

LONELY, SAD AND LOOKING FOR LOVE?  
Representations of female singleness on  
Cosmopolitan.com

Bachelor's thesis  
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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Yhdysvaltalaisessa yhteiskunnassa arvostetaan suuresti avioliittoa ja parisuhdetta, jonka ajatellaan olevan elämän tärkein ihmissuhde. Vaikka yksineläjien määrä on viimeisten vuosikymmenien aikana ollut kasvussa, asenteet yksineläjiä ja yksineläilyä kohtaan ovat silti usein negatiivisia ja kyseenalaistamattomia. Niihin liittyvät negatiiviset stereotypit heijastuvat mediarepresentaatioissa. Se, miten media puhuu yksineläilydestä ja parisuhteista vaikuttaa ihmisten ajatusmaailmoihin sekä olemassa oleviin diskursiivisiin resursseihin, joiden avulla yksineläjät voivat käsitellä elämäänsä ja rakentaa identiteettiään.</p> <p>Tämä tutkielma tarkastelee yksineläilyden representaatioita nuorille naisille suunnatun <i>Cosmopolitan</i>-lehden nettiversion artikkeleissa. Tutkielmani aineistona toimii kymmenen yksineläilyteen liittyvää artikkelia. Tarkastelen niiden luomia yksineläilyden representaatioita kriittistä diskurssianalyysia (CDA) hyödyntäen. Tutkielmassani kiinnitän erityisesti huomiota siihen, millaisessa suhteessa nämä yksineläilyden representaatiot ovat vallalla oleviin yksineläilyden negatiivisiin stereotypioihin.</p> <p>Tutkielmassani selvisi, että <i>Cosmopolitanin</i> artikkelit sekä vahvistivat että haastoivat vallalla olevia stereotypioita. Osassa artikkeleista yksineläily esitettiin yksinäisenä ja sääliäntävänä vaiheena. Toisissa siitä annettiin positiivisempia kuvia: yksineläily kuvattiin naisen omana valintana ja elämä ilman parisuhdetta merkittävänä ja tyydyttävänä.</p>	
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## 1 INTRODUCTION

During the past 50 years, the number of single people in the western countries has been growing steadily. In the United States in 2014, for the first time the unmarried outnumbered the married (Worstall 2014). Fewer years of the lives of Americans are now spent in marriage than ever before (DePaulo and Morris 2005: 59). However, in the American culture heterosexual partnership has traditionally been highly valued. Although marriage has become less of a necessity for women of late, stable heterosexual romantic and sexual relationships have maintained their importance.

Because of the importance of marriage and long term relationships, the attitudes towards the single are often negative and unquestioned (cf. DePaulo and Morris 2005). Together with the privileging of sexual relationships over other kind of relationships, such as kinships and friendships, the negative stereotyping of singleness has led to marriage and stable sexual relationships being the norm and the single being a stigmatized and marginalized social group (Byrne and Carr 2005: 84-85, DePaulo and Morris 2005: 60). Long-term relationships seem to be even more unquestioned than marriage, and remaining single for life often seems an unrespectable life style option. Singleness is still seen as more of a choice than it used to be; however, it is a choice that comes with negative stereotyping and inequality.

As the number of single people has been growing, singleness has been gaining both academic and popular interest. Popular culture has portrayed lives of single women in books, TV series and movies. The discourses of singleness have interested researchers, and several studies on narratives, representations and identity construction of the single have been carried out (cf. Reynolds and Wetherell 2003, Sandfield and Percy 2003, DePaulo and Morris 2005, Byrne and Carr 2005, Zajicek and Koski 2003). Despite the rising interest on the topic, singleness still has been overlooked in feminist theorizing (Reynolds 2009: 12).

Women's magazines too have been at the margins in feminist research, despite their large audience (Siivonen 2006: 227). *Cosmopolitan* is one of the most popular magazines targeted at young women, reaching more than 18 million readers with its printed edition and more

than 20 million unique users on its website a month (Hearst communication Inc. 2015). Its influence on the world views of young women can thus not be overlooked.

Reynolds (2009: 152) points out that theorizing of singleness is only beginning to emerge and emphasizes the need for attention to the discourses of singleness. In this thesis, I am focusing on the representations of singleness on Cosmopolitan.com. My aim is to find out how singleness is portrayed in its articles and whether they strengthen or challenge the existing discourses and stereotypes, drawing on critical discourse analysis (CDA) and singleness studies.

## 2 CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND SINGLENESSTUDIES

In this section, the theoretical framework relative to the present study will be introduced. First, the definition of *single* in general and in the scope of this thesis will be discussed. Secondly, I will present the stigma of single, or *singlism*. Then, key terms of critical discourse analysis (CDA), a sub-discipline of discourse analysis that aims to better understand social issues by studying how language is used, will be defined and discussed in relation to singleness studies, an emerging field of study that is interested in the stigma of the single.

