

Unpacking the Language of Online Multilevel Marketing Recruitment Training Materials: An Exercise in Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

Multilevel marketing has become increasingly popular in the age of social media. In order to sell products and recruit additional people to their companies, multilevel marketers often manipulate language in sophisticated ways to help them persuade potential customers and recruits. This paper aims to provide a critical discourse analysis of this language in action by examining written online training and marketing materials published by a consultant for Paparazzi, a multilevel marketing company that sells \$5 jewelry. The analysis shows how language can be manipulated through framing, sentence structure, and word and phrase choice to achieve the goals of the person using the language. Based on the findings, I make suggestions for developing critical thinking skills in second language teaching.

Introduction

Critical discourse analysis is a useful way to uncover the connections between the use of language and the social and cultural contexts in which it occurs. Doing a critical analysis of the discourse surrounding online multilevel marketing recruitment can help us better understand the ways in which language is used to negotiate and perform power relations and how it reflects and constructs social relations and identity. Multilevel marketing discourse is particularly ripe for critical discourse analysis as the Federal Trade Commission warns the public to be wary of this particular type of business model because of the risk associated with it, yet multilevel marketing companies continue to rake in billions of dollars each year. In fact, multilevel marketing companies made \$40.1 billion in retail sales in 2020, up 13.9% from the year before, according to the [Direct Selling Association](#), which acts as a lobbying group for the multilevel marketing industry. According to the Federal Trade Commission, multilevel marketing is a type of direct sales business model in which goods are purchased by individuals who sign up to become “consultants” or “distributors.” Typically, distributors make a modest commission off of the products they sell. It is worth noting that to become a distributor in the first place, many multilevel marketing companies require an initial “startup cost” to receive the product they will then try to sell to customers. Depending on the company, this initial startup cost can be up to several hundred dollars. As the materials evaluated in this study illustrate, recruitment efforts are often directed at women who are trying to provide for their families or to get out of debt.



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Furthermore, one of the staple characteristics of multilevel marketing companies is that once distributors join the company, they are incentivized with monetary compensation and other perks to recruit additional distributors. This is because, in a multilevel marketing business, distributors can make money not only from selling the product but also from a percentage of every sale made by the recruits below them, which creates an incentive to recruit as many people to the company as possible. Multilevel marketing businesses are often compared to illegal pyramid schemes. However, there is a distinction. Multilevel marketing businesses are considered legal so long as they have a product to sell. In contrast, pyramid schemes put the emphasis solely on recruitment for a perceived opportunity with no product to sell. However, multilevel marketing companies are often criticized for their similarities to pyramid schemes due to questions about the ethics of their business practices. The Federal Trade Commission has warned the public that a pyramid scheme might be using a product to masquerade as a multilevel marketing business if (a) the company requires individuals as a part of the compulsory startup costs to join the company to purchase more inventory than they are likely to be able to sell and (b) if the company has a lack of retail sales, which could indicate that the products are being sold to recruits rather than consumers outside of the organization. Because of the tiered structure of a multilevel marketing business, only a small percentage of distributors make a profit—and while some of that profit is often from product sales, a significant portion also comes from recruitment commissions. Studies by the [AARP](#) as well as the [Consumer Awareness Institute](#) have found that an estimated 73-99% of people involved in multilevel marketing either lose money or break even on their investment. Given this context, it is important to consider through the lens of critical discourse analysis how multilevel marketers employ language to further their goals of recruiting people to companies that the new recruits are likely to lose or make no money from by joining.

In this paper, I discuss the principles of critical discourse analysis and review existing research on linguistic strategies used by multilevel marketing consultants. Subsequently, I perform a case study of critical discourse analysis of online recruitment strategies employed by a consultant for a multilevel marketing company called Paparazzi. This paper concludes with a discussion of what implications the findings have for language teaching. It is worth noting that this is a case study about the relationship between language and society and how they influence each other. While this study looks at materials authored by one specific multi-level marketer, my goal is to examine this blog as a sample to uncover the possible linguistic strategies used to sway the audience.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a powerful tool that can reveal the values, positions, and perspectives woven into how we use language. Approaching a text through the lens of CDA, according to Paltridge (2006), allows us to not only “explore the connections between the use of language and the social and political contexts in which it occurs” but also to examine the ways in which language is used to establish, reflect and negotiate power dynamics, social relationships and social identities (p. 179). First, CDA considers the framing of the entire text and how that is

accomplished with language. Second, CDA examines the text at the sentence level to uncover patterns such as who or what tends to be the subject of the sentence and who or what is given agency in the sentence. And finally, the data is analyzed on the word and phrasal level to discover what words and phrases are used, why they are used, and their connotations.

