

# GENDER FLUIDITY AND THE REIMAGINATION OF IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA.

Dandak, Veronica B.<sup>1\*</sup>, Paulina Shittu Gaude-Jiwul<sup>2</sup> & Luka Jacob Jiwul<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Political Science, University of Jos, Jos, Nigeria;  
[verabondandak@gmail.com](mailto:verabondandak@gmail.com).

<sup>2</sup> Department of Business Studies, Faculty of Arts, Management, and Social Sciences, Karl Kumm University, Vom-Nigeria; [paulinashittu@gmail.com](mailto:paulinashittu@gmail.com).

<sup>3</sup> Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Plateau State University, Bokkos-Nigeria; [lukajiwul@plasu.edu.ng](mailto:lukajiwul@plasu.edu.ng); +2348030796163.

\* Correspondence: [verabondandak@gmail.com](mailto:verabondandak@gmail.com).

## Abstract

This article examined the emergence of gender fluidity and its implications for identity formation in contemporary Nigeria. Drawing on social constructionist, queer theory, symbolic interactionist and African feminist perspectives, the study explored how individuals who do not conform to binary gender categories negotiate selfhood within socio-cultural environments shaped by patriarchy, religious conservatism and moral regulation. Using qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews, digital ethnography, and cultural text analysis, the article investigated how gender-fluid Nigerians construct, perform, conceal and reimagine their identities across physical and digital spaces. The study found out that gender fluidity in Nigeria is not a mere adoption of Western identity categories but a locally situated process shaped by fear, resilience, strategic conformity and creative self-fashioning. Digital platforms emerge as ambivalent sites of both affirmation and intensified surveillance, enabling new forms of self-expression while exposing individuals to moral policing and social sanctions. The article concluded that gender fluidity constituted a form of everyday resistance that destabilises dominant gender ideologies and challenges prevailing notions of personhood, morality and citizenship. By foregrounding lived experiences and contextual meanings, this study recommended African-centred identity scholarship and calls for a reconceptualisation of identity as relational, negotiated and historically situated.

**Keywords:** Gender fluidity, Identity, Nigeria, Youth culture, African feminism, Social construction

## Introduction

Gender constitutes one of the most enduring and influential organising principles of social life. Across societies, it structures systems of kinship, divisions of labour, moral expectations, political authority and cultural belonging. While often presented as natural and immutable, a substantial body of sociological and feminist scholarship has demonstrated that gender is socially constructed, historically contingent and continuously reproduced through institutional practices and everyday interactions (Lorber, 1994; West & Zimmerman, 1987). In many African contexts, including Nigeria, dominant gender ideologies are articulated through rigid binary frameworks that distinguish masculinity from femininity in ways that are widely perceived as culturally authentic and divinely sanctioned.

These binary constructions are deeply embedded within key social institutions such as the family, religion, education and the legal system. They define what forms of

identity are considered legitimate, intelligible and morally acceptable, while simultaneously marginalising identities that fall outside these normative boundaries. In Nigeria in particular, gender norms are reinforced through strong religious conservatism, communal expectations, and state-backed moral regulations, creating a socio-cultural environment in which deviation from binary gender categories is often met with stigma, exclusion, or outright hostility (Izugbara, 2005; Kalejaiye, 2013).

However, contemporary Nigerian society is undergoing significant socio-cultural transformations. Processes such as globalisation, urbanisation, increased access to digital technologies and transnational cultural flows have reshaped how individuals understand identity and selfhood. Young people, in particular, are increasingly exposed to alternative frameworks of identity through social media, popular culture and global discourses, leading to the emergence of new forms of gender expression that challenge conventional binaries (Nyanzi, 2014; McLean, 2020). Within this shifting landscape, gender is no longer universally experienced as fixed or stable, but as something that may be fluid, negotiated and context-dependent.

One of the most significant yet underexplored manifestations of this transformation is the growing, though highly contested, visibility of gender fluidity. Gender fluidity refers to experiences of gender that are not permanently anchored in binary categories but are instead dynamic, shifting across time, context and social interaction (Richards et al., 2016). For gender-fluid individuals, identity is not a singular or stable essence but an evolving process shaped by personal experience, social constraints, and relational dynamics.

