

“These broke guys have lot of energy”: Binaries and Male Anxiety in Ebony’s “Sponsor”

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Abstract: *This paper seeks to explore two extreme constructions of masculinity in contemporary Ghanaian society by using the Ghanaian singer Ebony’s hiplife song “Sponsor” as literary basis. The authors argue that two major male types in “Sponsor” – a rich, old, and sexually impotent man on the one hand; and a poor, young, and sexually active man on the other hand – are diametrically opposed and exhibit an obvious lack, which is filled by their corresponding other. This lack amplifies masculine anxiety, as expressed in the song. Again, the lack that is attached to both male characters reflects two contemporary phenomena in Ghana: the explosion of bitters on the mainstream Ghanaian alcoholic market; and the rise of internet fraud. This paper is therefore interested in using the binary construction of masculinity to understand the ways in which the song approaches, engages with, and finally extends a socio-cultural reading of gendered roles and expectations for Ghanaian men.*

Keywords: Ghana, hiplife, gender, binaries, masculinity, popular culture, music

Introduction

In April 2018, the American television network, CNN, aired the preview to an episode of *Sex and Love Around the World*, a series put together by their international correspondent Christiane Amanpour, who would “talk with women about the rules of engagement in relationships and intimacy” in six cities (Amanpour 2018b, n.p.). In the 1 minute 27 second clip, the focus was on Accra, and Ghanaian actress and socialite Moesha Boduong spoke about why she and other attractive women (popularly known as “slay queens”) slept with rich men (called “sugar daddies” or “sponsors”) for money and upkeep (CNN 2018). Even before the full episode aired a few weeks later, there was a general

backlash in Ghana to the content of the clip. On social media and in traditional media, Ghanaians from all walks of life registered their displeasure at the apparent glorification of women exchanging their bodies for monetary reasons that ranged from economic survival to a life of luxury. The minister for Gender, Children and Social Protection led the way by releasing a statement denouncing Boduong's comments. Civil society organizations, local journalists, and other such bodies followed suit in condemning the young lady and people who supported her rhetoric (Ghanaweb 2018, n.p.; Amanpour 2018a; CNN 2018). The intensity of the negative responses compelled Amanpour to pen an editorial on CNN.com defending Boduong, while critiquing the gender minister and the Ghanaian public for their antagonistic comments on the issue (Amanpour 2018b). Boduong herself issued a video apology via her Instagram page, in an attempt to quell the controversy. She subsequently deleted the video as the backlash continued.

As the Boduong controversy suggests, Ghana's social landscape usually focuses attention on the profile and role of women in illicit relationships, disregarding the role of the men. Literary works, especially those written by women, tend to produce a more nuanced perspective on the slay queen/sponsor relationship, even if the focus is still on the women. Whether the novel is a classic, such as Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* or Bisi Adjapon's more recent *Of Women and Frogs*, there is focus on the context that informs the decisions and predicament of the women in such relationships, with little or no attention paid in the novels to what the men do to make such relationships function. Popular culture such as hiplife music also captures these relationships in diverse ways, reflecting the importance and ubiquity of such themes despite their illicit nature. Even though most of the attention remains on the profile of the women, the men these women have these romantic relationships with are also an important component of the equation. Beyond the very fact of being a part of these relationships, men again play roles that are usually validated by society in ways that associate them with agency to the detriment of the woman. Men are expected to provide for women; by extension, they are given the leeway to exert control over women. The situation is so unbalanced that sustained empowerment, especially of young women, will require meaningful change in the behavior of men (Ankomah 1999, 305), as men tend to be seen in a more sympathetic light in illicit relationships.

This article examines a complex example of illicit relationships in "Sponsor," a hiplife song that was released by the Ghanaian singer Ebony in 2017. While the protagonist is female, of initial interest to this article is the treatment of male anxiety through the characterization of the major male figures in the song. Through the music video and accompanying lyrics, male anxiety is imagined through a series of binaries that places two stereotyped but diametrically opposed men in conversation with each other. These characters are the two love interests of the protagonist: while one is old, rich, and sexually weak, the other is young, poor, and sexually energetic. We argue that Ebony

employs the deficiencies of these two men to approach, engage with, critique, and eventually extend notions of male anxiety in order to eventually complicate imaginations of what it means to be male in contemporary Ghana. And because these men are in heterosexual romantic relationships, the presence of the woman is ultimately important in understanding the notions of anxiety that structure the larger patriarchal society. We connect these anxieties to two socio-cultural phenomena that speak directly to sexual and economic lack respectively: the increase in the sale and consumption of bitters (traditional alcoholic mixtures that are prepared using herbal concoctions) and the engagement in *Sakawa* (internet fraud). “Sponsor” allows us to make connections between male anxiety in terms of these two socio-cultural phenomena and to show that transgressive behavior is a method of responding to anxiety.

