



Verbal attacks on Ghanaian traditional leaders on an online news platform

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ABSTRACT. The aim of this paper is to analyse verbal attacks targeting three prominent Ghanaian traditional leaders in comments on news articles published on *GhanaWeb*. The paper relies on appraisal theory, social actor analysis, and the theory of impoliteness to qualitatively analyse a number of purposively selected comments on the subject, published on the news website in 2022. The paper reports that these traditional leaders were verbally attacked on the basis of their capacity, truthfulness, propriety and seriousness. These attacks were based on the chiefs' alleged failure to protect the land and natural resources from illegal mining, their engagement in partisan politics, and some criminal activities. The paper argues that as verbal attacks are not culturally permitted in Ghana, it is the anonymity of the news site that encourages these commenters to verbally attack the chiefs. This paper serves as a springboard for further research on verbal attacks, not only on the comment sections of news sites in other communities but on social media platforms as well.

Keywords: chief; computer-mediated communication; *GhanaWeb*; insult; cultural norm.

Received on March 17, 2024.

Accepted on July 1, 2024.

Introduction

This study is located in the context of traditional leadership (or chieftaincy) in Ghana, an institution with a long history predating the colonial era. Traditionally, at the helm of affairs in every community is the chief, known as *Nana* in Akan or *Tɔgbui* in Ewe, who usually works in consultation with a council of elders (Ayittey, 2006; Thompson, 2021a). Often, people in this position obtain the right to be leaders from inheritance as they must come from royal families and exhibit a high sense of responsibility and morality. Before the colonial era, chiefs exercised their authority as cultural, legislative, military, administrative, religious, and economic custodians (Abotchie, 2006). They defended the people in their communities against any kind of external aggression and put in place mechanisms to ensure peace (Boulton, 2004). Busia (1951 apud Aning et al., 2018, p. 196) defines a chief as:

[...] a leader revered as the lineal successor of the founder of the state, its sub-divisions, divisions and the village. His subjects felt beholden to him for their well-being. He was the custodian of the lands of the political community of which he was the head. He exercised judicial functions in relation to offences classified as hateful to the ancestral spirits and other spiritual beings, to which he offered prayers for the prosperity of the community.

Given that ascendancy to chieftaincy is based fundamentally on birth and kinship, the institution has been considered undemocratic (Boateng & Afranie, 2020; Mawuko-Yevugah & Attipoe, 2021). Despite this, the chiefs were given a central role in the colonial administration through the indirect rule model, albeit with limited administrative power (Nukunya, 2003; Tieleman & Uitermark, 2018), and attracted much criticism from the nationalist leaders (Boateng & Afranie, 2020).

Today, chieftaincy is still an essential component of Ghana's government framework, as seen by its acknowledgement in the 1992 Constitution (Bukari et al., 2021). In modern Ghana, chiefs are also expected to plan and advocate community development initiatives and programs through their professional connections (Asamoah, 2012; Brierley & Ofori, 2023). A chief may be removed from office when he disregards chieftaincy taboos, violates his oath of allegiance, acts in a way that brings his office into disrepute, becomes incapacitated due to physical or mental illness, and/or persistently disregards the elders' advice. In other words, a chief who violates the moral code and diminishes the significance of the community forfeits his

position as the ancestors' representative and is, therefore, no longer able to lawfully and morally hold the position of chief (Oku & Korsah, 2019). In recent times, the significance of the chieftaincy institution continues to be questioned, given the behaviour of some chiefs in land conflicts and matters involving illegal mining. Chieftaincy has, therefore, been recently considered as an institution which should not be supported by the central government (Boateng & Afranie, 2020; Mawuko-Yevugah & Attipoe, 2021).

Among Ghanaians, chiefs belong to a social category held in high regard and, as noted by Thompson (2021a, p. 27), "[...] recognised as deserving of special respect or deference due to their roles in decision-making processes, the welfare of others, or the development of the communities in which they live". It is unacceptable for someone to criticise them, especially in public, and the use of insults against them is even considered a verbal taboo (Agyekum, 2010). Even though Ghanaians are enculturated right from childhood to know that it is inappropriate to openly use derogatory language against the elderly and authority figures, including chiefs, this behaviour is not uncommon on interactive online platforms (Thompson, 2019; 2020; 2021b). The general impression that this study does not contest is that unacceptable communicative behaviour on interactive online platforms is not shocking, as there is no accountability, gatekeeping or monitoring associated with online discourse in Ghana (Ofori, 2017; Thompson, 2019, 2021b). The online discourse participants, therefore, express themselves in ways that can easily be interpreted as violations of social norms. Also, the fact that the verbal attack on these chiefs may be viewed by the large audience of the online platform exacerbates this breach.

This paper examines the verbal attacks on three prominent chiefs in Ghana by commenters on *GhanaWeb*, a platform which, more than other platforms (e.g., *Facebook*, *Twitter*), guarantees a highly pseudonymous participation for all. Commenters are well aware that since they cannot be identified, they are divorced from the repercussions of their communicative behaviours. The paper operationalises verbal attacks as what Tracy (1998, p. 227) calls *face attacks*, that is., "[...] communicative acts perceived by members of a social community (and often intended by speakers) to be purposefully offensive". It is, therefore, a generic term for expressions often described as insults, incivility, hate speech or abusive language (Anderson et al., 2021; Culpeper, 2010, 2011; Culpeper et al., 2017). The findings reported in this paper, therefore, shed light on the interaction between online communication and culture and on the theoretical understanding of such interactions, and may be of interest to the audience of this journal who may be interested in the interface between culture, text and online discourse.

Research on online comments on news articles

This section situates the present study within the terrain of research on online news comments by first conceptualising them as a genre and then evaluating recent research on them.

