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Walls That Speak: Peer Linguistic Violence and Graffiti as Sites of Symbolic Harm in Zimbabwean Government Rural Schools

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[1]Priscila Unity Zhou*
[2]Victor Mugari
&
Patricia R. Mabugu

**Corresponding author: priscilaunity@gmail.com*

[1,2&3]Department of Languages, Literature and Culture, University of Zimbabwe

Abstract

This study investigates peer linguistic violence in rural Zimbabwean secondary schools, focusing on graffiti as a culturally embedded and yet underexplored form of school-based aggression beyond conventional bullying and corporal punishment. Adopting a qualitative, interpretivist approach, the research draws on sociolinguistic, discourse-analytic, and linguistic ethnographic methods to examine inscriptions on toilets, chalkboards, and trees. Data were collected through observation, photographic documentation, image analysis, focus group discussions, and interviews with 36 participants, including learners, teachers, and school heads. Findings reveal that graffiti operates as a strategic tool for identity negotiation, moral policing, and social hierarchy enforcement, employing naming, animal metaphors, sexualised labels, and rhetorical devices.

Through the lens of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991), systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1978), peace linguistics (Lopez, 2021), and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000), the study demonstrates that peer linguistic aggression undermines learners' emotional well-being, social relationships, self-concept, and academic participation and, in extreme cases, contributes to school dropouts. By addressing language in hidden spaces, schools can adopt restorative interventions that turn instances of aggression into constructive opportunities for emotional growth and mutual respect.

Keywords: *Peer linguistic violence, Graffiti, Rural Zimbabwe, Symbolic violence, Self-determination, School well-being.*

Introduction and Background

The persistent nature of school violence in Southern Africa undermines the educational environment, causing lasting damage to students' emotional stability, social integration, and academic performance. Studies in Zimbabwe and the wider Southern African Development Community (SADC) region have extensively documented physical aggression, bullying, and corporal punishment, highlighting their prevalence, causes, and detrimental effects on learners' well-being and academic performance (Gomba & Zindonda, 2021; Shoko, 2012; Khumalo, Makhakhe & Lipholo, 2025; Mpindo, Khohliso & Mphuthi, 2025; Pindo, Chabata & Madzima, 2025). Previous research has consistently identified factors such as jealousy, gender dynamics, peer competition, and inadequate institutional responses as contributors to school violence. While these studies illuminate visible and measurable forms of aggression, they have largely overlooked the subtle, symbolic, and discursive mechanisms through which learners inflict harm on one another.

One such under-examined form of school violence is linguistic aggression, particularly graffiti inscribed on semi-private surfaces such as chalkboards, tree trunks, and toilet walls. These inscriptions operate under the cover of anonymity and often employ culturally coded metaphors, sexualised language, animal imagery, and rhetorical devices to ridicule, shame, and socially exclude targeted learners. Both Victoria (2025) and Yaziyo (2018) have identified graffiti in university environments as a significant channel for negotiating identity and voicing perspectives that are otherwise suppressed. However, there is limited

empirical attention to how graffiti functions as a vehicle for linguistic violence in primary and secondary schools, where learners are still forming social hierarchies, moral understanding, and peer relationships.

The potential consequences of peer linguistic aggression are significant. Theoretical frameworks, particularly Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000), suggest that behaviours undermining learners' autonomy, competence, and relatedness can negatively affect motivation, engagement, and overall well-being. Graffiti, through ridicule, social policing, and moral judgment, may threaten learners' psychological needs, compromise peer relationships, erode self-concept, and reduce academic participation. While the theory is well-developed, there is a lack of empirical research regarding how graffiti manifests and impacts learners specifically within rural Zimbabwean secondary schools.

Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by investigating graffiti not merely as vandalism but as a deliberate, culturally intelligible form of peer linguistic violence. It examines the ways learners use language to enforce social hierarchies, regulate peer behaviour, and communicate moral judgments. Graffiti is conceptualised as a covert yet powerful medium through which identity, dominance, and moral and gender norms are negotiated, informed by the framework of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991), systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1978), and peace linguistics (Lopez, 2021). Linking these frameworks to self-determination theory allows for an understanding of how peer linguistic aggression may compromise learners' autonomy, competence, and relatedness, ultimately affecting their motivation, social integration, self-concept, and educational engagement.