### 2.1 Defining *single*

The single people are a diverse group that shares one thing in common: what they are not. They are defined by *not* being coupled, married or cohabitating. The definition largely depends on the situation, society, and the person defining it. However, the single people are usually divided in *legally single* and *socially single*. The legally single are all those who are single by law: they are not married (because they do not want to or cannot get married), but might still be in a serious relationship. The legally single who are in a stable relationship are not necessarily seen as single except in front of the law and thus might not face negative stereotyping. Those who are not in a long-term romantic and sexual relationship are referred to as socially single. They are those who are often perceived as single by the society. (Byrne & Carr 2005: 86, DePaulo & Morris 2005: 58-59.) In this thesis, the focus is on social singleness, in other words, on living outside a long-term romantic and sexual relationship.

### 2.2 Singlism

According to DePaulo (2005), there is an unrecognized stigma around the single, which she calls *singlism*. Singlism refers to the ways in which the single people are negatively perceived and unequally treated. Singlism means economic disadvantage, discrimination and negative stereotyping in everyday life (ibid: 60). It has remained largely uncontested and unrecognized by the majorities. In fact, the importance of marriage and the negative views on singleness are so deeply rooted in the minds of Americans that even the single do not always realize they are treated unequally. (Byrne, A. & Carr, D. 2005: 86.)

Singlism is reflected for example in the social perceptions of the single, which are generally more negative than those of the coupled/married. DePaulo and Morris (2005: 60-65) studied the perceptions that people have of the single by asking college students to give characteristics and word lists about the single and the married, and analyzed the results. In general, the characteristics given for the single were more negative than those given for the married. Single people were more frequently described as immature, lonely, self-centered, envious, insecure, and even stubborn and mean, while the married were called loving, happy, loyal, selfless, and confident, for example. DePaulo and Morris (2005) also found out that it is not only the married that are seen in a more positive light than the single, but also the young college students that were or had been in a relationship were described more positively than those who had never been in one. However, as singlehood is often seen as temporary, related to a certain life stage, the older the single are, the more probably they are going to be judged for their marital status (ibid.). Single people are, more often than not, described as less mature and less well-adjusted as the coupled and the married no matter their age. (DePaulo and Morris 2005.)

It has to be pointed out, however, that many factors besides the marital status influence the way people are perceived and treated, and the single are by no means a homogenous group. Apart from the division to the legally and socially single, many more factors may affect. (DePaulo & Morris 2005: 58-59.) Factors such as age, religion, race, and sexual orientation may strongly influence the perceptions of the single no matter whether they are socially or legally single. In addition, the gender of the single influences the perceptions of them. In this thesis, as *Cosmopolitan* is targeted to young women, I am concentrating on female singleness.

### **2.3 Discourses and Critical discourse analysis**

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a sub-discipline of discourse analysis, a term used to refer to several approaches that are used to analyze language use. It is a multidisciplinary approach, the goal of which is to better understand social issues by studying how language is used. Besides studying linguistic features, it also emphasizes the social context. CDA

focuses on inequality and in the ways it is created and reproduced in discourses. (van Dijk 1993: 252-253.)

Discourse is a concept that has been defined in multitude of ways, depending on the definer and their disciplinary. When using the term *discourse*, language is seen as social practice (Pietikäinen and Mäntynen 2009: 26). Especially in linguistics, discourse often refers to any spoken or written text (Fairclough 1992: 3). In CDA, however, discourses are also understood as different ways to describe the world. Discourses in this sense are recognized and separated by their perspective on different issues. (Pietikäinen and Mäntynen 2009: 27.) They reflect ideas, represent people and issues, and position them differently. Apart from being socially conditioned and reflecting the world, discourses also construct the world. (Fairclough 1992: 3-4.)

Behind discourses, there are ideologies. Generally, ideology refers to “the set of ideas and beliefs of a group or political party” (Merriam Webster, Incorporated 2015). Van Dijk (cited in Blommaert 2005: 161-162) defines ideologies as systems of principles that organize the group members’ thoughts, speech and actions. In other words, people speak and behave according to the ideas and beliefs that are shared by the group, thus practicing self-control as a group. That is where ideologies and power are related. Ideologies, in fact, are a factor in the use of power. (Blommaert 2005: 161-162.) Ideologies and the use power can result in social inequalities. Social inequality is created when the elites control an “inferior” group by either limiting their freedom of action or influencing the minds of people (action and cognition, respectively). Modern day use of power in western countries is more often that of cognition. It is often not visible or manipulative at all, but rather feels natural and mundane. (van Dijk 1993: 254.) It might be also legitimated by laws and sustained by the media (ibid: 225).

