

## Performing Sexuality in a Digital Environment: GenZee Culture, Technology and the Politics of Morality in Northern Nigeria

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### Abstract

In a highly morally and religiously charged Northern Nigeria, how is the appropriation and performativity of sexuality negotiated and contested between older generations and the Gen Zees through digital technologies? The growing influence of social media platforms presents an unregulated public avenue for Gen Zee Nigerians to digitally express and perform their sexuality against cultural values. However, this digitally sponsored visibility has resulted in a near-crisis of nudity that conflicts with the region's conservative and often guarded religious norms on bodily exposure, modesty, and moral decency. Using both primary and secondary historical sources, this study argues that social media platforms have created an intergenerational gulf that pitches the older generation against the Gen Zees' unbridled public sexual self-expressions. This conflict has led to the state deployment of censorship, backlash, police arrest, and even physical violence on the Gen Zees. Through a qualitative analysis of selected cases of arrest and humiliations of Gen Zees, this paper finds that the tensions between inherent cultural value and the technologically-gear quest for self-expression and identity of the Gen Zees in Northern Nigeria stoke embers of irreconcilable intergenerational differences in conservative Islamic Northern Nigeria in a democratic state. Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze framework of assemblage is used alongside interviews and digital ethnography of selected case studies which are explored in the paper. This research aims to contribute to the understanding of youth, modernity, and technology in Africa as regards the performativity of sexuality.

**Keywords:** Gen Zees, Morality, Censorship, Social media, Northern Nigeria, Hisbah

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### Introduction

The Gen Zees are a generation born into the high noon of digitalization with the emergence of the internet (Masitah F., et al, 2024). As succinctly categorised by M. Prensky (2001), they are best captured as “digital natives” who have their lives digitally construed and structured. The Gen Zees are citizens of the internet space and all the materials it offers. As people who grew up with technological agility, they tie their social identity, presentation, and authenticity to the public space, where they find reputation and popularity through nuanced digital engagements. The performativity of Gen Zees’ sexuality in the digital space, particularly the social media platforms, has surpassed the traditional moral standard of their physical territory. The Gen Zees are citizens of the net who find their chosen platforms and engagement as amplifying their digital patriotism (Alexandra V., 2019). The globalized structure of contemporary world geared by ICT has led to increased connectivity and network which Gen Zees are signing up for the opportunity to be digital advocates to all kinds of issues as they perceive (Alexandra V., 2019). The performativity, articulation, and orientation of sexuality and public display to the Gen Zees are not to be negotiated but presented assertively (Maitah F., 2024). Social media and its possibilities align perfectly with the sexual ideologies of this generation, as it presents opportunity to connect with diverse and like-minded individuals on similar standing and gain social traffic which is being monetised. This, however, raises crucial question on what extent does this digital freedom conflict with traditional moral standards and how do the Gen Zees negotiate their social media sexual lives to rapidly and digitally integrate the older generation within the praxis of traditional sexual dogmas?

Morality as conceptualised and instilled in the older generation is believed to be susceptible to changes and evolution by the Gen Z and, the technological spaces present an opportunity to showcase the different subjectification and multiple perceptions of the concept that might differ from rooted moral frameworks. The generational divide between Gen Zees and all other previous generations is sponsored by the digital networked space that has resulted to fluidity in what was once termed sacred or unspeakable. The conservative approach of previous Gens and the receptive attitude of the Gen Zees are open to cataclysmic contestation between those who uphold the static nature of morality, religion, and culture with those who observe a more flexible address. The ideology of morality as defined by religion and culture with technology creates often an unfair and harsh terrain for the Gen Zees to freely express their truth as perceived and upheld without facing backlash and censorship.

In Northern Nigeria, the politics of morality is played by the keepers and observers of laid down customs and traditions as well by the dictates and doctrines of Islam (Adamu., 2008). These bodies assume moral policing that often contests with and restricts the level of Gen Zees’ digital manifestation and sexual fluidity. Across Kano, Sokoto, Bauchi, Kogi, Jigawa among other northern states are the strict observation of religious, moral, and sartorial laws held tenaciously by the moral police called the “Hisbah” and other loyal conservative religious people who are fond of alerting the authorities to dissent across the social and physical space.