Despite increasing global scholarly attention to non-binary and fluid gender identities, African-centred analyses remain limited. Existing literature on gender in Nigeria has predominantly focused on women's subordination, patriarchy and gender inequality, often assuming binary categories as stable and uncontested (Aina, 1998; Mama, 1995). Where non-normative identities are addressed, they are frequently examined through the lens of sexuality, particularly homosexuality, thereby conflating sexual orientation with gender identity and obscuring the distinct experiences of individuals whose primary struggle concerns self-definition and gender expression rather than desire (Epprecht, 2008; van Klinken, 2013).

Moreover, public discourse in Nigeria often frames non-binary and gender-fluid identities as foreign impositions or moral threats, reinforcing narratives that position them as incompatible with African cultural values. Such framings obscure the lived realities of individuals who navigate gender beyond binary norms and ignore historical and anthropological evidence that gender diversity has existed in various African societies prior to colonial interventions (Nyanzi, 2014; Tamale, 2011). Consequently, there remains a critical gap in empirical and theoretical scholarship that centres gender fluidity as a legitimate and contextually grounded form of identity within Nigeria.

This study addressed this gap by examining gender fluidity as a site of identity reimagination in contemporary Nigeria. Specifically, it explored how gender-fluid individuals construct meaning, negotiate belonging, manage visibility and navigate moral

regulation within a socio-cultural context characterised by strong normative pressures. By studying lived experiences and situating them within broader socio-cultural transformations, the study sought to contribute to emerging African-centred debates on identity, gender and selfhood.

In doing so, this article advances the argument that gender fluidity in Nigeria should not be dismissed as a Western import or cultural anomaly, but rather understood as a locally situated process of identity negotiation shaped by historical, structural and relational dynamics. It further positions gender fluidity as both a form of everyday resistance to dominant gender norms and a lens through which the instability and contingency of those norms can be critically examined.

## **LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL REVIEW**

This study adopted a multi-theoretical framework to capture the complexity of gender fluidity as both a lived experience and a socio-cultural process within contemporary Nigeria. Given that gender fluidity involves identity negotiation, social perception and institutional regulation, no single theoretical perspective is sufficient to fully explain its dynamics. Consequently, the study integrated social constructionism, queer theory, symbolic interactionism and postmodern identity theory as complementary analytical lenses. Together, these perspectives provide a nuanced understanding of how gender-fluid identities are produced, interpreted, negotiated and contested within a socio-cultural environment characterised by strong normative expectations.

From a social constructionist perspective, gender is understood not as biologically determined but as a product of historically specific social practices, institutional arrangements, and shared meanings (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2020). In the Nigerian context, this perspective is particularly useful for explaining how binary gender norms are naturalised through cultural traditions, religious teachings and legal frameworks that present masculinity and femininity as fixed and divinely ordained. Gender fluidity, therefore, emerged as a disruption of these socially constructed norms, revealing that what is often perceived as ‘natural’ is in fact contingent and subject to change. This perspective helped explain how participants in this study experience tension between personal identity and socially imposed expectations, as well as how dominant perceptions of gender are sustained through everyday interactions and institutional reinforcement.

Queer theory extended this analysis by interrogating the normative structures that define which identities are considered legitimate or intelligible (Butler, 1990; Ahmed, 2021). Rather than simply advocating inclusion within existing gender categories, queer theory challenges the very assumptions that underpin binary classifications. In the Nigerian context, where non-normative identities are frequently framed as immoral or ‘un-African’, queer theory provides a critical lens for analysing how power operates through moral discourse, religious authority and cultural nationalism. It allows the study to interpret gender fluidity not as deviance or confusion, but as a form of resistance to compulsory gender coherence. This perspective is particularly relevant in analysing how

participants contest dominant narratives, reframe their identities and negotiate recognition within hostile social environments.

