The meanings of the social media practices of African women engaged in multi-level marketing in Makhanda

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ABSTRACT

In their efforts for a place in the economy, many South African women have embraced opportunities in the informal sector such as selling products for big Multi-Level Marketers (MLMs), who generally operate on a pyramid structure of commissions. This qualitative study investigates the meanings African women engaged in MLMs in Makhanda make of such work and examines how they construct notions of progress and success through their social media practices. The study was conducted in the strictest lockdown period and pioneered a research method that used Zoom to facilitate screen sharing on mobile phones to create an online version of the scroll-back method for Facebook. As expected for women working in a society increasingly integrated in a global neoliberal order, many of the meanings the women construct are rooted in neoliberal discourses that celebrate hyper-individualism and competition. This firstly includes constructing success through personal stories of self-appreciation, through which these women embody the MLM's brand, while simultaneously improving their position in the market as sellers. Secondly, the women invest considerable effort on social media in constructing MLM work as epitomising stability in the context of the growing precarity that characterises their everyday lives. However, other meanings draw on the local African context. Here the women make sense of the inequalities that characterise the MLM pyramid structures, by constructing top players in the upline as a symbolic vanguard trailblazing freedom from a racist past through showcasing paths out of poverty. More interestingly, success is constructed as both resulting from and serving collective ways of being rooted in the discourse of African humanism. Here success is recognised as emerging from dense place-based networks in the neighbourhood built on trust and obligation, now replicated on social media. In conclusion, the study speculates that the worlds of meaning facilitated by MLMs might provide ways for neoliberal and traditional discourses to find points of synergy, and so serve as entry points into a neoliberal order that interestingly nevertheless draws on communal cultures of obligation and patronage.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this half-thesis is my own work. I have acknowledged all other authors' ideas and referenced direct quotations from their work. I have not allowed anyone else to borrow or copy this research.

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1

1.1 Introduction and Context

This chapter marks the beginning of a study into the meanings of success and progress of African women engaged in Multi-Level Marketing (MLM) in Makhanda. The phenomenon of black African[1] women adopting ideas and ways of thinking, and imagining the future for themselves, closely aligned with Western ideals of modernity and neoliberal discourse, was appealing. It was appealing because this adoption of ideas and ways of being was occurring countrywide; even amongst my peers, the idea that the individual is solely responsible for their life's trajectory, with the government's role becoming minimal, became widely accepted. My interest is in the meanings of success and social mobility that arise from such a context and how these meanings manifest on social media.

I investigate these meanings by analysing the participants' social media practices and formulating an understanding of the relationship between the meanings they attributed to their business and their place-based networks. This research is mainly concerned with how these meanings of success and progress position these women, specifically focusing on two worldviews that appear to inform their subjectivities, African Humanism and Neoliberalism. The study thus employs theories of meaning and power, such as discourse and ideology, to understand how these worldviews help construct these women's notions of success and progress. I intend to unveil the complexity of these women's understanding of their work and their relationship to the work they do in terms of meaning-making rather than the financial or collegial relationship as MLM sellers. I critically engage the themes that emerged when analysing the data.

In this first chapter, the introductory section is a personal note that deals with my interest in the meanings of success and progress held by the women in this study and how this manifests in their interpretation of social mobility. This section pinpoints the positionality of myself as a researcher, it attempts to show-case the self-reflectivity I engaged in as a qualitative researcher, and this reflective writing continues in methods chapter 3. This section is followed by a description of the geographical context these women come from - townships and their history as well as the influence this context has had on the women they are today. Historically,

[1] For the purpose of this thesis, the racial nomenclature used is based on the historical significance of racial classification in South Africa economically, socially and politically. The term "black people" is used as a generic term to refer to Africans, Coloureds and Indians in South Africa. This thesis utilises the term "black African" to refer to black people, as opposed to the use of "black people" "black South Africans" Christopher, 2002:406). The significance of choosing to use of the term "black Africans" lies in its recognition of the degree of historical oppression faced by black African people compared to other black South Africans.

the world has been set up in such a way that the professional and social progress of black African women is limited, if not impossible, through regimes such as apartheid and colonialism (Mathur-Helm, 2005:67, Lues, 2001:103). Although this was the case, this section attempts to elucidate how black African women have always fought resiliently to participate in the economy and make a better life for themselves families.

The second section of this chapter, neoliberalism, and the predicaments of the emerging black middle class, discusses the historical context of the South African economy and its transformation. It explores how the apartheid economic system and the ANC's implementation of the economic shift to neoliberalism impacted the lives of South Africans and the rise of the black middle-class. Particular in its nature, I discuss how the South African middle-class has been defined. The third section deals with Multi-level Marketing (MLM) as a business strategy and the rise of the "side-hustle". In this section, I discuss the MLM strategy to understand the nature of this business strategy in relation to notions of success and social mobility. This then leads us to a discussion of how the adoption of the side-hustle became necessary and how the side-hustle is a form of work in the gig economy. The significance of networks in the gig economy is discussed in relation to MLM work being dependent on the networks of members. The significance of networks to the MLM business model makes social media an ideal ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) platform from which to conduct business, where one is able to generate content as a user and interact with their network through the specific platform's affordances. This leads to the fourth section, in which social media usage statistics in South Africa are discussed. This section focuses on fleshing out patterns of social media use in the population. Studies show that social media is a lucrative platform both for the formal and informal economy; for example, the study by Olamide and Ogbechie (2021) discusses how the positive performance of female-owned SMEs in Nigeria is partly due to the women's use of social media platform tools that allow them to acquire more resources, access new product markets and build on a larger social network (201). Another study, Brahem and Boussema (2022), discusses the phenomenon of social media entrepreneurship, highlighting the empowering role social media has played for women entrepreneurs by opening opportunities for them to grow (2). These are platforms on which company brands can market their products and partner with influencers.

1.1.1 On a personal note

I have always been interested in bringing to light and telling the stories of Black African women who work very hard to make a living in a world that disadvantages them both for being black and for being a woman. I am interested in understanding how these women understand the pathway to success and where they are headed, and how this links to the shared and unstated dreams of South Africans about how we can transform our country. I am specifically interested in older Black women who had to learn and adapt to the ever-changing world of social media in order for their businesses to succeed. MLM particularly plays into the ideas that South Africans are adopting about what success and progress mean and engages participants by bringing together ideas from different ideologies, both from their world of origin, the West, and the world of their members. In the past, I have been asked by such women for help to assist them in learning the basics of how to navigate and use social media. Social media became a powerful platform for MLM sellers to advertise and sell their products. I was particularly interested in the journey of these women, becoming MLM sales representatives and how they started to link their businesses to their social media, and the extent to which their social media became a platform for their businesses as much as for themselves. I wanted to document the time, the work, and the effort they put into building their lives on social media alongside building their businesses and the extent to which these two things became one.

I realised that the source of information that had the potential to answer these questions richly and insightfully was the meaning behind the actions of these women. The meaning of their social media practices, as observed through the research methods I was to use and as identified by the participants themselves. The research question broadened when I discovered that the participants' businesses might be linked to their offline or physical networks, such as their communities, churches, etc. They were also linked to their online networks, connections that existed and were maintained through their social media practices.

1.1.2 Geographical context

This research was conducted in the city of Makhanda, in the poorest province in South Africa, the Eastern Cape: the province was also declared one of the two most unequal provinces in the country in 2015 by Statistics South Africa (2019). Makhanda, much like many places in South Africa, has settlements known as townships. All participants in this study grew up in and live in townships. Townships are considered a South African invention; through colonial planning, townships were intended to spatially segregate three classes of citizens which coincided with race groups - the colonial elite (white), the colonized middle-class (Indians and some Africans)

and the working class (urban majority of Africans) (Pernegger and Godehart, 2007:6). Through laws such as the Group Areas Act of 1950, non-white people were forced to live in these townships, which were areas of control, exclusion, and containment of all aspects of the lives of black people (Pernegger and Godehart, 2007:7). In present-day Makhanda the general state of service provision in the city is dire, with inconsistent and in some cases non-existent access to water and electricity. The critical public infrastructure is in dire condition due to a lack of timely maintenance (McKaiser, 2020). Makhanda is a profoundly unequal city as well, such that where one is born determines one's quality of life and chances of success. Those who come from the city's peripheries, the townships, have less access to opportunities that enable them to reach their potential in life. At the same time, those in the pristine suburbs of the town receive a world-class education with better prospects of reaching their life's potential (McKaiser, 2020).

1.1.3 Black African women and the economy

Historically African women in South Africa have faced oppression both sociologically and economically (Lues, 2001:103). In spite of this oppression, through resilience, African women have always been active in agriculture, trade, and other economic pursuits. However, the majority of them are in the informal labour force. The colonial regime changed the circumstances under which African people lived; thus, the family structure had to constantly adapt (Lues, 2001:105); these changes caused the drastic and lasting deterioration of African women's position in society (Lues, 2001:105). For the general African community in South Africa, there were prohibitions against land ownership accompanied by the imposition of stringent taxes, resulting in the heavy migration of African men to look for work in towns and cities distant from their homes (Lues, 2001:105). The migration of men resulted in significant lifestyle changes for these men, which inevitably affected the lives of their families back home, a prime example being that in some cases, they ceased to provide financial support for their families (Lues, 2001:105). Meanwhile, black women had to be household heads (Jaga, Arabandi, Bagraim & Mdlongwa, 2018:431). This meant that their family subsistence became their responsibility, and they had to find opportunities to generate income; hence, they needed to significantly increase their participation in the financial world (Lues, 2001:104).

Furthermore, the Bantu Education Act, Act 44 of 1953, discriminated against black people, including black women, by providing inadequate education and training (Lues, 2001:106). In spite of this, black women found creative ways to make money through the informal economy;

through illicit and informal work such as beer brewing, spaza shops, shebeens, and money lending (Mager, 1999:368), these activities allowed them to establish some kind of independence (A Culture of Survival | South African History Online, n.d.). They demonstrated resilience and determination in carving out a life for themselves and their families. Beer brewing provided extra income for shebeen owners and their families. It provided a livelihood for unemployed extended family members, mostly in return for their labour in the shebeens (A Culture of Survival | South African History Online, n.d.). Although great changes in laws and legislation for black people were implemented, racism and sexism continue to plague black women pursuing economic opportunities in post-apartheid South Africa (Jaga et al., 2018:430). Jaga et al. (2018) argue that the efforts of the post-apartheid South African state and businesses have been inadequate in combating the marginalisation of black women (432). In support of this argument, they identify the labour dynamics in post-apartheid South Africa, finding that black women, in general, are overly represented in what they call "pink collar jobs" (Jaga et al., 2018:434). Pink collar jobs are defined as work in the care-oriented career field and have historically been considered women's work. These jobs include domestic work, where women occupy 94.6%, and community and service occupations, where they occupy 60.45% (Jaga et al., 2018:434).

Further, they find that men dominate manufacturing and construction while making up two-thirds of managerial positions and that women earn less than men in all labour market positions (Jaga et al., 2018:434). Although, in general, the state of employment in South Africa is bleak, according to Stats SA's (2021) latest media release report, the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QFLS), for the first quarter of 2021, there was a marginal increase in unemployment and the rate is currently at 32.6% (1). It is arguable that ensuring one's living and well-being in South Africa is an especially difficult task for women. The context from which these women come is informed by myriad forces, as discussed in this section, as well as other worldviews that dominate their world and understandings.

1.2 Neoliberalism and the predicaments of the emerging black middle class

Neoliberalism is a worldview that has social, economic, and political implications for countries like South Africa. Much of the statistics on unemployment and the general economic state of the country has to do with the ramifications of the adoption of neoliberalism as a worldview by the country and its government. In this section, I will be setting the scene for the historical context of the economy and its transformation, as well as the impact of this transformation on

the lives of South Africans and how this gave rise to a particular middle-class and social mobility in South Africa.

During the colonial and apartheid regimes in South Africa, race was the basis of stratification; black people were subject to racial discrimination and segregation and had a low ceiling placed on their achievements (Seekings, 2009:872). This system of racial discrimination was deeply embedded within the country's economic, social, and political structure (Mhlauli and Mokotedi, 2015:205). During the four decades of apartheid, the economy grew rapidly due to industrialisation and growth of services; however, inequality remained at a high level (Seekings and Nattrass, 2015:90). The apartheid government ensured that white people had skills, opportunities, and high incomes while black Africans s lacked skills, had few opportunities and remained in poverty. This oppression and stagnation of black people's advancement occurred in workplaces, politics, and education, even through regulating personal consumption of goods and services. Although race determined one's life chances much more than one's economic class, black people drew distinctions amongst themselves. Granted, there were no well-defined class structures such as bourgeois and proletariat, but there were emerging status differences. For instance, salaried professional or white-collar occupations came with a certain bourgeois status, while a lowly domestic worker carried the status of a proletariat (Seekings, 2009:872). Social practices that portrayed one's social mobility, such as leading a certain lifestyle and claiming prestige by conspicuous consumption, became significant (Seekings, 2009:872).

The African National Congress (ANC), the political party that came into power in 1994 when South African transitioned into a democratic country, attempted to establish a vibrant economy that would attract foreign investment (Hall and James, 2012:3). They paired this priority of economic growth with a political agenda of democracy, although the two proved to be irreconcilable objectives at times (Hall and James, 2012:3). Before and after 1994 poverty persisted due to unequal distribution of the benefits of growth (Seekings and Nattrass, 2010:4), and the employment of the economy was not adequately meeting the needs of the country (Gumede, 2013:5). When the ANC came into office, the economy of South Africa was effectively in recession, the labour market fragmented, and increased informality, casualisation and externalisation worsened the job crisis (Gumede, 2013:6). Millions of workers were trapped in informal, temporary, or involuntary part-time or casual work and in particular the youth, immigrants and, significant to this research, women constituted the most considerable portion of this workforce (Gumede, 2013:6).

Through the influence of mainstream economists and South African businesses, the ANC adopted neoliberalism as a policy model that has since shaped the political and economic state of South Africa. They abandoned their previous stance of state-centred, progressive policy approaches in the 1990s (Schneider, 2018:308). This impacted the lives and influenced the decisions of the women in this research. The pressure on South Africa from influential world organisations, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, to abandon the idea of a state-centred, progressive economic system made matters worse because it threatened the receipt of international financial support (Schneider, 2018:309). Consequently, in the end, no significant redistribution of wealth was implemented, and neither was nationalisation. Rather the debt of the apartheid era was inherited along with neoliberal capitalist principles of open financial markets, trade liberalisation, privatisation of the large state sector and deregulation of significant aspects of microeconomic markets (Schneider, 2018:311).

South Africa's transition to democracy did open a favourable atmosphere with opportunities for Black Africans s to participate in business, sports, education, and society at large (Ndhlovu and Spring, 2009:35). The government implemented a range of policies that supported globalisation, i.e., integration into the global economy. Some of these policies were the pro-investment policies that focused on creating a favourable investment climate for attracting foreign direct investment (FDI), including trade liberalisation (Salahuddin, Vink, Ralph and Gow, 2020:617). Further, adopting poverty reduction policies included focusing on economic empowerment by broadening participation in the economy through Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) (Salahuddin et al., 2020:618). Although the South African government saw trade liberalisation as only of benefit to a few countries, major conglomerates in the country's economy advocated for it; thus, both the state and these businesses internally generated globalisation (Carmody, 2002:256). Economic liberalisation has the propensity to affect women disproportionately. In the South African manufacturing industry, women's employment is heavily concentrated in labour-intensive sectors, which have been most adversely affected by trade liberalisation (Carmody, 2002: 271-272). Therefore, studies show that economic liberalisation has not always enabled poor countries to grow and improve, nor does it always ensure that the benefits of globalisation also go to the poor, and South Africa is a case in point (Salahuddin et al., 2020:621).

As discussed above, before and throughout the apartheid era, there existed a black middle class which came about through missionary education, preferential treatment of mixed-race individuals, existing elites in indigenous cultures and through applying for classification as

non-native; the success of this application would depend on adopting education, lifestyle and manners that conformed to the European conception of civility (Iqani, 2015:128). It was during this post-apartheid era that we saw rapid growth in the black middle class (Burger, Steenekamp, van der Berg & Zoch, 2014:25). This status did not, however, infer power or economic security (Seekings, 2009:873).

The character and appearance of this middle class are based on income and expenditure levels, and on the quantitative levels of consumption they enjoy (Scharrer, O'Kane and Kroeker, 2018:5). However, Scharrer et al. argue that approaches that use income and expenditure levels and consumption to identify the middle class may ignore important aspects of middle-class life in Africa (Scharrer et al., 2018:6). Theorists have emphasised the fluidity of class boundaries and membership in certain parts of the world including South Africa (Scharrer et al., 2018:8). Class is a system that orders society by dividing people into groups according to perceived social or economic status. There have been multiple definitions of middle class appropriate for certain contexts and based on certain research (Scharrer et al., 2018:8). The idea of middle-class that this research will engage with is one where individuals can make choices beyond those concerning basic needs (Scharrer et al., 2018:9). This can lead to heterogeneous economic strategies and lifestyles that give individuals the opportunity to create a range of social identities (Scharrer et al., 2018:9). These lifestyles, in turn, allow middle-class individuals social mobility between the classes below and above (Scharrer et al., 2018:9).

In my research, I will investigate where individuals place themselves in the spectrum from lower middle class to upper middle class to inform my interpretations and analysis of their social media practices as part of being sales representatives for these MLMs. In a study by Phadi and Ceruti (2011), multiple meanings of the middle class in Soweto, South Africa, found that individuals in the township of Soweto who accept the label "middle class" attach multiple meanings, and use it to serve various purposes. They find that middle-class identities are governed by the context in their expression and, much like other studies, show that these identities are formed through a process of comparison with the upper and lower classes (Phadi and Ceruti, 2011:90). The everyday descriptions of the middle class in this study included the following: 'affordability' referring to one's ability to consume; self-sufficiency such as having a job and having sufficient money to buy what you want without getting into debt; support referring to identifying as middle-class through support one receives from family; comparison between oneself and others to prove one's middle-classness or others lack thereof (Phadi and Ceruti, 2011:100-101). Comparison is a significant factor in this study and speaks to the link

between where a person stands in the world and how they see themselves. In Phadi and Ceruti's study, participants such as Andronica accept the middle-class status because she always goes to bed fed while others do not (2011:101). Andronica's comparison in this instance is about how she sees herself in relation to others in her context; it is not necessarily about her standing in relation to the rest of the world.

It is not important for us to find a definition of a black middle class in South Africa; rather, it is important to be aware that different approaches are used to identify, investigate, and understand the middle class in South Africa. The participants of this study may suit these definitions, or they may not, they may identify with them, or they may not. However, it is important to understand how they make meaning of their class status due to their social media practices relating to their multi-level marketing jobs.

1.3 Multi-Level Marketing and the rise of the "side hustle"

In this section, I will discuss the nature of Multi-level Marketing and the companies that adopt this marketing strategy; this will help us understand the nature of the business that the women in this study are involved. Further, this discussion will provide an understanding of MLM companies in relation to notions of success and social mobility and their role in foregrounding their members' ideas around success and social mobility. In the first instance, I will discuss the context in which MLMs thrive and explain how they function on an operational level. Following that will be an exploration of a study by Cahn (2018) that discusses the neoliberal notions of social mobility promised by these MLM companies to their members. The promise of a better future for all, along with the existing need for employment or a source of income in South Africa, is further identified as why MLMs are a popular choice. Individuals thus join MLMs to make ends meet, whether as a side hustle that supplements their government job, as a student or as entrepreneurs in many other businesses.

In countries with emerging and developing economies such as that of South Africa, the formal economic sector is growing, but so is the informal economic sector, which is widespread and ongoing (Herod & Lambert, 2016:1). The informal economy in South Africa makes up one third, 5 million, of the total non-agricultural employment. With the adaptation of neoliberal policies, resulting in the lack of social control of the direction the national economy takes, there has been a lack of a system that ensures the satisfaction of the needs of the majority of South Africans. While the country's unemployment rate stands at 30% of the population, according to Stats SA's Quarterly Labour Force Survey (2021), the gravitation towards the informal

economy follows logic. The logic here is that individuals join Multi-Level Marketing (MLM) companies as a result of the fore-mentioned lack of employment opportunities and security in a system that satisfies the needs of the poor majority of South Africans, as well as the far-reaching influence of the neoliberal and capitalistic policies informing their lives.

Multi-level marketing (MLM) is a marketing strategy used by various beauty, cosmetics, and fitness companies, involving ordinary people in direct marketing and selling their products. Individuals become members of these companies, referred to as sellers, members, distributors, and independent representatives. In this study, we refer to them as members or sellers. The key to the success of this model primarily lies in the networks of the MLMs and the women who sell for these companies. The networks of these MLMs have underlying architecture known as topologies. They vary from simple to complex topologies (Gane and Beer, 2008:16). MLMs have two common network topologies, namely, the pyramid (binary) and the sunflower (unilevel) model. These models apply to the companies mentioned in this study (Mathews, Manalel and Zacharias, 2007:161). The MLM model works such that once an individual is a member, they undergo training processes, which differ for each company, through which they are taught and prepped to sell products and recruit other people into the MLM. Then they start selling products and recruiting people into the MLM; when they recruit someone successfully into the MLM, that member falls under the seller who recruited them as their "downline" (Keep and Vander Nat, 2018:62).

Every recruit by a member falls under that member's downline, and while there are downlines for members with recruits, recruited members have uplines. An upline represents the network of people who joined the MLM through the same individuals connected by a thread that starts from the first member to recruit. Members have multiple income streams; they earn from the purchases they make, from recruiting others into the MLM, and through the purchases made by their recruits, i.e., downlines (in some MLMs). These forms of compensation for members are somewhat based on their ability to continuously recruit others into the MLM (Keep and Vander Nat, 2018:194), as well as making sure they are active and not solely dependent on the members' sales of products and services of the MLM. The higher a member is on the upline, the more they benefit from the sales and recruitments in the network (Mathews, Manalel and Zacharias, 2007:161). This is because one earns compensation in two ways: first, from personal sales of goods and second, from commission from sales made by people they recruited (Chaudhari and Mistry, 2010:14).

Members who join MLMs during the beginning stages of establishing the company or members who join MLMs during the early stages of introduction of the companies to their specific context or community have a better chance of being the first ones to introduce the company to their community and therefore a better chance of successfully selling products (Aggarwal & Kumar, 2014:78). This is because the demand for the company's products is still high as a result of its newness. There are a significant number of people to recruit because fewer distributors exist in that context. The strategy used by MLMs here is the harnessing of the strength of the ties their members have with their networks or communities. Strong ties are resultant from a combination of time and intimacy (mutual confiding, emotional intensity and reciprocal services characterising the tie (Granovetter, 1973:1361). Introducing a new product or service into a context or community becomes a more straightforward task when you can use pre-existing strong ties.

Peter S. Cahn's study on Consuming Class: Multilevel Marketers in Neoliberal Mexico (2008) follows the journey of Esperanza, a woman in Michoacán, Mexico, in her career as an Omnilife Multilevel Marketing company (MLM)) distributor. The study uses this person's journey to paint a picture of how MLMs enable their members to consider themselves within neoliberal notions of society as entrepreneurs on their way to success who do not need governmental assistance. Cahn notes the tenets of neoliberalism that MLM marketers like Esparanza embody, such as working hard to earn a living and helping themselves rather than looking to the government for handouts and accepting that the free market rewards every entrepreneur equally and without limit (Cahn, 2008:431). This principle resonates with the way that MLM companies in South Africa engage their audiences and is thus a belief that the women in this research may hold, which may further affect how they run their businesses and understand their progress within them.

Furthermore, Cahn notes how in practice, this approach has only widened the levels of inequality and how the elite are the ones that reap the benefits of investing in the market because of their access to networks, useful information and knowledge of the market and related spheres, and their access to profitable markets (Cahn, 2008:431). Thus, the social mobility promised to all members by these MLMs is only reaped by the already rich or elite while the poor continue to struggle. When these neoliberal and capitalistic MLMs inevitably fail to deliver on their promises in this way, specifically to the non-rich and non-elite dedicated members, these members still refuse to realise this, and they fault the system. They continue to hold on to the hope of reaching a certain level of consumption that has been promised to

them by these MLM companies (Cahn, 2008:431), while MLM companies continue to use this hope to enhance social reproduction and stratification. Members seek to align themselves along neoliberal lines rather than resist the dismantling of social welfare (Cahn, 2008:430). Taking into consideration the similarities between the context Cahn (2008) describes and the context of these South African women in Makhanda, a context wherein the government adopted neoliberal approaches to their policies, this switch to neoliberalism, in turn, attracted MLM companies who carried the rhetoric of entrepreneurship and decentralisation that resonate with the logic of the neoliberal turn the country is pursuing. Thus, in South Africa and Mexico, I argue in this research that one finds individuals realigning their work lives along neoliberal lines. This then provokes whether the experiences and the meanings made by Esperanza and the millions of other MLM distributors in Mexico might resemble those of my participants.

Furthermore, MLM companies in South Africa are represented by the Direct Selling Association of South Africa (DSA), according to which multi-level marketing pours billions into the pockets of ordinary South Africans each year (Direct Selling Association of South Africa, 2020). The industry is said to provide full-time careers for more than 170 000 people in South Africa (Direct Selling Association of South Africa, 2020). This popularity of MLM companies in the country must be understood within the global context of neoliberalism, where formal employment has increasingly been replaced by temporary contracts and informal arrangements (Cahn, 2008:419). After twenty years of transitioning to democracy, the emerging black middle class now finds themselves with the moral and social responsibility of having to support immediate and extended families using a significant portion of their income and savings, known colloquially as "Black Tax" (Fongwa, 2019:6). Most in the emerging black middle classes do have access to formal and informal credit facilities, but this comes with exploitatively high-interest rates, creating cycles of indebtedness (Scharrer et al., 2018:22). Such financial pressure has pushed many people to seek out opportunities for additional work to supplement their main income (Krige, 2012:75) – what is colloquially known as a "side hustle". My aunt and her friends joined Tupperware and Avon as their "side hustles". However, their experiences seem qualitatively quite different from most of the MLM sellers in the international literature, where people tend to be full-time sellers and fully depend on their MLM earnings for survival (e.g., Cahn, 2008:436, Dolan and Scott, 2009:206). My research suggests that South Africa's MLM sellers have more than one source of income or are selling for MLMs as a side hustle; for instance, some of the participants were also students pursuing other careers, while some were permanently employed, and others were unemployed but running other

businesses on the side along with their MLM selling. These circumstances and their recent access to social media make them particularly interesting research participants.

The MLM marketing strategy allows these companies to tap into informal economics that depend on informal networks by recruiting individuals that belong to these informal networks, who have found a source to infiltrate these networks in the best way possible, which is through a familiar face. The informal economy is defined as an umbrella term referring to all workers, activities, units of production and all employment without, or with inadequate, legal and social protection (Rogan and Alfers, 2019:91). More often than not, MLM members find the most success by approaching communities in the peripheries. An example is my friend who started working as a nurse in the rural town of Peddie in the Eastern Cape. She found that her business thrived in that town because she became a part of that community and found that there was no competition selling the products of her MLM in her immediate network. These networks and spaces are attractive to MLMs because their perception of the poor having shifted; they want to tap into the untapped markets of the developing world, realising the opportunity to exploit the undetected and unrecorded wealth of those at the bottom of the income ladder (Krige, 2012:73). Women are thus ideal candidates for penetrating these networks because they put these networks together and keep the connections going. For example, in a country like South Africa, historically, women have to a large extent, been excluded from participating in the formal economy. Much like women throughout the world, their role has been in the unpaid economy, with the primary responsibility being the home and the family, activities through which networks are formed (Posel and Casale, 2019:5).

In South Africa, with the growth of urban centres and Africans being moved into these spaces as a result of different regimes of power in the last quarter of the 1800s and the first quarter of the 1900s, traditional patterns of economic subsistence were disrupted (Verhoef, 2001:519). Out of this disruption, alternative forms of social and economic organisations arose. Some of which were women taking on an income-generating activity such as stokvels, which are informal savings organisations (Verhoef, 2001:520). Such organisations are based on support, mutual benefit, trust, and Ubuntu - encompassing the communal aspect of these organisations, the mutual support and collective consciousness (Verhoef, 2001:522). Companies that chose to adopt the MLM model would have been unable to penetrate these networks without their members because they are based on Western-style financial systems, engage in neoliberal discourses that drive individualism as opposed to collectivity, and have no connections to these contexts outside their members (Verhoef, 2001:538).

1.4 Social Media and building networks

The internet is a part of our everyday lives; we learn, shop, play, communicate, study, and so much more over our phones, tablets or laptops connected to the internet. We access a multitude of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) platforms, which are commonly known as social media (Duffet and Wakeham, 2016:21). Social media is a continuing element of the second generation of the evolution of word technologies; web 2.0, continuing onto web 3.0 the third generation (Kerner and Gillis, 2022). The continuation between web 2.0 to web 3.0 is notably in the way users have progressed from being participants to generators of content on platforms offered by the internet, including social media (Barassi, Treré, 2012:1270). In the study by Carr and Hayes (2015), they offer a definition of social media,

"*social media are Internet-based channels that allow users to interact opportunistically and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others."* (50)

The definition of social media recognises users' participatory and generative role on social media, the choice they have to interact in real-time or whenever they are able to, and the variability in audience members. It highlights the interactive nature of social media, where users generate content for audiences they can interact with, for instance, by commenting, sharing or liking/loving. The Digital 2021 report compiled by We are Social: Hootsuite on South Africa (2021) indicates that there are 25 million active social media users in the country - this makes up 52.6% of the population. Major companies have harnessed social media to reach billions of consumers with their marketing communications (Duffet and Wakeham, 2016:21). The number of social media users accessing social media via mobile phone stands at 24.63 million people in South Africa. The average amount of time per day they spend on these social media platforms is 3 hours 32 minutes (We are Social: Hootsuite, 2021). While users may be using social media daily for various purposes, the report indicates that 61.4% of this population uses social media for work purposes (We are Social: Hootsuite, 2021).