Bitters, *Sakawa*, and Male Anxiety

Bitters and *Sakawa* are two social phenomena that link to two stereotypical expectations linked to men. While the former is necessitated by the expectation that men should sexually satisfy their partners, the latter speaks to the notion that men are to provide for their partners materially and financially. Bitters and *Sakawa* are thus positioned as helping men achieve these two aims, especially when such men are deficient in those departments. There has been an explosion of bitters onto the mainstream Ghanaian market in recent times. Daniel Yaw Fiaveh counts 18 “and many more” (Fiaveh 2020, 174), while the Ghanaian website Nsemwoha lists 45 (Dada, 2021). The Product Certification Department of the Ghana Standards Authority on the other hand indicates as many as 57 registered bitters that are sold to the public.¹ Bitters advertisements dominate various media outlets such as billboards, posters, and radio jingles, trumpeting the wonders that these herbal mixtures can do for male sexual health. Targeted at mainly older men, the prevalence of commercials advertising bitters on primetime television was so rampant that the Food and Drugs authority had to issue a ban on such adverts before 8 pm in 2019 (Ghanaweb 2019, n.p.). Even though the use of bitters is frowned upon by moral society— apart from the restriction of adverts, the Nsemwoha article leads with the opinion that bitters have “unfortunately” become commonplace – it is well patronized.

This dramatic increase is mirrored by the prevalence of a more clandestine undertaking known as *Sakawa*, which in Ghanaian parlance refers to fraudulent online activities that are usually perpetrated by young men in urban areas.²As William Baah-Boateng opines, in a country where the youth form a large portion of the population, high unemployment rates mean that young people are disproportionate victims in Ghana (Baah-Boateng, 2018). Young unemployed men tend to use their disadvantaged socio-economic background as reason to engage in *Sakawa*, which in turn proliferates as a

means to access wealth. Mainstream media typically reports on *bitters* and *Sakawa* as examples of differing levels of social degradation in Ghana – this is hardly ever done in tandem with each other. On another level however, this paper identifies an interconnection that is linked to male anxiety – *bitters* on the one hand catering for sexual weakness, and *Sakawa* on the other hand dealing with poverty. This linkage is exemplified through popular culture in “Sponsor.”

The song is narrated from the perspective of a lady who sings about two men that she is romantically involved with. One is an older gentleman who is her “sponsor” – which is Ghanaian jargon for a sugar daddy: he provides for her material needs and lavishes her with money. The other character is a younger man who satisfies her sexually. From the song, it is clear that these two men are contrasts of each other (as each represents one side of each binary), with exaggerated emphasis on their strengths and weaknesses as the dividing line for the respective binaries: young/old, sexually virile/sexually impotent, and poor/rich. In other words, what the older man fails to accomplish in terms of sex is compensated for by his younger counterpart, whose failure to provide for material needs is in turn counterbalanced by this older man. Ebony skillfully takes advantage of their positive attributes as well as their shortcomings to her own ends.³

Female creative artists using incomplete men as their subjects is not a new phenomenon. Bode (2006, 443) argues that Australian female writers writing between 1980 and 2005 presented men as damaged, a depiction that poses unique challenges to feminist audiences. Robinson (2000) makes a similar argument, contending that the figure of the wounded white man “functions as a strategy through which white men negotiate the widespread critique of their power and privilege” (6). Furthermore, there is scholarship on the problems that Toni Morrison’s male characters deal with. For instance, Mercer (2016) and Gallego (2017) in respective articles explain how male characters in Morrison’s novels refute gender roles, expectations, and stereotypes. Even closer to home, Ennin (2012) similarly opines that the celebrated Aidoo portrays men who are as trapped by their gender relations and expectations as the women are, leading to questions of societal structure. While all of these arguments are valid, we posit that the portrayal of male characters in “Sponsor” reveals gendered anxieties that ultimately amplify female agency, albeit in a complicated manner.

