



The CEOmom

Exploring MLMs' tone of voice on Instagram during COVID-19 pandemic – case study of Company X

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– a case study of Company X

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Abstract:

The aim of this study is to explore the nature and role of tone of voice in multi-level marketing schemes' (MLMs) marketing communications during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through a qualitative approach including discourse analysis and development of a 4-pillar tone of voice framework, 30 Instagram posts from three Company X contractors were analysed.

The results indicate that Company X's tone of voice is highly personal, emotional, informal, and strongly assertive. 5 topics emerged as major themes discussed by contractors in their posts, with 9 different subject positions taken across the themes. A key finding was that every subject position covered a unique perspective to topics relevant to mothers and all maintained a different level of involvement with the consumer. The level of involvement of the consumer to the contractor was achieved through assumed thought-processes of consumers, usage first- or second-person pronouns, pre-determined relational familiarity, and actionable vocabulary. Mentions of the COVID-19 pandemic were largely implicit, with posts largely being split between referring to the pandemic as (1) an externally imposed experience and (2) as an opportunity to take action. As an externally imposed experience, the tone of voice is more depressive, focused on loss and togetherness. As an opportunity to act, the tone shifts to empowering and assertive through second-person pronouns and actionable vocabulary, delivering Company X as a solution to the aforementioned issues.

The study's findings provide insight into how tone of voice is a powerful tool defining not just the general "personality" of a brand but the perspectives that help communicate the brand's value to consumers. This study helps highlight how MLMs succeed in using a deep

understanding of their target audience and the context of the text's consumption, giving them more control over consumers' involvement in and perception of the brand.

Keywords:

marketing communications, tone of voice, multi-level marketing, social media

Contents

1	Introduction	5
1.1	Problem statement	6
1.2	Aim of the study.....	7
1.3	Demarcation.....	7
1.4	Definitions.....	7
2	Theory.....	8
2.1	Tone of voice frameworks	9
2.1.1	“Humanness”	9
2.1.2	Humanics.....	10
2.1.3	Brand Linguistics	11
2.1.4	Emotionality, Complexity, and Informality	12
2.2	Agency and identity creation	14
2.3	Impact of context on tone of voice.....	15
2.4	Consumer-brand relationship on Instagram.....	16
2.5	Marketing the “CEOmom”	18
3	Method.....	18
3.1	Choice of method.....	18
3.2	Data collection	20
3.3	Analysis of data	21
3.4	Reliability and validity	22
3.5	Ethical considerations	22
4	Results.....	23
4.1	RQ1: General tone of voice.....	25
4.1.1	Formality	25
4.1.2	Impersonality	26
4.1.3	Emotionality	27
4.1.4	Assertiveness.....	27
4.2	Minor RQ: Occurrence of COVID-19	28
4.3	RQ2: Identities developed through tone of voice	29
5	Discussion	37
5.1	Discussion of results.....	37
5.1.1	Methodological limitations	40
5.1.2	Future research	41
6	Conclusion.....	42
7	References	44

1 Introduction

From house parties to digital transformation, multi-level marketing (MLM) companies have adapted to different eras of connection between women. From when I was a child, I used to attend Tupperware and Nutrimetics parties with stay-at-home mothers hosting them, all getting a chance to catch up and supposedly earn money. Today, we scroll social media platforms to find a plethora of accounts selling MLM products, a clear indicator of network marketing entering the digital era. The very nature of marketing these MLMs on digital platforms so effectively has caused increasingly more women to lose money to stay involved.

MLMs have been criticised for years for their apparently exploitative nature but are still able to attract ever-increasing numbers of customers. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has found that 99.6% of all contractors lose their money while engaged in MLM schemes (Taylor, 2011). Despite contractors losing money, MLM companies continue to grow rapidly in size: in 2021, direct selling in the United States saw a record high of \$42.7 billion in sales and 44.6 million customers (Direct Selling in the United States 2021 Industry Overview, 2022). Company X, an MLM fitness and supplement company, saw a remarkable 300% increase in subscribers in 2020 coinciding notably with the COVID-19 pandemic (Haithman, 2020), long after its founding in 1998.

One change many MLMs have undergone which has successfully contributed to their growth is their adaptation to digital marketing. Over the last decade, MLM companies have focused on creating a sense of community and exclusivity, alluding regularly to contractors as “friends” and “private groups” on social media platforms (Fluegel & King, 2021). 2020 saw the height of COVID-19 quarantining globally (UCI Health, 2022), which coincided with a significant transition for women toward working from home and isolation from physical contact. Mothers with young children have been noted in studies as a primary target audience of these contractor opportunities due to the apparent potential of the work being remote, part-time, and highly flexible to their needs (Fluegel & King, 2021).

Social media platforms such as TikTok are taking an active stance against MLMs, however this has proven unsuccessful. TikTok officially banned MLMs from their platform during the pandemic on the basis of language used (Akhtar, 2020) and the FTC has issued warnings to

MLMs operating on platforms such as Instagram (Fluegel & King, 2021), prohibiting them from using certain vocabulary referring to working from home and COVID-19. However, on TikTok, MLMs have still been found in abundance (Little, 2021) despite the apparent ban. Social media platforms have thus unsuccessfully attempted to prevent the proliferation of MLMs due to them changing the way they present their business opportunity within the broader social context.

1.1 Problem statement

There has been little research on the tone of voice used by a brand and its relationship with the larger social context in which they're consumed by the target audience. Discourse analysis is an under-utilised tool within marketing (Caruana & Fitchett, 2015) which has been used inter-disciplinarily to explore the connection between the social context and how individuals consume content. MLMs actively changing their digital marketing communications during the pandemic are an example of how vital social context are in creating effective marketing communications to achieve a certain outcome, such as recruiting more contractors and customers.

A more tangible issue being faced is that mothers are more exposed to MLMs on social media during times of financial stress, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. These schemes will almost certainly cause them to lose money, specifically considering the current research gap that consequently prevents effective regulation.

The research questions that guiding this study are:

1. What tone of voice did Company X use on Instagram during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020)?
2. How did contractors position themselves within different topics through this tone of voice?

A minor research question that guides this study is:

3. In what ways was the COVID-19 pandemic referred to in contractors' posts?

1.2 Aim of the study

The aim of this study is to clarify what tone of voice Company X used during the COVID-19 pandemic to appeal to the target audience of mothers. This work uses discourse analysis, largely derived from the work of Potter and Wetherell (1987) to qualitatively evaluate the Instagram post captions created by Company X's contractors during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study explores in what ways the target audience's personal and social context are used within the company's marketing communications to achieve a certain outcome.

1.3 Demarcation

Various topics have been purposefully excluded from the scope of this study. Social media platforms outside of Instagram are not the focus of this study as Company X has the highest follower count of any social media platform on Instagram of 1.2 million, compared to the respective Twitter profile with 297k followers and Facebook profile with 59 followers. Therefore, understanding the social media platform that has the largest organic reach reflects the main digital marketing focus of the company.

This study also focuses on the recruitment of mothers specifically and doesn't explore how MLMs may target other demographics like fathers, adults of different age brackets or in different professions. This is because mothers have been found to be a primary target audience for MLMs (Fluegel & King, 2021). Therefore, a focus on this demographic was relevant. MLM company contractors began using terms such as 'CEOmom' specifically more during the COVID-19 pandemic (Asymkos, 2020).

Digital marketing communications are the marketing tactic studied in this paper as opposed to other sales techniques. This is because there was increased online activity during the pandemic and limited in-person interactions, resulting in heightened exposure of potential MLM customers to marketing activities on fully digital platforms like Instagram.

1.4 Definitions

Multi-level marketing (MLM)

MLM is both a business model and marketing strategy used by companies to sell products and services through existing employees, who then recruit new individuals to join the distributor's network (Tarver, 2023). Distributors are paid through the products the individuals they sell, and, in this way, they must recruit new individuals continually to earn more money (Tarver, 2023). These individuals then are tasked with the same form of direct selling by recruiting new people into the business (Tarver, 2023).

Contractors

Contractors, also known as distributors and independent consultants, are those within the Multi-Level Marketing scheme recruiting people to form a "downline" of distributors underneath them (Vander Nat & Keep, 2002). In other words, contractors engaging in multi-level marketing are focused on maintaining cashflow toward both themselves and their superiors in higher levels of the company. This requires multiple sub-tasks to achieve, including garnering new customers to purchase products in a short-term relationship, garnering new customers to join in on multi-level marketing in a longer-term relationship, and maintenance of customers-transformed-contractors below to continue receiving cashflow through their activities. Being able to appeal to customers for various goals and uphold multiple streams of revenue requires employing a variety of approaches.