While social constructionism and queer theory focus on structural and discursive dimensions of gender, symbolic interactionism provided insight into the micro-level processes through which identity is formed and negotiated in everyday life (Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1959; Blumer, 2020). This perspective emphasises that identity emerges through social interaction and is shaped by how individuals interpret and respond to others' perceptions. In Nigeria, where social surveillance is intense and deviation from normative gender expectations often attracts stigma, symbolic interactionism helps explain how gender-fluid individuals manage their identities across different contexts. For instance, participants may adopt strategies such as concealment within family settings, selective disclosure among peers, and experimental self-presentation in digital spaces. These practices illustrate how identity is not fixed but continuously constructed through interaction, interpretation, and adaptation to social expectations.

Postmodern identity theory further deepened this analysis by highlighting the fluid, fragmented, and multiple nature of contemporary identities (Bauman, 2000; Giddens, 1991; 2021). In contrast to traditional notions of a stable and unified self, postmodern perspectives conceptualise identity as dynamic and context-dependent. This is particularly relevant in contemporary Nigeria, where digital technologies and global cultural flows have expanded the possibilities for self-expression. Gender fluidity exemplifies this condition, as individuals navigate multiple identities across physical and virtual spaces. However, in a context marked by moral regulation and social constraint, identity multiplicity does not necessarily translate into freedom. Instead, it often requires continuous self-monitoring and emotional labour. This perspective thus helps explain both the possibilities and limitations of gender fluidity within the Nigerian socio-cultural landscape.

Importantly, these theoretical perspectives are not applied in isolation but are integrated to provide a comprehensive analytical framework. Social constructionism and queer theory converge in their critique of essentialist understandings of gender, though they differ in emphasis, while constructionism explains how norms are produced, queer theory interrogates their power effects and exclusions. Symbolic interactionism complements these macro-level perspectives by demonstrating how such norms are negotiated in everyday interactions. Postmodern identity theory, in turn, situates these processes within broader transformations associated with late modernity, including digitalisation and globalisation.

To this end, there are productive tensions among these perspectives. For instance, while postmodern theory emphasises fluidity and multiplicity, symbolic interactionism reveals the constraints imposed by social expectations, particularly in conservative contexts such as Nigeria. Similarly, while queer theory challenges normative structures, social constructionism highlights how deeply embedded and resilient those structures remain. These tensions are analytically useful, as they allow the study to capture both the possibilities for identity transformation and the limits imposed by socio-cultural realities.

This integrated theoretical framework directly informs the analysis of the study's qualitative data. Social constructionism guides the examination of how participants describe and interpret dominant gender norms. Queer theory informs the analysis of resistance, norm disruption and the politics of recognition. Symbolic interactionism shapes the interpretation of identity negotiation strategies across different social contexts, including family, religious spaces, peer networks, and digital environments. Postmodern identity theory provides a lens for understanding identity fragmentation, multiplicity and the role of digital media in expanding and complicating selfhood.

Combining these perspectives, the study is able to move beyond descriptive accounts of gender fluidity to offer a theoretically grounded analysis of how gendered identities are constructed, contested and lived within contemporary Nigeria.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretive research design to examine how gender fluidity is experienced, negotiated and reimagined within the socio-cultural context of contemporary Nigeria. This approach is particularly suitable for the study because gender fluidity is not a fixed or easily measurable variable but a complex, subjective and socially embedded phenomenon. Understanding such a phenomenon requires close attention to lived experiences, meanings, identity practices and social interactions, which are best captured through qualitative inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The interpretivist epistemological orientation underpinning this study assumes that social reality is constructed through interaction and that knowledge is context-dependent and shaped by participants' perspectives. This is especially relevant in examining gender fluidity in Nigeria, where identity is negotiated within culturally specific frameworks of morality, religion and social expectation. The qualitative design therefore enables an in-depth exploration of how individuals make sense of their identities and navigate the tensions between personal self-understanding and societal norms.

