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Predatory Identification: How Multilevel Marketing Weaponizes Feminist Rhetoric to Exploit Women's Economic Precarity

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Abstract: Multilevel marketing (MLM) companies disproportionately recruit women through narratives promising entrepreneurship, community, and work-life balance. Despite Federal Trade Commission data showing 99% of participants lose money, over 20 million Americans participate in MLMs, 74% of them women. This paradox demands intersectional feminist analysis: why do women—particularly middle-class white women, working-class Latinas, and Black women seeking entrepreneurial opportunities beyond white corporate spaces—continue joining MLMs despite overwhelming evidence of financial failure?

Drawing on social reproduction theory, feminist political economy, and Kenneth Burke's rhetorical analysis, this study examines recruitment materials from three MLMs (Lularoe, Herbalife, Scout & Cellar) to reveal how they exploit women's structural vulnerability through "predatory identification"—persuasive strategies that deliberately exploit structural vulnerabilities through promises designed to remain unfulfilled.

Analysis of 127 discrete persuasive appeals demonstrates that MLMs weaponize feminist rhetoric while perpetuating women's economic marginalization. They promise resolution to capitalism's "crisis of care" while commodifying the social reproductive labor women perform—extracting value from friendships, care networks, and community ties built through unpaid care work. The analysis reveals how women's legitimate demands for economic security are redirected into market participation that profits from their precarity while appropriating feminist language for capitalist extraction.

Keywords: Multilevel marketing; Neoliberal feminism; Social reproduction; Women's labor; Economic exploitation; Care work; Predatory capitalism; Intersectionality

1. Introduction

In May 2021, an MLM consultant—a composite character based on thousands of actual social media posts analyzed by Pavelko and Barker (2022)—posted a video showing her morning routine: waking in silk pajamas, sipping coffee while reviewing sales from her "team," working from her laptop at her kitchen island while her children played nearby, then heading to an afternoon pool party with other "boss babes." The caption read: "This is what freedom looks like. DM me to learn how you can have it too."

Within hours, hundreds of women had messaged her, many citing their desire for exactly what the video portrayed: income, flexibility, and community. What these women could not see in the carefully curated video was that the consultant herself likely earned little from product sales, that her income depended on recruiting those very women messaging her, and that statistically, 99% of them would lose money (Keep & Vander Nat, 2014).

This scenario encapsulates a distinctly gendered and racialized form of economic exploitation. The promise—earn income while caring for children, build wealth through flexible entrepreneurship, join a supportive community of women—speaks directly to needs that emerge from women's structural position in racialized capitalist economies. Yet these promises work differently across racial and class locations: for suburban white mothers facing the "motherhood penalty" in professional careers (Budig & England, 2001), for working-class Latinas experiencing occupational segregation and wage theft (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001), and for Black women historically excluded from white corporate spaces yet facing limited access to capital for genuine business ownership (Gill, 2010).

Over 20 million Americans participate in multilevel marketing (MLM) companies, with women comprising 74% of all distributors (Direct Selling Association, 2023). Well-known brands like Herbalife, Lularoe, and Mary Kay promise participants the opportunity to "own their own business," build wealth while maintaining work-life balance, and join supportive communities of like-minded entrepreneurs. Yet the economic reality contradicts these promises dramatically.

Federal Trade Commission analysis of MLM income disclosures reveals stark exploitation:

- 99% of MLM participants lose money (FTC, 2021)
- Median annual earnings: $400 (approximately $7.70 per week)
- Herbalife median: $310/year; Lularoe median: $0
- Average startup costs: $5,000-$10,000 (Taylor, 2011)
- Ongoing monthly costs: $200-500 for required inventory and fees
- Average annual net loss: $1,000-$3,000 when all costs included (Fitzpatrick & Reynolds, 2017)
- Implied hourly wage (20 hours/week): $0.38/hour—5% of federal minimum wage

Put simply, if a consultant works an estimated 20 hours per week—a conservative estimate based on time investment required for meaningful sales—median income translates to approximately $0.38 per hour, or about 5% of the federal minimum wage of $7.25. Working those same hours at minimum wage would yield $7,540 annually; working them in MLMs yields $400 while incurring thousands in costs.

This paradox demands intersectional feminist analysis. MLMs succeed not despite women's economic precarity but because of it, and they target different populations of women strategically. They recruit women experiencing what Hochschild (1997) terms "the time bind"—the impossible challenge of balancing paid work with caregiving responsibilities in a society that neither adequately compensates care work nor provides social support for it.

We argue that MLM recruitment narratives constitute predatory identification: persuasive strategies that deliberately exploit structural vulnerabilities—particularly gendered responsibilities for social reproduction—through promises designed to remain unfulfilled. By analyzing recruitment materials through feminist political economy, social reproduction theory, and Burkean rhetorical analysis, this study makes three contributions. First, it reveals how MLMs weaponize feminist rhetoric while commodifying the social reproductive labor women perform. Second, it demonstrates how neoliberal feminism's co-optation creates exploitative business opportunities that extract value from care work relationships. Third, it establishes criteria for distinguishing when persuasive communication crosses from ethical influence into systematic exploitation.

