

FRAMING FEMININE BEAUTY THROUGH PERSUASIVE METAPHOR IN ADVERTISING MEDIA DISCOURSE

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Summary

This study investigates the metaphorical representation of women's beauty in post-modern media advertisements, particularly Cosmopolitan magazine (June 2023 – June 2025). Although previous studies have analysed metaphor in advertisements and gender language, few understandings exist on how different arrangements of conceptual metaphors, ontological, orientational, and structural, function in upmarket fashion magazines to shape consumer consciousness and consolidate gender ideologies. Drawing from Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis, this study analyses 50 advertisement texts to categorise and understand trends of metaphors. The findings show a dominance of ontological metaphors (e.g., WOMAN IS FOOD, WOMAN IS ANIMAL) that essentialize and objectify women and orientational metaphors (e.g., BEAUTY IS UPWARD MOVEMENT) that stem from neoliberal ideals of self-change. Structural metaphors (e.g., BEAUTY IS TRANSFORMATION, BEAUTY IS FIGHT) are less frequent but occupy significant positions in conceptualising beauty as a struggle to be transcended by way of discipline and consumption. These metaphorical strategies do more than represent beauty, but actively work towards the building of gendered norms and consumer selves. The thesis promotes metaphor studies and media linguistics as it uncovers how figurative language use in beauty advertising represents and regurgitates prevalent cultural ideologies. It also opens up possibilities for cross-cultural and multimodal research into metaphor in framing media discourse.

Key words: Cosmopolitan, framing, media linguistics, critical discourse analysis, conceptual metaphor theory, gender ideology.

DOI <https://doi.org/10.23856/7102>

1. Introduction

Beauty in contemporary media culture is no longer merely depicted as a norm of appearance but is indeed discursively constructed and commodified in and through robust discursive processes, above all, among them, metaphor. The persuasive force of metaphorical language in media texts of advertising and in beauty discourse directed towards women, in particular, remains a very captivating field of interdisciplinary study at the intersection of conceptual linguistics, discourse analysis, and media research. Capitalising on the seminal conclusions of *Conceptual Metaphor Theory* (CMT) formulated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphor has increasingly been viewed no longer as a stylistic feature but as a natural process of human cognition permitting speakers to conceptualise abstract entities in terms of more concrete, bodily-based ones. In the conceptual theory, metaphors are classified into:

- ontological (e.g., *body as container*),
- orientational (e.g., *up = good, down = bad*),

- structural (e.g., *argument is war*).

Each of them has varying cognitive and communicative functions (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; Kövecses, 2020). Such metaphors are highly used in advertising, specifically in media targeting female consumers, where emotional appeal and identity construction take centre stage. As scholars like Forceville (2016), Charteris-Black (2019), and Pérez-Sobrino et al. (2021) argue, metaphorical strategies in visual-verbal advertising discourse serve not only to explicate abstract notions but to evoke culturally shared values, thereby shaping consumer attitudes and behaviour. In beauty media language, metaphors routinely draw on domains of conceptual meaning like war, transformation, nature, and light to present beauty as not just achievable, but also commodity-like and morally desirable (Beshlei, 2020). Recent studies have shown the metaphor's role in health (Semino, 2021), politics (Charteris-Black, 2014), and cross-cultural advertising (Kövecses, 2020), yet metaphor use in gendered beauty advertising discourse, and in iconic media like *Cosmopolitan* specifically, remains relatively unexplored.

2. Main text

This study aims to show how beauty is *not only represented but framed* in a way that meets commercial, cultural, and gendered stories. It is both a contribution to the study of metaphor and to critical media analysis in the sense that it connects metaphor typology to real campaign persuasiveness strategies within an influence-saturated media environment.

The empirical material consists of 50 advertisement texts, selected from the digital editions of the American magazine *Cosmopolitan*, between June 2023 and June 2025. The study reflects current trends in beauty discourse, shaped by shifts in gender roles, influencer culture, and post-pandemic consumerism. The findings will address previously underresearched aspects of conceptual metaphor in mass communication and clarify persuasive strategies in media discourse.

