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BOYCOTT WOKENESS, SHOP LIKE A PATRIOT: A DISCURSIVE ANALYSIS OF CONSERVATIVE MLM PROMOTION ON INSTAGRAM

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Introduction

Female conservative political influencers are an obscure but growing force within American politics, embedding distrust in healthcare, government, and education institutions. Exploiting the inadequacies in these systems, these women profit off the fears they cultivate through conspiratorial narratives such as the government poisoning food and indoctrinating children to encourage their Instagram audience to learn how to homestead through their content and boycott “woke” corporations by purchasing their household supplies through Patriot Wellness Boxes and other MLMs. Many of these women have risen from obscurity to internet fame and now attend events with prominent GOP figures, including former President Donald Trump and his family.

American conservative women and MLMs are happy bedfellows as they both have historically utilized gender tropes to advance their interests. For nearly a century, conservative women have leveraged racial and gendered logics to advance patriarchal white supremacist policies and evade accountability for doing so (Calahane, 2022; Matfess & Margolin, 2022; Nickerson, 2012). The origins of MLMs are not rooted in political ideology but have primarily targeted heterosexual cis-gendered women through postfeminist neoliberal rhetoric that promises them empowerment and the ability to supplement their husband’s income while not challenging his masculinity and the ability to stay home with their children (Pearce, 2024; Wrenn & Waller, 2021). MLMs have long been subject to scrutiny from the public and policymakers, especially during the pandemic, as wellness influencers selling MLM products such as essential oils became purveyors of anti-vaccination conspiracy theories (Baker, 2022; Mastrangelo & Longo, 2024).

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The genesis of conservative MLMs such as Patriot Wellness Box is unclear due to the lack of transparent business practices that purposefully obfuscate who owns or runs the company. To view products, one must contact a direct seller, who typically does not include the company name in promotional posts. A substantial number of these conservative-based MLMs appear to have opened within the last three years, and all promise consumers American-made products and a way to live their values.

Conceptual Framework

Using Abidin's (2021) framework of refracted publics and Cotter's (2019) concept of "playing the visibility game," this study seeks to understand the ways that vaguely coded conservative MLMs such as Patriot Wellness Box enable conservative female influencers to circumvent algorithms and sentiment seed more radical conspiracies within lifestyle content. As an extension of networked publics, refracted publics do not seek maximal visibility and instead are characterized by the conditions of transience or ephemerality, discoverability (not easily searched), decodability (coded language), and silosociality (communal context) (Abidin, 2021).

Like their mainstream counterparts, conservative influencers' success depends on their ability to cultivate a large following and adapt to constantly changing algorithms to maintain visibility (Abidin, 2015; Cotter, 2019; Duffy & Hund, 2015). However, given that much of their discourse is conspiratorial and contested (e.g., anti-vaccination, Joe Biden works with Big Tech to censor conservatives), it has a higher likelihood of being moderated or deleted. Thus, their tactics for negotiating visibility are inherently more complex. These frameworks enable deeper exploration into the relational nature of this form of affective algorithmic play.

Method

Using qualitative inquiry, I began analyzing the discourses of female conservative influencers tied to various conservative MLMs in a practice akin to the ethnographic concept of "deep hanging out" (Geertz, 1998). While this mode of inquiry is less systematic, it allows researchers to silently observe and familiarize themselves with the norms and practices of groups (Marwick & Partin, 2022). In concert with a larger research project, I have spent a couple of years in this space and have observed the shifts in discourse and audiences as they joined new MLMs.

Through this immersion, I developed an actor-based approach and identified 20 female conservative media influencers on Instagram. They all had a public account, promoted conservative politics with radical discursive themes, had between 10,000-1 million followers, and were affiliated with one or more MLM businesses. These accounts were selected as micro and macro-influencers who may be more persuasive than their mega-influencer counterparts as they can cultivate a more authentic persona (Campbell & Farrell, 2020), and their political endorsements are less likely to seem financially motivated (Goodwin et al., 2020). These accounts are not statistically representative of this group; however, they were chosen to represent central issues within the conservative media ecosystem, such as media bias, COVID-19 vaccines, home-

schooling, culture wars, belief in democratic conspiracy theories, reproductive rights, and gun control.

Data from Instagram profiles was computationally and manually collected. The dataset includes a large corpus of visuals, videos, and text. I also spent time experiencing each account as a user would by scrolling through content and taking detailed notes of stories, posts, and connections between influencers. Guided by the principles of discourse analysis, the corpus was read thoroughly and then reread several times, and notes were taken to identify overall themes and strategies in connection with the framework of refracted publics and playing the invisibility game.

Preliminary Findings

While mainstream influencers often build their audiences through collaboration, these female conservative influencers who teeter between mainstream conservative politics and the far-right utilize ideological MLMs in various ways that merit greater attention. First, their self-amplification groups operate simultaneously to grow their audiences and obscure their connections to the far right and one another. As these women climb to the top of the patriotic pyramid schemes, they often hide their connections to QAnon and far-right influencers and use more coded language to hint to their older followers that they have not sold out. They offer MLMs as a way to resolve the disenfranchisement their followers feel in a capitalist system that does not reward them for working hard and trying to fit within the narrow but cushioned box of white womanhood that is allocated in the white supremacist patriarchy. But freedom is not found in subscription boxes, nor are the skills to homestead.

Second, the MLMs are discussed in ways that mirror sovereign citizen/white militia rhetoric that positions the government as an existential threat they must be prepared to fight. Part of that preparation includes withdrawing from public schools and boycotting major corporations rather than forming militias (at least for now). They are promoting anti-democratic messages, xenophobia, and authoritarian-esque sentiments under the guise of a conservative lifestyle achievable through MLM participation.

The more significant impact is not on supposedly woke corporations' bottom line but in spreading widespread distrust and fear that institutions meant to serve public interest are actually tied to a government conspiracy to harm all Americans, not just conservatives. As the 2024 presidential election looms large, we must analyze the ways that trust in government and public institutions is being undermined through neoliberal conservative MLMs one subscription box ad at a time.

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