

# JUDITH BUTLER'S GENDER PERFORMATIVITY AND TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENT: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

**Jude Emeka Odoh, PhD**

State University of Medical and Applied Sciences,  
Igbo-Eno, Enugu State, Nigeria  
E-mail: [jude.odo@sumas.edu.ng](mailto:jude.odo@sumas.edu.ng)

**Florence Eke Adejoh, PhD**

Department of Philosophy,  
University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State.  
E-mail: [adejohflorence@gmail.com](mailto:adejohflorence@gmail.com)

**Jetty Joe Odey, PhD**

Department of Philosophy,  
University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State.  
E-mail: [jettyjoodey@gmail.com](mailto:jettyjoodey@gmail.com)

## ABSTRACT

Butler's Gender performativity holds that gender identities are socially constructed and maintained through repeated performances and acts. In this digital age, the rapid advancement in technology has impacted the conception of gender identities. Consequently, online platforms and algorithmic systems mediate and reinforce dominant gender norms via mechanisms like digital surveillance and algorithm bias. The aim of this paper is to examine critically the relationship between Butler's theory of performativity and the ongoing technological advancements with particular reference to how gender identities are created and regulated in the digital age. Employing the critical analytic method of philosophy, this paper argues that digital activism, resistance, and systemic transformation have enormous transformative power for changing normative frameworks and promote equitable digital space and inclusiveness.

**Keywords:** Performativity, Identity, Digital Surveillance, Algorithmic Bias, Digital Activism, Resistance, systemic transformation.

## INTRODUCTION

The era of digital communication has rewritten dramatically the script for the construction, performance and reception of gender identities. With a more integrated global world, digital media have privileged positions in speaking and negotiating identity. Building on the work of Judith Butler's highly influential theory of gender performativity, which suggests that gender is not a natural, biologically coded quality but instead a series of iterated social acts governed by power and discourse, this paper examines how late modern technological infrastructure mediates and reconfigures gender expression.

Butler's model illuminates the ways in which gender is being perpetually reproduced and reinscribed through performative acts, situated within the generalized institutional and cultural context. Under the era of the internet, such contexts are increasingly created by platform topology, algorithmic thinking, data surveillance, and content moderation regimes.

Consequently, gender performance is not achieved through interpersonal contact but it is carried out through coded form, digital footprints and mediated communication.

The focus of this paper is to analyse the relationships between digital technology and gender performativity. The details of how digital platforms reify and challenge patriarchal gender norms is also critically examined. This paper argues that in as much as algorithmic architecture and platform governance replicate dominant heteronormative forms, they also serve as spaces where minority identities serve as sites for subversion, active resistance, systemic transformation and rearticulation. Hence, active resistance, systemic change, digital activism and performative agency have the potential to severely change normative paradigms and promote inclusive digital space. The paper contributes to the current literature on gender, identity and digital culture. Furthermore this paper argues that digital activism, resistance, and systemic transformation have enormous transformative power for changing normative frameworks and promote equitable digital space and inclusiveness.

## **GENDER PERFORMATIVITY**

Butler is especially famous for her use of the term "gender performativity." Her work over decades has refined this model. The volumes that deal most directly with it include *Gender Trouble* (1990), *Bodies That Matter* (1993), and *Undoing Gender* (2004). Butler wishes to refute "essentialist" notions of gender which claim that male and female bodies should play roles which the other should not, these bodies have a natural attraction to each other, and masculinity and femininity are innate biologically or naturally (Butler, 2004). Butler had witnessed firsthand how such assumptions often made life unbearable for those who could not fit into gendered norms, even within feminist circles themselves. But Butler grew up into homosexual and lesbian groups. She accordingly embarked on contesting the view that representations of contemporary masculinity and femininity also serve as norms for acceptable gender conduct. Butler proceeds to outline the miscommunication that exists between what "is" and what "should be" regarding gender "norms", (Anna, 2022) which malcommunication prevents one from conceptualizing or even imagining other ways of living possibilities (Anna, 2022). Butler thus set about challenging the view that contemporary masculinity and femininity are represented as guidelines for correct gender behavior (Anna, 2022).

Butler accounts for this ambiguity between what "is" and what "ought to be" regarding gender "norms" (Butler, 2015). Due to this ambiguity, some individuals cannot even think about or consider possibilities of living differently. "Masculinity and femininity" determine a married couple as an individual who is viewed positively by the society (Butler, 2015).

