

# “I Went Undercover to Expose Sex Criminals”. Two Representations of Agency in a *Cosmopolitan* UK Feature Story

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*Denna studie handlar om hur mäns och kvinnors agerande konstrueras i ett reportage i en månadstidning för kvinnor. Deras handlingar beskrivs i repertoarer som illustrerar konflikterna mellan mäns och kvinnors sociala beteende, och därmed maktbalansen mellan könen. Repertoarerna identifieras genom kritisk diskursanalys, som kompletteras med aktoranalys. Studien visar hur månadstidningen genom diskursen i ett enskilt reportage försvarar sin idealbild av den moderna, frigjorda unga kvinnan.*

**Keywords:** women’s magazines, feature story, agency, subversion of power, CDA, repertoire analysis, social actors, metaphors

## 1 Introduction

The concept of “going undercover” is well established within popular media culture. In films and TV-series members of the police do it in order to expose criminals. They temporarily renounce their official status and assume the identity of a member of the public. This fictional behaviour is modelled on procedures in the social world of crime prevention, and also investigative journalism, where undercover work is used to obtain information which might otherwise be unattainable. This study explores how a reporter constructs herself and those she observes in the course of her investigation.

By allowing a reporter to go undercover a magazine may construct itself as an actor alongside the official authorities. The decision is a statement about what the magazine considers unacceptable from a legal and ethical point of view. It is also a declaration that the magazine is prepared to use unorthodox methods to obtain information which will expose criminal activities.

A woman’s lifestyle magazine like *Cosmopolitan* offers a number of entrance points for the researcher. The approach can be through e.g. modern popular culture, quantitative or

qualitative media research, or, as in this study, through sociolinguistics. Magazine publishing, their markets and readership have been studied by for instance Gough-Yates (2003). In this study she focused on the appearance of “the new woman” as a result of the magazine industry’s need to construct new markets and new readerships for itself. The reception of women’s magazines has been studied by, for instance Hermes (1995), who found that readers used repertoires to explain how they make meaning of the magazines’ content. How a magazine for teenagers addresses its readers has been studied by, for instance, Talbot (1995) who found that the magazine constructed a synthetic consumerism-based sisterhood with its readers.

A magazine can transmit its brand globally through discourses and through these create a fantasy world where sex is power. This has been shown by Machin and Thornborrow (2003) who examined branding and discourse within a global research project into women’s magazines, among them *Cosmopolitan*, carried out at the University of Cardiff. Machin and Thornborrow (2006) have also shown how sex is used to signify the power and freedom which are constructed as the core values of the magazines, and how these values are communicated through consumerism. However, they also point out that this power exists only in the fictional spaces created by the magazine, and not in the public, social domain (Machin & Thornborrow 2006: 184). Also within that project, Machin and van Leeuwen (2003) have shown how *Cosmopolitan* uses global schemas which construct social life as a struggle for survival in a precarious world.

In the editorials of *Cosmopolitan* UK 2004 the two most prominent repertoires describe the “*Cosmo* girl” as independent, and as someone who can, if she so chooses, invest in herself and they also confirm her right to be selfish. The editorials’ repertoires describing the “*Cosmo* girl” were investigated in my licentiate thesis (Höglund 2007). The repertoire of independence was formed by the interacting themes of having choice in life and having control in life from the personal experiences of the editors. This repertoire reflected the world of professionals who were at liberty to make career and lifestyle choices. Simultaneously, there was also a repertoire of pleasure which created a world where the “*Cosmo* girl” could invest in herself and her own pleasure.

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The repertoires of the *Cosmopolitan* UK editorials construct an ideal independent modern woman whose lifestyle is promoted by the magazine. She is the role model epitomized in the concept of the “*Cosmo* girl” but simultaneously also the reader, the “*fun, fearless females*” addressed by the contents of the magazine. The editor, for instance, is described as agentive and in control, and a champion of her readers and women in general, who may encounter dangers of different kinds in their lives. Readers are described as fun to be with and fun-loving and free to make career choices and lifestyle choices.

The editorials serve as an introduction to the contents of the magazine and briefly highlight topics dealt with in that issue. The editorials function as a shorthand version of the repertoires which will develop in the contents. The purpose of this study is to verify whether the repertoires in a *Cosmopolitan* feature story support or subvert the “*Cosmo* girl” image of the editorials. My data sample is one feature story from *Cosmopolitan* UK March 2004 which deals with the magazine’s investigation into a drug-rape trend in the London club world.

This study is set within the theoretical framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) where discourse is seen as a construction of reality in the Foucaultian sense (Mills 2004). Discourse constructs reality and communicates knowledge of it in a social context. It calls events and objects into existence by speaking of them, and discourses are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault 2004: 96). The aim of the critical analysis of discourse as outlined by Fairclough (1995, 2001) and Wodak (2001) is to unveil discursively created power structures. One such structure is, for instance, the relationship between a magazine and its readers in which the magazine is the producer of, for example, lifestyle discourses to serve its commercial purposes. Other examples can be found in male and female behaviour as described by the magazine.

