

Character and . . .

Connection

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Contact Information

Wendt Center for Character & Leadership

University of Dubuque

2000 University Avenue

Dubuque, IA 52001

563-589-3440 (office)

wendt@dbq.edu (e-mail)

www.dbq.edu/wendt (website)

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Ghosting and Graffiti

Character Lessons from Ancient Roman Social Media

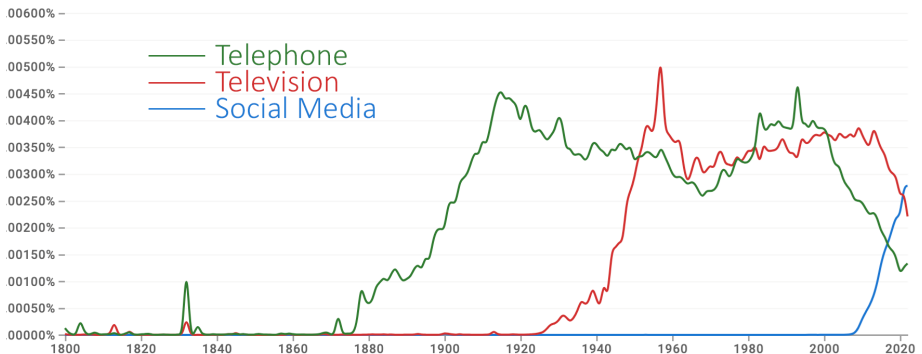
Nicholas A. Elder

Abstract

Social media is not a new phenomenon. It has a long and storied past. This article argues that we can learn character lessons from that past, and particularly from two different kinds of media from the Roman empire: papyrus letters and graffiti. In this ancient context, as in our own modern context, social media can both foster connection and create disconnection between people.

What is Social Media?

The term “social media” first appeared in the English language in 1994.¹ Since 2007, the word has seen a precipitous rise in use and has become a part of everyday English vocabulary.



Relative frequency of the terms telephone, television, and social media in English language books since 1800²

The internet and the world have been revolutionized in the past thirty years by online networks that have globally connected humans to a degree never

seen before in history. But social media is not a new phenomenon. In fact, it is quite old.

This article argues that social media has a long history and that we can learn from its use in the ancient past. Social media has always provided opportunities to both establish and strengthen connections between persons, while also creating unique spaces where connections can be severed or weakened. We will turn back the clock 2,000 years to explore two kinds of social media from the Roman Empire: papyrus letters and graffiti. We shall see that there are parallels between how these media fostered opportunities for both connection and disconnection and how social media does the same today. In each case it is not the communication medium itself that fosters connection or foments disconnection, it is how the medium is used. When social media is employed with positive intention and with consideration on its impact, it can foster connection across time and space. On the flip side, the unique communication possibilities that social media affords, including anonymity and the ability to disengage, can lead to behaviors that harm relationships and erode trust.



Social media can foster connection across time and space.

Defining Social Media

Most definitions of “social media” indicate that the term is reserved for internet-based sites, services, and applications that allow users to create their own content, share that content, and consume content created by other users. The Oxford English Dictionary, for example, defines social media as “Websites and applications which enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking.”³ Here, both “websites” and “applications” presume internet connectivity, indicating that social media is a 20th and 21st century phenomenon.⁴

However, an analysis of twenty-one academic definitions of “social media” between the years 1996–2019 found that the two most common terms in the definitions were, first, “social,” and second, “people.”⁵ While the modern connotation of “social media” involves virtual and internet connectivity, at its roots, social media is about connecting persons to one another.

And so Tom Standage in his book, *Writing on the Wall: Social Media – The First 2,000 Years*, locates the origins of social media not in the development of internet-based sites and applications like America Online, Facebook, or

Twitter in the early 2000s, as many others do. Instead, he argues that its roots are in human history and evolutionary biology.⁶ The ways that humans create, consume, share, and manipulate information in the era of social media is a part of our historical and evolutionary fabric.

Three things make modern social media so compelling and tap into this fabric, according to Standage:

1. As primates, humans are inherently social animals that are biologically conditioned to form networks.
2. Exchanging information is one way that humans maintain their position and status within those networks.
3. Technology, especially writing, allows humans to extend the reach of how and where information is exchanged.⁷

At the center of social media, and what unites a variety of different historical forms of social media is “person-to-person sharing of information.”⁸ Modern social media is set apart, thanks to the internet, by the unprecedented speed, distance, and vast reach at which information can be shared. The internet is the enabling infrastructure for our present social-media revolution.⁹

Ancient Roman Social Media

The Roman world also had novel enabling infrastructures that ushered in its own social media revolution: the invention of the phonetic alphabet, papyrus as a writing material, and increased access to travel.

The earliest human writing systems were pictures that represented words and ideas, not sounds. Because there are nearly an infinite number of words and ideas, in this system, there needed to be nearly an enormous number of pictures to represent them. As a result, writing and reading was a specialized task reserved for those who had the time, training, and ability to learn all the pictographs. These specialized writers and readers were called scribes.



The Ivory Comb is thought to contain the oldest example of a sentence written with a phonetic alphabet.

The invention of the phonetic alphabet in approximately 1800 BCE was a monumental shift in human communications that democratized writing and reading. Rather than having spoken words and ideas represented as pictures, the phonetic alphabet represents sounds as individual characters or letters. Any number of spoken words and ideas can be visually presented from the limitless combinations of these letters. Rather than memorizing an ever-increasing set of pictures, all one must do to learn to read and write is learn the letters and sounds of a respective language's alphabet. As a result of the invention of the phonetic alphabet, far more humans could communicate with one another through writing.

But material was needed to write on. Enter the papyrus plant. Papyrus is native to Egypt and grows in abundance on the banks of the Nile River. Ancient Egyptians harvested the plant and manufactured it as a writing material. Strips were cut and laid across one another vertically



The abundant papyrus plant was used to manufacture sheets to write on during the Roman Empire.

and horizontally, forming a sheet roughly the same size as a modern piece of printer paper. These were then glued end to end to make a blank scroll that was unrolled horizontally. The scroll in its entirety could be written on for long documents or it could be cut into individual sheets for shorter ones, like letters.

