

ANALYSIS OF PERSUASIVE ELEMENTS IN MULTI - LEVEL MARKETING OFFICIAL WEBSITES

Radzuwan Ab Rashid*, Siti Nadiah Ahamad Sapari*, Nur Hazwani Majid*,
Zanirah Wahab*, Kamariah Yunus* and Saiful Bahri Mohamed**

***Abstract:** This paper explores how multi-level marketing (MLM) companies persuade potential customers through their official websites. Within the 20 days of data generation period, there were 15 postings updated on the websites. The entries were analyzed using micro analysis approach through the lens of Aristotelian rhetorical theory (ethos, pathos and logos). The analysis shows that all the three MLM official websites strategically used ethos, pathos and logos in persuading their potential customers. Most of the time, these three appeals are combined together in an entry. This paper contributes to the existing literature on MLM by bringing to the fore the role of persuasion in the success of MLM business.*

***Keywords:** Aristotle, ethos, pathos, electronic eloquence model, multi-level marketing.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Multi-level marketing (MLM) can be generally defined as one of the business strategies to attract potential customers to buy their products and at the same time, recruiting more members to join the business. This business strategy is gaining its popularity worldwide. In the US for instance, MLM has become a big business where it accounts for up to \$50 billion in total US annual sales or about 1 percent of all goods and services sold (Marsh, 2004). As pointed out by Emek et al., (2011) MLM is an effective strategy as the products will be promoted through “word of mouth” especially when the existing members attempt to recruit new members (p.1).

In order to attract more customers and members to join the company, persuasion is needed to make it successful. Persuasion, according to Perloff (2010), is a “symbolic process” where the communicator attempts to convince other people in order to change their attitude or behaviors (p.12). Rundell (2007) provides a clear explanation to differentiate persuasion from manipulation. Whilst persuasion is positively connotated that it involves ethical acts, manipulation is not. Manipulation is “the behavior that influences someone or controls something in a clever or dishonest way” (p.6).

* Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Malaysia

** Faculty of Innovative Design and Technology, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Malaysia

Leung (2014) highlights that the most important characteristic of a salesperson in MLM business is being persuasive and they should not be perceived as being manipulative. Persuasion is one of the important elements in business strategies especially in MLM. This is because they not only need to sell products but also recruiting agents. However, previous research, such as Hatchaleelaha and Wongsurawat (2016) and Sethi and Khinvasara (2015), mainly focus on the bad and lies of multi-level marketing (MLM). On the other hand, previous research on persuasion mainly focus on social support (e.g. Rashid, Rahman & Rahman, 2016), literary works (e.g. Anas et al., 2016), teachers and learners (e.g. Zaid et al., 2016; Rashid et al., 2016a), sermons (Zulkffli & Rashid, 2016) and self-presentation (e.g. Rashid et al., 2016b). There is very limited research on how MLM companies persuade potential customers to buy their products and join the companies. This paper aims to fill in the gap by exploring how MLM companies persuade potential customers through their official websites.

2. ARISTOTELIAN RHETORICAL THEORY

Rhetoric is a communication that is associated with influence and persuasion (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991). Aristotle establishes three types of rhetorical appeals which are Ethos, Pathos and Logos. Ethos is an appeal on how the persuader presents himself for herself. Ethos can be defined as the persuader's credibility that he or she establishes with the audiences (Murthy & Ghosal, 2014). In MLM business, it is the ability to gain trust from the potential customers either to buy their products or to join the companies. For instance, the background information of the founder and his or her qualification are included in the official website to show the credibility of the company. As pointed out by Flanagan and Metzger (2008), a persuader's credibility is reflected from his intelligence, personality and relevant expertise (p.7).

Pathos is an "appeal of using the audience's state of mind to gain benefit from the persuasion" (Luukkonen, 2014, p.24). A sense of emotions can be obtained by using words or any relevant information that may affect the audience's identity and also self-interest (Ramage & Bean, 1998). In contrast to Phatos, Logos means "having logically and understandably explained reasons with valid evidence which the audience can agree on" (Larson, 2007, p.11). The evidence should be provided together with the "consistency of the information by providing facts and values" (Murthy & Ghosal, p.251). In MLM business, logos is used when the companies give information about the products by stating the ingredients used, the products' value and other factual information. Sellers who understand the elements of persuasion "can more effectively apply the lore of business development and proposal preparation" (Newman, 2011, p.151).