In line with this focus, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- What linguistic manifestations of peer violence emerge in rural Zimbabwean schools, particularly in the form of inscriptions, animal metaphors, and other culturally coded verbal expressions?
- How does peer linguistic violence affect learners' emotional well-being, social relationships, and academic participation?

Literature Review

Violence in schools remains a pervasive issue across Southern Africa, encompassing various forms that significantly affect learners' emotional well-being, social interactions, and academic performance. In Zimbabwe, numerous studies have explored bullying and corporal punishment, yet

most have focused on physical and psychological dimensions, leaving linguistic forms of aggression underexplored. Gomba and Zindonda (2021) investigated the causes of bullying in Zimbabwean schools, highlighting intrinsic factors such as jealousy, teacher favoritism, and home background. While existing research explains the motivations behind bullying, it fails to capture how learners use language for aggression, creating a need to study the mechanisms of verbal and symbolic harm. Similarly, Shoko (2012) documents the persistence of corporal punishment despite official bans, yet the study is limited to teacher-imposed physical violence and does not interrogate peer-to-peer linguistic interactions, which are crucial for understanding the subtle forms of aggression affecting learners daily.

Khumalo et al. (2025) examined contextual factors influencing school violence in the SADC region, identifying themes related to home, parental involvement, community, school, sociability, and individual behavior. Although comprehensive, the study does not explore the specific verbal or written forms through which learners enact violence, nor does it consider the spatial dimensions of these acts, such as graffiti or hidden communication spaces. Similarly, Pindo et al. (2025) analyzed the psychological impact of school-based violence, emphasizing trauma and stress as barriers to learning. However, their focus on psychological outcomes does not interrogate the linguistic mechanisms that may trigger or exacerbate these effects.

Bhana (2024) and Singh (2024) highlight the effects of gendered violence and trauma on learners' cognitive development, while Shiba and Mokwena (2023) associate anxiety and depression with the dual role of learners as perpetrators and victims. By prioritising physical and psychological aspects, current literature leaves a gap in understanding linguistic violence, which is critical for fully addressing the social and emotional harm experienced by learners.

Adebayo and Odutayo (2024) argue that schools mirror broader societal struggles, reproducing inequality and symbolic domination, while Dakwa, Nyandoro, and Chikono (2025) link poverty, cultural practices, and peer influence to school dropout among girls in rural Zimbabwe. Both studies point to the structural and social context of school violence but do not interrogate how language mediates peer conflict or reinforces harm, leaving room for research into symbolic and linguistic forms of aggression. Collectively, these studies highlight that while the causes and effects of school violence are well-documented, linguistic manifestations,

particularly peer-to-peer verbal and written aggression, remain largely unexplored, which this study seeks to address.

In contrast to studies focusing on physical aggression, Victoria (2025) and Mangeya (2020) explore graffiti and inscriptions as forms of self-expression and ethnic communication in educational spaces. Victoria (2025) highlights graffiti as a tool for identity negotiation in higher education, while Mangeya (2020) focuses on its role in manifesting symbolic ethnic violence. Although both studies foreground the communicative potential of inscriptions, they do not interrogate graffiti as a vehicle for peer-to-peer linguistic harm in rural secondary schools, highlighting a critical gap.

Graffiti takes many forms, including textual inscriptions, drawings, slogans, animal metaphors, and coded symbols. Its intensity varies from casual doodles and playful mockery to aggressive, threatening, or derogatory messages intended to humiliate or control peers. Beyond schools, graffiti in public spaces has been used historically and contemporarily for political expression, social critique, and activism, serving as a visible medium for dissent, solidarity, or public commentary (Cresswell, 1996; McAuliffe, 2012; Halsey & Young, 2006). Such uses demonstrate graffiti's dual function: as both a creative outlet and a tool for asserting power or enforcing social norms.