Subject positions

Subject positions within discourse analysis are seen as a tool which stems from the concept of subjectification, which is the idea that people are both subjected to ideologies and produced by them (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Subject positions can be understood as different perspectives taken within the same conversation, which ultimately form different "identities" within the broader topic through a certain way of talking about them. In this study, the "way of talking" that determines identities within a conversation is the tone of voice used and the positioning of the person uttering that tone.

2 Theory

The theoretical section of this thesis will first examine different frameworks used to analyse tone of voice. Then, existing literature on marketing communications by MLMs and the relevance of identity development in their marketing communications will be examined. Finally, mothers as consumers and as a target group for MLMs will be evaluated.

2.1 Tone of voice frameworks

Tone of voice can be used to reflect a brand's values, culture, and identity and has a fundamental role in consumer behaviour. Tone of voice can be defined more generally as a “style of organizational communication” (Kelleher, 2009, p. 177) and more succinctly as “more than just the words we choose. It’s the way in which we communicate our personality” (Meyer, 2016). In the digital age, this tone of voice extends to also include graphical elements like emojis (Gretry et al., 2017) and avatars (Park and Lee, 2013). Tone of voice has been found across decades to significantly impact consumer brand associations (Leclerc, Schmitt, & Dube, 1994), how memorable brand names are (Luna, Carnevale, & Lerman, 2013), customer evaluations of brands (Cheema & Patrick, 2008), perceived trustworthiness and reliability (Keeling, McGoldrick, and Beatty, 2010), and is used to signal various identities (Kehret-Ward, Johnson, & Louie, 1985).

Across the studies researching tone of voice, both definitions and frameworks are openly considered by researchers as scattered and unstandardised (Carnevale, Luna, & Lerman, 2017). Studying tone of voice overlaps into linguistics, semiotics, and consumer psychology at the minimum, which has made it challenging to cohesively research. In some frameworks, tone of voice is an overarching communication of personality that influences the language used in a brand’s content, and in other frameworks, tone of voice is a component under larger choices a brand makes regarding language. There is effectively no commonly accepted framework that specifically focuses on how tone of voice is both formed and used in branding despite research on its significance in consumer behaviour.

2.1.1 “Humanness”

A major distinction in literature on how tone of voice is studied is through splitting brands’ tone of voice into two broad categories: “human” tone and “corporate” tone. Tone of voice increasingly adopted by brands is the “conversational human voice”, which can be defined as “an engaging and natural style of organizational communication as perceived by an organization's public based on interaction between individuals in the organization and individuals in publics” (Kelleher, 2009, p. 177). Another definition defines humanness “as more natural, close, and human style of online communication” versus a more ““corporate voice”, which is the more distant and formal style traditionally used by companies” (Barcelos, Dantas, & Sénécal, 2018, p. 61). Humanness has been achieved through brands

appearing to have human-like thinking patterns and apparently genuine feelings (Fournier, 1998; MacInnis & Folkes, 2017). This humanisation can be taken a step further to personification of brands and portrayal of brands as people (Aaker, 1997; Veloutsou & McAlonan, 2012).

The influence of humanness in brand's tone of voice on consumer perceptions has been found in various studies to have a significant positive and negative effects. The usage of human tone over corporate tone, for example, has been found to significantly affect the likelihood of a consumer's purchasing intention (Barcelos, Dantas, & Sénécal, 2018). It has been found that particular choices of tone of voice can significantly negatively affect consumer attitudes (Gretry et al., 2017; Steinmann, Mau, and Schramm-Klein, 2015). In a study by Van Noort and Willemsen (2012), negative brand evaluation originally impacted by negative word-of-mouth was reduced when brands would use a "human" tone of voice online. However, in a study by Steinmann, Mau, and Schramm-Klein (2015), a more "human" tone of voice was found to be seen as less trustworthy and thus their perception toward the brand was negative. Therefore, existing research is conflicting when looking at tone of voice from the degree of "humanness", but it does appear to have an impact on consumer attitudes. As researchers state in the results of these studies, the impact of context on consumer attitudes is not sufficiently explored as they focus primarily on the isolated impact of "humanness".

2.1.2 Humanics

Another defining perspective on tone of voice is known as "humanics", wherein a brand uses tone of voice to give some clues to the potential customer as to what they're about to purchase (Berry, Carbone, Haeckel, 2002). Humanics centers around the clues given appeal to the emotional side of customers rather than the rational (Berry, Carbone, Haeckel, 2002). This can be seen in places where there is significant interaction between customers and the company, such as call centers, where the tone of voice the customer service employee is trained to use largely reflects the company, going as far as serving as a personification of the company (Brown and Maxwell, 2002). This perspective on tone of voice lends itself closely to humanness, however focuses on the communication of characteristics of the brand itself rather than solely on the perception and likeness to humans in its tone.

2.1.3 Brand Linguistics

Carnevale, Luna, & Lerman developed the Brand Linguistics framework in 2017 to establish a deep understanding of how cognition, symbolism, linguistics, semiotics, and sociology come together when a brand communicates to its audience and its effect on the brand. This framework is based on Schmitt's Consumer Psychology framework created in 2012, which among other components uniquely considered how brands act as symbols and signal identities connecting to the brand (Schmitt, 2011). Brand Linguistics splits the relationship between a brand and the consumer into Schmitt's five categories: identifying, experiencing, integrating, signifying, and connecting (Schmitt, 2011). The Brand Linguistics framework additionally clarifies the individual components of the language used by a brand and these respective actions it helps achieve, as seen in Figure 1. This framework highlights the connection between the perspective of the consumer and the content consumed being a highly complex process ranging from linguistic gendering to personal connection of the consumer's writing style, and the identity of community members bound together by language. Therefore, according to this framework, consumers' perception of a brand's tone of voice incorporates a large variety of linguistic, semiotic, sociological, and psychological elements. In many ways, tone of voice is seen as representing more than what the brand offers concretely but also symbolically and emotionally to the consumer.

The framework views language used by a brand largely within a vacuum, where external factors such as world events and current affairs are not included. This allows for more direct cause-and-effect relationships when studying materials between certain elements of a brand's tone of voice but doesn't allow for an understanding of how the context of a brand's post can potentially impact the choice of tone.

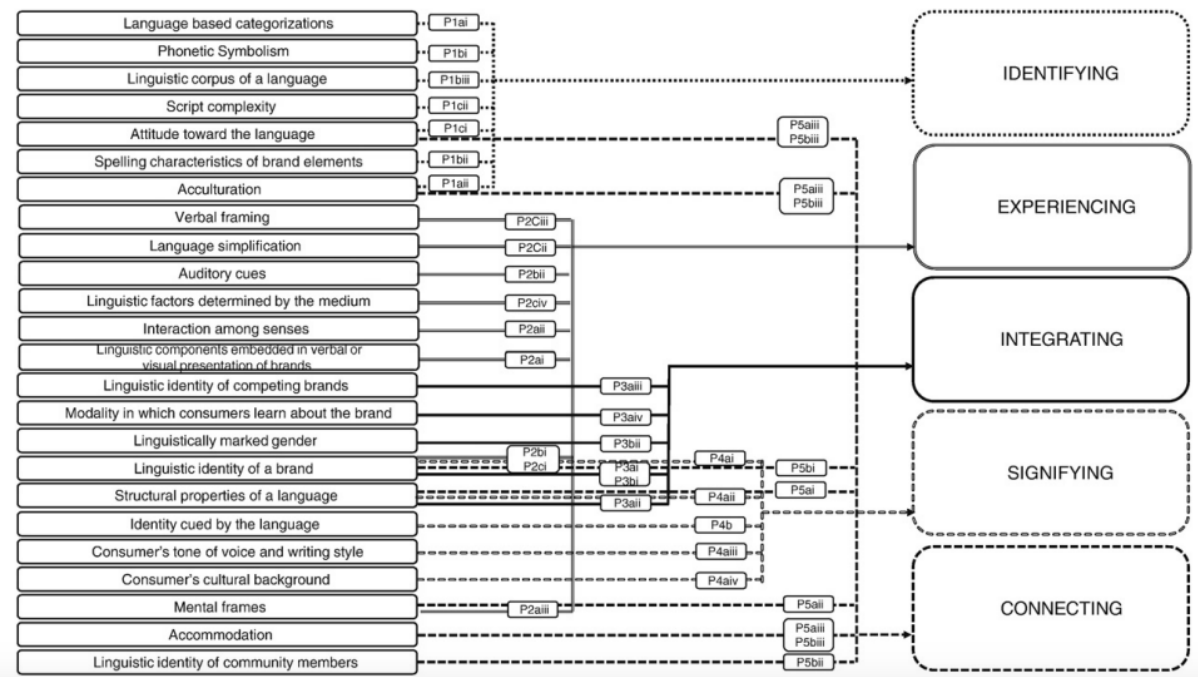


Figure 1: Brand Linguistics framework mapped in relation to the consumer psychology framework by Schmitt (2011)

Many components of this framework relate to the physical nature of a brand interacting with customers, such as the “experiencing” category. As the researchers highlight in their paper outlining the framework, there’s a strong need for more research on the digitally-savvy social media user consuming content as their relationship differs from in-person interactions (Carnevale, Luna, & Lerman, 2017). Researchers also highlight the issue of detachment from multi-sensory cues of real-life interactions and expectations of interactions present on specific platforms, such as shortened text and abbreviations on Twitter and Snapchat. While this framework doesn’t specifically encompass tone of voice on digital platforms, it does emphasise the overarching concept that brands are able to effectively lead consumers to perceptions and actions through choice of words. According to the researchers that established this framework, choices such as length of sentence, the complexity of vocabulary used, contractions, formality, punctuation, and emojis all help in determining the communication of a brand’s personality to consumers.

