"I had something to say, and I'm saying it now": Rhetorical and linguistic construction of the media genre of the personal account

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Abstract

The personal account is an endemic genre of women's magazines. In this first-person story, a woman shares her experience on a problem of potential interest for the magazine's audience and offers a solution to the problem. Personal accounts are presented as stories told by "real" women; however, the influence of editor's voice and institutional point of view can be traced in the particular rhetorical and discursive framing of such texts. Although the personal account has already become an object of critical sociological analysis, psychological inquiry, and media studies, it remains underinvestigated from a linguistic perspective. This paper offers insights into the rhetorical organization and language of personal accounts by applying genre, narrative and sentence triad analyses to the study of its instances published in *Cosmopolitan*. It shows that rhetorical and linguistic construction of this media genre ensures the imposing of the magazine's ideology upon its readers and helps to build their global community. The data collected in this study form a "genre portrait" which can be used to assist potential producers of personal accounts and help future journalists to develop their skills of storytelling and conveying personal experiences based on a genre template; also, the findings presented in the paper contribute to university media literacy and genre/discourse analysis courses.

Keywords: Genre, media genre, narrative, personal account, sentence triad.

Resumen

"Tenía algo que decir y lo estoy diciendo ahora": Construcción retórica y lingüística del género mediático del relato personal

El relato personal es un género característico de las revistas dirigidas a mujeres. En estas historias en primera persona, una mujer comparte su experiencia sobre un problema de interés potencial para las lectoras de la revista y ofrece una solución. Los relatos personales se presentan como historias narradas por mujeres "reales". Sin embargo, la influencia de la voz del editor y el punto de vista institucional puede rastrearse en el marco retórico y discursivo particular de estos textos. Aunque el relato personal ya ha sido objeto del análisis crítico en sociología, la investigación psicológica y los estudios de medios, apenas se ha explorado desde una perspectiva lingüística. El presente artículo examina la organización retórica y el lenguaje de los relatos personales aplicando el análisis de género, narrativo y de triadas de oraciones al estudio de los casos publicados en la revista _Cosmopolitan_. El estudio muestra que la construcción retórica y lingüística de este género mediático asegura la imposición de la ideología de la revista entre sus lectoras y contribuye a la construcción de una comunidad global entre ellas. Los datos recopilados en esta investigación conforman un "retrato del género" que puede utilizarse para asistir a futuros productores de relatos personales y para ayudar a periodistas en formación a desarrollar habilidades de narración y transmisión de experiencias personales basadas en un género. Asimismo, los hallazgos presentados resultan útiles para cursos universitarios de alfabetización mediática, así como de análisis del discurso y de géneros.

Palabras clave: Género, género mediático, narrativa, relato personal, triada de oraciones.

1. Introduction

Women's magazines are extremely popular media which have a considerable effect upon the maintenance of social values and lifestyle of their readership. They "offer to take up identity as a style of living" (Matheson, 2005, p. 65) and to develop an attitude to life based on individualism, personal responsibility, search for expert solutions and adherence to consumer culture (Bauman, 1992).

Attempting to build their own world where fashion, glamour and agency are connected with neo-liberal ideas of "enterprising selfhood and consumer-based individualism" (Chen & Machin, 2013, p. 83), such magazines have historically developed and established sets of specific genres as effective

communicative mechanisms of influencing the audience. Some of them manage to regain their stability, visibility, popularity and influence within long periods of time, having thus become endemic. One of such genres is the personal account (also called "narrative," "personal narrative," or "media account") or a first-person story narrated by a woman, in which she shares her experience on a problem of potential interest for the magazine's audience and offers a solution to the problem. The topics elaborated in such personal stories are limited by magazines' thematic repertoire and usually focus on relationships, health and beauty, sex, and, sometimes, professional life of women. From a broader perspective, personal accounts can be treated as the inheritors of the feministic consciousness-raising tradition which initially focused on the problems in women's life but later shifted to "personal transformation, including a medical transformation of the self" (Kenny, 2018, p. 222).

The layout structure of a typical text of the personal account includes the headline, the subheadline which precedes the main text and contextualizes the story, the body, and several photos which illustrate the narrated experience. The photos of women telling their stories contrast with gorgeous seductive images of models and celebrities abundant on the pages: they look much more "real" since they are shown as ordinary women in their everyday circumstances, which strongly differ from the world of glamour constructed in such magazines.

The first-person point of view dominating personal accounts allows approaching the issues that cannot possibly be discussed by means of any other genre due to their intimate and personal character. By providing insights into the private spheres of others, this genre responds to a natural longing of the female reader "for sharing feelings and experiences as a way of escaping solitude" (Ballaster et al., 1991, p. 131). At the same time, trust and friendliness of women confiding their experience in personal accounts are supposed to be shared by readers and to solicit a feeling of friendship and a sense of community.

Personal accounts are presented as stories told by "real" women, although the influence of editor's voice and institutional point of view can be traced in the particular rhetorical framing of such accounts. Not surprisingly, their authorship is usually defined by the words "as told by" (plus a journalist's name). The well known role of editors in women's magazines has been shown, for example, by Davies (2009) who conducted an ethnographic study

