



***At an Intersection of Postfeminism and
Neoliberalism: A Discourse Analytical View
of an International Women's Magazine***

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Abstract

Female empowerment, success and agency have become icons of contemporary postfeminist popular culture and especially of women's magazines. While in previous research these notions have been seen as manifestations of a new, popular feminism, more recently they have also been connected to the growing hegemony of neoliberal governance, a mode of power that ultimately aims at an economization of the social and is fundamentally exercised in and through discourse. This article seeks to contribute to the emerging body of research on the interconnectedness of these two phenomena, postfeminism and neoliberalism, by using the example of the German edition of the women's magazine Cosmopolitan. Methodologically the study draws on linguistically oriented discourse analysis. The analysis focuses on the operation of a 'discourse of postfeminist self-management' in two key domains of the magazine: work and sex. Following a multilayered examination, the study concludes that although the discourse of postfeminist self-management evokes a feminist ethos, its logic is that of neoliberal governmentality. Thus the study suggests that rather than feminist action of any kind, what is going on here is gender-specific neoliberal governance, whereby the subversive power of feminism is systematically turned into a productive force for the (self-)production of neoliberalized, entrepreneurial subjects.

Key words: postfeminism, neoliberalism, women's magazines, critical discourse analysis, discourses

1. Introduction

Female empowerment, success and agency have become icons of contemporary 'postfeminist' popular culture. Images of kick-ass career women, an unapologetic emphasis on women's sexual pleasure and advice for self-confidence and self-assertion abound across media genres, but especially in women's magazines. In recent years these features have been viewed as elements of a new 'aspirational feminism' (Winship 1987) and 'popular feminism' (McRobbie 1999; Gauntlett 2002). Even more recently, however, they have been related not only to feminism but also to neoliberalism, or as Rosalind Gill and Jane Arthurs (2006: 443) have put it, to 'the increasing hegemony of a neo-liberal form of governance'. 'Neoliberal governance' denotes a mode of power that seeks to interpellate human beings as entrepreneurial individuals, characterized by ambition, calculation and personal responsibility, as part of a wider 'economization of the social' –

postulated as the golden way to societal wellbeing (Bröckling et al. 2000; Rose 1996: 150-168). Neoliberal governance is a mode of power that fundamentally operates in and through discourse.

So far, the relationship between postfeminism and neoliberalism has remained 'underexplored' (Gill and Scharff 2011a: 7);¹ this article aims to explore further their interconnectedness. For this purpose it uses the example of the German edition of the women's magazine *Cosmopolitan* that, on the one hand, is often regarded as a paradigmatic example of contemporary 'postfeminist' women's magazines (e.g. Winship 1987; Gauntlett 2002; Gill 2007a). On the other, it has been suggested that the *Cosmopolitan* brand reflects a 'neo-capitalist philosophy of life' which points to its being particularly apt in connection with neoliberalism (Machin and Van Leeuwen 2003: 508).

The methodological framework of the study draws on critical discourse analysis (e.g. Fairclough 1992; Pietikäinen and Mäntynen 2009; Wodak 2001). In addition, the study is inspired by the nexus analytical approach, initiated by Ron Scollon and Suzie Wong Scollon (2004). The influence of the nexus analytical approach manifests itself in the study in the theoretical assumption of a circular connection and thus mutual influence between the micro and the macro (cf. Scollon and Wong Scollon 2004: 8) and the analytical attempt to trace the actual connections between these two (cf. Scollon and Wong Scollon 2004: 10-11; Scollon 2005; for further applications see e.g. Hult 2010; Pietikäinen 2010). For this purpose, in alignment with both critical discourse analysis and the nexus analytical approach, the study uses the concept *discourses*, understood here as historically contingent signification practices which signify a particular part of the world from a particular perspective (Fairclough 1992; Foucault 1978; Lazar 2006). From the myriad of different discourses coming together in the data, the analysis focuses on a particular discourse, which I have labeled a 'discourse of postfeminist self-management'. This is a discourse that is not only connected to, but at least partly brought into being by both (post-)feminism and neoliberalism which makes it especially appropriate for an investigation of the interconnectedness of these two. The analysis focuses on the operation of this discourse in the topic areas *sex* and *work* – two central areas in *Cosmopolitan* (cf. Machin and Thornborrow 2003), as well as in contemporary postfeminism more generally. Essentially, the investigation shows how the discourse of postfeminist self-management, while evoking a sense of feminist engagement, seeks to bring about a femininity that, invigorated by a feeling of self-confidence and enthusiasm, will organize itself into a version of the entrepreneurial subject of neoliberalism. Even though the discourse evokes a feminist *ethos*, its *logic* is that of neoliberal governmentality.

