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Charismatic Leadership and Vulnerability: A Comprehensive Study of Cult Dynamics

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Abstract

The term "cult" has various definitions in academic discourse, including religious or quasi-religious groups and small, ideologically aligned communities. This paper explores the complexity of the term, its alternative labels, and the influence of media portrayal on public perception. It examines cult leaders' attributes, focusing on the "dark triad" personality traits—narcissism, machiavellianism, and psychopathy—and their manifestation in charismatic leaders. The functionality of cults is scrutinized, highlighting their appeal as a familial structure and promises of intellectual, spiritual, and political power. However, the darker side of cult functionality involves manipulative recruitment tactics and thought-stopping techniques. Additionally, the paper examines susceptibility to cult recruitment in relation to emotional vulnerabilities, psychological tendencies, and motivations, emphasizing the role of personality traits, particularly agreeableness. The paper also delves into the psychological trauma faced by ex-cult members, examining challenges in identity redefinition, trust issues, and difficulties in forming social connections.

Definition

The term "cult" encompasses various definitions and interpretations within academic discourse. The American Psychological Association (APA) defined a cult as a religious or quasi-religious group characterized by unusual or atypical beliefs, seclusion from the outside world, and an authoritarian structure (American Psychological Association, n.d.). However, it is crucial to recognize that the concept of cults is not limited to a single definition. According to the research conducted by Richardson (1993), cults can also be defined as small groups of

individuals who share a common ideal, often characterized by a quasi organizational structure and a spontaneous development process. While cults frequently feature charismatic leaders, their presence is not a necessity for such groups.

Richardson further emphasizes the importance of contextualizing the use of the term "cult" within academic literature and refraining from its casual application due to its prevalent negative connotations (1993). To mitigate these negative associations, various alternative terms have been proposed, such as "new religious movements," "marginal religious movements," "alternative religious movements," and "emergent religions." These alternative labels aim to provide a more neutral and objective perspective to readers.

Research by Olson (2006) delves into public perception and comfort levels associated with different terminology. His study indicated that individuals tend to feel more at ease with terms like "new religious movements" or a "new Christian Church" as opposed to "cults." These findings emphasize the profound impact that language and terminology can have on shaping public opinion and attitudes, particularly concerning government regulations about these groups.

Critics often point to the deviation of cults from the established norms of mainstream religions, highlighting the stark contrasts in beliefs and principles between cults and the dominant religious culture. This divergence from societal norms contributes to the scrutiny and criticism often directed at cults. Furthermore, the media plays a significant role in perpetuating the negative connotations surrounding the term "cult." The media tends to focus on cults when they engage in harmful activities that contravene societal norms and the beliefs of the dominant religion (Cowan & Bromley, 2015).

In summary, the term "cult" is a complex and multifaceted concept, and its understanding varies within academic circles. Alternative terminology has been proposed to alleviate the

negative connotations associated with cults. Public perception and comfort levels also play a vital role in shaping discussions surrounding these groups, and the media's portrayal significantly influences public opinion on this topic. For this paper, the term "cult" will still be used to refer to the groups discussed. We will define this term as a group of individuals who share a common atypical belief, have a quasi organizational structure, and are often led by a charismatic leader.

Cult Leader Attributes

Cult leaders are individuals who have historically attracted attention due to their ability to amass devoted followers and create movements centered around their beliefs or ideologies. While not all such leaders are inherently harmful, many have been associated with the manipulation, exploitation, and coercion of their followers. Understanding the phenomenon of cult leadership is essential in recognizing the dynamics at play and the potential dangers that can arise within such groups.

Common personality traits that are held by charismatic leaders are narcissism, machiavellianism, and psychopathy. These traits are commonly referred to as the "dark triad" of personality traits (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Jones and Paulhaus, as referenced in Rauthman (2012) noted that these personality traits tend to be "toxic and antagonistic" and exhibit an exploitative behavioral pattern characterized by a focus on self-serving objectives, often pursued at the detriment of or, at the very least, without consideration for the well-being of the community and other individuals.