Ebony thus joins a long tradition of male depictions on the one hand, but also adds to the relative lack of female performers in Ghana through the lens of popular culture. Collins (2003) discusses the history of Ghanaian women’s roles in popular music using highlife as an example in West Africa. In particular, he addresses the problems that Ghanaian female artists dealt with as they attempted to enter the highlife music industry, which is one of the commercial entertainment industries that previously excluded or restricted women’s participation due to conservatively gendered ideals. This argument is buttressed

by Okuda (2019), who makes a provocative contention that local Ghanaian journalists tended to be more sympathetic to Afro-Caribbean and African American female performers who performed in Ghana than they were of Ghanaian female performers, who were deemed to be traversing gender roles and expectations. These contrasting attitudes were rampant at a time when Ghana experienced most of the political turbulence in the form of military juntas. Decades later, under the relatively stable fourth republic, women still continue to fight against negative reactions to their stagecraft.

This line of argument is taken up by Jabbaar-Gyambrah (2008), who positions the now defunct Ghanaian all-female group Triple M as key to engaging with the obstacles that plagued female participation in music performance at the turn of the millennium. Other female stars such as Mzbel and Abrewa Nana were prominent female performers during this period, contributing to making it less difficult for women to enter the space. A decade on, Ebony added extra layers to this small but formidable demographic of female performers not only via her music and performances, but also through the series of controversies that characterized her short but impressive career.⁴ Even though a lot of these controversial incidents took place off the stage, her song “Sponsor” equally garnered attention due to the message therein.

“Sponsor” and Binaries

The song is sung in a mixture of Twi, Pidgin English, English, and Patois. The code-switching allows the singer to comfortably transition from thematic issues to stylistic concerns, highlighting male shortcomings to underline female agency through the portrayal of a more complete female character. As she sings that she has gotten herself a sponsor who buys anything she asks for, the music video presents a panoramic view of an urban place with slum-like conditions, where Ebony is seen carrying a bucket on her way to bath. Capturing life in a slum in Accra highlights socio-economic challenges, which include a disproportionate attribution of resources such as water and electricity. Aidoo and Briggs (2018) show how authorities manipulated the load-shedding schedule of 2014-15 to ensure blackouts affected lower class suburbs more than affluent residential areas. The inhabitants of such spaces are therefore vulnerable to urban pressures, with women forming one of the most susceptible demographics. Rather than wallow in the lack of opportunity, Ebony is interested in appropriating agency to her benefit. This involves exploiting male weakness.

Her young lover accosts her ostensibly for romantic reasons, but she brushes him off to his chagrin. The young man is presented as also living in the area, meaning he is similarly poor. This background explains why he is unsuccessful in capturing her attention as he meets her. Right before this meeting, she has informed her audience that even though the sponsor that she has is older, she has got to survive in this life. In implicitly acknowledging his sexual weakness and the tendency of society to frown on their age disparity, she

braces herself for potential obstacles. When the camera pans to the meeting between the young man and Ebony, we find out that he is the other one, as Ebony sings, “another one who is younger/ when I ask for something edey cry, cry” (Ebony 2017, lines 6-7). Crying in response to a material request not only underlines the economic helplessness of the young man by making him appear to be like a child; it also sets the stage for the introduction of the older man through the heightened contrast via age.

From the beginning of the song, the two men are immediately set up as opposites to each other in terms of age and economic status. Their interest in the same young lady stems from her physical attractiveness, which becomes the target of their male desire. The song transitions from English through Pidgin and Twi to Patois and she reiterates the fact that this older man, who she refers to as “papa” (which is Twi for father or father-figure) fulfills her material desires but leaves her lonely at night. This is most likely because, as is found typically in the society in which a younger woman is “kept” by an older man, the man in most cases returns to his wife and family at night. On the nights that he does spend with her, though, Ebony reveals in the chorus that, when she initiates sexual activity, he asks that she be gentle and complains of pains in his waist and sex organ. This euphemistic expression is further clarified in English and then in Twi. The man begs her:

Cool it for me slow down
 Me sisi ye mi ya
 Eeeya Cool it for me slow down
 Me koti eye mi ya (Ebony 2017, lines 11-14).

