

# Narratives of Sex and Safe Sex on First Date among Young People in Urban Ghana

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## Abstract

Notions about the repressed sexuality of women in Africa are not new. While some locate it within the confines of culture, others emphasize new possibilities in terms of relevant concepts, e.g., women having agency to shape what happens in sexual relations. In this paper, I investigate young peoples' narratives of sex on a first date (the first time two people go on a date together) and highlight young women's safe sexual practices in Ghana. Women stressed on commitment and to experience closeness in relationship before sex. Men wondered how long should they wait to prove their commitment to women. Gender and love/romance were important triggers that influenced young people to engage in sex on a first date. Although women's sexual practices were located within the confines of hegemonic masculinity, the women had choices to have sex or not to have sex in dating relationships. Since some men do not want to be denied sex, they comply with women's sexual agency. Some designed interventions include to rethink the repressed sexuality of women and highlight their agency to masculinity. There is however the need to engage young people about comprehensive sexuality education using the media and peer programmes in Ghana.

**Keywords:** Youth culture, gender, sexuality, sexual health, youth sexual behaviour, Africa

## Introduction

In this paper, I seek to understand young people's perceptions and experiences of sex and agency of safe sex on a first date, i.e. first time heterosexual romantic appointment. Although young people constitute a critical mass in understanding gender power relations and sexual behaviour in Africa (Agbaje, 2010; Anarfi, 2000; Awusabo-Asare, Biddlecom, Kumi-Kyereme, & Patterson, 2006; GSS, 2015; Kwankye & August, 2007; UNICEF, 2000; Yeboah & Appai, 2017), there is dearth of knowledge about young people's sexual experiences in rapidly changing socio-cultural circumstances in Ghana due to risks of marginalisation in sexuality education. The study offers a perspective from which to understand young people's dating behaviour and particularly highlights interconnections between gender power relations and young women's agency in romantic relationships. Young people face important decisions about relationships and sex.

The controversies about the repressed sexuality of women in Africa are well documented. Anthropologists give us a glimpse into the world of sexuality in early cultures. Anthropologists such as Norman Haire, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Margaret Mead, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Edward Evans-Pritchard, to name just these, were concerned with customs and practices that regulated the sex drive of humans in society. In this era, sex was subjected to different forms of interpretations and the pursuit of sexual desires was dependent upon the extent to which sex was licentious in a particular society (Mead, 1930). For Hans Licht (1932) sexual license were

widespread although societies expected higher moral behaviour of women than men, who were allowed sexual license. Steven Marcus (1964), for example, stressed that sex was seen as a troubling condition best contained within the domain of marriage. Outside this boundary, sex is shrouded in mystery, spoken off in metaphor. Indeed, the most influential explanation for how externally enforced regulations influence sexuality was provided by Michel Foucault in his *History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (1978). Foucault argues that sexuality is a social construction having an existence in a society, and maintained that sexuality was historical (Foucault, 1978).

Overtime, especially in the context of sexual revolution and research, the debate on sexuality has taken different stands. Feminists and gender scholars (e.g., Andrea Cornwall, Audre Lorde, Diana Tietjens Meyers, Patricia Hill Collins, Judith Butler, Kopano Ratele, Michael Kimmel, Raewyn Connell, Richard Howson, and Sylvia Tamale) and some anthropologists (such as Evelyn Reed) emphasize new possibilities for understanding gender and sexuality. The Australian sociologist, Raewyn Connell (2014), for example, makes the clarion call to rethink familiar concepts and methods in masculinity studies in order to open new perspectives and new questions about the subject. Indeed, as Nikki Wedgwood observes there is need to emphasize the importance of non-hegemonic forms of masculinity [*among young men*] in the global south (Wedgwood, 2009; *emphasis added*; see also Kimmel & Mahler, 2003). Thus, while culture may exert some influences on sexuality, it makes sense, therefore, that humans are free to choose their own sexuality (Delgado-Infante & Ofreño, 2014; Fiaveh, 2017; Fiaveh & Okyerefo, 2017; Fiaveh, Izugbara, Okyerefo, Reysoo, & Fayorse, 2015a; Pereira, 2003; Tamale, 2011) although there is dearth of knowledge about how culture empowers the sexuality of young sub-Saharan African women.

### ***Cultured society and youth sexuality in Ghana***

The sexual behaviour of young people is well documented in Ghana (see Anarfi & Owusu 2011; Anarfi, 2000; Awusabo-Asare et al., 2006; Miedema & Oduro, 2017; Van Der Geugten, Van Meijel, Den Uyl, & De Vries, 2013). While there is gendered socialization about sexuality education (the society affords boys and men more sexual options than girls and women), young people in general are not expected to engage in sexual activities when they are unmarried (see Anarfi & Owusu, 2011; Nukunya, 2014). Openly discussing sexual matters is seen as tabooed and indecent (such as discussing one's romantic relationship and direct expression of sexual and reproductive organs in public) although such expectations do not provoke comprehensible sexuality education because of the overemphasis on 'self-control' i.e. abstinence (see Miedema & Oduro, 2017; Van Der Geugten et al., 2013). For women, not appearing too easy to be wooed by a male sexual advances is an important aspect of cultural upbringing in Ghana although cultural restrictions is also based on historical constructs. While young women and men are socialized in different ways about their sexuality and culture affords young men more liberal opportunities to sex than young women, women can also draw on culture (i.e. framing of sexual restrictions or licentious for men) as an agentic strategy to negotiate sex in an ongoing/dating or casual relationships because culture affords them the space to do so.

