Projecting masculinities or breaking sociolinguistic norms? The role of women’s representation in students’ profane language use

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Abstract
This paper explores how students from University of Ghana’s Commonwealth Hall (the only all-male hall of residence) project diverse masculine identities through how they represent women in their use of profanity and other uncouth linguistic forms. Data were collected from recorded profane songs, observations from various case studies of the use of insults and profane expressions and interviews with users of these expressions. The data generally present a picture of sexual and verbal abuse as ‘ideal’ ways of showing male dominance and power over women. These abuses are valued by the students, even though they are not expected practices in Ghanaian society. The paper concludes that although some students claim they use this language ‘just for fun’, disguising it as harmless only makes it easy to explore obsessions without a sense of guilt. If not properly checked, such obsessions may find expression in how women are treated.

KEYWORDS: MASCULINITY; GHANA; MUSIC; WOMEN; MEN; PROFANE LANGUAGE

Introduction
Research on gender in the past often took a sex role approach, in which gender was portrayed through traditional stereotypes (Venkatesan and

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Losco 1975). Most of these studies focused on how women have been represented in traditionally stereotyped ways (see Wollin 2003 for some reviews). Popularised by Connell’s theory of masculinities (Connell 1995), an increasing volume of research on men and masculinities has been recorded since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly from the West (see Kimmel 1998; Whitehead and Barret 2001). This area of enquiry has been growing in Africa since the 1990s, albeit scantily. A small but growing body of scholarly work on men and masculinities in Ghana is often found in the fields of sociology and anthropology (see Adinkrah 2012; Adomako Ampofo, Okyerefo and Pervarah 2009; Fiaveh et al. 2015; Miescher 2005; Owusu and Bosiwa 2015). Findings from these studies have uncovered masculine ideals such as phallic competence, strength, power, bravery, authority and leadership qualities, the ability to control women, among others (Adinkrah 2012; Adomako Ampofo and Boateng 2011; Fiaveh et al. 2015; Miescher 2005). These are often contrasted with ideals of femininity like submissiveness or obedience to men; modesty; humility; mothering; marital fidelity etc. (Fiaveh et al. 2015). Some of these ideals (like male power and superiority, exercising control over women, women’s submissiveness and obedience to men) reflect the notions of hegemonic masculinity and femininity – i.e. legitimising and guaranteeing the dominant position of men and the subordination of women; Connell 1995, 2001; Schippers 2007.1

In its contribution to this growing body of literature and to language and gender research in Africa (which has received little attention), this study looks at an interplay of language use and the construction of masculinities. It specifically focuses on how the University of Ghana’s Commonwealth Hall students construct different masculine identities through the way they represent women in their linguistic practices – taking cognisance of the argument that (gender) identities are constructed in and through discourse (West, Lazar and Kramarae 1997; Lazar 2007). This approach is key because, as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) rightly note, life-history research shows that women are central in many of the processes constructing masculinities (whether as mothers, schoolmates, co-workers, sexual partners or wives); as such, giving attention to how women are represented is one way through which we can understand how these male students experience and enact gender.

The Commonwealth Hall: norms and practices

The Commonwealth halls of residence is one of the five traditional Halls, and the only all-male hall, at the University of Ghana. Established in 1958, Vlach (1971) notes that students who first occupied the Hall were young men who had just graduated from high school and were exposed
to ‘freedom’ for the first time. They were seen as rowdy, and they engaged in various sex escapades and drinking sprees, thereby earning the tag-name ‘Vandals’. All members of the Hall are usually tagged as Vandals, although not everyone exhibits such rowdy behaviours or participates in their linguistic practices.

The male students have Hall executives who are recognised by the University as the official representatives of the Hall. They also have traditional heads (the Chief Vandal, the Chief Priest, Choir Master etc.), representing the Vandal fraternity/brotherhood; and surprisingly, these are more revered than the official Hall executives. The Vandals pay homage to Bacchus, a Greek god of sex and wine, who, according to Vlach, was chosen because he ‘provided a sanction for their mischievous drinking habits and orgy-aspiring behavior’ (Vlach 1971:35). They have a Vandals’ Week celebration annually to commemorate Father Bacchus’ birthday, the installation of a new Chief Vandal and the homecoming of Old Vandals. Although profanity characterises most Commonwealth Hall activities, the Vandals’ Week celebration has an outstanding characteristic of open use of profanity, much of which is through songs (I justify my use of the terms profanity and obscenity in the following section). Other times when the use of profanity is heightened include ‘charging’ days (Tuesdays and Thursdays – male students gather in front of the Hall to sing profane songs), sporting activities, escorting Vandals to matriculation or graduation ceremonies, or when students and visitors pass by the Commonwealth Hall on their way to the Great Hall for graduation and matriculation ceremonies (male students stand on the corridors to pass various comments).

The male students have two groups of songs: (a) Vandals’ inspirational/sacred songs and (b) Vandals’ power songs. These songs could either be Twespel (gospel songs substituted with profane lyrics) or Tweslife (hiplife/highlife, i.e. secular songs substituted with profane lyrics). Women are the central focus of their songs and other obscene language use; and as I shall discuss later, their representation of women in this linguistic behaviour is an attempt to project a certain image for themselves.