The resultant factor to this moral expectation often leads to moral panic and infringement of the right to freedom of expression.

Notwithstanding, Gen zees are confident in sharing presumed sensitive contents which encompass pictures, nudity and semi-nudes, personalised videos of self-admiration that showcase their sexual values and identity, music, and other images termed “illicit” by those bodies. This often opens the Gen Zees to social media policing and outright, and violent backlash from those who consider such contents to be demoralising. This raises an inquiry into how the Gen Zees are expected to unidentify their cosmological nature of digital expression. The virtual life of a Gen z is as important as the physical bio-networked space and each space deserves equal observance and performance of all issues and facets of life whether sensitive or not. The equilibrium of these spaces attests to their authenticity and selflessness.

According to the Pew research (2015), “a generation typically refers to groups of people born over a 15-20 year span”. The Gen Zees are fully known as ‘Generation Zoomer’ and are individuals born between 1997-2010. This paper presents them as people with features of fluidity and adaptability which stem from their ability to see beyond established structures, whether moral, cultural or technological and they interweave those elements to transcend in their unique worldviews. They are open, enthusiastic, bold, pragmatic, and they attach non-linear perception on matters of tradition and morality. The culture of morality as a fixed factor for societies is bypassed by these digital natives. What is right or wrong should be decided by individual values rather than socially constructed moral makeup. This ideology significantly differentiates the Gen Zees as they resonate about evolving as they so wish and dim fit.

### **Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

This study extensively analyses both primary and secondary sources and it is essentially qualitative. It attempts to understand and analyse how the Gen Zees are navigating their digital lives in the face of moral policing and to what extent has such censorship mitigated or exacerbated what it tends to solve in the Northern part of Nigeria. Therefore, oral interviews, newspaper articles and other similar thematic articles in journals and books were collected and analysed. Participants were selected through snowball method based on their citizenry of the selected Northern states, age criteria, and experience. To reach participants based on their locations, the researcher employed a combination of both internet-based and in-person interview methods to optimise accessibility. Newspaper articles and publication on public dissent and policing across Kogi, Sokoto, Kaduna and especially Kano, where the Hisbah is most instituted, were interrogated and analysed.

The assemblage theory by Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze was used in the analysis of Gen Zees’ approach to sexuality and morality which have resulted to a rupture in the accentuated system of Northern Nigeria.

### **Gen Zees, the Performativity of Digital Sexuality, and Moral Politics in Northern Nigeria**

Sexuality is the expression of one's sexual identity or emotional attractions as sexual beings (ELKok, 2004). But digital sexuality is the expression of intimacy, sexual activities or articulation utilising the digital space (Sanna, 2024). This digital sexuality also includes the sartorial expression that attunes with modern fashion displayed across the digital platforms that they have become exposed to through their social media fluency against the analog, traditional puritanical fashion. The Gen Zees are pro-technological advocates that are fond of utilising the digital spaces to express their sexual desires, attractions, and thoughts. As Kevin (2023) avers, the Gen Z finds it quite convenient to seek validation, guidance, and opinion through their chosen digital platform than the traditional settings. The digital space presents a remarkable atmosphere for advocacy, articulation, and expression.

In this paper, the Gen Zees' performativity of sexuality in the Northern Nigeria followed by the accompanied moral policing is analysed with regards to the rhizomatic theory. The world is no longer one generation and due to this multiplicity, morality has "lost its pivot" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). The heterogeneity of many generations in the world operates in its diversity and can corroborate through relationships that are not static but fluid. The convergence of generations specifically the integration of the Gen Zees is de-territorial as they reconfigure the static and fixed norms which make the world evolve, change, or dissolve to awake new contexts. The Gen Zees are what Deleuze & Guattari (1987) call the "doctores angelic" because they challenge fixed outdated systems and norms especially those related to sexuality and morality and replace them with new concepts. This redefinition is geared by their versatility and dynamism which enable them to create and allow pluralistic moralities to emerge.

