

Performing Gender Online: A Butlerian Analysis of Gender Performativity on Social Media

Introduction

Social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram are frequently celebrated as spaces in which traditional gender norms are destabilised, offering users unprecedented freedom to experiment with identity, appearance, and self-expression. Through short-form videos and curated images, individuals appear able to craft highly personalized presentations of gender that seem to resist older, more rigid expectations of masculinity and femininity. Popular discourse surrounding these platforms often frames them as sites of empowerment, authenticity, and self-definition, particularly for those whose gender expressions fall outside dominant norms. Within academic and journalistic commentary alike, digital spaces are often positioned as progressive arenas in which gender is loosened from its historical constraints and opened to playful reinvention.

However, such interpretations risk misunderstanding both the nature of gender and the conditions under which it becomes socially recognisable. While social media may expand the range of visible gender expressions, visibility alone does not equate to liberation from normative power. The performances that circulate most successfully online are rarely arbitrary or unconstrained; instead, they are shaped by platform aesthetics, algorithmic incentives, and the expectations of imagined audiences. Gendered self-presentation in digital contexts is therefore neither purely expressive nor wholly self-determined, but deeply embedded within social and technological structures that regulate recognition.

Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, this essay challenges the assumption that social media enables a straightforward liberation from gender norms. For Butler, gender is not a stable inner essence expressed outwardly, nor is it a freely chosen performance that can be altered at will. Rather, gender is produced through the repeated stylisation of the body within a highly rigid regulatory framework, coming to appear natural through repetition and social recognition.¹ Gendered subjects do not pre-exist these norms; instead, they are constituted through them. Crucially, performances of gender must remain intelligible within existing cultural frameworks in order to be recognised as meaningful, legitimate, or even visible.

This essay argues that social media platforms function as contemporary regulatory frameworks that intensify, rather than dissolve, gender norms. Through algorithmic visibility, audience recognition, and the repetition of stylised gendered aesthetics, platforms such as TikTok and Instagram reward coherent and recognisable forms of gender performance while marginalising or disciplining those that fall outside dominant expectations. Even performances that appear subversive or transgressive are often constrained by the need for intelligibility and recognition, limiting their capacity to destabilise normative gender structures in a sustained way. The essay will begin by outlining Butler's account of gender performativity, before analysing social media as a site of gender regulation, repetition, and limited resistance.

Judith Butler and Gender Performativity

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity emerged as a critical intervention into feminist theory and broader philosophical accounts of subjectivity. Writing in response to both liberal feminist assumptions about a stable category of "woman" and biological essentialist accounts of

¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990)

sex difference, Butler challenges the idea that gender is a natural or pre-social attribute. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler argues that gender is not something one simply is, but something one does repeatedly within socially sanctioned limits. Her work destabilises the assumption that sex precedes gender, suggesting instead that even the category of biological sex is interpreted and stabilised through gendered norms.²

Central to Butler's argument is her definition of gender as "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory framework that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance".³ Gendered acts—modes of dress, gesture, speech, and bodily comportment—are repeated so consistently that they come to appear natural, inevitable, and expressive of an inner truth. However, Butler insists that this appearance of naturalness is an effect of repetition rather than evidence of an underlying essence.

A crucial distinction in Butler's work is that between performance and performativity. While performance might imply a conscious act undertaken by a pre-existing subject, performativity refers to the way in which repeated acts bring the subject itself into being. As Butler explains, "gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be".⁴ There is no gendered subject prior to the performance of gender; rather, the subject is produced through the reiteration of gender norms. This insight challenges the notion that individuals can simply choose to adopt or discard gender identities at will, a common misinterpretation of Butler's work that is explicitly cautioned against in the module lectures.

Butler's theory is deeply influenced by Michel Foucault's account of power as productive rather than merely repressive. Rather than viewing power as something imposed externally upon an otherwise free subject, Butler emphasises that power operates through norms that shape the very conditions of subjectivity. Gender norms function as regulatory frameworks that delineate what counts as intelligible gender, establishing the boundaries of recognisability. To be recognised as a viable social subject, one's gendered performance must align with these norms to a sufficient degree.

Recognition is therefore central to gendered existence. Butler highlights the precariousness of gendered life, noting that performances which fall outside normative frameworks risk exclusion, ridicule, or violence. Gender norms are thus both enabling and constraining: they make social existence possible while simultaneously limiting the range of liveable identities.⁵ This tension between constraint and possibility is essential for analysing how gender operates in contemporary digital environments, where visibility and recognition are intensified.