It is worth noting that the University of Ghana does not have specific laws that prevent students from singing profane songs. Students are therefore not sanctioned for singing these songs or for using verbal harassment – probably because this linguistic behaviour is generally considered as having fun or destressing (see Extract 1). It may be seen as ridiculous for anyone to report that they have been verbally harassed by Vandals, in spite of the emotional and psychological effects these profane songs may have on them. Sanctions are however meted out if such actions lead to physical confrontations, which can sometimes lead to injuries and loss of property (often
between the Vandals and other groups of men who challenge them) – but even that is difficult because students rarely ‘betray’ their colleagues. The university’s attempts at breaking up the Vandal fraternity by turning the Hall into a mixed-sex hall (with the hope that the presence of the women will tame them), have been met with strong opposition from students and alumni, most of whom are very influential people in society.

**Norms of language use among Ghanaians**

As in other countries, there are norms governing language use in Ghana, and members of the community are generally expected to abide by them. Where a linguistic form is considered a taboo (like expressions about genitals and sexual practices), it is expected that such forms are veiled with euphemisms or preceded by apologetic expressions (Agyekum 2010; Asaah 2006). The appropriate use of euphemisms is thus a sign of one’s communicative competence (in English also, it is more appropriate to talk about ‘making love’ instead of ‘fucking’; Jay and Janschewitz 2008). Failure to abide by these norms is interpreted as being uncivilised or impolite (Agyekum 2010; Fordjour 2016).

It is from this Ghanaian sociocultural perspective of what constitutes (un)acceptable public discourse – the students themselves acknowledge it as such – and the students’ intention to deliberately cause face threats and construct a ‘unique’ identity for themselves that their language use is interpreted as profane. Calling such linguistic forms obscene or profane is not new (see Wasserman 2005). In his study of African-American language use in the US, Spears however argues for the term ‘uncensored speech’ (Spears 1998:226) since he believes that calling such forms profane or obscene language prejudges the actions of the users. As he notes, the increasingly large quantities of uncensored speech in the mass media and their neutralisation or normalisation in some contexts justify his argument (Spears 1998:231). But riding on the back of Spears’s own argument that ‘obscenity ... is in the ears of the hearer’ and that ‘the labelling of expressions as obscene varies socially, regionally, and temporally’ (Spears 1998:241), my use of the term profane language here can be justified.

It is interesting that, in a country where adherence to the use of euphemism in discussing sexual practices is considered key to public discourse, university students openly flout such language norms and rather use ‘plain’ language. But as I shall discuss later, going against these norms of appropriate language use is one way through which the students construct their masculinities.
Feminist critical discourse analysis

The theory that underpins this research is feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA). FCDA broadly explores the links between language use and gender practices. Researchers aim at investigating gender inequalities (e.g. issues of dominance, injustice, power, control) as manifested in language (Diabah and Amfo 2015; Holmes 2005). These inequalities may sometimes be opaque, often relying on stereotypical assumptions. Accordingly, researchers have explicit interests ‘in making transparent the “hidden agenda” of discourse, which may create and sustain these gender inequalities’ (Litosseliti 2006:55–6). Lazar therefore emphasises that FCDA aims at ‘critiquing discourses which sustain a patriarchal social order: that is, relations of power that systematically privilege men as a social group and disadvantage, exclude and disempower women as a social group’ (Lazar 2005:5).

This theory is useful in interpreting how the Commonwealth Hall students often represent women as subordinate to men, vulnerable and powerless, while projecting themselves as the superpowers who demand the obedience and subordination of women—representations which reflect the notions of hegemonic masculinity and femininity. On the other hand, it is through this same critical lens, the ‘hidden agendas’ of discourse, that I reinterpret the representation of women as sex objects (which projects men as sex-conscious) as the representation of women’s ‘power’ over men. This is in line with Lazar’s argument that ‘for feminist CDA, the focus is on how gender ideology and gendered relations of power are (re)produced, negotiated and contested in representations of social practices’ (Lazar 2005:11; my italics).

Methods

A snowball sampling technique was used for this study because the Vandals rarely open up to non-members, especially on their language use and things connected to Bacchus. I employed two male research assistants who contacted two Commonwealth Hall students in their tutorial groups. These students introduced them to two members of the Hall who play active roles in singing profane songs. They also introduced the research assistants to other students. After several visits to the Hall, the research assistants found additional people to participate in the research.

