

## ***‘Why aren’t you married? The same reason you are not dead, it’s not my time’*: Social Media Use of Hate Speech on Female Celebrities in Ghana**

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DOI: 10.56201/rjmcit.v8.no1.2022.pg109.131

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### **Abstract**

*This study is aimed at analysing the rhetoric of hate speech and the degree of pervasiveness in discriminating against the female celebrity’s identity on social media which is often centred on the question: ‘why aren’t you married or why haven’t you still given birth?’ The paper sought to examine the nature of social media posts of five female celebrities who had experienced the phenomenon of flaming through hate speech and explore the adoptive strategies of these female celebrities to ward off perpetrators of flames. Data was cyber-ethnographically gathered from the Twitter and Facebook pages of the female celebrities and thematically analysed using Willard’s Indicators of Cyberbullying and the tenets of Suler’s Online Disinhibition Effect. The findings revealed that the female celebrities experienced direct flames manifested in comments of aggression including dissing, hurtful jocular messages, invectives, snide comments, obsessive and malicious stalking, and profanity. A flamer of an attack attains a pseudo-celebrification status as other celebrity friends or fans of the female celebrity join in a particular hate speech episode as bystander reporters to either provide support to the victim or reinforce the attack. The data also revealed that the female celebrities mainly used instant blocking and the adoption of an aggressive persona as a strategy to rebut their abusers through clap backs, invectives, and evocation of death or curses as a way of warding off online abusers. The study thus contributes to the literature on gender stereotyping through flaming and recommends female celebrities employ the services of social media managers as gatekeepers for their accounts. Also, efforts at stringent laws of civility should be intensified in protecting the image of social media users in an era of social media pervasiveness.*

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**Keywords:** *Hate speech, celebrity, cyberbullying, singlehood, childlessness*

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## 1.0 Introduction

The advent of the internet and the rapid rise of social media use is the hallmark of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. McGowan et al. (2012) argue that the term social media comprises websites and applications where users contribute, retrieve, and explore content that is either primarily generated or received, through sharing. Consequently, Miller (2011) asserts that the digitisation of society has provided opportunities for people to interact with one another through varied media platforms including mobile phones, iPods, online chats, emails, websites, instant messengers (IMs), and social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter among others. Significantly, social media has become a mainstream media platform connecting about one-third of the world's population (Nelson-Field & Taylor, 2012).

The world is presently experiencing the second era of the Internet referred to as Web 2.0 (and probably the third era of 3.0 in the nearest future), which is distinguished by its unique ubiquitous nature in production and usage (Agboada & Ofori-Birikorang, 2018). The concept of Web 2.0 is explained by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) as the different ways by which people access social media to generate and share content as part of the characteristic of second-generation internet-based applications. The resultant effect of the internet or digital socialisation is the emergence of Social Network Sites (SNSs) which are rapidly becoming a primary mode of mediated forms of interactions in the rapidly evolving internet space. Pew Research (2019) suggests that about three-quarters of Facebook users and half of Instagram and Twitter users visit their accounts and engage in different forms of communication on daily basis, with Facebook being rated as the most patronised. It is estimated that about 1.86 billion active subscribers visit the Facebook space at different times regularly (Statista, 2019). This pervasive use of Facebook is not different from what happens in Ghana, where Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and LinkedIn are rated as the top five most patronised social networking sites, with Facebook being the most patronised (Alexa, 2019).

Human beings are gregarious and need to belong. This need is satiated by communication which, in recent times, is increasingly being driven by several technologically-mediated forms. Langmia and Hammond (2018) assert that the use of the Internet (i.e. for academic, professional, vocational and recreational purposes) has been heightened by the ubiquitous nature of the Internet and the affordances of social media in particular. Social media is globally accessed by different genders for different purposes and as averred by the female gender constitutes about 68% of active users on social media in Ghana (Lu et al., 2010; Quarshie and Ami-Narh, 2012). This assertion is reinforced by the Women's Rights Issues Online in Ghana (2017) which states that a considerable number of women currently access the internet for varied purposes including the search for prospective partners for intimate relationships. This declaration is consistent with the principles of 'Doing gender' as posited by West and Zimmerman (1987) that femininity and masculinity are in recent times actively organised and demonstrated in the digital space due to the overwhelming affordances of the internet. For instance, Hammond and

Langmia (2020) emphasise that the unrestrained interactive nature and ease of access to social media in the digital era have enabled different individuals, especially women, to access the digital space as a potentially liberating space to 'free themselves' and articulate their true nature from conventional traditional gendered norms of female subjugation. Available literature (Eduonoo, 2018; Langmia & Hammond, 2018; Meredith, 2020) also suggests that most females actively access varied social media platforms to create and foster new identities in a perceived hegemonic patriarchal world.

### **1.1 Celebrity and Celebification**

Celebrities account for a large subsection of social media users, as they interact directly with their fans through the different forms of mediated communication provided by social media (Osei-Mensah, 2018). These fans, in their quest to be more engaging, perhaps, sometimes, venture into the realms of using hate speech on the celebrities and thereby inflict harm or discomfort, particularly, about their marital status or condition of childlessness. The literature suggests that some individuals take advantage of the popularity of the celebrities to cyber-troll them online and thereby ride on the back of the celebrities' fame to create attention for themselves purposively for self-branding, self-presentation or self-promotion (van Dijk, 2013). In other words, the perpetrators of hate speech are intentional with their acts.

