

# How to Have Good Sex? The *Cosmopolitan's* Construction Common Sense and Consensual View of Sexuality

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## SUMMARY

*The aim of this article is to show which textual devices are used by the most popular women's magazine in Slovenia to construct a commonsense consensual view of female sexuality. A critical discourse analysis of the Cosmopolitan's advice articles on one of the most intimate parts of the private life – sex – was analysed. I propose that the writers of advice articles use pseudo-intimate, pseudo-scientific and prescriptive discourse to construct 'common sense' and a consensus about the contradictory ideology of female sexuality.*

Key words: critical discourse analysis, women's magazine, *Cosmopolitan*, advice articles, sex

## Introduction

Women's magazines are enormously popular and highly successful not only in Western but also in the Eastern European society. In Eastern Europe, successful Western women's magazines, which have begun to appear the national languages of Eastern Europe in the last decade, are widely read. The *Cosmopolitan* is an example of such a 'globalised' magazine; within a few months it has become the most widely read women's magazine in Slovenia (*Mediana*, 2002).

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The *Cosmopolitan* and other women's magazines are increasingly the objects of critical sociological and cultural analysis (Ballaster et al., 1991; Caldas-Coulthard, 1996; Coward, 1989; Durham, 1996; Ferguson, 1983; Hermes, 1995; Illouz, 1991; McCracken, 1993; Winship, 1987; Wolf, 1991). As studies prove, women's magazines have a highly important role in the maintenance of cultural values, since they construct an 'ideal' reader who is at the same time both produced and in a sense imprisoned by the text. As mass cultural texts, they 'exert a cultural leadership to shape consensus in which highly pleasurable codes work to naturalise social relations of power,' claims McCracken (1993: 3).

The present study examines a very popular genre in women's magazines: advice articles – also called how-to features – concerned with one of the most intimate parts of the private life – sex. Sex is the predominant and recurring theme in women's magazines and advice articles on it seek to instruct women in appropriate conduct for living (Ballaster et al., 1991; Caldas-Coulthard, 1996; Durham, 1996; McCracken, 1993).

The focus of this study is not women's magazine's ideology of female sexuality – that has already been studied by other researchers (e.g., Ballaster et al., 1991; Caldas-Coulthard, 1996; Durham, 1996; McCracken, 1993) – but discursive strategies which try to construct a commonly held view of female sexuality that is taken for granted and does not have to be proved. I propose that writers of advice articles use pseudo-intimate, pseudo-scientific and prescriptive discourse to construct 'common sense' and a consensus about the contradictory ideology of female sexuality. In brief, this contradictory ideology is revealed as contradictory messages about female sexuality: while advice articles emphasise women's freedom and self-determination in terms of seeking out sexual partners and expressing sexuality, the construction of that sexuality involves submitting to male desire (Ballaster et al., 1991; Caldas-Coulthard, 1996; Durham, 1996; Ferguson, 1983; McCracken, 1993). Through a critical discourse analysis of advice articles on sex from *the Cosmopolitan* from October 2001 to June 2005, I demonstrate which textual devices this most popular women's magazine in Slovenia uses to construct a commonsense consensual view of a female sexuality.

### **Contradictions of *Cosmopolitan's* ideology of female sexuality**

*The Cosmopolitan* appears in 43 local editions in national languages and is read by 35 million women across the world, as one can read in the editorial of the first issue (October 2001). Therefore, *the Cosmopolitan* is an example of a globalised magazine that deals with supposedly universal problems, difficulties and questions for women. Reading *the Cosmopolitan* involves an undeniable number of pleasures of participation and action (Ballaster et al., 1991; Herman, 1995). Indeed it is very difficult to resist reading it, because it deals with women's lives and desires, it shows ideal bodies, represents ideal relationships and prescribes ideal sex. It reports on individual experiences women can easily identify with. The problem here, however, is that *the Cosmopolitan* and other women's magazines address women readers as if they were a homogeneous group (Ballaster et al.,

1991; Caldas-Coulthard, 1996; Durham, 1996; Ferguson, 1983; Illouz, 1991; McCracken, 1993; Winship, 1987).

*The Cosmopolitan's* female subject is uniform in terms of age, social class, visual image, mentality, and most notably sexuality. A set of images and representations constructs an imaginary world and an ideal reader which is basically heterosexual, white and middle class, in other words, women who are interested in and can afford to buy the goods offered. Little room is left for diversity that would suggest differences within this firmly established collectivity. Without this collectivity, solidarity and 'the international', without a uniform female subject, *the Cosmopolitan's* entire ideology of sexuality would be rendered inoperable.

Collectivity is also established by constructing 'men' as the natural opposite. As Ballaster et al. suggest (1991: 9), 'there is an evident tension between the need to confirm the centrality and desirability of men in all women's lives and equally insistent recognition of men as a problem for and threat to women'. Although the two sexes are always struggling, they are also always in pursuit of each other. Winship (1987: 6) points out that these divides mark the boundaries of femininity and masculinity in the culture. She suggests that 'those versions of two genders are still profoundly influential in our experience of growing up'.

Furthermore, Durham (1996: 26) found four main themes in *the Cosmopolitan's* construction of women's sexuality: (1) the presumption of heterosexuality, (2) the goal of marriage or heterosexual monogamy, (3) the oppositional tension between the imperative of free sexual expression and the need to submit to men's desire, and (4) the male-centred construction of women's desire as either insatiable lack or a passion in need of strict control.

This list of themes shows *the Cosmopolitan's* contradictory ideology of female sexuality. On the one hand, there seems to have been an acceptance and incorporation of some basic feminist and liberal principles. *The Cosmopolitan* was launched in the mid-1960s when America was in the throes of the 'sexual revolution.' Using the rhetoric of that 'revolution', *the Cosmopolitan* supported the idea of 'sexual liberation,' constructing sexuality as 'self-motivated, driven, active, unattached, demanding, free ... like men's' (Davis, 1990: 5). *The Cosmopolitan* breaks with the tradition upheld by certain other women's magazines that are confined exclusively to the private sphere. We can speak of the emancipation of women who may now freely enjoy sex and talk about it openly. *Cosmopolitan* women are active, bold, optimistic, they have fun, enjoy a sense of freedom and seek a sexual life. The magazine gives the readers a sense of powerful knowledge about sexuality and a sense of modernity. It shifts decisively away from romance, replacing it instead with a much more assertive and 'fun-seeking' female subjectivity and sex as a first name for love (Ballaster et al., 1991; Caldas-Coulthard, 1996; Durham, 1996; McCracken, 1993).

