A Philosophical Inquiry into African Women and Digital Technology

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the relationship between African women and digital technology by focusing on the ethical and philosophical dimensions of their engagement. Drawing on existentialist frameworks, it examines how digital platforms enable African women to exercise agency, shape their narratives, challenge societal norms, and construct alternative realities that reflect their identities, aspirations, and lived experiences. The study also highlights the responsibilities of governments, corporations, and communities in ensuring equitable access, fair representation, and meaningful empowerment, while critically considering the impacts of algorithmic bias and techno-colonial practices. By analysing how digital technologies both shape and are shaped by social constructions of gender, race, and identity, the paper underscores the complex ethical and sociocultural stakes of African women's participation in cyberspace. Ultimately, it argues that existentialism offers a powerful lens for understanding their potential for self-empowerment and meaning-making, while calling for the removal of barriers that hinder the full realisation of their digital possibilities.

Keywords: Agency, Digital Technology, Existential, Identity, Techno-colonialism

Introduction

Digital technology has the potential to empower African women in terms of access to education, healthcare and entrepreneurial opportunities (Buskens & Webb, 2009) . Over time, it has enabled women to connect with global networks, advocate for their rights and participate in political and social movements (World Wide Web Foundation, 2020) . However, significant barriers remain. The digital divide, which is characterised by disparities in internet access, digital literacy and affordability (Harpur & de Villiers, 2012), disproportionately affects women, particularly in underdeveloped areas (Gillwald & Mothobi, 2019). Socio-cultural norms and gender biases further impede women's access to technology (Bornman, 2015). The intersection of African women and digital technology presents a fertile ground for philosophical inquiry, especially in terms of gender, identity and socio-economic transformation. This inquiry examines how digital technology, as a modern force, reshapes traditional gender roles and empowers African women in fostering new avenues for social participation, economic independence and political activism (Mutsvairo & Wasserman, 2016), hence, an exploration of the digital divide as well as a scrutiny of access disparities and the socio-cultural barriers that impede women's full participation in the digital sphere. The need to understand the intersection between tradition and modernity, autonomy and community prompts this inquiry.

This paper adopts an existentialist lens to critically analyse how African women navigate and negotiate their digital realities. In this paper, agency is defined in its broadest sense, that is, an action or intervention that produces a specific effect. Within the context of this work, agency denotes the capacity to influence one's life, thoughts and behaviour. It can also refer to the medium through which power is exerted. Specifically, in relation to African women and digital technology, agency represents their ability to take purposeful actions and pursue goals facilitated by advancements in digital technology. (Giddens, 1984).

Digital technology combines two terms: digital and technology. Digital refers to electronic systems that generate and process data, while technology, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, denotes the application of scientific knowledge in transforming natural materials for practical purposes (OED, 2023). Thus, digital technology encompasses electronic devices, software systems and resources that facilitate data creation, storage and management. This includes any device or system that utilises, processes or stores data (Rouse, 2019).

Existential derives from existentialism, a philosophical concept that emphasises individual existence, freedom and responsibility (Sartre, 1943). Existentialism explores human existence and asserts that individuals act based on free will. In this context, existential refers to the affirmation of the African woman's existence and her capacity for responsible action .

Identity refers to the distinct characteristics that define a person. Identity encompasses a person's sense of self and the unique behavioural traits by which they are recognised (Erikson, 1968).

Techno-colonialism combines technology and colonialism. While technology, as previously discussed, applies to scientific principles to practical situations, colonialism, as defined as the practice of a powerful country controlling another country or its people (Said, 1993). Techno-colonialism describes the use of technology by a dominant entity to control and exploit less powerful entities. This form of colonialism involves power imbalances and reinforces dependencies on the technological systems imposed by the dominant party, and often leads to exploitation rather than development (Mbembe, 2001; Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

The paper explores key questions like, how digital platforms facilitate or hinder African women's agency; what role digital literacy plays in transforming gender relations; and whether existential orientation of technology can bridge the gap between traditional and modern societal roles for women in Africa.

