

**THE EFFECTS OF GENDER PERFORMATIVITY ON
SOCIAL ACTION IN THE NOVEL *GONE GIRL*
BY GILLIAN FLYNN**

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Abstract	Article Information
<p><i>This research analyses the effects of gender performativity on social action in the novel 'Gone Girl' by Gillian Flynn. It aims to find out the aspects of gender performativity, and to analyse the effects of gender performativity on social action. The researcher uses Butler's theory of gender performativity to find the aspects of gender performativity and social action theory from Weber to analyse its affects on social action. This research uses a qualitative method with a descriptive approach for a close reading to analyse the narrative and dialogues. The researcher found three aspects of gender performativity, social construction, repetitive performance, and media expectations, with repetitive performance appear as the most dominant. The results of this research shows that four types of social action, instrumentally rational, value rational, affective, and traditional, are affected by gender performativity, with repetitive performance affecting instrumentally rational most out of the fifty data. The researcher found that gender roles in this context are often used as strategic tools to gain sympathy, repeatedly influence others, and shape public perception according to gender norms. These performative actions shaped by social and media expectations, directly affect the way individuals interact, make decisions, and express emotions.</i></p> <p>Keywords <i>Gender Performativity; Social Action; Qualitative; Continuous Process; Repeated Performance.</i></p>	<p><i>Received:</i> 03/09/2025</p> <p><i>Revised:</i> 05/09/2025</p> <p><i>Accepted:</i> 13/09/2025</p>

INTRODUCTION

Gender has long been a central part of human society, shaping social roles and power dynamics. Although it has traditionally been viewed as binary concept based on biological sex, modern views emphasize that gender is not something people are simply born with, but something shaped by social influences. As Pryzgodna (2000) stated, "... gender indicates

something about socialized behaviour patterns” (p.554), it means that individuals present themselves and interact with others is guided by social expectations. The researcher implies that gender becomes a kind of performance that is ongoing process where individuals behave in ways that help them fit into society.

Judith Butler expands the concept of gender performance, focusing on visible actions, into gender performativity, showing the deeper and continuous patterns behind those actions. As Butler (1990) states, “gender is not a noun ... gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence... gender proves to be performative... is always a doing” (p.34). This means gender performativity is something people do through repeated actions learned from society, rather than something they’re born with, as they learn to behave according social expectations.

These repeated behaviours over time start to feel natural, even though they are constructed through their surroundings. As mentioned earlier, many people still view gender as a fixed binary concept. However, the idea of gender performativity allows for gender to be expressed in different ways, which can gradually change how society understands and accepts gender diversity. In this way, gender performativity helps individuals both follow and challenge the roles that society gives them, showing they are influenced by the social environment around them.

The social environment refers to the setting where individuals interact, form relationships, and are influenced by cultural contexts. It includes people’s social connections, their physical surroundings, and the norms and rules of the society they live in. Meaningful action happens because individual’s behaviours are influenced by their social surroundings. This understanding of meaningful action within social environment aligns with Max Weber describes as social action.

Weber (1978) defines social action as “if the action of others is imitated because it is fashionable or traditional or exemplary... it is meaningfully oriented either to the behaviour of the source or of third persons or of both” (p.23). Weber argues that individual actions are influenced by the way people understand and anticipate other’s reactions. This emphasizes the social environment and cultural norms shape behaviours, as individuals are aware that their actions have meaning and consequences within society.

In this context, the strong connection between individual behaviours and social expectations is important in studying literature, because literary works often reflect the same forces that affects real life. Sociology of literature is a field that analyses the relationship between literary works and the real life social and cultural contexts in which they are created and received. Williams (2014) explains this connection by stating, “culture is ordinary: that is the first fact... human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings... every human society expresses these, in institution, and in arts and learning” (p.2). This means that literature reflects how social roles are created, challenged, and expressed in real life. Among many forms of literary works, novels offer deep character development, detailed storylines, and emotional depth. Even though most novels tell fictional stories, they often reflect real-life social interactions and issues. The novel chosen for this research is *Gone Girl* by Gillian

Flynn, published in 2012. The story focuses around Nick and Amy Dunne, a married couple whose relationship falls apart following Amy's mysterious disappearance. In *Gone Girl*, characters often behave in certain ways because they are aware of the way others might respond. This ongoing adjustment captures that actions can become a strategy for gaining approval, control, or protection.