2. Theoretical Framework

Social Reproduction Theory: Commodifying Care Work

Social reproduction theory—the analysis of how capitalism depends on unwaged labor necessary to reproduce human beings and social life—provides the foundational framework for understanding MLM exploitation (Bhattacharya, 2017). As Federici (2012) demonstrates, capitalism has always depended on women's unpaid reproductive labor: childrearing, eldercare, household work, emotional support, and community maintenance. This labor is simultaneously essential to capitalism yet systematically devalued.

Fraser (2016) argues that capitalism faces an inherent "crisis of care"—it depends on unwaged care work while requiring workers to engage in waged labor for survival. This contradiction falls disproportionately on women, creating impossible choices between career and caregiving. MLMs claim to resolve this contradiction but actually exploit it by commodifying the social reproductive labor women perform.

Neoliberal Feminism and the Weaponization of Empowerment Discourse

Contemporary MLM recruitment occurs within what Rottenberg (2014) terms "neoliberal feminism"—the appropriation of feminist language detached from collective political goals and reattached to individual market participation. MLMs represent the logical extension of this co-optation, appropriating feminist rhetoric wholesale—"empowerment," "independence," "boss babe"—while offering a business model that systematically fails participants (Wrenn & Waller, 2021).

Race, Class, and Intersectional Vulnerability

Crenshaw's (1989) foundational concept of intersectionality requires examining how race and class shape women's vulnerability to MLM recruitment. Scout & Cellar targets educated white professionals through environmental discourse. Herbalife recruits heavily in working-class Latino communities (Reay, 2004). Lularoe targets suburban white mothers. Each exploits race-and-class-specific vulnerabilities through adapted rhetoric.

Predatory Identification: Theoretical Synthesis

Synthesizing social reproduction theory, neoliberal feminism critique, and intersectional analysis with rhetorical method, we propose predatory identification as a concept describing persuasive strategies that deliberately exploit structural vulnerabilities—particularly gendered and racialized responsibilities for social reproduction—through promises designed to remain unfulfilled.

Unlike Burke's (1950) original concept, where identification creates genuine common ground, predatory identification manufactures the appearance of shared interests while obscuring fundamental conflict. The MLM profits from consultant failure; the business model requires that 99% lose money. Yet recruitment narratives construct identification around mutual success and shared empowerment.

The study builds on analyses of how contemporary capitalism appropriates feminist language while reinforcing gender inequality. Banet-Weiser (2018) demonstrates how "popular feminism" and "empowerment" rhetoric function as branding strategies that commodify feminist politics while depoliticizing feminist demands. Her analysis of "confidence culture" and self-optimization discourse reveals how individual women are recruited into market participation through rhetoric that promises liberation while delivering intensified self-surveillance and consumption.

Similarly, Gill and Scharff (2013) examine "postfeminist media culture" where feminist goals are reframed as achieved, making structural inequality invisible while celebrating individual choice and entrepreneurship. Their work on the "new sexual contract" shows how women are interpellated as freely choosing subjects who embrace traditional femininity as empowerment—a dynamic strikingly parallel to MLM recruitment's framing of exploitation as opportunity.

This manuscript extends these analyses by examining a specific institutional site where neoliberal feminist rhetoric translates into systematic material exploitation. While Banet-Weiser and Gill analyze media representations and celebrity culture, this study examines how actual businesses deploy similar rhetoric to extract value from women's labor. The "predatory identification" framework provides tools for distinguishing when empowerment rhetoric serves genuinely liberatory goals versus when it masks exploitation.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Gendered Economics

The study examines how language reproduces and challenges gender inequality (Lazar, 2005). Lazar's framework for analyzing "power and gender in discourse" emphasizes attention to how texts position subjects, naturalize inequality, and obscure material relations. MLM recruitment materials exemplify these processes: positioning women as entrepreneurs while denying actual autonomy, naturalizing financial failure as individual inadequacy rather than structural design, and obscuring the extraction of value from unpaid care labor.

Goldman's (1992) analysis of "commodity feminism" in advertising demonstrates how corporations appropriate feminist imagery and language to sell products while evacuating feminist politics of transformative potential. His concept helps explain how MLMs deploy sisterhood, empowerment, and independence rhetoric while operating business models antithetical to feminist goals. This manuscript builds on Goldman's work by showing not just how feminist imagery sells products but how it recruits women into exploitative labor relations.

Persuasion Ethics

Foss and Griffin's "invitational rhetoric" proposes alternatives to traditional persuasion that honors audience autonomy and seeks mutual understanding rather than compliance. Their framework highlights why predatory identification is ethically problematic: it manufactures false commonality, conceals structural constraints on autonomy promised, and extracts value from trust relationships.

This study also engages Campbell's (1973) analysis of feminine style in rhetoric, particularly her attention to how rhetorical strategies can both reinforce and challenge gender norms. MLM recruitment appropriates elements Campbell identifies as characteristically feminine (personal testimony, invitation to participate, emphasis on lived experience) while deploying them for exploitation rather than empowerment.