of their responsibilities based on face-to-face interviews and electronically distributed questionnaires. As editors in this study explain, their key function is to solicit content for magazines and to do what they call "styling" as well as traditional proofing. Typically, the process is web-based and starts when potential authors are asked to come forward with their stories by signing to the forum/community/"good to know"-chat on the website and to email their story (Buaphet, 2014). However, the website provides rubrics and general instructions (although not templates) organized by the topics which the magazine suggests. For instance, one of the rubrics offered by *Cosmopolitan* is Love, Sex and LGBTQ+. For authors who plan to submit their life stories within this rubric, the magazine explains its preferences by emphasizing that they "are most often looking for relatable, first person essays exploring dating, relationships, sex and sexuality. These should have a clear take-home message for our readers… We want to show our readers they are not alone…" (https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/worklife/careers/a25425/write-for-cosmopolitan/). Once the story is accepted for publication, the editor arranges its content in the form of a narrative, that is, constructs it in terms of a beginning, middle, and end (Buaphet, 2014, p. 43). The editor also adapts the story to other conventions of the genre (e.g., by adding a subheadline) and to the typical discursive patterns and vocabulary of the magazine which functions there as "an ideological resource against which people and situations are described, identified, and evaluated" (Del-Teso-Craviotto, 2006, p. 2017). The stories submitted are therefore seriously rearranged and discursively tailored ("stylized," as editors say in the interviews conducted by Davies) to fit the conventions of the personal account and thus to better meet the interests of potential readership accustomed to consumimg such accounts.

Personal accounts in women's magazines have already become an object of critical sociological analysis (e.g., Kenny, 2018), psychological inquiry (e.g., Madsen & Ytre-Arne, 2012) and media studies (e.g., Favaro, 2017). At the same time, they obviously remain underinvestigated from a linguistic perspective, as they have attracted the attention only of a small number of researchers in this field. One of the few linguistic studies of this genre was undertaken by Caldas-Coulthard (1996) who considered first-person narratives dealing with sex. The texts of the so called "sex narratives" employed in the study were analyzed with the use of the well known narrative scheme (consisting of six structural elements) which was suggested by Labov and Waletzky (1997). The conducted textual analysis helped to

reveal how such narratives create a "fictionalized world" where the ideology of feminism and sexuality is built and imposed upon the readers (Caldas-Coulthard, 1996, p. 250).

Another study of personal accounts has been undertaken by Figueiredo who combined the approaches of critical discourse, genre, and narrative analyses to the investigation of the stories of three women who share their experiences of undergoing plastic surgery. The author came to the conclusion that these stories provide evidence of a special role of the media account genre in promoting "hegemonic models of female identity in women's magazines" (Figueiredo, 2009, p. 274).

The structure of first-person accounts in women's magazines has also been addressed by Machin and van Leeuwen (2007) who studied personal stories about sex and work published in national versions of a global magazine. These authors have shown that such stories built upon a "problem-solution' discourse schema, which serves as an interpretative framework adequate to "the spirit of strategic communication that pervades global commercialised culture" (Machin & van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 69).

Finally, Kryzhanivska (2017) focused on the initial structural elements of personal accounts – headlines and subheadlines – based on the corpus of the instances of this genre published within two time periods – 2007-2008 and 2014-2015. The analysis revealed a special role of these elements which consists in the construction of a particular sociocultural setting of this genre in women's magazines. This setting is rhetorically and linguistically created by defining the readers of accounts as community members, establishing the relations of trust and solidarity with them, and emphasizing the topics of potential interest. Furthermore, the study showed that headlines and subheadlines support "unconscious and uncritical acceptance of the ideas encoded in the texts of this genre" (Kryzhanivska, 2017, p. 49).

As can be seen from the above, personal accounts have so far been investigated on a limited scale: either the texts representing one theme (Caldas-Coulthard, 1996; Figueiredo, 2009) or only certain aspects of the texts of personal accounts (Kryzhanivska, 2017; Machin & van Leeuwen, 2007) have so far been considered. Therefore, in this article we will try to provide a more global picture of the genre by simultaneously focusing on the overall organization and most conspicuous features of personal accounts. More specifically, we are interested in revealing and showing how the

rhetorical and linguistic construction of this popular genre facilitates imposing of the values of women's magazines upon their readers and helps to build a global community of the sharers of these values. We will begin with the explanation of the material analyzed and clarification of the methodological paradigms used.

2. Material and methodology

The analyzed corpus consists of the texts of personal accounts taken from the online version of *Cosmopolitan*. As known, this magazine is an international brand which globally distributes the discourse of women's independence, power of their body and sexuality, and fun of life connected to the values of consumer culture (Machin & Thornborrow, 2003). It offers and imposes a famous model of the "Cosmo girl" —"a fun, fearless female," preoccupied with the pursuit of "romantic adventure and sexual pleasure, of health and beauty, of consumer goods and pleasurable activities, and of career success" (Machin & van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 42). Given this characteristics of *Cosmopolitan* and its international standing, the choice of personal accounts published in this magazine seems to be quite appropriate for the purposes of this study.

The analyzed corpus consists of 40 texts accessed on the website (cosmopolitan.com) and randomly chosen from those issued each year within the time period of 2015-2021. The number of texts issued in one year ranged from 4 to 6. The total length of the compiled corpus is 51,544 words, with the length of individual accounts ranging from 787 to 2,979 words. The texts were chosen regardless of their themes in order to obtain a more general picture of their structure and rhetorical and linguistic features. Their topics appeared, however, to be quite typical of this genre and include the problems of health (11 texts), relationships (12), sex (4), abuse in relations (3), addiction (2), beauty (5), and professional life (3). All texts in the corpus were labeled as PA and consecutively numbered (PA-1 to PA-40).

The corpus was compared to another one compiled to check whether personal accounts are based on one template or possess individual features related to particular magazines. The second corpus also includes 40 texts randomly extracted from three magazines–Glamour (15), Elle (15), and Woman & Home (10). This corpus of comparable length (49,466 words) includes the texts of personal accounts which focus on the problems of

physical and mental health (13), love and sex (12), motherhood (3), addiction (2), beauty (4), and professional (2) and social life (4).