Studies show for example that exposure to media contents (radio, TV and access to the internet) and experiences with peers influence young people to deconstruct sex and cultural restrictions on sexuality (Bochow, 2012; Fiaveh, 2017; Fiaveh, Okyerefo, & Fayorsey, 2015b; Van Der Geugten, Van Meijel, Den Uyl, & De Vries, 2017). Young adults in general learn via media outlets about [in]appropriate masculine and feminine behaviours and relationship matters such as love/romance, sex, trustworthiness/faithfulness, commitment, spirituality, and fear (e.g., broken heart, depression, anxiety) (see Fiaveh & Okyerefo, 2017; Norona, Olmstead, & Welsh, 2017; Spielmann, MacDonald, Joel, & Impett, 2016; Van Der Geugten et al., 2017) although there is still dearth of knowledge about how young women position themselves in dating sexual behaviours with young men. Drawing on the perceptions and experiences of 20 young Ghanaian women and men, I explored first sex on a dating experience. How do young women and men negotiate sex on a first date?

## **Methods**

### ***Study area***

Participants were drawn from Cape Coast (known locally as ‘Oguaa’ meaning market in Fante), one of the most urbanised municipality in the Central Region of Ghana. Cape Coast has one of the highest rates of sexual activity among young people in Ghana (GSS, 2015).

Cape Coast is about 165km from Accra. It is bounded to the South by the Gulf of Guinea, to the West by Komenda Edina Eguafo Abrem Municipality, to the East by Abura Asebu Kwamankese District and to the North by Twifu Heman lower Denkyira District (GSS, 2014). It is made up of various ethnic groups (Akan, Ewe, Ga, and Mole-Dagbani) from several settlements including Duakor, Effutu, Ekon, Kokoado, Mpaesem, Ola, Pedu, Ankaful Village, Amisano. The others are Abura, Akotokyire, Nkanfoa, Pedu, Ola, Kotokoraba, Bakano, Amamoma, Apewosika, and Kwawpro, Essuekyir. For convenience, participants were drawn from Amamoma (largely Akan groups and heterogenous) and Duakor (urbanized rural community mainly of the Ewe group and homogenous in nature) shares boundaries with Apewosika (among the four communities that shares boundary with University of Cape Coast) and it is just about five (5) minute walk away from the East gate of the University on the Cape Coast-Takoradi Highways. Primarily because of its closeness to the sea, major occupation and main source of livelihood is fishing (for the men although some also work as labourers in the University), fish mongering, and trading (fry and sell gari, a local staple) mainly along the coast. Amamoma shares boundary with the University of Cape Coast. The community is mostly Fante and migrants from the Western, Greater Accra, Ashanti, Volta and Eastern Regions. Because of the community’s proximity to the University of Cape Coast, campus life styles (such as sex and dating behaviours) and economic activities affect those of the local people who are mainly the youth. The community largely engages in trading activities—women and men mostly engage in petty trading and skills work (e.g., hairdressing/barbering/dressmaking and catering services and retail activities) and some few youth are also engaged as labourers (e.g., cleaning and security work) in the University. Some of the workers (both academic and administrative) in the community and its environs also have residencies in Amamoma. Thus in selecting Amamoma by convenience, I am also aware that some of the communities listed in Cape Coast (such as Abora and Kotokoraba) also have similar

characteristics and could serve as alternatives to explore such a study especially in relation to the heterogeneity of the population.

### ***Design, population and procedure***

The study is part of a larger project to understand youth sexual behaviour in Ghana. This initial exploratory study comprised 10 women and 10 men aged between 18-28 years. I used in-depth interviews, informal conversations and group discussions and fieldnotes. As James Clifford observes fieldnotes embody vast activities including textual inscription, participation, observations, and rapport (Clifford, 1990 [31])—such as understand the ‘local’ perceptions and behaviour and able to speak the same language as interviewees. Fieldnotes thus goes beyond textual representations or recording—as James Clifford put, it encompass a rigorous sense of [in]partiality of writing about, against, and among cultures (Clifford, 1986 [32]). The anthropological approach thus emphasizes that in order for a researcher to understand a phenomenon in a given culture, the culture needs to be understood first and language is of critical essence (Clifford, 1986 [32]).

Accidental and purposive sampling techniques with an oral vignette technique were used in recruiting participants. The accidental and purposive sampling techniques were used because of convenience (Bernard, 2006: 191). Due to the sensitive nature of the study, all interviews were conducted by me (March 2016 to June 2017) and were at the convenience of the interviewees. I conducted in-depth interviews (5 women and 2 men), individual informal conversations (5 women and 2 men) and informal group discussions with young 6 men over a bottle of beer and some Scottish Whisky, ‘White Horse’. The women were not willing to discuss their sexual escapades in group although one was willing to do so.