3. METHODOLOGY

Data generation began on 2nd November 2015 until 21st November 2015, a total of 20 days. Within the data generation period, there were 15 postings updated on the MLM official websites being observed. The websites were Shaklee, Herbalife and USANA. These three MLM companies were chosen as they were among the top 100 MLM companies in 2015 (Nuyten, 2015). All the three MLM companies believe that nature holds the answers to a healthy and productive life. They highlight the use of pure ingredients in their products and the products have been scientifically tested. The data were analyzed through the lens of Aristotelian rhetorical theory where the entries were scrutinized for the evidence of ethos, pathos and logos.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

All entries from the three MLM official websites used ethos, pathos and logos appeals in order to persuade potential customers to buy products and to join the companies. These three appeals are further scrutinized in the sections that follow.

4.1. Ethos

Extract 1 below is the example of ethos used in Shaklee website.

Extract 1:

Our scientists find pure and potent ingredients from nature, spending thousands of hours reviewing scientific literature and conducting their own studies to verify efficacy. We use unique combinations of scientifically supported ingredients to create our exclusive formulas.

(Shaklee, Entry 3)

The word “scientists” holds a big role especially in research and development. O’ Keefe (2002) emphasizes that the credibility of the persuader occurs when the audience believe in them. Shaklee attempts to convince readers by highlighting that its products are produced by scientists who have engaged in thorough research in ensuring the effectiveness of the products. Hence, the company should be seen as a credible one.

Extract 2 presents an example of ethos found in Herbalife official website.

Extract 2:

... Herbalife is the Global Nutrition Partner of Cristiano Ronaldo. “I strongly believe in the importance of the right nutrition for me as an individual, both on and off the field.” (Cristiano Ronaldo - Footballer, Spain)...

(Herbalife, Entry 3)

The company presents a testimony from a famous footballer named Cristiano Ronaldo. He is a well-known athlete and a public figure that everyone knows. When a public figure reviews a product, people will be easily persuaded as he or she carries his or her credibility together with any information related to the product (Porter, 2014). It is most likely that readers will put their trust on Cristiano Ronaldo because he is capable enough in delivering information and messages related to health. Everyone is aware that a good health is one of the criteria to be an excellent athlete.

4.2. Pathos

Extract 3 is an example of Pathos used in Shaklee website.

Extract 3: What's possible? You decide.

What do you want out of life? More time with friends and family? Extra money to travel or enjoy a few perks? Or are you looking for more? A way to make a bigger impact. The beauty of a Shaklee business is that it can be designed around your life in a way that works for you.

(Shaklee, Entry 5)

Pathos is an emotional appeal where the speaker persuades an audience by appealing to their emotions. As can be seen in Extract 3, readers are prompted with several rhetorical questions so that they think of their future. As pointed out by Ramage and Bean (1998), a sense of emotions can be obtained by tapping on audience's self-interest. The question "Or are you looking for more?" can have a big impact on the audience's emotions because it is everyone's dream to live a good life, not just by having extra time with the loved ones or travelling, but it is more than that. The use of pathos appeal in the question can be the cornerstone of moving the people to act. In this case, they might be influenced to join Shaklee business for extra earnings.

Extract 4 is an example of Pathos appeal found on USANA website. The company attempts to persuade people to join their company as a sale agent.

Extract 4:

... New to the health and wellness industry? No experience in direct sales? No problem. You don't need a résumé. If you're willing to learn and have a passion to help others succeed, USANA will fit in perfectly with your life ... Sure, money can't buy you love, but it can buy you financial freedom ...

