

# Buying into the Ideal Performance of Womanhood: Gendered Marketing in the Recontextualization of “She’s Always a Woman” for John Lewis’ Advertising Campaign

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### Recommended Citation

Doherty, Emma () "Buying into the Ideal Performance of Womanhood: Gendered Marketing in the Recontextualization of “She’s Always a Woman” for John Lewis’ Advertising Campaign," *Nota Bene: Canadian Undergraduate Journal of Musicology*: Vol. 10: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/notabene/vol10/iss1/3>

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# Buying into the Ideal Performance of Womanhood: Gendered Marketing in the Recontextualization of “She’s Always a Woman” for John Lewis’ Advertising Campaign

## **Abstract**

This paper investigates the role of Fyfe Dangerfield’s cover of “She’s Always a Woman” by Billy Joel, within the presentation of heteronormative gender roles in John Lewis’ 2010 advertising campaign. After outlining the narrative of the advertisement and the ways in which the female protagonist is gendered from girlhood to womanhood, this paper draws upon the work of feminist scholar Judith Butler to problematize John Lewis’s portrayal of gender to show how it perpetuates heteronormative stereotypes. Then, drawing on theories of popular music surrounding identity and the importance of lyrics, John Lewis’ use of Fyfe Dangerfield’s cover is analyzed, outlining the way in which the music strengthens a simplistic narrative of ideal girlhood and womanhood, as well as how it encourages potential customers to identify with the brand. The paper then questions whether John Lewis is able to challenge heteronormativity due to their established brand identity or whether the responsibility falls upon the society, and concludes that it is essential to challenge the function of gender and music within advertisements.

## **Keywords**

Gender, advertising, popular music, heteronormativity, womanhood



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“She’s Always a Woman” for John Lewis’  
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“She’s Always a Woman,” the title of Billy Joel’s classic song, is the phrase that repeatedly echoes in the 2010 advertisement as part of John Lewis’ *Never Knowingly Undersold* campaign. John Lewis’ director of marketing, Craig Inglis, explains that this advertisement, which presents a montage of a woman’s life from birth to retirement, portrays the message that at whichever stage you are in life, John Lewis is there “for all the important times, big or small.”<sup>1</sup> By analyzing the presentation of normative gender roles in the advertisement alongside Fyfe

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1. 'Editor's Pick. John Lewis 'Always a Woman' advert', UTalk Marketing, accessed March 29th, 2015, <http://www.utalkmarketing.com/pages/CreativeShowcase.aspx?ArticleID=17464&Filter=0&Keywords=&Order=LATEST&Page=1&Title=Editor's%20Pick.%20John%20Lewis%20'Always%20a%20Woman'%20advert>

Dangerfield's recontextualization of Joel's original song into a more intimate setting, this essay aims to explore John Lewis' narrow portrayal of gender. This is to investigate whether the normative presentation of gender binaries in the advertisement capitalizes on society's conformity to the concept of ideal girlhood, womanhood, and motherhood within the white, middle class.<sup>2</sup> The presentation of these gender norms as aspirational is problematized through modern theories of gender that dispute traditional notions of gender binaries. This essay will thus question whether John Lewis is responsible for shaping society's normative views on what it is to be a woman, or, alternatively, whether John Lewis has to comply with these ideals due to society's acceptance of our current paradigm of gender.

John Lewis's normalization of a traditional depiction of ideal womanhood through a simplistic narrative reinforces the ubiquity of the stereotypical gender binaries that have become commonplace in heteronormative society. Using a plethora of cinematic and artistic techniques, the viewer swoops through the trajectory of the protagonists' life. The advertisement begins with a scene of a baby who is lifted out of her cot, before being placed on the floor again as a young toddler. This is followed by a shot of this child's birthday party, which seamlessly glides into a scene of her teenage years, where she shares a kiss with her boyfriend in a school hall. This very couple then walks down the aisle toward