Participation in the informal group discussion was voluntary and accidental (response-driven) and I had no specific criteria for recruiting. Men who wanted to talk about sex were eligible. The average age was 25 years. The discussions did not have any specific time because although it was about sex, occasionally some participants would interject discussion with football fixtures, the champions league and the English premier league in particular. This was because I wanted the discussion to be informal and free-flow. In some instances, we even discussed the true value of volume of alcohol written and contained in the Whisky we were drinking. They loved the idea. Eight of the ‘guys’ (young men) took both beer and the Whisky. Two indicated that they do not take hard liquor nor alcohol in general, hence, preferred Malta Guinness, a soft drink. The essence of indicating what the interviewees took or did not take is to inform the readers about their state of mind, i.e. whether they were tipsy/drunk or not or did not know what they were saying albeit whether there were exaggerations. I cannot deny that the men showcased ‘real’ or ‘ideal’ masculinity at some point, however, as far as I observed, the men felt the issues we discussed were interesting and shared their personal experiences because I afforded them the space to do so—I also shared my sexual escapes with them without necessarily exaggerating. Discussion did not end formally as people left one by one either to ‘go piss’ (visit the wash room) or indicated some form of hunger or watch football.

For the male participants, I began with an oral vignette pretending to be sexually active myself, it was a bit easier. I normally would introduce controversial issue bordering on women, men and sex. For example, 'so, you fit fuck a woman on a first date' [PG English, so can you fuck a woman on a first date]?' or 'masa, some girl be way a fuck yeste paa ino be easy o. I meet am for the Pedu junction there near Goil, masa...' [PG English, I fucked a lady yesterday. I met her at Pedu near the Goal filling station]. Again the approach depended on the demographic profiles of the men. For the young men, the approach was more of sharing my personal experiences over a bottle of beer and Guinness during a football match [such as the English premiersip or champions league or a fixture involving the Ghana Black Stars or even a top local league match such as between Accra Hearts of Oak and Kumasi Asante Kotoko; two popular local clubs].

Informal conversations with women took place in and around university campus and market places especially during my visit to purchase some food stuffs and was accidental. The conversations were introduced in the predominant language of the area. In some instances, I approached a woman asking for her friendship. I began by introducing myself depending upon my profiling of the woman and then attempted in building rapport. Should that fail (because not all women were interested in me as a person or my conversation), I would normally make complementary comments such as 'ebei, ohemaa' (Akan, 'why, my lady'). Some would smile and laugh, others would not border at all because their cultural ethos would not allow them to talk to any stranger they meet in the streets. As part of the socialization in Ghana, people (especially young women) are cautioned not to entertain people they rarely know. These were some of the challenges I had to surmount in search of young female interviewees to discuss sex. Sexual intercourse not necessarily sexual activities were associated with commitment and 'knowing a partner'.

In seven situations where formal individual interviews were held using purposive sampling technique (based on my profiling of the interviewee in terms of their looks, dressing and mannerism), they were conducted in the interviewees' site of preference allowing them to have choice and privacy. Access to male interviewees took place at beer bars and joints, soccer centres, and food joints. To ensure diversity in my sample, I needed to purposively sample individuals with varied demography such as young women and young men who were unmarried, employed and the unemployed, as well as variations in ethnicity, religion.

The central issues discussed were: whether the interviewee has ever gone on a date (probing for gender of the date and reasons for dating and frequency/number of times); their sexual activity, if any, on a first date (probing for kind of sexual activity and reasons) and some of the strategies they utilise to have or not to have sex on a first date.

The anthropological approach to research emphasizes that in order for a researcher to understand a phenomenon in a given culture, the culture needs to be understood first and language is of critical essence (Clifford, 1986). I am fluent in five dominant languages in Ghana: English, Ewe, Twi, Ga, and Hausa. The interviewees had an opportunity to express themselves without the possibility of being misunderstood and without the danger of not finding the appropriate words

in English to express their feelings and meanings about their sexualities. I truly believe that coming from the same background, using PG English and slangs, and speaking the local language was instrumental in achieving the confidence and rapport this study required.

### ***Data analysis***

The narratives were transcribed verbatim and coded with the support of four graduate assistants. The data was analyzed using themes. The first step consisted in systematising the information about demographics of the interviewees in relation to the specific objectives. To control bias, I defined descriptions of thematic categories and resolved meaning discrepancies to ensure data consistency. Three main themes emerged from the interviewees narratives based on the questions I explored namely: constructions of sex, experiences of sex on first date, and healthy sexual practices on first date. The findings were organized in relation to specific objectives and the themes developed.

