

Selling Synthetic Sisterhood: Legitimation Strategies of Entrepreneurship on MLM Corporate Websites

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Digital entrepreneurship is often positioned as a way for women to “have it all.” This is exemplified in the rise of multilevel marketing companies (MLMs) that rely heavily on the Internet to recruit and sell and are often targeted toward women. However, MLMs are often derided as pyramid schemes. This qualitative study aimed to examine how MLMs leverage their websites to rhetorically frame MLMs as legitimate operations. Through the examination and analysis of the visuals and texts of 10 different MLM corporate websites from 2019 to 2022, our results reveal that MLM corporate websites use gendered framing and appeal to entrepreneurship as an important component of their legitimation discourse. Using Van Leeuwen’s legitimation strategies as a framework, we identified six key themes at work in the MLM legitimation rhetoric.

Keywords: multilevel marketing, corporate websites, entrepreneurship, legitimation discourse, gender

The rise of smartphone applications and related Internet-based technologies has been accompanied by an increased interest in the so-called gig economy, in which workers labor in one-off arrangements with no guarantee of continued employment. Some workers seek these arrangements for flexibility or as a “side hustle,” while others may struggle to find other types of work (Abraham, Haltiwanger, Sandusky, & Spletzer, 2018). Similarly, these and other forms of creative labor via social media are valorized as entrepreneurial (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). This digital entrepreneurship is often positioned as a way women can “have it all” and balance work with traditional family life (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 9).

In recent years, the networked aspects of social media have intersected with societal trends toward a gig economy to produce a rise in multilevel marketing companies (MLMs) that rely heavily on the Internet to recruit and sell. Multilevel marketing is a subset of direct selling or network marketing business models that rely on recruiting new participants in a complex system of uplines and downlines to move products. MLMs have existed for decades, and like current discourse around creative work on social media, they have

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often used entrepreneurship rhetoric to attract participants and project legitimacy (Carl, 2004). Many well-known MLMs, such as Avon and Mary Kay cosmetics, are targeted toward women and are sometimes framed as home-based businesses (Amundson, 2008).

Direct selling schemes, including MLMs, are big businesses, generating more than \$35.2 billion in retail sales in 2019, with 6.8 million people acting as direct sellers, 74% of whom are women (Direct Selling Association, 2020). Monthly surveys of direct selling companies conducted by the Direct Selling Association during the COVID-19 pandemic suggest that direct sellers overall (60%) found the pandemic to have had a positive impact on company revenues as of January 2021, perhaps because of changing consumer habits and an increase in online shopping (Direct Selling Association, 2021a).

Despite these financial figures, MLMs often face skepticism about their legitimacy as business operations. Cults often use rhetoric to legitimize their existence and persuade members to join (Erickson, 2019). Multilevel marketing (MLM) companies have often been described as cult-like because of the rhetoric they use to legitimize their presence in the business community and to appeal to potential consultants. For instance, recent pop culture entertainment includes the Showtime series *On Becoming a God in Central Florida* (Funke & Lutsky, 2019), where the main character engages in an MLM, ultimately ruining her life. The creators of the show conducted extensive research with former MLM employees about the companies' "dark underbelly" (Lynch, 2019, para. 1). The Amazon Prime docuseries, *LuLaRich* (Furst & Nason, 2021), exposes MLM company LuLaRoe for its numerous lies, subpar product offerings, and dysfunctional working environment (Yuko, 2021). Perhaps most tellingly, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission provides guidance on its website about MLMs and pyramid schemes, directly tackling the issue of legitimacy:

Most people who join legitimate MLMs make little or no money. Some of them lose money. In some cases, people believe they've joined a legitimate MLM, but it turns out to be an illegal pyramid scheme that steals everything they invest and leaves them deeply in debt. (Federal Trade Commission Consumer Advice, n.d., para. 7)

While MLMs' business structures primarily exist in their networks of independent sellers, a more typical corporate entity often exists at the top of that structure. One tool MLMs use to rhetorically reinforce their legitimacy and attract new sellers is their corporate websites. As living documents combining visuals and texts, corporate websites exist in conversation with stakeholders, as they represent corporate values in response to stakeholder needs and societal expectations (e.g., Argyriou, Kitchen, & Melewar, 2006; Hong & Rim, 2010). Therefore, corporate websites are a form of discursive corporate image branding. To date, there is limited research on how MLMs use their corporate websites to rhetorically frame their legitimacy, although existing research demonstrates the centrality of entrepreneurship to MLMs' framing of their legitimacy to attract potential independent consultants or sellers (Carl, 2004). Given this, this study focuses on how MLM corporate websites frame their business operations to project legitimacy and the roles that cultural myths about entrepreneurship, as well as gender and religion, play in these strategies. We sought to qualitatively identify and assess themes that emerged from MLM corporate websites to help us better understand how MLMs use their corporate websites for corporate brand imaging and to provide insight into the gendered aspects of such rhetoric.

Literature Review

Corporate Legitimacy, Websites, and MLMs

Stakeholders bestow legitimacy on corporations by continually evaluating corporate practices against societal expectations and norms. The process of legitimization, or the search for approval or public buy-in, is constructed through discourse (Ho, 2021). For example, Castelló and Lozano (2011) found corporate discourse within the annual sustainability reports of 31 companies used to bolster the companies' legitimacy. Legitimation has also been part of corporate discourse in times of corporate crisis (e.g., Beelitz & Merkl-Davies, 2012; Florio & Sproviero, 2021; Ho, 2021). Van Leeuwen (2007) identified four major categories of legitimation strategies in discourse: authorization, such as pointing to traditions, customs, laws, and institutional authority; moral evaluation, or legitimacy derived from value systems; rationalization, or highlighting purposefulness and effectiveness; and mythopoesis, or stories in which legitimate actions are rewarded and nonlegitimate ones are punished. These strategies are used in various corporate discourses. For example, Ho (2021) examined the interviews of disgraced Theranos CEO Elizabeth Holmes, finding that Holmes used various Van Leeuwen's legitimation strategies in her rhetoric.

Corporate websites have been examined for their strategic use in corporate brand imaging—that is, discursively framing the organization's image and values for various stakeholders—in various contexts (e.g., Bravo, de Chernatony, Matute, & Pina, 2013; Hong & Rim, 2010; Jonsen, Point, Kelan, & Griebble, 2021; Tang, Gallagher, & Bie, 2015; Wei, 2020). One component of corporate brand imaging relevant to this study is recruiting, a type of corporate brand imaging, as the organization must seek to attract talent by presenting itself as a desirable place to work. Because an organization controls its own website's messaging, corporate websites are an integral part of the branding process for job seekers to form perceptions of an organization's culture (Jonsen et al., 2021).