In terms of genre (Martin & Rose, 2008; Swales, 1990), though online comments exemplify a purposeful verbal response to a news article, another comment on the article or both, they do not have clear-cut realisations in obligatory and optional moves/steps. Rather, they constitute a highly dialogic form of online communication with evaluative functions (Cavasso & Taboada, 2021; Ehret & Taboada, 2020, 2021; Faria, 2023; Marcoccia, 2004).

Several studies on online news comments have been multi-dimensional (Ehret & Taboada, 2020; 2021; Titak & Roberson, 2013). These studies compared online news comments to other online registers and traditional genres and unearthed interesting differences. First, online comments are less evaluative than other online texts; second, they are informational and argumentative; and finally, they are instructional and resemble opinion blogs (Ehret & Taboada, 2020, 2021). The present study focuses on verbal attacks in online comments as an expression of negative evaluation, stance or attitude towards the chiefs.

The evaluative characteristics of online comments have been a subject of recent research. Importantly, some work in this area has emerged from Canada (Cavasso & Taboada, 2021), Portugal (Faria, 2023), the United States of America (Kiesling et al., 2018) and Britain (Hansson et al., 2022). As Hansson et al. (2022) have revealed, comments targeting persons evaluate their capacity, truthfulness and tenacity, and Faria (2023) shows that sometimes, commenters attack the aesthetic value of their target by referring to them as ugly.

In Ghana, studies on insults in online comments have come from Thompson (2019, 2020, 2021b). From a semantic perspective, Thompson (2020), for instance, examined the use of three Ghanaian insults (i.e., *kwasea* 'oaf/fool', *aboa* 'animal/beast', and *gyimii* 'retard/stupid person') on the 2016 Ghanaian general election discourse on *GhanaWeb*. She found that these insults help to evaluate human actions. Thompson

(2021b) concluded that while it may seem normal to use insults against political figures in internet discourse, it is considered a breach when one takes into account Ghanaian societal standards of communication.

The final strand of studies describes, identifies, and automatically classifies comments according to whether they are toxic or abusive (Nobata et al., 2016; Kolhatkar et al., 2020; Risch et al., 2021; Wulczyn et al., 2017), showing that news comments contain a lot of abusive language. As far as we know, there is no research on verbal attacks on anonymous platforms targeting Ghanaian chiefs. Given the importance of chiefs in the sociopolitical lives of Ghanaians, this study is important as it reveals the main issues that trigger the verbal attacks and the focus of such attacks. The present study, therefore, contributes to the extant research by relying on an eclectic theoretical standpoint to offer a comprehensive analysis of verbal attacks on Ghanaian chiefs on *GhanaWeb*.

Theoretical underpinnings of verbal attacks

Verbal attack is a multifaceted phenomenon that can be explained by various theories. The present study contextualises verbal attacks within the theories of appraisal (Martin & White, 2005), critical discourse analysis (Leeuwen, 2008) and impoliteness (Culpeper, 2011; Culpeper et al., 2017).

Appraisal theory

Considering verbal attacks as negative evaluation, it is apposite to draw on Martin and White's (2005) appraisal theory in our analysis. The appraisal theory considers evaluation as a way of expressing interpersonal meanings through Attitude (expressing affective feelings as well as evaluation of entities and persons), Engagement (alignment or misalignment with propositions), and Graduation (increasing or reducing the degree of evaluation). As the focus of the present study is on the expression of attitudinal meanings towards persons, the Attitude dimension is considered the most fitting for our research and is, therefore, explained in detail to highlight its relevance to the research.

Attitude divides into three sub-categories: Affect, Appreciation and Judgement. Affect concerns the linguistic disclosure of positive and negative feelings, such as happiness, sadness, confidence, anxiety, boredom etc., Judgement borders on evaluations of behaviour which is admired or criticised, praised or condemned, whereas Appreciation involves evaluations of semiotic and natural phenomena according to the ways in which they are valued or not in a given field (Faria, 2023; Martin & White, 2005). For the present study, the Judgement dimension of Attitude is particularly relevant because our aim is to understand how public figures, particularly chiefs, are verbally attacked by participants in online polylogues, and as demonstrated by the existing literature (Faria, 2023; Hansson et al., 2022; Ross & Caldwell, 2020), such attacks are usually based on moral evaluation of their behaviour, which is convincingly explained by the Judgement.

Generally, Judgement evaluates human behaviour and character based on the values of social esteem and sanction. Judgements based on social esteem come in three forms: normality (how unusual someone is), capacity (how capable they are) and tenacity (how resolute they are) (Martin & White, 2005). Judgement of social sanction concerns how truthful someone is (veracity) and how ethical they are (propriety). In oral cultures, social esteem is typically upheld through conversations, rumours, jokes and a variety of stories. In contrast, social sanction is more frequently codified in written forms, such as directives, laws, rules and regulations about proper behaviour that are monitored by the state and church and that use fines and penalties as tools to punish offenders (Martin & White, 2005).

In verbally attacking public figures, commenters can focus on their capacity by the use of some descriptive phrases and adjectives that suggest that the target person is not up to the task or he/she does not have the mental fortitude required for his/her position, for example, *useless* and *stupid* (Hansson et al., 2022). Attacking a chief's veracity may entail framing him as "[...] dishonest, deceitful, lying, [...] deceptive, manipulative, devious [...]", etc. (Martin & White, 2005, p. 53), or by calling for a change in leadership due to lack of credibility (Hansson et al., 2022). Judgement on a chief's propriety involves evaluating how ethically they behave by using words like "[...] bad, immoral, evil, unfair and unjust" (Martin & White, 2005, p. 53). Finally, attack on tenacity can be achieved by making references that suggest the target is not taking things seriously when they should (e.g., 'buffoon', 'joke') (Hansson et al., 2022).