Having briefly explained the keywords, the following sections are dedicated to explaining the relationship between African women and digital technology, as well as the ethical and existential implications of these relationships, the ramification of African ethic's engagement with technology as well as how digital technology is influenced by gender and identity.

Empowerment and Agency in African Digital Sphere

Empowerment in the context of digital technology refers to the process through which individuals gain control over their lives, access information and participate in decision-making processes. For African women, digital technology offers a potent tool for empowerment. It allows them to access educational resources, engage in entrepreneurial activities and participate in civic and political discourse (Kedir & Kouame, 2022; Buskens & Webb, 2009).

The notion of agency is central to this empowerment. Agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently and make their own free choices (Giddens, 1984). In the digital space, African women exercise agency by using technology to navigate and negotiate their

identities, aspirations and social roles. Social media and other digital platforms enable women to voice their opinions, advocate for their rights and influence public policy (Sobande, 2020). For instance, social media platforms like *FemaleIN* on Facebook, which provides space for women can share their stories (see Lasisi, 2024), connect with like-minded individuals and mobilise for social change. Many African women use X (formerly Twitter) to voice their opinions, engage in social and political discussions and promote causes related to gender equality and women's rights. Hashtags like *#BringBackOurGirls* (see Tomchak, 2014) and *#Blacklivesmatter* have seen significant participation from African women activists. They also utilise YouTube to share contents ranging from beauty and lifestyle tips to educational videos and advocacy work. YouTube Channels like *Ndani TV* and *Sisi Yemmie* have significant followings and highlight various African women's experiences. Professional networking site like LinkedIn is used by some African women to showcase their professional achievements, connect with industry peers and access career opportunities; and has served as a crucial platform for those advocating for gender diversity in the workplace. Tiktok has also become increasingly popular among younger African women, who use it to create and share short videos that highlight cultural pride, personal achievements and social activism.

There is a prevalent belief that women, particularly African women, have been marginalised in the digital world. Historically, women have been relegated to domestic roles while technical and professional fields were dominated by men (Smith, Sinkford, 2022). Consequently, the representation of women in technology and digital professions remains significantly lower compared to men. Women are less likely to utilise digital technology or the internet, largely due to unequal access to education between genders. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in 2022, women constituted only 28% of professionals in the global tech sector. In many African households, the boy child is often given greater academic opportunities, resulting in more investments in their education compared to girls (UNDP, 2022).

Digital technology offers transformative opportunities and innovations that can promote growth. However, a persistent gender gap exists in internet usage, especially in African countries like Nigeria and Kenya (GSMA, 2022). This disparity has been present since the internet's inception (World Bank, 2021; Gillwald & Mothobi, 2019). Women often lag in developmental activities, including access to the internet. This wide gender gap in digital technology and literacy means that women's roles are often confined to traditional gender expectations such as domestic duties and childcare which overshadow their individual existence and potential (Beauvoir, 1949; Sartre, 1943).

Participation in developmental skills, including digital skills, is essential for personal growth. Despite this, women in Africa are often perceived as lacking the rationality to utilise advanced technological techniques. Gender inequality has profoundly impacted women's place in the digital world (UN Women, 2021; Huyer & Hafkin, 2007; Porfido & Marks, 2020). Barriers to women's access to digital technology include illiteracy and the high costs of devices and data plans. Moreover, women are frequently deprived of leadership positions, even when they are qualified (AfDB, 2022; Smith, Sinkford , 2022).

The underrepresentation of women in technology limits their ability to influence the development of digital tools. This often results in a lack of agency and autonomy within the digital sphere (Huyer & Hafkin, 2007). One existential implication of the digital technological gap for African women is the restriction of their digital identity and the oversight of their experiences, particularly in terms of surveillance (Eubanks, 2018). The lack of diverse perspectives in digital technology has led to homogeneous innovation that neglects the needs

and experiences of marginalised genders (Gillwald & Mothobi, 2019). Online opportunities are often tailored to a male perspective, with few innovations reflecting the contributions of African women (Noble, 2018). This underrepresentation stifles the potential for a more inclusive and equitable digital landscape.

