

THESIS

THE CALL TO SELL: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF CALLING FOR  
RELIGIOUSLY IDENTIFIED WOMEN IN MULTI-LEVEL MARKETING

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## ABSTRACT

### THE CALL TO SELL: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF CALLING FOR RELIGIOUSLY IDENTIFIED WOMEN IN MULTI-LEVEL MARKETING

Work is a life domain in which many people perceive a calling. Research on calling reveals that workers who perceive and live out a calling often experience a range of positive outcomes, such as increased work-related and overall life satisfaction and well-being. However, living a calling can also lead to negative outcomes, such as workaholism, burnout, and exploitation. Multi-level marketing (MLM) is a business model that operates via direct selling and network recruitment. This business model has been found to be particularly attractive to women. It has also gained traction within the faith community, with many MLM companies aligning with Christian values and faith communities. This study sought to investigate the sense of calling that religiously identified women who work in Young Living, a leading MLM company in the United States, may experience. Six individuals participated in-depth structured interviews, and transcripts were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Results revealed four domains and multiple themes, including 1) Reasons for Joining (e.g., supplementary income, pipeline of buying to selling, positive previous experiences with product, means to achieve work-life balance, desire to have own business), 2) Sense of Calling (e.g., transcendent summons, desire to educate and share clean products with others, sharing their faith with others, empowering others to become distributors, perceiving multiple callings), 3) Positive Outcomes (e.g., personal and professional growth, belonging to a community of like-minded people, camaraderie with other women in business, positive recognition and social influence,

increased religious engagement), and 4) Negative Outcomes associated with the work (e.g., overwhelm and difficulty setting boundaries, moral disagreements with discourse and utilization of certain products, negative perceptions of business structure from others, needing to convince others about usefulness of products). Implications for clinicians, organizations, and future research are explored. Future research is recommended to replicate and validate the results of this study. Research is also recommended to investigate how the results of this study may apply to more diverse samples, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods. The results of this study may help to inform clinicians into how one's religious perspective may inform their sense of calling.

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“The permeable membrane between religion and culture is also what allows so many corners of the capitalistic marketplace to call upon God to promote their products ... including and especially the multi-level marketing industry [...] Christian-affiliated direct sales companies like Mary Kay Cosmetics and Thirty-One Gifts encourage recruits by saying that God is actively ‘providing’ them with the ‘opportunity’ to sell makeup and tchotchkes... and to confer others to do so, as well. Billion-dollar businesswoman Mary Kay Ash was once confronted in an interview about her famous tagline ‘God first, family second, Mary Kay third.’ When asked if she thought she was using Jesus as a marketing ploy, she responded, ‘No, he’s using me instead.’”

– Excerpt from *Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism* by Amanda Montell (2021)

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Working is a central part of life for many people, an integral part of their lived experience. Accordingly, people often identify deeply with their job and seek to have their career reflect their values and their sense of meaning and purpose. The experience one's work as meaningful work has important implications not just for fostering a sense of workplace satisfaction, but for enhancing one's broader life satisfaction and meaning in life (Rosso, Dekas & Wrzesniewski, 2010; Steger & Dik, 2009). Exploring meaning and purpose can promote dignity at work by helping people cultivate a sense of calling in their work (Duffy et al., 2016).

Research on calling has increased exponentially over the last two decades. In general, research on calling indicates that people who approach their work this way tend to report numerous positive criterion variables. These include increased levels of work and life satisfaction (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997; Dobrow, 2006; Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007; Duffy et al., 2018), as well as reduced stress, lower levels of depression, and less work-life conflict (Treadgold, 1999; Oates, Hall, and Anderson, 2005). Job performance is associated with living a calling as well. For example, a study by Park et al. (2016) demonstrated that salespeople who reported living a calling performed significantly better in their jobs than did their coworkers who did not report living their calling.

Despite the large body of evidence revealing links to positive variables, some downsides or vulnerabilities to experiencing negative outcomes are associated with living a calling, too. This stream of research into calling's so-called "dark side" has identified potentially deleterious consequences like workaholism, burnout, and organizational exploitation (Duffy et al., 2016). Bunderson and Thompson (2009) found that a deep sense of meaning and calling for work can be a "double-edged sword." That is, people often exhibit a deep sense of calling and strongly

identify with their work, but this intense emphasis on calling and hyper-focus on work identity can create a vulnerability towards workaholism, work-life balance disruptions, and personal sacrifice. Understanding the “tipping point” in which something ordinarily so positive can turn into a vulnerability is one of the key questions for scholars to tackle within the next wave of research on calling (Duffy et al., 2018).

While research on calling has explored a variety particular career paths (e.g., college-aged students, physicians and medical professionals, animal care workers and zookeepers), none have explored how calling intersects with a specific branch of entrepreneurship called multi-level marketing (French & Domene, 2010; Bott et al., 2017; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Schabram & Maitlis, 2017). The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of women in multi-level marketing (MLM) companies. In doing so, this study aims to investigate how these women perceive a sense of calling, the extent to which their work currently aligns with their sense of calling, and the various potential impacts (positive and/or negative) of living out their calling within this kind of business model. Ultimately, this study seeks to broaden the extant research on calling by investigating it in an underexplored and unique population (i.e., women with religious commitments working within an MLM.)

### **Definitions of Calling**

As a construct, work has long been thought of as life domain within which people often feel “called” to pursue certain paths. In Western culture specifically, the idea of “calling” has deep roots in capitalistic ideals and religious philosophies. For example, prior to the 16th century, the term “calling” was used specifically to refer to a divine call to ministry (Hardy, 1991; Schuuman, 2004). Eventually, with the advent of the Protestant Reformation and separation from the Roman Catholic Church, the term “calling” was expanded to include any

domain in life where one feels faithfully “called” by God to contribute to society. Later expansions of the concept came from John Calvin, the famous French theologian, who proposed one’s “calling” arises from the specific gifts and talents bestowed to us by God (Calvin, 1547). These classical conceptualizations of calling imply that people have a duty or obligation, both spiritually and societally, to pursue their callings in life (Durkheim, 2014). Notably, these perspectives emphasize divinity, duty, and determination while holding one’s personal passions as secondary.

While centuries have passed since these definitions first emerged, their ideals have by no means diminished in the current cultural milieu. In fact, many 21st century Americans, both religious and non-religious, still indicate belief in the idea that God, the divine, or some higher power calls people to express their strengths and gifts (Gallup, 2003; Winesman, 2005). Other modern conceptualizations of “calling” have emerged to counter these neoclassical ideals. Some of these modern perspectives are influenced by capitalistic economic structures, including feeling a sense of personal agency and freedom and the desire to obtain wealth and monetary success (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015).

Obviously, definitions and perceptions of calling have shifted over time. Shimizu, Dik and Conner (2019) investigated if calling is a dimensional as opposed to a categorical or “taxonic” construct using cluster and taxometric analyses. They found that calling is indeed dimensional in nature, meaning that calling may have different definitions depending on the individual and context, but each of those undergird some aspect of a single underlying construct. Thus, callings can differ in degree rather than type. This is critical in informing one’s understanding of calling. If there were discrete “types” of calling, each of them should be studied on their own—with their own measurement instruments and perhaps with their own theories. But

there do not appear to be distinct types of callings. Rather, different people tend to emphasize different elements of calling. On a practical level, it's important to acknowledge that calling can mean different things for different people, but those differences reflect unique perspectives that each reflect a common core.

For the purposes of the present study, our working definition of calling is an approach to work marked by three dimensions: 1) a transcendent summons, 2) alignment of work purpose with life purpose, and 3) a prosocial orientation (Dik & Duffy, 2009). Taken together, these dimensions assert that calling is simultaneously inward and outward oriented, with some external and/or internal force influencing people's discernment and desire to approach work in a way that benefits the world around them, and that syncs with an overarching sense of purpose in life.

### **Research on Calling**

Research on calling and meaningful work has increased substantially in recent years. For instance, Google Ngram is a research tool for linguists that assesses how often a word or phrase shows up in English language printed text. Results using this tool show exponential growth for the use of "work as a calling" over the past two decades (Bunderson & Thompson, 2019). In other words, authors are writing about calling more often, and readers are reading about it more often.

Approximately 10% of the research on calling to date has been conducted using qualitative methods (Thompson & Bunderson, 2019). Most of these qualitative studies used interviews with people who are perceiving and/or living out a calling. Some of the populations studied include college-aged students (French & Domene, 2010), therapists and counseling psychologists (Duffy et al., 2012), physicians and medical professionals (Bott et al., 2017), working mothers in academia (Schermer Sellers et al., 2015), animal care workers and

zookeepers (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Schabram & Maitlis, 2017), and those who are currently transitioning between careers (Ahn et al., 2017).

Qualitative research is unique in that it allows for a nuanced, complex, and rich understanding of the construct of interest. With a construct like calling, which can often be interpreted in a variety of ways, qualitative research provides space for exploring how individuals make sense of their lived experience. While results of these studies cannot directly test theories in the same way that quantitative methodologies can, they often are useful for generating new theories or supporting extant quantitative studies. In this specific research domain, qualitative studies have historically highlighted the myriad positive outcomes of living a calling. For example, in their study on counseling psychologists, Duffy et al., (2012) found that the participants who were interviewed viewed their sense of calling as their broader purpose in life. By living out their calling and pursuing purposeful and meaningful work, these participants showed deep satisfaction with both their professional and personal lives. In turn, these participants reported that living their calling impacted their work and interpersonal relationships for the better (Duffy et al., 2012).

Some qualitative research has also brought forth the so-called “double edged sword” of calling. This idea suggests that in some cases, the positive outcomes typically seen in those living a calling (e.g., increased job and life satisfaction) can sometimes be offset by potentially negative outcomes such as workaholism, career tunnel vision, burnout, and exploitation (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Schabram & Maitlis, 2017; Gazica & Spector, 2015; Berg et al., 2010). For example, in their qualitative study on zookeepers, Bunderson and Thompson (2009) found that workers can simultaneously experience positive and negative outcomes of living out a calling. In this study, many zookeepers reported having a deep love and passion for their work

with animals, while also reporting that that they felt they needed to hide their passion from their supervisions. In fact, many of the zookeepers expressed that they worried that they would get asked to do more of these unpleasant jobs and be overworked without proper compensation. Through these interviews, the researchers established that a deep sense of calling can run the risk of making people vulnerable to things like organizational exploitation. This again harkens to the nuanced nature of qualitative methodologies. These outcomes of calling, both the good and the bad, are further expanded in Work as a Calling Theory.

### **Work as a Calling Theory**

Work as a Calling Theory (WCT) was developed to unify the extant research on calling and to highlight directions for future research (Duffy, Dik, Douglass, England & Telez, 2018). The basic premise of the model supposes that perceiving a calling lends itself to positive (and in some circumstances, negative) outcomes, with living a calling serving as they key mediator.

#### *The Positive Outcomes of Calling*

A substantial amount of research has supported the notion that people who live their calling exhibit many positive outcomes, including increased levels of satisfaction in domains such as work, career, and life as a whole (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997; Dobrow, 2006; Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007). With this increase in satisfaction comes reduced stress, lower levels of depression, and less work-life conflict (Treadgold, 1999; Oates, Hall, & Anderson, 2005). Taken together, these findings suggest that perceiving a calling and living that calling can lead to beneficial outcomes, as WCT predicts.

Living a calling is predictive of satisfaction with one's job. This finding has been demonstrated by a multitude of studies with diverse populations (Duffy et al., 2018). Since living a calling is so inextricably bound to one's sense of purpose and meaning, it is reasonable to

expect that greater satisfaction with work would come as a result of the successful pursuit of one's perceived calling. Research has supported this proposition. For example, in the epochal study by Wrzesniewski (1997), research demonstrated that calling is positively associated with both work and life satisfaction. Additional research by Duffy and colleagues (Duffy et al., 2012; 2017) supported this finding, and suggest that this association is mediated by sense of meaning and career commitment (Duffy, 2012). Taken together, these studies imply that calling enhances satisfaction in both work and nonwork domains by facilitating meaning and attachment to work.