The data were sourced from recorded songs, non-participant observations and semi-structured interviews. We audio-recorded their two major sets of songs – Vandals’ inspirational/sacred songs (popularly known as etwe nnwom ‘vagina songs’): 49 songs lasting approximately 35 minutes; and Vandals’ power songs: 18 songs lasting 14 minutes. The Vandals further
categorise songs from these two sets as Twespel (gospel songs substituted with profane lyrics) and Tweslife (secular songs substituted with profane lyrics). In our attempt to get natural data, we secretly recorded ten situations (during matriculation, graduation, charging) in which profanity was used. The students recorded were however informed later and asked for their consent to use the recordings in the present study. Eight granted consent and two refused. Out of the eight that granted consent, four songs that directly fall under the theme of this paper (i.e. those that represent women in ways that project certain masculinities) have been used. To assess the motives behind the students’ linguistic behaviour, we conducted semi-structured interviews with ten Vandals.

The data were transcribed, and the songs and portions of the observations which were in Akan were translated into English. I read through the data transcripts and listened to the audio recordings several times for emerging themes, which were grouped under various headings – this was done by highlighting some recurring phrases, concepts, assumptions etc. Themes that centre on how representations of women project their masculinities have been extracted and discussed below (those that centre on how they represent other men on campus will be discussed in another paper). In line with my promise of anonymity and confidentiality to research participants, pseudonyms have been used. Portions of the data that are likely to compromise anonymity have also been deleted. The transcription conventions used, adapted from Bucholtz (2007), are shown in Appendix 1.

**Breaking the norms or projecting masculinities?**

The use of offensive expressions has changed over time. Writing on cursing and gender in a corpus of UK and US users of MySpace, Thelwall (2008) for instance notes how swearing in recent times tends to refer to taboo subjects like sexual practices, sexuality and genitals. This is especially true among youth and college students (see Wasserman 2005; Jay and Janschewitz 2008; Gauthier and Guille 2017), and the case reported in this study is no exception. Findings from this study suggest that the recurring reason stated for using profanity is that it is in honour of Father Bacchus, a Greek god of sex and wine (the deity they pay homage to). In response to why they would choose to pay homage to Father Bacchus and consequently use profanity when they know that Ghanaian society frowns upon the use of such language openly, the students argued that they came to meet the tradition and so they are not sure why Father Bacchus was chosen (Vlach however notes that Bacchus was chosen because he ‘provided a sanction for their mischievous drinking habits and orgy-aspiring behavior'; Vlack 1971:35).
However, they have come to realise that it is all about branding themselves. They choose to create a unique identity by using linguistic forms that go against sociocultural norms and expectations of appropriate language use. The examples in Extract 1 illustrate this further.

Extract 1: Interviews

\textit{Interview 7}

1. Interviewer: So, what do you hope to achieve or communicate by using these songs?
2. Kwame: Nothing really, just for the fun of it, to let people know that we are not shy of anyone, we don’t just keep quiet because they say it is not allowed. It is sex education.
3. Interviewer: But don’t you think communicating that kind of sex education?
4. Kwame: That’s what we don’t understand, some people can actually say eyes, nose, so why is it too difficult for you to mention vagina, just because society says so? But we are also our own society... when I wake up in the morning the first thing I say is wo maame \textit{twe} <your mother’s vagina!>, it makes us unique... It’s normal, I don’t see anything wrong, that’s what defines us and makes us unique.
5. Papa: And then one thing, it makes us bold.
6. Interviewer: A few people mentioned that, and I was wondering, how does that make you bold?
7. Papa: Because not everyone on campus can say \textit{etwe} <vagina>, since I can say \textit{etwe} <vagina> meaning the normal words I can say it boldly... with confidence and boldness.

\textit{Interview 9}

1. Nana: I don’t know why society forbids that because the vagina or the \textit{twe} is part of the human body, so why in the society you can just say \textit{nsa} <hand> but you can’t say \textit{etwe} <vagina>; so the culture we have here says that we should say \textit{etwe} and when we say \textit{etwe} it doesn’t change anything...
2. Interviewer: There has been no time that somebody says that <your mother’s vagina!> and you feel very insulted.
3. Nana: /No! no! no! All Vandals will go against you because it is something that we do.
4. Interviewer: Hasn’t there been any day... you will be like ‘me maame \textit{twe}? Me maame memfa no ndi agoro [my mother’s vagina? I don’t joke with my mother]’?
5. Nana: No! no! Me I no dey joke plus ma mummy? [pidgin English], we will tell you when you come to Commonwealth you dey joke plus your mummy. If you
can’t stay in the Hall, you can leave.

KK: When we say wo maame twee, wo maame onni twee [when we say your mother’s vagina, does your mother not have a vagina]?

Interview 3
Kwabena: The society actually frowns on profane words but... we want to stand unique. That is why the sacred songs that we sing, it is just us... at the end of the day that is what we are going to sing, even in church we will sing etwe nnwom <vagina songs>, we don’t care about where we find ourselves so long as we are in a group ... The identity is what matters.

Interview 1
Interviewer: So, what do you feel when you say these things, our society doesn’t?
Kwasi: /Rules are meant to be broken and people that are successful, they break the rules, you understand? ... if I break the rules, it’s not anything.

