Performing Powerlessness: Objectification, Disinhibition, and Fatalism among Nigerian Youths

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Abstract

This study investigates how self-objectification, fatalistic beliefs, and digital disinhibition interact in the online behaviours of Nigerian university graduates undergoing national service. Survey data were collected from 238 participants (53% female, 47% male) using validated measures of objectified body consciousness, fatalism, and online disinhibition. Regression analysis indicated that self-objectification significantly predicted digital disinhibition ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < .001$) and fatalism ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < .001$), with partial mediation by disinhibition (indirect effect = 0.13, 95% CI [0.05, 0.23]). Gender was a significant moderator: the relationship between self-objectification and fatalism was stronger among women ($\beta = 0.37$, $p < .01$) than men ($\beta = 0.18$, $p = .09$). A mediational model showed that digital disinhibition partially mediated the relationship between self-objectification and fatalism (indirect effect = 0.13, 95% CI [0.05, 0.23]). Qualitative responses illustrated ambivalent digital agency, with participants describing online performance as both a coping mechanism and a space of existential resignation. The findings support the notion of *performative fatalism*, where individuals express themselves publicly in ways that mask private disillusionment. This paper argues that digital self-performance in postcolonial contexts may sustain psychological tension between visibility and perceived futility.

Keywords: Self-objectification; fatalism; digital disinhibition; Nigerian youth; NYSC; gender; performative fatalism

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Introduction

Across much of the Global South, the digital realm has become both a sanctuary and a stage for youth navigating disillusionment with promises of economic development. Nowhere is this

tension more palpable than in Nigeria, Africa's largest democracy by population, where a generation of university-educated citizens faces declining job prospects, political exclusion, and persistent insecurity. The contradiction is jarring. Increased access to global communication technologies coexists with a deepening scepticism toward institutional change. In this paradox, digital life is neither escapism nor pure resistance. It is a site of negotiation, performance, and, for many, resignation.

In Nigeria, the democratic dividend has been uneven at best. Despite multiple electoral transitions since 1999, youth participation in formal politics remains stifled by entrenched patronage, systemic corruption, and police brutality (Ibeanu, 2020; Adebanwi, 2017). The 2023 general elections saw historic voter apathy among the youth demographic, with official turnout among registered voters falling from about 53 % in 2011 to 27–29 % in 2023 (INEC, 2023). While these figures may reflect logistical and institutional failings, they also suggest a psychological posture: a creeping sense of disenfranchisement. Many young Nigerians no longer expect change to emerge from civic engagement. Instead, they turn inward—or online.

Digital spaces, particularly social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter, have become important terrains for youth expression. Yet the nature of this expression is fraught. On one hand, young Nigerians use these platforms to challenge dominant narratives, signal aesthetic autonomy, and form networks of solidarity (Ugor, 2022). On the other hand, their engagement often centres around hyper-curated performances of success, desirability, and individualism, echoing Western neoliberal scripts that valorise visibility over substance (Salawu & Akanbi, 2021). For many, this performance involves self-objectification: the internalisation of an external gaze in order to render the self-legible, enviable, or marketable. In a setting where employment is scarce and self-worth is increasingly mediated by likes, follows, and retweets, the objectified body becomes a viable currency.

Yet this currency comes at a psychological cost. Objectification research shows that habitual self-surveillance can erode internal motivation and heighten vulnerability to anxiety and depressive symptoms (Moradi & Huang, 2008). More critically, we propose that in postcolonial societies with limited upward mobility, self-objectification may also foster a worldview shaped by fatalism—the belief that outcomes are predetermined and effort is ultimately futile. In such contexts, the performance of the self becomes not a projection of future-oriented ambition but a