The remainder of this article is divided into five main sections. Section two aims to shed light on the social processes which make the appearance of the discourse of postfeminist self-management in the data not only intelligible, but more fundamentally, possible. The first part of the section focuses on processes related to postfeminism, the latter on processes related to neoliberalism. After this, Section three describes the discourse analytical starting points of the study. Section four first gives an account of the data and describes then how the study was carried out. Subsequently, Section five

examines the manifestation and operation of the discourse of postfeminist self-management in the data. On the basis of this multilayered investigation, Section six analyses the connections of the discourse with (post-)feminism and neoliberalism respectively, and considers its implications for contemporary femininity.

2. Two Strands of Social Development

2.1 Signs of Postfeminism

The current meanings of the term *postfeminism* seem to be almost as varied as its uses. However, when referring to it as a strand of societal development,² its core consists of the notion that feminism (as a social movement) not only belongs to the past, but more fundamentally has outlived its purpose, since the major feminist goals like women's right to education, participation in the world of work and access to safe contraception have been reached (Lazar 2005: 17, 18). Postfeminism suggests, as Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (2007: 8) put it, 'that it is the very success of feminism that produces its irrelevance for contemporary culture'. Thus, in a way, despite its ostensible obsolescence today, feminism has become part of our common sense (Gill 2007a: 1) and some feminist ideas, or ideas that resonate with feminism, like empowerment, agency, self-actualization and promotion of women's success, have become characteristic features of the landscape of contemporary postfeminism (cf. Gauntlett 2002; Gill 2007b; McRobbie 2009). That women finally are entitled to have a life of their own and can 'have it all' has become a postfeminist mantra (cf. Lazar 2005: 18; MacDonald 1995: 226).

The increased participation of women in the world of work and (some) women's possibilities of making a career figure in the popular discourse as definite signs of a postfeminist time in which women have become equal to their male counterparts. References to 'genderquake' suggest, furthermore, that not only has equality been achieved, but that the power balance between men and women (or boys and girls) has been reversed (cf. Wolf 1993). Undoubtedly, the domain of work today represents a social domain in which feminist ideas have been taken on board, or, to borrow Angela McRobbie's (2004: 259) expression, 'taken into account'. These ideas have received institutionalized form through the international concept and practice of *gender mainstreaming*, which the German Federal Administration, among others, declares to be its guiding principle (Gender mainstreaming). In Germany there is recognition of the fact that there too women are still clearly underrepresented in leading positions; the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth gives as one of its main goals increasing the proportion of women in leading positions and occupations that offer a future as well as supporting women's return to the labour market after having children (BMFSFJ Gleichstellung). In the field of popular media culture the postfeminist promotion of women's careers finds an expression amongst others in the popular self-help books like *Your career, your way!* (Quast 2007) and *Women in business: navigating career success* (Holton and Dent 2012) and on the pages of women's magazines. Here also the *Cosmo girl* has advanced from a working girl to a career woman – at least in spirit.

If recent developments in the field of work hold out the promise of women's more successful advancement on the career ladder, in the field of sexual relationships the development is essentially characterized by an increased emphasis on women's desire and agency. In this connection, the feminist media scholar Rosalind Gill talks about a fundamental shift in contemporary media culture, namely a move from depicting women as sex objects to their representation and interpellation as actively desiring sexual subjects (Gill 2007b). In Gill's words, the new postfeminist sexual subject is a 'sexually autonomous heterosexual young woman who plays with her sexual power and is forever 'up for it'' (Gill 2007b: 151). An emblematic manifestation of this shift is the HBO series *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), already recognized as a cult series (McCabe and Akass 2004: 2). The series follows the life of four thirty-something female friends in Manhattan, New York. As the title suggests, sex plays a central role in the lives of the 'girls'; not only is it a topic that is frequently discussed over a salad lunch in an up-market restaurant, but the series also presents an active and exciting sexual life as an essential part of the kind of hip and cool subjectivity which the protagonists in *Sex and the City* embody. Another prominent feature of the series is its multiple and ambivalent connections to feminism. Apart from dealing with topics of feminist concern, the series frequently revisits feminist views and attitudes. These two central strands of the series, sex and feminism, are the focus of an article entitled *Orgasms and empowerment: Sex and the City and the third wave feminism* by Astrid Henry. Considering the attitude the series has towards female sexuality – open to experiment, willing to break taboos, with the emphasis on the active role and satisfaction of women – Henry views the series as a postfeminist advocate for 'a woman's right to pleasure' (Henry 2007: 75) concluding: 'Sex and the City reflects an important – if limited – vision of female empowerment, a feminism that mirrors contemporary third wave attempts to celebrate both women's power and women's sexuality' (ibid.: 82). Concluding with these remarks we now leave postfeminism for a while and turn to neoliberal governmentality.

