

**DIGITAL RESPONSIBILITY IN NIGERIA THROUGH KANTIAN ETHICS:
APPLYING IMMANUEL KANT'S CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE TO DATA
PRIVACY, SURVEILLANCE, AND ONLINE MISINFORMATION IN
NIGERIA'S DIGITAL ECONOMY**

Introduction: The Digital Transformation And Ethical Imperative

Nigeria is also experiencing a tremendous digital transformation and at the first two quarters of 2025, the digital economy would contribute N7.37 trillion (14.4) to the real GDP, and this is a remarkable 18.4 national growth compared to the previous year (Fagbemi, 2025). Such expansion comprises over 142 million active internet subscribers and social media users (36.75) that offered untapped growth and baffling ethical challenges (Freedom House, 2024). Since Nigeria is on the border of technology, government, and personal liberties, the need to have proper ethical frameworks so that one can guide the digital custodianship becomes all the more acute.

The scale of the digital transformation in Nigeria demands serious ethical dilemma. The traditional approaches in technology governance are more inclined to refer to technical solutions and to the stimuli related to economy and fail to mention the philosophical foundations of the relationship between man and technology. This rule is particularly problematic in new economies where the rapid process of digitalization does not regulate citizens and their rights are being violated and misused.

The deontological ethics or rather the categorical imperative as introduced by Immanuel Kant offers a reasonable framework of the analysis of digital practices. Kant main tenet, according to which an individual should never be viewed as a means to an end but as something that must be viewed as an end, makes it a simple moral standard to be applied when analyzing the data collection and surveillance systems and the integrity of information (Johnson & Cureton, 2022). Unlike the consequentialist methods which believe that the outcomes alone define the actions, the Kantian morals refer to the intentions and the principles of the technological practices and whether the digital practices place human dignity in perspective and can be generalized without contradiction.

The essay will dwell on three areas of Nigeria online space that are salient such as coverage of data privacy protection, surveillance and control of misinformation. The human autonomy and dignity is questioned in all these areas and must be evaluated in terms of morality. The research questions that will inform the research will take the following form: (1) How does the presence of practices in the Nigerian digital spaces adhere to the Kantian moral principle? (2) What are some of the systematic violations of human dignity due to the application of data and

surveillance? (3) How can the categorical imperative inform us regarding change of policy to save the digital rights and to permit technological progress?

The importance of this analysis is emphasized by recent events. Data protection-Nigeria Data Protection Commission (NDPC) has started conducting investigations of over 1,000 entities on compliance breach; a sign of heightened awareness regarding digital rights (Wolfenden, 2025). Simultaneously, the 2023 elections demonstrated that the misinformation campaigns can negatively affect the democratic process and the voter turnout dropped to 26.72 part of which can be attributed to the manipulation of the media (MDIF, 2024). These tendencies indicate that there is an immediate need in the introduction of ethical frameworks beyond regulatory compliance, which will give ethical grounds of digital citizenship.

Nigeria is provided with opportunities and responsibilities due to the fact that it is the largest digital economy in Africa. The nation can be in the lead in setting digital governance policies that will balance innovation and human dignity that will be applied in the other emerging markets. To realize this possibility though, one must transcend technocratic remedies to philosophically-grounded policies that are mindful of the direst consequences of technology on human autonomy, privacy, and democratic involvement.

Kantian Ethics and Digital Citizenship: Philosophical Foundations and Contemporary Applications

The Categorical Imperative in Digital Context

The categorical imperative created by Kant offers eternal moral guidance to the modern technological dilemma. The principle requires: "Do only that according to which you may at the same time will that this should become a universal law" (Kant, 1785/1993). In this formulation, the issue is that digital practices should be considered in terms of their universalizability, that is, whether they can be generalized to all the people and cause logical contradictions or the necessity to change the grounds of social cooperation.

This test of universalizability is especially applicable in the digital world. Take data collection practices into account: in case all entities were collecting and exploiting user information without any meaningful consent, there would be no trust, and it would be impossible to conduct digital commerce and communications. The act is therefore self-defeating when the first formulation of Kant is applied to them. Such rational argument has more rationale in ethical data practices than the appeal to consequences alone as it does recognize underlying moral contradictions in exploitative technologies.

