

**Introduction**

Graffiti, an expressive form of urban art, has long served as a platform for individuals to voice their opinions, beliefs, and emotions. As a team of aspiring sociologists, we are drawn to graffiti as a form of contemporary cultural heritage, recognizing its potential to reveal the intricate layers of our society and its concerns. Our research question aims to decipher the messages people convey through their artistic creations. What messages are people sending through the graffiti they make? From political manifestos to social commentaries, economic reflections to emotional outpourings, we strive to explore the underlying themes that reverberate within our community in Bellingham.

**Research Question & Background**

In this study, we aim to uncover the underlying messages conveyed through graffiti in Bellingham, seeking to understand the motivations and intentions of the artists. Graffiti has captivated the attention of researchers and enthusiasts alike, offering a unique lens into the cultural fabric of communities. Our research question is as follows: What messages are people sending through the graffiti they make? We anticipate that political and emotional elements will be prevalent throughout our survey of Bellingham.

To contextualize our research question, we reference literature that sheds light on the multifaceted nature of graffiti and its significance in contemporary society. The (2017) explores the socio-political dimensions of graffiti as a form of resistance, highlighting its role in expressing dissent and challenging dominant power structures. Additionally, Millio (2016) delves into the symbolic meanings embedded within graffiti, emphasizing its capacity to communicate social and cultural identities.

By drawing upon these foundational studies, we recognize the potential of graffiti to serve as a visual platform for various messages and themes. We aim to investigate the variables that underpin the graffiti in Bellingham. These variables encompass the location of the graffiti, its visual characteristics, the type of message conveyed (e.g., political, social, economic, emotional), and the overarching themes present within the artwork. By categorizing the types of messages present in the artwork, we seek to discern patterns and concentrations within specific areas of focus. Through our research, we seek to explore the intricate interplay between urban art and community expression. By understanding the motivations and messages behind the graffiti, we hope to contribute to a deeper comprehension of the dynamics shaping our local social, political, and cultural expressions. We also aim to shed light on the societal issues that resonate strongly within our community, and ultimately contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamic urban landscape of Bellingham.

**Methods**

**Procedure:**

**Data Collection:** We conducted extensive fieldwork, exploring different parts of Bellingham to locate and document graffiti pieces. In each region, we gathered the following information:

- Location:** We recorded the precise location of each graffiti piece to establish spatial patterns and correlations.
- Photography:** We captured high-quality photographs of each graffiti piece, ensuring visual documentation.
- Description:** A comprehensive description was provided for each piece, including colors, styles, dimensions, and any notable wear and tear or damage.
- Message Type:** We categorized the graffiti pieces into different message types, such as political, social, economic, emotional, or other, based on the content and context of each piece.
- Theme:** We analyzed the content of the graffiti to identify underlying themes, such as activism related to BLM, local politics, housing crisis, and more. Collaborative analysis aided in discerning the themes accurately.
- Size:** We categorized the sizes of each graffiti piece as extra small (less than 6 x 6 inches), small (less than 1 foot x 1 foot), medium (less than 2 feet x 2 feet), large (less than 4 feet x 4 feet), extra large (less than 6 feet x 6 feet), or extra large/large (larger than 6 feet x 6 feet).
- General Notes:** Any additional observations or information obtained through interviews or other sources were documented.

**Data Analysis:** After data collection, we engaged in a rigorous analysis of the gathered information. We collaborated and cross-referenced our interpretations to ensure reliability and accuracy.

**Visualization:** To aid in conveying our findings effectively, we created visual representations. Pie charts were generated to illustrate the percentages of different types of graffiti, sizes of graffiti, themes of graffiti, and locations of graffiti. Additionally, we developed maps that featured different colored markers to indicate the distribution of various types of graffiti throughout Bellingham.

**Materials & Location:**

We utilized the following materials to gather data and analyze graffiti in Bellingham:

- Phone: We used a smartphone with a high-resolution camera to capture images of graffiti pieces for documentation purposes.
- Measuring Tools: We employed an iPhone app equipped with a measuring feature to estimate the dimensions of each graffiti piece accurately for larger pieces, and used a measuring tape for smaller pieces.
- Notebook: A dedicated notebook was used for organized and detailed data collection, allowing us to record specific information about each graffiti piece.
- Computer: We used Google docs and Google sheets for data entry & organization.