To analyse how metaphors frame beauty in media texts, a complementary combination of *Conceptual Metaphor Analysis (CMA)* and *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)* is employed here. Conceptual Metaphor Analysis, founded upon Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) seminal framework, provides a step-by-step approach to identifying and categorising metaphors into orientational, ontological, and structural, thus unveiling the underlying cognitive processes shaping how beauty is presented. However, to fully understand how these metaphors operate in social and ideological processes on a grand scale, Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2013) is required. It enables us to examine ways in which metaphorical language in magazine advertisements interacts with prevailing ideologies, gendered representations, and persuasive appeals that underlie cultural assumptions about femininity and consumerism.

Cosmopolitan routinely features advertisements alongside articles promoting the latest fashion and beauty ideals with the aim of influencing women's consumer decisions. However, these magazines routinely perpetuate traditional gender stereotypes by portraying women as members of a so-called 'weaker sex' whose primary social value is being attractive, slim, and well-groomed. The discourse of ideal beauty, defined in large part in terms of the physical body, demands a perpetual attempt to better oneself, and very frequently pairs beauty with such things as gym usage and living a disciplined, health-conscious lifestyle. The thin body, too, is very often portrayed as a marker of social status and success. Recurring topics in these magazines include *self-preservation* (e.g., yoga, skincare routines, fashion), *body modification* (e.g., cosmetic injections, fillers, facial shaping exercises), and the creation of a *consumerist way of life* structured around temporal cycles, such as holidays, weekends, and vacation periods.

Collectively, these reports constitute a gendered ideology of beauty that is commercial and culturally prescriptive, represented by 3 types of conceptual metaphors.

Ontological metaphors (50%) arise from basic bodily and sensory experiences, enabling abstract concepts to be understood through concrete entities, accounting for the largest part in our corpus. In the context of beauty discourse, they reflect how women are conceptualised by establishing metaphorical correspondences between the domain of womanhood and more tangible or familiar categories. This study identifies several recurring metaphorical mappings in *Cosmopolitan* magazine, including:

- WOMAN IS FOOD;
- WOMAN IS AN ANIMAL;
- WOMAN IS A CHILD;
- WOMAN IS ARISTOCRACY.

They are not neutral or decorative; rather, they subtly encode and reinforce specific ideologies about women's roles, values, and behaviour.

Cookies and candies evoke specific associations (e.g., sweetness, softness, attractiveness), which explains their figurative use to refer to beautiful women, as shown in the excerpts. They are usually decorated to make them more appetising. This use of creams, toppings, and syrups improves the appearance of these sweets, making them more visually appealing. Interestingly, women's magazines often resort to depicting cookies and candies in fashion articles, which leads to the establishment of a parallel between icing and creams with clothing and makeup, since their primary function is to decorate the appearance of cakes and women, respectively: “Hey, **cookie**, Cape Cod called! – it wants you (and all these pretty classic items) to come for a visit!” (*Cosmopolitan*, 2023). Similarly, ingredients commonly used in making sweets tend to become metaphors used to identify women in these magazines: “**Honey**, it's simple: Just moving, talking and thinking” (*Cosmopolitan*, 2023). Along with the properties described, the use of such ingredients likely corresponds to the youth of these women. It is interesting to note how women's desirability is viewed from a culinary perspective.

Another important aspect of the ideological basis of the metaphor WOMAN IS FOOD is that most of the terms belonging to this group represent women as desserts. Thus, by representing women as a separate or detached part, as a fragment of something, they are deprived of their uniqueness, because, after all, a piece of cake is the same as another piece of cake. The very lexemes *pie*, *piece*, *tart* and *cake* carry within them hints of disorder, accessibility and lightness. Therefore, although associations with sweetness, softness, delicacy, and beauty may lead readers to perceive these food metaphors as affection or even compliments, an analysis of the assumptions underlying the use of such language products shows that, in many cases, food disguises sexual desire.

One of the most common metaphors in the English language applies animal characteristics to women and their activities. These animal depictions correspond to the three main categories with which women are identified in women's magazines: domestic animals, farm animals, and wild animals. Being kept for pleasure rather than profit and living under the same roof as their owners, pets occupy a privileged position in the animal world. Indeed, pets are not considered beasts; they are taken for walks, petted, and fed. This attitude towards pets finds its way into language, as the word *pet* itself is used as a term of endearment.

