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Title: From victims to survivors : The discourse of trauma in self-narratives of sexual violence in Cosmopolitan UK online

Year: 2018

Version: Accepted version (Final draft)

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Please cite the original version:

Rodi-Risberg, M., & Höglund, M.-B. (2018). From victims to survivors : The discourse of trauma in self-narratives of sexual violence in Cosmopolitan UK online. *Discourse, Context and Media*, 25, 114-121. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2018.04.004>

From victims to survivors: The discourse of trauma in self-narratives of sexual violence in *Cosmopolitan* UK online

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1. Introduction

Critical discourse studies (CDS) has so far remained largely unaffected by the recent affective turn in the fields of the humanities and social sciences;¹ but what happens when such popular consumer lifestyle magazine brands as *Cosmopolitan* take on the issue of the trauma of sexual violence? Previous literature has shown how the representation of such issues as work, sex, relationships, and health become appropriated and shaped by these magazines; all become a model of self-empowerment suitable for every situation or problem (Machin and van Leeuwen, 2003). Thus, the magazine deals with these issues in a branded way (Machin and Thornborrow, 2003). Earlier research has also shown what women's magazines do ideologically, how sex becomes a form of play and empowerment for women, but only when removed from its social context in a fictional space (Machin and Thornborrow, 2006).

Previous studies raise issues of how sex as adventure relate to representations of sex as violence, and their findings resonate with and contributed to the research on the discourse on wider media representation of violence and trauma where evil versus innocence deflects from an actual social reality. In fact, the concept of trauma in contemporary culture has generated the dominant paradigm for depicting individual experiences of suffering in mass media: this discursive model of emplotment involves the antagonistic struggle between good and evil – represented by the stock characters of victim and perpetrator – and has a happy ending, where the victim wins over evil and becomes a survivor (Rothe, 2011). Nevertheless, this formulaic way of representing trauma depoliticizes suffering as it instructs consumers/readers that social and cultural change is unnecessary and no political action needed.

¹ For a critique of the “lack of affect” in CDA, see Thurlow (2016) and Milani (2015).

Trauma is an inherently emotive experience. Emotions are intrinsic both to the traumatic experience itself and the witnessing thereof. Informed by a theoretical framework that places critical discourse analysis (CDA) and trauma studies in constructive dialogue, this study examines how *Cosmopolitan* UK online deals with the discourse of trauma in women's self-narratives of sexual violence by exploring the ways in which emotions are thematized in the self-narratives as the magazine promotes its own dominant discourse of individual empowerment. While "self-narratives of sexual violence" can be defined as a form of testimony in which women testify to their traumatic stories of sexual violence, we recognize that the magazine takes editorial license with these. By the term "sexual violence" we mean to include sexual assault, sexual abuse, incest, and rape. The term is apt because although not all or even most sexual assaults include significant violent behavior, no sexual assault, abuse, or rape is nonviolent because it always implies violation.

Prima facie, CDS and trauma studies may appear an unlikely combination: the former attends to written or spoken discourse, to words, to what is expressed, spoken and represented, whereas the latter focuses on what is unspoken and unrepresented or rather unspeakable and unrepresentable, that is, on affect; yet, this article emphasizes emotions as an important link between CDS and trauma studies. According to psychoanalytical studies on trauma, traumatic experience produces an epistemological crisis that bypasses linguistic reference and is therefore knowable only belatedly in the form of traumatic effects which are seen to literally represent the traumatic event (see Caruth, 1996). Thus, narrative becomes a site for bearing witness to trauma in a way that reflects and passes on rather than represents the emotional impact of the phenomenon to readers. For trauma scholars, trauma discourse entails testimony, an ethical address whereby the audience is implicated in the trauma of the other (Caruth, 1996; Felman and Laub, 1992). Being addressed means being "deprived of will, and to have that deprivation exist as the basis of one's situation in discourse" (Butler, 2006: 139). Nevertheless, while trauma scholars espouse representations of trauma as "the liberatory testimony of the disenfranchised" (Rothe, 2011: 90) addressed to a responsive other, in women's magazines, factors including "mission statements, editorial guidelines, advertising concerns, audience expectations, and economic interests" impact on both the choice of stories about social issues and how they are told (Berns, 2004: 10).

The aim is to advance research on the discourse of trauma in self-narratives of sexual violence by drawing attention to the important part played by emotions in relation to politics and the significant role politics play in relation to emotions. Consequently, this study not only

asks what happens when *Cosmopolitan* uses the issue of sexual violence and the discourse of trauma in self-narratives fundamentally as part of their brand, that is, what happens to such issues when they become discursively presented through branding, but also explores how emotional bonds are created synthetically with imagined readers. Thus, an additional research question is: how do these self-narratives politicize or depoliticize the discourse of trauma and for whose benefit? Ultimately, the present study demonstrates how the discursive practices of the self-narratives are not only shaped by but also disrupt dominant discourses of trauma through the circulation of powerful emotions.