Job performance is another key outcome that is directly associated with living a calling. For example, in a study by Park et al. (2016), salespeople who reported living a calling performed significantly better in their jobs than did their coworkers who did not report living their calling, as measured through their total sales commissions. People who perceive a calling, enter a good-fitting work environment, and experience substantial meaning and commitment to their job not only feel like they are living a calling, but they are also highly motivated to perform well at their jobs. Research has demonstrated that those who are living a calling show better work performance (Kim et al. 2018), more success in their careers (Chen et al. 2018), are more employable (Lysova et al. 2018), and are viewed as more professionally competent (Guo et al. 2014).

A sense of calling also has been shown to be highly correlated with a sense of health and wellbeing. Calling has been found to decrease feelings of emotional exhaustion, improve physical health (Wrzesniewski et al. 1997), improve sleep (Clinton et al. 2017), improve psychological flexibility (Steger et al. 2010), and enhance overall subjective well-being (Conway et al. 2015).

A meta-analysis by Dobrow et al., (2019) endorses this idea that living a calling is predominately associated with overwhelmingly positive outcomes. A recent review by Thompson and Bunderson (2019) reinforces this notion. Indeed, they claim that the positive relationship between calling and various forms of work and life satisfaction are the “best established findings in the calling literature” (Thompson & Bunderson, 2019, p. 426). They suggest that calling is positively associated with work and life satisfaction, feelings of attachment to your work (e.g. commitment, engagement, and work-role identification), increased self-efficacy, greater occupational clarity, and a stronger sense of meaning and purpose. Although much of this research on calling is correlational in nature, a handful of longitudinal studies have substantiated that a sense of calling both predicts and is predictive of these outcomes (Dobrow, 2013; Bott & Duffy, 2014; Duffy et al., 2014). For example, in one study, medical students’ sense of calling, vocational development, and wellbeing was assessed across a 3-year period (Duffy et al., 2011). This study found that students who viewed their lives as meaningful endorsed high levels of calling. Ultimately, all these findings suggest that by and large, living a calling is both a predictor and a precipitate of a plethora of positive outcomes.

### *The “Dark Side” of Calling*

Although there are many recognized benefits to pursuing work as a calling, it does not come without potential downsides. Unfulfilled callings, distortions of calling (e.g., workaholism), and vulnerabilities of calling (e.g., exploitation) are some of the complexities and negative outcomes that can come with living a calling in some circumstances. For instance, Duffy, Autin, Allan, and Douglass (2015) noted that while many people report a sense of calling to a specific career, many of them are not able to pursue the career to which they feel called. This can happen for a variety of reasons, including lack of access to relevant jobs, lack of financial

stability, or limited opportunities for the education required. This discrepancy between perceiving a calling and actually being able to live it out is often referred to as an “unanswered calling,” a scenario that can be disheartening and demoralizing (Duffy & Austin, 2013). Indeed, those with unanswered callings report acute feelings of stress and dissatisfaction (Berg et al., 2010; Gazica & Spector, 2015).

There are also circumstances in which people who feel they are living a calling encounter vulnerabilities. For example, work experienced as a calling can sometimes take on an outsized degree of importance for a person, which can in turn form the basis of a rationalized overinvestment in the work. Workaholism (Ng, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2007) and burnout (Maslach et al., 2001) can occur as a consequence, along with negative impacts on a person’s interpersonal relationships and overall well-being (Cardador & Caza, 2021; Conroy et al., 2017; Duffy et al., 2016). Career tunnel vision may also result; a study by Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas (2012) demonstrated that elite music students who reported a strong sense of calling tended to be adamant about pursuing their chosen career path, even despite mentoring advice encouraging them to consider other options. At an organizational level, employees with a sense of calling can experience exploitation, such as when employees are underpaid or asked to perform unpleasant or unrealistic tasks by supervisors who expect little resistance due to the employee’s high levels of intrinsic motivation (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dik & Duffy, 2012). Seemingly, a strong sense of calling serves to blind some individuals to potential negative consequences that may arise from pursuing their current path.

### *Religion and Calling*

As mentioned earlier, the construct of calling has religious roots. Religion is a complex and multifaceted construct that for purposes of this study is understood as a search for the sacred

that occurs within an organized community and/or belief system (Pargament et al., 2005). It is important to note both the overlap and distinction between religion and spirituality. Although most people identify as both religious and spiritual, a growing number identify as spiritual but not religious (Dik et al., 2006). For this reason, spirituality is often considered the broader construct, with religion serving as a particular expression of spirituality.

In a 2018 Gallup poll, 50% of Americans endorsed the idea that religion is very important in their lives, and 45% reported an awareness of God in their work (Gallup, 2018). This highlights the idea that religion and/or spirituality may be important in people's vocational experiences and broader sense of calling in the workplace. In a 2021 study, White and colleagues (2021) found that in a nationally representative sample of U.S. adults, 43% endorsed the idea that calling is a relevant concept in their working life. Some 21% of individuals in this study endorsed that they are seeking their calling, while 29% reported that they are currently living out their calling. Interestingly, this study also found that those who placed a high degree of importance on God or spirituality reported higher rates of seeking, perceiving, and living their calling, in line with other research that has linked religion/spirituality and calling (Ponton et al., 2014).

Evidence suggests that calling is simultaneously a sacred and secular concept (Dik et al., 2012). However, even with the recognition that calling may be connected to religious values, surprisingly little research has examined the overlap between religion/spirituality and career development (Alayan, 2021; Duffy, 2006). However, research on religion/spirituality and work-related topics adjacent to career development has flourished, most notably that pertaining to workplace spirituality (Miller, 2003). Workplace spirituality is defined as "a framework of organizational values evidenced in the culture that promote employees' experience of

organizational transcendence through the work process, facilitating their sense of being connected to others in a way that provides feelings of completeness and joy” (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003, p. 13). This area of research explores how spirituality connects to work performance, specifically focusing on how integrating religion/spirituality into the workplace can improve outcomes like productivity and reducing turnover (Benefiel et al., 2014). Further research on workplace spirituality has explored additional correlates, including workplace creativity, trust, personal fulfillment, job commitment, job satisfaction, workplace involvement, and employee sense of well-being (Houghton et al., 2016). However, critics note that the manner in which spirituality is typically conceptualized within workplace spirituality research is unhelpfully broad, and includes elements (e.g., sense of community) that most religion/spirituality researchers do not consider to be core to the domain (Hill & Dik, 2012).

Since both religious development and career development are related to one’s sense of personal identity, some individuals may consider their line of work to be an extension of their religious and/or spiritual identification. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that further research investigate the connection between religion/spirituality and a sense of calling in the workplace. This is an especially salient suggestion for research examining multi-level marketing workers, given the close cultural ties between multi-level marketing and religious communities.

### **Multi-Level Marketing**

Entrepreneurship is often characterized by a sense of personal motivation (Da Palma, Lopes, & Alves, 2018), which is often linked to a sense of calling (Horvath, 2016; 2017). A specific type of entrepreneurship that has garnered a lot of interest in recent decades is multi-level marketing (MLM). Multi-level marketing, also known by other terms such as Direct Sales/Marketing or Network Marketing, is a type of business model that operates via direct sales,

whereby employees of the company are also members of the company's networking and recruitment platform (Sethi & Khinvasara, 2015). That is, employees of MLM organizations make commissions not only by selling the products, but also by recruiting others to the company. People who are recruited by other employees are known as a recruiter's "downline." When those in the recruiter's downline begin making a profit from their direct sales, the initial recruiter receives a portion of their commission (Bloch, 1996). Often, those who are recruited are friends, peers, or family members of the recruiter.

### *History of MLMs*

The multi-level marketing model was first introduced in the 1940s by the United States company called Nutrilite, which was a direct selling organization that sold food supplements (Sethi & Khinvasara, 2015). Following the typical MLM model, employees were not just encouraged to sell the product, they were also financially compensated for building a team of fellow salespeople below them who would also sell the company's products (Biggart, 1991). In the late 1950s, the United States-based health and home company, Amway, popularized the MLM model (Choudhary & Kamal, 2013). As of 2021, some of the most well-known and high-grossing companies that use the MLM model include Mary Kay, Avon, Tupperware and Young Living (Hallman, 2021).

Albaum and Peterson (2011) reported that in 2009, the amount of revenue generated by direct selling companies such as MLMs was around \$28.3 billion in the United States alone. An estimated 16.1 million people were employed by MLMs at the time, the vast majority of whom were women (Biggart, 1991; Good & Hassay, 2015). Furthermore, those who are employed by MLMs tend to have a relatively stable income, a high sense of entrepreneurial attitude, and a

flexible work schedule (Ramaniya, 2014). This flexibility in work is due to the fact that most people who work for MLMs set their own schedule and act as their own boss.

The former president of the United States Direct Selling Association, Neil Offen, claimed that employees working for MLMs tend to fit into one of six categories (Albaum & Peterson, 2011). The first type of MLM employee is one he deemed “the career seller,” or someone whose primary source is from the MLM. A “part-time permanent seller” is one who counts on ongoing income from the MLM but tends to work only part-time. A “short-term objective seller” is an employee who only works for an MLM with the purpose of earning income to meet a specific goal, such as purchasing a car or television. “Socially conscious sellers” enjoy the product they are selling and are inspired to share the product with other people. The “social contact seeker seller” is in it for the sense of community that is provided by the MLM. Finally, the “internal consumption seller” is one whose primary motive derives from the discounts and personal deals they get for the products (Albaum & Peterson, 2011). These categories demonstrate the range of motives experienced by people who work with MLMs. Some of these motives may align closely with a sense of calling, including and perhaps especially for women embedded within a religious community, for reasons I explore later.

### *Ethical and Legal Considerations of MLMs*

While the MLM model can be viewed as convenient and empowering to sellers, others have critiqued the model for its questionable ethical and legal practices (Koehn, 2001). In the public sphere, MLMs are often cynically described as “pyramid schemes” or “Ponzi schemes” (Nga & Mun, 2011). According to the U.S. Federal Trade Commission, MLMs and pyramid schemes do overlap, yet are distinct (Federal Trade Commission, 2021). (Pyramid schemes are considered illegal by the U.S. government, while MLMs are considered legal business models.)

While both rely on direct sales as a source of revenue, pyramid schemes rely far more heavily on recruitment as a source of revenue. For this reason, pyramid schemes are considered “scams” by the U.S. government and often result in people losing money, rather than gaining a profit (Federal Trade Commission, 2021).

In addition to the question of legality, there are also concerns over the public perception of MLMs and their ethicality. In fact, it is not uncommon for consumers to have negative views of MLMs and direct selling organizations (Peterson & Wotruba, 1986; Sethi & Khinvasara, 2015). For example, many view MLMs critically for how assertive or aggressive the selling of products and the recruiting practices can be. Regarding the recruitment practices, especially because the recruiter gets financial incentives and partial commission for the recruitment of downline employees, recruiters often persuade, coerce, or even exploit their peers, relatives and friends to join their MLM (Bloch, 1996; Sethi & Khinvasara, 2015). There is evidence to suggest that MLMs can at times promote exploitation of employees’ interpersonal relationships, to my knowledge, no research examined the exploitation of employees on the organizational level.

