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Sexed Appeals: Network Marketing Advertising and Adult Home Novelty Parties

The Avon Lady. Pink Cadillacs. Tupperware parties. These iconic images instantly bring to mind images of nineteen fifties' mid-American life (Wilson 404). Yet network marketing firms (NMOs) like Avon and Mary Kay remain a powerful economic force today. In 2005, direct sales businesses generated over \$30 billion in sales in the U.S., servicing 13.6 million direct home consumers. Home parties, one of the mainstays of direct sales, are responsible for about 26% of U.S. sales and are not only a profitable, but trendy, cultural activity today (Direct Sales Association; Farnham; Turner). One form of party—known as a “fantasy” or “passion” party—has become a commonplace female bonding ritual in neighborhoods across the US (Ikenberg; Rose). Such parties are for “personal care” products that your twin-set and pearl clad Avon lady probably never mentioned—vibrators, dildos and other “adult novelties.”

The promotional discourses surrounding adult novelty parties are of interest for several reasons. They are part of a recent, and expanding, effort to market and to make fashionable women's consumption of sexual commodities (Attwood; Heinecken; Lara). They are also of interest because of the heavily gendered nature of network marketing itself. The overwhelming majority of the 14.1 million people currently working in direct sales—an estimated 85%—are women (Direct Sales). The fact that adult

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novelty home parties also restrict attendance to “adult women only” defines them as uniquely female sites of cultural production and economic exchange.

While the role home parties play in the lives of the real women who attend them is important to consider, of greater interest is how adult novelty NMOs market themselves to their sales force of distributors. Distributors are actually the primary consumers of NMO merchandise, purchasing products directly from the organization before reselling them to customers in their local markets. Thus, it is necessary to examine how company marketing discourses work to define particular social realities and identities for their consumer/sales force in ways that attract their membership and further the company’s economic goals (Kong 475-476).

This paper examines promotional materials like company websites, brochures, press releases and other materials sent to prospective distributors by leading adult novelty NMOs like Passion Parties, Pure Romance, Slumber Parties and Athena Home Novelties. These company-produced texts seek to market organization membership and represent a uniform, coherent discourse that works to “enunciate the collective knowledge of the organization” (Carl 22-23). These texts function as implicit directives to distributors as to how they should understand the nature of their services as well as how to promote them to their own customers in turn. Materials such as newsletters are also the most regular and common form through which these organizations communicate with their distributors (Kong).

The marketing discourses of adult novelty organizations have a two-fold function: they must instruct potential consumers on the benefits of organization membership at the same time they present their products as necessary items fulfilling women’s sexual needs. This essay will examine the ways that both goals are met by adult novelty NMOs’ rhetoric of empowerment. Organization membership is promoted as a means to demonstrate one’s status as a liberated woman, freed from the constraints of traditional forms of female sexuality, and as a means to achieve economic and personal freedom.

However, as this essay will show, both the economic and sexual forms of “empowerment” promised by NMO membership are constructed around a traditional narrative of femininity defined primarily by childrearing and marriage. This narrative, rather than signaling the widespread acceptance of feminist values within larger culture, actually helps to normalize women’s

subordinate status at home and in the public work sphere. By doing so, women are urged to maintain their location within an economic underclass – a position that leads women to NMO membership in the first place.

The companies under examination were all founded in the early and mid-nineties and are among the most successful firms of their kind. Pure Romance, Slumber Parties, and Passion Parties all claim sales ranging from \$45-60 million dollars and boast between ten to twelve thousand consultants. Athena's (the only company to feature male distributors and offer "couples" parties) has over 1400 consultants and \$7 million in reported sales (Jefferson; Lew; Sanchez; White; Woosley).

Each of the companies utilize strategic appeals designed to speak to the concerns and aspirations of their target audience, a vast majority (76 percent) of whom are married and relatively well educated, with over a third possessing college degrees and another third having some college or technical training. Notably, a full 54 percent are between the ages of thirty-five and fifty-three, with almost a quarter between the ages of eighteen to thirty-four (Direct Sales Association). As suggested by their educational and marital status, a significant percentage of women involved in NMO sales are likely to identify with middle-class aspirations of economic and personal success at the same time they are likely either to be caring for small children or to have children still in school.