2.1.4 Emotionality, Complexity, and Informality

Deng et al. (2020) posits three main linguistic styles used by brands that help determine their tone of voice: emotionality, complexity, and informality. According to the separation within the framework, each strand has a distinct impact on consumer attitudes. Marketing

researchers have found that the way in which emotion is expressed through text can greatly impact how consumers receive and process information about a brand (Morris, 2012). The impact of emotionality in social media posts is significant across research in the field: it's been found that emotionally charged words garner more cognitive involvement from consumers (Kissler et al., 2007), increases their capacity to give feedback (Berger & Milkman, 2012), and the extent to which they will share information with their networks (Kim & Johnson, 2016). In one study on Twitter, emotionally charged posts garnered more reshares and faster reactions than neutral ones (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). In another on Facebook, Kim & Johnson (2016) found a similar connection between consumers and increased engagement based on the level of emotionality in posts.

According to the definition laid out by Arguello et al. (2006) "complexity" in this framework refers to the readability of the text and consequent effort required by the consumer to understand text's meaning. The more deeply complex a message communicated by a brand is, the more cognitive effort is needed to absorb it. Increased levels of complexity in a brand's content has been found to impact their persuasiveness in consumer behaviours (Burgers et al., 2015; Chatterjee, 2012) and negatively affect their perceptions of helpfulness in online reviews, for example (Ghose & Ipeiritis, 2011; Liu & Park, 2015). In the case of social media platforms, it's generally understood that low cognitive effort is expected of customers (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Jensen & Jepsen, 2007), particularly considering that shorter posts perform better on some platforms (Lee, Hosanagar, & Nair, 2018).

Finally, "informality" is communicated according to Gretry et al. (2017) and Morris (2012) through abbreviations, contractions, and emojis, which ultimately lends itself to being perceived as "familiar" and "casual" (McArthur, 2003). This perception is created through a sense of hierarchy between the poster and consumer being reduced, and development of emotional intimacy and closeness (Gretry et al., 2017; Delin, 2007). In some cases, employing informality in a brand's tone of voice has increased customer interactivity with the brand and elevates their perception of it (Jakic, Wagner, & Meyer, 2017). Given the research available, it appears that deepening a sense of informality in a brand's tone of voice can help to strengthen the relationship between a brand and a consumer.

2.2 Agency and identity creation

The effect verbal framing and communicating apparent agency of the consumer within a brand's tone of voice can greatly affect the likelihood of consumers taking certain actions towards products and services. In a study by Kronrod et al. (2012), it was found that a more assertive tone, such as "Stop the catastrophe" compared to "Please be considerate. Recycle" in a Greenpeace campaign was more effective in instigating action in consumers. In another study on verbal framing, expressions such as "I don't" versus "I can't" affects the likelihood of consumers taking action towards tasks (Patrick & Hagtvedt, 2012). These slight yet distinct changes in verbal framing are thought therefore to instill a sense of agency and autonomy in consumers and their sense of decision-making, motivating them to act on consuming products.

MLMs have been found to instil an entrepreneurial identity among their distributors. Kong (2001) studied network marketing organisations in the context of postmodern enterprises, where traditional expectations of working life no longer align with a workforce increasingly seeking deeper meaning in their work. Kong's study, which analysed written messages from directors of three network marketing organizations, found that communications were purposefully written in ways that balance the pragmatic, business-related aspects of MLM participation with the personal and emotional dimensions (Kong, 2001). This is largely done by adjusting the verbal framing: contractors are not merely salespeople but "entrepreneurs of self" and "business owners," thereby assuming ownership and autonomy (Du Gay, 1996; Biggart, 1993; Kong, 2001). This can be seen through MLMs' usage of various terms for their distributors, such as contractors, partners, business owners, and consultants (Vander Nat & Keep, 2002). Through deliberate choices in vocabulary and tone, MLMs are not aiming to only persuade but to reconstruct the identities of their agents (Kong, 2001). This is also a concept Company X concerns itself with, because within the last year they also changed their official term for distributors from "coaches" to "partners". Even if MLM organisations have official accounts and spokespersons to represent the company and keep in touch with customers, contractors play a fundamental role in this reconstruction of identities (Carl, 2004). Identity construction by MLM organisations can be complex, where balancing various identities—consumer, salesperson, the intelligent and reflective individual versus someone being deceived—requires careful navigation (Kong, 2001). It involves not only the deliberate cultivation of an entrepreneurial identity but must balance the expectations and perceptions of

both the contractors and potential customers in every interaction. Understanding these dynamics is essential for understanding what tone of voice MLM organisations use to balance the necessary identities, legitimacy, and “humanness”.

2.3 Impact of context on tone of voice

Marketing relies on creating strong connections between product and services with culturally strong knowledge and social meaning. Generally, companies try to market products and services to their audience which means they may inherently follow the “logic of the market” to better connect their product to the target audience's needs and wants (Moufahim et al., 2007). There are examples across industries that demonstrate the relationship between what’s being marketed, the context it’s being marketed in, and the communication choices used. Political extremist right-wing parties have been found to use their communications to reflect the struggles the target audience faces in their social context (such as unemployment and more crime) and using specific vocabulary to construct “solutions” that their political party can seemingly provide them (Moufahim et al., 2007). Through adapting the issues within their target audience’s social context into specific types of vocabulary in speeches and rallies, parties have been able to build highly differentiable brand identities and sell their “political product” more effectively (Moufahim et al., 2007).

The UK government’s ‘Change4Life’ social marketing campaign against obesity is another example where marketing communications are used as a tool to reframe the public’s views and partake in a program (Mulderigg, 2016). In the first social marketing campaign of its kind from the UK government, the communications had been purposefully changed to reflect a period of social change where people were being less civically engaged and obesity rates were climbing. Instead of convincing people to act against a seemingly life-threatening disease through a serious tone of voice, the UK government purposefully chose colourful cartoon characters paired with short, fun, and easily consumable messages (Mulderigg, 2016). This change of pace was an attempt by the UK government to reconstruct discussions on obesity to appear as an important and inviting discussion instead of daunting and stigmatising. This marketing campaign thus took into consideration the already-existing negative perceptions of obesity and purposefully reconstructed the topic to be inviting and encouraging involvement.

Crises have been found to have a significant effect on consumer behaviors and their engagement with posts online. People on social media were both displaying a keen interest in content related to the pandemic and its effects (GlobalWebIndex, 2020). This is seen across other crises other than the pandemic, where information is sought out specifically by people to reduce their uncertainties through continual assessment of risks (Zhang et al., 2015). This was no different in the pandemic: a study by Kleer and Kunz found that posts from companies related to the pandemic posted during 2020 were significantly positively correlated to online engagement behaviours, including those implicitly mentioning COVID-19 (Kleer & Kunz, 2023). MLMs use specific vocabulary to actively target mothers that feel disenfranchised both during these periods of hardship within the family and in the long-term as a woman within the larger patriarchal society (Wellman & Prins, 2021). An example of prefacing their products with solutions towards familial security and independence is Amway, an internationally recognised MLM. On their website, their “About Us” page highlights that the company is “family-owned” and “financially stable”, vocabulary that specifically appeals to a family-oriented audience (Harris, 2005). These companies provide an apparent solution to women for potential crisis: an alternative income and lifestyle to alleviate financial and familial insecurities.

