

Teaching Critical Analysis of Persuasive Business Communication: Using Multilevel Marketing Recruitment to Illustrate Predatory Identification

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Abstract. Students increasingly encounter persuasive business communication that blends empowerment rhetoric, entrepreneurial promise, and community-based appeals. Distinguishing ethical influence from exploitative persuasion is therefore a central learning outcome in business ethics education. This article uses Kenneth Burke's theory of identification as a pedagogical framework for teaching students to analyze the ethicality of communication. Drawing on recruitment materials from three multilevel marketing (MLM) companies, the analysis demonstrates how identification strategies create predatory identification: appeals that exploit legitimate needs through promises structurally unlikely to be fulfilled. Offering instructors a replicable classroom exercise, learning objectives, and an Ethical Persuasion Analysis Worksheet, this framework supports instruction in business ethics, communication, marketing, and organizational behavior.

Keywords: business ethics education, persuasive communication, Kenneth Burke, multilevel marketing, identification theory, pedagogical framework, direct selling, feminist economics.

Business students routinely encounter persuasive communication that appears empowering while obscuring structural constraints. Contemporary business discourse increasingly employs sophisticated persuasive forms that blend emotional appeals, entrepreneurial narratives, and community-building rhetoric. To navigate these contexts ethically and critically, students need analytical frameworks for evaluating when persuasion crosses ethical boundaries.

1. Defining Contemporary Persuasive Forms

Three persuasive forms have become ubiquitous in business contexts, each presenting distinct pedagogical challenges:

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Narrative-based marketing constructs compelling stories that position products or opportunities within aspirational life narratives. Rather than emphasizing product features, these appeals invite audiences to see themselves as protagonists in transformation stories. For example, fitness programs focus on identity transformation as much as on exercise equipment: the narrative of becoming the person you've always wanted to be. The persuasive mechanism operates through identification with the narrative arc rather than rational evaluation of claims (Escalas, 2004; Woodside et al., 2008).

Influencer branding succeeds by creating parasocial relationships where followers develop feelings of friendship or intimacy with influencers despite the relationship being mediated and one-directional (Horton & Wohl, 1956). When influencers endorse products or opportunities, followers experience these endorsements as recommendations from trusted friends rather than commercial advertisements. The persuasive power derives from perceived authenticity and shared values, making critical evaluation psychologically difficult (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Entrepreneurial rhetoric frames opportunities using the cultural valorization of entrepreneurship, self-employment, and business ownership. Appeals emphasize autonomy, flexibility, and wealth-building potential while often obscuring structural constraints, capital requirements, and failure rates, making it difficult for audiences to recognize when entrepreneurial promises are structurally unachievable (Spinuzzi, 2017; Gill, 2014). The persuasive mechanism exploits cultural narratives about meritocracy and self-determination, making it difficult for audiences to recognize when entrepreneurial promises are structurally unachievable.

These persuasive forms demand new analytical tools because traditional approaches focusing on logical argument or empirical evidence often miss their primary mechanisms. Students need frameworks that can decode how these appeals construct identification, exploit legitimate aspirations, and create emotional investment that bypasses rational evaluation.

While MLM recruitment primarily deploys *entrepreneurial rhetoric*, it also integrates elements of the other persuasive forms: they use *narrative-based marketing* through transformation stories of 'boss babes' and financial freedom and increasingly employ *influencer branding* as recruiters build parasocial relationships through social media to blur the boundary between friendship and commercial recruitment. This integration of all three persuasive forms makes MLMs particularly instructive cases: students learn to recognize how these strategies combine and reinforce each other in contemporary business contexts.

2. Why Multilevel Marketing Provides an Ideal Pedagogical Case

Multilevel marketing (MLM) companies, also called network marketing or direct selling organizations, recruit participants who purchase products for resale and recruit additional sellers, earning commissions on recruits' sales. Over 20 million Americans participate in MLMs, with women comprising 74% of distributors (Direct Selling Association, 2023). MLM companies promise participants business ownership, flexible income, and supportive communities through recruitment materials that emphasize entrepreneurship, autonomy, and empowerment.