The methods are repertoire analysis and the identification of social actors. Repertoire analysis has previously been applied by, for instance, Hermes (1995) in her study of how readers make meaning of magazine content, and also by, for instance, Siivonen

(1999, 2007) in her study of portrait interviews with women in newspapers and magazines. The identification of social actors is based on van Leeuwen (1996) and his concept of agency as a sociological category.

I claim that in the feature story male agency constitutes a danger to the lifestyle promoted by the magazine, that of the “*fun, fearless females*”. The description of male agency in the outside world subverts the magazine’s construction of female agency and therefore it must be challenged. The activities of the group of men threaten women’s choice of lifestyle and their control over their lives and thus also the magazine’s core values and commercial interests. The magazine depends on the image of the independent “*Cosmo girl*” who can make choices about how to spend her spare time. Therefore the female reporter is sent out “undercover” to collect information. This information will enable her, and other women, to resist male exercise of power and, thus, challenge it. The editor’s task is to invent herself as a champion of women with the magazine as her platform.

My data for this study is one feature story from *Cosmopolitan* UK, March 2004 (pp. 101–104). Its headline is “Rich, Charming and Dangerous” and the subhead is “The day I came face to face with the men who drug and rape in gangs”. The content of the story is well summed up in the lead which introduces *Cosmo* reporter Lisa Brinkworth who for six months has been investigating a new drug rape trend. Her main purpose is, naturally, to gather information for her feature story but also to pass her findings on to the police. The story is a sample out of the data consisting of 48 feature stories collected from *Cosmopolitan* UK 2004 and 2006 for my doctoral research. The first two stories from each issue featuring the narratives and life experiences of real people (i.e. women) were selected. In what follows, I will discuss my theoretical frameworks and methods.

## **2 Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this study is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Discourse is seen as the construction of identities by systems of meaning interacting in and with social context (Foucault 1981, 2004: 96; Mills 2004: 45–46). Discourse is

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made up of individual discourses which in turn are made up of repertoires structured around specific themes. Discourses can create multiple versions of reality (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001: 4). For instance, also within one industrialised country descriptions of different femininities will compete with and dispute each other. A woman may identify herself both as a mother and a career woman although the performance of one role may clash with the demands of the other.

Discourses are never neutral but always serve somebody's purpose. Dominant discourses serve to create and uphold power structures and reproduce social dominance as suggested by Fairclough (1995: 48; 2001: 45) and Van Dijk (2003: 354–356). The power structures may be political, social or cultural. In the data of this study, the issue is one not uncommonly looked at in feminist research, the power struggle of the sexes.

The central concepts of this study are discourse, repertoires, and subversion. Discourse is seen as a construction of reality calling it into existence. Reality does not have a meaning before it is organised and given meaning through discourse. It is the “ordering of objects” according to systematic rules (Foucault 2004: 96). The rules govern discursive practices which consist of groups of interrelated statements. On the linguistic level, recurring statements are grouped around a theme to form repertoires. The repertoires represent “webs of practices” that is accepted ways of constructing a theme (Mills 2004: 44). On the cognitive level repertoires are underlying systems of meaning (Hermes 1995: 31) to which the themes refer. For instance, in my licentiate thesis the two themes of the “*Cosmo* girl” having choice and of being in control were found to interact to form one repertoire the meaning of which was her independence (Höglund 2007).

Discourse, then, consists of individual discourses which, in turn, consist of repertoires. Repertoires are spoken or written utterances and statements (Mills 2004: 10) grouped around themes in a specific social context. One such context is, for instance, a women's magazine like *Cosmopolitan*. The magazine can, in its discourses, construct not one but several realities. For example, the magazine can produce a discourse which will describe the life of a reader where a husband, marriage, and babies form an everyday

reality (*Cosmopolitan* UK 2004a). It can also produce a discourse of travelling the world and complete freedom (*Cosmopolitan* UK 2004b) which most readers would identify as make-believe. This construction of *Cosmopolitan's* has been identified (Machin & Thornborrow 2003: 453) as a “fantasy world” where the rules of society do not apply.

The function of the discourses of the magazine is to provide models of femininities in their social contexts. The models are given in the form of descriptions of women or groups of women featured in stories whose experiences and the events surrounding these are clearly defined. The descriptions are repertoires which construct the behaviour and characteristics of the women in that particular event. This study understands a repertoire as a chain of recurring themes which together create meaning (Mills 2004: 44; Hermes 1995: 31, 149). A theme can be understood as an individual statement varying in length from an individual word and an expression to a whole sentence (Mills 2004: 54). The themes as they recur form repertoires which reflect the world of the women. An individual discourse, for example of femininity, can be structured by one or several repertoires of being a mother, a career woman, a sexy young woman which in turn can be identified through recurring themes.