### **Results**

The interviewees were aged between 18-28 years (Annex 1). The age range can be attributed to the purposive technique adopted in sampling the interviewees. I focused on persons who fall within the legal age of consenting to sexual union in Ghana, i.e., 18 years and above. Hence, the age was due to the demographics of the interviewees who participated in the study. All the interviewees had never been married and some were in steady/dating relationships (Annex 1). This age group also falls within one of the sexually active group reported in Cape Coast, Ghana (GSS, 2014; 2015).

### ***Constructions of sex***

This section discusses young people's socialization and perceptions about sex on a first date.

The young women and men had different perceptions about sex and these were influenced by cultural or religious upbringing, sexual knowledge, education, and past sexual experience. Young women irrespective of their educational background stressed the need for commitment (e.g., marriage, steady relationship, knowing parents of both parties) before sex. While the young men agreed with the women about commitment in relationship, they also questioned the sincerity of commitment—what it takes, duration, and 'women cannot be predicted'—'before you know she dey fuck some stupid guy' [she will have sex with another man behind you]. The interviewees, women and men noted that while family upbringing was instrumental in how they construct sex (in terms of liberal attitudes or being conservative, e.g., sex before marriage is bad/sinful and amounts to fornication), they also acknowledged that the school and the media were instrumental in shaping attitude about sex. They indicated that the stress on acts of moral uprightness and turpitude formed significant aspect of the training they have had.

The concept of the 'Church'<sup>1</sup> in particular 'Sunday School' (for those who identified as Christian)

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<sup>1</sup> The Church is used here to refer to religious principles and indoctrinations of the three main religious traditions in Ghana namely: Christianity, Islam, and Traditional Ghanaian religions.

and 'Makaranta' (basic Arabic education for Mohammedans) were common narratives that the young people noted. The 'Church' emphasized the need for moral constraints and uprightness guided by religious texts and admonishments during attendance to Church activities and the performance of religious rituals such as fasting and prayer and communion (for those who were Christians). Young women upheld higher commitment to religious values than young men because culture affords them to do so. As part of the cultural upbringing in Ghana, although young women and men are socialized to abstain from sex until they are married, the society is more liberal about boys'/men's sexuality than females/women due to patriarchal cultures. Hence, the young women were more cautious about their sexual escapades than their male counterparts in terms of engaging in sex with persons they really know in exhibiting proper femininity. As they put it, 'the body is the temple of God and one has to be weary of that'.

While the media (in particular, TV shows and telenovelas, radio discussions and social media, e.g., WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) offered another window through which young women and men interpreted notions about sex and to experience sex, young people were also cautious about what they regarded as 'negative media'. Thus, the extent to which the young interviewees were freed from all moral constraints (e.g., spirituality of the relationship) was largely determined by their perceptions (*yese yese* translated in Akan as 'they say they say') and interpretations of the media. As two women with different religious orientation and educational background concluded:

Because of my training at home, I don't do that [have sex with a casual partner]. It's against my [Islamic] teachings. I know these days, some girls don't mind. I know right, but this me. I'm a Dagaaba and for us, women, the belief is different. If a guy[man] asks you for sex on a first encounter then you know, he is not a proper one. I'm not 'twotwo' [a prostitute][both laugh uncontrollably]. What is that one too? Fashion or what? It's the TV programmes they watch. TV3, Metro, UTV. They say something is called 'Kumkum Bhagya' [a Hindi-language Indian soap opera which premiered on one of the local TV stations in Ghana]. My father will 'kill' you [Father would't allow her to match such operas] . (R10: woman, 23 years, Muslim, high school).

'There are all these 'sakawa' [a popular construct in Ghana usually used to mean fraudsters] guys. I got a video from WhatsApp where the lady met the guy through Facebook and they started chatting and became friends. They met and had sex for the first time and what happened afterwards....hm. The guy is a 'crazy'. He raped her, tortured her, hm, and all that. (R 13: woman, 28 years, Christian, higher education).

Thus, while parental guidance was crucial in terms of the construction sex among the young people, their notions about sex was constructed around fear of encountering harm as a result of engaging in sex with someone they do not know.

### ***Experiences of sex on first date***

This section is about how the young women and men negotiate with each other in engaging in

first sex or not and the factors that influence such sex decision making. I begin first by discussing young women and men who never engaged in sexual intercourse on their first date and subsequently discussed those who ever had sex on their first date.

Out of the total number of 20 interviewees, 12 (7 women and 5 men) indicated that they never had sex on a first date. While the women indicated that their dates were older men (ranging 25 years to 40 years depending on their own age), the men dated women who were younger than them. These developments is based on cultural values and religious upbringing where men are expected/encouraged to date and marry women they are older than although the trend is changing based on economic and educational considerations.