Cresswell (1996) characterises graffiti as "the chaotic, untamed voice of the irrational," while McAuliffe (2012) and Halsey and Young (2006) link it to anti-social behavior and delinquency. Blommaert (2013) frames graffiti within the linguistic landscape as a tangible utterance shaping social behaviour and interaction, and Yaziyo (2018) and Ferris and Banda (2015) demonstrate its function as a literacy space for self-evaluation and peer commentary. Despite recognising the impact of school violence, most research neglects hidden spaces like restrooms, where anonymous linguistic aggression occurs; this necessitates viewing graffiti as a site of intentional peer harm rather than just self-expression.

Although prior scholarship thoroughly documents physical and psychological school violence, and some acknowledge graffiti as a communicative act, there is a notable gap in understanding graffiti as a form of peer linguistic violence. Most studies either neglect hidden spaces where such communication occurs or focus on identity, solidarity, or ethnic expression, rather than harm, ridicule, or social control enacted linguistically.

Guided by the research questions, the present study reframes graffiti as a critical medium of peer communication, foregrounding toilet walls and other hidden spaces as underexplored sites of symbolic and linguistic violence. By examining these inscriptions, the study aims to identify their linguistic manifestations and analyse their effects on learners' emotional well-being, social relationships, and academic participation, addressing a key gap in the existing literature. Furthermore, by situating school graffiti alongside public graffiti practices, this study interrogates how social norms, hierarchies, and pressures shape the intensity of linguistic violence in rural Zimbabwean schools.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in a multi-layered theoretical framework that draws together Pierre Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence, Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Lopez's Peace Linguistics, and Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT). These theories collectively illuminate both the linguistic construction and the educational consequences of graffiti as a form of peer violence in rural Zimbabwean secondary schools.

Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence provides the foundational lens for understanding how graffiti operates as an invisible yet powerful mechanism of domination. Symbolic violence, expressed through language and semiotic practices, imposes social hierarchies and legitimises humiliation in ways that appear culturally natural. In the context of this study, graffiti such as sexual metaphors, animal imagery, and insults targeted at named learners demonstrate how peers metaphorically 'discipline' one another by constructing reputations, regulating behaviour, and enforcing gendered expectations. The anonymity of graffiti intensifies this violence, allowing perpetrators to inflict harm without accountability while the victim internalises the stigma. Through this lens, graffiti becomes a material site where power circulates linguistically, transforming classroom walls, toilet cubicles, and tree trunks into spaces of symbolic domination.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1978) complements this perspective by providing an analytical toolkit for examining how the inscriptions operate ideationally, interpersonally, and textually. Ideationally, graffiti constructs learners as morally deviant, cognitively inferior, or sexually impure. Interpersonally, these inscriptions enact

relations of dominance, policing, mockery, and exclusion, positioning the writer as morally superior and the target as socially inferior. Textually, the walls and surfaces become semiotic environments that preserve and reproduce violence across time, creating a persistent communicative space in which identity and power are negotiated. Using SFL, graffiti functions as a sophisticated meaning-making system where learners perform social roles, encode cultural metaphors, and enact interpersonal aggression.

While symbolic violence and SFL explain the mechanics of harm, peace linguistics (Lopez, 2021) introduces a contrasting normative orientation, emphasising the ethical responsibility to use language in ways that preserve dignity, foster harmony, and reduce interpersonal conflict. From this perspective, violent graffiti represents a breakdown of dignity-affirming communication. The humiliating metaphors, derogatory labels, and sexualised expressions signal the absence of peace-oriented discourse practices within the school environment. Peace linguistics thus helps frame violent graffiti not only as a linguistic problem but also as a relational and moral crisis in which language is weaponised to inflict emotional wounds. It highlights what is missing: empathetic, respectful, and restorative ways of speaking that nurture positive peer relationships.

To fully explain the educational consequences revealed in teacher and learner interviews, the framework also draws on Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000), which argues that learners' motivation and wellbeing depend on the fulfilment of three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Graffiti labeling learners as foolish, dirty, promiscuous, or animal-like directly undermines their fundamental psychological needs. Autonomy is compromised when learners feel powerless against public shaming; competence is eroded when they internalise insults targeting their intelligence or moral worth; and relatedness is disrupted when sexualised or stigmatizing inscriptions isolate them from peers. The teachers' reports of anxiety, withdrawal, absenteeism, low participation, misbehaviour, and, in extreme cases, school dropout align closely with SDT's predictions that unmet psychological needs lead to emotional distress, disengagement, and avoidance. Thus, just as physical bullying reduces motivation and affects attendance, peer linguistic violence enacted through graffiti similarly depresses learners' psychological wellbeing and academic functioning.