The underrepresentation of African women in digital technology leads to a skewed construction of reality, impeding their capacity for self-creation and development. In Africa, women often find themselves dependent on men, who set boundaries and dictate their actions, particularly in technical fields like data analysis and cybersecurity, which are predominantly male-dominated (EIGE, 2020). The prevalent belief in Africa that men should exercise control over all aspects of life, including digital spaces, raises the question of whether women can control their digital presence and actions. They can, and must be given the space to do so. If not, they should claim that space themselves (Nussbaum, 1991). This is because the essence of African women is often externally dictated by societal expectations rather than personal development. There is this the need for agency, which will allow African women to act and exert control in digital technology. It is crucial for them to exercise their rights as agents in all aspects, and curate their identities both physically and virtually (Bandura, 2001; Haraway, 1991). African women should have the capacity to navigate digital technologies and engage in online communities. However, societal norms often discourage women from participating in discussions, both offline and online, an act that perpetuate their marginalisation.

The involvement of African women in digital technology is not only a matter of equity but also crucial for social and economic development. Their participation can lead to innovations which can challenge dominant narratives and promote representative digital landscape (Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2024). Their digital engagement also facilitates the construction of a collective identity. They share their experiences, connecting with others and form virtual communities that provide support, solidarity and a sense of belonging. These communities can challenge patriarchal structures and promote gender equality which exemplify the transformative potential of digital technology.

Technology also enhances educational opportunities for African women. For instance, digital learning platforms and resources allow them to access some level of knowledge and skills which enable them to break away from traditional roles that confined them to household duties. E-commerce platforms, say 'WhatsApp Business', now allow women to start and manage businesses from home.

However, we must be careful that bringing women into digital spaces does not quietly turn into a new form of technocolonialism. As more African women come online, they often enter platforms and systems that were designed, owned and controlled far beyond their communities. When this happens, there is a real danger that empowerment begins to reflect other people's values, goals and business interests, instead of growing out of women's own everyday experiences and ways of life.

African Women and Technocolonialism

Techno-colonialism refers to how technology perpetuates colonial-like power dynamics that exacerbate existing inequalities and cultural erasure (Mbembe, 2001). When digital systems start telling women how they should speak, trade, learn or organise, while ignoring local languages and community knowledge, technology risks repeating old patterns of dependence and exclusion created by earlier colonial and development projects. In such cases, being digitally included does not necessarily mean being empowered; it may simply mean being

drawn into unequal systems that women do not control. This phenomenon is evident in the digital landscape, where African women face significant barriers to participation and representation. Traditional gender roles, which dictate that women should focus on domestic responsibilities, limit their access to digital technologies and professional opportunities in tech fields (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). These power dynamics reinforce essentialised notions of gender in Africa and perpetuate binary thinking and limiting the understanding of complex identities. Women are often confined to fixed roles that ignore their human existentialism (Crenshaw, 1991).

The underrepresentation of African women in technology is stark; for instance, women made up only 28% of professionals in the global tech sector as of 2022 (UNDP, 2022). This disparity is compounded by socio-economic factors such as unequal access to education and the high costs of digital devices and data plans (Bornman, 2015). In many African households, investments in education are prioritised for boys which further widens the gender gap in digital literacy and technological proficiency (UNDP, 2022).

Technocolonialism also manifests through biased AI systems that reinforce stereotypes and discrimination and marginalise African women from technological development and decision-making processes (UNESCO, 2020).

Approaches to addressing technocolonialism is a multifaceted one which involves governments, corporations and communities. For instance, policies are to be developed in such a way that digital inclusion is promoted and online safety ensured. Digital literacy ought to be enhanced among women and investments in digital infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, are to be made essential to bridge the digital divide (RFLD, 2024).