Addie and Brownlow (2014) have identified two main different discourses in narratives of single women talking about their singleness. These two discourses are the *heterosexual relationship and family life* discourse that places women in heterosexual relationships and emphasizes women’s role as partners and mothers. This discourse implies that when a woman comes to a certain age, she should get married. It also suggests that there is



something wrong with being single. The other main discourse they identified is the *independent single woman* discourse. This discourse portrays women as independent, singleness as a choice, and single life as meaningful. (Ibid.: 427-429.)

## **2.4 The ideology of marriage and family**

In western countries heterosexual relationships and marriage are highly valued, and it is generally taken for granted that everyone wants to marry or at least have a stable sexual relationship. Reynold and Wetherell (2003: 489) argue that these relationships have actually become mandatory in the American society. The non-sexual and non-kin relationships are nowadays devalued by the society, as the sexual partnership has become the most important relationship in one's life (DePaulo and Morris 2005: 60, 62). As the result, the single people are required to explain themselves to others. They are often seen as having failed in relationships and/or missed opportunities. Singleness is hardly ever seen as a choice of the women when they stay single for long. (DePaulo and Morris 2005: 61, Sandfield and Percy 2003: 475, Reynolds and Wetherell 2003: 490.) Singleness is thus constructed as failure, missed opportunities and desperation for love. These beliefs are what DePaulo and Morris (2005) call the ideology of marriage and family: a set of beliefs that privileges the sexual partnership and is behind singlism.

The ideology of marriage and family persists despite the demographic changes happening in the western countries (DePaulo and Morris 2005: 59). Marriage is seen as more of an achievement than a necessity, and thus delaying marriage has become more acceptable than it used to be. At the same time, the cultural values related to marriage are strengthening. The demographic changes are in fact challenging fundamental beliefs of the society, and thus those beliefs are promoted and protected even more. (Koropecj-Cox 2005: 97.)

## **2.5 Representations of singleness**

Representations are images of the world that are created for example with the use of language. Each representation associates different characteristics to the issue or group of people being discussed. (Pietikäinen and Mäntynen 2009: 57.) They reflect their social and cultural background and draw on the representations before (ibid: 54-56). Representations

may be very one-sided, describing the world only from one perspective (ibid: 57). This is due to the fact that every time language is being used, decisions of what to include and what to exclude must be made. In the media, just like in each social situation, certain discourses and representations are more prominent than others, and thus different realities shared by groups of people, cultures and societies are created (Valtonen 2003: 103).

The analysis on media representations of singleness has often focused on TV series. Independent single female characters have been present on TV since the 1970s. The first single females were portrayed as fighting to have both career and family (Collins 2013: 69). The representations, however, have gone through a great shift since then. The end of the 1990s with the series *Sex and the city* changed entirely the representations of singleness. Singleness was beginning to be perceived as a valid choice for women. Single women were seen as complete without a family of their own, instead of being portrayed as obsessed with finding a husband. Long term sexual partnership was no more privileged over non-sexual and non-kin relationships, but alternatively the idea of women being able to create and choose their own family emerged. (Collins 2013: 72-78.)

These representations each reflect the time and society they were created in and influence the views of singleness in general. Popular media representations function as discursive tools for single women to make sense of their lives, to talk about their singleness to others and to construct their identities (Reynolds 2009: 149-150). The lack of positive representations thus affects the existing discursive tools and makes identity construction of the single problematic (Zajicek and Koski 2014: 382). It also makes it difficult for the single women to manage and resist the stigma around them (Zajicek and Koski 2014: 377).

### 3 PRESENT STUDY

#### 3.1 Research questions

In this study, I examine the verbal representations of female singleness in the online articles of Cosmopolitan.com. As the articles analyzed are from the U.S. Cosmopolitan, I focus on female singleness in the United States. Cosmopolitan is mainly targeted at young women. Therefore, ageism related to singleness is not being discussed, even though it has been proven to have significant effect on the perceptions of the single women.

My research questions thus are:

1. How is female singleness represented in the online articles of Cosmopolitan.com?
2. How are these representations related to the common stereotypes of singleness as lonely and temporary? Do they challenge and/or reinforce them?

#### 3.1 Data

The data chosen for this thesis are ten online articles on Cosmopolitan.com from the years 2014 and 2015. Cosmopolitan.com was chosen for its wide audience. It is one of the most popular young women's magazines in the U.S., and the website has over 20 million unique readers a month (Hearst Communication Inc. 2015). In addition, at the moment the Facebook page and Twitter account of the U.S. Cosmopolitan, where the articles are continuously shared, have over 6 million and 1 million followers, respectively.

