

One would be at a loss for an accurate description of twenty-first century communication if they were to exclude the advent of social media. While social media has been both critically acclaimed and harshly criticized, it provides a window through which one can observe various identities and interactions of its participants. Social media has drastically affected identity formation of younger and older generations, and people have taken note. Judith Butler, chiefly known for her work in feminist and queer theory, provides an interesting lens through which one can analyze use of social media and its relation to the self. The purpose of this paper is threefold: to explicate Judith Butler's notion of performativity, to use Butler's performative lens to view a social media post, and lastly, to discuss how said post interacts with the performative categories it finds itself located in.

Performativity may be seen as the “doing” of an amalgamation of identities, but it is important to clarify what exactly an identity is via Butler's discursive model. Contrary to many other views, Butler's notion of identity is not inextricably linked to a body. Identity instead is found in the overlapping of innumerable networks of discourses (exchanges of messages, symbols, and meanings). Identity in this case is akin to a space that one is dropped into, and the individual is then made recognizable through their position in these various discourses. Again, it is only through discourses that identity is made intelligible, and the act of *doing* one's own identity is what Butler would like to call performativity.

To clarify, performativity is not the same as performance. In the words of Butler: “...whereas performance presupposes a pre existing subject, performativity contests the very notion of the subject” (GP, 33). In other words, performance implies an entity that

precedes the act of performing, as if an individual consciously assumes a costume and behaves according to the spirit the costume dictates. One may liken the act of performativity to the robing, de-robing, and re-robing between many costumes. The subject can only be made intelligible when moving within or between costumes, never outside of them. The subject *is* the spirit of the costume; acting is the reality. This notion is even seen in Nietzsche when he says, “‘The doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything” [GT, 33, GoM\*]. Butler has not been the first to attempt a dethronement of agency or a prediscursive self, but social media has provided a literal and virtual stage to show the fluidity and malleability of personhood through discourses and performativity.

One must not confuse a corporeal body with an identity or subject. A body is merely a collection of cells, what distinguishes one particular set of cells from another is the intelligibility that is found through the lens of various discourses. In other words, a subject is only made intelligible through discourses, and these discourses can only be identified through their motion.

Now that the theoretical groundwork has been laid, one may ask, “How does performativity manifest itself, and how is it related so social media?” An examination of one of my own social media posts may shed light on this question. The discourses made intelligible through this post are numerous: class, masculinity, consumerism, fashion, anti-fashion, irony, nature, authenticity (or quasi-authenticity), counterculture, and even a discourse of effortless excellence akin to renaissance courts or a perverted sense of Aristotle’s *arete*. There are many performative actions that are conscious and purposeful in the post. The caption which reads “bE@\$+ |\0d3 Ä[T1vatEĐ” was largely inspired by

the band Bon Iver's album, 22, *A Million*, whose track titles are semantically nonsensical with highly stylized characters. The text on the picture "Ok" elicits feelings of simultaneous silliness and underwhelming, with the subject (myself) donning a mismatched bandana and fanny pack while gazing into the unknown. The erect body position with crossed arms and a mild stoicism serve to portray masculinity, but the notion is knowingly undercut by the smirk on the face. These features come together in a whimsical fashion, with a tip of the hat to youthful playfulness that those who view the post would immediately recognize.

Other performative aspects were not necessarily acted on consciously, but were active features nonetheless. While there is a sense of irony in being thrust into the foreground, the pervasive but present discourses of capitalism, consumerism, and cultural passivity run amok. What would appear to be resistance may only be self-gratification for poking fun at the systems which one is so closely involved in. The backdrop of this photo is the popular chicken restaurant *McDougal's*, which Instagram viewers may view as normal, but to the larger population, a business that sells a \$12 basket of fried chicken is likely seen as ludicrous. The faux-rusticism of the restaurant is also apparent upon further observation, with an eclectic gathering of license plates, knick knacks, and string lights. The restaurant, like the post, attempts to claim a rich heritage based on aesthetics, but at its core it is an ontologically problematic.

The key to social media is that it is more than a vector of expression; it is a community that is conducive to rapid communication and discursive changes. The original intention of my social media use was schizophrenic at its core; on one hand it was to be used as a subversive and subcultural tool to engage in and challenge/undermine

normative performances which occur on social media, but in time this initiative was swallowed by the spirit of the hoi polloi, and the medium of expression became more vanilla and self conscious as the number of followers I had increased. Reminiscent of Sartre's gaze, the centrality of my social media universe shifted upon being observed by others, and an existential sinkhole caused currents of creativity and self affirmation to flow away from me. The postmodern tools of irony, cynicism, and wild juxtaposition were no longer unique to me; it appeared that everyone seemed to champion the notion of "being outside the mold."

For the most part, the discourses made apparent by this post were not upset in any particular way. As a community/media form, the use of instagram was not changed, but in regards to content, this post reified the new move away from attempts to portray life as ideal, over achieving, and hyper experiential. In a sense, nothing is being "done" save for the presence of the subject in a space. It is unlikely that this particular post transforms discourses in a radical manner, however, it may be seen as a piece within in a mosaic of movement that blurs the lines between the masculine and the androgynous, the serious and the silly, the deep and the shallow. It ought to be noted that the audience for this post was relatively small, about forty people. Therefore any intelligibility of performative attributes will be conveyed in a more intimate manner, since those who would see the post would already be familiar with the spirit of others posts.

Regardless of my particular posting and its impacts, Butler's concept of performativity allows for social media dissection with a refreshing amount of depth.

References:

“Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler,” *Radical Philosophy: A Journal of Socialist and Feminist Philosophy* (67) (Summer): 32-9.

Nietzsche, Friedrich [1887] *On the Genealogy of Morals (Zur Genealogie der Moral)*, trans. Douglas Smith, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

\*The asterisked quote is actually from Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals*, but the proper citation for this quote is not provided from the excerpt of Butler’s *Gender Trouble* provided for this class.

Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble*

