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The shifting ‘indie’ femininities of *Frankie* magazine

ABSTRACT

At a time when print media is said to be in decline, Australian indie lifestyle publication Frankie magazine has been an industry success story with circulation figures that now surpass glossy women’s titles such as Cleo and Australian Vogue (AdNews 2015). Frankie evokes nostalgia for bygone eras with its illustrated covers, retro aesthetics and focus on handmade crafts yet must be understood in relation to the current ‘indie’ trend. This article draws upon earlier studies of women’s magazines to examine Frankie’s shifting ‘indie’ femininities in the context of contemporary debates surrounding media representations of women. The article applies Schippers’ (2002) theory of ‘gender manoeuvring’ to a textual analysis of recent Frankie covers suggesting the magazine makes both subversive and conservative moves in relation to gender. The article argues that Frankie offers multiple and often contradictory feminine identities which may be key to its success.

KEYWORDS

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INTRODUCTION

At a time when print media is said to be in decline, Australian indie lifestyle publication *Frankie* magazine has achieved unexpected success. Launched in 2004 by an independent publisher, *Frankie* has since defied industry trends with circulation figures now surpassing those of glossy women’s titles such as *Australian Vogue* and *Cleo* (AdNews 2015). The magazine’s publisher Morrison Media was recently sold to Pacific Star Network for a reported \$10 million figure (Lee 2014), reflecting the extent to which *Frankie* has outgrown its origins.

Frankie features illustrated covers, handmade crafts and retro styles, seemingly representing a departure from previously successful young women’s titles. The success of the magazine suggests the appeal of the particular feminine identities the text invites.

This article examines *Frankie*'s illustrated covers as exemplars of the gender politics of the magazine's content, utilizing Schippers' (2002) theory of 'gender manoeuvring' to reveal textual moves that might frame its femininities as 'alternative' while also identifying limitations of these manoeuvres. The article thus argues that *Frankie* offers multiple and often contradictory feminine identities.

This movement between alternative and conservative models of femininity may be key to *Frankie*'s success allowing for an implied critique of mainstream women's magazines seen to provide narrow constructions of femininity. This critique might obscure the magazine's framing of desirable 'indie' femininity as primarily white, heterosexual and middle-class. This is significant because it reveals that while contemporary 'indie' femininities provide an alternative to mainstream media models of gender, this alternative may be available to only a relatively narrow constituency.

Women's magazines have long been a subject of criticism. While scholars such as Hermes argue readers are not necessarily beholden to ideologies represented in the magazines (1995; see also Currie 1999), women's magazines have typically been seen to represent conservative ideals of femininity based on gender difference and the primacy of heterosexual romance (Ferguson 1983; Gill 2007; McCracken 1993; McRobbie 1982). Critiques have highlighted the restrictive nature of these ideologies, with Ferguson arguing women's magazines perpetuate a 'cult of femininity' through which readers are provided with instruction in being feminine (1983: 184-185).

The declining circulations of mainstream glossy women's magazines which have typically formed the focus of this literature present the need for analysis of texts that have found contemporary success – particularly of publications as notably successful as *Frankie* (see Blight 2013). Zhao argues that *Frankie* appeals because it commodifies 'indie' without obviously promoting consumption, employing discursive strategies that allow the text to be read in other ways (2013: 156-7). She also suggests the magazine addresses 'indie' readers while remaining more widely accessible due to its 'familiar macro-generic structure' (Zhao 2013: 157). This article further explores *Frankie*'s success and duality, in relation to gender in particular. The article contributes to women's magazine studies by applying Schippers' (2002) ideas to a text not yet studied to the extent of earlier magazine models.

Given the sale of *Frankie*'s publisher last year, the magazine can no longer be described as 'indie' in the way that scholars such as Le Masurier have used the term to describe independently produced magazines (2012). However as Newman notes while the 'indie' label was originally a reference to independent production of culture such as music and film, it now has broader connotations of alternativeness and is used widely as a reference to particular media products, fashion trends and people (2009: 16). Thus *Frankie* and its femininities might be classified as 'indie' due to aesthetics and content as opposed to production context, reflecting the evolving use of the 'indie' term.

