

Men and Masculinities in Digital Public Discourse: Gendered Reactions to Teacher–Student Sexual Relations in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an empirical investigation of how masculinity is constructed and the locus of responsibility in online communities responding to a scandalous teacher-student sexual relationship in Ghana. The research question is the gendered normalisation of sexual relations with a minor, in which case the digital discourse takes a specific form and continues to hold unequal moral standards. Online platforms were used in the collection of data, specifically the *SecretNewsGhana* and *GhanaPage News*, which led to a corpus of 85 user comments. The mixed-method design was used that incorporated the qualitative thematic analysis and quantitative statistical analysis using SPSS. The remarks were coded into five themes, which were celebratory masculinity, moral condemnation, humour and trivialisation, gender double standards, and responsibility debate. There was also an analysis of patterns of blame attribution in four categories namely: teacher blamed, student praised, shared responsibility and system blamed.

Results indicate that online responses are mostly dominated by humour and trivialisation (28.2) and gender double standards (23.5) implying that the problem is often undermined or re-gendered. Shared responsibility (48.2) was the most frequent attribution and the student was frequently complimented (11.8) which shows a mortification of male sexual agency. Those findings highlight the extent to which digital space replicates hegemonic masculinity and support unequal gender conventions. The research paper makes a contribution to sociology and geography of gender since it shows how online conversation influences the knowledge of morality, responsibility and power relations among the population in contemporary Ghana.

Keywords: masculinity, gender norms, digital discourse, online comments, gender inequality, social media analysis, Ghana.

INTRODUCTION

The use of digital media platforms that are always increasing has fundamentally changed how individuals interact with social issues, particularly issues to do with morality, gender, and power. Online commentaries serve as the central arenas of the communal conversation where the users write about their views, bargain on meanings and affirm or challenge the social norms. The media outlets like *SecretNewsGhana* and *GhanaPage News* are areas of critical engagement in Ghana, specifically when issues of concern are involved. Sexual relations between teachers and students are often characterized by strong reactions of people because of ethical, legal, and moral consequences of such cases. However, these responses are not impartial; they are informed by the well-established gender expectations and standards. Masculinity and more so in patriarchal societies is generally constructed in terms of dominance, control and sexual prowess (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). On the other hand, the feminine trait is often associated with morality and self-control and thus there is a stricter assessment of the behaviour of women (Butler, 1990). Such gendered expectations have an impact on collective understanding of sexual relationships, in particular, relationships with power inequalities.

Online, humour, meme, and informal speech enhance these norms to the point of making grave matters trivial (Milner, 2016). Online discourse can, therefore, both reproduce and reproduce the conditions of inequalities in the society.

Problem Statement

Though the sexual relations between the teacher and the students are a serious issue, the reactions produced in the internet tend to be characterized by the standard tendencies of normalization, humour and gendering bias. There are few empirical studies on the organization of such responses and what they say about the ideas of masculinity and gendered responsibility in the Ghanaian digital world.

Research Gap

Despite the previous literature on gender norms and media representations, very few studies have been done with the country of Ghana online discourse, combined qualitative thematic analysis with quantitative SPSS analysis and explored the cases of female-male role reversal between a female teacher and a male student.

Objectives

The research questions of this work are as follows: (1) to determine the most common themes of online commentaries; (2) to evaluate how the responsibility is attributed in gendered terms; (3) to understand how masculinity is created in digital communication.

Research Questions

The research questions to be used in this study are: (1) what are the themes of online reactions? (2) What is the allocation of responsibility among the players? (3) What do these responses reveal about gender standards and expressions of manliness?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hegemonic masculinity refers to dominant forms of masculinity that rationalize men power and privilege (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). It previews such features as strength, domination, and sexual success. The society of Ghana, as well as any other society of the world, often uridines or glorifies male sexual behaviour even in areas where it can be considered problematic. Butler (1990) further states that gendering is not something that is innate but a practice that is repeated and dictated by society. Although hegemonic masculinity and gender performativity are valuable analytical methods, it is also crucial to frame this study on African and Global South approach to gender. Other scholars like Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí believe that western gender paradigms might not be able to explain gender relations in African cultures, which tend to follow social hierarchies that are not necessarily determined by gender as such, but through other factors like age, seniority, and kinship. The view is especially applicable to teacher-student relationships within which there is an overlap between authority and age and gender. Likewise, Amina Mama also stresses the need to examine gender in postcolonial settings in which power relations are conditioned by historical, cultural, and institutional factors peculiar to the Global South. These theorizations emphasize the fact that gender cannot be perceived separately but has to be analysed with other structures of power and inequality. Moreover, the African feminist scholarship supports the importance of the critical analysis of the interaction between the local cultural norms and the global discourses on sexuality and morality. This is specifically vital in the digital space where the global discourse merges with the local values in the way events like teacher-student relationships are viewed. With the combination of these views, the paper offers a more contextually specific insight into masculinity and gendered responsibility in Ghanaian digital discourse.