Bringing these theories together creates a holistic interpretive framework. Symbolic violence explains the cultural logic of harm; SFL

uncovers how this harm is linguistically constructed; peace linguistics foregrounds the ethical and relational implications; and self-determination theory clarifies the motivational and educational effects on learners. This integrated framework allows the study to account not only for how graffiti harms, but also for why it persists, what it communicates, and how it shapes learners' emotional, social, and academic experiences within rural Zimbabwean secondary schools.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interpretivist design grounded in sociolinguistic, discourse-analytic, and linguistic ethnographic traditions, which is well suited to uncovering the meanings embedded in everyday school-based communicative practices and interpreting subtle forms of peer violence. Graffiti inscriptions are conceptualised not as random markings but as socially meaningful acts indexing emotions, power relations, and peer hierarchies within learner communities. A descriptive case study approach was employed to explore how linguistic violence is enacted, circulated, and normalized in rural schools. By selecting four comparable rural secondary schools as the case boundary, the research ensured consistency in analysing institutional supervision and resource factors.

The inclusion of teachers and learners as participants allowed for a dual perspective on the meanings and impacts of peer graffiti within the school. A total of 36 participants were purposively selected to ensure diverse perspectives, characterised as 24 learners (gender-balanced across Forms 2–6) and 12 teachers. Purposive sampling ensured inclusion of individuals familiar with school culture and graffiti-prone spaces. Learners were invited to discuss perceptions and interpretations rather than authorship, prioritizing ethical sensitivity and psychological safety.

Data were collected through multiple qualitative techniques, notably observation, photographic documentation, image analysis, focus group discussions (FGDs), and semi-structured interviews conducted between March and July 2025. Participants interpreted inscriptions, identified social consequences, and reflected on the culture of verbal aggression in their schools, linking linguistic manifestations to learners' lived experiences. Observations involved systematic walkthroughs of toilet areas, tree clusters, corridors, classroom walls, and chalkboards to document graffiti placement, frequency, and learner interactions.

Data analysis followed a three-phase process integrating linguistic, thematic, and critical interpretation. First, inscriptions and images were analysed using systemic functional linguistics (SFL) tools to examine lexical choices, metaphors, evaluative meanings, and multimodal features constructing violence and identity, grouping graffiti under broader manifestations like direct insults, animal metaphors, sexualized labeling, and rhetorical ridicule. Critical interpretation then connected linguistic and thematic patterns to learners' socio-emotional and educational experiences, examining how graffiti potentially undermines autonomy, competence, and relatedness, in line with self-determination theory. This triangulated approach allowed for a holistic understanding of graffiti as anonymous linguistic aggression functioning simultaneously as entertainment, regulation, rebellion, and symbolic harm.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Zimbabwe Research Ethics Committee and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. Informed consent was secured from school authorities while learners' participation was voluntary and anonymised. To ensure ethical integrity, the researcher used reflexivity to mitigate power imbalances and adhere to the standards of respect, beneficence, and justice.

Findings

The findings show that toilet graffiti in rural secondary schools constitutes a deliberate, patterned, and potent form of peer linguistic violence rather than the random scribbling often associated with school-aged learners. Three broad tendencies emerged from the data. First, the personalisation of attacks through the repeated naming of specific learners. Secondly, the use of culturally grounded metaphors, particularly animal and sexual metaphors, to construct moral and social identities. The third tendency was the deployment of rhetorical expressions that police behaviour, hygiene, and sexuality. Together, these tendencies demonstrate that graffiti functions as an anonymous communicative arena in which learners regulate one another, mark social boundaries, and inflict symbolic harm.