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2. Although the ubiquity of the Internet allows people from all over the world to see this advertisement, it was primarily produced for an audience within the United Kingdom. I am therefore working with the assumption that the target demographic for this advertisement is the middle-class British family and therefore the 'society' to which I refer is a U.K. based society.

their large suburban house, where their children, now adults, have kids of their own. This scene transitions into the protagonist's retirement where she and her family enjoy a meal in their beautiful garden with adult children and grandchildren. In the next shot, the elderly couple go for an afternoon stroll with their grandchildren, beckoning to the audience to join. This seemingly authentic depiction of an ordinary British household, created through the inclusion of a working mother with a good home-and-work balance, as well as blatant tokenism through the inclusion of one ethnic family member, conforms to, and thus, reinforces the social belief regarding the supposed normalcy of being white and middle class. Similarly, the advertisement's linear narrative of an ideal heteronormative lifestyle reflects stereotypical gender binaries and uses these to normalize the concept of ideal womanhood within this social standing, as well as the family lifestyle as a universal goal.

However, this binary conception of gender is contested by modern theories, which defy the heteronormative implication that gender and biological sex are synonymous: the masculine as male and the feminine as female. Philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler argues that instead a state of *being*, gender is a form of drag, a way of *doing* the body, which initiates a repetitive form of imitation giving the illusion of a stable entity.<sup>3</sup> In this way, Butler depicts gender as a ritual, a “re-enactment and re-experiencing,” something that individuals perform every day to give the impression of their identities as being authentic.<sup>4</sup> If all

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3. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex,”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 313.

4. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 191.

gender is performance, it cannot be “true or false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived.”<sup>5</sup> All gender imitation is thus a ‘failed’ *performance*, because *no one* can completely embody it and hence, the ‘true’ expression of particular gender roles is revealed as fabrication.<sup>6</sup> In the advertisement, the seemingly natural identity of a mother, daughter, and wife, is thus nothing more than one possible performance, an imitation of a culturally accepted idea of femininity.<sup>7</sup> John Lewis’ advertisement reinforces the normalcy of this particular performance by showing the journey from birth to adulthood, and thus conditions viewers by displaying this performance at every stage of the characters’ lives. Conventional societal belief accepts and asserts that those who are ‘grounded’ also conform to gender binaries—society finds stability synonymous with success, therefore the majority of people subconsciously buy into this concept of the “socially established,” and so those who fit into the ideal societal belief are thus accepted.<sup>8</sup> By presenting this notion of stability and safety through the depiction of a comfortable, middle class lifestyle, John Lewis conflates traditional gender roles with success, perpetuating heteronormative stereotypes.

The message of the cinematic montage of ideal girlhood and womanhood is further strengthened by the simple soundtrack. “She’s Always a Woman” predominantly pivots around I, IV, and V in Eb major, creating a memorable tonal

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5. *Ibid.*, 193.

6. *Ibid.*, 192.

7. Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex,”* 313.

8. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 191.

progression that is easily accessible for the listener. The simple chord progression, in tandem with the simple texture of solo male voice with piano and guitar accompaniment, further reinforces the regularity and normalcy depicted in the visuals. The gradual thickening of texture reflects the trajectory of the protagonist's life as she embraces complexities: beginning with simple chords on the piano, rhythmic complexity is added through smaller subdivisions. The solo male voice and arpeggiated guitar join, with the music climaxing at the line 'she'll do as she pleases, she's nobody fool.' After this moment, the music fades out, reflecting the course of life as the protagonist welcomes old age and a seemingly stress-free retirement. Similarly, John Lewis' decision to exclude the chorus of "She's Always a Woman" from the advertisement serves to reiterate this simplistic paradigm of womanhood (see Example 1). The excluded chorus is significantly more interesting harmonically than the verse, due to the frequent tonicizations of different keys, two of which are chromatic relations (bVII and bVI) as well as a modal shift of the tonic from major to minor (through  $i^7$  or  $v^7/IV$  chord) in the second half of the chorus. These tonicizations are often characterized through I–vi progressions, as seen in Example 1, beginning with the line "Oh and she never gives out." The I–vi progression is repeated twice in sequence down by major second; however, instead of then moving to Ab minor (vi of bVI), the Ab is raised to A $\natural$ , to give a V<sup>7</sup> of V back in Eb major, which allows a return to the original key.