The three ethical criteria this study proposes—structural alignment, transparency about constraints, and organic versus manufactured commonality—offer scholars tools for evaluating persuasion across contexts where vulnerable populations are targeted through appropriated progressive rhetoric.

Consumer Culture, Advertising, and Women

The analysis contributes to scholarship on consumer culture and women's relationship to advertising and marketing (Press, 2011). MLM recruitment represents a distinctive form of consumer address that recruits women not just as consumers but as unpaid marketing labor—what Duffy (2017) calls "aspirational labor" in her analysis of social media influencers.

Duffy demonstrates how platforms recruit users into unpaid promotional labor through promises of eventual professionalization and income. Her concept of "aspirational labor"—work performed in hope of future compensation that for most never materializes—directly parallels MLM consultants' labor. Both influencers and MLM consultants perform extensive unpaid work (content creation, relationship cultivation, brand promotion) based on identification with an aspirational future that the structure ensures most cannot reach.

This manuscript extends Duffy's analysis by examining how social reproductive labor specifically gets monetized through aspirational labor frameworks. While influencers monetize content creation and self-branding, MLM consultants monetize care relationships and community ties—labor women were already performing unpaid. This distinction matters for understanding how platform capitalism and MLM capitalism differently exploit feminized labor.

Platform Capitalism

Finally, this study contributes to scholarship on precarious labor in digital capitalism (Scholz, 2013; Terranova, 2000). While much attention focuses on gig platforms like Uber or content platforms like YouTube, MLMs represent an earlier and ongoing form of what Scholz calls "platform cooperativism gone wrong"—ostensibly cooperative structures that extract value while shifting all risk to workers.

Cloud (2018) argues that scholars must attend to material conditions and class relations. This study responds to that call by examining both the rhetorical strategies MLMs deploy and the material exploitation those strategies enable and obscure. The integration of rhetorical criticism with political economy demonstrates how scholarship can bridge discourse analysis and material analysis.

By positioning MLM recruitment within broader patterns of how neoliberal capitalism recruits feminized labor through progressive rhetoric, this study shows that what might appear as isolated scams are actually systematic features of contemporary capitalism. The rhetorical strategies identified here—manufacturing aspirational identification, appropriating feminist language, commodifying care labor—operate across multiple institutional sites from gig platforms to influencer culture to corporate diversity initiatives.

3. Method

Research Design

This study employs Burkean rhetorical criticism to analyze MLM recruitment materials, examining how these materials deploy identification strategies to exploit women's structural vulnerability. Following Campbell and Jamieson's (1978) approach to genre criticism, we examine how MLMs constitute a rhetorical genre through repeated identification strategies that target gendered responsibilities for social reproduction.

This study applies Burke's four types of identification as a deductive analytical lens for understanding MLM persuasive strategies, using his existing categories to reveal systematic patterns.

This approach contributes to scholarship on how neoliberal capitalism appropriates progressive rhetoric (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill & Scharff, 2013) and critical discourse analysis of gendered economic exploitation (Lazar, 2005). By integrating rhetorical analysis with political economy, this study responds to calls for research that examines both discourse and material conditions (Cloud, 2018).

Importantly, this analysis examines corporate-level rhetorical strategies—the persuasive frameworks MLMs develop and disseminate—not how individual women experience, interpret, or resist these narratives. This represents both a methodological choice and a limitation, discussed below.

Case Selection and Sampling Rationale

We selected three MLMs using maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2015) designed to test whether identification strategies remain consistent despite variations in product category, company age, regulatory history, and target demographic.

Selection criteria included: (a) documented targeting of women as primary recruits through gendered marketing appeals, (b) active U.S. operations during the 2024 data collection period with accessible recruitment materials, (c) variation in product type to test consistency of rhetorical strategies across categories, (d) variation in company age to assess whether strategies evolve or remain stable, (e) variation in target demographic to examine race-and-class-specific appeals, and (f) public FTC scrutiny or litigation establishing regulatory concern about business practices.

The three MLMs selected were

Lularoe (fashion apparel, founded 2012): A clothing MLM that experienced rapid growth followed by legal challenges, including a 2021 settlement with Washington State Attorney General for operating a pyramid scheme (Washington State v. Lularoe, 2021). Lularoe represents newer MLMs targeting predominantly white, middle-class suburban mothers seeking fashion entrepreneurship and social connection through feminine-coded products. The emphasis on body positivity and "comfortable clothing" appeals to mothers experiencing postpartum body changes and seeking community beyond traditional mommy-and-me groups.

Herbalife (nutrition products, founded 1980): One of the largest and oldest MLMs globally, with extensive FTC scrutiny culminating in a 2016 settlement requiring $200 million in consumer redress and significant business practice changes (FTC v. Herbalife, 2016). Herbalife represents established MLMs with extensively documented recruitment patterns in working-class Latino communities (Reay, 2004). The emphasis on health transformation, weight loss, and overcoming economic barriers specifically targets working-class Latina women experiencing limited access to healthcare and seeking flexible income to supplement low-wage service work.