2. Women's magazine narratives, trauma, and politics

Narratives for constructing women's lives in *Cosmopolitan* globally follow specific structures identified by Machin and van Leeuwen (2003: 496) as *problem-solution discourse schemas*. The magazine constructs women's social life as a struggle for survival in a precarious world where relationships are unstable and women have nothing to rely on except their own resources (2003: 510). These problems include "risky encounters" such as "men making advances," and "institutional obstacles" which are "formulated as a personal problem" rather than "an issue of social and cultural gender inequality" (2003: 502). The magazine offers its readers advice for how to overcome obstacles and achieve their goals. Moreover, the magazine presents its solutions as practical ones; they are not construed as ideologies, but naturalized into global truths about human nature. Höglund (2016) has demonstrated that the *Cosmopolitan* UK print version allows for the selective introduction of discourses such as those of trouble, including sexual violence, which challenges its dominant discourse of the ideal *Cosmo girl*, for the purpose of neutralizing the competing ones.

Previous research on women's print magazines shows that the problem of gendered violence such as domestic violence is constructed as a private problem, most often as the woman's problem, and she is hence responsible for finding a solution (Berns, 2004; 1999; Nettleton, 2011). Focusing on the victim's story of empowerment and survival, however, reduces complicated social issues to "emotion, drama, and heroic tales" and obfuscates the way sociocultural structures sustain gender violence (Berns, 2004: 102). Gendered violence is presented as the woman's problem and responsibility because the magazines' editorial guidelines for writers instruct that women's magazines are "*service magazines*," offering readers advice and encouragement mainly by "*empowering*" them through "*keeping it*

personal,” personalizing stories of abuse with “*uplifting, positive resolutions*” made possible through focusing on one woman’s story rather than providing sociopolitical contexts (Berns, 2004: 84). Due to these guidelines, the *sine qua non* for the stories is that “abusers must be kept in the background, and advertisers’ interests must be maintained” (Berns, 2004: 91).

Earlier studies have also shown that in *Cosmopolitan* sex and sexual violence, like love, fashion and careers, are discursively presented through branding. The discourse of sex as empowerment has been mobilized in the interest of a lifestyle ideology of consumerism by magazines owned by global corporations such as Hearst (which owns *Cosmopolitan*) through situating it within a fantasy world (Machin and Thornborrow, 2006). Thus divorced from its social context sex becomes a form of empowerment for women; yet, the performance of this sexual power as described in the magazine may put women at risk for sexual violence in the “real” world (Machin and Thornborrow, 2006: 180-181).

The model for a one size fits all self-empowerment in women’s magazines corresponds with studies on the discourse of trauma in representation more broadly, where a discourse of evil versus innocence diverts from social realities. In the late twentieth century, sexual violence became linked with the discourse of trauma as a result of the identity politics of the late 1960s. At this stage of the women’s movement, voicing the untold parts of women’s lives was crucial and often shared in groups (Luckhurst, 2008: 71). In the 1970s, identity politics was “transformed into quests of personal self-discovery” as individual expressions of suffering and survival substituted for the political discourses of the 1960s, and therapeutic culture “absorbed interpersonal violence into its inherently de-politicized sphere” (Rothe, 2011: 117). The last two decades of the twentieth century saw in trauma discourse “the transformation of witness as victim to witness as survivor, and to witness as performer, telling the tale of survivor as a form of self-therapy and inspiration for others” (Douglass and Vogler, 2003: 41).

Recent research on trauma has investigated the role of politics in relation to emotion in representations of trauma in the media and beyond. Hutchinson indicates that while trauma is often seen as an individual and isolating experience, “traumatic events can also help to form the social attachments needed to constitute community” in the sense that “representational practices craft understandings of trauma that have social meaning and significance” (2016: 2, 3). Representations of trauma allow the sharing of injury and loss between victims and witnesses in ways that are politically significant. In a context of popular media representations, this is facilitated because “consumers have become unwilling to question the

authority of affect” (Rothe, 2011: 137). To make trauma a ‘collective’ experience it needs to “be transcribed (i.e. mediated through modes of communication) into a language through which it can be shared” (Hutchinson, 2016: 54). In a context of women’s magazines, Machin and van Leeuwen have shown how the community of *Cosmopolitan* readers “share an involvement with the same modalities and genres of linguistic communication, and the same linguistic constructions of reality,” but “[t]he ‘speech’ is institutionally controlled...through a hierarchically organised institution, with a head office that regulates the work of local editorial teams, and local editorial teams who shape the language of *Cosmopolitan* in deliberate and strategic ways” (2003: 509, 510). The sharing is not equal and is created in a synthetic way.

3. Material

The online textual material in our project consists of 35 self-narratives acquired from the *Cosmopolitan* UK website using the search words “rape,” “sexual abuse,” “sexual violence,” “sexual assault,” “incest,” and “trauma.” The narratives were published between 2013 and 2017 and downloaded within a three-month period, November 18, 2016-February 18, 2017. Selection criteria were a self-narrative testifying to a traumatic sexual experience including rape, sexual abuse, or sexual assault. These self-narratives were understood to have undergone a journalistic work process, resulting in narratives told in the first or third person singular. The role of the magazine as mediator was often emphasized by the note “As told to (name of reporter/editor)”. The self-narratives are not always based on interviews that *Cosmopolitan* has conducted with the women but are often based on interviews by other media and on social media including Instagram and tweets. For this reason, we do not analyze the images in the self-narratives. Articles were not included if they were regular news reports of incidents of sexual violence, or the magazine’s self-help advice.