From the extracts we see these students questioning certain societal norms and constructs. Kwame, for instance, notes ‘we don’t just keep quiet because they say it is not allowed’ (lines 4–5). He sees it as a form of hypocrisy that we can mention certain parts of the body freely and tag others as taboo (also see Nana’s argument in lines 21–24, and the fact that they do not see it as insulting). This argument perhaps references why Spears prefers to call what is generally described as obscene language ‘uncensored speech’ (Spears 1998:226). Their ability to use these profane forms is what gives them their unique identity (lines 11–12). It is an identity that shows their boldness and fearlessness (line 13), assertiveness (lines 4, 42), confidence (lines 16–18) and even success, since successful people are not afraid to break the rules (lines 47–48). This claim about unique identity construction corroborates Thelwall’s point that ‘the decision to swear might have the purpose of expressing identity (e.g., being cool), or group membership or displaying closeness in friendship’ (Thelwall 2008:86; cf. Coates 2003).

Although most of the students argue that the major aim for choosing this brand is to break the norms and be unique (or ‘just for the fun of it’; line 3), the data suggest that this language use is an attempt at projecting diverse masculine identities, some of which are considered ideal in Ghanaian society. Besides, breaking the norms or challenging the status quo (i.e. being daring) is one of the marks of masculinity. The students’ ability to flout societal conventions of language use and openly use profane words can thus be interpreted as evidence of constructing masculinities. Note also that the characteristics cited above (boldness, fearlessness, assertiveness and confidence) are perceived as masculine, and all these are acts of power
construction. As has been noted in the literature, swearing or the use of profane and taboo expressions are often considered as acts of power and ways of affirming oneself (Gauthier and Guille 2017:139).

An integral part of this language use is how women are crafted into projecting these diverse masculine identities. The following sections present how women are represented in the male students’ use of profanity and show how such representations project various masculine identities.

The abused and the abuser

A major recurring theme in this study is the portrayal of women as victims of various kinds of abuses and men as the perpetrators of such abuses. The students pride themselves in having ‘big penises’ which can ‘tear vaginas apart’. Below is a discussion of various subthemes.

The helpless woman and the powerful ruthless man

In this subtheme, women are represented as powerless, helpless and vulnerable. Through this, men are portrayed as powerful sex agents, ruthless and insensitive. Extract 2 below illustrates this (VIS represents ‘Vandals’ inspirational songs’).

Extract 2: Song (VIS 39)

1. Ouch! Ouch!
2. My vagina hurts young man
3. Take off your penis and let me fart
4. I didn’t know your penis can tear vagina apart
5. I wouldn’t have come to your room
6. I brought my vagina
7. But when I search for it, I can’t find it
8. Do you think vagina has spare parts? (2X)
9. I have inserted it <penis> into your vagina
10. Put your legs against the wall and stop talking nonsense! (your mother’s vaginal)
11. Every night you ate Kelewele <spicy fried ripped plantain; a delicacy, especially on campus> Didn’t you know that a Vandal’s penis can tear vagina apart?
12. (2X)

Although the woman is portrayed as assertive, demanding freedom, her demand is not met. Instead, we see a representation of a man who is ruthless, destructive and insensitive to the pains the woman may be going through (lines 9–12). The man sees providing for the woman’s needs (line
11) as giving him the right to her body, including abusing her (line 12). We also see a representation of men’s insatiable desires for sex; a man who is willing to do anything (like buying *Kelewele every night*) for sex. This also paints the picture of a vulnerable woman who can easily be bought with *Kelewele* – a stereotypical representation of women as materialistic. Line 10 also captures the stereotypical representation of women as nags, as the man shuts her up when she complains. Men are represented here as perpetually more focused on their own feelings and image of self-importance and power than they are focused on how anyone in a relationship with them feels. From the lenses of FCDA, we see in this example an unequal power representation. It paints a picture of a helpless and vulnerable woman and a more powerful abuser who is determined to take his pound of flesh.

In a similar example (VIS 38), apart from tearing vaginas apart, the Vandal’s penis is described as ‘poisonous’. This poison metaphor (repeated six times for emphasis) suggests that the man’s sexual activities have the potential of ‘killing’ a woman. Commenting on these examples, however, some respondents (e.g. Kwabena, Kwadwo) argue that these do not necessarily indicate being destructive or abusive. Rather, it can be interpreted as a sign of men’s power to control women, especially since sexual prowess (in whichever form it takes) is what makes a real man. They justify this action by arguing that some women actually prefer and hail men who are more aggressive during sex. Their point may be in line with Onyango’s point that ‘many patriarchal societies socialize women to pretend that they are being hurt during sexual intercourse just to reinforce the sexual ego of a man’ (Onyango 2009:66). Such arguments do not only represent men as ego-centred, but they reiterate my earlier point about an unequal power sharing in which the man is perceived as strong and powerful.

**Disempowering the ‘powerful’**

In another theme, although women are first portrayed as fearless and daring, they are later disempowered by the more powerful Vandals. This is illustrated in Extract 3.