Data for the study were generated through three complementary qualitative methods which were in-depth semi-structured interviews, digital ethnography and cultural text analysis. This triangulation enhanced the richness and credibility of the findings by capturing gender fluidity across multiple sites of experience, offline, online and representational (Patton, 2015). The primary data source consisted of 25 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with individuals who self-identified as gender fluid, non-binary, or who described fluid gender practices without necessarily adopting formal identity labels. Participants were predominantly young adults aged between 18 and 35, reflecting the demographic most actively engaged in identity experimentation, digital self-expression and cultural negotiation in Nigeria.

Interviews were conducted in English and Nigerian Pidgin, depending on participant preference, and typically lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The semi-structured format allowed for both consistency across interviews and flexibility to explore emergent themes. Key areas of inquiry included identity formation and

trajectories, experiences within family and religious contexts, strategies of visibility and concealment, emotional well-being and the role of digital platforms in shaping self-expression.

Digital ethnography complemented the interview data by examining publicly accessible online spaces where gender fluidity is expressed and contested. These included social media platforms, hashtags, comment threads and online communities. The focus was on observable patterns of self-presentation, interaction and discourse rather than private communications, thereby ensuring ethical integrity. Cultural text analysis further contextualised individual experiences by examining media representations, influencer content, fashion imagery and public discourse surrounding gender non-conformity in Nigeria. This allowed the study to situate personal narratives within broader cultural and symbolic frameworks.

Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling enabled the identification of individuals with relevant experiences of gender fluidity, while snowball sampling facilitated access to a population that is often difficult to reach due to stigma and concerns about confidentiality (Noy, 2008). Initial participants were recruited through trusted networks and online communities, and subsequent participants were identified through referrals. Given the sensitive nature of the topic and the marginalised status of gender-fluid individuals in Nigeria, probability sampling was neither feasible nor ethically appropriate. Instead, the emphasis was placed on depth, diversity of experiences and the generation of rich, contextually grounded data rather than statistical representativeness.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). This method was chosen for its flexibility and suitability for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data. The analysis proceeded through several stages: familiarisation with the data, initial coding, identification of themes, review and refinement of themes and interpretation. Also, elements of discourse analysis were incorporated to examine how language, moral narratives and cultural meanings shape participants' experiences and representations of gender fluidity. This was particularly important in analysing how dominant societal discourses around morality, religion and 'Africanness' influence identity construction and social perception. The integration of thematic and discourse analytical approaches allowed the study to move beyond descriptive accounts to a more critical examination of how power, meaning, and identity intersect within the Nigerian context.

Ethical considerations were central to the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and strict measures were taken to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, including the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying details. Given the potential risks associated with participation, particular care was taken to protect participants from harm. Reflexivity was also maintained throughout the study, with attention paid to how the researchers' positionalities, assumptions and social locations may have influenced data collection and interpretation. This enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The findings reveal that gender fluidity in Nigeria is experienced not as a stable identity category but as an ongoing process of negotiation shaped by moral regulation, digital mediation, and social surveillance. Participants described identity as something continuously managed across contexts rather than discovered as a fixed essence. Thematic analysis produced five dominant patterns that structure gender-fluid experiences. These patterns, summarised in Table 1, illustrate how identity is navigated through strategic concealment, selective visibility, emotional labour and everyday resistance.