Observations on the social media space in Ghana in recent times have revealed that some unmarried female celebrities have endured the pervasive use of aggressive and hostile language (i.e. hate speech) from some fans on their Facebook and Twitter pages which were targeted at casting aspersions on their singlehood (especially if such celebrities have attained the 'conventional age' for marriage by the society) and/or childlessness. Marriage is considered a gender ideology upheld by societies in Africa. It is worthy of note to state that it is common knowledge in Africa that the female is perceived as 'incomplete' until her achievements are sealed or crowned with the payment of her dowry/bride price by the family of a prospective husband (Addai et al., 2015; Oyewumi, 2003).

The situation of the female celebrity in Ghana is worsened by the deep-seated patriarchal nature of the society, where it has become a conventional expectation that a female celebrity is endowed with all the needed ingredients (i.e., appealing appearance, financial stability and requisite exposure to a sea of prospective males) to be considered the best option for any prospective bachelor. The female celebrity is thus expected by society to be married after attaining the 'conventional marriage age' of eighteen years. The female celebification is therefore regarded as synonymous with wealth and marriage, and sometimes by extension, the ability to give birth. Ahorator (2016) and Oyewumi (2003) are of the view that childbearing is tied to marriage in Africa and it is a conventional expectation that the female should be put to birth after one year of marriage which is inclusive of the nine months of conception, gestation and delivery.

Observations on the social media space, particularly on Twitter and Facebook walls of some female celebrities in Ghana have revealed two categories of female celebrities who have become the target of the emerging phenomenon of targeted cyber trolling; (1) unmarried female celebrities with or without children; (2) married female celebrities without children. Each of these categories of female celebrities is noted to have endured different levels of pervasive cyber trolling for varied reasons. The trolling is, however, heightened if the female celebrity is touted as being outspoken on socio-political issues in Ghana or tagged as a 'pro' or 'anti' for any of the political parties in Ghana. Any female celebrity in any of such categories could become a target of hate speech attacks or societal ridicule, erroneously, from their fanbase who conversely, is to idolise or rally support for the celebrity. This study is thus, aimed at analysing the rhetoric of hate speech and its degree of pervasiveness in discriminating against the female celebrity's identity on Social Media often centred on the question: '*why aren't you married or why haven't you still given birth?*' The paper sought to examine the nature of Social Media posts of some selected female celebrities who have attained the conventional age of marriage in Ghana and are either single with or without a child or are married but childless but have experienced the phenomenon of cyber trolls. The paper further explores the adoptive strategies of female celebrities to ward off perpetrators of hate speech on their persona.

### **1.2 The rationale for this Study**

Zhang and Luo (2018) contend that either physical or relational, aggression in media content has been in existence since time immemorial and has evolved into cyber trolling; cyberstalking, and the use of hate speech with the advent of technology and the pervasive use of the social media. Zhang and Luo (2018) further assert that the pervasive use of hate speech is associated with ethnocentric behaviours including racism, homophobic, Islamophobic, xenophobic, and misogynistic intentions often enacted on a perceived marginalised group.

Additionally, Brown (2017) earlier a similar line of argument emphasises the legal implications of what is considered hate speech as regard acts that pertain directly to comments and emoticons, which may not necessarily contain 'hate' but articulate negative feelings or emotional outbursts of a particular individual on another is often embedded in words carefully selected to inflict pain, discomfort or marginalised a person. Studies (Osei-Mensah, 2018; Zhang & Luo, 2018; Zheng, 2019) have shown that the use of hate speech on a particular target could be personal or communal and could be borne out of the desire to spite or protest against a real or an imagined socio-cultural tolerance. Zhang and Luo (2018) affirming this assertion also allude that cyber trolling is persistent against public figures in all discourses but profound against female celebrities.

Although some efforts have been given to social media interactions such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, much attention has been on the accessibility and usability of Social Media and not on hate speech as a form of cyberbullying on female celebrities in a developing country such as Ghana. Although extant studies exist on studies such as the

affordances of Social Media and how to narrow the digital divide and knowledge gaps of users (Langmia & Hammond, 2018); conversational analysis, cyberpsychology and online interactions (Meredith, 2020); growth and usage of the internet in Ghana (Quarshie & Ami-Narh, 2012); self-branding, identity construction and social media use by chief executive officers in Ghana (Agboada & Ofori-Birikorang, 2018); and self-branding, ‘micro-celebrity’ and the rise of social media influencers (Khamis et al., 2017) among others, little attention has been given to the literature on hate speech enacted on female celebrities. Some other studies have focused on the usability of cyberspace and people living with disabilities including accessibility to the Internet and visually impairment (Abuaddos et al., 2016; Babu et al., 2010; Brinkley & Tabrizi, 2017; Okonji et al., 2015; Wu & Adamic, 2014; Voykinska et al., 2016). Some research efforts have focused on females and their intentional use of social media including online dating (Hammond & Langmia, 2020; McCluskey, 2017); ‘doing gender’ and commodification of courtship (Zheng, 2019); as well as gender and power in online communication (Herring, 2008).