Previous studies of NMO discourses have focused on ways they present themselves as alternatives to bureaucratic corporate business practices that "stifle initiative and fixes earnings" (Wilson 405). NMOs have relied upon an egalitarian ethos in which their sales force of "distributors" or "consultants" are cast as independent business owners, limited only by the effort they are willing to put into work. Among their primary marketing tactics is to stress aspects of network marketing itself —the flexibility of scheduling, the low time commitment, and more "friendly" manner of selling —as among the primary ways individuals benefit from NMO membership (Kong 474-493; Wilson 404-406).

These discourses are all apparent in adult novelty NMOs. For example, a testimonial in Athena's company newsletter, *Happy Buzzing*, provides a blistering critique of current corporate practices which are anything but family friendly. The writer describes her grueling schedule: rising at 5:30 a.m. and working all day before picking the kids up from school and waiting

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for her husband, who works the opposite shift, to arrive home at 11:30 p.m. “I just feel *my* family deserves more quality time together. There has to be more to life than just hustle and bustle day in and day out [emphasis original]” (8). The solution to such stress is offered on the back page of Pure Romance’s recruiting brochure. It depicts the legs of a woman dressed in business attire, with copy that reads “Let’s just call it a permanent vacation from Corporate America...who says you have to put up with long hours and small paychecks? Not us. At Pure Romance, You’re the Boss.”

Adult novelty businesses make overt reference to women’s historic economic marginalization at the same time they promote themselves as a means by which women can attain economic success, self-actualization and empowerment and “eliminate the glass ceiling” (*Pure Romance*). They also underscore the fact that women dominate every aspect of the business, reassuring the new distributor that she has “the help of our sisterhood... You have support; most women do not have that at their jobs!” (*Pillow Talk*) Distributors are thus promised a network of social support at the same time they are presented with a vision of entrepreneurial freedom.

This promise of social support is notable in the face of a large number of testimonials that speak to the stress and uncertainty many women experience due to social and family obligations. For example, one writer reports: “I’m a mother of five children, a wife, I work full time as well as volunteer as a fundraising ‘team mom’ and I care for my Grandpa. My list just goes on and on.” Yet, after an NMO meeting with other distributors, “I had this sense of true happiness, confidence that I have not felt for sometimes [sic] as well as a sense of belonging...I just felt so good, so sexy, like a woman should feel! It was very empowering!...What a great feeling, to be accepted as who I am...Having that kind of support is so powerful” (*Happy Buzzing* 13).

Another Athena’s distributor says that up until the moment of a NMO meeting “I thought my only purpose in life was to become a mother. I never thought that there could be *another* purpose [emphasis original]” (*Happy Buzzing* 12). Her fellow consultant notes that “I felt that a large piece of what was keeping me from fully pursuing my dream was not sure that it would fit into my husband’s dream and what that might mean if it didn’t.” The meeting gave her confidence to talk to her husband, and now “We’re making a plan towards shared dreams” (13).

Whether or not they accurately represent the unedited words and feelings of real distributors, the inclusion of testimonials into company newsletters and websites is strategic. The personal address creates a sense of intimacy, while the narratives speak to the female consumer who sees in them aspects of her own life. Given the stressful family roles many women must fulfill, it's not surprising that a major selling point is the support they will receive and the sense of "belonging" given by NMO participation. As one Athena distributor writes in the company newsletter that "As you grow up and out of the 'fuzzy purple robe' that is your childhood, you have fewer and fewer opportunities to feel special...Athena slips that fuzzy robe on my shoulders...I am special, I am worthy and I am beautiful" (*Happy Buzzing* 12).

Such testimonials call to mind Janice Radway's explanation of women's consumption of romance novels. Radway draws from Nancy Chodorow's theories on the psychological development of women to argue that, because of their family histories, women most often perceive themselves as selves-in-relation. As a result, they "tend to experience an ongoing need for nurturance and attachment well into their adult lives" (Radway 137). Yet given the asymmetrical psychological development of men, who tend to define themselves by autonomy and independence, as well as the everyday demands of family life which require women to nurture others rather than themselves, women are very unlikely to have this need met. Radway thus argues that the popularity of romance novels is due to their promise of filling women's emotional need for connection and nurturance (135-137). Adult novelty organizations base much of their marketing around similar promises.