Data collection took place in various locations across Bellingham, specifically designed to ensure comprehensive coverage of the town. These locations encompassed diverse neighborhoods, downtown areas, public spaces, and prominent landmarks. Data collection occurred during a period of two months to provide a comprehensive representation of the graffiti in Bellingham.



Figure 1. QR code which will link you to our google drive file containing the photographs of each graffiti piece.

**Types of Graffiti in Bellingham**



Figure 3. A map showing the locations we marked graffiti pieces: Type 1 (scribble-like tags) in dark blue, type 2 (bubble letters) in orange, type 3 (painting of image/object/person) in green, type 4 (mural/large scale piece) in light blue, type 5 (stickers) is green.

**Size of Graffiti in Bellingham**



**Graffiti Themes in Bellingham**

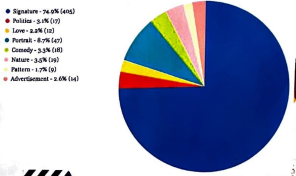


Figure 2. Pie charts depicting the data points collected from graffiti in Bellingham. We made a pie chart for each data point. Type, size, theme, message.

**Discussion**

Upon analyzing over 500 graffiti pieces in Bellingham, we found that the majority of the messages expressed were emotional in nature, accounting for 72.8% of the graffiti. In contrast, political messages constituted only 2.2% of the pieces. When examining the themes, we discovered that the most prevalent theme was signatures, constituting 74.9% of the graffiti. Other notable themes included love (2.2%), nature (2.6%), concentrated (3.1%), non-related (5.2%), patterns (1.7%), and advertisements (2.6%). Regarding the sizes of the graffiti, medium-sized pieces represented the largest proportion at 24.7%, followed by large (19.2%), extra small (20.5%), small (17.7%), extra large (11.2%), and extra extra large (6.5%). In terms of type, scribble-like tags (type 1) dominated at 62.2%, followed by bubble letters or more complex tags (type 2) at 14.4%, stickers (type 5) at 10.7%, paintings of images/object/people (type 3) at 8.7%, and large-scale murals (type 4) at 4.1%.

- Interactions:** Our findings provide valuable insights into the characteristics of graffiti in Bellingham and the messages conveyed by its creators. The dominance of emotional messages suggests that individuals are utilizing graffiti as a means of personal expression, conveying their true thoughts and feelings through this artistic form. However, the low representation of political messages challenges our initial hypothesis that people primarily use graffiti to express their political opinions. This disparity could be attributed to various factors, such as the specific demographics of the graffiti artists in Bellingham. The prevalence of signatures as a theme highlights the presence of graffiti artists marking their territory or asserting their identity within the urban landscape.

- Limitations:** Despite the limitations we encountered, our study contributes to the understanding of graffiti as a form of community expression in Bellingham. The prevalence of emotional and the diverse themes observed indicate the multifaceted nature of graffiti and its messages and the social and cultural factors influencing graffiti creation, engage in interviews or surveys with community and public perceptions. In conclusion, our research sheds light on the complexity of the graffiti in Bellingham and the messages embedded within this urban art form. While our findings did not fully support our initial hypothesis regarding political messages, they revealed the prevalence of emotional expression and diverse themes. Our study serves as a foundation for further exploration of graffiti art in community expression.

- Limitation:** Our project felt limited in terms of how much ground we were able to cover. Despite being able to collect as much data, we had to cut out some areas of Bellingham, we were brought to an end due to the sheer quantity of data points collected in the first few map zones we analyzed on foot. If we had more group mates or additional time, we may have been able to fully analyze the graffiti in diverse areas around Bellingham, which would help us provide a more equitable analysis of the purpose behind graffiti in town. The sample size of political messages was relatively small, which might have limited our ability to detect a more significant representation in other parts of town. Additionally, the study was conducted within a specific timeframe, and graffiti is a dynamic art that evolves over time. Therefore, our findings may not capture the entire spectrum of graffiti in Bellingham.

**Acknowledgements**

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