However, despite all these research attempts, we argue that there is a paucity of studies on female celebrities and cyber trolling with a focus on hate speech bordering on their singlehood or childlessness as well as an assessment of their adoptive strategies to ward off perpetrators of the hate speech. This current study, therefore, attempts to fill the identified research gap in the literature by focussing on the use of hate speech on the Facebook or Twitter pages of some selected female celebrities in Ghana, with a focus on the frequently asked question of ‘*Why aren’t you married?*’ and ‘*Why have you still not given birth?*’ Specifically, the paper is guided by these objectives: to identify the nature of hate speech enacted on selected female celebrities, and to examine adoptive strategies employed by the selected female celebrities to ward off perpetrators of the pervasive hate speech attacks on their singlehood and/or childlessness.

## **2.0 Cyber Trolling through Hate Speech**

In this paper, we explore the term hate speech in cyberspace and operationalise these terms to include any form of communication purported to cast aspersions or denigrate the singlehood or childlessness of a female celebrity on their Instagram pages, Facebook walls or Twitter handles by their followers or fans. Brown (2017) argues that hate speech involves any form of communication including memes or emoticons, purposively employed to ridicule or denigrate an individual as regards their body type, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, language or race, to cause discomfort or emotional distress to a person. Thus, hate speech is a malicious, hostile and prejudice-driven communicative behaviour purported to inflict pain on the target of the attack. Cohen-Almagor (2013) is also of the view that hate speech is the insensitive use of any form of communication enacted to provoke pain, injure, intimidate, demean, and stereotype an individual or group. Another observation of hate speech lies in where it is being broadcast. Any form of communication, as explained by Zhang and Luo (2018), that sneers at or disparages a person or group based on race, colour, gender, ethnicity, sexual preference or political

affiliation is explored as hate speech. Since cyberspace is considered an extension of society, online hate speech in this paper includes all forms of societal deviance intended to disrupt the shared cultural standards, rules, or norms of social interactions in context as affirmed by Castano-Pulgarin et al (2021).

This paper analogues aspects of the 1992 constitution of Ghana and Article 21(a), which stipulates that “a person shall have the right to (a) freedom of speech and expression, which shall include freedom of the press and media.” In practice, the media’s (including social media) original premise is to establish and democratize sites that enhance free speech. Expressions of aggressive social media interaction have spotlighted the phenomenon of cyber trolling. The practice of cyber trolling entails the intentional use of insults or foul language on online platforms and social networking sites to elicit a response from its intended targets. To Lumsden and Morgan (2017), cyber trolling is gendered, and it is frequently used against women and minorities on social media platforms to limit or undermine participation in virtual spaces. The virtual space which affords users the freedom to frame their opinions on issues has invariably become a platform or echo chamber of hateful comments and posts that are riddled with prejudiced, impolite, vulgar, and cynical messages that are intended to induce pain or harass particular audiences. Moreover, the technological affordances of social media in terms of content creation and sharing allow users to also invite other users to share hate-embedded communication. As a result, by interrogating literature and analysing obtained data through cyberethnography, the study examined hate speech as a tool to understand the kind of comments and posts made by followers of female celebrities in Ghana that are targeted at their singlehood or childlessness.

### **2.1 Is Marriage a Discriminatory Cultural Practice in Ghana?**

The role of marriage cannot be underemphasised in discussions in this paper. Ahoritor (2016) asserts that “marriage is an important institution with soteriological implications because the journey of marriage is associated with ethical values and ritual practices that go a long way to affect a person’s moral conduct” (p. 71). In Ghanaian society, marriage is associated with moral responsibilities and obligations from consenting adults to preserve family systems by procreating upon the attainment of a certain age (Abantu for Development, 2004). The conventional practice is that the female who is perceived as docile in initiating intimate relationships is blamed if she remains unmarried after a certain age. Moreover, although marriage is between consenting adults, and childbearing is a concerted effort, the female is often victimised for her inability to give birth (Addai et al., 2015; Ahoritor, 2016; Oyewumi, 2003). Marriage is a gender ideology, and childbearing is considered a metric of gratification and fulfilment in marriage, especially in Africa where the two institutions are considered deep-seated expectations in the life of the woman (Addai et al., 2015). However, in the event of being unmarried or childless after attaining a certain age, the male is spared the ridicule of being single or childless whilst the female is made to endure the painful onslaught of societal mockery and humiliation. As already stated in this paper, the intensity of the blame is profound if the

‘childless’ and/or unmarried female is a celebrity.