Butler saw gender function in this way: "When a child is called a 'girl' or a 'boy' it is already situating the child in a certain relation to cultural norms" (Butler, 2015). When we refer to ourselves or others with terms like "man" or "woman," we are, in part, outlining and constructing such categories. Whereas most theories of gender distinguish between biological and social "gender," Butler does not think it is worth the trouble. She considers it absurd to refer to biological "sex" in any way that does not have something to do with its social meanings. If it exists, we cannot perceive such a thing because we are socialized in a culture that ascribes gender to everything—like physical characteristics—and then interprets retrospectively those things (Butler, 2015). We cannot even know ourselves independent of those social connotations. Butler's writing does, indeed, often remind us that we are never really aware of who we are (Butler, 2015).

Here, Butler is frequently accused of believing that gender can be chosen at birth, or at least that gender is only a matter of words and has nothing to do with the body. Butler however does not think this at all. She states that behaviour is one component in the definition of gender, but also greatly embedded speech patterns (Butler, 2015). The ways in which we dress in specific ways, exercise in specific ways, display specific body language, visit specific doctors, and on and on (Butler, 2015). Put another way, layer upon layer, the statement of gender occurs over and over and again until it seems obvious. She continues to reiterate the idea that gender norms are, indeed, fluid across time and that gender definition and construction can never be completed because they must continually be reiterated (Butler, 2015). That would suggest we can never perform them precisely "right," and that when we stop doing them or do them in other ways, we contribute to their changing, which, she says, opens up possibilities for gender transformation (Butler, 2015). These are, indeed, hard ideas to think with because they run against some of our most deeply held assumptions regarding language, gender, and identity (Butler, 2015). Part of why Butler's work is thought to be "complicated" but nonetheless part of some of the most favored reads on gender (Butler, 2015) has been because of this.

According to Michael Foucault, power functions through subtle mechanisms, shaping the behaviours of individuals. This aligns with gender performativity in the sense that power dynamics can influence how individuals perform and express their gender (1977). Similarly, Gillespie Deleuz's conceptualization of identity as a means or process of becoming that enables individuals to constantly negotiate and define their identities. This view further clarifies how technology enhances new forms of gender expression and identity construction (1994). Furthermore, Julia Kristeva's subject-in-process which holds that the subject is in a constant state of flux and negotiating between varied identities and positions demonstrate how technology can facilitate multiple gender and fluid identities (1984). In the digital age, the concept of gender performativity has become important, particularly in digital environment where acts of performativity are usually molded and limited by technological systems.

## **TECHNOLOGY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY**

The construction of identity occurs as soon as one participates in digital space. At this instance, the individual begins communication. The question that arises naturally at this point becomes, who is the communication being done with? is the communication done with another person or a virtual identity? As soon as we begin using digital content we come to the *chatbot* – the human principle, versus the digitally recorded one, this brings a novel perspective of research, particularly at the level of the formation of digital identity (Deh & Glođović, 2018). In the digital space, the division between mind and body becomes accepted in the digital space. The whole idea of bodiless principle of digital space divides the personality of the person participating in the digital space in a way. This is because, apart from the profile of the person uses to participate in the digital space, the person could be using a life that is poles apart that may be conscious of that fact or not (Deh & Glođović, 2018).

Digital space affords one the opportunity to perform oneself through the creation of content such as information, images, representations of oneself, interests, activities, in other words. In the process of creating this virtual identity, one experiences loneliness. The creation of this virtual identity can activate the design of an identity that renounces its authenticity. The relation between online and offline identities is truly the key to defining oneself in digital time, which would in the psychological terms be co-construction of oneself. In as much as this virtual space is very rich in information and durability it attacks the intimacy of the individual, leaving a smaller space for intimacy and secrets which are very relevant areas of vulnerability of each individual (Deh & Glođović, 2018).

For Haraway, technology has brought about novel forms of identity and expression. This automatically blurs the lines between humans and machines. This concept of Cyborg can be understood as a symbol of the fluid and hybrid nature of gender identity in this digital age (1991). In another sense, the idea of simulation that holds that technology has created a world of simulation that makes it possible for identities and realities to be constructed and manipulated. This shows how technology is both a tool that can empower and disembowel individuals in their gender performance or expression (Baudrillard, 1994).