(USANA, Entry 2)

The statement "USANA will fit in perfectly with your life", suggests that the company is concerned with the potential customers' lives. People with no qualifications and knowledge in business field can still join MLM business as their

source of income. To make it more appealing, USANA declares that they do not even have to prepare their resume. It is highly likely that this statement will appeal to customers' emotions and feelings because USANA seems to be very helpful for them to earn some cash and change their lives. Murthy and Ghosal (2014) put forth that emotions are powerful motivators to stimulate minds and hearts of the audiences. They further explain that the audiences will simply accept the claims or the content of the speaker's speech when they are emotionally persuaded. The statement "Sure, money can't buy you love, but it can buy you financial freedom" is also powerful in persuading readers. With good financial, people can have a very good life where they can afford to buy anything that they want in this life.

4.3. Logos

Extract 5 presents an example of logos appeal found in Herbalife official website. The company attempts to persuade their potential customers to buy a product called "Formula 1 Shake".

Extract 5:

Delicious healthy meal that provides an excellent balance of high quality protein from milk and soy, essential micronutrients and added botanicals and herbs. ...

Key benefits:

- ... Rich in protein from dairy and soy (18g per serving), Formula 1 shakes are a great option if you are looking to build lean muscle mass along with exercise
- Soy protein: a complete protein providing all essential amino acids ...

(Herbalife, Entry 2)

The above extract contains two persuasive facts. Firstly, it is a fact that high quality protein comes from milk and soy. Secondly, protein is the main nutrition in building muscles that it supplies essential amino acid for the body. Since "Formula 1 Shake" has this high quality protein, readers should not doubt this product will help in weight management and maintain a nutritionally balanced diet.

Extract 6 is an example of logos found in USANA website.

Extract 6:

... We can't remove all of life's stressors like bills, family challenges, work hurdles, and other pressures. But there are ways to shut down the worrying and get some sleep. ...

(USANA, Entry 1)

The persuasive fact is presented in the statement “We can’t remove all of life’s stressors like bills, family challenges, work hurdles, and other pressures”. Stress is faced by everyone thus readers can easily accept the truth value of that statement. As pointed out by Murthy and Ghosal (2014), Logos is used as a tool to make readers realize the truth in the persuader’s words. USANA suggests that the stress can be overcome by having some sleep. This is another fact presented in the paragraph. Following the two lines presented in Extract 4, USANA recommends its product which can help the readers to get the good sleep and overcome their stress.

4.4. The Combination of Appeals

Extract 7 is an entry in USANA official website which has ethos and logos appeals.

Extract 7:

“At USANA, we’re committed to making the highest quality products without compromise. That’s why we use only the purest ingredients, stringent quality control, and a manufacturing process that’s second-to-none. After all, at USANA we make more than just nutritionals – they’re *Nutritional You Can Trust*”.

(Dr. Myron Wentz, Founder and Chairman, USANA Health Sciences)

(USANA, Entry 4)

This powerful message comes from Dr. Myron Wentz who is the founder and chairman of USANA. He is a microbiologist, immunologist and pioneer in the infectious disease diagnosis. His expertise and qualifications reflect his credibility which constitutes the ethos appeal in this entry. As mentioned by Flanagan and Metzger (2008), a persuader’s credibility comes from his or her intelligence and expertise. Besides ethos, this entry also has logos appeal. This appeal is in the sentence “At USANA, we’re committed to making the highest quality products without compromise” which is followed with “we use only the purest ingredients, stringent quality control, and a manufacturing process that’s second-to-none”. These two statements are logically stated that they use only the best ingredients in their products because they care about customers.

5. CONCLUSION

All the three MLM websites strategically used ethos, pathos and logos appeals to persuade readers. In line with the spirit of MLM, they not only use the appeals to sell their products but also to recruit their sale agents. When using ethos, they attempted to highlight the credibility of the company by revealing the background of their founders which have relevant expertise in the field. They also included the testimony from famous public figures who live a healthy life as the healthy public

figures are perceived to be credible to recommend their products. When using pathos, the MLM companies tapped on the readers' emotion by encouraging them to improve themselves and their family by using their products or becoming their sales agents. As for logos, the companies mainly presented the nutritional facts in their products and they inform readers that it has been scientifically proven that the nutrition is essential for a healthy life.

In this study, we focused on the construction of persuasive discourse presented on the MLM websites and we highlighted the possible impacts created when the ethos, pathos and logos appeals are used in the entries. We are in no position to conclude that the entries have created the intended impacts because we did not interview the readers. We recommend that future research builds on our finding that MLM websites strategically construct their entries by using the three appeals by interviewing readers of these websites to examine whether they are persuaded.