Critical discourse analysis

Verbal attacks can also be examined within the context of critical discourse analysis (CDA), where they are considered strategies for challenging political power (Faria, 2023; Ofori, 2015, 2017; Ofori et al., 2021). Though there are several strands of CDA, the present study relies on Leeuwen's (2008) approach to social actor analysis, as it provides affordances for the examination of how attitudinal meanings are expressed through the labels that are given to humans in discourse and therefore, serves to theoretically complement Martin and White's (2005) appraisal theory. The study specifically draws on the dimensions of Nomination and Categorisation.

Nomination entails identifying social actors by means of proper nouns (e.g., first names, surnames and titles/ honorifics) (Faria, 2023). Categorisation, on the other hand, entails identifying social actors "[...] in terms of identities and functions they share with others" (Leeuwen, 2008, p. 40). Categorisation can be achieved in two ways: functionalisation and identification. The former involves using a noun phrase to identify social actors based on their role or something they do or by referring to them by general nouns such as 'man', 'woman', or 'person'. The latter, identification, involves referring to social actors "[...] not in terms of what they do, but in terms of what they, more or less permanently, or unavoidably, are [...]", and can be realised in three ways, classification, relational identification, and physical identification (Leeuwen, 2008, p. 42).

Classification involves referring to social actors based on the major categories by means of which a given society or institution differentiates between classes of people, for example, by "[...] age, gender, provenance, class, wealth, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation", etc. (Leeuwen, 2008, p. 42). Relational identification represents social actors in terms of their personal, kinship, or work relations to each other, and it is realized by a closed set of nouns denoting such relations: 'friend', 'aunt', 'colleague', etc. while physical identification represents social actors in terms of physical characteristics which uniquely identify them in a given context. It can be realized by nouns denoting physical characteristics (e.g., 'blonde', 'redhead', 'cripple', etc.) or by adjectives (e.g., 'bearded', 'tall') or by prepositional phrases with or without postmodifying highly generalized classifications such as 'man' or 'woman'.

This theory is very important to the present study. For example, Nomination is crucial to the present study because, in the Ghanaian context, chiefs are expected to be addressed with certain names, titles and honorifics as a way of expressing deference towards them (Aborampah, 2023; Agyekum, 2011). The paper argues that in verbal attacks, commenters may avoid these acceptable address forms or use certain address forms unacceptable in the given context. Chiefs may also be attacked by reference to their ethnic groups, by their role or by other means that do not fit their status.

Impoliteness

The third theoretical perspective that offers an understanding of verbal attacks is impoliteness (Culpeper, 2010, 2011; Culpeper et al., 2017). Integral to the theory of impoliteness is the longstanding concept of 'face', which Goffman (1967, p. 5) defines as "[...] the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact". Thus, the key to impoliteness is that a speaker or writer knows the probability of degrading the social image of the target (Walter, 2013). In the context of the present study, the point is that the attacker knows the positive assumptions people may have about the chief, which the chief claims for himself, and the attack involves identifying negative values that might conflict with those positive values.

Another important aspect of politeness is that it is context-bound, though some expressions may be inherently impolite. As Culpeper et al. (2017, p. 8) note,

[...] words and expressions become increasingly associated with their contexts of use so that those contexts become part of the meanings of those words and expressions with the result that they can be interpreted with the associations of their contexts even when they are used in atypical contexts.

Culpeper (2011) identified several impoliteness strategies, including insults, which may be realised as personalised negative vocatives (e.g., 'you', 'fucking moron'), personalised negative assertions (e.g., *you are such a hypocrite*), personalized negative references (e.g., 'your stinking mouth'), and personalised third-person negative references (e.g., 'the daft bimbo'), as well as pointed criticisms/complaints (e.g., 'that is absolutely rubbish'), and challenging or unpalatable questions and/or presupposition (e.g., 'which lie are you

telling me?’), condescensions (e.g., ‘that’s being babyish’), message enforcers (e.g., ‘listen here’), dismissal (e.g., ‘fuck off’), silencers (e.g., ‘shut up’), threats (e.g., ‘I’ll smash your face if you don’t stop talking’), and negative expressives such as curses and ill-wishes (e.g., ‘go to hell, hang yourself’). Others include innuendo, snide comments, sarcasm, teasing, etc. (Faria, 2023; Culpeper, 2010, 2011; Culpeper et al., 2017).

Methodology

This section describes the methods and procedures used in conducting the study. It specifically provides contextual information on the data and analytical approach adopted.

The data

The present study relied on comments on twenty-three purposively-sampled articles reporting on news featuring three prominent paramount chiefs in Ghana in 2022: (a) Asantehene Otumfuo Osei Tutu II, the paramount chief of the Asante Region, (b) Osagyefuo Amoatia Ofori Panin, the reigning king of Akyem Abuakwa, and (c) Togbe Afede XIV, the Agbogbomefia of the Asogli State. These three traditional leaders were selected because they are always in the news for one reason or the other and often contribute to socio-political issues in Ghana. On *GhanaWeb*, they are described as influential traditional leaders who have given Ghanaians a lot to talk about (Why..., 2022).

The data were obtained from *GhanaWeb*, a news website that protects free speech and encourages public engagement in online socio-political discussions (Thompson, 2019, 2025). Generally, the computer-mediated mode of communication of online discussions, which entails a high level of anonymity and pseudonymity as well as the lack of physical presence, provides fruitful grounds for conflict and polarization (Blitvich, 2010; Bou-Franch & Blitvich, 2014; Faria, 2023; Kopytowska & Baidier, 2017), and in the case of *GhanaWeb*, this leads to language use that does that conform with the socio-cultural norms, which has become the subject of recent linguistic research (Thompson, 2019, 2020, 2021b). Though commenters may verbally attack each other, the present study focused on comments targeting the chiefs.