2.4 Consumer-brand relationship on Instagram

Digitalisation and social media platforms, particularly Instagram, have helped generate brand communities never seen before. Social media has been increasingly more used by brands to build and maintain relationships and increase brand loyalty (Laroche et al., 2012), which it has seen particular success in. The low cost of using social media for companies and direct connection to consumers has made social media-based “brand communities” an essential part of companies’ strategies (Cottica et al., 2017). While brands use social media an efficient and cost-effective tool (Jiao et al., 2018; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), what currently lacks is a comprehensive academic view on how these “brand communities” are formulated and upheld by these brands, despite their relevance rapidly growing (Kuo & Huo, 2017). What is understood is that brand communities can be interpreted as social aggregations of people of similar mindsets, backgrounds, goals, and interests (J. Brown et al., 2007; Rheingold, 1994). Overall, brand communities positively influence consumers’ loyalty and relationship with brands (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001), which is largely due to these consumers feeling an emotional attachment to the brand (Martínez-López et al., 2017). The “humanisation” of

brands have allowed for such brand loyalty relationships with consumers (Kuo & Hou, 2017; Martínez-López et al., 2016), which in turn creates “self-brand connections”.

Marketing communications and the needs of customers have shifted over time, hastened by the introduction of social media – word-of-mouth marketing, dialogue, and shareability currently take the forefront. Understanding and effectively using social media is argued as fundamental to companies wanting to stay relevant and sell their products and services. Marketing has transformed from a form of one-way communication of “telling” to “interacting”, a form of two-way communication that requires interactivity and dialogue to remain effective (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998). Two-way communication has been strengthened through social media’s ability to empower everyday consumers to create purchases with a wide variety of resources available to them. Word-of-mouth marketing has also become increasingly more important and challenge to fully utilise on social media platforms – Keller (2013) states that “consider word-of-mouth as not just “nice to have,” but a game-changing element of today’s marketing mix” (Keller, 2013). Using consumers’ innate drive to share information can efficiently serve as a powerful tool in marketing communications.

Instagram has proven an essential marketing communication tool for companies over the last decade. Instagram has been found to have the strongest purchase decision influence among young adults when compared to Facebook and Twitter (Krallman, Pelletier, & Adams, 2016). Instagram uses images and videos to communicate messages to different audiences, which companies can use to associate their products and services with visual imagery. The visuals of this platform have been found to help in shaping consumers’ identity through demonstrating social relationship dynamics, easily retrievable memories of posts, and ability to express oneself with more ease in numerous ways (Chen, 2017). This sense of “identity-building” is solidified by Instagram’s technical focus on post shareability and community-building through hashtag functions, quick-sending features, and group creation. This association of imagery, text, and community on Instagram specifically has been used by companies to build an improved brand reputation, as seen in one study on the greenwashing of top oil and gas companies (Sagapova, Dušek, & Pártlová, 2022). Marketing communications on Instagram are most effectively done when there is a focus on brand building, brand awareness, and building a long-term relationship over simply focusing on purchase conversions, for example.

2.5 Marketing the “CEOmom”

MLMs have commonly been found to target women and mothers in their marketing communications. 3 out of 4 MLM distributors in the United States are women (Direct Selling Association, 2022) and in one sociological study, it was found that they “deliberately tap into women’s anxieties and desires to blend their perceived gender roles with their need for income” (Lamoreaux, 2013). It further goes to state that the primary motivation behind majority of consultants is the desire to be “stay-at-home mothers – to have freedom” while engaged with “meaningful employment” (Lamoreaux, 2013). This coincides with the price of childcare in the country is rapidly climbing year-on-year (The US and the High Price of Child Care, 2022). The connection between being a mother and getting an income has been developed through MLM websites and social media accounts, which publish content relating to the nurturing identity of the ideal mother and connecting it to the necessity of earning an income and freedom (Pearce, 2023). Mothers have been noted in other studies as a primary target audience of MLM contractor opportunities due to marketing communications of companies focusing on the work model being remote, part-time, and highly flexible to their needs (Fluegel & King, 2021). This can be seen through Instagram usage of the term ‘CEOmom’, where communities have been built around an identity tying together being a worker and a mother (Asymkos, 2020).

3 Method

This chapter gives an overview of the chosen approach to conduct this study and the materials needed to be collected and analysed. This section also covers the methodological considerations of the chosen method and what considerations are accounted for when collecting and analysing the data.

3.1 Choice of method

The method chosen for this study was qualitative in nature, requiring thematisation and coding of materials to answer each research question of this paper.

Discourse analysis was used with particular reference to the approach outlined by Potter and Wetherell’s (1987) work. Discourse analysis is a qualitative method used to analyse the social implications and “meaning beyond the sentence” when looking at language used in texts.

There are various kinds of discourse analysis, however all relate to the context of the consumption of text and most contend that language does not form within a vacuum. Discourse analysis required the researcher to first study the language used in selected texts, identify patterns and themes through coding, and then place these patterns within a broader social context of consumption through different relevant lenses. The tool of subject positions was used alongside thematization to highlight what kinds of perspectives were taken within each discourse, in this case themed Instagram post captions.

In the light of a lack of frameworks appropriately addressing tone of voice apart from a purely linguistic perspective, patterns recognised in the process of discourse analysis were used to answer the first research question about general tone of voice. This was done through an amalgamation of key aspects of Carnevale, Luna, and Lerman's Brand Linguistic framework (2017) and Deng's Emotionality, Informality, and Complexity analysis (2020). The general tone of voice of Company X contractors was analysed through four components: formality, impersonality, emotionality, and assertiveness. The formality of the tone of voice was determined based on 5 characteristics: usage of abbreviations, contractions, slang, and punctuation. The impersonality was determined based on 3 characteristics: usage of pronouns where third-person is considered most impersonal, and second- to first-person are considered highly personal, the extent to which questions (both rhetorical and direct) are asked to readers, and how many personal anecdotes are included in the text. The level of emotionality was determined based on the usage of emotionally charged vocabulary, and specificity of claims versus vagueness. Finally, assertiveness versus passiveness was determined by the urgency of the text (e.g. through references to time and resource scarcity) and actionable vocabulary (e.g. "You will" versus "You can").

There are other types of discourse analysis that were ruled out for the purpose of this study, including Foucauldian discourse analysis and Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory. While Potter and Wetherell's theory would give room to interpret the interaction between context and the active nature of language used, discourse theories such as those mentioned above focus on power struggles in society and politics (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017). Neither of these is the primary focus of either research question in this study, so Potter and Wetherell's more general approach was most appropriate.

The author also ruled out the usage of quantitative methods for this study. What was initially considered for this study was using a quantitative frequency analysis through data scraping tools such as Phantom Buster, however the quantitative nature of this approach would have not allowed me to investigate the behaviours and reasoning behind changes to the marketing communications used. Instead of focusing on just changes to marketing communications of MLMs, discourse analysis allows for more specific analysis of how MLM marketing communications are done in terms of the target audience's background.

The author based the study on previous research on marketing communications and the impact of the audience's context such as work by King and Fluegel's discourse analysis on MLMs' communications during COVID-19 pandemic (2022), Banet-Weiser's discourse analysis on commodification of girls' empowerment (2015), Carl's discourse analysis of how MLMs manage legitimacy in their marketing materials (2004), and Mısır and Işık-Güler's critical discourse analysis on online courses' usage of promotional persuasion techniques (2022). Guidance in literature towards implementing discourse analysis in marketing communications was provided through research by Caruana and Fitchett's "Exploring the Role of Discourse in Marketing and Consumer Research" (2015). These research papers were fundamental in determining the marketing communications angle this analysis took, as opposed to a purely linguistic approach, for instance.

The structure followed throughout the research process involved 5 general stages of processing drawing inspiration:

1. Familiarisation with the data collected
2. Organising the data based on general understanding
3. Closer analysis of individual pieces of data
4. Establishing themes
5. Placing these themes into context

3.2 Data collection

The author used primary and secondary sources for this study. The primary sources were taken directly from 3 Instagram contractors' profiles promoting Company X's brand. Primary sources allowed the author to analyse the exact text used and individual details about the marketing communications consumed by the target audience. Secondary sources that were

used in this study relate to the social context during publication and analyses of the target audience's lifestyle. These included news publications, peer-reviewed articles, and published texts referring to societal changes during the timeframe being studied. These secondary sources allowed the author to develop a more nuanced and historically accurate understanding of the context of the marketing communications being published.

Purposive sampling was used to collect data for this study. Purposive sampling was a non-probability sampling technique based on predetermined characteristics making them representative of the phenomenon being studied. The author collected 10 texts each from 3 contractors, totaling to 30 posts. All posts referred to the selling of an online Company X course and additionally selected to vary in length, with their time of publication evenly spaced apart to accurately reflect the tone of voice used throughout 2020. This number of posts was chosen with resource capabilities in mind while still ensuring the author can identify enough patterns and themes to create a solid and reliable analysis. Given the depth of research required before analysing the posts themselves, the author noted that the number of primary sources could change during the study based on resources available and if data saturation would be reached early in the discourse analysis.