**Example 1.** Transcription of the excluded chorus of Fyfe Dangerfield's "She's always a Woman" in the John Lewis advertisement.

**E<sub>b</sub> : vi            B<sub>b</sub>: V    V<sup>7</sup> I   vi**  
Ohhhh... she takes care of herself

**E<sub>b</sub>: i<sup>7</sup>                            IV**  
She can wait if she wants

**ii    V<sup>7</sup>                            I I<sup>7</sup>**  
She's ahead of her time

**i<sup>7</sup>                    D<sub>b</sub>: V<sup>7</sup>            I   vi**  
Ohhhhh... And she never gives out

**C<sub>b</sub>: I (vi)**  
And she never gives in

**E<sub>b</sub>: V<sup>7</sup>/V            V    V<sup>7</sup>**  
She just changes her mind<sup>9</sup>

The disjunct melody of the omitted chorus is also more complex and expands the vocal range of the singer by a fourth. By excluding the more complicated material from the advertisement, John Lewis allows the simplistic music to corroborate their

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9. Chords transcribed by author.

simplistic narrative of what it is to be a woman. John Lewis's lack of challenge to heteronormativity, therefore, permits the heterosexual matrix—Butler's concept for the norms of Western society (heterosexuality, whiteness, masculinity and wealth surmounting to dominance and superiority)—to assert itself as the 'natural.' John Lewis' multifaceted reiteration of these gender binaries as normative, through both visuals and music, supports the conflation of gender and sex, undermining the performativity of gender, and thus reinforcing heteronormativity.

Similarly, the decision to use a cover in this advertisement not only allows John Lewis to adhere to a sense of poignancy and purported emotional authenticity of the song, but also is integral to the association that is made with John Lewis as a brand. As Media scholar Bethany Klein suggests, advertisers today change the lyrics and rearrange the music to "actively control [the audience's] sensory experience."<sup>10</sup> In the case of "She's Always a Woman," the lyrics maintain the emotive tone while simultaneously differing from their original meaning. Billy Joel wrote the original song to defend his wife after she experienced negative criticism as one of very few women working as a manager in the music industry. He told *USA Today* in June 2008 that, to him, the lyrics are very simple: "She may be that to you, but she's this to me."<sup>11</sup> However, in the cover by Fyfe

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10. Bethany Klein, *As Heard on TV: Popular Music in Advertising* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), 100. This reinterpretation of well-known songs has become synonymous with the brand and similar songs are used as the sound track to John Lewis' various adverts, for example, Swedish folk band Taken by Trees reworking of Guns N' Roses' *Sweet Child O' Mine*.

11. "Songfacts: She's always a woman by Billy Joel," *Songfacts*, <http://www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=3033> (accessed 5 December 2015)

Dangerfield that is the version used in the advertisement, the meaning is inverted. Dangerfield's cover instead reflects a patronizing and possessive tone, which substantiates the notion of the male gaze. The male singing about the female gives a possessive quality to the advertisement: *she's* always a woman to *me*. The choice of music therefore not only sexualizes this ideal woman through the male gaze, creating a protagonist who caters to the male idea of feminine perfection, but also renders this woman as passive, which is ironic considering the nature of the lyrics: "She can do as she pleases." Although the lyrics are not altered, verses have been carefully omitted to fit with the tone of John Lewis' brand message. For example, the line "then she'll carelessly cut you and laugh while you're bleeding" does not adhere to the portrayal of the ideal woman they have constructed, and is conspicuously missing from the advertisement, thus conforming to the advertisement's narrative.<sup>12</sup>