Gail Presbey's reading of Wangari Maathai shows that women's empowerment is not about tools, income or mere technical access, but about restoring confidence, voice and collective agency, a lesson that speaks directly to debates about digital technology in Africa (Presbey, 2013). Through the Green Belt Movement, Maathai demonstrated that women become empowered when they learn from one another, organise around shared problems, build self-confidence and mutual trust and act together to challenge injustice with a strong sense of ethical responsibility and care for their communities, rather than waiting for experts or external solutions (Maathai, 2004). Seen this way, digital technology can support empowerment only when it strengthens these same conditions instead of merely providing access to devices or platforms. Presbey highlights Maathai's warning against shallow forms of empowerment that simply integrate women into existing capitalist systems without changing power relations, a caution that applies equally to digital inclusion agendas that celebrate connectivity while ignoring agency and ethics. Digital tools, like the GBM's community networks, become empowering only when they amplify women's voices, respect local knowledge and help women act together to shape their own social, political, and economic realities (Presbey, 2013).

What truly matters, especially in discussions of African women and technocolonialism, is not just whether women are online, but whether they have real power over the technologies they use, the data they produce and the stories they tell about themselves. Genuine digital empowerment therefore requires pushing back against technocolonial arrangements and placing African women's voices, cultures and communal values at the centre, so that technology becomes a means of self-expression and shared freedom rather than a new form of domination.

Ethical dimensions and implications of digital participation

Digital participation is a mixed and uneven space for African women, full of new possibilities but also marked by real obstacles and limitations. Among the foremost ethical dilemmas is the pronounced disparity in digital usage (Women Leaders Network for Development - Réseau des Femmes Leaders pour le dévelopement [RFLD], 2024). Access to digital space and the internet is unevenly distributed, a condition aggravated by socio-economic and gender disparities. (Harpur & de Villiers, 2012; Bornman, 2015). African women in rural areas encounter obstacles in obtaining digital tools and engaging with online platforms (Shava & Vyas Doorgapersad, 2023). Addressing this digital disparity is not merely a technical challenge but an ethical imperative. Equitable access to digital resources is essential, underpinning the broader principle that all individuals must be able to fully exercise their digital rights and opportunities (Koltay, 2011). The digital disparity thus highlights deeper questions about justice, equality and the moral responsibility of societies to foster inclusive digital environments where every voice, regardless of gender or location, can be heard and valued.

It is the case that digital platforms offer African women a space to challenge stereotypes and present diverse narratives. However, their representation online is often fraught with issues of bias and stereotyping. The media can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and marginalise African women's voices and experiences (Creedon, 2023). Ensuring ethical representation involves promoting authentic portrayals of African women, enabling them to control their narratives and combat negative stereotypes. This ethical responsibility extends to content creators, platform administrators and users alike, who must strive to foster inclusive and respectful digital environments (Maton, 2019). Like all digital users, African women, including female undergraduates, are vulnerable to data breaches and exploitation. The unauthorised use of personal data can lead to significant harm, including identity theft, harassment and exploitation (Mulikat, Mustapha-Abdulqadir, Shuaib & Olowoniyi, 2021; Nyst & Monaco, 2018). Online abuse, including hate speech, cyberstalking and doxing, can have severe psychological and social consequences (Bali & Desai, 2018). Addressing this requires comprehensive policies and mechanisms to prevent and respond to cyber violence. Digital platforms have an ethical responsibility to create safe online spaces, enforce anti-abuse policies and provide support for survivors (Henry & Powell, 2018).

There's also the case of ethical responsibility of stakeholders, including governments, corporations and communities in ensuring equitable access, representation and empowerment. Digital inclusion is essential for enabling all women to benefit from technological advancements. However, disparities in access to technology persist, often exacerbated by socio-economic factors (UNESCO, 2015; Bornman, 2015). Governments ought to create policies that promote digital literacy and infrastructure development which will in turn ensure that marginalised groups have access to digital tools.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution involves the transfer of technological values and norms from one locale to another (Ugar, 2023). In this case, the challenge of algorithmic biases becomes conspicuous. Algorithms that drive digital platforms can perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce existing inequalities (Noble, 2018). For instance, search engines and social media algorithms often amplify content that conforms to mainstream narratives and marginalising voices that challenge the status quo. This techno-colonialism can undermine the agency and empowerment of African women. Moreover, much, if not majority of Africa's digital infrastructure, which includes everything from internet services to social media platforms are dominated by Western tech corporations. This implies that the rules and norms governing these spaces are set by entities outside of the daily realities of African women, often leading to the reinforcement of existing social inequalities and the marginalisation of local voices.