FRANKIE'S ILLUSTRATED COVER

Frankie's illustrated covers¹ can be analysed as examples of its construction of 'indie' femininities. McCracken suggests women's magazine covers are 'windows to the future self' that construct ideal femininity and frame the content of the rest of the magazine (1993: 14). In other words, the magazine cover functions to define parameters of desirable femininity, offering an aspirational identity that can be achieved via purchase of the magazine. This article asks: what sort of 'self' (or selves) might the illustrations offer *Frankie*'s potential readers?

For its first 49 issues, *Frankie*'s covers each featured a young female fashion model.² Though the models were dressed in 'indie' styles and there was some racial diversity, the women represented largely conformed to fashion industry norms particularly in terms of body shape. However, the magazine's 50th cover was an apparently hand-stitched collage of items such as a teapot, a bicycle, a sewing machine and a flowerpot. Now in its 67th issue, *Frankie* has since featured a different illustration for each cover. These covers often include only the magazine's regular masthead without headlines for particular articles. An absence of models can also be identified inside the magazine in fashion spreads such as Issue 59's 'Come Round Tomorrow' which depicts pairs of sandals in backyard settings with no person 'modelling' the shoes (McComas

¹ For all references to *Frankie* covers please see <http://www.frankie.com.au/past-issues>. Accessed 7 December, 2015

and McCauley 2014).

Frankie's illustrated cover can be read in the context of critiques of media representations of women that are seen to be overly sexualized and 'unrealistic'. These critiques offer ways of reading the cover as representing a potentially subversive politics. Criticisms of what has been variously described as 'hypersexual culture' or 'raunch culture' question the conflation of sexualization and female empowerment in contemporary western society (Walter 2010: 8; Levy 2005). For instance, Walter suggests the mainstreaming of the sex industry and pornography has seen various popular media forms adopt 'the aesthetic values of soft pornography' (2010: 3-4). She argues that rather than representing female liberation the 'hypersexual culture' limits definitions of female advancement by equating it with sexual desirability (Walter 2010: 10). Magazines are perhaps seen as a central feature of this culture; indeed Gill highlights the increased focus upon heterosexual sex in women's magazines (2007: 184).

Popular discussions of women in media are also punctuated by concerns about potential harms of 'unrealistic' representations of the body. These concerns are seen in calls for guidelines pertaining to the use of digital altering in advertising and media (Freedman 2009; Zubcevic-Basic 2012). These concerns are also evident in petitions calling for magazines such as *Cleo* to reduce their use of Photoshop in editing images of women with particular covers attracting outrage if thought to be obviously modified (Mumbrella 2012; see also Stevens 2013).

When considered in the context of these broader debates, *Frankie's* covers, with their illustrations and lack of 'sexual' headlines, might be read as offering an alternative or 'indie' feminine identity. By moving away from any claim to 'real' representation of women *Frankie* might also avoid typical criticisms. As Newman suggests, indie is defined by its challenge to the mainstream (2009: 16); thus perhaps *Frankie's* 'indie' femininities are defined by a challenge presented to what are perceived as 'mainstream' ideal femininities.

FEMININITIES AND 'GENDER MANOEUVRING'

Here, Schippers' models for theorizing gender are useful in thinking about *Frankie* (2002; 2007). Building upon Connell's work on hegemonic masculinity, Schippers'

model acknowledges ‘multiple configurations’ of femininity (2007: 89). She argues that the gender hierarchy is sustained not only through masculine dominance over femininity but also through a hierarchy of femininities (2007: 94).

Schippers draws upon gender theorist Judith Butler’s notion of the heterosexual matrix which conceives of heterosexual desire as the defining aspect of the binary relationship between masculinity and femininity (Schippers 2007: 89-90). She thus argues that configurations of gender are defined in relation to the ‘idealized relationship between masculinity and femininity’ (Schippers 2007: 94). For Schippers ‘hegemonic femininity’ conforms to the ideal relationship of femininity and masculinity as opposites defined by desire and masculine dominance, while femininities that depart from this ideal are described as ‘pariah femininities’ (2007: 94-5).