There is a clever pun in this chorus, as “mennkote a eye me ya” on the one hand reads as “only for me to hear [from him] that it hurts.” On a more salacious level, it means “my penis hurts.” The singer capitalizes on the tonal qualities of Twi for the double entendre. The play on words underlines the anxiety connected with male sexual performance and portrays the man as unable to complement his economic prowess with sexual satisfaction. At one point where this part of the song plays in the music video, the old man is driving her in a plush land cruiser, while she is in boy shorts, thus amplifying the titillating nature of the relationship.

She transitions to saying that “these broke guys have lot of energy.” The use of the word “guys” is important because in Ghanaian parlance, “guy” has an informal inflection and usually connotes a younger male. It also continues the contrast with the older man, who was called “papa.” Claiming that broke guys have energy again speaks to the notion that, due to their unemployment, young men have the time and energy to focus on sex. The energetic young man thus informs the thrust of the next verse:

Inna me downtown hot just like oven
 But when the morning comes mi no have nothing
 A boyfriend who cyan buy you food when you are hungry

Msheew is that one too a boyfriend?
So I change game move fast switch up the lanes
I got myself a sponsor (Ebony 2017, lines 21-26).⁵

She acknowledges his sexual prowess by saying that he keeps her “downtown” hot just like an oven. The imagery of the oven recalls the tendency in Ghanaian (and West African) popular music where food is consistently a metaphor for sex and love. Again, in Pidgin, the word “chop” is used both to mean eat and have sex. And despite his sexual prowess, she highlights his failure to provide for her material needs. Accordingly, the rhetorical question about being unable to buy food when she is hungry connects with the source of the male anxiety for the young man. His inability to provide materially disqualifies him from being a legitimate romantic partner to the lady. He is thus only worthy of sex, and nothing else. The literal provision of food is again connected in a complex manner with the oven image and could question whether Ebony really knows what she is looking for in a male partner. Regardless of whether she is confused or not, she is comfortable with dumping him for the rich older man, as is seen in the music video when she brushes off his advances.

Additionally, she states, “So I change game move fast switch up the lanes/ I got myself a sponsor” (Ebony 2017, lines 25-26). Changing the game, moving fast, and switching lanes indicates her preference for a flashy lifestyle, which, despite her inability to afford, is available to her. Linking metaphors of transport with illicit relationships has been shown in research to isolate and highlight gendered roles in West African literature that indicate ways in which women deal with lack of agency (Opoku-Agyemang 2013). In this case, Ebony is confident about being in control of the situation by not positioning herself as a puppet of the patriarchy. Her ability to switch lanes is stylistically reinforced by her code-switching choices at this part of the song. It is important to note that she uses Twi and English when referring to the old man but employs Patois and Pidgin when the young man is the subject. These choices appear deliberate, as Twi and English are accepted more as standard and hence conservative linguistic choices, versus Patois and Pidgin, which are not accepted in formal contexts. These choices entrench the binaries that are represented by the two male figures.

The video proceeds to show images of her sponsor taking her to a spa and then shopping for shoes, hearkening to arguments in feminist discourse that examine the implications of men using economic power to control and entice women. The older lover is, in a sense, in charge of how she looks and what she wears. His control over her through the male gaze is supported by the lady herself, who appropriates the gaze. She does not want to abandon “all these Gucci Prada” (Ebony 2017, line 40) as she asks rhetorically “na which young girl no dey fear hunger?” Similar to the character Mercy in Ama Ata Aidoo’s short story “Two Sisters” (Ebony 2017, line 41), she views the man as a convenient way of surviving and even thriving. In other words, she does not cast herself as a victim, but as a beneficiary of the economic power of the old

man. The choice of spa and shopping for shoes, as well as the mention of designers such as Gucci and Prada again highlight the notions of affluence that inform such songs, and by extension, the popular imagination. A lot more can be said about the implications of monetary flows on a global scale, as the impression created is that a country like Ghana is heavily reliant on imports from Western countries.

The man's riches are highlighted repeatedly, as he buys her a house and then gives her a stack of 50 Ghana Cedi bills in his big car. They proceed to engage in physical intimacy in the car. Unlike Mercy and the politician Mensah-Arthur in Aidoo's short story however, they are unable to consummate their relationship in the impressive vehicle. The man appears to have sexual discomfort and proceeds to drop Ebony back at her house. The car leaves as the song ends, and she calls the young man as a substitute. Talking over his annoyance at being discarded earlier, she effortlessly convinces him to come over for sex. It is clear that at least from her perspective, she has two men who can fill each other's gaps.