Method of analysis

The data were analysed at two levels. The first level involved a thematic approach, a data analysis method that moves well with qualitative research. Though there are different types of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017; Terry et al., 2017), because of the constructionist orientation of this qualitative study, the Big Q technique is a good fit for the analysis of the data (Terry et al., 2017). According to Terry et al. (2017), this approach entails six steps: (a) acquainting oneself with the data, (b) constructing codes, (c) developing themes, (d) reconsidering prospective themes, (e) defining and naming theme, and (f) producing the report, and are discussed below in respect of the proposed study:

Acquainting oneself with the data is when researchers immerse themselves in the data by reading through them several times in order to generate insights into the aboutness of the data (Terry et al., 2017). For the present study, familiarisation involved repeatedly reading through the comments to get familiar with them, with notes taken on the key issues that caught the researchers’ attention.

The stage of code development involves assigning meaningful labels to a stretch of text that captures an idea related to the objective of a research project (Terry et al., 2017). In this study, the ‘New Comment’ function of Microsoft Word was used to assign codes to the data. The coding process was iterative, involving coding and recoding, as well as code revisions to refine earlier codes. This process ended with compiling the codes and their accompanying data segments to enable easy development of themes in the next phase.

Theme development involves aggregating related codes into bigger patterns, taking into consideration central organising concepts (Terry et al., 2017). In the study, this step involved carefully reading through the codes to identify key concepts that ran through them. Then, codes that relate to each central concept were categorised as one potential theme. Following the extant literature (Faria, 2023; Hansson et al., 2022; Rohrbach et al., 2020; Pas & Aaldering, 2020), the themes were generally constructed based on the focus of the attacks, i.e., whether capacity, veracity, propriety, or tenacity.

After the development of themes came the review of themes, where codes under potential themes were reviewed to ensure they all align with a central idea and the themes were reviewed vis-à-vis the data set to confirm whether they reflect each other. The fifth phase, defining and naming themes, involved briefly

explaining what the theme refers to and providing concise labels for each theme. At this step of the analysis, the linguistic means of attacking were examined, guided by the three theoretical orientations underpinning this research.

The sixth and final step involves writing the report. In this study, the report is presented as a journal article. Extracts are used both illustratively and analytically to substantiate the claims made.

Findings

This section highlights the findings of the study, which are organized based on the focus of particular insults, alongside the strategies adopted in the verbal attacks.

Attack by judgement on capacity

As noted earlier, appraisal by Judgement can involve evaluation of the capacity of the target. Judgement of capacity can focus on the character of the individual, and this can be lexicalised in the use of some descriptive phrases and adjectives that suggest that the target person is not up to the task, or he/she does not have the mental fortitude required for his/her position (Hansson et al., 2022). In the data analysed, the commenters referred to the chiefs with some negative evaluative adjectives such as ‘useless’ and ‘foolish’, nouns such as ‘imbecile’, ‘idiot’ and ‘fool’, verbs such as ‘failed’, and some expressions that suggest the target chief does not reasons. Consider Extract 1 below:

1. These [sic] useless chief did know he also failed as a chief, because you no long get free money from government, ghana has failed, stupid chief [WHY TOGBE AFEDE XIV BELIEVES GHANA HAS FAILED]

Extract 1 is a comment on an article reporting on a newspaper editorial published on 12th December, 2022, in which Togbe Afede XIV, the Agbogbomefia of the Asogli State of the Volta Region of Ghana, was claimed to have said that the nation, Ghana, has failed to provide citizens with fundamental life conveniences. The chief was reported to have attributed the failure to the general negative attitudes of the political elites, including corruption, nepotism, improper planning, and economic mismanagement. The comment in Extract One suggests that the chief is being partisan by commenting on the state of the nation at a time the New Patriotic Party (NPP) is in power. The comment presupposes that the chief received money from the previous National Democratic Congress (NDC) government, which is associated with the Volta Region. Since chiefs are not supposed to be partisan, Togbe Afede’s capacity is attacked as *useless* and *stupid* and he is considered as having failed as a chief. Thus, the chief’s character is attacked because he is considered as being partisan, something unexpected of chiefs. Let us consider another example below, where Okyehene is similarly attacked verbally because of his supposed involvement in politics.

2. Foolish man. Go and put on your red red attire that you used to inspect the road and do the roads your self. “Successive governments have abandoned us over the last 50 years”. Do you know about all this then you do the fucking politics. [OKYEHENE ANGRY AT GOV’T OVER]
3. Idiotic Chief What have you been telling the famous son of the region, Akufo Addo when he was in government. You were busy enjoying the loot so forgot then your region needs road infrasture. Imbecile at the highest level, Amotia. [OKYEHENE ANGRY AT GOV’T OVER]

The article that received this comment reported on a concern raised by the Okyehene at the Okyeman Congress in 2014. The chief specifically bemoaned that successive governments had neglected the Eastern Region of Ghana in terms of road infrastructure. The Eastern Region is associated with the then opposition party, NPP, given that the party’s leader, Nana Akufo-Addo, hails from that region. Before NDC came to power in 2008, NPP had ruled Ghana for eight years, and the commenters’ opinion is that the chief did not pass such comments when the NPP was in power, so making such comments at a time their rival is in power was a strategy to make them unpopular. Thus, the chief is tagged as engaging in politics, and since chiefs are expected to not engage in partisan politics, this makes him unfit for his role. He, is therefore, considered a ‘foolish man’, ‘idiotic chief’, and ‘an imbecile’, someone who lacks the mental capacity to be a chief.

This political involvement is also insinuated in Extract 4 below. This extract is a comment on an article which reported Okyehene imploring the Ghana Medical Association to ignore some comments by some government officials and get back to work. The chief said this at a time that the GMA had been on strike for about two weeks, a strike that the then president, Mr. John Mahama described as illegal.