The word *bitch* is probably one of the most common terms of shame for a woman. Nevertheless, this term of abuse appears in women's magazines in articles that encourage women to be assertive. “Men Accuse Women of Not Being Witty – Just **Bitchy**” (*Cosmopolitan*, 2024). Interestingly, the reversal of the submissive role traditionally attributed to women takes the

form of an animal in these publications, as if to single out strong women from the human group. Animal metaphors mark the animal/human dichotomy and are often used to encode aggressive behaviour.

Similar considerations are observed in the work with the metaphorical lexeme *cat*. Unlike dogs, cats are known for being cunning, independent, and even treacherous, and they have traits that a woman does not value. The metaphorical use of a kitten instead symbolises the beauty and sexuality of a woman. In addition, the small size is also a positive quality to endow the metaphor with positive connotations. At the same time, the typical image of kittens playing is reflected in its figurative use, because the examples imply playfulness: *“This season’s staple strand style for all sex kittens: coooooomphy roots, pushed up and pinned, with a ruffled texture that you would get after a night in bed”* (Cosmopolitan, 2024).

Bird names are a rich source of metaphors, the most common of which are chickens: *“Things Every Cosmo Girl’s Gotta Ditch From Her Life. These bad little habits, phobias, and self-sabotaging moves could be holding back a fabulous chick like you”* (Cosmopolitan, 2025).

In light of some articles, one might venture to say that under the metaphorical chick, there is a hidden sexual component. Indeed, chicks are applied to young women: *“When to marry is a huge decision in most women’s lives, these days, many sexy single Cosmo chicks are putting off getting hitched”* (Cosmopolitan, 2024).

Animal images used for women usually present them as small, helpless animals that need care and protection and whose primary function is to entertain and feed. However, the image of women as wild animals does not fit this model. Wild animals turn the tables instead of cats, dogs, chickens, or hens because they are no longer cute animals that create company or can be used for human benefit, but are threatening and dangerous.

The fox is a prototypical example of a wild animal known for agility and cleverness. Furthermore, *fox* and the adjective *foxy* imply hunting. This is interpreted as if women dressed and groomed themselves to pursue men, which can create the illusion of the woman as the hunter and the man as the prey. Aggressiveness is the main characteristic to encode this metaphor, referring to successful businesswomen: *“Victorian Vixen Sarah Jessica Parker in this funky twist on romantic style”* (Cosmopolitan, 2025).

In other cases, the fox carries the idea of a predator waiting for its prey. Relationships are often depicted in terms of hunting. As can be seen, most animal terms metaphorically depict the man as the hunter, while the woman takes on the passive role of prey. However, when the roles are reversed, i.e. the woman takes on the active role of hunter, she is depicted as a threatening animal, as if hinting at the inappropriateness of such power, as can be seen in the following passages in which women take on the role of a relationship: *“It’s been a massive year for those feisty foxes”* (Cosmopolitan, 2023).

The metaphor of WOMAN IS AN ANIMAL foregrounds instinctive behaviour, depicting humans as consisting of a rational part (subject) and an emotional part. This metaphorical theme suggests that what distinguishes humans from other species is their rational capacity, such as their ability to control their behaviour. According to this belief, there is an animal within every human being, and civilised humans should restrain their animal instincts, allowing their rational side to dominate them.

Depicting women using the metaphor of a *baby* is another semantic device that glossy magazines often use to represent women. Such words can certainly evoke favourable associations in the encoding of the metaphor. Typically, babies evoke feelings of tenderness and protection in us; therefore, the metaphor can be established based on affection. However, specific nuances are conveyed based on such metaphorical identification when considering the actual

use in women's publications. Babies are defenseless and need to be protected because they are unable to do anything on their own, which may explain the metaphorical use of the child in these articles that encourage women to take the initiative in finding a job, working, or buying new clothes, as shown in the excerpts below: “*Work it **baby!** Make your Saturday job work for you*” (Cosmopolitan, 2025).