References

- Anas, M., Ismail, N. S., Rashid, R.A, Ab Halim, Z., & Zubir, B. N. (2016). The narrative structure and rhetorical elements in *The Companions of Cave*. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 5(5), 70-75.
- Emek, Y., Karidi, R., Tennenholtz, M., & Zohar, A. (2011). Mechanisms for multi-level marketing. Retrieved from http://research.microsoft.com/pubs/153671/MultiLevelMarketing_EC11.pdf.
- Flanagin, A. J., & Metzger, M. J. (2008). *Digital media, youth, and credibility*. Retrieved from <https://books.google.com.my/books>.
- Hatchaleelaha, S. & Wongsurawat, W. (2016). Multilevel marketing and entrepreneurship in Thailand: A case study. *Journal of Research in Marketing and Entrepreneurship*, 18(1), 146-160.
- Herbalife Overview*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://company.herbalife.co.uk/>.
- Larson, C. U. (2007). *Persuasion: reception and responsibility*. Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Leung, N. (2014). *MLM sponsoring: how to be persuasive in your MLM business*. Retrieved from <http://www.nateleung.com/how-to-be-persuasive-in-your-mlm-business/>.
- Luukkonen, T. (2014). "This will not be a ponzi scheme" persuasion in an American ponzi scheme. Retrieved from <https://jyx.jyu.fi/dspace/bitstream/handle/>.
- Madhavi Latha Murthy & Madhumita Ghosal. (2014). A Study on Aristotle's rhetoric. *Research journal of English language and literature (RJELAL)*, 2(4), 249-255. Retrieved from <http://www.rjelal.com/2.4.14/>.
- Marsh, J. (2004). Techniques of persuasion in MLM or network marketing companies. Retrieved from <http://www.energygrid.com/money/2004/03jm-mlm.html>.
- Newman, L. (2011). *Shipleys proposal guide*. United States of America: Shipleys Associates.
- Nuyten, T. (2015). Top 100 global direct selling companies 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.businessforhome.org/2015/04/top-100-global-direct-selling-companies-2015/>.
- O' Keefe, D. J. (2002). *Persuasion: Theory and research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

- Perloff, R. M. (2010). *The dynamics of persuasion: Communication and attitudes in the 21 century*. Retrieved from <https://books.google.com/books>.
- Porter, J. (2014). *Why you need emotion to persuade?*. Retrieved from <http://www.jrmyprtr.com/using-emotion-to-persuade/>.
- Ramage, J., & Bean, J. (1998). *Writing arguments (4th edition)*. MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Rashid, R.A, Rahman, M. F. A., & Rahman, S. B. A. (2016). Teachers' engagement in social support process on a networking site. *Journal of Nusantara Studies*, 1(1), 34-45.
- Rashid, R.A, Wahab, Z., Yunus, K., Ismail, N. S., Yusof, N., Omar, S. S., & Azmi, M. N. L. (2016a). English language teachers as a dissenter on a social networking site. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 5(4), 72-78.
- Rashid, R.A, Yunus, K., Azmi, N. J., Rahman, S. B. A., & Yusoff, S. Z. (2016b). The discursive construction of teachers' desirable identity on a social networking site. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 5(5), 139-144.
- Rybacki K., & Rybacki D. (1991). *Communication criticism: Approaches and genres*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.
- Rundell, M.(2007). *Macmillan English dictionary for advanced learner*. United Kingdom: MacMillan Publisher.
- Sethi, R. & Khinvasara, S. (2015). Multi-Level Marketing: An Exploitation of Relationships. *International Journal of Recent Research Aspects*, 2(1), 22-25.
- What is USANA?* (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://whatsupusana.com/what-is-usana/>.
- Zaid, S. B., Zakaria, M. H., Ab Rashid, R., & Ismail, N. S. (2016). An examination of negotiation process among ESL learners in higher institution. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 5(6), 228-234.
- Zulkffli, M. A., & Rashid, R.A. (2016). A discursive psychological analysis of Islamic sermons on homosexuality. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 5(6), 190-198.