This research aims to study on characters analysis of the novel. The scope is limited to analyse the effects of gender performativity on social action as shown in the narrative of the novel *Gone Girl*. More specifically, the researcher uses Judith Butler's aspects of gender performativity, social construction, repetitive performance, and media expectations, to find out the continuous performance of socially constructed gender roles influences the character's social behaviour throughout the story's conflicts. Max Weber's theory of social action is also used to analyse the relationship between gender performativity and social behaviour. The analysis includes Weber's four types of social action, instrumentally rational, value rational, affectual, and traditional, and analyses how each type is affected by gender performativity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender Performativity by Judith Butler

Butler's concept of gender performativity primarily argues that gender is as performative construct rather than a natural or culturally inscribed attribute, as cited in Ton (2018, p.9). This means gender is formed through repeated behaviours and social interactions, which over time create the appearance of a fixed identity. This views that gender is not static but are fluid and constantly changed in different contexts. It also emphasizes that gender is neither completely a personal choice nor entirely something imposed by society. As Butler (1990) states, "Gender is a kind of action that can potentially proliferate beyond the binary limits imposed by the apparent binary of sex." (p.125). Which means that gender is a continuous series of actions and expressions shaped by social settings, it can constantly evolve and at the same time challenge or change traditional understanding of gender roles. This means gender can constantly evolve and at the same time challenge or change traditional understanding to express gender in ways that move beyond the binary framework, showing that gender is flexible and influenced by ongoing cultural and social interactions.

1. Social Construction

Judith Butler argues that gender is not an inherent biological trait but a social construct, shaped by cultural norms, traditions, and institutions. As Butler (1990) emphasizes, "gender ought not to be constructed as a stable identity or locus of agency... rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time... an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts." (p.191). Butler suggests gender is created through expressions that are shaped by social environments. This means gender is not a fixed identity, but built over time through patterns encouraged by cultural systems like family and media. Over time, these behaviours can start to feel natural, even though they are shaped to fit the social expectation.

2. Repetitive Performance

Gender performativity is a continuous process of repetition behaviours. As Butler (1990) states “gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts” (p.45). This means gender is not something people simply possess but something they repeatedly performed through various forms such as behaviour, clothing, speech, which can also challenge traditional views of gender. The repetition of these acts makes gender appear natural even though it is shaped by social norms. Because of this, repetition becomes a natural part of the way people live every day. It shapes the way they act, speak, and show themselves to other, both in private and in public.

3. Media Expectations

Media expectations, shaped by gender performativity, involve portraying characters and stories that reinforce or challenge societal norms about what it means to be masculine or feminine. As Butler (1990) states, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (p.33). It means that gender is formed through the ways individuals present themselves, such as through behaviours, appearance, or speech. These behaviours, often influenced by media portrayal, give the illusion of a stable gender to understand what is seen as acceptable or ideal behaviour based on how they are expected to act in society. This makes that gender is publicly shaped and reinforced by dominant cultural images, especially those portrayed in media.

Social Action by Max Weber

Max Weber, a German sociologist and political economist, developed the theory of social action to explain how human behaviour is oriented toward the behaviour of others. As Weber (1978) states, “Social action... be oriented to the past, present, or expected future behaviour of others” (p.22). This means every social action is shaped by a person’s life experiences and can affect others, depending on the situation and timing of when the action takes place. Social action refers to a conscious and meaningful act by an individual that can influence others. This means that people absorb social behaviours over time, which eventually helps build organized patterns within society. This aligns with Weber (1978) statement that, “... the actions of the individual are strongly influenced by the mere fact that her is a member of a crowd...” (p.23). In these situations, people often act by mirroring others, showing how social actions are shaped through shared habits.