There were gendered reasons for not engaging in sex on a first date. On the part of the young women, these included culture and religious upbringing[as evident in issues about morality, fear of being labelled as 'cheap'/'loose' or a promiscuous[sex worker], 'broken heart' (disappointment from previous relationship), the 'I barely/really know you factor' (commitment to the relationship or whether they were engaged in other relationships)/'let's get to know each other', 'be sure if he is serious/real', 'to know what he wants from the relationship', 'you don't worry, everything will be fine' [meaning let's postpone sex for now]', and for religious and safety/security reasons and their readiness to engage in sex (not necessarily sexual activities such as kissing). The idea of 'broken heart' had a strong link with young men's strategy to wooing women into sex on a first date. The young men indicated that it is quite easy to have sex with a woman on a first date if she had recently 'broken' [ended] her relationship . They indicated 'girls' are vulnerable in that respect because they want someone to 'lean' on (console them), i.e what some men referred to as 'rebound'. They also mentioned 'small hardship' (financial challenges), how you talk to the person, the manner in which you touch and console the 'lady' (young woman) after she has narrated her ordeal from her previous relationship could also influence sex on a first date. The men were also quick to add that some women who have sex on a first date feel remorseful or regret having done that because they feel the men would perceive them as being 'cheap' especially if they want some commitment from the man afterwards. One man explained:

I know this girl heh, if you approach her, she wants to know your state of mind—if you are in for sex or commitment. If you pretend like you want to date her and start like rushing into sex, she will cut you off. But then if you come with a mindset, with a straight mind that oh like sex, I'm in for sex she will agree with you. There are some girls who only want to have fun and be friends and so immediately you propose to them they will leave you (quit the relationship). They will say they are not ready. [Interviewer: so it means women are different]. Sir [referring to the interviewer], you can't understand them o. [Interviewer: yeah! Even men are the same]. Yeah but women are complicated [difficult to understand]. You think they are this before you realise they are this. (R16: man, 26 years, Christian, higher education).

The women corroborated that they are vulnerable but also had agency to men in that respect. They indicated that they know that they are vulnerable when a partner 'beaks their



heart' (disappoints/cheats on them with another women or deceives them about their love or end the relationship). Hence, they will not engage in another relationship or a date immediately (until 3 months) after the 'break-up'. They said, they would normally use their mantra 'let's be friends' and would not share their past relationship or break-ups' on a first date or tell men 'what they want to hear (lie to the men or not disclose aspects of their past relationships).

You know men right? Sometimes you just have tell them what they want to hear. I think it's a thing about human beings. When you disclose everything about your past to them they tend to use it against you. They will then know that you are like this or like that [will get to know your weakness]. (R12: Woman, 25 years, Christian, high school).

While the men also offered labelling as the main reason for not initiating sexual talks on a first date (e.g., fear of being labelled a 'playboy', i.e., sexually promiscuous), none indicated that a female partner requested for sex or exhibited signs to want to engage in sex on a first date. The women generally (regardless of their religious or cultural upbringing, education, age or sexual experience) do not like men who would pressure them into having sex when they are not ready to do that and the men corroborated that.

The young men indicated that they did not want to create the impression to the women that they [men] were too desperate for sex. Thus, the 'I barely/really know you factor'/'let's get to know each other', 'tomorrow [meaning let's postpone sex to another time]' factors were not influencing factors. Indeed young men's view of engaging in sex on a first date with a woman meant that the woman is promiscuous and tantamount to sex work particularly if the woman demands for some economic favours before giving in to sex. The men indicated that while some women maybe erotic or romantic on a date or engage in some sexual activities (such as kissing; not deep kissing, hag), that does not mean that they want to engage in sexual intercourse, in particular, 'penetrative' sex. This finding is not surprising because of the socialization regimes that characterize boy and girls sexuality in Ghana where boys are socialized to believe that it is 'proper' masculinity for a girl/woman to propose love or indicate sexual overtures to a boy/girl. For fear of encountering negative costs (e.g., ridicule) associated with such improper masculinity, boys/men in most cases seek to uphold such masculine standards.

Five men and 3 women ever had sex on a first date. Generally, choice, romance (eye contact, lips, dress, holding hands, smile) are important triggers for sex on a first date. For the men, the trick is not to necessarily ask for sex bluntly. It comes with the conversation and what you say by way of impressing upon the woman that you are someone she can trust. For instance, your way of dressing, the way you talk to her, showing signs of concern in terms of listening and saying what she expects to hear from you. You need to show compassion, selflessness, and not appearing too aggressive for sex or do anything that would upset the woman or make her 'change her mind'. However, men stressed that upbringing (i.e. conservative or liberal), alcohol (beer and hard liquor), greed (i.e. 'adufode'/'Awuuf' in local slang meaning someone who want's cheap or free things or looks out for favours) and 'times are hard'/hardship (e.g., money and food) are important in determining sex with a woman on a first date. The women agreed that 'women like

money' but also stressed that money per se does not necessarily procure men sexual intercourse on a first date.

They argued 'these things [sex on a first date] come with the conversation and what you say by way of impressing upon the woman that you are someone she can trust'. For instance, your way of dressing, the way you talk to her, showing signs of concern in terms of listening and saying what she expects to hear from you. You need to show compassion, selflessness, and not appearing too aggressive for sex or do anything that would upset the woman or make her 'change her mind'. In fact, the men also largely agreed with the women that while money is important, the issue is more about demeanour and approach than greed per se. Kojo, male artisan, shared his experiences as:

'Don't rush and make it seem like the date is all about sex. It will come naturally. Try and enter her world and don't be too difficult and straightforward. Be gentle. Women easily trust cute guys you know'. (R2: 28 years, Christian, Higher Education).