All the articles chosen for analysis discuss singleness as their topic. They were chosen with the help of the search tool of Cosmopolitan.com using a key word *single life*. The articles chosen were the 10 most recent ones published between April 2014 and May 2015. They were written by several different authors; thus, different voices can be seen in the texts. The analyzed articles are listed in bibliography under primary sources.

#### 3.2 Methods

Fairclough's framework (in Blommaert 2005: 29-30) for discourse analysis consists of three dimensions. The first dimension, discourse-as-text, analyzes the linguistic features of the

text, for example the vocabulary and grammar. The second dimension, discourse-as-discursive-practice, concentrates on the text and its context. For instance, intertextuality is studied. The third dimension, discourse-as-social-practice, analyzes discourses in their wider social context, e.g. the ideological effects of them are examined.

In order to see how the articles portray female singleness, their themes and linguistic features such as word choices were studied. Only the texts of the articles were under analysis. The multimodal and hypertextual features (images, adds, comment sections, etc.) apparent on the web site alongside the article have not been studied, as it would call for a bigger study than this thesis.

As usual in discourse analysis, during the analysis, the naming and description of singleness was examined through looking at word choices. The underlying assumptions behind the descriptions of being single and the attributes associated with singleness were identified. The discourses and ideologies present in the articles were then compared to the discourses and common stereotypes of singleness identifies in earlier research in the field of singleness studies.

## **4 ANALYSIS: FIGHTING AND STRENGTHENING STEREOTYPES**

The images of singleness in the online articles of the U.S. *Cosmopolitan* are somewhat contradictory. On one hand, there are fresh, contemporary ideas of singleness being a legitimate option for women, a choice by the women herself rather than a failure of not having been chosen by a man, but still, in the background there are underlying assumptions of singleness always being a pitiable, temporary phase in a woman's life. Even though a serious, thoughtful conversation of singleness is present in some of the articles, singleness is discussed in a trivial way, too. In some of the articles, the common stereotypes of singleness as a lonely and pitiable phase are dominant.

In my analysis, I focused on three different themes related to the stereotypes of singleness described by DePaulo and Morris (2005). First, the category 'the lonely single' reinforces the common stereotype of singleness meaning loneliness and solitude. Secondly, 'singleness as a temporary phase' is related to the idea that everyone wants to marry and is looking for love, and thus the single women are desperate and are required to explain their singleness. Lastly, the category of 'challenging the ideology of family and marriage' includes different aspects found in the articles that fight the existing stereotypes and provide new, fresh ideas on singleness. These three themes are analyzed more thoroughly in the paragraphs to come.

### **4.1 The lonely single**

DePaulo and Morris (2005) showed that the single people are commonly perceived lonely, unhappy, independent, and less mature. DePaulo and Morris (2005) point out that the stigma of singlehood might only concern the older single who are past the expected age of marriage, and thus the images related to younger single might not be any more negative than those related to the young who are coupled or married (2005: 60-61). However, the stereotype of the lonely single can clearly be seen in many of the analyzed articles. It must be mentioned, however, that not all the articles reinforce these negative images of singleness, and even though they are somehow present in most of them, the degree to which they can be found varies greatly. Nevertheless, in most texts there seems to be an underlying assumption of the single being solitary and lonely. This can be seen in the words that are used to describe the single but also in the ways single life is described in general and what

kind of aspects of singleness are mentioned and what is left unsaid. In several cases, the aloneness pictured by the articles might not refer to the total state of isolation of the single, but rather be due to the privileging of sexual partnership, discussed in Chapter 2.4. It could be interpreted that the single women, even though they would have friends and family in their life, are described as alone and lonely, because of the fact that the sexual partnership is seen as the most important relationship one can have. Thus single women, despite having close friends and family, are lacking something essential.

Among the analyzed articles there are four that stand out especially for the negative stereotypes of singleness. These articles are titled as “12 Best Things About Not Dating” (Moore 2014a), “14 Things Not to Say to Someone Who’s Single During the Holidays” (Moore 2014c), “12 Problems Only You, the Single Friend, Understand” (Moore 2014b), and “38 Times Single Life Legitimately Rules” (Cosmopolitan 2015). Even though two of these articles are seemingly about the positive aspects of singleness, the stereotypes are strongly present in them, too.