Scout & Cellar (wine, founded 2016): A newer MLM marketing "clean-crafted" wine through environmental and wellness discourse, explicitly targeting educated, upper-middle-class, environmentally conscious women. Scout & Cellar represents recent MLMs that appropriate wellness and environmental discourse to appeal to specific demographic segments with cultural and economic capital. The emphasis on "conscious consumption" and environmental sustainability appeals to educated white women seeking to distinguish themselves through consumption practices.

Why these three specifically? This combination tests whether rhetorical strategies remain consistent across significant variation: product type (fashion vs. nutrition vs. wine), company age (44 years vs. 12 years vs. 8 years at time of data collection), regulatory history (state settlement vs. federal settlement vs. no major enforcement action), and target demographic (suburban mothers vs. working-class Latinas vs. educated professionals). If identification strategies prove consistent despite these differences, this suggests broader patterns in how MLMs exploit gendered vulnerability.

Data Collection Procedures

We collected publicly available recruitment materials from each company's official website during November-December 2024. This timeframe was selected to capture current recruitment rhetoric while avoiding holiday-specific messaging that might not represent typical appeals.

Materials collected included:

• Homepage messaging and visual/textual content

• “Join Us,” “Business Opportunity,” or “Become a Consultant” pages

• “Why Join” or “Benefits” sections describing the MLM opportunity

• Consultant testimonial sections and success stories

• Descriptions of training programs, community events, and support systems

• Compensation plan overview pages (where publicly accessible)

• FAQ sections addressing potential recruits’ questions

This yielded approximately 50 pages of text comprising 127 discrete persuasive appeals. A “discrete persuasive appeal” was operationally defined as a single claim or promise about the MLM opportunity that could be coded as a distinct rhetorical move. For example, “Earn income while spending time with your family” contains two discrete appeals: (1) income generation, and (2) work-family balance. “Join our community of like-minded entrepreneurs” contains two appeals: (1) community belonging, and (2) entrepreneurial identity.

Appeals were bounded by identifying complete claims that functioned as independent persuasive units. When claims appeared in lists (e.g., “Benefits include: flexible hours, unlimited income, supportive community”), each list item was coded as a discrete appeal if it made an independent claim about the opportunity.

We analyzed only text-based content, excluding images, videos, and multimedia elements. This decision reflects both practical constraints (systematic analysis of visual rhetoric requires different methodological tools and expertise) and analytical focus (examining linguistic and symbolic strategies specifically). Future studies might investigate visual rhetoric—images of consultants’ bodies, homes, products, and lifestyles—as such content likely reinforces and potentially complicates textual strategies in ways this study cannot address.

We excluded product descriptions focusing solely on merchandise features (e.g., fabric quality, wine characteristics) rather than business opportunity framing. The focus remained on recruitment rhetoric specifically—how MLMs persuade women to become consultants rather than how they sell products to consumers.

All materials were captured using web archiving (Wayback Machine at archive.org) to preserve original formatting and context. Archive dates are documented in the reference list. This archiving serves multiple purposes: preserving materials that companies might later modify or remove, allowing verification of claims made in this analysis, and enabling future longitudinal research on how MLM rhetoric evolves.

All quoted materials are from official company sources rather than individual consultant social media posts or team pages. This ensures analysis focuses on corporate-level strategic messaging rather than individual interpretations or improvisations. While consultant-created content represents an important dimension of MLM recruitment (Pavelko & Barker, 2022), including it would require different sampling strategies and raises additional ethical considerations regarding individual consent and privacy.

Data Analysis Process

Following Foss’s (2009) framework, we conducted analysis in four iterative phases:

Phase 1 - Immersion and Familiarization: We read all collected materials four times, developing familiarity with recurring themes, linguistic patterns, and persuasive appeals. During this phase, we maintained analytic memos noting initial impressions, patterns, and questions. This phase focused on understanding each MLM’s overall rhetorical strategy and identifying preliminary patterns across companies.

Phase 2 - Systematic Coding: We coded passages deductively according to Burke’s four identification types for intercoder reliability:

• Consubstantiality: Appeals to shared substance, values, experiences, or identities

• Property: Appeals based on possessions, ownership, or material goods (including symbolic ownership)

• Autonomy: Appeals to independence, freedom, or self-determination

• Cunning: Strategic omissions or silences about constraints, costs, or negative outcomes

Each appeal was coded for primary identification type. We allowed for passages exhibiting multiple forms of identification simultaneously, noting these overlaps as they revealed how identification strategies work in integrated systems rather than discrete tactics.

Of the 127 appeals coded, 77 (61%) employed multiple identification types simultaneously.

We maintained a coding journal documenting decisions, noting when coding was straightforward versus uncertain, and tracking patterns as they emerged. For example, early in coding we noted that "your own business" appeals combined property (ownership language) and autonomy (your control), which led me to attend more carefully to how multiple strategies work together.