It should be noted that, in terms of their reading and reception, the texts which appear on websites possess a dual status of both media and texts. As media, they are processed in the navigation mode, when the reader constantly moves between the text and the links to other webpages or media resources it contains. As texts, they are considered in the reading mode and are treated as "printouts" and read in the usual, sequential way (Askehave & Nielsen, 2005). Since the personal accounts located on the *Cosmopolitan* website do not generally have any links inside the texts, we decided to consider them only in the reading mode. The printed out personal accounts in the corpus look like usual texts with 1-2 photos and 1-2 graphically accentuated sentences inside the texts.

The procedure for the analysis of the texts of personal accounts involved the identification of the so-called moves and steps. The term "move" (Swales, 1990) is used to define a semantic and functional unit which serves one purpose and contributes to the realization of the overall communicative goal of a genre. The term "step" (Swales, 1990) or "rhetorical strategy" (Bhatia, 2004) is used to define a sub-unit of the move, which contributes to the move's communicative function. The purposive nature of moves and steps triggers a range of conventionalized linguistic features utilized to implement their particular communicative intentions. We need to emphasize that the notion of a rhetorical strategy is of particular interest for our research as such strategies, on the one hand, reveal "standard practices in the actual formulation" (Askehave & Nielsen, 2005, p. 123) of a genre in question and, on the other, show variations within its boundaries, thus allowing us to see a broader picture of its functional organization and textual construction.

The analytical procedure generally followed the one used in Yakhontova and Ivantsiv (2021). First, moves in the texts of personal accounts were revealed. Each of four coauthors separately segmented the texts based on their detailed top-down reading for shifts in topics and relevant linguistic signals. Further, every coauthor identified a communicative function for each revealed fragment and suggested their own label. Then, all coauthors discussed together their findings. It should be noted that there were no discrepancies realated to the textual boundaries of the moves and their functions which is due, as it will be shown below, to a highly homogeneous

and predictable structure of the personal account genre. As to the labels for the moves and correlation of the latter with Labov and Waletsky's elements, there were some differences in opinions, which were unified in the process of discussing them and reaching a final consensus.

Also, we probed the texts for the presence of Labov's narrative elements and their possible interrelation with the revealed moves. As known, Labov (Labov, 1972, 1997, 2006; Labov & Waletzky, 1997) treated narrative "as a particular way of reporting past events, in which the order of a sequence of independent clauses is interpreted as the order of the events referred to" (Labov, 2006, p. 37). Labov's framework helps to reveal the structure of the narrative by deconstructing it into constitutive and consecutive elements (their labels and description are provided in Table 1).

Element	Description
Abstract	Introduces the story to be told
Orientation	Presents preliminary information on participants, space and time settings, and relevant previous actions
Complicating action	Disrupts the usual chain of events leading to a crisis
Evaluation	Creates a feeling of suspense by providing evaluation of narrative events
Resolution	Shows how the crisis is resolved
Coda	Produces a sense of completion by bringing a reader back to the starting point of a story

Table 1. Structure of the narrative according to W. Labov.

We need to emphasize that we treat narrative as an overall pattern of textual organization, which can be utilized by different genres (see, for example, Bekar and Yakhontova (2021) for narrative episodes underlying the genre of the transcribed interview). Furthermore, as Labov's scheme is one of universal organizational patterns, typical of different communicative formats, we differentiate between its constitutive elements and moves. The latter, common in genre analysis, perform the functions specific for a particular genre. Therefore, the narrative and genre perspectives are two different methodological paradigms which can be applied together to provide deeper and more versatile insights into the organization of the personal account.

The procedure of the identification of narrative elements was exactly the same as the one applied to revealing moves. Further, we tried to find the correlation/interrelation between the moves and narrative elements to obtain a broader picture of the organization of the genre.

Then we reiterated the same identification procedure, this time on the step/rhetorical strategies' level. Further, the revealed strategies became an object of the linguistic scrutiny, undertaken from a functional stylistic

perspective. This perspective implies that linguistic features are described not for their own sake but to show their functional significance in adequate interpretation of texts (Wales, 2001, p. 373).

Also, at this stage, we applied the sentence triad analysis suggested by Bolívar (1994). According to this author, a triad is the minimal unit of interaction in the written media texts. It is typically composed of three turns called Lead (L) – the initial sentence which has the function of introducing the topic and modality, Follow (F) which keeps the same topic in the triad and provides further information on the Lead, and Valuate (V) which evaluates the preceding two turns and closes the unit (Bolívar, 1994, p. 281). The triads may, however, appear in a cyclic manner and can have more than three turns in a sequence. The allocation of more than one sentence to a turn is based upon the signals that indicate the same modality, tense or mood (Bolívar, 1994, p. 280).The peculiarities of manifestation of the Lead-Follow-Valuate pattern (henceforth LFV), which Bolívar calls "a content triad," are useful for the interpretation of moves' rhetoric since they reveal the way in which the information is transmitted and evaluated in the moves.

The findings resulting from the described study are provided below.

3. Results and analysis

The analysis showed that the personal account has a particular pattern of functional organization consisting of three moves – Setting a story, Experiencing a problematic situation, and Establishing the value of the experience.

The moves, their correspondence with the elements of Labov's narrative scheme, and their textual positions are shown in Table 2.

Move structure	Narrative structure elements	Textual position	Number of texts (out of 80)	
			Number	Percentage
Move 1: Setting the story	Abstract Orientation	Headlines and subheadlines	80	100
Move 2: Experiencing a problematic situation	Complicating actions	The first half or two thirds of the body of the text	80	100
Move 3: Establishing the value of the experience	Evaluation Resolution Coda	The last half or one third of the body of the text	80	100

Table 2. Move structure of the personal account.