1. Instrumentally Rational

Weber (1987) describes instrumentally rational action as a behaviour “determined by expectations... the behaviours of objects in the environment and of other human beings... expectations are used as ‘conditions’ or ‘means’ for the attainment of the actor’s own rationally...” (p.24). This type of social action refers to a goal-oriented behaviour. This means instrumentally rational action happens when a person thinks logically about their surroundings and other people’s behaviour, then uses that information to plan the actions where they focuses on being strategic to achieve a certain purpose.

2. Value Rational

Weber (1978) defines value rational action as a behaviour that is “determined by a conscious belief in the values for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other form of behaviour...” (p.24-25). This type of social action is driven by deeply held beliefs rather than external rewards or outcomes. This means value rational happens when a person behaves according to strong inner beliefs, such as moral, religious, or cultural values. This action does not act to get a reward or achieve a specific result, instead this action is believed to be valuable and meaningful.

3. Affective

Weber (1978) explains affective action as a behaviour that is “determined by the actor’s specific affects and feeling states” (p.25). Affective action is driven by emotions rather than by rational calculation or adherence to values. This means affective action is guided mainly by emotions or mood at certain moment, rather than by rational thinking or strong personal values. This action is often quick and impulsive, reflecting the emotional condition of the person at that time.

4. Traditional

The last type of social action, is the traditional action. Weber (1978) states traditional action as “determined by ingrained habituation” (p.25). Traditional action refers to behaviours that are guided by customs, habits, and long-standing practices. This means these actions are performed simply because it has always been done that way. The action is shaped by habit that is repeated over time until it becomes automatic, guided by the feeling of normalcy.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this research, the researcher uses a qualitative research method, as the most suitable method to analyse this topic. This method focuses on textual interpretation to provide in-depth explanations. As stated by Strauss (1997), qualitative research broadly refers to any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification, as cited in Hoepfl (p.48). This means qualitative research focuses on understanding experiences, actions, and meanings rather than measuring or counting data. It allows the researcher to apply a more flexible approach, such as textual analysis, to analyse dialogues, actions, and events in the research object. Therefore, descriptive qualitative analysis is used to carefully examine the important parts of the text in this research.

This research uses both primary and secondary sources. The primary source is the *Gone Girl* novel by Gillian Flynn. All the main data in this research come directly from the novel’s content, including narration, and dialogues. The secondary sources include theoretical references and academic studies that support the research discussions. Theories from Judith Butler on gender performativity and Max Weber on social action are used as the main

framework for the research. Additionally, this research refers to theses and journal articles from both Indonesian and international scholars that explore gender studies, performativity, and social interactions in literature. Books and e-books related to these topics are also included to strengthen the interpretation.

Data are collected through detailed and repeated close readings of the novel, with relevant passages underlined, annotated, and categorized based on their relation to gender performativity and social action. The analysis involves grouping excerpts into aspects of gender performativity, such as social construction, repetitive acts, and media expectations, and then analysing these influence behaviours and decisions, which are further categorized according to Weber's four types of social action. To ensure trustworthiness, the research applies theory triangulation by combining Butler's and Weber's perspectives along with insights from other scholars, thereby enhancing the validity, reliability, and credibility of the findings.

FINDINGS

Aspects of Gender Performativity

The data found in this section was taken from the novel that is related to the theory. Social construction with thirteen (13) excerpts. Repetitive performance as the most dominant with twenty-two (22) excerpts as gender in the novel is often performed repeatedly to appear natural and acceptable, especially by female characters that use familiar gendered behaviours to gain trust, sympathy, or control in social interactions. Lastly, media expectations with fifteen (15) excerpts. In total, the researcher found fifty (50) excerpts in the novel that show the three aspects of gender performativity.

The Effects of Gender Performativity on Social Action

In this section, the researcher found fifty-five (55) data that shows the effects of gender performativity on social action. The most dominant type of social action affected is instrumentally rational action, which appears with twenty-two (22) data from repetitive performance. It is in line with the explanation in chapter two that repetitive performance meets instrumentally rational, repeated gender performances turn into an intentional strategy, that are done on purpose to gain certain benefits. Social construction relates to instrumentally rational, value rational, and affective action. Repetitive performance shows connection to instrumentally rational, value rational, affective, and traditional action. Media expectations affects instrumentally rational, value rational, and affective action. The researcher does not find any significant connection between social construction and traditional action, nor between media expectations and traditional action.