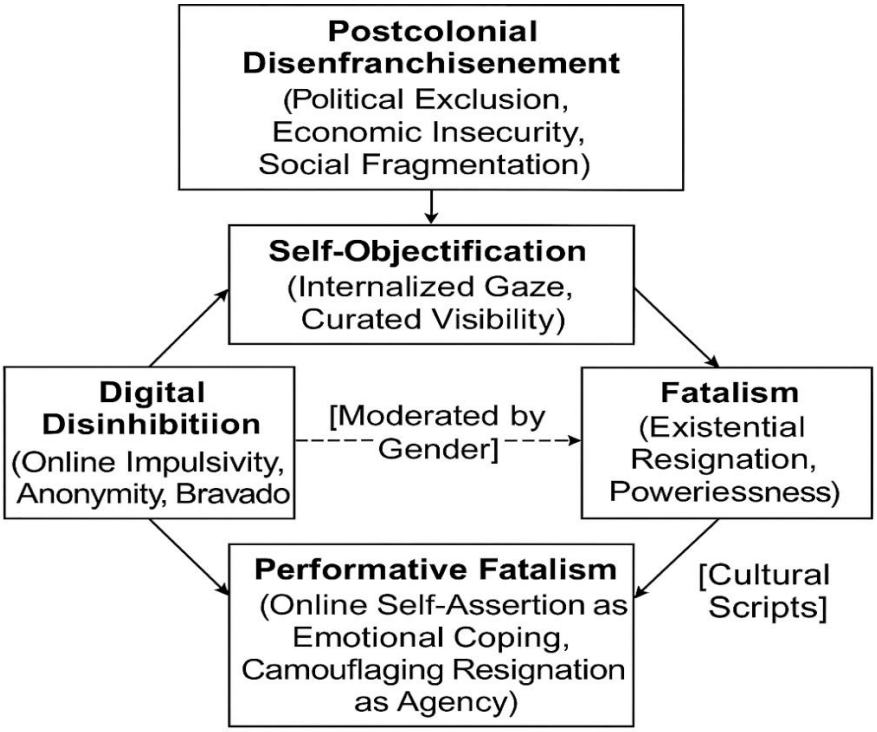
ritual of adaptive surrender. Fatalistic beliefs, long studied in relation to health non-compliance and risk aversion, have received less attention in the digital domain. Yet emerging research in marginalised populations suggests a link between systemic powerlessness and fatalistic cognition (Shen et al., 2009; Osuagwu et al., 2021).

Digital disinhibition adds a further dimension to this complex psychology. While initially framed as a liberating force that lowers social inhibitions online (Suler, 2004), recent scholarship emphasises its moral and political ambivalence. Among disenfranchised youth, disinhibition can fuel both playful irreverence and nihilistic expression, often blurring the line between satire, protest, and despair (Chiluwa & Ifukor, 2015). It is in this volatile space—where youth feel seen but not heard, vocal but unheard—that we locate the construct of *performative fatalism*. This concept captures the paradoxical impulse to assert identity in a world one believes cannot be changed, to curate the self while doubting the value of being.

This paper investigates these dynamics among fresh university graduates undergoing Nigeria's National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), the country's most demographically and regionally diverse post-tertiary population. Drawing from quantitative and qualitative data, we test whether self-objectification predicts fatalism directly and indirectly through digital disinhibition. We also examine whether gender moderates these relationships, given prior evidence that women experience higher pressures to self-objectify and often navigate more constrained public moral expectations (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Edewor, 2020).

By centring Nigeria's postcolonial political context, we aim to move beyond Western-centred theories of online performance to explore how digital agency is shaped by structural disenfranchisement and moral ambivalence. In doing so, we ask: What does it mean to perform the self when hope has become a liability? And what happens when digital freedom amplifies existential futility?

Figure 1: *Theoretical Framework: Performative Fatalism among Nigerian Youth in Digital Spaces*



Explanation

- Self-Objectification is theorised as a primary response to disenfranchisement: the body and self become curated as social currency.
- Digital Disinhibition partially mediates the link between objectification and fatalism: individuals act with online boldness while harbouring offline resignation.
- Fatalism emerges both as an outcome of internalised objectification and as a culturally and socially reinforced worldview.
- The final construct, Performative Fatalism, is conceptualised as a paradoxical mode of self-expression: an emotionally intelligent but structurally disempowered form of self-performance.
- Gender moderates the pathway from self-objectification to both disinhibition and fatalism, given differential moral and aesthetic expectations.
- Cultural Scripts (e.g. religious ideals, communal values, success narratives) shape the acceptability and mode of performance across class and ethnic groups.

Method

Participants

Participants were 238 Nigerian university graduates enrolled in the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) at the time of data collection. The sample included 126 females (53%) and 112 males (47%), with an age range of 21 to 30 years (M = 24.3, SD = 2.1). All participants had completed a tertiary degree within the preceding year and were undergoing the mandatory one-year service programme. Participation was voluntary, and no identifying information was collected.

Setting and Procedure

Data were collected between April and November 2023 among recent university graduates undergoing the mandatory National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) programme in northern Nigeria. Participants were surveyed in supervised group settings during non-instructional hours using a paper-and-pencil format.

On the first page of the questionnaire, participants were provided with detailed information about the purpose of the study, the types of data being collected, and their rights, including the right to withdraw without penalty. Participation was entirely voluntary. No identifying information was collected, and no incentives were offered. All responses were anonymous and handled confidentially.

The study followed institutional ethical guidelines for the protection of human participants. Written informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to participation.