The social media serve as a part of the rhizomatic structure as it enables the linkages of identities, authenticities that interact, overlap, and coexist resulting to a line of flight that generate crisis between the good and the bad, that is, the rigid and territorialized identities rooted in established systems, and the flexible and de-territorialized identities that are re-stratifying the systems (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). The Gen Z uses the digital space as a line of flight to express their sexuality in images, posts, and videos in ways that contradicts the organized code of morality. The nature of the social media allows features such as comments from the viewers of such expressions (Butkowski C.P et al., n.d), that could erupt backlash from the morally accentuated individuals. This leads to cultural dichotomy that ruptures to manifest cultural and religious backlash which, abnormally, rebound the Gen Zees' revolve to defy traditional contexts. The Social media platform is non-hierarchical, decentralised, and unbound by moral codes of an analog society, it presents opportunity for convergence and pluralism where people, ideologies, and formations can mutually influence one another. The Gen Zees are individuals of the global world precipitated by ICT where the world exists in plural dimension syncing the reality, spiritual, abstract, and the virtual. The Gen Zees are adaptive organisms that leverage these worlds to showcase their identities. The algorithm and personalisation that

the virtual world has over the physical world presents a unique atmosphere for the Gen Zees to explore, interact, and as well project their orientations, to make their voices heard and be recognised to the global village (Cookingham et al, 2015).

### **Islam and Moral Tradition in Northern Nigeria**

Islam is the totality of a man's life which includes his moral framework (Salihu, 2022). In the traditional and religious Northern Nigeria where Islam dictates the acceptable or normal performativity of sexuality and public presentation in the digital and analog spaces, the Gen Zees are in the forefront of backlash and censorship as their fluid nature conflicts with the former. The negotiation of moral codes has tarried on tensed field between the two with no victor at sight. With the adoption of the Sharia in most northern states, there have been an effort by the Muslim communities to ensure the full implementation of the stipulated ethics. This fundamentally saw the emergence of the Hisbah as an agency dedicated to promoting and ensuring that the Islamic moral codes are kept. This religious duty comes from a Quranic text which reinforces the “enjoining what is good and forbidding what is wrong” (Qur'an 3:104). Islamic leaders are tasked with the duty of promoting high moral standards according to the tenets of Islam and the establishment of a Hisbah institution serves as a means to an end (Hamarneh, 1964).

The adoption of the Sharia laws is complemented with the formation of the Hisbah groups to ensure that the Islamic moral conduct is upheld (Musa, 2022). The major role of the Hisbah is in “enforcing public morality through policing people's behaviour” (Adamu, 2008). The duty of moral policing aside the formal Hisbah groups is an obligation for all Muslim individuals. The Hisbah's moral enforcement as a group is not inclusive or isolated but as stated in Qur'an 3:104, every Muslim owns the responsibility of performing similar duty with the view of addressing moral dissent both in the physical and digital spaces. Morality in this context becomes a spectacle that is subjected to scrutiny and judgement. The implementation of Hisbah across Northern states of Nigeria has been effective in its duty across various analog spaces such as the transport sector in which men and women especially on motorcycles are often branded as portraying immorality, even the film industry popularly known as “Kannywood” is not exempted from this backlash (Adamu, 2008; Musa, 2022, Maishanu, 2021).

The activities of Hisbah in moral policing encompasses indecency to alcohol and fashion to beauty agencies which retrogressively deal with the economy of such states (Musa, 2022; Jonathan, 2020). Interestingly, this vigilantism has been transferred to the digital spaces especially as the Hisbah groups have virtual offices across the social media platforms to scrutinise and also punish moral offenders. The Hisbah within the analog spaces engage in corporal discipline of moral offenders through the use of “sticks and whips” are their weapon of ingraining moral rectitude (Adamu, 2008). In the digital space, the Hisbah and other Moral police —those who identify themselves as promoters of the Islamic moral system, engage

suspected digital moral offenders by commenting harshly to offenders' social media posts and also embarking on physical punishment in which the Gen Zees are often the recipients.