We have chosen *Cosmopolitan* because it has a history of publishing and campaigns on sexual violence. We have selected the online version because narratives of sexual violence have mainly transferred to the magazine’s free web version, diminishing its visibility in the print version, which is for sale. The technical possibilities allows *Cosmopolitan* to create online networks across related internet sites, at the same time making use of social media for added reach. For the *Cosmopolitan* brand, it is vital to own and monitor an online space which functions as a network of resources in combination with social media. Therefore, the data

collected for this study are linked to other sites through the writers/reporters. For instance, the profile of digital reporter Catriona Harvey-Jenner is created not only by the traditional journalistic by-line, but also by catch-lines such as “Follow Cat on Twitter” and “Like this? Come and check us out on Snapchat Discover.” The magazine makes use of the linking possibilities provided by the social media, thus strengthening its own online space and contents. The result is a platform from which the magazine can assert itself and its brand through campaigns against sexual violence.

4. Theoretical framework

In this study, we bring CDA in productive dialogue with trauma studies, suggesting that emotion is an important link between them, to examine the self-narratives of sexual violence in *Cosmopolitan* UK online. CDA is a critical perspective, rather than a methodology (Blommaert, 2005: 21). Its purpose is to investigate how power manifests through language. The ideological nature of discourses, specifically those constructed by women’s magazines, makes CDA a suitable tool for their deconstruction. Discourse is viewed in this study as constructed and is understood as Foucault’s “discursive practices or systems of meaning” (1972: 49) which call objects into existence (Foucault, 2004: 94). It is closely linked to ideology and power; discourses – like ideologies – struggle with each other for dominance (Fairclough, 2001: 45; Mills, 2004: 38), and those who benefit from a particular dominant discourse will uphold it.

CDA is, by definition, interdisciplinary (Wodak, 2001a), which makes it suitable for our purposes. It is problem-oriented which allows for the possibility of integrating theories and methods that help to interpret and explain the object investigated (Wodak, 2001b: 69). Naturally, its interdisciplinary approach can be an advantage, but also a disadvantage. CDA allows for the flexible combination of research methods, and offers the researcher the freedom to choose the tools most suited to the material and project in question. While this freedom of choice can render a study unstable, it is appropriate here where trauma studies offers what CDA seemingly lacks: a focus on emotions.

We use Fairclough’s (1992) three-dimensional model of discourse to investigate key discursive practices used by *Cosmopolitan* UK online to construct women’s experiences of sexual violence. This tri-partite model makes it possible to analyze discourse in three stages: *discourse-as-text*, describing texts in terms of grammar, vocabulary, cohesion and structure;

discourse-as-discursive practice, interpreting the production, circulation, and consumption of discourses, and *discourse-as-social practice*, explaining discursive practices in their social contexts where power structures are at work (Fairclough 2001: 20-21). We analyse the self-narratives to identify and describe, along the first dimension, distinctive linguistic strategies that give rhetorical force to the trauma discourse deployed by the magazine to promote its dominant discourse of empowerment. The second dimension offers the contextual considerations upon which the linguistic strategies were based and within which representation we interpret meaning. We identify the topics which recur regularly to form patterns in the self-narratives (see Foucault, 1972, 2004; Fairclough, 2001), as discursive practices which are named according to their function and interpreted. Here, the discursive practices are defined as the strategies employed by the magazine, for example, to represent trauma and construct the plots and characters involved in the narratives to promote its dominant discourse of empowerment. The third dimension or social practices offer CDA's explanatory representation of the meanings constructed where the function of the discursive practices are explained in terms of their role and significance in society.

Because these self-narratives are a genre where the aim is to have the women speak about a personal emotional experience, the analysis focuses on the connection between discursive practices and discursive function, noting how the discourses are grounded in the notion of empowerment to achieve the goals of *Cosmopolitan* UK online. Fairclough presents empowerment in relation to “emancipatory discourse” as empowerment and emancipatory discourse “which contributes to the transformation of existing orders of discourse”: empowerment means that individuals who are not included in certain types of discourses or subject positions within these “are helped to infringe conventions, without radically changing them, by ‘entering’ these discourse types or positions” (Fairclough, 2001: 201). As discourses are situated in specific times and places they are also open to transformation: empowerment “has a substantial ‘shock’ potential” and can demonstrate that present “orders of discourse” are changeable (Fairclough, 2001: 202).

This is where the important link between CDA and trauma studies manifests itself most evidently: we explore the shock potential of discourse by drawing on studies on trauma and emotion. According to Butler, “dominant forms of representation can and must be disrupted for something about the precariousness of life to be apprehended” (2006: xviii). These dominant forms of representations are disrupted through the circulation of powerful emotions. As Hutchinson argues, discourses and representations of trauma are “intimately

emotional” calling attention to “the harrowing nature of traumatic events: they signify shock, vulnerability and confusion” (2016, 4). “Representations ‘frame’ traumatic events,” Hutchinson suggests; consequently, “Patterns of words” constitute “a mechanism through which individual and distant experiences of trauma can resonate with and affectively appeal to a wider society, to a community linked by shared patterns of emotionality and feeling” (2016: 271).