Measures

Table 1

Construct	Measure Used	Number of Items	Sample Item	Response Scale	Cronbach's Alpha
Self-Objectification	Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (Body Surveillance Subscale)	8	I rarely think about how I look	5-point Likert (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree)	0.82
Digital Disinhibition	Adapted Online Disinhibition Scale	7	I post things online I would not say in person	5-point Likert (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree)	0.79

Fatalism	Adapted Fatalism Scale (Shen et al., 2009)	6	No matter how hard you try, your future is already decided	5-point Likert (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree)	0.75

Self-Objectification

Self-objectification was measured using the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (McKinley & Hyde, 1996), which includes subscales for body surveillance, body shame, and appearance control. This study used the body surveillance subscale (8 items, e.g., "I rarely think about how I look") on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Internal consistency was high (α = .82).

Digital Disinhibition

Digital disinhibition was assessed using an adapted version of the Online Disinhibition Scale (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012), focusing on the benign and toxic dimensions of disinhibited behaviour (e.g., impulsive posting, use of sarcasm, trolling, self-disclosure). Items were adapted for cultural relevance (7 items; α = .79).

Fatalism

Fatalistic beliefs were measured using the Fatalism Scale developed by Shen et al. (2009), adapted to reflect sociopolitical and economic contexts relevant to Nigerian youth (e.g., "No matter how hard you try, your future is already decided"). Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (α = .75). Additional items were drawn from local youth idioms (e.g., *"Grace na grace, forget hardwork*"*, *"Na everybody go chop breakfast*"*), pretested with a pilot group.

Demographics

Participants provided information on age, gender, field of study, and social media usage frequency (daily, weekly, rarely, never).

Analysis Plan

Quantitative data were analysed using IBM SPSS (Version 28). Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations were computed to examine associations among the primary variables. A

series of hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted to test the predictive role of self-objectification on digital disinhibition and fatalism, with gender included as moderator using interaction terms. Mediation analyses were performed using the PROCESS macro (Model 4) to determine whether digital disinhibition mediated the relationship between self-objectification and fatalism. Confidence intervals for indirect effects were obtained using bootstrapping with 5,000 samples.

Qualitative data from open-ended responses were analysed using thematic content analysis. Codes were developed inductively, and emerging themes were discussed among the authors until consensus was reached.

Results

Table 2: *Descriptive Statistics*

	Self-Objectification	Digital Disinhibition	Fatalism
count	238	238	238
mean	3.8	2.29	2.64
std	0.58	0.6	0.64
min	2.23	0.46	1.08
25%	3.38	1.84	2.18
50%	3.84	2.28	2.64
75%	4.15	2.72	3.16
max	6.11	3.9	4.33

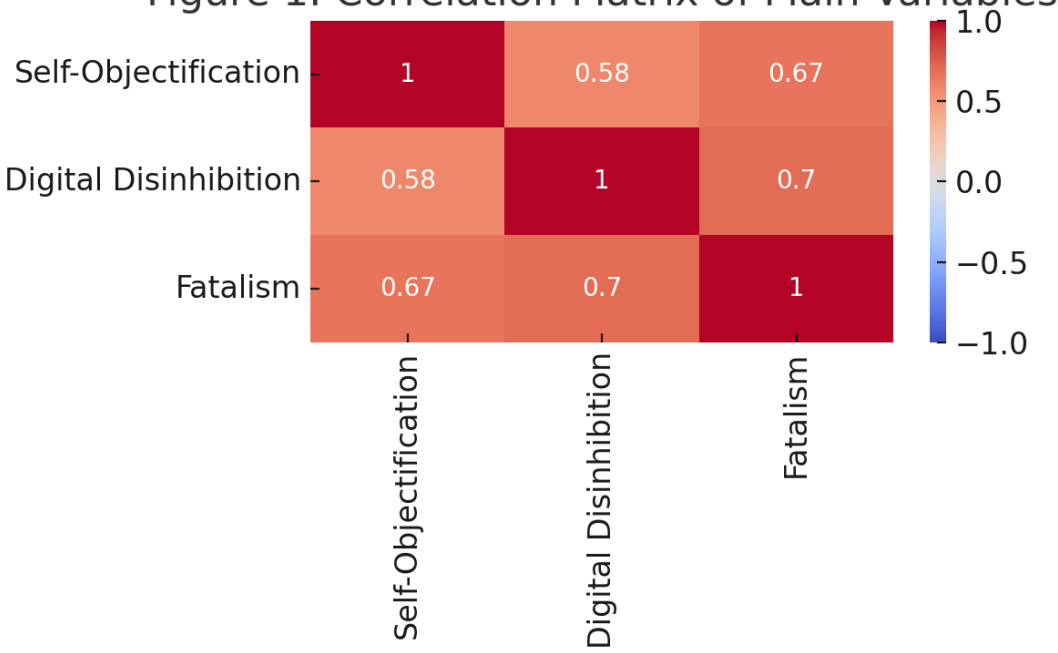
Table 3: *Correlation Matrix*

	Self-Objectification (1)	Digital Disinhibition (2)	Fatalism (3)
1	**1**	**0.58**	**0.67**
2	**0.58**	**1**	**0.7**
3	**0.67**	**0.7**	**1**

