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Feminisms and Rhetorics

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Join the [Multi-Level Marketing] Movement:

Women, Leggings, and the Corporate Mythology of LuLaRoe

Around 2016, patterned leggings started popping up on my Facebook feed. My college friends—most married and with a child or two under the age of five—were all suddenly raving about LuLaRoe (LR), an apparel brand specializing in bright leggings and loose-fitting dresses. These clothes were sold by LuLaRoe “Fashion Consultants” to friends and family through home parties and social media, a model called multi-level marketing (MLM), direct selling, or network marketing. LR was founded in 2013 by DeAnne and Mark Stidham, but really hit the public consciousness in 2016-2017. *Business Insider* estimates that LuLaRoe went from about 2,000 consultants in Sept 2015 to nearly 77,500 consultants in March 2017. However, by September 2018, fewer than 35,000 consultants remained.

This rise and fall can be attributed to many things. LR had issues with defective apparel, and to counter this, they instituted a buy-back program, which many consultants used to leave the business. Additionally, LR’s apparel supplier sued the company last November for $63 million. Currently, LR is in litigation with the attorney general of Washington state, who is alleging it is a pyramid scheme. Which may—or may not—be true, according to the federal definition. MLM companies such as Amway, Avon, Mary Kay, Herbalife, Rodan + Fields, Pampered Chef, and many others work like this: you, the consultant, sell products to customers that you purchase at a wholesale price from the company. You also recruit others to sell as part of your team. You receive a cut of their profits; if your team does well, you receive significant bonuses, as does the consultant who recruited you. The label of pyramid scheme largely depends on if the Federal Trade Commission considers your main income as coming from selling products to actual consumers, or from recruiting more sellers. The courts have waffled about whether particular MLM companies are pyramid schemes, in part thanks to the political clout of large MLMs like Amway.

The latest is that LR is firing all 167 of its warehouse employees in Corona, CA, five days before Christmas. The website of the company is as brightly colored and positive as ever. The current “Our Story” video on the LR site highlights the people who supported LuLaRoe from the beginning: DeAnne’s original collaborator, the original LuLaRoe apparel producer, and the first LR seller. However, the LR recruitment videos back in 2017, near the height of the company’s recruitment and popularity, focused on women as sellers within the MLM structure, upholding traditional gender roles under a sheen of female empowerment.

In this project, I look at the appeal of MLM companies, Barthes’ theories of cultural mythology, and video testimonials from LuLaRoe’s website in 2017. Ultimately, I argue that through these consultant testimonials, LR ties the company’s ethos to larger cultural myths about women’s roles, while simultaneously adjusting these myths for a economic and social reality in which women are balancing the need or desire to work with prioritizing the family and home.

A key demographic of MLM sellers and buyers are women, particularly stay-at-home mothers who see MLM as work that can be done alongside one’s primary work of homemaking.

Because of this, the standard (or ideal) MLM consultant has historically been a white, middle-class married woman. In 2016, 74% of direct sellers were women, and 84% of direct sellers were white. In her 2013 dissertation about direct sales and gender, Tiffany Lamoreaux identifies that the claims of these companies that sellers can earn unlimited income, while blatantly false, also draws on traditional conceptions of ideal American femininity. LR and other companies like it perpetuate gender essentialisms—which I will term cultural myths—through corporate narratives about the benefits of being a direct seller: flexibility to work at home, ability to use social networks and relationships, and the joy of helping and empowering others through these products. These corporate narratives are communicated through advertisements, webinars, email, training materials, social media posts, leadership conferences, and especially testimonials.

As a basis for discussing a company’s constructed corporate mythology, we can turn to Roland Barthes’s conception of cultural mythology. Barthes builds upon Saussure’s semiotic system to demonstrate how the process of mythology endows another layer of significance upon a signifier (which may be an image, a word, a concept), extending the meaning-making process. This first-order and second-order signification, which some simplify as denotation and connotation, creates the cultural myths that are used as shorthand in cultural discourse. In his 1957 text *Mythologies*,Barthes discusses how cultural staples such as movies, sports, products, and even foods like steak and chips have been raised to the level of myth.