Additionally, the discursive framing encapsulated in corporate websites is a type of impression management work. The corporate brand imaging process that takes place via corporate websites can be understood as a bid for legitimization. Stakeholder skepticism can make the attempt to achieve "license to operate and goodwill in the public eye" (Podnar & Golob, 2007, p. 336) difficult. How well organizations perform this balancing act of portraying their values with the reality of life in their organizations can affect perceptions of corporate legitimacy (Jonsen et al., 2021; Windscheid, Bowes-Sperry, Jonsen, & Morner, 2018). For MLM companies, achieving corporate legitimacy is an especially fraught process.

Direct Sales and Multilevel Marketing: Some Definitions

To better understand MLMs, a brief history is helpful. The Direct Selling Association (2021b) defines direct sales as a direct-to-consumer retail channel in which independent consultants affiliate with a parent company to sell goods and services through personal relationships and direct consumer interactions. Consultants are paid through sales commissions and may develop a network of other direct sellers to expand their income.

MLM is a subset of direct sales in which a consultant's compensation partly depends on the sales success of the consultant's recruits, and their recruits' recruits, known as a downline (Kong, 2002; Vander

Nat & Keep, 2002). These levels of so-called uplines and downlines, or networks of relationships among the consultants based on who recruited whom to the company, lend the scheme its name. Madame C. J. Walker pioneered the classic pyramid structure associated with MLMs in the early 1900s to sell beauty and hair care products designed for African American women (D'Antonio, 2019). However, Keep and Vander Nat (2013) attribute the model's modernization to the Nutrilite empire, now part of Amway. The Food and Drug Administration investigated Nutrilite's inflated product claims throughout the 1940s, meaning that MLMs' legitimacy has been scrutinized for decades.

The hierarchical nature of MLMs' reward systems encourages an entrepreneurial approach to expanding the consultant's downline to maximize returns (Vander Nat & Keep, 2002). The model shifts many organizational costs and responsibilities to these independent consultants, including much of the marketing and sales efforts and workforce recruiting. As such, the parent organization must regularly and actively "convince their network marketers that what they are doing is for the benefit of their friends, not at their expense" (Kong, 2002, p. 51). For example, Koroth and Sarada (2012) conducted a survey of MLM distributors and found that almost 70% of distributors enrolled simply because of pressure from their friends, family members, and colleagues.

MLM companies' outsourcing of major operational functions somewhat mirrors tech companies' gig economy, in which independent contractors match with tasks via an app—such as DoorDash, Fiverr, or Uber. However, while both MLM consultants and gig workers are compensated as independent contractors, MLM consultants uniquely bear the burden of developing networks of downlines and clients. In the gig economy, existing relationships between the "gigger" and the consumer are not necessary; the company acts as a mediator of the transactions. In contrast, MLMs rely on consultants to develop entire markets for them.

Whether this manipulation of existing relationships brings about positive outcomes may depend somewhat on the economic systems in which the individual consultant operates. As Droney (2016) pointed out in his ethnographic study of MLMs in Ghana, many distributors feel as if they genuinely help their community. Schiffauer's (2018) ethnographic study of Amway distributors in Siberia points to a reliance on community and kinship that forces people to join MLMs but also keeps them there. On the other hand, Mullaney and Shope (2012) discovered that because U.S.-based MLM consultants engage in work that "attempts to redefine all of the major characteristics of work" (p. 137) in their economic system, consultants must engage in additional emotional labor on top of their sales work to manage their relationships and to prove the validity of their work.

Although MLMs predate the Internet, social media have proven beneficial as a medium for consultants to leverage their personal social networks. D'Antonio (2019) firmly positions the MLM model within consumer culture, in which consumption and material purchases are key indicators of the consumer's social standing and identity. Petersen (2021) points out how the rhetoric used by women wellness bloggers, especially mothers, through social media platforms persuades their followers to trust these bloggers, sometimes to their detriment. In turn, the renewed visibility and prevalence of MLMs afforded by social media have pushed MLMs once more into the public eye, increasing their potential for societal impact, for good or ill. Indeed, the unwelcome experience of being approached by an old acquaintance via social media to participate in an MLM is a common enough experience to be an Internet meme (see the r/antiMLM community on Reddit for examples).

Entrepreneurship and Legitimizing the MLM

Because of their structure, MLM companies are often confused with pyramid schemes—an illegal business model. The Federal Trade Commission uses the *Koscot* test to distinguish pyramid schemes from legal MLMs (Vander Nat & Keep, 2002). A pyramid scheme will often have a high buy-in cost and a compensation structure based almost entirely on recruiting new participants unrelated to actual sales (Vander Nat & Keep, 2002). Leggings purveyor LuLaRoe, which infamously encouraged consultants to purchase thousands of dollars' worth in inventory and then refused to refund or buy back the unsold product, may have crossed the line (D'Antonio, 2019). To remain on the legal side of the law, an MLM's compensation plan must be tied to actual retail sales (Vander Nat & Keep, 2002). Because MLMs and pyramid schemes look essentially the same from the outside, MLM companies must pursue corporate legitimacy in the eyes of potential consultants and consumers to remain in business. This is where MLMs' corporate websites can offer us a fruitful site of inquiry to better understand the legitimization strategies MLMs enact to achieve corporate legitimacy through their brand imaging.

Previous research indicates that one key discursive strategy MLMs use in their recruiting rhetoric is to frame the opportunity as entrepreneurship (Carl, 2004; Martin & Rawlins, 2018), appealing to potential participants' desire for autonomy, flexibility, and self-defined success. Carl (2004) found that MLM organizations use the frame of entrepreneurship to associate the organization with positive cultural values of independence and initiative to project legitimacy. The Trade Group Direct Selling Association (2019) calls direct sellers "American entrepreneurs in the truest sense of the word" (para. 5).

Entrepreneurship as Cultural Value

Thanks in part to cultural values embodied in the cultural myth of the American Dream and its associated hard work and "bootstraps" mentality toward economic success, entrepreneurs have achieved a hero-like status in U.S. culture, imbued with characteristics like individualism, innovation, and creativity (Marwick, 2013). Entrepreneurship studies have long understood the importance of discourse, including organizing myths and metaphors, for entrepreneurs' identity construction and guiding performance (Roundy & Asllani, 2018).