While identifying the moves and narrative elements, we drew on the previous research (Kryzhanivska, 2017) in which the headlines and subheadlines of personal accounts were treated as one initial move comprising the Abstract and Orientation elements in Labov's terms (even though headlines and subheadlines may also convey evaluations and conclusions). In the present study, which primarily focuses on the main body of texts, we have revealed two more moves, one of which correlates with the Complicating actions narrative element, while the other one embraces the Evaluation, Resolution, and Coda ones. Evaluation here is a label suggested by Labov for a narrative element, although, as he admitted, in complex narratives, evaluation can be spread all over the narrative supporting its main idea and maintaing the reader's interest (Labov & Waletzky, 1997). The moves sequentially appear in the texts of personal accounts in both corpora (that including the texts from *Cosmopolitan* and the one with personal accounts from other magazines), thus showing that the overall structure of the personal account is strikingly homogenous and conventionalized.

Still, more variation (although insignificant) has been traced on the level of the step structure of the texts. Table 3 demonstrates the steps or rhetorical strategies which were identified in each move and provides appropriate quantitative data. It should be noted that steps, in contrast to moves in the texts of this genre, have been observed to appear several times, as cycles.

No	Moves	Steps	Texts Cosmopolitan (out of 40) Number/Percentage	Other (out of 40) Number/Percentage
1.	Setting the story	1a. Voicing the woman telling her story	40/100	40/100
		1b. Voicing the editor	17/43	34/85
2.	Experiencing a problematic situation	2a. Outlining the life before a problematic situation	40/100	40/100
		2b. Indicating events leading to the problematic situation	40/100	40/100
		2c. Encountering the problematic situation	40/100	40/100
		2d. Establishing the solution	40/100	40/100
3.	Establishing the value of experience	3a. Indicating self-reward	40/100	40/100
		3b. Encouraging readers	12/30	30/75

Table 3. Steps in the move structure of the personal account.

As the data from Table 3 show, the move-step structure of the texts in both corpora is quite similar (even though two steps – Voicing the editor and Encouraging readers – are quantitatively more prominent in the second corpus). This similarity of the genre pattern allows concentrating on the study of personal accounts from *Cosmopolitan* as one of the most popular women's magazines. The results of analysis of the revealed moves and strategies in the personal accounts of this magazine is provided below.

3.1. Move 1: Setting the story

The first move helps the reader to understand what to expect from the story. The headline, the first textual element of the personal account, orients about the woman and the topic of her story, whereas the subheadline specifies and supplements this information. The headline and the subheadline connect into one whole in answering the questions of Labov's Abstract (What is the story about?) and Orientation (Who, when, where and what?) and, thus, can be treated as one move – the first one in the structure of the personal account (Kryzhanivska, 2017). Overall, the Setting-the-story move aims at introducing the sociocultural setting of the genre, which embraces temporal and spatial contexts, participants of the story, and their interpersonal relations and presumed interests.

The communicative function of the move is realized in one or two steps manifested by the headline and the subheadline of the personal account (for appropriate quantitative data, see Table 3) These two steps appear in a linear sequence and are signaled by a number of linguistic clues. Although they have already been considered in Kryzhanivska (2017), we will still provide their brief analysis (based on more recent research material) to show a fuller picture of the rhetorical structure of the personal account.

3.1.1. Move 1. Step 1a: Voicing the woman telling her story

Step 1a voices the woman as an active and authoritative protagonist of the story told (1) and as a member of the *Cosmopolitan* readers' community (2). The rhetoric of this step is exemplified in the following representative example:

> (1) "How *I* finally left an abusive relationship after nine years…" "He only ever hit *me* once, but the brutality of his tongue was *as cutting as a punch in the face*" (PA-12).

As can be seen, the first-person pronoun denotes the woman telling her story. Since "using the first person is an act of taking responsibility" (Mühlhäusler & Harré, 1990, p. 92), the appearance of this pronoun emphasizes the authoritative role of the woman-storyteller in the context of the genre. At the same time, the use of *I* personalizes the discourse, increases the trustworthy character of the information announced, helps to evoke confidence in readers, and to build friendly relations with them (Yakhontova & Ivantsiv, 2021, p. 195). This effect is reinforced by direct speech (marked

by quotation marks), which creates an illusion of face-to-face communication and positions the woman as an active participant in the communicative situation of the genre. The sentence structure of the headline facilitates the understanding of the implied questions of "who did what, how and where" and allows readers to comprehend information in an easy and quick way, while the stylistic device of a simile (*as cutting as a punch in the face*) immediately attracts the readers' attention. All these linguistic means contribute to the rhetorical effect of foregrounding the narrator and of establishing her friendly relations with readers.

3.1.2. Move 1. Step 1b: Voicing the editor

This step is realized by subheadlines of 17 personal accounts in the corpus and can be exemplified by the following fragement:

> (2) "*27-year-old Lauren and her husband Shaun* were faced with a dilemma *they* never thought *they*'d have to consider when *she* became pregnant with their first child…" (PA-9).

It voices the person who provides additional information about the woman sharing her experience and the event – the editor. The rhetoric of the step is based on the use of the third-person form of narration, which implies the presence of a journalist/editor who personifies the *Cosmopolitan* and takes the role of a "go-in-between," that is, introduces the woman telling her story to the reader. Furthermore, it allows the magazine to establish a position of the powerful mediator, the one who selects the message and delivers it to the audience.

As known, deixis signals "the way in which a speaker or writer fits the discourse to the actual place and time of the situation in which the discourse is produced" (Ensink & Sauer, 2003, p. 10). Social deixis of the woman (her first and last names, age, occupation, place of living, experience) not only supports the credibility of the subheadline but also reinforces a feeling of community by introducing identity details typical of the readership. The reader is supposed to believe that the story is real and the account is produced by the "I" actor who appears in the text.

Overall, Steps 1a and 1b prepare readers for reception of the story and establish the relations which imply the presence of common interests.