Lacan on the other hand, argues that identity is created through what he refers to as the mirror stage which helps individuals recognize themselves as unified and coherent. However, technology can distort this process, bringing about opportunities for identity formation and expression (1977). As for De Beauvoir, embodiment is relevant in shaping how we understand gender and identity. In other words, technology can challenge traditional conceptions of embodiment, enhancing new types of gender expression and identity formation (1949).

Current performative stages are digital platforms where identity is curated and demonstrated. But these platforms are not neutral. The algorithms of these digital platforms are constructed based on cultural and historical datasets that usually show dominant norms (Techtranslator, 2024). For instance, social media platforms such as Tiktok, Instagram, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter) advance some visual aesthetics and behavioural patterns, ingeniously reinforcing binary gender roles. Furthermore, digital surveillance activities promote what Foucault refers to as panopticism. This happens when users are conscious that they are being monitored usually conform to the digital platform anticipation in order to stay visible or to avoid penalization (Conrad, 2009).

## **ALGORITHMIC BIAS AND THE REPRODUCTION OF NORMS**

Algorithms are central to all computer systems, most especially autonomous ones. Generally, algorithms form the mind or engine room of autonomous systems. Autonomy demands capabilities to adapt and respond to new, usually ill-defined environments and contexts. Without algorithms the operations of hardware and other software components of technological systems would be impossible. In particular, we focus here on learning, context detection, and adaptation algorithms for autonomous systems, despite of whether the algorithms are used in training and development, or in real-time system activity, or in both regimes (David Danks & Alex John London, 2017).

In countless circumstances, our focus has been on autonomous systems specifically because they lack some of the imperfections that are common to humans. For instance, a self-driving vehicle cannot fall asleep at the wheel, or become distracted by background music. If autonomous systems are to be better versions of us (at least, for some tasks), then we should reasonably seek to employ the most impartial algorithms that we can (David Danks & Alex John London, 2017).

Notwithstanding this desire, several sophisticated issues have provoked a mounting debate about the possibility, or probability even inevitability, of *algorithmic bias*: generally, this means that an algorithm is, in some sense, not simply a neutral transformer of data or extractor of information. There has been growing concern about algorithmic bias on public discussion on technology as well as prevalent concerns about “bias” (of one form or another) in Google searches, Facebook feeds, applications such as FaceApp, and other algorithmic systems.

Furthermore, there is a swiftly growing scholarly literature about algorithmic biases, as well as technological techniques to attempt to lessen it (David Danks & Alex John London, 2017).

The likelihood of algorithmic bias is predominantly irritating for autonomous or semi-autonomous systems. This is because it does not necessarily need a human “in the loop” who can find out and pay off for biases in the algorithm or model. Since the workings of systems are becoming more complex it is gradually becoming impenetrable to users. This will become a challenge to the very idea of human monitoring for bias. In as much as autonomous systems could be said to be unbiased they could however use impartial algorithms that do considerable do some harm and get unobserved and uncorrected (David Danks & Alex John London, 2017).

According to Virilio, technology has brought about a world of speed and control, creating room for individuals to be regulated and surveilled. This demonstrate the capacity of technology to constrain individual expression and reinforce traditional power dynamics (1997). As for Lyotard, (1984) technology has created a postmodern situation that allows for grand narratives and meta narratives are challenged. This shows how multiple and fluid gender identities can be facilitated by technology.

Several study which have demonstrated that algorithmic systems can unconsciously create replica of structural inequalities. For instance, facial recognition systems have greater possibility of error rates for women and people of colour owing to biased training data (Techtranslator, 2024). In the same vein, virtual assistants such as Alexa or Siri which were feminized and designed to be submissive, helpful, polite, and reinforcing conventional gender stereotypes. The fact is that, these artifacts not only reflect societal norms, they actively mold and create identities that are considered intelligible, the ones that are marginalized, and the ones that are methodically barred from digital participation.

## **THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER IDENTITY AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY**

There is a need for an ethical and political response to the dynamic change happening with the co-production of gender identity and digital technology. This co-production of gender identity and digital technology is a mix of how digital technology influences the expression and perception of gender identities and how social practices form the development and use of digital systems. This reciprocal interaction is encrusted with digital infrastructures that encode, reinforce and challenge sometimes current gender standards. Consequently, any attempt to critically engage with this interplay demands the consideration of the complex interplay of power, identity, agency, and technological blueprint (Wajcman, 2007).