2.2 Neoliberalism as Contemporary Governmentality

Following Foucault (e.g. Foucault 2006), the present study views neoliberalism as a governmentality, as a rationality of government of social actors. In Foucaultian terminology, *government*, paraphrased by Foucault himself as 'conduct of conduct' (Foucault 1982: 220), refers to a mode of power that operates less through suppression than through the production of subjectivity by instrumentalizing the self-steering capacities of human beings (cf. Foucault 1982; Rose 1996: 150-168). Viewing neoliberalism as a governmentality brings two important aspects to the fore. First of all, it directs attention to the social and cultural side of neoliberalism; to the operation of power at the grassroots level of everyday life. Second, it opens up the perspective of actual language use, since, as Nikolas Rose (1999b: 28) has put it, '[l]anguage is not secondary to government; it is constitutive of it.' In spite of this fundamental insight, the analytical potential of investigating actual language use has largely been neglected in more sociologically oriented research on neoliberal governmentality (cf. Kauppinen 2012; Milani 2009). Seeking to contribute to filling this gap, the present study places the aspect of

actual language use in central place and makes it investigable by drawing on linguistically oriented discourse analysis.

In short, neoliberalism represents a political rationality, and further a governmentality that aims at an economization of the social by dismantling welfare state securities on the one hand and strengthening the entrepreneurial capacities of individuals on the other (e.g. Bröckling et al. 2000; Rose 1996: 150-168). In this spirit the report of the committee for future questions of the federal states of Bavaria and Saxony (Kommission für Zukunftsfragen Bayern – Sachsen 1997: III) declared in 1997:

The leading concept of the future is the individual as entrepreneur managing his or her own work skills and providing for his or her own existence. This insight must be made use of, and people's own initiative and responsibility, that is, the entrepreneurial in society, must be developed more strongly. [--] Politics, science and the media are especially needed here. [my translation]

In this context *the entrepreneurial* designates, in the words of Nikolas Rose, 'an array of rules for the conduct of one's everyday existence: energy, initiative, ambition, calculation, and personal responsibility' (Rose 1996: 155). 'The enterprising self', Rose goes on to say, 'will make an enterprise of its life, seek to maximize its own human capital, project itself a future, and seek to shape itself in order to become that which it wishes to be' (ibid.). The ability to generate one's own motivation and enthusiasm is therefore an essential prerequisite for self-steering neoliberalized individual (Bröckling 2007; 2005).

In neoliberalism the autonomy of the self appears thus not as the antithesis of political power but as something that needs to be brought into alignment with political objectives (Rose 1996: 155). In the face of this challenge, neoliberal power works, rather than through coercion or oppression, through well-regulated freedoms, enablement and the empowerment of individuals (e.g. Bröckling 2007; Rose 1996: 150-168; 1999b: 84). Thus, in the field of health, for example, hygienic homes and healthy bodies are still political objectives, but they are no longer governed by state bureaucratic inspections and instructions imposed from above. Rather, contemporary modes of regulation operate on the assumption that people want to be healthy and guide them to seek out the best ways of taking care of their health (Rose 1999b: 86-87). Similarly, in the field of work the key is to align employees' aspirations with the objectives of the organization and so 'through striving to fulfill their own needs and wishes at work, each employee will [--] work for the advance of the enterprise; the more the individual fulfils him or herself, the greater the benefit to the company' (Rose 1999a: 56).

In their historical-comparative study *The new spirit of capitalism*, the French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello (2007) view management manuals for corporate management from the 1990s as a key site of 'the new spirit of capitalism', that is, contemporary neoliberalism, considering these, as Franz Schultheis (2007: iii) expresses it, to be a kind of mirror for social processes evolving in front of our eyes. If one turns one's attention, on the other hand, to the processes, one cannot but observe, as Ulrich Bröckling has put it, the hegemony of managerial thought in nearly every sphere of life (Bröckling 2000: 131). Management is connected, as Otto Nigsch (1997: 418)

notes, with positive associations like clarity, uncomplicatedness, objectiveness, competence and efficiency. Management presents itself, Nigsch (ibid.) adds, as a category of calculated progress, endowed with unquestioned legitimacy. Those who position their activities, whatever these may be, near management, provide them with a new kind of quality that ensures a distinction of a higher order (ibid.). With all this in mind, let us turn next to the discourse analytical starting points of the study.

3. Discourse Analytical Starting Points of the Study

Methodologically the study draws, as already mentioned, on critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1992; Lazar 2006; Pietikäinen and Mäntynen 2009; Wodak 2001) and is additionally influenced by the nexus analytical approach initiated by Ron Scollon and Suzie Wong Scollon (e.g. 2004). *Discourse*, 'language use', is understood as a form of social action which, like other forms, has social effects and consequences, also in a very material sense. On the other hand, discourse is shaped by the social, or, in Jan Blommaert's words, by 'the economic, social, [and] political' (Blommaert 2005: 66). Subscribing to a multimodal view, the study takes *discourse* to comprise besides the linguistic a variety of other semiotic modes, like images (cf. Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996; Blommaert 2005: 3; Scollon and Wong Scollo 2004).