Thanks to the development of a vast system of Roman roads, papyrus could travel and be used across the Roman Empire. It was a widely available material for writing, like paper is today, from about 200 BCE until 400 CE.¹⁰

Because of this combination of the invention of the phonetic alphabet, the availability of papyrus as a writing material, and the opportunity to write and send documents to people in far-off locations via Roman roads, this period saw an explosion of people writing and connecting with one another across time and distance. It was a phenomenon never seen before in human history.

Sound familiar? The Roman Empire’s communications revolution was similar to the one we are presently experiencing. They did it on papyrus and via roads, we do it on digital devices, sites, and applications via the internet.

And the Romans used their new access to connecting with one another across time and distance in ways that are very similar to how we use social media today. The four most common applications of social media are socialization with friends and family, romance, business, and vocational networking.¹¹ All reasons that the Romans also wrote.

Human Responses to Technological Revolutions

Whether in 25 CE or 2025 CE, humans use media to connect with one another socially, romantically, or for purposes related to work. In both the ancient and the modern world, these connections can be healthy and infused with character, but they can also be unhealthy and lack character.¹²

THE SIMPLE ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONS THAT GET ASKED ABOUT EVERY NEW TECHNOLOGY:	
WILL ☐ MAKE US ALL GENIUSES?	NO
WILL ☐ MAKE US ALL MORONS?	NO
WILL ☐ DESTROY WHOLE INDUSTRIES?	YES
WILL ☐ MAKE US MORE EMPATHETIC?	NO
WILL ☐ MAKE US LESS CARING?	NO
WILL TEENS USE ☐ FOR SEX?	YES
WERE THEY GOING TO HAVE SEX ANYWAY?	YES
WILL ☐ DESTROY MUSIC?	NO
WILL ☐ DESTROY ART?	NO
BUT CAN'T WE GO BACK TO A TIME WHEN—	NO
WILL ☐ BRING ABOUT WORLD PEACE?	NO
WILL ☐ CAUSE WIDESPREAD ALIENATION BY CREATING A WORLD OF EMPTY EXPERIENCES?	WE WERE ALREADY ALIENATED

We ask the same questions with each new technology.

Because modern, internet-based social media is still a relatively new phenomenon, there are presently very different responses to its use. When humans are in the middle of a technological and communications revolution, there are typically two very different responses. On the one hand, some people claim that the new technology will ruin everything. On the other hand, some people see the new technology as a panacea for all of society's woes. When both radios and televisions became widely available in homes, some thought that each would ruin family life by discouraging interaction with one another. Others thought that each was going to improve family life by bringing everyone together around a shared experience. In reality, the truth is somewhere between the two.

People form more-balanced and nuanced opinions about technologies as they become “domesticated.” As Nancy K. Baym, Senior Researcher at Microsoft, puts it, “As technology are integrated into everyday life, they come to be seen as offering a nuanced mix of both positive and negative implications.”¹³ Writing itself was viewed suspiciously by none other than the philosopher Socrates.¹⁴



In both the ancient and the modern world, connections can be healthy and infused with character, but they can also be unhealthy and lack character.

In what follows, we will look at two specific phenomena of social media: ghosting and anonymous posting. While we consider these modern phenomena, we shall see that they both were features of Roman social media as well. Because the Roman social media that we will engage have been domesticated for over 2,000 years, it allows us to see the ways that

their use is and is not infused with character. Observing how these parallel our own technologies and media, we are better equipped to consider carefully our own use of social media in ways that are and are not infused with character.

Modern Ghosting

Leah LeFebvre defines ghosting as “unilaterally ceasing communication (temporarily or permanently) in an effort to withdraw access to individual(s), prompting relationship dissolution (suddenly or gradually) commonly enacted via one or multiple technological medium(s).”¹⁵ Usually the ghosted partner does not immediately recognize that they are being ghosted. “The

absence of interaction, irregularity in communication patterns, and sometimes abruptly ending communication causes non-initiators to then realize that they and their partner are no longer in a relationship.”¹⁶ Ghosting happens in both romantic and non-romantic relationships and both committed and casual relationships.



The digital age has facilitated an increase in ghosting as a strategy for ending a relationship.

Ghosting comes in many forms and degrees. Its strongest form is what Wendy Walsh in an interview with *The New York Times* calls “heavyweight ghosting.”¹⁷ This is completely cutting off communication after either being engaged in a committed or sexual relationship. On the other end of the spectrum is “lightweight ghosting,”

and might involve ignoring a handful of messages from a friend or cutting off communication with someone after one or two interactions. Between heavyweight and lightweight ghosting is midweight ghosting, which involves meeting several times and then demonstrating strong avoidance behaviors.

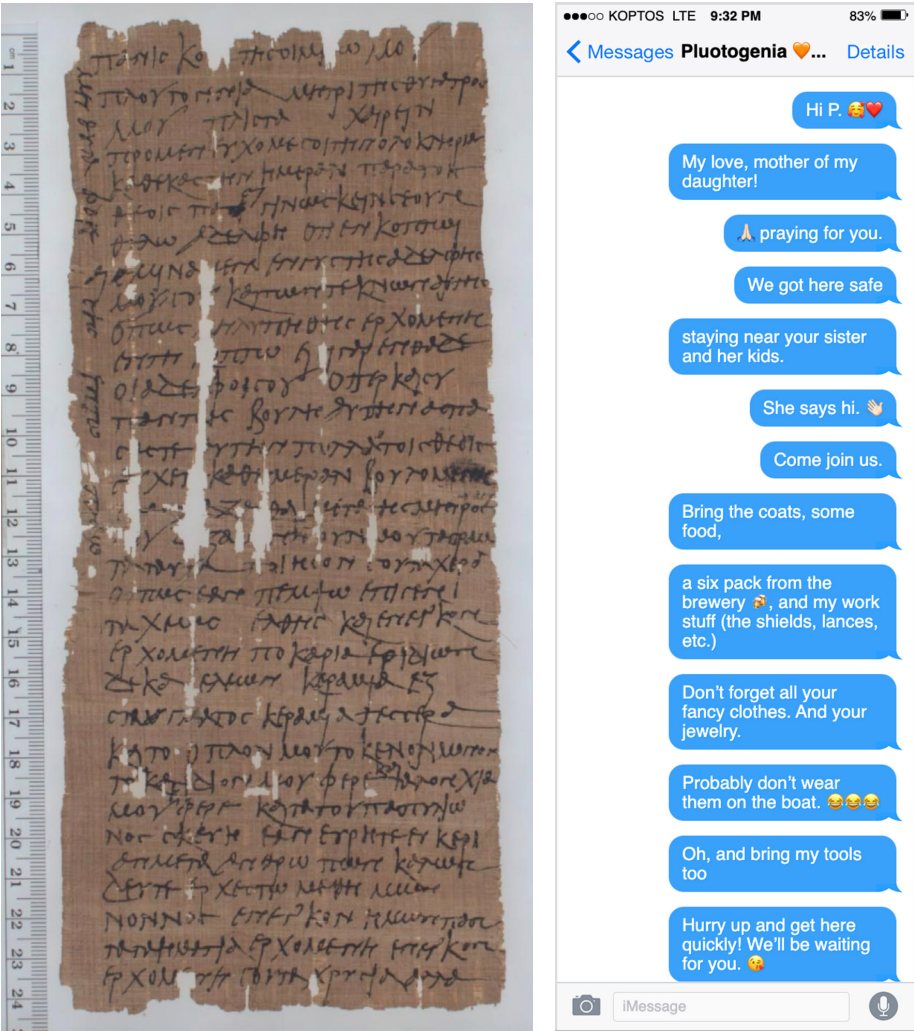
And ghosting is not a new phenomenon. Gili Freedman, Darcey Powell, Benjamin Le, and Kipling Williams write in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, “The idea of ending a relationship by cutting off contact has likely been around for a very long time, current forms of technology are making ghosting a more prominent relationship dissolution strategy.”¹⁸ We have a very good example of it from Roman Egypt from about 300 CE.