The negotiation of moral order is more contested with the female gender than it is enforced on the men and this is because, the women are construed as moral objects in African societies especially Islamic and patriarchal societies such as Northern Nigeria with or without the Hisbah force and this makes them susceptible to moral policing than the male gender in issues of articulation, sartorial choices, and even marital decisions among other lines (Okposkwasili, 2021; Adamu, 2008). Women's vulnerability seemingly curtails bodily freedom as argued by Olugbemi-Gabriel, which serves as a yardstick for state and non-state regulation and control of the women's bodies (Olugbemi-Gabriel, O. 2021). The female Gen Zees, as illustrated in the next section, are perturbed in the world of trends as regards to their articulation and displays have been categorised as corruptors of the moral order which brings them to the moral watch of the society both in the online and on-site spaces. The moral code loyalists of Northern Nigeria can be considered as the "tree and root" that subject their citizens into a process of "subjectification and significance" (Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F., 1987) which oftentimes censure the Gen Zees for aligning with the generation they were born into. One participant noted that,

"most of the behaviours and expressions that we the Gen Zees are showing are from the systems built by the previous generations which we have come to accept as a way of life. The Gen Zees did not create the digital platforms neither were they the architect of sexual porousness, these things existed before their birth and became the order. Most of the people impacting morality on us are themselves morally corrupt and they are part of the reason we will never ever go back to that morality". ( Participant 1(P1))

P1's view showcases the inherent views upheld by most Gen Zees who contributed to this research as participants. The Gen Zees behave based on what they have observed and consumed from the previous generation. P1 reinforced that, many young girls at the early age of their lives are exposed to sexual abuses and contents perpetuated by older individuals which most often than not shape the sexual order of the girls. This aligns perfectly with Lin, W.H et al (2020) study of which they noted that sexually explicit contents to adolescence could influence their behaviour as they become adults, which the society might later judge against societal standards as immoral.

### **Sexuality and Policing: A Case Study of Ankpa Girls and Murja Kunya**

The moral censorship has been critical in Tiktok, a platform where many young Nigerians find very appealing for its fun and content creating monetisation. At the dew of 2023 and 2024, two significant scenarios occurred that showed the height of moral censorship in both Hisbah and non-Hisbah Northern Nigeria. As at late January 2023, following an earlier request for the arraignment of Murja Ibrahim Kunya and other Tiktok skit-makers in September, 2022,

Miss Kunya was arrested in Kano on the grounds of illicit and vulgar social media content posts which was branded as a risk to the moral system of Northern Nigeria. Her arrest was conducted on the day she was preparing herself and guests for the celebration of her birthday party in a hotel in Kano. The Miss Kunya case sparked mixed reactions across social media which was accompanied with a hashtag #FreeMurjaKunya by pro-Kunya defenders. The Hisbah Officers claimed that her apprehension was due to her vulgar language content which oftentimes, is offensive and moral decaying, other crimes included the offender's sexual displays and vibe to musics branded immoral (Shuaibu, 2023). Murja Kunya was sentenced to 3-weeks' community service by the Kano State Sharia Court presided by Justice Abdullahi Halliru to serve as a janitor in the Murtala Mohammed Specialist Hospital, one of the largest in hospitals in Kano (France-Presse, 2023).

Another incident occurred in Ankpa, Kogi State in February, 2024. What makes this case study peculiar is that, the region is a non-sharia state and lacks the Hisbah force. However, members of the community have taken up the obligation of contesting with what or who trivialises the moral code. In February, 2024, a group of girls tagged as "Ankpa girls" engaged in a tiktok challenge labeled as "of course", a popular trend that swept through the country and had several Gen Zees and millennials subscribing to the video making content creation. These girls, while being expressive with their local language (Igala) took turns in stating, in a translated version that, "I am an Igala girl, of course, I am into hookup". The Tiktok video which became viral led to a commotion online about the degrading impact of the video content to the Ankpa community while some other individuals simply saw it as entertainment and social media traffic generation. However, the rage was transferred to the physical space as a group of men led by a local policeman called "Eskay Mayana" raided the girls' residence and meted out retributive justice to the girls which was recorded and also posted on the social media platforms. The new video sparked appraising comments on the posts with some commenters offering a word of prayer for the executors. The police and other men who exacted this punishment on the girls clearly violated the assault and battery laws to which the girls stand justified (MSN reporter, 2024).