The starting point of this study is my previous study of repertoires describing women in magazine editorials (Höglund 2007). The editorials functioned as shorthand introductions to the contents of the magazine. In the contents, there may be themes which refer to the repertoire of female independence found in the editorials. There may also be themes which point to different representations of agency in men and women. Most importantly, however, there may be themes which alter or subvert the editorials' image of the “*Cosmo* girl”. In this study, CDA will be applied in order to analyse the repertoires describing the actors in a feature story. It will be conducted as repertoire analysis previously applied in the study of the reception of women's magazines by, for example, Hermes (1995), and in the study of women in newspaper and magazine portrait interviews by Siivonen (1999, 2007). Hermes found that readers used repertoires to explain **why** and **how** women's magazines made sense to them. Siivonen,

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in turn, found that women would describe their lives in, for instance, the metaphor of a journey between events which influenced their future direction of life.

The focus of this study is on the representations of agency and the description of *social actors* in a *Cosmopolitan* feature story. Agency and *social actors* may be represented, for instance, through verbs of action which recur to form a repertoire. As van Leeuwen (1996: 32–33, 66) has shown, individuals or groups can be identified as *social actors* through a number of linguistic means such as, for instance, verbs, nouns, pronouns and prepositional phrases. In this study, repertoire analysis will be applied to identify the repertoires which explicitly describe agency through verbs of action but also implicitly by the use of metaphors.

Metaphors are among the variety of linguistic and rhetorical ways of evaluation and representation. Positive self-presentation through metaphors in connection with women’s narratives of success has been investigated by Wagner & Wodak (2006: 393). In a media text, on the other hand, a number of different mechanisms of implicit or explicit evaluative positioning can be activated. The capacity of metaphors and other modes of analogy to act as attitudinal tokens has been described by, for instance, Martin and White (2005) in their work on the Appraisal theory framework and by White (2006: 48–49).

In what follows, I will first discuss how the female editor is constructed as a social actor through active verbs denoting action and initiative. Then I will discuss how the men in the feature story are constructed as predators through metaphors deriving from human hunting activities and from animals hunting.

### **3 Two Representations of Agency**

In the feature story “Rich, Charming and Dangerous” two repertoires (or *macro-topics*) of agency can be found. The one constructs the reporter as a social actor who is a champion of women, the other constructs the men mentioned in the story as threatening

social actors. In the following section I will discuss the repertoire which through the use of active verbs denoting initiative and action constructs the reporter as a social actor.

### 3.1 Repertoire 1: Champion of Women

The lead of the story introduces the main actors and declares the aim of the magazine. The main actors are *Cosmo* reporter Lisa Brinkworth and the “successful and attractive” men who prey on women (Example 1). The example shows how the magazine introduces her with verbs of action (marked in bold in the examples below); she has “infiltrated” a drug rape gang. To infiltrate suggests an action with a purpose.

The purpose of the magazine is to expose the men and their activities. As the magazine constructs its reporter as agentive, it also constructs itself as an actor in society. The verb used to position the magazine is “expose” (Example 1) which denotes deliberate action. The men are labelled “criminals” whose actions are both immoral and illegal. Moreover, they represent a direct threat to the lifestyle and the agency of the “*fun, fearless females*” constructed by *Cosmopolitan*.

- (1) For six months, *Cosmo* reporter Lisa Brinkworth **infiltrated** a group of men who embody a terrifying new drug rape trend – successful and attractive, they hunt in packs, drugging and raping women for kicks. Here, we **expose** the new sex criminals. (Brinkworth 2004: 101 lead, line 1.)

The reporter’s determination is underlined by the statement which marks time, that is, that she has pursued her story during six months. Indirectly, she is also constructed as courageous and willing to face danger when set against the men who, in the headline, are described as “Rich, Charming and Dangerous”. As the feature story unfolds, the quality of the reporter is referred to in verbs denoting initiative, courage and professionalism.

The magazine’s introduction of the reporter lays the foundation for how she will represent herself as a social actor in the story. By doing so, it also validates her construction of herself as a champion of women.

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The reporter undergoes a transformation from bystander into an actor. She represents herself as helpless when she recounts how she witnessed her friend being drugged. The experience was “frightening” and she “watched with horror” (Example 2). It is also noteworthy in this example that her friend is described in the passive voice as the object acted upon. This event functions as the turning point, or *topos*, of her story.<sup>1</sup> It explains why she turned herself into a social actor and it becomes the driving force behind her activities. The incident provokes her into action. She does not give in to frustration, but resorts to anger (“incensed”) which she transforms into action, she “started to investigate” (Example 3).

