

How Multi-Level Marketing distributors have adapted to the Covid- 19 Pandemic.

Capstone Project

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Research Question: Has the Covid-19 Pandemic allowed Multi-Level Marketing distributors to heighten fears of individuals through their online social media platforms?

National College of Ireland
Project Submission Sheet – 2020/2021

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Abstract

The following body of research is an investigation of the exploration of how Multi-Level Marketing distributors and companies have adapted to the Covid-19 Pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in 350,000 people in Ireland being on the pandemic unemployment payment (Aodha,2020). During this time, it has left many people vulnerable due to unemployment in this time of uncertainty. The aim of this study is to examine how Multi-Level Marketing companies have adapted to the Covid-19 Pandemic to potentially heighten fears of individuals and determine the hypothesis if they have benefited. Multi-Level Marketing companies use social media to make sales and recruit employees, this research examines the ontological position in terms of how social media alters the way we view the world. A decision into this field was proven to be significant as many literature texts exist of the unethical issues associated with Multi-Level Marketing companies, this research aims to dive into how these companies are operating during the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Introduction

Multi-Level Marketing is also known as network marketing is a business strategy in which individual salespeople sell inventory from a manufacturer to buyers, which is sold from either word of mouth or direct sales from their own social media networks (Crelin, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in a spike in unemployment which has led to an increase in individuals being involved in direct sales for Multi-Level Marketing distributors. The aim of this research is to investigate how exactly the pandemic has affected these Multi-Level Marketing distributors and how they are heightening fears online. Also wishes to investigate how Multi-Level Marketing are growing their markets and how exactly they are using the inflation of unemployment to their advantage. Upon investigation Multi-Level Marketing has been described as “*controversial*” as according to (Sparks & Schnek, 2006) salespeople for Multi-Level Marketing firms often are unaware of exactly they are getting into and Multi-Level Marketing schemes have often been scrutinised for ethical issues and been targeted as pyramid scheme like businesses. A common reoccurrence in these literatures is how these Multi-Level Marketing companies seem to be trading as normal with such scrutiny and be able to market non-FDA approved drugs that supposedly can help kill the coronavirus. The research question examines has the Covid-19 pandemic allowed multi-level marketing distributors to heighten fears of individuals through their online social media platform. With the findings hopefully answering the hypothesis of: Have Multi-Level marketing companies benefited from the Covid-19 pandemic? The research explores themes in the hopes of determining the hypothesis and uses nentography to explore further in these Multi-Level Marketing groups who use social media to campaign there businesses.

This study aims to investigate how multi-level marketing distributors have responded to the pandemic and the concept of them taking advantage of individuals vulnerabilities, This can be achieved through the analysis of techniques Multi-Level Marketing companies have adopted since the pandemic and also an observation at how unemployment has affected the

population and a look into how much exactly certain Multi-Level Marketing firms have grown this year. A mixed methods approach using quantitative and qualitative in is used to collaborate on findings of the two and strengthen the study's findings. A survey is sent out in the collection of quantitative data and a content analysis for qualitative incorporating the topic of netnography is used to help the research findings in determining if Multi-Level Marketing companies have heightened the fears of individuals. The collaboration of a mixed method approach allows the two data forms to complement each other in the significance of the findings. A common reoccurrence in these literatures is how these Multi-Level Marketing companies seem to be trading as normal with such scrutiny and be able to market non-FDA approved drugs that supposedly can help kill the coronavirus. Another reoccurrence that is apparent throughout the findings is the awareness of Multi-Level Marketing employees being aware of the unethical issues associated with these companies. The research thoroughly investigates how these distributors use this to their advantage.

Research Question and Hypothesis

Research Question: Has the Covid-19 pandemic allowed multi-level marketing distributors to heighten fears of individuals through their online social media platform.

Hypothesis: Have Multi-Level marketing companies benefited from the Covid-19 pandemic?

The purpose of this research is to determine the hypothesis of have multi-level marketing companies of benefiting and resulted in a positive outcome since the Covid-19 pandemic. The focus of this research is to determine how Multi-Level Marketing distributors have adapted to the Covid-19 pandemic and answer the research question in relation to heightening fears of individuals through their online social media platforms. The logic behind this research and the ability to have sufficient evidence in order to complete the evidence exists from previous literature. The literature review discusses Multi-Level Marketing companies' previous reactions to events such as the recession and how they thrived, in an event such as the Covid-19 Pandemic it is evident the pattern is there for the repetition of these events. The research investigates how they heighten fears in order to benefit from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Literature Review

Impact of Covid-19 on Multi-Level Marketing companies

Previous studies have emphasized that multi-level marketing distributors have been using Coronavirus and also the internet to grow their businesses. A survey conducted in June reported that 51% of companies who conducted in the survey confirmed that Coronavirus has had a positive impact on their companies (Vesoulis & Dockterman, 2020). The authors recognise that working in direct sales can be *seemingly ideal for people who are unemployed*. While some distributors stated that their products that are not approved

by FDA products can protect people from the virus. This boosts sales for these companies while playing on the insecurities of peoples fear of the Coronavirus. This article demonstrates the hypothesis that Multi-Level Marketing distributors are supposedly benefiting from the Covid-19 pandemic. The article also discusses how Multi-Level Marketing companies are using social media to recruit new potentials employees by personally messaging them. This article creates a foundation for the research question and hypothesis. In this previous study we are constrained American Multi-Level Marketing companies. With limitations to research on Irish Multi-Level Marketing companies which suggests that research is needed in this area. The study supports the research project as the author argues that particular companies are gaining off the Covid-19 pandemic a new approach is therefore needed to investigate potential Irish companies who also might be capitalizing.

Multi-level marketing also known as network marketing and infamously also referred to as pyramid schemes is a business model in which has a unique way of doing business. Emek, et.al , (2011) Multi-level marketing is a marketing technique in which encourages its employees and distributors to promote a certain product amongst their friends using social media platforms. Crelin (2020) describes how Multi-Level Ms sell any kind of products with the most well known companies such as Avon, Herbalife, Amway, Montat and many more specializing in products such as cosmetics, health/dietary products, kitchenware just to name a few. Multi-Level Marketing distributors recruit new employees by messaging them on their social media platforms in engaging into a high degree of informal conversations. Tierney (2020) conducted research and revealed that many recruiters start a business relationship with friends by a simple message on Facebook of “Hey Hun!!” and an engaging introduction of how being an employee can give this Facebook friend a new way of earning money online. Previous research illustrates how employees of Multi-Level Marketing firms earn primarily from commission from sales by other vendors in which have been recruited by said employee (BĂLĂȘESCU,2020). Multi-Level Marketing firms encourage sales representatives to sell to people within their own social media networks and to build social media platforms. The primary motivational factors that are used to capture new employees in to this global business models are the idea of a supplemental income, gaining financial independence, being a “girl boss”, more free time, meeting new people and earning a substantial increase in income, Pearse (2001) empathizes how the attractiveness of Multi-Level Marketing’s marketing strategies are used in the recruitment process.

Multi-Level Marketing companies have adapted to the pandemic in sales techniques Tait (2020) examined several Multi-Level Marketing employees and how they market such products describing one user posting on their Facebook page *“I know many of you are wondering how you might be able to pay your bills if they lock down the UK. I have an opportunity.”* This is just one of thousands posts in a attempt to recruit more employees. in addition to existing Multi-Level Marketing companies attempting to recruit employees with the exciting new business product has also resulted in the emergence new proposed Multi-Level Marketing firms which have been known to be suspected pyramid schemes. Burns (2021) investigated how the flower/leaf which entails a €150 joining fee and then in the recruitment on others they can move up levels in to the inner circle of so called leaf or flower. These two authors both demonstrate practices in how these firms have adapted to the Pandemic and are using marketing techniques in doing so. In contrast to these marketing

techniques there has also been attempts to ban this particular kind of content as TikTok has recently banned content that promoted Multi-Level Marketing companies. This evidence represents how Multi-Level Marketing firms have used plots to increase sales/ recruitment, thus a content analysis and an investigation into the techniques and clear qualitative research position will thoroughly demonstrate how exactly Multi-Level Marketing companies have adapted to the pandemic as an advantage.

Adee (2019) stated that Multi-Level Marketing firms obtain a business model that target the poorest this is also apparent in Groß, C. and Vriens, D. (2019) investigation as they report that Multi-Level Marketing companies target the unemployed, vulnerable individuals, and income- deprivates populations who may be attracted by “*promise everyone can succeed*”. Tait (2020) had a similar analysis and interviewed a former employee of a Multi-Level Marketing firm and stated that they were encouraged to target a profile of people such as stay at home mums or newly unemployed people. This addresses how Multi-Level Marketing groups target certain individuals and how employment techniques are revolved around targeting vulnerable individuals. Which results in Multi-Level Marketing firms using the Covid-19 pandemic to their advantage as it’s a time of uncertainty. Previous research concludes how unemployed individuals are targeted by these distributors prior to the Covid-19 Pandemic. The body of research that exist already allows the research to progress to the exploring a methodology for this field and how the researcher can add to the existing research.

Effect the pandemic has on Multi-Level Marketing groups an economic perspective

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in 350,000 people in Ireland being on the pandemic unemployment payment (Aodha,2020). Although the spike in unemployment in terms of GDP it has estimated to have increased by 11.1 percent, which is driven widely increases in personal spending (Burke-Kennedy,2020). The authors evidence of an increase in non-essential items provides clarification that it is possible Multi-Level Marketing distributors sales may not be affected or even increased as a result of the pandemic. If we compare this with (Vesoulis & Dockterman, 2020) report during the 2007-2009 great recession the number Multi-Level Marketing sellers began to rise and went from 15.1 million in 2008 to 18.2 million in 2014. This study addresses the concept in which also examined by Tait (2020) that individuals are seeking alternatives in a time of uncertainty. Multi-Level Marketing firms are using the Covid-19 pandemic and their internet platforms to capitalize their businesses and play of individuals insecurities regarding unemployment and general fear of Covid-19 itself.

The individuals Multi-Level Marketing distributors target

Adee (2019) stated that Multi-Level Marketing firms obtain a business model that target the poorest this is also apparent in Groß, C. and Vriens, D. (2019) investigation as they report that Multi-Level Marketing companies target the unemployed, vulnerable individuals, and income- deprivates populations who may be attracted by “*promise*

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Ethical issues associated with Multi-Level Marketing distributors.

There exists a considerable body of literature on the ethical issues associated with Multi-Level Marketing companies, Kohen (2001) demonstrates how if a company is recruitment focused as opposed to sales targets and with the high upfront fees that come with joining Multi-Level Marketing companies, this raises a red flag of how ethical these companies really are to their employees as highlights how they have been targeted as being pyramid schemes

This research investigates the ethical issue associated Multi-Level Marketing Although the author discusses ethical issues associated with Multi-Level Marketing the research is limited as since 2001 the door to door selling aspect of Multi-Level Marketing is nearly gone with the rise of social media being the drive of direct sales. There is also a need for investigation of how people are more susceptible to Multi-Level Marketing due to smartphone and social media view. Although the study demonstrates how Multi-Level Marketing companies target new recruiters there have been new techniques due to filter and targeted advertisements on social media. This study has similarities to the research but further investigation in regard to social media supply model of Multi-Level Marketing companies. The author unstudied the theory of how individuals can be vulnerable to joining these firms without knowing what they are getting into, although this study validates the ethical issue, it proposes the need for research of vulnerability amongst unemployed individuals due to the Coronavirus pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in a projected amount of as high of 24.7 million in a high case scenario and in the lowest cases scenario 5.3 million jobs will be lost due to the pandemic (Kawohl, & Nordt, 2020). The repercussion of mass number of individuals being unemployed and industries shutting down has many impacts on households both emotionally and financially. Individuals who are out of work can be considered as vulnerable and can become a target for Multi-Level Marketing distributors.