Lippman, Davis, & Aldrich (2005) noted that societies with higher wealth gaps are associated with higher levels of entrepreneurship. They identified a distinction between necessity entrepreneurship and opportunity entrepreneurship, with the former being a sort of last-ditch effort to secure an income, when other more traditional work arrangements are unsuitable or unattainable, and the latter requiring the financial resources and flexibility to take advantage of a specific opportunity. Perhaps due, in part, to the widening economic gap and workplace uncertainty in the United States (Kessler, 2018), an Ipsos survey conducted on behalf of the Direct Selling Association indicates that 77% of Americans are attracted to the idea of flexible, entrepreneurial income opportunities, with especially high interest among the Gen Z and Millennial generations (Direct Selling Association, 2020).

While an individual entrepreneur has classically been defined as a person who starts a business, often incurring some financial risk (Lazear, 2005), scholars in entrepreneurship studies have recently argued for widening the concept to include various other conceptualizations. In an examination of the gig economy,

Kessler (2018) describes an entrepreneurial spirit that attracts many workers to these arrangements: “a willingness to try new things, to hustle, to start a business, and, when that [doesn’t] work to start another business” (p. 27). Guercini and Cova (2018) define an unconventional entrepreneur as someone who recognizes an opportunity to marry their passion—often derived from consumption practices, including hobbies—with their work or to develop an income stream. They note that such unconventional entrepreneurship is often prevalent in information-rich societies, as it helps individuals gain a sense of stability in the face of workplace precarity and instability.

Women and Entrepreneurship

Women often associate entrepreneurial success with the “ability to live their passion”—which can include spending more time with family—and understand “economic growth as a means to an end rather than being the ultimate goal for their businesses” (Dean & Ford, 2017, p. 190). Likewise, Duffy and Hund (2015) identified a performance of entrepreneurial femininity among bloggers and Instagram influencers that emphasized having a passion for one’s career over purely economic motives. This may be in part because of internalized cultural messages about gender. Gherardi (2015) noted an implicit assumption within Italian women entrepreneurs’ discourse about their work that women are first responsible for balancing work and family, reminiscent of neoliberal feminism.

In conjunction with the Western idolization of entrepreneurs, increasing economic inequality, and new possibilities fueled by technological innovation have come an increasing awareness of the side hustle—additional work one takes on during one’s free time. There is often an implied goal of merging that passion-based “side hustle” with a primary source of income. In a study of discourse from websites aimed at entrepreneurs, Roundy and Asllani (2018) found that consumer-facing marketing and digital entrepreneurship opportunities, including new business models around social media, are dominant themes in contemporary entrepreneurial discourse. Duffy (2016) calls women’s entrepreneurial side hustles based on content creation for digital and social media aspirational labor—that is, engaging in creation and consumption activities with a belief that the effort will pay off in the future. This concept is reminiscent of the known literature on MLM recruiting rhetoric, in which prospective consultants are encouraged to sign on to sell with the hope of future economic success.

Thus, based on the preceding, the following research questions are posed:

- RQ1: What themes emerge in how MLM companies use their websites to frame participation in the MLM for potential sellers as entrepreneurship?*
- RQ2: How do MLM websites appeal to gender in terms of entrepreneurship?*
- RQ3: How are MLMs using their websites to legitimize their company in the minds of potential consultants?*

Methods

To answer these questions, 10 MLM companies were identified for inclusion in this study. Companies were selected to reflect the variety of scopes in products, longevity, and global footprints in the MLM space. These were Amway, Thirty-One Gifts, Stella & Dot¹, Paparazzi, Young Living, Scentsy, Mary & Martha, Norwex, Isagenix, and Pampered Chef. See Table 1 for a brief description of each company. We sought to include companies that were not solely targeted toward women (e.g., Amway, Isagenix, Norwex) and to exclude some long-established MLMs (e.g., Mary Kay, Avon). We also excluded some MLMs already known to be controversial at the time of this study (e.g., LuLaRoe). The final 10 MLMs selected for analysis represent various product categories and market segments in the MLM space. We made these selections for our results to be more representative of the “MLM corporate website” construct as a whole, rather than an analysis of a particular company. A summary of the MLMs can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Multilevel Marketing Companies in the Study.

Company	Start	Headquarters	Products
Amway	1959	Ada, MI	Nutrition, Beauty, Home & Sports
Isagenix	2002	Gilbert, AZ	Dietary Supplements
Mary & Martha	2013	Siloam Springs, AR	Tableware, Books
Norwex	1994	Lillestrøm, Norway	“Green” Cleaning
Pampered Chef	1980	Addison, IL	Kitchenware
Paparazzi	2010	St. George, UT	Jewelry & Accessories
Scentsy	2004	Meridian, ID	Fragrance Systems
Stella & Dot	2004	San Bruno, CA	Jewelry & Accessories
Thirty-One Gifts	2003	Columbus, OH	Purses, Totes, Bags, Decor
Young Living	1993	Lehi, UT	Essential Oils

Analytical Process

We took a qualitative, inductive approach to our analysis of these MLM corporate websites. In doing so, we relied on Pauwels’ (2012) six-phase multimodal framework to “address cultural aspects of websites” (p. 250) for our initial coding process and identification of emerging themes and then applied Van Leeuwen’s (2007) framework of legitimation strategies to further refine our analysis. Pauwels’ (2012) six phases for website analysis are: log initial reactions to website content; note specific features; gain a deeper understanding of various signifiers, including verbiage used, design choices, selected visuals and auditory components; determine the website’s point of view; detail the layout and navigation of a website; and finally, understand who or what the culture is that contributes to the creation and evolution of a website. We engaged in these steps through a holistic process.

In the first phase, after the 10 MLMs companies were selected, the authors reviewed each website, identified the key layout and navigation elements of the websites, and discussed our initial reactions to the

¹ Stella & Dot moved to a “brand ambassador” model in late 2019, after initial data collection, wherein the company handles order fulfillment (Chiquoine, 2020).

sites' content. We discovered that each of the 10 MLM corporate websites had some version of an "about us" page and a "join us" page. For consistency across these 10 websites, we further analyzed each MLM corporate website's home page, the "about us" page (typically corporate history and mission), and the "join us" page (details about becoming involved in the MLM). The pages of each of the 10 MLMs' websites were screen captured as images for further analysis in two phases, first in August and September 2019. The rest of the coding process was developed based on these screen captures. We later captured new images of the same websites three years later, in 2022, for comparison pre- and post-pandemic.