The use of social media for work purposes includes using social media to earn an income. Social media users are increasingly utilising the large networks available on these platforms to source product information (Stubb, Nystrom and Colliander, 2019:109). Brands are aware of this and are investing more in paid partnerships, or brand ambassadorship deals with Social Media Influencers (SMI) to promote and review their products (Stubb, Nystrom and

Colliander, 2019:109). SMIs, influencers for short, can be celebrities in their own right or ordinary individuals such as college students or MLM members; they are influencers by virtue of having a significant number of followers, and these followers should value their opinion and review as well as consume the content they publish on social media. Although the participants are not influencers but are utilising social media to sell the products of their MLMs, ordinary people can sell their products on social media; this may be how they grow their business or brand.

In South Africa, the most used social media platforms (at the time of writing) were by people between the ages of 16 and 64, which is the age group of the participants of this study, and are WhatsApp at 93.2%, YouTube at 92.4% and Facebook at 86.7%, as the top 3 (We are Social: Hootsuite, 2021). From these statistics, we are able to understand the effective use of WhatsApp and Facebook by the population of South Africa, which informs the choices of which platforms to focus on when investigating the social media practices of the participants.

More than half of the participants in this study, specifically two-thirds of the participants, fall in the 18 to 35 age group, which is identified as a group that uses Facebook frequently and more than other applications (Budree, Fietkiewicz and Lins, 2019: 328).

1.5 Thesis Outline

This thesis consists of six chapters. The first chapter introduces the study, highlighting the research objectives and their significance and providing an outline of the thesis as a whole. Chapter two reviews the literature that discusses how meaning is constructed through Stuart Hall's (1997) constructivist approach to representation and signifying practices, which provides a lens through which we can understand how culture and meaning are socially produced. Fundamental to this review of literature is also the Foucauldian notion of discourse which explains that the meanings individuals are subjected to and by are constantly in contestation with each other. Chapter three outlines the methods, procedures and techniques employed; this chapter gives a rationale for adopting a qualitative research strategy rooted in Constructivism and Interpretivism. It discusses the innovative adaptations of data collection methods, unstructured interviews, participant-observation, and the scroll-back method on social media platforms—chapters four and five present the findings in the light of the literature explored in Chapter three. The two chapters unfold by presenting findings from the combination of methods utilised in gathering the data and presenting them in themes of

constructs. Finally, Chapter six gives a summary and conclusion of the study and speculates the findings of this research for issues of meaning, thus probing further research in the field.

1.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored different aspects of the social context of the participants. I have explained the context of the South African economy and its history of adopting various economic models and have unpacked different ideas around social mobility in the economy. I considered the position of black women in the economy. I proceeded to describe the growing informality and the appearance of MLMs in the South African economy, ending by describing the extent of social media usage in South Africa and the role of social media in an informal economy. The next chapter of this thesis is the Theoretical Framework chapter, in which I will show how my participants make sense of their economic prospects on social media by mobilising different discourses, using from the current chapter the kind of theoretical tools and lenses necessary to investigate the insights that this chapter has given against the experiences and testimonies of the participants. It places great value on understanding how meaning is produced and how practices can be interpreted meaningfully. This opens us up to different theoretical lenses that give us a complex understanding of the participants' world through knowledge that previous scholars have produced, thereby arming this research endeavour with the understandings, justifications and focus needed to pursue further research.

CHAPTER 2

Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction

This study is an investigation into the meaning of the success and progress of African women engaged in Multi-Level Marketing (MLM) in Makhanda. The previous chapter set up the historical economic, political, and social context of South Africa in relation to the creation of ideas about success and social mobility. This chapter demonstrates the working of theoretical frameworks of understanding and concepts useful for analysis and interpretation that yields an understanding of the collected data. Firstly, the chapter will be engaging very much with understanding the relationship between the participants and the MLMs. Then, it will come back and look at how social media also speaks to this relationship. The chapter starts by discussing how meaning is constructed through Stuart Hall's (1997) constructivist approach to representation and signifying practices, which provides a lens through which we can understand how the culture of the participants and the meanings they make are socially produced by drawing on both their social backgrounds and the culture promoted by these MLMs. Below I introduce various concepts related to representation, such as signs, ideology, discourse, and subjectivity. The Foucauldian notion of subjectivity considers the ability of individuals to be subjected to and subjected by discourse. This notion helps us understand the relationships the participants have with the discourses they engage within their MLMs and social media.

The discourses that the participants engage emanate from both neoliberalism and African Humanism. This study investigates these two discourses and the ways in which they inform the meanings constructed by the participants in their social media practices. I first consider how the discourse of neoliberalism constitutes neoliberal subjects with very particular ideas about their place in the world and how to improve their standing. I explain how such neoliberal subjectivities are rooted in notions of meritocracy and self-appreciation, self-enterprise, and personal responsibility, all of which are concepts embraced by the participants in the way they engage social media. This neoliberal worldview is then juxtaposed with the worldview of African Humanism and how it influences the construction of subjectivities through which the participants understand themselves and the meaning of community. African Humanism as a philosophy, a worldview ascertainable among most pre-colonial African societies, one of

solidarity, community, and compassion (Winks, 2011:456). In this pre-colonial era, through the notion of the frontier African by Nyamnjoh (2015), we understand that African Humanism allowed for flexible and malleable roles, where people adapted to the context and necessity of the times (258), rather than the essentialist understanding that there were quite rigid roles for women, for instance. Nyamnjoh (2015) identifies the frontier African, who embodies African Humanism in a way that adapts to the context and necessity of the times, who, through technological innovations, can navigate myriad margins of identity and belonging (259), and who accepts their incompleteness and hence interdependence on others.

Furthermore, Mamdani (1996) describes the colonial system of governance as having prescribed identities to people in African societies through colonial institutions. He notes that some natives were identified as subjects governed by customary law and settlers (white people) governed by civil law. This system was carried into the post-colonial era because institutional decolonisation in those societies did not occur. The settler had civil rights, and the native had no rights, only patronage and allegiance as part of an ethnic group; this had implications for the development of African subjectivity.

Further, the Foucauldian notion of discourse explains that these meanings individuals are subjected to and are constantly in contestation with each other, thus pointing to the contrast that may be found in the meanings the participants make of their MLM work and social media practices—making both subjectivity and discourse useful concepts for understanding how subjects might be subject to multiple discourses. These Foucauldian notions are useful in understanding how two discourses might constitute a person. However, the idea of agency in how a person situates themselves within these two discourses and how they develop a hybrid subjectivity is interesting here. Given the broad framing provided by these two worldviews, the process of making sense of and interpreting the world to produce meaning is analysed in terms of the system of representation. This theory of representation foregrounds the role played by social actors, informed by their context and conceptual language and other representational systems in the process of meaning-making.

In addition, this chapter discusses various frameworks of consumption in relation to what consumption is for South Africans and the meanings attached to consumption. Consumption practices carry meaning that can be interpreted in many ways; with South Africa's history of colonialism and apartheid, consumption practices have become ground for building one's identity and self, and much of black people's aspirations and goals are linked to consumption.

Thus, we find that poor black people interpret conspicuous consumption by rich black people to be aspirational; they view their consumption as symbolic of trailblazing freedom from a racist past and creating a path out of poverty (see Iqani 2016). This interpretation of conspicuous consumption influences the meanings constructed about consumption and thus the participant's framings of consumption through their social media practices. Furthermore, in this chapter, I discuss the experience of being and relating to others through the notion of sociality. Sociality is the idea of society as a way of being together constructed through people's practices. I will focus particularly on place-based sociality vs more dispersed forms of networked sociality.

2.2 Meaning, Power, Ideology, and discourse

2.2.1 Meaning making

To analyse the social media practices of the participants of this study, as well as their relationship to those in their networks, it is imperative that we use tools that allow us to understand how meaning is produced. Meaning arises through practices such as the marking of difference, production and consumption and construction of identity (Hall, 1997:4). In social and personal interactions, meaning is produced and exchanged. Through such interactions, participants in a culture give meaning to objects, events, and people. (Hall, 1997:2-3).

Representation as a system consists of two processes. The first process is the system through which objects, people and events in the real world are linked with the set of concepts that exist in our heads to produce an internal conceptual map (Hall, 1997:5). The concepts in the internal conceptual map are organised, arranged, classified, and clustered according to their similarities and differences. This complex relation between concepts allows for complex ideas and thoughts, for instance, ideas or thoughts based on concepts classified according to sequence (which concept comes after which) and concepts classified according to causality (what causes what, for example, the claim that hard work results in success) (Hall, 1997:4). This conceptual map then needs to be communicated through a shared medium of language. Therefore, the second process of representation is communicating the concepts to others, and this is done through language - the term language here is used inclusively to refer to the written and spoken system of languages, as well as the languages of visual images, music, non-linguistic facial expressions, or gestures etc.

Language helps translate our conceptual maps, such that the concepts in our conceptual maps are associated with signs, which are words, sounds or images that carry meaning (Hall, 1997:4). The relationship between signs and the concept in our conceptual maps is governed by codes, which are specific to our cultures and that is how the meaning systems of our cultures are made. Meaning is constructed and fixed by the code that creates a correlation between our conceptual and language systems. When we communicate the concepts in our conceptual maps, the code tells us which language to utilise to communicate our intended meaning. Thus, if the cultural codes establish the relationship between concepts and signs and fix meaning, signs in themselves do not possess meaning. These cultural codes are dependent on cultural, social, and linguistic conventions; however, these conventions change; therefore, meaning is not fixed (Hall, 1997:7).

Signs do not possess meaning, and they need to be actively read and interpreted (Hall, 1997:17), using representational systems such as the conceptual, language and other representational systems in order to construct meaning about the world and communicate that meaningfully (Hall, 1997:11). When a speaker produces a verbal sign, they may have intentions or meanings they attach to the sign, however, this does not mean that sign will be interpreted or read by the audience in the same way the speaker intended (Hall, 1997:17). Thus, signs are produced by active actors who are informed by their own social and cultural contexts. This influence of the actor's cultural and social context impacts the meaning intended by the actor producing the sign. However, this intended meaning may not be the meaning that the audience deduces when they observe the sign, thus making it significant that we study people's interpretations of texts.

Hall (1997) refers to concepts particular to specific languages, such as the Inuit - this demonstrates how meaning is not reflective of nature; rather, it develops conceptually alongside cultural knowledge. In the context of this study, the questions were in English, and the participants would translate them into IsiXhosa, their mother tongue; this was evident in their responses. From these responses, there was a concept in the IsiXhosa language that relates to communal assistance, "ukuxhasa", such as church work, mentorship, and voluntary work. In the English language, the equivalent would be "support"; however, in English, the concept was being used to refer to financial support, not communal assistance. The significance here is the fact that "support" in the IsiXhosa language developed in line with the cultural knowledge of AmaXhosa.

The signs in a culture or context are linked through notions of similarity, difference, and causality, creating the shared conceptual map of the culture or context. Therefore, observing signs in themselves does not allow an understanding of the culture or context. To understand the culture or context of participants, the relationships between signs are explored as they manifest on social media and in the physical world, and this enables us to understand the signs and associations between them. Various scholars have conceptualised mobile phones as objects imbued with social, cultural, and individual meanings that relate to users' identities (Gordon, Al Zidjaly & Tovares, 2017:9). Therefore, people's social media use can be meaningful, albeit for different reasons. However, in the instance of the participants in this study, their social media use is meaningful to the extent that it helps earn them an income that sustains their lives. The participants are much like many other social media users, and their engagement is meaningful to constructing their identity.

2.2.2 Ideology

In this section, I will show that ideology is not sufficiently useful as a concept and that discourse will serve my analysis much better. Ideology is defined as a set of statements or beliefs that serve the interests of a particular group or class (Hall, 1992:87). Through ideology, the particular group or class with power uses meaning to dominate people without using force, thus using meaning to serve the interests of those in power (Thompson, 1999), by emerging from specific social relations that support the interests of the dominant social group or class (Holborow, 2007). Ideology presents existing relations as both natural and inevitable and masks the location of the interests served in these relations as universal and neutral (Purvis and Hunt, 1993:478). Gramsci (1971) theorised the term hegemony, which refers to the ideological predominance of the values and norms of the bourgeois over those of the subordinate classes (Daldal, 2014:157). Ideological hegemony is power maintained through ever-shifting, ongoing cultural processes of winning the consent of the subordinate classes (Wilson, 2018:22). These hegemonic values and norms organise and direct societies, and they are validated by disciplines and determine the consciousness of men (Daldal, 2014:154). By reinforcing hegemonic values in this way, ideology hinders subordinate classes from realising the true nature of their subordination.

Neoliberal ideology became dominant by advancing a conceptual apparatus appealing to people's values and desires, the ideals of human dignity and individual freedom, which are appealing especially to those who value the ability to make decisions for themselves (Harvey,

2005:5). In a world characterised by precariousness, neoliberal ideology explains and justifies the struggles and hardships people face by engaging ideologies such as meritocracy that centre the individual as an empowered agent despite structural and systematic obstacles. These ideologies are presented and promoted through influential popular culture, political and social agents, and their platforms. The media and societal institutions repeat ideological representations, and these ideological representations thus acquire hegemonic status, such that they are made natural and common-sense truths (Holborow, 2007:53).

2.2.3 Discourse

Structuralist notions of representation assumed that representations created by institutions of power structured human understanding and offered one-way transmission of ideology. In contrast, post-structuralist notions of representation considered multiple sources of power and a plurality of discourses and sources of meaning (Hall, 1985:92). While I have explained that ideology is defined as meaning utilised by the powerful to oppress people and is thus a structural concept, discourse, on the other hand, is a post-structuralist concept that portrays how various sets of meanings are constantly in contestation with each other. Discourse refers to a group of statements that provides a language for talking about or representing a particular kind of knowledge about a topic (Hall, 1992:86). The objects of our knowledge are defined and produced by discourse, as it governs how a topic can be meaningfully discussed (Hall, 2013: 29). Crucially, as with all cultural practices, discourses are not fixed, nor are they totally determining (Prinsloo, 2003: 27). While there may be hegemonic discourses, these are contested by a range of competing discourses that offer alternative ways of understanding the world. In this study, we discuss discourses related to neoliberalism, such as individualism and competition and somewhat contradictory or competing discourses of communal values and solidarity that stem from African humanism.

Discourse is also not neutral or entirely representative of the interests of a particular class or group because groups can use the same discourse with different or contradictory class interests (Hall, 1992:87). Groups decide to construct a topic, a discourse in a particular way, in a way that expresses a particular meaning. Discourse, therefore, possesses meaning because people assign it meaning. The statements within a discourse that express the same meaning form what Foucault calls the discursive formation; they refer to the same object and support a common strategy or institution or political drift and thus limit the different ways a topic can be constructed (Hall, 1992:86). There exist various discursive formations. Discourse is about the

production of knowledge through language; various individuals can produce it in different institutional settings through a discursive practice - the practice of producing meaning. Existing discourses draw from earlier discourses; they alter and translate earlier meanings of the discourse; however, traces of past discourses remain embedded in more recent discourses.

Individuals become discursive subjects when they subject themselves to the meanings and principles of a discourse, i.e., train themselves to act in specific ways (Prinsloo, 2003: 27), such that they personify the particular forms of knowledge the discourse produces (Hall, 2013: 40). The discourse governs the choices subjects make, and thus governs behaviour. Further, discourses offer subject positions to occupy from which individuals make sense of the discourse. When occupying a position as a subject to a discourse, subjects thus construct themselves in relation to that discourse; they are formed by the discourse, but at the same time, they constitute themselves by taking up the discourse. Thus, subjects may be constituted by multiple discourses at one time, and they take up these subject positions. For instance, neoliberalism may offer an individualised and competitive subject position for an entrepreneur. In contrast, African humanism may offer a communal approach to entrepreneurship, i.e., sharing resources with other entrepreneurs and equally distributing the market each individual may sell to (Hall, 1992:87).

2.2.4 Power through discourse

Discourse is not power in itself (Miller, 1989:121); rather, it is productive, and that is power, as it defines and produces our objects of knowledge by constructing a topic and regulating how it is spoken of (Foucault, 1982). Through our understanding of the existence of multiple discourses constantly contesting each other, we are able to understand that power can exist in multiple spaces rather than as a singular force controlling us from above and using meaning to stay in power. Power is pervasive as well as a relational social phenomenon. Foucault describes power as coming from everywhere (Miller, 1989:120). It does not reside in a singular force like the repressive power possessed by the state, and it is in institutions of civil society; power is exercised everywhere, and power relations are embedded in social life; they are not external to other forms of relations (163). Discourse and power exist together; hence, discourse can produce its subjects. For instance, through neoliberal discourses of competition and personal responsibility, the ‘hustler” exists who personifies the particular forms of knowledge produced by the discourses of neoliberalism.

Power circulates through discourse; it is through knowledge produced by discourse that power circulates. Foucault insists that power may be coercive, but it is also constructive, such that it produces a certain kind of being (Miller, 1989:122). In the instance of this study, the participants are subject to discourses of neoliberalism that produce them as entrepreneurial, autonomous agents and at the same time also subject to African humanism that produces family/community oriented and dynamic beings. The discourses within these worldviews offer them subject positions that determine their relation to others, their practices, and the meanings they attach to these relations and practices.

2.3 Consumption as meaningful practice

Meaning is produced through several practices including through consumption practices (Hall, 4). Consumption is an action of spending funds on goods and services, it is a set of discursive and material practices whereby individuals as well as collectives use their agency and construct their identities through their expenditure (Iqani and Kenny, 2015:97). Colonialism as a political and economic system, integrated racist and social forms of oppression into consumption regimes, that were meant to regulate what the colonial subjects consumed and the material conditions of their lifestyles (Iqani, 2016:25). In countries like South Africa racial forms of oppression from colonial and apartheid regimes of power controlled black people's consumption (Posel, 2009:163). Thus, oppression against South African black people was also in material form, which resulted in a population deprived of material wealth and opportunities for consumption. This material oppression gave rise to particular meanings of consumption by black people, such that it is argued that liberation and empowerment of black people post-apartheid was centred around materiality and consumption (Iqani, 2016:25).

Iqani (2016) posits that in capitalist societies equality takes material form, and to access that quality one needs to engage in some form of consumption (16), setting out how access to material resources and consumption is necessary to lead a comfortable and enjoyable lifestyle. This is as much the case in South Africa as it is in many parts of the world, and much like all previously colonized countries this access to quality of life is still unavailable to the previously colonized subjects, not due to explicit racially oppressive regulations but rather to economic inequalities. However, post-apartheid, a number of black Africans s benefited from the policies that the African National Congress (ANC) adopted towards transformation and redistribution of wealth i.e., the Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) that replaced the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RPD). These policies and other changes by the

government gave some black Africans s an opportunity to climb the economic ladder and hence the opportunity to participate in conspicuous consumption. Conspicuous consumption is defined as a display of wealth, spending on goods and services of significantly higher quality or quantity, and beyond merely covering one's needs. This term is one of the indicators that consumption is a practice that bears meaning, the kinds of meaning attached to consumption explored in this study are those from the South African context and related to black people.

Consumption in the global south including South Africa has become about aspiration and empowerment and being free, and how freedom has come to be viewed is through material equality and economic empowerment (Iqani, 2017:107). Central to consumption as a set of material and discursive practices is the meaning of those practices, and that meaning varies and is contested (Iqani and Kenny, 2015:97). Iqani (2016) argues that the framings of consumption and materialism as foreign Western pursuits that serve only to distract and cause black middle class to abandon real social justice and welfare issues faced by their countries, are overly simplistic (Iqani, 2016:43-(45). Westernized consumption by people in the south should not be easily discounted as evidence of exploitation and a vulgar betrayal of the struggle for liberation, rather it is important to acknowledge how this consumption may be an expression of complex and hybrid identities as well as an exhibit of agency and empowerment (Iqani, 2016:45).

Consumption as aspiration is a theorisation of consumption concerning the relationship between the rich and the poor of a society (Iqani, 2016:45). A simplistic and problematic understanding of this relationship assumes the rich are indifferent to the plight of the poor while the poor are resentful of the rich. Rather, there are nuances in the discursive power of wealth and the complex relations between the subaltern groups and the elite, but it can safely be said that conspicuous consumption serves as a powerful symbol of freedom to which the poor can aspire (Iqani, 2016:46).

This section has explored the multiple ways in which consumption is framed by theorists, specifically looking at the development of the framings of consumption in the context of the participants as black Africans s. It has explored the different ways that consumption is meaningful, and the meaning that consumption has acquired for black people, which is the celebration of collective freedom. This conceptualisation of consumption will be used in this study as a lens through which to understand the consumption practices and interpretations of the participants. The section that follows will be discussing the capitalist system of

neoliberalism that has produced certain subjectivities in different contexts, which we find in the context of this study.

2.4 Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is a broad structure of beliefs, an ideology that has become a hegemonic discourse (Türken, Nafstad, Blakar & Roen, 2016:33) that proposes political democracy, individual freedom, and unfettered entrepreneurship (Peet, 2002: 62) and is characterised by strong private property rights, free trade, and free markets (Türken, Nafstad, Blakar & Roen, 2016:33). As a discourse, neoliberalism can be understood as a carrier of careful, rationalised, organised statements supported by credited validation procedures, made within communities of experts (Peet, 2002:56). In my attempt to investigate the meanings of success and progress made by the participants, it is important to understand the kind of subjectivities they have adopted, and neoliberalism is a significant discourse in the construction of these subjectivities. The discourse of neoliberalism constructs subjectivities characterised by hyper-individualism, which is a form of individuality ensuring that people are independent agents responsible for their realities, thus enabling the view of individuals as entrepreneurs rather than citizens who compete in the most important aspect of society, the market

As a discourse, neoliberalism works by establishing conditions under which individuals understand themselves as autonomous, self-interested, free self-entrepreneurs, thus reproducing individualistic subjects (Türken, Nafstad, Blakar & Roen, 2016:34). It shapes subjectivity by suggesting each bears human capital that they must maximise towards their self-value (Weidner, 2009:406), a constant reworking of the self through continual self-improvement and lifelong learning (Türken, Nafstad, Blakar & Roen, 2016:34). A move away from coercive disciplinary mechanisms, neoliberalism creates a subject that is simultaneously autonomous and governable through continual self-monitoring and self-disciplining (Türken, Nafstad, Blakar & Roen, 2016:34).

Neoliberal ideology and discourses are isolated from contextual and historical conditions, while being detached from the structural constraints of societies that neoliberal subjects are affected by (Türken, Nafstad, Blakar & Roen, 2016:34). Therefore, the neoliberal subject is understood to have no one else to blame but herself if she fails to achieve goals or make ends meet; through the increased dominance of discourse like self-development we can see the burden placed on individuals (Türken, Nafstad, Blakar & Roen, 2016:34). By placing the burden of responsibility entirely on subjects to "be in charge of", "take personal responsibility",

"work hard" and "take action" to achieve a better life, neoliberal discourse justifies the insufficient provision of formal safety nets and the short-changing of the poor, which creates difficulties for the black middle class, because they then have to provide informal social security in the form of monetary support to their immediate or extended families. This results in continued financial pressure on the black middle class.

2.4.1 Neoliberal Subjectivities

In the present neoliberal world, people are faced with precarity, which refers to the loss of security and stability benefits in work and everyday life (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008:52). However, precarity, in the form of constant threat and danger to one's livelihood, has been a lived experience for many people (Wilson, 2018:44), including black Africans, for a long time. Neoliberalism promotes a world where everyone is pursuing their advantage, and its discourse claims that, given the time, everyone would benefit from such efforts (Wilson, 2018:37). This argument supports the economic proposition to reduce taxes on private business and the wealthy as a means to stimulate business investment and benefit society at large in the long run. However, these benefits are and would be unequally distributed throughout society (Williams and Taylor, 2000:23). This experience of precarity underpins a subjective shift in everyday practice from ontological security, which is the experience and perception of predictability, continuity of life, and stability, to existential anxiety, the physically manifesting and overwhelming state of distress, loathing, fear, and dread caused by the awareness of the transient and fragile nature of life (Neilson, 2016:186).

Cultural, social, political, and economic neoliberal forces centre competition in life, and this is the nature of the current world that the participants live in - one filled with existential anxiety. I argue that to experience some form of ontological security, the participants embrace the subjectivities offered by neoliberalism as a power structure. Ortner (2006) speaks about subjectivity as a cultural and historical consciousness; at the individual level, this consciousness assumes that actors are at least partially aware of their subjecthood, with the ability to reflexively observe themselves and their desires and how they are formed by their circumstances (111). Neoliberalism extends beyond free market principles, shaping new forms of subjectivity created and shaped by neoliberal ideology, creating subject positions free of ties to class. The neoliberal worker is entirely responsible for their destiny, equipped with techniques and technologies of regulation for self-management, and producing the self as

having skills and qualities necessary for their success in the new economy (Walkerdine, 2003:240).

This neoliberal worker is encouraged to self-appreciate, which is the practice of engaging in various activities that improve one's chances of being better positioned in the economic market; individuals treat themselves as boundless projects of growth, always developing, expanding, and being optimised (Wilson, 2018:65). This neoliberal subjectivity aims to achieve a sense of empowerment in its subjects (Rutherford, 20018:623). This sense of empowerment instils the belief that subjects can overcome obstacles, in this case, obstacles of a financial nature. Neoliberal subjectivity instils the belief that individuals are in control of their lives, and their inability to be productive, well-adjusted entrepreneurial subjects is their failure to take personal responsibility for themselves (Wilson, 2018:76). This idea of individual responsibility is rooted in the discourse of hyper-individualism, which can be understood as the reinforcement of individuality on people to the extent that social categories lose all meanings, and such that everyone is independently responsible for their social realities (Keating, 2013:158).

Another form of hyper-individualism is self-enclosed individualism, which is the tendency to emphasise individuals being disparate entities rather than members of a collective or group such as a social class (Casey, 2020:279). Self-enclosed individualism is a neoliberalism status quo story. Keating (2013) describes these as the stories told with great certainty in popular culture, which we also tell ourselves. They are unthinking affirmations of our relationship to our present reality and our investment in the world as we know it (170). They are a form of unthinking resistance to change of that reality because we view them as accurate reflections of the world and as permanent and unchanging facts (Keating, 2013:170). Distinguishing self-enclosed individualism from the idea of individualism understood through positive concepts such as agency, autonomy and self-determination, Keating (2013) explains self-enclosed individualism as the inflexible nature of boundaries that divide the individual self from others and refers to the absolute isolation and intense focus on the individual by defining them very narrowly and in non-relational terms (Keating, 2012:171).

This competitiveness and division nurtured by self-enclosed individualism are at the root of "hustle", which is a form of labour that infiltrates and reshapes aspects of one's life, entering the home and friendships and financialising them by making personal interactions about business. The hustle is by definition the opposite of an actual job, or normal work, in which the work one does in a job is left in the office, does not affect personal relationships and provides

security from risk. Hustling describes the reality of constantly having to work for economic benefit (Wilson, 2018:122), with little to no protection from risk by the law or by the company one works for. For instance, MLM members are not protected by the Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995 of South African law, and their companies do not provide them with salaries or benefits.

Rooted in this form of labour is the concept of self-enterprise, a neoliberal status quo story and a discourse presented through a lens of empowerment, where individuals are presented as entrepreneurs of the self who apply market logic to all aspects of their lives to enhance their position in the market (Wilson, 2018:121). This notion of self-enterprise invites workers to think of themselves as belonging less to a class, with experiences and problems in common, and more as private, individualised enterprises in competition with one another. This phenomenon is termed deproletarianization (Wilson, 2018:122). In this section, I have discussed the reshaping of the economic world according to neoliberal ideology and produced certain neoliberal subjectivities, which are brought to life through neoliberal status quo stories or discourses that frame subjects in specific ways as self-enterprising, autonomous, empowered and entrepreneurial agents of the market, in an attempt to justify and maintain the status quo. In the following section, much like neoliberalism, I discuss a world view that produces certain subjectivities for those subject to its discourses, African Humanism.

2.5 African Humanism

In studying the meanings dealing with notions of success and progress that the participants in this study make and circulate on social media, it is constructive to understand a worldview that informs this process of meaning-making and communicates that meaning. In the previous section, we discussed neoliberalism, a worldview that informs the participants, and in this section, we will discuss African Humanism, another discourse that constitutes the participants. Foucault (1972) theorises that since cultures are constructed out of competing discourses, individuals can be constituted by multiple discourses that invite one to take up different subjectivities (27 & 50). Nyamnjoh (2015) theorises that individuals are permanently incomplete according to African subjectivity, such that African subjectivities are dynamic, malleable and flexible in recognition of their incompleteness (261). In recognising this incompleteness, African subjectivity recognises the interdependence of individuals on each other (Nyamnjoh, 2015:263). Thus, recognising and respecting one's incompleteness of being and being interconnected with incomplete others and in communion with collective interests

helps individuals maximise the pursuit of their interests (Nyamnjoh, 2015:262). Nyamnjoh's notion of incompleteness provides a philosophical basis for a collective orientation, which explains why it remains a central tenet of African subjectivity even in times of great change for the frontier African. These potentialities are open to the idea of being incomplete, such that beings, words, deeds, and things are always incomplete because of their possibilities and impermanent condition (Njamnjoh, 201:261). African subjectivities are thus painted as dynamic, malleable, and flexible in recognition of the incompleteness of being and the interconnections we have with incomplete others in the interest of the collective.

African traditional values emphasise economic relations driven by solidarity such that they aim to attain the well-being of the whole community, as opposed to satisfying the interests of an individual (Murove, 2005:168). African humanism advocates for communalism, through which wealth is used for the common good rather than serving individual interests and this common good is undertaken not only for the present day but in consideration of future generations as well (Murove, 2005: 131); ensuring the well-being of generations to come is vital to African Humanism. The subjectivity offered by this worldview in terms of beliefs and values in today's context of the most unequal country in the world is claimed to survive more or less in remote villages and intimate kin relationships and provides a blueprint for the present and future economic, political and social life in urban environments that are central to the economy and the political system (Binsbergen, 2001:53).

Umntu ngumntu ngabantu is a proverb within African Humanism that expresses the value of belonging to a community and how that belonging makes one fully human; it translates to "a human being is a human being through other beings." Ubuntu, which comes from this proverb, is an ethic of African Humanism, representing a broader worldview or belief system (Hailey, 2008:3), purporting that individual identities are formed by community and their well-being and that personhood is socially mediated (Murove, 2005:134), the individual being what she is because of her community (Verhoef, 2001521). This expression of Ubuntu translates to economic relations as well, and from this perspective, economic relations based on the perception of others as a means to an end are incompatible with Ubuntu (Murove, 2005:144). Rather, Ubuntu recognises the interdependence between people and realises that individuals are not self-sufficient (Verhoef, 2001:521). This idea of depending on or looking to others in one's community or network for assistance resonates within the neoliberal idea of financialisation of personal relations. However, although the use of personal networks or communities to assist an individual with personal or business-related matters is interpreted as

a self-interested and exploitative attempt through neoliberalism, African Humanism interprets or understands this behaviour as stemming from the reciprocal nature of support and solidarity between individuals in a community.