Ghosting is not a new phenomenon.

Ploutogenia Ghosts Paniskos around 400 CE

Over the course of three papyrus letters, we find a man named Paniskos being ghosted by his wife, named Ploutogenia. He writes her three letters, to which she gives no written response. At first Paniskos does not know he is being ghosted, and his realization of what is happening unfolds before our eyes as we read the three letters.

Paniskos writes his wife this first letter, labeled P. Mich. 3.214.¹⁹ I have translated the letter from Greek into English and from the ancient communication technology of the papyrus letter to the modern communication technology of the text message.



First letter from Paniskos to Ploutogenia: Original papyrus letter alongside my translation into the modern communication technology of the text message.

In the letter, Paniskos greets Ploutogenia, tells her that he prays daily for her health, and then informs her that he is staying at a place called Koptos, which is in upper Egypt. Presumably Paniskos is on extended business there, either as a soldier or a merchant engaged in the armory trade.²⁰ He

has found a place to rent near his sister-in-law and her children. Paniskos requests that Ploutogenia come join him in Koptos and bring along some very specific things: food, some of his weapons, tent poles, his clothes, and her clothes and nice jewelry, which he advises she should not wear on the boat.

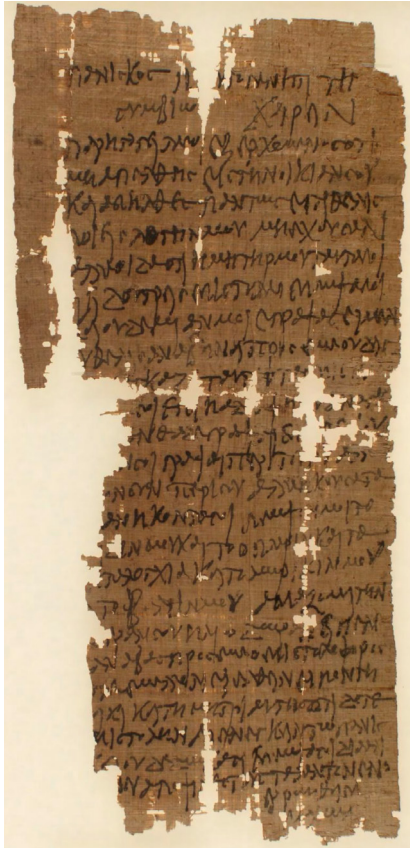
Ploutogenia never came to Koptos. Apparently she never told her husband that she wasn't going to either. At least that is what he indicates in a second letter written to her, labeled P. Mich. 3.216, that follows up on the first one.²¹



Second letter from Paniskos to Ploutogenia: Original papyrus letter alongside my translation into the modern communication technology of the text message.

Once again Paniskos greets Ploutogenia and tells her that he prays for her. Then he jumps right into a screed about her not joining him at Koptos. “Already I have written you a second letter that you might come to me and you have not come.” He then tells her that if she doesn’t want to come, she should reply and let him know. Paniskos repeats the very same request from the first letter about Ploutogenia bringing his weapons and other things with her.

After not receiving any reply to this second letter, Paniskos loses his patience. He writes Ploutogenia a third letter.²²



Third letter from Paniskos to Ploutegenia:
Original papyrus letter alongside
my translation into the modern
communication technology of the text
message.



Again, husband greets wife, but this time he does not say that he prays for her, as he did in the previous two letters. He insults his wife, saying she is just like his mother, doing whatever she wants to without thinking about him. Having given up hope that she will come to Koptos, he asks her to respond to his letter so that he might know how she is doing and to *send* him his weapons and tools, not *bring* him his weapons and tools, as requested in the previous two letters. Finally, he ends the letter informing Ploutogenia that he knows she is refusing to write him a letter: “The letter carrier said to me when he came to me: ‘When I was on the point of departing I said to your wife and her mother: ‘Give me a letter to take to Paniskos,’ and they did not give it.”

In letter #1, Paniskos is hopeful that Ploutogenia will join him in Koptos. In letter #2, he starts to get a bit annoyed, but still holds out hope that she will come join him. By letter #3, however, Paniskos realizes what has happened: Ploutogenia is not joining him and not responding to his requests. Paniskos receives a report from the letter carrier that Ploutogenia is midweight ghosting him.

Learning from Ploutogenia and Paniskos

What might we learn from Ploutogenia ghosting Paniskos and his response?

It is important to recognize that we only have one side of the conversation. There are no letters from Ploutogenia to Paniskos. Perhaps she had a very good reason not to come to Koptos. There may also be a perfectly good explanation for why she has not written him back. There are occasions when abruptly cutting off contact with a person is appropriate. For instance, it is not a negative mark on one's character to ghost an abuser. If we imagine such a situation with Paniskos and Ploutogenia, then the husband's repeated messages might be overbearing and controlling.

However, if we imagine the relationship to be functional, the situation is different and we can learn from Ploutogenia's intentional lack of communication with her husband.