### **3.0 Analytical Framework**

The analysis of data in this study is guided by the tenets of Suler’s (2004) online disinhibition effect and Willard’s (2004) typology of online bullying acts. The online disinhibition effect states that the online space allows audiences to be more intensely vocal than they would have naturally been if they were in person. Hence, social media has become a ‘free space’ devoid of any form of inhibition for users to say or post their views without fear, appraisal or reprimand (Suler, 2004). This assertion is seeded in the fact that social media is designed with the absence of a centralised control system to allow users to see themselves as both explorers and ‘breakers of timely news’ (Suler, 2004). Thus, once there is no inhibition, then there are no mechanisms or regulations to check online abuse including trolling, use of invectives, creation of fake identities or self-disclosure and any form of pervasive negative interaction. This argument of the theory is further grounded on the assumption that online space users are capable of dissociating their imaginations from the virtual space and thereby, creating imaginary characters of themselves (i.e. known as their avatars) where they see themselves as invisible beings clothed with the power to enact pain without recourse or societal reprimand of their behaviour (Suler, 2004). To this, “the imaginative zone of the social media space provides the ‘assumed identity’ for the avatar despite the reality when he/she is offline” (p. 323). Belal (2017) extends the discussion of Suler (2004) and argues that individuals per the notion of the possibility of their avatars, could create fake profiles from where they could hide and unleash a barrage of hate-embedded speeches to unsuspecting users who may never know their true identity for a possible rebuttal or cause them to face the law.

Willard (2004) on the typology of cyberbullying asserts that the act of cyberbullying is performed in two ways: direct and indirect. The direct form comprises the enactment of aggressive attacks often through flaming, dissing, denigration or hurtful jocular messages, invectives, snide comments, obsessive and malicious stalking, and use of vulgar words or profanity. On the other hand, indirect cyberbullying involves hacking or impersonation where a perpetrator could masquerade as another online user through acts of exclusion with a fake identity or profile. Willard (2004) describes indirect cyber trolling as subtle and elusive but pervasive, especially, in sharing fake news on a persona for purposes of defaming the person’s character.

The two theories have been selected and rationalised as resonating with the focus of the study which seeks to identify the nature of hate speech enacted on the persona of selected female celebrities as well as their typologies as well as the adoptive strategies to ward off the perpetrators of the cyber trolls.

### **3.1 Methodology**

This study is a multi-site cyber-ethnography and qualitative, with a focus on examining online user posts and viewer comments (i.e. Facebook and Twitter) of these female celebrities: *Lydia Forson, Nana Aba Anamuah, Yvonne Nelson, Yvonne Okoro, and Jessica Opere-Saforo* in Ghana who has been victims of hate speech on their singlehood and/or childlessness between the data collection period of June 2015 to April 2020 when the data collection process had reached a stage of saturation for this study. It is worthy to state that within this period only comments that trolled the singlehood or childlessness of the sampled female celebrities were considered as part of the data for the study. Additionally, it was observed that the selected sample frame had verified accounts on Facebook and Twitter and had followers of two million and above. This is in line with the assertions of Hossain (2019) that any user of social media with a following of more than a million can attract reactions from more than 70% of his/her followers on a single post or comment is described as an ‘influencer’ and a celebrity. In that regard, each of the selected females had attained the celebrification status and could be selected for this study. For instance, in one of the sample frames, Lydia Forson’s responses to the comment ‘Why aren’t you married?’ generated several comments and rebuttals from her fan base as well as other female celebrities. Additionally, reactions from other female celebrities who also rallied support for her in the form of rebuttals, invectives, and evocation of omen or death among others, lingered on for close to two years with recurring posts intermittently throughout data collection for this study.

Being a cyber-ethnography, two main activities were performed on daily basis to access any Facebook or Twitter posts targeted at the singlehood or childlessness of any female celebrity in Ghana. Thus, in deriving data for this study, we purposively conducted (1) passive participant observation of posts and reactions considered as hate speech (including emojis or emoticons); and (2) gathered screenshots of such posts and reactions for subsequent qualitative content analyses.

In the first part, to enable us keenly observe the sustained communicative interactions on the phenomenon of hate speech as a form of cyber trolling on female celebrities, we consciously bracketed ourselves as researchers and did not comment on any of the posts or comments on the phenomenon under study to ensure the ethical considerations of the study. Secondly, to enable thick rich descriptions and interpretations of the data as findings of the study, we meticulously gathered screenshots of the messages considered hate speeches for purposes of analysis and to ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the study. In all, twenty-six (26) Twitter and Facebook posts and comments were embedded with diverse forms of hate speeches, some of which were transcribed or screenshot as data within the period of this study.

### **3.2 Data Analysis Plan**

The gathered data which comprised naturally occurring communicative events in the form of social media posts that had been ethnographically gathered in the form of



screenshots were subjected to thematic analysis to organise the data as well as aid comprehension. Indeed, researchers such as Caulfield (2019) and Ofori-Birikorang (2018) propose that an effective thematic analysis plan should include data processes such as coding, categorisation, and noting of recurring patterns with the view to identify relationships between variables and the recurring themes. Therefore, this study meticulously followed the proposed thematic analysis data processes and arrived at the identified themes from the data. Firstly, we familiarised ourselves with the data through immersion (Braun & Clarke, 2018) on daily basis on the Facebook and Twitter posts of the selected female celebrities to identify any form of data on hate speech. Secondly, through iterative readings, we searched for patterns and meanings from which thematic categorisations were outlined from the data based on systematic coding of the semantic and latent meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2018; Hallet & Barber, 2013). Thirdly, through the lenses of Willard's (2004) typology of online bullying acts and Suler's (2004) online disinhibition effects, the gathered data with a focus on 'what had been saying' (i.e., manifest meanings) and also 'what was intended but has not been explicitly saying' (i.e., latent meanings) and subjected them to analysis, interpretations and thematic presentations of thick rich descriptions (Creswell, 2014) complemented with excerpts (i.e., screenshots) to foster sound arguments.

