men's and women's college bathrooms and argued that far more of the women's bathroom graffiti centered around relationships and support versus a more hegemonically masculine style of sexual bravado in the men's bathrooms .

Because scholars have suggested that women use bathroom graffiti as a way to bond and provide mutual support in a community free from masculine influence (Bruner & Kelso, 1980; Cole, 1991; Rodriguez & Clair, 1999), we initially hypothesized that the bathroom graffiti messages and conversations in women's bathrooms would reflect the emergence of a *community* of support or site for activism. Previous research has found, in contrast, that men are much less likely to use bathroom graffiti as a space to form a supportive community (Rodriguez & Clair, 1999). However, in their analyses of graffiti among both genders, researchers have often noted the impact of interpersonal graffiti dialogue, even as it differs in content, with dialogue between women writers strengthening a sense of communal support, and dialogue between men writers provoking retaliation, criticism, belittlement of women, or expressions of hyper-masculinity.

However, our findings suggest that while writers may indeed post with the expectation that others will read, and at times engage in conversations, this did not generally appear to be an anonymous correspondence community. Although there were notable examples of conversation and community occurring, this was by no means a predominant pattern. While the findings here cannot assert that all student commenters are seeking a community or university change – there

are certainly some students who are calling for such things. Further, we did observe some conversations that provided emotional and material support to others. Perhaps like community in other forms (e.g., Facebook, Reddit), bathroom stall conversations are another venue for fleeting exchanges posted on similar topics, but not necessarily engaging with others. The first poster, for instance, doesn't know if he/she will be starting a conversation or whether their comment will stand alone; and the first commenter may never return to see responses to their comments.

Our third research question explored whether graffiti messages indicated a desire for change in how universities handle sexual assaults (e.g., prevention, responses, resources, and/or adjudication). While this appears to be a larger national sentiment in terms of public dialogue on the role of college campuses in responding to sexual violence, in the media, and among U.S. legislators, this was not necessarily represented in bathroom graffiti. We found that the majority of comments made by students (71-78%) did not criticize or endorse university efforts to address sexual assault. Obviously, creating community and/or reducing the incidence of sexual assault is not expected to result from institutional fliers alone, and several college campuses have instituted educational measures such as bystander intervention awareness and community of care rhetoric (Gidycz, Orchowski, & Berkowitz, 2011). Without minimizing these measures or exaggerating the effect of graffiti support, this study acknowledges that anonymous disclosure (such as in bathrooms) initiates at least some sense of community investment and involvement.

Findings of this study indicate that at least some students are paying attention to, and reacting with, information presented in bathroom stalls. This finding may suggest a greater need for official campus conversations, or conversation spaces, around sexual assault to occur on campuses, especially in anonymous conversation spaces. The absence of negative or critical comments about the university indicates students are receptive to university initiatives to address sexual violence. Further, extending knowledge gained from this study to other areas, universities could also post information that would similarly benefit students, e.g., on mental health or harmful behaviors like binge drinking, or topics for which students may be reluctant to discuss but could benefit from having information on. Further, such educational campaigns may signal to students and others on campus that bathrooms and the stalls will be the locations for presenting campus-wide policies or initiatives pertaining to the general welfare of the campus.

While our study provides novel and useful information, and highlights a naturalistic research method, it also has several limitations. The current data was limited to one university campus, which means our results may not be generalizable to campuses with significantly different demographics such as community colleges or urban campuses. Similarly, assessments across campus may also be able to account for differences in graffiti and other forms of student responses with respect to varying campus-specific sexual violence education and intervention programs. The findings of our study may be due, in part, to the type of information on the flier, and in what ways the initial graffitist specifically prompts subsequent responses. For example, a flier attempting to educate readers on the definition of consent may elicit different graffiti messages than a flier whose primary mission is to inform survivors of campus or local resources available to them. Fliers would have to be frequently monitored over time to more accurately assess the order of graffiti messages and the role of initial messages on shaping specific graffiti in particular locations/stalls. Finally, because graffiti is removed from bathrooms each term – walls painted over and fliers replaced as they are continually revised – there may not have been enough time for strong community to be established as the walls may have been whitewashed too quickly. These and other questions can be further explored in future research, either with a

similar naturalistic research design or with experimental bathroom stalls that let fliers and graffiti remain for longer periods of time.

Despite these limitations, we believe our study makes a valuable contribution to the existing literature. The thorough data collection effort in a large number of bathrooms creates a full picture of graffiti messages present during that time on campus, and we are confident that there were no themes left unidentified due to missing data/lack of coverage. Most importantly, our research questions, bring together the fields of psychology, anthropology, sociology, criminology, gender studies, and geography of place, have not been previously explored. Thus, the study and its results serve to highlight contemporary discussions of sexual violence on campus. Our findings also suggest several avenues ripe for future research. Due to the changing nature of the messages on the fliers, how graffiti changes in response is worthy of investigation. Last, like many campuses, IUB has been moving toward more accessible private/singular-use unisex bathrooms in newer and remodeled buildings. This change in bathroom space structure leaves a number of questions ripe for exploration, particularly the question of how the presence, content, or relationship between graffiti writers will change.

In conclusion, several researchers have studied graffiti conversations and commentary, acknowledging the uniqueness of bathroom graffiti as a space for written dialogue. Scholars have argued that people may feel more comfortable being open about sexuality, romance, and other sensitive topics when writing in bathroom stalls in part because of the tension of doing semi-private things in semi-public spaces. However, little research focuses specifically on a textual analysis of graffiti conversations about social issues. When in 2014, IUB placed fliers in bathroom stalls across the campus to bring attention to campus sexual violence, they spurred myriad forms of graffiti commentary, sparking conversations about sexual violence, prevention, and response, as well as discussions of other social justice issues. The current findings suggest that at least some students engage with the flier intervention, and many use graffiti in this public-private space in a purposeful manner to discuss important and pressing social issues. We suggest this highlights a need for continued education and resource interventions among efforts of all kinds aimed at addressing the epidemic of sexual violence on college campuses.

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## APPENDIX

### Example original bathroom stall flier



**Indiana University does not tolerate acts of sexual violence.  
As a community, we all have responsibility to prevent, support and respond.**

#### **WHAT IS SEXUAL VIOLENCE?**

- Sexual violence is a form of sexual harassment and can include rape, sexual assault, sexual coercion and any sexual actions that violate another's personal boundaries.
- Sex without consent is sexual assault. Consent cannot be given by someone who is impaired by alcohol, drugs or mental disability.

#### **IF YOU OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW IS IN DANGER, CALL 911.**

#### **HELP PREVENT SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND HOOKUPS THAT CROSS THE LINE:**

- Make a check-in plan with friends before going out.
- Intervene when you see a problem or questionable behavior.
- Help your friends home safely, especially if they've been drinking.
- If you or a friend needs an emergency ride, call a cab or use IU's **Safety Escort: 812-855-7233.**
- To speak confidentially with a sexual assault counselor, call the 24-hour **Sexual Assault Crisis Service Line: 812-855-8900.**

#### **MAKE THE CALL. SAVE A LIFE.**

Under Indiana's Lifeline Law, people younger than 21 who are under the influence of alcohol will not be prosecuted for crimes such as possession, intoxication or consumption of alcohol if they call 911 for medical help for another person or in cases of sexual assault and cooperate with police.

