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More than just a laugh: The representation of New Zealand in Funny Girls

ABSTRACT	KEYWORDS

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Local television contributes to the daily reproduction of national identity and provides insight into local culture. In particular, sketch comedy highlights and mocks aspects of national culture and issues of national concern. The purpose of this paper is to examine how aspects of New Zealand identity are represented in season 2 of Funny Girls *(2014-) through thematic analysis. As a programme that receives funding from New Zealand on Air it could be expected that it would foster a sense of national identity. Three dominant themes emerged: New Zealand as patriarchal yet beginning to engage with feminist ideas, New Zealand as perpetuating Pākehā culture hegemony and struggling with cultural diversity, and New Zealand culture as uncertain and stable in comparison to others. The paper also considers how Funny Girls reflects existing constructions of national identity and attempts to construct New Zealand as progressive in the area of gender and feminism.*

KEYWORDS

national identity
television
comedy
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INTRODUCTION

Funny Girls (2014-) is a sketch comedy, which comments on social norms and expectations in New Zealand according to one of the programme's writers Laura Daniel.[1] Sketches are interspersed with the behind-the-scenes narrative of making a sketch show, in which female comedians are guided by Pauline, the producer, and a group of male executives. The television production received funding from New Zealand Air[*] and had an average audience of 168,000 in season one and 122,000 in season two.[2] As a programme partially funded by a cultural policy initiative, it is expected that the content will foster a sense of national identity.[3] The purpose of this paper, then, is to examine how aspects of New Zealand identity are represented in

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[*] Season 1 received $278,997 in October 2014, Season 2 received $366,432 in May 2016, Season 3 received $394,587 in December 2016

season 2 of *Funny Girls*. The six thirty-minute episodes are examined using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis to identify and analyse repeated patterns of meaning[4] in relation to what the programme suggests about New Zealand national identity. This representation could impact the way New Zealanders understand what it means to belong to the nation, and provide insight into how local television represents aspects of national identity.

CONTRIBUTION OF LOCAL TELEVISION & COMEDY TO NATIONAL IDENTITY

Cultural policy is underpinned by the notion that public investment into culture can foster and promote national identity.[5] Policymakers can encourage the consumption of certain cultural goods and cultivate taste among the population based on their funding decisions.[6] The cultural expressions may become part of regular life, and consequently facilitate a sense of unity and social cohesion.[7] The funding body, New Zealand on Air, echoes these aspirations in their mandate to "reflect and develop New Zealand identity and culture"[8] and specifically fund comedy that offers "a uniquely New Zealand perspective" about life in the nation.[9]

Local television can contribute to the way individuals understand the nation and their national identity because its mediation and construction of reality contributes to local identity and culture.[10] Television can offer insight into a contemporary understanding of social relations and views,[11] which is valuable considering how national identity is formed through perception. The nation is a social construct,[12] which evolves[13] as the meanings associated with the nation are transformed and reproduced.[14] Thus, the nation can be understood as "an imagined political community",[15] which relies upon individuals perceiving a shared common bond. Similarly, national identity is not fixed. Instead, in order to identify with the nation, an individual must positively evaluate the social group against others, and then internalise distinctive values associated with it.[16] This means that *Funny Girls* could impact the way New Zealanders understand the prototypical characteristics. National identity is embedded into daily experiences that continuously flag the nation and identity, and television, as part of banal nationalism, is another space where citizens are reminded of national identity.[17]

Despite the significance of television in terms of national identity, there is a lack of local content in the New Zealand environment. This is due to the commercial

pressures created by the neoliberal and deregulated broadcasting context.[18] The reliance on overseas television has subordinated New Zealand culture to American[19] and leads to insecurity about local culture, resulting in cultural cringe.[20] New Zealand on Air emerged to increase the visibility of New Zealand identity and address the market failure. In particular, comedy television is considered to be a "threatened"[21] and the "riskiest"[22] genre because there is a dependable stream of imported content that New Zealanders prefer and it is expensive to produce.[23] However, comedy is also a space in which national identity is expressed. According to Medhurst, English comedy contributes to English identity and reveals the Englishness of the nation.[24] Consequently, comedy can be conceptualised as a space of inclusion and exclusion in relation to the dominant group or subculture and so functions as "an invitation to belong".[25]