Digital technology, though highly transformative, raises ethical questions, particularly around privacy and algorithmic bias, with specific implications for African women. On one hand, the widespread collection and use of personal data can expose women, especially those in marginalized or rural communities, to surveillance, online harassment or exploitation, thereby limiting their sense of autonomy and safety in digital spaces (Floridi, 2019). On the other hand, algorithmic decision-making in areas such as access to financial services, education, fashion sense or employment can perpetuate systemic biases that disadvantage African women, reinforcing existing social and economic inequalities (O'Neil, 2016). These ethical concerns highlight the urgent need for inclusive digital policies and culturally sensitive technology design that protect African women's privacy, ensure fair representation and empower them to benefit fully from the digital revolution.

Existentialist philosophy as a framework for digital technology

Existentialism, a philosophy centred on individual freedom and the principle that existence precedes essence, is a powerful lens to explore African women's engagement with digital technology. It asserts that people define themselves through actions and decisions, rather than fixed roles imposed by society (Sartre, 1943; de Beauvoir, 1949). For African women, cyberspace, say, social media, online communities and learning platforms, provide unprecedented opportunities to express themselves, challenge societal norms and exercise autonomy. These platforms allow women to participate in global conversations and actively construct their identities, making existentialist thought essential for understanding the nuances of digital empowerment.

An important aspect of this empowerment is the reclamation and reshaping of narratives. African women's voices have historically been marginalised or distorted. Digital technology provides a means to tell authentic stories, build supportive communities and advocate for rights. In doing so, women assert their agency and foster both social and existential liberation. Sartre's ideas of freedom and authenticity, alongside de Beauvoir's exploration of gendered selfhood, highlight how identity is actively formed through choices and actions (Sartre, 1943; de Beauvoir, 1949). Digital engagement thus becomes a space for resistance, self-expression, and the pursuit of meaningful existence. Sartre's notion of existential freedom, the ability to act according to one's own will, is particularly relevant in the digital realm (Sartre, 1943). Online platforms allow African women to explore identities beyond traditional societal constraints. However, Sartre's idea of bad faith warns of the risks that may be accrued from it, such that curated or performative online personas may reflect social pressures rather than true self-expression, leading to alienation from authentic essence. This dilemma highlights the challenge of exercising freedom responsibly in digital spaces, where societal expectations and online performativity intersect. African women frequently balance online personas with offline realities, managing multiple selves that may conflict or fragment authenticity. However, this is not to say that digital platforms do not enable access to education, skills and economic opportunities that strengthen self-determination. In fact, online learning and digital literacy programmes equip women to pursue careers and shape their destinies, embodying Sartre's claim that humans are condemned to be free, responsible for their choices (Sartre, 1943).

Heidegger's critique of technology further widens this understanding. In *The Question Concerning Technology*, he warns that technology can reduce beings to mere standing reserves where users may be treated as data points rather than individuals (Heidegger, 1954). Digital systems can commodify engagement, threaten agency and undermine authentic selfhood. Similarly, de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism reminds us that women are often positioned as the Other, a dynamic that online spaces can both reproduce and challenge (de Beauvoir, 1949).

While social media may reinforce stereotypes and objectification, it also offers avenues for subverting dominant narratives, experimenting with identity and forming empowering communities.

Albert Camus's concept of the absurd, that is, the tension between the search for meaning and an indifferent universe, also resonates in digital contexts (Camus, 1942). The vast and often overwhelming flow of online information can produce existential disorientation. Camus emphasises that meaning emerges through personal creativity and rebellion. This principle is mirrored in how African women navigate digital spaces. They actively define their identities and assert autonomy, thereby transforming potentially chaotic online experiences into meaningful engagements.