4. Which government communicators is this ugly bodily talking about. If he is blind and can not see or dumb that he can not hear, he should know that all Ghanaians are against these npp doctors. This galamsey chief should reason before he opens his mouth. Useless talk. To hell with him. Absolute nonsense. Who are the government communicators. Buffon and idiot. You stupid Akufo Addo will never be President. Swine. [OKYEHENE TO GMA: IGNORE THE COMMENTS AND RECONSIDER]

The commenter here suggests that the chief is involving himself in politics by siding with the members of the GMA, who are described as NPP doctors. Since it was the president who described the strike as illegal, the commenter suggests that the chief was indirectly referring to the president as 'government communicators'. Again, the fact that the chief and the then opposition leader come from the same region is used as the basis for the chief's alignment with these NPP doctors. The chief is, thus, described as someone who does not reason, an idiot, a buffoon, etc.

Some comments on the same article implicated Okyehene as being an irresponsible chief who is blaming the government after destroying his own region. For this, he is described as shameless, an idiot, and a wasted chief, as in Extract 5 below:

5. Shameless tin Look at who is talking o, after destroying your own region you are now coming to nonsense, my friend don't let me put my anger on you. Idiot, look you think you are wise, but the most wasted chief we have in our country [OKYEHENE ANGRY AT GOV'T OVER NEGLECT OF EASTERN ROADS]

This destruction of the region is specified by one commenter as the chief's involvement in illegal mining activities, popularly known as 'galamsey' in Ghana, illustrated in Extract 6 below:

6. Even at his backyard, the Okyehene is supervising illegal mining. Amotia has superintended the destruction of all water bodies in Akyem lands. Okyehene to be enstooled as Galamseyhene [OKYEHENE ANGRY AT GOV'T OVER NEGLECT OF EASTERN ROADS]

Illegal mining has been one of the major problems of the Eastern Region and Ghana, in general. As such, chiefs are expected to help fight the problem. Here, the commenter suggests that Okyehene's failure to fight illegal mining is because he himself is involved in it, making him unfit as a chief. Thus, the chief qualifies as *Galamseyhene* (chief of illegal mining) rather than Okyehene. The attacks due to the failure to fight illegal mining is equally extended to Otumfuo, as in Extract 7 below:

7. This pampered chief is sitting down all day long whilst his land bequeathed to him by his ancestors is being raped. Sit up like Dormaa hene because you are nothing without your land. Kumasi smells like rotten eggs... [OTUMFUO CALLS FOR URGENT STEPS TO TACKLE ALARMING RATE OF DEFORESTATION]

This comment was on an article that reports on a speech by the chief during the 40th anniversary celebration of the Faculty of Renewable Natural Resources of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST). In the speech, the chief urges the managers of the country's natural resources to urgently take steps to stop the destruction of these resources. Meanwhile, as a chief, he is expected to take action to protect land that falls under his jurisdiction. Therefore, the commenter attacks him because he thinks the chief has failed in that regard, which has led to the destruction of the natural resources, making Kumasi smell 'like a rotten egg'. Comparing Kumasi to the smell of a rotten egg helps sensualise the extent of damage that the believed irresponsibility of the chief had caused.

In some instances, the chiefs were attacked for being terrible leaders. This bad leadership is attributed to their selfishness, as in Extract 8 below:

8. He should enrol himself HE's a terrible leader himself. Too Self centred. Wants to be the centre of attention all the time. And very fickle. I know the man. He's a terrible leader. [TOGBE AFEDE XIV TO ESTABLISH AFRICAN TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE]

This comment was on an article that reported on Togbe Afede's announcement that he was going to establish African Traditional Leadership institute. This institute was to help unify traditional leaders in Africa and promote development. The commenter, however, attacked the chief because he thinks that the chief himself lacks the capacity to be a good leader so he should enrol himself. The chief is described as a terrible and self-centred chief. A similar attack was directed at the Asantehene, as shown in Extract 9 below:

9. Selfish king Every contract government bring to Ashanti region you take your percentage as the main ruling king what do you use those money for All those money you been taking supposed to help develop

Ashantiman but you refuse to do so [ASHANTI REGION DESERVES MORE DEVELOPMENT AS YOUR STRONGHOLD – OTUMFUO TO NPP]

The NPP has a huge following in the Asante Region, where the Asantehene is the paramount chief. Thus, in a speech, the Asantehene asked the NPP government to provide more developmental projects to his region. The commenter, however, attacks the chief because he believes that government had done its part by providing him money from government contracts and that the underdevelopment of the region was due to the chief's poor leadership and selfishness.

Attack by judgement on veracity

Veracity concerns “[...] how truthful someone is” (Martin & White, 2005, p. 52). Generally, attacking on a chief's veracity, therefore, entails framing him as “[...] dishonest, deceitful, lying, [...] deceptive, manipulative, devious [...]”, etc. (Martin & White, 2005, p. 53), by negating the positive equivalents of these traits, and by calling for change in leadership due to lack of credibility (Hansson et al., 2022). For instance, in a comment, Togbe Afede was referred to as a con man, as shown in Extract 10 below:

10. AFEDE MUST REFUND ALL SALARIES & PERKS THE PEANUTS AFEDE RETURNED WAS BECAUSE HE ATTENDED ONLY 16 MEETINGS OUT OF A POSSIBLE 280 SO HE FELT INNER GUILT AND A FEAR FOR THE SPECIAL PROSECUTOR, KISSI ADJABENG. HE IS A CON MAN [Togbe Afede XIV attended 39 out of 242 meetings of Council of State Adom-Otchere]

This comment was made on an article that reported Paul Adom Okyere, a journalist, accusing Togbe Afede for failing to attend Council of Staff meetings though he received monthly salaries for that. Prior to that accusation, the chief had rejected over ₵365,000 ex-gratia paid to him for serving on the Council of State between 2017 and 2020. Thus, the commenter attacked the chief's veracity. To the commenter, the chief is a con man for creating a false impression that he did not like the money. The commenter, thus, believes that if the chief truly did not like the ex-gratia, he would not have accepted the salaries while not attending the meetings. This issue of hypocrisy is reflected in another attack presented in Extract 11 below:

11. So what? Where is the maturity of your Togbe Afede the populist, inward looking, and a hypocrite Nyebro who took ex-gratia but was not attending meeting as a member of the Council of State. [TOGBE AFEDE REJECTS KENNEDY AGYAPONG'S 'YAM FESTIVAL' GIFTS]

The article here reports that the chief refused to take a gift from Kennedy Agyapong. Prior to that Kennedy Agyapong had insulted the tribe of the chief and ruined the relationship he had with him. The commenter, however, thinks the chief was being inconsistent since he received salaries but failed to attend meetings, labelling him as a hypocrite.