Social Media as a Contemporary Regulatory Framework

Social media platforms can be understood as contemporary regulatory frameworks that structure gendered performances through mechanisms of visibility, repetition, and evaluation. Although platforms such as TikTok and Instagram present themselves as neutral spaces for creativity and self-expression, their design and governance shape the forms of gender that are most likely to be seen, shared, and rewarded. Algorithmic systems prioritise content that generates engagement, often favouring performances that conform to established aesthetic and cultural norms.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

Within these platforms, gendered performances are continuously assessed through metrics such as likes, comments, shares, and follower counts. These metrics function as forms of social recognition, signalling which performances are successful and which fail to gain traction. In Butlerian terms, recognition is not merely affirming but constitutive: it stabilises particular gendered identities through repeated validation. Performances that align with dominant norms of femininity or masculinity are more likely to be amplified, while those that challenge or complicate these norms risk marginalisation or invisibility.

The regulatory power of social media operates in a diffuse and decentralised manner, reflecting Foucault's account of disciplinary power. Rather than enforcing norms through explicit prohibition, platforms encourage conformity through reward structures that make certain performances more desirable. This form of regulation is particularly effective because it appears self-directed; users may experience their gendered self-presentations as authentic choices, even as these choices are shaped by platform norms and audience expectations.⁶

Social media thus intensifies the regulatory frameworks described by Butler. The constant demand for visibility encourages users to refine and repeat gendered performances that have already proven successful. Over time, this repetition contributes to the naturalisation of particular gender aesthetics, reinforcing the illusion that they reflect an inner truth rather than a socially conditioned performance. Far from dissolving gender norms, social media often amplifies their reach and durability.

Repetition, Intelligibility, and the Performance of Authenticity

Repetition is a defining feature of gender performance on social media. Trends, challenges, and aesthetic styles circulate rapidly, encouraging users to reproduce similar forms of dress, movement, speech, and bodily presentation. These repetitions exemplify Butler's claim that gender congeals through iteration, acquiring the appearance of naturalness through sustained performance. The prevalence of recognisable gendered aesthetics demonstrates how repetition stabilises norms rather than disrupting them.

Gender intelligibility plays a crucial role in this process. Butler argues that for a gender to be intelligible, it must align coherently with prevailing norms linking sex, gender, desire, and practice.⁷ On social media, intelligibility is often tied to aesthetic coherence. Performances that clearly signal femininity or masculinity according to dominant cultural codes are more easily categorised, understood, and rewarded. In contrast, performances that blur or disrupt these codes may be dismissed as confusing, excessive, or inauthentic.

The emphasis on authenticity within influencer culture further obscures the constructed nature of gender. Content creators frequently frame their gendered self-presentations as expressions of an inner, authentic self, reinforcing the belief that gender precedes its performance. Butler's theory challenges this narrative by revealing authenticity itself as a performative effect. What appears authentic is often simply what has been repeated and recognised often enough to appear natural.⁸ Social media thus plays a significant role in reproducing the illusion of stable gender identity that Butler seeks to dismantle.

This dynamic highlights the productive power of social media norms. By encouraging repetition and rewarding intelligibility, platforms contribute to the ongoing production of gendered subjects

⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998)

⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*

⁸ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London: Routledge, 1993)

whose identities feel self-evident but are in fact the result of sustained performative labour. Gender on social media is not merely represented; it is actively produced through regulatory mechanisms that shape what can be seen and recognised.

Subversion, Resistance, and Their Limits

Butler's account of performativity allows for the possibility of subversion through the repetition of gendered acts in unexpected or parodic ways. On social media, such subversive performances are often associated with nonbinary, gender-fluid, or deliberately non-normative presentations. Increased visibility of these performances can challenge the assumption that gender is naturally binary or fixed, exposing its contingent and constructed character.

However, Butler cautions against viewing subversion as inherently liberatory. Because all gendered performances depend on existing norms for their intelligibility, acts of resistance are always constrained by the frameworks they seek to challenge.⁹ On social media, this constraint is particularly pronounced. Even subversive performances must attract recognition in order to gain visibility, often requiring them to adopt familiar aesthetic cues or narratives that render them intelligible to dominant audiences.

As a result, subversion is frequently reabsorbed into normative structures. Performances that initially appear disruptive may be commodified, aestheticised, or incorporated into mainstream trends, losing their critical force. This process reflects Butler's claim that power produces the conditions of its own contestation, managing resistance through incorporation rather than suppression. Social media therefore offers limited scope for sustained gender subversion, as visibility itself remains governed by normative frameworks of recognisability.