They are also presented as a means by which to mark one's distinction. "You *Are* Special [emphasis original]" reads a headline in *Pillow Talk*, Slumber Parties' monthly newsletter. "You believed in yourself enough to get a kit. *That* means you are special! You have an inner desire to change your current situation and help others... You are different, you are unique and you are needed! Slumber Parties and the world are happy to have you" (19). Women will receive public affirmation, and be offered an identity built on American notions of individual success and difference rather than simply being defined by their family roles.

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Yet similar strategies are employed by most NMOs. What sets adult novelty businesses apart from other organizations of this kind is the sexual nature of their commodities. In addition to promising support and public recognition, adult novelty companies are able to draw on the meanings attached to sexuality that have been promoted and made available to middle class white women over the last thirty-odd years. These discourses are a major means by which adult novelty organizations signal their status as a company *uniquely* concerned with the empowerment of women.

While never explicitly invoking the term “feminism,” the promotional materials of these organizations evidence how feminist discourses of the 1970’s have shaped contemporary representations of sexuality, in particular for the ways they link the selling and consumption of sex toys to notions of agency, self-actualization, and “sisterhood.” According to June Juffer’s history of pornography, the second wave of the feminist movement redefined the cultural meaning of masturbation. Because it illustrated the independence of female orgasm from the penis and/or men, women’s masturbation came to be understood as “a political act of individual liberation from the confines of the home, marriage, and family” (72). Accordingly, women’s consumption of erotic products began to be seen as a means to practice resistance against male dominated expressions of sexuality and to signal one’s “liberated” status (Hall 3).

This theme of liberated resistance continues today as a primary sales tactic of adult novelty NMOs. The companies stress their differences from male-dominated adult stores, commonly describing themselves as “founded by women for women” and operating under the principle of “women helping women” (“About”). (In fact, according to Burbank, Passion Parties was actually founded by two men). Like other adult stores for women, they typically depict themselves as offering “safe” “comfortable” and “confidential” spaces where women can educate themselves about their bodies, and “become sexually empowered” (Heinecken). Similarly, Jennifer Sanchez reports that Passion Parties’ President Pat Davis says the company’s success “stems from women taking responsibility for their own sexuality,” while one distributor explains that she is “a pioneer ready to kick down the boundaries imposed upon us by the evolution of a sexually restraining culture” (*Happy Buzzing* 33).

Like other stores selling sexuality to women, NMOs render the selling and consumption of sexual commodities as an upscale and affluent activity (Attwood; Hall; Heinecken). For example, Athena's FAQ page says that it is the company for "discerning women" whose logo "reflects our panache for elegance. While we do offer sexual products, our logo does not in any way reflect the stereotypical image that sex is sleazy. Our mission is to take the 'sleaze' out of sexuality." The page for Passion Parties has a link addressing the question "What will people think of me if I sell these products?" which then goes on to reassure the reader as to the acceptability of sex toys ("Common Questions"). Pure Romance is described in its brochure as "A classy and sophisticated company needing a classy and sophisticated name." Selling sexual commodities is thus transformed into a highly desirable activity, reflective of one's sophistication and political awareness.

Kong has observed that, linguistically, the discourses of network marketing organizations are more similar to those of charitable and religious organizations and other "belief driven" activities than those of traditional businesses, creating an ideology that the company works in the best interest of others (488). Adult novelty distributors are similarly presented, not as selling, but as "sharing" or instructing others about the benefits of membership. However, for adult novelty distributors, this "sharing" is framed as an explicitly feminist act, as they are encouraged to see themselves as helping to liberate women who are not yet sexually aware.

One Pure Romance testimonial, for example, describes the experience of a consultant who "decided to try Pure Romance because I had always been intrigued by the double standard that women were faced with when it came to female sexuality...I was able to empower women and give them the tools and education to take ownership of their intimate lives—some of them for the first time!" ("See What Our Consultants Are Saying"). An Athena distributor writes that "as we bring our expertise into the homes of women and couples, each of us has the potential to use our knowledge to transform lives for the better" (5). Athena likewise writes of its parties "We educate our Goddesses on issues of sexuality that our customers desperately want (and need!) to hear" ("FAQ"). "Transformation Equals Liberation" reads the headline of another article in *Happy Buzzing*.