### *Research on MLMs*

Most research on MLMs still targets the economic structure or the questionable ethicality of these business models (Albaum & Peterson, 2011). To a lesser extent, researchers have also examined the various personality, interpersonal, and motivational factors for why people join these types of companies (Srilekha & Suma, 2016). For instance, Jain et al., (2015) investigated a variety of motivational factors for why people tend to join MLMs, identifying four main motives. These include: 1) social responsibility (e.g., building rapport and community with others, making a contribution in the world), 2) self-development (e.g., feeling challenged, financial security), 3) personal freedom (e.g., work flexibility, “low risk” of investment), and 4) working lifestyle (a

sense of accomplishment, respect for the company image, and the ability to “be your own boss”). Kumar and Satsangi (2021) recently expanded on these findings and noted that primary factors for joining MLMs generally include the desire to earn more income, the seemingly low risk and high rewards of joining an MLM, the potential lifestyle benefits (e.g. more leisure time, the flexibility of the work schedule, etc.), and the desire to connect with and help others. Building on these results, Gulabdin et al., (2020a, 2020b) recently proposed that personality traits (e.g. The Big 5) and interpersonal factors may also play a role in the willingness to join an MLM and the success of agents currently in MLMs. While this theory has not yet been tested, it reinforces the idea that there may be specific personality factors at play that could be predictive for people joining MLMs.

In addition to organizational and individual factors, some evidence suggests that cultural factors may be at play when joining MLMs. In other words, MLMs may be especially attractive to people that hold certain identities. For example, Frederico (2020) reported evidence that women who are mothers may be particularly inclined to join an MLM. She suggested that the cultural scripts surrounding femininity and motherhood may be well-suited for the structure of MLMs. She stated that MLMs may be a unique business model that permits mothers to “[explore] the contradictory expectations faced in motherhood: the cultural ideals of ‘stay-at-home’ motherhood, but also the need and desire of many women to generate an income and have career fulfillment” (Frederico, 2020, p. 8).

Clearly, diverse factors motivate people to join MLMS. The main factors that influence the decision to join MLMs include the desire to supplement income, the attractiveness of work flexibility, and the desire to form a connection with others while making a positive contribution in their work. These motivations may be especially pronounced for those who hold certain

identities, such as being a woman, given that the particular structure of the work itself arguably aligns with cultural expectations for women in the workplace.

### **Religion and MLMs**

Several studies within the research on entrepreneurship broadly suggest that this line of work may be spiritually or religiously motivated for many people (Dodd & Gotsis, 2007; Griebel et al., 2014; Zelekha et al., 2014; Khurana et al., 2021). For instance, Balog et al., (2013) claims:

The experience of entrepreneurship is a values-driven endeavor [...], whereby entrepreneurs often place a deep level of personal meaning on their entrepreneurial pursuits, that are primarily driven by their internal values [...], such as religion and spirituality. (p.1)

For this reason, it seems reasonable to expect that entrepreneurship may be a domain where a sense of calling is particularly salient.

Although evidence suggests that entrepreneurship may be characterized by a religious or spiritual motive for some, this research has yet to expand to workers within MLMs. One factor that could potentially facilitate the linkage between calling and MLMs is religious identification. As summarized earlier, research has supported the notion that a sense of calling, vocation, and religion/spirituality can be influential in the workplace (Dik & Duffy, 2009; Dik et al., 2012; Steger et al., 2010; Duffy, 2010; Molloy & Foust, 2016; Neubert & Halbesleben, 2015; Marsh & Dik, 2020), whereby religion may act as a moderator between calling and work and life satisfaction (Jaramillo, 2011). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that for at least some workers who view MLMs as a path through which they may express a calling, religion and spirituality may also play a role. As noted earlier, entrepreneurship is a domain where a sense of calling and religion/spirituality may be particularly salient (Dodd & Gotsis, 2007; Griebel et al., 2014;

Zelekha et al., 2014; Khurana et al., 2021). However, to date, no empirical research has specifically investigated the overlap between calling, religion, and MLMs, despite speculation that church structures may provide an ideal atmosphere in which MLM's thrive (Shellnutt & Anderson, 2015).

It is worth noting that numerous MLMs have overt ties to organized religion. For example, the essential oil company Young Living was founded by the late Gary Young, a devout Christian who founded the company with religious ideologies, even claiming that his essential oils had "spiritual powers" (CBN News). Some other well-known MLMs with religious ties include Just Jewelry, 31 Gifts, Amway, and Mary Kay (Online MLM Community, 2021). In the book *Multi-Level Marketing: At the Crossroads of Economy and Religion*, Luca (2011) claims that MLM businesses are uniquely positioned in the bridge between economy and religion. The author asserts that MLMs were originally formed with the intention to make capitalism more ethically and spirituality centered. Luca (2011) added that the MLM model was based closely on Protestant networking strategies, which allowed for an essentially mission-based growth model.

This study examined the potential intersection between MLMs, sense of calling, and religion/spirituality. Gender scripts of femininity seem to have promoted MLMs as a potential business venture for women and a place for them to pursue their calling. Furthermore, since calling is often inextricably bound to religion and spirituality, it is highly plausible that women who identify as religious may feel called to MLMs for religious reasons. In sum, cultural ideologies, gender scripts, and religious structures may specifically promote MLMs as a worthy business venture for women who identify as religious. The aim of this study was to examine the potential intersection of gender, religiosity, and calling with regards to individuals in multi-level marketing. Hopefully, by exploring these factors, a better understanding into how or why

religious women perceive and live out their sense of calling in this specific domain can be achieved. Furthermore, by understanding the various outcomes associate with living their calling, both researchers and practitioners can work to further bolster and dignify these individual's experiences in their given line of work.

## **Purpose**

Although research has examined calling, religion, and MLMs independently, to my knowledge, no study has investigated how they may intersect. This present study sought to expand the extant literature on both calling and multi-level marketing by examining how women who identify as religious and engage in MLM business models describe a sense of calling to their jobs. This was assessed using semi-structured qualitative interviews with participants.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experience of a novel and unique population. The multi-level marketing industry offers a surprisingly unexplored population for whom the construct of calling may be particularly salient. This study specifically aimed to explore how women in multi-level marketing companies perceive and live out their sense of calling. To pursue these aims, the research questions of this study were as follows:

1. How do women in multi-level marketing companies perceive a sense of calling?
2. How do women in multi-level marketing companies feel that they are currently living out their calling?
3. How does religious or spiritual identification influence their sense of calling?
4. What specific aspects of their job align with their sense of calling?
5. What are the impacts of living their calling in this setting?
  - a. What are the positive outcomes for these women living out their calling?
  - b. What are the potential downsides to their pursuit of calling?

6. How does religion, gender, and calling intersect for those employed in multi-level marketing?

The method used to analyze the participant's interviews, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This qualitative methodology allows for a rich and detailed exploration of a particular population's lived experiences and helped to inform the results of this study.

## CHAPTER 2: METHOD

This study employed purposive sampling. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyze content.

### **Participant Recruitment**

Although there are several types of qualitative methodology, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was selected, as it was the best fit for the specific aims of this study. IPA is a qualitative research method that is used to understand how people make sense of their experiential reality. These experiences are then used to develop a better understanding of the phenomenon, or for how the phenomenon uniquely manifests within a specific group of people (Finlay, 2011). Ultimately, IPA aims to provide complexity, richness, and an enhanced understanding of a particular group and their unique lived experiences (Smith, 2008). Therefore, since IPA emphasizes the need for an extremely detailed account of unique group's experiences, phenomenological analysis was a more appropriate choice than an approach like grounded theory, which is aimed more at theory development than phenomenological description per se (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007).

Best practices in IPA methodology suggest sample sizes of anywhere between three to six participants (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This number ensures that the themes developed are focused and detailed enough to accurately reflect each of the participant's individual experience, while also avoiding the risk of overwhelming or saturating the data (Finlay, 2011). Given this guideline, six participants were recruited for this study. IPA is best suited for gathering information on the experiences of a small group of mainly homogeneous participants, so this was accounted for in the recruitment process (Smith & Osborn, 2008). In IPA, depth of data is ultimately prioritized at the cost of breadth. This desire for depth necessitates relative

homogeneity of participants and smaller sample sizes than other qualitative methods (Smith & Osborn, 2008). It is also difficult and time-consuming to analyze large amounts of qualitative data derived from a semi-structured interview process. Therefore, this study was limited to six participants.

Participants were recruited through the @YoungLivingEssentialOils Facebook community, a social media group focused on the essential oil MLM company Young Living (see Appendix B). This company was selected because it is one of the most active and well-known MLM organizations in the United States and due to its mission-focused platform that may be conducive to the aims of this study (Hallman, 2021). At the time of this project, the Young Living Facebook community had 4.5K members and was a highly active group, with post engagement happening daily. This was also a public group, where sellers and consumers of Young Living products meet and discuss the company and its products.

To ensure richness of data and homogeneity of the sample, this study focused on women employed (part-time or full-time for at least 1 year in the company) in multi-level marketing companies who identify as religious, are between the ages of 20 and 40, and how endorse a sense of calling to their current line of work (see Appendix D for participant demographics).

According to a 2018 study done by AARP, 60% of individuals involved in MLMs identify as female. The majority are also white, educated, and young adults. Upwards of 45% join their MLM company in their 20s, and the average age at which people join is 29 years (DeLiema et al., 2018). A screening survey was used to ensure that individuals who expressed interest in the study met the inclusion criteria (see Appendix A).

**Table 1: Participant Demographics**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Religious Affiliation</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Time in Org.</b>	<b>Hours/Week</b>
Mary	37	Catholic	United States	5 or more years	25
Sarah	25	Christian	United States	1 - 3 years	5
Kelsey	25	Christian	Canada	1 - 3 years	10 to 20
Sunshine	29	Christian	Australia	1 - 3 years	30+
Lucy	25	Jesus Follower	United States	1 - 3 years	7 to 10
Emily	36	Jesus Follower	United States	1 - 3 years	15 to 20

*Note.* All participants self-identified as female and endorsed having a calling to their work.

### ***Data Collection***

Before starting the interview, participants were asked to read and electronically sign an informed consent form. The participants were ensured the confidentiality of their data. After completing the interview, the participants received a debriefing form via email outlining the purpose of the study. All interviews were conducted and recorded using Zoom and used the program’s password protection to ensure participant confidentiality. All interview recordings and transcriptions were de-identified and stored in a secure electronic folder.

As with all qualitative studies, there was a possibility that the interviewer or interview questions will influence, and therefore bias, the participants’ responses. Several steps were taken to limit these biases. First, the semi-structured interview questions were all either open-ended or will lead to a follow-up question that will be open-ended (e.g., why or why not?). Furthermore, the interviewer sought to develop rapport with the interviewee prior to engaging in the semi-structured interview via introductions and indicating a non-judgmental environment. During the semi-structured interview, the interviewer also responded occasionally to answers with follow-up

questions to gain clarity. Clarifying questions remained as neutral as possible to prevent the participants from interpreting judgment from the interviewer.

Prior to data collection, a pilot study was conducted. This was done to evaluate the semi-structured interview questions and to trial-run the study's protocol. Pilot interviews are important in the use of qualitative data to ensure that researchers are informed prior to data collection about potential challenges, weaknesses, or shortcomings that the existing protocol may have. This helps to ensure that any revisions needed to the protocol are done in advance of data being collected. Malmqvist et al. (2019) states that, "a carefully organized and managed pilot study has the potential to increase the quality of the research as results from such studies can inform subsequent parts of the research process" (p. 1). The primary researcher asked if a personal acquaintance to volunteer to do a pilot interview with her to test the interview protocol. The interview lasted approximately 45-minutes and evaluated all the primary semi-structured interview questions, along with a few probe and clarification questions. All the questions asked were found to be effective, so no revisions to the semi-structured questions were needed (see Appendix C).

### **Data Analysis**

Given the potential nuance and complexity of responses to the research questions, this study employed a phenomenological methodology that will help in understanding the lived experiences of women in multi-level marketing organizations. This was a qualitative, phenomenological study using a semi-structured interview method. Content from the interviews were be analyzed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). As mentioned previously, IPA was chosen due to its ability to interpret rich and complex experiences. As Smith and Osborn (2008) stated, "IPA is a suitable approach when one is trying to find out how

individuals are perceiving the particular situations they are facing, how they are making sense of their personal and social world” (p. 55).