The second phase of our inductive process was to gain a deeper understanding of the specific features and various signifiers present on these corporate websites, as Pauwels' (2012) framework for website analysis suggests. Our first step in this phase was to review the collected screenshots to identify emergent themes from the websites' points of view, which we could use as a framework to record our observations. We next applied that framework to the website of a company not included in the final analysis (makeup MLM company Mary Kay) as a practice coding session to help us make further refinements. After this, we individually engaged in a close reading of the screenshots, examining the texts, visuals, and other design elements of the 10 MLM corporate websites' home pages, "about us" pages, and "join us" pages. We recorded our observations as thick descriptions in spreadsheets based on the emergent themes of aspiration, gender, social desire, work/life balance, entrepreneurship, and appeals to outside authority. Finally, after recording the thick descriptions of the screen shots' elements and themes, we discussed our individual observations and applied Van Leeuwen's (2007) framework of legitimization strategies to help us further refine our observations from the qualitative coding process into the results described in the next section.

Results

After comparing the website versions from 2019 to 2022, we observed that the updates were largely cosmetic, refreshing design, and imagery (see Figure 1). Therefore, we discuss the results here holistically.

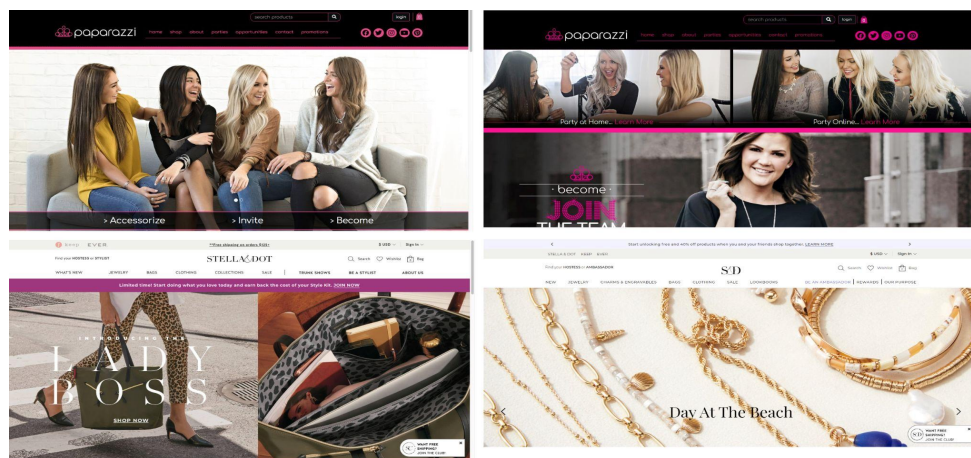


Figure 1. The Paparazzi home page in 2019 (top left) and 2022 (top right), and the Stella & Dot home page in 2019 (bottom left) and 2022 (bottom right; Paparazzi Accessories, n.d.; Stella & Dot n.d.-a).

Van Leeuwen's (2007) framework provided a structure for identifying the relationships among the emergent themes we identified in our close reading of the website screenshots. In doing so, a complex picture of MLMs' corporate websites as a locus for rhetorically framing legitimacy emerged. In answer to RQ3, we found that these websites relied on all four of Van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimation strategies—specifically, authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis—through a combination of appeals to outside authority, intangible cultural desires, such as "sisterhood," and the cultural myth of the entrepreneur to appear as legitimate business opportunities. In this section, we present examples of these legitimation strategies. Van Leeuwen (2007) explained that these strategies may at times overlap, and we see this in MLM corporate websites' attempts to legitimate their business models. We begin by discussing appeals to outside authorities and subsequently discuss appeals to cultural desires and myths.

Authorization: Accreditation, Memberships, and Endorsements

We observed that many of the MLMs employed the legitimation strategy of authorization by pointing to institutional authority via membership in outside professional organizations, including the Direct Selling Association. In some cases, the depiction of a series of logos across the bottom of the website appeared intended to exhibit gravitas, while other companies pointed to endorsements and partnerships for the same purpose (see Figure 2). The Amway (Figure 2, top left) and Isagenix home pages (Figure 2, bottom left) include logos of the Better Business Bureau along with those of the Direct Selling Association, which Young Living (Figure 2, bottom right) also featured on its home page. Pampered Chef's home page (Figure 2, top right) disclosed its affiliation with Berkshire Hathaway to emphasize its credibility. By appealing to these external organizations, the MLMs claimed their legitimacy by proxy—that is, by authorization.

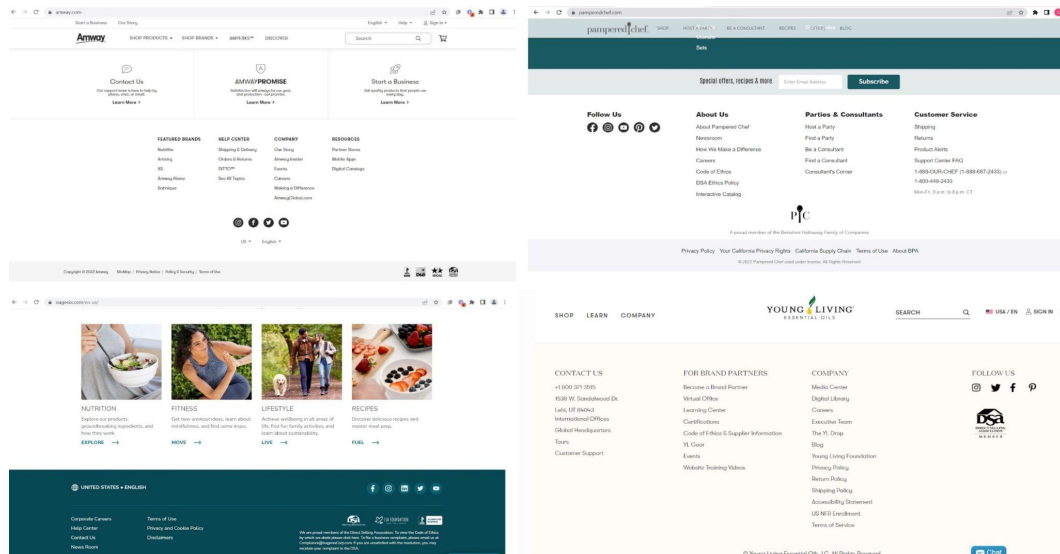


Figure 2. Composite image of screenshots of the home pages of MLMs featuring the authorization legitimation strategy (Amway, n.d.-a; Isagenix, n.d.-b; Pampered Chef, n.d.-b; Young Living Essential Oils, n.d.-a).