Ubuntu has been the backbone of many African societies as a value system. Before the industrialisation and modernisation of the Southern African societies, they were communalistic (Mwipikeni, 2018:323). Through the philosophy of Ubuntu, mutual recognition and independence fostered feelings of solidarity, compassion, and generosity, among others. Ubuntu values were entrenched in the subjectivities and attitudes of individuals (Mwipikeni, 2018:323). However, due to the forceful immersion of Africa into colonial modernity, characterised by a generative logic of individualism, the communalistic socio-cultural conditions that existed disappeared (Mwipikeni, 2018:323). This individualism became embedded in the subjectivity of individuals as well as the liberal and neoliberal political, economic and juridical systems, and it is irreconcilable with the ethic of Ubuntu, which is communal harmony (Mpikweni, 2018:323). At the level of individual subjectivity, Ubuntu still offers guidance for personal behaviours such as compassion and respect and acts as a rule of conduct or social ethic that guides individual behaviour, characterised by a preference for cooperation rather than individual competitiveness (Hailey, 2008:8).

The frontier African embodies the ideas of African Humanism, and this frontier African conceptualised by Nyamnjoh (2015) is not specific to a certain time in history; rather, they are Africans that embody specific features. The frontier African adapts according to the context and necessity, such that they are dynamic, flexible, and blendable, so they believe everything is malleable, flexible and blendable (258). Through the physical and social mobility afforded the frontier African by technological innovations and creativity, they navigate and negotiate myriad margins of identity and belonging (Nyamnjoh, 2015:259). The frontier African's idea of incompleteness allows for a dynamic approach to social customs while retaining a communal orientation hence Ubuntu for the frontier African is not in the form of the essentialist notion of what it means to be African; the idea of incompleteness allows for a dynamic approach to social customs while still retaining a communal orientation.

In African Humanism, the community exists prior to the individual (Murove, 2005:156). In Western writings, community signifies a collection of self-interested individuals with individual sets of preferences which make the decision to come together because they realise that is the best way to protect their self-interests (Menkiti, 1984:179). Here the individuals

operate as separate entities; this understanding is at odds with the African conceptualisation of community, which considers the individual as 'thoroughly fused in the 'collective we' (Murove, 2005:157). The pre-requisite for individual well-being is communal well-being, which means achieving collective interests is achieving one's self-interests (Murove, 2005:158). These ideas of the individual fused into the collective and the individual's well-being attached to their community are critiqued for being oppressive and hindering economic progress for individuals. This critique is based on the interpretation of the African conceptualisation of community as absolute dependence on others, which does not do justice to the African understanding of community. Instead of absolute dependence on others, individuals from African communities understand the interdependent nature of people as opposed to depending on others; individuals attain freedom, i.e., economic freedom for themselves as well as others instead of looking to be free from the burden of others, and lastly, individuality is celebrated in togetherness rather than in solitude (Murove, 2005:161).

2.6 Sociality and Networks

The notion of networked sociality refers to the phenomenon of sociality that is fast-paced and based on fleeting, instrumental encounters with a large set of individuals (Amit, 2015:61). The phenomenon of being networked with a large set of individuals in today's world is made convenient and widespread by social media, thus making it a form of sociality that is relevant to the study of the meanings of social media practices such as this one. Network sociality suggests that people treat their networks as resources to create, maintain and exploit without showing responsibility towards those in their networks in an attempt to attain success and social mobility (Amit, 2015:16) (Berrou and Combarnous, 2012:2). Networks are an innate feature of society, through which people develop conceptual and language systems that help them make sense of the world and communicate this meaningfully to others. Networks, therefore, constitute a great part of the subjectivities that people embody; in the case of this study, the participants embody African humanism and neoliberalism, which assign specific ideas about how one should relate to others, for example, solidarity and competition, respectively. While networks are meaningful for individuals, they have a practical function for MLM companies' networks are important because the MLM strategy depends largely on them to make sales and to create the pyramidical structure of the downline.

Sociality is how people understand themselves in relation to others and their cultural environments. Characteristics of sociality include interaction, interdependence, civility, mutual

accommodation, cohabitation and so on (Nyamnjoh, 2015:263). These enable us to tell each other and ourselves stories about the world and how it operates (Iqani, 2016:22). Today, these stories can be told through online platforms like social media. People establish particular ways to engage with each other through social media platforms. People are fundamentally sociable and want to relate to each other; their social life is organised in tandem with their relationships with others in their social networks (Fiske, 1992:689). Social networks are defined as the way individuals are tied to one another by invisible bonds. Social networks consist of a set(s) of actors and their defined relation(s). These actors can be individual or collective social units that are connected by links, and these links may be undirected, directed, or mixed (Scott, 1988:109). Such connections or ties take different forms, including kinship, friendships, work colleagues, communities etc. (Emek, Karidi, Tennenhdtz, Zohar, 2011:209).

In developing countries such as South Africa, exchange is recognised as resting upon webs of social ties established with actors in one's social network. Although MLM companies are fully immersed in the gig economy of neoliberalism with its hyper-individual ethos, they are dependent on mining the capital and trust within these large social networks, which are valued by women, working-class people and people in the developing world, who depend on other people for everyday life. Therefore, for MLM companies, social networks are avenues for profit and income accumulation (Dolan and Scott, 2009:207-208). MLMs encourage their members to harness their social networks with the promise of profit and income accumulation (Dolan and Scotts, 2009: 214), thus shaping the way these member women approach their engagement with their social networks.

The resourcefulness and usefulness of networks to individuals are informed by the strength of the tie between the individual and the actors in their networks (Berrou and Combarnous, 2012:2). The strength of a tie or connection between an individual and actors in their networks are formed by a combination of various factors including the emotional intensity, the amount of time, the intimacy, and the reciprocal services which characterise the tie (Gravovetter, 1973:1361) (Berrou and Combarnous, 2012:7). Strong ties are based on trust and obligation and commitment, they are based and operate on legitimacy - a person needs to be a legitimate member of a network by for instance being a blood relative or being the same gender or sharing another social identity, and they need to build trust with the people in their networks. This strong type of tie means an individual's network is approachable and more reliable, and they have access and support to this network based on shared trust and obligation (Berrou and

Combarnous, 2012:7). Weak ties are based on information sharing; they enable access to other social circles beyond the actors' own and they are flexible and easily manipulated (Berrou and Combarnous, 2012:7).

MLM companies shape the behaviour of their members in how they interact with their networks by encouraging them to harness their social networks for customers, which could be seen as encouraging manipulation of these networks to some extent. Women have historically been the direct targets of MLM companies because their informal gendered networks are tight-knit and, therefore, not easily penetrated by outsiders (Purkayastha and Subrmaniam, 2004:8-9). Convincing these women to join the MLMs thus opens a closed network of potential customers for the MLMs. These networks, established through children, churches, and other social organisations, are not only functional but are often also deeply meaningful, meaning that the ties with these networks may be strong as a result of kinship or history or shared locale and experience. MLMs benefit from the existing notions of communal care that guide the relations between members and their social networks.

Multi-level Marketing is a business model built on networks. The structure of an MLM is similar to a pyramid structure, such that they contain a hierarchy in the form of a pyramid that benefits members at the top as the pyramid expands, from the earnings of members at the bottom. MLMs are legal in countries like South Africa because they offer products and services, unlike pyramid schemes, which are illegal in this country. Pyramid schemes are defined as:

"...perpetual recruitment chains in which the design of the scheme's compensation plan dooms the vast majority of participants to financial failure based on the fact that they are non-product based" (Keep and Vander Net, 2018:193).

The networks that the MLM structure builds from recruiting individuals and the downlines and uplines formed indicate the company is growing, and thus, so are their profits. Most importantly, the structure indicates possible growth for the members, which in the hierarchy of the organisation means social mobility and success to members and thus encourages them to continue harnessing the capital and trust in their networks.

2.7 Digital Media, Mediated Sociality and Influencers

2.7.1 Digital Media

In an attempt to understand the meanings of the social media practices of the participants, it is valuable to look at the participants' relationship with digital media and the consequences of this for their practices. Depending on the audience, context and situation, people manage their identities in relation to others, opening identities to constant negotiation (Lindgren, 2017:101). This negotiation can occur on social media, where users are able to construct their identities and display and share their lives in more than one specific and fixed way (Lindgren, 2017:101). People are able to 'write themselves into being', constructing who they are or at least whom they want to be seen as by others, extending their offline selves in different ways. Today we live in digital societies, where our lives, culture, relationships, and sociality are digitised and affected by digital media (Lindgren, 2017:16). People in society contribute to the shaping of digital media through the ways they use, adapt, or resist them. At the same time, technological developments affecting digital media have social consequences that go far beyond the immediate purposes of the technology and practices themselves. Key shifts in technological ability and practice change how people relate to the world around them (Lindgren, 2017:15).

Lindgren (2017) posits that in practice, people's identities are moving between the offline and online worlds in ways that blur the division between digital and face-to-face (101). These individuals construct their identities in the ways discussed above within groups, communities, and networks. Groups, communities, and networks have existed in the past; however, social media and the internet have enhanced and altered the processes by which these can be formed (Lindgren, 2017:105), thus portraying the significance of studying social media practices along with networks on digital media for this research.

Social networking sites, commonly known today as social media, are predominantly used as a stage for self-representation and social connections that authenticate one's identity, and they are centred on public displays of these social connections. Thus, they allow for portraying collective and individual identities (Papacharissi, 2010:305). They enable the connection of people with others outside of their world of family and friends, and they enable the gathering of people for social, civic and cultural purposes (Boyd, 2010:39). It is useful to explore the features and functionalities of social media because these differ with each site but more importantly, they play a role in constructing these sites as networked publics (Boyd 2010:43).

In this study the profile, friend-list and statuses or stories update features that are explored both on Facebook and WhatsApp.

Humans are thought to have a fundamental drive to compare themselves to others (Vogel, Rose, Roberts and Eckles, 2014:206-207). This phenomenon is called social comparison, where individuals compare themselves to others, and is a behaviour that fosters competition, self-evaluation, and self-enhancement among other things (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, Eckles and Franz, 2015:249). Understanding the function of these social comparisons thus helps us understand how and what informs the women's competition and constructions of success in this study. Social media platforms have features that allow users to construct their personal profiles and present a rich set of information about themselves (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, Eckles and Franz, 2015:249). On Facebook, for instance, users can share photographs or videos of their daily routines, they can check in (to) wherever they go (usually people share locations at high-end luxurious locations when they use this function), and through their profile, they can share their accomplishments etc. Social media thus provides an ideal platform for social comparison to take place, as one is exposed to rich information about others and can access an expansive network of people from which they can learn this information, thus making social media an ideal tool for selling products, as people can compare themselves to others in terms of what they have (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, Eckles and Franz, 2015:249).

2.7.2 Mediated Sociality

Social media facilitates a particular kind of sociality, along with communication and information exchanged, as people worldwide use social media to maintain, create and expand their networks (Brinkman, Bruijn &Bilal, 2009:75-77). These networks may consist of existing networks of family and friends but also new networks of other social media users. Facebook allows users to create an online network for themselves through various affordances, including friend lists, pages, and groups.

"Every click, share, like, and post creates a connection, initiates a relation. The network dynamically grows, evolves, becomes" (Bucher, 2015:1)

Friend list contains the list of names of people a participant is friends with. For two participants on Facebook to become friends and come up on each other's profiles, they must mutually agree to the friendship. How they agree is by one participant sending a request to be a friend of the 2nd participant and the 2nd participant accepting this request. Having people on one's friend

list means they have people who directly view and engage with their posts on their profile. People tend to develop relationships with the people on their friend list. These relations may be strong ties or weak ties, which may have been already established in the offline world, for example, family members, acquaintances, friends etc. (Granovetter, 1973:1361), while some ties are established through the engagement people have on the platform, such as liking a friend's post, commenting, or sharing their post. Groups are another feature on Facebook. Groups can be open or closed, referring to the ability of the public to access these groups. The open group can be joined by anyone, who can then invite others to join the same group., while closed groups require administrative approval when a person wants to join them, although anyone can see the group description. Both types of groups allow their members to share resources such as posts, photos or videos (Idris and Wang, 2009:251).

Individuals decide how to use social media technologies. They appropriate them and adapt them to serve their own goals and lives, and the technologies also influence how individuals can use them in their social interactions and communications (Davis and Chouinard, 2017). Digital media specifically has allowed for these interactions to transcend space and time and has given rise to forms of mediated sociality even more interactive and decentralised than before, thus developing new and complex workings of space and the social (Delfanti and Arvidsson, 2018:48). Such virtual spatial forms of sociality that are decentralised are experienced, and recounted during the interviews, by some of the participants of this study. Digital media enables such decentralising of activities by simultaneously connecting to spaces that exist only virtually (Castells, 1999:294). The participants of this study mainly use social media platforms via their mobiles to transcend the office space and university facilities such as lecture halls and to interact with others during the day for their "side hustle", thereby decentralising their activities by simultaneously connecting to spaces that exist only virtually (Castells, 1999:294). The development of digital technologies paved the way for the creation of subject positions that users can choose to occupy and exploit the affordances of digital media

2.7.3 Influencers

A social media influencer (SMI) is a human brand conducting independent (from any organisation) work, someone who is a well-known persona and a subject of marketing communications efforts. In recent years the gig economy has expanded as a result of digital technologies and platforms such as social media (Wilson, 2018:125). Social media made the existence of influencers possible by providing platforms equipped with tools for self-branding,

self-promotion, and content creation that ordinary people can access and use (Gómez, 2019:12-13). Thus, social media influencers are particularly attractive to brands, and marketers have started to develop a new communication practice, "influencer marketing", to take advantage of SMIs' content (DeVeirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017; Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). Influencer marketing is defined as promoting brands through the use of specific key individuals who exert influence over potential buyers. These marketing efforts are produced using traditional forms of media targeting specific audiences, but most prominent today is the use of personal media, specifically social media such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook.

Influencers influence their audiences; for instance, Mihlali Ndamase is a South African influencer; she started with her brand of beauty, cosmetics, and personal care, for which she gained a significant number of followers, and from there, she started partnering with various other brands, including RevlonSA, Maven Beauty, Skin Renewal etc. Today she is a nominee of Forbes 30 Under 30. Branding is a strategy to shape and channel certain messages, from the company of a product to consumers, to gain a competitive edge in the marketplace. Influencers are in and of themselves brands, such that they communicate their identity in specific ways through social media to gain a competitive edge in terms of getting followers and financial gain. They also associate with or support company brands that (mostly) align with the brand they have built for themselves.

"Eventually, with consistent juxtaposition, the human brand (influencer) can become synonymous with the brand and hence the product, service, or firm" (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017:194).

In this way, companies benefit from the brand around which the influencer has built their identity. By associating their product or service with the influencers' brand, influencers build their brand on the content they produce. This content should be relatable or attractive in terms of beauty standards of the time, and their personality, i.e., charismatic personality, helps them gain followers. The companies benefit from the relationship that the influencer has established with their followers, who would thus buy the company's products (Jhally, 2006:45). The rise of individualism as well as the digital media developments that make it easy for people to project their images through social media, have both worked to popularise the notion of self-branding. This has also created an illusion that people can easily be famous and attain the kind of success that influencers and celebrities enjoy (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017:194). Social media has been a valuable platform for the work of influencers; as an example of work in the

gig economy, influencers use their social media profiles to build their brand and garner support from their personal networks.

Individuals create their identities as though they are creating products to be consumed by their audiences (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017:195). They package themselves such that their most appealing aspects are most prominent, and those that do not further their branding objectives are downplayed (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017:199). Influencers attempt to develop and maintain an emotional bond with their audience by giving their identity authenticity, the sense that it is their true self being presented and not a performance, and this is central to being an influencer because audiences are attracted to the aspect of a "real person", with a sense of trustworthiness (Wellman, Stoldt, Tully & Ekdale, 2020:3). Being consistent with one's brand is essential to being an influencer, as consistency conveys the understanding that the influencer is being themselves and communicating their independent assessment for the benefit of their network rather than solely promoting another brand. For instance, audiences listen, watch and engage with content concerning clothing styles, exercise routines, make-up and general lifestyle-related topics. Considering the vast number of people producing the same kind of influencer content, it is important for influencers to have charisma that retains people's attention and content that is diverse and interesting (Gómez, 2019:24).

In a general context of uncertainty, self-branding is the active and purposeful cultivation of a coherent and lucrative self-image of oneself (Wilson, 2018:133). Individuals are in constant promotion of themselves and their brands, using their bodies as commodities to sell the brands they work with for the collection and consumption of audiences in the social marketplace, thus leading to individuals treating their social networks relationships as transactional and instrumental to their fame and success (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017:20). Self-branding is seen as a reflection of uncertain and unstable labour markets rather than personal control, as a result of economic and political realities that expect people to be as adaptive and nuanced as branded products are (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017:200-201). Therefore, the rise of self-branding is conceptualised as another form of neoliberal governance, paraded as empowering people to consider themselves entrepreneurial subjects responsible for their own success and failure in the marketplace. Self-branding implies that the individual needs to adapt or adjust to fit into the world as it is and that there is no issue with the economy or how it is functioning. This perception absolves the governments from any intervention and thus satisfies the modus operandi of free-market ideologues (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017:202).

2.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have introduced the idea of two primary discourses being relevant to the participants of this study – the neoliberal world of MLM selling with its values and the world of African humanism with its communal values in an extremely unequal society. I have defined various concepts related to the production of meaning; for example, while networks have very material characteristics, I have focused on aspects of meaning - such as the trustworthiness of a network and the authenticity and autonomy of its members. These concepts will allow me to explore meanings associated with success and progress in the next chapter, as they will be used to inform understanding of the world of the participants and existing interpretations of these worlds. Armoured with understanding the various theoretical perspectives, we should be able to address the questions of how the participants in this study construe success and progress.

The women in this study are engaged in a complex process of managing their lives and making decisions while they appear to be constituted by multiple, sometimes contradictory discourses. The literature this chapter has discussed informs the analysis that will take place in Chapter 4, has highlighted the complexity of meaning-making, understanding social networking and sociality in tangent, and considering the contextual factors that have significant influence over the women's lives. The discussion in the chapter immediately suggests an open-ended, exploratory yet structured approach to conducting this research in order to address its objectives. The following chapter will discuss the research methodology undertaken by the researcher to capture the empirical data, as well as the lens through which I analysed the data, thereafter, including details of the data collection techniques, sample selection, the management of the researchers' role, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in conducting the research and the overall research strategy adopted.

CHAPTER 3

Research Methodology & Methods

3.1 Introduction

This research aims to understand the meanings made by African women in Makhanda of their social media practices when they are engaged in Multi-Level Marketing. Since it is concerned with meaning-making, this research is a qualitative study. The Covid 19 pandemic had a significant impact on the study; section three of this thesis deals with the Research Strategy utilised by the researcher, and under that strategy is where the challenges and opportunities presented by the Covid-19 pandemic regulations are discussed. A significant aspect of the research methodology was that it was multilingual; the interviews were conducted in both isiXhosa, my mother tongue, and English. In qualitative research, we are interested in people's meaning systems, their beliefs, and experiences from their perspectives, all of which are largely embedded in and influenced by their cultures and languages (Mohajan, 2018:2). Thus, it is important to allow the participants to use whichever language through which they interpret and make sense of the world, in order to understand their social reality in their specific context (Mohajan, 2018:2). Some interviews were predominantly in isiXhosa and others predominately in English and switching between both languages allowed the participants to communicate with me effectively, as they could choose how they wanted to express themselves.

This chapter will be divided into different sections, the first of which will detail the overall research approach taken in this study as a qualitative study informed by the ontology of Constructivism and epistemology of Interpretivism. This section will also discuss how I established and maintained rapport with the participants under Covid-19 conditions and explain the field sites in which I conducted the research, namely Makhanda and the online platform Facebook. The second section details the data collection. I discuss the sampling strategies utilised to recruit the participants and the difficulties I faced in recruiting participants due to extraneous factors related to Covid-19. My positionality as a researcher familiar with the participants' world is also discussed in this section. I detail my experience of how my familiarity with the world of the participants blinded me to details and nuances of this world and how I overcame this challenge. In the third section, I explore the methods I used to conduct this study. I discuss the process of adaptation of these methods, i.e., unstructured face-to-face interviews becoming online over Zoom and WhatsApp video call interviews. I reflect on the

scroll-back on social media method and how social media as a memory object allowed the participants to reflect on their social media practices and the meanings behind them. The participant observation of MLM events is also a method that had to be adapted, during this research, into an observation of virtual live events and visiting the MLM websites. Adapting these methods presented challenges, including network coverage issues, data sufficiency issues and the ability to navigate unfamiliar applications and their features. The fourth section is the framework for data analysis. Here I discuss the qualitative analysis conducted in this study, focusing on factors such as meaning through language and practices, as well as detailing the process of using thematic analysis as a tool to analyse the data compiled. This section discusses the ethical considerations of this study in terms of ensuring the anonymity of the participants and maintaining confidentiality throughout the research.

3.2 Research Strategy

3.2.1 Research Paradigm

This study is based on a qualitative philosophical paradigm, and this approach is appropriate for this study because it allows for the exploration and in-depth investigation of the meanings of the social media practices of the participants. In a qualitative approach, the researcher, as the point of empirical departure, investigates the social world of the participants by immersing herself in the perspectives of the participants and interpreting the data that emerges from such interactions (Bryman, 1984:77). Thus, the ontology that underpins this research is Constructivism, where the participants involved in the research are understood as conscious, self-directing and symbolic social actors who participate in the production of meaning and social phenomena through social interaction (Peck and Mummery, 2018:323). It recognises the participants' involvement in making sense of their world, interpreting, creating, and giving meaning to things, as well as the role played by the researcher in these processes. The epistemology that underpins this research is Interpretivism, which argues that truth and knowledge are subjective, such that people's experiences and their understanding of them are historically and culturally situated (Ryan, 2018:8). Therefore, reality depends on how individuals view and experience the world and through the socially constructed meanings they carry (Ryan, 2018:9).

Meaning is highly contextual. Hall (2007) explains that meaning is constructed through representational systems based on specific contexts. It is therefore important to understand the systems of representation operating within a context, be it the conceptual systems of culture or

language systems, to be able to interpret the meaning constructed, understand how the world is made meaningful and how that meaning is communicated (Hall, 2007:25). In spite of only a partial understanding of the context, because as much as we share identity markers, i.e., black and female, as well as other contextual markers, i.e., from the Eastern Cape, have experienced township life as well as MLM companies in our personal lives, I understood that people in different contexts have different maps of meaning that can be explored through qualitative research, as well as the systems of representation operating within that specific context. The aim was to collect and analyse the participants' narratives detailing their lived experiences relating to the research topic and to interpret the various meanings that arose, such as those associated with success and progress. This phenomenological perspective enables the identification of various meanings (Amedeo, 1997). In my study, these meanings emerged from how individual participants make sense of their social media practices and the networks they work with, both on social media and in the offline world, for the purposes of their MLM businesses.

3.2.2 Establishing Rapport under COVID-19 conditions

The ability of the researcher to interpret data is foregrounded in qualitative research. Therefore, the researcher must establish rapport with the participants with an open mind and attitude. Establishing rapport includes building trust with the participants so that they have a space to freely share their understandings and explanations. Sharing physical presence may help establish rapport arguably much easier and faster because of its intimate nature (occupying the participants' home or space of comfort) (Dodds, Hess, 2020:207). To gain knowledge and understanding of the meanings of the social media practices of the participants, one has to engage with them and be a part of their everyday world (Byrne, 2001:830). According to the Covid-19 regulations of the School of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University, face-to-face meetings for the department's work were prohibited, making qualitative research more difficult. However, research shows that online interviewing can feel safer and less intrusive than face-to-face interviews, allowing participants to feel safe sharing things (Dodds, Hess, 2020:208). I, therefore, had a certain advantage in conducting the interviews online.

The participants and I share the same home language, isiXhosa, and we also have similar identity markers, i.e., black and female, as well as sharing familiar background experiences such as growing up in an isiXhosa culture/home and living in townships. All of these factors played a role in my ability to establish rapport; it made my relation with the participants easier,

and the participants were comfortable with the familiarity they shared with me. Beyond familiarity, I strategically ensured that the participants could see and hear me as I used social cues such as smiling, nodding and other facial expressions to assert my presence in the conversation and their space. The Covid-19 pandemic itself and lockdown regulations implemented as a result, which restricted people's movements and prohibited, among many things, gatherings and meetings did not only affect the physical activities of people, but it also affected their mental, psychological, and emotional well-being. Establishing rapport by connecting with the participants through their personal lives helped them understand that I did my research, I understood where they come from, and I was interested in their lived experiences and the meanings they imparted to them.

3.2.3 Field site

The participants for this study were chosen from the population of the town of Makhanda/Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape. This choice was made for convenience as the researcher is based in this town, as well as because the town has an active MLM culture. I am a member of a Facebook group for the town, and this is how I became aware of the vibrant community of MLM sellers in Makhanda. It was necessary to identify a physical/offline field site, as well as the digital spaces used as field sites for this digital research because field sites are the spaces where the social processes under investigation take place (Burrel, 2009:185). Choosing to focus on Makhanda was for the purpose of getting a clearer understanding of the context within which the study took place. The focus on women in Makhanda only instead of including women in Port Elizabeth and East London, two neighbouring cities, is significant because those cities have their own histories and have developed in specific ways and thus produced specific lives for the women in them. The magnitude of this research allowed for the investigation of the lived experiences of women in a single town, thus enabling me as the researcher to focus on the specific meanings of that specific context and ground my interpretations of the women's actions within that context, which is significant in qualitative research (Mishler, 1979:2).

3.3 Data Collection

3.3.1 Sampling

I spoke to a sample of six Black African female participants from Makhanda who are involved in Multi-level Marketing and who use social media for the purpose of running these businesses. The sample from which the participants were chosen was based on the following criteria: black, woman, involved in Multi-level Marketing and using social media such as WhatsApp and Facebook. Therefore, a Purposive/Non-Random sampling technique (Deacon, Pickering, Murdock, and Golding, 1999:50.) was used in selecting the participants because the selection of the sample of participants needed to be deliberate and conscious. Qualitative research is not conducted with the intent to produce findings that can be generalized but rather contextual, rich and meaningful data that can further our understanding of how participants make sense of their social world (Bryman, 1984:79).

The participants were purposively identified through specific Facebook groups local to Makhanda. I visited all the groups identified as local to Makhanda: 1. "Grahamstown Makhanda," a Facebook group which acts as a notice board for the town; its "About" section indicates that "…it is a fun, family-friendly community where people can share their passion for this wonderful Eastern Cape city." 2. "Grahamstown buy and sell," a Facebook page where the community of the town can buy anything advertised or sell anything they want to, including products from their businesses. 3. The "UCKAR Student Body Page 2021," a Facebook page that was created as a platform where Rhodes University students can freely communicate without university administrators silencing them for whatever reason. The acronym stands for University Currently Known as Rhodes. I targeted this group specifically because it is a group where most students are actively participating, and there are fewer gate-keeping rules than the other university groups. Visiting these groups was a process that occurred over time, where I would visit a single group at a time and search keywords such as the names of the MLMs I had found by googling "Well known Multi-Level Marketing companies in the Eastern Cape" or "Multi-Level Marketing'' or "MLM" in those groups.

Many posts that would come up from these searches were either MLM sellers advertising their business or community members asking who in the groups sells products from a specific MLM. The engagements with the posts by other group members asking for MLM sellers of specific companies were much more frequent than posts by the MLM sellers themselves, where they

would be advertising products. Groups such as the "Grahamstown Makhanda" group do not allow advertisements of products; hence here, there would not be any group member advertising what they sell. Rather, MLM sellers would comment on the other group members' posts which were asking for MLM sellers, but either way, both types of posts helped me identify MLM sellers.

Further, besides monitoring the Facebook groups and pages for MLM activity, I made a public advertisement or post on the Grahamstown Makhanda Facebook page, calling on anyone who met the above criteria and was interested in being part of the research to comment, message or email me. The post received a significant number of responses in the form of comments, but it was mostly people tagging others they knew that met the criteria. I went through the comments and tags, and I then visited the profiles of each of the people who were tagged to see their activity on Facebook and how much they posted about their MLM business. I also searched for each name mentioned in the groups above to see if they had made any posts advertising their MLM business or products on those public groups. It was important for the study that the women I chose were actively posting about their MLM business or products either on their Facebook profiles or their Facebook groups, or both because the research questions are focused on the use of social media by the participants.

It was also important to identify which MLMs the people were a part of because I wanted participants who belong to different MLMs. I wanted participants to belong to a variety of MLMs because MLMs seemed to have differing identities, products and cultures, and hence I suspected these might have different influences on their members and how they advertise or post about their MLM business or products. I also looked at my potential participant's engagement with audiences on their social media, such as initiating conversations about their MLM business through posts or responding to people's comments, posting videos or pictures of themselves representing the MLMs' products or the business, the consistency and extent of this engagement was considered. This level of intensity of the potential participants' MLM engagement contributed to the decision of which people to approach and ask to be participants in the study.

Despite following what appeared to be a good plan informed by the literature to construct a sample of participants, by accessing the Facebook profiles of potential participants and examining these as described in the above paragraph, this strategy proved not to yield good results. First, my access to my potential participants' Facebook posts was limited as most of

the participants had privacy settings on their profiles on Facebook, which blocked those they are not "friends" with on Facebook from seeing their posts; therefore, I could only see a limited amount of their profile, posts, and activities on Facebook. Therefore, a full assessment of their MLM-related engagements in the form of posts and their frequency was not always possible. To improve the situation, I decided to also send the potential participants messages on Facebook Messenger, a Facebook messaging application. Since the potential participants and I were not "friends" on Facebook, this meant that my messages to them went into a different message folder called Message Requests. People who do not have Facebook Messenger do not receive notifications of messages in their message requests inbox. This meant that these people probably did not receive my messages. This also meant that the majority of the people I approached through Facebook Messenger did not respond to my messages.