#### **4.0 Discussion of Findings**

Social media has become the easiest and simplest medium through which individuals communicate and form connections but has also become an arena for cyber trolls using hate speech (Brown, 2017; Chisholm, 2014). Research has shown that people have found love through social media interactions (Lumsden & Morgan, 2017; Langmia & Hammond, 2020) and others have also contracted genuine business deals through networking opportunities on social media (Cohen-Algamor, 2013; Zhang & Luo, 2018). Whilst considering the benefits of these online individual and group interactions, it is worth noting that others have not found interaction on social media a haven (Lumsden & Morgan 2017) and have suffered undue cyber trolling and fake identity disclosures from other users. Indeed, studies have shown that the affordances of social media have enabled some users to become victims of the attack (Suler, 2004) because perpetrators can hide behind anonymity and fake representations to disrupt, humiliate, or ridicule a person whilst deviating from shared cultural standards, regulations, or norms of the media space. The research question was targeted at examining the nature of hate speech enacted against female celebrities in Ghana. The findings from the data revealed two themes: the *flaming of the singlehood* of female celebrities and the *denigration of the childlessness of the female celebrity*. Each of these themes is discussed accordingly and complemented with screenshots of the social media posts to aid comprehension and enhance the trustworthiness of the data for the study.

#### **4.1 Flaming of singlehood**

Internet behaviour research has revealed that there are multiple forms of internet harassment including trolling, flaming, and cyber-bullying (Shultz et al, 2014). The

concept of flaming is described as the use of online hateful intense language or comments including aggressive argumentation, curse words, profanity, obscenity, invectives, and visual symbols of emotional intensity to disparage or hurt another (Schenk & Fremouw, 2012). Two or more people engaged in flaming is described as a flame war and studies have shown that individuals with a high level of inhibition tend to be engaged more often in flaming (Auerbach, 2009). Being single is typically seen as a deficit identity for women who have attained the conventional age and standards set by a particular community (Ahortor, 2016; Oyewumi, 2003). As a result, the female celebrities in this study were perceived by some users of the social media space to have outlived their period of singlehood and ridiculed their state of singlehood. Singlehood is considered a transitory stage of life that people go through while waiting to marry; this perspective often attributes negative features such as apathy, unproductivity, and selectiveness, to singles, particularly women (Lahad, 2013). The woman's state of singlehood at a specific age is believed to be attributed to perhaps, her being overly selective of her potential suitors. This belief is evident in data as some of the comments flaming the singlehood of the selected female celebrities were targeted at the belief that they have been overly selective in their quest for potential suitors and this affirms Lahad's (2013) assertion of selectiveness and apathy on the part of females in their quest for a potential partner.

An analysis of the gathered hate speeches revealed instances of flames or war of words by perpetrators within the online community aimed at either attacking the posts from the female celebrity or the responses from the audience of the post. Figure 1 is a tweet reaction from a perpetrator of flame on a female celebrity named Nana Aba Anamoah who is a well-known vociferous radio broadcaster in Ghana. She had tweeted to encourage her followers mindful of the policies of the government and their effects on them as citizens only to be trolled with hate speech from one of her fans. From the language of the poster in Figure 1, he/she is provoked by the message from the celebrity and squelches a response as in: "*@thenanaaba gal is rude paaa, I now understand why she is still not married*" The flamer on this post is intentional and direct with his/her choice of words and alludes to the singlehood of the victim as consequential of her rudeness and bad-manners although nothing in her post affirms a non-decorous use of language. This flamer does not indicate the relationship between the victim's vocal dexterity on socio-political issues and her marital status in the content of the message. Again, was the flamer alluding to some established conventions that unmarried females should cower to national issues and not comment? The flaming act of using course language and personal insults as flames in this sense was deliberate and meant to hurt the victim's feelings without inhibition as asserted by the tenets of Suler's (2004) online disinhibition effects. Some online observations revealed that within a very short period, the flamer had attained other followers who had joined in the hate speech episode as bystanders to provide support either negatively or positively and this had instantly provided some pseudo-celebrification status to the flamer as espoused by Balal (2017) as a motivation for enacting malicious comments on celebrities in the digital space.