Federal Trade Commission (2021) research reveals that most MLM participants lose money, with median annual earnings typically below \$500 even before expenses. FTC analysis demonstrates that in pyramid-structured businesses, mathematical reality ensures that the vast majority of participants cannot succeed regardless of effort, as income derives primarily from recruitment rather than retail sales.

This gap between persuasive promise and statistical outcome makes MLMs an ideal pedagogical case for teaching persuasion ethics. The ethical violation is clear and well-documented, making the stakes transparent to students, while the persuasive mechanisms are sophisticated enough to reward careful analysis. MLMs successfully recruit millions despite overwhelming public evidence of failure. Students quickly grasp the ethical tensions while encountering persuasive strategies they will see in other business contexts, making MLMs a powerful entry point for developing critical analytical capabilities.

MLMs disproportionately target women through recruitment narratives emphasizing work-life balance, community, and economic empowerment (Pavelko & Barker, 2022; Wrenn & Waller, 2021). Recent feminist political economy research (Stewart & Clark, 2026) demonstrates that MLM recruitment systematically weaponizes feminist rhetoric while commodifying women's social reproductive labor, the care work relationships women build through years of unpaid community building, friendship cultivation, and mutual support networks. This gendered exploitation makes MLMs particularly valuable for teaching students to recognize when empowerment rhetoric masks structural exploitation.

3. Article Contributions to Business Ethics Education

This article contributes to business ethics education in four ways. First, it introduces a theory-based framework for analyzing the ethics of persuasive communication grounded in Kenneth Burke's identification theory. Second, it demonstrates that framework through systematic analysis of MLM recruitment materials, revealing specific mechanisms through which persuasion becomes exploitative. Third, it translates those analytical insights into a structured classroom exercise where students apply the framework themselves, developing

transferable critical thinking skills. Fourth, it provides complete instructional materials including learning objectives, assessment tools, and an Ethical Persuasion Analysis Worksheet (Appendix A) that instructors can adapt for their courses.

4. Learning Outcomes

The framework supports learning outcomes central to business ethics education. After completing the exercise, students will be able to:

- Analyze persuasive communication using Burke's identification framework (Burke, 1950)
- Evaluate ethical boundaries in persuasion using evidence-based criteria
- Interpret numerical disclosures in relation to rhetorical promises (Federal Trade Commission, 2021)
- Apply critical thinking skills to real-world business contexts
- Communicate ethical evaluations clearly and persuasively

These learning outcomes align with AACSB International (2020) accreditation standards in three specific areas. First, Standard 9 requires that business graduates demonstrate 'ethical understanding and reasoning abilities' (p. 37). This framework directly develops students' capacity to analyze when persuasive communication crosses ethical boundaries and to articulate evidence-based ethical evaluations.

Second, the framework supports General Skill Learning Goal 1, which emphasizes 'analytical thinking' and the ability to 'identify and solve unstructured problems' (p. 39). Students must decode implicit persuasive mechanisms and evaluate complex real-world cases.

Third, the exercise addresses Communication Learning Goal 2 by requiring students to 'communicate effectively' in written analysis, presenting evidence-based arguments about persuasion ethics (p. 40). The framework thus directly supports core AACSB competencies in ethics, critical thinking, and communication that business programs must demonstrate for accreditation.

5. Theoretical Framework

Why Kenneth Burke for Business Ethics Education

Persuasion research offers multiple theoretical frameworks, each with distinct analytical strengths. Dual-process models such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) explain persuasion through central versus peripheral processing routes, distinguishing between careful argument evaluation and heuristic-based influence. Cialdini's (2006) principles of influence identify specific tactical triggers, reciprocity, scarcity, authority, consistency, liking, and consensus, that shape persuasive success across contexts.