Prior research demonstrates the implications that Multi-Level Marketing firms have been faced with due to ethical issues, Leskin (2020) provided evidence that a Herbalife a Multi-Level Marketing company has paid out \$235 million in the last six years to settle lawsuits and investigation against the company. The author examined press articles and interviews conducted with individuals who have had suffered financial loss from certain companies. The understanding of a loss these individuals have suffered and use this a mean of research can create an insight into how these companies can manipulate in recruitment processes. This provides a meaningful insight It is credible with all the above literature that Multi-Level

Marketing companies have ethical issues associated with them and also that they are potentially thriving with a spike in unemployment. These studies all prove relative similar points, but with constraints of investigation exactly how these firms are capitalizing.

Multi-Level Marketing distributors use false advertising on their social media platforms as investigated by Graham (2020) Multi-Level Marketing sellers have even suggested that their products which are non-FDA approved can “ward” of the virus. Distributors of these unethical companies are now using the fear of pandemic as marketing rescheme or also as an employment strategy due to high rate of unemployment and the potential attractiveness of working from home. This illuminates how Multi-Level Marketing firms are using the pandemic to their advantage.

Multi-Level Marketing and social medias relationship

Social media is the platform in which Multi-Level Marketing distributors get their messages across, Rhodes, et.al, (2016) discusses how social media isn't just used by business as method of marketing but as an “overall strategy”. In the light of this research it is conceivable that business' have had to adopt their business models to use social media as a medium for marketing. The author analysis the significance of social media in how business' market their company. Rhodes, et.al describes how effective social media is in reaching out to people and can reach a significant higher amount of people compared to standard marketing. This study confirms how social media, and the internet is a result of most of the businesses' market growth. This literature can be considered a first step toward a more profound knowledge of how Multi-Level Marketing distributors use social media as marketing and in their direct sales. The understanding of how important social media is in marketing confirms how Multi-Level Marketing companies are using the internet to grow their businesses.

The surge of social media has allowed Multi-Level Marketing to grow at an increasingly steady rate. Le Gall et.al (2020) focused on the impact of social media and cognitive abilities which are the core skills the brain is needed to function among the practice of users. The author suggested that reliance on social media has altered user's perception and the inflation of “fake news” has resulted in social media portraying negative qualities and not just a networking platform to connect friends. WOJDAN, et al. (2021) also demonstrates through an investigation how of every tenth individual surveyed the stated they used social media all the time. Social medias newly profound presence in today's society has greatly altered the way in which communication is done as described by Martin (2020) social media changes the way we communicate and also is a strong marketplace for business which strengths Multi-Level Marketing's business model.

Social media is the platform in which Multi-Level Marketing groups trade and do majority of their business from Hajili, (2014) describe how social media facilitates the social interaction of consumers online, which results in an increased trust and intention to buy this indicates how Multi-Level Marketing distributors can use social media to gain users trust and use campaigns that include fears of the Covid-19 as marketing strategy in either offering products that help “fight” the virus or offer a job working from home to the newly unemployed as a result of the pandemic. Social media and the use of filtered advertisements due to consumers

previous interactions on posts filters in which advertisements, pages or even links will appear on their homepage. As demonstrated by Obar & Wildman (2015) “*user generated content is the lifeblood of social media*” this piece of literature examines how individuals’ profiles generate the posts in which they see. This provides evidences that Multi-Level Marketing groups can use social media to target individuals in which based on their profiles would be most interested in their products or joining the companies.

Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study is determining how Multi-Level Marketing distributors have adapted to the Covid-19 pandemic. To explore this an investigation using a mixed method approach of qualitative and quantitative research. A mixed method approach allows the researcher to compile strengths from qualitative and quantitative data. Groß, and Vriens, D. (2019) identified how these groups consist unemployed, vulnerable individuals, and income- deprivates populations, Aodha (2010) analysed the spike of over 350,000 individuals becoming unemployed due to the pandemic. This purpose of this research is to investigate using a mixed method approach to how multi-level marketing distributors have adapted to the Covid-19 pandemic and comparative approach will be applied to analyse techniques in which have been executed. The techniques which will be analysed is the social media activity in which Multi-Level marketing companies have adopted since the Covid-19 Pandemic. The objective of the research is to analyse techniques used pre pandemic and post pandemic to determine. This section will go through the steps taken to comprehend, compile, and present the study that was conducted in support of this research project. Second, it will explain the paradigms that were used to thoroughly explore the conceptual positioning as well as the alternative methodologies that were used to create a Research Design.

Philosophical Assumptions

In terms on an ontologically position social media alters the way we view the world in terms of individuals beliefs which can be adjusted as a result of social media. Macionis & Gerber, (2010) Social media is an online platform which allows us to network with our friends, Goh, (2018) reported how social media is a method of people connecting and interacting with each other through various platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc. In the context of this research multi-level marketers use this in a different perspective, a way to do business in marketing there products as and highlighted in the literature review in messaging certain individuals for recruitment purposes. The conceptual framework of this research must take into account that in the analysis of social media is of a different reality to the standard connecting with friends’ standards and opens up a whole different perspective of how social media can be used for business purposes. The use of social media for Multi-Level marketing can look very attractive for social media users. Multi-Level marketing distributors can use social media to portray a new way of working and creating a positive social media feed can looking promising for social media friends. The research looks at a different side to social

media in a way of using it as an overall business strategy. The ontological positioning highlights and must be accounted for upon research as social media is changing the reality of how people engage and must be examined from a different point of view. As the research looks at multi-level marketing distributors the research paradigm will take into account interpretivism. As the research is based upon human interaction interpretivism is important in consideration in the research. As the research looks at unemployment the rationale to why individuals engage in these Multi-Level marketing companies will be interpreted. The research will include individuals' emotions, opinions, and values of to engaging and the ethics associated with these groups of individuals. Interpretivism seeks to explain the meaning and rationale behind something, and this involves a subjective view to follow with this research theory. This will be applied to the research as the analysis will investigate the general human interest. As interpretivism involves how individuals shape society this key indicator as the individuals involved in multi-level marketing are the result of a rise in the increase in multi-level marketing activity since the pandemic

Research Method

In order to gain a through understanding of methods that multi-level marketing distributors have adapted since the Covid-19 pandemic a mixed method approach will be adopted. As According to Greene (2008) using just a quantitative or qualitative paradigm only quantitative or qualitative paradigm will only have a sliver of an understanding of the phenomenon being investigated. Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, (2011) illustrated how a mixed approach acknowledges and agrees that several variables are at work in a single event, and as a result, it typically requires more than one instrument for data collection and a large number of evidence sources to capture the effects of these variables. It has the ability to combine quantitative and qualitative information. A mixed method approach also answers the objective of if yes they have adapted to the Covid-19 pandemic and how in fact they have. In investigating other research conducted in June 2020 by (Vesoulis & Dockterman, 2020) reported that 51% of companies who partook confirmed that the Coronavirus has had a positive impact on their companies. As the authors singly used quantitative research qualitative will help gain an understanding of underlying motivations and to uncover possible themes and patterns certain distributors have used.

To clarify and demonstrate material in determining the themes and patterns the multi-level marketing distributors have used a content analysis will provide the research with this. A content analysis will analyse and uncover certain themes and examine nuance behaviours of the multi-level marketing groups. In establishing which social media platform's content to analyse Facebook will be the platform in which the researcher will investigate. Facebook provide the most applicable data in which can be analysed although multi-level marketing distributors engage Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc Facebook provides an extensive amount of data. The content analysis will undertake a qualitative approach as it will be analysing posts by Multi-Level marketing companies and distributors. Instagram was determined not fitting as majority of useful data that was published by multi-level marketing distributors is Instagram stories which are only available to view for 24 and then are deleted. Twitter also proved to provide an inadequate amount of data to analyse and would result in difficulties for the research. The content analysis will exclusively look at Herbalife Nutrition in the analysis as this long-standing company provides an extensive amount of material to investigate. The data in which the research will focus on in these social media posts will be

posts regarding the research question. This includes posts in relation to unemployment, Covid-19 pandemic, recruitment process and techniques, the mentioning of new opportunity due to Covid-19 pandemic and the adjustment to working from home. The content analysis will also take a subjective view in interpreting certain posts that may have only occurred post pandemic. As the analysis looks at Herbalife nutrition this will analyse certain health and lifestyle orientated products that are being promoted post pandemic. Along with this the content analysis in terms of data analysis a comparative approach will be undertaken, comparing pre and post pandemic posts and content on Herbalife Nutrition's Facebook platform.

In terms of quantitative research, a survey will be conducted to support the findings of the content analysis. A survey rather than an interview was chosen as the survey can provide more answers due to more participants being applied to a survey approach. The rationale of a survey is to provide a statistical interpretation of how social media users have noticed or associate with multi-level marketing distributors, as this will be the criteria of the survey respondents. The survey will contain 10 multiple choice questions with an "other" option choice allowing participants to comment if the multiple choice questions answers are not chosen. The survey will be sent through email to participants who use social media. The survey will only be sent to participants who use social media as the answers will then deflect as they have no way of seeing the marketing of these companies, in order to get the most accurate results and represent precise results. The survey will provide quantitative results that will be interpreted in the data analysis to determine if the group have noticed an increase in Multi-Level marketing activity. The survey design and the questions asked will be around the theme of social media and multi-level marketing companies and distributors. The questions aim to provide a result of users noticing an increase in their social media users engaging or an overall increase in activity in these companies. The survey will also mention ethical issues associated with multi-level marketing companies and gather users' opinions. The questions will be multiple choice allowing another option which allows user to contribute if they which another answer if the above is not deemed fit. There will also be certain question which will be scaled answer 1-5. As many individuals may be familiar with multi-level marketing under a different name such as network-marketing or pyramid selling this will be stated in the survey as long as an abstract to ensure participants are aware of the research title. It will also ensure participants can answer questions correctly as they aware of the ethos of the survey and what multi-level marketing is.

In addition, the research will also ethnography in the analysis of Herbalife nutrition this will be used in conjunction within the content analysis. Netnography allows the user to analyse the behaviour of a certain group of individuals on the internet, in this instance this is member of the Herbalife Nutrition community. In order to examine these groups of individuals the research will examine a group on Facebook of Herbalife Nutrition. This involves the joining of this group on Facebook, as the user can join instantly and acquires no validation this a public group on Facebook. The research will be a passive member of this group as the observation of the group will be done will no participation. The use of netnography allows the data analysis to examine these groups of individuals and how they react on a wider scale. The analysis will produce a more informative research as the investigation of this group will result in a more aware understanding of how these groups operate and themes and patterns in terms of the language used in these groups and also marketing techniques. The marketing

techniques will help in answering the research question as the research will produce how exactly these groups are being informed to interact or a pattern of how multiple multi-level marketing distributors have reacted to the pandemic. Netnography will be used alongside the content analysis.

Limitations

In research various limitations exist in the research process and inhibit the research investigation as these occur. Limitations are apparent in the survey as respondents may be unaware of multi-level marketing although an explanation is provided, they may provide inaccurate answers. There is also a limit on survey respondents there will be 40 participants in the survey limiting the questionnaire to a larger cohort. As the content analysis is done manually and no programmes is used the limit of time suffers as a result. Content analysis' are time consuming and in order to produce the research in the allocated time places a limit on the time that can be used for the content analysis. Although the research takes a mixed method approach the quantitative research is used in subordinate to qualitative research. This limits how the research can be statistically represented and may propose problems in producing patterns of the research.