As its main analytical tool the study uses the concept *discourses*, understood here as historically contingent signification practices which signify a particular part of the world from a particular perspective (Fairclough 1992: 3, 4; Foucault 1978; Lazar 2006: 506) and thus 'systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault 1978: 49). Although discourses get realized through language and other semiotic modes, i.e. through discourse, they are understood here as something inherently social and thus irreducible to their linguistic/multisemiotic manifestation. This is seen rather as a sign of their presence (cf. Foucault 1978: 49; Lazar 2006: 506; Pietikäinen & Mäntynen 2009: 51). Due to this two-fold nature, discourses can be used, from the analytical point of view, to investigate the multiple connections between the micro level of actual language use and the wider social, political, economic etc. processes (cf. e.g. Lazar 2006; Pietikäinen & Mäntynen 2009; Scollon and Wong Scollon 2004). It is especially this aspect that makes the concept particularly suitable for the purposes of the present study.

4. The Study Data and Method

4.1 The Data from the German Edition of *Cosmopolitan*

Cosmopolitan, as we know it today, first appeared in 1964 in the USA (Winship 1987: 106). Today, the magazine appears in 64 versions in over 100 countries and holds with its 78 million or so readers the position of the world's bestselling women's magazine (MVG *Cosmopolitan*). The German edition was launched in 1980 and has currently around 350 000 readers, mainly in German-speaking countries (MVG *Cosmopolitan*/Auflagen). The editorial concept of the German version, published around the 25th anniversary of the

edition on the publisher's homepage, conveys vividly the current postfeminist ethos of the magazine as it declares:

Federal Chancellor, supermodel, head of a company, US -foreign minister – nowadays women can become whatever they want. Except for the pope. When COSMOPOLITAN was launched in Germany, such a range of opportunities was still a distant vision. More than 25 years later the COSMOPOLITAN - motto 'stark. smart. sexy.' ['strong. smart. sexy'] has progressed from a guideline to a way of life. The secret of COSMOPOLITAN'S success? Empowerment! Month by month our highly qualified readers are encouraged to have the self-confidence to achieve their goals and make their dreams come true. COSMOPOLITAN is her personal coach in all spheres of life [--]. (MVG Cosmopolitan; translation mine)

The data of the present study are the twelve issues of this German edition from the year 2006. The central spheres of life, or, topic areas, in these data include fashion, beauty, sex, work, relationships and popular psychology. As to the genres of the magazine, over a half of the 200 pages in an average issue consist of straightforward advertisements. The second largest proportion is made up of reviews showcasing among other things the latest fashion and beauty trends, holiday destinations, cars, books, films, and occasionally also men, and reporting the results of the latest research on psychological aspects of sexuality, partnership and work. The third largest share is taken by feature articles, which mainly deal with sex, work, partnership and popular psychological matters and frequently make use of the genres *advice*, *interview* or *biography*. In addition, the magazine offers portraits of successful career women, actors and singers, psychological tests and columns as well as a horoscope, which mainly deals with sex, relationships and work. (For a more detailed description see Kauppinen 2012.)

As I have shown elsewhere (Kauppinen 2012) the discourse of postfeminist self-management figures in all main topic areas of the magazine. To select a sample for a detailed study from the twelve issues, comprising altogether 2518 pages, the data were narrowed down gradually (cf. Mautner 2008). First were selected articles that addressed the topic areas/domains *sex* and *work*; from these was identified the genre *feature articles*; from among these remaining articles were chosen those that were giving advice. In the two final rounds, the selections were made on the basis that the discourse of postfeminist self-management seemed to play an especially prominent role in the texts. The final sample consists of twenty articles, ten of which relate to the domain of work and ten to the domain of sex. The articles are on average four pages in length. Nineteen of the articles are cover stories, which means that there is a catch-line referring to the article on the cover of the magazine. In terms of their structure, the articles of the sample are very similar: After the title there is a lead-in summing up the core message of the article. Then comes (in most cases) an introduction, and after that the body text, which is divided into sections, each containing one particular piece of advice. About one third of the space is taken up with illustrations.

4.2 Method

The discourse of postfeminist self-management can be described as a signification practice that constructs different domains of life as areas in which women can, by dint of expert strategies and tips, independently and self-confidently achieve various kinds of goals related to their own success, happiness and well-being. The discourse was identified through a cyclical process of close examination of the data (at this point the whole year 2006) and investigation of the various contexts in which this is embedded.³ The initial identification was followed by a detailed investigation of the main signs for the presence of the discourse in the data and subsequently an analysis of the linguistic features⁴ through which these signs and the discourse were realized there (now focusing on the sample described above) (cf. e.g. Lazar 2006; Sunderland 2000). On this basis the investigation moved on to the level of operation of the discourse and focused eventually on the connections between the discourse and wider social processes, especially those related to postfeminism and neoliberalism (cf. Lazar 2006; Scollon 2005; Scollon and Wong Scollon 2004: 10-11).