The second formulation -humanity formulation- claims: act in such a manner that you do not treat humanity, whether in yourself or in the person of any other, but in yourself and in the person of any other, you treat humanity at once as an end to an end (Kant, 1785/1993, p. 36). This principle is in direct opposition to common models of digital business, which perceive users not as self-reliant agents deserving of respect, but rather as sources of information. In cases where interfaces are designed by the platforms in a way that they extract as much data as possible and reduce the amount of understanding needed by the user, the platforms are in breach of this core Kantian requirement.

In recent research, Kantian ethics are applied to artificial intelligence and digital technologies, and it is stressed that human moral agency requires moral behavior in the development, deployment, and regulation of technology (Ulgen, 2017). This point of view is particularly useful to assess the adequacy of regulatory systems in Nigeria and the regulatory mechanisms with regard to the protection of human dignity in cyberspace.

Digital Autonomy and Human Dignity

Kantian autonomy is extended further than self-determination and further to refer to principled autonomy of O'Neill (2002), which is the capacity to act on the grounds which can be intelligible to another in a rational dialogue. It aligns with transparency, informed consent and meaningful choice requirements in digital contexts as far as the collection and use of personal data is concerned. Users are expected to be in a position to understand words on which they engage digital services and judge them rationally.

Kant ethics are concerned with human dignity in which people possess intrinsic values that cannot be instrumentalized (O'Neill, 2002). This ideal serves as an objection to the present digital culture, in which user information, Web behavior is largely regarded as a valuable resource to be traded commercially, as opposed to a declaration of self-agency. Such fact that human experience could be transformed into data sets that could be worked with the help of algorithms raises serious doubts whether digital technologies could respect or violate the dignity that Kant describes as the main part of the moral philosophy.

The autonomous choice has particular problems with the digital environment in Nigeria. The digital divide with the 45.5% internet penetration rate creates a situation where internet access is already a prerequisite to the freedom of choice in an already digital society (Freedom House, 2024). The unconnected are systematically excluded in opportunities of independent involvement in the case of the migration of the basic services to the web. Moreover, the platforms that are accessible also confront those that are meant to exploit cognitive biases as well as

seek to manipulate their actions rather than make rational decisions as required by Kantian autonomy.

Dignity is also a concept that mandates that the digital systems must be designed to progress rather than diminish the human abilities. When algorithms provide consequential determinations of persons, e.g. as over creditworthy or not employed or on social services, without giving the notion of how it was determined or with any meaningful appeal, it does not treat persons as beings capable of understanding and challenging decision-making that affects their lives but as objects to be processed by an algorithm instead. Even the most accurate and efficient of these systems fail to pass the most basic Kantian standards.

Kantian Evaluation of Nigerian Digital Practices

Data Privacy: Instrumentalization versus Respect for Persons

The Nigerian data privacy environment shows that there is a deliberate breach of Kantian principles. Important protections are enshrined in the Nigeria Data Protection Act (NDPA) 2023, such as enhanced data protection regarding sensitive personal data and a requirement of registration of major processors (ICLG, 2025). Nonetheless, enforcement measures reveal a lack of compliance, with the NDPC examining more than 1,000 entities and fining them massively, including N766.2 million on Multichoice Nigeria (ICLG, 2025).

The data privacy environment in Nigeria shows that there are systematic infractions of Kantian principles. Nigeria Data Protection Act (NDPA) 2023 sets some significant safeguards such as increased protection on sensitive personal data and obligating significant processors to register (ICLG, 2025). Nevertheless, there is a high level of non-compliance as it has been reported that the NDPC has been investigating more than 1,000 organizations and imposing heavy fines, such as N766.2 million on Multichoice Nigeria (ICLG, 2025).

In Kantian terms, the core aspect of the problem is the treatment of the users by the digital platforms. Most services collect a lot of personal information not usually with any significant consent, and with little or no substantive value consideration. The practice goes against the humanity formulation by taking users as a source of valuable data but not as autonomous agents worthy of respect (Gwadi and Igbashangev, 2025). The legal requirements of the informed consent processes often do not provide Kantian transparency and are not rationally determined, since the legal texts they describe appear incomprehensible to users, and they are not really able to assess them.

The unequal treatment of the data subjects depending on the size of the processor is a breach of the principle of universalizability. It should be pointed out that, in

case privacy is a human right based on dignity, it has to be argued equally in spite of the financial size of the data controllers. Formation of levels of protection according to the size of the organization implicitly acknowledges that dignity may be violated when it comes to smaller organizations, a standpoint that cannot go hand in hand with Kantian ethics.

