

Boss Babes and Predatory Optimism: Neoliberalism, Multi- level Marketing Schemes, and Gender

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Defining Boss Babes

- Boss Babes is the term used in the propaganda of Multilevel Marketing Firms (MLMs) to refer to the women who are persuaded to become distributors for their firms.
- These women are offered the “opportunity” to earn income by becoming independent, flexible, direct-to-consumer sales people, who are persuaded that they epitomize the optimism, meritocracy, and work ethic particular to our current stage of capitalism, neoliberalism.
- MLMs have not attracted a great deal of attention from other feminist scholars, including economists.

Short history

- MLMs are pyramid schemes with a “twist.”
- MLMs get around the illegality of pyramid schemes by selling an actual product. But structurally it is the same as a pyramid scheme. Distributors make money, not by selling the product, but by recruiting new distributors in a typical pyramid fashion.
- The results are the same however, early distributors in the pyramid make money, the promoter makes money, but those lower in pyramid almost always lose their money.

The MLM “Twist”

- The FTC defines a pyramid scheme as involving companies that promise consumers or investors large profits based primarily on recruiting others to join their program, not based on profits from any real investment or real sale of goods to the public. Some schemes may purport to sell a product, but they simply use the product to hide their pyramid structure
- “[A]s long as a company does not *require* that new recruits buy large inventories and maintains some level of retail sales ... then companies ... are able to avoid being defined as pyramid schemes under the law.” (Lamoreaux 2013, 188-189)

Secrecy and Deception, Profits and Losses

- The main issue which I and many other people have with these companies is that they claim to be supporting female entrepreneurs and feminism, calling themselves 'Boss Babes' and 'Momtrepreneurs'. They make outrageous claims such as 80 percent of women who earn over 6 figures a year are doing so through direct marketing. (Wood 2019, 5)
- Estimates of earnings, profits, and losses from participating as a distributor in an MLM are hard to find.
- One estimates suggests 99.6% of participants to losing money. Another shows 99% of all distributors earn less than \$13 a week. An AAUP panel survey found 77% of their respondents broke even or lost money.

The Potency of Neoliberalism and Religion in U.S. MLM culture

- Mary V. Wrenn has analyzed “Veblenian social practices” which help explain the appropriation of prosperity theology, combined with neoliberal ideology, to sustaining the enabling myths employed by MLMs.
- She identifies: conspicuous consumption (the tithe); invidious distinction of faithfulness; and prosperity emulation; as the Veblenian social practices supporting the prosperity gospel.
- The elevation of the concept autonomous individual to being *the* only normal expression of innate human nature is central to the enabling mythology of neoliberal ideology.

Neoliberalism and the Prosperity Gospel

- In Neoliberalism the actions of the autonomous individual agent are the only causal factor in determining the economic or social outcomes the individual experiences.
- The Prosperity Gospel Christian believes that God has victory planned for her and that to receive it, she must act as though she has already received it. The believer must positively confess her trust and belief in God in order to activate into existence that which she is owed.
- Failure to receive comes from failure to believe adequately that one will receive, in the near future, what God has promised.

Veblenian Social Practice—Conspicuous Consumption (the tithe)

- The Prosperity Gospel teaches that the tithe—a financial contribution to the church—is a demonstration of faith; depth of faith is therefore measurable and demonstrable through the act of tithing. More importantly, the Prosperity Gospel teaches that the tithe-as-an-act-of-faith attracts prosperity.
- In MLMs, new recruits are encouraged to buy product up front to achieve the minimum level of sales to move up to a higher level of distributor status to achieve larger discounts and to demonstrate their faith and commitment to the program. Or in the language of the prosperity gospel, the tithe—the seed of faith—is planted and the believer receives that for which she asks.

Veblenian Social Practice—Invidious Distinction of Faithfulness

- Prosperity Gospel preachers claim to be role models—living examples that God’s abundance is awarded to the most able practitioners. They argue that their conspicuous displays of wealth provide evidence of the power of the Prosperity Gospel as well as honor God and His beneficence.
- The world of MLMs is one of predatory optimism. Those in the distributor network are provided resources, seminars, mentoring, and conventions (for which the distributors pay) all to assure them that if they push on and increase their effort at “duplication” (adding more downstream distributors to their individual networks) their success is guaranteed.

Veblenian Social Practice—Prosperity Emulation

- The doctrine of the Prosperity Gospel specifically states that the individual believer is exceptional in God's view—the proof is in the prosperity. That prosperity is measurable and thus comparable to others through wealth.
- In MLM's celebratory conventions, displaying the successes of distributors, celebrity endorsements, and well publicized prizes and gifts for the successful distributors are classic conspicuous displays to serve as a prod to the attending distributors to emulate the successful distributors' strategies and work effort in building their distributor network.
- Notably absent is significant effort devoted to getting distributors to engage in direct sales of the product to consumers

Conclusion

- Wrenn's exploration of Veblenian social practices, her conclusion rings as true for MLMs as it does for the Prosperity Gospel preachers: Through these Veblenian social practices, individuals are socialized and habituated to deny the material reality of the failure of their faith. Veblen's Propaganda of Faith is particularly instructive here, as the Prosperity Theology is able to further mitigate doubt and fill its coffers by selling materials which promise and inspire the individual believer to improve her performance in those Veblenian social practices.
- Clearly the management and top distributors of MLMs are using the same Veblenian social practices as prosperity Gospel preachers to sustain their predation on those who join the ranks of distributors destined to lose money for their benefit. As with any long con, MLMs use these social practices to make the hapless distributors complicit in their own fleecing.

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