I want to focus on two elements of mythology from Barthes to illuminate how LR crafts their corporate mythology by tapping into and reframing cultural myths about the woman’s roles. Barthes emphasizes that myth naturalizes a concept or belief, even while it robs the sign of its original (and individualized) meaning. It creates “a kind of causal process: the signifier and the signified have…a natural relationship” (130), though this naturalness is manufactured. Additionally, myth suppresses the variability and discrepancies inherent in the semiotic process, saying myth gives concepts—in the case of marketing, individual stories—“a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact” (143). In order for myths to be perpetuated, they have to seem both natural and factual; there is no room for the complexities of lived experience within myths.

Gender roles can become part of mythology, as discussed by Lindal Buchanan in her book *Rhetorics of Motherhood*. She looks at the cultural myth of Mother as used by female rhetors, a myth that “alludes to, masks, and sustains the network of power relations that undergird gender,” providing women with credibility while also constraining them within the gendered status quo (5). Myths uphold traditional power structures by naturalizing dominant worldviews and subsuming all other experiences into their generalized mythology.

LuLaRoe utilizes cultural myths of the roles of women that revolve around social relationships, which are important for success in multi-level marketing, especially feeding off of dominant cultural myths about women as daughters, wives, and mothers. This branding work was reflected in videos posted to their website in 2017, testimonies by consultants that combined these cultural myths with the core values of MLM to create a corporate myth of the ideal seller. The presentation of these values—flexibility, family, financial prosperity, personal development, and relationships—ignore the complexities of identity and lived experience, particularly in regards to class, race, and sexuality. Instead, LR’s corporate myth of the ideal seller cheerily presents LR as a solution to any challenge and a purpose in life that complements the purposes given by social gender roles.

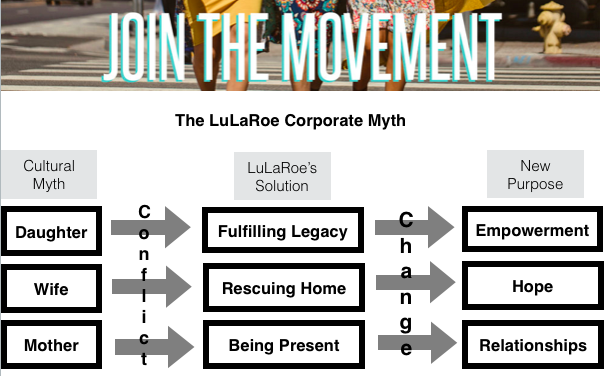


Figure 2. The LuLaRoe Corporate Myth

### This rhetorical move could be seen in the video testimonials on the “Join the Movement” page of the LR website in 2017. On this page for potential consultants, a paragraph talked about how everyone has a story, and every story has conflict that must be overcome. Potential consultants were urged to consider the similarities between their stories and the featured stories, already showing how these testimonials functioned as naturalized and factual corporate myths of the LR Fashion Consultant. Differences were immaterial; the similarities were the focus.

The three consultant testimonials were the starkest example of the gender roles held by the ideal LR consultant, as well as the changes wrought in them by joining the movement that LR considers itself to be. Each video typified one role/cultural myth most fully. The Hollis sisters demonstrated the myth of Daughter, Timber Elko demonstrated the myth of Wife, and Susan Raleigh demonstrated the myth of Mother.

Instead of going through the in-depth analysis of each video and each myth, I’m just going to go through the chart that I created and quickly recap how each myth is enacted and enhanced by the LuLaRoe corporate mythology.

**DAUGHTER (Hollis Sisters)**

* The Hollis sisters represent the cultural myth of the Daughter who uses her mother as a model for her life
  + Home movies that show them as children at a birthday party in Pakistan
  + The images of the birthday party often focus on the Hollis sisters’ mother: “really troubled” and “really sick”, “She was also really depressed.”
  + One sister outright says, “If [our] mother had had LR, her life would have been completely different.”
* Childhood has exotic elements that are emphasized (which can be problematic in its own right), but the actual story they convey about their mother and her impact is incredibly general (myth) – no attention is given to the socio-cultural context
* The sisters named their store “Bobbi’s Dreamers” after their mother – while they indicate the value of having their mother as a rallying point, they do not discuss why their mother is a strong rallying point for themselves or others. They also do not discuss how LR would have changed their mother’s life. Their participation in LuLaRoe, after encountering conflict in the loss of their mother, helps them fulfill a general legacy.
* Finally, the story of the Hollis sisters culminates in the desire to empower women
  + how they are doing this is unclear
  + empowerment is a buzzword in LuLaRoe and other MLM companies; other consultants also talk about encouraging women
  + Lamoreaux: the direct selling industry tends to use empowerment in a shallow sense, and in ways that affirm the status quo of gender structures.
  + LR: they are changing people’s lives, which is a repeated refrain from other testimonials (gives purpose to their work beyond commercialism and justifies the time spent on this work)
* LR empowers the sisters to fulfill their mother’s legacy and surpass it