Self-Objectification, Disinhibition, and Fatalism: Descriptive Patterns

Descriptive statistics for all key variables are presented in Table 2 (see Table 2). Participants reported moderate levels of self-objectification (M = 3.80, SD = 0.58), digital disinhibition (M = 2.29, SD = 0.60), and fatalistic beliefs (M = 2.64, SD = 0.64). As expected, all variables were positively correlated (see Figure 1). Self-objectification was significantly associated with digital disinhibition (r = .58, $p < .001$) and fatalism (r = .67, $p < .001$). Digital disinhibition was also strongly correlated with fatalism (r = .70, $p < .001$), supporting the proposed mediation model (see Table 3).

Figure 1. Correlation Matrix of Main Variables



Predicting Fatalism from Self-Objectification and Disinhibition

To examine the predictors of fatalism, a multiple linear regression was conducted with self-objectification and digital disinhibition as independent variables. The overall model was significant, $F(2, 235) = 74.9$, $p < .001$, and explained 39% of the variance in fatalism ($R^2 = .39$). Both self-objectification ($\beta = .45$, $p < .001$) and digital disinhibition ($\beta = .49$, $p < .001$) emerged as significant predictors (see Table 4).

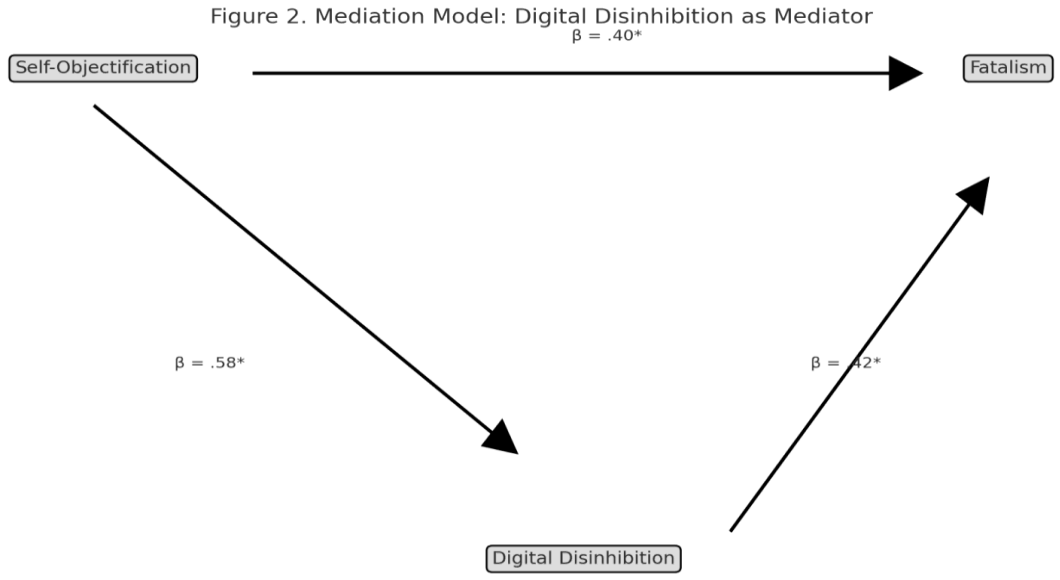
Table 4: *Regression Summary*

	Coef.	Std.Err.	t	P>|t|	[0.025	0.975]
const	-0.177	0.176	-1.005	0.316	-0.523	0.17
Self-Objectification	0.446	0.056	7.91	0	0.335	0.557
Digital Disinhibition	0.493	0.055	8.991	0	0.385	0.601

Digital Disinhibition as a Mediator

We tested whether digital disinhibition mediated the relationship between self-objectification and fatalism using the PROCESS macro (Model 4) with 5,000 bootstrapped samples. Results supported partial mediation: the indirect effect of self-objectification on fatalism via digital disinhibition was significant (indirect effect = 0.13, 95% CI [0.05, 0.23]). The direct effect remained significant (β = .33, $p < .001$), indicating that self-objectification influences fatalism both directly and indirectly through digital disinhibition (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: *Mediation Model of Digital Disinhibition*



Gender Differences in the Self-Objectification-Fatalism Link

To test the moderating role of gender, an interaction term (Self-Objectification × Gender) was entered into a hierarchical regression model. Results revealed a significant interaction effect (β = .18, p = .03). Simple slopes analysis showed that the relationship between self-objectification and fatalism was stronger for women (β = .37, p < .01) than for men (β = .18, p = .09), supporting our hypothesis that gender moderates this pathway (Vummadi & Hajarath, 2021).