Toilet walls, chalkboards, and tree trunks emerged as covert communicative spaces where learners transgress both cultural and institutional norms through language. Particularly striking was the use of these spaces to direct explicit insults at specific, named individuals. In this section, the name "Esther" is used as a generic pseudonym to

illustrate this pattern. In the actual graffiti, real learners' names consistently accompanied the insults, personalising and intensifying the violence. Inscriptions such as *"Esther rangova gaba"* (Esther has become a container), *"Esther apedza nyika"* (Esther has destroyed the whole world), and *"auya muvhuri wemakumbo"* (here comes the legs opener) carried strong insinuations of sexual promiscuity, relying on metaphors of excess, consumption, and moral impurity to portray the target as sexually deviant. Other inscriptions, notably *"Esther idofo"* (Esther is dull), attacked intellectual capacity, thereby constructing a parallel narrative of both moral and cognitive deficiencies. These personalised inscriptions collectively positioned the learner as promiscuous, destructive, sexually deviant, and unintelligent, demonstrating the strategic targeting inherent in peer graffiti.

Beyond direct naming, the data revealed extensive use of rhetorical expressions and culturally grounded metaphors to ridicule personal conduct, hygiene, behaviour, or social identity. Inscriptions such as *"Esther miswa iwe"* (Esther, you are overdoing things) and *"Esther ukageza unobvei?"* (What do you lose if you bathe?), and *"Esther ukadzikama unobvei?"* (What will change if you behave yourself?) functioned as discursive strategies of humiliation and behavioural policing. Similarly, expressions such as *"chembere dzemusha uno"* (the old village woman) imposed premature ageing as a stigma, pushing the learner symbolically out of the youthful peer group. Sexualised graffiti, including *"mjolo uyanyisa Esther"* (Esther, your dating habits will kill you), further revealed how female sexuality was policed, censured, and framed as excessive or dangerous. Animal metaphors, such as *"uri imbwa"* (you are a dog), *"mbudzi"* (goat), *"huku yemusha"* (village hen), *"shumba yapera simba"* (the lion has lost its strength), and *"makudo chaiwo"* (real baboons), reinforced social hierarchies, dehumanised targets, and encoded culturally intelligible judgments about intelligence, gender, bravery, and morality. For instance, *"huku yemusha"* sexualized girls within a socially recognisable frame of gossip, while *"shumba yapera simba"* emasculated boys, undermining peer respect and authority.

Collectively, these patterns of stupidifying, sexualising, feminising, masculinising, ageing, and behaviour-policing discourse illustrate that graffiti is not random or playful but a strategic medium through which learners negotiate identity, assert dominance, and communicate moral and gendered judgments. The combination of direct insults, rhetorical devices, sexualised metaphors, and animal imagery produced a spectrum

of explanatory effects on learners' experiences, including humiliation, social isolation, anxiety, and academic disengagement. By inscribing these messages in visible yet semi-private spaces, learners transformed ordinary school sites into arenas of symbolic violence where the visual and linguistic landscape itself perpetuated harm.

Just as overt physical bullying causes significant harm, peer linguistic violence through graffiti produces parallel educational, social, and emotional damage. Interviews with teachers and learners revealed that the inscriptions had profound emotional, social, psychological, and educational consequences. Many learners described persistent feelings of shame, anxiety, anger, and sadness, particularly when graffiti appeared in public and frequently used spaces. Teachers observed that some learners would cry privately, avoid certain toilets or classrooms, or request to leave school early after encountering humiliating inscriptions. Victims reported that the graffiti disrupted peer relationships, as gossip and social exclusion followed the inscriptions; friendships were fractured, and learners were often isolated or treated with suspicion. Girls targeted with sexualised labels expressed feelings of fear, sexual shame, and vulnerability, while boys emasculated through derogatory metaphors described feeling diminished, weak, or socially powerless. Over time, many learners internalised these insults, resulting in diminished self-esteem, a negative self-concept, and heightened self-doubt regarding their intelligence, morality, and social worth.

These emotional and social impacts translated directly into learners' academic participation. Teachers reported that targeted learners became quiet, withdrawn, or reluctant to contribute to class discussions. Some avoided school entirely on days when humiliating graffiti appeared, while others struggled to concentrate, resulting in declining academic performance. In extreme cases, learners transferred to other schools or dropped out entirely, unable to endure the persistent social and emotional stigma. These patterns mirror the predictions of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000), which asserts that learners' motivation and wellbeing are contingent on the fulfilment of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Violent graffiti undermined all three. Learners' autonomy was compromised as they had no control over how they were publicly represented or targeted; competence was eroded as insults attacked their intelligence and moral standing; and relatedness was fractured as peer relationships became strained or hostile. By frustrating core

developmental needs, peer linguistic violence drives anxiety, social withdrawal, and academic disengagement, ultimately threatening student retention and self-concept.