DISCUSSION

Aspects of Gender Performativity

1. Social Construction

Social construction refers to the way gender is shaped through cultural expectations and ongoing social interactions.

“I didn’t ask if I could go home. I had them take me to Go’s, because I knew she’d stay up and have a drink with me, fix me a sandwich. It was, pathetically, all I wanted right then: a woman to fix me a sandwich and not ask me any questions.” (Flynn, p.58).

After experiencing stress and exhaustion, Nick avoids vulnerability by seeking out a predictable, being cared for silently by a woman. His choice is not to seek emotional support through conversation or openness, but through actions that align with old-fashioned gender roles. The desire for a sandwich and quiet company becomes a symbol of comfort, but also control, for he wants care without emotional demands. This statement explains the pressured masculinity to be a real man by showing that Nick still defines safety and strength through traditional gendered behaviour. This decision reveals that the male identity he has assigned does not allow space for softness or emotional honesty, it only allows indirect comfort, delivered in silence, from someone performing a feminine caregiving role.

2. Repetitive Performance

Repetitive performance explains gender is performed through repeated actions over time. These actions become part of daily habits and are often seen as natural even though they are shaped by external expectations from society.

“I keep my head down and do my work: I drive Mo to doctor’s appointments... I drop off cookies for the staff... I’m making the best of a really bad situation... mostly bad because my husband... seems to have lost all interest in both me and said ailing parents.” (Flynn, p.157)

Amy lists her efforts to be responsible, helpful, and kind, especially during a hard time. She continues to perform her role as the good daughter-in-law and supportive wife. But her words reveal a deep sense of loneliness and emotional pain. Nick is distant, and she feels the weight of holding everything together alone. This is a repetitive role fatigue because Amy is stuck in a cycle of caregiving and self-sacrifice. She performs the obedient wife and daughter-in-law role perfectly, but it has become emotionally exhausting. The “work” she does is not just physical, it is a performance that drains her, with no emotional return

3. Media Expectations

Media expectations refers to the way gender roles are shaped and reinforced through narrative in media and public discourse.

“‘Nick!’ she finally keened... and fell into my arms. I wanted to kill her. ...but we weren’t alone, we were in front of cameras... So I did the right thing, I held her to me and howled her name right back: ‘Amy! My God! My God! My darling!’... and I whispered deep inside her ear, ‘You fucking bitch.’” (Flynn, p.413)

The moment Amy returns home, the scene is filled with flashing cameras and reporters. In front of them, Nick acts exactly the media expects a husband to react, full of joy and relief. He shouts her name and hugs her tightly. But in reality, he feels nothing but violent anger. He uses the moment to fake love while secretly expressing hate into Amy’s ear. The contrast between his public act and private thoughts is clear. Nick becomes the perfect image of a loving man on national television, even though he is boiling with hate, all of the care he performs is part of a scripted masculinity for the media. His public actions are scripted to match people’s expectation from a good man. Nick does not just act for Amy, he performs for the public.

The Effects of Gender Performativity on Social Action

1. The Effects of Gender Performativity on Instrumentally Rational

Gender is performed repeatedly in ways that look normal to others, but under the surface, it is a strategy.

“I feel myself trying to be charming, and then I realize I’m obviously trying to be charming, and then I try to be even more charming to make up for the fake charm, and then I’ve basically turned into Liza Minnelli: I’m dancing in tights and sequins, begging you to love me.” (p.12)

Amy explains her effort to appear likable in a social gathering. At first, she tries to be charming, but when she feels it looks forced, she increases her charm to cover the awkwardness. This cycle continues until it becomes over-the-top, like a stage performance. The comparison to “Liza Minnelli” shows that Amy feels she is turned into a performer, desperately seeking approval. Amy uses her charm, a gendered behaviour expected from women, not because she feels cheerful or friendly, but because she wants others to accept and like her, a performed manipulation in front of the other guests. She performs the role repeatedly to get a reaction, of love or approval. This is an instrumentally rational act, she thinks about the way others respond and chooses her staged behaviour as a strategy, even if it feels fake.