The facts as demonstrated above show that biometric technologies, AI-driven personalization tools, recommendation algorithms, and social media platforms are not neutral. They usually mirror the assumptions, priorities, and biases of the developers, founded in dominant sociocultural contexts. Specifically, gender standards are usually fixed in the logics of these systems, perhaps, through binary classification of users, removal of non-normative identities, or the strengthening of label-content through algorithmic curation (Noble, 2018; D’ignazio & Klein, 2020). These limitations can stop self-expression, perpetuate exclusion, and strengthen current hierarchies. Notwithstanding the fact that these technologies create numerous limitations, they also provide new ways of creating resistance, subversion and redefinition.

## **RESISTANCE, SUBVERSION, AND DIGITAL ACTIVISM**

Since the nature of digital space is fluid, it can enhance individuals to investigate, negotiate, and perform gender in ways and means that confront the unchanging nature of traditional categories. For instance, fake online profiles, digital art, online avatars, and virtual communities afford platforms for experimenting with identity further than the limitations of the human body or biological essentialism or the expectations of the society (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Furthermore, gender-nonconforming individuals such as Trans, non-binary individuals have, in several occasions, taken advantage of digital spaces to seek solidarity, voice, visibility, and oppose removal while also asserting their presence.

Digital spaces can also promote resistances. In recent times, there were different movements such as the #metoo and #Niunamenos which have demonstrated how marginalized group employ platforms to fight dominant narratives and organize collective action (Toxigon, 2024a). These campaigns online employ performative tactics such as storytelling, hastags, digital art to reconstruct the visibility of oppressed identities and to contest algorithmically maintained silences. Through the creation of different narratives, digital activism reflects the subversive potential butler associates with performance.

This is where Butler's theory of performativity becomes very relevant. She conceives gender as unstable identity but repeated acts of performance. These acts according to her produce the appearance of a consistent gender identity, nevertheless, this identity is usually vulnerable to disorder. Furthermore, she argues that that performance embodies the seeds of subversion. Similarly, in digital spaces where bodily presence are usually hidden and self-presentation is made possible through text, image, and code, the capacity for such rebellious or subversive performances is escalated (Cover, 2003).

Nonetheless, subversion as proposed by Butler is not enough as a single solution to gender essentialism. Individual resistance and creative expression can oppose standards, they do not immediately transform into structural change. As a matter of fact, digital platforms usually co-opt and commodify dissent or rebellion by packaging countercultural aesthetics into trends that are marketable without changing the foundational systems of control and exclusion (Dean, 2010). This fact highlights the necessity for broad-spectrum structural reforms in how technologies are created, governed, and experienced. In other words, ethical engagement with gender and technology has to go beyond individual empowerments to systemic transformation.

## **SYSTEMIC TRANSFORMATION AND REFORMS**

A major reform that could go a long way in the creation and deployment of inclusive data sets. It is common knowledge that machine learning and AI systems rely serious on data employed to train them. The data enable algorithms to categorize, predict, and respond. As far as these datasets are impartial either through underrepresentation of marginalized groups or the addition of discriminatory historical data, the system produced from these datasets perpetuate injustice. For instance, facial recognition technologies have been proven to misidentify people of colour and gender-nonconforming individuals at a very high rate than white users (Buolamini & Gebu, 2018). Such inequalities are not simply technical errors; they are reflections of deeper knowledge and social exclusions.

To create inclusive datasets, there is need for adding diversity to current pools as well as rethinking the classifications, assumptions, and values that bring about data collection. There

is need for participatory ways of dealing with the problem that is focused on making heard the voices of the people most affected by algorithm harm (Costanza-Chock, 2020). For instance, communities of trans and non-binary have to be actively part of determining how gender is represented in technological systems.

Apart from training AI systems with impartial datasets, there is need for transparency and accountability in algorithmic governance. Presently, several algorithms operate as 'blackboxes' making their decision processes opaque from public examination (Pasquale, 2015). This obscurity creates challenges as regards resisting biased results or challenging to understand how systems reinforce particular standards. It also weakens democratic control and informed consent. Transparent governance has to do with opening up algorithmic systems for examination, helping users and auditors to follow through the process of how inputs bring about outputs. It demands clear means for addressing harms whenever they take place.

Furthermore, this transparency should reflect ethical reflexivity and social accountability rather than being reduced to technical and legal documentation and disclosure (Benjamin, 2019). The end users particularly, marginalized groups have to be carried along in the processes of conception, design, and examination of technologies. This is in order to avoid treating users as passive recipients of innovation. Participatory design identifies them as co-creators with relevant knowledge and experience (Bodker, 1996). This aligns with the view of Haraway (1988) on feminist epistemologies that highlight contextual knowledge, mutual respect, and collective agency.