The format of sketch comedy, in particular, allows for a variety of identities to be explored.[26] Deveau argues that aspects of culture are critiqued and mocked and controversial issues are discussed particularly related to the nation in Canadian sketch comedies.[27] Larrea also concluded that national identity was central to the sketch comedy, *Vaya semanita,* in two distinctive ways.[28] Firstly, some sketches were based on everyday realities and concerns that existed in the nation. Secondly, some sketches mocked traditional aspects of national identity, stereotypes and traditional views. In light of this, the thematic analysis examines a sketch comedy in the New Zealand context guided by the research question, what aspects of New Zealand identity are reflected in *Funny Girls?*

THEME ONE: "ONE, TWO, THREE, SMASH THE PATRIARCHY"

The first theme concerns the way gender and feminist ideas are portrayed and constructed as part of New Zealand society. New Zealand is described as male dominant in both the sketches and the behind-the-scenes narrative. For example, the way that Pauline describes the television audience is emblematic of the way New Zealand is constructed. She is concerned that "we're down in all male demographics".[29] This aligns with the way New Zealand is constructed in terms of masculinity.[30] Phillips describes New Zealand as a 'man's country' because national identity has relied upon the strong, unemotional, resilient and skilled hegemonic male, the kiwi bloke.[31]

Hegemonic masculinity ensures the legitimacy of patriarchy[32] and this is reflected when New Zealand is labelled as patriarchal in episodes three[33] and four[34]. The patriarchy refers to a social system of power dynamics in which men dominate women, and femininity is subordinated.[35] Aspects of the patriarchal nature of New Zealand are highlighted and critiqued in sketches. For example, the truck commercial sketch draws attention to cultural expectations related to gender roles through the interaction between the voiceover person and actor. It is expected a kiwi bloke will drive "the new Holden Colorado, the new ultimate workhorse with a powerful 2.8L engine" and as the voiceover exclaims "what the fuck? Hello, sorry love just didn't expect to see a woman".[36] There is a critique of hegemonic masculinity as narrow and exclusive of women, and *Funny Girls* suggests the traditional construction of New Zealand is outdated and sexist. This finding is also evident in a more subtle way as Rose performs traditional masculinity and competitiveness in the game of social netball. She shouts to her teammates "throw the ball, you pussy"[37] and although this gendered insult is not commented on, it reflects the way sport is tied into construction of national identity in New Zealand.[38]

Not only does *Funny Girls* suggest New Zealand is patriarchal but that there is also a desire for this to be "smashed"[39] or at least challenged. The male executives have become 'feminists' in season 2 and their comments in the behind-the-scenes narrative suggest how feminism can be both understood and misunderstood in a contemporary context. For example, during a social netball game they chant, "one, two, three, smash the patriarchy" in their pre-game huddle. This exists alongside the statement "as a male feminist, I'm not really comfortable playing what is a traditional female game"[40] highlighting a shallow understanding of feminist ideas. The concept of mansplaining is also explicitly demonstrated through its use in dialogue. A male executive says to Pauline, "allow me to mansplain, sure you could get married and have three babies … but that's what the patriarchy wants you to do".[41] She is also criticised for "sidelining" her career for love[42] and consequently, a discussion around what feminism actually is emerges as a central narrative of the season.

Sketches also adopt a feminist perspective through intentionally exploring other contemporary struggles facing women.[43] The issue of the gender pay gap and inequalities that exist in the workplace are alluded to. For example, Commander Shepperd is unable to be sent on the mission to Mars "because women aren't from Mars, they're from Venus".[44] The female politician press conference sketch also

comments specifically on the way women in politics are gendered in media coverage and subject to trivialisation and sexism.[45] The politician expresses frustration at the range of irrelevant questions she is asked and draws attention to an issue understood contextually in New Zealand. A female reporter asks her "why are you being such a bitch?"[46] which also enables the sketch to highlight how women can be complicit in reproducing the patriarchy.[47] Another example of the feminist perspective embedded in *Funny Girls* is the portrayal of sexuality and pleasure "because women enjoy sex now".[48] It reinforces the way television challenges common beliefs about how women should behave and express their sexual desires.[49] The notion that women's sexual pleasure is socially acceptable is exemplified in the seven launch sketch in which the latest version of a vibrator rather than iPhone is launched.[50]