3.2. Move 2: Experiencing a problematic situation

This move, a longer and structurally more complex than other ones, can be considered a core component in the generic structure of the personal account. Functionally, it is oriented towards reporting the personal experience of a woman who encountered a dramatic event or a life problem, rather typical of *Cosmopolitan*'s readers, in a socially acceptable and easy for comprehension way. Due to this communicative role, the move manifests the most prominent "narrative cues" (Nemčoková, 2011) or linguistic features of storytelling, such as the use of active verbs in past tense and deictic markers, which create "a feeling of the rhythm and help to catch the narrator's sense of time and space" (Marmaridou, 2000, pp. 82-83). As can be seen from the fragments exemplifying this move in Table 3, such markers help to define the time of the described situation in relation to other events in the story and thus intensify its credibility and evoke a feeling of anticipation.

The study of our corpus has shown that the Experiencing a problematic situation move possesses a quite rigid schematic structure and consists of four steps, which appear in all texts of the corpus (see Table 3). The steps are chronologically organized making the comprehension of the story easier.

The analysis of rhetorical steps in this move was performed based on the differentiation of the type of sentences they comprise. Using the framework suggested by Bolívar (1994), we considered each step as realized through the LFV units (the triads) that link together in a linear semantic path to sequentially accumulate the meaning.

3.2.1. Move 2. Step 2a: Outlining the life before a problematic situation

The initial step of the account of a personal experience provides background of the arising problem. Although it is somewhat related to the Setting-the-scene move, it rhetorically and linguistically signals a start of the events reported in the story: a woman begins her account with some general information on her family, relations, job, style of life, interests, etc., which reflect the situations typical of the *Cosmopoitan* readers. The analysis of the data has shown that the information in this step is organized as units with the following pattern of sentence combination (here and henceforth, a caret sign after the abbreviated name of the turn indicates that it may include more than one sentence):

$$L^\wedge \; F \; V$$

The pattern demonstrates that the rhetoric of this step is oriented towards accumulating information: the Leads introduce common facts from the life of a woman, whereas the Follows supply relevant details which frame the perception of further events as credible and consensual, e.g.:

> (3) **/L/** I first met Dom when I was 13, nearly 14. He was three years older than me, and lived a few hours away, near Birmingham. **/F/** We met online, through Twitter, after bonding over a TV show on the fan page, and after seven or eight months of talking, we called each other boyfriend and girlfriend although we'd never actually met in person. **/V/** He was really nice, and it felt nice to have someone to talk to because I often felt quite isolated (PA-7).

The Valuate statement, which closes the triad, manifests the use of the evaluative words (positive in this case – *really nice, it felt nice*) which trigger in readers sympathy, compassion and a sense of involvement.

3.2.2. Move 2. Step 2b: Indicating events leading to the problem.

This step presents a series of actions which lead to the situation seen as difficult or problematic. The rhetoric of the step is mainly oriented towards emphasizing the disruption in the normal development of events. A typical pattern of elaborating this step appears to be as follows (here and henceforth, parentheses show the turn/s can be optional):

$$LF^\wedge \; (LF^\wedge) \; V$$

Such a combination of sentences shows that the rhetoric of the move shifts from general information to specific details so that the meaning of the Valuate is perceived as commonsensical and consensual. Consider the following excerpt:

> (4) **/L/** Experiences like this should've brought us closer, *but the tension in our relationship made me feel isolated.* **/F/** For my husband, the pressure to produce stories (with the help of his translator) was consuming. While he worked all hours, I found myself *paralyzed.* **/L/** As a brand-new freelance writer, I didn't know how to develop a steady flow of assignments. **/F/** I'd spend *mindless* hours trawling Facebook and reading media gossip. I showered only when I smelled. I started smoking. … **/V/** I'd always been independent, and I *missed* my sense of self (PA-36).

As it can be seen, the Leads introduce situations in the life of the woman and Follows indicate disruptions in the normal development of events and situations, while the Valuate demonstrates narrator's values in estimating current circumstances. The conspicuous linguistic feature of this step is the use of structures of comparison and contrast *(but, however)* which focus on the facts leading to the problematic situation. Such semantic and rhetorical organization creates the atmosphere of suspense intensified by the use of negative evaluations which add dramatic touches to the story showing its heroine as experiencing serious difficulties. As a result, the readers' compassion is invoked; they become more deeply involved in the unfolding story and align their values with those manifested by a woman telling a story.

3.2.3. Move 2. Step 2c: Encountering the problematic situation

This step highlights the problematic situation in the life of a woman by describing her negative feelings and emotional reactions which reach their maximum at this point. Its triad organization can be schematized as:

$$L\ F^\wedge\ V^\wedge$$

Extensive Follow and Valuate elements follow the Lead and demonstrate a shift from narration to description. Follows display details depicting the situation as unacceptable, while Valuates reveal woman's thoughts and emotions concerning the problematic situation. Here is a fragment of the personal account which exemplifies the rhetoric of the step:

> (5) **/L/** …My first boyfriend … kept telling me to relax and was insistent we'd just keep trying. **/F/** But however calm he was about the situation, it didn't stop me *feeling stressed* out about it. **/V/** Everyone around me was having their first times and *I felt* like I was *missing out*. *I felt like* I was holding my boyfriend back from experiences because it should have been his first time, too (PA-15).

The example shows that the Follow and Valuate are more prominent than the Lead in this step. Furthermore, the Valuate is, obviously, the focus of readers' attention due to its elaboration, in this case based on the repetition of the single-rooted words *(feeling, felt)* and the comparative construction *I felt like* as well as of the words of negative appraisal *(stressed, missing out)* which emphasize the intense emotional state of the storyteller. The prevalence of description over narration in this step stretches out the flow of the story,

draws attention to the emotional experiences of the protagonist, and triggers the formation of the empathetic attitude to the suffering heroine.