Yet it is not only party-guests that are liberated and transformed, but the distributor herself. A key identity offered to the potential distributor is

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that of expert educator. Distributors are expected to inform and advise their customers about the workings of their bodies, and told to teach them about sexual and relational health. The companies bolster the notion that the distributor plays an educational, therapeutic role by promoting their association with famous sex educators like Jennifer Berman and Sue Johanson. Pure Romance and Passion Parties offer advice columns on their websites, via which women can find information on sex and health related questions, while Pure Romance sponsors a National College Health Tour and special programs geared to help women regain their sexual selves after breast cancer (“Sex Toy Company Puts New Twist on Sex Ed”; “Sensuality, Sexuality, Survival Fact Sheet”).

While other NMOs also present sharing or “educating” others about their products as a vitally important gift, similar statements about cooking tongs, candles or blenders would be debatable. But the historical suppression of female sexuality globally and in the U.S. remains fact. Especially in an era of abstinence-only sexual education, the insistence on female pleasure and the educational mission promoted by adult novelty organizations actively advance a political and feminist agenda.

However, discourses around sexuality play another role as well, working to locate women’s sexual “empowerment” specifically within the context of heterosexual practices and lifestyles. In doing so they help to reinforce identities defined by women’s enactment of traditional roles within the family. For example, Passion Parties’ “Our People” web page says that the company offers “ordinary women the opportunity to live extraordinary lifestyles.” Consultants, we are told, are very diverse, coming from “all walks of life.” Consultants are “Married. Mothers. Housewives. Grandmothers.” Curiously, all of these “walks of life” seem to involve husbands and children.

Similarly, NMO websites, catalogs, and newsletters promote the notion that the major benefit women gain from using these products and knowing about their bodies is that it will enable them to maintain relationships. Passion Parties’ home page informs us that company’s “sensual products” are designed to “promote intimacy and communication between couples” (“Home”). Athena likewise instructs distributors that party guests should be encouraged to ask questions about “how these products are used and how they relate to a couple’s intimate relationship” (“Host a Party”).

Yet it is also clear from press releases and news stories sent to prospective Athena distributors that these relationships should be relationships with men. For example, one news story in Athena's promotional packet tells us that even though "After a party like this guys may be worried that they will be seeing less of their girlfriends," according to the Athena distributor interviewed, this will not be the case, since she does not believe "anything can replace the real thing" (Finity). An article profiling a distributor for Passion Parties likewise reassures the prospective consultant that "toys are never meant to replace a guy, but to enhance relationships" (Truman-Cook).

Accordingly, it is important to observe that one of the benefits of home parties frequently described in the testimonials is that they save *marriages*. "It feels great to be able to help so many women change their lives for the better. I've helped women fall back in love with their husbands" ("See What Our Consultants Are Saying"). A Passion Parties' consultant writes, "I love the end of those parties when I have that one lady who thanks me for keeping her marriage together. *This* is what it's all about! [emphasis original]" ("Your Passion Consultant"). Athena's founder Jennifer Jolicoeur similarly describes her work as helping to ensure that "mommies and daddies stay in love forever" (qtd. in Berard).

It's not just the marriages of customers that are saved, but those of distributors. One story in *Happy Buzzing* is peppered with pictures of the author in her wedding gown and is titled "Making Dreams Come True." The story describes how Athena's helped her achieve her goal of getting her boyfriend to "marry me in less than seven months" (10). Athena's promotional packet includes a color brochure titled "Wedding Bells, Without the Bills," urging one to "join Athena's and earn the money you need for the wedding of your dreams." The copy is in the form of a personal letter from company president, Jennifer Jolicoeur, to the "Bride-to-Be." It congratulates the bride before listing all the things she will "have" to consider now about her wedding. "As a bride, you are going to want to have the best of everything and you deserve nothing less!" It goes on to mournfully list the \$26,327 cost of the "average" wedding (for 150 people)! Yet instead of proposing the prospective bride elope, the suggested alternative is to pay for the wedding by becoming a consultant. All of this is offered to the bride-to-be because "at Athena's our mission is to empower women to make their

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dreams comes true.” But the dream is based on a very traditional narrative of female success (not to mention excessive consumption).