3.3 Analysis of data

Discourse analysis required collecting and analysing materials through a series of dimensions relating to the context of their consumption. Identifying the texts used was crucial and required considering what material is realistically available and determining how much data needs to be collected and analysed based on the resources available.

After having collected the texts, this method first required the investigation into the context of the texts selected. This involves determining where the texts were published, when, by whom, and the overarching messages at face-value and then on a deeper, contextual level. This required thorough understanding of the texts chosen to analyse and as such multiple "lenses" of seeing the text were employed. Once the context of the data was established, coding was needed to identify patterns, themes, and concepts that came up regularly in terms of language used. Repetition of certain phrases or words may relate to themes that appear throughout multiple texts, so identifying patterns in each text was crucial. Once a stage of data saturation has been achieved and patterns have become clear, the patterns themselves

went through review. Patterns were then grouped together and themes that came up in the data were used alongside the context and were used to begin answering the study's research questions.

3.4 Reliability and validity

Ensuring a standard of validity and reliability is always important when conducting a discourse analysis given the subjective nature of the method. Validity refers to the extent the variables selected in a study represent what they are intended to study. In this study, validity could refer to the extent language within Instagram post captions represent the marketing communications of Company X, for instance. One of the largest challenges to validity in this study rested in producing a varied, objective approach due to the depth and thoroughness individual materials need to be examined. Discourse analysis is extremely resource intensive and as such, only a few select materials are usually analysed at a time. This made purposive sampling a relevant technique for selecting which materials to analyse – the author of this study collected varied materials in terms of length and timeframe to maintain the validity of the study.

Reliability refers to the extent the findings of a study are consistent when applied to different circumstances and timeframes. A challenge regarding reliability in discourse analysis is the overall task of deriving meaning of communications and language through different lenses, an inherently subjective process. The function of discourse analysis rests in analysing how individuals perceive text through the lens of another individual, the researcher. This can impact the reliability of the results of the study. The author combated this issue by noting any biases that may hinder an impartial analysis of the data and by attempting to explore all potential results, with particular and active attention paid to those that may not align with initial assumptions about the study.

3.5 Ethical considerations

Research ethics are a range of standards and principles that help in protecting participants of studies, their wellbeing, and their anonymity, as well as increase scientific credibility. Trustworthy results that maintain the integrity of participants are fundamental when conducting studies. They should be safely repeatable and as transparent as possible so that the results themselves are reliable and can be tested in different contexts. There are a number of

ethical considerations that should be taken into account when conducting any discourse analysis, let alone one focused on the COVID-19 pandemic, MLMs, and a target group such as mothers. The topic explored remains largely sensitive and required strong consideration of ethical implications.

The first of these ethical considerations was in maintaining the accurate representation of participants. Misrepresentation of the target audience's views can occur intentionally or unintentionally through selecting specific quotes that back a certain view, excluding information, or otherwise distorting the full context. The author to the best of their ability ensured that the conclusions reached were justified and varied to ensure accurate representation.

Another ethical consideration was the sensitivity of the timeframe and audience being researched. The target audience, mothers, and the timeframe, the COVID-19 pandemic, come together to represent a period of hardship and loss. The researcher needed to report on the target audience's experiences with careful consideration and needed to avoid trivialising their experiences.

Finally, discourse analysis is a highly subjective process that maintains reliability largely through accounting significantly for bias. This was noted through acknowledgement of any biases that could affect the study and any conflicts of interest that would have affected their perception of what's being studied.

4 Results

The steps for the analysis were based on each other in stages, where during the first round of familiarisation with data, there was a focus on what information was being communicated. Once an understanding of the general information presented, *how* information was communicated was more focused on next.

In relation to the first research question, the results of the study find that the tone of voice used by Company X contractors is highly personal, emotional, informal, and strongly assertive. Covering the minor research question, COVID-19 pandemic was mentioned frequently and notably implicitly with an assertive tone of voice across most material.

Finally, regarding the third research question, 15 themes were identified in posts by contractors and were consequently grouped into 5 overarching themes: finances, independence, relationship with self, relationship with family, and relationship with community. There were 9 subject positions that occurred across these 5 overarching themes, including: Financially-Conscious Mother, Financially Fulfilled Mother, Empowered Mother, Underappreciated Mother, Responsible Mother, Loving Mother, Self-Aware Mother, Community-Oriented Mother, and Lonely Mother. These represented the multiple perspectives to cover these 5 different overarching themes, as can be seen in Table 1.

1	Themes	Overarching Themes	Subject Positions
2	financial struggles	finances	Financially-Conscious Mother Financially Fulfilled Mother
3	financial freedom		
4	fitness	independence	Empowered Mother Underappreciated Mother
5	motherhood	relationships with family	Responsible Mother Loving Mother
6	role-models	relationship with self	Self-Aware Mother
7	friendships	relationships with community	Community-Oriented Mother Lonely Mother
8	marriage		
9	COVID-19		
10	remote work		
11	exuberant incomes		
12	corporate work		
13	independence		
14	flexibility		
15	self-reliance		

Table 1: screenshot of table featuring the themes, overarching themes, and subject positions identified in materials

The themes identified appeared to some degree as recognised by the contractors themselves rather than a subconscious process, with one exclaiming about the topics of her posts externally:

“How we created our own business from home, how we juggle mom life, wife life and entrepreneur life and the freedom this has created in our lives.”

In the subsequent sections of the results, the unpacking of the general tone of voice of Company X and approach to these specific topics is presented.

4.1 RQ1: General tone of voice

Within the following section, Company X's tone of voice across the 30 posts are placed into the framework of formality, impersonality, emotionality, and assertiveness, with excerpts to demonstrate how patterns were identified. Following results regarding the framework, the minor research question regarding COVID-19 references is covered through two distinct patterns. Finally, the results for the second major research question regarding the brand's positioning to customers is presented through a series of tables featuring the five major overarching themes, the subject positions taken on by Company X, and corresponding example extracts.

4.1.1 Formality

Overall, all Company X's posts analysed were generally informal with varied punctuation and occasional grammatical errors, with common sayings and abbreviations present in many posts, such as those presented below:

"I took pain and made it into a gain"

"I say this too shall pass....."

"loljk"

"hit my work grind from home"

"It's payday!! Awesome! Just going to pay some bills AAAAAAND I'm broke!" Old me."

There were notable, rare instances across posts midway in 2020 where a highly impersonal tone was used, which was when income disclaimers were edited into the caption after its publication.

"Disclaimer: [Company X] does not guarantee any level of success or income from the [Company X] coach opportunity. Each coach's income depends on his or her own efforts, diligence, and skill."

This disclaimer spoke was written from the perspective of Company X's company in third-person with more complex vocabulary, longer sentence structure, and heightened seriousness.

These disclaimers strongly juxtaposed the contractors' original posts due to their impersonality and sudden, explicit connection between the contractor and Company X.

4.1.2 Impersonality

All posts had a high level of personal involvement in texts through "I" and "my", many posts involving personal anecdotes, and rhetorical questions throughout. Examples of this can be seen in the examples taken from posts below:

"I remember it like it was yesterday. It was my sons birthday party"

"I was breaking down on the inside. It was a super stressful time in my life. I knew my marriage was at its end"

"I bottled it all up"

"I had just gone through divorce and moved 3 times while holding down a demanding full time job and adjusting to coparenting my two boys"

"I had no freakin clue what I was doing"

In many of the second-person perspective posts, the line between the experience of the contractor and the person reading becomes blurred, as seen in the below extracts.

"I'm human like you. I don't always have super powers that make me jump out of bed, feeling ready to seize the day"

"Your mind starts letting go you think and do some crazy things. You don't think clear."

"I don't have time. Oh but you do!"

"Aren't you sick of it?! I was."

This sense of blurring boundaries within relationships is seen in other structural parts of posts as well. This occurred specifically in posts concluding with calls to action and a term of endearment, like "sister" and "girlfriend" despite not necessarily having this close of a relationship with the reader. Examples of this include:

"Are you ready sister?!"

"Are you ready to join our squad feel good?"

"I'm ready to feel badass before summer, what about you girlfriend?"