**Extract 3: Song (VIS 45)**

1. Volta lady! She says *she is not afraid of a big penis*
2. *She has met Vandals’ big penis*
3. She now understands what a big penis is
4. She wakes up in the morning and opens her vagina
5. And says, ‘*help me Lord!*’
6. Treat it for me if it has a sore (10X)
After encountering the Vandal’s big penis (line 2), the fearless and daring woman in this example is now presented as weak and helpless, as she pleads for help from God (lines 5–6). The image painted here is that of an ignorant woman, who obviously boasted about her strength and power (line 1) because she did not know what the Vandals represent (lines 2–3). She who once boasted of strength and courage has now been rendered powerless. This invariably projects the Vandals as the superpowers they claim to be.

VIS 29 paints a similar picture, where a lady acknowledges her strength and claims she likes penises until she meets the Vandal’s big penis which ‘tears vagina apart’. She then acknowledges her powerlessness in the presence of a more powerful being.

The hegemonic representation of men’s power presented in these sections is similar to what is found in studies emanating from other parts of Africa (Izugbara 2005; Onyango 2009). Izugbara (2005) for instance describes an erect penis, from what he sees as a primitive understanding of the meaning of penetration, as a symbol of power, invading women. The semen it emits during ejaculation is also described as a kind of venom that weakens women (Izugbara 2005:14). He thus notes that the outcomes of penile activity include loss of virginity and pregnancy; thereby ascribing the penis with the power of death and life, respectively. It is this power or domination that underscores the meaning of the metaphoric expression of pregnancy in Kenya as ‘breaking a woman’s leg’ – an indication that the man has ‘disabled’ or disempowered the woman (Onyango 2009:61). As Onyango (2009) further notes, men who place special premium on the penis therefore see it as the most important means of enhancing the domination of men over women. Agyekum (2010) makes a similar comment about the Akan of Ghana. He argues that in most of the euphemistic (and non-euphemistic) expressions for edie ‘sexual intercourse’, the male is represented as the one ‘playing an active role, and sometimes as an aggressor [… which] confirms the concept of male domination and exploitation of women in Akan’ (Agyekum 2010:172). This is not surprising since ‘the erected penis by its shape and function is equated to a weapon ready to be used in a battle’ (Agyekum 2010:71). Thus, sexual practices, as presented in this study and the studies cited above, project hegemonic masculinities as they generally portray male dominance and female subordination. I argue, from a FCDA point of view, that Kwabena and Kwadwo’s argument that women actually prefer and hail men who are aggressive in bed will only make such abuses appear normal and legitimate.
Verbal abuse for ego repairs: evidence for insecure masculinities?

Apart from the portrayal of women’s physical abuse in their songs, findings from student observations indicate that the Vandals sometimes abuse or harass female students verbally (by using profane and other uncouth linguistic forms) for failing to respond ‘appropriately’ to their demands. This happens when the women ignore or snub them when they try to get their attention, as exemplified in Extract 4.

Extract 4: Observations

<Scenario 1: a lady approaches the entrance of the Commonwealth Hall>

1  Owusu: A certain girl is approaching.
2  Nana: Forget about her, she’s not beautiful. Let’s wait for another one. She
3    has slim butts <buttocks>.
4  Owusu: <Shouts> What a vaginal! Excuse me pretty lady.
5  <Lady ignores them and continues walking>
6  Nana: Hey lady! Are you not the one being called by the Chief <the leader
7    of the Vandal fraternity>? Vagina that boosts GPA!
8  <Lady continues walking without turning>
9  Owusu: Ei Vagina, won’t you even mind us? Stop! look, if I even call you, I
10    will vomit. Smelly vagina! Stupid fool! Look at your maggot-infested vagina.
11
12  <Scenario 2: a lady comes into contact with a group of Vandals in front of the Hall>
13  Kyei: Beauty, queen, come!
14  <Lady ignores and walks away>
15  Kwasi: Do you think he wants to propose to you? He only wanted to send
16    you on an errand’.
17  All: Stupid fool, your mother’s vagina! <all start hooting at her>

As shown above, the students often start by ‘praising’ the female students (in ways that may still be profane; line 7), but turn to verbal abuse when the women snub them (lines 9–11, 18). In lines 4 and 14, for instance, the women are referred to as ‘pretty lady’, ‘beauty’ and ‘queen’. The exclamation in line 4 ‘what a vaginal!’ also emphasises the beauty of the woman in question. This beauty is further highlighted when she is referred to as a ‘vagina that boosts GPA’ (line 7) – the interpretation being that her beauty can make male lecturers give her more marks than she deserves. This so-called ‘praise’ questions the value and abilities of the woman. It reinforces a popular perception that women in certain high places or those who advance in their careers get there by trading their bodies and not based on their intelligence or hard work. These examples also show how women are sexualised and
verbally abused by using their genitalia to reference them (the Vandals use ‘vagina’ metonymically to represent women). In her discussion of naming and androcentrism in the English language, Mills also argues that ‘all of the words which refer to female genitalia [e.g. pussy] do so as sexualized terms ... [and they] can be used abusively to refer to the woman herself, so that sexual organs come to define the whole person’ (Mills 1995:79). The women in this study are likewise defined by their sexual organs.