In all of the four articles, one of the dominant discourses is that of loneliness, which associates single life with aloneness and loneliness. The stereotypes of loneliness and solitude can be seen for example in the words used in the texts. Words such as *alone* and *lonely* are repeated constantly, value-laden words and phrases such as *pathetic*, *destined to be sad forever*, and *discarded like old meat scraps* are used to refer to the single. Especially the article *14 Things Not to Say to Someone Who’s Single During the Holidays* (Moore 2014c) emphasizes these negative images of singlehood. Underlying assumptions about solitude and loneliness can be detected in the whole article. The title itself suggests that the holidays are somehow different for the single than for the coupled, and there are things one had better not to say to them. When reading the 14 points of the article it becomes clear that the holidays are assumed to be harder and sadder for the single for the fact that they are supposed to be spent with the people one loves, which the single, apparently, do not have. That is also the reason why certain things should not be said to the single to avoid making them feel worse than they supposedly already do. The article seems to neglect the possibility that a single woman could have a wide social circle, close friends and family apart from a romantic partnership to spend the holidays with. In fact, the article portrays holidays as a

single person as *just me and snacks, sitting at home eating gluten-free snacks in my French toast pajamas, [eating] in bed a lot, and having alone plans involving wine*. The article also neglects the possibility that anyone should happily and voluntarily choose to spend the holidays alone. This all can be interpreted from the points such as *That sounds so lonely*, and *Don't feel bad. Lots of people are alone today.*, which both are, according to the article, comments one should never say to a single person during the holidays. The comments imply the single should be sad and feel lonely, at the same time suggesting that being a single cannot be a choice of the women, and that everyone would rather be in a relationship than without one. The article does not therefore only reinforce the stereotype of loneliness, but also the ideology of family and marriage, which privileges couplehood and fails to acknowledge singleness as a legitimate lifestyle option and other relationships as important.

The other articles emphasize aloneness, too. It seems to be generally assumed that singleness means spending most of one's time alone. In "12 Problems Only You, the Single Friend, Understand" (Moore 2014b), single life is pictured for example as *sitting in your room alone*. In "38 Times Single Life Legitimately Rules" (Cosmopolitan 2015), it is presented in very similar manners. It is *[binge-watching] your favorite TV show, watching six straight hours of E! on a Saturday afternoon...*, and *[wearing] the killer combo of spot cream, a scrunchie, and sweats around the house for more than three hours* (Cosmopolitan 2015). There are hardly any mentions of any social circles or hobbies, except for one remark in "12 Best Things About Not Dating" (Moore 2014a), where it is pointed out that as a single one has *much more time to spend with a true female best friend*. The lack of close friends and family is implied in points about singleness being cheaper than relationships, as one does not need to buy expensive presents or drinks on dates; as if the single had no one to buy presents to or anyone to go out with.

Furthermore, many more mentions about aloneness can be found in the articles. They list moments such as *when you wake up hugging a cuddly toy and feel like you're 5 again and no one is there to judge, when you don't change your sheets for three weeks and no one knows or cares or any time you pick your nose* as the positive sides of singleness. All of these are not expected to be done by adults by the society's standards, which implies that the best moments of singleness are those when you can do whatever you want without anyone judging. Behind the idea, there is again the assumption of a single woman being alone and the insignificance

of kin and non-sexual relations. After all, if the single people lived with friends or family or were surrounded by them most of the time, friends and family would be there to judge; unless they are seen as less relevant than a sexual partnership, and thus their opinions and judgements not important.

The assumption of aloneness can also be seen in the way freedom is emphasized as an advantage of singleness. In “12 Best Things About Not Dating” (Moore 2014a) [*having*] *the time to do whatever you want* is mentioned as one of the best sides of not being in a relationship. This reflects the idea of the sexual partnership being the most important relationship in one’s life, which dominates one’s time, unlike friendships or family relationships. It seems the long-term sexual relationship is considered as an essential part and the most important aspect in one’s life, and everything else as secondary and inferior. In that case, it might be logical to conclude that a single person would be alone and possibly lonely. These assumptions of the privilege of the sexual relationship overlook the lives of single women who are part of wide social circles, have close relations with their friends and family and lead an active life. Besides, it is not only the single to whom these assumptions are harmful: at the same time the privileging of coupledness is harming the coupled ones in assuming the partner must be the only important person in everyone’s life.

The stereotype of aloneness is revealed also in the assumptions of the single people being more selfish and having to make fewer compromises. Expressions like *time to do whatever you want, no one else gets to weigh in on this, no one criticizes your cute fashions and you can go out for ‘girly’ food and not have a dude there whining about it* in “12 Best Things About Not Dating” imply that singleness means no compromises. For a single person who spends all of their time alone, that might be true; however, someone with a wide social circle can hardly go through life without listening to others’ opinions and making compromises without being selfish. It seems the author is either failing to acknowledge the existence of singles with wide social circles, or pictures them as self-centered and not caring about the opinions of their friends and family. If the existence of single women with wide social circles is not acknowledged, there might be two different reasons behind: first, it might be assumed even the coupled ones only have their partner, and thus it would be logical to expect the single to be completely alone. Secondly, as the single people are generally seen as having failed in



finding a partner and maintaining relationships, they could be assumed to have problems in forming friendships, too. In either case, the article, like the other three articles, fails to challenge the dominant discourse of solitude and loneliness around the single and instead strengthens the negative images of the single and the privileging of the sexual/romantic partnership.