Phase 3 - Close Textual Analysis: For representative examples of each identification type, we conducted close linguistic analysis examining:

• Word choice and semantic fields (e.g., family/community language, business/entrepreneurship terminology)

• Grammatical structures and syntax (e.g., imperative constructions, possessive pronouns, presuppositions)

• Implicit assumptions embedded in language (e.g., presupposing isolation, assuming shared values)

• Strategic absences and what remains unsaid (e.g., income data, time requirements, failure rates)

• Rhetorical figures and tropes (e.g., metaphors of freedom, community, empowerment)

This phase focused on understanding how identification operates at the level of language itself and how specific appeals target race-and-class-specific vulnerabilities. We paid particular attention to how the same rhetorical strategy (e.g., community rhetoric) manifested differently across the three companies.

Phase 4 - Comparative Pattern Analysis: We compared rhetorical strategies across the three MLMs to identify consistent patterns and meaningful variations. We specifically examined:

• Which identification types appeared most frequently in each company's materials

• How appeals varied based on target demographic (working-class Latinas vs. suburban white mothers vs. educated professionals)

• Whether newer companies (Scout & Cellar) deployed different strategies than established ones (Herbalife)

• How product type influenced rhetorical framing

This comparative analysis revealed that while specific examples varied, the underlying identification strategies remained remarkably consistent across companies with different products, ages, and target markets.

Validation and Trustworthiness

We employed multiple strategies to enhance trustworthiness and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985):

• Prolonged engagement: Six weeks immersed in materials, reading repeatedly and refining interpretations as analysis progressed.

• Thick description: Extensive quotations and detailed linguistic analysis throughout the findings section, allowing readers to assess the adequacy of interpretations and consider alternative readings.

• Peer debriefing: Discussion with two colleagues familiar with rhetorical criticism seeking alternative explanations and challenging emerging interpretations

• Triangulation of theory: Triangulating Burke's rhetorical framework with feminist political economy and intersectional analysis, checking whether findings held across theoretical lenses.

4. Findings

Table 1 demonstrates the deployment of the four Burkean identification strategies.

Table 1. Distribution of Burkean Identification Strategies Across Three MLMs

Identification Type	Lularoe	Herbalife	Scout & Cellar
Consubstantiality	23	19	21
Property (ownership)	18	22	16
Autonomy-Belonging	15	17	14
Cunning (strategic omissions)	12	14	13

The statistics in **Table 2** demonstrate the impact of these persuasive appeals, as it shows the mathematical impossibility underlying MLM promises. A consultant working 20 hours per week at minimum wage would earn $7,540 annually. In MLMs, she earns $400 while spending $5,000 upfront and $200-500 monthly—a net loss of thousands. Yet recruitment materials systematically conceal this reality while deploying three primary rhetorical moves.

Table 2. The Economic Reality of MLM Participation

Company/Category	Median Annual Income	% Earning Profit	Startup Costs	Implied Hourly Wage*
Herbalife (nutrition)	$310/year ($5.96/week)	< 1%	$5,000-$6,000	$0.30/hour
Lularoe (fashion)	$0/year	< 1%	$5,000-$10,000	$0.00/hour
Scout & Cellar (wine)	Not disclosed	< 1% (estimated)	$3,000-$5,000	Not calculable
General MLM Average	$400/year ($7.70/week)	< 1%	$5,000-$6,000	$0.38/hour
Federal Minimum Wage (comparison)	$15,080/year ($290/week)	100%	$0	$7.25/hour

**Based on estimated 20 hours/week investment. If working 40 hours/week, implied wages are even lower.*
Sources: FTC (2021) Business Guidance Concerning Multi-Level Marketing; Taylor (2011); Fitzpatrick & Reynolds (2017); Herbalife Statement of Average Gross Compensation (2020); Washington State v. Lularoe Settlement Agreement (2021)

Finding 1: Commodifying Sisterhood—Extracting Value from Social Reproduction

MLM recruitment materials consistently construct pre-existing female community, inviting recruits to join "like-minded women." This manufactured community specifically targets women's social reproductive labor—the friendships, care networks, and community ties built through years of unpaid care work.

Lularoe's homepage declares: "You are not alone. The Lularoe community has your back." This presupposes isolation while positioning a corporation as personal ally. Most crucially, it commodifies relationships built through unpaid care labor. When consultants recruit from friend networks cultivated through school pickup, playdate hosting, and volunteer coordination, they convert social capital into corporate profit while bearing all financial risk.

Finding 2: The Entrepreneurship Illusion—Appropriating Feminist Demands

All three MLMs emphasize "your own business" despite offering no actual equity, autonomy, or transferable assets. This exploits women's historical exclusion from business ownership—women receive only 2.3% of venture capital (Brush et al., 2009). The language grants what the structure denies, targeting race-and-class-specific barriers to legitimate entrepreneurship.

Finding 3: Strategic Silence—Concealing Structural Impossibility

None of the three MLMs provide median income data in recruitment materials, despite claiming to be "fully transparent." Income discussion occurs exclusively through success stories showcasing extreme outliers, creating availability heuristic that leads recruits to overestimate success probability. This silence specifically exploits gendered wage gaps and limited financial literacy education.

The community rhetoric functions differently across racial and class locations, exploiting race-and-class-specific forms of social capital:

For white suburban mothers (Lularoe's target): The promise of "sisterhood" addresses isolation created by nuclear family structure, suburban geography, and intensive mothering ideology. These women have invested heavily in building peer networks through school involvement, neighborhood associations, and mommy groups. MLMs monetize precisely these networks while destroying the social trust that made them valuable.