This was when I decided to send each potential participant a "friend request", which would allow us to be friends on Facebook, and my messages would then go into their normal inbox. This was much more effective. Most of the people I approached in this manner were open to becoming participants. There were dozens of people I had been communicating with, and at one point, I thought I had a sufficient number of participants, but they kept dropping out. I had to keep going back to restart the process of identifying potential participants and assessing their posts many times. This process was frustrating for me, but it was also frustrating for the participants who had agreed and were waiting for the interviews to begin. I did not want to set up the interviews before I had recruited all my participants. In general, many people who rejected the offer to participate did so because they were experiencing professional changes and facing personal difficulties. These changes and challenges resulted from the Covid-19 pandemic only being declared a few months prior, with people adjusting to the reality of living in a pandemic.

After having identified the potential participants, the snowballing technique was utilized, where I would ask the people I had messaged and received responses from if they knew any other MLM sellers. This snowballing sampling technique (Deacon et al., 1999:43) was adopted for practical reasons because I knew these MLM representatives would have ties or links to other MLM representatives because of the pyramid nature of the structure of MLMs that creates webs of networks between members (Mathews, Manalel and Zacharias, 2007:161). I used the snowballing technique to recruit people in the same MLM company and people in different MLM companies who knew each other. I recruited many of the participants through the direct

messages I had sent on Facebook Messenger and two of them through the snowball method.

3.3.2 Positionality of the Researcher

As much for the fact that I share similarities in race, culture, and background with most of the participants, for example, I come from a Xhosa family and culture, a black African home within the emerging middle to lower class ranks, put me in a much-informed position about their general lives, it also presented some challenges for the research, because in some ways I was too familiar with their worlds. At times I took for granted things in the world shared by the participants and myself as a researcher and missed describing some of the nuances of this world. I had to go through a process of 'making the familiar strange…', as discussed by Ybema, Yanow, Wells and Kamsteeg (2009:102). This process is part of a research method called "at-home ethnography," which is a research method that is appropriate when the researcher works within their cultural setting (Ybema et al., 2009:159). When the researcher relates to others through natural access to a certain setting and they are active participants within that setting, and more or less on equal terms with the other participants, the home ethnography method is a useful tool (Ybema et al., 2009:159). This definition of "at-home ethnography" applies to my position in this research to the extent that I did have natural access, meaning I was no stranger to the cultural setting of the participants as a result of shared language and culture. I was not so much an active participant; rather, I had people close to me who were active participants.

"Being personally involved in the object of study (the context in which one is studying) also means that one may be less able to liberate oneself from some taken-for-granted ideas or to view things in an open-minded way" (Ybema et al., 2009:166)

Choosing a perspective from which to tell the stories of these women was challenging. I caught myself selecting content I thought was relevant; I would also tend to ignore the statements that seemed typical and normal for people to say in this space, thus making unnecessary judgment calls about what and what not to include. However, social research is never neutral and always either supports or questions existing social institutions (Ybema et al., 2009:167), and with my access to a community of scholars, I was able to extract myself from a position grounded in personal experience and become interested in different perspectives **(**Ybema et al., 2009:169**).** I found myself grappling with the notions of emic (insiderness) and etic (outsiderness) (Gary and Holmes, 2020:5), where I was positioned in the world of the participants and the implications of this for this research. From an emic perspective, I understood how the participants' actions and behaviour were meaningful to their context and culture (Gary and

Holmes, 2020:5). I was able to utilise this understanding by embracing this emic perspective created by my strong connection to the world of the participants, particularly being a black woman with insider knowledge of township life. A person who grew up witnessing women head up households on their own, without any qualifications that would give them access to good employment opportunities. I viewed these women as heroines because where I come from, they are considered heroines. This heroine status was based on how much they struggled yet used their survival skills to raise kids and take care of households, and this deserved appreciation and recognition. This is one of the initial reasons I embarked on this research. My emic perspective was useful in fostering empathy and generating rich data that focused on the struggles of overcoming obstacles and having dreams of success. However, drawing purely on my habitual ways of seeing prohibited me from confronting the vulnerability to powerful oppressive forces of less privileged people.

My emic perspective might have initially encouraged me to ignore such depressing ideas of the participants' oppression by powerful sources. My inability to initially address provocative questions is possibly linked to how people from these communities, myself included, tend to block this oppression and struggle out of their minds to protect themselves emotionally. Wilson (2015) discusses this phenomenon: cruel optimism where one needs optimism and being affectively invested and attached to one's social world in order to live and keep moving through daily life (172). Through this conceptual lens, we can see that these communities choose to block out the oppression and struggles they face, to be optimistic about the meanings they attach to them, and what they take away from those experiences in order to survive. However, as a scholar, I was initially unable to observe this phenomenon. I did not address the existing hegemonic way of thinking about these women's struggles with poverty and the work they do because, as an insider, I was very close to the culture and overly sensitive about the meanings of the struggles they faced and how these shaped their characters in this story (Gary and Holmes, 2020:6).

It was also necessary to consider the outsider perspective as it brought in themes that were equally valid and accurately captured the circumstances of the women, making sense of their choices through a different lens, the lens of an outsider, that identified the oppressive nature of these women's relationship to this capitalist and neoliberal world. In identifying the exploitative and unequal attributes of the deal between the participants and their MLM companies, I recognise that the outsider perspective glosses over significant aspects of the

equation, such as the degree of agency these women have and their hard work. By hard work, I am referring to the art of surviving, which is considered an achievement that outsiders, especially those from privileged backgrounds, may not understand. Understanding the women's participation in MLM work as a response to being oppressed and thus finding good strategies to survive is as valid as considering their participation as victims of exploitation. However, I have not given the oppressive conditions under which the women work any power. I observed how black women have had few opportunities offered to them, that even this exploitative and unequal deal is some form of achievement and a way of utilising the agency they do have without necessarily escaping neoliberalism and capitalism (Wilson, 2018:225). My objective was to bring attention to the different ways these women construct their identities within this system and utilise it to survive, even when it works to dispose of them, working in the sliver of space within the system where they have the freedom and political agency to construct a new world (Wilson, 2018:255). I presented the chapter containing my findings to members of staff and students, following which there were discussions that made me realise the significance of acknowledging both perspectives that the women can be seen as both oppressed and as having agency and resourcefulness and, in this way, can be truly admired.

3.4 Methods

The methods chosen to collect the data were suited for the chosen approach. However, they had to be adapted to the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic by conducting some of the data collection online, and this impacted some of the ideals of rapport. These methods allowed the participants to explain and interpret how they understand their lives. In this way, they shared the meanings they make, which I was able to understand through immersing myself in the participants' contextual world and listening carefully to their constructions of meaning through juxtapositions, associations and metaphors. These methods allowed me to interpret the experiences and the meanings attached to the practices embedded in that specific context (Byrne, 2001:831).

Methods in line with qualitative research methodology were utilised to gather the data for this study. I combined three methods to collect the data for this study, enabling triangulation (Bryman, 1984). Triangulation is an approach within the research process that combines research methods in order to contextualise and cross-check findings (Bryman, 1984:86). The first method was unstructured interviews, facilitating an emic perspective to gain an understanding of the participants' view of reality. (Bryman, 2003:3). The second method was

the scroll-back method demonstrations of social media practices where the participants were asked to take me through their daily social media routine, and scroll back to discuss their profiles, their posts on groups, their stories, and other social media practices relating to their MLM work. Lastly, I conducted the non-participant observation of MLM websites, social media and two virtual events of one of the MLMs; at the time, this was the only company with virtual events taking place live on their Facebook. I observed the activities and focused on the kind of language used to relate their activities to notions of success and progress (Bryman, 1984:79; Bryman, 2003:3).

3.4.1 Unstructured Interviews

Unstructured interviews allow for a systematic exploration of themes set out in the interview guide, while also giving space for the participants to share unexpected information/experience/knowledge (Deacon et al, 1999:9). These interviews function to elicit people's social realities, allowing them to narrate this reality from their own perspective (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009:2). These types of interviews rely on social interaction between the participant and the researcher. They provide a way to understand the complex behavior of people without imposing any a priori categorization and thereby limiting the field of inquiry (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009:1). The unstructured nature of these interviews generates a conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee, thereby generating different data with different patterns and structures (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009:2). The intention of unstructured interviews is to expose the researcher to unanticipated themes (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009:2).

Qualitative research methods help researchers tap into the knowledge and practices of participants, by building rapport with participants to create an atmosphere that is comfortable for the participants (Moises, 2020:82). Both the participant and researcher need to form a relationship where the participant opens to a free-flowing conversation and the researcher adjusts themselves to enter the participants' contextual world. This type of engagement requires proximity between the two parties (Moises, 2020:82). When the researcher adjusts in this way, they are able to establish rapport by ensuring the participant is in an environment where they do not feel strange or judged. Traditionalists prefer face-to-face research interviews for various reasons, including the building and maintenance of rapport with interviewees, the access researchers have to visual clues for improved communication, and the ability to assess the environment of the participant to collect contextual data (Villiers, Farooq and Molinari,

2021:1). The collection of this contextual data is important to interpretive researchers because their interest is in the unique characteristics of the participant's case (Villiers, Farooq and Molinari, 2021:2), much like in this research study. The interviews would have therefore taken place at the participants' destination of choice, where they feel most comfortable and free to talk. I would have asked them to clear at least 2 hours on that day when they would be able to dedicate their attention entirely to the interview without any external disturbances. However, with the COVID-19 pandemic, it was unsafe to conduct the interviews face-to-face. In line with these concerns there were countrywide lockdown regulations that prohibited gatherings and meetings of this kind. The Rhodes University School of Journalism and Media Studies also called a halt to carrying out any research that requires face-to-face interaction with others. In consideration of the participants and my own health and safety and in line with the laws and regulations in place, I had to rethink face-to-face interviews. As a result, the interviews were conducted online over WhatsApp and Zoom applications.

In order to arrange a place suitable for a physical interview, we discussed their own space, which they had to make sure was quiet and comfortable and had a good network connection. At the beginning of the call, instead of familiarizing myself with the space they had chosen to have the physical interview and setting up my recording equipment, I was trying to make sure the connection was stable, and they could hear me; this gave us a bit of time to establish familiarity, which helped the participants feel comfortable. Video calls are arguably less intimate than physically sharing a space, however with the pandemic rules of social distancing and no visiting, video calls were as close as people were able or allowed to be and video calling more closely resembles in-person qualitative interviewing than any other method, as it preserves many of the features available in the in-person interview (Iran, 2019:3-4; Villiers, Farooq, Molinari, 2021:1). Using video call instead of voice call was necessary as an attempt to occupy the same space as the participant, as I would have in a normal physical interview (Villiers, Farooq and Molinari, 2021:1). I also wanted the participants to see me engage with them both verbally and physically using body language. I wanted to see their visual cues throughout the interview, because these signs form part of their response and would help me understand how they meant their responses and allow for further questioning (Irani, 2019:4-5). Utilizing video call also allowed me some access to their environment and hence the ability to collect contextual data.

I intended to mimic the aspects of face-to-face interviews that best helped the process of building rapport with the participants, and I was deliberate in my attempts to establish rapport before starting the interview (Bowden and Galindo-Gonzalez, 2015:81). For instance, I started the interviews with basic introductions including who we are, where we are from and how we were that day. I would then tell them about myself and my research and how the two are linked, followed by an explanation of what would take place during the process we were together. This I would do in isiXhosa to make it less formal, and I would code-switch between English and isiXhosa frequently in an attempt to make them comfortable with my presence in their space, and to make them less nervous about the process, since code-switching served as a reminder that they can communicate in any language in which they feel comfortable expressing themselves. The dynamics between myself and the participants were already intimidating since most of them had never been part of a research project or conducted one. An example of this switchover between English and isiXhosa is as follows:

Researcher "Hi Khanya, thank you so much for agreeing to participate in my research. So, le research ngeyeMasters degree yam, ndiInterviewer abantu abango Mama abesenza kwiMlit-Level Marketing companies, ezoke zeziCompany zifana no [mentions a few MLM company names]. Ndenzanjalo ke kubandifuna ukuqonda amabali abo ngomsebenzi wabo. Sizokuqala ngoku iInterview, ndizokubuza umibuzo and then you can answer nokuba uthethe iEnglish okanye isiXhosa xa uphendula, it's up to you."

There was not a lot of time to ensure that the participants were entirely comfortable, relaxed and prepared to participate in the interview because I had to constantly consider the amount of data we were using up. I was also conscious of how long the interview schedule was; along with the demonstration, it would take a lot of time, and this was bound to cause fatigue that would affect the participants and myself. This was more so since the interviews were online, and looking at a screen, holding up a phone and maintaining your attention span over that period of time would prove difficult.

3.4.2 Scroll-back on Social Media

To understand the social media lives of the research participants, I used the scroll-back method (Moller and Robards, 2019:96). This method involves the participants scrolling through their social media Facebook pages, including their profiles and timelines, their posts and their friend lists, while narrating what is going on in each of these to the researcher (Moller and Robards, 2019:105). The method involves the participants as co-analysts along with the researcher and

allows them to view, reflect on and narrate their social media use and practices (Moller and Robards, 2019:96). It involves the researcher sitting with the participants as they scroll back through their social media timelines or profiles (Moller and Robards, 2019:105). This co-analysis of the content on their Facebook served well in providing me with the context of the social media practices observed, revealing those that were not as obvious; for example, some of the participants had pages for their businesses that I had not found.

In doing this, I did find that, as Moller and Robards had theorized, the visual engagement of the participants with their Facebook content provides empirical prompts in the form of words, images etc. that enabled me as the researcher to engage with primary research material, for example in my research there were images of the participant's exercise routines, diet meals etc. (2019:96). The hybrid nature of this method, in that it involves some aspect of interviewing combined with non-participant observation of how the participants engage with social media, allowing for a purposive gain of further insight into the world of the participants (Bryman, 1984:79; Bryman, 2003:3). It also provided a form of verification for the participants' descriptions of what they did on social media (Stickdorn, Lawrence, Hormess and Schneider, 2019). This is a proven method for navigating complex digital cultures, producing accounts that represent the multiple voices in a study and portraying the richness of their everyday life in mediatized society (Moller and Robards, 2019:96). This method is a response to the fundamental ways in which sociality and intimacy have been reconfigured by social media (Moller and Robards, 2019:96).

Although this scroll-back method was designed to allow for reflection on changes in online behaviour over time because participants are confronted with their old posts, I was more interested in accessing the rich empirical reflections this method provokes, as described above. Hence, my exploration was slightly different from Moller and Robards (2019) in that I did not focus on the changes over time in their social media practices. Rather, I used their past posts as a memory object that the participants used to remember parts of their lives and experiences online and offline (Moller and Robards, 2019:105). Similar to what Moller and Robard (2019 found, by way of this collaborative journey through their social media, the participants in this study met earlier versions of their mediatized selves.

As Moller and Robards (2019) recommended, I sat with the participants, albeit virtually and not face-to-face, because of lockdown regulations due to the COVID-19 Corona Virus Pandemic of 2020. To establish a sense of "sitting together" online with the participant, I

realized I had to conduct the scroll-back method after the interview and not before, as I had initially planned. The reason for this change in sequence is because the interviews were long enough for myself and the participant to establish a rapport, for them to feel comfortable talking to me and know that I am present in the moment and listening actively to what they had to say, even when we could no longer see each other when the time came for them to share their screen with me to show me their Facebook during the scroll-back. Similar to the majority of South Africans, the women were using the internet on mobile phones and therefore did not have the Zoom functionality one would have on a PC, which allows one to also see a video image of each participant while screenshare is active (de Lanerolle, Walton & Schoon, 2017:3), We still maintained the same connection, presence and rapport we had established during the interview. The participant scrolled through their Facebook profiles while they discussed and explained various aspects of what they saw. The participants engaged with the content on their Facebook profiles, making sense of it and explaining their social media practices while I was listening and observing them and asking questions to help make sense of their explanations.

3.4.3 Participant Observations of MLM events

Before the lockdown was announced, I planned to conduct participant observations of MLM events, such as their various workshops, where I would spend time observing and participating in the events to obtain firsthand experience of the MLM cultures and an understanding of them (Laurier, 2010:9-10). At such gatherings of these MLMs, one can interact with long-standing representatives of the company steeped in knowledge of the company and its culture and discourse. Therefore, the things that the companies stand for and represent would be shared and portrayed by these people during such gatherings. Furthermore, I was hoping to observe the practices of these MLMs in the way these representatives would be interacting and engaging with the attendees as they promoted the MLM. I would have been able to gather observations of what these representatives were saying and doing in the presentations that would have helped me interpret how they constructed themselves in particular ways and attached meaning to what they did.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, such face-to-face activities were, however, not allowed. Instead, MLMs hosted gatherings virtually on social media platforms such as Facebook, and I joined two of their virtual Facebook live recruitment presentations. The presentations shared similar structures; for instance, the host would begin the live presentation by introducing themselves and telling their story of who they are, how they became involved in the MLM and what they have achieved thus far through the MLM. They would then talk

about the MLM, how it works in terms of its structure, the products they sell and all the essential things necessary to know about the company for those who want to join. During these presentations, they allowed comments to be made by the audience. They would then read the comments made by the audience, specifically those comments of members who shared the stories of their journeys within the MLM. Thereafter, the keynote speaker of the presentation, who is also a member of the MLM, would essentially tell the story of their journey through the MLM, where they started from, their ups and downs, and what they achieved as a result of the MLM and so on. I observed the activities and focused on the kind of language used to relate their activities. There was much talk of success and progress during these presentations, and the manner of them tended to be inspirational, positive and preach-like in nature. I took notes of the presentations, noting things such as the structure, the nature of the engagement, etc. The data gathered through this method served to help me understand the kind of MLM; these were a grasp at their culture and core values. For the rest of the MLMs, I closely read their websites and social media pages on Facebook to gain a grasp on their culture and core values through these platforms. These platforms gave me access to who these companies are, their histories, the projects and campaigns they are engaged in, what they do, etc. The observations were purposive and gave further insight into the world of the participants as well (Bryman, 1984:79; Bryman, 2003:3) because by accessing these platforms, I knew the kind of MLMs for which they were working.

3.4.4 Challenges to over-the-phone interviews and demonstrations

When I had to conduct the unstructured interviews and demonstrations and attend workshops, the country South Africa, following the example of many other countries in the world, implemented a National lockdown due to the Corona Virus (COVID-19) pandemic. Movement of citizens was restricted, schools and universities closed down, workplaces were also shut down, and a list of other things were discontinued/not allowed to take place, including quarantine restrictions and other health protocols that were put in place (Moises, 2020:79). Rules were implemented that affected the way I could conduct my research moving forward, for instance, no meetings were allowed, and social distancing meant that one needed to avoid handshakes, hugs and other forms of direct contact as well as keep a distance of at least two metres from others. As a result of all the above rules in place, the traditional way of conducting the aforementioned data collection processes was no longer feasible (Moises, 2020:79). Also, for my safety, I chose to adjust the methods I had chosen to conduct the research. Instead of focusing on the negative implications of the COVID-19 regulations and protocols as a

researcher, I needed to be creative and adapt my data collection strategy and ensure that it still upheld the values of academic integrity and scholarly research (Moises, 2020:30).

Specifically, the unstructured interviews would now happen online instead of face-to-face. The interviews were then conducted through both Zoom and WhatsApp video calls. The Zoom application was chosen for its screen-sharing feature, which was important because the participants had to demonstrate their Facebook profiles to me while we both looked at their profile. Then we switched to WhatsApp to conduct the interview itself because WhatsApp proved to consume less data when making a video call in comparison to using Zoom for a video call.

There were various challenges that came with this change in implementing the methods of my research. For one, I had to apply for additional funds from my scholarship to buy the participants' data - 1GB per participant. For each participant, the price for that amount of data was between R89-R100 depending on which network service provider they were using. I could not ask the participants to buy the data themselves for various reasons, including the fact that the prices of data are not affordable to low-income people in South Africa (Lanerolle, Walton and Schoon, 2008); this is how most of the participants would identify themselves because of their lack of formal employment. The modest data packages that low-income people do manage to procure limit the range of services they can afford to access from their phones (Lanerolle, Walton and Schoon, 2008). Zoom video is one of the services that is not frugal in its data consumption, nor covered in zero-rated features by mobile providers. This meant I had to find ways to ensure that the data lasted the duration of both the interview and the social media demonstrations.

I used WhatsApp voice call for the longer and more data-consuming interviews. As I only needed to record the audio, I used a digital recorder to capture the audio from the Whatsapp voice call I was conducting using my phone. For the first interview, I had not anticipated that Zoom would consume so much data, so I conducted the first social media demonstration and the interview on Zoom. However, the call cut off halfway through the interview, and we had to find alternative ways to finish the interview. Luckily the participant had enough data to use WhatsApp video call to finish the rest of the interview; therefore, I was able to record the audio from both the Zoom and WhatsApp calls. The data I had sent the participants enabled them to purchase data bundles exclusively for WhatsApp, which would help ensure the data lasted for a specific period of time and was only utilised by the specific application. However, targeted

data use was not an option available on the Zoom application. After realising the limitations of using Zoom for the demonstration and interview, I adopted the technique of switching from one application to the other to avoid this from happening again. I ensured that the time spent between switching from one application to the next was as short as possible to keep the attention of the participant and ensure the continued flow of the conversation and their memory of what we had just discussed.

I also had to find a way to ensure that this data was received and used solely for the purposes of conducting interviews and social media demonstrations. To ensure this, I had to buy and send the data to the participants on the day to conduct the interviews. I went through this process to ensure the data was only used on the day and for the purpose of the interview in order to ensure that the participants were never inconvenienced or had to use their data for the interview. I explained to the participants that I would be sending the data on the day of the interview because it was solely for the purposes of conducting the interviews, as I could not expect them to essentially fund the research by buying data with their own money. I also explained that this data was not a form of payment for their participation but rather a means to an end because we could not meet face-to-face and had to have virtual interviews.

Furthermore, although some researchers claim that online video conferencing interviews provide a quicker build of rapport between them and the participants (Moises, 2020:83), I encountered the opposite effect since the beginning of the video calls would generally revolve around acquainting the participant with the Zoom application. Some participants had to learn the complicated process of sharing their screens with me. In one case, the participant needed to bring her child to help her navigate the app to enable her audio and video settings, after which we could continue but soon, she had to ask her child for help again to share her screen with me. The entire time on Zoom, I had to consider the amount of time we were spending on the application doing the scroll-back demonstration in relation to the amount of data being used up; this meant we had a limited amount of time. The disorientation caused by their inability to navigate the application, the inability to see each other during the demonstrations and the time limit hanging over us made it difficult to establish rapport quickly. After overcoming these technical hurdles and moving into a familiar application, WhatsApp, the participants became more expressive and open, but it did take time.

I encountered various issues regarding the use of the Zoom application. For example, some participants had never used the app and were unfamiliar with its features. Information and

Communication Technologies (ICTs) are becoming important in all domains of life. Yet, many citizens of South Africa are excluded from participating in the use of ICTs as a result of structural and systematic obstacles such as lack of access to infrastructures, not affording access etc (Levels of Digital Divide in South Africa, 2020). This lack of access to resources results in a lack of skills to navigate ICTs, and, therefore, possible exclusion from better career or educational opportunities, fuller access to social networks and greater personal advancements (Levels of Digital Divide in South Africa, 2020). The participants in this study could navigate their cell phones and the applications we were using, but some did not have the skills to do so without assistance, as explained in the previous paragraph. This not only took time away from the time they had allocated for the interview but also affected their comfort level with using the application and showing me their social media. In terms of infrastructural network connections, we had issues with Buhle's network connection. Her network connection gave us significant issues at every point during the interview. We had to move the time of the interview because, at first, we thought the bad connection was due to peak time network traffic as it was around 17:00, and so we moved the time to later in the evening, 20:00. However,, we still experienced the same problems. Multiple times we had to restart the call on both Zoom and WhatsApp applications because the calls kept disconnecting, cutting or lagging. For the duration of the interview, the participant had to repeat herself or I had to repeat myself more than once because of the dysfunctionality of the network connection.

Therefore, conducting the interviews without physically occupying the same space with the participants proved difficult. The shortest interview was an hour long, and the longest interview was 2 hours long. Conducting the interviews on Zoom and WhatsApp made it difficult and it took longer to establish rapport with the participants due to technical issues.

In the instance of Buhle's interview, I would say rapport was barely established because the network kept cutting or lagging, and we had to adapt to this issue by ensuring that we got through the questions as quickly as possible. Although I did try to make the participant feel unrushed and not mind the network disturbances, it was only natural for her to become annoyed and tired of having to repeat herself or ask me to repeat myself at every question. The interview schedule had a lot of questions, and I had to repeat myself, asking for the other person to repeat themselves, having to ask if they were able to hear me, re-calling the other person when the call cut abruptly, and having to remember the response the participant had given or was busy giving when the call cut – all this made both of us exhausted. The alternative was for us to try again on a different day, preferably when the participant would be in a different environment

and at a different time, however, if she had a lot of responsibilities on her plate, she often couldn't promise to be available on another day, and we couldn't have the interview at another time in a different environment.

In conclusion, for some participants, the virtual nature of the interviews was a learning curve, in terms of familiarising themselves with new applications, perhaps even for future purposes. Although rapport was difficult to establish with some of the participants that experienced these difficulties, especially with Buhle, they were all committed to being heard and understood by me and hence the people who read this thesis, and that we ensured everything they had to say was communicated and documented even if they had to repeat it more than once.

3.5 Framework for data analysis

3.5.1 Qualitative Analysis

Audio of the unstructured interviews and social media demonstrations were recorded and transcribed. The interviews and demonstrations were conducted in both English and isiXhosa, with some interviews predominantly in isiXhosa and others predominantly in English. The transcriptions were done in English. Two techniques were adopted to ensure that the meaning expressed in isiXhosa was not lost in translation. Firstly, some words were left in isiXhosa, when those words could be translated in multiple ways so that these potential meanings could be considered when conducting the analysis. I added a step to my analysis where I would return to these words after transcribing everything and rereading the transcript. This time I would focus much more on the context in which these words were said and then translate them into English. Secondly, I only transcribed and immediately translated the isiXhosa bits in the interviews that were predominantly in English, which meant there was not much content to translate. This made the work easier to translate accurately.

I, as a mother-tongue speaker of isiXhosa, the language I was transcribing, as well as being a black woman from a similar background to the participants in this study, could hear and understand what the participants communicated in relation to their local realities. Through this step-by-step translation process, I could navigate the ambiguities within the isiXhosa language in relation to concepts that were in English in the interview guide but that I had to translate or explain in isiXhosa in the interviews for some of the women to understand their meaning. These concepts, such as class, were important to this study, and to unpack them, the particular meanings offered by the language used by the participants were needed. An example that

portrays the openness of translation or interpretation of words when translated from English to isiXhosa or vice versa in the instance of the interviews was during Bulelwa's interview; when asked what values she lives by, her response was as follows:

"Ndiyixabisileinto yokuya ecaweni ndiphinde ndigoduke. Itshomi andizixabisanga kakhulu izinto ezinjalo, ndikhuliswe ndihlala apha ekhaya"

This quote can easily be translated or understood in English as, *"What I value is going to church and coming back home. I don't value friends and stuff; I wasn't raised that way; I was raised to stay at home".* The word "value(s)" in my question translates to "ixabiso" in isiXhosa; in both languages, the word can refer to principles or standards of behaviour or the worth or importance of something. The question utilised the concept "value" to refer to principles or standards of behaviour, and Bulelwa translated the same concept of value into IsiXhosa, "ixabiso", where it took the meaning of referring to the worth or importance of something rather than the intended meaning, which referred to principles or standards of behaviour. However, with my knowledge of isiXhosa expressions, I recognised this word choice was originating from a common isiXhosa saying, "Sukuxabisa itshomi", which generally is said to guard one against prioritising friends (who in the context of this expression are considered a bad influence) over family and church. Having spoken to Bulelwa and gathered the importance of her family and friends to her, I deduced that when she said "I don't value friends", she did not mean she has no regard for friends or thinks they are not necessary. Instead, she was communicating how she prioritised family and church and was portraying herself as a respectable person.

With that said, I was still vigilantly cognizant that the participants were strangers to me, their experiences were unique to them and that although I understood the language, the meaning of what they had to say may not be readily discernible because meaning is not fixed and is constantly shifting (Hall, 1997:17). During the interviews that were predominantly in English, if they expressed things in isiXhosa, I would ask them what they meant by what they said in order to later translate it accurately and according to the meaning they intended to express. During the two interviews that were predominantly in isiXhosa, I took more time to transcribe and translate these because I wanted to give enough attention to the decisions made about the cultural meanings that the language carried and the intended meaning by the participants (Temple and Young, 2014:165).

To ensure that this research resulted in credible findings, as discussed by Maguire and Delahunt (2017), a rigorous and relevant thematic analysis of the data was conducted (3352). The process of conducting a thematic analysis requires the identification of themes within the data collected. These themes are based on patterns that are of importance and that are interesting to the research objectives; therefore, the thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse, and report patterns found within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006:79). The contextualist method was used for this thematic analysis. This method is characterised by theories to:

"Acknowledge the ways individuals make meaning of their experience, and, in turn, the ways the broader social context impinges on those meanings, while retaining focus on the material and other limits of reality" (Braun and Clarke, 2006:81).

The themes were used to capture important aspects of the data in relation to the research question and brought out patterned responses as well as meaning from the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006:82). Through the lens of the latent level of research, I was looking beyond the obvious and explicit meaning of the data, to the underlying assumptions, conceptualisations and the ideologies that were informing the content of the data (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017:3353). The constructionist approach recognises the role structural and sociocultural aspects play in influencing the meaning and experiences of the participants, as well as that meaning and that experiences are not inherent within the participants but rather that meanings are socially produced and reproduced. (Braun and Clarke, 2006:85).