Rationalization and Moral Evaluation: Numbers, Trainings, Policies, and CSR

Many of the MLMs included in the study also employed the strategy of rationalization, framing their legitimacy through numbers and statistics, such as boasting the number of years they had been in business or through timelines and measurement of company progress (e.g., number of consultants, parties held, products sold, conference attendees, company growth; in one example, Paparazzi Accessories claimed they grew 900% in six months to motivate potential consultants). Amway proclaimed themselves “one of the world’s largest direct selling businesses” (Amway, (n.d.-b, para. 1), while others offered several reasons to join their venture (e.g., an embedded video outlining 12 reasons to join Mary & Martha, and eight reasons why someone should work for Pampered Chef).

The legitimation strategy of rationalization also overlaps with that of moral evaluation. We see MLMs touting various ethics policies, educational and training programs, advisory councils, FAQs, and money-back guarantees to assuage potential consultants’ concerns about joining. All of these are intended to project an image of reputability and signal to potential consultants that their investment will pay off (but no specific income guarantees). Additionally, many of the MLMs included in this study claim interest in corporate social responsibility, a common strategy even among mainstream businesses to promote goodwill. Many of these MLMs tout a “giveback” mission and claim partnerships with nonprofits, such as Feeding America, Make-A-Wish, and Dress for Success. Language tying altruism and capitalism is common, including phrases like “make a difference and an income” (Norwex, n.d.-a, para. 9). This language is reminiscent of how Greek life campus organizations often have a philanthropy—a charitable cause around which sorority activities can center. By combining numbers, ethics, and altruism, the MLMs present themselves as a locus for appealing to the potential consultant’s higher self.

Moral Evaluation and Mythopoesis: “Kit”-Start a Journey to Rewarding Entrepreneurship

RQ1 questioned how the companies presented their MLM as a form of entrepreneurship. As discussed, the concept of “entrepreneur” functions as a cultural myth loaded with moral weight related to cultural perceptions regarding the value of some types of work over others. The myth of entrepreneur also comes loaded with gender-based expectations. Our analysis indicates that tapping into these moral evaluations and mythopoesis is a central, powerful legitimation strategy for MLMs.

First, as may be expected, the MLM websites are centered on funneling potential consultants through the pipeline to become committed consultants. The websites’ “join us” pages emphasize the convenience of joining, often presenting some form of “1, 2, 3 steps to join” (see Figure 3).

Perks & Benefits

How to Sign-up

Enrollment Kits

Testimonials

FAQs

JOIN TODAY

GET STARTED IN 1, 2, 3

Become a Consultant and launch your business in a few easy steps.

1. **Sign Up**
Enroll online in just 5 minutes

2. **Select Your Kit**
Choose from options full of bestselling products.

3. **Start Selling**
You're officially open for business!

JOIN TODAY

SPECIAL MINI KIT OFFER
Start your new biz for just \$31 (a \$92 value)

Figure 3. The 2022 capture of the *Thirty-One Gifts* "join us" section claims to get consultants started in 1, 2, 3 [steps] (*Thirty-One Gifts*, n.d.).

Each MLM has various seller kits, presented with language claiming to help consultants jump-start their entrepreneurial journey, encouraging readers to "design the life you love" (*Thirty-One Gifts*, n.d., para. 1) with just the click of a button. Potential consultants are repeatedly told that they have the potential to earn free products, transform their financial future, and bring life-changing solutions to homes around the world. Buttons are labeled with action-oriented phrases, such as "Join Today" or "Register Now" (see Figure 4). All of these tap into the cultural myth of entrepreneurship to legitimize the MLM in the eyes of the potential consultant.

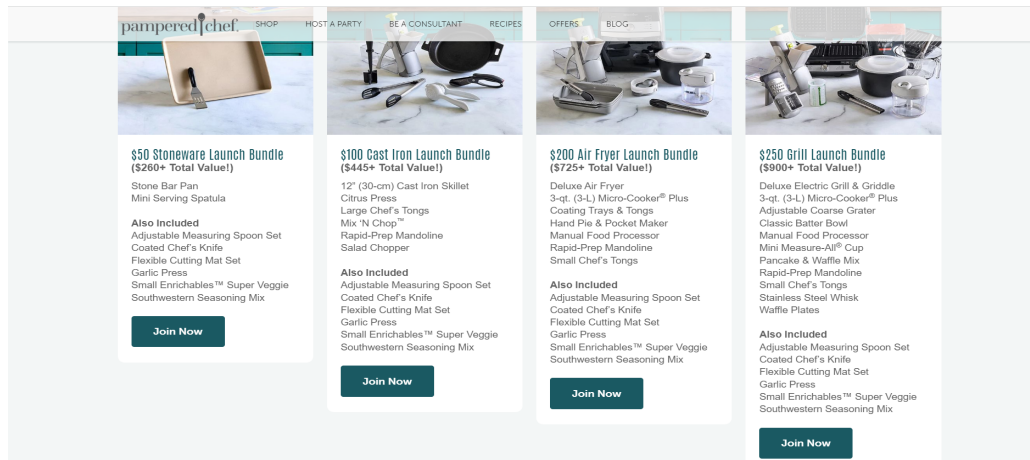


Figure 4. The 2022 capture of the Pampered Chef "join us" page displays the various starter kits available (Pampered Chef, n.d.-a).

Lest the website appear too pushy, this language is tempered to emphasize low risk or effort. For example, in the 2019 iteration of its website, Pampered Chef asked, "Wouldn't it be great to make money talking to people about how much you love [Pampered Chef]?" (Pampered Chef, n.d.-a, para. 1). These MLMs seem to walk a fine line between presenting romanticized notions of what it means to be an entrepreneur, in keeping with the legitimation strategy of mythopoesis, while not overpromising results, which could result in legal difficulty. A key theme that emerged was presenting the MLM as an opportunity for achieving work-life balance by framing the MLM as a hybrid of romantic notions of success and benefits, with a side of practicality. The claims are loaded with gendered approaches.

In an article by feminist scholars Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg (2020), the authors provide insights into their interpretations of the concepts of postfeminism, popular feminism, and neoliberal feminism. Of particular relevance to this study is Rottenberg's idea of neoliberal feminism, born out of the idea of postfeminism or the idea that feminism is no longer needed because of the many positive changes that have occurred for women. However, this is often masked by discrepancies in society that suggest that women are still in a double bind; that is, they can work, but they also must appease societal norms. Neoliberal feminism suggests that women are responsible for their own well-being, especially as it relates to maintaining a work-life balance. Scores of examples of this language of neoliberal feminism (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020) were apparent in the rhetoric of most of the MLM websites in this study.