The emphasis on marriage is even more evident at Passion Parties, whose press materials often highlight the fact that company president Patti Davis has been married for over forty years. The company’s on-line FAQ page likewise reminds potential distributors that “we stress monogamy, safe sex, and the importance of keeping a relationship exciting.” Its home page is dominated by images of white roses, underneath pictures of three heterosexual couples, and foregrounds a link to a “7-Day Passion Challenge” in which one can enter to win a 7-carat diamond ring. The couples are all dressed in white, including one (the only African Americans represented on the site) in bridal gown and tuxedo. The text and copy are clearly meant to suggest weddings. Perhaps these will be sexually-active marriages, but it’s clear that traditional power dynamics are to be maintained: in each picture, the man is positioned as physically dominant, looming behind the woman, or protectively encircling her with his arms.

In some ways it is quite progressive to present sexual commodities within the context of “normal” heterosexual life. However, this presentation is teamed alongside other framings which help reinforce notions of female sexual passivity and marginalize women’s sexual autonomy. A case in point is the way the companies all delineate certain occasions as appropriate for their home parties. Athena’s homepage lists the occasions consumers might want to host a party. They are suitable for events such as: “Girls Night Out. Bachelorette Party. Bridal Shower. Housewarming Party. Football Widow Parties,” among others.

As I have written elsewhere, such events are a form of carnival, moments in which women’s resistance to normative sexual behaviors are encouraged with the implicit understanding that the resistance is only temporary, a form of play (Heinecken 133-134). Athena’s logo, a close-up of a woman’s face and winking eye, similarly underscores the carnivalesque nature of the parties. The winking eye, functioning as a sign of secret complicity and as a means of underscoring a joke, instructs consumers to understand the nature of the party as being “just in fun.”

The consistent description of these parties as places where women can “laugh” extends this notion. Sex, in all its legislated, social and individual forms, has afforded millions of women great pain. Laughing at sex certainly

is a means by which to express discontent, rage, pain and criticism of gender/sexual norms. However, laughter, the heart of carnival, does little to challenge the social norms that envelop us. In addition, laughter is also a means of expressing shock, disbelief, and disapproval, a key method of drawing the line between what is normal and what is not. The emphasis on the potential humor of the parties by all of the companies is an assurance that certain products and the sexual activities and identities they represent are not meant to be taken seriously. What, after all, actually *is* so funny about a big purple dildo or anal beads to begin with?

Similarly, the promotional materials often reinforce notions as to the still-marginal nature of female sexuality. For example, in its pages dedicated to Patti Davis's guide to sexuality, the Passion Parties' website describes the book as "flavored" with real-life stories and "confessions" from Passion Party-goers around the country, once again presenting sexual expression as a secret transgression best relegated to the confessional. The fact that three of the four companies emphasize their "confidentiality" and restrict attendance to women likewise speaks to the need to keep sexual discussion confined to an isolated space—and, indeed, distributors are instructed to sell their products in a separate, private space after the larger "public" presentation.

Certainly, the promise of real-life stories is a means to reassure women as to the normality of female desire. They are also probably sales tactics appreciated by women who remain uncomfortable with overt sexual discussion. The point, however, is that despite the apparent messages that sexuality needs to be "brought out of the closet," the emphasis on privacy and confessions suggests it's only appropriate to know and speak about sex in jokes or whispers.

This attitude is echoed by the figure of the "Passion Diva," a term coined by Passion Parties' President Patti Davis in her book "Passion Parties Guide to Great Sex." The national company website dedicates a number of pages to touting the book, informing us that "every woman has a Passion Diva" inside of her," a "sparkling, sexy, lusty creature just waiting to be let out," whether one is a "boardroom superstar or a stay-at-home mom" ("Guide").

Yet the opposition of two types of women here is telling, as is the use of the term "diva." In recent years diva has become a popular way to

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describe a powerful or outrageous woman who defies cultural convention. In this case the diva is obviously meant to be perceived as “cool,” a term used to mark a woman’s distinction in a positive way. Still, it’s important that sexual agency for women remains framed as essentially transgressive, as this reading depends on an understanding that the diva is *unlike* other women. Additionally, the term diva is just as often used to signal a woman whose actions are perceived as despicable, like Naomi Campbell or Britney Spears. Like the figure of “the unruly woman” discussed by Kathleen Rowe, the diva is thus a deeply ambivalent figure, whose sexual agency remains tied to a range of negative connotations.