We make the claim that the song addresses a dichotomy that stems from male anxiety that exists in contemporary Ghanaian society. The anxieties of the older rich men who suffer sexual problems on the one hand, and that of the younger poor men who cannot provide for the material needs of their women but are able to give them sexual satisfaction, mean that both male types need each other's strengths to present what is imagined in the song as a complete male. The incompleteness in both male types leads to their being used by the sly queen in the sense that she receives sex from the younger man and money from the older man. It is important to note that even though the female is also incomplete – more glaringly in terms of economic stability – she uses her beauty as a gap filler. Neither man has this luxury or option. Failure to overcome their defect leads to embarrassment for both men.

Older Men's Sexual Problems, Younger Men's Economic Problems

Studies on age and sexuality (Hyde et al. 2012, Martin et al. 2012 and Stibich 2020) make it clear that as a man ages, apart from weight gain, wrinkles, and hair loss, he encounters a number of sexually related changes. For one thing, he finds that it takes a longer time for him to get aroused and succeed at getting an erection, and when he even does, the sex organ is less firm. Also, from around age 45, men experience an increase in incidences of premature ejaculation. All these changes that occur in the aging man cause a lot of anxiety, especially when he misconstrues some of these natural changes to erectile dysfunction and therefore fears that he may be losing his 'manhood.' These physiological changes inform the meteoric popularity of Viagra when it was launched, and its effect on the sociocultural landscape worldwide has been documented as well. For a number of men who find themselves in this position, the idea of having a much younger girl makes them feel that they are still able to perform sexually.

This impression is consistently played upon in adverts and creative work with older men and younger women. The logic is that if an older man can satisfy such a woman, he can be seen as still able to compete with younger men and will therefore feel empowered.

This feeling fuels the upsurge in bitters on the Ghanaian alcoholic beverages market. Bitters are herbal-based drinks that have medicinal value, but are mainly marketed for their sexual potency. Popular bitters advertisements that feature during prime time on television tend to highlight the connection with sex, in line with the visual rhetoric in the “Sponsor” video that foregrounds sex appeal. A popular *Adonko* bitters advert for instance features a single older man on a swing who is being pushed by many younger nubile women. The sexual imagery and innuendos in this advert suggest that the drink gives the man the ability to sexually satisfy multiple younger women. The older man in “Sponsor”, although has one young nubile woman, is unable to satisfy her. This inability to satisfy even one woman causes his anxiety. Another commercial that sells *Kalahari* bitters ends with the tag line “rise to the occasion.” The obvious link between the play on words and sexual imagery underlines the purpose of the product. In “Sponsor,” too, as discussed earlier, there are a number of puns that invoke sexual imagery. Further, a *Shatta* bitters advert features a woman praising her man for his sexual prowess to her fellow female friends. The hypersexual male is the ideal because he has the obvious ability to satisfy women. Accordingly, bitters are positioned as answering this issue of older male anxiety.

However, the need to actually satisfy these young women further compounds the anxiety of these men, a phenomenon that is so common that it features in popular culture and literary works. Creative works such as the aforementioned Aidoo short story show how in order to deal with this anxiety, some men shower material things on the young women to keep them bound to them. Others also resort to using aphrodisiacs: Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Healers* includes a scene where a character attempts to sell an aphrodisiac to a chief who is anxious about his sexual performance. In Ghana, most locally produced herbal bitters promise sexual rejuvenation and prowess. Names such as Bie Gya Bitters (meaning Open Fire), Round 2 Bitters, and Playboy Bitters have obvious sexual connotations and corresponding advertisements aim to appeal to those who wish to increase their sexual performance. Thus, it is easy to see that the influx of these bitters is linked to the (typically older) Ghanaian man’s quest to put to rest his sexual anxieties. While there is a strong link between old age and lack of sexual prowess, there is another clear connection that links youthfulness and poverty.

It is in this light that the anxiety that plagues younger men, as exemplified by the young male lover in Ebony’s “Sponsor,” is linked to economic difficulties they find themselves in. The unemployment rate among the 15- 24-year-old demographic in Ghana from 2007 to 2017 according to the International Labor Organization stood at 4.9% (Statista, 2018, n.p.). Formal education is

unfortunately not always seen to be a credible means of ameliorating these statistics. To survive, therefore, a lot of young men have to find some way of meeting their basic and physiological needs. Though some search for honest work that may be beneath their qualification, others resort to other unconventional and criminal acts like internet fraud, known locally as *Sakawa*. The pervasive spread of digital technology included a proliferation of internet cafés in urban centers such as Accra, Kumasi, Cape Coast, and Tamale; these cafés have been replaced by smart phones that have ready access to the internet. Instead of loitering in cafés, these young men now use their phones to send fantastic emails and social media messages that end up scamming unsuspecting foreigners out of significant sums of money. As more young men become involved in *Sakawa*, the practice has become more dangerous and risky.