The observation that the Vandals often start by ‘praising’ the female students is corroborated by the students interviewed. They further explain that they interpret the ‘snubbing’ attitude from the female students as a serious damage to their ego as men and especially as Vandals (the campus superpowers). The verbal abuse is therefore seen as a form of damage repair. Kwasi and Nana articulate these sentiments quite strongly in Extract 5.

Extract 5: Interviews

Interview 1

Kwasi: Vandals, we respect ladies more than everything o, we respect our mothers ... You want the thing to chop <to have sex> and you are insulting the thing?...if we are like shemaa <queen>, we start calling you those names and if you want to kyerekyere wo ho kakra <show off a little> then we start saying ɔanim tantan!, wo maame twee! <your ugly face! your mother’s vagina> and things like that

Interviewer: so how do you feel when you use such expressions?

Kwasi: I feel okay, automatically it’s two ways, when I make you feel inferior, I feel superior, I make you know that you are not nice even though you are nice, I make your day very bad...you want to kyere wo ho <show off> so me too we will make sure you know that you are inferior,

Interview 9

Nana: ... you are a lady and when a guy is calling you, just feel free, why is the guy calling me in the first place? Just come and listen to what he will say

Interviewer: Are we making it compulsory that when ladies are called they should respond

Nana: Not that compulsory but at least you are ladies and so you have to respond, sometimes oh ‘hi lady’, oh ‘hi’ back, something like that but when a whole Vandal says ‘hi’ to a lady, and the lady goes <behaves> like ‘who are you, I don’t know you so why are you saying hi to me?’, then we will descend on you. How dare you!

Kwasi’s account here reinforces what was observed in Extract 4, that male students often start by praising women and only abuse them verbally when
they ‘show off’ (I can also confirm from personal experiences at the Hall during my school days, that male students indeed treat women well when you engage them one on one; I was told their leadership will sanction any Vandal who abuses a woman in the Hall). From lines 8–11, we see an ego repair work in place. In his statement ‘when I make you feel inferior, I feel superior’, Kwasi clearly indicates that he resorts to using these insults to feel superior. Being snubbed is interpreted as insulting, a damage to their self-worth, and to repair it they must use these abusive profane words which will make the women feel inferior.

In Nana’s account, although he points out that it is not compulsory that women should respond to men when they call, his statement ‘at least you are ladies and so you have to respond’ (line 18–19) suggests otherwise. Demanding this submission is particularly important when it has to do with ‘a whole Vandal’ (line 20; the use of ‘whole’ is interpreted here to mean ‘if not for anything, the fact that the person is a Vandal should scare you’). Through the lens of FCDA, which also ‘has an explicit interest in making transparent the ‘hidden agenda’ of discourse – which, for instance, may be responsible for creating and sustaining gender inequalities’ (Litosseliti 2006:55–6), I argue that Nana’s statement creates a power hierarchy in which the Vandals are found at the top (perhaps with other men in the middle) and women at the bottom. By this unequal power, women are ‘obliged’ to respond when called by the powers that be. The impression created here is that although the female students may ignore some men, it is totally unacceptable to do that to a Vandal, hence the exclamation ‘how dare you!’ (line 22). This hegemonic masculinity highlights the image Vandals have created for themselves, as the ‘real’ men and the superpowers on campus. For women to rubbish that image and self-worth is perceived as a serious damage which has serious repercussions – hence denigrating them so they can feel superior and powerful. This is consistent with some arguments in the literature on swearing, that ‘swearing is often considered as an act of power [at least from the perspectives of the male students in this study] and a way of affirming oneself (Gauthier and Guille 2017:139).

However, these accounts also suggest what may be referred to as ‘insecure masculinity’. The male students in this study abuse the women verbally because their actions make them (Vandals) feel threatened and insecure. This argument may indeed be supported by a comment from a colleague during a seminar presentation on this paper, that real men do not make noise about their manliness. Just like the Akan maxim ahwenepa nkasa (‘a precious bead does not rattle’; this is similar to the English idiom ‘empty barrels make the most noise’), real and powerful men do not need to ‘rattle’ and draw attention to themselves because we already know their worth.
The power of the vagina: women as sex objects and men as sex-conscious

One of the common findings in studies on gender stereotypes is the representation of women as sex objects (Chytkova and Kjeldgaard 2011; Diabah and Amfo 2015; also see Wollin 2003 for some reviews). In their responses to why their focus is on women’s sexuality, the majority of the students interviewed argue that sex is what women have to offer, which also suggests that sex is what men seek from women. Examples of such responses are shown in Extract 6.

Extract 6: Interviews

Interview 7
1 Kwame: ...Women are very special features; that is power. She can make and unmake you. When we sing about them, it is in the sense that we love them.
2 They have all they need to make something happen, and that is it, something like that. For that, we are talking about their vagina, their private part. Boys, we have the attraction to them
3 Interviewer: But why is it that when you are singing about women you don’t have any feature to adore about them apart from their private part?
4 Kwame: Vagina is the ultimate, when you are liking a girl, it’s because of the vagina... because women are very special features, a woman has many ways to get what she wants from you, it means what she is going to use is her vagina.