Analysis and Findings

This study was approved by the NCI ethics board, following NCI ethics policy. Participants were aware that by completing the survey, they consent to using their data in the study. The research question aims to understand how multi-Level marketing companies have adapted to the Covid-19 pandemic and if it has positively impacted these distributors. As mentioned in the literature review the sole business model revolves around social media to gain sales and recruit new member to join these internet-based selling firms. This research sets out to prove through a question how multi-Level marketing companies have adapted to the pandemic. All participants of the questionnaire are users of at least one social media platform of either Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. After collecting an adequate amount of 40 responses and a survey design that intends to highlight the hypothesis of these companies heightening the fears of individuals, this survey is focused to discover how social media members have noticed an increase of content from these companies and contemplate survey responses views of these companies. Along with the quantitative approach of a survey a content analysis using a qualitative approach is also used. This mixed method approach enables a stronger

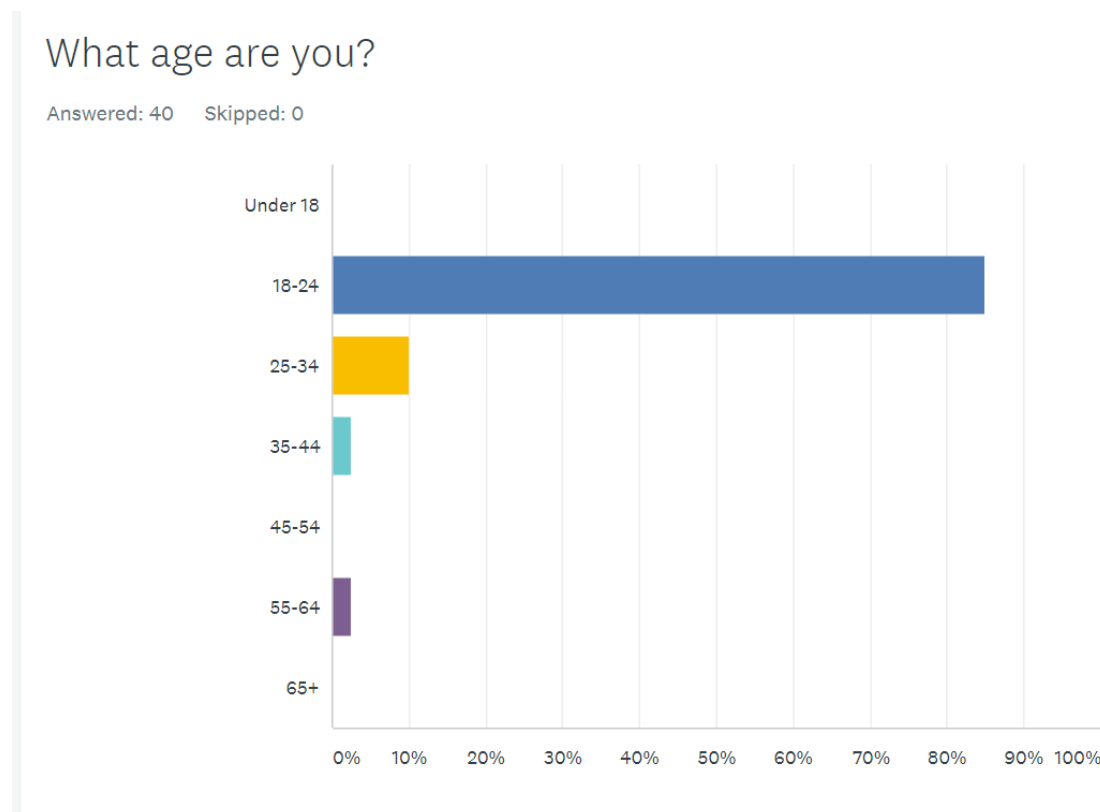
understanding of techniques and influence multi-level marketing companies have on individuals and also expand and strengthen the research findings.

The survey hopes to recognise the influence multi-level marketing companies have on social media users. This study was approved by the NCI ethics board, following NCI ethics policy. Participants were aware that by completing the survey, they consent to using their data in the study.

Survey findings and analysis

Figure 1

Question 1



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES |
|----------------|-----------|
| Under 18 | 0.00% 0 |
| 18-24 | 85.00% 34 |
| 25-34 | 10.00% 4 |
| 35-44 | 2.50% 1 |
| 45-54 | 0.00% 0 |
| 55-64 | 2.50% 1 |
| 65+ | 0.00% 0 |
| TOTAL | 40 |

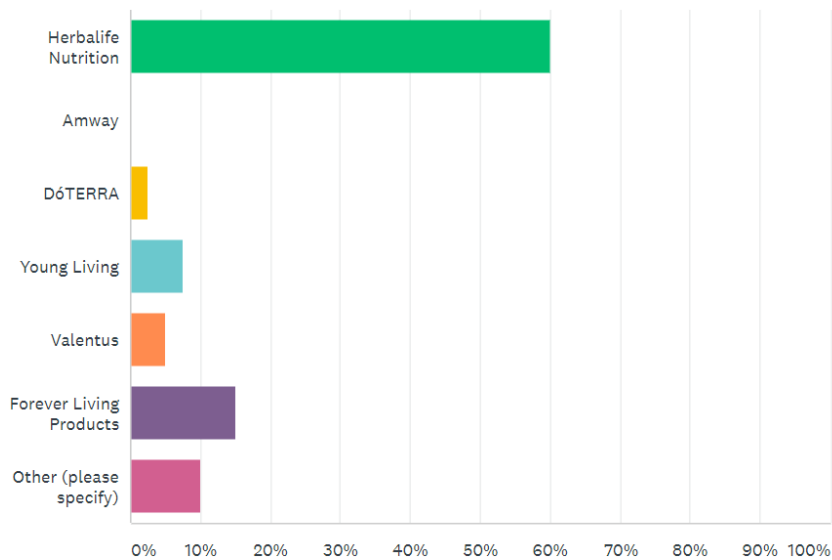
The survey results for question 1 showed that 85% of survey participants were between the ages of 18-24 years old, this age category being the majority of participants. While 10% between the ages of 25-34 years old, 2.5% between the ages of 35-44 years old and 2.5% between the ages of 55-64 years old. The rationale behind this question is to reveal the age demographic of participants. In asking this question the researcher can identify if there is a correlation between age and the answers in which are recorded in the survey. As over 85% are between ages of 18-24 this research during the analysis process of the 10 survey questions the examination can be done if there is a trend in the answers of this survey and can come to conclusion its majority from the same age demographic.

Figure 2

Question 2

Which Multi- Level Marketing scheme are you most familiar with?
(also known as network marketing or pyramid selling)

Answered: 40 Skipped: 0



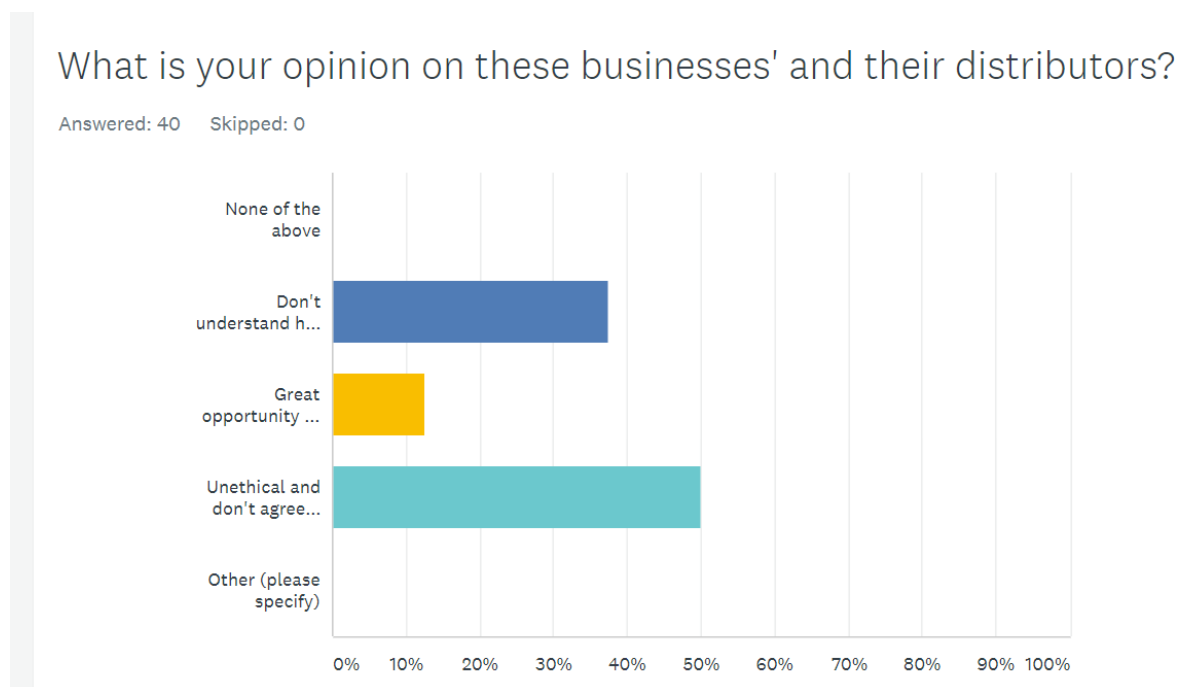
| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|-------------------------|-----------|----|
| Herbalife Nutrition | 60.00% | 24 |
| Amway | 0.00% | 0 |
| DóTERRA | 2.50% | 1 |
| Young Living | 7.50% | 3 |
| Valentus | 5.00% | 2 |
| Forever Living Products | 15.00% | 6 |
| Other (please specify) | 10.00% | 4 |
| TOTAL | | 40 |

The results for question 2 consisted of 60% participants being familiar with Herbalife Nutrition, 2.5% participants being familiar with DóTERRA, 7.5% participants being familiar with Young Living, 5% being familiar with Valentus and 15% participants being familiar with Forever Living Products. In addition to these results 10% of participants choose the

other option with three participants stating N/A and none and one participant stating that the multi-level marketing company they are most familiar with being Juice Plus. The reasoning behind this question is to expose the multi-marketing companies in which these participants (who are all social media users) have come across. The survey design hoped to get a trend of any companies who a number of participants have witnessed selling of their products or the promotions of their products on social media. It is evident there is a trend of Herbalife Nutrition being the company participants are most familiar with at 60%. This proposes the research with an insight to a basis to further investigate Herbalife Nutrition with the research question of how they have adapted to the Covid-19 Pandemic. As declared in the literature review Leskin (2020) reported that Herbalife Nutrition have paid out \$235 million in the last six years to settle lawsuits. It is evident of ethical issues with this company and with the results of the survey that participants are familiar with Herbalife Nutrition the research can investigate this particular company in more detail in order to answer the hypothesis that multi-level marketing companies have capitalised of the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Figure 3

Question 3



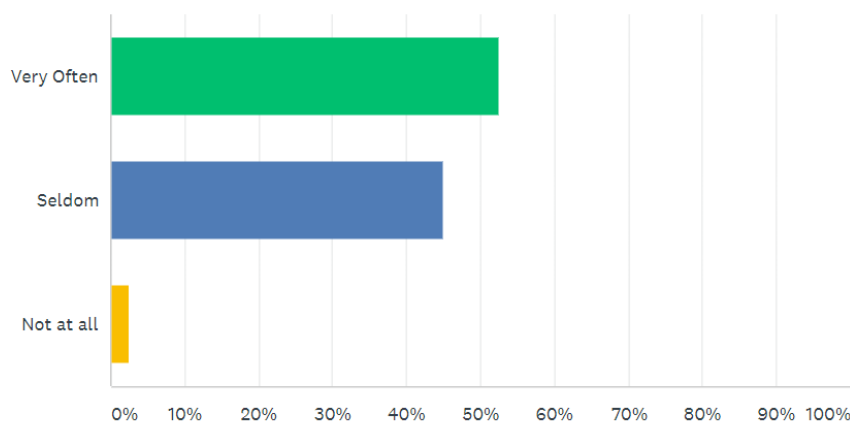
| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|--|-----------|-----------|
| None of the above | 0.00% | 0 |
| Don't understand how this type of business works | 37.50% | 15 |
| Great opportunity to make money | 12.50% | 5 |
| Unethical and don't agree with this type of business | 50.00% | 20 |
| Other (please specify) | Responses | 0.00% 0 |
| TOTAL | | 40 |

The results of question 3 show that 37.5% of participants don't understand how this type of business work, 12.5% have the opinion that is a great opportunity to make money and 50% have the opinion that is is unethical and don't agree with this type of business. The purpose of this survey question is to gain knowledge of what participants assumptions and opinions are of these companies. As these have faced allegations for years of being unethical the research hopes to reveal participants views on these companies. With 50% agreeing they are unethical business but at 37.5% of participants don't understand how this type of business works this provides the research and clarifies that even some of these participants aren't aware of the ethical issues associated with these companies and employees of these firms have suffered financial loss as a result of the unawareness of these ethics. From this analysis it is evident that individuals may join these companies during the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Figure 4
Question 4

How often do you come across multi-level marketing through social media posts?