A few examples of calls-to-action on these sites that mirror the language of neoliberal feminism include, "dream more achieve more" (Thirty-One Gifts, n.d., para. 1), "set your personal goal and go for it" (Isagenix, n.d.-b, para. 4), "make your promise for a brighter future" (Norwex, n.d.-b, para. 6) "step out of your comfort zone" (Paparazzi Accessories, n.d., para. 2), "be your own boss" (Mary & Martha, n.d., para. 7), "Life is about moments. Don't wait for them. Create them" (Scentsy, 2018, 0:48). In other words, the MLMs subtly—and not-so-subtly—guilt women into participating using this language of neoliberal feminism.

Numerous companies pile it on by showcasing emotionally keyed videos (see Figure 5) about consultants who claim they went from one lifestyle to another better one via the MLM they work for (as their “own boss”). Many videos included the spouses and children of the consultants focused on financial and familial desires like paying off debt, saving for vacation, and spending more time together. Aspirational images of consultants at conferences or going on vacations based on earnings were abundant. Togetherness, whether that be with family or with the “sisterhood,” as Thirty-One Gifts explicitly calls it, is a common scene on MLM websites. Pictures from some of the MLM conferences frame women jumping, hugging, and throwing confetti at one another, implying that a future consultant would experience this same sense of social desirability if they joined.

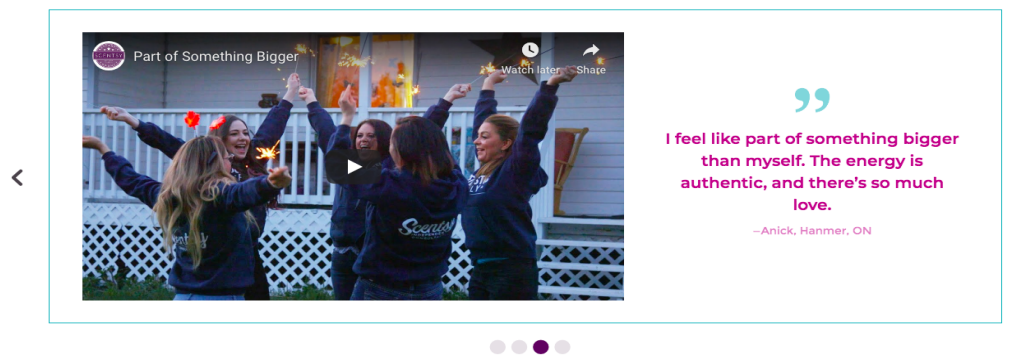


Figure 5. The 2019 capture of Scentsy’s website includes multiple aspirational videos and quotes as part of the messaging (Scentsy, n.d.).

Special Club/In-Group

The MLM websites often included visuals and rhetoric borrowing from the language of neoliberal feminism that imply one would be part of an in-group if they joined as a consultant, including “join our family” (Norwex, n.d.-b, para. 6), “find your purpose and your people” (Pampered Chef, n.d.-a, para. 7), “imagine a career that becomes a community” (Young Living Essential Oils, n.d.-b, para. 1), “you belong in this business” (Mary & Martha, n.d., para. 1), and “join us and take part in an opportunity unlike any other” (Isagenix, n.d.-a, para. 1).

Moral Evaluation: Gender and Religion

RQ2 asked about the role gender plays on MLM corporate websites. As previously mentioned, gendered elements are a significant component of MLMs’ legitimization strategies. The intersection of gender and religion is also significant in the MLM websites’ legitimization rhetoric. Some MLM websites’ copy frames religion as central to their operations. For example, Mary & Martha consider the Biblical New Testament figures of sisters Mary and Martha as their founders, while Pampered Chef refers to God-given talents. Some women in the Scentsy videos also discussed their faith. Luca (2011) posits that MLMs heavily rely on prosperity theology, a Protestant Christian belief that one will prosper economically because it is God’s intention. As such, MLMs are “ubiquitous in Christian networks” (Luca, 2011, p. 225). Women were often

trained to witness to others while simultaneously promoting an MLM business opportunity (Luca, 2011). This is stated explicitly on Mary & Martha's website, such as in Figure 6.

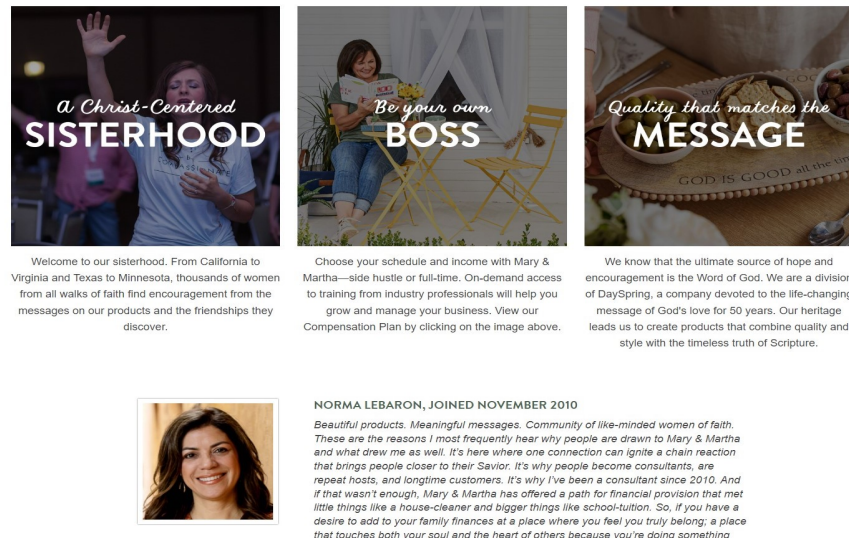


Figure 6. The Mary & Martha site (2022 capture) combines gender, religion, and entrepreneurial messaging (Mary & Martha, n.d.).

In a similar vein, Ganga Kieffer (2020) writes about the gendered spiritual entrepreneurship rhetoric that is prevalent in several industries aimed at women, including MLMs. The author's analysis of essential oils MLM doTERRA showed several instances of gendered spiritual entrepreneurship rhetoric at play. Ganga Kieffer (2020) suggests that the strategy of MLMs combining religion and business in one while targeting women entrepreneurs has been instrumental in building "a gendered capitalism based on the precept that personal financial growth is best enjoyed as a spiritually fulfilling sharing of gifts" (p. 92). In the current study, gendered and religious elements manifested through various means, including symbols, titles, and missions.

Gendered Symbols and Language

As previous research has found, many MLMs target women to become consultants. Our analysis of these 10 MLM websites indicated that imagery of women was dominant on the websites. When men were shown, they were typically in leadership positions within the company or in secondary positions within an image. Traditional family scenes depicted on the websites include women taking the kids to school, cooking, bathing kids, playing outside, and doing laundry (see Figure 7). However, it should be noted that some MLMs are comparatively more gender neutral in targeting consultants (e.g., Amway, Isagenix, and Norwex; see Figure 8).