There were six steps in conducting this thematic analysis: the first step was familiarising myself with the data, which required active reading of interview transcripts to look for patterns and meaning within the data. This step gave me a list of ideas about what the data entails and what is interesting in the data. In the second step, I identified the initial themes that identified the features of the data that appeared interesting. Many potential themes were identified at this stage, for example, "Success", "Meanings associated with progress", "MLM entrepreneurship", and "Manifestation of themes on social media". This process organised the data into meaningful groups, which was also a part of the analysis of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006:88). I explored all the identified potential themes and their sub-themes and the paths they took the research towards without having established how they relate to the objectives of the study, but this proved useful because I let the data guide me instead of being adamant to only include data that seemingly spoke to the objectives. The third and fourth steps coincided when I returned to the objectives of the study, which guided me in forming

substantial themes, merging the existing themes into one, discarding themes that didn't contribute and making room for themes that the data revealed.

The themes needed to be coherent with each other as well as distinct and identifiable as separate entities that dealt with separate issues. (Braun and Clarke, 2006:91) It took a process of going back and forth between the data, the objectives of the study, the actual interviews' transcripts and recordings to get to a stage where I had a sound overall structure and coherence of themes. From there, the themes had to be conceptualised as findings that speak to the research objectives, address questions posed by the research topic and build an argument. This was very difficult because step 5 of the analysis is where the themes are further defined and refined, in this case into findings, while the data extracts within them are analysed. This process gets to the essence of each theme and how it speaks to the overall research. A detailed analysis of each theme is conducted and written, each should tell a story, and that story should fit the overall story that is being told by your data set in relation to your research question.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

In an attempt to ensure that when the participants read this thesis, they can identify themselves while simultaneously ensuring that an ordinary reader is not able to identify them, there were multiple ethical considerations. Although true anonymity may be difficult to achieve in practice (Grinyer, 2002:2), all the identifying details of the participants were stripped off the data, and this was done to protect the participants and minimize the risks associated with divulging sensitive or personal information (Novak, 2014:40).

3.6.1 Anonymity for the participants

In conducting ethical research, I had to consider mechanisms to protect the identities of the participants in the study. The names of the participants were changed; they were given pseudonyms by which they are referred in this thesis. Their identities were also hidden by masking their faces in images of them used in this research as data. Any personally identifiable information was hidden, inhibited or adjusted as much as possible to protect the participants from identification and thus ensure confidentiality.

3.6.2 Blurring aspects of the photographs

The social media practices of the participants were a significant aspect of this study hence their posts on social media were observed closely, and some were incorporated as evidence into the findings. These posts included some photographs of the participants, and here as the researcher

sought written permission from the specific participant to use that picture of them and only included photographs for which such permission was given. To further protect the anonymity of the participants, their faces, names and the names of anyone who commented on the post were blurred. This meant that readers were not able to identify who was in the picture, what their social media name was and whom they were friends with while still being able to incorporate the photographs as evidence in the findings. It is generally possible to analyse photos without publishing them within one's thesis; however, in this study, much of the analysis depends on one's ability to see the photos and thus, publishing them proves effective in demonstrating the analysis.

3.6.3 Decision to name/ not name the MLMs

The participants belonged to various MLM companies operating in the country; however, I made a deliberate decision not to name these MLM companies in this thesis. This decision was made after weighing the importance of mentioning the companies' names against protecting the participants and myself as the researcher from possible litigation by MLMs when their brand and identity are discussed. In analysing the practices of MLMs, I found the relationship between the MLMs, and their members could be exploitative, and at the very least, MLMs are not as supportive and economically benefitting as they claim to be. However, the value of this research is not in exposing particular companies that are potentially harming participants. This study only looks at MLMs as a whole, rather than investigating specific companies, comparing them and conducting a careful legal investigation. Therefore, I cannot allege that specific companies are exploiting their members without investigating the facts of this exploitation. My thesis is about the relationship the participants have with their MLM work in terms of the meanings they associate with their work and how this meaning is informed directly by these MLMs and manifests itself mainly on social media. Additionally, I wanted to ensure that the participants did not reserve anything they had to say in relation to the MLM company they are a member of in fear of jeopardising their relationship with the MLMs.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the methodology and methods used in this research, which is significant to this study, while the events that occurred, which were unplanned and out of my control as the researcher, had as much impact on how this research unfolded. Conducting research during the Covid-19 pandemic had unique implications for a qualitative study, such that my initial plan of how to conduct this research was abruptly interrupted by the onset of the

pandemic; however, it did not undermine my ability to gather the data necessary for analysis. I worked creatively and strategically to ensure the best output from the use of the methods I had chosen, although these were adapted to abide by the Covid-19-related regulations in place at the time. The adaptation of these methods may have caused difficulty in conducting this research; however, overall, they may have improved the quality of the data produced rather than diminished it; as theorized by Rania, Coppola and Pinna (2021), the limitations of face-to-face methodologies were overcome through the use of virtual platforms (2712). For instance, the unstructured interview method had to be adapted to online unstructured interviews. This change did inhibit my ability as the researcher to experience the spaces of the participants; however, the participants were comfortable having me at a distance so as not to intrude and impose my presence and simultaneously close enough to disclose personal information to me. My inability to execute the methods in the traditional form I expected to execute them did not obstruct the process of gathering information and its analysis.

My position as a researcher who straddles the line between insider and outsider in the worlds of the participants was a challenging part of this research. It required constantly shifting my perspective to understand multiple interpretations of the data, presenting these and the information they provide. As a researcher who had planned for this research, I had to challenge existing ideas I had s a black woman with contextual similarities to the participants and see the findings through the multiple lenses offered to me through the literature in the field. In the following chapter, I outline the research findings using the abovementioned tools and strategies developed.

CHAPTER 4

Self-Appreciation against Precarity -Findings Part 1

4.1 Introduction

In the following two chapters, I will address this study's research topic, which is understanding the meanings black African women engaged in Multi-Level Marketing in Makhanda (MLM) give to their social media practices. I will focus on how these meanings relate to participants' notions of success and progress in their socio-economic context characterised by economic hardships. The findings are structured around five constructions of success and progress, the first two will be discussed in this chapter, and the remaining three will be discussed in Chapter 5. The findings shared in this chapter discuss the relationship between the participants and their MLMs and the subsequent meaning they construct through their social media practices, as influenced by neoliberal discourses. While Chapter 5 discusses more meanings constructed by the participants, rooted in the African context and the discourse of African Humanism.

In this chapter, I will discuss: 1) Success as resulting from self-appreciation, a term used in this study refers to the constant work one needs to put in to improve one's position in the market economy through adopting practices that enhance their personal brand and earning potential (Wilson, 2018:241).; 2) Success through MLMs as guaranteed and offering a predictable trajectory of constant progress. The first section discusses constructions of success through narratives of self-appreciation, the practice of engaging in a range of activities to improve the self, and to position the woman better in relation to the market. Thus, the women see success as arriving soon, resulting from their efforts and commitment to improved branding or "self-appreciation". Here, I show how the frequency of such narratives of self-appreciation in women's social media is not as spontaneous as it might appear to the people in their online networks. These narratives are often responses to direct prompts from the MLM companies who provide their sellers with curated templates for creating personal narratives of self-appreciation.

Both the sections in this chapter draw largely from the literature that unpacks how neoliberal discourses function to construct neoliberal subjects. In the first construction, the participants mobilise notions of self-appreciation through the process of selling MLM products, and in the second, they mobilise notions of the potential of MLM careers through the process of recruiting new members. These aspects of the discourse are internalised and reproduced in their

interactions with others. In the 2nd section of the construction of success, the participants conceptualise success as guaranteed through MLMs. Here they engage neoliberal discourses that position MLMs as formal structures of stability that offer a bulwark against precarity and disposability, masking how such highly unpredictable work in the gig economy, such as MLM work, offers no bargaining rights (Kaine and Josserand, 2019:487) or guaranteed income. In the following sections, I explore the ways in which the participants frame their MLMs as protective and safe options for their economic health and their MLM work as the path to attain success and wealth

4.2 Success as personal stories of self-appreciation

Self-appreciation is the constant work one needs to put in to improve one's position in the market economy by adopting practices that enhance one's personal brand and earning potential (Wilson, 2018:241). The concept of self-appreciation stems from a neoliberal worldview that conceptualises people not as citizens with human rights but rather as human resources with a market value (Wilson, 2018:65). Due to the instability of the neoliberal economy, stable jobs are decreasing, and people must thus constantly compete and try to improve their skills and foreground their strengths to increase their potential value in the market or their human capital. In a neoliberal society, governments or employers are no longer primarily responsible for training; the onus is instead placed on individuals to increase their chances of survival in competition with others through self-appreciation, which is conceptualised as investing in the self (Feher, 2007:26).

In an attempt to 'invest' in themselves and improve their competing chances in the market, the majority of the women in this study use social media to share personal narratives of self-improvement, the main purpose of which is to promote their MLM products and MLM membership. There are different forms of self-appreciation displayed in these narratives. For instance, some of the women in this study work to improve their bodies through practices of a healthy lifestyle consisting of exercising and dieting. Others work on their personal style, becoming more fashionable through grooming, make-up, and clothing. Buhle, a participant in the study, is a member of an MLM that centres nutrition and healthy living as their brand, and this company offers products and services that encourage people to establish healthy diets, lose weight, and exercise. Buhle purposefully aligns both her physical body and social media content to match the identity of this MLM. She does this by posting curated images and videos of herself exercising to document her healthy dieting journey with the product.

Buhle: "I want to make money, but also now I am working on myself. You will see most of the time; I am posting myself and the process. I am in a body transformation process. I am working on my body first so that when I sell, people can see the results of the product from me. Most people like to buy things that they have seen that they really do work, so that's why you will find most posts are about my journey."

By proclaiming, "I want to make money but also now I am working on myself, " Buhle explains that her primary purpose here is self-appreciation. While she is happy with her new body, it is the potential for these improvements to produce financial gains that really motivates her. She continues explaining that much of her content on social media is what she calls her "body transformation process". Here she is referring to how she documents her self-appreciation efforts, using her MLM products for exercising and dieting through her social media posts. She sees her social media posts as a form of testimony to her friends and social media connections about the products of her MLM. She, therefore, uses her own body and her life story as an example of what kind of results the products could produce. By attributing her improvement to the MLM and its products, she improves her competitive position in the market to sell the products and earn money.

The term "body transformation" belongs to the name of the "body transformation challenge" that Buhle's MLM is running, and it has become a buzzword for members to use with every post they share on social media. This term foregrounds the agency of the participating members as taking charge of a predictable and certain process at the end of which they will achieve their physical body goals. Through such posts, Buhle is linking her personal progress to these products to prove their effectiveness. In this way, Buhle markets the product by producing a personal testimony for the people in her network who trust her judgement. Such self-appreciation is evident in the social media posts of various other participants as well, each making use of their own bodies in photographs to track their self-appreciation. Lebo is a participant who regularly does this in her social media posts. She is a part of the same MLM as Buhle; therefore, it is expected that her practices of self-appreciation are those associated with healthy living, such as exercise and dieting.

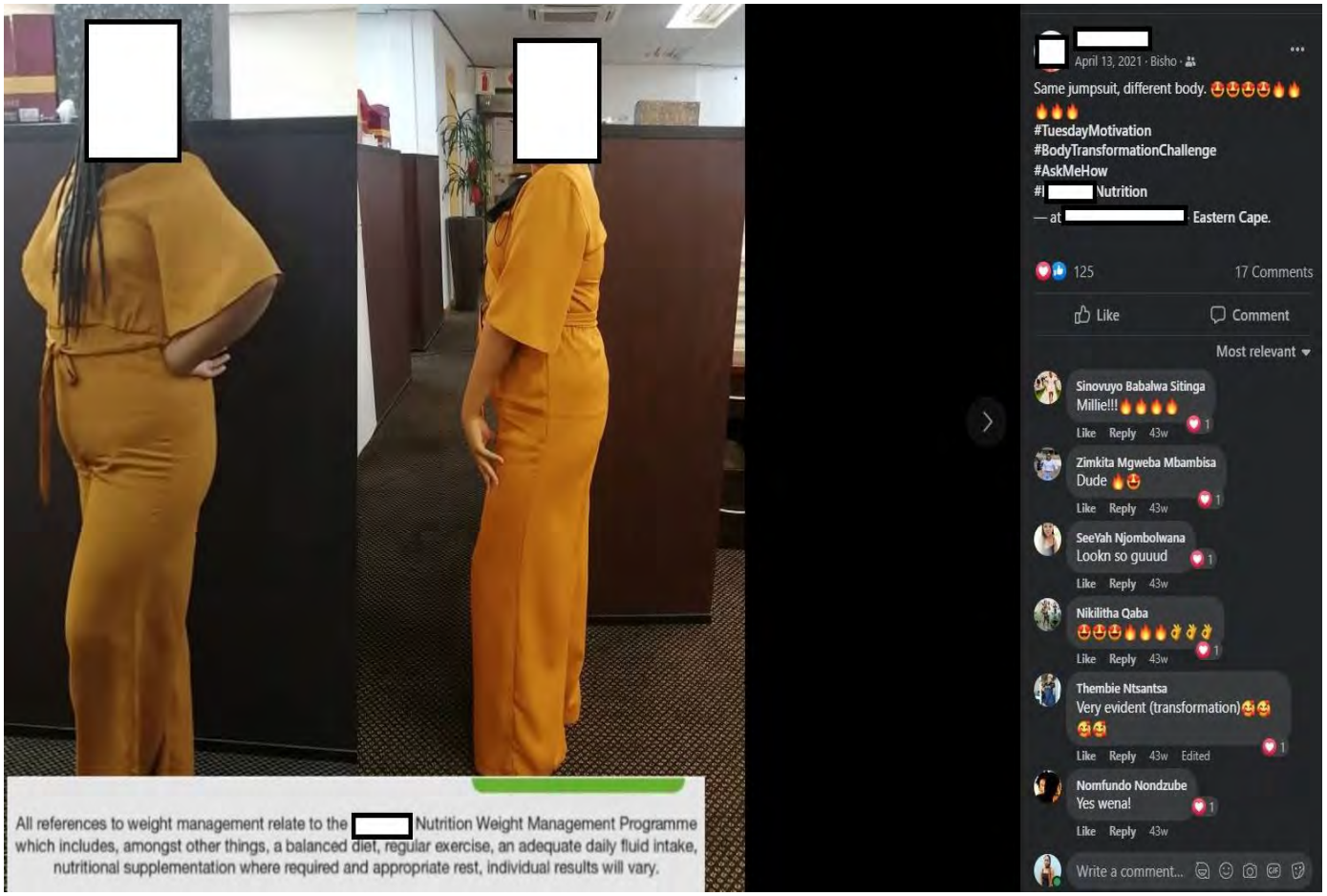

Figure 1. Lebo's Facebook post documents her weight loss between September and October

In figure 1, there are two photographs, side by side, of Lebo sharing her weight loss journey thus far. On the left of the screen, she uses an image of herself where her body is visibly filling out the jumpsuit, and on the right-hand side, she presents the image in which the same jumpsuit is less tight on her body, indicating a decrease in weight. In her caption Lebo indicates that she is wearing the same jumpsuit in both pictures; however, she has a different body in the second picture compared to the first. She portrays the idea of having control over her body through the representation of how she has transformed her body from one form to the other with the help of the Body Transformation Challenge. The caption uses the hashtag "Body Transformation Challenge", suggesting her participation in this online challenge. The informal nature of Lebo's post suggests she is simply and proudly sharing her physical transformation. However, in reality, this challenge is an ongoing corporate competition promoted by her MLM. This body transformation challenge, which tracks weight alongside nutrition and fitness, can be

interpreted as an attempt by the MLM to put a positive spin on previous criticism of their brand: when their weight loss tonics were associated with unhealthy extreme weight loss or addiction. One needs to be a member to participate in this challenge, and members are required to follow specific rules to participate, such as buying the MLM's products, submitting proof of the purchase, and regularly submitting videos/images of their "before" and "after" bodies to show their progress. At the end of the competition cycle, members who made it to the top 10 of the group win certain prizes depending on the position they won.

There is a private, registered members-only Facebook group dedicated to this challenge. While the challenge is not overtly associated with the MLM initiating it, members like Lebo (as shown in Figure 1) do not mention the MLM by name or explicitly say that this post is a part of a challenge by this MLM. The MLM companies create scripts for their sellers to use in their attempt of the social media challenge, and they ensure it appears authentic because by not mentioning the association of the post to the MLM, the members' challenge-related appear un-curated and therefore authentic.

There is a private Facebook group dedicated to this challenge, a group that only members who are registered with the MLM and signed up for the Body Transformation Challenge are allowed to join. It is clear that the social media posts with these hashtags are responding not just to suggestions or prompts from the MLMs, but to real monetary incentives - the possibility to win prizes. However, at the same time, the posts appear to be authentic celebrations of a personal achievement; the notion of authenticity is constructed by masking the association of the challenge with the MLM initiating it and thus its commercial nature. I obtained some information about the guidelines given to members for their social media posts in participating in the challenge. They are explicitly instructed to take a picture with that day's date and that while the pictures would be from different dates, they should be wearing the same outfit on both, capturing different angles of themselves and sharing these on their social media platforms. These specific requirements for curating the posts are required for participating in the challenge; MLMs are thus producing and incentivising these seemingly spontaneous posts.

The construction of authenticity on social media to mask the economic nature of the author's relationship to their network is something that is discussed extensively in the social media influencer literature (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 8 &10; Duffy, 2018:135; Duffy, Hund, 2015; Faleatua, 2018:722). Social Media Influencers (SMI's), known as Influencers today, are social media users who have created and mobilised their identity as a brand in itself; they utilise social

media to engage in positive self-representation practices to strategically gain followers, they manage public visibility that is stable and sustained (Leaver, Highfield & Abidin, 2020:126) and groom followers to consume their content and over which they ultimately hold influence over (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017) (Hurley, 2019:3). This influence on their followers then attracts other brands/companies that seek partnerships with the influencer; usually they form these partnerships in return for monetary or some form of compensation (Audrezet, de Kerviler & Moulard, 2020:558). It is argued that influencers draw in audiences through authenticity, giving their audiences a sense of intimacy that allows influencers to appear relatable (Leaver, Highfield & Abidin, 2020:227). Some establish this intimacy by creating content that gives a sense of "backstage" authentic sharing with their audiences, such as behind-the-scenes videos showing the background process taking place to produce the final stylised shot (Leaver, Highfield & Abidin, 2020:160). This construction of authenticity through "backstage" content is a strategy utilised by the participants in this study; they post pictures of their exercising or diet to appear sincere and authentic in their journey towards success, however masking how they are following their MLMs' script. Therefore, it can be argued that the process of authenticity construction is driven by the MLM company, unlike with influencer culture, where it has emerged from the influencer community themselves

4.2.1 Self-appreciation by improving their business skills

I have thus far emphasised a form of self-appreciation where the sellers gradually master the process of embodying the brand of the MLM and so are able to generate more sales of the MLM product. In this section, I will describe the second form of self-appreciation where the women use their social media posts to highlight how their MLM membership improves business skills. I will argue that this, too, is a form of self-appreciation because it allows the women to become better positioned in the market - not only to better sell the products through learning some business skills - but to sell actual memberships of the MLM by promoting it as offering business training, so attracting more members eager to learn such skills which may then provide sustained income through the downline.

Khanya "Yeah…you learn how to deal with people better, you learn how to treat different people… you develop certain values along the way. Like I said on social media, now I don't just post anything, I don't just comment on anything, I check things I post, I check the things I comment on. So, I think you learn along the way, and how to treat other people… for instance…I don't want people saying whatever things they want to say to me, you shouldn't

disrespect me, but in business, they say, "the customer is always right," when someone is disrespectful, and I feel like answering them or fighting them, I can't; instead I have to apologise and say I was in the wrong."

Posting content of self-appreciation are performative actions which, usually in the caption or other supporting posts, offer advice based on an "embodied experience and perspective that experts may not be able to offer" (Johnson, 2015:244). This personal experience makes the testimonies of these women authentic, such that when they share personal narratives of entrepreneurial self-appreciation, the women in their networks trust them. Interestingly, Khanya sees herself as a businesswoman even though she has a very modest stand and feels empowered by learning these lessons about how to run a business. In black African communities, there is a lack of black formal entrepreneurship culture and education; historically, black people were restricted by law from having their own businesses in most fields of the economy. Most importantly, the black population was suppressed in terms of a sense of independence and initiative (Preisendörfer, Bitz & Bezuidenhout, 2012:8); this initiative was also hindered by the lack of access to financial resources and opportunities for education in administration and business skills useful for entrepreneurship (Preisendörfer, Bitz & Bezuidenhout, 2012:9-10). Khanya thus found a place to learn and nurture her entrepreneurial nature in her MLM, and she feels her association with the MLM arguably allows her to target others who want to become business owners. In approaching people, she shares these skills with them while also improving her ability to recruit people into her downline and sell more products.

These stories of business success document the progress the women make in their business and how they become better at business, and they are significant in the positioning of the women in the market as they are a recruitment strategy for the member to recruit others into her downline. MLMs mobilise their members to share their personal narratives of business success with the world through their personal networks, especially on social media. I observed two ways in which MLMs foreground the progress of their members. The first is a public announcement and display on all MLM social media platforms and websites of members who attain certain achievements while also encouraging all other members to announce and celebrate these winners on their personal social media—the second hosting of events to honour the members who have attained certain achievements. The first observation is how MLMs have public announcements and displays on all social media platforms and websites of individuals that have attained certain achievements, such as progressing to a higher level in the hierarchy

of the MLM. MLMs structures are typically made up of 7 or 8 levels, through which members progress according to the number of their sales and successful recruitments. The members who progress and attain these specific achievements are then announced on the MLM's social media platforms as well as websites, using a photo of the member. All members, including the member being celebrated, are encouraged to share this post on their social media for their networks; for instance, Bulelwa, a participant in this study, reposted a post made by her MLM about herself achieving Ruby level membership.

Figure 2. Bulelwa's celebratory post of her achievement of Ruby status.

Figure 2 is a post that arguably serves multiple purposes; firstly, the MLM is celebrating Bulelwa for her progress, which is bound to encourage her when she sees how their company boasts of her. Secondly, it serves to advertise the MLM business, as it showcases the opportunities the MLM offers of becoming a "dream team" member to the viewers of this post. Bulelwa shared this post with the people in her network, further selling the idea of her social network joining her MLM. The second observation I made was of how MLMs also host member events that honour the people who have achieved bonuses or progress of some sort, where these events create a display of public extravagance and celebration of success through the use of props such as red carpets, awarding certificates or prizes such as cars, award statuettes etc. and progress of members who have met various sales targets. These glamorous events are documented and shared on the MLM social media platforms as well as company

websites. Members also document themselves at these events through selfies and social media postings. These website posts of various winners and glamorous events celebrating progress and success all serve to encourage and mobilise the members to share their personal narratives of self-appreciation as a part of selling their products to their networks.

As we have seen above in the #bodytransformationchallenge where the MLM company provided templates for the sellers to discuss their successful body transformations, the MLM companies also provide templates through which members are encouraged to discuss their business progress and success. However, from my observations, instead of the member posting these on her own social media as they would for the challenges, the MLM edits and publishes the business stories online, i.e., on their website and official social media. One of the MLMs that the woman in this study belongs to is running such a campaign that encourages members to complete their templates and share their stories of "becoming, overcoming and winning big." This MLM is centred around beauty products and empowering women in business.

This MLM appeals to its members to share their stories of "becoming", where they share how they became successful entrepreneurs in the MLMs through the #WatchMeNow campaign. They are required to tell a story of how their lives changed through selling the product and they were able to "overcome" whatever obstacles and start "winning big". In the picture below (Figure 3), we see the MLM hosting this campaign, highlighting that they are "supporting UN Women's Generation Equality campaign,". Note the text advertising that for every story that is donated to the campaign, the MLM will donate R17 to charities supporting women. This phrase creates an association between the MLM brand and women's development that is supported by a well-known and influential organisation, the United Nations. It paints the campaign as a certified cause that is a part of a larger initiative to support and empower women and associates being an MLM sellers with women's upliftment. This association also downplays any suggestion that the labour of members and their endorsement is being exploited to create free marketing for the MLM's corporate structures. Digital media has indeed been problematised as sites that enable exploitations through unpaid digital labour of content

creation for internet audiences (Fuchs 2013).

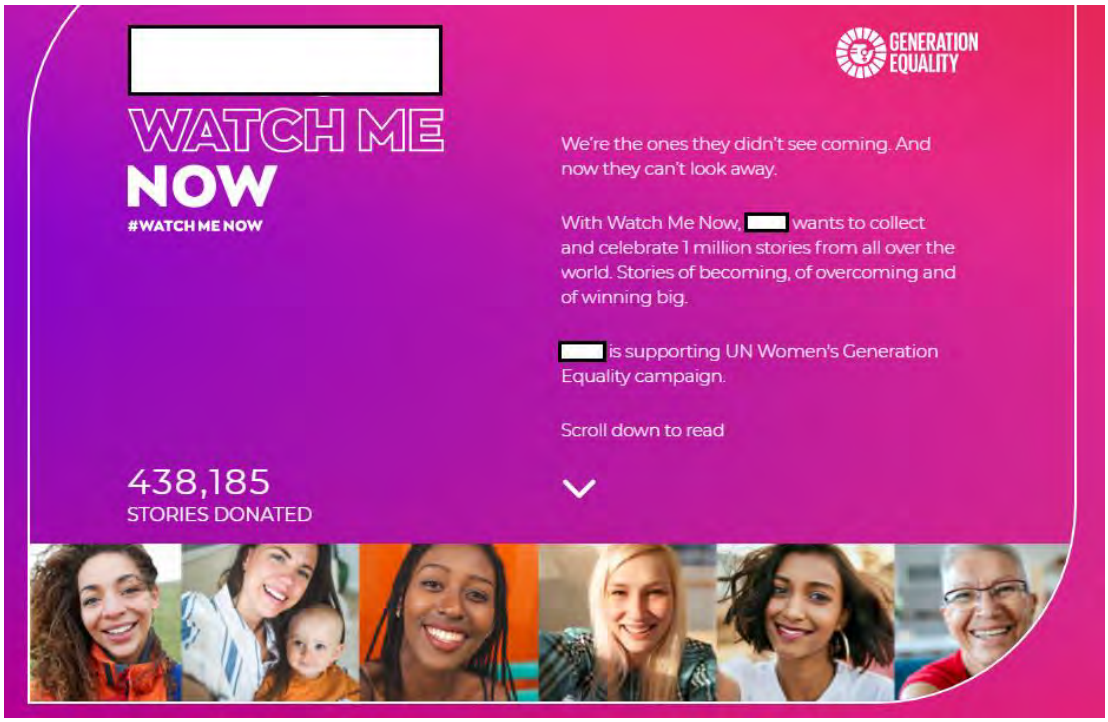

Figure 3. Landing page of the campaign website.

To view and/or participate in the campaign the participating member needs to follow the provided link, which takes one to this landing page (refer to Figure 2) of the campaign website where one can view other people's stories and/or submit your own. To understand this process, I followed the prompts to share a story. After following the prompts given on the landing page, one is offered a form template where you have to either create a title for your story or choose from one of the suggested titles, which are as follows:

- "Mum. Boss. Woman. Me".
- "When COVID-19 Hit- I hit back".
- "I'm a fighter. Not a survivor"
- "I'm the boss of me".
- "I am learning to love myself".
- "Over 40 and fabulous".
- "I don't fit in. I stand out".
- "My colour is my superpower".
- "I love every inch of me".

These titles are pre-emptive and suggestive of the kinds of stories that should be shared, stories of an inspirational and motivational nature. Their suggestive nature continues as you

choose a title. There is a text template that you're then given to work with for writing your story, which continues to provide the overall framing for the stories the sellers should share and how they should share them. These stories that these women write accompanied by these titles are shared with the rest of the world, most importantly they share them with their own networks. For example, the title "I love every inch of me" for example incites many thoughts, discourses that advocate for women loving their bodies, loving their imperfections etc. topics that resonate personally with many women. Using such a title as opposed to "Join this MLM I am a part of", shifts the focus from the MLM and places it on broader issues that the women face and may relate to in order to provide the MLM as a solution. The following are examples of text templates that come with choosing 2 of the suggested titles.

Figure 4. Text template for suggested title "When COVID-19 hit- I hit back"

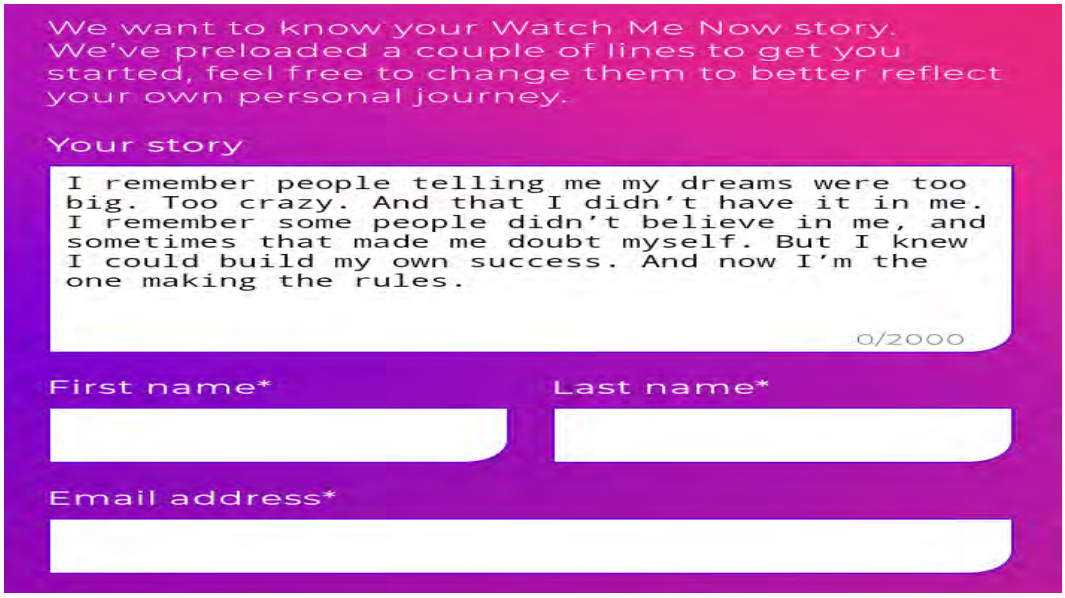

Figure 5. Text template for suggested title "I am the boss of me."