Nevertheless, there are those who justify the present day practice by stating that Kantian principles are not feasible in the digital world, and that they have to be absolute. Terms of service are voluntarily accepted by the user who is free to choose self-autonomously despite the complexity of the terms. The scaled regulation as a necessary response to economic constraints is justified by the fact that small businesses are not able to withstand compliance costs that are similar to those experienced by large corporations. Moreover, full disclosure of data practices may overload users with information, which is a counterproduct to free decision making instead of reinforcing it.

However, this defense does not value Kantian demands of meaningful autonomy. Consent that is made with terms that are intentionally obscure or a design pattern that is exploitative do not find a rational basis that is required of Kantian ethics. According to O'Neill (2002), real freedom needs to imply that people have access to information about the principles applicable in their treatment and can analyze them. By devising consent systems that deliberately aim to maximize acknowledgment at minimum understanding, digital platforms are driven to achieve strategic, but not communicative, objectives, which is a breach of the respect of the rational agency upon which the ethics of Kantians rests.

On scaled regulation, Kantian ethics does not allow different implementation methods but different moral standards. Human dignity should be observed by all data processors but small entities may have a more basic approach to attain this. The basic need, which is to treat people as ends, and not end as means, does not allow exceptions due to the size of the organization or the economic convenience.

Surveillance: State Power and Individual Dignity

The growing surveillance capacity, especially the social media intelligence (SOCMINT) by the security agencies adopted in Nigeria raises serious Kantian concerns (Stegen, 2025). The Cybercrimes Act permits electronic surveillance on the pretext of national security, but the routine monitoring of computer-mediated interactions where individuals do not know or consent to it disregards the imperative to handle persons as ends in themselves (Oghogho et al., 2024).

The universalizability test is informative: Would we tolerate a society in which we have government surveillance of all the digital communications? This type of universal surveillance would essentially change the very essence of the

communication as a process, taking away the trust and authenticity without which any meaningful discourse cannot be held. Under the supervision of the population, the autonomy that Kant regards as a crucial aspect to human dignity is denied to them since their words are constructed performances that they deliver in front of an unknown crowd instead of revealing themselves.

Surveillance systems also view citizens as potential dangers that need surveillance and not individuals who are independent and can govern themselves. Such instrumental orientation is offensive to the Kantian ethics even when the surveillance prevents actual harms, since it does not treat the dignity of the large majority that are not a threat seriously. The categorical imperative requires that the moral rules should apply to every human being across the board; to put in place a whole nation as the victims of surveillance due to the possibility of a few guilty of crimes to perpetrate crimes is instrumentalizing the majority who are innocent.

According to the advocates of surveillance, security threats such as terrorism, cyber crime and political instabilities generate valid demands of surveillance. The need to defend citizens can be used to justify surveillance to avoid grave harms by the state. In addition, the citizens who are involved in the open digital environments possess lower expectations about their privacy and therefore surveillance is not as invasive as a physical search. They think that the consequentialist advantages of such prevention of attack or crime supersede any abstract interests in dignity.

This defense, however, cannot succeed on the Kantian grounds since it considers dignity as something that can be exchanged towards security benefits. But the ethics of Kant is dignified as absolute and inviolable. Categorical imperative prohibits use of innocents to achieve security goals irrespective of the scale of returns attained. Due to the argument of Allen (2013), individuals are ethically obligated to uphold their informational privacy, but the states can not subjugate such obligations just because of the need of security.

Moreover, consequentialist calculation presented by the defenders of surveillance goes against the very framework of Kantian deontology. Although the harms prevented by surveillance may be minor, the question to ask whether the surveillance treats individuals with the respect to which their dignity is entitled. Massive surveillance that takes place without the awareness of individuals or without significant control does not pass this test. The ethics proposed by Kant allow taking of security measures, though in such a way that they do not interfere with the free agency of others, i.e. an element of transparency, responsibility and disproportion is needed, which is lacking in the existing surveillance procedures.

Misinformation: Truth-Telling and Democratic Discourse

Falsehoods over the Nigerian online fronts pose crucial dilemmas to the Kantian ethics. Truth-telling is considered a central concept in the Kantian moral system since lying breaches the principle of universalizability (universal lying would reduce trust to ashes, and people could no longer communicate) as well as the principle of respect to a person (lying would turn other people into objects to be used and not persons).