This model is useful as it allows us to think of *Frankie*’s indie femininities in the context of multiple versions circulating in contemporary media and examine how they might function as part of a hierarchy. Of particular relevance to *Frankie* is the way that the model allows for understanding of the ways in which gender configurations that reinforce hegemonic relations can be as Schippers puts it ‘intentionally replaced’ in particular contexts (2007: 97). Schippers has described this as ‘gender manoeuvring’ which she explains as ‘a process of negotiation in which the meanings and rules for gender get pushed, pulled, transformed and re-established’ (2002: 37). This negotiation is described as ‘active’ and can occur across a variety of everyday settings (Schippers 2002: 37). Schippers’ theory was originally developed in her study of alternative rock culture (2002); applying this theory to a media text builds upon her ideas by utilizing them in a new context.

Frankie’s illustrated cover might be read as an example of gender manoeuvring. The move away from textual conventions that are seen to contribute to the objectification of women and undermine female progress might be read as offering what Schippers describes as ‘alternative’ femininities (Levy 2005; Walter 2010; Wolf 1992; Schippers 2007: 97); in this case femininities that are not objectified or required to conform to an idealized norm in body shape and appearance. This could be seen as an example of ‘gender manoeuvring’ that subverts the position of femininity as an object of masculine desire, an aspect of ‘hegemonic gender relations’ noted by Schippers (2007: 94). This can

be considered particularly subversive in the context of the women's magazine genre given the criticisms outlined.

Frankie offers multiple gender manoeuvres that sometimes contradict other moves in the magazine. For example, the magazine seems to simultaneously challenge and reassert the normative relationship between men and women. *Frankie*'s website hints at the accessibility of the magazine for both genders, noting that it is for 'women (and men!)' (Frankie Press 2015). This might reflect *Frankie*'s broader content which features articles written by several regular male contributors.

The inclusion of male voices that imply potential similarities or connections between males and females might work to challenge the dominant model of gender relations as opposites, a model that has been associated with women's magazines (see Ballaster et al. 1991: 9). The magazine also regularly represents same-sex relationships (see Law 2013) in contrast with the strictly heteronormative sexuality that has commonly been associated with mainstream magazines (see Winship 1987: 117). This is where instances of gender manoeuvring in *Frankie* might become clear as the relationship between masculinity and femininity as defined by heterosexual desire and difference is challenged allowing masculine and feminine identities to coexist in a context other than heterosexual romance.

However other textual moves in *Frankie* seem to reassert a normative assumption of heterosexuality albeit perhaps a less overtly sexualized one than those of its contemporaries. The magazine's 2014/5 media kit noted *Frankie*'s 'high unisex appeal' yet supported this claim by noting that '33.4 per cent of readers share *Frankie* with their *boyfriend*' (Frankie Press 2014, emphasis added) thus assuming the heterosexuality of their *female* target market. In addition the illustrated covers do not necessarily represent a departure from normative heterosexuality. For example Issue 63's cover features an illustration of a young man and a young woman standing side by side. Both characters are adorned with key signifiers of the 'indie' style: large black framed glasses and collared shirts buttoned to the top. These signifiers reflect the androgynous aspects of the indie style as they are variations of the same style for both men and women. This might suggest a gender manoeuvre via what Schippers describes as 'bodily practice' (2002: 107), which can include clothing.

However, as might be made clearer by the inside cover where the two characters link arms, the ‘couple’ on this cover might reassert the assumption of heterosexual desire as a natural aspect of this relationship. Thus while *Frankie* might invite gender manoeuvres that suggest similarities between men and women these manoeuvres are perhaps primarily reserved for an implied heterosexual audience. This might reflect the way that gender manoeuvring can ‘ultimately rely upon and fortify the sexual order’ as Schippers suggests (2002: 151).