Funny Girls also demonstrates the way that gender is performed and is mutable.[51] For example, in the Demon Jizz sketch two promo girls argue of the existence of free will in private, displaying a high level of intelligence, before performing a flirty and giggly version of femininity when giving out samples of the new energy drink. The sketch deconstructs appearance based assumptions such as girls who are beautiful are also unintelligent, and critiques hegemonic masculinity and binary notions of gender. The range of gender identities and limitations of the gender binary are also discussed in the baby sweepstakes sketch in which colleagues predict the unborn baby's weight and gender. One office worker states there is "actually not a spot on the board" for a particular gender identity suggested, which is responded with "I guess that's your problem for having a limited perspective on gender".[52] The sketch follows an attribute of postfeminist television of deconstructing binary categories of gender[53] and is able to position the feminist perspective as common-sense and hegemonic.

The consistent critiquing gender inequalities and hegemonic stereotyping allows for *Funny Girls* to employ feminist humour at times.[54] The feminist themes raised in *Funny Girls* suggest feminism is embedded into New Zealand society and identity. However, the programme could be considered part of the way television "structures and presents its picture of reality"[55] rather than purely reflecting it. Although New Zealand has experienced progression in relation to gender and feminism, there continues to be gender differences and inequalities.[56] In addition, New Zealanders may not hold the same level of concern for feminist issues or

consider feminism part of their understanding of national identity as it is portrayed in the programme.

THEME TWO: "YOU HAVE JUST FAILED YOUR PRIVILEGE CHECK"

The second theme concerns the way white New Zealanders occupy a place of privilege. The focus on this cultural group reflects Pākehā cultural hegemony and the dominance of Pākehā identity in national identity.[57] According to Dyer, whiteness is perceived as invisible and normal to the extent that people are marked as unraced.[58] *Funny Girls* makes the invisible visible to demonstrate the way ethnicity contributes to privilege. For example, it is the ethnicity rather than the gender that is unveiled in the baby shower reveal cake sketch. The parents and partygoers celebrate the baby's whiteness because as the father states, "he's got my privilege".[59] White privilege is "an invisible package of unearned assets" and power that is distributed systematically[60] to Pākehā in the New Zealand context.[61] Pākehā New Zealanders are encouraged to "check" their privilege routinely in the privilege checkpoint sketch[62]. The sketch subverts and highlights the way racial profiling occurs in the area of crime as a white woman is arrested. Furthermore, it highlights a level of awareness and shame associated with privilege that may exist.

As the label of the theme, "you have just failed your privilege check"[63] suggests, *Funny Girls* demonstrates ways in which New Zealand society "fails" to engage authentically with cultural diversity. This limited perspective is exemplified in the awards night sketch where a previous recipient received a hero award for trying a "new Korean restaurant in his neighbourhood".[64] This reinforces the way New Zealand struggles to embrace equal representation of cultural groups in national identity,[65] and that New Zealanders support of biculturalism and multiculturalism can be restricted to their symbolic representation rather than addressing social inequalities.[66]

There is also evidence of uncertainty around addressing cultural diversity appropriately especially due to the issue of white privilege. For example, a player in the guess who sketch does not want to "ask something about the way they look".[67] There is an unwillingness and hesitation to say the word Asian in fear of being racist, but this leads to him asking insensitive questions based on racial stereotypes such as

"is she good at maths?" The sketch alludes to social anxiety in dealing with racial difference. This and the previous example use two Asian ethnicities, which may reference the increase of Asian migrants to New Zealand.[68] However, the singling out of these two ethnicities reinforces the boundaries of belonging, and the implied typical New Zealander is Pākehā, once again reinforcing cultural hegemony.

THEME THREE: "WHY HAVE YOU GOT THAT ACCENT?"