**Figure 1:** Twitter post calling out the female celebrity as rude

The victim, Nana Aba Anamoah in a poignant rebuttal also stated, *'For the same reason you're not dead. It's not my time.* This response strategy drew several reactions from other social media users who rallied support for her and commended her for providing the most appropriate answer to the perpetrator of the hate speech. The attack on the female celebrity is an affirmation of Addai et al's (2015) avowal that marriage is a gendered ideology and a metric of gratification for especially women in Africa, hence, the audacity of a person to malign the female with such unwarranted utterances. The victim thus provides a correlation between her delays in marriage to the same reason why the perpetrator's life had been spared to be still alive. It could be seen that the victim in a subtle tone of anger had shaded the offender using the delay in marriage as similar to that of death. Anger is described as a powerful emotion characterised by feelings of hostility, agitation, frustration and antagonism towards an object (Ekman & Cordaro, 2011) and the body's way of fighting negative stimuli. Death, although unpleasant in all cases is often described as a transition from one world to the other and yet abhorred. Subsequent comments from well-wishers heightened the evocation of death especially, where emoticons of pain and torture were used purposively to induce pain and fear in the perpetrator. In one instance, a fan posted an emojis of a 'cheerful' face with the inscription *'Don't be afraid na she didn't mean what she said.'* Such comments and emoticons further heightened the ridicule from other users who claimed that the perpetrator was silent because he/she was afraid of the evocation of death in his/her life. Other users rebutted the perpetrator with comments like *'Did you marry? 'Loudmouth, are you married? 'HMMMMM'; 'Marry first or follow the steps of Christ Jesus so that we will leave you alone for spewing rubbish.'* At this point, it could be seen from the bystander intervention comments that some of them were appalled at the offender and had joined in to provide variant bystander intervention strategies and to also attain some level of goodwill from the celebrity. This act of bystander communalism is affirmed by Wright and Li' (2011) that comments of solidarity from fans of a celebrity on a particular malicious post are a collaborative way of showing camaraderie and in turn, attaining some level of pseudo-celebrification from a 'ride at the back of the celebrity. Brown (2017) extends this argument and states that providing bystander support for a celebrity is a motivation for the bystanders to also increase their visibility and relevance on social media.

One of the commenters associated singlehood with chastity on the part of the female and the fact that the female celebrity was *'following the steps of Christ'* suggestive of marriage attaining some level of soteriological implications and becoming a religious obligation to be fulfilled. This bystander intervention strategy (Balinska et al., 2013) like all the others generated a barrage of invectives from other fans of the female celebrity on the offender. This positive bystander in this instance does not perpetuate the flame by sharing to a wider audience but provides an intervention strategy of supportive behaviour and not becoming confrontational.

Another female celebrity actress also flamed on her singlehood is Lydia Forson. From the data, she had posted to conduct a question and answer (Q&A) session as shown in Figure 2; *'I'm trying to have a #COVID19 free day that I talk about anything but that. I've already failed twice. Do you guys want to do a Q&A?'* It is obvious from her post that the Q & A was not targeted at her private life. However, since she had erroneously opened the floodgates for questions, a perpetrator of hate speech saw this post as an opportunity to ridicule her singlehood as well as childlessness as shown in Figure 2 by replying; @lydiaforson; *"Why are you still not married whiles all your mates are married?"*, *"Are you married?"*, *"Do you have kids, if not why?"* The questions were as though single females could be stigmatised as people without the right to own their lives. The post was made in April 2020 when COVID19 was at its peak and Ghana was in a state of lockdown. There was heightened anxiety and studies (Dogbevi, 2020; Lo, 2020) have shown that several people had taken social media to seek information and to pass time (Lo, 2020).



**Figure 2:** Twitter posts by Lydia Forson

The offender who probably was also whiling away his/her time on the media space had taken advantage of the purported Q&A session to enact hate speech on the poster to cause pain and ridicule. Owing to these unwarranted flames on the victim, the entire activity of

Q&A was marred with invectives and snide comments on the female celebrity from other users of the social media handle. This behaviour is in line with Sharp and Ganong's (2011) postulations that the enactment of hate speech is intense and pervasive among females, especially, if they are celebrities. In this instance, the flaming of the female celebrity's singlehood is further deepened with questions about her childlessness; a cyber-trolling which is gradually gaining roots especially in Africa and in the entertainment industry because of the African attitude towards gendered issues (Osei-Mensah, 2018) often associated with marriage and childbearing.

In another instance from the data, another female celebrity called Yvonne Nelson tweeted, as shown in Figure 3. The tweet could be described as an opinion piece on the politics in Africa. However, a follower of her (i.e., @head\_ofleaders) replied and insinuated that; *"In Africa people are interested in what is not for them, e.g., Dating married men and taking money before they vote."* The first part of the comment was intentional to draw attention to the post when the example *"Dating married men and taking money before they vote"* is given. We also noticed how a bystander affirms this assertion in the earlier post by saying *"E be things."* (colloquial to explain how some situations cannot be comprehended).



**Figure 3:** Twitter post by Yvonne Nelson

It is obvious that the commenters were simply roping in the idea that the female celebrity was single and dating married men to exploit them or 'reap where she had not sowed'. Thus, the flame is suggestive of the fact that the female celebrity is unproductive to fend for herself but depends on rich 'married men' for purposes of exploitation and amassing which is to 'kill them.' This flame is in line with Willard's (2004) typology of inflicting pain through the use of a language of hostility on a social media user without recourse to

the feelings of the recipient. The flamer in this case has taken on the character of an ‘avatar’ as suggested by Belal (2017) by being intensely vocal whilst behind the mediated platform of a social media platform. This finding is also a confirmation of Suler’s (2004) argument that the online space is an arena devoid of inhibition for users to say what they want to say without fear of inhibition, admonishment, or reprimand and has become an arena for denigration, especially for marginalised groups.

#### 4.1.1 Denigration of Childlessness

The undesired phenomenon of denigrating the childlessness of the female is pervasive in Africa (Oyewumi, 2003). The phenomenon is so pervasive that the unnatural phase of eligibility for marriage and becoming a ‘mother’ is often called into question even when an issue under discussion has nothing to do with either marriage or parenthood as shown below in Figure 5 from the data.