We engage with trauma studies to examine subject positioning to understand how such emotional bonds are created synthetically with imagined audiences in *Cosmopolitan* UK online. For Butler, acknowledging our interdependence, the way it is revealed in our vulnerability initiates an undertaking that is both ethical and political: “violence” exploits “that primary way in which we are, as bodies, outside ourselves and for one another” (Butler, 2006: 27). The meeting-point between trauma and violence is sustained by representation through discourse: “the situation of discourse...is one in which we are addressed, in which the Other directs language towards us”: consequently, “there is a certain violence already in being addressed...compelled to respond to an exacting alterity” (Butler, 2006: 139). In our material an address is created synthetically with imagined readers as the women in the stories speak out about sexual violence. Those who have experienced violence cannot control the representations of different forms of discourses offered by the media; consequently, “through modes of representation, trauma can be shaped in ways that serve the political interests of those who have the power to represent it” (Hutchinson, 2016: 134). Human interrelatedness in trauma requires an ethical response, but the media also use self-narratives of trauma for commercial purposes. In self-narratives of sexual violence *Cosmopolitan* UK online strategically construct subject positions to enable the magazine to create social relationships and to accept or reject dominant discourses of trauma thereby enhancing their brand.

5. Findings and discussion

5.1 Synthetically bound: Trauma, the discursive practices of emotions, and imagined readers

Cosmopolitan UK online allows self-narratives where women tell their stories of sexual violence with the ultimate aim to further the concept of their brand through specific discursive practices. As a form of testimonial genre representing trauma these self-narratives follow distinctive discursive patterns. To achieve the aims of the magazine, they are designed to create an affinity in a synthetic way with imagined readers. The discursive practices of

emotions are used to appeal to the imagined audience's emotions and give rhetorical purchase to the trauma discourse deployed by the magazine to further Hearst's mission statement to empower young women (Hearst, 2017).

The self-narratives in *Cosmopolitan* UK online about women who have experienced sexual violence emphasize an ideological conviction of the possibility of sisterhood. The magazine offers a forum for sharing experiences and values, saying in its mission statement that it "empathises with what young women are going through" (*Cosmopolitan* Media Pack, 2016). Sharing is part of being a member of a *synthetic sisterhood* as defined by Talbot (1995: 144) who showed how "advertorials" (editorial texts which are advertisements) create the conception of sisterhood to promote a particular young woman's femininity based on consumption. The space of a *synthetic sisterhood* allows *Cosmopolitan* to further its contents and advice, thus constructing itself as the reader's personal friend. Through this process, the magazine promotes its dominant discourse of the ideal femininity of the *Cosmo girl*, and strengthens its brand and, consequently, its position as a commercial enterprise.

To create synthetic emotional bonds with its imagined readers through representing emotions associated with trauma in the self-narratives in our material the women's experiences of sexual violence are often constructed and organized around the traumatic event(s). The narratives often unfold according to a time frame with three different stages and begin with the event of sexual violence and the immediate reaction following it described in terms of pain, humiliation, shame, and guilt. Here the intertextual references to trauma discourse vocabulary is drawn from therapeutic terminology and corresponds to the diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD (see American Psychiatric Association, 2013: 271). This stage is personal and unshared because these feelings prevent the women from making themselves heard. This time frame varies in length, from a short period of time to a few years as in Excerpt 1 below, to 10 years or more.

Excerpt 1.

In her new autobiography, Amanda [Holden, of the TV show *Britain's Got Talent*] has detailed how she was sexually assaulted by a famous comedian in a corridor at a public event – and that she kept the event a secret for years as she felt as if she deserved it. (Dray, 2013)

Deploying the linguistic choices informed by trauma discourse, the women indicate emotions such as self-guilt and shame (*as if she deserved it*, Excerpt 1) as a reason for their voluntary

silence. This suggests awareness of the discourses around sexual violence circulating in contemporary society including the widespread victim-blaming (see, e.g., Healicon, 2016). The first stage, however, marks the beginning of a process which will eventually culminate in the women's decision to go public, but is first followed by the discourse of fear of judgment.

The discourse of fear of judgment describes a stage where negative emotions are suppressed, the goal is oblivion and the women's voices are silent; they choose silence since they expect condemnation rather than understanding in a culture where the dominant discourse of sexual violence focuses on the actions of the victim rather than that of the perpetrator. This is expressed in terms of denial, self-blame, and fear of public judgment. The women's hesitation is linked to insecurity about how the guilt and responsibility would be placed; with them or with the perpetrator. Another reason for their hesitation is found in the lack of self-confidence, and feelings of shame and fear informed by trauma discourse.

Excerpt 2.