5. *The Discourse of Postfeminist Self-management in the Data*

In this section, we first take a look at the main signs of the discourse in the data and then move on to analyse its operation by using the example of representative articles from the sample. In the data, the discourse of postfeminist self-management finds expression through five central signs, which are:

- constructing discursively a goal oriented ethos, or quite explicitly, goals
- providing ‘strategies’, or different kinds of methods and tricks, for
- achieving the goals
- signifying the goals always as something for the reader herself, often
- attributing to the reader an a priori wish to achieve such goals
- stressing the maximal character of the goals; what is to be achieved with the help of the strategies is nothing less than ‘*maximal* success’ in work and ‘*even more* fun in bed’
- signifying expert strategies, or rather, expert knowledge as a kind of power resource, which enables the reader to achieve ‘her’ goals independently and confidently

How these signs are realized in the actual articles will be examined in detail in the following analysis. Before doing so, I wish to point out that the twenty articles selected from the corpus are highly formulaic. Because the study wishes to convey an idea of how the discourse of postfeminist self-management operates within the scope of the articles, the following

examination focuses on two of the articles as a whole, which I consider particularly telling and representative of the sample, instead of presenting fragments from several articles. The examination that follows focuses first on the domain of work and subsequently that of sex. Bolded text indicates the presence of the signs for the discourse in the data.

5.1 Domain of Work

In the domain of work, the article *Zehn Königswege zum Erfolg* ('Ten Silver Bullets to Success')⁵ (September/2006) offers an illustrative example of the feature articles relating to this domain in the German *Cosmopolitan*. The catch-line on the cover of the issue allures with the promise:

(Excerpt 1)

Souverän ans Ziel. Die zehn effektivsten Erfolgsgeheimnisse der Top-Coaches

Competently achieving your goal. The ten most effective secrets of success of top coaches.

which in the table of contents is presented as follows:

(Excerpt 2)

Zehn Königswege zum Erfolg. Wir haben Top-Coaches nach ihren Karriere-Mantras für den maximalen Erfolg gefragt

Ten silver bullets to success. We have asked top coaches for their career mantras for maximal success

At the head of the article the title proclaims once more:

(Excerpt 3)

Zehn Königswege zum Erfolg

Ten Silver Bullets to Success

after which the lead-in poses the rhetorical and suggestive question in the voice of the reader:

(Excerpt 4)

Wie erreiche ich meine Ziele?

How do I achieve my goals?

and answers immediately in the voice of the editorial staff:

(Excerpt 5)

Wir haben Top-Coaches nach ihrem Karriere-Mantra gefragt

We have asked top coaches for their career mantras

Subsequently, the introduction to the article explains:

(Excerpt 6)

Manche Sätze begleiten uns ein ganzes Berufsleben lang. Weil sie zeitlos sind, in unterschiedlichsten Situationen anwendbar, aber trotzdem immer den Kern der Sache treffen. Um **solche markanten Leitformel** für den Job zu finden, haben wir **führende Berater aus dem deutschsprachigen Raum** gebeten, uns **ihre wichtigste Maxime** preiszugeben und zu erläutern. Denn sie alle haben im Laufe ihrer Coaching-Karriere jeweils **eine zentrale These herausgefiltert, die die Quintessenz ihres umfangreichen Wissens und ihrer Erfahrung darstellt. Das Ergebnis unserer Recherchen wird Sie sicher weiterbringen.** Viel Erfolg!

Some phrases accompany us throughout our professional life. Because they are timeless, applicable in the most varied situations, but still always get to the heart of the matter. To find out **such important leading formulas** for the job, we asked **leading consultants in the German-speaking region** to share with us and explain **their most important maxims**. For each of them has **crystallized one central thesis in the course of his/her coaching career which represents the essence of his/her comprehensive knowledge and experience. The result of our inquiry will certainly help you on.** We wish you success!

In these first parts of the article the discourse of postfeminist self-management finds expression primarily through a multiple repetition of the two central signs of the discourse: the construction of a goal oriented ethos, or goals, (effected e.g. through the final structures *ans Ziel* ('achieving your goal') and *zum Erfolg* ('to success')), and the subsequent or preceding reference to means (i.e. to 'Königswege' ('silver bullets') and 'Karriere-Mantras' ('career mantras') with the help of which the goals can be achieved. As to the success that can be achieved, what is at stake, as emphasized in the table of contents (Excerpt 2), is not just success, but indeed *maximal* success. As the rhetorical question asked ostensibly in the voice of the reader, *Wie erreiche ich meine Ziele?* ('How do I achieve my goals?') (Excerpt 4), further suggests, what is going on here is not just offering the reader the possibility of achieving success in her career, but of realizing her own wish to achieve her own goals in her working life. In addition to these features, the discourse of postfeminist self-management expresses itself through the signification of expert knowledge, or 'mantras', as exceedingly effective, as an esoteric power resource, which for its part will enhance the feeling of power and competence that has already been evoked. Besides the references to the 'most effective secrets of success of top coaches', 'silver bullets', 'important leading formulas' and 'leading consultants', the feeling of power is boosted by the description in Excerpt 5, which evokes the image of the reader as sovereign in her empire and of the experts as courtly advisers who give her the best advice possible in that realm. The metaphor *Königswege* and the adverb *souverän* ('confidently') also contribute to the feeling of effortless and competent advancement.