As it can be seen in the analysis above, the stereotypes of the lonely single women still persist in Cosmopolitan.com articles, even though media representations of singleness that fight this stereotype do exist elsewhere. As seen in Chapter 2.5, TV series such as *Sex and the City* have changed the way singleness is pictured in the media by bringing characters that are complete without a stable sexual/romantic relationship and who lead a social life with their 'chosen families' consisting of friends. However, especially in these four articles from Cosmopolitan.com, this aspect of singleness has been forgotten and instead singleness is seen as very solitary and even lonely and pitiable.

#### **4.2 Singleness as a temporary phase**

One of the main discourses of singleness identified by Addie and Brownlow (2014: 427) is that of heterosexual relationship and family life (see Chapter 2.3). It emphasizes women's roles as partners and mothers and sees singleness as wrong or unnatural. The assumption of singleness being a temporary phase is closely related to the idea that coupledness is the ultimate goal in everyone's life. Likely due to these ideas, the single people are required to explain their singleness, especially when it comes to the lifelong single. The articles provide contradictory views on this aspect of singleness. The need to explain one's marital status is strongly present in the articles, as after all, some of them are actually in itself explanations for singleness. On the other hand, some of the articles recognize the stigma of singlehood and the anxiety it causes in the singles themselves and in the people around them, and discusses it rather thoughtfully. In these articles there are two distinct voices: that of those discussing singleness as a legitimate option and the one of those strongly influenced by the stereotypical thinking. The latter considers relationship and marriage as an essential and necessary part of life, and the first in turn recognizes singleness as a viable choice.

Examples of singleness being seen as a temporary phase in one's life can be found in half of the articles. In the article "14 Things Not to Say to Someone Who's Single During the Holidays" (Moore 2014c) lists comments that should not be said to someone who is single during the holidays. One of comments listed as something one should never say to a single is *Are you going to get married before I die?*. This reflects how unquestioned marriage is and thus the need other people have for the single people to explain their single status. After all, the coupled and the married hardly need to answer questions about their marital statuses. Another example of the expectation for everyone to get coupled and/or married in the same article is the use of the word *yet* when talking about finding love: *just because I haven't found the love of my life yet*. The word *yet* implies that the person in question is indeed going to, or at least expecting to, be in relationship someday. "12 Problems Only You, the Single Friend, Understand" (Moore 2014b) provides a few examples of the same issue.

- 1) Having to hear tons of platitudes like, 'You'll find someone,' every time you talk to your friends.
- 2) Watching your super-happy friends in couples being super-happy. ... on another level, a reminder that you might never have that, why, God, why.

Examples 1 and 2 both universalize the desire for a relationship. The possibility that someone would happily choose to be single is neglected. This can also be seen in the same article, when it is discussed how the single get set up with friends of friends without asking for it. Again, the single is expected to be looking for a relationship.

The articles "Why There's Absolutely Nothing Wrong With Being a Single Woman?" (Filipovic 2015), "Why are Twentysomething Relationship Virgins on the Rise?" (Heaney 2014), and "Why I Bought Myself an Engagement Ring" (Piazza 2014) discuss singleness in a more positive manner, also taking into account that singleness, in fact, might be a choice for someone. However, the same assumptions and the need to explain are present in these articles, too. First of all, each of these articles start with a question as a title. The articles attempt to challenge the readers' negative stereotypes of singleness, but at the same time they also reflect the society's assumptions of the necessity of romantic and sexual relationships. After all, there would be hardly any articles titled as *why there's nothing wrong with being in a relationship?* or *why I bought my partner an engagement ring*. The stereotypes are mostly present in the voices of other people rather than the author. In "Why I Bought Myself

an Engagement Ring” (Piazza 2014) the author explains having to hear questions such as *Are you gay?* and *Why haven't you been married?* because of her single and unmarried status.

“Why Are Twentysomething Relationship Virgins on the Rise” (Heaney 2014) begins with an incident that happened to the author. A friend of hers confessed not having ever been on a relationship:

- 3) “I was sitting across from my friend S. after dinner when she leaned over our cramped restaurant table and inhaled dramatically, as though she were about to confess to murder. “This is not something I advertise about myself,” she said, “but I’ve never really dated anyone”.