I was afraid that no one would believe me. I was afraid other potential partners would consider me damaged goods. I was afraid I was overreacting. I was afraid it was my fault. I was afraid he would be angry. Eight years later, I know just how classic these fears are. They are the reason that the majority of college women who are assaulted will never report it. (Kenyon, 2014)

However, shame does not necessarily form an obstacle. Healicon (2016: 31–33) describes it as protective, signifying defiance and challenges the current situation. Thus, shame can act as a driving force pushing towards the third stage, the discourse of empowerment, which is the decision to speak out and take charge of one's destiny.

The discourse of empowerment delineates the women's transition from an emotional state of fearing judgment to a cathartic cleansing of reclaiming agency and finding empowerment through sisterhood. The women 'speak out' to help their "sisters" in the imaginary community and share their experiences in public to benefit other women. This stage often involves reporting the violence to the police which reflects sexual violence as a law enforcement issue drawing on legal discourses. In the personal sphere, the women have felt protected by anonymity. Therefore, the transfer of their experiences to the public sphere requires courage, often expressed as a waiving of their anonymity.

Excerpt 3.

Sarah Thompson, 21, has courageously waived her right to anonymity in the hopes of preventing other women from getting into unlicensed taxis, following a horrific rape two years ago. (Savin, 2015)

Here, like in many of the other self-narratives, the verbs construct the passive ‘victim’ who “was raped” becoming the active “survivor” who “speaks out” (Savin, 2015), and the adverb “courageously” further emphasizes empowerment to persuade readers how they achieved it after first having been victimized.

The ‘collective’ act of telling trauma in these self-narratives becomes a speech act with the potential of highlighting the issue of sexual violence in society. Such speech acts can reconstruct the bonds that were shattered by the isolating effects of trauma and shape shared meanings with imagined witnesses. Additionally, as Hutchinson points out, witnessing trauma mediated by journalists “can ‘steer’ an audience’s emotions” which means that these “mediations can...‘pull’ individuals and prompt emotional receptivity (and a wider affective resonance) in this or that way depending on what is seen,” thus “making particular aspects of the trauma visible – and, of course, others invisible” (2016: 271).

Mass media has popularized the discourse of victim empowerment in a way that is different from the goal of empowerment in social literature, where individual empowerment should pave the way for empowerment on interpersonal and political planes as social justice: the popularized discourse of victim empowerment “does not explain the different levels of power and control nor does it call for a reduction of this inequality” (Berns, 2004: 154). Instead the problem is framed in the media as entertainment to suit their own commercial needs (Berns, 2004: 155). Thus, instead of politicizing power, the discourse of victim empowerment depoliticizes it through divorcing it from its socioeconomic, historical, cultural, gendered, and structural contexts, including a culture that condones violence (Berns, 2004: 158).

The excerpts above portray the woman as alone with her problem and her decision. This answers to the findings of Machin and van Leeuwen (2003: 496) who describe the *Cosmo girl* as being alone in the world, with no other friend than *Cosmopolitan*. The magazine provides advice or what Rothe in another context calls “survival, lessons” (2011: 89) which help her cope in a hostile world. This representation of the victim as being alone with her decisions also suits the online edition’s promotion of itself as a loyal friend who supports, gives advice, and helps to make the private public in the name of sisterhood.

Additionally, the self-narratives corroborate previous studies on gendered violence in women's magazines as the woman's problem and the woman's responsibility to solve (see Berns, 2004; 1999; Nettleton, 2011).

The discourses in these self-narratives are constructed to appeal to imagined readers through representations of emotions and ensuing discourses in broadly acknowledged and socially and culturally accepted emotional ways, thereby orienting them to empathize with the women's plight as the women transform from traumatized victims to empowered survivors. These dominant representations produce meanings in accordance with the experience of sexual violence being a trauma of significance for not only the women presented in the magazine but to the imagined readers. To increase the potential of the distinctive linguistic strategies to engage readers' emotions the self-narratives contain the representation of emotional elements in addition to factual ones. The self-narratives deploy different, accepted discursive practices to narrate the emotional experiences and show awareness of these practices as social, the third dimension of discourse-as-social practice (Fairclough, 2001), which can be seen from the way they emphasize the conscious decision needed to transfer the narratives from the personal, emotional, and secluded non-political sphere to the public, shared and (presumably) political sphere of determined decision-making. The discourse of empowerment enables the women to 'enter' the dominant discourse in the way suggested by Fairclough (2001: 201), here the victim-blaming discourse of sexual violence. They may not be able to change that discourse, at least not in a short-term perspective, but claim a position for themselves and the discourse, challenging the dominant one, as a synthetic bond, emotional in nature, is forged with an imagined readership.

5.2 Representing trauma and emotion: Plots and stock characters of good and evil

Examining the linguistic strategies and discursive practices in the material allows for an exploration of the angle used to discursively construct plots and characters according to its editorial policy for the purpose of strengthening the synthetic emotional ties to its imagined readership. It allows approaching institutional discourse in contexts such as the media where conflict is explicitly reported or implicitly present in commentary (see Wodak 2001a: 1–2). As emotions “permeate the complex, overlapping social structures that undergird decision-making” (Hutchinson, 2016: xi), editorial practices of magazines are not uninfluenced by emotion but partly act in accordance with broader socially recognized emotions. The first

priority of the magazine as a commercial enterprise is to uphold the values attached to its epitome, the *Cosmo girl*. In addition, the *Cosmo girl* can prevail only when she has been challenged and has reclaimed her agency. The decision about the material and the angle from which it is presented is the magazine's control over how it is prepared for presentation to readers. Women's magazine editors prefer an emotional story where individuals overcome problems to one focusing on the problem's "complex social and political dynamics" because a happy ending sells more (Berns, 2004: 159).