Company X was mentioned very rarely throughout all posts referring to the online course offerings, and instead online courses were posed as courses fully owned by respective contractors. In this way, contractors posed themselves as entrepreneurs by default and the opportunity as fully self-made. Examples of implicit mentions to Company X's offering with this entrepreneurial slant include:

"started my own online business from the platform of beachbody"

"My platform I use to teach health and fitness"

"In my virtual gym"

"This business opportunity"

"Interested in building your own business alongside me? [...] See what it's like to run your own business before you start! Ummm an entrepreneur sneak peek?! Yes, please!"

4.1.3 Emotionality

Posts were determined highly emotional over being rational, due to extensive usage of emotionally-charged vocabulary relating to elation or depression. These choices of vocabulary were framed with the usage of punctuation such "...", "!", capitalised words, the transfer of emotion into physical action, such as crying, falling, and quitting. Examples of the presentation of emotionality are shown below:

"I LOVE my job. Just being able to finally say that brings tears to my eyes."

"It's so easy to fall into the feeling of overwhelming loss."

"Let's FEED the positive and STARVE the negative TOGETHER!"

"That makes me so happy I could cry!"

"But we committed together, we were scared... scared that someone might quit... scared that we might quit on ourselves."

4.1.4 Assertiveness

Contractors' posts generally took on a more assertive tone of voice rather than gentle, with strong pushes toward urgency, and time-sensitive calls to action featured often at the end of posts. This was developed through short and direct sentences, occasional curse words that would be unusually strong against the friendly tone otherwise taken, and references to ambition. Assertiveness was strengthened through addressing the reader directly as "you" and demanding they take direct action. Examples where this assertiveness is clear can be seen in the following examples:

“Life is not stopping for you. It’s not tapping its fingers on the counter waiting for you to catch up.”

“Be so fucking committed to growth that you are willing to push through the hard, the uncomfortable... be the 1%”

Assertiveness was particularly strong in many texts due to a recurrent direct connection between the capabilities of the contractor and the reader toward a certain task. The contractors demonstrated their understanding of the capabilities of the reader through establishing an authoritative relationship to them. This is apparent in the following examples:

“Each and every single one of you can do this too!”

“If I can do it so can you!”

”You always had the time”

Pronouns such as “we”, “us”, and “our” were used also to further the apparent understanding of the capabilities of the reader. What “we” need to do as the reader was framed by the contractor themselves, as seen in these examples:

“We are not losing anything. We just need to refocus. We have to adapt”

“My Virtual Gym is going hard in crushing our goals”

“Let’s do the damn thing!”

4.2 Minor RQ: Occurrence of COVID-19

Implicit mentions of COVID-19 were far more prevalent than explicit mentions and were categorised into two types of implicit mention: as an externally imposed experience and an opportunity to exercise control. Within the externally imposed experience, words such as “these times” and “right now” were more prevalent, and topics such as loss and togetherness are most prominent. Extracts from contractors’ posts about the external experience can be seen below:

“Feeling extra blessed to have my virtual gym during these times!”

“I sure as hell have 30 minutes now with that two hour commute gone, even if it is just temporary”

“Also when this pandemic is a thing of the past”

“now that we’ve all experienced this together”

“Ready to be part of a group again?!”

“It’s so easy to get lost in what we think we’ve lost right now. It’s so easy to focus on everything we can’t do, everywhere we can’t go. It’s so easy to fall into the feeling of overwhelming loss. What does it take to not get lost in those things? It takes community!”

In posts where the COVID-19 pandemic was posed as an opportunity to exercise control, an assertive tone is strongly present in many posts within this category and refers to the pandemic as a challenge to overcome by taking particular action. In the case of Company X’s contractors, all connected the exercise of control to starting Company X’s course. Examples of the COVID-19 pandemic serving as a timeframe to exercise control can be seen below:

“Use this time to work on what you can control”

“Mentally and physically our bodies need this physical activity more than ever”

“let’s show 2020 who’s boss? K, sis?”

“I’m fully committed to accepting this circumstance as a challenge to work on ME!”

“If you want to change the world, start with yourself? Why not take this as opportunity to totally shift my mind, shift my life and get on a path to a healthier, happier me?!”

4.3 RQ2: Identities developed through tone of voice

The stances these contractors took toward talking about the different identified themes changed in tone depending on the subject position taken by the contractor toward that theme. What became particularly apparent across the data was the usage of multiple perspectives to deliver information on topics, such as in the overarching theme of finances, which can be seen in Table 1. In Table 1, there are two identified subject positions which differed in emotional intimacy in terms of details shared and different levels of authoritativeness. The subject position of the Financially-Conscious Mother became apparent particularly towards the middle of 2020. This subject position was closely related but still separate from the subject position of the Financially Fulfilled Mother, with references to the corporate world having been restrictive in terms of time and physically needing to be present at the workplace in comparison to what they have now. The next step for this subject position was in Company X, with a strong connection to associating that next step as the act of breaking free from traditional working life.

	Subject position	Description of subject positions	Example extract
1	Financially-Conscious Mother	The contractor talks about periods of financial difficulty, lay-offs, and reliance on partner for financial support being burdens in everyday life. They talk about the wellbeing of themselves and their family.	<p>“Here’s to the women who deserve so much more than what they get. Who work hard to pay their own bills.”</p> <p>”The money didn’t feel worth the time it took from my family”</p> <p>“I considered getting a second job to help out with birthdays, holidays, kids clothes”</p>
2	Financially-Fulfilled Mother	The contractor talks about feeling unfulfilled and burdened with financial instability within the family. Particularly noted is the regularity of associating corporate 9-5 working life as limiting both mentally and financially. The new income opportunity of the MLM is referred to along with holidays and leisure activities.	<p>“Work that I’m so passionate about and get paid to do”</p> <p>“I’m amazed every Thursday by being able to earn that kind of income in a line of work that makes me this happy”</p> <p>“I donated money to families and friends in need and saved some too for our family vacation”</p> <p>”But, I LOVE what I do now. I LOVE my job. Just being able to finally say that brings tears to my eyes. Providing a stream of income for my family [...]”</p>

Table 2: The subject positions identified as used by the Company X contractors within the theme of finances

The following theme identified in Company X contractors' posts was the theme of independence. There were two different subject positions identified in this study that were taken on, including the Empowered Mother and the Underappreciated Mother, which strongly opposed each other in terms of tone. As can be seen in Table 1, the Empowered Mother focused strongly on the flexibility of remote work from home and the ability to focus on oneself financially, physically, and mentally. This becomes apparent from posts of this subject position focusing on transformations and comparisons of various types.

The second subject position identified when talking about the theme of independence is a largely opposed one: the Underappreciated Mother, where the contractor focuses on the difficulties of her life daily, a lack of recognition for efforts in both motherhood and working life, and the affect this has on her mood and behaviours. Discussion of these difficulties were paired with more emotionally charged language.

	Subject position	Description of subject positions	Extracts
3	Empowered mother	The contractor talks about freedom the physical nature of being able to work remotely, both financial and physical, paired with various synonymous terms with empowerment. They talk regularly about their mental and physical transformations over specified timeframes to demonstrate improvement.	<p>“So many of you know how much I changed my old habits and created a new vision in life”</p> <p>“I have a passion and a purpose, and with that I do get paid with is a blessing on top of it all.”</p> <p>“Money wont buy you happiness. It’s fulfilling your passions and purposes”</p> <p>“Work that doesn’t feel like work. Work that rewards me for working on myself. Work that rewards me for helping others.”</p>

4	Underappreciated mother	The contractor talks about the daily responsibilities of motherhood being challenging and efforts not being recognised in the workplace.	<p>“Here’s to the women holding it down even when the world feels against them.”</p> <p>”Did I mention reduces stress?! I need all those things right now! Is it just me?!”</p> <p>”I don’t know about you but I want the best of my energy to go to the people in my life that matter and not to a job that would just replace me the next day if I died!”</p>
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Table 3: The subject positions identified as used by the Company X contractors within the theme of independence

A strong theme apparent throughout the data was about relationships. There were 2 subject positions when focused on relationships within the family (Table 4), 1 subject position when the theme was more focused on relationship with self (Table 5), and 2 subject positions when the theme focused on relationships with community (Table 6). Overall, relationships were found to be a strong guiding force in the content included in posts and the importance of the work in fostering relationships.

When contractors took on the subject position of Responsible Mother, the focus of content was on serving as a role model for children and serving their needs in the moment as best as possible. This was intertwined with mentions of work flexibility allowing them to fulfil their children’s needs in physical and emotional ways. When the Responsible Mother subject position was taken by contractors, the focus would focus on “we” and “us”. This pronoun usage was paired with assumptions of mothers’ experiences and asserting the importance of certain components of their lifestyle, tasks such as going to the grocery store, kids’ sports, and travel time. Examples of how this is achieved can be seen in extracts of Table 3. The Loving Mother, on the other hand, is focused on the role of the contractor as an individual with usage of pronouns “I” and “me” and the relationship between themselves and their

family, spouse, and children. Texts focused largely on long-term goals for the benefit of the family rather than the everyday habits.