‘FEMININE’ COVERS

Frankie’s ‘indie’ femininities may also reassert aspects of white, middle class, hegemonic constructions of ideal femininity at the same time as they might constitute gender manoeuvring. When the illustrated covers have not depicted women they have often signified domesticity in some way, whether with depictions of flowerpots (such as in Issues 57 and 54) or craft and kitchen items (Issue 50’s hand-stitched cover). These covers offer signifiers of typically ‘feminine’ pursuits with Issue 50’s appearance of hand stitching and Issue 54’s watercolour punctuated with paint spots. Such signifiers of ‘real’ artistry can be read in the context of critiques of glossy ‘Photoshopped’ women’s magazine covers just as Duffy suggests discourses of authenticity in glossy women’s magazines might be read as a response to persistent criticisms of the genre (2013: 150-1). However *Frankie*’s domesticity-themed illustrations might also be read as a reassertion of traditional hegemonic femininity by rejecting more contemporary configurations of femininity in favour of a femininity associated with the domestic sphere.

Frankie’s covers are often adorned with ‘traditional’ feminine signifiers: for example, on the cover of Issue 55 the painted female’s blonde hair, pink lips and rosy cheeks can each be recognized as signifiers of traditional youthful ‘feminine’ beauty. The string of flowers that she wears as a crown further constructs the traditionally ‘feminine’ aesthetic of the cover. The girl depicted wears a frilly high-cut collar; perhaps signifying reserved feminine beauty and virtue in opposition to ‘revealing’ clothing that might be associated with mainstream magazine covers.

As Schippers suggests, femininities that incorporate overt sexual agency have typically been assigned ‘pariah’ status (2007: 95). Thus while we could read the

illustrated cover as a potentially feminist critique of the objectification of women we might also read this rejection of 'sexualized' depictions of women as a reassertion of traditional hegemonic femininity as a chaste and virtuous femininity. In their studies of ways in which young girls resist the heterosexual matrix Renold and Ringrose found that rejection of hypersexualized femininities could reinforce class distinctions (2008: 332). *Frankie's* rejection of sexualized covers might have similar implications particularly considering the dual function of indie that Newman describes: he suggests the culture 'counters and implicitly criticizes hegemonic mass culture... but also serves as a taste culture perpetuating the privilege of a social elite' (2009: 17). Thus *Frankie's* covers might work to establish difference between its own femininities and those of the mainstream media but also suggest their superiority as identities associated with an 'elite' indie taste culture.

However *Frankie's* covers are also an example of where the 'traditional' becomes coded as 'alternative'. Femininities that reference 'retro' identities can invite an alternative subject position in a contemporary context: for example, Bramall suggests the 'austerity chic' trend in contemporary Britain can be understood as a critique of contemporary consumerism (2013: 28). In addition Hollows argues Nigella Lawson's 'domestic goddess' is not necessarily nostalgic for a mid-twentieth century reality but might be a response to contemporary time constraints (2003: 190).

Covers such as Issue 61's illustration of a young woman in a 1950s-style bathing suit illustrate the ways that 'retro' styles are reappropriated as part of *Frankie's* 'indie' femininities, becoming simultaneously traditional and alternative. However these identities are perhaps not made equally available to everyone. Schippers notes the importance of 'race and class positions' to the availability of particular gender manoeuvres (2002: 126). *Frankie's* illustrated covers, including for Issues 55 and 61, have often depicted young white female characters, perhaps suggesting limitations to the accessibility of the retro 'indie' identity.

CONCLUSION

This article has suggested that *Frankie's* covers invite both subversive 'gender manoeuvres' and more conservative moves. As Budgeon notes contemporary

femininities represent hybrid identities that make it difficult to determine coherent gender configurations in line with the models presented by Connell and Schippers (Budgeon 2015: 330); perhaps *Frankie* reflects these contradictions. Schippers argues that ‘gender manoeuvring is never simply about gender, but it is also always about negotiating race, class, ethnicity and sexuality’ (2002: 124). *Frankie*’s gender manoeuvres offer alternatives to mainstream femininities but within a primarily white, heterosexual and middle-class framework. *Frankie*’s multiplicity of femininities may be key to its success as it facilitates an implied critique of mainstream models of femininity while making its more conservative elements less overt. This article has contributed to magazine studies by applying Schippers’ (2002) theory to a particularly successful contemporary magazine. Further research might examine the significance of *Frankie*’s form as a tactile print object with ‘retro’ qualities as well as how *Frankie*’s gender manoeuvres operate as branding strategies in a competitive market.

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