2. The Effects of Gender Performativity on Value Rational

This behaviour becomes a routine driven by internal values about how men or women should act.

“He shoved me... I banged my head... I couldn’t see for three seconds... I knew what I was doing, I was punching every button on him... I just didn’t realize he was going to do that... He’s such a good man, at his core... I am willing to write it off... Nick feels the strain... and for a man like Nick—who

believes strongly in an up-by-the-bootstraps sort of happiness—that can be infuriating.” (p.220–221)

Amy reflects on a violent moment with Nick. Even though he physically hurt her, she chooses to excuse his behaviour by reminding herself that he is “a good man at his core.” She continues to justify him, even saying she provoked him. Her understanding of love includes patience, forgiveness, and endurance. She sticks to this belief even when she is clearly the victim. Her repeated forgiveness is driven by her own values about love and partnership require. Amy keeps performing the role of a forgiving partner out of principle. She believes that part of being a loyal wife is understanding and accepting her husband’s flaws. Even in the face of abuse, she repeats this behaviour because it aligns with what she believes about love and moral commitment.

3. The Effects of Gender Performativity on Affective

As mentioned before, affective action is the behaviour driven by spontaneous emotions. When this kind of emotional reaction is shaped by repetition, the person often expresses their feelings as a result of repeating gender roles or expectations for too long.

“‘Be friendly, Amy,’ Nick spits into my ear... ‘I am,’ I whine... Sometimes I feel like Nick has decided on a version of me that doesn’t exist... I’ve done girls’ nights out, charity walks... I tapped the last of my money... Nick just gave a flat begrudging thanks. I don’t know what to do. I’m trying.” (p.136)

From this excerpt, Nick tells Amy to be friendly, even though she already feels she has done everything possible to be likable. Amy reflects on all the performative things she has done, social events, charity, even spending money. But no matter how hard she tries, Nick is still cold. Her voice in the excerpt is tired, and her words, “I’m trying” show that she feels emotionally empty from repeating behaviours that are not appreciated. Amy’s emotional exhaustion are shaped by the emotional fatigue of repeating certain behaviours to make her appear likeable. She has followed all the “rules” of being a nice, agreeable wife, yet receives no real response. Her response of confusion, sadness, and desperation, results from repeating emotional performances that have no impact.

4. The Effects of Gender Performativity on Traditional

In traditional action, people act in certain habitual ways because it is what they have always seen or learned to do. When repetition emphasizes these habits, especially gender roles, the behaviour becomes deeply rooted and automatic.

“‘Happy day after anniversary,’ I start.
‘Please don’t lay a guilt trip on me...’ Nick grew up with a father who never, ever apologized, so when Nick feels he has screwed up, he goes on offense...
I don’t want to be the bad guy here. I don’t deserve that.” (p.74–75)

Amy gently brings up the fact that Nick forgot their anniversary. Instead of apologizing or expressing regret, Nick immediately becomes defensive. He accuses Amy of trying to make him feel guilty, even though her words were not aggressive. Amy then explains that this behaviour comes from Nick’s father, that never apologized for anything. Because of this,

Nick learned to turn blame outward rather than admit mistakes. Nick's behaviour is a traditional action shaped by repetitive masculine performance from his father. His emotional defense mechanism is not new or calculated, it is inherited from his upbringing and reinforced by repeated gender behaviour. The refusal to apologize and the quick shift to anger have become second nature, not because they are rational, but because they follow a male tradition passed down through generations. This is how repetitive performance solidifies into traditional gendered action.

CONCLUSION

According to the findings and discussion, the researcher found that each aspect of gender performativity affects different types of social action, which are social construction leads to emotional responses and self-perception, repetitive performance shapes daily behaviours and emotional exhaustion, while media expectation affects gender roles are displayed to gain public approval. All four types of social action are found to be affected. The most dominant interaction is between repetitive performance and instrumentally rational action, because of the frequent use of gender roles as strategic tools to gain sympathy, power, or public image. These performances are repeated because they are effective in achieving personal goals. Therefore, this research concludes that gender performativity plays a central role in shaping the way characters act within society. Gender is not merely a matter of identity, but a performative tool that influences strategic decisions, emotional responses, and social navigation in various contexts.

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