The attempt to assist the reader in her professional life expressed here in the frame of the discourse of postfeminist self-management might well evoke a feeling of feminist engagement. What the discourse also does, however, is to

create an idea of work as a domain of life in which it all boils down to the ability to confidently and competently pursue one's own goals and head for maximal success (whatever that may be) by utilizing what are alleged to be exceedingly powerful expert strategies.

The remainder of the article *Zehn Königswege zum Erfolg* presents and explains the ten 'career mantras' of the ten 'top coaches', each in its own section. These include for example the advice entitled *Wechseln Sie Ihre Perspektive* ('Change your perspective') by Sabine Dembkowski, founder and leader of The Coaching Center, which advises the reader to align her activities at the workplace to the goals of her boss in order to gain more recognition at work. The advice *Zähmen Sie Ihren Perfektionismus* ('Tame your perfectionism') by Susanne Alwart, economist and coach, tells the reader to abandon her alleged addiction to perfection (or rather: meticulousness) and to adopt new principles in order to be more effective. Others give advice about how to appear self-confident and become more self-assertive, how to overcome frustration, stress, anxiety and unhappiness, and how to push one's market value and build networks. What these many instructions have in common is that they invariably guide the reader to work on herself; change and modify her attitudes and behaviour, get rid of her allegedly usual habits, learn new skills. And even more importantly, the ways of acting and modes of thinking she is advised to adopt are entirely compatible with those expected from entrepreneurial employees in the contemporary world of work (cf. e.g Boltanski and Chiapello 2007; Bröckling 2007).

5.2 Domain of Sex

In the field of sex, the article *Der Venus Code* ('The Venus Code') (July/2006) offers a telling example of articles relating to this domain in the data. The catch-line on the cover of the issue promises:

(Excerpt 7)

Der Venus Code. 44 Frauen verraten ihre Geheimnisse für noch mehr Spaß im Bett

The Venus Code. 44 women reveal their secrets for even more fun in bed

The table of contents repeats the same promise and after that, in the actual article, the title highlights once more the hint at mysterious female sexuality:

(Excerpt 8)

Der Venus Code

The Venus Code

Subsequently, the lead-in to the article elaborates on the preceding hints with:

(Excerpt 9)

Die eine führt ein Sex-Tagebuch, die andere bringt sich mit erotischen Hörbüchern in Stimmung: 44 Frauen verraten ihre

HEISSESTEN STRATEGIEN FÜR NOCH MEHR SPASS IM BETT – und erzählen hemmungslos ehrlich, welche erotischen Fantasien sie haben und was ihnen himmlisch guten Sex beschert.

One keeps a sex diary, another gets herself into the mood with erotic audio books: 44 women reveal their HOTTEST STRATEGIES FOR EVEN MORE FUN IN BED – and tell uninhibited and honestly what erotic fantasies they have and what brings them heavenly sex.
[upper case in the original]

Also in this article the discourse of postfeminist self-management finds its most prominent expression through the two central signs: the construction of goals and the reference to strategies for their achievement. With the comparative final structure *für noch mehr Spaß im Bett* ('for even more fun in bed'), setting the goal in this case the discourse implies that the women in question (and the reader) certainly already have a lot of fun in bed but that they can still have even more. Indeed, it can be *heavenly sex* (Excerpt 9). The expression *verraten ihre Geheimnisse* ('reveal their secrets') (Excerpt 7) creates an aura of esoteric knowledge around the tricks and strategies of the women, as does the title of the article, *Der Venus Code* ('The Venus Code'), which refers to love techniques. The two parts of the title open, however, in two different directions: on the one hand, both the main noun *Code* and the attributive noun *Venus* connote to something esoteric and mystical, the latter through an association to the female goddess of love in Greek mythology. On the other, the main noun *code* also refers to something mathematically exact, and indeed, like the noun *Strategien* in Excerpt 9, it takes us back to the field of management. Especially the word *Strategien* suggests a peculiarly technical relationship to (one's own) sexuality. Building on this technical notion, like it was something completely natural, the superlative *heißest* ('hottest') suggests that the strategies 'revealed' by the 44 women may indeed be the most effective ones that women can deploy to boost their sex life.