	Subject position	Description of subject positions	Extracts
5	Responsible Mother	The contractor talks about the task of a mother to serve as a role model to their children through their behaviours, responses, and daily activities. They talk about the physical flexibility of working from home, physical fitness, and prioritisation of mental health serving as a responsible choice for their childrens' wellbeing.	<p>“And it’s a real thing to take care of yourself it’s so important for us.”</p> <p>“These are totally essential for all the things kids sports will drag us into this spring mama!”</p> <p>“There’s that commute you no longer have, there’s those several trips to the grocery store you used to make”</p> <p>“We all know as moms we have to get everyone else ready before we can even begin on ourselves”</p> <p>“I never have to worry about finding someone to watch my kids, about travel time to and from the gym”</p>
6	Loving Mother	The contractor talks about their marriage and relationship to their spouse. There are connections made between business and wellbeing of the family in the long-term.	<p>“Work that has made me a better mom and wife.”</p> <p>“What’s working for me is [...] seeing the bigger picture in the life I’m creating for my family”</p> <p>”I’m on the hunt for more women ready to [...] create a business from</p>

			home that allows them to spend more time with their family!”
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Table 4: The subject positions identified as used by the Company X contractors within the theme of relationships with family

When the Company X contractor talks about relationship with self, the subject position of Self-Aware Mother, where a focus on learning and growth were strong. Mentions of illness, difficult periods of life, and transformations were regularly used when discussing this theme in posts, making this subject position deeply personal. This type of subject position was more inward facing with “I” and “me” being frequently used and more emotionally charged.

	Subject position	Description of subject positions	Extracts
7	Self-Aware Mother	The contractor talks about their relationship with themselves, their mental wellbeing, and their physical health. They refer to previous illnesses and difficult events in their life and lessons learnt.	<p>“Caring for everyone else first didn’t get me anywhere.”</p> <p>“It is so important that I keep moving my body and keep my mind clear today and every day going forward because when your mind starts letting go you think and do some crazy things. You don’t think clear.”</p> <p>“I want to be Strong & Healthy for me & no one else. That’s where the motivation and desire of determination comes from.”</p> <p>“I could have watched them and hated on them (hell I probably did at first but then I was like damn I CAN DO THAT!)”</p>

			”Mentally and physically our bodies need this physical activity more than ever”
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Table 5: The subject positions identified as used by the Company X contractors within the theme of relationships with self

There were two subject positions identified within the theme of relationship with community, including Community-Oriented Mother and Lonely Mother. When taking on the perspective of the Community-Oriented Mother, the contractor used terms such as “like-minded community” and would reference meeting up with friends and the value of forming relationships with people with similar aspirations. This in many posts was followed up by mentioning of the online course offering, establishing a connection for readers between the importance of being part of community and the course acting as a gateway into accessing one. The closely related perspective of the Lonely Mother highlights another perspective towards relationships in the community, with references toward loss during the pandemic and reintegration into communities. The tone is considered assertive as it imparts assumptions that readers experience the same things as the contractor, as can be seen in extracts of Table 6.

	Subject position	Description of subject positions	Extract
8	Community-Oriented Mother	The contractor talks about the importance of fostering friendships with those who are like-minded. The importance of being part of community and specifically engaging with them through questions in posts is highlighted.	<p>“We wanted to make a community to help others feel Empowered, even if they don’t have enough support or motivation themselves. We wanted a community where women where women can talk openly”</p> <p>“We believe all women are strong in their own way”</p>

			<p>“I donated money to families and friends in need and saved some too for our family vacation”</p> <p>“Without you this would all be impossible”</p> <p>“I have made so many badass friends through this!”</p> <p>“one of the best things that social media brought to my life is the ability to meet people I never would have.”</p> <p>”it’s introduced me to so many women that continue to inspire me every day”</p> <p>“my fellow group of rockstars”</p> <p>”We are a team, a girl gang, a tribe, the bestest of friends”</p>
9	Isolated Mother	The contractor talks about isolation, both intentional and unintentional, and their impact on their everyday lives.	<p>“Ready to be part of a group again?!”</p> <p>“So many things have been canceled out of our control, weddings, vacations, parties, graduations... so many things we were all looking forward to, canceled.”</p>

Table 6: The subject positions identified as used by the Company X contractors within the theme of relationships with community

5 Discussion

This paper set out to answer the following research questions: (1) What tone of voice did Company X use on Instagram during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020)? (2) How did contractors position themselves toward consumers through this tone of voice? The minor research question of this study is: (3) in what ways was the COVID-19 pandemic referred to in contractors' posts?

5.1 Discussion of results

With respect to the first question, it was found the general tone of voice in posts published by contractors during 2020 was informal, personal, highly emotional, and highly assertive.

Various studies on tone of voice have focused on brands and their ability to communicate “humanness” over a corporate tone, and this study found that Company X contractors adopt a deeply human tone throughout all posts. As was discussed in the theoretical framework of this paper, a sense of “humanness” in tone has been found to reduce a sense of hierarchy and bring consumers emotionally close to brands (Gretry et al., 2017; Delin, 2007). This “humanisation” of brands has contributed to strong brand loyalty among consumers (Kuo & Hou, 2017; Martínez-López et al., 2016), in turn contributing to these brand communities.

Company X develops a sense of community through deeply personal posts, high emotionality, and referring to readers as “sisters” and “girlfriends”, actively determining how emotionally close the consumer is to the contractor. On one hand, the sense of humanness and personal connection contributes to a sense of reduced hierarchy between the brand and reader. On the other hand, however, the results of this study found the tone was simultaneously strongly assertive with hierarchy between the consumer and contractor strong. This became apparent in many posts pushing calls to action in signing up for courses, which communicated a sense of time-scarcity and urgency through aggressive vocabulary. What stood out particularly was the usage of the second-person pronouns, directly talking to the reader, and further assumptive evaluations of the consumer's needs and abilities without personally knowing them. Examples of this assumptive evaluation of consumers developing a sense of authoritativeness can be seen below:

“We are not losing anything. We just need to refocus. We have to adapt”

”You always had the time”

Therefore, it appears that the strong humanness in Company X's tone of voice does not guarantee a lowered sense of hierarchy in a brand's tone of voice. Instead, high levels of humanness rather contribute toward a sense of emotional intimacy that allows the brand to choose what hierarchical distance they want to exercise toward consumers. In the case of posts focused on community and relationship-building, contractors opted for more a closer emotional distance to the reader through familial relational language and a friendly tone. In the case of posts focused primarily on signing up for courses and pushing time-sensitivity, contractors chose a more authoritative position in relation to the reader through appearing to know the consumer's exact capabilities and thoughts.

The results aiming to answer the second question found 9 distinct subject positions appearing across 5 major themes, which demonstrate Company X's usage of various perspectives which relate to the lifestyles of mothers. While this study does not investigate if this is intentional, the usage of different tones of voice and content while still writing about the same topic indicates an appeal to mothers of different backgrounds and lifestyles. The subject positions themselves fluctuated in their emotionality within the same theme, as seen with posts under the theme of relationships with community: the Isolated Mother featured mentions of loss and had a more depressive tone while the Community-Oriented Mother position was uplifting and joyful. While the depth of emotionality in contractor posts was established in the results relating to research question 1, the nature of the emotionality presented was similarly important to determining the tone of voice and further the kinds of perspectives taken by Company X.

A particularly interesting finding was the differing usage of pronouns based on subject position rather than the topic being posted about. This is particularly clear in posts relating to the theme of independence, where the two subject positions identified had stark differences in their use of pronouns and hierarchical positioning toward the consumer. The Empowered Mother, while discussing financial achievements, successes, and milestones, would focus the text primarily inward through frequent usage of "I", "me", and "myself". The Underappreciated Mother, on the other hand, would focus on the role of others, using pronouns like "you" more, and asking the reader about their own experiences. Therefore, the subject position taken by the contractor, even within the same topic, is a large determinant in the extent the consumer is involved in the text.

Regarding the minor research question of this study related to mentions of COVID-19, this paper has found implicit mentions were more frequent than explicit ones. The pandemic would be implicitly referred to through time references such as “these times”, “even if it is just temporary”, “use this time”, and “need this [...] more than ever”. As was found by Kleer and Kunz (2023), implicit mentions to the pandemic positively affected social media engagement during the height of the pandemic, and as such even implicit mentions such as these may have generated similar upticks in interest through Company X’s contractor posts.