In Figure 4, Jessica Opare-Saforo a female broadcast journalist posted a picture of herself in the company of two other bikers with the message; “*The little things that make me happy!*”! The message had also come with three emojis of love. This post had attracted 542 comments including a flame; “*There is nothing like little things, just marry*”. Some research on the motivations of flamer-bystanders had revealed personality traits including empathy, extraversion, and self-efficacy as potentials to provide support or confront victims of flames as a priming effect (Wright & Li, 2011).



**Figure 4:** Facebook post by Jessica Opare-Saforo

It is difficult to determine the motivation for this act from the flamer, the behaviour could be described as congruent to the explications of the Co-construction theory (Wright & Li, 2011), which states that negative prosocial behaviours offline are a true reflection and the motivation for online behaviours, without recourse to offend a target audience. The foregoing affirms the reality of echo chambers which are common practices on social

media where users encounter contents that have nothing to do with their post but are ready to perpetuate hostility and reinforce aggression by providing aggressive bystander interventions (Bruns, 2018).

Again, in Figure 5, an admirer (i.e., @iamghlinks) shared a picture of two female celebrities (i.e. Yvonne Okoro and Yvonne Nelson) with the inscription ‘*what can you say abt the Yvonne’s love*’ (i.e. depicting ‘love’ with emojis of love’).



**Figure 5:** Twitter comment by an audience member to female celebrities

The person who posted the picture intended to evoke complementary reactions from the fans of the two celebrities. Unfortunately, an irate commenter responded to the post with “*Well one is not married and the other one is chasing another man’s husband and busy attacking people doing the same...@berlamundi I dey lie?*” (see Figure 5). The flamer goes ahead to invite another female celebrity by the name Berla Mundi into the picture with *berlamundi I dey lie?* for the invitee to confirm or deny his/her sickening assertions. The unsavoury comment appears uncalled for and this is evident in the reactions from the other users of the internet that provided supportive interventions by sharing the picture of the two celebrities and making them viral; although the flamer had purported to ‘objectify and commodify the two female celebrities’ (Hammond & Langmia, 2020, p.32). The infuriated flamer, perhaps obsessed to denigrate, fails to recognise the grammatical lapses in the post and says “*another man’s husband*” instead of “*another woman’s husband.*” Perhaps, the eagerness to disparage the two celebrities is ‘hallowed’ in the fact that the flamer is simply a sadist whose gratification is in inflicting pain on others.

In Figure 6, Yvonne Okoro celebrates her birthday with a tweet “*I identify as 18 but my Mama and birth certificate says I am 35 years old TODAY...happy birthday to me*”. The post was to celebrate her beauty and youthfulness despite what her mother or birth certificate insinuates. An infuriated flamer then comments “*And you are not married*”. The statement has a subtle interrogative intention demanding why the celebrity is 35

years and yet unmarried despite having attained the conventional age of marriage in Ghana as argued by Addai et al. (2015).



**Figure 6:** Twitter post by Yvonne Okoro



**Figure 7:** Twitter post by Lydia Forson

Figure 7 is data from Lydia Forson's page. A fan had earlier inquired if the female celebrity had time to answer one nagging question. Unsure of the intentions of this fan and particularly to prevent incurring the wrath of social media users for being snobbish to a fan, she upheld her revered celebrity status and encouraged the fan to go ahead with his/her question as shown in Figure 8. The aftershock is the question; "Are you married, do you have kids and if not, why? Once again, this female celebrity is being flamed for her singlehood and childlessness and had been called to explain herself to the world. The female celebrity perhaps, exasperated by the question, immediately, 'un-follows' or 'de-friends' the flamer; an indication to avoid being confrontational.

In Figure 8, the same female celebrity in her quest to understand the motivations behind the pervasive attacks on the female's marital status as a 'weapon' to denigrate and abuse queried:





**Figure 8:** Twitter post by Lydia Forson

Surprisingly, this post did not attract further flames or any form of bystander intervention strategies since it was evident from the posturing of the poster that she was ready to ‘unleash venom’ on any flamer on her post. She had gotten to her limit of endurance on the pervasive attacks on her singlehood and childlessness. Her assertiveness had silenced all perceived perpetrators of hate speech. This revelation in data is, however, contradictory to the assertions of Ahonsi et al. (2019) that African female is often cowered into submissiveness in respect of their traditional roles and needs to be empowered to re-write their narratives. This assertion is confirmed by Hammond and Langmia (2020) who contend that the digital era has produced a new wave of radical intelligent, open-minded, and assertive females contesting the perception of the female as ‘the docile persona’ in the digital space. Such proactive reversal of role from the victim which may be interpreted as insolence could perhaps support the need for a deserving change in every patriarchal society (Ahonsi et al., 2019).

Research question two was focused on gathering data on the adoptive strategies of the selected female celebrities to ward off perpetrators of any language of hostility toward their persona. Owing to the degree of abuse which was mainly related to delving into the private lives of the celebrities, they resorted to adoptive strategies to ward off the flammers and to also consolidate a defensive mechanism of reciprocity. The themes generated from the data are an *exhibition of aggressive persona* (in varied forms) and *instant blocking*.