For educated white professionals (Scout & Cellar's target): "Community" signals class distinction and shared cultural capital—appreciation for "clean" wine, environmental consciousness, sophisticated consumption. MLMs extract value from professional networks cultivated through costly credentialing, association memberships, and networking labor.

For working-class Latinas (Herbalife's target): Community rhetoric appropriates cultural values of familia and mutual aid networks built through church participation, family gatherings, and neighborhood reciprocity. Herbalife recruitment in Latino communities exploits kinship obligations and community trust, transforming collective survival strategies into pyramid schemes where relatives recruit relatives into financial loss.

Most insidiously, the community rhetoric obscures the zero-sum competitive structure. For every consultant who succeeds, many must fail—this is mathematical necessity in pyramid structures where income derives primarily from recruitment. The business model requires that "sisters" recruit "sisters" into probable financial loss.

This represents the deepest form of social reproduction commodification: MLMs don't just monetize existing relationships; they destroy the social trust and reciprocity that constitute genuine community. When women recruit friends who lose money, when family members recruit family into debt, when neighbors exploit neighborhood trust for profit—the social fabric women built through years of care work unravels. The social capital extracted cannot be rebuilt.

Finding 2: The Entrepreneurship Illusion—Appropriating Feminist Demands While Denying Material Reality

All three MLMs heavily emphasize business ownership, entrepreneurship, and economic independence—appropriating feminist demands while denying their material substance. Close analysis reveals a consistent pattern: linguistic construction of ownership through grammar and metaphor that the actual business structure systematically denies. This rhetorical strategy specifically exploits women's historical exclusion from business ownership and capitalizes on race-and-class-specific barriers to legitimate entrepreneurship.

Lularoe states: "Start your own business with the flexibility to reach your goals on your schedule."

The possessive pronoun "your own business" performs critical ideological work, grammatically constructing the consultant as entrepreneur and owner. For women historically excluded from this category, the language feels revolutionary. Women entrepreneurs receive only 2.3% of venture capital funding (Brush et al., 2009), face discrimination in lending, and navigate gendered expectations that devalue their business acumen. Black women entrepreneurs face even more severe barriers, receiving less than 1% of venture capital despite starting businesses at rates higher than any other demographic (Bates et al., 2018).

What the grammar grants, the structure denies. Lularoe consultants cannot set their own prices (determined corporately), choose their inventory (until 2017, required to purchase pre-selected packages), build transferable business equity, sell their "business," control branding or marketing, or develop proprietary products or services.

This represents "linguistic property"—rhetorical construction of ownership through grammar rather than actual equity or autonomy. The persuasive power lies precisely in the gap: the language grants what the structure denies, exploiting women's legitimate desire for business ownership while offering only its simulation.

Race and Class Dimensions of the Entrepreneurship Illusion

For white middle-class women leaving professional careers: The "your own business" rhetoric addresses the motherhood penalty—career women who "opt out" due to inflexible workplaces face economic dependence and identity loss. The promise of entrepreneurship offers professional identity and income without requiring navigation of discriminatory corporate structures or demanding affordable childcare.

For Black women excluded from white corporate spaces: MLM "business ownership" appropriates Black women's historical entrepreneurship born of necessity. As Gill (2010) documents, direct selling provided real entrepreneurial opportunities when corporate doors remained closed. Contemporary MLMs exploit this history, offering "ownership" that lacks the genuine equity and autonomy Black women's historical businesses represented.

For working-class Latinas in service work: The entrepreneurship promise addresses occupational segregation and wage theft common in service industries. "Your own business" suggests escape from employer exploitation. Yet MLMs substitute corporate exploitation for employer exploitation—consultants face inventory requirements, recruitment quotas, and fee structures equally coercive.

The Flexibility Myth and Intensified Labor

The emphasis on "flexibility" deserves particular attention as it directly addresses women's care work responsibilities. All three MLMs promise consultants can "work from anywhere," "set your own hours," and "build a business that fits your lifestyle."

The same materials describe mandatory training, required inventory purchases, quarterly quotas for maintaining active status, and a complex compensation structure requiring continuous recruitment. The "freedom" to set one's schedule means freedom to work constantly to meet sales requirements the consultant cannot control.

Significantly, MLM "flexibility" intensifies rather than resolves the time bind. Consultants must perform both intensive market labor (recruiting, sales, social media presence) and intensive care labor (childcare, eldercare, household work) while the business structure ensures most will fail financially. The promise of working "in the margins"—during children's naps, after bedtime, on weekends—conceals that significant income requires full-time labor incompatible with intensive caregiving.

Finding 3: Strategic Silence—Cunning and the Concealment of Structural Impossibility

The most powerful form of predatory identification operates through absence—what Burke called cunning. Analysis reveals systematic patterns in what recruitment materials strategically omit, particularly regarding the actual economics of MLM participation and the labor required. These silences specifically exploit information asymmetries that gender wage discrimination and limited financial literacy education create.