This theoretical approach explains why women are severed more severely in the sexual situations - they are supposed to conform to the specific moral norms. The empirical studies show that male sexuality is commonly associated with accomplishment and prestige, but the female sexuality is morally governed (Flood, 2008). This unfairness is more evident with respect to issue of power and their ages, where male actors might be forgiven or applauded. Online platforms have become key platforms of influencing the opinion. However, such settings often encourage unprofessional and jovial interaction, thus making weight of serious matters insignificant (Milner, 2016). Memes, sarcasm and humour have a major role in shaping the way the audience interprets controversial events.

The studies point out at persistent discrepancies in the court scrutiny of men and women in similar situations (Kitzinger, 2004). Females tend to be accused and stigmatized but males tend to get and go or even get a party. This effect is a symptom of more general patriarchal systems, which shape social attitudes. The current paper shows strong empirical applicability as the results of the research are aligned with existing literature in a number of important aspects. The extremely elevated humorous rate in the corpus (28.2 3) supports the claims of Ryan 3 M. 3 Milner (3) who highlights the role of humour in creating digital discourse. Similarly, the rate of celebratory masculinity (11.8 0.0) supports the theoretical framework of hegemonic masculinity pioneered by R. W. -Connell, and the discovery of gendered double standards (23.5 0.0) corresponds to the studies of Jenny - Connell on the topic of media representation and gender bias.

In spite of these academic contributions, there exists a research gap. Quantitative studies using statistical software like SPSS to work out the discourse of social media are scarce, and especially in the Ghanaian context. Also, there are not many studies that focus on the digital audiences in Ghana or test the role-reversal situations in which an adult female interacts with a minor male, which makes the current question timely and irreplaceable. On the whole, this research contributes to the fields of gender sociology, masculinity studies, and digital media studies by providing empirical evidence of the development and meaning-making of gendered narratives in the online environment. Moreover, it has a salient implication on child-protection laws, media regulatory systems, and gender equality advocacy, in that it will deal with deep-rooted biases and intensify the reaction to delicate socioeconomic issues on online platforms.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research design embraced in this study is mixed-method research design, which is a synthesis of qualitative and quantitative researches. The qualitative part involved the thematic analysis of online commentaries, and the quantitative part involved the use of SPSS to assess patterns and distributions.

Data Source

The following online news sources were used as the source of data:

- *SecretNewsGhana*
- *GhanaPage News*

The above platforms were chosen as they:

- Active social discussions.
- Offer convenient comment boxes.
- Represent different opinions of the audience.

Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique was used to select relevant comments related to the case. Only comments directly addressing the issue were included.

Sample Size

Total comments analysed: **85**

Data Collection Procedure

Comments were manually extracted and compiled into Microsoft Excel. Each comment was treated as a unit of analysis.

Data Coding

Step 1: Thematic Coding

Each comment was assigned to one dominant theme:

- Celebratory Masculinity
- Moral Condemnation
- Humour and Trivialization
- Gender Double Standards
- Responsibility Debate

Step 2: Attribution Coding

Each comment was also coded based on blame:

- Teacher Blamed
- Student Praised
- Shared Responsibility
- System Blamed

Data Analysis

The coded data were first entered into Microsoft Excel and subsequently imported into SPSS for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used to examine the distribution of themes and patterns of responsibility attribution. This approach enabled the transformation of qualitative data into quantifiable insights.

Ethical Considerations

Data for this study were obtained from publicly available sources, ensuring transparency and accessibility. No personal identifiers were included in the analysis, and the anonymity of commenters was strictly maintained throughout the research process to protect their privacy.

Reliability and Validity

Coding categories were consistently applied across all comments, while themes were derived inductively from the data. Furthermore, the combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis enhances the overall reliability of the study.