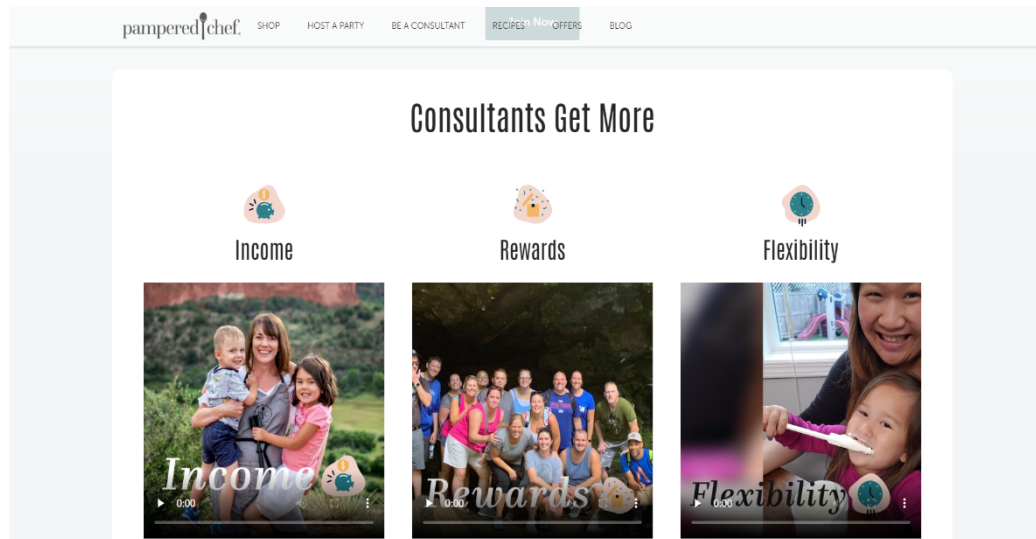


Figure 7. The Pampered Chef site (2022 capture) uses family-oriented imagery (Pampered Chef, n.d.-a).

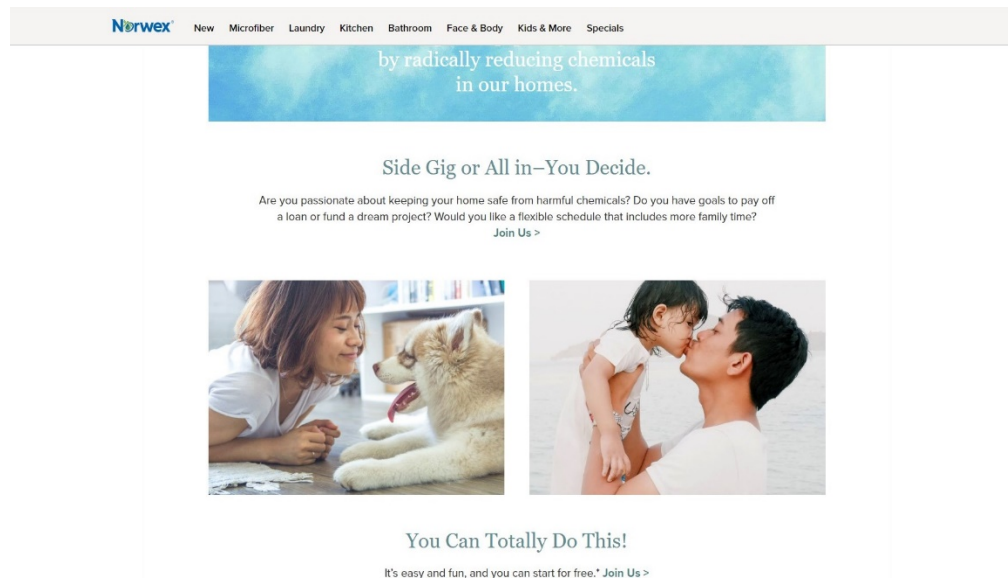


Figure 8. The 2022 capture of the Norwex website emphasizes domesticity for both men and women (Norwex, n.d.-b).

Gendered symbols stereotypically associated with femininity included colors and graphics (i.e., crowns, font using a spotlight, hearts, stars, XOXO letters, pink donuts, pink smoothies, pink cupcakes, and an image of a necklace that spells out "Boss"). Products were displayed in gender-specific ways (i.e., women holding purses; brooding man on motorcycle next to a man's product; surfer guy next to an energy product).

Women were also typically framed together in pairs or groups, and almost all the women could be considered beautiful by Western society's standards, in full makeup and jewelry.

Some MLMs make it clear that their company's mission is aimed only at women. For example, the 2019 version of the Stella & Dot website's "about us" page stated that they are "a company inspired by, created for and run by strong women" (Stella & Dot, n.d.-b, "We are Stella & Dot"). These gendered missions map onto the concept of the "synthetic sisterhood," which posits that women and girls are intrigued by inclusionary efforts from other like-minded women and girls (see Figure 9) but can often result in a phony friendship (Firth, Raisborough, & Klein, 2010).

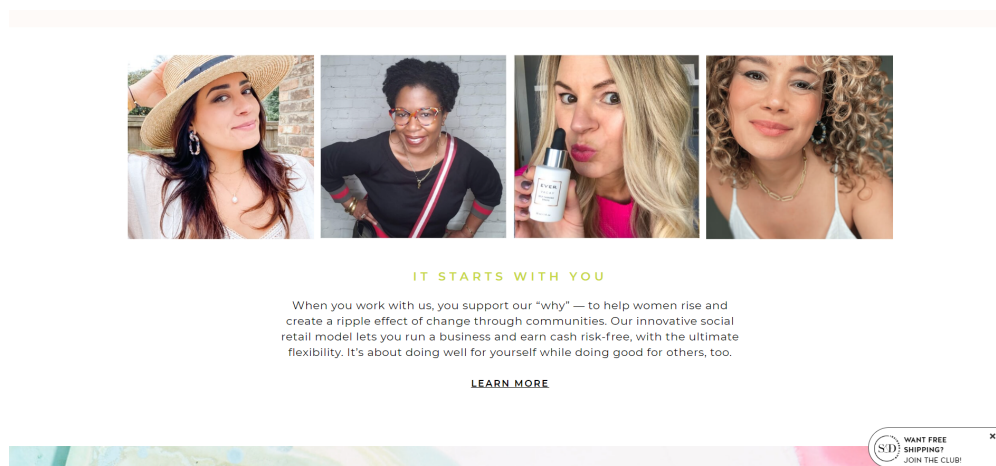


Figure 9. In multiple places on the website, Stella & Dot emphasizes a focus on empowering women. Screen capture from 2022 "About Us" page (Stella & Dot, n.d.-b).

