



Framing MLM on Corporate Websites and Consultants' Instagram Posts

Heidi E. Huntington, Paul & Virginia Engler College of Business
Mary E. Brooks, Department of Communication

Introduction: 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 their flexibility or as a “side hustle,” while others may struggle to find other types of work (Abraham, Haltiwanger, Sandusky & Spletzer, 2018). At the same time, these and similar forms of creative labor via social media are valorized as being entrepreneurial (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). Such digital entrepreneurship is often positioned as a way for women to “have it all” and balance work with traditional family life (Duffy & Hund, 2015).

To date, there is limited research on the intersection of multilevel marketing, social media, and digital entrepreneurship. Given existing research that demonstrates the centrality of entrepreneurialism to MLMs’ framing of their legitimacy in order to attract potential independent consultants or sellers (Carl, 2004), the present study examines the websites of 10 active MLM companies to qualitatively identify and assess themes that emerge regarding how participation in the MLM is framed for potential sellers. Additionally, the study examines 200 public Instagram posts made by MLM consultants (sellers) in order to assess how these sellers frame their participation in the MLM for others, including whether and how these posts reflect similar or different themes, or frames, from those presented by the MLMs themselves. Doing so will help us to better understand the role of MLMs within the current media and economic environment. This study may also provide insight into gendered aspects of such digital entrepreneurialism.

Research Questions

RQ1: What themes emerge in how MLM companies use their websites to frame participation in the MLM for potential sellers as entrepreneurialism?

RQ2: What themes emerge in how MLM consultants use their Instagram posts to frame their participation in the MLM as a form of entrepreneurialism?

Method: The focus of this study is on the visual and textual framing of MLM opportunities or products on corporate websites and in public Instagram posts made by presumed consultants for those MLMs, based on hashtags contained in the posts. Ten MLM companies were identified for inclusion: Amway, Thirty-One Gifts, Stella and Dot, Paparazzi, Youngliving, Scentsy, Mary and Martha, Norwex, Isagenix, and Pampered Chef.

For each company’s website, analysis focused on visuals and text on the home page, “about us” and “join us” pages. Additionally, two popular Instagram hashtags, one product-related and one seller-related, for each MLM in the study were identified and 10 recent public posts for each of the hashtags collected, for a total of 200 Instagram posts (20 per company). A random number generator was used to select which 10 specific posts from among the 100 most recent public posts for each hashtag to collect. Screen capture was used to save the post image and caption for analysis. Collection of the Instagram posts was spread across five different days in September 2019, with all 20 posts for two different companies collected each day. Therefore, these posts represent the work of anywhere from 10 (1 per company) to 200 (20 per company) unique MLM consultants, depending on each consultant’s level of posting activity on the day the posts were collected for their company.

Results

Selected themes used in MLM websites based on the following variables:

Aspirational, gender, social desire, work/life balance, entrepreneurship, legitimacy and other.

Aspirational: *Calls-to-action and empowering language*

“Craft your world”

“start designing the life you love”

“you can have it all” “What’s your why?”

“start your next chapter” “dream more achieve more”

“join today to say ‘yes’ to income and perks”

Social Desire: *Togetherness*

Images and videos of people together (primarily women or families); Pictures from the MLM conferences including the Scentsy Family Reunion; women are jumping, hugging, throwing confetti.

Work/Life Balance: *Practicality and Romanticism*

- Images of people at a resort implying they worked hard enough to earn a trip and have a life.
- Images show women working from home while kids are playing in the background.
- Families are running on the beach - testimonial about the couple on the beach that sells Amway.
- Executives quotes about having a career and a family.

Gender: *Gendered titles/activities/calls-to-action.*

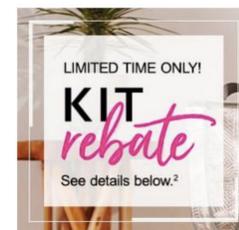
Words including hostess, DIY, craft imply targeting towards women.

Other words to describe the products being sold or utilized include: “cute”, “say hello”, and “festive”.

Some conferences focus on sisterhood and celebration.

Other phrases: “grab your besties”; “head to happy - take them to their happy place with our seasonal gift guide”; “mom conquers her imperfections”; “overweight mom sticks to her challenge”; “a selfless dad”; “help your friends clean with a purpose - plan a party”; “contagiously fun shopping experience”; “feel the \$5 frenzy”; “it’s a Paparazzi party”; “invite your friends to a launch party”; “Scentsy sisters”; “Option titles including :girl on the go, ear party, French girl chic”; “when you start a business, you help another woman”; Actual title of the job for S&D is “be a stylist”

Entrepreneurship *Be a Consultant*



How many times have you heard someone say how much they love Pampered Chef, or how many times have you said it yourself? And wouldn't it be great to make money talking to people about how much you love it? If so, then maybe you should be a consultant. As a Pampered Chef consultant, you'll bring people together and show them how the right tools and recipes make everyday cooking simpler, tastier, and more memorable. It might surprise you how much it changes your life and the lives of others.

Join Now

Join today to say "YES!" to income + perks!

Legitimacy: *Accreditation/memberships/credible logos/recognition/endorsements*



Other: *Diversity*

Some type of diversity is shown in all of the websites at least once. This could come from race/ethnicity, gender, ability or age; One woman is speaking in Spanish; diverse in terms of some educational trainings (Amway Education is in a variety of languages); #SDFORALL (Stella and Dot). Diversity is shown in Young Living when the founder is hugging diverse children from what looks like a underserved community.