The linguistic choices in the self-narratives resonate with those in popular mass media, where "the discursive knot generated by the trauma concept provides the dominant mode of emplotment – the basic narrative structure and core set of characters" of victims and perpetrators (Rothe, 2011: 4). Popular cultural products reflect the discourse of trauma promulgated by the self-help industry which presents trauma as "an experience in which a seemingly omnipotent perpetrator inflicts extreme violence on a helpless victim" (Rothe, 2011: 4). Perpetrators are generally depicted as the "bad guy" in the media, whereas in reality they are seldom "evil" (Berns 2004: 163, 164) but complex human beings. The following excerpt exemplifies the discourse of demonizing the perpetrator in *Cosmopolitan* UK online:

Excerpt 4.

During the interview, the politician and TV host branded her brother a 'monster', saying: 'He's sick, I hope he rots in hell' (Harvey-Jenner, 2016)

In the discourse-as-text, the nouns and adjectives used to describe the aggressor are emotionally charged to evaluate the event and stock characters; the evil perpetrator and innocent victim. While Excerpt 4 follows the dominant paradigm for representing trauma in constructing plots and characters of good and evil, the ending is not a truly happy one: the article relates that as an adult this woman has struggled with anxiety and depression (Harvey-Jenner, 2016).

Polarizing perpetrator and victim and isolating trauma from its sociopolitical context through a Manichean discourse may be "emotionally appealing" (Berns, 2004: 157), but does not allow for needed cultural and structural changes. Instead it validates current existing conditions, and while it not only constructs offenders as wholly and unproblematically inhuman, it also "further victimizes 'victims'" (Healicon, 2016: 5). Additionally, reducing sexual violence to pure evil through a discourse of omnipotent monstrosity separates the violence from its causes, validating and freeing the social order from responsibility for "social

deviancy.” Covering only “exceptional cases of violence...shifts responsibility away from social systems and patriarchal attitudes that foster and support the larger problem of widespread male violence and, instead, demonizes a few, troubled men” (Nettleton, 2011: 144). Nevertheless, if the cause for sexual violence is a few distressed men, rape is framed as “a law enforcement and medical problem” (Berns, 2004: 8). This is seen in the material for the present study (see above).

The self-narratives sometimes contradict previous studies on gendered violence in that they also include a discourse of acquaintance sexual violence (cf. Marhia, 2008; Nettleton, 2011). The following excerpt presents a case of a woman who has been raped by her then boyfriend and illustrates how the discourse of stranger rape is internalized from the media:

Excerpt 5.

Despite limping for days and crying for weeks, this incident didn’t fit my ideas about rape like I’d seen on TV. Tom wasn’t an armed lunatic, he was my boyfriend, and it didn’t happen in a seedy alleyway, it happened in my own body. (MacMillen, 2017)

Excerpt 6 tells about another woman who has experienced rape by her ex-boyfriend, and who comes face-to-face with him through restorative justice:

Excerpt 6.

It was empowering enough to tell him that he would not be able to ruin my life any more. That I have moved on and that *I* am in control now. (Pook, 2016)

This narrative shows how power shifts from “he raped me” and “I was powerless” to “*I* am in control now” when the woman seeks to restore the order that was disrupted by the trauma and establish control by confronting the offender (Pook, 2016). The grammatical subject and object show who is protagonist and who antagonist.

Drawing upon this discourse of good and evil reflects efforts to ascribe the trauma of sexual violence to individual men while ignoring structural changes and this discursive strategy is employed to mobilize empathy from readers and avoid victim-blaming. This is in line with earlier research on gender violence in the media: when an entertainment format was embraced “emphasis shifted from gathering information to getting emotional reactions” and “editors of women’s magazines, as well as other entertainment media, shape stories on social problems to be inspiring, uplifting, and emotional” (Berns, 2004: 96, 14). Yet, while Excerpts

5 and 6 typify “the dominant mode of emplotment” where a powerful attacker violates “a helpless victim” who wins over evil in the end (Rothe, 2011: 4), it differs from previous findings on gender violence in print magazines in that it represents a discourse of the woman as innocent of the violence perpetrated on her and holding men responsible (cf. Nettleton, 2011).