3.2.4. Move 2. Step 2d: Establishing the solution

Step 2d of the Experiencing a problematic situation move introduces a solution to the problem found by the storyteller. A typical pattern of the triad organization in this step is:

L (F) V^

The Lead introduces a series of actions dealing with the problematic situation, and the Follow (if present) provides additional information which specifies the Lead and solicits the appropriateness of the Valuate. The Valuate, which can comprise more than one sentence, provides their elaborate evaluation, e.g.:

(6) **/L/** … *I started to find* different styles that made me *feel sexier* in other ways. **/L/** Instead of trying to create body features I didn't have, *I started focusing* my look on other things *I liked about my body*. **/V/** Turns out *I love my toned arms and shoulders*, so off-the-shoulder and backless styles have become my weekend go-tos (PA-34).

The excerpt shows that each Lead introduces the action undertaken by the woman in solving the complicated problem she encountered. A repeated use of active constructions positions her as a dynamic and influential force and demonstrates a rational and straightforward approach towards the problematic situation. In other words, the rhetorical and linguistic representation of the heroine endows her with an active role in the context of this step. Furthermore, a victorious image of the storyteller is reinforced here by numerous positive self-evaluations (*feel sexier, I liked about my body, I love my toned arms and shoulders*). Their prevalence reduces the tension accumulated in the previous step and projects an optimistic vision of the outcome.

3.3. Move 3: Establishing the value of experience

The purpose of this move is to inform about the present circumstances of the woman's life and to show how they have been influenced by the experience narrated in the personal account. In other words, the move states the outcome of the story and simultaneously evaluates it, thus uniting two elements of Labov's scheme – Evaluation and Resolution. The prominent

linguistic feature which helps to differentiate this move in the generic structure of the personal account is a shift from past to present tense in narration. This shift indicates a temporal gap between the problematic situation and present reality implying a period of consideration and, consequently, a more objective and unbiased view of the situation. The results of the analysis show that the move embraces two sequential rhetorical steps (see Table 3), with the first one occurring in all texts and the second one – in 12 of them.

3.3.1. Move 3. Step 3a: Indicating self-reward

This usually short step describes a positive influence of the negative event on the life of a woman by showing and justifying beneficial changes which have taken place after resolving the problematic situation. A conspicuous linguistic feature of the step is the use of the present tense and appropriate temporal markers (*now, today*) which imply the "now" and "here" situation correlating with the Setting the scene move (see Example 7 below). Due to the short length of the step, the pattern of developing its meaning includes two elements:

$$L \wedge (V)$$

The Lead is a dominant element which assembles facts about the present life of the woman. It introduces a certain achievement of the storyteller which may be followed by self-evaluation, as in the example below, e.g.:

> (7) **/L/** Except instead of trying to control every possible outcome, I breezily offer extra hugs and improvise with what we have. **/V/** It's a version of myself I literally could not have imagined before. And while I barely remember those first few months of motherhood, what I focus on *now* is how grateful I am that I'm not the mom I thought I would be. I no longer feel the frantic need to spiral about perfection, and I'm not striving for excellence or taking every possible precaution. We are together, we are alive, and that is more than enough (PA-32).

Four sentences in the Valuate statement emphasize here the positive outcome of the story and foreground the protagonist as a triumphant victoress in the battle with difficult life circumstances. This positioning of the heroine obviously evokes the feelings of solidarity in readers, who are forced, due to a particular rhetorical framing of this step, to share her personal appraisal of the story and admire its happy end.

3.3.2. Move 3. Step 3b: Encouraging readers

The objective of this optional step (visible in 12 texts) is to inspire readers to accept and share the approach to solving the life problem experienced by the heroine. This step is predominantly realized in one triad:

LFV

The Lead introduces a conclusion of the story, the Follow elaborates its main idea, and the Valuate asserts and evaluates it, e.g.:

(8) **/L/** *I*'m sharing this story for those women who are currently in a relationship like the one *I* was trapped in for nine long years, and plead with them to confide in someone who'll help you to leave. **/F/** *You* can do it – and believe me, you'll never look back and regret it. **/V/** *You* deserve the best in life – and should never let anyone tell *you* otherwise (PA-12).

A salient feature of this step is a shift from *I*- to *you*-perspective inside the triad. While *I* in the Lead foregrounds the narrator and emphasizes her active and triumphant role, *you* in the second and third elements of the triad seems to primarily refer to readers. As known, the main function of this pronoun is to communicate directly with an addressee by asking questions and influencing him/her in various ways (de Hoop & Hogeweg, 2014). However, in media texts, *you* expresses the striving "to project an empathetic relationship, a community of readers bonded by shared values, feelings and experiences" (Breeze, 2015, p. 38). Indeed, in the above and other similar textual segments, the second person pronoun directly engages the reader into the story told and provokes her empathy and the feelings of solidarity and inclusion, increasing at the same time the trustworthy character of the information and thoughts shared in the account. Furthermore, in the context of the rhetorical step under consideration, *you* also implicitly defines the storyteller as a member of the community of like-minded females. This positioning allows her to show the experience shared in the story as not a unique one but, vice versa, typical of other women, and thus to shorten the distance between the narrator and reader and to construct an illusion of reciprocity.

It should be noted that a similar function of direct involvement is performed by the inclusive first person pronoun *we/us*, which is found in six instances of step 3b, e.g.:

(9) **/L/** As women, as mothers, *we*'ve been trained to take on so much and downplay the struggle that comes with it. **/F/** But here and now, *we* need to stop. **/V/** No one questions that a person recovering from a broken back needs help; *we* need to show our loved ones that healing from a birth sometimes requires just as much care (PA-11).