Although the use of the text template in this case may be to assist sellers in writing their stories and making the process easier, they are also prompted to edit the templates as they please to better "reflect their own personal journey." While the suggested titles set the overall tone for the stories to be told, the text template provide sellers with actual keywords associating struggle and success such as: "taken a hit, crazy, challenge, uncertain times, didn't have it in me" and "success, boss, winning, dreams,".

Figure 6. A story from the list of stories shared by members on the website for the campaign

The above is an example of a finalised story based on the contribution of a seller, not a template. This story was posted with her picture on the left-hand side of the text, which has been omitted here to protect the identity of the contributor. This particular contributor clearly chose the template titled "I am the boss of me", and this slogan was displayed at the bottom of their image. One can see how she built upon or at least read the suggested text template that came with the title (refer to Image 5). The contributor clearly edited the text template to better reflect her personal journey, as suggested. Even though she does not use the exact words, it seems she followed the template's story format in that she began by describing the start of her personal journey in negative terms, noting her lack of confidence, and attributed this to the fact that she was not a member of the MLM. She again copies the story format despite using different vocabulary as she soon switches to a positive note when she talks about how joining the MLM made her happy and gave her an extra income as "boss." Of course, this word "boss" is one of the suggested critical words from the overall slogan of this template, highlighting that being in

charge of oneself comes with joining the MLM. She continues to end her story on a positive note, asserting how she has progressed in terms of her growing confidence.

Above I have demonstrated how MLMs use story templates to enable their members to tell their narratives of self-appreciation, to proudly share and boast about their improvement in selling products and achieving higher levels within the structure of the organisation. In some ways, such techniques appear to be a generous celebration of the MLMs "staff", however arguably, the main purpose of all this is free marketing for the MLM to drive profits by boosting recruitment and sales. Such celebrations of progress are, however, not simply celebrating becoming better at business; here, narratives of business success facilitate recruiting a downline and thus, attaining monetary success. Thus, even though these women's social media posts sharing their improvements within their networks and the world do directly benefit them as it places them in a better position to sell and recruit, they ultimately also greatly benefit the MLMs, providing them with free marketing.

4.2.2 Is self-appreciation simply instrumental?

Although the women in this study understand the marketing role that these packaged stories on such platforms as the #WatchMeNow campaign and the Body Transformation challenge play for their businesses, they are paradoxically also adamant that these platforms reflect authentic experiences of transformation. I would also argue that they accept the narratives on those templates as hope for their lives, along with the broader lifestyle narratives provided by the MLM.

Lebo: "My whole perspective has changed… health wise. My perspective about health has changed, and even here at home, they don't care about what they eat, at least now I'm able to say no please don't dish up this thing for me, I want this thing …and also exercising… not for weight loss but like the heart... I just do those things now because I want to be a healthy person…I want to be a better version of myself… [MLM name] is about that because something that I've never really thought of, "personal development", [which is] about reading books. I used to read novels and stuff, [now I] read books that would like enrich you"

Lebo went on to explain that her perspective on health has changed, she has changed her diet, she also changed her habits i.e., adopted exercising. Among other practices she adopted, Lebo told me she had started reading novels and "enriching" books as she puts it. For Lebo these self-improvement practices moulded her into the kind of person she has become and constantly bring her closer to the version of herself she yearns to be. Wellness and health have become a

personal responsibility and a lifestyle to those who can afford it, wellness is defined as changing one's lifestyle and adopting health promoting practices (Conrad, 1992:385). Annavarapu (2018) begins their article by stating that a driving force value for the bourgeois' consumption today is the quest for wellness (415). Much like the products offered by Lebo's MLM, wellness is said to be sold through a range of objects and services (Annavarapu, 2018:415). The authentic experience of transformation manifests for Lebo in obtaining middle class status as well as lifestyle, where one has access to commodities and lifestyle options which were once beyond one's reach. The idea of evaluating and changing one's lifestyle appropriately to match the kind of life they aspire to is driven by the MLMs Lebo and Buhle belong to. Lebo mentioned during her interview that at their MLM seminars or extravaganzas they are actively taught about healthier ways of living and eating for instance, among other things.

Such active attempts at mobilising an aspirational lifestyle transformation in order to promote unfamiliar products is not new in South Africa, Laden (2003) examined the history of consumer magazines and their role in "repertoire-formation" and "repertoire-transmissions" for black Africans (192). She describes how in the 1930's advertisers were reluctant to advertise to black consumers because they lacked the necessary middle-class tastes for articles such as perfume, kitchen gadgets, fashion etc. As a business strategy the magazine prioritised developing such tastes among its black readers in order to bring advertisers on board, illustrating how cultivating middle-class dispositions may be the most successful business strategy for companies in new markets. Clearly MLMs use this strategy to cultivate middle-class dispositions among their sellers. For sellers like Lebo, adopting middle class dispositions is as much about earning money as about transforming herself for the better. To Lebo her MLM is meaningful, it is a path through which she can grow into a better and more focused person, and this impacts how she understands recruiting other people.

Lebo: "So, I believe [MLM name] is the way for me to help someone …, but I can give them the opportunity that would change their life… if a person says they don't have the money, when I see that they are actually very serious… I sign them up from my own pocket, and then they work for themselves, makes the money, pays me back whenever…Now you must put in some effort… I'll loan you the R550, but you must at least try to get R20 to buy data to tune into a meeting (virtual member meetings) … attend the meeting, tell me what you think about the meeting…Are you willing to work on yourself? read books? … but for someone to depend on

you fully for everything then I'm sorry but I can't waste my money on that person because they'll be full of excuses, "I can't attend meetings, I can't do this or do that."

In the above quote Lebo paints the kind of individual she is willing to help financially and provide support as a recruit into the MLM. The language Lebo uses resonates with neoliberal discourses of personal responsibility and human capital when she says, "Are you willing to work on yourself". Essentially Lebo offers people an "opportunity that would change their life" and in return one must agree to take personal responsibility of themselves and adopt middle-class tastes. Lebo uses this criterion to assess who she should help and support or not because she realises that only a person who makes this business a priority and accepts these neoliberal discourses will be willing to adapt in these ways, and this makes for a productive recruit. Once again, Lebo may believe in the discourses she engages and the life changing power of her MLM business, it remains that she stands to benefit more and waste less time helping and supporting people who are committed to becoming the prototype seller who serves their upline by making sales and recruiting.

To understand what women like Lebo mean when they say, "are you willing to work on yourself", we can interpret it through the concept of self-enterprise, which is central to neoliberal discourse. Self-enterprise is treating and conducting the self as a private enterprise, accepting the normative terms that position the self as entrepreneurial, autonomous, responsible, risk aware and decisive (Kelly, 2013:14). Lebo expects her recruits to embody these attributes rather than be passive recipients of charity; she expects them to show responsibility in their decision making and prioritizing the needs of the business. They need to be entrepreneurial in findings creative ways to move forward in the business, such as hustling money to attend virtual meetings.

The personal narratives of self-appreciation are more than just words, these women use their lives and bodies to constantly perform real, material success and progress. These representations of success thus become embodied not only as posts on social media, but also through the constant performance of success in these women's everyday lives as they share their stories of material monetary success (whether this be extreme wealth or the bare minimum i.e., avoiding uncertainty monthly) to convince others to join the MLMs and become sellers. Thus, business, and financial interactions are introduced into personal interactions with friends, family, and neighbours and, consequently the nature of the relationships shift towards conceivably becoming transactional. Both in the online and offline world of the women, life is

thus financialized, as it is in other neoliberal societies where the logics and practices of finance (such as calculated risk management and estimating loss vs gain) infiltrate everyday practices including social interactions (Wilson, 2018:159). When social interactions become financialised, they thus become centred on investment and consumption (May 2012:108). In the context of this study, the participants invest their time in social interactions by building relationships and strengthening ties with those in their existing and new networks, with the intent to garner support for their business and hence profiting from these relationships.

Thus far I have discussed how the women in this study engage various practices that are aimed at improving their position in the market as MLM sellers. For one these women engage in self-appreciation practices where they purposively embody the brand that they are selling, by for instance using the products of the MLM and then documenting this use and the results thereof on their social media post. Constantly treating the self as an enterprise through these self-appreciation practices, these women not only use this to sell products and recruit people into their MLM which benefits them in terms of earnings, but they also benefit their MLMs through providing unpaid digital marketing and content creation that builds their companies. MLM companies take advantage of this opportunity and create platforms such as the campaigns, in which they offer templates for members to share their narratives of self-appreciation and offer pre-empting language for members to use in telling those narratives.

At this point I have primarily drawn from literature about neoliberal subjectivity and how this relates to notions of success, in the section that follows I will be drawing more from neoliberal discourses that enable MLM companies to position themselves as sustainable sources of income, that offer structures for stable progress and success.

4.3 Success as certain through MLM formal structures of stability acting as a bulwark against precarity and disposability.

In this section, I will show how the participants have generally conceptualised multi-level Marketing companies and how these MLMs have indeed constructed themselves through their own media as formal structures that provide stable careers. They are represented as equivalent to formal employment or even equivalent to business ownership, purporting an ability to keep one out of a state of precarity and disposability. I will argue below that such representations conceal the very precarious nature of the selling work in MLMs. In this instance, precarity is used in a broader sense to refer to how power operates by subjecting individuals to constant danger and threat. Precarity is not a particularly new experience for black Africans who have

been marginalised, oppressed, exploited and essentially experienced much worse dangers and threats through racist regimes of power: colonialism and apartheid. In alignment with this definition Isabelle Lorey (2015) conceptualise a form of precarity specific to neoliberalism, which is the phenomenon of precarization, where precarization is defined not simply as a condition of the most destitute in society, but as state in which everyone is now increasingly exposed to precarity (1). Lorey (2015) acknowledges that this precarity is distributed unequally across the social spectrum, where the upper middle classes may experience it simply as a steady stream of anxiety and uncertainty, while for the lower working classes, such as some of the women in this study, it manifests as deeply economic and material threats in everyday life (12).

The participants in this study receive different levels of income; this assertation is based on the fact that Lebo and Babalwa have government jobs, Buhle, Athule and Zoey are formally unemployed, while Khanya is a student. Although Lebo and Babalwa may experience precarity in terms of ontological security where they worry about predictability, continuity of life, and stability (Neilson, 2016:186). However, Buhle, Athule, Zoey and Khanya experience a different level of precarity; they function within a constant state of distressing, dreadful precarity; what characterises their precarity is that they assume all the risk and experience instability and uncertainty in everyday life (Wilson, 2018:125). In the face of such high degrees of uncertainty, these women need a sense of stability and a trusted avenue towards success, and they find this in MLMs that present themselves as stable prospects. Many of the MLMs in this study, in their advertising or in media addressed to their members, tend to position their sellers as akin to business owners (Tajti, 2021:49). This positioning of members is mostly done through the terminology used; below are a few examples captured from some of the MLM websites.

Figure 7. 1st MLM website screenshot

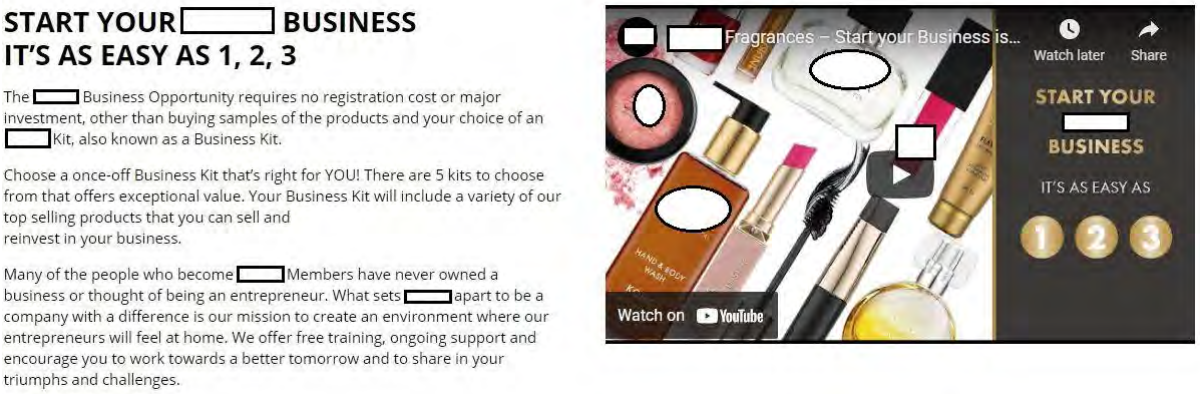

Figure 8. 2nd MLM website screenshot

The above examples show how these MLMs position selling for them as a "business opportunity". In figure 8 the advertisement is to potential members, with the selling point being "your own boss" as to imply infinite freedom and the term "business" is used to indicate that if you join you would be starting your own business. Figure 9 is from a different MLM that positions selling for them as a "Business Opportunity", at every 2nd sentence the term "business" is used, in relation everything that the company offers to reiterate the idea of selling as a business. The term "business" can, according to the Cambridge dictionary refer to any type of selling activity, however many people understand it to describe a company, thus an organization or enterprising entity engaged in commercial, industrial, or professional activities. In South Africa a registered company is formally defined by the law (Cassim, 2011:30) and South Africans can write off a number of expenses as tax deductions to help lower the amount they owe on their income tax (James, Ottley, 2006:73). The law acknowledges there are many risks associated with running a business for instance financial loss, which is why there are laws to protect an individual as well as their business. These legal protections available to a business registered as a company (Cassim, 2011:31) are not available to those in the "business" of MLM selling. MLM members do not own a business in the sense that they do not run a registered organization or company and hence do not have the government supported opportunities or legal protections of a business. However, members, more specifically the women in this study, eagerly define MLM selling as equivalent to running a business, and constantly utilise such terminology when posting advertisements on social media.

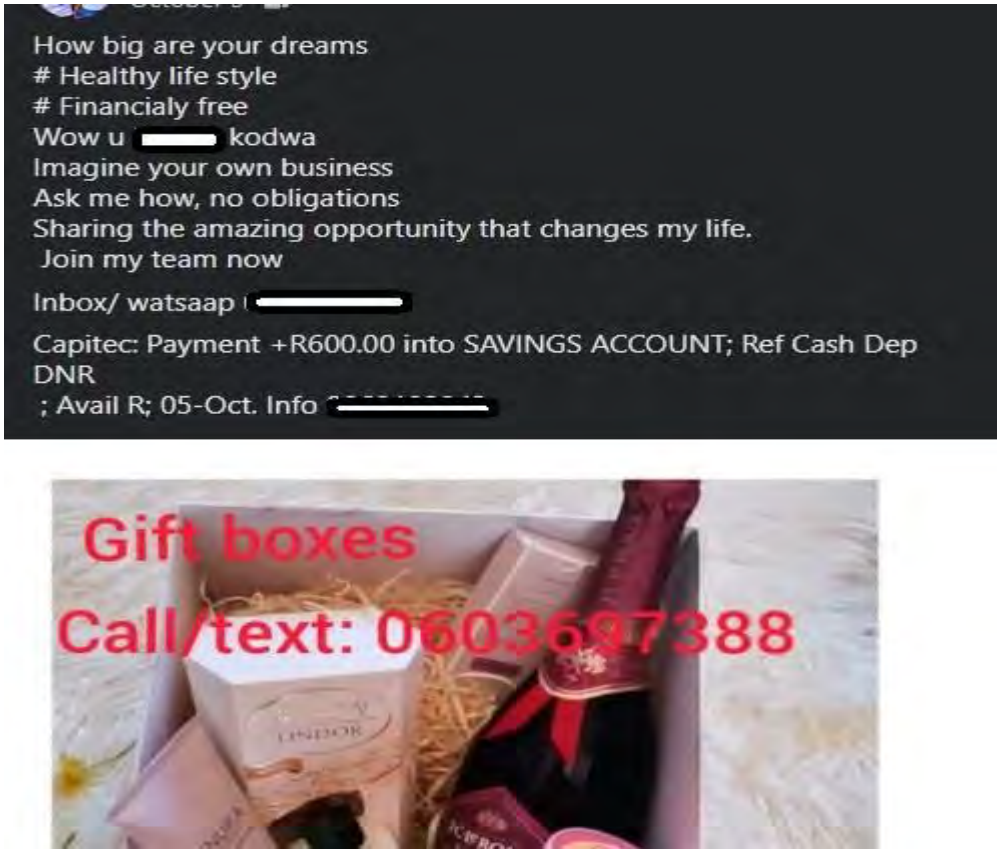

Figure 9. Bulelwa's social media post advertising her MLM

Figure 9 is an example of one of Bulelwa's social media posts where she is advertising her MLM, in which she uses such business terminology. She starts by asking viewers about their "big" "dreams", prominently advertising financial freedom followed by the idea that this is an opportunity to have one's own business when she says, "Imagine your own business", she doesn't suggest or insinuate that MLM selling is a business rather she outright claims it is. Although, some slippage in using the term business as it seems to equate simply to selling products informally with the legal protections of owning a small company, this still suggests an element of risk which is of course at the heart of entrepreneurship. Some participants went even further and equated MLM selling with having a "job", exaggerating MLM selling even more as a risk-free activity that offers stability and legal rights.

> *Athule "Also there are volume rebates that you get, people are getting rich at [MLM company name], and people are growing. It opens job opportunities because there are no jobs, so when you tell someone that they can make money this way you are empowering them."*

When Athule speaks of "job opportunities", she is insinuating that a job is being offered through MLM membership; however, according to South African legislation, an individual needs to meet various criteria to be presumed an employee. These include, but are not limited to, the following: working or rendering services to the person or entity; the manner in which the person works is subject to the control or direction of that person or entity; the person's hours of work are subject to the control or direction of that person or entity; the person only works for or renders services to one person or entity. MLM members operate more as independent contractors rather than employees (Nat, Keep, 2002:140) Athule is a part of the MLM quoted in Image 9 where the term "Business Opportunity" is used excessively; she uses that exact term but replaces the "business" with "job", the transition she makes may be attributed to the interchangeable nature of the two terms for a non-native English speaker because in her home language IsiXhosa a job (umsebenzi) and a business are both versions of work, and in colloquial speech, one wouldn't differentiate between the two unless necessary. However, neither the "business opportunity" Bulelwa speaks of "job opportunity" Athule speaks of are actual businesses or jobs.

Referring to their MLM work as a job or a business was a continuous trend with most of the participants; for the most part, they would use the terms interchangeably in quite a random way; however, it was a concerning trend because of the nature of MLM work. MLMs operate in the gig economy, which consists of a series of short-term, contract-based and side gigs, where these jobs do not offer much security, benefits or protection. For example, MLM selling offers no pension, sick or general leave, or negotiation of salaries and so forth. People working in the gig economy are not employees in the traditional sense of a business model. For example, the women in this study may perform really well and make fast progress in the hierarchy of these MLMs however, if they suffer any setbacks such as ill health or pregnancy, they are not protected by the Labour Relations Act of South Africa or any aspect of South African labour law, they also do not have the options that an actual business has in terms of accessing small business loans or government subsidies as their "businesses" don't actually belong to them. This lack of systematic protection for members in these MLMs results in a particular experience of precarity.

While precarity has worsened for the poor in South Africa, it is not something that black women are inexperienced at managing. For decades African women in South Africa were denied access to adequate education and training because of various systematic and structural obstacles as well as social and cultural discourses and practices that encouraged and prepared girls only for

wife and motherhood roles (Lues, 2001:106). Black women are conceivably adept at operating according to the rules of the gig economy, perhaps because they never had anything better in comparison. As a result of legal prohibitions in terms of land ownership and imposition of stringent taxes on the African community in the country, African men migrated to far away towns and cities (Lues, 2001:105). The migration of African men exposed them to the emergent culture in the mining compounds built for the black (male) labour force population for the gold mining industry and the urban life (Kynoch, 2008:630). This exposure changed their lifestyles and thus ceased their support of their distant families (Lues, 2001:105) thus, circumstances changed, and women had to take up the responsibility of being the household heads. The responsibility of ensuring the family's subsistence fell on the women; hence, they needed to participate in the economic world much more significantly (Lues, 2001:104). Lacking the necessary education and skills to find paid labour (Lues, 2001:106), they turned to illegal economic activities such as stokvels and beer brewing, which were illegal for Africans or black people (A Culture of Survival | South African History Online, 2021). These historical experiences paint a picture and provide evidence of how black women in the developing world have always had to navigate great inequalities, inadequate institutions, and legal protection of citizen rights. Thus, black women understand what it is like to live under neoliberal economics that is only recently starting to break down the citizenship rights that used to characterise much of middle-class life in the developed world in the mid-twentieth century. In this way, black women know what it takes to survive in a neoliberal global future.

Despite democracy, remnants of the social, economic, political and constitutional levels of discrimination instigated by the apartheid regime still remain. Granted, legislation was put into effect post-apartheid to be inclusive of women and prioritise black people; however, there exists a disjuncture between these changes and the social and material realities of many black women's lives (Jaga, Arabandi, Bagraim and Mdlongwa, 2018:433). According to the South African Department of women report on "The Status of Women In the South African Economy" (2015), women are more likely to be unemployed than men, specifically African women and women without post-secondary education experience are a categories of women that face particularly high unemployment rates and the participants of this study fall into both of these categories (71-72). Women's participation in the labour market is central to their ability to participate in the broader economy; according to the Quarterly Labour Force Survey of the 2nd quarter of 2021, women are more likely than men to be doing unpaid work. More men are participating in the labour market than women, and the rate of unemployment among

women is higher at 36.8% than their male counterparts at 32.4%.Hence, MLM work, which would explain the positivity that these women view MLMs with, because while they may not offer much in terms of sustainable profits, they may indeed offer much more to these women even in material terms than they have historically been offered or opportunities currently available. The implications of these past and present conditions have been effective in allowing women like Lebo to construct MLMs as stable structures that can provide them protection from precarity. It is however also worrying that Lebo sees the MLM as more of a sound prospect than her government job.

> *Lebo "Initially, they [my goals] were all centred around my job… I want to do this one [job] at this level…in government, but now… I don't want that anymore. [I don't want] to be confined by government's approval… [I don't want] for government, [to dictate] that in order to be at this level by this time [I need to do this] … through network marketing I can see that I can reach these things… if I commit myself to this, I can have this lifestyle that I want in three years' time" (Lebo, 2020:7)*

Lebo is contemplating resigning from her permanent low-level job in government to work full time as an MLM seller instead. Lebo here constructs MLM selling as a much better economic prospect through setting up particular differences between it and her government job as an Assistant Director, a process we can analyse through Stuart Hall's (1997) concept of how the construction of meaning emerges through difference, by setting out this table of oppositional pairs.

MLM Selling	Gov job
Binary differences that set out Lebo's argument:	
<u>Freedom and self-driven success in MLMs</u> "If I commit myself to it, I can have this lifestyle that I want in 3 years"	**<u>Constrained government control and restriction of success</u>** "I don't want that anymore…confined by govt's approval"
Woman empowerment **(Women have freedom to define their own progress)**	Sexism in the workplace
Differences not included in Lebo's argument:	
Uncertainty for increased income The pyramid nature of the MLM structure means that only the lucky few who joined an MLM in the early stages are able to continuously increase their income through their downline.	Formal promotion process Officially govt is supposed to be fair in promotions and they can be challenged through the LRA and public sector unions.
<u>Uncertain income</u> Income depends not only on affordability for her customers but on a market that does not become over-saturated with the product and on constantly recruiting more members (two strategies that work to cancel each other out)	**<u>Income is guaranteed</u>** Monthly Salary
All risk carried by herself	Employer covers sick leave, pension, medical aid, training

Table 1. Comparison between MLM work and formal employment

Lebo points out differences between her formal employment work with the government against the work she does with her MLM. The main difference she emphasises are the rigid requirements for promotion in the government job, especially the amount of time needed to

achieve such a promotion. She contrasts this with what she sees as the "requirements" for progressing to a higher level in her MLM, where the minimum time periods some people have managed to achieve such levels are advertised as guidelines to track one's success by the MLM. They are further verified through following the life stories they see played out on social media of MLM members like Nombasa, whom Lebo has witnessed achieve such success in the minimum of 3 years. When success is presented as only dependent on the amount of hard work one puts in, these "requirements" thus appear less rigid in comparison to the government job, needing less time to achieve these. Lebo personifies her government workplace as "confining" and "approving" and constructs it in stark contrast to the freedom she and her fellow sellers associate with MLMs. In setting up the contrasts between working for government or selling for her MLM, Lebo ignores the other significant differences that exist between the two i.e. how a government job offers medical aid, pension and allows for job security through the Labour Relations Act, thus providing general workers' rights. By paying no attention to these other differences Lebo mobilises neoliberal discourses that ideologically emphasise the freedom offered by the gig economy, while downplaying the increased risk and precarity. However, progressing up the MLM hierarchy is not a certainty, as argued above, as the structural underpinnings of the MLM model limits the success one might have within it.

In a desperate attempt to get out of economic and material threats of precarity and circumvent disposability by competing for scarce resources and jobs especially during the times of COVID-19, the formally employed women in this study took up MLM selling as a side "gig". Such informal employment claims to offer creativity, freedom and flexibility but these emancipatory promises of the job are possible however they come with the risks of uncertainty and loss that can occur at any moment. Hustling is a term that the Buhle uses to refer to the uncertainty and risk of loss that she faces as a seller, her belief in earning through hustling comes from a place of desperation, the lack of social structures and provision according to legislation that assists entrepreneurs and young women like Buhle have led her to this point.

> *Buhle: "I believe that it will be better because I would say because of my hustles I see where they are leading me to and as time goes by as I work very hard there is an earning to that, and I still believe that it will get better"*

In the above quote Buhle is responding to a question about her dreams for her future life and why this life she dreams would be better. She references her MLM selling and hairstyling venture as her "hustles", and in how she uses the word hustle here she is trying to invoke a

picture of hard labour, that is inconsistent, uncertain, unstable and risky. She uses the term in her explanation for how her work is ensuring her progress, although unstable and uncertain, she observes benefit in the form of earnings and progress which indicates to her things will improve for herself and her family. Buhle conceptualises MLMs as a form of hustling, the definition of hustling that closely resembles the meaning the women in this study are communicating is hustling as a new form of neoliberal labour where individuals are constantly working longer and harder in all arenas of life just to make ends meet (Spence, 2015:2). The women who use this term generally tend to emphasise the great degree of risk and uncertainty in the work they do and hence the amount of effort and hard work necessary while downplaying the lack of general security and protection involved in hustling. Their hustle is predominantly their MLM work, as well as other work that they do such as hairstyling and baking goods. This description of MLM work as ridden with uncertainty and instability by calling it a hustle makes sense when one considers the essential markers required for stability within a job or work, which include an established salary or wages; provision of health benefits, pension; general security and protection. Conceptualising MLM work as a hustle, Buhle captures the instability and exposure to precarity and disposability when selling for these MLMs but at the same time she refutes this by asserting that "hard work" will make things better.

The members who joined MLMs earlier when they were first introduced in their areas, easily moved to occupy the top of the pyramid structure (Aggarwal & Kumar, 2014:78). For instance, people like Nombasa probably earn a lot of money because their downline keeps increasing, as most of the activity in their area moves through their downline. Remember that the MLM structure can have many levels, and the longer the downline, the more commission the member earns in some MLMs (although Lebo's MLM has this structural incentive not all of participants' MLMs do) (Aggarwal & Kumar, 2014:78). Members who, like the participants in this study, join after an MLM has already been established in an area, inevitably occupy the bottom rungs of the pyramid. Their earning potential is therefore significantly less because of market saturation of the MLM product as well as the increased competition resulting from the many sellers who are all trying to recruit others into their MLM downline (Aggarwal & Kumar, 2014:78). To further demonstrate the shortcomings of treating MLM work as a stable career option, the story of a friend of the researcher will be used to highlight how MLMs function to benefit those with access and resources.

This friend is recent nurse graduate is currently working in Peddie (Ngqushwa), a small town in the Amathole district of the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. On her arrival in Peddie

as an MLM seller she found an untapped market of people who wanted to buy products or to join the MLM, therefore making her much more successful in both selling and building up a downline in this area than in the saturated market of her hometown. Peddie is a small, rural town, mainly constituted by villages and without many major retail trade companies. It is therefore a more difficult space to penetrate commercially and most MLM companies have not yet made inroads into the village network. What the pyramid structure of an MLM rewards is a type of networking that seeks out untapped markets and encourages sellers to enter new spaces where people are not yet familiar with the MLM. However, this kind of networking is not readily possible for most people like the women in this study, as they tend not to have the capital or be physically mobile enough to be one of the first to introduce MLMs into new social spaces. This initiative necessitates connections to the outside world or sufficient mobility to connect with more marginalised spaces where one can travel and introduce the MLM, and also requires sufficient capital investment that the participants cannot afford. The researchers' friend was allocated to Peddie as a salaried nurse, without any family obligations and her move to this new town as well as her accommodation were mostly financed by her employer. She therefore did not incur the costs that the women of these study would have needed to invest, which would be impossible since they are unemployed and/or have established lives in Makhanda with families and children.

In the instances discussed above, the structure of the MLM shows that members inherently have better chances at succeeding provided they join the MLM early. MLMs, however, present themselves as offering infinite potential for success for everyone who works hard through reinforcing neoliberal discourses of meritocracy; personal responsibility and self-enterprise, thus ideologically masking the structural conditions that underpin this world. Ideological meaning tends to serve the interests of those in power and organises our conduct and practices (Thompson, 1999), as it emerges from those specific social relations that support the interests of the dominant social class, in this case the MLM companies (Holborow, 2007). Those who seek to regulate the conduct of others, Hall argues (1997), aim to structure and shape meaning in order to set the norms, rules and conventions by which we organise and order our lives (4). The ideology of meritocracy in the context of this study presents the world of MLM selling as a level and fair playing field. Thus, creating unrealistic expectations that regulate the conduct of the participants and members in MLMs to the extent that it effectively brushes under the carpet structural disadvantages faced by those who join the MLM late or indeed most sellers

bare those isolated individuals like Nombasa who serve to keep everyone motivated, as effectively they take on all of the risks of the business without much potential for reward.

The neoliberal discourses in are filled with buzzwords such as freedom (Wilson, 2018:255), autonomy, creativity, flexibility etc. which are attractive and positive terms that inspire hope and excitement from neoliberal subjects. However, if one analyses the use of these terms against the actual structures and systems of these MLM one finds discrepancies and exaggerations of what MLMs can offer their members. This is similar to the tensions that arise when one considers the pyramid like nature of MLMs, and how for over a decade various parts of the world have been grappling with how to differentiate between MLMs and Pyramid schemes or Ponzi schemes (Nat, Keep, 2002; Barkacs, 1997; Grant, 1988; Koehn, 2001; Beasley, 2012) As discussed above, through social media marketing, business websites and hierarchy levels of MLMs, members are somewhat convinced in the ability of their MLMs to help them avoid precarity and disposability.

