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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 sciences¹; 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.

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

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

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, 1999, 2004; 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 socio-cultural 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

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