The method for analyzing data replicated the analytic structure proposed by Smith and Osborn (pp. 66-76, 2008). Interviews occurred virtually and were recorded. Afterward, each interview was individually transcribed and edited. To help avoid the potential for researcher bias, and thus enhancing the validity of the coding process, an additional member (e.g. another graduate student in the Counseling Psychology Department) also participated in individual coding and was trained in IPA methodology. Both the primary researcher and the additional rater independently reviewed the interview transcripts, made notes and memos on the themes that arose. Then, both raters used their notes to collaboratively develop emerging themes. These emerging themes were then grouped together to form overarching themes based on similarities or overlapping constructs.

Prior to the results being finalized, member checking also took place. Member checking is a process whereby the interviewees have the opportunity to review their individual transcript and provide any feedback they may have on the emerging themes and analysis results (Foster, 2014). This process is commonly adopted in qualitative research in an effort to improve credibility, trustworthiness, and internal validity (Dickens, 2014). Member checking helps to reduce misinterpretations and encourages participants to actively engage in the research process, should they wish to participate in this way (Guba, 1981; Foster, 2014). The primary researcher followed up with interviewees after their initial interview to solicit their feedback on the accuracy of interpretation and to ask any additional questions that may have come up for participants. Only one participant responded at the time of this document, but she gave positive feedback and agreed with all parts of the transcript.

The primary researcher then compared the coding schemes between the raters for each interview. The raters discussed potential differences, along with their individual memos and notes to gain insight into the reasons why the codes may be similar or different. For instance, differences in coding due to minor language differences (e.g., additional income vs. extra income) were not considered critical or meaningful. However, differences due to the rater's own interpretations or thought processes were considered meaningful. After this process occurred, a list of superordinate themes was be constructed (Smith & Osborn, 2008). These were used to develop a discussion of the major themes from the interviews and how this relates to the extant literature.

### **Positionality Statements**

It is crucial in any research project, including ones that utilize qualitative analyses, to be mindful of identities that researchers hold and aware of potential biases that they may carry. I self-identify as a cisgender female, middle class, well-educated, and was raised as a Protestant Christian but currently identify as agnostic. I have never been engaged or employed in any multi-level marketing organization, but I have numerous family members, friends, and peers who are involved in a variety of MLMs. While I don't openly support MLM companies, I am intrigued by the way they operate. I have always been fascinated by what makes people drawn to certain lines of work. Originally, when I started psychological research, my interests centered on women who enter fields that are generally male dominated, such as women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). While this continues to be an area of interest, I also became fascinated by women who enter other lines of work, including multi-level marketing. I began noticing that many of the people in my life who were involved in MLMs were women. I noticed that many of these women were often also religious and joined companies that tended to

promote religious or spiritual messages. I started wondering if there was something particular about these identities that drew them into this line of work. In other words, I was curious if religious women felt called to multi-level marketing.

A research assistant that is also training in IPA analyses will be involved in coding the participant interviews. The research assistant wrote her own positionality statement, which is included below:

I self-identify as cisgender women, multiracial, atheist individual who researches the nonreligious experience. I've never been in an MLM, nor have I been actively recruited. However, I do have a close relationship to someone who is currently active in an MLM. I don't tend to support MLMs, but I am also interested by them, especially considering the religious undertones some of them seem to have.

Given our unique positionalities, identities, and potential biases, several strategies will be utilized to establish reliability in the analysis process. As mentioned previously, all data will be coded by the primary researcher as well as a research assistant to ensure that multiple perspectives are considered. The primary researcher and research assistant will independently make memos and engage in reflexive writing during the coding process. Additionally, the research team will continually debrief our individual reactions to the interviews and process the ways in which our own biases and lived experiences may be impacting the interpretation of data.

### **Anticipated Themes**

Given women's involvement in MLMs and the potential for a sense of calling, I anticipate a number of themes to emerge from the data. This could include their reasons for joining the organization (e.g., the sense of community, supplementary income), how their work aligns with their sense of calling (e.g., community impact, prosociality), how their religion and

sense of calling intersect with their work (e.g., spiritual values, connection to a religious community), how gender roles may influence their calling (e.g., cultural scripts of how to be a working woman and/or mom in society), the positive outcomes of working in their organization (e.g., additional income, sense of community), along with any potential negative outcomes of working in their organization (e.g., pressure to perform, organizational exploitation).

## CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

Multiple domains arose in each interview capturing responses to the semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix). These domains are reasons for joining, sense of calling, positive outcomes, and negative outcomes of their work. Each domain contains several associated themes associated that collectively described how women in multi-level marketing experience their work. While only one domain directly addresses how their sense of calling is perceived and lived out in their line of work, each domain is relevant in informing this phenomenon, especially regarding the reasons they decided to join this line of work and the outcomes associated with their involvement in multi-level marketing, both the positive and the negative.

### **Domain 1: Reasons for Joining**

This domain relates to the participants' reasons for joining their organization. This specifically addresses how the participants first heard about the organization and how they made the decision to join the organization. Participants identified that the primary reasons they joined Young Living included having a supplementary source of income (*Theme 1-1*), the quick pipeline of buying to selling (*Theme 1-2*), having had positive previous experiences with the product (*Theme 1-3*), joining as a means to achieve work-life balance (*Theme 1-4*), and expressing a desire to have their own business (*Theme 1-5*).

#### *Theme 1-1: Supplementary source of income*

Three of the six participants expressed that a reason for them joining their organization was due to a desire for a supplementary source of income. Many of the participants mentioned that they enjoyed the idea of working a job that would provide them with additional money or financial support for them and their families. For instance, Emily stated that, “[I realized that] I

could sell these things and make an income.” Sarah also commented that a reason she joined was because, “I would love to have that extra bit of income.”

### *Theme 1-2: Pipeline of buying to selling*

Five of the six participants expressed that there was a common pipeline of being a consumer of the Young Living products to being a seller and distributor of the product. While this theme often closely coincided with Theme 1-1, it was adopted as its own independent theme due to how prominent it was for individuals. Sarah spoke to this theme by commenting how, “I’m already buying the products anyway. Why not get a commission off of those items?”

Some of these women specifically noted that the jump from going from buying to selling was rather rapid. In some cases, this transition from buying to selling took place in a matter of days or weeks for some participants. Lucy stated that, “I kind of made the decision [to join] kind of all in the same day of like if I’m gonna do this, I’m gonna go like I’m all in.” Similarly, Emily noted that “[she went from buying to selling] at the exact same time because the way that my friend presented it to me, she presented the business at the same time as she presented the products to me.” Another participant, Sunshine, noted that:

From the first time I saw it and it planted the seed I would say 12 weeks later I purchased, and I was a brand partner that day. I hit start the next month. I climbed the ladder very quickly. Yeah, there are 9 ranks and I went up up five in eight months [...] I didn't go from, you know, all you know. Apply to distribute. It it was the same the same day. My oils arrived. I told everyone this is what I'm doing.

### *Theme 1-3: Positive previous experiences with product*

Five of the six participants discussing having positive previous experiences with the product. They described that their own personal experiences with the products were often so positive that this inspired them to join the organization and sell these products to other people.

Sarah described a moment where she first tried the products and had an overwhelmingly positive experience:

I came to school one day with a horrible headache and I was asking around everybody, “Does anybody have any Advil? Does anybody have anything” and she's like “No, but I have Peppermint” and I'm like “Yeah, OK, sure” and I tried it and 30 minutes later it helped relieve so much of my headache and I just kept applying it every you know throughout the day and I'm like “girl, this helps so much. I need this” and so I first fell in love with Peppermint oil was my first. You know, kind of gotcha oil.

Another participant, Kelsey, also described her positive previous experience with the products and how this inspired her to become a seller:

As I tried the Young Living oils and the Young Living products I was like, 'wow, these are so much better than the clean products that I was using before, and like better than the other oils I was using before.' Ah man, so like really crazy, like just the difference in the quality of the oils and the quality of the products was night and day for me. And so that's how I got into it.

#### *Theme 1-4: Means to achieve work-life balance*

Two of the six participants discussed how joining Young Living was a way for them to achieve a better work-life balance. While this was not a theme that the majority of the participants endorsed as a primary reason for joining, it was expressed in detail by the two individuals who reported it. These two participants noted that joining Young Living gave them the means to achieve better work-life balance in their professional lives, especially in terms of spending more time with family. For instance, Mary discussed, “I could actually retire from teaching and go into this so I could come home and have more time for my family.” Sunshine also echoed that joining Young Living allowed her to have more time with family, which allowed her the opportunity to have balanced life roles:

For me personally [the most rewarding things is] being with my children. When I was a nurse, I was previously single mom and I would work like a 40 or 50 hour week. No good. You're always working. You never get time off, you're exhausted. So thinking about maybe being able to run this business with my children at home with my family

[...] a lot of the rewards for our family have been things that money can't buy: time together, being able to be at home...

### ***Theme 1-5: Desire to have own business***

Three of the six participants reported that another reason they decided to join Young Living was due to a desire to have their own business. This theme also closely coincided with Theme 1-1, but was kept as its own category due to the identity and pride involved with running a business, not simply due to the financial aspects. Sunshine noted, “[I started] thinking about maybe being able to run a business.” Mary discussed her and her husband’s desire to have a business in detail:

My husband and I wanted to have a business and we were both schoolteachers and I thought, "how on Earth could we ever have a business?" We don't have time for anything really else and then we realized, "wait a second, Young living is one of those businesses" [...] We looked into it and we realized we could do this...

## **Domain 2: Sense of Calling**

This domain explicitly addressed the primary goal of this study by investigating how these participants experienced and enacted their sense of calling. More specifically, this domain When asked about their sense of calling, participants identified multiple themes, including perceiving a transcendent summons and religious alignment with their work (*Theme 2-1*), a desire to educate and share clean products with others (*Theme 2-2*), wanting to share their faith with others (*Theme 2-3*), seeking to empower others to become distributors (*Theme 2-4*), and perceiving multiple callings in life (*Theme 2-5*).

### ***Theme 2-1: Transcendent summons and religious alignment with work***

All six of the participants endorsed experiencing a sense of calling to their work. More specifically, these participants expressed perceiving a transcendent summons to this work,

meaning that they perceived that this calling originated beyond their own self. Since all these participants self-identified as religious, many of them labeled the transcendent summons as originating from a religious figure such as God. Lucy, for example, stated that, “I’m a Christian and I believe that, like God has called, each of us to live our life for Him.” Mary echoed this notion of feeling a summons for God by stating that, “I have always believed that, you know, God has a plan for us.”

In addition to perceiving a calling and a transcendent summons, many participants also discussed feeling that there was an alignment between their religious beliefs and the work they were doing. Mary, specifically, described how she not only feels called by God generally, but how she perceives that this calling to the work aligns with her religious values. She discusses how she believes the products she’s selling allow her to feel more connected to her faith perspective and God:

We know from divine revelation that an oil is a created thing that God gave us. And so, as a Catholic, I believe that I have a very strong articulation about who God is. About creation and that everything on this Earth is created by God [...] So within my ability to be able to give God glory, to understand that His creation was a gift to us and when we use it properly, we give him glory.

Similarly, Sarah also described how her calling from God provides her the opportunity to use the products of the work to connect back with her religious beliefs:

My sense of calling is from God alone and the calling to share the gospel. To get His good news out there. Bring other Christians to life and come to have their hearts turned for God, and so my calling is definitely living by example with other people. That I feel like intertwines with Young Living because I believe that God put these plants on Earth for a reason and not just to look pretty. They absolutely have medicinal purposes to them, and so the calling with that is if I can bring someone to Christ. I mean the best win ever is, you know, when they realize, like hey, these plants work for my body. And so they'll ask more questions about my faith. So I kind of intertwine those together.