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12. The choice of music could also be perceived as complicating the simplistic narrative of music, through musicologist Ian Biddle's attempts to conceptualize the complex relationships between voice and masculinity by exploring the recent tendency in music to represent straight men as vulnerable. Biddle explores the role of white, often heterosexual, male singer-songwriters and how they expose this "openness to vulnerability" to the public. By portraying themselves with a social and sexual intimacy, and revealing an exposure to hurt and suffering in their lyrics, Biddle claims that these artists attempt to redefine the accepted notion of stereotypical gender binaries and therefore invert the traditional construction of masculinity. Yet, if gender is a way of 'doing' the body, scholars have questioned whether it is only the feminine that can be parodied since the idea of femininity is far more defined than that of the masculinity. Philosopher Sandra Bartky argues that this is the case, stating that this concept or 'regime' of femininity renders the female body "more docile than the bodies of men." See Sandra Lee Bartky, "Foucault, Femininity and the Modernisation of Power," *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed. K.Conboy, N Medina and S.

This identification with John Lewis as a brand through the advertisement is significant when considering that a substantial aspect of the popularity of this advertisement appears to be bound to the construction of identity within it, and the way in which the advertisement reinforces the attempted sense of poignancy. Musicologist Tia DeNora argues that musical experiences are integral to the formation of one's identity.<sup>13</sup> This is significant, as John Lewis is not attempting to sell specific products but instead a lifestyle, particularly that of the white, middle class, British family. By engaging with this music, the listener reaffirms their sense of identity and therefore relates to the brand. This links with Philip Mirozki's notion of the rebel sell—selling something without the consumer even realizing that they are being sold to. He infers that if an advertisement manages to successfully achieve “cool,”—an advertisement within the context of capitalism that adheres to a sense of rebellion from conformity—they succeed in a sense of “cool” that is also “safely nested within a popular shared script.”<sup>14</sup> Through this advertisement, John Lewis achieves this notion of “cool” and thus the advertisement transcends mere commercial purpose to become a widely talked-about phenomenon of popular culture: *The Daily Mail* claims it “reduced the nation to tears” and Dangerfields cover reached number seven in the charts,

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Stanbury (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007) and Biddle, Ian Biddle, “The Sing-Song of Undead Labor,” *Oh Boy!: Masculinities and Popular Music*, ed. Jarman-Ivens, Freya and Ian Biddle (New York: Routledge, 2007), 125–144.

13. Tia DeNora, “Music and Self-Identity,” *The Popular Music Studies Reader* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 146.

14. Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (London: Verso, 2014), 143.

ultimately competing for fourteen weeks.<sup>15</sup> Cultural analyst Jim McGuigan explores the “conquest of cool,” a period in which a “cool” version of capitalism has gained prominence and in which the capturing of “cool” is marketable and profitable at the “front region of capitalism today.”<sup>16</sup> I would argue that this concept of “cool,” which in McGuigan’s case is not necessarily concerned with the intersections between gender and capital, is, nonetheless, gendered in this context. Particularly, the synonymy of masculinity and nostalgia combines as “cool” through the affected vulnerability of Dangerfield’s voice. Therefore, by capitalizing on this conquest of cool through the notion of the rebel sell, John Lewis continues to gender their advertisement and perpetuate the stereotypes of what it is to be ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine.’

Before condemning the company for overtly reinforcing gender-normative binaries in this advertisement, it is important to question how, if at all, John Lewis could break this mold of heteronormativity. John Lewis fails to challenge the heteronormative notions of gender which have been actively contested. The visuals, of the advertisement combined with the heavily altered cover of the song merge to reinforce normative notions of ideal womanhood. That being said, the company’s intention is to sell; consequently, in order to retain their

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15. See Mark Sweney, “John Lewis uses Power of Love for its Christmas Campaign,” *The Guardian*, accessed March 29th, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2012/nov/09/john-lewis-power-of-love> and “John Lewis Advert reduced nation to tears... but did it copy another TV hit?,” *Daily Mail*, accessed March 29th, 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1271320/John-Lewis-advert-reduced-nation-tears--did-copy-TV-hit.html>