5.3 Subject positioning and political affect

Careful examination of the discursive practices in the self-narratives illuminates counter-discourses indicating Fairclough’s notion of the “‘shock’ potential” of empowerment discourse potentially leading to “emancipatory discourse” (Fairclough, 2001: 202), and brings to mind Butler’s emphasis that “dominant forms of representation can and must be disrupted for something about the precariousness of life to be apprehended” (2006: xviii). In our material, the circulation of powerful emotions and feelings sometimes disrupt dominant forms of representation. The self-narrative from which Excerpts 5 above and 7 below are taken challenges research saying there are no narratives of men taking initiative to counteract violence (cf. Nettleton, 2011: 154). Relating how Thordis Elva has written a book with her abuser, Tom Stranger, the narrative introduces a discourse where the rapist is invited to be part of the solution to the problem of gendered sexual violence:

Excerpt 7.

a lot can be learned by listening to those who have been a part of the problem – if they’re willing to become part of the solution – about what ideas and attitudes drove their violent actions, so we can work on uprooting them effectively. Sexual assault, she points out, is not a ‘woman’s issue’ but a human issue, and perpetrators – the vast majority of whom are men – have not only the power but the responsibility to reshape the social forces that encourage assault in the first place. (MacMillen, 2017)

This active presence of the aggressor taking responsibility for the violence contradicts previous research that found an absence of magazines holding men responsible for their violent acts (cf. Nettleton, 2011).

MacMillen finds Stanger’s taking the microphone “jarring,” suggesting the shock potential of a trauma discourse that includes the perpetrator as part of the solution to the problem of gender sexual violence. Excerpt 7 also seems to contradict *Cosmopolitan*’s

dominant discourse, not only in allowing a discourse of perpetrator responsibility but also by introducing a discourse of the responsibility of “social forces.” As such, Excerpt 7 represents a counter-discourse to the dominant discourse of *Cosmopolitan* UK online because it places individual suffering in a social context. Still, no explicit connection is drawn between patriarchal structures and gendered sexual violence.

Exploration of the discursive practices in the self-narratives reveals that the position of *Cosmopolitan* UK online on the topic of sexual violence is that the woman is not to blame for it, but that it is her responsibility to solve the problem by reporting it and speaking out according to the dominant discourse of individual empowerment. The discourse of trauma can lend victims visibility and raise awareness of a specific social problem.

The self-narratives are sometimes a call for action through positioning within political discourses of change translated into shared experiences. The following excerpts were selected because they clearly introduce a discourse of a need for change:

Excerpt 8.

“People need to be talking about it,” Rhianon advises. “Introducing sexual abuse as a subject within sex education into schools would be beneficial, and feeling comfortable enough to verbally express yourself when it comes to such a complicated issue will make it less of a taboo subject area” (Harvey-Jenner, 2015)

The modality “need” creates a sense of urgency, and serves as a call to action. This is intensified by the reference in the article to a conference Rhianon organizes to deal with gendered sexual violence for the purpose of facilitating discussions about it, and shifting shame from those who have experienced it to those who perpetrate it. Nevertheless, the discourse of change is restricted to individual empowerment, or at best to interpersonal empowerment, because, while making the issue less taboo and women “feel” more at ease when speaking rape may affect social attitudes through de-shaming and re-shaming, no link is established between sexual violence and social structures and there is no discussion of structural changes needed to prevent sexual violence.

Like Excerpt 8, the following excerpt exemplifies a call for change through speaking out, here in an effort to appeal to readers’ feelings of righteous indignation while strengthening *Cosmopolitan*’s profile as a defender of women’s rights. As such, the emotions it is supposed to elicit serve the entrenched interests of the magazine. The excerpt relates that

the day after Donald Trump was elected president of the US, Evan Rachel Wood revealed she had been sexually assaulted:

Excerpt 9.

“I’ve been raped. By a significant other while we were together. And on a separate occasion, by the owner of a bar...I don’t believe we live in a time where people can stay silent any longer. Not given the state our world is in with its blatant bigotry and sexism.” (Lewis, 2016)

Wood’s speaking out positions her within a political discourse of “blatant bigotry and sexism”. The last two excerpts detail how conventions are disrupted by subjects “entering” certain discourses or discourse positions without transforming them (see Fairclough 2001: 201). The majority of media narratives focus on the woman who has experienced sexual violence, and this may aid in producing ‘synthetic sisterhood’ through circulating feelings, but does not automatically increase public understanding of contextual factors of sexual violence. Analyzing social issues on a personal level decontextualizes social problems and is consequently less politically subversive and complicated than struggling against sexism, socialization, media violence, acceptance of violence in society, social attitudes, and socio-economic and family structures (Berns, 1999).

Trauma studies focuses on the reader’s/listener’s role as empathically witnessing narratives of trauma: the audience “comes to be a participant...of the traumatic event” (Felman and Laub, 1992, 57). When readers witness and empathize with the women in the self-narratives and their situations depicted therein, they become involved in the narrative of social and gender oppression and forced to consider the context of belonging to a society that apparently condones such a lack of social justice. Thus, the function of the discursive practices as social practices, their role and significance in society and the meanings constructed through the trauma discourse are placed in a broader context within a wider community. Consequently, the representation of trauma is problematized not only by questions such as what kind of trauma is represented by whom and for whom, and by the understanding of who is identified as victim and who as perpetrator and by whom, but also by the question of who capitalizes on it (Rodi-Risberg, forthcoming).