But on the other hand, despite these liberating approaches to female sexuality and the representation of women as financially independent and having a free sexual life, the implicit and explicit agenda is based on prioritising only certain forms of heterosexual relationships as the determining force in human relations, and traditional sexual role models (Ballaster et al., 1991; Caldas-Coulthard, 1996; Durham, 1996). According to McCracken (1993: 162)

/m/any of *Cosmopolitan's* sexually daring pieces are based on male fantasies about women that have habitually structured women's view of their own sexuality. Thus, although much of *Cosmopolitan's* editorial matter appears on the surface to counter traditionally accepted social values, it ultimately upholds many of them.

Female sexuality continues to be organised around fashion, beauty and personal appearance as if for male consumption (Jackson, 1996). The sexually attractive woman is the beautiful one who, to please men, is persuaded to buy the products advertised in the magazine. Ballaster et al. (1991) argue that the woman addressed by *the Cosmopolitan's* text is addressed foremost as a consumer:

The magazine is at the same time a medium for the sale of commodities to an identifiable market group, women, and itself a commodity, a product sold in the capitalist market place for profit. It is also a text, a set of images and representations, which construct an imaginary world and an imaginary reader. (Ballaster et al., 1991: 2)

Femininity is a goal to be worked for. The discourse of sexual liberation draws on the male-dominated sex manual. Relationships are women's responsibility and part of their work. The woman is addressed by the magazine as already 'a woman', which is also the ground on which she is identified as a reader. On the other hand, Ballaster et al. argue (1991: 143) there is a clear gap between what she is and what the magazine claims she 'ought' to desire to be. Femininity, therefore, becomes both a source of anxiety and a source of pleasure because it can never be fully achieved. The magazine perpetuates this myth of femininity and offers itself as a solution. The magazine will be a friend, an advisor and an instructor in the difficult task of being woman.

Constructed thus on the ideology of consumerism and on formulas of advice, the private world of sexuality is, according to Caldas-Coulthard (1996: 255), directly accessed either through first-person narratives of personal experience ('I am twice divorced ...'), analysed by her, or through advice articles ('you should do this or that'), which are the focus of the present study.

### **The media's construction of common sense and a consensus**

The aim of this paper is to reveal *the Cosmopolitan's* strategies used to construct what's taken to be a common sense consensual view of female sexuality. Langer proposes that an important element of the media's ideological work involves the ability to win the audiences' consent to the 'the very legitimacy of the encoding practices themselves' (1981: 352). When the media use different strategies, such as direct address, informality, intimacy, they have acquired this legitimacy, they 'become the currency of common sense, appearing to be the only form of intelligibility available, the only field of possible meanings from which to choose' (Langer, 1981: 351). The effectiveness of ideology depends to a considerable degree on it being merged with this common sense. Ideology comes to be

ideological common sense to the extent that discourses which embody them become naturalised (Fairclough, 1987: 33). This is a process, in which a dominant discourse appears to lose its connection with particular ideologies and interests and become the common sense practice of the institution. Thus when an ideology becomes common sense, it apparently ceases to be an ideology; this is itself an ideological effect, for an ideology is truly effective only when it is disguised. One of the background assumptions of the media's mapping reality and presenting it as common sense is that of the consensual nature of society (Hall, 1987; Hartley, 1982). In brief, the ideology of consensus assumes that, for a given grouping of people, it is a matter of fact that interests of the whole population are undivided, held in common; and that the whole population acknowledges this 'fact' by subscribing to a certain set of beliefs. The consensual mode denies any major structural discrepancies between different groups or between very different 'maps of meaning' in a society (Hall, 1978: 55), and so 'it takes on political significance' (Hartley, 1982: 83). If *the Cosmopolitan* presents and enforces itself as a source of a commonsense consensual view of female sexuality, it is possible to speak of a hegemonic ideological effect of the women's magazine (in the words of Gramsci). It is the ideological effect with approval. The strategy *Cosmopolitan* uses for achieving the hegemonic ideological effect is the formation of its own institutional discourse.

## Methods

In order to reveal *the Cosmopolitan's* discourse which embodies the strategies of construction of a common sense consensual view of female sexuality, Critical Discourse Analysis (e.g., Fairclough, 1989, 1992, 1995; Fowler, 1991; van Dijk, 1991) is used, whereby discourse (abstract noun) is defined as a language use conceived as a social practice, while discourse(s) (count noun) is defined as a way of signifying experience from a particular perspective (Fairclough, 1992: 243). The methodological assumption underlying CDA's qualitative approach is, as Fairclough (1992) claims, that discourse is socially shaped (constituted) and shaping (constituting), i.e. that discourse is not only a product or a reflection of social processes, but is itself seen to contribute towards the production or reproduction of these processes. For each article, typical textual devices are analysed to reveal which discourse strategies *Cosmopolitan* used to construct a commonsense consensual view of female sexuality. However, due to the limited scope of this paper, only the most typical textual devices, which constitute the specific discourses, are presented.

The present analysis considers the most widely read women's magazine in Slovenia (*National Research of the number of readers, 2005*), *the Cosmopolitan's* Slovenian edition; however, it cannot be dissociated from its parent magazine because the Slovenian edition is published under licence and must therefore satisfy certain demands imposed by the parent magazine. For the purpose of this study, I analysed the first forty-one issues of the Slovenian edition of *the Cosmopolitan* published so far, including the February 2005 issue. Because the themes about sex always appear on the same pages in a specific section of *Cosmopolitan*, the analy-

sis covered the section 'Sex, love and relationships'. This section contains one article (in two cases also two articles) about sex of two or more pages each, written by journalists, mostly women, non-experts. A database of 43 advice articles was established. A list of the articles analysed, with their publication dates, is provided in the Appendix.