RESULTS

Thematic Distribution of Online Comments

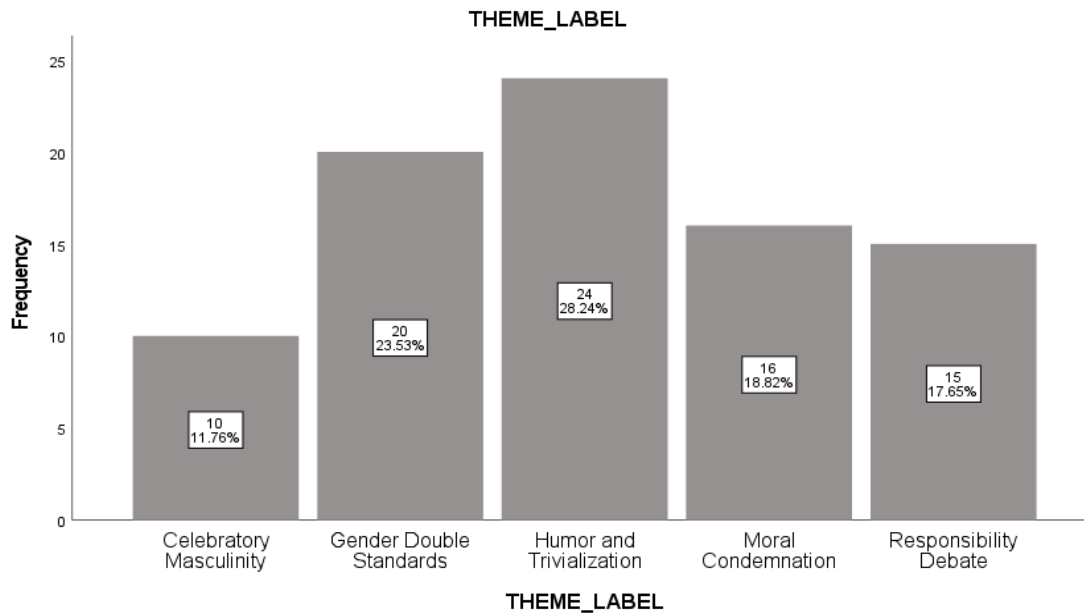
To examine the dominant patterns in online discourse, frequency analysis was conducted on the coded themes using SPSS. The results are presented in **Table 1** and **Figure 1**.

Table 1: Thematic Distribution of Online Comments

Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Humour and Trivialization	24	28.2%

Gender Double Standards	20	23.5%
Moral Condemnation	16	18.8%
Responsibility Debate	15	17.6%
Celebratory Masculinity	10	11.8%
Total	85	100%

Figure 1: Bar Chart of Thematic Distribution



As illustrated by Table 1 and Figure 1, the theme of Humour and Trivialization which explains 28.2 percent of the data is dominant. This implies that a significant percentage of online users solved the problem by using jokes, sarcasm and entertainment-based language, which may have diluted the perceived seriousness of the scenario. The second theme that occurs most commonly (Gender Double Standards 23.5 percent) indicates a continuing awareness and dissatisfaction of society with unequal treatment of male and female actors in similar circumstances. This means that some users accept and challenge gender biasness in the social language.

Moral Condemnation (18.8 %) is also salient as many of the comments are delivered with anger and blame, the ethical judgement, and most of them refer to the adult figure in question. At the same time, the Responsibility Debate (17.6%) pre-empt arguments of consequences, including pregnancy, maturity, and decision making. Lastly, the least but very important is Celebratory Masculinity (11.8 percent), which denotes the standardization and approval of male sexual behaviour, consequently, endorsing the existing constructions of masculinity.