A critical examination of the language used in multi-level marketing recruitment materials is particularly interesting as the language used during recruitment is ripe with underlying social contexts, identities, and power dynamics. Critical discourse analysis is important in language teaching as language learners should be taught how to look at language critically so that they are better prepared to detect the ways language can be manipulated to shape their perceptions of certain issues and how language can be used in media or everyday life as a tool to further unspoken agendas.

Critical Analysis of Multilevel Marketing Discourse

Biggart's examination of multi-level marketing companies, also referred to as direct sales companies, argues that charisma is essential among consultants and salespeople. Specifically, these companies tend to promote "go-give" attitudes among their salespeople with an emphasis on spreading the benefits the companies can offer rather than on "go-get" attitudes that focus on competition among distributors (Biggart, 1989). A study published in 2019 found that in online videos, multilevel marketing consultants mostly used logic and evidence as well as appeals to emotions as persuasive strategies during various pitches (Andriani & Marlina, 2019). Past critical discourse analyses have also found that multilevel marketing consultants often work toward their goals, whether sales or recruitment, by promoting identities—which is reflected in the language that they use (Carl, 2004). In fact, multiple studies have found that it is common for multilevel marketing consultants to invoke the notion of an ideal entrepreneurial identity and to refer to themselves as "business owners" in order to increase the perception of legitimacy in their sales and recruitment efforts (Biggart, 1989; Kong, 2001). Not only do multilevel marketing companies use language to create a sense of entrepreneurial identity among consultants for the benefit of their own business operations, but also to appeal to friendship and connections. Kong (2001) stated that "Network marketing, as an enterprise 'using' friendship to promote products, has been notorious for its exploitative use of interpersonal meaning."

Existing research clearly demonstrates that communication among multilevel marketing consultants is rich with efforts to establish social identities and power dynamics. This paper aims to look at exactly how language is employed for these purposes by investigating how language is used to frame recruitment materials as well as how social identities and power dynamics are reflected and established at the phrase, sentence, and word level of these materials. The paper also considers the implications the findings have for language teaching.

Research Questions

This study seeks to find out: 1) What are the linguistic features used in the online training and marketing materials published by a Paparazzi consultant in order to encourage additional

recruitment to the company? For the purpose of this paper, linguistic features include grammatical structures, the subject of each sentence, and who or what is given agency in each sentence. 2) What discourse strategies are used in the online training and marketing materials to persuade Paparazzi consultants to recruit additional consultants? Discourse strategies include choices made at the word and phrasal level to further the rhetorical goals of the author.

Methodology

The data examined in this study were taken from a [website](#) created by a consultant at a multilevel marketing company called Paparazzi. The website consists of blogs, podcasts, and more. The data for this study come from a blog post intended to be used as training material for other consultants who are thinking about recruiting additional consultants to the company. Though the blog post is labelled as training material, it is written from the first-person perspective of the author. The text was analyzed using a critical discourse analysis approach, following Fairclough (1995) and Paltridge (2006) (cited above). In the analysis below, I will focus on representative examples from the text collected to illustrate the patterns found.

Findings

Framing as a Persuasive Strategy

The first data sample comes from a section of the blog post that's entitled "Why should I want to build a team?" This blog post is written from the perspective of a multilevel marketing consultant who is a seller of the product and receives monetary incentives from recruiting additional people to join the company. The text in the excerpts for this paper has been numbered by paragraph or sentence for ease of reference. The blog post can be read in its entirety in the Appendix.

Excerpt 1

1. *As you are growing leaders in your business, you get to connect with other women who are fun, excited and motivated in their business. It is really fun to make new friends and get to know people because of Paparazzi.*
2. *This is something I talk about a lot because I wasn't a super popular kid and that is something I didn't expect when I joined Paparazzi. I don't think I would have believed it if someone HAD told me! Paparazzi has given me friends, great relationships, an increase in our family funds and a way to take amazing vacations with my husband!*
3. *While the reasons your friends and customers will want to join can be as various as they are, a lot of times they will also discover that Paparazzi is more than just \$5 jewelry.*

In Excerpt 1, the author frames the idea of recruiting additional people to become salespeople for Paparazzi as a way to build connections and friendships with other business-minded women (paragraph 1). By using "you" as the agent of the first sentence, or the subject that has agency to take action, the author signals to the reader that it is in their power to grow their business and connect with other like-minded businesswomen (paragraph 1). The second sentence of the first paragraph uses the dummy subject "it" to express a general truth in which Paparazzi is portrayed as the key component that could help the reader meet new friends and get to know other professionals.