Answered: 40 Skipped: 0



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------|-----------|-----------|
| Very Often | 52.50% | 21 |
| Seldom | 45.00% | 18 |
| Not at all | 2.50% | 1 |
| TOTAL | | 40 |

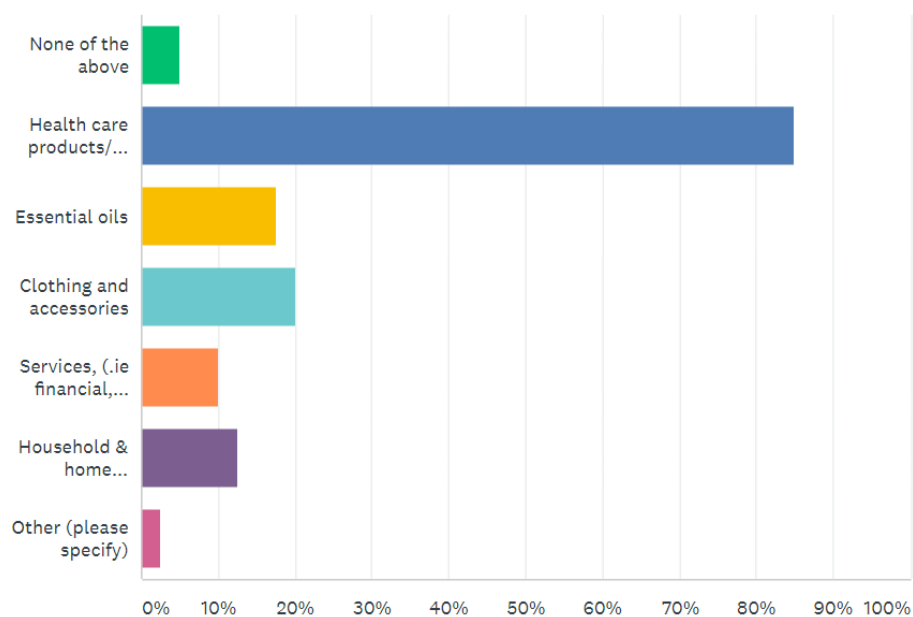
An analysis of question 4 showcases how often participants come across these social media posts with 52.5% coming across these posts very often, 45% seldom and 2.5% not at all. The ideology behind this question is to investigate how many participants encountering these social media posts which can give the research a basis to go that social media users are coming across these posts. With only 1 respondent not coming across these posts at all provides evidence of how many individuals internet-based selling businesses can reach.

Figure 5

Question 5

What kind of products have you come across being advertised on social media by these companies?

Answered: 40 Skipped: 0



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|--|-----------|----|
| None of the above | 5.00% | 2 |
| Health care products/ wellness products (dietary products, weight loss products, vitamins,etc) | 85.00% | 34 |
| Essential oils | 17.50% | 7 |
| Clothing and accessories | 20.00% | 8 |
| Services, (.ie financial, cashback, educational) | 10.00% | 4 |
| Household & home appliances | 12.50% | 5 |
| Other (please specify) | 2.50% | 1 |
| Responses | | |
| Total Respondents: 40 | | |

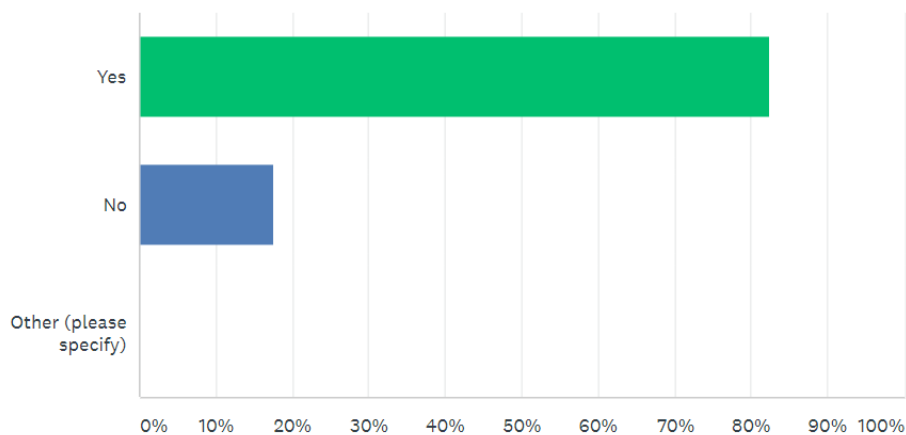
The responses to question 6 display the kind of products participants have encountered being advertised by these companies, with 5% stating none of the selected options, 85% stating health care/wellness products was encountered, 17.5% stating essential oils products was encountered, 20% stating clothing and accessories was encountered, 10% stating services were products that were encountered, 12.5% stating household and home appliances were encountered and 2.5% stating other which was responded by the participant as none. The purpose of this question was to determine the products that are being campaigned during the Covid-19 Pandemic and will be used for further analysis in the content analysis the research.

Figure 6

Question 6

Since the Covid-19 Pandemic have you witnessed more of your Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or social media friends engaging in these companies? (i.e recruiting for the company, selling products, purchasing products)

Answered: 40 Skipped: 0



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES |
|------------------------|-------------------|
| Yes | 82.50% 33 |
| No | 17.50% 7 |
| Other (please specify) | Responses 0.00% 0 |
| TOTAL | 40 |

Question 6 resulted in 82.5% of participants noticing an increase of their social media friends being associated with these companies and 17.5% responding that they have not noticed an increase in engagement. The ideology of question 6 is to detect if there has been an increase in activity of these companies since Covid-19 Pandemic and then enables to research to later conclude what activity has been taken to do so. The importance of this question is considerable as it provides a need for further investigation as to answering they have increased in activity and secondly the research will provide the answer of how. In addition, it is evident that the review of previous literature as examined by (Vesoulis & Dockterman, 2020) who concluded that the Covid-19 Pandemic has resulted in a positive result for which can be showcased

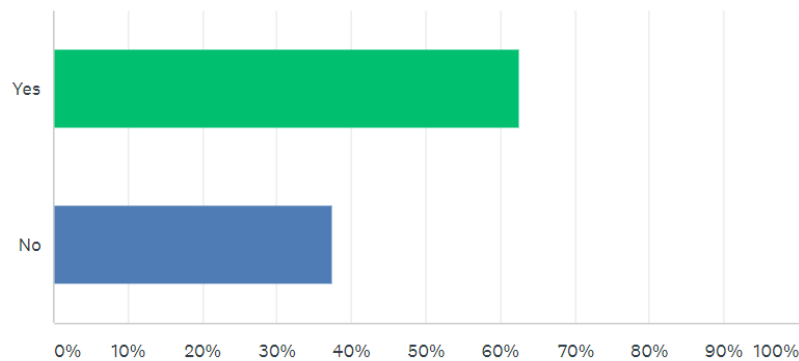
through the increase of employment which has resulted in participants in seeing more social media posts prior to the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Figure 7

Question 7

Are you aware of ethical concerns many individuals associate with Multi-Level Marketing schemes?

Answered: 40 Skipped: 0



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES |
|----------------|-----------|
| Yes | 62.50% 25 |
| No | 37.50% 15 |
| TOTAL | 40 |

The 7th question relates to the revealing if participants were aware the unethical practices that certain Multi-Level Marketing are associated with as a result 62.5% reported yes and 37.5% reported no. This question to gain knowledge of participants awareness was to understand that even though many participants are aware 37.5% were not aware. With the limitations kept in mind that the survey could only facilitate this highlights that there are individuals that

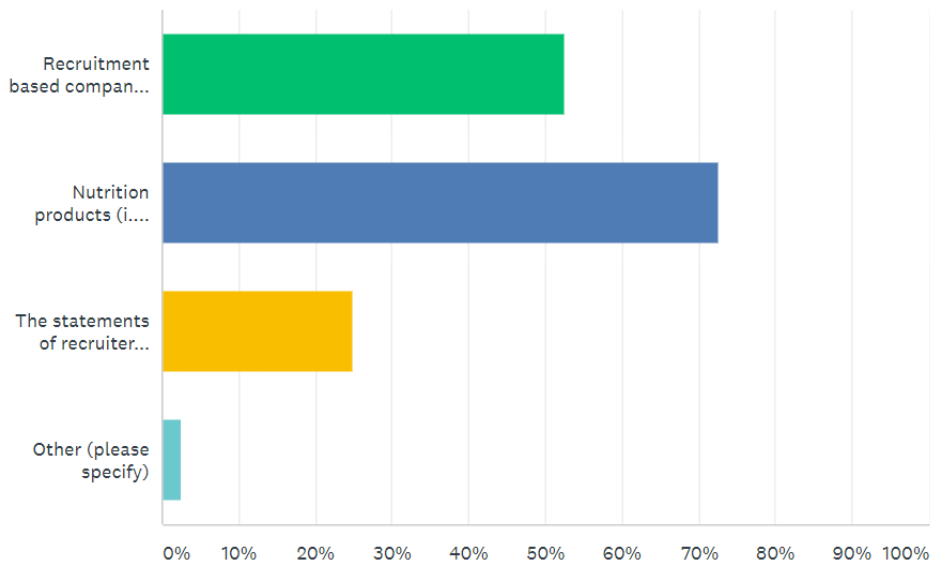
might not recognise the dangers associated with joining these companies. With 37.5% not being aware it is evident that these could become potential targets of these groups especially with the Covid-19 Pandemic which started out as a period that resulted in a rise in unemployment. As described in the literature review by Tait (2020) individuals are seeking alternatives in a time of uncertainty so the idea of Multi-Level marketing companies can look promising if unaware of ethical issues as of 37.5% of participants were not aware.

Figure 8

Question 8

Which practices do you associate with being unethical with Multi-Level Marketing companies?