Interview 4
14 Interviewer: ...the females you said you sing about their sexual organs, why?
15 Kwaku: I think that is the best we can get from females for now

Interview 6
18 Interviewer: Why don’t you talk about their hair, face, their dressing/
19 Kofi: /ɛtwɛ <vagina> is what we need

In his representation of women as sex objects, Kwame argues that ‘vagina’ is the ultimate thing about women, and that when men like a woman, it is because of that (lines 8–9; also see lines 4–5). In Kwaku’s account, sex is the best thing women can offer (line 15). These responses reduce women to mere sex objects, suggesting that their worth in a relationship is just to satisfy men’s sexual needs, while representing men as sex-oriented or sex-conscious (see also Diabah and Amfo 2018). Whereas Kofi argues that the vagina (i.e. sex) is what men need (line 19, as opposed to ‘want’),
Kwasi notes in his rhetorical question (Extract 5, lines 2–3) that it does not make sense for men to insult women because they want to sleep with them; and Kwame also points out that their attraction to women is sex-motivated (line 5).

However, being 'sex objects for the gratification of the (straight) male gaze' (Lazar 2007:157), which some studies interpret as a representation of women's vulnerability or weakness (Diabah and Amfo 2015), is also represented here as a source of women's power. Because of the perception of men's insatiable desire for sex, they are often portrayed in ways that suggest that they will do anything in order to have sex, including submitting to women's demands (we see an example of this in Extract 2, where the man is portrayed as buying Kelewele every night). Knowing that sex is one thing that men need so badly (lines 8–9), women also capitalise on this and use it as a source of power to put men in check (lines 10–11). In his own words, Kwame identifies this as 'power' which can be used to 'make and unmake' men (lines 1–2), 'make something happen' (line 3) or 'get what she wants from you' (lines 9–19). In this we can interpret the stereotypical representation of men as lecherous as a sign of weakness and vulnerability, while women are seen as the powerful ones who call the shots. Highlighting this power relationship, which is often hidden or presented subtly, is key to my FCDA stance, as it uncovers the hidden agendas of discourse – downplaying women's power in the sexual encounters described in the Vandals' songs. It also provides an analytical resistance to how the relationship between gender and power has often been presented – men as powerful and women as powerless.

In Extract 7, the power of the vagina (women) is shown in its ability to jeopardise men’s future and cause moral and religious decadence.

Extract 7: Observations

<A lady uses the sidewalk by the Commonwealth Hall, on her way to Matriculation; some guys on the corridor begin to chat her up>

1 Opoku: Wow! Beauty. As for this even if I have sex with her and I get an F
2 I don’t mind...for as long as you are beautiful we will always worry
3 you...So do you have a sibling who is dark in complexion?
4 Ama: <faint> yeah
5 Opoku: then your chromosomes passed somewhere. Your brother can
6 even sleep with you, so take good care of yourself
7 <Lady laughs>
8 Oko: Do you think we are joking? We will have sex with you, you will see!
In this example, Opoku admits to his unquenchable desire to have sex with Ama. Note that the major desire of every student is to get good grades. However, this young man represents his sexual urge to be so strong to the extent that he is willing to fail in exchange for sex (lines 1–2). To strengthen how bad the lecherousness of men can be, he warns the lady to beware of her own brother since he too can sleep with her (lines 5–6). This indeed shows the power of the vagina to make and unmake men (as emphasised by Kwame in Extract 6, lines 1–2) – that is, the willingness to forfeit their grades and possibly jeopardise their future, and the throwing away of all social, moral and religious decency (by Ghanaian standards) in order to have sex with one’s own sibling.

The power of the vagina described in this section is similar to what Kabija discusses in her study on masculinity and ritual violence in bull-fighting among the Luhyia of Western Kenya. She notes that a woman’s used underwear, which is believed to acquire potency from the vagina it covers, is used to beat bulls which are going to fight. This has the symbolic purpose of inspiring courage and empowering them to conquer. On the other hand, the wife of a bull owner can pour the water from her washed underwear on the face of an aggressive bull to make it docile and easy to tame (Kabija 2009:50–51). These practices corroborate Kwame’s statement that a woman can ‘make or unmake you’ (lines 1–2).