#### **4.2 Exhibition of aggressive persona**

The data revealed that the victims of the hate speech sometimes exhibited tendencies of an aggressive persona in variant forms including clap-back attacks on their offenders. The clap back through verbal and visual exchanges bothered on two primary cultural requirements in Ghana: marriage and death. The former is a celebration of love and the latter is a dreaded event of mourning and departure from the earth. One of the

participants, Lydia Forson used the latter to enact vengeance and denoted that “if getting married was an important natural event then death should be the natural reward for the commenter.” The victim is thus seen as clapping back in equal measure of emotional attack of evocation of death and raining of curse on the flamer as shown in one of her posts which has been transcribed below:

*Can I marry you? I'm in dire need of validation and since the ratio of men to women is in your words '7:1', I don't want to be left behind. If you can't marry me, give me one of the married men in your congregation. I will hold on to him like there's no tomorrow. Chai, like you, I also speak the truth and I don't care. So, we will get on perfectly. And I promise, with all my honour that if you beat me, cheat on me, abuse my children and don't even provide financially for me, I will still stay! Unlike other women, I want to continue to have value so I will stay married even if it sends me to the grave. I make wild.”*

This long satirical speech from the female celebrity downplays all other things essential for marriage as the male gender is presented as ‘flawless’ and ‘validated.’ Unlike her previous comments on ‘*Why aren't you married?*’ her response was suggestive that domestic abuse and marital violence were self-inflicted. Indeed, it is recorded that in an interview between Nana Aba Anamoah and KSM on the ‘TGIF Show’ (i.e., a programme aired on Metro TV), the female celebrity intimated that; ‘*When people ask me when I am getting married, I also ask them when why they are not dead yet because I am unmarried for the same reason why they are still alive; It's not my time.*’ The contribution from this victim of hate speech is an explication of the intense relationship between marriage and death which are two rites of passage that the individual has no control over but should embrace anytime any of them beckons. Death denotes the end of life, hence if a question is asked of when a person is going to die, for which the answer is unknown, it presents the ultimate clap back against recurring comments from social media users on the marital status of the female celebrities. The female celebrity has thus adopted an aggressive witty persona to exact invectives of sarcasm in equal measure to ward off her infuriating followers from their pages. In another instance, Jessica Opare-Saforo claps back on a flame on ‘the little things that make her happy’ post (see Figure 9) inquiring from a flamer (i.e., Abena Serwah) ‘how his/her ‘marriage was faring’. She quizzed the flamer on whether she/he was ‘happy if she had achieved anything’ after being married or sees him/herself as being better than a normal single girl like her. It could be deduced that the female celebrity is associating marriage with success by tagging the perceived ‘married flamer’ as an ‘achiever’ although all her pictures just show off her behind”. The poster then seals off her message with a sarcastic local parlance ‘*Anokwa!*’ (which means how erroneous) to show her disgust.



**Figure 9:** Facebook response post by Jessica Opere-Saforo

#### 4.2.1 Instant blocking

One other adoptive strategy employed by female celebrities is the instant blocking of their flammers. The affordances of social media provide a feature for blocking access to an unpleasant follower or friend. Twitter has an added feature of ‘flagging’ as well as requesting a ‘bystander report’. The concept of ‘by standing’ denotes that audiences on the periphery of a user who is witness to abuse are likely to partake in an ongoing engagement as either arbiter to provide supportive intervention (Wright & Li, 2011) to the abused, or act as negative intervention providers to reinforce the unsavoury behaviour. In any of such situations, the victim of the harassment could reach out to a bystander for support (Twitter, 2021). For instance, from the data, a positive bystander provided support for Yvonne Nelson when she was questioned on why she ‘had a child although she was unmarried’ and even called her a ‘prostitute’. This bystander rebutted; “*Seriously? So, the fact that a woman isn’t married but has a child makes her a prostitute?*” With this question, other bystanders provided positive interventions by instantly blocking or unfriending the flamer and creating a community of well-wishers for the victim affirming Zhang’s (2019) avowal that the affordances of technology should empower users to own their page and be selective of their target audiences. It was evident from the data that all the selected female celebrities instantly blocked or defriended users who verbally denigrated their persona, especially, when such users questioned their singlehood or childlessness.

#### 5.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

The study contributes to the literature on gender stereotyping through hate speech in cyberspace and asserts that most of the hate speeches enacted against the selected female celebrities are embedded with direct trolls of aggression such as dissing jocular messages of prejudice, and snide comments, malicious stalking, invectives, and profanity. Although some speeches appeared seemingly polite and unintended to inflict pain, it was observed

that the flammers were intentional and purpose-driven in select hurtful-laden words carefully crafted to emotionally cause pain. Despite the affordances of social media to adopt a strategy of blocking or unfriending a flamer, the purported unsavoury flames may have gone viral denigrating the persona of the victim before the flamer is rebutted, blocked, or unfriended and the comments deleted. The study thus, recommends female celebrities employ the services of social media managers as gatekeepers to protect content and access to their social media accounts. Also, efforts at stringent laws of civility and sanity on social media such as the introduction of punitive measures including flagging, fines, and identification and deletion of fake profiles, should be intensified in this era of social media pervasiveness.

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