While one of the six women who ever had sex on a first date corroborated Kojo's assertions and approach, she also added

'Sometimes you can't tell, maybe it's just sex [love] at first sight [for those you meet the first time]. Ei, I mean love at first date. Some guys are good. They are just too sweet [take good care of women financially]. So, sometimes when he wants it [sex], you also wanna do it [have sex with him] but because of our culture it's hard to do that because you don't want to be [appear] 'cheap', you see. We [women] know guys are bad [smart]. Because they want sex, they will tell you all manner of things or yap [deceive] or be too sweet. If I have sex with you, it's because I feel like doing that and not what you say or do per se. (R6: 25 years, Christian, In School).

In terms of location, where the date took place, i.e. one's own residence (any of the parties) although the women indicated that they would hardly invite a guy they really know to their residence or have sex with them. In most cases it was the young men who invited the women to their place of residence. Here again, all the women whether they had sex on a first date or not indicated insecurity of visiting a guy at his place of residence on a first date. In that case then, only three of the male interviewees indicated that their first date took place at their place of residence. The rest of the dates (17) took place at a neutral place, i.e. restaurants, beer bars, food joints, film/theatre, lover's joints on university campuses, and the beach. Due to work activities, most of the date took place in the evening (in between 18:00 and 9:30) and lasted based on the agency of work activities the following day by the interviewees.

### ***Sex on first date, risk and healthy sexual practices***

This section focuses on those interviewees who had sex on a first date; their sexual awareness in relation to healthy sexual practices. The young women and men defined sexual risk to include both social and health risks. Socially, they constructed risk as risk of being dumped after sex, and

contravening cultural/moral/religious/spiritual upbringing. On the other hand, they constructed healthy sexual practices to include practices to prevent sexual risk such as unplanned pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and sexual discomforts.

The young women drew on different strategies including the use of contraception (placed a male condom on the penis and swallowed a pill e.g., postinor, N-tablet) and menstrual 'excuses'. Out of the 5 men who had sex on a first date, 3 used contraception (male condoms, spermicides, and emergency contraception for their female partner). According to one man who used a condom on a first date sex, since he has not dated the partner for long and did not want her to doubt his intention (e.g., misconception of their HIV status or being infected with any STIs), he had no choice than to use a condom to prevent mistrust or for the woman to deny him sex. For the women, all 3 indicated that they used contraception (male condom and emergency oral contraception, i.e. postinor). Although the practices of the young women in terms of oral contraception is a risky practice because they did not know the HIV status of their sexual partners, they however perceived it as agency to the risk of unplanned pregnancy.

While the reasons for using a contraception depended on the willingness of a male partner, it was also influenced by the women's willingness to have sex. This is because they noted that women's sexual interests hinge on several factors including mood and menstrual periods. While some indicated that some women are 'turned-on' for sex during their menstrual period be it a first date or not, others (both women and men) stressed that 'menses' ('flow'/'visitors'/'red flags') offer women the opportunity to deny men sex, in particular, first date sex—'oh, I will just give an excuse that I have my visitor [in my menstrual period] and that ends it'.

For the men who did not use contraception, two claimed that the sexual act was impromptu; they did not expect the woman to give in to sex—I tried my luck'. The other two also noted that they just do not like using condoms, hence, they had no condom with them. When asked whether the willingness to use a condom did influence the women's refusal to have sex with them, they claimed that at some point they had to lie to the women who insisted on the use of condom about their HIV status. **A man aged 28 years confirms the risk young men take in order to have sex with women:**

Masa, me abi professional o [Pidgin English, I am an experienced guy when it comes to fucking women and having unprotected sex and knowing what to do to prevent "small" infections from unprotected sex]. Flush it [onset of infection] out of your system. Don't wait. Every infection begins as a bacteria/small viral infection and spreads to all parts of the body. Why do you think that you can't determine that you are HIV positive until 6 months after your last sexual encounter. There is waiting period where the initial infection develops. So don't wait till it [the perceived infection] develops [becomes severe]. Use strong antibiotics like sey [such as] Amoxicillin/amoxiclav, doxycycline, etc. [Interviewee gives a proverb in Akan that seek to admonish individuals to take opportunity/deal with issues at the initial stages or should not underestimate small beginnings]: Small [toddler] frog if in dey water how you they see am? Black black black. if you take bucket fetch am you see sey you fit fetch am easily

kroaa. [Pidgin English and Akan, it is easier to swoop toddler frogs in water with a bucket but not easy to do same for bigger/matured frogs. It is preferred to deal with issues when they are smaller]. We dey call am 'kokontibaa' [small things/beings but he meant small infections]. But the big frog you see sey you no go fit fetch am like that easily. That be how infections dey. You don't wait till it [infection] develops. Ghanaians by their nature [lifestyles] don't go for checkups. Me, I check my blood pressure, sugar levels, urine, every three months. Once you know sey you 'fuck' raw and no sure of the 'chick' you for take some antibiotics immediately [If you have unprotected sex and you are unsure of the fidelity/trustworthiness of the female partner, you better take some strong antibiotics as safety mechanisms for disease prevention. Do not wait till you experience complications/severity of the situation]. (R 13: Christian, 28 years, higher education).