Children and play are inseparable concepts, because people usually play with babies. From this perspective, baby and child can be shortened as ‘doll’. Dolls, in turn, activate associations of fun and pastime, as opposed to more serious matters, and at the same time suggest physical beauty: “*If you really want to be his **sex-rated boudoir babe**, read on for some sure-fire ways to fuel his lust, for good!*” (Cosmopolitan, 2023).

Among the ontological metaphors, we find metaphorical images of otherworldly supernatural beings, such as sirens, dark angels, and vampires. Although most people associate sirens with beautiful women, these mythological creatures lured sailors to destruction with their singing. This seductive quality has been preserved in its figurative use, and, in light of these examples, the siren conveys the idea of a powerful sexual attraction: “*International sex **siren***” (Cosmopolitan, 2024).

Another creature used to identify female beauty is the vampire. Vampires are associated with eternal youth and are also metaphorically applied to a woman who treats herself to food: “*A **vampy** sex symbol*” (Cosmopolitan, 2024).

Overall, ontological metaphors conceal deeper cultural assumptions about femininity by presenting them as natural or self-evident. They play a significant role in shaping societal perceptions of women, *framing them as objects to be admired, controlled, or idealised*. Ultimately, these metaphors help construct and sustain gendered worldviews in contemporary media discourse.

Structural metaphors (20%) are verbalised through the frames of *transformation* and *struggle*. These metaphors construct beauty not as an innate quality but as something that must be actively *achieved* and *maintained*, primarily through consumer practices. Two dominant conceptual metaphors emerge in this discourse:

- FEMALE BEAUTY IS TRANSFORMATION;
- FEMALE BEAUTY IS FIGHT.

Through these metaphorical frames, the media encourages women to view beauty as a process of self-reinvention, made possible by purchasing cosmetics, fashion items, and personal care products. Advertisements position these products as gateways to a more glamorous, fulfilling version of oneself. For instance, the fragment “*The most sensational place to wear satin is your lips*” (Cosmopolitan, 2020) links consumption with sensual pleasure and self-expression.

Moreover, the *language of combat* is often employed to emphasise the challenges women face in maintaining socially accepted beauty standards. Phrases like “*Hair is **under attack***” (Cosmopolitan, 2018) and “*You have the tools to **fight back***” (Cosmopolitan, 2019) metaphorically frame beauty routines as battles in which women must defend or restore their appearance. Hair, in particular, is frequently depicted as a site of weakness or failure, dryness, split ends, or dullness, serving as signals of neglect that require immediate intervention.

Advertisements also use emotionally charged language to encourage identification with a particular product or lifestyle, as seen in the slogan “*Beauty breaks all rules*” (Cosmopolitan, 2018), which suggests that purchasing the advertised product is an act of empowerment and nonconformity.

Structural metaphors in beauty advertising are deeply intertwined with consumer ideology. They do not merely describe a product’s features but construct a narrative in which women

are invited to transform themselves through consumption, often framed as a personal challenge or conquest. These metaphors both reflect and reinforce broader cultural discourses that equate femininity with constant self-improvement and discipline.

Oriental metaphors (30%) in *Cosmopolitan's* beauty discourse are frequently expressed through spatial and directional lexemes such as *lift*, *boost*, *push*, *light up*, and *top*. The most common metaphoric mappings are:

- BEAUTY IS MOVING UPWARD;
- BEAUTY IS MOVING FORWARD.

They convey the idea that beauty requires upward and forward movement, aligning physical appearance with *progress*, *improvement*, and *elevation*, all of which frame beauty as an aspirational goal. For instance, the phrase “You will **light up** every room you walk into” (*Cosmopolitan*, 2025) equates feminine beauty with light and radiance, suggesting a woman’s presence transforms the space around her. Similarly, “When the money is **high**, take a woman **to the top**” (*Cosmopolitan*, 2025) employs financial and spatial metaphors to construct a hierarchy in which the woman ascends through association with wealth.