In another instance, Togbe Afede is called a hypocrite due to some comments he made on the creation of new regions in Ghana:

12. “Togo” Afede is a big time hypocrite The Togolese Trokosi Ewe, “Togo” Afede is a fake and a big time hypocrite nation wrecker. A typical Ewe!!! [TOGBE AFEDE XIV'S TAKE ON THE CREATION OF NEW REGIONS]

Around 2018, there was a proposal by the government to create six additional regions. Togbe Afede, at the time, disagreed with the processes the government was using to carry out the creation of these geographical regions. To him, opinions are divided among the people of the Volta Region on the appropriateness of the creation of Oti Region out of the Volta region so there was a need for extensive consultations with both those for and those against the creation of the region. The commenter, here, calls him a hypocrite and changes his title from ‘Togbe’ to ‘Togo’.

The hypocrisy of the chief is associated with his supposed involvement in partisan politics. As noted earlier, the Volta Region is associated with the National Democratic Congress and once Togbe Afede makes a negative comment about Ghana under the governance of the NPP government, he is considered to be a hypocrite. The assumption is that he would not have passed such a comment if the NDC was in power. This is illustrated in Extract 13 below:

13. Oo Togbui, tsooo !! Sorry for you Togbui, for availing yourself to be insulted and abused by the all insulting Ghanaian youth of today. This hypocritical statement should've been issued way back in the days of bus branding saga, Geeda, the hig [WHY TOGBE AFEDE XIV BELIEVES GHANA HAS FAILED]

This comment was made on the article reporting on Togbe Afede's claim that the country had failed to provide its citizens with basic necessities. Because the chief made this comment when NPP was in power, he is labelled a hypocrite by this commenter who thinks that there were worse scandals in the previous NDC administration (references to 'bus branding saga' and *Geeda*) and yet the chief did not make such comments at that time since he is associated with the NDC.

Like Togbe Afede, Asantehene is also accused of hypocrisy. This is especially evident in comments on an article reporting on Asantehene attacking his sub-chiefs for their failure to fight illegal mining.

14. Powerless Haha he thinks we're stupid. We know you are involved too. Otumfour is like thief who helps you search for the stolen item [ASANTEHENE DESCENDS ON SUB-CHIEFS FOR FAILING TO STOP GALAMSEY]

In the article, Asantehene was reported as accusing his sub-chiefs of not doing their best to protect the land he had entrusted to them. Here, the commenter attacks Asantehene for being a hypocrite who is acting as though he is innocent while he himself is a culprit. This is achieved with a simile which portrays Asantehene as a 'thief who helps you search for the stolen item' and helps create an imagery of pretence and hypocrisy. A similar accusation is seen in Extract 15 below:

15. THE POT CALLING THE KETTLES BLACK "THE POT CALLING THE KETTLES BLACK". WHO DOES THIS PARAMOUNT CHIEF THINK HE'S DECEIVING? GHANA LEADERS ARE FUNNY HYPOCRITES. [Asantehene descends on sub-chiefs for failing to stop galamsey]

Here, the hypocrisy of the chief is portrayed using a proverb (i.e., 'a pot calling the kettles black') involving a psychological projection, where someone with a particular fault is presented as accusing someone else of the same fault. Thus, Asantehene is here regarded as a hypocrite for accusing his sub-chiefs of something he himself is guilty of. In one other instance, Asantehene is attacked for being unreliable and untrustworthy. This is achieved by the use of the chameleon metaphor, as presented in Extract 16 below:

16. True Colors of the Chameleon We've known it all the time. That's why the NPP threw dust in the eyes of people by breaking up various regions, while leaving Ashanti Region and Eastern Region intact. Some of us said it loud that the regions were being. [ASHANTI REGION DESERVES MORE DEVELOPMENT AS YOUR STRONGHOLD – OTUMFUO TO NPP]

The article that received this comment was on Asantehene's plea to the government to provide the Asante Region with more developmental projects. Prior to that, the government had created six additional regions in a controversial manner, and people questioned why the government failed to create those regions from Asante and Eastern, which were comparatively bigger than the regions from which additional regions were created. Thus, in this comment, the writer verbally attacked the credibility of the chief. He thinks that the chief and the government formed a syndicate to avoid dividing the Asante Region so as to give that region a greater share of national developmental projects.

Attack by judgement on propriety

Judgement by propriety involves evaluating how ethical someone behaves; therefore, attacking based on propriety may involve portraying the target as "[...] bad, immoral, evil [...]; corrupt, unfair, unjust [...]; insensitive, mean, cruel [...]; vain, snobby, arrogant [...]; rude, discourteous, irreverent [...]; selfish, greedy, avaricious" (Martin & White, 2005, p. 53). Consider Extract 17 below:

17. Freemason chief No we hate how some of you act like kwaku dua is powerful. He's just a Canadian fraudster who got lucky and had the opportunity to become asantehene. How much was otumfour worth before he became asantehene??? . [ASANTEHENE DESCENDS ON SUB-CHIEFS FOR FAILING TO STOP GALAMSEY]

Here, the chief is labelled as a fraudster. Fraud is ethically wrong so labelling him as a fraudster is a negative judgement by propriety. In another instance, Asantehene is labelled as a criminal for asking the government to provide more developmental projects to the Asante Region, as shown in Extract 18 below:

18. Kwaku Duah is a criminal I blame Mahama for building a market for such ungrateful cockroaches [ASHANTI REGION DESERVES MORE DEVELOPMENT AS YOUR STRONGHOLD – OTUMFUO TO NPP]

Here, the Chief is referred to as Kwaku Duah, which is in itself an attack to him, and labelled as a criminal who was ungrateful to the past NDC government which contributed to the development of the Asante Region by building them a market. The criminalisation of chiefs is again evident in Extract 19 below, which was in relation to Okyehene:

19.KEN, BAWUMIA+NANADDO = CALAMITY!!! Okyehene Osagyefo Amoatia Kromfuorhene, as for me I don't see your lunatic Akuffo Addo as any president biaaa...!!!! That criminal Kyebi junkie who roams around carrying a chair like a mad man is nothing but a scammer and an [NO WELL-NURTURED PERSON WILL INSULT THE PRESIDENT – OKYENHENE]

Here, Okyehene is referred to as Kromfuorhene (Chief of thieves) and this is even heightened by his association with President Akuffo-Addo, who is also described as a criminal and scammer. This attack was a comment on an article reporting Okyehene saying that those insulting the president and blaming him for the country's economic challenges were uncivilized, because the economic problem was a global phenomenon. As noted earlier, the Okyehene and the president hail from the same region, so by association, those who consider the president to be a criminal consider Okyehene to be his collaborator. In this case, Okyehene is regarded as a thief because he is trying to defend Akuffo-Addo, his supposed collaborator.

Attack by judgement on tenacity

Judgement by tenacity refers to how dependable someone is (Martin & White, 2005). In verbal attacks, this can be achieved by making references that suggest the target is not taking things seriously when they should (e.g., 'buffoon', 'joke') as well as negative attributions that suggest officeholders are cowards (Hansson et al., 2022). Consider Extract 20 below:

20.D cab driver chief shud give us a break Just listen to this cab driver chief. He is a joker. Let us be honest with ourselves. Akuffo Addo is just a kobolor. He doesn't know anything. Akua Donkor would be a better presidential material than Akuffo Addo. [THOSE WHO INSULT AKUFO-ADDO ARE VILLAGERS AND WITCHES – OKYENHENE]

In Extract 20, Okyehene is given several labels, including *a cab driver chief* and *a joker*, all of which suggests that he is not serious. This lack of seriousness is also used to describe Asantehene, as in Extract 21 below:

21.This Chief is annoying This Chief is not serious. Ashanti region has produced many corrupt politicians which is dragging the country backwards. Look at politicians like Lawrence Addai, Joe Fool, Yaw Adutwum, K. T. Hammond, Napo, Sticka, Kingsley Ny [ASHANTI REGION DESERVES MORE DEVELOPMENT AS YOUR STRONGHOLD – OTUMFUO TO NPP]

In this extract, Asantehene is called 'this Chief' instead of his title name and labelled as not serious. The commenter believes that the lack of development in Asante Region and the country as a whole derives from the corrupt politicians in that region.

Finally, Togbe Afede is also considered a buffoon in Extract 22 below. The article that received this comment was on Togbe Afede attributing the country's economic problems to the failure of economic policies:

22.He doesn't understand monetary policy He doesn't understand monetary policy management. Is he an economist? He won't pass even a first year evonoc class!!! This buffoon goes around bragging all the time [ECONOMIC WOES PARTLY DUE TO FAILURE OF MONETARY POLICY MEASURES - TOGBE AFEDE XIV]

The commenter attacked the chief based on tenacity because he thinks the chief is not an economist so he cannot provide reliable information on the economic situation of the country. Therefore, Togbe Afede trying to act as an economist only exposes him as a joker.

Discussion

This paper sought to examine verbal attacks on traditional leaders in online comments posted by Ghanaians by looking at the comments from two perspectives. This involved, first, the evaluative basis of the attacks and, second, the discursive strategies associated with the attacks. In this section, the major findings of the study are highlighted and discussed in relation to the extant literature.

The study found that these traditional leaders were attacked on the basis of their capacity, where the attacks portrayed them as lacking the ability to be traditional leaders. In attacking the capacity of traditional leaders, words such as 'useless', 'foolish', 'imbecile', 'idiot' and 'fool' were used. These words, when considered from the perspective of the Appraisal theory by Martin and White (2005), entail negative evaluation by Judgement, specifically, capacity. On the other hand, from the perspective of impoliteness (Culpeper, 2010, 2011; Culpeper et al., 2017), these evaluative lexis qualify as insults directed at traditional leaders who have supposedly not performed up to expectations. In some cases, the attacks on capacity involved functionalisation using 'chief' (as in 'this' chief) and 'man' (as in 'this man') as well as by using unpalatable questions and presuppositions (as in 'Do you know about all this then you do the fucking politics?'). In the Ghanaian context, traditional leaders are highly regarded and are supposed to be addressed using titles and honorifics that show deference (Aborampah, 2023; Agyekum, 2011), so referring to them using functional categorisation is a verbal attack. This finding agrees with the findings of Agovi (1995), whose study of Nzema festival songs revealed that insulting language was used in these songs to attack chiefs who do not ensure good governance in their communities.

In the present study, the attack on the capacity of the chiefs suggested their involvement in partisan politics. Also, chiefs were attacked due to their failure to protect natural resources and stop illegal mining and their self-centeredness. The importance of chieftaincy in Ghana partly lies in their role as the custodian of the land, and their role in natural resource management is even recognised by the government. As Asori et al. (2023, p. 1958, authors' quote) aptly noted:

Ghana's Mineral and Mining Act grants chiefs and other traditional rulers the power to manage the benefits of mining to local communities. This constellation is practically linked to the chief's control over both public and private lands as they are allowed to control and manage lands in Ghana in trust for the subjects of the stool – 'the people'.