In a recent study, only 5% percent of people surveyed indicated that they thought ghosting was acceptable in a long-term relationship.²³ Put another way, 95% of people disapprove of heavyweight ghosting. If you read Panisko's letters and were irked by his wife's lack of response, you might be among that 95%. When it comes to ghosting in any form, lightweight, midweight, or heavyweight, about 70% of people indicated that they would think poorly of a ghoster.

Notably, in this study, persons who possessed a strong "growth mindset" were less likely to think that ghosting was an acceptable way to end either a long-term or short-term relationship. A growth mindset is the belief and attitude that the intelligence, abilities, and qualities of a person can develop or grow.²⁴ A growth mindset is the opposite of a fixed mindset, which is the attitude that intelligence, abilities, and qualities are static and unchanging. Persons adopting a growth mindset tend to embrace challenges and see them as opportunities for development, whereas persons with a fixed mindset avoid challenges.

Persons with a fixed mindset are more likely to view ghosting as an acceptable way to end a relationship, to have reported ghosting romantic partners in the past, and to consider using ghosting as a dissolution strategy in the future.²⁵ This makes good sense: if you hold a fixed mindset, you are more likely to believe a relationship is simply not meant to be and ghosting is an easy way to avoid the difficult conversation of ending the relationship. However, if you hold a strong growth mindset, believing that people can change and grow, you are more open to working through or communicating about whatever issues might arise in a relationship, no matter how new it is.

LeFebvre identifies six steps in a “relational dissolution process:”²⁶

1. Gradual or sudden onset of relationship problems
2. Unilateral or bilateral desire to exit the relationship
3. Use of direct or indirect actions to accomplish the dissolution
4. Rapid or protracted nature of disengagement negotiation
5. Presence or absence of relationship repair attempts
6. Outcome of relationship termination or continuation

If one holds a growth mindset, they are more likely to see the relationship problems (#1) as opportunities, extend the disengagement negotiations (#3) and are more likely to attempt to repair the relationship (#4-5). If one holds a fixed mindset, however, they are more likely to take indirect action to end the relationship (i.e. ghost; #3) and are less likely to attempt to repair the relationship (#4-5).

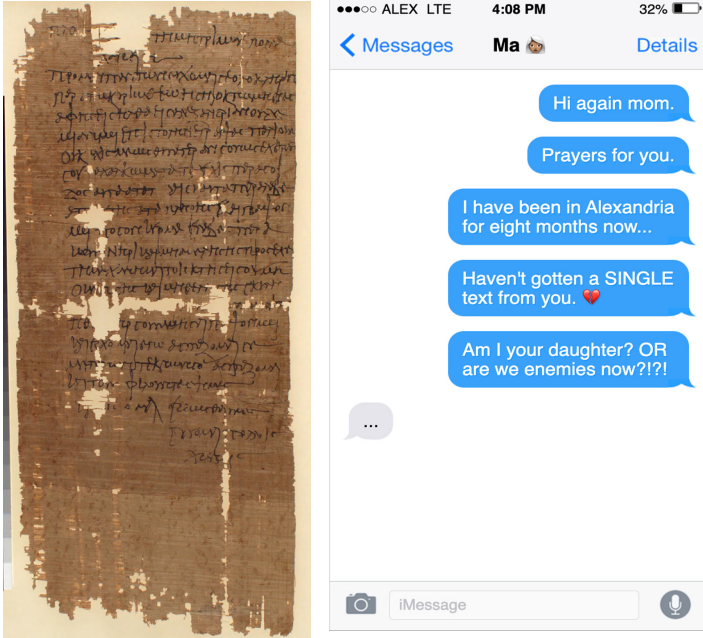
Let us presume that Ploutogenia is not attempting to end her relationship with her husband by ignoring his letters but is ignoring them because she does not want to move to Koptos. What advice might we give her? We might advise her not to ignore the conflict. Lack of communication very often leads to more problems. Ghosting is not the most effective or ethical way to handle disagreement. We might also point her to the tried-and-true Golden Rule: treat others as you want to be treated.

The advice would be fitting, because there just so happens to be a letter written from Ploutogenia to her mother in which she, Ploutogenia, is upset about her mother’s lack of communication.²⁷



*Lack of communication
very often leads to more
problems.*

The letter continues beyond what I have translated and Ploutogenia addresses several practical matters. But the first thing that she brings up after her obligatory greeting and prayer is that she hasn't heard from her mother.



Letter from Ploutogenia to her mother: Original papyrus letter with my translation into the modern communication technology of the text message.

Communication technologies, whether it be ancient papyrus letters or modern messaging, connect us to one another. Ghosting, at its core, severs connection. As noted earlier, there are rare and select occasions when cutting off communication is healthy, appropriate, and even ethical. Generally, however, ghosting, and especially heavyweight ghosting, is an unhealthy, inappropriate, and unethical communication strategy. Victims of ghosting question themselves, and often their self-worth and self-esteem are sabotaged. Psychologist Jennice Valhauer states that, like other forms of social rejection, ghosting is akin to emotional cruelty. In addition to emotional pain, it causes physical pain that several studies show can be treated with Tylenol.²⁸

In short: we would do better not to ghost. Looking at you, Ploutogenia.

Anonymity and Pseudonymity



"On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog."

CartoonStock.com

Peter Steiner, The New Yorker (1993)

In 1993, as the internet was becoming a popular commodity and not the exclusive domain of academics and the government, Peter Steiner published his "On the internet, nobody knows you're a dog" cartoon in *The New Yorker*. The cartoon captures one facet of internet privacy that has been a staple of online connectivity from its early years until today: content on the internet can be created, maintained, shared, and consumed anonymously.

Anonymity describes a situation when the author of content is not named. Pseudonymity is different but closely related. This occurs when content is created under a name that is not the author's own. Debates rage, and will continue to rage, about whether anonymity and pseudonymity are positive or negative features of the internet in the age of social media.

A balanced take is that they are neither good nor bad in and of themselves. There are both positive and negative aspects to anonymity and pseudonymity, and much depends on the varied purposes of creating and consuming content anonymously or pseudonymously. Social-media anonymity has been compared to a weapon: it can be used for self-defense or for injury to others.²⁹

Positive and Negative Functions of Social Media Anonymity

Social media anonymity and pseudonymity can have a positive function for historically marginalized groups. For instance, online anonymity has been shown to play a positive role for LGBTQ+ youth with respect to identity development, access to resources, and coming out.³⁰ Anonymity and pseudonymity can be a protective device, shielding individuals and groups from harm or abuse, both online and off.