What was particularly interesting when analysing the materials was the emerging split of two categories in mentions of COVID-19 in terms of tone of voice: (1) externally imposed experience where loss and togetherness are valued and, contrastingly, (2) an opportunity to take action. When it came to the first approach, the content focused on building community around shared experiences, hardships, and anxieties and used heightened emotionality when discussing these topics. In previous research by Lamoreaux (2013), MLMs have historically leveraged the anxieties of mothers to create a narrative of solution, in this case presented through the second form of pandemic referencing: exercising control through Company X’s course. Through more assertive vocabulary and assumptive claims about the experience of consumers, urgency of action is paramount and instilling a sense of “solution” through the Company X course is clear. Examples from the results can be seen below:

“Use this time to work on what you can control”

“Mentally and physically our bodies need this physical activity more than ever”

“I’m fully committed to accepting this circumstance as a challenge to work on ME!”

“let’s show 2020 who’s boss? K, sis?”

This findings from the study reaffirm the findings of Lamoreaux (2013) and Fluegel & King (2021) in that Company X has combined the anxieties of mothers and frame it as an opportunity to obtain meaningful yet flexible employment. Therefore, Company X appears to have appealed to the anxieties of mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic by reaffirming their difficult experiences and posing their courses as a solution through verbal framing and differed tone of voice.

During the study, there were clear themes that arose among the posts of contractors and an overarching tone of voice permeating all posts. General tone of voice was present throughout the contractors’ posts, being highly emotional and assertive. However, the tone of voice

deviated according to the subject position taken by contractors even within individual topics covered in Instagram posts. This demonstrates tone of voice serving as a malleable characteristic adapted to different textual situations for different outcomes. So, while tone of voice is commonly described as a way for brands to deliver a personality to the audience, it can also be interpreted to deliver multiple versions of personality depending on the topic being covered. Furthermore, tone of voice appeared to help establish emotional distance of contractors to consumers reading posts depending on the intended outcome of a post.

5.1.1 Methodological limitations

Limitations in the sample used in this study related to the fact posts from official accounts appeared to be taken down throughout 2020 specifically. The reasoning for why this occurred is unknown but come down largely to two scenarios: they could have been forcibly removed or reported, or they were purposefully taken down by account owners. This hindered the researcher's ability to find standardised texts and required them to instead search out data from contractors rather than official accounts, which was the original intention of the study. The individual variance of how these contractors promote courses could have resulted in a less standardised approach in how Company X communicates and skewed the data collection. Furthermore, using 30 posts across three contractors may not accurately reflect the approaches of a wider range of contractors operating on behalf of Company X. Expanding the number of contractors whose posts are studied would increase diversity in their backgrounds and potential tones of voice under the assumption they are not necessarily standardised.

Another fundamental limitation in this study is the unstandardised approach to particularly research question one, with the creation of a new four-pillar framework based on previous frameworks. Using this framework alongside the discourse analysis guiding the study was effective at determining a more holistic understanding of the materials but the results could have been more robust if, for example, a quantitative approach was used. This could have been done through numerical evaluations of frequency of occurrence of certain terms, sentence structures, and perhaps even emoticon usage, all used in order to place more accurately the tone of voice on potential continuums.

Instagram and social media platforms allowing photo-based sharing methods brings into question to what extent tone of voice should only be considered as a text-based approach to

branding and at what point full posts including images should be considered as part of it. In many instances, contractors used unpolished and personal pictures to promote courses, and on official accounts, edited and polished images are used alongside text instead. In some ways, this could potentially affect how the tone of voice is consumed by the audience.

5.1.2 Future research

There is a considerable research gap when it comes to tone of voice in digital marketing communications, although there are studies showing its positive significance in influencing brand perception and consumer behaviours. While some groundwork about the humanness developed by contractors has been laid during this study, there are a lot of areas to still explore and methods that could be used to achieve an even deeper understanding.

One suggestion for future research would be to explore changes over longer periods or comparatively to understand a cause-and-effect relationship, something that couldn't be deeply explored during this study. A longitudinal approach to tone of voice would more closely highlight the impact of significant events, such as recessions, pandemics, or others, on tone of voice used in marketing materials. Recruitment strategies could even be considered over a longer period, given that circumstances have had notable changes on the MLM industry and how information is delivered in the first place. Longitudinal analysis could provide some insight into the extent to which MLMs adapt their tone depending on changing circumstances. A comparative analysis that would compare the tone and strategies used by MLMs in different industries or the same MLMs across different periods of crisis would give more insight into the commonalities and differences in how MLMs adapt their tone of voice to different consumer contexts.

Taking a step back from the materials themselves and focusing on the consumer themselves is also vital for future research. Studies investigating how consumers perceive the tone of voice and content included in MLM marketing materials could reveal the extent particular choices sway purchasing intent and perception of trustworthiness, for example. A different qualitative approach, such as survey questionnaires or interviews, could allow for more deep understanding of the effects of materials on the audience.

This study focused on MLM marketing of Company X on a specific platform in a specific country, the United States, which limits its applicability to different contexts. There may be

considerable regional variations in how the tone of voice is perceived. A deeper exploration nationally in different states, for example, could reveal how certain contexts can influence consumers further. This approach can be used internationally in future research with regards to cultural differences in different continents, given that many MLMs are widespread across multiple countries. This study only focused on Instagram as a social media platform for MLMs, however many other platforms are used by MLMs to promote their business and raise brand awareness. Conducting a platform-specific analysis on how MLMs tailor their tone and content for specific social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, or Tiktok, could reveal how platform choice affects recruitment outcomes and what the results are based on.

These suggestions for future research can help scholars develop a larger scope of research on MLM practices, recruitment strategies, and ultimately the tone of voice used across geographical regions, timeframes, and demographics. The implications of these choices are becoming particularly relevant for AI-trained models identifying posts to be removed from social media platforms based on consumer protection efforts. Furthermore, when used in other contexts, the efficacy of strategies in tone of voice may help other businesses succeed in their digital marketing strategies and brand.

6 Conclusion

While the tone of voice of Company X was found to be informal, personal, highly emotional, and highly assertive, the level of emotional closeness the brand has to a consumer appears to depend on the perspective taken by the brand on different topics. Contractors balance the image of Company X, legitimacy during times of uncertainty, and building identities for the potential customer to relate to. This balance is complex yet successfully achieved through a steady tone of voice lending to a recognisable brand, the development of 9 relatable subject positions to 5 major themes, and fluctuating level of authority toward the consumer depending on the theme. While in one post Company X comes across as an empathetic and friendly brand through its deep emotionality and personality, it can switch according to the topic to a more authoritative and assumptive approach through primary usage of second-person pronouns and aggressive vocabulary.

The identities developed when discussing different themes shed light on the different ways Company X seeks to resonate with and recruit mothers, acknowledging their different

experiences and commonalities. These findings highlight how MLM recruitment strategies are focused on in-depth understanding of the customers' pain points and responding accurately to multifaceted concerns of their target audience. More importantly, this study shows that tone of voice can be used also as a determining factor in shaping how people understand MLM offerings. Tone of voice goes beyond simply communicating the "personality" of a brand but can help shape perspectives the customer will take on when viewing content. This is demonstrated through all themes, such as the 2 subject positions used to discuss the topic of finances, for example. This also becomes apparent when implicitly referring to COVID-19 as both an experience shared with the community and an opportunity to consume services. This demonstrates how flexible tone of voice can be in highlighting different perspectives and nuances to singular topics and for varied outcomes.

The findings of this study underscore some key patterns that Company X, and potentially other MLMs, use within their contractors' materials to appeal to mothers. The interaction between a brand's general tone of voice, fluctuations in the apparent closeness between the brand and consumer, and the perspectives taken within different topics by the brand are fundamental to understanding how MLMs can flourish, even during times of crisis. For digital marketing, the findings of this study emphasise how important it is for them to deeply understand the current issues faced by target audiences to effectively use tone of voice and further build perspectives around these issues. Adopting distinct perspectives towards singular topics are a key factor in how Company X communicates to its audience, showing an understanding of their pain points and mapping out future possibilities simultaneously. For regulatory bodies, the findings of this study highlight the importance of implicit communications in tapping into the target audiences' and recurring five overarching themes frequently being discussed by Company X and potentially by other MLMs. Posts on social media covering these themes can be leveraged to better target and flag MLMs on digital platforms in the future with the appropriate tools.

This study provides insights into the tone of voice used by Company X contractors on a general level and perspective-specific level. By understanding the themes present in texts and the multiple identities that can be part of presenting these texts to the public, this research helps fill the research gap in tone of voice used in marketing as a whole and specifically within MLMs.

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