The body of the article consists of 44 small quotes allegedly from the 44 women mentioned in the opening of the article. One, highlighted by means of a bigger font, the disclosure of 'Julia, 32' well conveys the atmosphere:

(Excerpt 10)

Tabus sind tabu. Wie soll ich wissen, was Spaß macht, wenn ich nicht alles mindestens einmal ausprobiere?

Tabus are tabu. How shall I know what is fun if I don't try out everything at least once?

The open and curious attitude towards female sexuality and the attempt to help women to live their sexuality more intensely and in various ways that *Cosmopolitan* in general and the article *Der Venus Code* in particular show finds obvious resonance with feminist approaches manifest also in contemporary popular culture, as for instance the afore mentioned study by Astrid Henry (2007) on the series *Sex and the City* indicates. Sex has to be *fun!* asserts the feminist motto there. Here, however, in the power field of the discourse of postfeminist self-management, there is a different emphasis: Sex *has to be fun!* – and that all the time and for ever more, the message suggests

here. Although the notion of female sexuality remains strictly heterosexual and the allegedly radical ideas do not reach much further than trying out new positions or watching porn, in *Cosmopolitan Germany* female sexuality is given the form of a never-ending tour of discovery for 'even more fun in bed'. Curiosity and the wish to expand one's boundaries become a prerequisite for the quest. The kind of sexual subjectivity that the discourse of postfeminist self-management seeks to evoke here seems strongly reminiscent of that constructed in the women's magazine *Glamour*, as shown in a study by Rosalind Gill (2009) and it also resembles the figure of 'sexual entrepreneur' that Laura Harvey and Rosalind Gill have examined drawing on the makeover show *Sex Inspectors* (Harvey and Gill 2011).

In the article *Der Venus Code*, the introduction following the lead-in (Excerpt 9) introduces a slight change in the goal that is set. Instead of the rather profane aspiration for 'even more fun in bed', it suggests a more general and higher goal, namely, becoming happier. The introduction reads as follows:

(Excerpt 11)

Haben Sie sich schon mal gefragt, **warum manche Frauen so glücklich aussehen? Warum sie eine so sinnliche Ausstrahlung haben? Dieses gewisse Leuchten in den Augen? Und wieso sie hin und wieder verträumt in die Ferne blicken? Ihr Geheimnis ist: Sie haben sensationellen Sex. Sex, der auf sie wirkt wie ein Lebenselixier – vorher, hinterher, währenddessen.** Wir haben solche Frauen nach **ihren besten Tricks und Tipps** gefragt. Lassen Sie sich inspirieren!

Have you ever wondered why some women look so happy? **Why they radiate such sensually? That certain glow in their eyes? And why they every now and then look so dreamily into the distance? Their secret is: They have sensational sex. Sex that affects them like an elixir of life – before, afterwards, along the way.** We have asked such women for **their best tricks and tips.** Let them inspire you!

The introduction makes clear that the 44 women sharing their secrets here are not just any randomly selected women, but women who definitely have something over 'us' others in that, they seem always happy. Notwithstanding the obvious difference between 'us' and 'them', the encouragement at the end of the lead-in *Lassen Sie sich inspirieren!* ('Let them inspire you!') suggests that by employing the 'best tricks and tips' of these women offered here the reader too can achieve the same condition of everlasting happiness. Thus, sex gets changed from a goal into a means that can be used for achieving and maintaining an enduring feeling of pleasure. It is depicted as an activity that extends its vitalizing effect in all dimensions of time, as the adverbs *vorher*, *nachher* and *währenddessen* ('before, afterwards and along the way') suggest. However, for the effect to persist the means need to be used often enough. And consequently, as the 'tricks and tips' presented later in the article indicate, 'sex' is by no means restricted to one's own bed, but rather it is something one can do anywhere and all the time. Indeed, only one of the four sections into which the tips in the article are divided deals with sex in the usual sense of the word. Others encourage the reader to sleep naked to feel sexy as soon as she wakes up in the morning, to keep a sex diary, to listen to

erotic audio books and to go shopping without any underwear on for more excitement in her everyday life, to buy wine and candles on holiday trips to get herself into the mood later on with her man, and to draw on memories and fantasies to find motivation for her everyday tasks. Sex activities like this thus contribute to filling the time left over from actual sex. And consequently, not only is she mentally preoccupied with sex 'before, afterwards [and] along the way', but sex activities occupy her everyday life, driven by the desire for perpetual happiness.

6. Conclusions

The aim of this article was to investigate the interconnectedness of two current social phenomena, postfeminism and neoliberalism, in the context of contemporary popular media culture. For this purpose, we have, so far, examined the operation of a discourse of postfeminist self-management in two key domains, work and sex, in the German edition of the women's magazine *Cosmopolitan*. In this concluding section we will look at the connections of the discourse with (post-)feminism and neoliberalism respectively and consider its implications for contemporary femininity.