In other cases, orientational metaphors are directly tied to the physical body and personal care. The slogan “**Lift it, boost it, own it**” (*Cosmopolitan*, 2024) refers to hair care but simultaneously invokes themes of *empowerment* and *self-mastery*, suggesting that upward movement in appearance leads to increased self-confidence. Likewise, “Drama? Sometimes I like to **push it**” (*Cosmopolitan*, 2025) uses the verb *push* metaphorically to indicate agency and boldness in style or personality, aligning assertive behaviour with a desirable feminine identity.

These orientational metaphors consistently promote a cultural ideal in which women are expected to strive for improvement, advancement, and ‘*rise*’ above perceived shortcomings. They normalise the belief that beauty is a continuous process of climbing, enhancing, and optimising. This framing reflects broader neoliberal ideologies that link self-worth with productivity and visible success, even in the domain of physical appearance.

Moreover, when viewed alongside **ontological** and **structural metaphors**, a broader pattern emerges: ontological metaphors often depict women as fragile, luminous beings, sources of emotional or visual comfort, while structural metaphors introduce more dynamic or even threatening roles, such as the woman as poison or warrior, suggesting power through transformation and conflict. All metaphor types, however, converge on the idea that beauty is a process of becoming, often requiring financial investment, effort, and conformity to evolving aesthetic standards.

The findings of this study, including the predominance of ontological metaphors in *Cosmopolitan's* beauty advertisements media discourse, resonate with the outcomes of earlier studies in *media linguistics*, *gender discourse*, and *conceptual metaphor theory*. As Pérez-Sobrino, Littlemore, and Houghton (2021) observe, metaphorical language in advertisements is accountable for attracting attention and establishing affective resonance, usually by broadcasting abstract values such as beauty, power, or transformation in embodied, concrete experiences.

This study’s exploration of metaphors such as WOMAN IS FOOD, WOMAN IS ANIMAL, and WOMAN IS ARISTOCRACY shows how women are still portrayed in advertising texts as desirable *objects of consumption*, *control*, or *possession*. These findings echo Lazar’s (2006) *feminist critical discourse analysis* of advertising, which illustrates how empowering ads frame traditional gender hierarchies through the objectification of the female body and the construction of beauty as a woman’s primary value. In this case, ontological metaphors not only dehumanise but also create a false sense of intimacy between the consumer and the product by rendering the female subject tangible and purchasable.

Orientational metaphors such as BEAUTY IS MOVING UPWARD also support the rhetoric of individualised self-improvement that is central to *postfeminist and neoliberal discourses* (Gill, 2008). Such metaphors are in keeping with the cultural mandate of self-improvement through consumption, where upward movement serves as a metaphor for achievement, bliss, and social advancement. This discourse aligns with Littler's (2013) "*success myth*," which equates physical beauty and self-control with moral worth and thus implants capitalist and patriarchal ideologies in the guise of choice and empowerment.

Structural metaphors (BEAUTY IS TRANSFORMATION, BEAUTY IS WAR) are less common in the dataset but ideologically significant when they do appear. They frame beauty as a place to be worked toward, even fought for, something that requires effort, sacrifice, and discipline. This is to support Charteris-Black's (2019) argument that metaphors in media discourse are powerful tools to normalise challenging behaviour. In beauty discourse, metaphors legitimise the repeated use of products as an indispensable struggle in a woman's life.

3. Conclusions

This study provided empirical proof of how language, in the form of metaphorical building blocks of beauty, reflects, but also reinforces, cultural ideologies on gender, identity, and consumerism. The presented metaphorical trends signal a deeper tension within today's media: whereas women's magazines traditionally market themselves as empowerment spaces, their language is still caught up in highly gendered, market-driven paradigms. Beauty is not offered as an individual choice or as personal expression, but as a social duty to be accomplished through discipline, makeover, and consumption.

This study contributes to the broader discipline of metaphor studies by demonstrating how metaphors function within one specific genre: women's glossy magazines. It blends cognitive linguistics and critical discourse analysis. Based on CMT and CDA, **further research** has the potential to explore how imagery, composition, colour, font, and body positioning in advertisements converge with metaphorical language to create a unified persuasive message. It would involve *multimodal discourse analysis* that would help to interpret the way visual and linguistic metaphors co-construct meaning within media texts.

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