*Theme 2-2: Desires to educate and share clean products with others*

All six of the participants expressed that part of their calling derived from a desire to educate and share clean products with others. By “clean,” many of the participants discussed that they perceived the oils and products produced by Young Living to be more healthy, less toxic, and less harmful than other products currently sold on the market. This perception that the products are safer and cleaner than other products prompted these participants to want to share that with others. Kelsey shared that:

The thing that I feel called to most is definitely just helping people realize like how they can take control of their health. And that they can benefit from clean products and then just also like the education side of it.

Many participants utilized the word “education” when discussing their sense of calling. They discussed that they have a deep desire to not only give the products to others, but also educate people on the benefits and properties of the products. Emily also described how her calling revolves around educating others and giving the gift of the products that have benefitted her and her family back to others:

But then also just the side of like educating others because I remember getting that kit that night six years ago and being completely lost and being totally terrified and scared and not knowing what to do [...] You know what I mean? And it just, it was terrifying. And so the fact that I now have a position where I'm able to educate others on the products and that just means so much to me.

This theme also carried the implicit messaging around the perceived usefulness, and even necessity, of the products. Some participants endorsed the notion that the products became so important to them that they believed that everyone could also benefit from using them. This tied into their sense of calling to educate and share the products with others. Mary specifically discussed how she believed that the products from Young Living were not only useful, but that she believed they were a necessity. She stated, “it's like going to the grocery store. Everybody needs food. Everybody needs oils.”

### *Theme 2-3: Sharing their faith with others*

Three of the six participants noted that their sense of calling also involved sharing their faith with others. While participants expressed a calling to share the Young Living products with others (see *Theme 2-2*), they noted that this seemed like an opportunity for using their platform as distributors to share their faith perspective with others. Participants commented that selling products often serves as a primary goal of their calling but introducing their religion, proselytizing, and bringing others to God can often serve as a natural secondary goal. In other words, selling people Young Living products can often lend itself to conversations around faith, spirituality, and religion. For example, Sarah mentioned:

My sense of calling is from God alone and the calling to share the gospel. To get His good news out there. Bring other Christians to life and come to have their hearts turned for God, and so my calling is definitely living by example with other people.

It is worth noting that the participants recognized that not everyone buying their products identified as religious or desired to engage in conversations regarding religion. However, participants noted that this doesn't limit their ability to welcome nonreligious individuals into their circle. In fact, many noted that this only strengthened their conviction and sense of calling.

For instance, Emily noted:

That is one thing that I really love about Young Living is that they they literally say there's a place for everyone at our table. And now it's something that just resonates with me so much because I believe as a Jesus follower, we're supposed to do that. We're supposed to welcome those that don't know Jesus, you know? And so Young Living gives me the opportunity to welcome those people.

Another participant, Sunshine, echoed this:

I don't think that Jesus just wants us to sit around like-minded people all day agreeing. If we're only talking to other Christians all the time, how are we helping people who aren't saved? Who's talking to them?

#### *Theme 2-4: Empowering others to become distributors*

Three of the six participants described that their sense of calling derives from empowering others to become distributors. Since many MLM companies are designed to encourage distributors to recruit other distributors, this role lends itself well to participants who view this as a calling. Many of the participants described helping others to become distributors almost like a mentorship role. For example, when asked about what the most rewarding part about her work was, Emily claimed, “definitely that mentorship and education portion [...] Mentorship is definitely my biggest passion.” Mary described a specific instance where she recruited a person to the organization and felt that this was a particularly rewarding part of her work:

I also help people start businesses [...] I had a friend, they still had a debt from law school and they had children who were going to college, and so they already had debt. And now they're going to be amassing more debt, and so her goal was to be able by the end of the year to pay off the law school debt. Yeah, by having classes and teaching and making an income from [Young Living], they were able to do that.

Sunshine also reflected on how rewarding this part of her work was:

It's [recruiting others] is my favorite. I think this business is absolutely life changing and I would talk about it to anyone all of the time, yeah. I have very high numbers and statistics of people who I enroll who do the business because I find it authentic to talk about.

#### *Theme 2-5: Perceiving multiple callings in life*

All six of the participants endorsed that they perceived multiple callings in life. In other words, they noted that their sense of calling was not restricted to Young Living alone. Some participants noted that they felt a calling to other lines of work, such as teaching or pastoring. Other participants noted that they felt a calling to life roles outside of the work domain, including being a wife, partner, or mother. Mary eloquently described how she conceptualized the idea of multiple callings, along with this idea of how having multiple callings showed up in her own life:

There's the big plan of God is calling you to marriage, is he calling you to go to the monastery, or is calling you to priesthood? Is he calling you to, you know, in that way? So that's the big calling. But then within that calling, there's like other you know individualized, particular columns. What type of work you do and you know what sector of work you want to work in [...] For a while we were called to teach, so we've had an elementary school for a long time. And then I felt the calling to really come back home [...] I wanted my work to support my being a mom and also being a wife [...] I knew I could do Young Living in such a way that if I could retire from teaching, do it part time and be able to keep that order of my calling in life from God, my husband, my son, and then the people I serve.

### **Domain 3: Positive Outcomes**

The third domain centered around the positive outcomes that participants noted when thinking about their work. This is differentiated from the second domain in that this domain focuses on the *outcomes* of the calling and not the calling itself. These positive outcomes included personal and professional growth (*Theme 3-1*), belonging to a community of like-minded people (*Theme 3-2*), camaraderie with women in business (*Theme 3-3*), positive recognition and social influence (*Theme 3-4*), and increased religious engagement (*Theme 3-5*).

#### ***Theme 3-1: Personal and professional growth***

Four of the six participants endorsed that a positive outcome they've experienced from their work has been personal and professional growth. By this, participants noted that they have noticed themselves improve in both work domains and other life domains. In fact, many participants commented that growth opportunities are a major tenant and selling point emphasized in the culture of Young Living. Specifically, Emily noted that:

One of our leaders like they say like “Young Living is an opportunity for personal development with a side of residual incomes” and I'm like that's really what it is. It's just so much personal development has happened for me over the last two years and that I've been able to really grow in a really safe space, and so and then it's helped me to then help others do the same thing.

Other participants also commented on the personal and professional growth they have experienced since being involved with Young Living. Even when asked to discuss aspects of the job that can be challenging for her at times, Mary mentioned that part of the reason she enjoyed the work is due to the personal growth she experiences when faced with trials and tribulations:

It's personally challenging to recruit business builders. But with anything that's challenging, you have to grow in virtue and be able to do it. So overall I have found that promoting the business and looking for business builders has been something very good for the growth of my character.

Lucy mentioned that the work has helped her grow, even outside of the professional domain, and has helped her become a better person to those around her:

And I feel like it's helped me be a lot more intentional. I think before I would listen to my friends like, oh, I'm really struggling with this and I I know that I listened well. But I didn't always... I know what to do and I don't always have like answers, but I feel like I listen even better now. And it's not like, oh, I'm trying to sell you something all the time, you know. But it was like no, I really understand that struggle of there's something happening in my life or whatever.

### *Theme 3-2: Belonging to a community of like-minded people*

All six of the participants endorsed that another positive outcome of their work was belonging to a community of like-minded people. For instance, Sarah stated that she enjoyed working for Young Living because, “it's also so welcoming because we all are like-minded.” When participants referred to the community being “like-minded,” they were often referring to the shared identities of people in their circles, such as being moms and holding similar religious beliefs. However, others also used this term when referring to their shared values and passion for promoting a “cleaner” home. Kelsey stated:

The most rewarding part of it honestly has been the community. Like the team I'm on is incredible [...] And like just the community of people that I've gained, like some of my best friends I have come out of this and it is honestly is the best, like I've shared everything with them.

### *Theme 3-3: Camaraderie with other women in business*

Five of the six participants discussed the camaraderie they experienced with other women in business. They described that this sense of support and community with other women in their line of work as a positive outcome they experienced because of their work. While there was some overlap, this theme was differentiated from *Theme 3-2* (Belonging to a community of like-minded people) due to its unique emphasis on the professional affiliation and solidarity with other women in business. Lucy discussed how the culture of her business centers around women supporting other women and how impactful this has been for her:

It's also one of the only spaces I feel where woman can support each other and aren't always competing. I had someone on my team once say, "collaboration over competition" and it's definitely a culture in Young Living. Like, "when you win, we all win" kind of mentality, which just feels so supportive.

Mary also echoed how supportive the climate of Young Living has been for women. She described how this type of business lends itself well to working women, especially moms, who can lean on other working moms for support and connection:

This is a good, it is a really good option if a woman needs, even a busy mom. Most of our moms in our group, we have like a mom with 10 kids. For those moms, this has been a nice way to connect with ladies also, like they have their family life and then they set aside a little bit of time each day where they can, you know, send a text, make a post, send out a class. Whatever contact ladies need and so it keeps them still kind of in the mom circles.

### *Theme 3-4: Positive recognition and social influence*

Three of the six participants noted that they enjoyed the positive recognition and social influence they gained because of their work. This was often discussed in terms of the recognition and appreciation they received from friends, family, peers, colleagues, or customers who would comment positively on their work. Some women commented on the social influence they had

acquired as a result of their work, specifically in terms of their social networking and Instagram platforms. For example, Sarah commented:

I love when people text me or call me or, you know, leave a comment on Instagram. Whatever it is, I love when they say, “hey. this oil really worked! I'm so happy I tried it.” Just anything along those lines makes me feel so good.

Other participants detailed specific stories where they felt they made a positive impact and got recognized because of this impact:

I had a really close friend reach out to me out of the blue, I've literally never once talked to her about Young Living and I have been and she like messaged me and she was like hey, you're with Young Living right? And it's like yeah, yeah actually like you know, is there something I can help you with? Or whatever and she was like, “Yeah, I need this oil” [...] And for me, that was like, oh like, I am doing what I'm supposed to be doing. Like there are people around me that I'm not realizing that are watching me and like I, I think that's true of not just like people in Young Living like, I don't think we always realize like I have a lot more influence than I think I do and people are watching me more than I think they are. But for me it was just like OK, like I can't do this it might be hard some days, but I can do this and I want to do this. Umm, and so I think those days were like you were, at least for me, like I remember like the thing that I'm doing is something that I want to do and I'm passionate about doing. It's really helpful. I'm like, “Oh yeah, I really do love my job” (Lucy).

These participants often noted that moments like these gave them a newfound appreciation for their work and helped to remind them of their sense of calling.

### *Theme 3-5: Increased religious engagement*

Three of the participants described that another positive outcome of their work was that they had the opportunity to become more engaged with their religious identity. These participants mentioned that Young Living, while not explicitly a Christian affiliated company, often had many distributors and brand partners who are Christians. With a large percentage of their workforce identifying as Christian, many would choose to incorporate their faith perspective into their work. Some would integrate their faith into work by doing things like holding prayer during their business meetings and inviting those on their team to church. Emily

discussed how she holds meetings at her family's home, which gives her the unique opportunity to have open conversations about both the company and religion:

And so Young Living gives me the opportunity to welcome those people into my home [...] It's an opportunity for us to share about not only Young Living, but sometimes our conversations do go into conversations about God and stuff and it's just really cool to have that opportunity.

One of the participants, Sunshine, had a unique relationship with religion. Whereas most of the participants in this study identified as religious prior to joining Young Living, Sunshine noted that she only became religious after getting involved in the organization. She described that this experience of being involved in Young Living has allowed her to connect with her faith perspective:

Young Living sort of came before my relationship with Jesus. It was being around so many godly women [...] so many of the big faces in this company are Christians. And you are being influenced and you're second-guessing things and yeah, I don't, I don't know how to explain it. But I feel like they can go hand in hand. You can be a strong Jesus loving woman. You can be a person of faith and still have a business and still help other people and that those things can go hand in hand. And now I reach my audience in such a different way.