16. Jim McGuigan, *Cool Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2009), 1.

consumer base it behooves them to adhere to the segment of society in which they are engrained. It is worth questioning whether by changing tactic, John Lewis would be jeopardizing their company. They would likely receive high praise from some of their audience who would hope for the media to reflect diversity, while simultaneously alienating others.<sup>17</sup> If John Lewis did change tactic to employ radically different visuals and sounds, it would not be surprising if they were then criticized for capitalizing on a trend of advertisements promoting inclusivity and diversity, to sell. Musically, changing their style would have detrimental consequences to the brand as the genre of music that underpins these advertisements has become a sensation within popular culture, initiating a sense of anticipation before the release of a new advertisement, as well as becoming representative of innovative marketing. The seemingly vulnerable sound of the solo voice and thin accompaniment is clearly a formula that works for John Lewis. Doubtlessly, if the sound did not fit the expected formula after months of anticipation for release, then much of the audience may be disappointed, leading to potentially adverse effects on the brand's reputation. Perhaps this popularity and anticipation could be perceived as a hindrance to John Lewis, as it would be very difficult for them to alter the sound world that they create in their advertisements.

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17. H&M's 'Lady Campaign' was highly criticized for hypocrisy due to ethical issues surrounding their factories and a suggestion that they are employing these tactics for their own capitalist gains, accessed March 29th, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/28/hm-advert-diversity-ad-women>

Does the responsibility to challenge the portrayal of heteronormativity then fall upon the audience? Despite the clear sales strategies employed, as well as the conscious portrayal of an authentic reality, the audience conforms to the lifestyle that is being sold. Inglis highlights the reason behind John Lewis's marketing success as their creation of "compelling, emotionally led marketing, which is true to [their] brand promise," a promise to be there with the consumer at all stages of their life.<sup>18</sup> To sell, it is advantageous for John Lewis to illustrate heteronormative gender roles because of their widespread acceptance as 'normal.' By presenting this normative lifestyle as aspirational, John Lewis continues to retain the loyal customers from their target demographic, and by doing so they perpetuate the stereotypes of the heterosexual matrix. However, until society's views on heteronormativity are altered, how could big corporations change their tactics? Equally, until mainstream media stops presenting this binary as the accepted norm, then it is hard to imagine that mainstream society's views on gender would change.

This therefore becomes a chicken-and-egg argument with both sides integrally affecting the other. John Lewis conforms to the supposedly stable constructs of gender in their advertisement so as to sell their brand. It is clear through this specific advertisement that John Lewis do not want to challenge heteronormativity. However, whether it is their duty to do so, is a

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18. Ben Somerset How, "Market Leader Interview – Craig Inglis, Director of Marketing at John Lewis" Creative Brief, accessed March 29th, 2015, <http://www.creativebrief.com/blog/2012/09/10/market-leader-interview—craig-inglis-director-of-marketing-at-john-lewis/>

different question. In the case of this advertisement, the aim is to reflect the traditional ideals of British society; the advertisement is thus unable to represent the ideology of gender as a performance, as it does not attempt to represent reality. The media's aim is to portray ideal notions of our society as aspirations, and as John Lewis are not attempting to challenge heteronormativity, it is unlikely that they would represent this shift in thought. Instead, by using this soundtrack and superimposing it with the depiction of ideal womanhood, John Lewis' recontextualization of popular music in advertising encourages consumers to identify with their brand. John Lewis does not musically or visually challenge the society they are selling to, and instead they present a narrow portrayal of reality that conforms to heteronormativity. This portrayal of ideal womanhood from John Lewis does not seem to be a conscious endeavor, but instead a tool to depict the ideal of comfortable living for the white middle class. Rather than determining who is to blame for this compliance with normative gender stereotypes, it is important to question the function of heteronormativity in these adverts and the role of sound to reinforce this function, in order to demystify and validate the notion of 'other.' Thus, the categories of gender must be dissolved to support the livability of existing outside this binary of traditional notions of femininity and masculinity. This shift will then enable new ways of understanding the world in all its diversity. It is no wonder that John Lewis has not attempted to challenge heteronormative society, as despite being aware of its construction, society buys into its reality.

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