This practice has evolved to include rituals, which according to media reports can be as extreme as human sacrifice, or strict adherence to the instructions of a spiritualist. These practices are supposed to ensure the success of the practitioners, and reportedly enrich the young men who partake, thus allowing them to live lavish lifestyles. As Oduro-Frimpong (2014, 134) notes, the rendering of the spiritual aspect of *Sakawa* in local Ghanaian movies is reliant on a complex relationship that exists between major religions and the creativity of the film director. When the rituals and scams become successful, these *Sakawa* boys are able to satisfy all their material needs and the needs of the many women they manage to entice with their money. They are thus able to also deal with the anxiety that the younger man in “Sponsor” faces because of an inability to provide for their women, which then meant they were just needed to satisfy the sexual desires of their women, as they sat and watched these women become companions to the richer old men.

Female Agency

Ebony’s agency manifests primarily in her appropriation of the male gaze. This ability to appropriate the male gaze is a form of agency in and of itself. As such, by positioning herself more as a beneficiary rather than a victim, Ebony succeeds in exercising her agency within the patriarchal context within which she finds herself. The notion of agency itself is polysemic and ambiguous, as Campbell (2005, 1) notes. Campbell still proposes various parameters for understanding agency, arguing that among other things, it is “linked to and effected through artistry or artfulness” and it is textual (6-7). In being able to utilize the resources available to her, Ebony’s actions can be read as a masterful appropriation of lack that enables her not only to survive, but also thrive.

Beyond the male types then, the song amplifies female agency and speaks to the ideas espoused in the CNN interview mentioned in the introduction. As Boduong reveals to Amanpour, for many young women in urban Ghana, it is easier to maintain double relationships, similar to what the protagonist in the song portrays, than to try to achieve economic progress without the stream of

income that is possible through a sponsor. The cost of living, particularly in the urban areas in Ghana is extremely high, with Accra noted as an expensive city (Cassiman 2018, 77). The high cost of accommodations, high unemployment rates and different opportunities for success between men and woman mean that it is more difficult for an average young woman to live an independent and satisfactory life. Having a sponsor makes things more manageable, which is why she asks if any young girl does not fear hunger. Thus, many young women who find themselves in such situation feel they have no other choice than to look for a sponsor, a means to gratify their needs and wants, a way to survive in societies that have put in structures that enable numerous challenges to exist as part of the cultural fabric.

The protagonist in the song wields a lot of power over the two men in her life. She calls the younger one whenever she feels like it. Because she has money, she can afford to take care of herself, and even support him financially since he is 'broke'. As is often the case in such situations, the young man cannot complain much because he directly or indirectly enjoys some benefits which come about as a result of having a girl who has a sugar daddy. On the other hand, though the older gentleman in the song seems to have some control over the protagonist, she has the potential to control him beyond what is shown in the music video. For instance, if she decides to divulge their relationship to his wife or family, or even make it known in public, especially if the older man holds a high ranking or respected position in society, then the man will be in trouble. This situation renders complex the ways in which a Ghanaian society responds to illicit relationships. On the one hand, the young unmarried woman is demonized; on the other hand, when the relationship becomes public, the married man receives part of the backlash, even if usually not as much as the woman does. In early 2020, a Ghanaian minister received heavy public criticism after a woman leaked a video of him having a salacious conversation with an unidentified woman. The irony was that the minister was in charge of national security, yet he remained at post and survived social media mockery (Ghana News Page 2020). The relative slap-on-the-wrist reactions are still a deterrent for married men, who keep such illicit relationships out of the mainstream.