As several recent studies have shown, some chiefs abuse this power by being involved in mining activities for their personal gain at the expense of their communities (Lawer et al., 2017; Tenkorang, 2021).

In addition, chiefs were verbally attacked based on veracity, that is, how truthful they are (Martin & White, 2005). Here, the chiefs were generally tagged as hypocrites. This attack derives from misalignment between words and deeds, or inconsistencies in deeds. Saying one thing while acting differently might lead to a number of unfavourable interpersonal outcomes. When a transgression misaligns with principles the perpetrator has previously embraced, it might elicit more severe moral censure and punitive emotion than when it does not. Leaders who had previously preached against a transgression may find it more difficult to mend their reputation than if they had not (Effron et al., 2018). It is important to note that in the present study, accusations of hypocrisy featured figurative language such as simile (e.g., 'Otumfour is like thief who helps you search for the stolen item'), proverbs (e.g., 'the pot calling the kettles black'), and metaphor (e.g., 'True Colors of the Chameleon'). Existent literature shows figurative language as an important tool in verbal attacks (Camp, 2017; Ofori, 2015, 2017; Ofori et al., 2021). On the functions of metaphors in verbal attacks, Camp (2017) has asserted that metaphors portray their subjects in a manner that cannot be achieved by recourse to just the propositional content. The animal metaphor used (i.e., 'True Colors of the Chameleon') is an example of Charteris-Black (2019) calls 'human-as-animal frame' which involves idioms that use animal terms to describe conventional human characteristics like greed and deceit. The stylistic inclination of this frame is toward exaggeration and intensity.

With propriety, the chiefs were described as criminals, while tenacity entails references to the chiefs not being serious or not demonstrating enough courage. In the Ghanaian context, the selection and installation of a chief follow a very rigorous process that ensures that the potential chief is not from the royal family but also exhibits the highest level of morality and courage (Ayittey, 2006). The process involves a nomination, confinement, and installation. Only individuals with high moral standards are nominated, and during the confinement stage, the potential chief is taken through the customs of the land and the code of conduct of chiefs. This process ensures that people with past criminal records have no chance of becoming a chief, and this also serves as a basis for the consideration of chiefs as the embodiment of the cultural and moral values of the society (Ayittey, 2006; Opuni-Frimpong, 2021). Therefore, any person who becomes a chief has a positive self-image, i.e., 'face' (Goffman, 1967), which suggests they have no criminal records. Drawing on the theory of impoliteness (Culpeper, 2010, 2011; Culpeper et al., 2017), this paper argues that calling a chief a criminal is, therefore, an impoliteness strategy intended to hurt the face of the target chief. The commenter is aware of this face of the chief and, by referring to the chief as a criminal, aims to achieve some negative

impact on him, which may not be based on the truthfulness of the insult but based on other factors, including the mood of the target chief (Thompson, 2020).

In general, the attacks on the chiefs bring back memories of military rule and its governance problems. First of all, these kinds of regimes are known for their ruthless repression of civil liberties and fundamental freedoms. Authoritarian regimes impose restrictions on the right to free speech, which is a fundamental component of the indigenous African political system in which citizens gather in public locations such as marketplaces to voice their opinions on matters of public importance. Due to their history of egregious human rights abuses and repression of press freedom, both governments frequently have severe economic mismanagement issues as a result of their unwillingness to accept opposing viewpoints and discerning perspectives (Darkwa, 2022). If during the time of military rule, freedom of expression was restricted, or there was no online platform to guarantee the venting of grievances pseudonymously, today, GhanaWeb offers Ghanaians such an opportunity to respond to the undemocratic and inappropriate behaviour of some chiefs. Thus, while the use of insults in this online space is not encouraged, it can also reveal the rot in the chieftaincy institution and keep the chiefs in check.

Conclusion

The thrust of this paper has been to examine verbal attacks on three prominent Ghanaian chiefs in comments on news articles published on *GhanaWeb*. The study found that these traditional leaders were attacked on the basis of their capacity, veracity, propriety and tenacity. These attacks were based on the chiefs' alleged failure to protect the land and natural resources from illegal mining, their engagement in partisan politics, and some criminal activities. Generally, the sociocultural norms of Ghana do not permit verbal attacks on chiefs. However, these commenters go against societal norms to freely express their dissatisfaction with the chiefs, and this is facilitated by the anonymity that this online space provides.

In Ghana, a rigorous procedure is followed in the selection and installation of chiefs, and this ensures that people with criminal records and bad reputation have no chance of getting enthroned. The commenters are aware of this public image of the chiefs, and, therefore, by verbally attacking them, aim to achieve some devastating impact on these chiefs and their associates. The content of these insults is, therefore, usually arbitrary as the impact is not necessarily dependent on its veracity. However, it is important to recognize that some of these attacks are not unfounded, but rather are based on certain issues of socio-political concern that these commenters are aware of. Thus, one needs some background information to be able to properly appreciate these attacks.

This study draws attention to news sites in Ghana as a platform where the use of verbal attacks against people of higher social status is increasingly becoming the norm. This study, thus, contributes to the emerging body of literature focusing on the language of computer-mediated spaces (Cavasso & Taboada, 2021; Ehret & Taboada, 2020, 2021; Faria, 2023; Marcoccia, 2004). In addition, as a culturally-situated study of online citizen participation and use of verbal attacks, it can serve as a springboard for further research on verbal attacks, not only on the comment sections of news sites in other communities but on social media platforms as well. A major limitation of the present study is its adoption of the qualitative method and a small data set. It is, therefore, recommended that a quantitative or mixed methods approach be considered in further study. Also, it is observed that such platforms generate polarized comments. What this entails is that attacks on chiefs could generate counter-attacks from their supporters, which can serve as an important issue for further research.

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