Although seeing men as weak and vulnerable is not one of the ideals of masculinity in Ghanaian society, it is ‘acceptable’ and pardonable for a man to fall victim to this feminine power, often referred to in Ghanaian parlance as ‘bottom power’. This may be supported by the Akan proverb Mmaa atopagengyen na ekum mmarima (Women’s violent shakings of the hips/buttocks kill, i.e. give them power over, men; see Diabah and Amfo 2015). This references the argument in masculinity research about the internal complexities of masculinity. Connell (2001), for instance, argues that masculinities are not simple, homogeneous patterns which are free of tensions; rather, they are full of contradictory desires and tensions. Although these students construct themselves as powerful, in charge of, and controlling women, we see in these cases their willingness to yield that power to women because of their insatiable desires for sex. There is tension between their desire to construct the traditional masculine identity of men’s power and the stereotypical representation of men as sex-conscious, which then disempowers them and renders them vulnerable. But it can also be argued that yielding to the ‘bottom power’ in order to get what they want (sex) is also evidence of the representation of another kind of masculinity — men as go-getters; men as focus-minded; men as goal-oriented.
Summary and conclusion

Responses to interview questions in this study indicate that the persistent use of profanity by students of the Commonwealth Hall is to create a unique identity for themselves. Though they consider their linguistic behaviour as just having fun, I argue that it is a means for projecting diverse masculine identities; and women are made to play a critical role in making this happen. They achieve this by using some sexist forms to sexualise women (as Thelwall notes, ‘the use of swear words referring to female anatomy parts, in recent times, can be regarded as sexist, especially when used by men in front of women’; Thelwall 2008:88). Some of these masculinities are non-hegemonic (for instance falling victim to and subsequently being weakened by women’s sexual guile), but others are hegemonic (e.g. seeing themselves as the campus superpowers, controlling women and demanding their submission).

As shown in the section ‘the abused and the abuser’, their songs (which form a chunk of their profane language use; 67 songs were collected for my project) generally present a picture of sexual assault as an ‘ideal’ way of showing male dominance and power over women. This is valued by the students, even though it is not the most expected practice in the wider society. This corroborates the argument that hegemonic masculinity need not be the most common form of masculinity, although it is highly visible in a particular setting; Connell 2001). It is noteworthy that out of four songs cited in this paper, three mention tearing women’s vaginas apart. This is in addition to similar representations of abuse like vaginas becoming ‘sore’.

Such vivid representations of an abused helpless woman, while representing men as in control of women, is indicative of the kind of mindset these students may have. Perhaps they see a society in which sexual violence against women may be ‘sanctioned’ (for instance, Diabah 2013 discusses how both citizens and the police ‘justify’ the sexual assault of a female musician in one of Ghana’s Universities). They probably see a society in which sexual assault may be used as a means of getting back at women (e.g. for making them buy kelewele every night; Extract 2). This is the kind of concern Onyango (2009) raises when she questions the kind of premium (African) society places on the penis, to the extent that some men of a previous Kenyan ruling government warned men who supported other political parties that their women will be raped if they do not desist from multiparty politics.

It may be true that these students see this language use as a means of destressing or ‘just for the fun of it’, and not that their words translate into actions per se, as some claim (and in fact ‘victims’ of their verbal abuses do
not even see the need to report them because of the ‘it is for fun’ perception people have about this linguistic behaviour, irrespective of the psychological effects these abuses may have on them). As I have already alluded to above, indeed there may be no specific relationship between the male students’ language use and how they (would) normally treat women. Nevertheless, we can argue that what they sing or talk about are projections of what is actually in their minds and, as such, disguising it as harmless only makes it easy to explore their obsessions without a sense of guilt (see Kabija 2009 for similar comments). If not properly checked, such obsessions may find expression in how women are treated on campus; and this will have damning consequences, considering that their linguistic behaviour generally presents sexual and verbal abuse/harassment as ‘ideals’ of masculinity.

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Grace Diabah is a senior lecturer at the Department of Linguistics, University of Ghana. She has a PhD and a master of research in applied linguistics from Lancaster University (UK). Grace is a post-doctoral fellow of the American Council of Learned Societies’ African Humanities Program (ACLS-AHP) and Building a New Generation of Academics in Africa (BANGA-Africa, with support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York). Her teaching and research focus on gender and language, and language use in specific domains (e.g. business). Some of her scholarly works include ‘From “Recharger” to “Gidi Power”: The representation of male sexual power in Ghanaian radio commercials’ (Critical Discourse Studies, 2015), ‘To dance or not to dance: masculinities in Akan proverbs and their implications for contemporary societies’ (Ghana Journal of Linguistics, 2018), and ‘Caring supporters or daring usurpers? The representation of women in Akan proverbs’ (Discourse and Society, 2014).

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Appendix 1: Transcription conventions

, pause 
. end of a statement/utterance 
? rising intonation/interrogation mark 
! exclamation 
... omitted data 
<> researcher comments 
“ direct quotes 
/ overlapping statements 
word emphasis 
italics Akan words in English transcript
Notes

1 Hegemonic masculinity also operates through the subordination or marginalisation of other masculinities it coexists with.

2 The closest one in the University of Ghana basic laws is Section 2 (it is an offence for a member of the university to sexually harass another member of the university by engaging in unwelcome or unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature, including, but not limited to, attempting to touch or touching, attempting to fondle or fondling, attempting to caress or caressing). Although their linguistic behaviour sometimes constitutes sexual and verbal harassment, it is difficult to enact and enforce specific laws that prevent them from singing profane songs without contravening their right to freedom of speech and expression (as enshrined in Article 21(1a) of Ghana’s 1992 constitution).

References


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