The invincible aspect of these scenarios is that, such publicity as seen in the public display and posting of the punishment on the acclaimed offenders as seen in the case with the Ankpa girls and Miss Kunya only on one hand erupted a form of publicity which translates to social media traffic which the Gen Zees are most critical about irrespective of whether the garnered comments are positive or negative and on the other hand, it reveals the level of moral censorship on the Gen Zees in Northern Nigeria which leads to stigmatisation on punished offenders and other Gen Zees in the digital spaces. On the second point, however, a participant noted,

"I have seen younger generations pushing back against these ideas, trying to balance their personal freedoms with the values they were raised with" (Participant 2).

A published interview with one Amina Adam, a 20-year-old Tiktoker by the Rest of World news noted that,

“I was discriminated against in our Islamic school for being a Tiktok creator and was threatened to be withdrawn from the school...I had to voluntarily withdraw from Islamic school to continue making videos”. (Olaigbe, 2023)

The censorship of Gen Zees in this regard starts from their affiliation with the social media platforms especially Tiktok. The utter displeasure with Tiktok can be seen in the statement released by the Kano State Censorship Board (KSCB) in which they highlighted the platform that they “are primarily for film industry, social media, especially Tiktok, which has enabled influencers to engage in immoral and indecent act” to which Ismail Na’abba Afakallah, the executive director of KSCB opined categorically to acclaimed moral dissent that, “we can’t accept you to go wayward” (Daily Trust, 2022). The action taken by Miss Amina reiterates the Gen Zees’ culture and unresolved push for self-expression and freedom to do whatever they set to do irrespective of community acceptance.

Both Miss Kunya and the Ankpa girls were obligated to render their apologies through the social media spaces with Miss Kunya being banned from her digital platforms by a court ruling in March 2023, despite this obligated sentence, Miss Kunya has continued to make her presence known especially on Tiktok where she posts her video comedy contents. A report by France-Presse in the Voice of Africa showed that Miss Kunya after her first meeting with the Hisbah group posted on her Tiktok handle in which she opined that, “Now that you don’t know what to do you are resorting to preaching? You should stop wasting your saliva... I am not interested in your preaching”, this statement was made before her apprehension in January, 2023 and could be evaluated as description of her actions afterwards. As Muhsin Ibrahim, an interviewed correspondent offered in the same report, “many people thought she would stop or reduce some of her “transgressive” acts after the previous court sentence... she did not” (France-Presse, 2023). P1 purported that,

“if she was to be given such public embarrassment and harassment as with Kunya or the Ankpa girls, I would continue even much greater because the moral police persons have sold me out by using such approach in the first instance”.

This buttresses the defiance culture of most Gen Zees to the counter force approach of the moral disciples of Northern Nigeria especially when they conceive such treatment as unfair. P1’s position reverberates what Sherman (1993) posits as the “A Theory of Criminal Sanction”, where he noted that, punishments exacted on an individual who perceives such as unfair would lead to defiance in which more crimes are committed and sanctions are rendered ineffective. Most of the participants reinforced that, while the Gen Zees action could be offensive to the community, the censorship of morality in northern Nigeria is not reciprocal and are often targeted at the young, unmarried, and poor individuals within the society. This factor



stands as a contradiction to the upholding of moral piety to which the Gen Zees that come to the label of moral offenders leverage to continually attack by not yielding to the punishment.

The Gen Zees moral negotiation and digital usage remains a tough ground as they are faced with both online and on-site harassment, punishment, and backlash. One participant from Kaduna offered that,

“the Gen Zees within the public spaces are not allowed to wear indecent or trendy clothes, and if they want to, they must use veil to cover up. The punishment for violators can be abusive words, point of fingers to the extent that the youth is intimidated and if possible, the throwing of stone” (Participant 3)