Answered: 40 Skipped: 0



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES |
|---|-------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruitment based companies (majority of income is made of recruitment of new members and not of the products they sell) | 52.50% 21 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nutrition products (i.e many nutrition/ wellness schemes sell weight loss products which can contain harmful ingredients) | 72.50% 29 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The statements of recruiters of an attractive income that is not promised? (many new members lose or make no money) | 25.00% 10 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Other (please specify) | Responses 2.50% 1 |
| Total Respondents: 40 | |

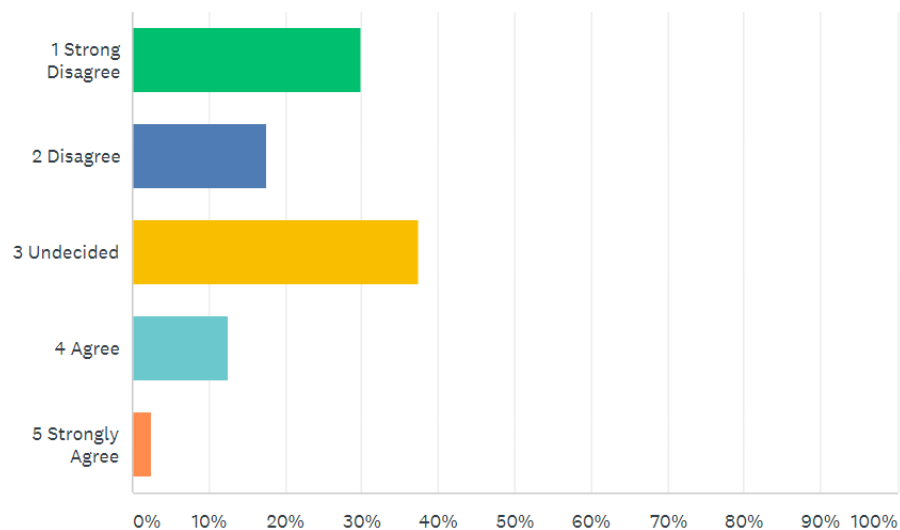
The 8th question was asked to determine why individuals may find unethical about Multi-Level Marketing companies. Participants were able to select more than one option hence the answer scores. 52.5% of participants chose the recruitment-based practices of Multi-Level Marketing companies, 72.5% believe the nutrition products and the harmful ingredients they can contain, 25% of participants believed it was the statements of recruiters of an attractive income that is not promised, with 2.5% stating other which was that “a lot of makeup is tested on animals”. In determining what individuals find unethical about these companies determines that nutrition and the healthcare products was the biggest factor. This is interesting as the biggest problem with Multi-Level marketing schemes is the pyramid like selling in which may member loose money. With other answers in mind the research proposes that many individuals are simply unaware of what entails in joining these companies and the potential loss of investments that is put into the company and income.

Figure 9

Question 9

Do you think multi-level marketing is a good way to earn money?

Answered: 40 Skipped: 0



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES |
|-------------------|-----------|
| 1 Strong Disagree | 30.00% 12 |
| 2 Disagree | 17.50% 7 |
| 3 Undecided | 37.50% 15 |
| 4 Agree | 12.50% 5 |
| 5 Strongly Agree | 2.50% 1 |
| TOTAL | 40 |

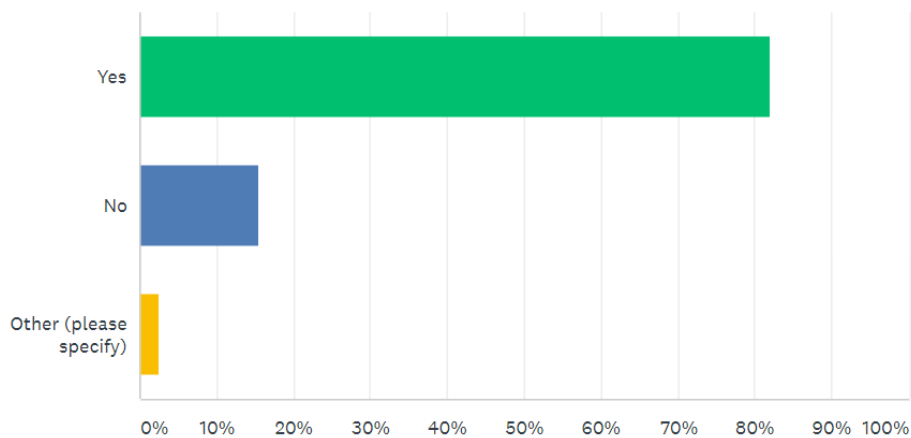
Question 9 of the survey is to determine if individuals believe if being a Multi-Level marketing distributor is a good way to earn money. To determine if besides the survey highlighting ethical issues with these companies this question determines if individuals would still consider it a good way to make money. With 30% strongly disagreeing, 17.5% disagreeing, 37.5% undecided, 12.5% agreeing and 2.5% strongly agreeing. With the response of participants there appears to be different opinions of participants. With 37.5% of majority being undecided which can conclude that these companies can potentially look attractive for these individuals.

Figure 10

Question 10

Do you think there has been an increase in your social media friend promoting/engaging in multi-level marketing companies since the Covid-19 pandemic?

Answered: 39 Skipped: 1



| ANSWER CHOICES | | RESPONSES | |
|--------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| ▼ Yes | | 82.05% | 32 |
| ▼ No | | 15.38% | 6 |
| ▼ Other (please specify) | Responses | 2.56% | 1 |
| TOTAL | | | 39 |

Final question is to create further validation among participants of this survey if the Covid-19 Pandemic has resulted in an overall increase in social media friends have been involved with these companies. With 82.05% reporting yes of an increase, 15.38% reporting no increase in which they have noticed and 2.5% reporting other which was down as N/A. It is evident that there has been an increase which gives the researcher a further means of discussion. The limitations have been considered that participants may not be aware that certain companies that may appear on their social media platforms are promoting or a “member” of these companies, with 82.05% reporting this the conclusion can be made that there has been sufficient evidence for further investigation and answers the research question and no further analysis can be done to prove the hypothesis.

Content Analysis

The next step in this research was investigating the qualitative component in this research titles mixed method approach. In doing this the with the research that was analysed in the survey and along with research already composed by numerous authors in the literature review the decision was to make a comparative content analysing specifically noticing a trend in content produced by multi-level marketing companies. Facebook was the chosen social media network as although Instagram is another social media network that is a popular platform choice for Multi-Level Marketing distributors, but Facebook was the chosen network. The reason behind this as Instagram stories only last 24 hours so Facebook post would be the most beneficial source for this research. With the data analysis Herbalife Nutrition concluded to be the Multi-Level Marketing company that survey participants were most familiar with. Along with all though research of lawsuits against this company in regards to the company having unethical claims, the research will look at Facebook posts from Herbalife Nutrition.

Immune boosting claims

A first look at a key theme of Herbalife Nutrition was claims of the nutritional products that Herbalife has to offer. Looking at the official page of Herbalife was analysed. As according to the HSE (2021) having a weaker immune system has been proven to may put you at a higher risk of serious illness from Covid-19. In relation to the population being concerned about Covid-19 there has been a spike in claims by Herbalife in regard to products the corporation claims to have immune boosting effects. Using the search bar on the Herbalife Facebook page to search all posts that contain the key word “immune” included showed all posts from the Facebook Page.