## **Prescriptive, pseudo-scientific and pseudo-intimate discourses**

### **Prescriptive discourse**

The most basic strategy of *the Cosmopolitan's* advice articles, used to construct a commonsense consensual view of female sexuality, is prescriptive discourse, which instructs or teaches the readers how to have good sex. Prescriptive discourse reduces the complexity of the theme to simple advice and creates the illusion that a women's magazine can very simply help its readers change their sexual life, if only women follow *the Cosmopolitan's* advice.

When *the Cosmopolitan* gives advice for good sex, it also defines what is allowed and what is forbidden. Thus, prescriptive discourse defines the boundaries between normal and pathological female sexual behaviour. To naturalise this 'normal' sexual behaviour, *the Cosmopolitan's* writer presents herself both as an authority and as a friend, helping her readers with pieces of advice. On the other hand, *Cosmopolitan* posits female readers as lay and ignorant of sexual activities and relationships, or as Ballaster et al. suggest (1991: 172), female subjectivity is positioned as a problem, and the magazine as the answer, offering itself to female readers as a guide to good sex, a means of organising, responding to, and transforming their sexual experiences as women.

Since there is an obvious difference between the institutional discourse of the media, based on profit maximisation (Hartley, 1982; McManus, 1994), and the sympathetic discourse among friends, the difference must be done away with in an imaginary way, in order for a women's magazine to achieve the hegemonic perspective – the illusion of a commonsense consensual view of female sexuality. By presenting itself as a form of help, *the Cosmopolitan* constructs the illusion of understanding women's sexual problems, empathy, altruism and solidarity, with which it is possible to rise above this difference and approach its readers as a close friend, helping them with very intimate problems. The ideological effect of *the Cosmopolitan* is achieved precisely by making this difference smaller, by creating an illusion of a friendly agreement and thus, a consensus regarding the basic presuppositions about how to solve sexual problems. This imitation of solidarity and friendship enables the readers to feel comfortable and has ideological consequences: it allows the unnoticed expression of familiar thoughts. This expression of a specific vision of normal sexual behaviour is further eased by *the Cosmopolitan's* use of authoritarian knowledge. *The Cosmopolitan* claims solidarity, closeness and friendship, but asserts authority. There is a risk that in claiming solidarity and friendship, one will be unable to sustain authority, which makes this a problematic mix to achieve. In the moment, when *the Cosmopolitan* constructs friendly closeness with its readers, it presents from a self-confident position of

authority its advice as the only form of intelligibility available, thus legitimating its commonsense view of female sexuality.

Furthermore, by colonising common sense words (such as, 'It is normal/usual/typical...') *Cosmopolitan's* writers naturalise *the Cosmopolitan's* ideology of female sexuality, which actively contributes to the continuing dominance of this ideology (Connell, 1979).

*Cosmopolitan's* advice articles prescribe specific female sexual behaviour by using the following textual devices: a) structure of advice articles, b) imperative mood, c) obligation modality, d) prescriptive vocabulary, e) speech acts.

### **Structure of advice articles**

The macro-structure itself simplifies the sexual theme and expresses help. A typical structure of advice articles is the following: the headline summarises the most important pieces of advice, the lead defines the problem/objective and the reason for doing it; steps/solutions offer advice in a given order; and the conclusion summarises the prescription and shows satisfaction as a reward for successful achievements (Graham, 1993; Hennessy, 1997). The simplification of sexual themes is revealed above all in the simple steps/solutions which reduce the complexity of the sexual 'solution' to simple advice and create the illusion that *Cosmopolitan* can help its readers change their sexual life, if only women follow its advice.

This illusion especially is created by *the Cosmopolitan's* use of subheadings, summarising specific advice and work as motto. They are placed at the beginning of each step or partial solution and are also numbered in the case of steps; for example in the advice article with the headline 'The wretched first time'[T], the lead defines the problem as fear of first time sex and the purpose of the article – to help its readers overcome the fear of first time sex – then steps giving advice are listed with the following subheadings: 'Step One: Take Initiative', 'Step Two: Undress Seductively', 'Step Three: Be Determined and Go On'; 'Step Four: Have Orgasm', 'Step Five: Happy End'. By numbering the steps and using subheadings, the writer reduces the problem of the fear of the first sexual encounter to the 'correct' sequence of specific sexual activities and creates the illusion of helping, promising that following the advice prescribed will guarantee good first time sex. The writer also attempts to reach the reader's preferred meaning by using the imperative mood in subheadings.

### **Imperative mood**

A key feature of advice articles is that, unlike other articles in women's magazines, they tend to – in addition to the declarative mood – regularly use the imperative mood. The writer is in a position of asking something of the addressee, while the addressee is ideally a compliant actor. According to Fairclough (1989: 126), systemic asymmetries in the distribution of moods between participants are important *per se* in terms of participant relations: asking, be it for action or information, is generally a position of power, as too is giving information. In the advice articles analysed, the imperatives constitute a relation of authority, where writers

are in a position of authority by instructing ignorant readers on how to have good sex. The imperative may be used already in the headline: 'Say it without words' [M], or in the first sentence of the lead 'Don't give up, go back with confidence', or in the subheadings, as in the above mentioned examples: 'Say it with a sign', 'Say it with a look', 'Say it with seduction', 'Say it to him with passion', 'Say it to him with a pen' and once again at the end of the advice steps as a summary of the advice given, as for example 'Once again, say it to him without words.'

### **Obligation modality**

The types of modality which predominate in the advice articles analysed construct the relational meaning of 'obligation' expressed by the modal auxiliaries 'have to', 'should', 'must be', 'should' and 'ought to'. Obligation modality can appear in the headline: 'Secretes you *must* trust a man' [G] or 'You *have to* prevent it on time from becoming a habit in your bed.' [AE]; they regularly occur in the opening or closing sentences of each set of pieces of advice, e. g. in the opening sentence: 'You *must* follow your own intuition.' [M] or the closing sentence: 'You *mustn't* imitate male coarseness. [T]'. 'Must' signals implicit authority claims and implicit power relations (Fairclough, 1989: 127). By using obligation, *the Cosmopolitan* constructs its authority to instruct readers.