4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have applied notions related to neoliberal subjectivity to the gig economy MLM sellers who are the participants in this study. The constructions of success discussed in this chapter explore the ways in which MLMs are constructed by the participants as formal structures capable of protecting their members from precarity and disposability. The aim of this section was to analyse and understand how the participants communicate this construction of their MLMs. MLMs sell this idea that members are running or owning businesses when they sell MLM products; the participants in this study have adopted this way of thinking and use it to inform their social media practices. However, I find that it is inaccurate to equate MLM selling to business ownership; MLM sellers do not have the same protections and access that businesses have. This protects against risk, exorbitant taxes, or access to business insurance or loans. MLM selling is also not a job opportunity because they offer no jobs in the sense that sellers do not meet the criteria to qualify them as employees of their MLMs or a business under South African legislation, the Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995. This lack of systematic protection results in a particular experience of precarity; due to historical events, black women are adept at operating in the gig economy and hence experiencing precarity. They continue to operate in a context filled with inequality and discrimination against their race: black and gender: female. They are therefore disadvantaged in their attempts to participate in the labour market. Hence, they are very receptive to the work and optimistic about the profits and material

rewards of the work offered by MLMs. Their past and present conditions have been effective in allowing them to construct MLM as stable structures.

The arguments I make are related to how black women in this historical context see the current precarious conditions of their lives as somewhat easier compared to what they have had to navigate in the past; this means that one cannot simply apply a neoliberal analysis lens to the study. It calls for a more nuanced analysis that also incorporates an understanding of South Africa's past and the struggles related to colonialism and apartheid. At this point, I have primarily drawn from literature about neoliberal subjectivity and discourses and how this relates to notions of success; in the chapter that follows, I will be drawing more from the literature concerning contemporary African worldviews and notions of success.

CHAPTER 5

Trailblazing Freedom and the Collective- Findings Part 2

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I aim to continue from the previous chapter by discussing meanings constructed by the participants through analysing the data collected to support the objectives of this study and responding to the research question. The research question focuses on what meanings the participants in this study construct in their MLM work, specifically through their social media practices and how these relate to notions of success and progress. The three constructions will be discussed. First, Success as trailblazing freedom from racism for your community; second, success constructed as both resulting from and benefiting collective ways of being and third, Success as resulting from mobilising dense-place-based networks built on trust and obligation.

In Chapter 4, the discussion highlighted a neoliberal, and arguably western, conceptualisation of what success looks like. This chapter is divided into five sections. The constructions in this chapter show how the women are not only constituted by neoliberal discourses; their perception of the world is informed by multiple discourses, including those that stem from the worldview of African Humanism. Although these are different ways of understanding the world and, at times, opposing ways, these women are able to creatively reconcile the two to fit their needs. The first section discusses the construction of MLMs offering imminent success, focusing both on notions of communal aspiration through consumption and notions of "black excellence". In the second section, I discuss how the participants construct success through collective ways of being in 2 parts. The first part is success as a result of collective effort and support, and the second part is success as collective achievement insofar as it benefits others beyond the individual. The section explores the value community holds in the attainment of success for the participants, the struggle and connections between neoliberal values and values stemming from African Humanism. Lastly, I explore tensions between the two worldviews. These worldviews include the juxtaposition of competition versus partnership and obligation versus exploitation. The third section of this chapter is success constructed through the utilisation of dense-place-based networks built on trust and obligation. Presenting the final construction will conclude the two discussion chapters.

5.2 Success and trailblazing freedom from racism for your community

The participants in this study view consumption as a way of expressing their aspiration for a better life and as a form of power. I will show in this section that their interpretation of the conspicuous consumption practices of black elites in their MLM upline is understood collectively and optimistically as people of their race increasingly achieve material wealth and power. The story in this section relates to the participants seeing other successful black women as role models or trailblazers providing road maps to success, which they can follow. I will show how the idea of leading others to success is even more pronounced in MLM culture as it does not only involve displaying lavish lifestyles and freedom from poverty, but here people actually showcase strategies for such progress in the ranks of the MLMs and thus also showcase pathways to achieve such success. One may analyse your participants' interpretations through the literature on consumption as a meaningful practice in South Africa (Laden, 2003:205), meanings which are based on a historical, racist experience of being excluded from consumer goods and experiences (Iqani, 2016:43). In the global south, in South Africa particularly, the consumption practices of black people were a site for regulation and control by colonialist and segregationist regimes, which ensured that oppressed subjects had limited agency and freedom to consume (Iqani, 2012:3). This inaccessibility of unregulated and conspicuous consumption shaped oppression into material form for black Africans, resulting in a population that yearns for material wealth and opportunities for consumption.

As a result of the racialised economic inequality which denied black Africans access to consumption and material wealth, black people in the country had come to understand freedom from racism and oppression as material wealth and economic empowerment (Iqani, 2017:107). The practice of consumption thus evolved into one that signifies success for black Africans and is encapsulated by black elite celebrities like Kenny Kunene, who became sites of what success looks like for black people in the post-apartheid era. The individual's ability to conspicuously consume and accrue material wealth is thus a success that legitimises, reinforces and objectifies larger social units (communities) of which the individual forms a part (Laden, 2003:205). Conspicuous consumption would be engaging in practices of displaying wealth and spending money on lavish and luxury goods and services (Iqani and Kenny, 2015:97). These material possessions have the ability to construct and communicate specific identities because they hold meaning as signs that form part of a conceptual and language system. Everatt (2000) argues that in understanding the South African youth, we need to understand that in democratic South Africa, from 2000 onwards, the "struggle" was replaced by consumption (314). This

replacement is linked to the ANC's policy shift from nationalisation and redistribution of the Freedom Charter to free market capitalism (Evaratt, 2000:314). The new ruling elite's changing lifestyle choices, who adopted "unsavoury" habits from their predecessors, specifically conspicuous consumption. The new ruling elite found liberation and empowerment in materiality and consumption, and this newfound freedom was received with scrutiny.

Much of the conspicuous consumption of black people in the post-apartheid period was disparaged in the media as evidence of exploitation and a vulgar betrayal by blacks of the struggle for liberation (Iqani, 2016:45). Thus, the expenditure of black people was moralised as excessive and constantly measured for appropriateness in ways that their white counterpart's consumption practices were not scrutinised (Iqani and Kenny, 2015:100). However, for many black Africans, consuming is framed in the language of revolution, and central to the set of material and discursive practices of consumption is the meaning attached to them (Iqani and Kenny, 2015:97). Consumption in the global south including South Africa is indeed about aspiration and empowerment, and it is a complex social and cultural practice influenced by the processes of colonialism and globalisation Iqani (2016). Iqani (2016) theorises the meanings of consumption in South Africa in three ways that resonate strongly with my participants. Firstly as power, which makes sense in the context of my participants who understand the materially wealthy as powerful individuals in their communities; Secondly, as aspiration, and it becomes clear that my participants also understand conspicuous consumption of elite figures like Nombasa as aspirational and thus denoting their own possible progress; and lastly as communication, as a way to portray to your community a sense of having overcome the oppression and exclusion black people have been accustomed to in the past (Iqani, 2016:43).

Arguably the participants, who have little education and grew up in families without intergenerational entrepreneurial knowledge, have limited knowledge of the pathway into business success, based on how township spaces are devoid of local entrepreneurial activity. In this way, they understand the success of others as collective and community orientated, as it becomes a way of pioneering this journey and showing others the way to freedom defined through consumption. During Lebo's interview, she would often refer to an example of a member in her MLM who embodies self-enterprising practices and qualities; Nombasa is a part of the President's Team in their MLM, which is the second highest level in their hierarchy. Nombasa's story is one of "rags to riches", as Lebo explains in the following quote.

Lebo: "Nombasa [is] from PE, she is one of the top people in the company doing [MLM name], and she was doing [it] for three years, uNombasa only has Matric she used to sell rat poison at Korsten with her mother… So, she quit her job and focused purely on[MLM name], the lifestyle she is living now, she has got a house in Summerstrand, she's making so much money… uNombasa is earning R700 000 now if you could see her Facebook or Instagram she just bought a top from Gucci like a couple of days ago and she paid 33 000… so I thought to myself, if she could do without being a graduate, nothing, I can also do this thing. And I really need to give it my all."

Lebo juxtaposes Nombasa's past life before she joined the MLM and her life now as a member in one of the uppermost tiers of the MLM. She highlights the fact that Nombasa had been with the MLM for three years before she became successful. This time period correlates with the MLM's promotional media, which estimates a period of 3 to35 years for members to become successful. Since Nombasa achieved success in the minimum timeframe without having any educational qualifications, this suggests she only relied on her entrepreneurial skills and hard work to succeed. Moreover, this achievement, despite her limited education, convinced Lebo that such success was also within her reach. Nombasa's life story's details have also become reference points for Lebo as she lists all the things she has observed Nombasa acquiring, such as buying a house in the upmarket suburb, Summerstrand, and her regular and enormous earnings. These milestones, alongside the precise numerical amounts of Nombasa's increasing earnings, become a trajectory into the middle class that Lebo can visualise. It suggests success within the MLM is less of a gamble and more tangible as it is based on reliable "facts". In order to promote this notion of reliability and progress through the MLM based on the factuality of predictable numbers, MLMs constantly advertise the earnings of members who have progressed within the hierarchy of the organisation and recruit others into their MLM network as downlines. Publicising positions and earnings for members within the hierarchy encourages other members to strive to reach the next level too, which is then reinforced by sharing personal narratives of success, such as Nombasa's story.

The notion that the most extraordinary successes are within reach even for the most ordinary person is not a notion that MLM companies promote solely. Iqani (2016) found that the spatial proximity between the poor lower classes and the wealthy upper classes, referring here to a set-up, for instance, between a wealthy family and their domestic worker coming from a relatively poor background, is a factor that fuels the aspirations of the poor as well (204). Lebo shares close proximity to Nombasa through belonging to the same MLM, attending the same meetings

and events, and constantly viewing Nombasa's social media posts about her wealth and success. This exposure to Nombasa contributes to Lebo's aspirations to acquire the same wealth; attributing Nombasa's success solely to the discourse of personal responsibility makes these aspirations a possible and tangible reality for Lebo. While Nombasa probably joined her MLM at a time when it was still new in her area and therefore had the best opportunity of successfully selling products and recruiting members. Lebo most likely does not now have the same likelihood of becoming wealthy since she joined the MLM much later. Yet, similar to how the grandiose aspirations of the South African poor are fuelled both by the extreme visibility of those with great wealth as well as their physical proximity to the wealthy (Iqani 2016:204), the visibility and proximity of high achievers to ordinary MLM members make success more tangible to sellers like Lebo. The visibility of Nombasa's progress and success through Facebook posts on her own page as well as the MLM's posts, including and conversations about Nombasa in offline discussions between members, have a significant impact on people like Lebo who are part of her social network. Furthermore, Lebo's notion of virtual proximity to Nombasa's success and ideas of such success as only dependent on hard work has prompted Lebo to quickly escalate her modest aspiration to consume better quality food into much more extravagant aspirations for a holiday home:

Lebo: "...Eating what you want when you want, doing what you want not be limited by money or anything. And that's a good life to me…living where I want to live, buying a house wherever, more than a single holiday home wherever. That's the good life to me."

During this particular conversation, Lebo continuously expressed her admiration of Nombasa's success and progress and never derided her conspicuous consumption, such as her purchase of a new "Gucci top" as being inappropriately self-indulgent. While critique from outsiders has painted the consumption of wealthy black elites as selfish and an insufferable insult to the poor, this understanding is too simplistic and problematic (Iqani,2016:46). Instead, it is important to have a more complex understanding that explores the nuances of the discursive power of wealth and the complex relations between the poor and the wealthy (Iqani, 2016:46). Black people's consumption practices are what Posel (2010) terms striking signs of the erasure of the racist regime of the past (159), they are evidence of freedom from regulation of the interests, aspirations and powers as consumers of black people (Posel, 2010:160). People who therefore embrace such freedom are seen as role models/ trailblazers for what we will all hopefully eventually acquire. They, therefore, do not become subjects of envy but of hope. This explains Lebo's reaction towards Nombasa's wealth and success, Nombasa's success and wealth function

as a powerful symbol of opportunity and the possibility for a black woman to have access to opportunities of consumption and economic participation in a way that they did not experience in the past and Lebo should aspire to attain this level of success, as she demonstrates when she says:

Lebo: "...Nombasa is earning 700,000 now. If you could see Nombasa, her Facebook or Instagram. She just bought a top from Gucci like a couple of weeks a couple of days ago and she paid 33,000… I thought to myself, if she could do without being a graduate, nothing, I can also do this thing."

Nombasa's story from rat poison to riches is such a powerful symbol never is her previous lowly position as a seller of rat poison used to suggest she is unworthy of her current success. Rather Nombasa's story fuels Lebo's conviction that not only will she soon attain a point in life where she might eat whatever she wants to but that having more than one holiday home is as feasible and a predictable next step for someone like herself following in the path that Nombasa has charted. Due to her belief that Nombasa's story points to a realistic pathway to success Lebo has become powerfully motivated to emulate Nombasa's MLM practices i.e., working hard to build a downline of recruits, constantly sharing her personal narratives of self-appreciation on social media, and totally changing her lifestyle to align with the values of the MLM.

Throughout the interviews, the participants consistently referred to "hard work" as the source of their future success. The participants tend to buy into meritocracy, an ideology representing the world as a place where people are rewarded purely according to individual merit (Wilson, 2018). The participants thus understand those who succeed to be "the best" in their communities, and thus leaders who, through moral example, are role models to follow. As the participants in this study accept and reason that their success relies exclusively on their ability to be "the best", they too engage in such a discourse of personal responsibility and thus take on board the ideology of meritocracy. Steady progress towards success based on hard work is the story that underpins the notion of meritocracy; however, in entrepreneurship, for instance, failure is likely to occur in the early stages of an entrepreneurial venture (Mayr, Mitter, Kucher and Duller, 2021:540). Venturing into entrepreneurship is risky, as one significantly invests but cannot be certain of the returns. A large percentage of small businesses fail for various reasons (Shepherd and Wiklund, 2006:3); indeed, it is only after several failures that most entrepreneurs succeed, and it is only those who can recover from failure who eventually

achieves great success. However, in the following quote, Zoey demonstrates a different understanding of how one succeeds as an entrepreneur or seller.

Zoey: "I mean a lot of people are successful from selling things, they start small - from their backyards and they talk to the right people for their product and eventually they become successful so if you work hard enough and you believe in yourself and your products, and you know what you want then most definitely…."

Zoey bases her optimism on meritocracy, the certainty that hard work breeds success and believing enough in one's talent to have a plan and a vision for the products one makes or sells. This mindset of entrepreneurial thinking and the agency that MLMs offer may not be scientific, but it is indeed psychologically empowering for black Africans who have been marginalised from entrepreneurial activity for generations.

The main problem with this picture is, however, that it does not point adequately to the risks involved and the amount of security that might be needed, whether in people banding together to mitigate risk, like the Somali traders, or relying on generational capital, institutions, and social networks, like white South Africans. This understanding of how the world works endorses a seemingly equal competitive system, but where some face great obstacles. However, they insist on believing that success is solely the fruits of hard work. This worldview not only functions to obscure inequalities and structural prejudices in terms of class, gender, race and ability, but it also plays a role in restricting social mobility, as it supports the fallacious idea that people compete on a level playing field (Litter, 2018:50). This shift in focus to meritocracy obscures how institutions can simply reproduce and reinforce class stratification, how people can be excluded from the mainstream society, the economy and politics systematically through race, sexuality, gender, age and class.

Furthermore, success often depends on factors such as cultural capital, social ties, one's personal and professional networks, opportunities arising from developments in the economy, inheritance, and general access to resources (McNamee and Miller, 2004:77). In reality, the participants of this study are exceedingly aware of the structural and systematic inequalities and obstacles that contribute to whether people's endeavours in the market are a success or failure. However, they find themselves in a position where indulging these negative circumstances to the extent that one gives them power by attributing their failure or lack of success to them does not achieve anything.

Lebo, for instance, is commenting on generational wealth, which is a factor in one's success in the labour market, and how it is perpetuated in the time invested in children, giving them an advantage.

Lebo: "... at the events we have when you go to Cape Town…there are tables at the front and there sits the top 1% of the country, and it was just white people only. And that is the one thing I asked myself, why is that white people… I thought back to high school that our friend's mothers would go to every game to support... When they needed parents to assist ...they were always there, they had the financial… the time freedom to be there with the kids, but they never struggled. So, I'm thinking is it probably because white people were doing this thing, way before and that's why they've been living this kind of life because now I see that with the black people who are also… in the top 1%, they go to stuff with their kids… they've got that freedom you know so I thought, "Oh, it's something I want for myself because one day I'll have kids. I don't want to be a stranger to my kid one day…and this opportunity can give me that freedom."

Lebo links the predominance of white people occupying the top 1% of her MLM to the context of her primary school extra-curricular activities, where predominantly white parents were seen to attend and avail themselves to help the school as opposed to the black parents. She acknowledges the systematic and structural set-up that allowed white people access to opportunities that gave them both financial freedom and time to attend their children's school events, opportunities like being a member of her MLM. Lebo hinges her hopes to achieve the same financial and time freedom as the white top 1% in her MLM and white parents in her primary school on her MLM.

However, why do people like Lebo and Buhle have such absolute faith in their imminent great success when there is so much evidence to the contrary? The precarious neoliberal subject painted here tends to ignore any questioning related to the optimistic dream of wealth and success that they have conjured because that is too depressing. This phenomenon is what Berlant (2011) terms cruel optimism, where the object of one's optimism blocks the thriving that motivates their attachment to it in the first place (1).

Rather than realising the two-fold role these status quo stories they are attached to play in their success and failures, the participants choose to take on an approach that recognises their own willpower, their individual merit: talent, attitude, hard work and moral character as the most significant factors determining their success. They are effectively attached to and invested in this dream, and they are pushed by status quo stories of neoliberalism. These neoliberal stories

prize personal responsibility, hard work, self-enterprise, self-enclosed individualism; and ideologies such as meritocracy to hold on to the dream of reaching the top 1% for instance. However, the same status quo stories driving them are also hindering them from realising their dreams because they do not allow for the acknowledgement of structural and systematic hindrances.

One of the MLM companies has a "Success Stories" section to their website, where they post success stories of a select few of their members. One of the stories that are shared in this section is Princess Fana's success story, a member of the MLM from the Eastern Cape province, the same as the participants of this study but in the much bigger city of East London.

IMAGE 10. Princess Fana's picture on her MLM website

PRINCESS FANA

I am 28 years old and from East London in the Eastern Cape Province.

I joined [redacted] in July 2019. I did not know anything about the business, but I decided to try it out since I love being an entrepreneur. I am not working and doing [redacted] full time.

A year after I joined the [redacted] Business Opportunity and in July 2020, I became Diamond Leader. I can safely say that I earn more than R20 000 a month from my [redacted] Business and I can assure you it is going to be 6 figures soon with my annual earnings.

I bought my 1st car in cash in October 2020 with my Volume Rebate earnings and retail profits. I am now building my mom a new house with my [redacted] earrings. [redacted] is indeed a business of HOPE!

I always dreamed of becoming a Top Business Leader. My hard work resulted in me being recognized as No 2 in the Top 3 New Business Leader Category. It was a huge achievement for me. I am so proud of myself. At our recent Top 100 Annual Event, I also earned the 4th position in the Annual Top 5 Recruiting Category.

I make sure I advertise my business every day so that people can get to know me and my [redacted] Business. It is important that I lead by example and that my team knows that results and achievements are the result of hard work.

Remember: You will never change your life until you step out of your comfort zone. Change begins at the end of your comfort zone. We must be honest about what we want and take risks to achieve our goals. Never make excuses and stay in our comfort zone if you want to change your life for the better.

Success is not always about greatness. It is about consistency. Consistent hard work leads to success.

IMAGE 11. Princess Fana's story on her MLMs website.

Note above how Princess' testimony is very empirical, listing actual figures and dates that lend a real sense of concrete factuality to the story: "a year after I joined… I became Diamond leader" "…I earn more than R20 000 a month", "… I can assure you it's going to be 6 figures soon", "1st car in cash in October 2020 with my Volume Rebate earnings and retail profits". It is focused on communicating the idea of a certain predictable future with constant, unstoppable progress, consistently referring to what has been achieved and what will be achieved. Living in constant competition as a result of precarity breeds anxiety, thus planning and certainty would prove comforting to those living with that anxiety. MLMs are probably aware of how precarious the lives of their members are and play the role of easing this anxiety by offering their companies as havens of security for example through stories such as Princess'. Princess's testimony makes her story relatable and inspirational because the achievements she speaks of, are the same goals that some of the participants in this study for instance would like to achieve soon. Very little attention is explicitly given to the idea of cultivating a downline, yet it is always implied. For example, in her quote Princess emphasises the importance of hard work in relation to the lesson she will inspire in her "team", by which she of course means her downline of recruits. The notion of Princess being an inspiration to her "team" positions her as benevolent mentor and thus masks how she profits off the sales of her "team". Her story of success continues the thread of the discourse of personal responsibility and reinforces the ideology of meritocracy, as she emphasises consistent hard work as key to success. She repeatedly advocates for risk-taking behaviour on the part of the individual sellers, e.g., she constantly refers to "stepping out of your comfort zone." This "stepping out" would presumably be taking risks such as purchasing large amounts of stock and trying to ensure it sells, or giving people products on credit with the promise that they could pay you back when they receive their salary, or experimenting with new sales venues etc. Before the advent of the gig economy risk-taking was normally undertaken by a company instead of its employees, and it was on the basis of such risk that profits were often justified (Wilson, 2018:125).

This approach to viewing the world that the participants, much like a lot of people like them, have adopted considers success as resulting from individual confidence to embark on risks. Taking risks to achieve success in the way discussed above is justified by the conceptualisation of workers as empowered individuals, where the idea of labour as class and exploitation are non-existent and are replaced by the project of appreciating human capital. Thus, when an individual is empowered instead of exploited, they have the power to competitively take risks

and hence don't need to rely on the calculated risks of collective bargaining to achieve success. This phenomenon is called de-proletarianization, whereby individuals distance themselves from working-class solidarity. They conceive of themselves as individual agents freely pursuing private interests in the market and facing private challenges and risks rather than belonging to a class or group with similar interests and challenges (Wilson, 2018:123). De-proletarianization embraces a status quo story of self-enterprise, it aims to shut down capacities of commonality, to cut-off any points of relation and collectiveness between people and establish constant and locked-in competition between them (Wilson, 2018:122). South Africa is saturated with such neoliberal discourses such as the ones shared by these MLMs, a typical practice of schools inviting motivational speakers to speak to learners is one way the sellers in this study may have encountered these discourses as Buhle explains in the following quote:

> *Buhle: "… there was one motivator when I was still in school that came during a career expo that once said that… 'black people always sitting on their arses and wait for things to come to them' and now that I have grown, I have realised that that is true, most people… they like being spoon fed, instead of trying their own things... You see we tend to sit down and wait for things to be given to us, of which it is not a time for that, that time will never come."*

In an attempt to make sense of the question posed to her about why she thinks people from the same background as her are or are not successful, Buhle juxtaposes entrepreneurial agency of "trying their own things" with the visceral metaphor of "always sitting on their arses". She thereby represents the lack of an entrepreneurial culture, where she comes from, as crude laziness, so that the lack of success of the people there then becomes a moral failing. She thus blames individual lack of moral ethic and unfavourable individual attributes for lack of success. What she fails to discern or even acknowledge are the factors that reproduce such an environment where the entrepreneurial spirit and culture she is looking for, is lacking. Unable or unwilling to make these connections she does not recognise the oppressive conditions of existence that people from a background like hers may face. Finally, the inference that can be made of what Buhle says and her general attitude is not one of solidarity and collectivity but rather one of hyper-individualistic competitiveness in which poverty is given racist justifications.

In this section I have discussed the ways in which success has been constructed based on the pathways created by black women in these MLMs. The status quo stories of neoliberalism have

helped construct success as a clear trajectory provided by the MLM that the women in this study should follow. Imbued with the status quo stories of personal responsibility, hard work, self-enterprise, self-enclosed individualism among others and neoliberal ideologies such as meritocracy, on their social media, in MLM meetings and events and their general context. the women are determined to reap success. However, the issue remains, emulating these actions cannot override the systematic and structural issues that exist in the real world of these women. While I have discussed the world in which these women live as self-enclosed and individualised, unequal and competitive. The following section speaks to a seemingly contradictory idea: the construction of success by the participants as based in communal achievement.

5.3 Success is constructed through collective ways of being

5.3.1 Success is insofar as it benefits others.

In this section of the chapter, I will be discussing how in a world characterised by cultural, social, political, and economic forces that centre competition in social life, and with less and less public structures of support, the women in this study still maintain an understanding that human beings are interdependent beings connected to one another at once vulnerable and for this reason, to the community still holds great value. According to Foucault (1972:27 & 50) we are constituted through multiple discourses at any one point in time, for instance, although these women are constituted by the discourses of neoliberalism through which they relate to themselves as enterprises. They are also constituted by the discourse of African Humanism, such that they essentially construct success and progress around similar notions of escaping precarity, having a stable job and income and avoiding disposability.

There are two constructions discussed in this section. The first is that success as a result of the collective effort and support from one's community of networks. Second, success as a collective achievement insofar as it is for the benefit of others beyond the individual. It is significantly different from the constructions we have explored thus far, all of which have been very clearly related to specific neoliberal subjectivities and affective states (Wilson, 2018:). These constructions of success discussed in this section are embedded in notions of the worldview of African humanism, the view that human beings exist in symbiosis with all existence; other human beings and nature (Murove,2005:136). Directly linked to African traditional values which emphasise economic relations that are driven by solidarity such that

they aim to attain the well-being of the whole community, as opposed to satisfying the interests of an individual (Murove, 2005:136).

Umntu ngumntu ngabantu is a proverb that expresses the value of belonging to a community and how that belonging makes one fully human, it translates to "a human being is a human being through other beings (Murove, 2005:168). This section will be divided into 2 according to the constructions mentioned above. I will show how the women highlight the collective's quality of life improving, the collective gaining access to resources and opportunities that will allow them to self-appreciate and compete in the market and the collectives' access to consumption and material wealth that they aspire, as success and progress. Lebo speaks to this construction of success:

> Lebo: *"...And I really need to give it my all… because I don't want my cousin to be faced with the same challenges as I faced when she works you know by having to help out at home… that's when I thought that I should give this my all."*

Lebo refers to her cousin, who is her aunts' daughter and therefore her extended family. She frames her success in terms of her ability to ensure that her cousin does not have to contribute large portions of her salary to financially support their family when she starts working, in the same way, that Lebo herself had to financially support their family when she started work. Such support is colloquially referred to as "black tax", a term used to describe how black people, more especially black middle-class people, are obligated to provide social and economic support through money, shelter, and food to their extended families. Black Africans lived in a context of racialised economic inequality that denied them access to consumption and material wealth (Iqani, 2017:107) because this access was reserved for their white counterparts. This targeted discrimination of black people resulted in their conceptualisation of the practice of consumption (conspicuously) as empowering. This gave rise to claims that being free and how freedom takes shape is through material equality and economic empowerment (Iqani, 2017:107). However, in an attempt to maintain the standards of living that black people were denied, as well as pay "black tax", black people are at risk of becoming indebted.

> *Lebo: "She just bought a top from Gucci… a couple of days ago and she paid 33,000… you can see…you know MacBook Pro the latest iPhones, nice cars… so I thought to myself, if she could do without being a graduate, nothing. I can also do this thing…"*

The above quote forms a part of the quote I discussed immediately above; it was pertinent that we understand the arguments that exist about black tax in order to relate it to the conspicuous

consumption Lebo speaks of in this quote. Lebo speaks about Nombasa's conspicuous consumption of expensive products, she indicates her aspiration to the same practices and in the same breath, she speaks about her aspirations to ensure black tax ceases to exist in her family. What Lebo does here is construct success to her ability to conspicuously consume expensive products and attain material wealth while also ensuring her cousin does not have to pay "black tax". This conceptualisation of success being a collective improvement of the standard of living of the family and their access to consumption extends beyond kinship ties to the wider community of one's personal networks inclusive of friends, acquaintances, community members and even strangers.

The participants treated themselves as brands, much like internet influencers do, where an influencer, a well-known persona and a subject of marketing communications efforts, embodies their human brand (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017; (Hurley, 2019:3). Yet unlike the individualism that tends to dominate influencer culture, there was often a shared notion of success through foregrounding collaboration, as in the following quote by Khanya where she explains how she used her own social media to both advertise her MLM as well several other small, local black women-owned businesses at the same time.

> *Khanya: "this is the pictures I posted, I tagged other businesspeople who helped me put this look together. The make-up was done by… and then I tagged her, she is the owner and founder of Just Creations. And the beads were made by Limthande, and the nails were done by Athenkosi Nzanzeka. So that's what's happening in this post."*

Although Khanya's intention with the photo shoot was to advertise her own business products, she moved away from the influencer frame rooted in a competition that highlights her individual process of self-appreciation to also foreground other black women-owned businesses in town. Similarly, Zoey is open to promoting her competitors by actively advertising for them on her personal social media platforms.

> *Zoey: "…when it comes to supporting other peoples' businesses or when you ask me "Zoey you know a lot of people, please share this" then I would share it cause I don't see anything wrong, whether we're in competition or not, like I'll do it, so I don't mind competition at all"*

The structure of MLMs and the way that structure works does not allows for "teams" of sellers working together to progress through the levels of hierarchy but instead focuses on individual sellers only. The only time group success and progress is considered is for the benefit of the

upliner of that group of downlines, meaning the members who recruit people into their downline concern themselves about the success and progress of those members in their downline for the purposes of earning more profit from their sales. Therefore, the way that MLM companies work is very much focused on individual success or progress. Although members speak of themselves as teams and may work as teams, reposting each other's posts of self-appreciation for instance and encouraging each other to work hard i.e., Lebo to her recruits.