It can also foster moral courage.³¹ This is because anonymity reduces the risk of consequences for taking courageous moral action. This is the same reason why “tip hotlines” for crime are very often anonymous. In and of itself, anonymity in communication is not a bad thing.

However, just as anonymity and pseudonymity provide a cloak for positive action, they can also provide a cloak for negative action. Anonymity is a major contributing factor to online aggression and cyberbullying, which is now considered an international public health concern.³²

Anonymous digital aggression is more humiliating and threatening than both anonymous in-person bullying and non-anonymous online and in-person bullying.³³ Because victims of online, anonymous or pseudonymous aggression do not know its source, they are unable to contextualize the aggression and make sense of it. Anyone could be their bully, even their closest friends. There is a significant imbalance when it comes to online, anonymous cyberbullying: 84% of cyberbullies know their victim, but only 31% of victims know their perpetrator.³⁴

Anonymity fuels aggressors for three reasons. First, it offers a sense of power over victims. This is because, second, anonymous aggressors are less likely to be detected and retaliated against. Even if there is retaliation, it is not a personal affront, but one against an anonymous “user.” Third, and most profoundly, anonymous aggressors do not see the pain they cause their victims. Social cues, such as eye contact, which are essential elements of interpersonal communication are absent.

Simply put, if one has to see the pain they cause a person, they are less likely to cause that pain in the first place. Detachment or disconnection from a person makes it easier to cause them harm. One study suggests that digital aggression is less common when cyberbullies must engage their victims in real time, even if the bully is anonymous.³⁵ The fact of knowing that there is another person on the other end of the message changes people’s actions.

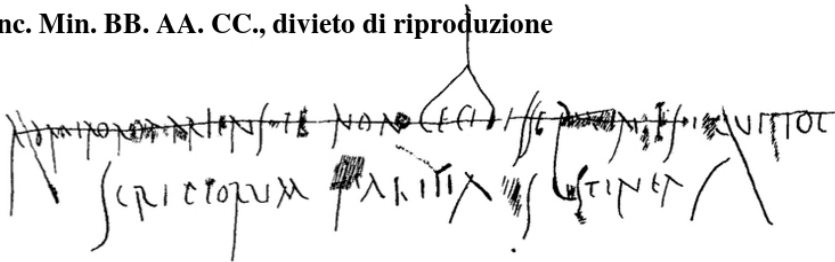
In summary, anonymity and pseudonymity in online interactions are not inherently bad or unethical. They produce both positive and negative outcomes. The negative outcomes stem from the disconnection between the perpetrator and the victim. By not having to connect directly with the person they are bullying, digital aggressors are emboldened to do harm.

Roman Graffiti

Just as there was ghosting in the ancient world, so also was there anonymous posting. And just as anonymity in modern communication has a positive and negative side, so also does anonymous posting in the ancient world.

In Roman antiquity, people wrote on each other's "walls," just as in the early days of Facebook before user's "walls" were replaced by a "timeline" in 2011. In the Roman world this posting was not electronic, but physical. There are remains of thousands of graffiti—the singular of this word is graffito—from the period. Graffiti were so common that one writer wrote, "I'm amazed, oh wall, that you haven't fallen into ruins since you hold the boring scribbles of so many writers."³⁶

Conc. Min. BB. AA. CC., divieto di riproduzione



Ancient graffiti about . . . too much ancient graffiti

Most of the Roman graffiti that still exist today come from the ancient cities of Herculaneum and Pompeii in southern Italy. These were tragically destroyed by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE. The pumice and volcanic ash covering the city has served as a time capsule, allowing archaeologists to unearth elements of everyday life in the Roman empire a few decades after the death of Jesus.

And it turns out that these Romans were humans who were just like us. This is reflected in the kinds of graffiti that they scrawled on the walls and other surfaces of the city. The increased literacy that we talked about earlier is on full display in Pompeii and Herculaneum, as persons wrote and drew on all kinds of surfaces. What they wrote and drew is no different than what you

might find in a gas-station bathroom today: comments about defecation, phallic and erotic images, “so-and-so was here,” boasts about sexual exploits, vulgar words, love notes, doodles of people (including the sports stars of the day: gladiators), animals, plants, jokes, and reviews of politicians and local establishments, to name a few. History nerds like me and normal people alike can lose hours or days exploring these graffiti at the Ancient Graffiti Project, which has digitized thousands of them.³⁷



EDR - Epigraphic Database Roma



Conc. Min. BB. AA. CC., divieto di riproduzione

Conc. Min. BB. AA. CC., divieto di riproduzione

DAVID

Ancient graffiti cover the gamut of possible topics

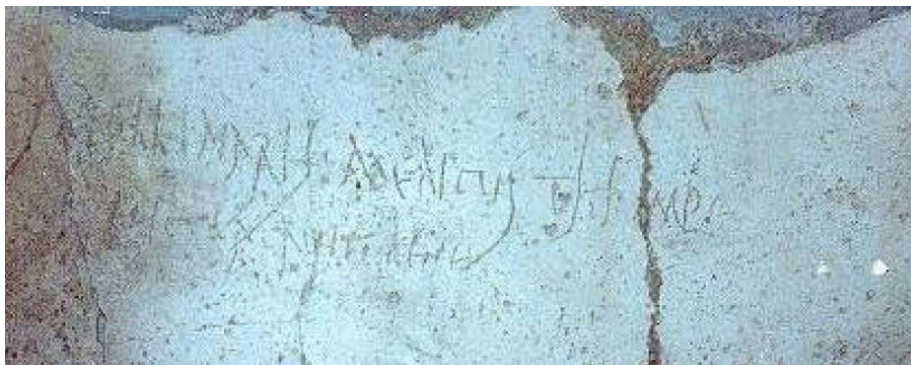
While we largely associate modern graffiti with anonymity, this was not the case in the Roman world. The writers and drawers of graffiti very frequently named themselves next to their writing and images, though of course not always. There are many examples of both anonymous and non-anonymous graffiti from this world. In this way Roman graffiti has much in common with modern social media posts. Many are anonymous; many are not.

The two also share in common the fact that anonymity can function both positively and negatively. While the Romans were more likely to append

their names to their graffiti, even the most crude and vulgar graffiti, there is, as we shall see, a tendency for direct insults of other people to be anonymous.