### **Prescriptive vocabulary**

*The Cosmopolitan* uses vocabulary of help. This is especially visible in the following lexical device: over-lexicalization. Advice articles provide 'a large number of synonymous or near-synonymous terms for communication of some specialised area of expertise' (Fowler and Kress, 1979: 211) giving rise to a sense of 'over-completeness' (van Dijk, 1991). As Fowler (1985: 65) argues, vocabulary might be seen as a map 'of the preoccupations of a culture. ... Detailed systems of terms develop for the areas of expertise, the features of habitat, the institutions and relationship, and the beliefs and values of a community.' Let us first of all examine the pervasive use of lexical cohesive devices to instruct readers. The most direct and obvious form of lexical cohesion is the repetition of words of help, for example in the headline: 'Our sexual guide 'Be prepared' will *help* you avoid any last-minute mishaps.', in the lead: 'We will *help* you prevent an accident.', in specific advice steps 'The use of all your charms can be of *help*.', 'To *help*, we offer the following piece of advice: ...', 'You can *help* yourself with a silk scarf.', 'Our *help* will be of use to you even when you are alone.' [J]. Furthermore, *Cosmopolitan* uses synonyms and other direct references to help its readers; examples such as 'ease sexual difficulties', 'give advice', 'recommend', 'suggest', 'remind', 'offer advice' construct the meaning of friendly helpful writers: 'I *offer* you some advice ...' [Nj]; 'This time we *suggest* you end the act of lovemaking calmly by ...' [F], 'We wish to *ease your difficulties in bed*' [L], 'I *suggest* you express your devotion to your girlfriend with gentle affections.' [S], 'Let me *remind* you of them one more time.' [M], 'I *suggest* you make your own love map.' [P].

There is also a group of synonyms and other direct references to prescription. These words explicitly define what is allowed and what is forbidden and imply



authority. Writers use normative words of restriction already in the headline, e.g. 'An act of *crime*' [B], often in a special frame '*Strictly forbidden!*' [A], or in the subheadings of the advice steps, e.g. 'Buff lingerie is *forbidden*', 'Imitating male coarseness is *forbidden*', '*Don't* pinch men's cheeks' [AB], and in the individual pieces of advice, e.g. 'You must *prevent* your outburst of anger.' [Z]. On the other hand, writers use normative words of what is allowed, e.g. in the lead: '*Real* sex begins with desire.' [K], in the subheadings, e.g. 'It is *correctly* done with tact.' [F], or in the individual pieces of advice, e.g. '*Correct* behaviour means not commenting on his penis' [H], '*The golden rule is:* be like a lovely and light gymnast.' [T], '*It is still acceptable* to adjust your bra strap.' [U], '*It is appropriate* to tell him he is too rough immediately.' [R].

There is another group of synonyms and other direct references to normality, which construct a commonsense view of female sexuality, since they colonise the meaning of normality (Connell, 1979), such as '*It is normal* to wonder whether he is cheating on you.' [O], '*Generally* men feel threatened by this question.' [R], '*Typically*, a woman needs gentleness.' [A], '*Ordinarily*, sex takes place at night.' [C], '*All* women seek a knight in shining armour.' [T], '*Every* woman wishes to have a *normal* sex life.' [h].

With its choice of words, prescriptive discourse creates a simulated help and with normative words of authority it defines what is allowed and what is forbidden in female sexuality. With words of common sense, writers naturalise *Cosmopolitan's* definition of normal female sexual behaviour.

### Speech acts

Prescriptive discourse also includes using speech acts to construct a commonsense consensual view of a female sexual ideology. The illocutionary act is, according to Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), a form of words which actually constitutes the performance of action. To consider an utterance as a prescribing act is to acknowledge that the writer, in uttering words and sentences, not only writes something, but also thereby does something: this is the illocutionary function of language, through which writers make promises and request, issue commands, warnings, etc. A speech act changes in some way the conditions that exist in the world. In general, the speech act will take the grammatical form of having a first person subject and a verb in the present tense.

The advice articles analysed contain the following speech acts: the most common word: 'to advise': 'I advise you not to stare and giggle when glancing at his little pal.' [H]; 'to turn to': 'I am turning to you with a new question: how to tell your partner your wishes.' [Z], 'to judge': 'On the basis of scientific findings, I judge this to be a subconscious fear of the loss of manhood.' [H], 'wonder': 'I wonder whether you too are uncertain and don't dare to take the first step.' [T], and also 'demand': 'I demand the same pleasures as a man.' [U], 'oppose': 'I oppose a routine in bed.', 'suggest': 'I suggest you casually mention you could combine sex and massage.'

*The Cosmopolitan's* frequent and prominent use of speech acts has two implications. First, because by using a speech act, writers construct the meaning

that they are doing something (Austin, 1962: 17), this gives the impression of a momentary performance of an action. Thus, speech acts construct an illusion of direct carrying out of advice, above all when commands and threats are concerned, e.g. 'I warn you to use the right amount of flirting.' [T]. Since there is an impression of a momentary performing of an activity, writers legitimate their advice by using speech acts. Second, speech acts give the sense of personal interaction. They construct the illusion that the writers speak directly to the readers (this subject is further discussed in the section on pseudo-intimate discourse). These two implications together naturalise the ideology of female sexuality, because they imply co-operation, agreement, symmetry of power and knowledge between participants, and a commonly held view of female sexuality, a shared subjective reality that is taken for granted and does not have to be proved. The speech acts work by creating an illusion of a consensus on sexuality between the readers and the writers and naturalise a commonsense view of female sexuality.

*The Cosmopolitan's* advice articles prescribe a specific women's sexual behaviour as a commonsense consensual view by using speech acts and the colonisation of common sense words and combining textual devices which construct help and authority.

### **Pseudo-scientific discourse**

In its advice articles, *the Cosmopolitan* also constructs a commonsense consensual view of female sexuality by using pseudo-scientific discourse. According to Foucault (1972, 1990), our cultural tendency is to convert everyday speech into statements which have to undergo science procedures of validation. Illouz claims (1991: 241) that in women's magazines' treatment of love, science is quoted in two main contexts: when the article explains what 'starts, keeps and ends love', and when the article prescribes specific behaviour. This last dimension is present also in *the Cosmopolitan's* advice articles. The pseudo-scientific discourse is used to construct and legitimate *the Cosmopolitan's* vision of normal sexuality. In general, this function is most frequently expressed with phrases such as '*Sex experts claim that it is perfectly normal not to always have a sexual appetite.*' [I], or '*It is perfectly normal to wish for a spicy horizontal tango. Experts too, agree with this statement.*' [D].