Yet any rebellion signaled by the figure of the diva is undercut by reassurances that despite appearing to be “naughty” the diva really is a “nice” girl. After all, a woman’s inner Passion Diva is not fully in her control, but is a “creature just waiting to be let out” (“7daypassionchallenge”). Passion Parties stresses that great sex “is not about becoming a sexpert or even the world’s greatest lover” (something which would indicate a level of knowledge and skill on the part of the woman) but about “the ability to let go and enjoy everything you do together.”

Even the way products are advertised in the on-line catalog stress the passivity of the female consumer, presented as something that consumers “experience” rather than use. RomantaTherapy, Passion Parties’ exclusive line of products, was designed to “prepare our mind and body to receive loving attention from a caring partner.” The product itself is only something that will “prepare” us. The ultimate goal is clearly the “loving attention” of a partner, rather than the sexual pleasure taken directly from the product. And, once again, women’s sexual pleasure is framed as a *re-action* versus an *action*.

It is also critical to consider the products being sold on the site. Actual sex toys account for only 17% of Passion Parties sales—the rest are lotions and potions and lingerie (Lew). Most of the featured products are creams, vaginal “intimacy” wipes, bath oils, and perfumes. The sexual pleasure at offer here is one built around an insistence on vaginal cleanliness and pleasant bodily aromas, in which women’s natural smells and fluids are banned. It is also one built around the penis and penetrative intercourse. For example, the product category “For Her,” features only two products designed to arouse a woman’s clitoris, while a product called “Tighten Up”

promises to “increase that snug feeling.” Even Ben–Wa Balls are sold alongside blurbs stressing the health benefits of strengthening one’s Kegel muscles while “improving sexual performance,” hinting that women should be more concerned about giving than receiving pleasure.

Certainly not all products for sale on the various sites are designed exclusively for heterosexual couples desiring “vanilla” sex. Athena’s online catalog has pages dedicated to gay and lesbian consumers and more “alternative” sexual practices. However, representations of heterosexual pairings dominate the marketing materials. Women who might want to experience forms of sexual pleasure other than penis/vagina are largely excluded within the discourses at work in the Passion Parties’ online catalog.

Company materials thus provide powerful ideological instruction supporting the existing sex-gender system by locating female sexual liberation specifically within the boundaries of heterosexual marriage. They suggest that female pleasure is inherently tied to sexual relations with men, who will be able to unleash female desire in appropriate ways. Any other notion of sexuality is acceptable only because it is done “in fun.” While this does not guarantee individuals encountering these texts will unquestioningly share this attitude, such framings are still likely to shape the practices of actual consultants and party guests, who are offered the chance to adopt a pleasurable identity of sexual rebel and liberated woman without actually threatening the status quo.

It is important to observe that heteronormative discourses coincide with those designed to advocate women’s NMO participation, in which a key selling point is how membership enables women to perform traditional roles within the family and preserve existing relationships between men and women. For example, one Athena distributor reports that she wants to work for the company because it will allow “me to be home with my children, take better care of my home, and most of all, spend more time with my husband...to have a life where hot cookies I’ve made are waiting for my kinds after school...where I greet my husband (with my face full of fresh make-up and wearing a sexy little outfit)...[and to be] more available to my most precious treasure...*My family* [emphasis original]” (*Happy Buzzing* 8). Selling sex toys to other women will allow her the life of Donna Reed.

In particular, organization membership will enable *mothers* the time and money to stay at home with their children. For example, Pure Romance’s

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brochure opens with a letter from company founder Patty Brisben. The letter includes pictures of Brisben kneeling with her young children, while telling the reader that “I was determined to be around for every childhood activity, from my kids’ first steps to football games and PTA meetings.” (Brisben was apparently so successful as a mother that her children never left; she later writes that all four of her children now work alongside her. Passion Parties’ website similarly boasts that Patti Davis works with her adult son.)