5.3.2 Success as the product of collective effort and contribution.

In recognising that one's community has an impact on their success and can contribute significantly to one's success, Khanya speaks about a plan that she and Mdu, the member who recruited her, her upliner, devised:

> *Khanya: "In the team it's myself, Mdu, Nozi Thulisa, we're a team of 5 and we keep adding people to join so we grouped each other in the team, so that everyone can reach a certain level, so that they can earn money."*

Khanya and Mdu decided to form a team with other members of their MLM who reside in the same town as them, Makhanda. The purpose behind forming this team was to ensure that everyone can reach a higher level than they currently occupy in their shared MLM, by combining and coordinating efforts to make sales and recruit people and therefore earn more money. This plan is to counteract the practices involved in competing, members will still conduct themselves as sellers however this opens a space to share selling techniques and advice, to divide and share places or communities where people sell rather than targeting the same place and provides a space where people motivate each other.

> *Buhle: "We are living in a society whereby we tend to undermine each other, we tend to look down at each other, especially us black people, like we would see a black child very much trying and hustling and selling things, but we will go to other shops and buy there the very thing that they are selling… we don't want to help each other grow…"*

Ubuntu which comes from the proverb "Umntu ngumntu ngabantu" presented above, is an ethic of African humanism purporting that individual identities are formed by community and their well-being and personhood are socially mediated (Murove, 2005:134), the women in the study also construct collective success as a product of the contribution of the community and not only the work of the individual. The individual is what they are because of their community (Verhoef, 2001:521). The relational relationship between people and the inherent nature of

belonging to each other in society is encapsulated in the ethic of Ubuntu (Murove, 2005:134-135). Individuals are understood to be who they are because of their community, and this challenges the idea that an individual is solely responsible for their own success and that success is a product of individual talents, which is the core belief of meritocracy. Ubuntu is about one's relations to others, with kindness, courtesy, attentiveness, friendliness and consideration amongst other things (Murove, 2005:145). This expression of Ubuntu translates to economic relations as well, from this perspective economic relations based on the perception of others as a means to an end are incompatible with Ubuntu (Murove, 2005:144). Rather, Ubuntu recognises the interdependence of people to each other and realises that individuals are not self-sufficient (Verhoef, 2001:521).

> *Khanya: "And even when I started the group, I started in my community, like I started at my neighbour, I took the products, and I went door to door and I told them I'm selling this and they had to buy because they are my neighbours."*

In African traditional values, economic relations are driven by solidarity such that they aim to attain the well-being of the whole community, as opposed to satisfying the interests of an individual. Khanya's neighbours recognise their role to act in solidarity to support Khanya as neighbours and hence her community rather than as customers. The culture of Ubuntu may be helping MLMs profit, however, these women's communities are only supporting these MLMs because of their commonality with the women. Khanya answers the question of which people who engage her social media statuses are her customers.

> *"I think mostly it's people I know and people who say "just because you're selling then I'm going to support you in your business but when you post on the Grahamstown pages or when you are at the stand that's when you meet the most strangers. Otherwise, here [Facebook] the people who respond are people who know me…"*

Khanya explains that the majority of people who engage with her advertising status updates are people she knows, friends, family, community members, acquaintances and so forth. These people she points out tend to support her mainly because they know her, and she is selling products. They support her because they realise their role as her community to ensure that she earns an income, sustain a living, and grow as an entrepreneur and without their support, none of this would be possible.

5.4 Success through the utilization of dense-place based networks built on trust and obligation

In this section I will show how the participants rely on the ties they have established through trust and mutual obligation and building relationships through online interactions and engagements with their social network, to sell their MLM products. The MLM sellers provide testimonies for their products that are considered trustworthy advice and information by their communities, because they are seen to stem from personal first-hand experience of people who look like themselves. In this way MLM selling is rooted in meanings of group identity and solidarity among marginalised people, especially women, who tend to distrust elite experts. In a study with new mothers s (Johnson, 2015) the women tend to trust experiential advice by other women more than medical experts. Similarly, Yee and Simon' (2010) show that African American and Latina women trust the opinions and advice of their female social network more than professional experts in choosing contraceptives. Among working class women, kinship networks frequently provided an important source of trusted informal support- practically, emotionally and financially (Mitchell and Green 2002).

The women in this study offer this kind of peer support to their networks, rather than simpy selling them MLM products. They utilize their own stories of struggling financially or otherwise and then earning an income when they joined the MLM to provide emotional, practical and financial support. Black and Latina women in Yee and Simon's study (2010) much like the black women in this study were historically marginalised from expert institutions, where they were seldom the experts themselves, they were not necessarily respected by these experts and their bodies were never the primary focus of expertise. Black women in South Africa were continually marginalised from expert institutions not only on the basis of gender but through the systematic and structural obstacles of the regimes of power operating at the time. They did not have access to adequate education and training because of as a result (Lues, 2001:106) and this ensured their economic marginalisation, the effects of which linger today in the case of some of the women in this study. Therefore, the participants rely on the ties they have established through trust and mutual obligation and building relationships through online interactions and engagements with their social network to sell. They provide testimonies considered trustworthy advice and information because they stem from personal first-hand experience of people who look like themselves.

The business model of a multi-level marketing company such as the ones the women in this study belong to largely depends on the strong ties of trust between members and their social networks. This model benefits from cultures where women are more likely to take advice from each other than from experts. The model also targets marginalised people to run a cheap

business model that does not require investment in overheads such as a shop and for this reason, it is contingent that the members have extensive place-based networks. Thus, it made sense to find that the social relationships of the women in this study are largely place-based, meaning they are strongly tied to their physical world. To understand the relationships between the women and their social networks and how these relate to their local space and entrepreneurial activity, discussions while scrolling through people's contact lists on WhatsApp and friend lists on Facebook showed interesting trends. While these cannot be presented with the certainty of a formal Social Network Analysis (SNA), they nevertheless suggest the importance of such place-based networks. Zoey's contact list, for example, shows how entrenched she is in her physical neighbourhood and local institutions like the church and school and their associated networks, much like most of the women in this research. Women, particularly women with working-class roots, are targeted by MLM companies. A reason that could be attributed to the specific targeting of these women is the nature of their networks, which tend to be such dense place-based networks that best serve the interest of an MLM to maximise income from a space, particularly places difficult to penetrate through conventional commercial activity.

The members of these MLMs utilize their social networks in this way for two reasons. The first is to make a profit from the sale or recruitment. The second is their MLMs encourage and justify their participation as a way to introduce people in their networks to the lucrative job opportunity of becoming part of the MLM team. In this way, personal interactions are again monetised. There is a psychological set-up at play here, with how the women are now able to justify to themselves that they are empowering others by sharing this opportunity to make money through their MLM. However, it is clearly not simply altruistic as they stand to profit financially from the interaction because successfully recruiting people into their downline may benefit them directly. More conventional companies would pay extraordinary amounts of money to gain market intelligence and gain access to customers (Mundy and Bullen, 2009:14). MLMs use the access that these women give them to their personal networks, to profit from each woman's own intelligence about her market. The MLM profit model in comparison to conventional sales means saving not only on market intelligence but also personalised advertising and the cost of establishing physical stores. into spaces and advertising for them at all times.

Lebo explains that at some of the MLM events they are encouraged to make it a practice to speak to at least 10 people a day, and she and Zoey have taken this "a minimum of 10 people per day" rule seriously. Lebo or Zoey approach many of these 10 people a day, who are

strangers to them, through social media platforms, either to recruit them or to sell their MLMs' products to them. These "strangers" Lebo refers to do not necessarily have to be strangers in the strict definition of the term i.e., a person whom one has never seen before. They may indeed be people that are familiar in some way but that they have not directly approached before; it could be community members or former school classmates they are not in contact with. Thus, by initiating contact with people who are either total strangers or distant acquaintances they do not currently have in their networks, then they are expanding their reach.

This access to the networks that extend deep into communities outside of commercial centres is arguably what is central to the MLMs business models. Research across developing countries including South Africa has shown that women's extensive networks are generally built on kinships ties and that women tend to have more extensive networks of community ties than men (Irving, 2005:8-9). These kinship ties offer established relationships of trust and mutual support, while community ties bring reciprocal relationships providing essential psychological and practical support (Irving, 2005:8-9). Often such kinship and community ties are built on notions of shared obligation to others in the network, which is probably why Khanya is confident that the people who buy from her through her social networks do so not because of the quality of her products but based on their sense of obligation to support her.

> *Khanya: "Mmh I've never thought about that, let me think about it…I think mostly it's people I know and people who say, "just because you're selling then I'm going to support you in your business… here the people who respond are people who know me."*

Khanya is highlighting the support that she receives for her business from the people she knows, i.e., family, friends, schoolmates, community members. What Khanya and most of the participants generally agreed to be the best method to successfully sell and recruit people was through their community of networks. Lebo had such faith in her friends and family's sense of obligation to support her that she was surprised when this did not happen all the time even when they could not afford to do so:

> *Lebo: "… you expect to buy now, your family and friends are going to support you in this, but they don't…and they're always complaining about the price, 'you're so expensive,' at first and I was so hurt about this because I used to… support my friends if they sell bags, I'll buy a bag. Even if it's expensive…because I'm supporting my friend…but now I'm selling [MLM name], people are like, 'your products are so expensive, I'm not interested,' they made excuses."*

Lebo contrasts her experience of lack of support for her business by her family and friends to the way in which she supported her friends and family in their own business. The argument Lebo brings forward isn't concerned with whether her friends and family can afford the products she is selling, rather that she expected them to support her in the same way she provided them with support. She juxtaposes how she used to buy her friend's bags even though they were expensive but now they are unable to buy from her because her products are expensive. This statement comes from the fact that Lebo knows her friend's finances to an extent or at least she feels or understands that both herself and her friends are able to afford to buy certain things when they want to. Hence, she was able to buy their bags and why she expects they should be able to buy her products. By saying her friends "made excuses" Lebo reveals a strong sense of obligation to her community. MLMs already profit from such networks of women being reluctant to trust experts and rather trusting each other, so profiting from the power of the network. Now we can see that they are also profiting from the sense of obligation to support each other that are part of these networks.

The MLMs encourage members to utilize and continue harnessing their existing networks of strong ties where this sense of obligation is strongest, and through them, they stay informed about their communities through daily interactions. The knowledge of the community they get through such networks give them the capacity to financialise these relationships and makes these dense networks powerful tools for maximising sales, as they incorporate intimate knowledge of the financial circumstances and purchasing power of potential customers. Zoey, for example, knows the pay date for everyone in her community:

> *Zoey: "When you advertise your business you don't just advertise on the 6th, no one gets paid on the 6th…that's how I use social media to advertise my business…So you target like certain days- on a certain day …"*

Zoey put in much less effort into her social media than the other participants but was disciplined about targetting target specific days for social media posts to advertise her business. As many people in low-income jobs run out of surplus cash early in the month, Zoey prioritised payday advertising because she knew people would be more likely to have the funds to buy her products. For example, teachers in her community are paid on the 20th of every month, nurses on the 15th of every month, most contract workers on the 25th of every month and police officers on the last day of every month. By purposefully advertising her goods on Facebook around these dates, Zoey explained that these posts served as reminders for people in her personal

network of the products that they had expressed an interest in buying, Zoey's actions are typical of the financialization of everyday life in neoliberal societies (Wilson, 2018:159) as she now engages in very targeted interactions with her friends based on her knowledge of their cashflow, and maximises her interactions with them to be around their paydays, so turning her close personal ties into business ties.

Khanya speaks of the way she maximises her knowledge of people in her community, by catering to their specific needs and keeping track of when they need to replenish their products.

> *Khanya: "…there is a customer here in my community that I sell to, she uses one of our perfumes and I don't even have to ask her when she wants a perfume. I just keep track that she hasn't bought a perfume this month, so she probably still has some so let me… I just bring her perfume; she doesn't even have to order, and she'll be telling me 'oh the one I have was almost finished.' …"*

Khanya demonstrates how close community ties are useful for access to intimate spaces such as people's homes, as with that access she is able to go to this lady's house and leave her a perfume when that the other one is used up. The nature of their relationship has become both personal and transactional, with an informalized business tie. Khanya's quote illustrates how the participants may use personal knowledge about their clients and access to their personal spaces as part of their business strategy. Constantly drawing from such networks of obligation can be taxing as it involves the emotional labour of persuading others of their obligation to support you, which is why Athule describes this process as hard work:

"…its stressful [being an MLM seller] because you have to recruit, sell, push and tell yourself, "The whole week I wake up early and go to town to make a stand and sell. You have to go to your friend's house even if they didn't order, you do all of this because you want to earn money, because [MLM name] pays us according to how much work you put in" (Athule:2)

It is significant that Athule begins by emphasising how stressful it is to sell and recruit in order to earn money through MLMs through mobilising her strong ties. This description of stress and hard work, suggests that when she says "you have to go to your friend's house even if they didn't order, you'll do this because you want to earn money" when she says "you have to", this is not just a description of the process but that Athule is emphasising her desperate situation, where her only option is to mobilise notions of caring and reciprocity in her friendships to earn a living, and thus Athule's friendships here have clearly also been financialised.

To some, it may seem that this friendship is inauthentic and somehow corrupted by money concerns. However, I argue that this is not necessarily the case, because there exists a long tradition of financial support in the lives of black women. For example, through the stokvel, a friendship including some element of financial support is considered normal. An example I can make is of myself as the researcher and my personal friendships. I am a black African young woman, and much like the women in this study I feel a sense of obligation towards my friends who are members of these MLMs. It is an obligation to buy the products I need from them instead of elsewhere. This sense of obligation comes from a place of wanting to support those in my network, our friendship is rooted in uplifting each other in various ways and when possible, it means supporting my friends financially by buying their MLM products. This financialization of our relationship does not make it any less authentic, rather as a testimony, in a context where financial troubles can be isolating, having my friends involved in my finances and me in there has made our relationships stronger. There exists mutual support and consistent reciprocity that has made us trust and lean on each other and recognise the true value of the proverb "umntu, ngumntu, ngabantu".

The sellers preferred to use social networks that privileged non-judgemental interactions with close friends that foregrounded warm expressions of support and encouragement based on notions of obligation and thus discouraged the kind of cold public scrutiny and judgement that a more public network of strangers, such as Twitter, would favour. This is why Khanya found Facebook and Whatsapp a more comfortable social media space for her business.

> *Khanya: "I use Facebook and WhatsApp mainly because, okay, WhatsApp for me, people are more comfortable to communicate and also on Facebook, the same. I don't use Instagram and I don't have Twitter at all…I personally feel like it's very cold as a social media platform especially for business. Facebook has that sense of family or maybe that sense of friendship, we're all brothers and sisters, we all get along, it's easy for people to communicate with us on those platforms, people are comfortable, and they can talk to them anyhow."*

Kanya mainly uses Facebook as a social media platform for her business as her trusted dense place-based network is mirrored on Facebook. For her Twitter has a more urban feel where there is not the same trust and loyalty, and ideas are more open to scrutiny and criticism. This is due to all posts on Twitter being public and it being a space for trending news, celebrities, politicians, and journalists rather than sharing news just with friends and thus engagements on

the platform are extremely cutthroat and critical especially in discussions about MLMs, due to the negative reputation MLMs often have in South Africa.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that participants of this study may be subject on the one hand to the influences of neoliberalism discourses of hyper individualised competition, but at the same time they are also subject to older discourses of African humanism that promote mutual obligation and emotional and material support. In this chapter the constructions of success and progress of black women in Makhana involved in Multi-level Marketing was discussed in terms of African ideas such as African meanings of consumption and African Humanism, which is is directly linked to African traditional values that emphasise economic solidarity and belonging to a community through which one's identity is formed, and well-being socially mediated (Murove,2005:134-136). The world that these women come from socialises them into collective ways of being, hence they also construct success through collectivity/community which is seen as key to surpassing obstacles and attaining success. The first construction of success is success as taking on leadership in the black community to show others that freedom from racist material deprivation is possible. The second construction of success is through collective ways of being which was divided into two sections, 1. Constructing success insofar as it benefits others and 2. Success as collective effort and contribution. While the last construction of success that I found in this study was through the utilization of dense-place based networks built on trust and obligation. I have discussed these constructions of success discussed in this chapter and the importance of social networks in realising these notions of success by these women. Social media is another significant factor that has formed a thread within each conceptualisation of success, through social media they are able to enact and share practices aimed at self-appreciation, they have access to other women and MLM members' narratives of self-appreciation. The participants' engagement on social media pertaining to meanings of success is largely informed by neoliberalism' discourses and ideologies as well as African Humanism, they thereby contribute this to broader social discourses.

It is possible that the women in this study remain affectively invested and attached to the dream offered to them by neoliberalism and its status quo stories of personal responsibility, self-appreciation, hard work, self-enterprising and self-enclosed individualism as well as ideologies of meritocracy. As a result of the present context in South Africa, one with possibilities of entering the middle class that remain, despite growing unemployment. Therefore, it is quite

interesting the turn to integrating these hyper-individualised discourses of neoliberalism with the traditional, community-orientated discourse of African Humanism.

CHAPTER 6

Concluding Discussion

6.1 Concluding Thoughts

This research has revealed that the women in this study frequently express on their social media notions of success that are seemingly contradictory. On the one hand, they envision success in neoliberal terms to stem solely from hard work and merit, ideas informed by neoliberal ideologies such as a highly competitive meritocracy and discourses of hyper-individualism, constant competition and aspiration that produce specific subjectivities. However, on the other hand, the women in this study also construct success as an altruistic act that emerges from being connected to others and based on traditional relationships of care and obligation. While they are acutely aware of brands and sales figures, the women also see success as a symbolic act of claiming dignity on behalf of all black people and as a form of female solidarity, and thus informed by very different, even contradictory values focused on rights and group solidarity, standing in contradiction to the hyper-individualistic values of neoliberalism.

How indeed is it possible for these women to reconcile the world of neoliberalism advancing hyper-individuality and competition with notions of solidarity or, indeed, African humanism, which promotes communal ways of being? While it might seem that these discourses are totally at odds, there might indeed be ways in which African humanism and neoliberalism could resonate with each other. In the first instance, both worldviews speak of a world that demands and relies on constant informal networking and building relationships instead of relying on formal liberal state institutions. Neoliberal society undermines the idea of state institutions (Wilson, 2018:45), albeit by promoting discourses that encourage personal responsibility and an attitude of competition between individuals, necessitating constant competition and interaction with others to set up short-term agreements, frequently described as hustling. Traditional African notions of society similarly do not depend on state institutions either but rather emphasize the importance of the work of tending to social connections and networking with others in an attempt to create a reality where one's needs are met and supported (Comaroff, Comaroff, 2001)

One might indeed argue that MLMs operate in the gig economy of a neoliberal world. However, at the same time, they depend on mobilizing extended kin networks of more traditional family structures to extract money from such networks. Krige (2012) explains that

in South Africa, such extractive relationships often mirror older exploitative, racist relationships as they tend to be launched by white Afrikaner entrepreneurs who needed access to monies that flow outside the formal banking system in township communities. They recruit predominantly black female Africans as agents who are able to tap into kinship, social and work networks that would otherwise have been unreachable (75). However, such Afrikaners are often invisible to the downline due to the use of black mediators as upline leaders. In Krige's study (2012), the black female Africans would play the role of financial brokers and intermediaries, socializing their networks into the functioning of MLM schemes (75). In this study, we see that such financial brokers and intermediaries are perceived to be role models who play a leadership role as successful businesspeople. Their commissions from their downline and resulting success are not considered immoral; rather, it is understood as paving the way for others in their community to follow the same path to success. Thus, recruiting others into a downline is understood to be an act of development and of striving towards equality in the community, where those in the upline are seen to offer opportunities to those below them in a relationship that resembles that of patronage. Patronage is a type of relationship common in traditional societies, where people pledge allegiance to a powerful patron or "big man" in exchange for his protection and benevolence. Yet, we increasingly see such relationships of patronage emerge in modern political democracies (Heller 2009). Given this definition of patronage, the people at the top of the upline and the MLM companies themselves may indeed be said to be patrons to MLM sellers at the bottom of the ranks. Here those in the downline might indeed be understood to express a form of allegiance to their patrons through their participation in the spin of marketing the MLM products and membership expressed through embodying the brand, for which they, in exchange, expect security and material support. Thus, the relationship between individuals and MLMs can not only be understood in neoliberal terms of the gig economy but also be conceptualized in terms of the notion of patronage common in traditional communities.

One might indeed argue that MLMs provide a transitional space through which people from traditional value systems might enter and embrace a neoliberal modernity. In this way, MLMs might resemble Pentecostalism as a transitional space from which to enter modernity (Meyer 1992). Pentecostalism is a religious form of expression that promotes a modernity that is not cold and rational but rather an enchanted modernity more closely resembling traditional cosmologies, thus providing a bridge for traditional Africans to enter modernity, argues (Meyer 1992:63). Pentecostal churches thus offer a space for becoming a modern individual, where

individuals can move back and forth between their traditional way of life and the modern way of being they aspire to (Meyer, 1992:63); thus they are able to be constituted by multiple discourses simultaneously. MLM companies promote risk-taking and aspirational dreams for success based on notions of constant competition of neoliberalism; however, through the MLM structures, participants can conceptualize the neoliberal subjectivity they embody to also include a sense of community, albeit a community-based in complex hierarchical structures of patronage, dependency and obligation. Participants might thus arguably utilize MLMs as transitional spaces from which to enter a neoliberal modernity. From within this space, they are then able to build networks that resonate with social structures they are familiar with and that indeed resemble traditional sociality and so create possibilities for these very different seemingly contradictory meanings of success to emerge.

Social media plays a significant role in constituting this hybrid and transitional space of MLMs at the crossroads of neoliberal modernity and a traditional network of patronage. While social media may, in earlier waves of scholarship, have invoked liberal values of free circulation of ideas in the public sphere, the reality is that networked publics (Boyd 2011) often limit debate as ideas are always tied to profiles and so tied to consequences for voicing unpopular opinions from those who hold power over these individuals. Here social media can be understood as a space of limited freedom and corporate platform capitalism (Papadimitropoulos, 2021:251-252) that is more accurately characterized by influencers (Gómez, 2019:12-13) than Habermasian publics. Such influencers can be understood to also be subject to a system of corporate patronage, and they are therefore a useful starting point for making sense of social media as used by these MLM sellers. The boundaries between the personal and the public are blurred as well as the between the personal and commercial, which provokes performances of authenticity to legitimize the brands with which they align themselves to their audiences. Thus, in this study, social media is therefore shown to be both a tool of neoliberalism's hyperindividual global corporate culture as well as a tool for harnessing, reinforcing and exploiting older traditional African socialities and drawing people into neoliberal modernity.

APPENDIX A

Human Ethics subcommittee
Rhodes University Ethical Standards Committee
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29 June 2020 Khuselwa Tembani

Email: g15t6735@campus.ru.ac.za Review Reference: 2020-1389-3541

Dear Dr. Schoon

Title: The meanings of the social media practices and networks of black African women in Makhanda engaged in Multi-Level Marketing Principal Investigator: Dr. Alette Schoon

Collaborators: Ms. Khuselwa Anda Tembani,

This letter confirms that the above research proposal has been reviewed and **APPROVED** by the Rhodes University Ethical Standards Committee (RUESC) – Human Ethics (HE) sub-committee.

Approval has been granted for 1 year. An annual progress report will be required in order to renew approval for an additional period. You will receive an email notifying when the annual report is due.

Please ensure that the ethical standards committee is notified should any substantive change(s) be made, for whatever reason, during the research process. This includes changes in investigators. Please also ensure that a brief report is submitted to the ethics committee on the completion of the research. The purpose of this report is to indicate whether the research was conducted successfully, if any aspects could not be completed, or if any problems arose that the ethical standards committee should be aware of. If a thesis or dissertation arising from this research is submitted to the library's electronic theses and dissertations (ETD) repository, please notify the committee of the date of submission and/or any reference or cataloging number allocated.

Sincerely,

Prof Arthur Webb

Chair: Human Ethics Sub-Committee, RUESC- HE

APPENDIX B

RHODES UNIVERSITY
Where leaders learn

School of Journalism & Media Studies
Rhodes University

Research project name: The meanings of the social media practices and networks of black African women in Makhanda engaged in multi-level marketing

Participant Information Sheet

We would like to invite you to take part in the above-named study but before you decide, please read the following information.

What is the purpose of this study?
My proposed research aims to investigate the social media practices of black African women in Makhanda engaged in Multi-level Marketing and the meanings that they make of these practices. The way in which they make sense of their digital practices will also be investigated. Notions of progress and success which are particularly associated with the Multi-level Marketing businesses that these women are a part of, will be investigated in relation to these digital media practices. As a part of this the social networks that these women have both online and in the offline world will be investigated and the extent to which these are mobilised by their MLM businesses is of interest to the study.

Names of principal researcher(s): Khuselwa Anda Tembani

Department/research group address: School of Journalism and Media Studies, Africa Media Matrix building, Rhodes University (RU), Upper Prince Alfred Street, Grahamstown, 6140.

Telephone: 0787358017
Email: khuselwaandatembani@gmail.com

Who is being asked to participate?

Black African women engaged in Multi-Level Marketing living in Makhanda who use social media are the types of participants being researched in this study. This is because these participants are part of a shifting population of new South African internet users, a "New Wave" that primarily uses smartphones and social media platforms to access the internet. Researching the meanings of their social media practices and these interact with their sociality has the potential to produce rich, in-depth data.

Your rights as a research participant

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and anonymous. Information gathered during the research will be used solely for the purpose of this study and all efforts will be made to ensure the confidentiality of participants' personal information. Please note that while your name will be recorded with the data, it will not be used in the report. All identifiable data will be stored securely on a computer with password-restricted access and only the researcher (and supervisor if applicable), and ethics committee members will have access to it. All identifiable information will be destroyed at the end of the study or after 15 years, whichever comes first.

If you decide not to participate there will not be any negative consequences. Please be aware that if you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time and your data will be returned to you or destroyed. You may also decide not to answer any specific question.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The results of the study will be published in the form of a thesis submitted to Rhodes University

APPENDIX C

RHODES UNIVERSITY
Where leaders learn

Informed Consent Sheet

**** To be signed in duplicate – one copy to be returned to the researcher and one copy to be retained by the participant.**

Thank you for your participation. By submitting this form, you are indicating that you have read the description of the study, are over the age of 18, and that you agree to the terms as described in the short questionnaire that follows:

I have read this form and received a copy of it. I understand the purpose and nature of this study and I am participating voluntarily. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without any penalty or consequences. **I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction**.

Yes ☐
No ☐

I agree to take part in this study, and I hereby grant permission for the data generated from this research to be used in the researcher's publications on this topic.

Yes ☐
No ☐

I grant permission under the following conditions:

- I agree to being identified with a pseudonym in the research to protect my privacy
- I agree to be recorded during interviews and in participating in various events, subject to the following conditions:
    - My interview recording will not be published without my permission.

I grant permission for the research to be recorded and saved for purpose of review by the researcher, supervisor / principal investigator, and ethics committee.

Yes ☐
No ☐

I grant permission for the research recordings to be used in presentations or documentation of this study.

Yes ☐
No ☐

Participant's names and signature _____
_____

Date_____

Researcher names and signature_____
_____

Date_____

Contact

If you have any questions at any time about this study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher:

Khuselwa Anda Tembani
0787358017
khuselwaandatembani@gmail.com

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. What is your name and where are you from?
2. Do you have a job, if so, what do you do?
3. Do you consider yourself middle class? Why?
4. If you had to describe someone who is just surviving vs someone who is more comfortable, what words would you use?
5. Describe your lifestyle?
6. Who do you live with? Are you supporting anyone except yourself? How do you feel about this responsibility?
7. What values do you live by?
8. What does "living the good life" mean to you? What dreams do you have for your future life? Will it be a better life? Why?

Multi-Level Marketing

9. Are you in involved in Multi-Level Marketing?
10. Which MLM company do you sell for?
11. How long have you been an MLM seller?
12. Why are you doing this MLM selling?
13. How is life as an MLM seller?
14. Describe how your day usually goes starting from the morning, especially the parts of it that involve using social media, running your MLM business and your daily job
15. Do you consider your MLM business to be successful?

Success and Progress

16. How easy or difficult do you think it is these days for a black woman like yourself to become successful? What makes it so, in your opinion?
17. Why do you think some people who come from the same background as you are/are not successful?
18. What is your opinion about the role of entrepreneurship and selling in helping people become successful?
19. How do you understand "progressing in life" for someone like yourself?
20. Do you consider yourself a modern woman? Why?
21. Do you consider yourself a traditional woman? Why?

22. In terms of what you said about being a traditional woman, how does this relate to how you understand progress?

APPENDDIX E

Social Media Demonstration Schedule

23. Do you use social media and if so which platforms? Why did you choose these platforms?
24. Do you use social media for the purposes of running your MLM businesses? To sell your MLM products?

    If so, how do you do it, for instance do you use your personal profile for the MLM business or did you create a page for the business or do you post on groups? Why is this?
25. How many people do you have on your networks for each of these social media platforms? Can you describe the kind of people you have in these networks and how they know you?
26. Would you describe yourself as quite a networked person? What kind of networks do you have in the community you grew up in and are they still part of your online social networks now? Who are the majority of people in these online networks?
27. Who are the people in your networks who are the best clients? What platform do you reach them with?
28. If you look at a post on social media, can you tell if someone is successful? How?
29. How often do you post on your social media about your MLM business? What does it say to you if people post too frequently about selling? And if they only post very seldom?
30. Who often reacts on, comments on or messages you about your MLM posts? How do they know you?
31. Did you use social media before you became an MLM seller? If you did, how have your posts changed, if not, why didn't you?
32. Why did you choose to start using social media when you became an MLM seller?
33. Do you think social media helps your business? How does it or how does it not?
34. Are you careful about how you present yourself on social media? The way you look. The way you express yourself. Are all MLM sellers?

    How do you feel about the brand you are selling? What does the brand stand for, and does it link with how you see yourself?

    Are people just after this brand name, or do you think the fact that it is YOU selling it also makes a difference?

It is usually the same people who buy from you online or different people each time?

35. Where else do you post about the products you sell?

Do you have people that buy from you face to face and not on social media? If so, how do these people know you? Or are these people still the people you have on your social media?

Would you say you have the same customers or do your customers change?

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