These linguistic manifestations can be interpreted through the lens of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991), systemic functional linguistics (SFL), and peace linguistics (Lopez, 2021). By deploying metaphors, rhetorical devices, direct insults, and sexualised imagery, learners enact domination and regulate peer behaviour in ways that are culturally intelligible and socially reinforced. SFL helps to reveal how these inscriptions operate across multiple strata: ideationally, they construct moral and cognitive deficiencies; relationally, they impose social hierarchies and enforce gender norms; and textually, they transform school spaces into enduring semiotic sites of harm. The combination of anonymity and the use of culturally coded metaphors ensures that symbolic aggression is both pervasive and highly effective at creating social impact. From a peace linguistics perspective, these inscriptions exemplify the absence of dignity-affirming communication, illustrating how language can be weaponised to exclude, humiliate, and silence, thereby undermining both relational and academic well-being. In this way, the findings bridge the study of school graffiti with broader concerns about symbolic violence, gendered socialisation, and learner safety within rural Zimbabwean educational spaces. When viewed alongside self-determination theory, the findings make clear that peer graffiti functions as a form of symbolic aggression with measurable emotional, social, and educational effects. It disrupts motivation, fractures peer belonging, diminishes self-worth, and, in extreme cases, expels learners from the school system through shame-driven disengagement. Thus, graffiti is both a linguistic and psychological threat, shaping the educational experiences of rural learners in ways that are often silent, enduring, and deeply harmful.

Discussion of findings

The study's findings demonstrate that graffiti in rural Zimbabwean secondary schools represents a structured and culturally embedded form of peer linguistic violence rather than mere adolescent mischief. Learners employ anonymity, naming, metaphor, and culturally coded symbols to perform aggression, ridicule peers, and regulate behavior, transforming school spaces into arenas of symbolic conflict. These inscriptions reveal how learners negotiate identity, assert dominance, and enforce social

hierarchies within their peer groups, reflecting broader societal norms and patriarchal codes. This aligns with previous studies on school violence, which highlight that aggression is often socially mediated and contextually patterned (Gomba & Zindonda, 2021; Khumalo et al., 2025) and extends Zhou's (2025) work on the regulatory and moralising functions of language in interpersonal contexts.

A central pattern emerging from the data is the personalised targeting of named individuals, situating learners within moral and social hierarchies. Naming functions as a mechanism of social surveillance and identity regulation, anchoring peers into derogatory roles and creating persistent stigma. This reinforces the conceptualisation of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991; Blommaert, 2013) and confirms Adebayo and Odutayo's (2024) assertion that schools mirror societal inequalities, reproducing systems of domination. Anonymity in graffiti removes accountability for perpetrators, intensifying the psychological and social harm caused to victims. Learners reported shame, humiliation, and anxiety in response to animal metaphors such as *imbwa* (dog), *mbudzi* (goat), and *gudo* (baboon), which marked targets as weak, immoral, or sexually promiscuous, illustrating the enduring influence of linguistic aggression on self-concept and social participation.

Gendered patterns of linguistic violence were also evident. Girls were frequently labeled promiscuous or morally corrupt, whereas boys were feminised, ridiculed for weakness, or compared to women. These findings align with Bhana (2024) and Singh (2024), demonstrating that peer linguistic aggression enforces patriarchal norms and moralized social expectations. Graffiti thus operates not merely as a form of playful expression but as a culturally intelligible tool for policing behavior and reinforcing gendered hierarchies.

The study's findings also link directly to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). Peer linguistic violence compromises learners' autonomy by constraining freedom of expression and social participation, undermines competence by stigmatizing intelligence and moral behavior, and threatens relatedness by fostering social isolation and exclusion. Learners reported withdrawing from group activities, avoiding peers, and reducing classroom participation, while teachers noted declines in engagement and performance. In this way, graffiti functions as an extension of bullying that impacts emotional well-being, peer relationships, and academic participation, directly addressing the second research question regarding the effects of peer linguistic violence.