That Romans were not shy about appending their names to vulgar content, or about bodily acts and functions generally, is on display with this inscription, written by a man name Apollinaris, on the outside wall of a house.

“Apollinaris, the physician for the emperor Titus, shat well here.” This is Roman shitposting at its finest.



An imperial physician's expression of relief

There are any number of other vulgar graffiti that boast of sexual exploits, mock other people, or negatively review some kind of service provider to which the writer of the graffiti attached their name. Many of these are too crude to be reproduced here.

One that is not too crude is a back-and-forth conflict between two men named Successus and Severus. They are sparring over a woman named Iris on whom they both have a crush. Their conflict unfolds over the course of three graffiti.³⁸ You can imagine it existing in the comments section of an online social media thread. The personal dispute spills into a public space, as the two engage in a kind of performance to an unseen audience, each seeking to outdo the other with wit and insult.

First graffiti, written by Severus

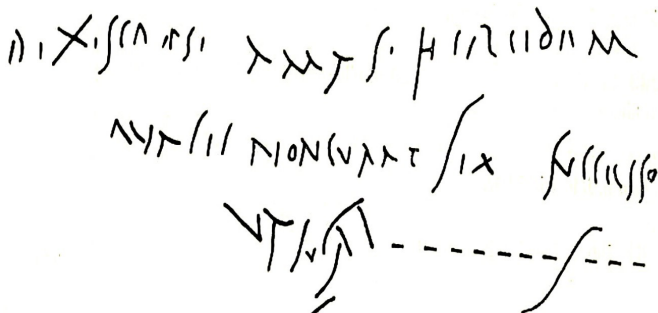
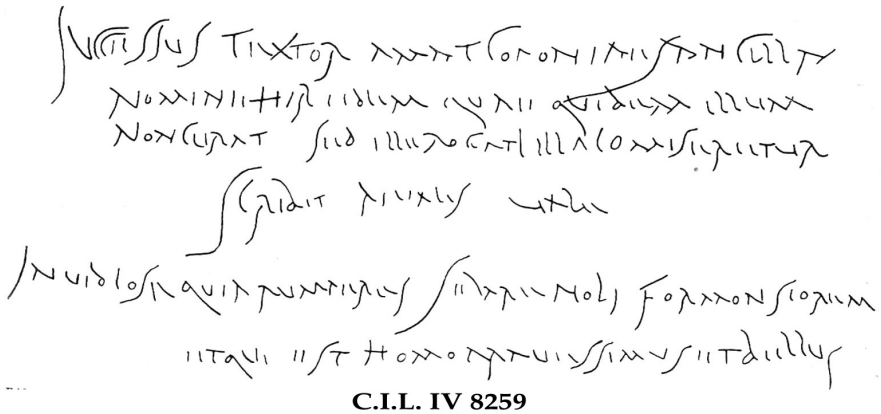
“Successus the weaver loves the barmaid of the inn, called Iris, who doesn’t care for him, but he asks and she feels sorry for him. A rival wrote this. Farewell.”

Second graffito, a response written by Successus

"You're jealous, bursting out with that. Don't try to muscle in on someone who's better looking and is a wicked and charming man."

Third graffito, a response written by Severus

"I have written and spoken. You love Iris, who doesn't care for you. Severus to Successus."



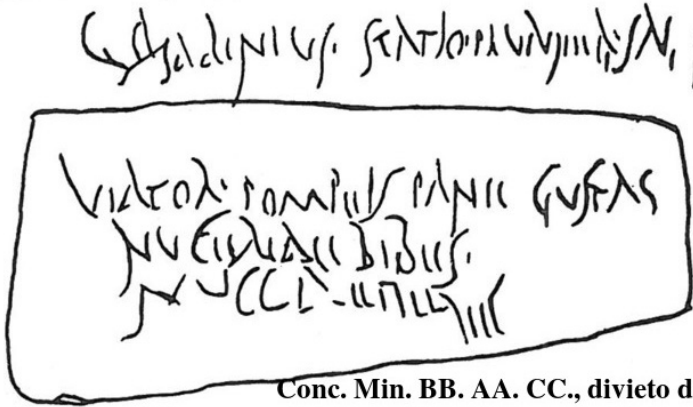
DIXI SCRIPSI AMAS HIREDEM
QVA TE NON CVRAT SIX SVCCESO
[...]
SEVERVS

A love triangle unfolds for all to see among Successus, Severus, and Iris

Apollinaris, Successus, and Severus, like many of their Roman contemporaries, created scatological or contentious messages, but they had the gumption to own up to their words by appending their names to them.

Other graffiti writers created what we would likely characterize as positive messages and also appended their names to them. Gaius Sabinius greets his friend heartily, while also offering a review of the fare in both Pompeii and the nearby city of Nuceria.

“Gaius Sabinius gives lots and lots of greetings to Statius. Traveler, at Pompeii you eat bread. But at Nuceria, you will drink!”³⁹



Conc. Min. BB. AA. CC., divieto di riproduzione

The ancient Romans' version of Yelp

By appending his name to the message, Gaius Sabinius stands by his review. This is not to say that there is no value in anonymous reviews, both ancient and modern. Anonymous feedback is valuable and can give a reviewer the freedom to communicate honestly.

Perhaps this is why the writer of this next graffito opted not to include their name with their one-star review of a bar and inn: “What a lot of tricks you use to deceive, innkeeper. You sell water but drink unmixed wine!”⁴⁰ The complaint is about the quality of wine. In the Roman world, wine was normally cut with water so that it would last longer. The graffito is complaining that the wine at the bar of the inn is so diluted that it is just water. It implies that the innkeeper is cutting costs to increase profits while keeping the better, unmixed wine to himself. It is both a complaint and a warning to future patrons.

Anonymous graffiti could also be just plain abusive. This is where modern anonymity with respect to online aggression and Roman anonymity link up. When it comes to one-off insults in graffiti, there is a notable pattern of anonymity. In all of the following messages the recipient of the insult is named but the writer is not:⁴¹

- “Epaphra, you are bald!”
- “Epaphra is not good at ball games.”
- “Chie, I hope your hemorrhoids rub together so much that they hurt worse than they ever have before!”
- “Samius to Cornelius: go hang yourself!”
- “Phileros is a eunuch!”
- “Lucius Statius Philadelphus, freedman of a woman, is a thief!”
- “Erotaria, you jealous old hag!”