One can argue that the rejection faced by these Gen Zees in the physical space led to their resort to digital spaces where they feel much safer to be themselves but with the transition of moral policing to the virtual spaces, the Gen Zees are infringed which to them is unfair and unjust to their expressive self. P2 noted that, “...the internet has made it easier for young people to share personal aspects of their lives without feeling judged” and that if moral sensitive people come across what “they might consider as immoral based on cultural or religious views...”, they should remember that, “everyone has the right to express themselves, but we also have the right to decide what we consume”. To this effect, another participant who vehemently considered illicit online behaviour as a prohibited act and corporal punishment as a deserved duty of Muslims as “Ummah” (Family), stated that, his best strategy to online sexual posts is to “unfollow or block them, without insulting such individuals” (Participant 4). This approach offers a less punitive action which the Gen Zees hardly experience. Meanwhile, the Hisbah groups of Northern Nigeria has included a more reintegrating approach towards moral offenders through provision of alternative options as Aminu Daurawa, the Kano Hisbah Commander General noted that, the group would grant repenters “capital and train them on business” (Shuaibu, 2024). However, such approaches have not yet materialized in entirely curbing moral dissent across the region and its social media spaces.

### **The Future of Moral Policing in the Rapidly Digitalizing Northern Nigeria**

The social media remains a line of conflict between the Gen Zees and moral police or morality-driven individuals in Northern Nigeria. During Miss Kunya’s first meeting with the Hisbah group, her attire and composure as captured in a report showed a rather distinct individual as her sartorial choice was termed “decent” and her composure “quiet” compared to her usual Tiktok skits (France-Presse, 2023). Similarly, the Ankpa girls after the viral ‘Of course’ challenge was said to have offered an apology through their platform prior to the corporal punishment meted out on them. This exemplifies that most Gen Zees are aware of their societal accepted moral codes to which they find the digital spaces as a platform where they can be unapologetically themselves and are less constrained by any discipline as dominant in the traditional society.

The future of moral policing remains vague in the evolving technological and globalized world. Gen Zees remain unperturbed about the societal norms but are individuals who value distinct norms that attune to their personality as a person. With more trends offered by the social media, this generation has put themselves on the cart of occurring trends which give them satisfaction than the traditional construed fun as it were to older generation. While the society might still survive in upholding their moral system and values, the media continues to offer Gen Zees a world where they can freely express their opinions, sexuality, and lifestyle. To P1, continued censorship on physical spaces might result to Gen Zees' migration to places where they feel safe and secure. This option has already been offered by Dauruwa, the Kano Hisbah Commander who states that: "those promoting immorality in Kano should either repent or leave Kano... because Kano is not a center of immorality" (Shuaibu, 2024). The Gen Zees of Northern Nigeria are faced with either a chance at repentance or forceful migration, but on the contrast, Participant 4 believes that, the society will triumph in ridding immorality from the Youths either way. Gen Zees like Miss Kunya and others have remained undeterred in their digital solidarity and the opportunities that it presents to them by the virtue of their creative sense irrespective of what the society refers to as "good" or "evil" especially in Northern Nigeria. This behaviour attributes the Gen Zees' resolve at deconstructing fixed moral systems which will amount to the moral world, in what Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987) referred to as the losing of pivot.

## Conclusion

This paper explored the negotiation of moral framework between the Gen Zees and their Northern states which has resulted to a critical contestation that has continued to define the dynamics of morality. It argues that, the emergence of the Gen Zees as a peculiar generation has caused an eruption in traditional moral negotiation in Northern Nigeria. However, the policing and silencing of their sexual displays in physical environment have caused them to utilise the social media spaces as an avenue for unsupervised expression, to be able to follow and be in trends. This has unequivocally positioned these digital platforms as lines of conflict between the traditional moral systems and individuals and the Gen Zees' disruption of moral codes as such policing have been incorporated to those platforms. As stated, the northern policing has adopted both online and offline approach towards curbing the acclaimed "immorality" of their young ones. The digital platforms have created an avenue for the Gen Zees of Northern extraction of Nigeria to be able to freely express their sexuality and decentralise fixed social norms. But despite the freedom the media presents, they continue to navigate their sexual expressions in both digital and analog spaces. Hence, the Gen Zees' moral style as regards to fluid articulation and sartorial choices that exhibit nudity are factors that constitute to moral dissent and policing in Northern Nigeria which are also approaches that, they utilise to rupture and defy the moral codes of their analog society, the Northern society's Hisbah and Corporal approaches have only resulted to Gen Zees' resolve to stay committed to their course.

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