The function of normalisation converts a moral prescription (good/bad) into a simple description validated by a reference to science. *The Cosmopolitan's* use of statistics/polls and references to experts/scientists verifies its claims as truthful and as the right solutions to sexual problems. The media in general portray science as a sacred field for which it is necessary to have qualified individuals as guides (Horning, 1990). Similarly, science is seen as important weapon for solving problems (Nelkin, 1995).<sup>1</sup> The media are privileging science over other forms of communication (Dornan, 1990). Referring to insights from the philosophy of science, Stone (1993: 301) argues: 'Thus it is that scientific knowledge itself is reified and idealised, and science enforces its claim to be the sole mode of access to a Truth greater than any other epistemological system'. Stone also shows that any belief system needs to be referred to a scientific proof to justify it.

*The Cosmopolitan* imitates scientific discourse with the use of: 1) statistics and polls, 2) cross-sections from real life, and 3) references to experts.

### **Statistics and polls**

The starting point is a survey conducted in Great Britain ... As many as 83% of the readers of the British edition of *Cosmopolitan* have not yet fulfilled their sexual fantasies, but luckily, as many as 98% wish to fulfil their hidden desires in the future. [B]

*The Cosmopolitan* builds its credibility and authenticity on the use of facts. We tend to look at facts, particularly those grounded in statistics, as the most reliable and objective form of information, but ‘/s/statistics serve an ideological function by grounding free floating and controversial impressions in the hard, incontrovertible soil of numbers,’ claim Hall et al. (1978: 9). Also, a large proportion of the criticism on polling has taken as its starting point the fact that polls do nothing but reflect the ideas upheld by the elite and journalists (Bourdieu, 1979; Habermas, 1962; Herbs, 1992). In the advice articles analysed, statistics and polls serve the normative purposes by defining ‘normal’ behaviour as the majority’s statistically established opinion on sexual behaviour.

A typical way to introduce an argument for *the Cosmopolitan*’s advice is ‘... percent of men/women believe that ...’ as in ‘69 percent of men believe that they are equally excited by the unseen. That is why your success in bed largely depends on your imagination.’ [I]. Moreover, advice articles on sex rely heavily on statistics or polls to ‘prove’ the validity of their advice. Thus, statistics and polls constitute a site whereby institutional definitions are legitimated and provide a link between *Cosmopolitan* and science discourse. By using statistics and polls, *Cosmopolitan* constructs and legitimates a certain vision of normal female sexuality.

### **Cross-sections of real life**

The second way of constructing pseudo-scientific discourse is using cross-sections from real life. With each piece of advice, the advice articles also offer a cross-section from real life to legitimate it. The private, intimate world is portrayed as a scientific report, which reflects reality, and where everything is documented, researched or personally confessed. Cross-sections from real life are presented as acts of giving evidence which provides authenticity and has the reality effect. They act as models of ‘appropriate’ behaviour for the readers facing similar situations and thus serve a normative purpose. At the same time they serve as potential points of identification for the readers, who are presumed to share the experience of those testifying. They serve also as an important strategic cue to control the reader’s preferred meaning of the articles and activate the relevant knowledge needed for understanding them in the reader’s memory. They also show the readers that the advice given by *Cosmopolitan* is useful in real life.

‘I started thinking about changes because I felt lonely ... One day I skipped lunch and went to his office. I entered the office and locked the door behind me. I tied his hands, blindfolded him and sat on his lap. I

mounted him. I finally claimed the attention I had missed for months. What an effect!' 32-year-old Marjana from Solkan described her experience.' [G]

Cross-sections from real life make pretensions to factuality. But age, place and first name (sometimes also occupation) do not in fact identify real people and cannot be factually identified. Although *the Cosmopolitan* wants the readers to believe that the stories are real, the texts are not produced by the 'I' actor that appears in the text, but by a series of people that put the text together (Caldas-Couthard 1991). In the written press in general, articles are not produced by a single source. The written text is handled by many people and undergoes transformations as it follows its way to printing (from the chief reporter, to the journalist (first writer), to the sub-editor and finally the editor). Even if there was a primary report by a '32-year-old Marjana from Solkan', the advice article writers are in charge in selecting, ordering and organising the sequences in which real life experience will be recounted.

As far as the identification of the narrators of their experiences are concerned, another feature needs to be mentioned: the women *Cosmopolitan* writes about belong to a particular age group (from 20 to 35) and in the Slovenian edition their names are 'properly' Slovenian. It has already been said that *Cosmopolitan's* female subject is uniform in terms of age, social class, visual image, mentality, and most notably sexuality. But the information about the name is also interesting, because the name also has a nationalistic implication. Namely, all the names, which identify those testifying about their sexual experiences, are 'properly' Slovenian. There are no women's names of other national or ethnic groups, such as the Romani, Hungarians, Italians, Serbs, Muslims or Croats, who also live in Slovenia. It is hard to imagine that *Cosmopolitan* can only find, chose and write about people with typical Slovenian names, e. g. Marija, Stanka, Marjana, Maja, Marjeta, Tatjana, Betka, Katja placed in a local setting (26-year-old Marija from Kranj, Maja from Kamnik, 30; 24-year-old Marjana from Koper [G]; 26-year-old Marija from Murska Sobota; 22-year-old Stanka from Maribor [T]). We rather get the impression that the names have been carefully selected or made Slovenian. The implicit message is that real Slovenian women's readers should be doing what they are about to read. Slovenian actors in the texts are presented as role models for the readers.

### Experts

*The Cosmopolitan* refers extensively to the authorised speech of 'experts'/'scientists'. In fact, across the 32 advice articles surveyed, there are 34 references to experts of various categories. Among these 34 experts, 12 are 'sex experts', 8 are 'psychologists' and 'psychiatrists', 'psychoanalysts', and 6 are 'therapists', while the remaining few are 'experts' (4) or 'scientists' (3) and a 'biologist'. But *Cosmopolitan* not only quotes famous experts or scientists, but also presents their findings in an extremely partial and simplified manner. The following example is from a lead:

Sex experts claim that sex is the driving force of a relationship. Every woman wishes to have a normal sex life. By analysing dreams, the Austrian psychoanalyst, Freud, discovered that frigid women too subconsciously desire sex. That is why it is of key importance for your every day life that you also develop as a sexually mature personality. [H].