The 2023 elections in Nigeria painted the image of how misinformation can be corrosive. The use of social media influencers spread disinformation by the political parties that used ethnic and religious differences (Freedom House, 2024). Deepfakes that are produced through artificial intelligence pose a threat to future elections based on more advanced deceptions (Aigbiniode and Goodman, 2025). According to Kantian standpoint, such practices are systematic in breaching the rational autonomy required to engage in democracy, and instead of relating to the citizens as rational entities, who can make informed decisions, they relate citizens to objects, which are manipulated.

The obligation of truth is not just limited to individual actors, but also platform operators and policymakers. The social media companies that make their algorithms to encourage engagement instead of accuracy would be against the Kantian principles because they would have established the spaces in which misinformation can flourish. By platforms using cognitive biases to gain the greatest attention of users, the latter objectify them, as objects of advertisement revenue, but not independent agents who deserve to be told the truth. The Kantian imperative requires that the design of platforms put the interests of the user and the rational debate of the user over the commercial interests.

Electoral law in Nigeria does not allow any false statements made about candidates (Aigbiniode and Goodman, 2025), but the law is not properly enforced and does not correspond to new forms of manipulation. The gap in the overall AI and deepfake regulations means a lot in terms of guarding the integrity of information. Fact-checking such as MyAIFactChecker are good projects, though they need more involvement and spread into digital ecosystems to create an impact.

The critics can make the argument that the regulation of the flow of information is a menace to censorship, which is the opposite of the freedom of speech that the ethics of Kant also celebrate. Misinformation and the legitimate speech cannot be easily distinguished, and the enforcement mechanisms can be directed at the political enemies. In addition, individuals are obligated to think critically on the information; the state obligation to ensure that individuals tell the truth will

reduce the individuals to infantilism and the people will lack the right to make their own judgment.

These are important problems that should be considered seriously but they cannot comprehend the Kantian requirements. Although, the ethics of Kant do value the freedom of expression, it should occur in a manner that respects the autonomy of other individuals. Intentional misinformation violates this need because it seeks to distort, rather than inform. The categorical imperative prohibits no random censorship, but permit and even requires censorship that protects the contents of rational discourse. Other platforms must follow through with fact-checking systems and open content moderation without censoring acceptable points of view, as Gwadi and Igbashangev (2025) explain.

The challenge lies in the capacity to create the regulatory framework which will not rely on safeguarding rational discourse and inculcation of ideological conformity. The doctrine of Kantian ethics provides: universalizability of the interventions (that is, the ability to be applied to the actors regardless of their viewpoint), transparency (that is, the ability to make rational evaluations), and respectfulness of independent judgment (that is, should provide information, and should not prohibit access to it.). These principles support the activities like high profile labeling of provocative content and the antidote against wholesale censorship.

Policy Framework Enhancements

The Kantian ethics demand the Nigeria digital governance to be radically changed in which the human dignity is maintained by the need to consider commercial or political expediency. First, there should be equal treatment of data protection requirements to all the processors without the existence of tiered systems which compromise on privacy due to the magnitude of the organization. The NDPC must not only ensure the technical compliance but also the actual adherence to the user autonomy, the consent mechanisms applied must be made to guarantee actual comprehension and not artificial assent.

Second, the surveillance programs require radical transparency and accountability. Security measures are permitted by Kantian ethics, but only those measures, which consider citizens as an end in themselves. This involves including the warrant in the judicial review in order to engage in surveillance, regular publicity on size and performance of the programs, and huge compensations against the unsuitable surveillance. Security agencies must have the right to conduct surveillance based on individualized suspicion as opposed to entire populations as the source of potential dangers.

Third, Nigeria needs elaborate systems of AI and automated decision systems. Kantian ethics holds that the consequential determinations must be explainable and defendable which involves people in order to allow autonomous agents to understand and challenge determinations. To provide effective human jurisdiction and attractive mechanisms, decision-making algorithms to administer credit, jobs, or government services must be in accordance with the requirements of the transparency standards that respect human dignity.

Fourth, the regulation of platforms should be more about autonomy of the users and not about the engagement measures. This implies that the use of manipulative design patterns should be banned, putting algorithms transparent and making design choices in a manner that enables one to make a more informed choice. Although it should continue to protect the work of its users properly, platforms should be subject to legal liability as a systemic encouragement of misinformation.

Institutional Capacity Building

The use of the Kantian principles requires a more regulatory power. The NDPC and agencies in association with the NDPC are in need of resources to keep track of high-level technology, competence in morality structure, skills in technical expertise, and deficiency in political focus. The global partnership should not solely seek the capacity to enforcing but also work the policies on the values and priorities of the Nigerians and not merely import western ones.