Example 3 shows the unquestioned status relationships have. DePaulo and Morris (2005: 62) found not only that the single people are generally perceived less positively than the coupled, but also that those who had never been in a relationship were seen most negatively. This issue is reflected in the example above. As telling others one has never been in a relationship is compared to confessing a murder, it must be perceived very negatively by the society and seen as something abnormal.

The abnormality of being single is also reflected in the anxiety the single people seem to have about their single status. This can be seen in several occasions in the articles. The best example, however, is from “Why Are Twentysomething Relationship Virgins on the Rise” (Heaney 2014). In the article the author explains her self-questioning and anxiety related to singleness:

- 4) “Whenever I drink too much wine and ask my girlfriends why I’m still single - which I try not to do very much, but I’m only human - they’ll use words like picky or intimidating.”

There are a few points to notice. First, as in the examples before, there is again the use of the word *still*, which implies the desire for a relationship and the assumption that one should have already been in one. Secondly, the expression *but I’m only human* when discussing the self-questioning related to singleness emphasizes the importance of the issue. When sexual and romantic relationships are seen as necessarily an essential part of life, not having one feels surely abnormal. This anxiety and self-questioning is present in the three articles: “Why are Twentysomething Relationship Virgins on the Rise” (Heaney 2014), “Why I

Bought Myself an Engagement Ring” (Piazza 2014), and “Why There’s Absolutely Nothing Wrong With Being a Single Woman” (Filipovic 2015). It could be said to be actually one of the most prominent themes in all of these articles and there would be plenty of material for further analysis on the theme alone.

As seen in the examples above, the discourse of heterosexual relationship and family life and the idea of singleness being a temporary phase is strongly present in the articles. It can be detected in expressions such as *being still single* and *not having found love yet*. These beliefs are also reflected in the way singles have to explain their singleness and are questioned about not being married yet, or whether they actually are gay because they are not in a relationship. It can also be seen in the ways in which long lasting singleness is seen as something abnormal, and thus causes anxiety and worries to the single. The anxiety of singleness is such an important theme in the articles that it seems to be taken for granted and is thought to be experienced universally.

### **4.3 Challenging the ideology of family and marriage**

Even though there are several aspects that reinforce the negative stereotypes of singleness, the articles include more positive representations, too. Instead of singleness being seen as the fault of the women, singleness seems to be considered as either a choice or the result of circumstances. Positive views on singleness exist as well when singleness is emphasized as freedom and independence. The discourse of *Independent Single Women* identified by Addie and Brownlow (2014: 427) (see Chapter 2.3) is present in the articles emphasizing women’s choice to be single and the meaningfulness of single life. The positive themes seem to be acknowledging the existence of the happy single women and recognizing singleness as a viable lifestyle option. The single women are no more pictured as alone at home, but rather leading a life that they enjoy and have chosen. The ways in which the articles fight the ideology of family and marriage which sees sexual and romantic relationship as a necessity and the stereotypes regarding the single are analyzed in this section.

Many of the articles refer to singleness as freedom. The articles in the form of lists such as “12 Best Things About Not Dating” (Moore 2014a), seem to see this freedom as very trivial, however. In those articles it means mostly staying at home watching Netflix all day long or

not having to care about one's looks or anyone else's opinions. In other articles, however, freedom comes to mean an active, fulfilling life. In "Why Are Twentysomething Relationship Virgins on the Rise" (Heaney 2014) it is pointed out how not having to date or be in a relationship in one's twenties means more freedom to concentrate on other relationships, hobbies and work. In the same article, the distinction between the coupled who have everything figured out and the lost single is erased when the author also writes: *my friends are as confused about their dating lives as I sometimes am in my lack of one*. In "Why I Bought Myself an Engagement Ring" (Piazza 2014) the author describes her own experiences of singleness, and portrays herself as a happy person, who has a dream job traveling around the world. She describes nuns she met as people who *live each day to the fullest, followed their passions and fight for causes that actually change our world*. In "Why There's Absolutely Nothing Wrong With Being a Single Woman" (Piazza 2015) singleness is portrayed as an opportunity to use one's creativity, instead of one's time and thinking being dominated by romantic relationships. Suddenly the single are not lonely, passive people anymore, but persons who are following their dreams.

Especially in "Why There's Nothing Wrong With Being a Single Women" (Piazza 2015) marriage and relationships are questioned and new, fresh ideas about singleness are provided. Personal choices and trusting oneself are emphasized, and new perspectives on relationships are introduced. The stereotype of single being immature is reversed in Example 5:

- 5) "I had never experienced life on my own, and that seemed pernicious to me and kind of childish. How am I going to be an adult if I always have people around me who are taking care of me or lifting me up? ... I thought, Wait, I don't know how to build up my own confidence. I don't want to be relying on a relationship to make me feel whole or secure or confident."