Undoubtedly, digital technology facilitates access to education and economic opportunities that are crucial for existentialist self-determination. Online learning platforms and digital literacy programmes enable African women to acquire new skills and knowledge that enhance their capacity for autonomous decision-making and career advancement. This empowerment through education and authentic freedom of expression, a fundamental human essence, aligns with Sartre's idea that individuals are condemned to be free, bearing the responsibility of shaping their destinies (Sartre, 1943). However, the existentialist journey for African women in the digital realm is not without challenges. The digital divide and issues of access remain significant barriers. Many African women still lack reliable internet access and digital literacy, which hinders their ability to fully participate in the digital economy and society. The digital space is not immune to the patriarchal structures present in offline societies. Online harassment and gender-based violence which pose threats to women's safety and freedom of expression are prevalent (Aribisala, 2023; (Mulikat, Mustapha-Abdulqadir, Shuaib & Olowoniyi, 2021) and many of their aspirations are curtailed by societal confines and attempts to gain freedom are often met with resistance labelled as cultural transgressions (Mwauwa, 2020).

The explanations above show that existentialist philosophy provides a compelling understanding of African women's digital engagement. Digital technology offers both opportunities and constraints that require continual negotiation of freedom, responsibility and selfhood in the digital age.

Digital technology and existentialism as socio-cultural constructions

Digital technologies are not neutral entities; they are deeply embedded with socio-cultural values and assumptions that reflect and reinforce existing power dynamics (Feenberg, 1991, pp. 45-47). This embeddedness influences how African women experience and enact their identities. For instance, advancements in healthcare technology, such as telemedicine and mobile health applications, are avenues for African women to access medical information and services, which not only improves their health and that of their families but also empowers them to make decisions regarding their bodies and well-being. However, the deployment of technology without caution can lead to inauthentic lifestyles. Social media platforms, for instance, often prioritise visual content that perpetuates specific beauty standards and body image issues. African women who do not conform to these standards may face marginalisation or pressure to alter their appearances. Conversely, digital technologies can serve as tools for resistance and subversion. African women can leverage these platforms to challenge dominant narratives and promote alternative representations of gender, race, and identity. This subversion can help disrupt hegemonic discourses and create spaces for diverse voices and experiences (Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2024).

Digital technology, thus, helps African women question dominant narratives and create safe digital environments. Their engagement in digital spaces can promote equitable and inclusive digital landscapes that enable them to redefine their ontological realities (Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2024). It should be noted however, that closing the gender digital gap in Africa requires a collective societal effort, not just the responsibility of specific individuals or groups. There is an urgent need to promote equal opportunities for both girls and boys in African homes and foster confidence and resilience in girls (Porfido & Marks, 2020). Digital technology should be designed to incorporate and encourage women's participation (Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2024).

The need to equip African women with digital skills and allow them to contribute to the online space is existentially essential. Grassroots education and training can help reduce cultural and societal biases (Tetteh, 2023). Top women in tech should form communities to transfer skills and address the gender gap and showcase digital opportunities (Porfido & Marks, 2020). African women and access to digital technologies are often divided along gender and socio-economic lines (Hilbert, 2011, pp. 75-77).

Conclusion

This paper presents a philosophical examination of the intersection between African women and digital technology. It elucidates the existential freedom African women experience when engaging with digital platforms, alongside their ontological freedom. In this context, existential freedom pertains to the ability to make autonomous choices and define one's own life, while ontological freedom relates to the essence of being and identity formation. The paper considers how digital interfaces influence and shape these identities and provide a framework for understanding the impacts of digital technology on African women's lives.

The paper noted that the relationship between African women and digital technology is complex. Digital technology offers African women unprecedented opportunities for empowerment and agency and enables them to challenge societal norms and construct alternative realities. The paper noted however that these opportunities are accompanied by significant challenges which include inauthentic lifestyles, digital disparity, algorithmic biases and online harassment.

Through existential philosophy, the paper highlighted the transformative potential of digital technology for African women, while underscoring the ethical and ontological implications of their digital engagement. To ensure that digital technology serves as a tool for empowerment rather than marginalisation, the paper contended that stakeholders must address the barriers hindering equitable access and representation. The paper argued that through concerted efforts to promote digital literacy, inclusivity and ethical practices, the digital space can become an avenue where African women can exercise their agency and express their authenticity. The paper maintained that if African women embrace digital technology, they can redefine their identities and assert their agency; a process that can reduce techno-colonialism in gender dynamics and empower African women to take control of their lives (Sambuli, 2016).

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