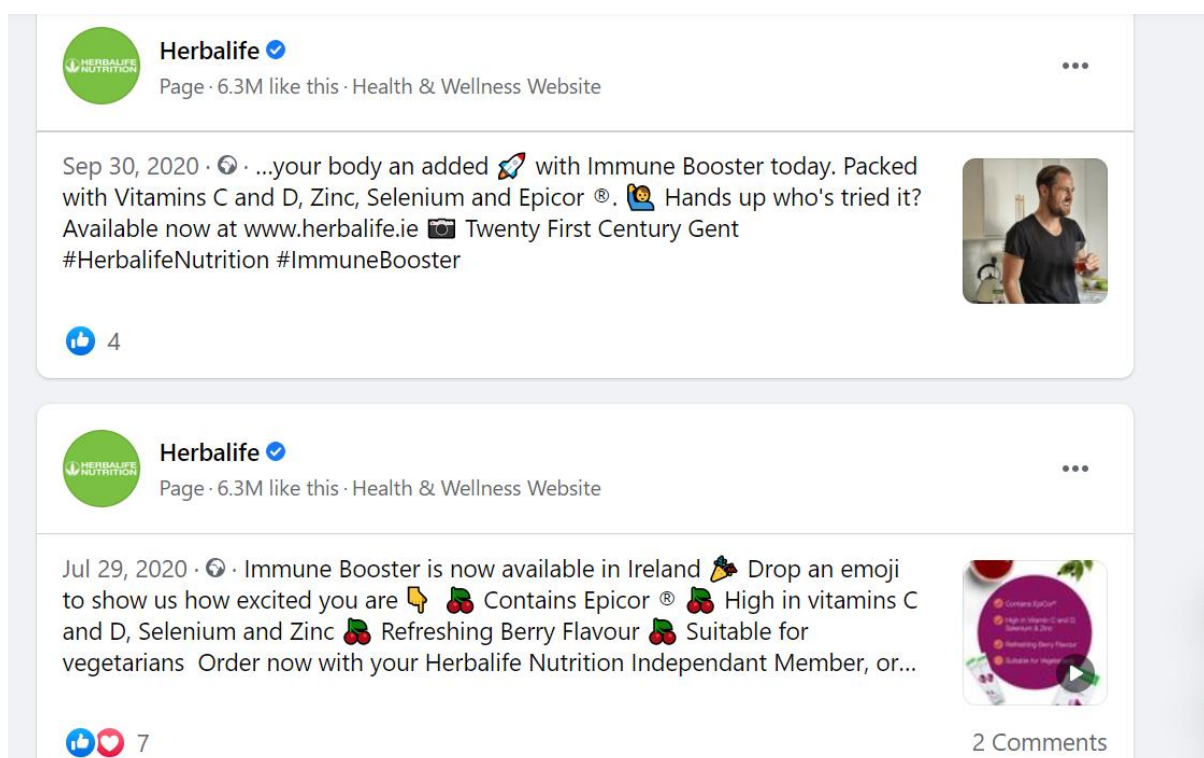


Figure 11

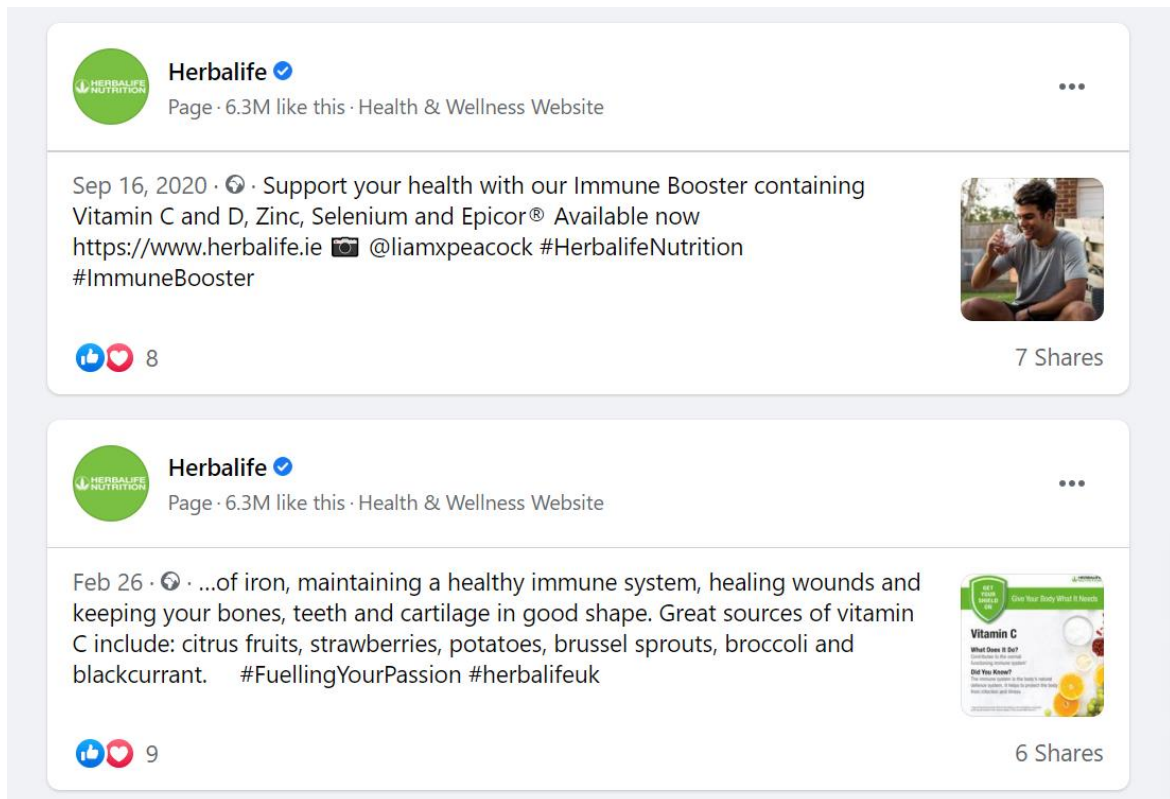


Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 13

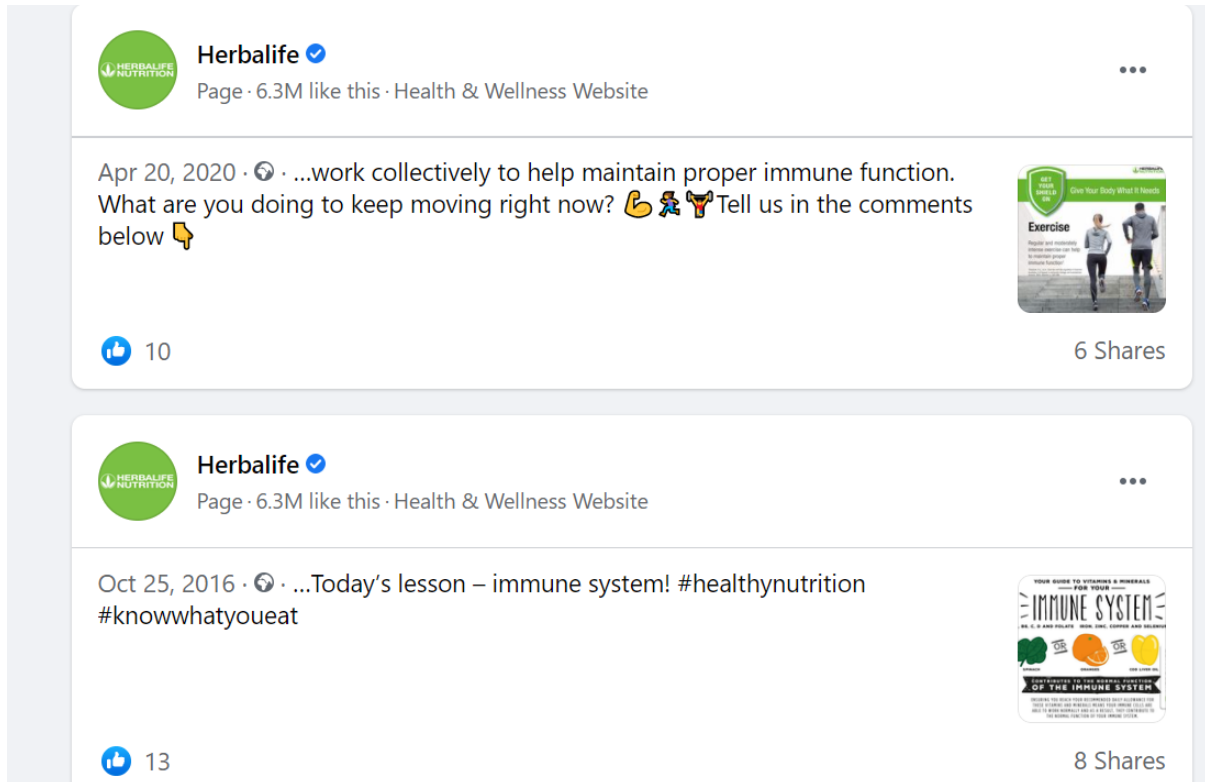


Figure 14

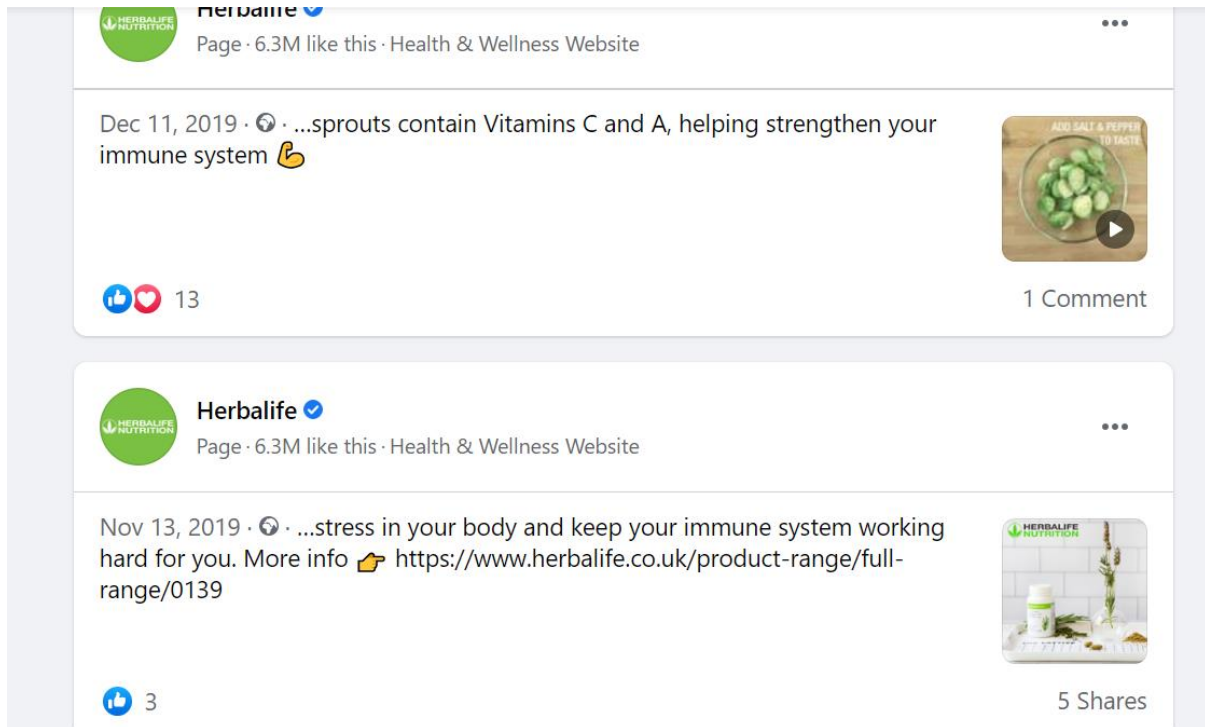


Figure 15

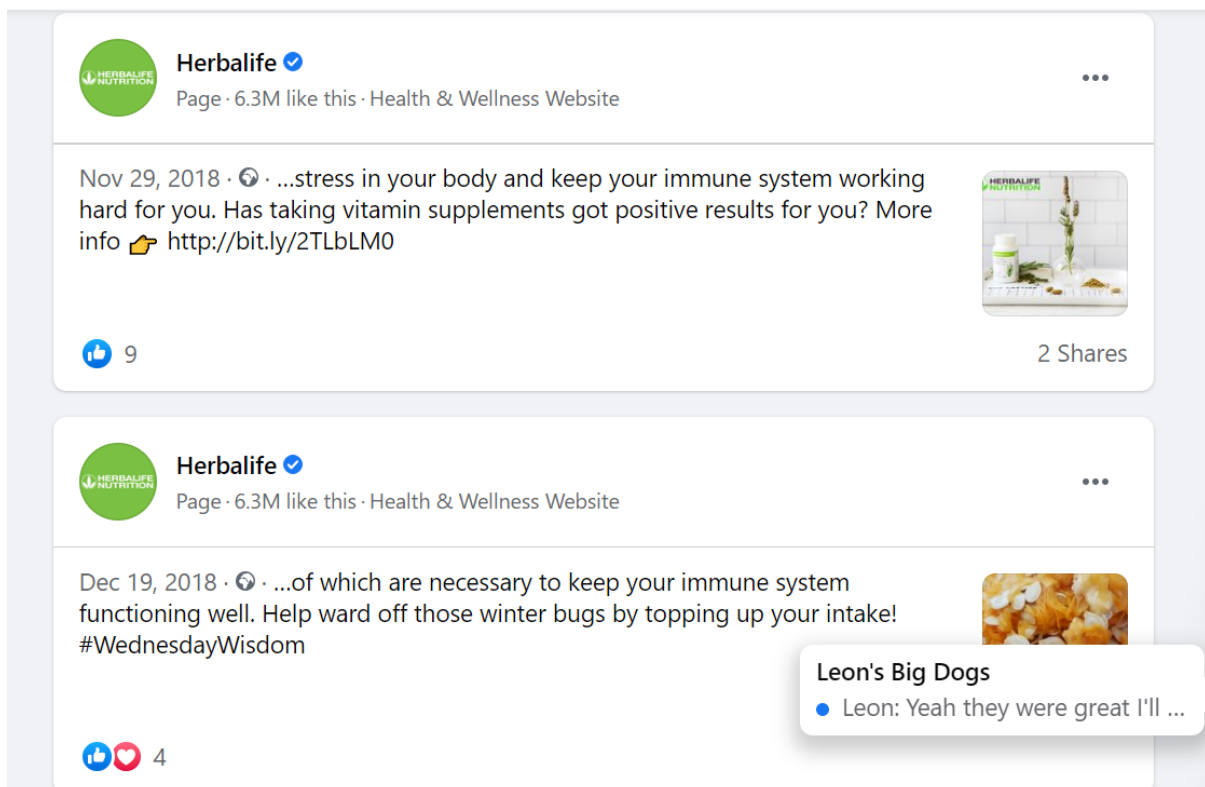


Figure 16

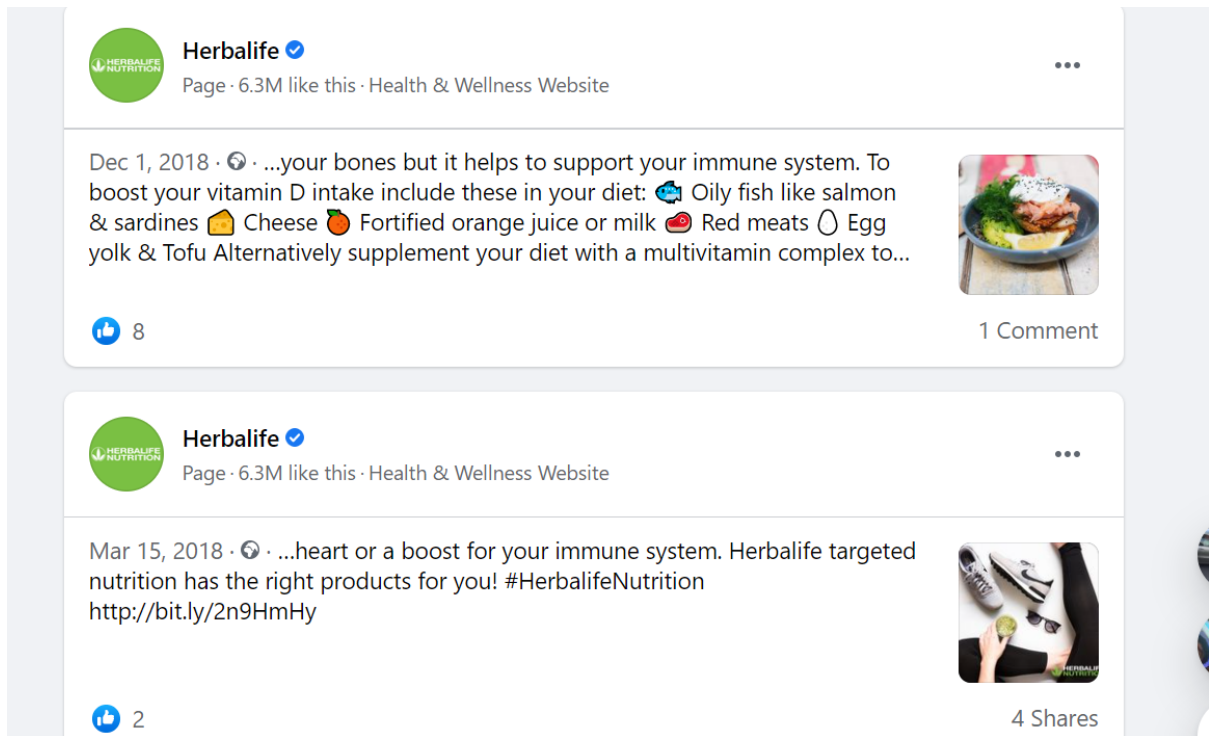


Figure 17

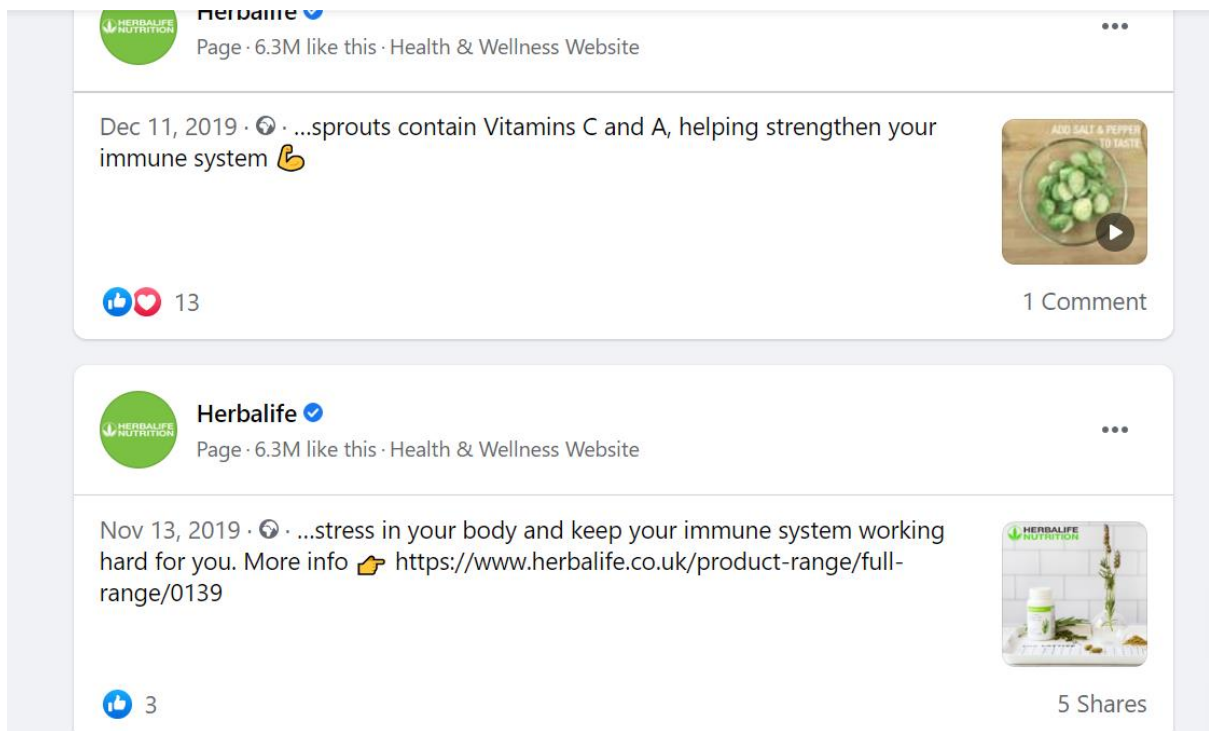


Figure 18



Figure 11-18 shows all Facebook posts in which include the work “immune”. In investigating these posts there has been an increase in these posts post the Covid-19 Pandemic which was considered a worldwide Pandemic as of 2020. In 2020 there was 8 posts from Herbalife containing the word “immune, in 2019 there was 4, in 2018 there was 6 and in 2016 there was 1. In 2020 compared to 2019 there was double the amount of Facebook posts advertising immune boosting products. This is a key example of how Herbalife their marketing and selling techniques in response to the Covid-19 Pandemic. It is evident there has been a change in Facebook posts alone in response to the Covid-19 Pandemic. It is discernible that the research of the content analysis is mirroring research within the literature review as Graham (2020) describes companies stating certain non-FDA approved products are advertised to ward of the Coronavirus. The repetition of immune boosting products The first step in this content analysis is the confirmation of an adjustment to the strategies of Herbalife adapting to the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Netnography

The next step is using the concept of netnography to examine the social interaction of Herbalife members. In order to examine the world of how they react the researcher joined a Facebook group “HERBALIFE ❤️” this a private Facebook group but is visible and anybody who is a Facebook user can find this group. After requesting to join the group the approval and being a group member was confirmed within minutes. The Facebook group