In the second paragraph, the author continues to frame recruitment as a social benefit and does so by emphasizing that “I wasn’t super popular” in the past, but that with the help of Paparazzi, she has constructed a new-and-improved ideal social identity through which she now has many friends and relationships. The use of the past tense “wasn’t” helps the author to separate and contrast her identity into a more negative or less desirable past-self that existed before joining Paparazzi versus her present-day idealized social identity constructed after joining Paparazzi. Joining Paparazzi is framed through the lens of a doubter in the second and third sentences of paragraph 2 as a method of persuasion. The author does this by stating that she “didn’t expect” that the company could help her make new friends and by stating that she would not have “believed” it could happen if someone “HAD” told her that this social transformation would result from joining Paparazzi, implying that though the results may seem too good to be true, she is living proof that the outcome can, in fact, be better than expected. Within the framing of the first sentence, the word “joined” represents a transformative action (paragraph 2). The author only briefly mentions the personal monetary benefits that Paparazzi has provided her with (paragraph 2). When personal monetary gain is mentioned, it is done by framing the profits as new “family funds” that allow the author to make memories and go on vacations with her husband, thus emphasizing social connection rather than, say, expensive material possessions. It is notable that monetary gain is only mentioned when framed as something that benefits more than just the author or the company itself.

The third paragraph continues with this framing by positioning “friends” as potential clients. This section of the excerpt goes on to once again minimize Paparazzi as solely a company that sells \$5 jewelry and instead frames the company as a vehicle through which people can construct an ideal social identity and gain the power to benefit their families. The author achieves this outcome partly by using “Paparazzi” in the last sentences of paragraphs 2 and 3 as a grammatical metaphor in which Paparazzi is the agent acting to make positive things happen for both the author and potential recruits.

Choice of Grammatical Constructions to Establish Agency and Construct Social Identity

Excerpt 2 shows how language is used at the sentence level to establish social and power identities and assign agency to the audience.

Excerpt 2

1. *Another great reason to build your team is because you have the opportunity to help other women too.*
2. *You can be the person that helps them get out of debt or helps them find a way to put food on the table.*
3. *Or maybe they are able to work less and be with their kids more.*
4. *Whatever the reason, you can be the person that helps them change their lives!*

Sentences 1 and 4 in Excerpt 2 topicalize “reason.” In this context, the word “reason” is used to refer to why the reader should recruit other women to the company. The emphasis is placed on how recruitment would help the women being recruited rather than the monetary gain. Sentence 2 topicalizes “you” (the reader) and sentence 3 topicalizes “they,” or the women

the reader could “help” through recruitment. The structure of the sentences assigns agency to the reader when it comes to recruiting more women to the company and establishes a dynamic in which the reader has the power to improve other women’s lives if only they work to recruit the women to the company.

Excerpt 2 also provides an example of how language is used to construct social identity. In sentences 2 and 4, the phrase “you can be the person that” is used rather than simply saying “you can help,” which would convey the same message that the reader can help other women. Choosing the phrase “you can be the person that” is a way of using language to construct social identity by implying that if the reader recruits other women to the company, then they will achieve an idealized version of themselves that would be the type of person who helps other women gain the means to spend time with their children and put food on the table.

Phrases and Word Choice in Advice

Once the text establishes why the reader should recruit people to the company, it then shifts to how the reader can do that. The following excerpts show how phrase and word choice significantly change depending on whether the author is writing advice to a reader who has not yet started their recruitment efforts versus a reader who has already begun those efforts yet is still struggling to recruit.

Excerpt 3

1. *If, on the other hand, you talk about how the styles change all the time and how Paparazzi has the latest colors, fashions, and trends, you are speaking right to her heart and she is more likely to jump right in!*
2. *My favorite question to figure out what their heart wants is: “What is it about the Paparazzi business that is most exciting to you?”*
3. *This leaves it wide open to see what is in their hearts and what will motivate them more to join?*

In Sentence 1 of Excerpt 3, the author says that the reader can recruit a potential client by “speaking right to her heart.” The second sentence gives an example of a question the reader can use to do this, while the third sentence uses similar phrasing to the first sentence by saying that this approach will help “see what is in their hearts” to motivate the potential client to join the company. This phrasing personifies a potential client’s heart in an effort to portray the recruitment process as an emotional connection rather than a business transaction.

Excerpt 4 shows a shift in phrase and word choice when the author addresses consultants who may feel discouraged in their recruitment efforts.