Quotes from experts/scientists are limited to no more than two sentences and they are simplified so they always support and verify the writer's advice. Thus, references to experts are selected and written so that they legitimate *Cosmopolitan's* ideology of female sexuality.

In addition to the partial and simplified interpretation, *the Cosmopolitan* frequently quotes authors of popular psychology books who explain sexual behaviour in an utterly simplified manner. By quoting the titles and the publishing houses exactly, the quoting itself is also an advertisement for the books in question, e.g. 'Therapist Dr Harville Hendrix, the author of *Getting the Love You Want* and *Keeping the Love You Find* (both published by Pocket Books) appearing in Slovenian as *Najina ljubezen: od romantične ljubezni do zrelega partnerstva*, claims: 'We fall head over heels in love with a person who has both positive and negative characteristics of our imperfect parents ...' [P]

When no suitable expert or theory can be found, the magazine simply makes one up and refers to 'scientists'/'experts' in general, e.g. 'Experts claim that the back side is as concerning to every man as it is to every woman.' [M] or use references to occupations without identifying the name of the person, as in 'sex experts', 'psychiatrists', e.g. 'Sex experts warn that mental preparation is necessary for a successful sexual encounter' [U]. Choosing an expert/scientists as a source of information and a simplified interpretation of scientific findings are both used by *the Cosmopolitan* as legitimisation of the magazine's ideology of female sexuality.

By imitating scientific discourse, *the Cosmopolitan* constructs and legitimates a certain vision of normal female sexuality as derived from the 'facts' and appearing to be the only form of intelligibility available.

### **Pseudo-intimate discourse**

*The Cosmopolitan* uses pseudo-intimate discourse which creates and perpetuates an illusion about a consensus on an ideology of female sexuality and presents it as common sense. A women's magazine achieves a hegemonic perspective by eliminating the difference between the discourse of the media and the intimate, private and personal discourse of the reader in an imaginary way by imitating intimate communication. Using this imitation, it is possible to rise above the difference between the institutional women's magazine discourse and the intimate personal discourse of the reader (Fowler, 1991). The ideological effect of *the Cosmopolitan* is achieved precisely by making this difference smaller, by creating an illusion of a consensus regarding the problems presented, or at least an illusion of a consensus regarding the basic presuppositions about how to solve sexual problems. Fowler (1991: 47) claims:

The basic task for the writer is to word institutional statements in a style appropriate to interpersonal communication, because the reader is an individual and must be addressed as such. The task is not only stylistic, but also ideological: institutional concepts have to be translated into personal thoughts. The process can be seen in terms of the *narrowing of a gap* between bureaucratic and personal discourse. The gap once narrowed, a discursive norm is achieved for the particular paper as a whole, a sense of a 'neutral' language embodied 'normal' values. ... /t/he fundamental device in narrowing the discursive gap is the promotion of oral models within the printed newspaper text, giving an illusion of conversation in which common sense is spoken about on which there is consensus.

Thus, the second effect of imitating direct intimate communication is the colonisation of 'common sense' by women's magazines. Adopting intimate language results in the construction of an illusion of informality, familiarity, friendliness, personal and intimate verbal interaction (Fairclough, 1995), and, according to Fowler (1991: 57), a more important ideological consequence: to naturalise the terms in which reality is represented. This discourse implies intimacy, co-operation, agreement, reciprocity, symmetry of power and knowledge between participants, and a commonly held view of the world, a shared subjective reality that is taken for granted and does not have to be proved. The textual strategies discussed below work by creating an illusion of a consensus on the basic presuppositions regarding sexuality among the readers and naturalise a commonsense view of female sexuality.

By using direct address of the reader(s), intimate vocabulary, contact words, paralanguage, short sections of information structure and short or incomplete sentences, *Cosmopolitan* creates a simulated intimacy.

#### **Direct address of the reader(s)**

A common feature of all the advice articles analysed is that they organise their meaning and structure in such a way that they address their readers in direct terms. This is done most commonly and basically by the use of the second person pronoun, 'you'. This stimulates interpersonal communication in which 'I' or 'we'<sup>1</sup> (*Cosmopolitan's* writer(s)) are speaking directly to 'you' (*Cosmopolitan's* reader). Here are some examples: 'Are you ready for an affair?' [R], 'Enjoy a bit of pleasure.' [E]; 'Have you just realised there is something missing in your relationship?' [G]; 'If you see that not all is well in bed, don't hesitate to make some changes.' [K]. This direct address constructs an illusion of friendliness and intimacy and closes a 'discursive gap' (Fowler, 1991: 47) between *Cosmopolitan* and its reader, creating an illusion of reciprocity with an imagined *Cosmopolitan's* reader and implying a shared subjective reality that is taken for granted, thus naturalising an ideology of female sexuality.

Furthermore, this direct address also reinforces the identification process. It is an exchange of looks with an individual and the possibility of direct communication with an organisation. It is on this second level that advice articles illustrate a

general argument about the address and identification which was first proposed by the French Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser (1971). Writing about ideology, Althusser argued that ideologies depend, for their effect, on making an appeal to the attention of the individual. Moreover, this is an appeal which, at some level, cannot be ignored. And if the appeal is successful, then the individual might begin to define his or her identity in terms of the ideology which is on offer. To that extent, Althusser suggests, the individual would become a 'subject' of that ideology. Althusser calls this process interpellation – interpellation of individuals as subjects. By using direct address, *Cosmopolitan* directly grabs the attention to appeal to its reader. But, Montgomery (1986) argues that Althusser's concept of interpellation needs to be extended. There are two levels of interpellation. There is the interpellation of a particular member of audience who is addressed directly, but at another level, there is a more general address to anyone who might be a reader. At the second level of interpellation, women's magazines construct what has been described as a 'pseudo-community' (Beniger, 1987). How? In analysing DJ talk, Montgomery (1986) claims that listeners are aware in different ways (e.g. quiz spots, listeners' letters, phone-ins) that they are part of a community of members of radio listeners. In our case, the pseudo-community of *Cosmopolitan's* readers is constructed by addressing the readers as 'you' (plural). The Slovene language distinguishes between a singular ('ti') and a plural ('vi') form of 'you'. This stimulates interpersonal communication in which 'I' or 'we' (*Cosmopolitan's* writer(s)) are speaking to 'you' (the community of *Cosmopolitan's* readers), such as 'I am giving you some guidelines ...' [Nj]; 'We put them on paper for you.' [AF]. Thus, the readers are not just interpellated as individuals, but also as members of an audience ('millions of women like us') – an identity which is reinforced when the readers realise that other members of that audience read the same advice about sex. Readers imagine themselves to be part of a general community of women, i.e. women's collectivity, in which everybody shares sexual problems and the basic presuppositions about how to solve these intimate problems. In addition to the construction of collectivity, the pronoun 'you' also claims solidarity, help and friendship (Fairclough, 1989) and thus also constitutes prescribing discourse. So an imaginary consensus of an ideology of female sexuality is also constructed through para-social interaction which revolves around *Cosmopolitan's* direct address.