However, some young men also acknowledged that women are aware about men's sexual escapades (in terms of the desire to put sexual pleasure ahead of safe sexual practices) and that for some women, no 'amount of money or 'yap' (slang, to deceive or make a woman fall in love) can make them have sex on first date without condom'. A young man aged 27 years, for example said that

A[I] remember sey some girlie be like that, I shock sef. See, she come dey ask me HIV status. The way a bore heh. As a tell am I do am, she come dey ask make in see am. Ah ma guy... You wan chop woman see this idiot. Masa ino be easy o. I talk am ma last test [VCT of HIV] be two weeks ago. oh noooo she was just too inquisitive [curious] and [she] wanted to check everything [I once met a very difficult lady who would insist on knowing my HIV status and all that before sex. It took me a hell of a time to convince her]. She read any leaflets [paper containing details of medicine and instructions] in my drawer. I had some used prescriptions [doxycycline and cyprolex] in my drawer somewhere and she even wanted to take the paper [prescription] away. I don't know for what? But I think she would have gone to enquire more what those prescriptions. The time wey I finally convince am sef be another wahala. She they ask me "wats that?" [When I finally persuaded her she was again curious about a scar on my penis and asked "what's that?"]. All these before the game [sex] o maasa! You know we guys always have our style [know how to cajole women]. Masa ion be easy o. Some be wild [some women have sexual awareness about sexual health]. (R18, Muslim, basic education).

The above quote points to the fact that some young women have knowledge and agency about sexually transmitted infections. Though the young woman's agency to sexual risk (about a male partners' sexual escapades/infidelity) was premised on what men tell them, the act (of being inquisitive about a partner's substance use) points to a promising direction of young women's sexual awareness to healthy sexual practices. It also shows that women know that men can have multiple sexual partners and the decision to engage in sex with a man on a first date is based on women's choice.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

In this paper, I have discussed young people's perceptions and experiences of sex on a first date

and highlighted their sexual negotiation strategies in sex decision making on a first date. I am cognisant of the fact that such a methodology oversteps the boundaries of what might normally constitute a sensitive research design (see Fiaveh, 2018). I am guided by the required ethical protocol as well as the standards of professionalism as dictated in the social sciences. The conversations with the young men and some women were based on their informed consent. The young men were willing to share their experience than the women partially because the boys showcased their masculinity of conquering women. On the other hand the women felt that I was invading their privacy, some were shy (e.g., 2 out of the 10) and because they do not want to also show that they are 'too bad'. All the interviewees identified themselves as heterosexuals with interests in erotic sexual relationships. None identified as nymphomaniacs or sadists or masochists or fetishists.

The reasons offered for engaging in sex on a first date or not were gendered and finds social expression in religious and cultural prescriptions as evident in the adherence of religious rituals (such as abstinence from sex when not married and emphasis on spirituality of the relationship) or in other observable cultural ethos such as being perceived as too easy to be wooed by men or give in easily to men's sexual advances.

Age was an important variable that influenced sexual experience and sex decision making with a date and intersected with other multiple variables such as marital status and the likelihood to commitment to a relationship. Young women were less likely to date men who were younger than them than the younger men would although women were also likely to date older men than younger men would. These developments were based on cultural values and religious upbringing where men are expected to date and marry women they are older than although the trend is changing based on economic and educational considerations. For the young women in particular, the age of their date would indicate whether he is either married or committed to another woman in a romantic relationship. Hence, the women who upheld strong commitment to cultural/moral values would not want to engage in sex with men who were married, i.e. 'married men'. This narrative was not common among the young men. The young men except one were not preoccupied with age per se although this does not mean that they would not consider the age of a partner in a steady relationship.

Again, there were no variations in perceptions and the experiences of the young men and women about sex on a first date irrespective of locality/residence. Perhaps this was due to the fact the heterogeneous nature of the study population and the individual interviewees' level of education and contact with the larger society as a result of mobility irrespective of ethnicity and place of residence. Socio-demographics (in particular religious upbringing) and personal demeanour were important triggers that influenced the young women's and men's sexual choices/perceptions and experiences and dating behaviours and willingness to engage in sexual activities on a first date. The media, i.e. TV, radio and social media (for those with access to smartphones), in particular, were sources of the constructions of these reasons and sexual mistrusts. Religious and cultural upbringing (that emphasise moral constraints especially for young women based on notions of 'cheap', 'loose' woman) and perceptions and experiences in dating influence young women's

agency to engage in sexual activities (e.g., kissing, caressing, and sexual intercourse) or not on a first date compared to their male counterparts.