Excerpt 4

1. *I know it can be discouraging when you have been posting and posting and no one seems to be buying, but just keep it up!*
2. *Have a party.*
3. *Get some new blood in your sales group.*

Excerpt 4 shows a stark contrast in word and phrase choice from the other data samples and from the text as a whole. When the author addresses readers who may be discouraged in

their selling and recruitment efforts, she then starts to talk about the process in more explicit terms by using words like “buying” and “sales group” whereas these concepts were mentioned in more euphemistic terms in the rest of the text. The author also moves away from phrases like “speaking to the heart” to refer to sales and recruitment tactics and instead uses phrases like “get some new blood” to refer to new recruits. Whereas phrases to personify a potential client’s heart were used to emphasize emotional connection and de-emphasize the business transaction, phrases like “new blood” and “sales group” are used to minimize emotional connection and emphasize new business tactics to find success. Another contrast worth noting is that the author only begins to use imperatives when addressing the women who are struggling to recruit—a phrasal feature that is absent when the author addresses the women who are just thinking about becoming recruiters for the company. In Excerpt 4, the author acknowledges that a lack of success can be “discouraging” and then proceeds to use language to give the reader directives, instructing them to not give up and follow the author’s tips on finding success in recruitment. This shift shows how language can be manipulated in various ways depending on the intent or agenda of the author.

The framing of the text as a whole is used as a persuasive technique to convince consultants that they should recruit additional women to work for Paparazzi. The author does this by de-emphasizing the personal profit the company and the reader will get through recruitment and framing recruitment as an opportunity for emotional connection, a chance to make friends, and help others.

On the sentence level, the author often topicalizes the reader, the reasons why the reader should recruit new women to the company, and the potential recruits themselves. This has the effect of keeping the author’s message centered on the people involved and the benefits they can reap through Paparazzi rather than drawing attention to the processes of multilevel marketing and the detailed ways through which benefit can be gained—in which a consultant increases their own profit margins (and thus the profit of the company as a whole) by convincing other women to buy a bulk of inventory that they will then be responsible for selling themselves (an effort new recruits may or may not find success in, resulting in their own financial consequences). The topicalization of the readers, whom the author is trying to convince to recruit new salespeople, also assigns agency and responsibility to the readers. This makes the text imply that it is incumbent on the reader to help improve the lives of the women around them by sharing the opportunity of joining Paparazzi.

Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis above has shown how language can be manipulated through framing, sentence structure, and word and phrase choice to achieve the goals of the person using the language. Specifically, this can be done in the context of multilevel marketing training materials. The person who authored the materials benefits if readers follow the instructions outlined to recruit additional people to the company. A critical look at these materials reveals that the author uses language to convince the reader to exploit emotional connection and friendship for their benefit and the company’s benefit as a whole—not to mention the consultants they were recruited by.

Language is used to frame recruitment as a noble way to help struggling women without acknowledging that to recruit a woman struggling to put food on the table for her kids is to ask her to spend her limited resources on a bulk of inventory that she will need to sell before seeing any returns on her investments—sales that are not guaranteed to be successful.

Admittedly, this was a very small-scale study. It would be interesting if future research could conduct a similar critical discourse analysis, but with a larger data sample collected from multiple multilevel marketing consultants from a number of different companies. A larger-scale study would be able to investigate whether the trends found in this study are present in the larger multilevel marketing discourse. Future research should also examine how gendered language is used in the broader multilevel marketing discourse. Though it was not analyzed, the data examined in this study contained a significant amount of gendered language. Future research could look at data from many different multilevel marketing companies to see if this gendered narrative is a trend in the broader discourse.

The findings of this study confirm the importance of approaching text or any other media through a critical lens rather than taking it at face value. This importance should be conveyed to language learners in the classroom. It is essential to give language learners the tools they need to identify the ways in which language is used and manipulated to achieve unspoken agendas. While this may be most relevant for upper-level ESL learners who will use their new language skills to consume new information, we can also promote this view even at lower levels. This can be done through incorporating authentic reading materials such as newspaper articles in lessons to help students identify how framing, word choice, and sentence structure can be used to leave the reader with certain impressions. Doing this would promote critical thinking among learners while also helping them to hone their English skills.

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About the author

Anna Dye is a freelance writer and editor and a candidate in the MA TESOL Program at Hawaii Pacific University. Her research and writing interests include the exploration of how language and society influence each other as well as how technology can be used in the language classroom.

Appendix

Link to original blog post: <http://paparockstars.com/grow-your-team/>

The text below is directly from the blog post.

Training

Building a team with Paparazzi is a great way to help other people as well as expanding your business.

Why should I want to build a team?