### **Intimate vocabulary**

The next textual device used by *Cosmopolitan* to create an illusion of intimacy is the vocabulary. This is especially visible in the following lexical device: overlexicalization. The most direct and obvious form of lexical cohesion is the repetition of intimate sexual words such as 'sex', 'foreplay', 'orgasm', 'penis', 'clitoris', 'seduction', 'kissing', 'licking', 'arousal', generally uttered by sexual partners in intimate face-to-face communication. Furthermore, *Cosmopolitan's* advice articles also repeat synonyms of the word 'sex', such as 'sexual act', 'to have sex', 'sexuality', 'sexual relationship', 'sexual life', 'sexual world'. The use of these intimate sexual words creates an impression of great confidence, privacy and intimacy.

Secondly, in addition to the general intimate sexual words, advice articles use two groups of metaphors for the sexual act, not found among the official or formal words related to sexuality, which tend to be used in the intimate private sphere. For example, most metaphors for the sexual act refer to the bedroom activity: 'bed', 'bedroom exercise' [T], 'bedroom fun' [C], 'bedroom ride' [R], 'bedroom attack' [J], 'bedroom jump' [k], 'bedroom work' [I], 'hot sheets' [A]; and night activity: 'night escapade' [M], 'night work' [m], 'night hobby' [T], 'night jump' [U], 'night action' [A], 'night occupation' [R]. The use of metaphors re-shapes and re-conceptualises the meaning and experience (Lakoff, 1987; Goatly, 1997). Metaphors which refer to the bedroom activity connote intimate sexual activity and metaphors of night activity connote sexual activity, hidden from daylight and from the eyes. By using both groups of metaphors which connote the intimate private sphere, *Cosmopolitan* further constitutes the illusion of intimacy.

Third, advice articles use ideolectical sexual language limited to *Cosmopolitan*, not found in other magazines. This specific language creates an illusion of an intimate link between a women's magazine and its readers, since they share something only they have in common. It imitates a connection which can be established through private communication, since these words refer to very intimate sexuality, such as labelling the points of arousal: 'point of pleasure', 'orgasmic button' [M]; ways of implementing a sexual act: 'solo quickie', 'a real rodeo', 'a real snake' [G], 'spicy', 'sweet surrender' [N] 'horizontal tango' [G]; labelling men and women according to their sexual activity: 'a self-centred bimbo', 'confident gal', 'dude' [A]; ways of kissing, such as 'cool breath', 'seductive tug', 'passionate panting', 'naughty nibble' [I].

*The Cosmopolitan* uses vocabulary which constructs an illusion of pseudo-intimacy, since it contains words used in the intimate sexual sphere. It creates an impression of an agreement between two parties involved in intimate communication and implies a commonly held view of sexuality.

### **Contact words**

The articles analysed contain words used in face-to-face communication to attract attention and establish contact, such as 'look': 'Look, you must caress the penis slowly at first.' [H], 'well': 'Well, what do you want?' [N], 'you know': 'You know you don't have to practice this every day.' [I] or 'You know, a gift is perfect when it is beautifully wrapped.' [T]; 'you see': 'Sex can only be successful with lots of imagination, you see?' [M]. In a printed medium, contact words suggest the presence of speech, as if there were a direct conversation. By using these words, *Cosmopolitan* implies co-operation, agreement, intimacy, reciprocity and therefore, naturalises its ideology of female sexuality.

### **Paralanguage**

*The Cosmopolitan* also uses paralanguage. For Abercrombie (1972: 65) 'paralinguistic phenomena are non-linguistic elements in conversation', but he had speech communication in mind. In press, we could speak about paralanguage when an idea is written down in the same way the writer speaks about it (Fowler,



1991). In advice articles we find vocal gestures which imitate intimate conversation. In addition to the construction of an illusion of intimacy, paralanguage strengthens and increases the effect of that which has been written, for example with a vocal gesture of hesitation, additional derision is constructed: 'How do you react when your partner first shows you his ... um, willy?' [H]; it increases the effect of the meaning of pleasure 'Wow, this feels good.' [I] or warning 'Yikes, be careful not to hurt him!' [S].

### **Short sections of information structure and short or incomplete sentences**

*The Cosmopolitan* also imitates intimacy by using short, incomplete sentences. The structure of giving information in *Cosmopolitan's* advice articles is more or less conversational. According to Halliday (1976), speech is fragmented into shorter sections of information than writing, by shorter intonation curves which are more independent of the conventional syntax. In *the Cosmopolitan*, this effect is cued by short or incomplete sentences. The ending of the article on the sounds of the sexual act ends with an incomplete sentence: 'And true enough. Sound manifestations of sexual pleasures are the mark of pleasure. They need to be copied. The louder, the ...' [I] or a short sentence: 'Quickly. Quickly. A strong and unexpected 'attack'. The sheets catch fire.' [A].

By using a direct address of the reader(s), intimate vocabulary, contact words, paralanguage, short sections of information structure and short or incomplete sentences, *Cosmopolitan* imitates intimate private communication and constructs a commonsense consensual view of female sexuality.

### **Conclusion: Interdependent discourses**

All three discourse strategies of *the Cosmopolitan's* advice articles to construct a common sense consensual view of female sexuality are intertwined and complement each other. By using a specific structure, the imperative mood, obligation modality and prescriptive vocabulary, prescribing discourse constructs both help and authority, with which *the Cosmopolitan's* definition of normal female sexuality is naturalised. By using speech acts and common sense words, *the Cosmopolitan* further constructs a commonsense consensual view of female sexuality.