#### **Domain 4: Negative Outcomes**

The fourth and final domain addressed the negative outcomes that the participants self-identified from their work. It is worth noting that all participants expressed both positive and negative aspects of their jobs, but some were more willing to discuss negative aspects than others. These themes focus on aspects of the work to which participants expressed they *didn't* feel called, or various things that they feel have negatively impacted the satisfaction with their work. These included feeling overwhelmed and having difficulty setting boundaries (*Theme 4-1*), expressing moral disagreements with the discourse and utilization of certain products (*Theme 4-2*), negative perceptions of the business structure from other people (*Theme 4-3*), and feeling demoralized from needing to convince others of the usefulness of products (*Theme 4-4*).

#### ***Theme 4-1: Overwhelm and difficulty setting boundaries***

Five of the six participants shared feeling overwhelmed by the work at times. They also reported having difficulty setting boundaries between work and life domains. For example, Mary stated, “that's the biggest difficulty I would say as far as what I feel like I'm not calling to. Sometimes I feel like I have to say ‘no’ to the business.” Lucy also described instances where she felt overwhelmed by the work:

It's really overwhelming for me some days. There's another thing to add to my To Do List [...] That's not easy for everyone. It's not even always easy for me. Uhm, and so that aspect of it is really hard. (Lucy)

Also, many of the participants described instances where they experienced moments of doubt or felt conflicted in the business:

I think with any job, some days are tough yeah, and some days suck. And things are hard sometimes. I don't think that there's any side to the job I don't feel called to. Uh, but there are definitely days where I'm like, “what the heck did I get myself into? Why am I doing this?” But yeah, for the most part, I wouldn't say I don't feel called to. Definitely days where I'm like, “Why am I doing this?” (Kelsey)

It is important to note that while a majority of the participants endorsed feeling overwhelmed or uncertain at times in their career, many shared these stories to contextualize moments where they have felt challenged but have experienced personal or professional growth as a result of these obstacles (see *Theme 3-1*).

#### ***Theme 4-2: Moral disagreements with discourse and utilization of certain products***

Two of the six participants described that they have experienced some dissatisfaction with the ways in which the products they sell are used or talked about. More specifically, these participants endorsed having moral disagreements with the discourse and utilization of certain products. Since many of these participants view the products as direct connections to God, many

then extrapolate this to mean that misusing the products equates to misusing God. Mary remarked:

So just like if you use an oil to help you sleep at night or help you destress, that's a proper use, but if somebody is a witch and decides they want to use oils and do something, you know, individually to the oils and then teach other people how to do witchcraft with them, then that would be a misuse of God's gift.

Interestingly, two participants used very similar language around their discontent with the usage of certain products. Both Sunshine and Mary commented on disliking when people use the oils and products in “new age” ways:

I think a very big thing here [...] is the new age culture as in like your crystals you're manifesting. That's a very good part of the market here, and I think the thing that doesn't love me or doesn't call me or that I find difficult [...] Like someone from my church just called that the “Devil work,” it's [...] really counter teachings of the Bible, so I don't find it rewarding. I do find that difficult. Yeah, it's almost witchy [...] Sometimes I have to enter those things and like, “oh sorry, this actually isn't for me. I'm going to leave (Sunshine).

I do not feel called to promote products that are... they seem to get people confused. Uhm like for example, we have some essential oil blends that might have "new agey" sounding names and I don't feel called to promote those [...] So anything that would be like close to the "new age" movement we just stay away from (Mary).

#### *Theme 4-3: Negative perceptions of business structure from others*

Three of the six participants discussed that a negative outcome associated with their work is the negative perceptions of the business structure that they experience from other people. In other words, these participants noted that there seems to be a stigma associated with multi-level marketing, and that they have had people around them talk negatively about their line of work. Mary discussed that people in her life have accused her of being in a “pyramid scheme” and how this negative perception has impacted her:

Some people think badly about network marketing and so I probably have people who were like, 'Why is [Mary] doing a pyramid scheme?' Like though that term pyramid scheme still floats around. It's not a pyramid scheme, but some people, I'm sure that some people, their estimation of me has gone down because I'm doing this type of business.

Kelsey elaborated on this idea further. She noted that the negative perceptions are not restricted to the business structure alone, but that people often have a negative stereotype for what it means to be a woman in business, especially if that business is an MLM:

When I talk about running a business to people like face to face, they're all like kind of like "Whoa, really?" And then I say it's Young Living and they're like, "oh, that makes sense." So I do think that there's a stigma [against women in business]. [...] It drives me nuts. Uh, there is a huge stigma, you know the what's it called? What do they call it? The "girl boss?" Oh, you're running an MLM, like that's sketchy, like of course you're doing it, you're a woman [...] So yeah, there's stigmas everywhere for women in business.

*Theme 4-4: Needing to convince others about usefulness of products*

Two of the six participants mentioned that an aspect of their job that they did not enjoy was needing to convince others about the usefulness of the products. More specifically, these participants discussed how burdensome or exhausting it can be for them to try and sell products to others who do not perceive the products to be necessary or helpful:

It takes people a little bit of time to believe in natural products, which blows my mind because so many people are so quick to believe other products working but not the natural products [...] I wouldn't say that's unrewarding, but it gets me down [...] It's kind of discouraging when some people are scared to try things, or they buy something, but then they haven't even opened up the package. So those are more of the discouraging moments (Sarah).

**Table 2: Domains and Themes**

<b>Domain</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>Themes</b>
Reasons for Joining	1-1	Supplementary source of income
	1-2	Pipeline of buying to selling
	1-3	Positive previous experiences with product
	1-4	Means to achieve work-life balance
	1-5	Desire to have own business
Sense of Calling	2-1	Transcendent summons and religious alignment with work
	2-2	Desire to educate and share clean products
	2-3	Sharing their faith with others
	2-4	Empowering others to become distributors
	2-5	Perceiving multiple callings in life
Positive Outcomes	3-1	Personal and professional growth
	3-2	Belonging to a community with like-minded people
	3-3	Camaraderie with other women in business
	3-4	Positive recognition and social influence
	3-5	Increased religious engagement
Negative Outcomes	4-1	Overwhelm and difficulty setting boundaries
	4-2	Moral disagreements with discourse and utilization of certain products
	4-3	Negative perceptions of business structure from others
	4-4	Needing to convince others about usefulness

## CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the experiences of religious women in multi-level marketing. More specifically, this study sought to explore how these women's sense of calling informed their experiences in their line of work. The aim of this study was to examine the potential intersection of gender, religiosity, and calling for individuals in multi-level marketing. Although research has examined calling, religion, and MLMs independently, no study has investigated how they may intersect. By exploring these factors, this study hope to gain a better understanding into how or why religious women perceive and live out their sense of calling in this specific domain. To pursue these aims, the main research questions were: 1) How do women in multi-level marketing companies perceive a sense of calling? 2) How do women in multi-level marketing companies feel that they are currently living out their calling? 3) How do people's religious or spiritual identification influence their sense of calling? 4) What specific aspects of their job align with their sense of calling? 5) What are the impacts (e.g., positive and negative) of living their calling in this setting? and 6) How do religion, gender, and calling intersect for those employed in multi-level marketing?

Based on the extant literature on calling and MLMs independently, I anticipated themes to include participants' self-reported reasons for joining the organization (e.g., the sense of community, supplementary income), how they conceptualized their work aligning with their sense of calling (e.g., community impact, pro-sociality), how their religion and sense of calling intersected with their work (e.g., spiritual values, connection to a religious community), how gender roles influenced their calling (e.g., cultural scripts of how to be a working woman and/or mom in society), the positive outcomes of working in their organization (e.g., additional income, sense of community), along with any potential negative outcomes of working in their organization (e.g., pressure to perform, organizational exploitation).

Based on the nature of IPA, this study called for a small, homogenous sample. Therefore, the recruitment strategy for this study focused on women who were employed either part-time or full-time for at least 1 year in the multi-level marketing company Young Living, who self-identified as religious, who were between the ages of 20 and 40, and who endorsed a sense of calling to their current line of work. Six women were interviewed, and their data were later transcribed and coded following the IPA analytic method (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

### **Reasons for Joining**

The first domain of the present study addressed participants' reasons for joining their line of work. These reasons varied, but most participants noted having positive previous experiences with the products (*Theme 1-3*) and that there was a quick pipeline from being a consumer of the products to becoming a seller themselves (*Theme 1-2*). These themes mapped well onto extant literature that discusses motivations behind people joining MLMs, including a sense of social responsibility, self-development, financial security, and working lifestyle (Jain et al., 2015). The present study adds a novel lens by incorporating how these integrate into the research on calling. In other words, participants discussed that their reasons for joining helped to inform their perceiving a calling and later pursuing and living out that calling.

Duffy et al. (2018) developed the Work as a Calling Theory (WCT) to unify the extant literature on calling, while simultaneously highlighting directions for future research. The premise of the model asserts that perceiving a calling lends itself to the positive outcomes, such as increased job satisfaction and performance, and in some cases negative outcomes like workaholism and burnout, with living a calling serving as the key mediator. In other words, one must be living a calling, and not simply perceiving that calling, to experience the positive outcomes. When translated onto this model, it could be reasonably suggested that these

participants' reasons for joining may help describe their process of perceiving a calling, which later led to them living a calling in that line of work. For instance, in the WCT model, one of the factors linking perceiving a calling and living out that calling is work meaning (Duffy et al., 2016). Work meaning is best understood as the experience of perceiving your work as personally significant and worthwhile (Lysova et al., 2019). Having a calling within the work role implies that a person views their work as a source of, or vehicle for expressing, purpose and meaning. Therefore, when one is actively living a calling, this also serves to increase feelings of meaning in life (Steger et al., 2010). In other words, because the present study's participants derived meaning from their own experiences with the organization prior to working for the organization, this may have influenced their perception of having a calling to that line of work. Then, since they perceived this calling and experienced a sense of meaning and purpose, this may have facilitated their experience of living their calling in that line of work.

However, it should be noted that many of the participants' reasons for joining may not have been explicitly linked to a sense of calling. For example, it was not evident that participants' sense of calling to Young Living was clearly linked to their desire for supplementary income. It could also be that in some cases, participants may not have perceived a sense of calling until after they joined that organization. For example, Sunshine entered her work identifying as an atheist and later converted to Christianity due to her involvement in Young Living; she seemed to demonstrate the idea that a sense of calling to Young Living was only salient for her when she was more established in the organization. Some may have joined Young Living for pragmatic or other more mundane reasons, then experienced a sense of calling later, a possibility that is consistent with questions others have raised regarding whether a sense of

calling precedes a new career direction or emerges from it (Dik et al., 2020). This may be an area where individual differences may be particularly evident.

There is little to no research on the antecedents of calling, or how people start to derive their sense of calling (Ensher & Ehrhardy, 2022; Reed, Jones & Dik, in press). This may be another factor contributing to why participants' self-described reasons for joining may not translate as neatly to their later perceptions of calling. This connection between reasons for joining and their sense of calling should be explored in greater detail in future research.

### **Connection to Calling**

Domain 2 (Sense of Calling) most directly addressed the overarching purpose of this study. Within this domain, multiple themes arose, including perceiving a transcendent summons and religious alignment with work (*Theme 2-1*), having a desire to educate and share clean products with others (*Theme 2-2*), wanting to share their faith with others (*Theme 2-3*), seeking to empower others to become distributors (*Theme 2-4*), and perceiving multiple callings in life, even outside of the domain of work (*Theme 2-5*). These align closely with the anticipated themes of impacting those in their community and perceiving alignment between their religious values and their work values.