6. Conclusion

The heart of this article is an analysis that places CDA in productive dialogue with trauma studies: this study has investigated what happens when *Cosmopolitan* UK online uses the issue of sexual violence and the discourse of trauma in self-narratives as part of their brand, exploring the linguistic strategies and discursive practices deployed by the magazine to engage readers' emotions to create emotional bonds synthetically with imagined audiences. In this way, the inquiry emphasizes emotions as a significant link between CDS and trauma studies.

The study of trauma surpasses and resists language, exposing the need for CDS to revise and reconceive its methods to accommodate emotions, to what remains unsaid or is not always or fully representational in words. Thus, the intensely emotional and unspeakable nature of trauma invites an alternative approach to knowledge. As it stands, CDS's "centring of texts and transcripts – leaves us struggling to read between the lines, to understand the gaps and the traces, the unspoken and the unspeakable" (Thurlow, 2016: 487). New methodological innovations that emphasize affect can aid in better understanding the abuses and inequalities at the centre of concern in CDS. By engaging with emotions it is possible to see how power and veiled ideologies work. Representing trauma is an act of politics, not just in the sense that representations may be explicitly political in intention, but also because, as Hutchinson indicates, "the 'real' location of the politics of trauma is situated in the very space between the experience of trauma and the practices used to represent it" (2016: 130). Emotions are socially and culturally constructed in relation to language. In this lies the value of combining CDS with trauma studies.

The results of this study show how the discursive practices of emotions can be harnessed for ideological purposes and commercial ends, and reveal the significance of such discursive practices for *Cosmopolitan* UK online to construct a discourse of individual empowerment. To explain how dominant discourses are shaped by the magazine and how it shapes these we explained how the discursive practices of emotion were deployed to advance its dominant discourse, *Cosmopolitan* UK online. The magazine constructs discourses in which the protagonists go from adversity to empowerment, thus appealing to readers through representations of emotions and ensuing discourses in widely acknowledged and socially and culturally recognized emotional ways, guiding them to empathize with the women in the self-narratives. Consequently, while the women are provided a voice online that may otherwise not be heard, the editorial guidelines and practices of a commercial enterprise such as *Cosmopolitan* ensure that the narratives serve the purposes of the magazine.

The findings of this study demonstrate the significance of the discursive practices of emotion for *Cosmopolitan* to construct a discourse of empowerment. The findings suggest that *Cosmopolitan*'s readiness to allow the accounts of sexual violence relies on the discursive practices employed in the self-narratives. The magazine employs particular discursive practices of emotion to further its dominant discourse of the *Cosmo girl*, "the modern woman who wants to impress in all areas of her life" (Cosmopolitan Media Pack 2016). The women have no control over the angle from which their experiences are represented. Power affects "what can or should be said when it comes to the nature of individuals' feelings" (Hutchinson, 2016: 94). Therefore, the discourse of trauma becomes a locus where the ideology of the empowered *Cosmo girl* is constructed and marshalled through the circulation of powerful emotions in the service of the magazine.

The representation of sexual violence requires sensitivity so as not to perpetuate or reinforce myths or constructions of women as victims; yet, the online magazine often uses the strategy of structuring the plots through polarizing the characters through a discourse of good and evil in terms of the roles of victim and perpetrator to mobilize empathy from readers and avoid victim-blaming. Nevertheless, the social problem of sexual violence is ascribed solely to a few individual 'deviant' men and the need for structural solutions and change are largely ignored. Although the circulation of powerful emotions in the form of emancipatory or counter-discourses that disrupt dominant forms of representation and place individual suffering in a social context exist in the material, no explicit link is forged between patriarchal structures and gendered sexual violence. Whereas this strategy is less politically subversive, strategically employing a feminist discourse of empowerment furthers the magazine's own commercial ends rather than the women's interests. Thus, the ideological effects of its discursive practices of emotion tacitly reproduce power relations between gender groups and empowerment is confined to the space of the emotional bond forged synthetically with the imagined readership or synthetic sisterhood.

To the degree that the representation of sexual violence is compromised by the entertainment format of the online magazine and its mission and vision, where empowerment is meant to be a personal emotional experience shared among 'sisters', the politicization of the discourse of trauma in these narratives remains limited. From a trauma studies perspective, it is unethical to disregard the problem; sexual violence needs to be empathetically and emotionally witnessed through testimony. The challenge will be to

consider women's magazines as significant sites of representing trauma, where readers empathically witness the suffering of other women.

We hope that the significance of this study and its findings exceed the purview of the discourse of trauma in *Cosmopolitan* UK online self-narratives of sexual violence, and has implications for sociolinguistics of discourse. By critically analyzing the discursive practices of emotion used in these self-narratives, we call attention to the important part played by emotions in relation to politics and the significant role politics play in relation to emotions, suggesting with Milani that CDS may need to head “in the direction of the *affective*” (2015: 330). Investigating how the material in our present study was received by readers through social media at the time of publication is a significant topic for further research.

Acknowledgements

We would especially like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this paper: their thorough reading and astute and generous comments were particularly helpful. Thanks also go to Professor Merja Koskela, University of Vaasa, Finland, and Researcher Anne Soronen, University of Vaasa, Finland, for reading an early draft of this paper and offering useful comments.

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