currently has 25.4k members and works to keep expanding this. In requesting to join the group in the hope the new member will attract more members in the hope to grow the group an online form must be filled out. In including members of the private Facebook group in order to ensure members names are not exposed all personal details of members will be protected. The research keeps in line with the National College of Irelands ethical guidelines.

I promise I will invite { } remember you promise ...

You can choose one option

20

50

100

500

1000




Figure 19

Figure 19 is the form in which must be filled out when joining the Facebook group. Once this option is requested and the “promise” has been filled out the content can now be analysed and now the research can gain quality insights. As members of the group posts marketing material in hope of gaining sales the material and the way it is communicated is analysed.

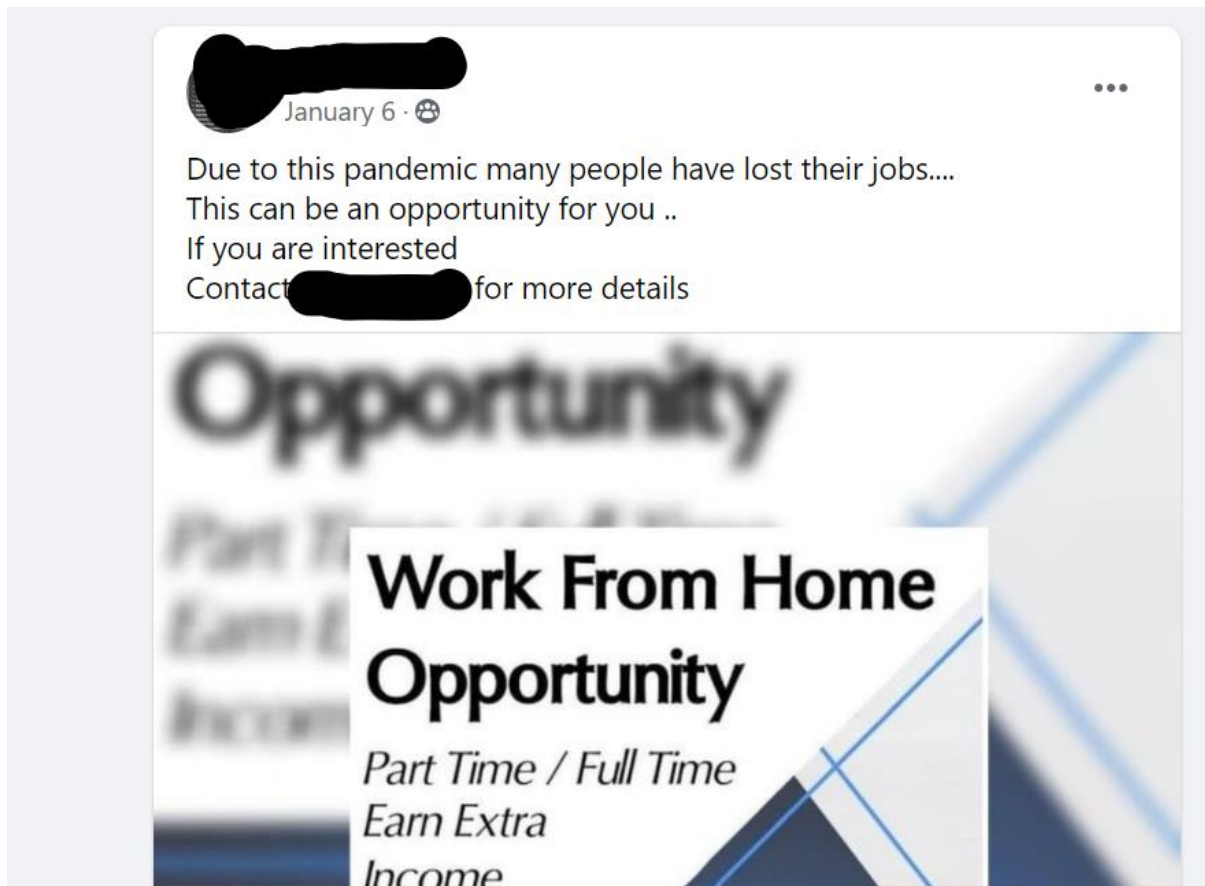


Figure 20

Figure 20 shows a result of a search result of searching the word pandemic in the search field. This was one of several members looking to recruit people to join Herbalife adopting the Covid-19 Pandemic as there latest marketing campaign. Members of this group highlighting the loss of jobs and unemployment due to the current health crisis of the Covid-19 Pandemic targets individuals and the uncertainty during this time. The reminder of the loss of jobs reevaluates to individuals of the loss of jobs and may believe they have no choice.

Ethical issues within the netnography of Herbalife private Facebook group

Throughout this research it is clear of the ethical issues that are associated with Multi-Level Marketing companies. The use of netnography allows the researcher to view how members of the Herbalife community socially interact with one another in a concealed environment. As ethical issues are so highly integrated with these companies it is valuable that the research concludes that group members are aware of the ethical issues and even express in group posts.