Pseudo-scientific discourse complements prescriptive discourse by working more or less as its legitimisation. *The Cosmopolitan* uses statistics and polls, refers to experts/scientist and portrays cross-sections from real life as scientific reports to primarily naturalise its advice as derived from facts.

The construction of a commonsense consensual view of female sexuality and with it the legitimisation of prescriptive discourse through pseudo-intimate discourse are based on a different strategy. By directly addressing the reader(s) and using intimate vocabulary, contact words, paralanguage, short sections of information structure and short or incomplete sentences, *Cosmopolitan* creates simulated intimate private communication, which implies intimacy, co-operation, agreement, reciprocity, symmetry of power and knowledge between participants,

and a commonly held view of the world, a shared subjective reality that is taken for granted and does not have to be proved.

The discourses are intertwined on various levels. On the macro level of the advice article, the discourses are not strictly separated but follow each other in various sequences. Thus the pseudo-scientific discourse of the lead can verify in advance the use of prescriptive discourse, which is legitimated by pseudo-intimate discourse. In the individual pieces of advice, all three discourses are intertwined as well, even though the end of the individual pieces of advice and the article as a whole is marked by prescriptive discourse, which sums up the main points. The individual textual devices too can serve different discourses, e.g. speech acts and direct address for prescriptive and pseudo-intimate discourse. On the micro level of the sentence, the discourses can also be mixed, the writer may refer to an expert and at the same time use very intimate vocabulary.

The intertwining and complementing discourses work together to establish the advice articles' terrain of intelligibility. These interdependent discourses comprise what Hall calls the 'point of identification' (1979: 344) that ensures the preferred reading of the ideology of female sexuality.

#### ENDNOTES:

- 1 The use of the first person singular or plural depends on the individual writer of the advice article.
- 2 The media also portray science and scientists as evil and violent figures, outside the rules of normal society (Gerbner et al., 1981).

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**APPENDIX:**

- [A] 'Same do vrhunca', pp. 90-93, October 2001  
[B] 'Kriminalno dejanje', pp. 60-62, November 2001  
[C] 'Moč poželenja', pp. 54-55, December 2001  
[Č] 'Striptiz za enega gledalca', pp. 50-51, January 2002  
[Ć] 'Narediti igro zanimico', pp. 60-61, February 2002  
[D] 'Zakaj bi žulile zelje, ko je na voljo kaviar', pp. 96-99, March 2002  
[DŽ] 'Bodite skrivnostne', pp. 60-62, May 2004  
[Đ] 'Uspešno! Ne bojte se!', pp. 70-71, April 2004  
[E] 'Pripravljene na avanturo?', pp. 62-65, April 2002  
[F] 'Podaljšajte si posteljne užitke', pp. 48-49, May 2002  
[G] 'Skrivnosti, ki jih morate razkriti moškemu', pp. 88-91, June 2002  
[H] 'Igra, ki se ji reče užitek', pp. 28, August 2002  
[I] 'Nikar se ne uspavajte v zadovoljstvu', pp. 50-51, September 2002  
[J] 'Naš seksualni nasvet "Bodite pripravljene" vam bo pomagal, da se se izognete zapletem v zadnjem hipu', pp. 62-64, October 2002  
[K] 'Zvoki, ki božajo moška ušesa', pp. 60-61, November 2002  
[L] '30 skrivnosti dobrega seksa', pp. 76-77, December 2002  
[Lj] 'Dobro se pripravite na morske avanture', pp. 70-72, June 2004  
[M] 'Povej brez besed', pp. 60-61, January 2003  
[N] 'Zasvojite ga z ustnicami', pp. 60-61, February 2003  
[Nj] 'Ponujam vam nekaj nasvetov', pp. 54-55, July 2004  
[O] 'Izognite se monotimiji in rutini', pp. 60-61, March 2003  
[P] 'To mi delaj! Cosmov vodnik: pot do orgazma', pp. 70-73, April 2003  
[R] 'Pot do orgazma', pp. 70-73, May 2003  
[Q] 'Izklepetajte si boljši seks', pp. 46-47, June 2003  
[S] 'Njegove skrivne točke', pp. 76-78, July 2003  
[Š] '6 vročih iger', pp. 152-155, August 2003  
[T] 'Prvič bedno', pp. 46-47, September 2003  
[U] 'Pasti privlačnosti na zemljevidu ljubezni', pp. 100-103, October 2003  
[V] 'Ta vražji prvič', pp. 54-55, November 2003  
[W] 'Koraki do dobrega seksa', pp. 61-62, December 2003  
[X] 'Natočite oplemeniteno gorivo', pp. 100-101, February 2004  
[Y] 'Mnogokratni orgazmi', pp. 60-61, March 2004  
[Z] 'Na kaj "padajo" moški', pp. 60-62, January 2004  
[AB] 'Orgazem ni edini cilj', pp. 50-51, August 2004  
[AC] 'Čim bolj razgibano', pp. 97-99, September 2004  
[AČ] 'Bodi pogumna', pp. 70-71, November 2004  
[AD] 'Kaj morate narediti, če moški ne more', pp. 72-73, December 2004  
[AE] 'Pravočasno morate prepričati, da bi postelja postala navada', pp. 54-56, January 2005  
[AF] 'Za vas smo zapisali na papir', pp. 61-64, February 2005

**Karmen Erjavec**

## **Kako imati dobar seks? Konstrukcija općeg mišljenja i pogleda na seksualnost**

### **SAŽETAK**

Cilj je članka pokazati jezične elemente koje koristi najpopularniji slovenski ženski časopis *Cosmopolitan* kako bi konstruirao “zdravorazumsku” suglasnost o ženskoj seksualnosti. Metodom analize diskursa kritički se propituju savjeti koje magazin u svojim člancima daje čitateljicama kad je riječ o najprivatnijem dijelu njihova života – seksu! Hipoteza je da autori članaka koriste pseudo-povjerljiv i pseudo-znanstveni diskurs kako bi konstruirali suglasnost i opće stajalište o kontradiktornoj ideologiji ženske seksualnosti.

Ključne riječi: kritička analiza diskursa, ženska revija *Cosmopolitan*, savjetodavni članci, seks