One distributor writes that she joined Athena’s because she “desperately needed to do something that would make me feel like a grown up again but also allow me to do the soccer mom thing” (20). A Pure Romance testimonial reports that “I am able to be a stay-at-home mom for my three girls” and, in addition to being able to afford “a nicer home in a great neighborhood,” the flexibility of her schedule means that “my girls don’t ever have to spend time in daycare” (“See What Our Consultants are Saying”). Indeed, news reports of NMOs often present them as “the solution” for harried moms, “allowing a career at home as they raise a family. NMOs are means by which “women are redefining what it means to be a stay-at-home mom...whether you call her homemaker or entrepreneur, mom is making money” (Trinidad).

The representation of NMO membership as “the solution” for mothers is important for a number of reasons. For example, the ability to stay home with children is often listed alongside other benefits of working as a distributor, such as access to fancy cars, vacations, jewelry and other luxury items. The construction of stay-at-home parenting as a luxury speaks to the ways in which nuclear family arrangements are no longer possible. In part because of the decline in real value of men’s wages, most married women now must work out of economic necessity. The traditional stay-at-home mom of the fifties is actually quite rare; estimates are that only about 15% of U.S. families now meet that model (Worley and Vannoy 166). Within this context the ability to stay at home becomes a symbol of one’s higher economic standing and a key marker of empowerment.

Yet within adult novelty home party discourse, a woman’s desire to be at home is presented as an individual choice, solely motivated by a woman’s personal pleasure in being near her kids. This skirts over the fact that many women look for work which will enable them to stay home during the day

because that is the only way they can *afford* to work in the first place. As Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels have observed, because our nation lacks affordable, quality daycare, many mothers who need a salary or who simply want to work “feel they have no choice but to quit their jobs” because the cost of paying daycare is greater than the income generated by work (Douglas and Michaels 266). While many women might prefer working a full-time job outside the home, these organizations construct an understanding that women engage in part-time labor by choice rather than because it is the only viable work available to them. The resulting suggestion is that they are guided more by their mothering instincts than by any economic necessity.

Certainly, testimonials that boast about never having to put children into daycare recirculate the anti-daycare propaganda that has existed for years in the U.S. Despite much evidence to the contrary, the suggestion is that putting one’s child into any form of daycare at all is a sign of bad parenting and even harmful to the child (Douglas and Michaels 236-266). The ability to stay home with children thus becomes a sign of personal integrity and individual success, reflective of one’s standing as a parent.

Furthermore, while many women would argue the ability to provide fresh cookies for their children is simply a reflection of their personal desires, narratives that stress women’s desire to be stay-at-home moms (even as they work) reinforce a traditional division of labor in which childcare has been and remains the primary responsibility of mothers. These marketing discourses never question that dad might or *should* stay home, or reveal how women’s work for the NMO has enabled a male figure to stay at home and care for children full time.

It is clear by this that adult novelty companies participate in what Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels call “the new momism”— a media rhetoric of “intensive mothering” that is built around the notion that women should have choices and be “active agents in control of their destiny.” Yet though it seems on the surface to “to celebrate motherhood,” the new momism ultimately dooms women to failure by creating unachievable standards of perfect parenting (5). Similarly, even though these organizations acknowledge women might want and need to work, they also suggest that a successful woman will never leave her children in the care of others. This

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presents women a Catch-22—unless they sell adult novelty products via home parties.

As Ara Wilson has discussed, the discourses of network marketing organizations construct particular identities for consumers that work in the best interests of the company. Accordingly, these companies present a form of sexual liberation premised around the maintenance of a heterosexual identity that is not only located within the boundaries of marriage but dependent upon men for pleasure. This heteronormative identity is echoed by other appeals that reinforce women's role as primary caretaker.

The construction of identities built around motherhood and marriage to men is in the best interest of the company, since the maintenance of patriarchal family relations helps channel women into the NMO in the first place. As discussed earlier, women's traditional role as primary caregiver is an obvious motivation for membership: these companies fill a real need for many women who require flexible work schedules that enable them to meet their family obligations while gaining an income.