The multi-stakeholder involvement comes in handy. Digital governance is not enforcementable but part of the ongoing communication between the government, civil societies, business community, and institutions of higher learning. It is not just that such discussions are expected to deliberate on how it should be implemented technically, but also answers simple questions such as what is expected to be the correct relationship between technology and human flourishing in the Nigerian society.

Digital Literacy and Public Education

Kantian autonomy requires informed citizens who are rational. Nigeria should invest in multilevel digital literacy policies which would encompass the privacy rights, discernment of misinformation and informed decision-making when it comes to digital services. These programs are not meant to be limited to the urban educated individuals but to the rural and the marginal groups which are most vulnerable.

Technology education should be more based on moral reasoning of technology rather than technical skills. There should be mechanisms that enable the citizens to evaluate how digital practices are taking away their dignity and autonomy so

that they can insist on the platforms and policymakers to treat them better. Digital ethics must be introduced to schools and young Nigerians must learn to survive in the technological space without losing their sense of morality.

Balancing Innovation and Dignity

Nigeria has massive potential in the development of its digital economy. To bring these benefits to a reality in the world, it is quite a challenge to uphold the Kantian imperative of persons never being used as a means to an end alone. It includes the rejection of spurious distinctions between innovation and ethics, and the perception that sustainable digital economies must be founded on the issues of trust and dignity.

Innovation should not be stifled by moral principles since it should be upheld using specific tenets concerning responsible development. The business constructors who take into account the user autonomy and dignity are able to create stable business and those ones who rely on exploitation create poor systems that are susceptible to regulatory measures and protests. The Kantian ethics will thus not only provide a guideline of how to be controlled but also provide a model on how to conduct business that would satisfy the needs of commerce and moral demands.

Conclusion

This discussion shows that categorical imperative by Kant offers formidable instruments to review and transform Nigeria online habits. The standard of persons as ends in themselves criticizes the common practices in data collection, surveillance and misinformation that commercializes citizens to either commercial or political agendas. The test of universalizability demonstrates the inconsistency of existing practices, the fact that a practice that has been tolerated in narrow circumstances would be self-destructive should universal application be undertaken.

The digital governance of Nigeria has a wide gap between the formal protections and the achieved justice. Although the NDPA 2023 sets significant legal guidelines, their enforcement is still unsatisfactory and latent practices tend to contradict the Kantian principles. The way in which data platforms deal with users is based on valuing them as sources of important information, rather than viewing them as independent agents who should be respected. The surveillance systems are used to monitor whole populations on the basis of the possible danger rather than on personal suspicion. Misinformation campaigns exploit citizens instead of acting as a source of information to their rational thinking.

However, the Kantian paradigm provides optimism as well as criticism. It offers practical reforms to respect human value and yet allow technological advancements by giving straight forward moral principles namely, dignity, autonomy, and universalizability. The above recommendations will show how the Kantian ethics can be applied when framing certain policies on data privacy, accountability in suicide attempts by surveillance, regulation of the platform, and integrity of information.

The issues of implementation are still daunting. The capacity of regulations is constrained by the scarcity of resources. The Kantian individualism can be in conflicts with cultural contexts. Political forces oppose reforms that pose threat to the conventional interests. Vulnerable populations are not covered and excluded due to the digital divide. These challenges require life long dedication and imaginative modification as opposed to the sacrifice of moral demands to expediency.

The status of Nigeria as the most advanced digital economy in Africa opens opportunities to be the first to find ways of creating a balance between innovation and humanity. The Kantian approach to digital governance will ensure that the country develops frameworks that can be used in all new markets and prove that technological advancement does not have to harm human value. The decision open to Nigeria is clear either to keep abiding by digital practices that view persons as means to commercial and political ends or devote oneself to frameworks that regard dignity and autonomy that Kant has at the core of moral life.

Research directions of the future should focus on certain mechanisms of implementation, the cultural application of the Kantian principles to the Nigerian setting, and the comparison with the other emerging digital economies. The policy of enforcement effectiveness and the general understanding of digital rights could be supported by the empirical studies of these two factors that would enhance the knowledge base in developing the policy. However, the basic ethical lesson is that in the realm of the digital (as in any other field) individuals are to be treated as ends (not means) to purposes of other people.

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