Calling is a multidimensional construct that arguably consists of three dimensions: 1) a transcendent summons, 2) alignment of work purpose and life purpose, and 3) a prosocial orientation (Dik & Duffy, 2009). It could be argued that the present study's themes align with these dimensions. For example, *Theme 2-1* (Transcendent summons and religious alignment with work) maps onto the first and second domain of the calling construct. Meanwhile, with regards to the prosocial component, this captures *Themes 2-2* (Educate and share clean products with others), *Theme 2-3* (Sharing faith with others), and *Theme 2-4* (Empowering others to become

distributors) of the present study. Outside of these dimensions, the participants in this study also noted that they perceived multiple callings, even outside of the domain of work (*Theme 2-5*). Each of these themes will be explored in greater depth with respect to their convergence with the definition of calling, along with ways they may diverge.

All participants in this study noted a transcendent summons with regards to their calling. Consistent with the definition of transcendent summons, these participants felt that their calling was “experienced as originating beyond the self” (Dik & Duffy, 2009, p. 427). Often, participants explicitly noted that their calling originated from a higher power or God. This emphasis on calling originating from God seems to be consistent with a classical understanding of calling (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). These participants also noted that they sensed a strong alignment between their personal religious values and the values of their work. This also translates well onto the second dimension of the calling construct, the alignment of work and life purpose). While all participants expressed perceiving a transcendent calling to their work, the specific ways in which this calling manifested itself varied across individuals, along with the outcomes associated with pursuing that calling.

When considering the third dimension of calling, which relates to prioritizing making a difference or positive contribution for others, this study identified multiple themes that connect to a prosocial orientation. For instance, *Theme 2-2* (desire to educate and share clean products with others), *Theme 2-3* (sharing faith with others), and *Theme 2-4* (empowering others to become distributors) all seem inextricably bound to a prosocial manifestation of calling. These themes appear consistent with the motivational factor of social responsibility (e.g., contributing to the world) consistent with common motivational factors for why people join MLMs (Jain et al., 2015). Participants seemed to value not only positively impacting the consumers (e.g., by

selling products and sharing their faith perspective), but also desired bringing other people into the business. This desire to sell products and bring others into the business as distributors seems intuitive, considering this is how the economic structure of MLMs operate. However, the participants described these desires as more than a business obligation. Rather, they described a sense of meaning and prosocial calling, whereby they felt called to sell and recruit others to try and make a positive impact on others, whether through selling or recruiting.

Furthermore, while the themes involving selling and recruiting may seem intuitive, the theme around sharing their faith with others does not seem directly linked to business objective. However, several researchers have noted how many MLMs seem to be a space where religion and economics intersect (Luca, 2011; Koehrsen, 2018; Wrenn & Waller, 2021). Luca (2011) claims that MLMs were originally formed with the intention to make capitalism more ethically and spirituality centered, while noting that the MLM business structure was based closely on Protestant networking strategies (e.g., recruiting those who are close to you). This allowed for an essentially mission-based growth model that parallels the evangelistic or proselytizing strategies found in many Christian circles. This may inform why the participants in this study felt like sharing their faith in these spaces was so integral to their sense of calling.

It is notable that all participants also noted perceiving multiple callings. They believed that their sense of calling extended beyond the work domain and applied to other areas of their life, including their identities as wives and mothers. This idea of having multiple callings is certainly not a novel one (Oates et al., 2005; Oates et al., 2008; Dik et al., 2019). In fact, research has documented how this concept of having multiple callings (e.g., feeling called to work, parent, be a partner, etc.) may be particularly salient for working women, who often must juggle various life roles in addition to their work (Sellers et al., 2005; Laney et al., 2022). This notion of

feeling called to multiple life roles seemed particularly salient for the women in this study, who noted feeling called not only to the work they were doing, but to the other roles they occupied, such as being mothers and wives. While this cannot be completely generalized to those outside of the present sample, it could be reasonably speculated that this experience of perceiving multiple callings may be a common experience for those in MLMs, especially those who identify as religious women. Future studies could explore if this finding extrapolates to additional samples of religious women in MLMs.

### *Connection to Meaning Making*

While the WCT model helps to inform the themes of this study, there seems to be another guiding framework may be useful in further describing the lived experiences of these participants. The faith-work integration process detailed by participants seems to also lend itself well to research on meaning making. Those who identify as religious often express a desire to incorporate their religious beliefs with their career decision making (Adams, 2012). Park (2012) developed a Global Meaning System Model, showing how if one's worldview (e.g., their beliefs, goals, and values) aligns with their work (e.g., what their work means, what they are striving toward, and what they find important), then their work ultimately becomes more meaningful and satisfying to them. Furthermore, this alignment between meaning and work helps to foster a feeling of living out a calling. Therefore, this meaning-making model may serve as useful context when interpreting how one perceives and lives out a calling, especially when considering how individual's religious beliefs and values may inform their work experiences.

Religious and spiritual aspects of meaning systems also influence work life, especially pertaining to job choice, job performance, stress and coping with work, and job satisfaction and wellbeing. More specifically, one's sense of calling may facilitate the bridge between religious

and spiritual meaning and career choice (Steger et al., 2010); in other words, individuals who perceive a calling in a certain work domain may feel more inclined to pursue that work, especially when this is informed by a religious or spiritual source. Religious beliefs can also deepen one's commitment to a vocational path overtime (Wax, 2007). In terms of job performance, there is research to suggest that some religious or spiritual individuals find the work to be intrinsically meaningful due to feeling like they are making a difference by being of service to others (Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2008). Research also suggests that religious and spiritual individuals may report having strategies that are informed by their faith perspective, such as prayer and meditation, that help them cope with work-related stressors (e.g., Paragmet, 2011). For participants in this study, it is evident that they viewed their work as a source of meaning making. By successfully integrating their faith perspective with their work, this may have contributed to them feeling like they were living out their calling, while also lending itself to positive outcomes, such as a deeper sense of meaning and purpose, personal and professional growth and an increased religious engagement.

It is notable that while Park's model has burgeoned a copious amount of research since its inception, most research has focused on meaning making following trauma and bereavement. In fact, no research to date has focused specifically on how this theory connects to faith-work integration. This study has demonstrated that when one's global meaning system aligns with their daily experience of meaning in work, their work ultimately becomes more satisfying. These results are consistent with Park's model in the context of work and support subsequent research further investigating the fit of the model within the work role.

## **Outcomes of Work**

In the WCT model, perceiving a calling, with the key mediator of living a calling, lends itself to positive, and in some cases, negative outcomes. The specific self-reported outcomes of the participant's work are detailed further in Domains 3 (Positive outcomes) and 4 (Negative outcomes) of this study.

### *Positive Outcomes*

Participants in this study expressed experiencing many positive outcomes associated with their work. These participants noted several themes with regards to positive outcomes, including a sense of personal and professional growth (*Theme 3-1*), feeling a sense of belonging to a community with like-minded people (*Theme 3-2*), camaraderie with other women in business (*Theme 3-3*), receiving positive recognition and social influence because of their work (*Theme 3-4*), and having increased religious engagement (*Theme 3-5*). These themes align with the positive outcomes linked to the WCT model: increased job performance and job satisfaction (Duffy et al., 2018). These also align with the themes that were anticipated for this project, including a greater connection to their religious community and values. Since this domain overlaps so closely with the themes aforementioned surrounding participant's sense of calling, and the positive outcomes associated with living their calling, greater space will be given to detailing the negative outcomes noted by participants.

### *Negative Outcomes*

Although participants overwhelmingly detailed the positive outcomes associated with their work, most also mentioned negative outcomes. Specifically, participants noted feeling overwhelmed and having difficulty setting boundaries (*Theme 4-1*), having moral disagreements with the discourse and utilization of certain products (*Theme 4-2*), perceiving negative

perceptions of business structure from others (*Theme 4-3*), and struggles with needing to convince others about the usefulness of products (*Theme 4-4*). These themes seem to implicitly align with the negative outcomes linked to the WCT model, including workaholism and burnout (Duffy et al., 2018). For example, with regards to the first theme in this domain, many of the participants noted that they often felt like they had to make sacrifices in their lives to maintain their standing in their work. This often involved spending less time with family or friends. This is consistent with what some scholars would classify as workaholism. As Duffy et al., (2016) note, “though people who exhibit workaholic behaviors often enjoy their work, they may sacrifice excessive amounts of personal time for work” (p. 636). This finding suggests that the “dark side of calling,” especially regarding the negative outcome of workaholism, could be particularly salient with the given population of religious women in multi-level marketing due to the competing demands of work and life.

What was particularly surprising about these themes was that none of the participants noted a sense of organizational exploitation. Organizational exploitation is best understood as organizations benefitting and exploiting their employees’ sense of passion and calling by mechanisms such as dominance and control (Duffy et al., 2016). This was an anticipated theme of this study that is also a well-documented negative outcome associated with the “dark side of calling.” This was an anticipated theme due to the cultural stereotypes surrounding the exploitative nature that multi-level marketing companies are often known for (Koehn, 2001). However, none of these participants noted any feeling of exploitation. It is possible these women may have felt exploited in their work, but were unwilling to disclose this, for fear of retaliation, judgement, or shame. On other hand, it is also possible that these women simply have not felt exploited.

Another surprising finding was that only three of the participants noted a stigma surrounding their work in MLMs. In fact, I was expecting more to report a feeling of stigma based on how polarizing MLMs can be in popular culture. Again, this could be a result of many participants feeling hesitant to fully disclose their experiences. Conversely, it could be that many of the participants in this study may be surrounded by people who support their engagement in MLMs and, indeed, do not experience the stigma or negative perceptions of working in multi-level marketing.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

While IPA is most appropriate with a small, homogeneous sample, this is certainly a weakness for this methodology. By design, IPA allows for analyzing detailed accounts from a small group of individuals with similar identities and experiences. In qualitative research, saturation is the goal, whereby enough data is collected to account for most, if not all, of the possible variations of the phenomenon in question (Guest et al., 2006, p. 60). They state that on average, saturation is usually reached with a sample of approximately twelve participants. Therefore, since this study had half of this, it is unlikely that saturation was sufficiently reached.

While this is certainly a potential shortcoming, this decision to limit the number of participants to six allowed for a much deeper and richer exploration of their lived experiences. There also may have been some domains and themes in which saturation may have been reached to a greater extent than others. For example, all participants endorsed themes relating the second domain of this study relating to sense of calling and a transcendent summons. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that adding more participants to the study would have only resulted in more people endorsing this theme. Since this domain addressed the primary research question in

this study, and was close to reaching saturation, recruitment was discontinued, as adding more participants to the study would have likely not contributed any new data to this key domain.

Another limitation is that while a homogeneous sample is essential for the IPA method, this does limit the transferability of the results of this study. While it is plausible that these results could be consistent across samples of different identities, this is impossible to know without further research. Furthermore, since a prerequisite for this study was that participants already endorsed a sense of calling, it is possible that this contributed to potential response biases. Since participants self-selected into this study, those who volunteered to participate likely felt strongly about their sense of calling and were excited to discuss their experiences. In other words, it is possible that there are many women in multi-level marketing who do *not* endorse a sense of calling to this line of work, but since this was a requirement for this study, their experiences are not represented. Also, while self-identifying as religious was also a prerequisite for this study, it is notable that all participants identified as Christian. This may have limited the ability to apply these understandings to other religious perspectives that were not represented in this study. While these are important limitations to consider, it is also worth noting that the nature of the IPA methodology is purposefully designed to harness a deep and rich exploration of the lived experiences of a homogeneous sample, while accepting the pitfalls that the method inextricably carries. This protocol would not be possible without these drawbacks, but it is still important to acknowledge them.