None of the three MLMs provide median income data in recruitment materials, despite FTC requirements that income disclosures be made available. Herbalife's website states: "Our Gold Standard commitment is set to help you grow. This means we are easy to work with, fully transparent."

This silence specifically exploits the gender wage gap and women's limited financial literacy education. Women earn less than men across occupational categories and have less access to financial education (Lusardi & Mitchell, 2008). The promise of "unlimited earning potential" feels revolutionary to women experiencing wage discrimination, even as the silence about actual earnings conceals that MLM participation typically deepens rather than resolves economic precarity.

Income discussion occurs exclusively through success stories. Lularoe features consultants who "earned six figures" or "replaced my husband's income." These narratives create availability heuristic (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973): because successful examples are cognitively available, recruits overestimate success probability. The selective visibility constitutes strategic manipulation—showcasing extreme outliers while concealing that 99% lose money.

Most significantly, materials remain silent about the zero-sum nature of MLM structures. For every consultant who succeeds, many must fail—this is mathematical necessity in pyramid structures where income derives primarily from recruitment. Yet the rhetoric uniformly suggests that success is limited only by individual effort, not structural mathematics.

This silence is particularly gendered in its victim-blaming effects. When women fail—as 99% statistically must—they internalize failure as personal inadequacy rather than structural inevitability. The self-blame narratives consultants report ("I didn't work hard enough," "I wasn't consistent enough") reflect neoliberal feminism's individualism: if opportunity exists (which MLMs claim), then failure is individual rather than structural.

5. Analysis and Discussion

The systematic deployment of identification strategies across three MLMs with different products, ages, and target demographics reveals predatory identification as a coherent rhetorical genre specifically designed to exploit women's structural economic vulnerability while commodifying their social reproductive labor. This section synthesizes findings to address: (1) How does predatory identification extend rhetorical theory through feminist analysis? (2) How does it illuminate neoliberal feminism's material consequences and women's resistance? (3) How does it connect to broader feminist debates about capitalism, care work, and economic justice?

This analysis extends Burke's identification theory in three significant ways, each illuminated through feminist political economy:

First, manufactured aspiration: Burke's original formulation assumes consubstantiality reflects existing shared substance. MLM materials, by contrast, create identification not with who recruits are but with who they imagine becoming. The "community of like-minded wine enthusiasts" at Scout & Cellar does not exist as a pre-formed group; it is an aspirational identity the MLM offers to construct. This temporal dimension proves crucial for understanding gendered exploitation: traditional identification assumes shared actual substance; predatory identification manufactures the appearance of shared substance by projecting it into an aspirational future that the business structure ensures cannot materialize.

Second, integrated systems: The analysis demonstrates that identification strategies work in integrated systems rather than discrete tactics. Sixty-one percent of appeals employed multiple identification types simultaneously. The Herbalife statement "Build your business with Herbalife Nutrition" contains property-based identification ("your business"), assumes consubstantiality through shared health values ("nutrition"), suggests autonomy ("build"), and employs cunning by omitting structural constraints. This integration creates layered persuasive effects where each strategy reinforces others.

Third, ethical criteria: This analysis proposes criteria for distinguishing ethical persuasion from predatory identification: (1) Structural alignment—do promises match structural reality given actual business models and statistical outcomes? (2) Transparency about constraints—when autonomy is promised, are structural limitations disclosed? (3) Organic versus manufactured commonality—does persuasion build on genuinely shared experiences and aligned interests, or manufacture false commonality while obscuring conflicts?

MLM recruitment systematically violates all three criteria. The narrative promises flexibility, income, and autonomy; the structure delivers constant labor requirements, financial loss, and subordination to corporate control. The gap between promise and reality is not incidental but constitutive of the business model.

Weaponizing Feminism:

The findings illuminate how neoliberal feminism's rhetoric translates into material exploitation of women's social reproductive labor. MLMs represent the logical endpoint of feminist co-optation: the appropriation of feminist language, values, and goals in service of a business model that deepens women's economic vulnerability while extracting value from the very care work feminism sought to value.

Every feminist demand finds its perverted echo in MLM recruitment:

- Economic independence → "your own business" without equity
- Workplace flexibility → constant labor masked as freedom
- Women supporting women → zero-sum competition disguised as sisterhood
- Freedom from patriarchal authority → corporate hierarchy
- Valuing care work → commodifying care relationships for profit

6. Limitations

Limitation 1: Official Corporate Materials Only

The exclusive focus on official recruitment materials represents a deliberate choice and a significant constraint. Official materials represent corporate-level rhetorical strategy—the persuasive frameworks companies develop and disseminate—not the interpersonal recruitment discourse women actually encounter. Existing ethnographic research (Pavelko & Barker, 2022) demonstrates that face-to-face recruitment, private Facebook groups, and direct messaging involve tactics that may differ significantly from official messaging.

Future research: Ethnographic observation of recruitment conversations, interviews with current and former consultants, and analysis of consultant-created social media content would complement this analysis by revealing how corporate rhetoric gets reproduced, transformed, or resisted at the interpersonal level.