In a synthetic sisterhood, women and girls interact with these "sisters" in constructed ways to show that they are part of the sisterhood. This extends to entrepreneurship contexts. For example, Nadin, Smith, and Jones (2020) conducted a discourse analysis of more than 70 articles spanning eight years of the United Kingdom's *The Times* newspaper to understand how women entrepreneurs were presented in the media. Results revealed a synthetic sisterhood whereby female entrepreneurs were compelled to boost other women along the entrepreneurial journey. The authors conveyed that not only is operating a business difficult enough, but women also face compounded pressure to carry along other women to help ensure their success.

In a critical analysis of a reality TV makeover show, Firth and colleagues (2010) elaborate on three primary concepts, including "a discourse of body appreciation; by constructing a 'synthetic sisterhood;' and by creating a space of 'suspended sexuality'" (p. 472). Concerning a synthetic sisterhood, the authors explain that the male host of the show carries out the synthetic sisterhood concept in a stereotypical feminine fashion with the show's participants and viewers. Thus, the authors posit that regardless of gender, anyone can produce a sisterhood through their stereotypical feminine verbal and performative actions, including the use of friendly exchanges and "pet names and endearments—such as 'angelcake,' 'babes,' 'my darling,' and 'girlfriend'" (Firth et al., 2010, p. 478).

This use of symbols and rhetoric in MLMs centered on being a “girlboss” is not new. A similar result was found in Austin’s (2021) analysis of MLM consultants’ social media pages, where digital wallpaper options, hashtags, and graphics spouting motivational, empowering phrases about women being their own bosses are rampant. However, the use of these types of graphic design tactics and social media rhetoric often trivializes and manipulates the concept of feminism. Many women MLM consultants might feel that they have control over their own lives and business goals, but in reality, many women choose to work for MLMs because of their desire, need, and responsibility to serve others, including their families (Austin, 2021).

Many of the MLM websites under analysis for this study followed the same form of showcasing a synthetic sisterhood. Their websites use a rhetoric that portrays women supporting other women as they travel the business road together. Additionally, the aforementioned gendered language and imagery were rampant across many of the websites’ texts and visuals, solidifying how gendered missions and synthetic sisterhood were a type of legitimization strategy for MLMs. From Van Leeuwen’s (2007) framework, we can understand moral evaluation and mythopoesis as legitimization strategies that do the heaviest lifting on MLM corporate websites.

Discussion

These results suggest that MLM companies use their websites as vehicles for legitimization discourses to attract potential sellers. In keeping with how the direct selling industry positions itself overall, MLMs rely on themes of entrepreneurship and business success that reflect Van Leeuwen’s four major categories of legitimization strategies, especially those of moral evaluation and mythopoesis central to cultural desires and myths. Legitimation by authorization, as in appeals to accreditation, and rationalization, such as pointing to large sales numbers, are present. MLM corporate websites also rely heavily on appeals to entrepreneurship to legitimate themselves. These appeals are made through a mixture of moral evaluations, such as gender roles, as well as mythopoesis drawn from the cultural myth of the heroic entrepreneur.

Additionally, at least in terms of the MLMs studied here, there is a noticeably gendered aspect to the specific ways MLM entrepreneurship is framed on corporate websites to attract potential sellers, which reflects both moral evaluation and mythopoesis. For example, many of the companies point to work-life balance as a benefit, but that balance is centered around subtle appeals to moral evaluations regarding women’s varied roles within the family, such as speaking to women’s desire to spend more time with family. There is a noticeable use of feminized language and imagery throughout. This includes the discussion of altruism through helping others as a reason to join and helpfulness being more associated as a desirable trait for women. Some MLMs present as an exclusive group or sorority of sorts, the synthetic sisterhood, which is also a gendered approach.

Conclusion

Overall, the way MLMs use their websites to frame their company as an opportunity for entrepreneurship is in keeping with current trends toward “side hustles” and the gig economy. These MLM opportunities are presented as a fun opportunity to make one’s dreams come true by using times carved out from the margins of the seller’s “real” life or family life. This gendered approach to framing entrepreneurship could have real implications for women in regard to the gender pay gap and other similar considerations that often impact women more than men. Shade (2018) describes this kind of framing as “neo-liberal feminism,

which commends the independent and entrepreneurial work spirit” (p. 46). Indeed, some MLMs used the economic turmoil caused by the 2020 coronavirus pandemic to promote entrepreneurship and economic security via their business opportunities (Parker, 2020). At the same time, the economic fallout of the crisis is anticipated to affect women more than men, in part because of caregiving responsibilities and expectations, in addition to existing structural norms (Hutt, 2020; Hutzler, 2020). While the data for this study were collected in the fall of 2019 and the fall of 2022, these results shed light on this important phenomenon.

Limitations and Future Research

These themes are reminiscent of those from recent examinations of MLMs in popular culture, such as the *LuLaRich* documentary (Furst & Nason, 2021). These results also support previous research on corporate discourse and the cultural entrepreneur myth (Martin & Rawlins, 2018). In this analysis, we demonstrate how the use of entrepreneurial discourse as a legitimation strategy combines moral evaluation of traditional gender roles with mythopoesis to present a highly gendered perspective on entrepreneurship.

Still, this analysis focuses solely on MLMs’ corporate websites and does not account for social media use, either by the MLM home office or by MLM consultants. Future research may wish to look at the ways MLM sellers engage in legitimation strategies, including via social media. Additionally, while an effort was made to select a broad sample of MLM types for this analysis, it is possible that our final selection of MLMs to include influenced the results regarding the gendered portrayals of entrepreneurship.

Future research could also explore how the media is showcasing the MLM industry and how the portrayal of this big business is shaping consumers’ views of MLM. For example, using cultivation theory to examine how either fictional or nonfictional media portrayals of MLMs shape consumer perceptions of MLMs and their legitimacy.

While this study focused on entrepreneurship and the legitimacy of MLMs through an examination of corporate websites, a future study could focus on consumer shopping behavior and habits as it relates to MLMs in light of the post-COVID era. Additionally, how retail shopping and the branding of these MLM companies have been altered as a result of the pandemic is another angle to explore. Furthermore, scholarship regarding an increase in home-based careers, including MLMs, because of the societal changes the pandemic created is warranted.

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