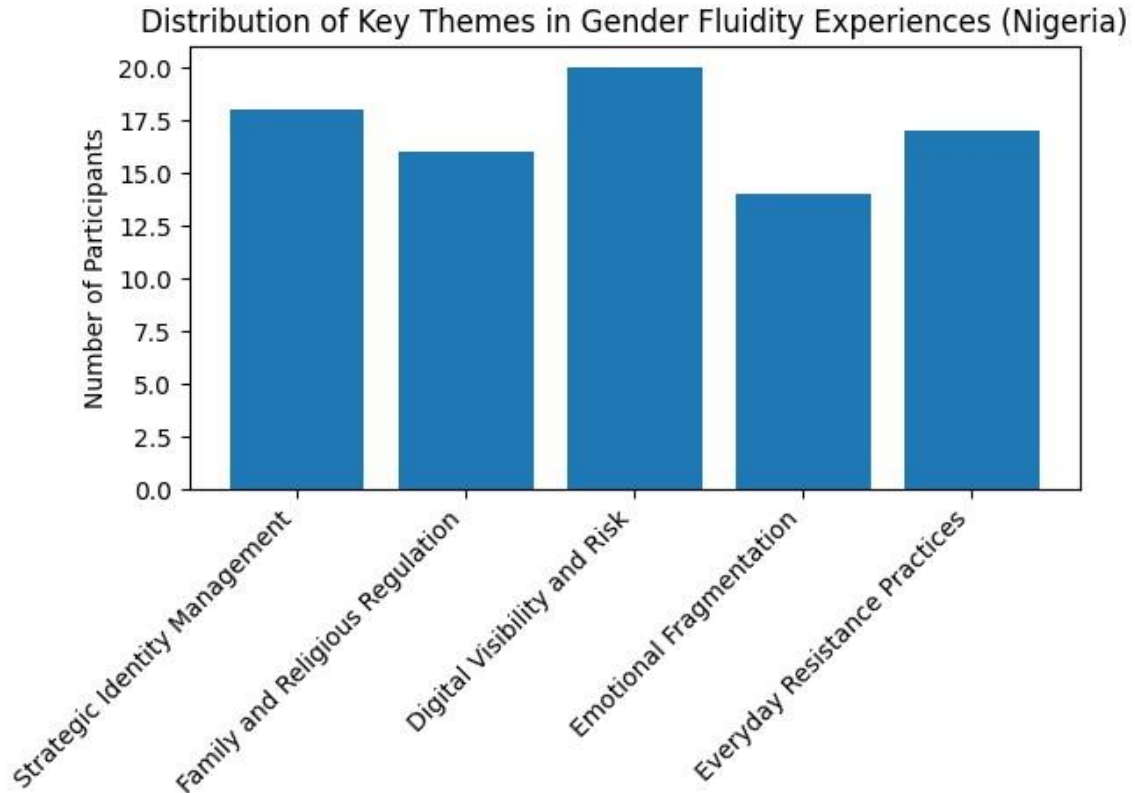
**Table 1**

**Distribution of Core Themes in Gender-Fluid Identity Experiences (n = 25)**

Theme	Participants Referencing Theme
Strategic identity management	18
Family and religious regulation	16
Digital visibility and risk	20
Emotional fragmentation	14
Everyday resistance practices	17

**Figure 1**

**Distribution of Key Themes in Gender-Fluid Identity Experiences in Nigeria**



As shown in Table 1 and Figure above, digital visibility and risk was the most frequently referenced theme, highlighting the ambivalent role of social media as both a space of affirmation and intensified moral surveillance. Strategic identity management and everyday resistance practices further underscore the careful negotiation of selfhood across social contexts, while emotional fragmentation reflects the psychological cost of sustained identity regulation. Figure 1 visually represents the uneven distribution of thematic experiences, reinforcing the prominence of digital visibility and risk while illustrating the subtle but persistent presence of everyday resistance practices.

**Table 2**

**Identity Negotiation Across Social Contexts**

Social Context	Dominant Identity Strategy	Illustrative Description
Family / Home	Concealment and conformity	Binary presentation to preserve familial acceptance
Religious spaces	Strategic silence	Avoidance of gender expression to prevent moral sanction
Peer networks	Partial disclosure	Selective sharing with