Gender, Normativity, and Theological Reflection

Although this essay has focused primarily on social media through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the analysis also raises important questions for the study of Bible and Theology. Christian theological traditions have long been invested in questions of gender, embodiment, and normativity, often grounding gender roles and sexual difference in appeals to divine creation, natural order, or scriptural authority. Butler's insistence that gender is not a pre-social essence but a performative effect of repeated norms challenges theological assumptions that treat gender as a fixed and God-given attribute of the human subject.

From a theological perspective, Butler's work invites renewed scrutiny of how claims about "biblical" or "natural" gender roles are produced and sustained. Just as this essay has shown that social media platforms regulate gender through repetition, recognition, and intelligibility, theological discourses can also be understood as regulatory frameworks that shape which forms of gendered life are deemed legitimate, moral, or faithful. Appeals to scripture do not operate outside power; rather, they are interpreted, repeated, and authorised within particular historical and institutional contexts. Butler's theory thus resonates with critical biblical scholarship that emphasises the historically situated nature of scriptural interpretation and the role of tradition in stabilising meaning.

Moreover, Butler's account of performativity complicates simplistic readings of biblical texts that assume a direct correspondence between bodily sex and social role. While many theological traditions have treated gender difference as an expression of divine intention, Butler's analysis suggests that what appears as natural or ordained may in fact be the effect of sustained social

⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*

repetition. This does not necessarily require theology to abandon claims about creation or embodiment, but it does challenge theologians to reflect critically on how norms are enforced, who is rendered intelligible within theological frameworks, and whose lives are marginalised or excluded.

The emphasis on recognition is particularly relevant for theological ethics. In Butler's work, recognition is a precondition for liveable life; subjects who fall outside normative frameworks risk invisibility or violence. Similarly, Christian ethics has increasingly grappled with questions of inclusion, dignity, and the recognition of marginalised identities, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality. The analysis of social media presented in this essay demonstrates how visibility alone is insufficient if recognition is conditional upon conformity to dominant norms. This insight can inform theological discussions about hospitality, embodiment, and the moral responsibilities of religious communities toward those whose gendered lives challenge established expectations.

Finally, Butler's scepticism toward celebratory narratives of subversion offers a cautionary lesson for contemporary theological engagement with culture. Just as digital spaces may reproduce norms under the guise of freedom, theological discourses that claim to affirm diversity may still operate within unexamined frameworks of intelligibility. Butler's work encourages theology not merely to include new identities within existing structures, but to interrogate the structures themselves. In this sense, Butler provides Bible and Theology with a critical tool for examining how gender norms are constructed, justified, and sustained, both within religious traditions and in the wider cultural contexts in which those traditions are lived.

Conclusion

Using Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, this essay has argued that social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram do not simply liberate gender expression but function as powerful regulatory frameworks that shape, normalise, and intensify gender norms. Through repetition, recognition, and the demand for intelligibility, these platforms contribute to the production of gendered subjects whose identities appear natural and authentic. While digital spaces may expand the visibility of diverse gender expressions, this visibility remains constrained by normative structures that limit the transformative potential of subversion.

Crucially, the apparent openness of social media should not be mistaken for an absence of power. Instead, power operates through diffuse and often imperceptible mechanisms that reward coherent, recognisable, and aesthetically legible gender performances. In this context, gender norms are not imposed through direct prohibition but are sustained through systems of visibility, validation, and circulation that encourage subjects to repeat particular stylisations of the body. As Butler's work makes clear, such repetition does not merely reflect identity but actively produces it, reinforcing the illusion that gender is an inner truth rather than a socially conditioned effect.

The analysis also demonstrates the ambivalent status of subversion within digital spaces. While social media enables the circulation of non-normative and marginalised gender expressions, these performances remain dependent on existing frameworks of intelligibility in order to be seen and recognised. As a result, practices that initially appear resistant are frequently absorbed into normative and commercial logics, reducing their capacity to unsettle dominant gender structures in a sustained way. This highlights the limits of visibility-based politics and cautions against overly optimistic accounts of digital gender liberation.

Ultimately, Butler's theory remains a vital analytical tool for understanding how contemporary cultures of visibility produce gender through performative means. By foregrounding the roles of repetition, regulation, and recognition, Butler enables a critical examination of how gender norms persist even in spaces that promise freedom and self-expression. Social media, far from existing outside power, exemplifies the ongoing process through which gender is made, managed, and naturalised in late modern culture.

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