Yet the fact that women have this need in the first place is symptomatic. NMOs both benefit from and perpetuate social arrangements that negatively affect many women. Women remain primary caretakers (even when working outside the home) as a result of unequal power relations built into traditional family and social structures. For example, due to factors such as the low pay of many female-dominated jobs as well as the fact that women still perform the majority of childcare and household labor, women tend to have less economic power than their male partners (Worley and Vannoy). Since the partner with greater external resources tends to have more power within the relationship and is able to set the terms of how household tasks will be divided, women tend to do even more chores like childcare, further reducing their labor force participation and negatively impacting their ability to earn wages (Coltrane and Adams 145). Hence, one reason women occupy the position of an economic underclass is a result of their relatively low status within the traditional family structure.

At the same time, however, discourses emphasizing marriage are also a key means by which to target women whose roles as wives actually enable them to join the NMO workforce. While women need not adopt heterosexual identities to experience economic discrimination, it is clear that married women—a full 76 percent of distributors—are a key NMO

market. It is likely that the relatively high percentage of married people is at least partly due to the fact that few individuals can actually make enough money to live on via direct sales. According to the Direct Sales Association, the median income of distributors is only about \$2,400 a year (Harris 104). A full 90 percent of distributors make less than five thousand dollars a year and 89.9 percent sell only on a part-time basis (Direct Sales Association; Walsh). Even of those few selling full-time, only six percent earn more than a middle-class income of \$50,000 (McQueen 96).

While there are probably many women who work other jobs and even full-time as well as selling part-time for the NMO, it is clear that women who lack the economic support of a partner need to make a living wage. Without a safety net they are less likely to opt to work as a “self employed” NMO distributor due to the relative (un)likelihood of earning such a wage via NMO sales, as well as the lack of benefits and the possibility of a heavier tax burden.

Yet the part-time nature of the work means that for most participants, their earnings are functioning only as supplemental income. Although the extra income might provide a necessary economic boost for individual families, such part-time labor will hardly be “the solution” for women’s economic or personal problems. Women whose only work outside the home is part-time NMO sales remain economically reliant on their partners; while women who perform other work in addition to selling for the NMOs do so because of larger economic structures that make it so difficult to make ends meet with only one job.

Obviously, most network marketing organizations similarly target a part-time, female market. However, the discourses of adult novelty NMOs stand out for the way they attach their rhetoric of individual, economic empowerment to issues of sexuality, explicitly drawing upon the language of feminism and female liberation in their marketing of sexually-related materials. But to what end? One consequence of this rhetoric is to suggest that since women are now “empowered” to consume sexually-related material, they are also now “free” from exploitation in the personal realm and economic sphere and have already achieved the feminist dream of female liberation.

But the ability of individual women to achieve better orgasms, feel more romantic with the husbands, or even be able to afford to send their

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kids to a better school does not mean that larger feminist goals have been achieved on a wide-scale social and cultural level. While these companies do bring attention to the important issue of women's access to knowledge about their bodies, as well as their right to sexual pleasure, such attention should not be accepted uncritically. The forms of sexual agency most often represented by NMOs are extremely limited, contained within a (white) heterosexual framework that remains rigidly patriarchal and that does little to disrupt inequalities in existing sexual, family, social, or economic systems. Selling sex toys to other women may be fun, even gratifying, but it is not the same thing as working to gain social, political, or economic power for all women.

It is useful here to point out that one reason NMOs are doing so well is that they have been able to take advantage of events in the global economy. Women's move into the work force over the last 30 years or so is a result not just of feminist inroads allowing women to enter the public sphere, but is also due to the decline in real-world wages of male workers, a deterioration that coincides with the shift from a manufacturing-based to an information-based economy, the decline of labor unions, and an ever-widening gap between the wealthy and the poor in the U.S. More people have to work *more* simply in order to make ends meet. The historically low wages of women in comparison to men, tied to the under-compensation of female-dominated jobs as well as forms of more direct discrimination against female workers, only furthers the need for supplemental income for many women and their families.

Hence, while NMOs provide one means by which individuals may feel better about themselves while navigating the demands of surviving in this new economy, those concerned about the feminist principles of empowerment for *all* people might place more emphasis on getting government and businesses to adopt policies and practices supporting a living wage for workers, equal pay for equal and comparable work, affordable health and day care, and other courses of action directed towards the goals of social and economic justice, and less emphasis on buying and selling the newest model of vibrator, dildo, or kitten whip.

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