Narcissism, as the first trait on this list, is defined by the APA as "excessive self-love or egocentrism" (American Psychological Association, n.d.). Charismatic leaders who exhibit narcissistic traits tend to crave admiration, recognition, and adulation from their followers. They often possess a magnetic charm that draws people towards them, while their self-absorption may

cloud their judgment, making them less empathetic to the needs and concerns of others (Rauthman, 2012). It was also shown in Rauthman's study that unpleasant sides of narcissism can seep out in cooperative situations (2012).

When testing the relationship for ethical leadership and psychological safety, it was demonstrated that employees felt more comfortable expressing concerns without fear of repercussions. Psychological safety, in this context, refers to the perception among employees that they can freely express concerns, opinions, or ideas without the fear of facing negative repercussions or adverse consequences. In simpler terms, an ethically led environment fostered an atmosphere where employees felt more comfortable and secure in voicing their thoughts and raising concerns, contributing to a healthier and more open communication culture within the organization. This connection between ethical leadership and psychological safety underscores the importance of ethical conduct in leadership as a catalyst for promoting an environment where employees feel empowered to share their perspectives without apprehension (Walumba & Schaubroeck, 2009).

CEOs are a fantastic example of narcissistic leadership. Moreover, narcissists possess a strong desire for attention and admiration, compelling them to take bold actions to satisfy their personal needs. Narcissistic CEOs actively seek attention and admiration (Shah, 2021). They may engage in self-promotion, boast about their achievements, and seek publicity to enhance their personal image. CEOs may articulate ambitious and grandiose visions for their companies, driven more by a desire for personal glory and recognition than realistic business goals (Wales et al., 2013). Their confidence and belief in their own abilities may lead narcissistic CEOs to take bold risks, sometimes without thorough consideration of potential consequence. This heightened

confidence often manifests in the strategic decisions they make and their subsequent outcomes, as highlighted by Chatterjee and Hambrick in 2007.

Machiavellianism, the second trait in the dark triad, is characterized by manipulative and cunning behavior. It is defined by the APA as a trait distinguished by a strategic approach to human interactions, guided by a belief that achieving desired outcomes, even through meticulous means, is justifiable (American Psychological Association, n.d.). Leaders with these tendencies are often highly strategic and calculating, using their charisma to achieve their own objectives and maintain power and control over their followers. They are skilled at exploiting social situations and may employ deception and manipulation to achieve their goals (Rauthman, 2012).

Generation Joshua is an American Christian fundamentalist group that focuses on creating the next generation of leaders. Their mission centers on the belief that the United States of America should be the beacon of hope for Christianity. To achieve this vision, they focus on training today's youth to pursue political positions across the country (*GenJ*, n.d.). These young evangelicals are homeschooled with curriculum provided by the organization, and then many pursue higher education at Patrick Henry College (*GenJ*, n.d.;). The college was founded on the ideal of recruiting conservative Christian young adults to train occupying political offices across the country. Since the college's primary focus is on preparing students for political leadership, this can be seen as a Machiavellian approach because it prioritizes the acquisition and exercise of political power, often associated with calculated and strategic decision-making. Over time, Patrick Henry College gained the reputation of being a feeder to political power (Rosin, 2011). This strategic approach to fostering future leaders aligns with the principles of Machiavellianism, which involves identifying and grooming individuals who can further a particular agenda, even if it involves manipulation or strategizing. Although the college itself does not directly identify

with the concept of Machiavellianism, it is important to note that many of the traditions align with the core principles of the concept.

The third facet of the dark triad, psychopathy, is marked by a lack of empathy and remorse. The APA defines psychopathy as a synonym for antisocial personality disorder, which is characterized by the pervasive disregard for the rights of others (American Psychological Association, n.d.). Charismatic leaders with psychopathic traits may exhibit a charming and superficially engaging demeanor that conceals a profound disregard for the well-being of others. They can be callous and willing to exploit others for their personal gain, often using their charismatic charisma to mask their darker inclinations (Rauthman, 2012).

One of the most prominent and well-documented cases illustrating psychopathy in cult leadership is that of Charles Manson, who led the infamous Manson Family cult. Charles Manson's case has garnered significant attention from both the public and the field of psychology. In a recent psychological evaluation conducted in 1997, Manson was diagnosed with several mental health conditions. Notably, he was diagnosed with a psychotic disorder, which indicates a severe impairment in his ability to perceive reality accurately and may have contributed to his distorted beliefs and actions. Additionally, he was diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder, a condition characterized by persistent patterns of disregard for the rights of others, rule-breaking behavior, and a lack of empathy or remorse. The evaluation also identified traits of narcissism in Manson's personality. Narcissistic individuals tend to have an inflated sense of self-importance, a strong desire for admiration, and a lack of empathy for others. These traits may have contributed to Manson's ability to attract and maintain a following within his cult (Roy et al., 2023).