Like cyberbullies, these graffiti-bullies do not have to take responsibility for their words because their name is not attached to them. They also do not have to see the pain their words cause their victims, because they are not bullying them live and in person. Like the victims of cyberbullying, Chie, Epaphra, Samius, Phileros, Philadelphus, and Erotaria do not know who is writing about them. It could be anyone, even their closest friends.

But let’s end on a positive note. Anonymity can also be productive and even beautiful in ancient graffiti. Earlier I indicated that online anonymity can offer safety and space for LGBTQ identity expression, often for coming out. Perhaps anonymous graffiti played a similar role in the Roman world.

There are at least three instances of individuals expressing their same-sex desire and acts anonymously via graffiti. The first, which I will not reproduce here because it vulgarly describes sex acts, is labeled *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum (CIL)* IV 3932 (you can look it up). The anonymous writer tells women to weep because he will no longer have sex with them, but with men instead. He writes “farewell to femininity!”

Two other graffiti, *CIL* IV 4523 and IV 2110, are simple confessions. The first indicates that the male writer has had sex with other men. The second expresses a writer’s desire to have sex with men. It might be psychologizing to suggest that these three graffiti are anonymous confessions that serve as a sexual-identity release valve, but it is certainly plausible. If anonymity in modern social media has “enhanced the ease of coming out anonymously or testing one’s tentative identities,” then anonymously doing the same in the older media of graffiti might function similarly.⁴²

Anonymity also functions in words of wisdom, as well as in confessions of love in Roman graffiti.

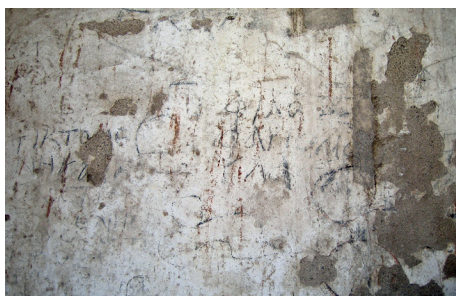
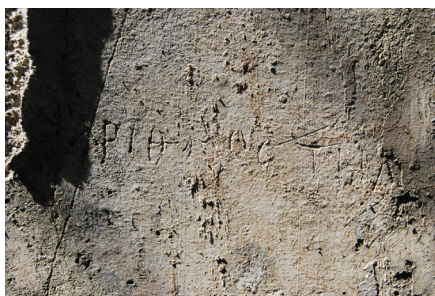
Words of Wisdom:

- A small problem gets bigger if you ignore it. . . . *CIL IV 1811*
- Once you are dead, you are nothing *CIL IV 5279*
- Now, when anger is still fresh, it is time to leave. When grief has departed love shall return. Trust me! *CIL IV 4491*

Confessions of Love:

- I don't want to sell my husband, not for all the gold in the world! *CIL IV 3061*
- If anyone does not believe in Venus, they should take a look at my girlfriend! *CIL IV 6842*
- Greetings to Primigenia of Nuceria. I would wish to become a signet ring for no more than an hour, so that I might give you kisses dispatched with your signature. . . . *CIL IV 10241*

One of the cleverest ways to confess love in the ancient world was via a phenomenon called gematria, in which the letters of the alphabet are assigned numerical values. Names, then, have a number which is the total value of all their letters. So, for example, the name David in simple English gematria, in which the letter is associated with its number in the alphabet, is 40: D (4) + A (1) + V (22) + I (9) + D (4). Gematria was common in the ancient world and most people knew the number associated with their name. However, it is very difficult to work backwards from only a number to a name, because a number could be the result of any variety of combination of letters.



Cryptic confessions of love through gematria

"I love a man whose number is 351."⁴³ "I love a woman whose number is 751."⁴⁴

Thus, when these two writers anonymously confessed their love, they did so cryptically. The persons whose number was 351 and 751 would have

known that the note was about them, but it would have been very difficult for a random person to determine who 351 or 751 were. This was an ancient form of “someone has a crush on you.”

Polly Lohmann writes that ancient Roman graffiti and modern social media are forms of self-display and self-commemoration.⁴⁵ I would add that they are also spaces to exert and form one’s identity and connect with other humans in networked relationship. In the processes of self-display, self-commemoration, identity- and social-formation, anonymity can play a role.

There is a time and place for anonymity in communication technologies. It can provide a safe space for identity formation. Anonymity can allow for a greater deal of honesty and the free flow of information. On the other side of the coin, it can be used against others abusively as a weapon and buffer for being held accountable for one’s actions and words.

Lessons Learned from Anonymity in Social Media

So, what lessons might we take from these anonymous and not-anonymous ancient graffiti?

First, there is power to accountability. Even in the cases of some of the most crude, vulgar, and provocative messages, people frequently attached their names. This is different from our modern social norms, but there is something to owning one’s words that fosters accountability and responsibility that we could use in online spaces today.



There is a time and place for anonymity in communication technologies.

Second, anonymity can be a tool for courage, support, and identity formation. Anonymity and pseudonymity are not in and of themselves bad things. They are tools that can be used positively.

Third, there is a danger to disconnection. Both ancient and modern examples show that anonymity can uniquely fuel harmful behavior. Anonymity and pseudonymity are tools that can be used negatively.

Fourth, anonymity should be used intentionally and with purpose. If there is a time and place for anonymity and pseudonymity in communication and media, then we ought to carefully consider what those times and places are and think through the effects, whether positive or negative, anonymous communication might have on other persons.

Conclusion

Communication technologies have always offered both opportunities and challenges. Modern social media, still in its infancy within the grand timeline of human communication, is no exception. As its influence continues to expand alongside technological advancements, it carries profound potential to foster either connection or disconnection, much like earlier forms of communication such as letters and graffiti.

The outcomes of the use of social media hinge on the intentions and mindfulness of individual users. While no one will employ any medium perfectly, reflecting on both the positive uses and harmful misuses of ancient communication tools can inspire a more thoughtful approach. By learning from history, we can intentionally utilize modern social media for meaningful connection while mitigating its potential for harm.

Ancient letters enabled long-distance, thoughtful communication, akin to today's emails or direct messages. However, they could also cause pain. From the ancient ghoster Ploutogenia we learn of the harmful impact of ignoring or ceasing communication. Acknowledging messages whenever possible helps to maintain trust and respect in relationships.