Women receive criticism also because of the actions they undertake to appear attractive. It takes a lot of work for these young women to place themselves in the position to attract these two kinds of men. It is not just any young woman who can become a 'slay queen,' because "these displays of hyper femininities are an embrace of class privilege that mark these women as different from ordinary working-class women" (Ligaga 2020, 8). Many young women bleach their skin to suit a common assumption that light skin women are more attractive. Apart from getting a lighter skin tone, she needs to have the right body shape. Among many Ghanaian men, the idea of an attractive woman is one with huge buttocks and an above average bust. This has led to the recent hype in breast and buttock enhancement creams (like Glutimax),

clothing and surgeries (for those who can afford them). Social network sites are full of pictures of celebrity slay queens showing off their new bodies. In November 2019, a story of Boduong was circulated on social media, making fun of her for suffering the effect of an alleged buttock enhancement surgery (Bansah, 2019). Though some ladies have lost their lives as a result of these surgeries, they are still heavily patronized, with even a marriage counselor advising young women to undergo body enhancement surgeries if they so wish (Asamoah, 2019). Again, some individuals take advantage of this need. A typical example is Mama Gee, a social media entrepreneur who makes a living by providing young women with herbal concoctions and charms to attract men.

Ligaga (2020) has undertaken a more nuanced analysis of slay queens, as she posits that the transgressive actions taken by three social media personalities in Kenya allow for a broader set of conversations regarding women's bodies and the question of ownership (16). It must be noted that, while this argument can be extrapolated to Ghana, where the conservative nature of society – as highlighted by the backlash that followed the CNN video mentioned earlier, for instance – means that women who engage in these practices face many obstacles. In other words, all the efforts that these young women make to ensure they live a more comfortable life also have some serious inconveniences and downsides. For one thing, substantial disgrace and humiliation comes from being tagged as a prostitute. The tag problematizes a search for marriage, and since marriage is a social engagement which is highly recognized and expected for every woman, remaining unmarried is another challenge. Again, as the protagonist in “Sponsor” also indicates, the fact that the older man cannot stay with her during the night but leaves her lonely is also a form of emotional dejection. “Sponsor” thus underlines the fact that characters in Ghanaian urban spaces do not only seek to survive; they all—the young man, the older gentlemen and mostly the female protagonist at the center—aim to thrive and enjoy their lives despite the various challenges that inform the urban experience.

Conclusion

The fact that “Sponsor” allows us to make connections between male anxiety in terms of age and economics indicates that transgressive behavior is a method of responding to anxiety. Despite the societal disapproval of such acts, the increasing presence of bitters, which is then linked to adulterous relationships, and *Sakawa*, which is linked to fraud, leads to an argument about the ways in which “Sponsor” presents an alternative viewpoint to Ghanaian society. Moreover, it must be mentioned that there are other forms of transgression in the music video. For instance, the role of the older romantic partner in the music video is played by Ebony's biological father. Even though they are acting, this fact elicits suggestions of incest, which is frowned upon in Ghanaian society.

Nevertheless, the video and song were well-received: while by the end of 2020 the video had more than 11 million views on YouTube, Ebony won the Ghana Music Artiste of the year in 2018. This positive feedback brings us back to the question of why there was such a level of negative backlash with respect to the confession by Boduong in the now-infamous CNN interview. After all, if people generally like music with such themes, what is wrong with talking about it on other platforms? There are two potential reasons for this: first, there is the suspension of disbelief that occurs when the text is creative. An aesthetic piece allows the audience to accept that because it is fictive, the themes are not to be confronted in reality. The other reason, which could be the focus of further research, could stem from the fact that the CNN interview allowed the illicit relationship problem to cross borders for an international outlook. In other words, once Ghana was being sold abroad as a place that was welcoming of immoral relationships, the feeling was akin to having the proverbial dirty linen washed in public. It becomes apparent, then, that Ghanaian society would be happier dealing with such problems in-house rather than have them displayed to a global audience.

Notes

- ¹ This information was gotten after a visit to the Ghana Standards Authority on April 21, 2021.
- ² See Jenna Burrell's *Invisible Users* for an early examination of the practice, while Joseph Oduro-Frimpong explores the limiting modes of engagement with *Sakawa* in "Sakawa Rituals and Cyberfraud in Ghanaian Popular Video Movies."
- ³ Even though Ebony's manager Ricky Nana Agyemang, popularly known as Bullet, is credited with authoring the song, the fact that Ebony sings and performs it makes her the face of the song, even if it asks questions of ultimate ownership.
- ⁴ Ebony died in a car accident in 2018, aged 21.
- ⁵ Makes my sex organ hot just like an oven/ But when the morning comes I do not have anything/ A boyfriend who can't buy you food when you are hungry/ [kissing of teeth] how can he be a boyfriend?

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