Gendered Attribution of Responsibility

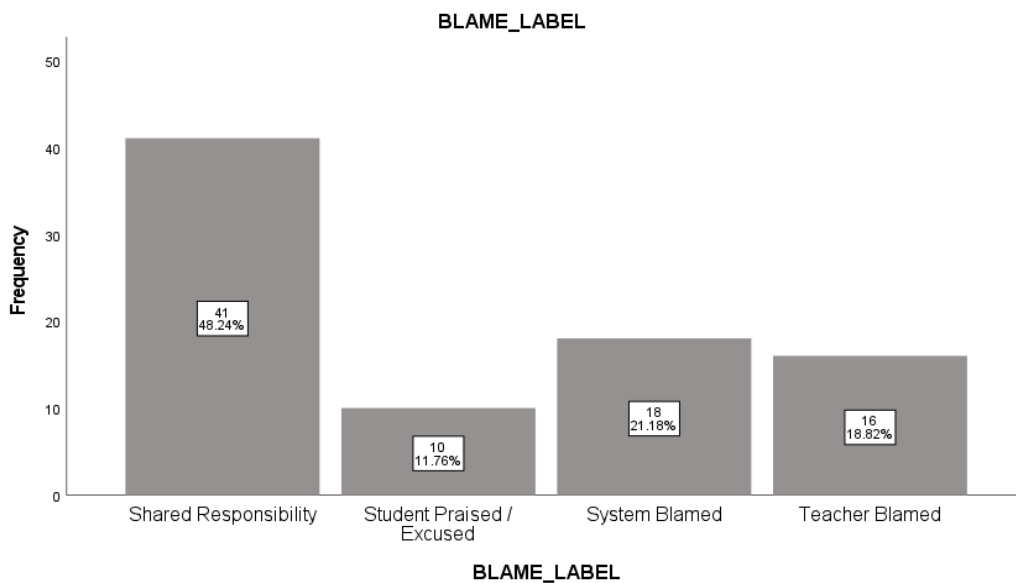
To examine the dominant patterns in online discourse, frequency analysis was conducted on the coded themes using SPSS. The results are presented in **Table 1** and **Figure 1**.

Table 2: Gendered Attribution of Responsibility

Attribution Category	Frequency	Percentage
Shared Responsibility	41	48.2%

System Blamed	18	21.2%
Teacher Blamed	16	18.8%
Student Praised / Excused	10	11.8%
Total	85	100%

Figure 2: Bar Chart of Attribution of Responsibility



The most common attribution pattern is Shared Responsibility (48.2%), as shown in Table 2 and Figure 2. This implies that many commenters distributed blame among people or situations rather than placing all the blame on a single actor. The category System Blamed (21.2%) shows that a significant portion of respondents blamed the problem on more general institutional or societal shortcomings, like lax regulation or moral deterioration.

In line with expectations of authority and responsibility, Teacher Blamed (18.8%) represents moral accountability aimed at the adult figure. Nonetheless, a diffusion of blame is suggested by the comparatively lower percentage when compared to shared responsibility.

The existence of narratives that normalize or celebrate the male minor's involvement is particularly highlighted by Student Praised or Excused (11.8%). This result is consistent with themes of celebratory masculinity and shows that gender norms that portray male sexual activity as positive rather than negative still exist.

DISCUSSION

Overview of Findings

This study set out to examine how online audiences construct masculinity and assign responsibility in response to a teacher–student sexual relationship. The findings reveal that digital discourse is shaped by humour, gender bias, and normalized perceptions of masculinity.

Humour and the Trivialization of Serious Issues

The prevalence of trivialization and humour (28.2%) indicates that many participants presented the incident as amusement rather than a significant ethical issue. This supports Ryan M. Milner's claim that serious issues are frequently reduced in perceived severity by being turned into participatory humour in digital culture.

In this situation, humour serves as both a coping strategy and a tool to downplay the seriousness of sexual misconduct involving minors. Such narratives may become more commonplace in online environments, which could lead to a wider desensitization of society.

Gender Double Standards and Social Inequality

Social expectations for men and women are different, as evidenced by the prevalence of gender double standards (23.5%). Comments that imply that responses would be different if the genders were switched both acknowledge and perpetuate inequality.

This is consistent with Raewyn Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, which holds that women are subject to more stringent moral scrutiny while male behaviour is accepted and normalized. In a similar vein, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity clarifies how recurring social interactions including online commentary replicate these expectations.

Moral Condemnation and the Policing of Female Behaviour

The female teacher was primarily targeted by moral condemnation (18.8%), despite shared responsibility being the most frequent attribution (48.2%). This is a reflection of a larger cultural trend that holds women responsible for upholding moral order, especially in sexual situations.

This result is consistent with studies that indicate women's sexuality is more strictly regulated and scrutinized than men's (Flood, 2008). Even in situations where both parties are involved, female actors frequently bear a disproportionate amount of the blame.