Graffiti allowed writers to make their thoughts permanent. Digital graffiti does the same. Roman graffiti writers were more likely than modern writers to append their name to their writing or drawing. However, when they directly insulted another person, they were far more likely to hide behind a mask of anonymity. While anonymous communication has positive functions, we ought to consider why we are communicating without our named attached: is it to protect ourselves or to harm someone else? With anonymity, motive makes all the difference.

Nicholas A. Elder researches and teaches how Scripture has been experienced across media, from ancient scrolls and codices to apps and film, showing how the medium shapes the message. Before joining the University of Dubuque, he taught at Marquette University, where he earned his PhD. He is the author of The Media Matrix of Early Jewish and Christian Narrative (Bloomsbury, 2019) and Gospel Media: Reading, Writing, and Circulating Jesus Traditions (Eerdmans, 2024), and is currently writing The Bible is Not a Book. His work also appears in journals such as Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Journal for the Study of Judaism, and Journal of Biblical Literature. Outside the office and classroom, he's usually running, restoring his preposterously old house, or wrangling his four kids and oafish dog.

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Notes

1. Aichner et al., “Twenty-Five Years of Social Media,” 215. There is, however, some debate about who coined the buzzword, with Tina Sharkey and Ted Leonsis, who were executives at America Online (AOL) in the mid-to-late 1990s, and Darrell

Berry, who developed an online media environment in the mid 1990s called Matisse, being the main contenders. See Bercovici, "Who Coined 'Social Media'?"

2. Google Book Ngram Viewer: "social media, television, telephone" (Accessed October 17th, 2024)

3. Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "social media (n.)," September 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5718206998>.

4. Other definitions of social media assume the same. See Kaplan and Heanlein, "Users of the World, Unite!," 6.

5. Aichner et al., "Twenty-Five Years of Social Media," 217.

6. Standage, *Writing on the Wall*.

7. Standage, 7–20.

8. Standage, 3.

9. This is what is referred to as "Web 2.0" in definitions of social media. The early days of the internet were characterized by users consuming content, not creating it themselves. Web 2.0 is a term for the internet as we know it today: a space for human interaction and participation with one another.

10. It was overtaken in popularity by a different material, parchment, which is made from animal skin. Eventually this led to a decrease in the number of people writing in the population simply because parchment was not as widely available as papyrus because it was a more expensive product.

11. Aichner et al., "Twenty-Five Years of Social Media," 216–17.

12. Throughout this essay, I use "character" to refer to positive moral character, rather than to morally neutral or negative dispositions.

13. Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, 53.

14. As recorded by Plato in *Phaedrus* 275d–e. Socrates's concern is that writing will erode people's memory and degrade communication since writing cannot physically speak for itself.

15. LeFebvre, "Phantom Lovers," 220.

16. LeFebvre, 220.

17. Popescu, "Why People Ghost."

18. Freedman et al., "Ghosting and Destiny," 908.

19. The Greek text and an English translation of P. Mich. 3.214 can be found at <https://papyri.info/ddbdp/p.mich;3;214>. Images of the letter are in the public domain and can be found in the Advanced Papyrological Information System in the University of Michigan digital library: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/a/apis/x-1409>.

20. Winter, "The Family Letters of Paniskos."

21. The Greek text and an English translation of P. Mich. 3.216 can be found at <https://papyri.info/apis/michigan.apis.1406>. Images of the letter are in the public domain and can be found in the Advanced Papyrological Information System in the University of Michigan digital library: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/a/apis/x-1406>.

22. The Greek text and an English translation of P. Mich. 3.217 can be found at <https://papyri.info/ddbdp/p.mich;3;217>. Images of the letter are in the public domain and can be found in the Advanced Papyrological Information System in the University of Michigan digital library: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/a/apis/x-1405>.

23. Freedman et al., "Ghosting and Destiny," 911.

24. Dweck, *Mindset*.
25. Freedman et al., "Ghosting and Destiny," 911–13.
26. LeFebvre, "Phantom Lovers," 222.
27. The letter is P. Mich. 3.221. The Greek text and an English translation of it can be found at <https://papyri.info/apis/michigan.apis.1403>. Images of the letter are in the public domain and can be found in the Advanced Papyrological Information System in the University of Michigan digital library: https://quod.lib.umich.edu/a/apis/x-1403/1362v_a.tif.
28. Popescu, "Why People Ghost."
29. Sardá et al., "Understanding Online Anonymity."
30. Craig and McInroy, "You Can Form a Part of Yourself Online."
31. Pan, Hou, and Wang, "Are We Braver in Cyberspace?"
32. Nixon, "Current Perspectives."
33. Sticca and Perren, "Is Cyberbullying Worse than Traditional Bullying?"
34. Ybarra and Mitchell, "Youth Engaging in Online Harassment."
35. Wang and Sek-yum Ngai, "The Effects of Anonymity, Invisibility, Asynchrony, and Moral Disengagement."
36. AGP-EDR158840, *The Ancient Graffiti Project*, <https://ancientgraffiti.org/Graffiti/graffito/AGP-EDR158840> [accessed: 12 Nov 2024]
37. Ancient Graffiti Project.
38. Translation from Cooley, *Pompeii: A Sourcebook*. Images from della Corte, *Case ed abitanti di Pompei*, 292.
39. AGP-EDR147519, *The Ancient Graffiti Project*, <https://ancientgraffiti.org/Graffiti/graffito/AGP-EDR147519> [accessed: 12 Nov 2024]
40. *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* IV 3498.
41. These are taken from a list compiled at <https://tourguidegirl.wordpress.com/2017/05/26/graffiti-of-pompeii/>. The *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* number for each is as follows: IV 1810; IV 1926; IV 1820; IV 1864; IV 1826; IV 3990; IV 9945.
42. Sahoo, Venkatesan, and Chakravarty, "'Coming out'; Craig and McInroy, "You Can Form a Part of Yourself Online," 95–109.
43. AGP-SMYT00422, *The Ancient Graffiti Project*, <https://ancientgraffiti.org/Graffiti/graffito/AGP-SMYT00422> [accessed: 14 Nov 2024]
44. AGP-SMYT00242, *The Ancient Graffiti Project*, <https://ancientgraffiti.org/Graffiti/graffito/AGP-SMYT00242> [accessed: 14 Nov 2024]
45. Lohmann, "What the Graffiti of Ancient Pompeii Teach Us."

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