The interviewees, women and men, had varied perceptions and experiences about sex on a first date. Consistent with other studies (e.g., Norona et al., 2017; Spielmann et al., 2016), the findings show that those who never had sex (women in particular) on a first date stressed cultural/religious ethos as well as their personality such as readiness to have sex, fear of being dumped after sex and future relationship orientation (lack trust in men or no confidence, lose interest in intimacy). While men indicated that women like men who will lure them into sex, some also indicated that there are women who want a man to be blunt with them—thus state to them clearly 'what they seek in the date', i.e. whether they only want to have fun (have sex without commitment) or engage in a steady relationship. Women's strategy to men on a date by way of assuring sex after commitment is not only agentic but also offered the men some assurance to stay in the relationship/date.

The readiness to have sex is also located within issues of knowing a partner well (i.e. whether a partner is committed to them or engaged in other relationships such as married or in steady dating relationship). Those who ever had sex on a first date indicated that the dating environment and location (e.g., hotel or one's own residence—the man or the woman) and demeanour of date (e.g., readiness to use contraception) can influence/trigger the extent to which a woman in particular would be willing to engage in sexual activities or not on a first date. Others (women) also stressed that men who demand for sex on a date are not 'proper men' and that such men are not ready for a committed relationship. For the men, 'proper' women do not 'get loose' (easily give in to sex) with men on a first date, although they (men) also believed that having sex on first date does not necessarily indicate that a woman was a 'loose' woman. The men were of the view that some women do not give in easily to male sexual demands especially on first date because women do not want to appear to such men as 'cheap' or 'loose'. While women were of the view 'today's' woman is smarter for contemporary men, the men reiterated 'men will be men', meaning men will always outwit women in intimate sexual relations.

In terms of agency of young people to safe sexual practices, this exploratory study shows that safe sexual practices among young people is premised upon their sexual knowledge and experiences of gender mistrusts. The most used contraception was mainly to prevent unplanned pregnancy not necessarily about the prevention of STIs. Although young men have mistrust as young women, young women are more likely to engage younger men in safe sexual practices than younger men would. Cultural and moral ethos where the society emphasises the chastity of younger women than men and by extension gendered sexual practices and mistrusts largely influenced the young women's safe sexual practices or not (see also Bochow, 2012).

In conclusion, this paper has provided a discussion about the complexities of knowledge and culture as a tool for empowerment (see Collins, 2000; Lorde, 1984; Meyers, 2002; Tamale, 2005) in relation to young people in romantic relationship. Examples were provided which demonstrated that culture per se is not as disempowering to young women's sexuality as popular

knowledge makes it appear. Whereas for young women engaging in sex on a first date can lead to guilt and may influence men's misconception about women's sexuality—being loose, to young men engaging in sex on first date amounts to 'real' masculinity and the conquest of women. Thus, whilst the study agrees with scholars who have suggested the importance of the links among demography (employment, religion, and education), media, and young people's sexuality in Ghana (see Fiaveh, 2017; Kwankye & August, 2007; Van der Geugten et al., 2013), there is however the need to deconstruct misconceptions about the repressed sexuality of women in Africa and to emphasise narratives about women's agency to hegemonic masculinity. It will also be useful to engage young men about comprehensive sexuality education and sexual health using the media and peer programmes as key agents in Ghana. Culture empowers young women's sexuality than young men's.

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**Annex 1** Table 1: Demographic characteristics of interviewees

	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Religion</b>	<b>Dating Relationship</b>	<b>E d u c a t i o n a l background</b>	<b>Economic Status</b>
R#1	F	27	Muslim	Dating	Basic	Trader
R#2	F	26	Christianity	Dating	Secondary Education	Hairdresser
R#3	M	20	Christianity	Dating	Secondary Education	Employed
R#4	M	18	Christianity	Not dating	Secondary Education	In school
R#5	F	26	Christianity	Not Dating	Basic Education	Fismonger
R#6	M	24	Christianity	Dating	Secondary	Shop attendant
R#7	F	28	Christianity	Not Dating	Basic Education	Unemployed
R#8	M	20	Christianity	Not Dating	Secondary Education	In school
R#9	M	24	Christianity	Not Dating	Nursing Training	In school
R#10	F	23	Muslim	Dating	Secondary	Trader
R#11	F	18	Christian	Not dating	Secondary Education	Unemployed
R#12	M	25	Christian	Not dating	Secondary Education	Self-employed
R#13	F	28	Christian	Not dating	Tertiary Education	Self-employed
R#14	M	28	Not religious	Dating	Basic Education	Self-employed
R#15	M	25	Christian	Not dating	Secondary Education	Self-employed
R#16	M	26	Christian	Not dating	Tertiary Education	Self-employed
R#17	F	27	Christian	Not dating	Basic Education	Unemployed
R#18	F	28	Muslim	Dating	Basic Education	Self-employed
R#19	F	19	Christian	Not dating	Secondary Education	Self-employed
R#20	F	26	Christian	Dating	Basic Education	Self-employed

**Note:** basic education is junior high school certificate; secondary includes those with high school certificate; and higher education or tertiary are those with university/polytechnic/vocational/nursing training certificates.