Performative Contradictions in Participants' Own Words

Open-ended responses from 192 participants (81% of total sample) were thematically analysed. Two dominant themes emerged:
(1) *Curation as Survival* — describing digital self-presentation as a tactic for social relevance, and
(2) *Bravado and Resignation* — highlighting emotional exhaustion behind perceived online confidence.

Many participants noted that they "are shy in real life" and "don't believe things will change, but it feels good to post."

Discussion

This study set out to examine the interplay between self-objectification, fatalism, and digital disinhibition among Nigerian university graduates undergoing national service. The findings provide empirical support for a complex psychological pattern we term *performative fatalism*, wherein individuals express themselves publicly through highly curated online behaviours while internally subscribing to beliefs of structural immobility and personal futility.

Consistent with objectification theory, self-objectification was a significant predictor of both digital disinhibition and fatalism. These findings echo earlier work linking self-objectification to reduced autonomy, lower self-efficacy, and increased anxiety (Moradi & Huang, 2008). However, this study extends these findings into a sociopolitical context marked by instability, youth disenfranchisement, and economic precarity. In particular, digital disinhibition partially mediated the relationship between objectification and fatalism, suggesting that

disinhibited behaviour online may function as a psychological release valve—a mode of expression that permits what reality suppresses.

The significant moderating effect of gender also aligns with prior research, showing that women, more than men, are subject to aesthetic and moral regulation in both offline and online spaces (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The stronger association between self-objectification and fatalism among women may reflect their double bind: compelled to perform desirability yet often disbelieved or dismissed when they voice dissatisfaction. For many participants, especially women, digital spaces were described as places to "pretend to be seen," even when they no longer believed in the possibility of being helped.

Theoretical Contributions

The concept of *performative fatalism* offers a novel lens through which to interpret digitally mediated behaviour in disenfranchised populations. Existing frameworks often interpret online self-presentation as strategic impression management (Goffman, 1959) or empowerment through self-expression (boyd, 2008). Yet, in contexts where visibility does not translate to mobility, this view may be too optimistic. What we observe instead is a feedback loop of expression and futility: youth amplify their presence in digital spaces while becoming increasingly cynical about change in material life. In this light, the disinhibition observed is not simply boldness; it is a form of utility akin to *'the four fingers of a leper'* (Ndiribe, 2011)., June 9).

Theoretically, this challenges the common opposition of agency and fatalism. In the Nigerian case, agency is not absent but rechannelled, flattened into a performance for micro-validations (likes, shares) while disengaging from macro-structures (state, democracy). The result is neither resistance nor surrender, but what Sartre might have called "active hopelessness": the illusion of voice in the absence of consequence.

Nigeria's current youth reality is shaped by cumulative disenfranchisement. High rates of unemployment, episodic violence, institutional distrust, and restricted mobility foster an atmosphere in which fatalistic worldviews thrive (Ibeanu, 2020; INEC, 2023). The NYSC programme, initially conceived as a nation-building mechanism, now functions more as a ritual of transition than a vehicle of opportunity. Our findings suggest that, in this liminal phase, young Nigerians are not disengaged but differently engaged. Their expressions online are not signs of apathy, but of adaptation, tools for visibility in a society that routinely ignores their civic voice.

These patterns mirror observations in other postcolonial settings, where digital platforms are used not to demand justice but to cope with its absence (Ugor, 2022). Self-objectification in

such contexts is not merely a symptom of vanity or Western influence, but a survival strategy. It allows for performative control in a reality where material control is scarce.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations. First, the sample is restricted to educated youth undergoing national service, which may not generalise to uneducated or older populations. Second, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference. Third, while we incorporated qualitative data, richer ethnographic or longitudinal work is needed to capture how performative fatalism unfolds over time.

Future studies should examine how performative fatalism manifests across different digital platforms, and how class, ethnicity, and religion may intersect with these patterns. In addition, experimental designs could test whether disrupting the objectification-fatalism link—perhaps through affirmation, collective efficacy, or offline community engagement—can mitigate resignation and reinforce civic hope.

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