- (2) I’m here as part of a year-long investigation triggered by a *frightening* (my italics) experience I witnessed in January last year. Back then I *watched with horror* as a close friend of mine *was transformed* from a lucid and sober woman to a disorientated and confused individual within minutes of consuming a drink spiked by two strangers at one of our local bars. (Brinkworth 2004: 101, 1: 17).
- (3) Incensed by this [events of example 2], I **started to investigate** drug rape. I **wanted to take the issue a step further** by infiltrating a gang. I would **pass** any information I uncovered on to the police. (Brinkworth 2004: 101, 2: 17.)

Having made her decision, she develops a plan which is described in verbs of action. Her plan is to “target” her prey (Example 4) by touring the clubs (Example 5), that is, to act in exactly the same way as they do. Incidentally, she represents herself as being as ruthless as the men she is investigating, albeit for a good cause.

- (4) Although they don’t know it, I’ve **targeted** these men in the same way they target their prey (Brinkworth 2004: 101, 1: 9).
- (5) The following week, I **visit** several smart London hot-spots. Within hours of chatting to the sort of attractive women I imagine these men would target, I met Sarah, 29, a marketing manager from Bristol. (Brinkworth 2004: 102, 1: 29.)

To conclude: the reporter is now a social actor motivated by the incident which threatened her friend. Her behaviour is described in verbs of action which recur to form a repertoire of agency. In her activities, she constructs herself as a champion of women. Incidentally, however, her actions echo the images of hunting used to describe the activities of the rape gangs.

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<sup>1</sup> The *topos* functions as an explanation to why and wherefore; it is the “conclusion rule” which connects the argument to the conclusion (Wagner & Wodak 2006: 393).

### 3.2 Repertoire 2: Man as Predator

In this section, I will discuss how man is constructed as a hunter through metaphors of hunting, and how the metaphors evaluate him. The metaphors derive from human hunting traditions, but also from images of animals hunting. Hunting is a contested sport, but the reporter gathers statements that the men consider their way of amusing themselves as “harmless sport” (Example 6; marked in bold). Incidentally, more archaic expressions for “having fun” are “sport” or “good sport”.

The metaphors evoke the brutal procedures of, for instance, fox hunting as found in the expression “hunt down women” (Example 7). The women are referred to as “prey” (Example 4, previous section) and also constructed as animal of prey in an expression like “fair game” (Example 8). The latter expression also suggests that women are of a lower order, that is equal to animals, and thus legitimate prey.

- (6) I return to the same club the following Friday and get chatting to Steve\*, a regular customer, who tells me about how certain club members see spiking women’s drinks as **harmless sport**. “I’ve seen them hunting girls in groups,” he says, discreetly pointing at a group of four smart men. (Brinkworth 2004: 102, 2: 8.)
- (7) These seemingly harmless men are a drug-rape gang who regularly **hunt down women**. (Brinkworth 2004: 101, 1: 11).
- (8) They regard their activities not as rape, but as casual sex, where their targets are **‘fair game’** (Brinkworth 2004: 101, 1: 16).

The metaphors range from describing the men engaged in the hunting activities of humans to metaphors evoking the hunting behaviour of animals. Already in the lead the men are constructed as animals who “hunt in packs” (Example 1, previous section). In the text, the men are referred to as “hunting in groups” (Example 6) and a gang “who regularly hunt down women” (Example 7). The recurring metaphors form a repertoire of hunting which both se behaviour of the men and also evaluate them. Consequently, the feature story employs metaphors as attitudinal tokens which dehumanise the men into animals in the same way that they themselves dehumanise the women they prey on.

#### 4 Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to verify whether the repertoires in a *Cosmopolitan* feature story support or subvert the “*Cosmo girl*” image of the editorials. The theoretical framework was CDA and the methods repertoire analysis and the identification of *social actors*. In the data, the reporter described her transition from helplessness into action and offered her realisation that women were being victimized as the reason for her quest. Subsequently, she constructed herself as professional, capable and determined through verbs of action and her magazine supported this description. The verbs used by reporter and magazine formed a repertoire of agency which described taking initiatives and proceeding to determined action. The agentive reporter was constructed as a champion of women. The activities of the men mentioned in the feature story were constructed through metaphors which recurred to form a repertoire of hunting. The men were to some extent dehumanised to illustrate that their agency was destructive.

In the story, the lifestyle of the “*fun, fearless females*” promoted by *Cosmopolitan* was being threatened by a new drug-rape trend. By taking action, the magazine constructed itself and its reporter as agentive and responsible, and the phenomenon investigated as unacceptable and criminal. By launching an investigation into unacceptable behaviour the magazine simultaneously also defended its own epitome the “*Cosmo girl*” and, ultimately, its commercial interests.

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