The third theme to emerge from the analysis addresses the way New Zealand identity borrows from and exists alongside British and American culture. Three sketches are set in the Victorian era,[69] which echoes the dominant Pākehā historical narrative and reflects the way national identity was initially reliant upon New Zealand's British heritage.[70] British culture is also consistently constructed as more sophisticated than New Zealand's, exemplified by Rose wanting to do a girl Beatles sketch to "inject some culture in our low brow comedy show".[71] This may highlight the perceived shallowness of Pākehā culture[72] and the historical struggle to foster a unique identity.[73]

However, Britain's high culture is also used to highlight New Zealand's comparative positive distinctiveness, exemplifying the way national identity is formed through comparison with relevant out-groups.[74] Laura labels Rose a "pretentious glazer" who acts "all high and mighty"[75] and mocks her British accent after she returns from her OE asking "why have you got *that* accent?" (emphasis added).[76] The critique of behaviour that is interpreted as posh or elitist reveals the continuation of the myth of egalitarianism.[77] In addition, it could suggest the cultural cringe associated with the identifiable Kiwi accent[78] may be shifting because Laura's comments indirectly claim it as positive.

There is also evidence of references to American people and organisations as well as the use of American accents. The president rather than the prime minister is used in sketches requiring a head of state, which could suggest that New Zealand figures are not perceived as holding the same level of authority. The woman in space sketch is set at NASA and based on the premise that "Commander Sheppard will be piloting our first space mission" to Mars[79]. The reference to the leader of the women's suffrage movement in New Zealand, Kate Sheppard, allows local characters to be inserted into global settings. This reflects the way national culture can be "filtered through a plethora of references to international cultural texts".[80]

Funny Girls references other popular culture programmes such as *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad*,[81] which reinforces the way New Zealanders are subject to a diet of imported television particularly from America. [82] However, this potential subordination of local culture exists alongside to references to New Zealand popular culture texts. For example, the YouTube channel *Jamie's World* and local celebrity Jamie Curry are parodied by Curry in the behind-the-scenes narrative where Rose and Laura meet the creator of Planet Becky.[83]

CONCLUSION

Funny Girls represents New Zealand identity in ways that reflect existing constructions: the dominance of masculine values in patriarchal New Zealand,[84] Pākehā New Zealanders occupying a place privilege,[85] the limited construction of cultural diversity,[86] and the uncertainty of local culture compared to more established nations.[87] Alongside this is evidence of New Zealand as progressive in the areas of gender and feminism. In addition, the recognition of New Zealand culture could suggest the shallow sense of a distinctive identity beyond "displaced Europeans"[88] and that cultural cringe[89] is beginning to subside.

Interestingly, although the programme overtly draws attention to and critiques white privilege, overall cultural diversity seems to be reproduced uncritically and this is not an area of national identity that is represented in a way that reflects the changing conceptualisation of New Zealand as bicultural and multicultural. This could mean that *Funny Girls* instead contributes to the on-going cultural hegemony of Pākehā culture. The burden to address the diversity of New Zealand is acknowledged in episode one. Pauline informs the team they must "represent, vocalise and further all women and minorities, while also appealing to a wide audience of men".[90] Given national identity is multifaceted, it is unrealistic to expect *Funny Girls* to represent and construct New Zealand in its entirety. Ultimately, the programme is able to present diversity in terms of a female-driven comedy and suggest that feminist issues are issues of national concern.

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[81] *Funny Girls,* "Episode 6"

[82] Wood, "Beyond Local Content"

[83] *Funny Girls,* "Episode 2"

[84] Bell, "Imagining Aotearoa"; McCreanor, "Sticks and Stones"; Phillips, *A Man's Country?*

[85] Matthewman, "Pakeha Ethnicity"

[86] Bromell, *Ethnicity, Identity*; Chung. "Native Alienz"; Fleras and Spoonley, *Recalling Aotearoa*; Thakur, "Defence of Multiculturalism"

[87] Bell, "Settler Belonging"

[88] Capie and McGhie, "Representing New Zealand", 233

[89] Horrocks, "Construction Site"; Dunleavy and Joyce, *New Zealand Film*

[90] *Funny Girls,* "Episode 1"

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