Spatially, toilets emerged as loci for unregulated communication, reinforcing the strategic and enduring nature of graffiti. These semi-private sites allow learners to transgress both institutional and cultural norms, embedding symbolic violence within daily routines and social interactions. This observation supports global work on marginal school spaces and extends it to the rural Zimbabwean context, highlighting how cultural silences around morality, sexuality, and shame create permissive environments for symbolic aggression.

Overall, the study demonstrates that linguistic violence in graffiti is neither trivial nor peripheral. By integrating textual and interpretive dimensions, the research confirms Zhou's (2025) argument that language functions as a performative tool for social regulation, moral judgment, and identity construction. Graffiti emerges as a potent medium through which learners negotiate power, enforce social norms, and reproduce societal hierarchies, while simultaneously influencing autonomy, competence, relatedness, and educational engagement.

These findings have clear implications for policy and practice. Interventions to reduce school violence must target linguistic aggression within hidden and anonymous spaces. Approaches informed by peace linguistics (Lopez, 2021; Zhou, 2025) offer pathways for fostering restorative, dignity-affirming communication. Recognizing graffiti as both a symptom and a signal of social unrest, schools can implement dialogue, mediation, and educational activities that encourage empathetic and non-violent expression, transforming language from a tool of domination into a medium for reflection, learning, and social repair.

In summary, the study brings to fore the linguistic manifestations of peer violence in rural schools' inscriptions. These animal metaphors, and culturally coded verbal expressions. The research has also illustrated their effects on learners' emotional well-being, peer relationships, and academic participation. By situating graffiti within symbolic violence, SFL, peace linguistics, and SDT frameworks, this research identifies linguistic aggression as a key driver of social regulation and educational marginalisation, necessitating language-centred school safety interventions

The study findings have demonstrated that graffiti in rural secondary schools constitutes a deliberate and culturally embedded form of peer linguistic violence, extending traditional conceptions of school bullying to include symbolic, textual, and anonymous aggression. Through inscriptions on toilets, chalkboards, and trees, learners enact personalised

attacks that regulate identity, enforce moral norms, and reinforce gendered hierarchies, often intensifying the social and emotional vulnerability of their peers. By employing metaphors and sexualised labels, students use semiotic strategies to maintain social hierarchies and perform symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991; Zhou, 2025; Lopez, 2021).

The study confirms prior research on the harmful effects of school violence while extending understanding to underexplored linguistic and symbolic dimensions. Unlike conventional bullying or corporal punishment (Gomba & Zindonda, 2021; Shoko, 2012), peer graffiti operates anonymously, persists over time, and embeds insults in highly visible, socially meaningful spaces, creating enduring emotional distress, peer isolation, and academic disengagement. These impacts align with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000), showing that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are undermined by symbolic peer aggression. At the same time, the findings acknowledge the dual potential of graffiti, aligning with studies on its role in self-expression, identity negotiation, and peer commentary (Victoria, 2025; Mangeya, 2020), while demonstrating that such creative potential can be co-opted for harm.

Given these findings, interventions to address school violence must incorporate strategies targeting linguistic and symbolic aggression. Schools should adopt restorative approaches that encourage dignity-affirming dialogue, empathetic peer communication, and conflict-resolution practices informed by peace linguistics (Lopez, 2021; Zhou, 2025). Educators should monitor and transform hidden spaces such as toilets, chalkboards, and unmonitored outdoor areas into sites of positive engagement, recognising that anonymity amplifies the harmful impact of graffiti. Curriculum initiatives could include guided discussions on ethical language use, peer-respect workshops, and creative literacy projects that are channelled constructively, thereby reducing the appeal and effects of harmful inscriptions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, by highlighting the semiotic, performative, and culturally coded nature of peer graffiti, this study deepens the understanding of school violence in rural Zimbabwean contexts. It broadens conceptualisations of bullying to include symbolic and linguistic forms of aggression and situates these forms within sociocultural hierarchies. Addressing peer linguistic violence through policy, pedagogy, and school-based interventions can foster safer, more

inclusive, and emotionally supportive environments, protecting learners' dignity, social belonging, and academic engagement.

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