Figure 21

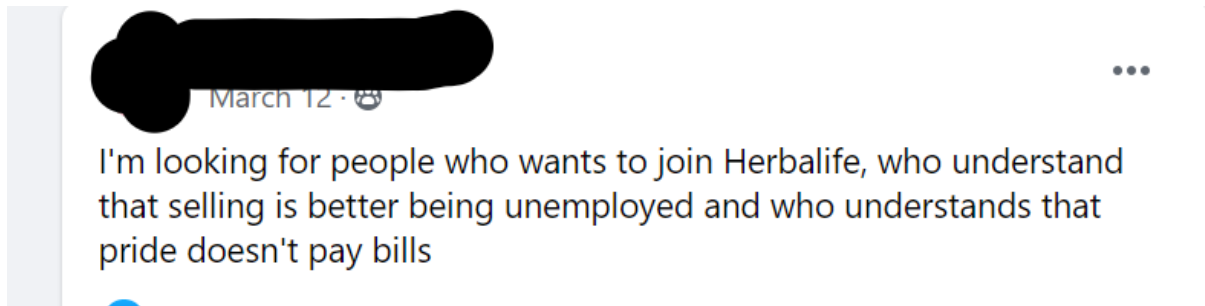


Figure 22

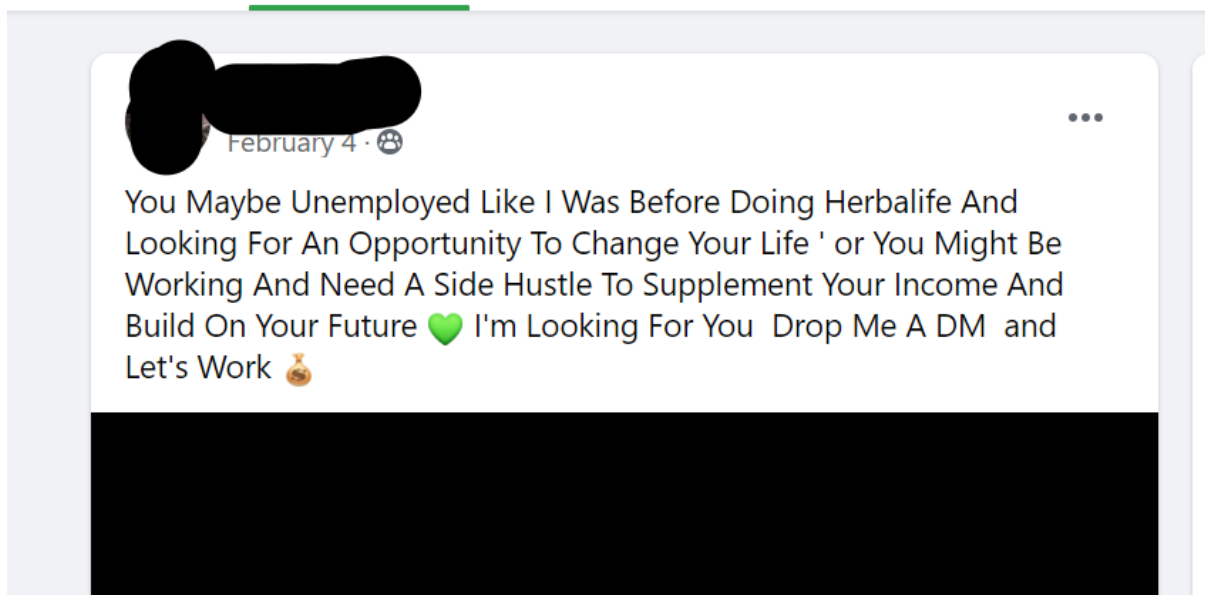


Figure 23

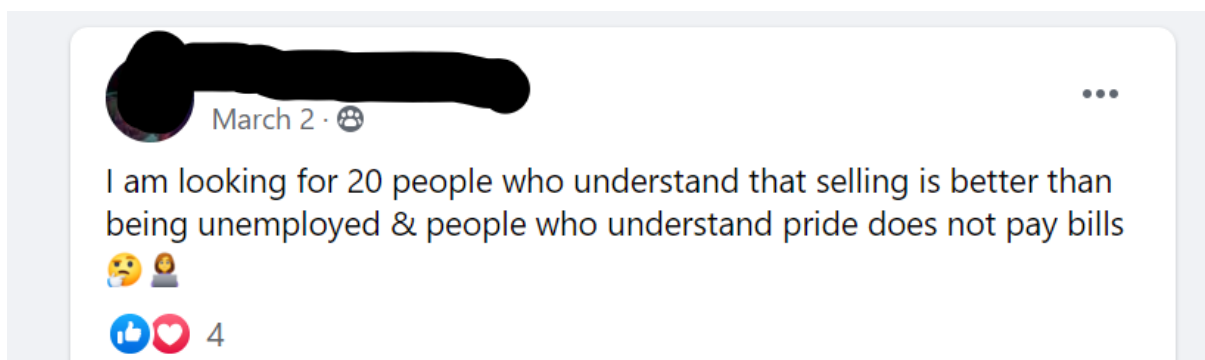


Figure 24

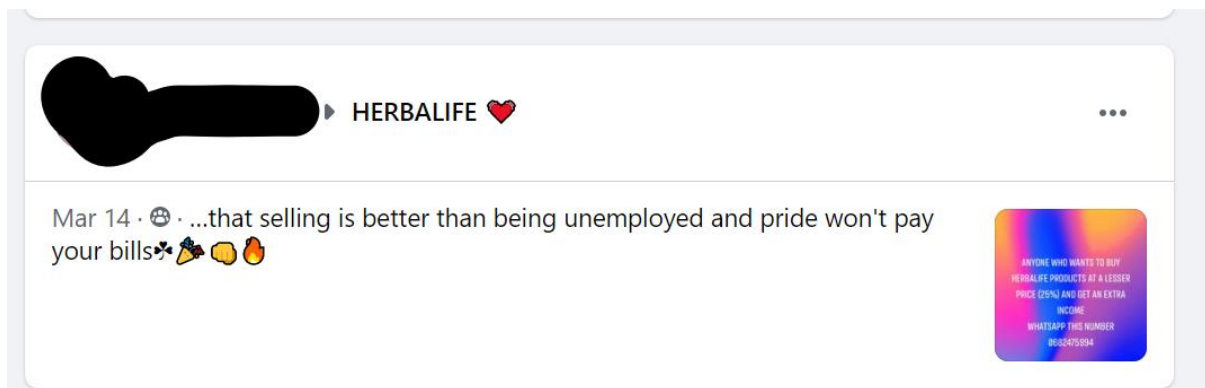


Figure 25

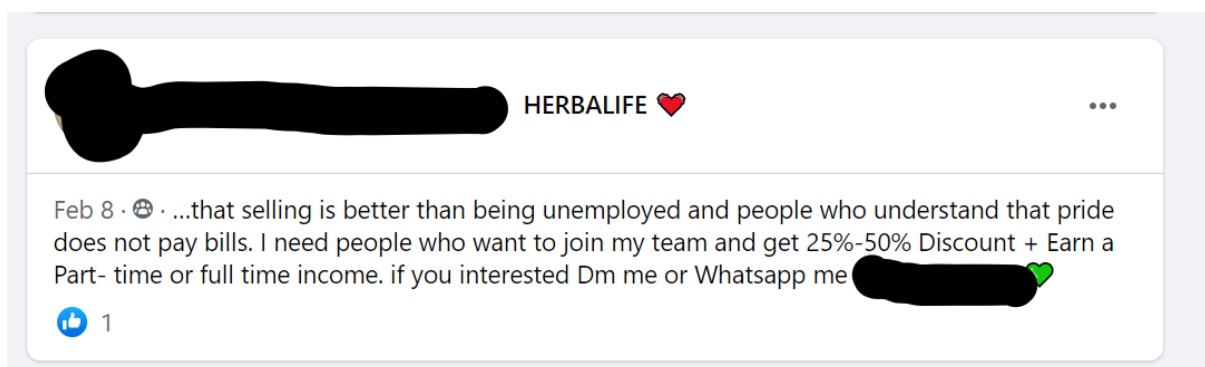


Figure 26

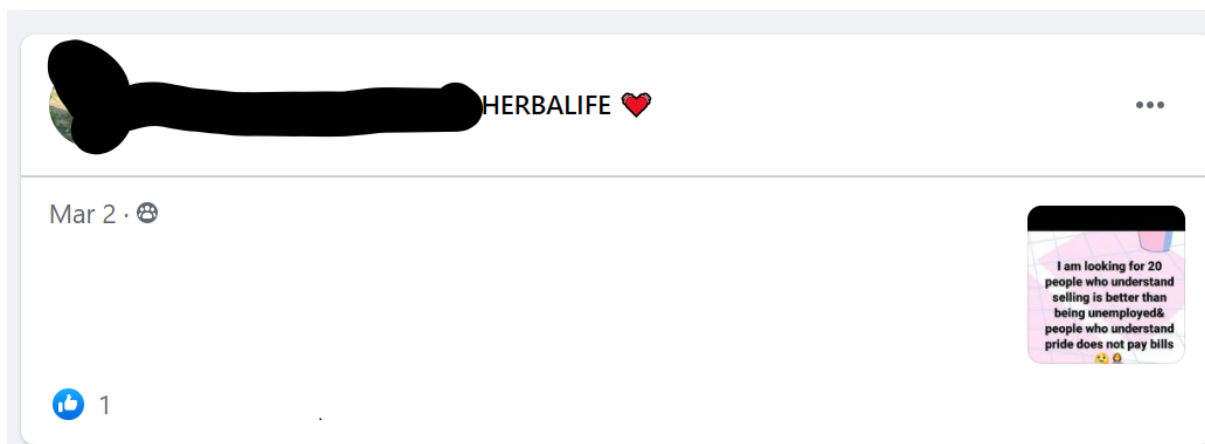


Figure 21-26 shows of posts highlighting members awareness of ethical issues. With a popular slogan used widely in the group from members of “pride doesn’t pay the bills”. Members also continually mention selling is better than being unemployed which as the literature review has analysed many individuals have been made unemployed due to the Covid-19 Pandemic. The comparison on the netnography of the private group compared to the official Herbalife Nutrition is evident.

Discussion of limitations within the data analysis and findings

Within the data analysis the research imposes certain limitations within the findings. Although netnography allows the researcher to dive into a world to study the interactions of this community it can be considered that the authenticity of the content compared to academic work that could potentially improve the research from a more scholarly academic point of work. If further analysis of this work was to be done this would be an aspect to look into and also the comparison of different Multi-Level Marketing companies compared to Herbalife Nutrition.

Conclusion

The aim of this research paper was to determine the research question of Has the Covid-19 pandemic allowed multi-level marketing distributors to heighten fears of individuals through their online social media platform. The data analysis concludes this, as the Covid-19 pandemic has created an overall fear factor within society today. As health concerns are more prominent than ever Herbalife promoting “immune boosting”. The use of increasing the inclusion of how their products boost the immune system can be concluded it as a result of the pandemic. The company is simply playing of peoples fears especially in relation to health. The research also concludes that the hypothesis is proven from the researcher as the survey results show that Herbalife was the most recognised Multi-Level Marketing company, and health products being the top result. The survey also concluded that survey participants have noticed an increase in social media friends interacting with Multi-Level marketing cooperation’s. The Covid-19 Pandemic has resulted in these companies benefiting as due to clever marketing techniques they were able to widen their reach online which is essential for a company which overall strategy is social media engagement for recruitment as this generates the most sales for the companies. The content analysis and survey analysis have a clear relation, as the use of recruitment strategies in “pride doesn’t pay the bills” and the recognition of unemployment within the Facebook group has proven to be successful, as members have joined this group due to marketing strategies it can be resulted that it has resulted in the companies benefiting with an increase in social media activity as a result.

The findings of the content analysis use netnography technique of the Herbalife Facebook page highlighted how Multi-Level marketing group target vulnerable people which is also illustrated within the literature review. The findings illuminated previous researchers’ findings that they target income deprived individuals also, which are also considered

vulnerable people, and the increase of unemployment on the rise fears are heightened by Multi-Level marketing companies by marketing slogans. The significance of the findings is imperative as it opens up a discussion that members of these companies are aware of the unethical issues. The netnography allowed the researcher to unquestionably find that members of these groups are aware of the unethical practices of these companies. As the detection of the knowledge of the unethical practices the assumption can be made those members of the group can alter campaigns despite knowledge of unethical issues. Members of these groups are seen to take advantage of this and can target the vulnerable groups, being able to do this benefits the overall Multi-Level marketing cooperation's as sales will continue to grow especially in the Covid-19 Pandemic when fear is overall heightened. The findings of the data analysis conclude that Multi-Level marketing companies have heightened the fears of individuals during the Covid-19 Pandemic. The ability of these companies being able to heighten the fears has resulted in a benefit for the corporations as it has resulted in increase in online word of mouth which is evident through the survey answers.

The finding in this analysis intensifies the information available already in the literature review regarding Multi-Level marketing companies in terms on ethical issues. As research is already present for confirmation of this the advancements this study makes using netnography provides a meaningful insight. The collaboration of the mixed method is concluded as an excellent choice, the survey provides us the answer to the research question and the content analysis with the how and confirmation of the benefit these companies have as a result of the Covid-19 Pandemic. Mixed methods allowed the research to understand contradictions. In terms of progression the research can explore the theme of netnography even further in possibly joining and entering more groups of Multi-Level Marketing companies.

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Appendix 1

Survey Link- <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/F39P2GQ>

Appendix 2

Survey abstract

This research survey looks to discover how Multi-Level Marketing distributors have adapted and overcome the Covid-19 Pandemic and determine if they have benefited from the pandemic. Multi-level marketing is also known as network marketing or pyramid selling. It is a business model in which it encourages its employees and distributors to promote a certain product amongst their friends using social media platforms. This survey is completely anonymous, so any answers given will not be traced back to any one individual. At any time during the survey, you may opt-out of the survey process, any incomplete surveys will not be used in the findings of the study. All information gathered in the survey will be securely stored by the researcher. The survey consists of 10 questions and takes approximately 2 minutes to complete. Surveyor is contactable at x18407524@student.ncirl.ie. At any time, you wish you may opt out of doing the survey as all incomplete surveys will not be used in the findings of the investigation.