Digital platforms	Experimental visibility	trusted friends Use of aesthetics, usernames, and narratives
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Table 2 illustrates how gender-fluid individuals adopt context-specific identity strategies. While familial and religious spaces demand conformity or silence, digital platforms provide limited opportunities for experimentation, revealing the relational and situational nature of gendered selfhood in Nigeria. Despite these constraints, participants articulated moments of agency and self-affirmation. Gender fluidity was often expressed through subtle practices—fashion choices, online usernames, linguistic play, and aesthetic experimentation—rather than overt political declarations. These micro-practices allowed individuals to reimagine selfhood without directly confronting dominant norms. Gender fluidity, in this sense, functioned as a quiet but persistent challenge to compulsory gender coherence.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study complicate dominant narratives that frame gender fluidity either as a Western import or as a purely liberatory form of self-expression. Instead, gender fluidity in Nigeria emerges as a relational practice shaped by moral regulation, historical power and everyday negotiation. Consistent with social constructionist theory, the data demonstrate that gender norms are sustained through repeated social reinforcement rather than biological inevitability. The hostility directed toward gender fluidity reflects anxiety about the instability of these norms rather than the inherent threat posed by non-binary identities. Queer theoretical insights are particularly useful in interpreting these findings. Gender fluidity does not merely seek inclusion within existing gender frameworks but exposes the demand for coherence itself as a mechanism of control. Participants' experiences show that what is at stake is not simply identity choice, but intelligibility, who is allowed to appear as a legitimate social subject. Gender fluidity disrupts this by refusing stable categorisation.

Symbolic interactionism further illuminates how identity is negotiated through social interaction. Participants' shifting self-presentations should not be read as inauthentic but as rational responses to unequal power relations. Identity multiplicity reflects strategic adaptation rather than confusion. This challenges liberal assumptions that authenticity requires consistency across contexts. Postmodern identity theory helps explain the fragmentation participants described, but the Nigerian context complicates celebratory accounts of fluidity. Fragmentation here often produces psychological strain rather than freedom.

Gender fluidity thus operates within constraint, requiring constant emotional labour. African feminist and decolonial perspectives are crucial in situating these experiences historically. The claims that gender fluidity is un-African ignore the colonial origins of many contemporary gender norms. The study supports the argument that gender fluidity should be understood as a localised negotiation of identity rather than

cultural betrayal. Participants were not rejecting culture but reworking it under changing conditions.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study demonstrated that gender-fluid individuals continuously manage their identities across different social contexts, including family, religious spaces, peer networks and digital environments. Key findings indicated that strategies such as concealment, selective disclosure, and experimental visibility are central to navigating social expectations and mitigating risks associated with non-normative gender expression. Digital platforms emerge as ambivalent spaces that simultaneously enable self-expression and intensify moral surveillance, while emotional fragmentation reflects the psychological cost of sustained identity regulation. At the same time, the study highlighted subtle but significant forms of agency, as individuals engage in everyday practices of resistance through fashion, language and digital self-representation.

These findings contributed to existing scholarship by challenging dominant narratives that frame gender fluidity as either a Western import or a purely liberatory phenomenon. Instead, the study situated gender fluidity within the Nigerian socio-cultural context as a relational and context-dependent process shaped by historical, structural and interactional forces. Putting forward, lived experiences, the research extended African-centred gender scholarship beyond binary frameworks and sexuality-focused analyses, offering a more nuanced understanding of gendered selfhood and identity formation.

In the light of these findings, several practical and policy-relevant implications emerged: First, there is a need for Nigerian gender scholarship to move beyond binary assumptions and engage more rigorously with non-binary and fluid forms of identity. This requires expanding theoretical and empirical frameworks to better capture the diversity of gendered experiences within African contexts. Second, educational institutions and mental health practitioners should develop more inclusive and context-sensitive support systems that recognise the emotional labour associated with identity negotiation, particularly among young people. Such interventions should prioritise psychological well-being, confidentiality, and culturally informed counselling approaches.

Third, digital platforms and media actors should be critically engaged as key sites of identity formation and regulation. While these platforms offer opportunities for visibility and community building, they also facilitate new forms of surveillance, harassment, and moral policing. There is therefore a need for stronger digital literacy initiatives, platform accountability, and protective mechanisms that safeguard vulnerable users. Fourth, policymakers and civil society actors should promote more inclusive public discourse on gender and identity, grounded in human dignity, social justice and an appreciation of cultural complexity. This includes supporting research, dialogue and advocacy efforts that challenge stigma and foster greater social understanding.

Future research should build on this study by exploring gender fluidity across diverse social locations, including rural communities, older populations and longitudinal identity trajectories. Such work will deepen understanding of how gender fluidity is shaped by intersecting factors such as class, ethnicity, religion and geography.

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