## **CONCLUSION**

Butler's concept of performativity provides a robust framework for unpacking the complex dynamics and interplay between gender identity and technological advancement. Even though digital technologies and platforms usually reproduce dominant gender norms through algorithmic bias and surveillance, they also open spaces for resistance and self-assertion. Going forward, digital gender identity depends on both performative agency and collective rethinking of technological systems that enhance different expressions of self. Consequently, this paper argues that performative agency, digital activism, resistance, and systemic transformation hold enormous transformative power for changing normative frameworks and promote equitable digital space and inclusiveness.

## REFERENCES

- Banet-Weiser, S. (2018). *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*. Duke University Press.
- Benjamin, R. (2019). *Race after technology: Abolitionist tools for the new Jim code*. Polity Press.
- Bødker, S. (1996). Creating conditions for participation: Conflicts and resources in systems development. *Human-Computer Interaction*, 11(3), 215–236.
- Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacres et simulation*. Galilée.
- Buolamwini, J., & Gebru, T. (2018). Gender shades: Intersectional accuracy disparities in commercial gender classification. *Proceedings of Machine Learning Research*, 81, 1–15.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing gender*. Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2015). *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Conrad, D. (2009). Surveillance, gender, and the virtual body in the information age. *Surveillance & Society*, 6(4), 380–387. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/40228576\\_Surveillance\\_Gender\\_and\\_the\\_Virtual\\_Body\\_in\\_the\\_Information\\_Age](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/40228576_Surveillance_Gender_and_the_Virtual_Body_in_the_Information_Age)
- Costanza-Chock, S. (2020). *Design justice: Community-led practices to build the worlds we need*. MIT Press.
- Cover, R. (2003). The metaphor of “queer technologies.” *Continuum*, 17(3), 301–312.
- Dean, J. (2010). *Blog theory: Feedback and capture in the circuits of drive*. Polity Press.
- De Beauvoir, S. (1949). *The Second Sex*. Translated by H.M. Parshley. Vintage Books.
- Deh, D., Glodović, D., The Construction of Identity in Digital Space, *AM Journal*, No. 16, 2018, 101–111.
- Deleuze, G. (1994). *Difference and Repetition*. Translated by P. Patton. Columbia University Press.
- D’Ignazio, C., & Klein, L. F. (2020). *Data Feminism*. MIT Press.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline And Punish: The Birth Of The Prison*. Translated by A. Sheridan. Vintage Books.
- Fraser, N. (1997). *Justice interruptus: Critical reflections on the "postsocialist" condition*. Routledge.
- Haraway, D. (1991). *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge.

- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575–599.
- Hooks, B. (1981). *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women And Feminism*. South End Press.
- Kristeva, J. (1984). *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Translated by M. Waller. Columbia University Press.
- Lacan, J. (1977). *Écrits: A Selection*. Translated by A. Sheridan. Routledge.
- Lyotard, J-F. (1984). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report On Knowledge*. Translated by G. Bennington and B. Massumi. University of Minnesota Press.
- Nakamura, L. (2002). *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*. Routledge.
- Noble, S. U. (2018). *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. NYU Press.
- Pasquale, F. (2015). *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money And Information*. Harvard University Press.
- TechTranslator. (2024, November 16). *The Algorithmic Performance Of Identity*. <https://jjstechtransformations.wordpress.com/2024/11/16/the-algorithmic-performance-of-identity/>
- Toxigon. (2024a). *The impact of Digital Activism on Feminism*. <https://toxigon.com/the-impact-of-digital-activism-on-feminism>
- Toxigon. (2024b). *Digital Activism: Empowering Women And Creating Change Online*. <https://toxigon.com/digital-activism-empowering-women>.
- Szorenyi Anna, *The Philosophy of Judith Butler. Pt. 1*. <https://theconversation.com/judith-butler-their-philosophy-of-gender-explained-192166>. Accessed July, 2022
- Shaw, A. (2014). The internet as a site of identity formation and performance. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17(6), 641-656.
- Virilio, P. (1997). *Open sky*. Translated by J. Rose. Verso Books.
- Wajcman, J. (2007). From women and technology to gendered technoscience. *Information, Communication & Society*, 10(3), 287–298.