When you have a team, you can reach greater ranks in Paparazzi, get achievements like the Crown Clubs and you get a downline bonus check every month that will only add to the money you are already getting with your personal sales.

As you are growing leaders in your business, you get to connect with other women who are fun, excited and motivated in their business. It is really fun to make new friends and get to know people because of Paparazzi.

This is something I talk about a lot because I wasn't a super popular kid and that is something I didn't expect when I joined Paparazzi. I don't I would have believed it if someone HAD told me! Paparazzi has given me friends, great relationships, an increase in our family funds and a way to take amazing vacations with my husband!

While the reasons your friends and customers will want to join can be as various as they are, a lot of times they will also discover that Paparazzi is more than just \$5 jewelry.

Another great reason to build your team is because you have the opportunity to help other women too. You can be the person that helps them get out of debt or helps them find a way to put food on the table. Or maybe they are able to work less and be with their kids more. Whatever the reason, you can be the person that helps them change their lives!

You are probably thinking, "I don't know the first thing about being a leader or training someone." Not a problem! This episode will get you started on the right foot!

So now that we've covered WHY you SHOULD want to grow your team, let's cover the HOW.

Whether you've been with Paparazzi for several years or are just getting started, sharing the business doesn't have to be complicated. Usually I just say something like, "Girl, you just love this jewelry SO much, have you ever thought of just joining?! Your passion would be contagious and I'm sure your friends would love looking as amazing as you do!"

See, that simple! I think a lot of times we over-complicate the process and make it a lot more difficult than it has to be!

Here are a few tricks that I've learned to help me out...

Ask questions

Start out by asking them what questions THEY have about Paparazzi. This may be the only thing that you need to do. Most people only have a concern or two before they are ready to jump in! Talk about those and get them started!

There are some people who like numbers, facts and data to look over. Share with them the Compensation Plan. Be sure to add your consultant information to the top so that they know who to contact when they are ready to join your team.

Don't over complicate this! It is really as easy as talking. If you get asked a question you don't know or get stumped, tell them that you don't know, BUT you can find out and let them know. You don't have to have all the answers before you get going! Your potential team member will love that you will look into their question and get back with them! This shows them that you care and that you WILL find them the answers they need.

Be interested in them!

Learn about their personal life. Do they have kids? Family? Are they married? Are they new to the area? Do they stay at home? Do they work outside the home? Do they like jewelry? What is it about Paparazzi that they like most? How could Paparazzi make the biggest difference in their lives?

These are all great questions that will help you get to know that person better. Be sure to keep things conversational and not like an interview. You want them to get a feel for who you are at the same time AND not sound scripted.

Listen before you talk

When I get excited or nervous... and sometimes just because I'm awake, I like to talk... and talk and talk and talk. When you are chatting with someone about joining Paparazzi, the BIGGEST "secret" I can tell you is to LISTEN! Ask questions, like we talked about a minute ago but you really want to focus on listening more and talking LESS. When they ask you a question, answer it and then ask them another questions.

This leads me right into my next point...

Speak to what speaks to them

People join Paparazzi for all kinds of reasons. Sometimes it's because they need girl time. Other times it's just for the money. And still others just want to travel the world with a group of amazing people and see Paparazzi as a way to do just that. When you are talking about the benefits of joining Paparazzi, you need to focus on the aspect that is most appealing to them

If you have someone who wants to be fashionable at all times but is on a tight budget and you talk to her about traveling the whole time, she might walk away confused and unsure if Paparazzi is the right fit for her. If, on the other hand, you talk about how the styles change all the time and how Paparazzi has the latest colors, fashions and trends, you are speaking right to her heart and she is more likely to jump right in!

My favorite question to figure out what their heart wants is: "What is it about the Paparazzi business that is most exciting to you?" This leaves it wide open to see what is in their hearts and what will motivate them more to join.

Walk the walk

When you are wanting to build a team, the BEST way to attract people to you is to be an amazing example of a Paparazzi consultant. Wear your jewelry, take it with you while you are out and about. When you sell a little or a lot, TELL people about it. You don't have to brag, but simply sharing those little things will start to get your friends and family thinking that they want to have that kind of success too! Or maybe they will share what you are doing with the people they know and you will get referrals. It all starts from those little seeds you sew every day, so be sure you are planting seeds that you want to harvest!

Be consistent with the parties, events, and posting you do. Work your business consistently over time will be what gets you the results. I know it can be discouraging when you have been posting and positing and no seems to be buying, but just keep it up! Have a party. Get some new blood in your sales group. Shake things up a little bit. But keep with it When you push through those difficult times, that's when you will find the tremendous, amazing, Elite kind of growth that we all want to achieve.