Limitation 2: Text-Only Analysis

Excluding visual and multimedia content means missing how bodies, homes, lifestyles, and visual displays work rhetorically. Instagram posts featuring consultants' bodies and material possessions, TikTok videos showing morning routines, Facebook live streams demonstrating products—all are primary recruitment mechanisms in contemporary MLM activity. Visual rhetoric may deploy identification strategies differently than text and may appeal to different or additional vulnerabilities.

Future research: Multimodal analysis incorporating visual rhetoric, video analysis, and examination of how platform affordances (Instagram's emphasis on visual aesthetics, TikTok's algorithmic amplification) shape persuasive strategies.

Limitation 3: Corporate Voice, Not Women's Voices

This study analyzes corporate self-presentation, not women's experiences. It reveals how MLMs construct persuasive narratives but cannot establish:

- Whether these narratives actually persuade (and which women they persuade)
- How women understand or interpret recruitment appeals
- What motivates women to join despite poor statistical odds
- How women experience cognitive dissonance between promises and reality
- How women develop critical consciousness about exploitation
- Why women continue participation even after

recognizing financial loss

Future research: Interview-based research with current and former consultants would reveal how women interpret recruitment narratives, what knowledge they bring to MLM participation, how they rationalize continued participation despite losses, and how they come to recognize exploitation. Such research should attend to differences across race, class, and immigration status in women's experiences and interpretations.

Limitation 4: Single National Context (United States)

Analysis examines three U.S.-based MLMs recruiting within U.S. contexts. MLM recruitment operates globally, often targeting women in the Global South through rhetoric that may differ from U.S. appeals. The relationship between neoliberal feminism and MLM exploitation may function differently across national and cultural contexts where feminist movements have different histories, economic conditions vary, and relationships to capitalism differ.

Future research: Comparative analysis of MLM recruitment across nations, attention to how companies adapt rhetoric for different cultural contexts, and examination of how MLMs exploit different forms of gendered vulnerability in different economic systems.

Limitation 5: Intersectional Analysis Constrained by Data

While we attended to how different MLMs target different demographics, the official materials analyzed do not always make racial and class targeting explicit. The intersectional analysis offered is inferential—based on what scholarship documents about each MLM's demographic recruitment patterns (Reay, 2004 on Herbalife's Latino recruitment; Washington State v. Lularoe settlement identifying suburban white mother targeting) rather than being explicitly stated in recruitment materials themselves.

Future research: Analysis of MLM materials in languages other than English, examination of how individual consultants adapt corporate messaging for their specific social networks, and attention to MLM companies that explicitly target specific racial or ethnic communities.

Limitation 6: Snapshot in Time

Materials were collected over a two-month period (November-December 2024), providing a snapshot rather than longitudinal view. MLM recruitment rhetoric likely evolves in response to regulatory pressure, public criticism, economic conditions, and cultural shifts. The findings capture how these three companies recruited at this specific historical moment but cannot address how their rhetoric has changed over time or might change in future.

Future research: Longitudinal analysis tracking how MLM rhetoric evolves over time, particularly in response to regulatory enforcement, media exposure, or anti-MLM activist pressure.

7. Conclusion: From Critique to Transformation

This analysis reveals multilevel marketing recruitment as a sophisticated form of gendered and racialized economic exploitation that weaponizes feminist rhetoric to profit from women's structural vulnerability while commodifying their social reproductive labor. MLMs succeed because of women's economic precarity, targeting different populations of women through appeals that extract value from the particular forms of care work and social capital each group performs.

The predatory identification MLMs deploy extends rhetorical theory by revealing how persuasion operates through manufactured aspiration, illuminates neoliberal feminism's material consequences by showing how empowerment rhetoric translates into systematic exploitation, and contributes to intersectional feminist analysis by demonstrating how race and class shape vulnerability to economic extraction.

The findings establish three criteria for distinguishing ethical from exploitative persuasion: structural alignment between promise and possibility, transparency about constraints and risks, and organic rather than manufactured commonality. These criteria apply beyond MLM contexts to evaluate persuasive communication across business domains where neoliberal capitalism appropriates progressive rhetoric for profit.

Policy Implications: Regulation and Consumer Protection

Policy interventions could mitigate MLM exploitation:

Enhanced Disclosure Requirements

- Mandatory income disclosure on all recruitment materials
- Clear statement of median income, not average
- Percentage of participants who lose money
- Typical time investment required
- Total costs including inventory, fees, training, travel

The consultants who lose money in MLMs are not failures who didn't "lean in" hard enough—they are casualties of a system designed to produce failure while profiting from their social reproductive labor. Women's needs are real: flexible income, meaningful work, community connection, economic security. And predatory businesses will continue exploiting the gap between feminist aspirations and capitalist reality.

The "predatory identification" framework developed here applies beyond MLM contexts. Whenever we encounter rhetoric that promises liberation through market participation, asks us to monetize care relationships, or recruits unpaid labor through aspirational identification, we can ask: Does structural reality align with rhetorical promise? Are constraints disclosed transparently? Is commonality organic or manufactured? These questions help distinguish genuine empowerment from exploitation dressed in feminist language.

As scholars, we must remain vigilant about how progressive language gets appropriated for regressive ends.

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