The comment of Kate Bolick, an interviewee of the article, in Example 5 reverses the parts of the single and the coupled. The single, as shown in the studies by DePaulo and Morris (2005), are often perceived as less mature than the coupled. Kate Bolick, however, associates singleness with knowing how to take care of oneself and with maturity, while she sees always relying to other people as childishness. In addition, the idea of women being alone, and not needing relationship for example for the construction of their identity is also seen

in the article “Why Are Twentysomething Relationship Virgins on the Rise?” (Heaney 2014), where again there is a quote saying: *Women have choices and aren't waiting for a man to 'complete' them. ... They want someone to complement their already full and fulfilling lives.*”

Furthermore, there are three articles of famous women and their empowering remarks on singleness. In one of these articles, Britney Spears states she does not believe one needs a man anymore (Rees 2014), while in another one it is described how Gwyneth Paltrow celebrates single life by taking *her newly single self out to a concert* (Thompson 2014). The word choice *celebrate* implies that being single is a positive, important event that requires something special, enjoyable activity, while *take her newly single self out* makes her an active actor rather than passive single who stays at home. Not needing a man implies that in the modern world, a relationship is not a necessity anymore. Pointing that out in an interview in the middle of saying that she hopes women would feel confident and *more loving to themselves*, these two things are contrasted: a common stereotype of singleness is that of being less confident and lonely, and needing a relationship to be loved and confident. This stereotype is challenged by suggesting women could actually live without a relationship and still be loved.

In the third article, Miley Curys discusses singleness and being “*finally OK*” *with being single* (Rees 2015). She argues there should be more conversation around being single not being necessarily negative, and emphasizes it being a choice.

- 6) “There are times in my life where I’ve had boyfriends or girlfriends. And there are times where I just love being with myself and don’t want to give part of myself away to someone else ... I think that’s a new freedom for women, especially. I don’t know that my mother would have been able to be 22 and secure in being alone. But my future doesn’t rely on having a partner.”

Example 6 combines many of the ways the articles challenge the stereotypes of singleness. Singleness is seen as a viable choice, as freedom, and the women as complete and secure without a relationship.

Although the existing stereotypes of singleness are challenged in the articles, there are contradictions in their imagery, too. This is mostly due to the several voices present in the articles. In “Miley Cyrus Is “Finally OK” With Being Single”, right after Miley Cyrus’

argument that *[being alone] doesn't necessarily mean being lonely*, the author of the article gives a very solitary image of singleness meaning staying home Friday night, *wrapped up in a blanket with a large tub of ice cream and, you know, not wearing any pants*. In addition, even though many articles recognize the possibility that someone would choose to stay single for life, there are no concrete examples of it. In addition, the single women are pictured as anxious and worrisome for their single status, even though the articles would accept singleness as a legitimate option. On one hand, they fail to show that not all of the singles are preoccupied with finding love and some of them might actually be happy with their status without anxiety. On the other hand, that also reflect the influence of stereotyping and privileging of sexual and romantic relationship on the young women, who eventually become worried that there is something wrong with them because they are single.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to see how female singleness is represented in the online articles of Cosmopolitan.com and how these representations are related to the common discourses of singleness as being solitary and temporary. The online articles of U.S. Cosmopolitan show that the perceptions of singleness are changing in the American society. Fresh representations of singleness are provided through voices of those who have chosen singleness themselves and are content with their status, for now at least. Some of the articles challenge the privileging of sexual relationship and present singleness as a lifestyle option chosen by the women themselves, rather than being seen as a temporary phase.

Although new ideas on singleness are discussed in the articles, at the same time many of them strengthen the existing stereotypes. There are seemingly positive texts about the best aspects of singleness that in fact fail to challenge the stereotypes of sad and lonely single altogether. Unlike the modern TV representations of single (see Chapter 2.5) that often portray the single as surrounded by their chosen family, i.e. friends, the articles analyzed seem to construct a very solitary image of singleness. Even the articles that manage to talk about singleness with a more positive tone often seem to ignore the option of choosing singleness for life, and when discussed, it is often mentioned very briefly. It seems more voices of the lifelong single are needed. To edit the perceptions of singleness as solitude and loneliness, singleness needs to be discussed as more than only staying at home, eating and watching Netflix.

Ten online articles are, however, a very small sample, and more studies would need to be done to be able to say more about current representations of female singleness on women's magazines. The representations surely differ depending on the target group. As Cosmopolitan is targeted to young women, the results of this study only apply to the representations of young single women. In addition, to understand the way female singleness is constructed and how the single women are stereotyped, different reasons behind singleness should be taken into account. The notion of a successful, independent career woman present in other media might be enough for some women to successfully construct identity and to make sense of their singleness, but still more resources are needed.



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