**WIFE (Timbre Elko)**

* Represents the cultural myth of the Wife who sacrifices and supports her husband, but her decisions are filtered through her husband’s work, her family, and their co-decision making
* Elko’s husband was the breadwinner as a diesel mechanic in a mine who lost his job just as they were moving to a bigger house
  + Got a job in an Alaskan mine, she was left to “do everything on her own”
  + Elko became aware of the dangers after watching a movie trailer about the Chilean miners and seeing the GoPro videos her husband (Chad) sent
  + Started (?) LR in order to bring Chad home – 33 pieces at a time
* Chad talks about how he thought LR would be a phase, but it’s “the best thing we’ve ever done”
* LR something that husbands and wives can do together after a husband loses his job
  + Repeated trope perpetuated by DeAnne herself – eliminating stress for husband so he doesn’t feel “overwhelming pressure”
  + Slightly different from the traditional model of wives earning extra money to supplement husband’s income
* As such, LR can save the home, literally and figuratively by supporting the husband, working from home, and making it so that the husband can leave his job to be with the family
* Then results in Hope for others, “helping others” find confidence or their own solution in challenging economic times
  + their labor is internalized as something different than “work.” For the consultants, defining their labor as either socializing or as care work increases the self-perceived value of their work, in other cases this becomes part of their gender performance (how and what they are as women) (Lamoreaux)

**MOTHER (Susan Raleigh)**

* Represents cultural myth of Mother whose focus is the home and children
  + MLM makes it so Mothers don’t have to leave the home to do work
  + They (well, husband Brooks) talks about this failed adoption, and imply that they started LR to gain money for adoption which they ultimately ran out of money for
  + Susan mentions the leadership conference, “What are you willing to sacrifice to do this?” – her answer was not willing to sacrifice being a homeschool/stay-at-home mom
  + Husband quit his job to join her in the business because he was missing out on things (quality time)
  + They talk about LR making possible a road trip across the country, interspersed with videos and photos of the trip
* A big selling point of MLM is that women can do it “from home” though they often go to others’ homes to give parties, which means they can still be stay at home moms while also working
  + Not everyone is this, but this is a key value of the company, mentioned in nearly every video promo or mission statement
* This results in improved quality relationships: with family, other sellers, and customers
  + Raleigh talks about how her geographical community was supportive after the failed adoption
  + How they want to improve their backyard for the neighborhood
  + Giving back to communities

Ultimately, these cultural myths turned corporate myths demonstrated that LR’s ideal seller is the traditional MLM seller: a daughter, wife, and mother who can sustain the family while doing work that keeps her in the home and has relational meaning. At the same time, LR was somewhat cognizant of changing economic and social pressures, and as such, shifted these myths slightly to demonstrate how women were taking ownership of their own legacies and homes, supporting their families when their husbands could not. Yet even with these slight updates, LR continued to naturalize cultural scripts of Womanhood through their myth of the ideal LR consultant. The former popularity of the company can be attributed in part to this corporate myth they built, leveraging the cultural roles of Daughter, Wife, and Mother and adjusting them to gain new employees and build the company. However, LR’s structure could not sustain the new Consultants who bought into these myths, leaving many to wonder why they joined the movement to begin with. It’s worth noting that the LuLaRoe website currently makes no claims about joining a movement, preferring instead to highlight the businesses that LR Fashion Retailers (“Consultants” no more) will start. Their new testimonials are on a page called “LR Life,” seven women who present as white and most who are pictured with their male partners and children. Thus, even as the company continues to decline, they continue to promote a corporate myth through consultant testimonials that largely reifies traditional American myths of Womanhood.