We serves "to establish a sense of *esprit de corps* between *Cosmo* and its readers" (Conradie, 2012, p. 403) and signals that they are included in the referential scope of the pronoun. In this way, a feeling of community is asserted, which fosters acceptance of the imposed ideas. The readers of the magazine are thus rhetorically constructed not as individuals, but as the members of the *Cosmopolitan* community with a shared set of values and principles.

At the same time, the leading role of the storyteller is emphasized and reinforced by the use of imperative constructions, which often appear together with assertive *I*-statements. Such a combination of syntactic structures promotes her point of view and produces an explicit didactic effect, e.g.: "It's the only things that moves me forward: *You have to say something. You have to ask the kids. Ask the person. Ask the police. Send in a tip. Raise a question.* I had something to say, and I'm saying it now" (PA-5).

However, a simultaneously induced feeling of solidarity and belonging to the community somewhat flattens the instructive tone of the imperatives. The ideas expressed in the personal account are therefore not interpreted as inflicting ones, but rather as suggestions or pieces of advice which offer answers to commonly shared problems.

4. Summary of the findings

Our analysis has revealed that texts of personal accounts consist of three moves which possess a number of conspicuous linguistic features and follow a certain pattern of rhetorical organization. Table 4 below provides a summary of the moves and steps and their linguistic features. This summary can be metaphorically viewed as a generalized "portrait" of the media genre of the personal account.

No	Moves and steps		Sentence triad structure	Linguistic features
1	**Setting the story**			
	1a	Voicing the woman telling her story		The first-person pronoun *I* and possessive pronoun *my*; direct speech in quotation marks; sporadic stylistic devices
	1b	Voicing the editor		Third person narration; elements of social deixis
2	**Experiencing a problematic situation**			
	2a	Outlining the life before a problematic situation	L^ F V	Accumulation of factual information; past tense; positive evaluations
	2b	Indicating events leading to the problematic situation	LF^ (LF^) V	Focus on specific details; structures of contrast and comparison
	2c	Encountering the problematic situation	L F^ V^	Shift from narration to description; negative evaluations and/or words with negative connotations
	2d	Establishing the solution	L (F) V^	Repeated active constructions; positive evaluations
3	**Establishing the value of experience**			
	3a	Indicating self-reward	L^ V	Present tense and appropriate temporal markers; positive evaluations
	3b	Encouraging readers	LFV	Second person pronoun *you*; inclusive *we (us)*; imperative constructions; instructive tone

Table 4. Moves, steps, and their linguistic characteristics.

The first move, Setting the story, embraces the headline and subheadline and starts the unfolding of the account. The communicative purpose of this move is to construct the sociocultural setting, essential for appropriate comprehension of the information in the subsequent functional and structural units. The move is accomplished in one or two steps. The first step voices the woman telling her story as an active and authoritative participant in the communicative situation of the genre in question. At the same time, it induces a feeling of community by establishing friendly and informal atmosphere of communication. The second rhetorical step of this move voices the editor, who is in charge of the story as an influential mediator. By demonstrating friendly relations with the woman narrating her experience and the reader, the editor, on the one hand, supports the narrator and, on the other, reinforces the overall sense of community to which all the partakers (narrator, editor, and readers) are assumed to belong.

The second move, Experiencing a problematic situation, is developed in the main part of the text of the personal account. Its aim is to report a dramatic life experience of the narrator in the situations which are generally typical of women's magazines' readership. The move is realized in four steps. The first step outlines the background of the difficult life situation by introducing the storyteller and sharing some personal (usually positively colored) information about her. The circumstances outlined in this step are rather

common for the *Cosmopolitan*'s readers. The second step indicates the events which lead to a problematic situation. Such events are shown as dramatic, disrupting the normal course of life, and creating the atmosphere of suspense. The heroine depicts herself as deeply suffering from these complications, and, consequently, the feelings of sympathy and compassion are invoked in the reading audience. In the third step, the influence of the problem on the life of the woman is disclosed. The strong emotional potential of this step appears to be a powerful argument in presenting the situation as negative and unacceptable. The atmosphere of compassion and reciprocity is further reinforced here and an affective contact with the reader is established. The last, fourth step introduces the solution chosen by the protagonist of the story. The step emphasizes an active and dynamic approach of the woman towards solving the problem, foregrounds her as a triumphant victoress and solicits readers' agreement by presenting her decision as straightforward and rational.

The third move, consisting of one or two steps, concludes the personal account by focusing on the outcome of the narrated experience. The first step of the move indicates positive changes in the present life of the woman and underscores her achievements, while the second (optional) one appeals to readers' by encouraging them not to fear difficult life situations and to bravely fight for successful solutions.

5. Conclusions and further considerations

Thus, the rhetorical development of the personal account genre leads to two important communicative consequences. First, it foregrounds the storyteller as a rather typical representative of *Cosmopolitan*'s audience who experienced a problematic situation, suffered but succeeded in overcoming it, changed her life for the better, and, as a result, gained an authoritative status. Second, it constructs and unites its readership by providing implications of shared reality and evoking the feeling of community transmuted into a common ground for accepting the ideas in the texts of the genre. Both of these effects undoubtedly contribute to constructing and sustaining such important ideological symbols of *Cosmopolitan* as the "Cosmo girl" role model and a "global sisterhood" (Machin & van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 42) of the magazine's readers who share similar interests and values.

However, it is important to take into account the role of the journalist/editor who carefully chooses the topics fitting the magazine's culture and ideology and ensures their initial framing typical of many media genres. This framing is based, according to Machin and van Leeuwen, upon the "problem-solution" discourse schema as a global model for representation of social practices, adequate to "the spirit of strategic communication that pervades global commercialised culture" (2007, p. 69). Furthermore, as Chen and Machin indicate, "the problem-solution format helps to create a 'can do' attitude, and a sense that the world of glamour, fashion and products presented by the magazine is one of positive identities, values and ideas" (2013, p. 81).