Celebratory Masculinity and the Normalization of Male Sexuality

The study identified celebratory masculinity at a rate of 11.8% which showed that male students received praise and admiration. The comments that describe him as a "champion" and "legend" create an impression that male sexual activity serves as a standard for measuring success.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) study show how male sexual dominance became a social norm in contemporary society. The case involves a minor but the boy's depiction as successful instead of vulnerable shows how society builds masculinity through methods that hide problems with consent and exploitation.

Diffusion of Responsibility in Digital Spaces

The dominance of shared responsibility (48.2%) suggests a tendency among commenters to avoid assigning clear blame. The diffusion may occur because people find it difficult to deal with complex moral situations or because they want to maintain a position of neutrality.

The system of neutrality hides power relations while diminishing the responsibility of people who should be held accountable. System blame (21.2%) demonstrates that some users believe the problem stems from widespread social and institutional breakdowns.

Implications for Sociology and Gender Studies

The research findings show that digital platforms function as social sites which create and maintain social inequality. The study contributes to:

1. Masculinity studies → through its demonstration of how society normalizes male sexual behaviour
2. Gender studies → through its demonstration of how society imposes different moral standards on men and women

3. Digital sociology → through its demonstration of how internet discussions influence how society understands public issues.

Policy and Social Implications

The findings suggest the need for:

1. Stronger child protection awareness in digital discourse
2. Media literacy programs to reduce harmful normalization
3. Gender-sensitive policies to eliminate double standards between genders.

Ethical Implications of Digital Narratives Involving Minors

The results of the research create great ethical issues, especially in the way the online discussion is involved in the cases involving minors. The humour and joyful masculinity that can be seen in the reactions to the event indicate a disturbing normalization of the circumstances when the abuse of power is evident and the risks of injuries are likely. Ethically, the positioning of a minor as a willing and/or successful participant conceals important questions of consent, vulnerability, and protection. These stories are dangerous and expectant in sustaining negative social values that downgrade the severity of sexual affairs involving underage children and could lead to a culture of silence or dismissal.

In addition, the spread of responsibility evident in the information would complicate ethical responsibility, even further. Individual responsibility can also be weakened when the blame is spread or shifted to the larger systems and thus, try to deal with the misconduct at a personalized level. These results show that more responsible online interaction and moral awareness in the populace still require improved. The media, teachers, and policy makers should strive to bring about discourse that values the safety and welfare of minors, and criticize the discourse that deems this as normal or trivial.

Limitations

Although this study made its contributions, there are a number of limitations that should be noticed. First, the sample size of 85 comments is not large, so it might not be representative and generalizable to the wider Ghanaian online space. Although the dataset does offer useful information about online talk, it might not be representative of the variety of opinions one can find in a larger or more diverse group of people. Second, the research is based on the data of two web sources only, namely *SecretNewsGhana* and *GhanaPage News*. This can present selection bias, since the viewers of these sites may not be representative of all socio-economic, cultural and demographic views in Ghana. The opinions of various users on various platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook or even forums in the region) might not be represented in this dataset.

Third, despite the systematicity and consistency of the coding process, one dominant theme was attributed to every comment. Although this method can be helpful when it comes to quantitative analysis, the use of it can complicate the online discourse due to the fact that some comments might have several overlapping meanings and tones or purposes. This way some undertones in the data might not have been well reflected. Lastly, this paper is concerned with textual information with no other contextual data pertaining to commentators, including age, gender, or background. This restricts the possibility to examine the way in which the issue can be perceived in various ways among the different social groups.

Future Research

Future research should also consider more and more various datasets of multiple digital platforms to better generalize the results. Also, it is possible to introduce mixed data to gain a better understanding of the motives and meanings of comments posted online by using interviews or surveys. There could also be a better option of using a more flexible approach to coding that enables the use of several themes within a comment.

CONCLUSION

The present study shows how people respond online to delicate social matters because of their use of humour and their following of gender norms and their adherence to cultural standards. Digital platforms enable people to connect with the public but they create obstacles which maintain male dominance while they monitor female behaviour. The combination of humour with shared responsibility highlights a dangerous trend which diminishes serious concerns while celebratory masculinity demonstrates that patriarchal beliefs continue to exist. The two patterns need to receive research focus from academics and policy makers who will establish necessary regulations to address them.

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