Viewed against the background of the patriarchal notion of the woman existing 'only for and through her husband and children' (Friedan 1963: 41) on the one hand and the feminist-informed encouragement of women to have a life of their own and 'the self-confidence to achieve their goals and make their dreams come true' (MVG *Cosmopolitan*; cf. Friedan 1963), the discourse of postfeminist self-management clearly resonates with feminist discourses. Especially is this the case in the domains of work and sex, where women's success and women's 'right to pleasure' (Henry 2007: 75) have been (and still are) of central feminist concern. At the same time, the discourse of postfeminist self-management may well evoke a sense of empowerment associated with control, competence and agency. If the discourse evokes a sense of feminist engagement, it also corresponds to the logic of neoliberal governmentality which, instead of operating through coercion or obligation, works through calculated guidance of the 'self-realization' of 'autonomous' individuals (e.g. Rose 1996; 1999b: 86-88). This is the modus operandi of the discourse of postfeminist self-management be it about the (self-)production of aspirational employees, the (self-)regulation of female sexuality or the (self-)production of subjects, able and willing to produce and maintain their own motivation and happiness in their daily lives like in the articles examined above. Likewise, the suggestion that one should not be satisfied with anything less than maximal success, continual happiness and ultimate sexual pleasure could be read as signs for a kind of 'aspirational feminism' (Winship 1987: 106) or 'power feminism' (Wolf 1993). On the other hand, however, 'the ethics of lifestyle maximization (Rose 1999b: 160), or, as Angela McRobbie has put it, 'the encouragement to achieve 'complete perfection'', play a crucial role in the contemporarily 'dominant discourses of governmentality' (McRobbie 2009: 70). Through the (never-ending) pursuit of (ever more) success and happiness, the femininity the discourse of postfeminist self-management seeks to evoke here gains the shape, not only of *one* project, but of a configuration of overlapping projects. In the process, the happy woman's

actions become directed exclusively towards the improvement and modification of her self. Emotions – happiness, fun, anxieties, frustrations – only appear as technically manageable entities to be enhanced, overcome or transformed, all according to requirements. What is advocated and required, then, is nothing less than a thoroughgoing rationalization of the self.

Thus, although the discourse of postfeminist self-management may evoke a feminist *ethos*, its *logic* is that of neoliberal governmentality. While evoking a sense of feminist engagement, it seeks to bring about a femininity that, stimulated by a feeling of self-confidence and enthusiasm, will form itself into a version of the entrepreneurial subject of neoliberalism. In other words, rather than feminist action of any kind, what is going on here is gender-specific neoliberal governance, whereby the subversive power of feminism is systematically turned into a productive force for the (self-)production of entrepreneurial subjects (cf. Bröckling et al. 2004: 14). If, as Ulrich Bröckling (2007: 54) has remarked, the enterprising selves do not exist on their own but are instead an effect of permanent mobilization, the women's magazine constitutes through its regular appearance a particularly potent medium for their evocation. And, evidently, it is specifically women who make up the target subjects.

Notes

- 1 See, however, Gill (2007b; 2009); Gill and Scharf (2011b); McRobbie (2009) and Peck (2008).
- 2 In addition to this, *postfeminism* is sometimes used to refer to the strands of academic feminism drawing on poststructuralism and postmodernism (cf. Brooks 1997) as well as, in the plural, to a variety of new feminist movements, the best known of which may be Naomi Wolf's *power feminism*, whose foundation she laid in the early nineties in the bestseller *Fire with fire. The new female power and how it will change the 21st century* (Wolf 1993). All these newer directions are occasionally also referred to as third way feminism. (For a critical account of these distinctions see McRobbie (2009: 156-159).)
- 3 The discourse of postfeminist self-management seems to play a vital role not only in the data of the present study but also in the whole format of *Cosmopolitan* as well as in other contemporary women's magazines, as the studies of David Machin and Theo van Leeuwen (2003) and David Gauntlett (2002) indicate. Furthermore, it definitely figures in the fairly recent, but rapidly expanding genre of make-over shows (cf. Gill 2007b; McRobbie 2009) and in the continuously growing field of self-help, or rather, self-management literature (cf. Gauntlett 2002).
- 4 As it soon became clear that this discourse manifests itself first and foremost through the linguistic (and not the visual, i.e. images) the examination concentrated on linguistic features.
- 5 The meaning of the German expression *Königsweg* (lit. 'king's road') approximates to the English expression *silver bullet* in so far as it denotes an easy and uncomplicated solution to a problem. What this translation leaves out, however, is the reference to kingship and the idea of a road. The former is crucial here in that the article plays in different ways with the notion of kingship, or rather 'queenship': The photos show a female model posing in a 'sovereign manner' with a severe expression on her powdered white face and her hands on her hips, wearing a crown and heavy jewellery, dressed in a glamorous evening dress. Also

the adverb *souverän* in Excerpt 1 and the description in Excerpt 6 connect to this imagery. The idea of a road, in turn, contributes to the notion of getting ahead.

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