In the genre of the personal account, this dominant organizational schema is developed as a story, in which its heroine first experiences a dramatic situation or event ("problem") but then eventually reaches a happy ending ("solution"). The first-person narrative pattern which underlies storytelling appears to be the most powerful cognitive and sociocultural template for development of the "problem-solution" schema since it brings the narrator into the limelight and shapes her representation of herself as pursuing and reaching the goal in the struggle with different circumstances (Bekar & Yakhontova, 2021, p. 202). The pattern is rhetorically appropriated and further elaborated in the communicative situation of the personal account genre, which is marked by a distinct generic (move-step) structure. Thus, the global organization of the personal account seems to have three layers of its construction, as schematized below:

Genre (move-step) structure

↑

First-person narrative pattern

↑

"Problem-solution" discourse schema
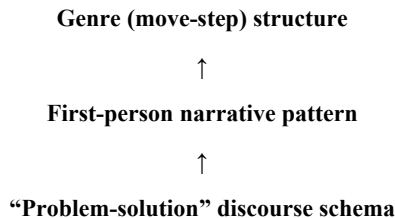
A tight connection between the move-step structure and the first-person narrative pattern, revealed in the present study, seems to influence the degree of variation of the moves and steps in the texts of personal accounts. As it was shown, this degree is quite low since the personal account possesses a rigid and quite predictable generic structure with only two optional steps.

Furthermore, even the linguistic features of the texts are surprisingly similar and steadily recurrent in all texts of the corpus. Overall, the instances of the genre in our corpus produce the impression of the texts based on one rhetorical framework, which seems to be constantly reused. This, however, is not surprising as, according to Bhatia, the purpose of such rhetorical templates is to help readers use media texts "more effectively as a genre" (2017, p. 49). In other words, this predictability produces a special, addictive effect upon the readers: they get accustomed to reading personal stories and start to unconsciously (or subconsciously) accept the ideas and opinions of the issues discussed in the accounts.

Thus, we may conclude that particular rhetorical and linguistic features of the media genre of the personal account, which are marked by a high degree of predictability, ensure effective transmittance of *Cosmopolitan*'s values and ideology. These values primarily include empowering women by offering them, in the case of personal accounts, a role model of a female-victoress who cultivates an individualistic perspective on life, appreciates and foregrounds emotional experience, and seeks expert advice. The transmittance is largely accomplished by producing, sustaining and textually "imprisoning" (Caldas-Coulthard, 1996, p. 250) an ideal community of readers who are implicitly forced to share the values offered through the deliberate and intentionally homogenous strategies of text construction within this genre. Such a community, however, is not unique as all women's magazines strive to create this 'synthetic sisterhood' (Talbot, 1995, p. 143) using personal accounts which possess a quite similar rhetorical structure irrespective of a particular magazine's features (as it has been quantitatively shown in Section 3).

The present study offers new research directions. First, it would be interesting to reveal interdiscursive and intertextual relations of personal accounts with other genres of women's magazines, in particular with "agony columns." Such columns contain letters from readers about their personal problems together with advice on how to deal with them provided by journalists called "agony aunts". Although the first agony column appeared more than 300 years ago, it can still be found on the pages of women's magazines, in *Cosmopolitan* in particular, where it appears under the rubric of "Free therapy." Potentially, it will be possible to compare the communicative purposes of both genres and their influence on rhetorical and linguistic features of their textual realizations.

Second, since personal accounts also occur in men's magazines, it is possible to conduct a cross-gender analysis. It can reveal both similarities in their structure as well as differences in thematic content and emotional accentuation determined by gender ideologies underlying women's and men's magazines.

Finally, personal accounts in women's magazines are constructed within certain cultural contexts and bear the imprints of these contexts, as it has already been shown in a number of studies (e.g., Len-Ríos & Jeong, 2023; Lulu & Alkaff, 2019; Orphanides et al., 2023). However, there remain cultures and territories (e.g., former Soviet countries) where international brands of women's magazines have relatively recently appeared and have not yet become the objects of comparative investigations. In Ukraine, for example, women's magazines are critically perceived (Kitsa & Mudra, 2019), this meaning that their producers have to think of modifying thematic content, ideological values, and conventions to meet the needs of the readers. In view of this, it would be interesting to compare, for example, the features of personal accounts published in Anglophone magazines and their Ukrainian versions (as well as in the versions published in other East European countries).

5. Pedagogical implications

Since the personal account is an extremely popular genre of women's magazines, the magazines themselves and numerous Internet writing resources for freelance writers provide support for readers wishing to produce such accounts. However, this support usually has the form of sample texts and quite general pieces of advice (like "Give a fresh angle to your topic") from experienced writers or editors. In contrast to such recommendations, the results of this study propose " a genre portrait," or a template, which can be used by those providing web-based resources or courses to better assist potential authors of personal accounts. Such a template can make the process of writing personal accounts much more efficient.

Further, the findings of the study, which raise awareness of the function-form relationships within a genre, can be utilized in higher education. In particular, they can be used in university media literacy courses to develop students' critical thinking skills by helping them to understand how global

ideology of women's magazines is coded in the media genre of the personal account. Also, they can be applied in the training of future journalist practitioners to develop their skills of storytelling based on a genre template and also to increase their knowledge of language potential in conveying personal experiences.

The obtained data can be utilized in the courses which focus on genre/discourse analysis to show and explain how the choice of a certain textual structure and particular linguistic means contribute to the overall goal of the genre.

Viewed from a methodological perspective, the research framework adopted in this study can potentially be used in investigating other types of media texts, since the combination of genre, narrative, and content triad analyses with a stylistic approach seems to provide rather deep insights into the functional organization of such texts.

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