Qualitative research inherently runs the risk of researcher bias. While steps were taken to reduce the potential impact of researcher bias (e.g., including multiple coders, writing positionality statements, and writing memos while coding), no combination of actions can fully eradicate the potential for bias. Prior to discussing the individual interviews, coders first shared

their experiences reading the transcript and any personal reactions or potential biases that arose for them during this process. It is notable that certain interviews evoked strong emotions from both coders, especially surrounding the political and religious beliefs held by some of the participants. While the researchers took all the necessary steps to reduce potential biases, it is always a possible limitation within qualitative research that biases could impact the results of the study.

Another limitation to this study was the difficulty with recruitment. It is notable that many of the participants were hesitant to share their experiences with the primary researcher due to the cultural stigma surrounding multi-level marketing. On the post for recruitment, the primary researcher got messages back from individuals admonishing the research, saying things such as “stop asking us to talk about this,” and, “why are you asking us about this?” It is notable that at the time of this research, Young Living was facing some public backlash after many of the higher-level distributors publicly announced their resignation from the company. This certainly could have contributed to the fear and skepticism in the prospective participants. Prior to the interview, one of the participants even asked the primary researcher if she was in the FBI, for fear that she would get sued or penalized for speaking publicly about her experiences. Other participants would ask about what the primary researcher’s relationship was with Young Living (e.g., is she was a distributor or consumer of the products), hoping to discern if the researcher intended to use their experiences for good or if she was intending to bash the company. This begs the question of response bias in participant answers. In other words, they may not have been fully honest with their experiences, both for the positive and negative outcomes. This is a consideration that needs to be accounted for when interpreting the results of this study.

Since the research on calling has yet to be applied to this unique population, qualitative research was necessary to explore the potential nuances and complexities of this phenomenon. While the qualitative methodology allowed for an exploratory study, sufficient saturation may not have been met. Future qualitative research should seek to achieve saturation by using more participants. This will help to replicate and validate the results of this research. Furthermore, future research should investigate if these findings withstand with more diverse samples, whether that be regarding participants from different multi-level marketing companies, participants who hold diverse religious perspectives, or participants representing different racial, ethnic, or gender identities.

It is worth noting that some participants in this study seemed to note a sense of calling to the organization rather than simply to the job itself. Most of the previous research on calling has explored how participants experience a calling to a certain line of work, such as being doctors (e.g., Westerman, 2014), academics (e.g., Brower, 2013), or zookeepers (e.g., Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). There is also research on how employee's individual sense of calling is beneficial to the broader organization (Rawat & Nadavulakere, 2015). However, no studies, to my knowledge, have investigated those who feel less called to the role itself and more so called to an organization. In this study, all participants seemed to experience a unique sense of calling to the organization of Young Living as a whole. This may be due to the distinct contextual and cultural factors surrounding the Young Living organization, such as its close ties with the organized religion that with which many participants reported affiliating. Future research should explore calling's level of abstraction, perhaps comparing those who feel called to an organization (e.g., Young Living) as opposed to a job title (e.g., health product consultant) or a broader task or pursuit (e.g., to provide healing to families).

In addition to more qualitative investigation, future research on this topic could utilize quantitative measures. When considering WCT, quantitative research could investigate how, or if, these findings may map onto the model. For instance, research could investigate how religious women in multi-level marketing perceive and live out their calling using scales such as the Calling and Vocational Questionnaire (CVQ; Dik et al., 2012) and the relationship between potential positive outcomes (e.g., job performance and satisfaction) and negative outcomes (e.g., workaholism and exploitation). Similarly, when considering Park's meaning making model, quantitative research could explore how people's sense of meaning may mediate the relationship between perceiving and living their calling.

### **Implications for Practice**

This study may help to inform career counseling practitioners. The results of the study helps to better contextualize the impact that religious identification can have on one's sense of calling, at least for women considering multi-level marketing pathways. Clients seeking vocational clarity often report seeking a greater sense of meaning in their work (Dik et al., 2009). Also, those who identify as religious often express a desire to incorporate their religious beliefs with their career decision making (Adams, 2012). However, surprisingly little is known about the interaction between religiousness, people's sense of calling, and career outcomes. This study may be useful for continuing the conversation on how religion, calling, and career may intersect.

An important goal for a career counselor working with a client who is spiritually or religiously identified may be to explore the relationship between the client's career development and how that connects with their beliefs, values, and existential worldview. The notion of calling may be a construct that may help spiritual or religious clients better integrate their faith into their work, in turn increasing the meaning and satisfaction with the work (Dik & Duffy, 2015). While

the notion of a transcendent summons may not be as frequently endorsed as other dimensions of calling (Dik et al., 2009), it seems to be especially salient among those with religious and spiritual commitments. Especially for the participants in this study, all of whom endorsed a transcendent calling by God to their work, inviting a discussion of how their beliefs have impacted their work choices and broader sense of calling can be beneficial, both to clients' work satisfaction and to the counselor-client working alliance (Dik & Duffy, 2015).

It is also important to note that clients who are very religious may seek counseling in nontraditional therapeutic spaces. Those who are devoutly religious may be more likely to seek counseling from religious counselors or religious leaders, due to potential concern of feeling unsafe discussing their beliefs with those who are nonreligious (Dik et al., 2009; Richards & Bergin, 2000). Therefore, it is important that clinicians clearly express an openness to discussing matters of faith and spirituality with clients, even if they themselves are not religious. Dik and Duffy (2015) provide a list of potential questions that may be useful for framing an exploring on how religion and spirituality may inform a client's sense of calling. These include: 1) "To what extent do religious or spiritual beliefs play a role in your career decisions?", 2) "How do you see your religious or spiritual perspective operating in your career development?" and 3) "In what ways does your religious or spiritual perspective guide the decisions you make in life?" (Dik & Duffy, 2015; p. 311). Asking clients these questions, regardless of your own religious or spiritual affiliation, may help shape the conversation and provide clients with the space to use the language around their commitments that fits their unique lived experiences.

Furthermore, the results of this study help to better understand the experiences of women in multi-level marketing, along with their intentions going into that line of work and the various outcomes that they reap as a result. By understanding these factors, practitioners can better serve

those who may view their work as a calling, while also acknowledging the variety of identities and experiences they may hold. Research on public perceptions of multi-level marketing indicates that many people consider this line of work to be controversial and potentially exploitative in nature (Pavelko & Barker, 2022). This negative perception often contributes to a stigma surrounding those who enter this line of work. Without better understanding the intentions and motivation behind this line of work, this perception may further exacerbate the stigma and negative perception of those involved (Van Laar et al., 2019).

One of the ways that practitioners can reduce the stigma surrounding work in this domain could be to expand the scope of socially acceptable career paths with clients. Research demonstrates that even workers in traditionally stigmatized jobs (e.g., coal miners, factory workers, funeral directors) often derive a deep sense of purpose and meaning from their work and often ascribe this to the broader social function their work serves (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Dik et al., 2009). It is probably safe to assume that most clients present to counseling with a fairly narrow scope of awareness regarding what jobs exist, let alone the jobs that are deemed appropriate and worthwhile. Many rule out jobs that are well within their abilities due to a socially constructed range of what is deemed acceptable, appropriate, or accessible (Gottfredson, 1981). Therefore, it is imperative that practitioners help clients unpack and explore the diverse range of jobs, potentially even those within multi-level marketing, so that clients can think more broadly about how they can make a positive social contribution through their work.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

This qualitative study supported the notion that multi-level marketing appears to be a domain whereby a sense of calling can be particularly salient to certain individuals, especially religious women. Participants described that their sense of calling often derived from a

transcendent summons (e.g., God) and that they felt called to educate and share products, share their faith with others, and empower others to become distributors. Participants' reasons for joining (e.g., supplementary income, positive previous experiences with products, etc.) were essential to understanding how these women perceived their sense of calling. Participants noted both positive (e.g., personal/professional growth, sense of community, etc.) and negative outcomes (e.g., overwhelm, negative perceptions of business from others, etc.) for their work. Further investigation should seek to achieve saturation and utilize quantitative measures to explore this phenomenon.

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APPENDIX A: SCREENING SURVEY

1. How long have you been employed by Young Living? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Are you currently employed by Young Living? (Yes or No) \_\_\_\_\_
3. Are you employed full time or part time? \_\_\_\_\_
4. About how many hours a week do you dedicate to Young Living? \_\_\_\_\_
5. Do you view your work as a calling? (Yes or No) \_\_\_\_\_
6. Where do you currently reside? \_\_\_\_\_
7. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_
8. What is your gender identity? \_\_\_\_\_
9. What is your religious and/or spiritual identity? \_\_\_\_\_
10. Do you currently identify as religious? (Yes or No) \_\_\_\_\_
11. Are there any other important identities that you hold that you would like the interviewer to know about? \_\_\_\_\_
12. What is your email address? This will be used to communicate with the researcher to schedule an interview, should you be deemed eligible to participate. \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

This was posted on the @YoungLiving Facebook group as a call for participants:

Hello! My name is Alexa Jayne, and I am a Ph.D. student at Colorado State University in the Department of Counseling Psychology. I am doing a research project as part of my program. I am hoping to learn more about the experiences of **spiritual/religious women that are between 20 and 40 years old, who have been employed in Young Living for at least 1 year, and feel a sense of calling to this line of work.** Calling can be defined in a lot of ways, but sometimes people describe it like a “summons towards something that aligns with your values in life and can benefit those around you.”

People who live out their calling often experience a plethora of positive outcomes, including increased job satisfaction, better job performance, and increase health and wellbeing. However, in some rare circumstances, calling can also lead to some negative outcomes, like overworking and burnout. I am interested in how religious/spiritual women in your organization experience a sense of calling towards this line of work, along with the variety of outcomes they may experience. I hope that interviewing people on this topic will help researchers and counselors better understand how people with these identities perceive and live out their calling.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please complete this brief Screening Survey below:

<https://forms.gle/rHWLxm5p8F2hdHFo6>

If you meet the criteria for participation, I will reach out to you via email to schedule a 45 to 60-minute virtual interview. Participants will be given a \$15 Amazon Gift Card at the end of the interview. Thank you for your interest in this study!

## APPENDIX C: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What do you do for your organization?
  - a. Probe (Explore): How would you describe your work to someone outside of the organization?
  - b. Probe (Clarify): How did you first hear about the organization?
  - c. Probe (Explore): What are some of the reasons why you joined the organization?
2. Do you feel like you have a calling in life? If so, how would you describe your calling?
  - a. Probe (Clarify): Calling can be defined in a lot of ways, but sometimes people describe it like a “summons towards something that aligns with your values in life and can benefit those around you.”
  - b. Probe (Elaborate): How does this apply to you?
3. In what ways does your work align with your sense of calling?
  - a. Probe (Clarify): What are the aspects of your work that you feel most called to?
  - b. Probe (Clarify): What are the *most* rewarding aspects of your work?
  - c. Probe (Elaborate): When is a time that you have felt “called” to your work?
  - d. Probe (Clarify): What are some of the most rewarding aspects of your work?
4. In what ways does your work not fit your sense of calling?
  - a. Probe (Clarify): Are there aspects of your work to which you do not feel called?
  - b. Probe (Clarify): What are the *least* rewarding aspects of your work?
  - c. Probe (Elaborate): When is a time where you have felt like your work did not coincide with your calling?
  - d. Probe (Clarify): What are some of the most challenging/frustrating/burdensome aspects of your work?
5. How does your faith perspective influence your sense of calling?
  - a. Probe (Clarification): To what extent does your religion/spirituality align with your ideas about your career?
  - b. Probe (Elaborate): Can you describe one career-related choice that you have made that has been informed by your religion/spirituality?
  - c. Probe (Elaborate): In what ways did your religion influence you joining this particular organization?
  - d. Probe (Elaborate): How does your religion enhance/impact your work?
6. What is it like being a woman in your line of work?
  - a. Probe (Elaborate): How has being a women made your job more rewarding/challenging?
7. What other question(s) do you wish I had asked you?
8. Is there anything else you’d like me to know?