In addition to considering the factors that cause individuals to be susceptible or vulnerable to cults, it is also essential to recognize any special techniques used by cult leaders. These techniques encompass a wide array of strategies and tactics, such as initiation rituals, intimidation, isolation, punitive measures, and the use of negative reinforcement. These are designed to enhance the recruitment process and exert a profound influence over their followers (Curtis & Curtis, 1993; Scheflin & Opton, 1978).

Functionality

It is suggested that the biggest appeal of joining a cult is their similarity in structure to a familial environment. They provide a sense of belonging and purpose to their members, offering a close-knit community where individuals may find a sense of identity and validation. Cults can serve as a support network, offering emotional and social support to members, something that most members are lacking in their day-to-day life (Kanter, 1972). With the promise of intellectual, spiritual, political, social, and self-actualization power, it's no wonder that these groups attract those who are curious, the unaffiliated, the trusting, and the altruistic. These groups also offer many other promises, such as salvation, revolution, personal development, enlightenment, perfect health, psychological growth, and sometimes even egalitarianism. However, it's important to note that the functionality of cults is not always benign. In some cases, cults can engage in harmful or exploitative practices, manipulating their members and leading to detrimental consequences (Curtis & Curtis, 1993).

Many cults utilize various forms of deception during their recruitment phase (Singer & Lalich, 1996). These tactics may include, but are not limited to, love bombing, misrepresentation of beliefs, isolation, exploitative use of fear, financial manipulation, restriction of information, and psychological manipulation (Dittmann, 2002; West, 1990). All of these techniques fall under

the concept of "mind-control" or "brainwashing", which cults may use to create a sense of group identity amongst its members. A study performed by Crocker and Luhtanen (1990) showed that groups that held high collective self-esteem were more likely to protect their social identity compared to those who had low collective self-esteem. This concept enhances and maintains the cult's influence over its members.

Through thought-stopping techniques, individuals are instructed in ways to prevent doubts from entering their awareness regarding the cult (Dittmann, 2002). Thought-stopping techniques are defined by the APA as the ability to employ a physical or cognitive signal to halt pessimistic thoughts and guide them toward a more neutral or positive perspective (American Psychological Association, n.d.). The process of thought-stopping techniques used by cults typically begins by targeting an individual's sense of self, gradually undermining their critical thinking and strengthening the cult's influence. Thought-stopping techniques are employed through the manipulation of an individual's environment and interpersonal interactions. This involves suppressing certain behaviors and conditioning new ones in line with the cult's beliefs. Cults aim to guide individuals towards a profound reinterpretation of their life's history and the adoption of an entirely new worldview, often radically altering their perception of reality and causality (Singer & Lalich, 1996).

By conducting thorough research, Lifton (1956) compiled a series of steps detailing the psychological processes involved in thought reform. These include social control, mystical manipulation, demands for ideological purity, personal confession, acceptance of principles, language restrictions, subordination of person to doctrine, and dispensation of existence. Social control involves regulating individuals' behavior, thoughts, and emotions through social influence. Mystical manipulation involves manipulating events or experiences to appear guided

by a divine force. Demands for ideological purity discourage deviations, creating a homogenous ideological environment. Personal confession encourages members to disclose personal information, while acceptance of principles and ideologies is expected without critical evaluation. Language is often restricted into polarizing terms, and individual identity (Ungerleider & Wellisch, 1979). Lifton (1956) referenced two men who were "brainwashed" by Chinese communists using these methods, and the men described their experience during the process as a gradual erosion of personal autonomy, where their thoughts and beliefs were systematically reshaped to align with the ideological principles imposed by the captors.

Each was reduced to something not fully human and yet not quite animal, no longer the adult and yet not quite the child; instead, an adult human was placed in the position of an infant or a sub-human animal, helplessly being manipulated by larger and stronger "adults" or "trainers." Placed in this regressive stance, each felt himself deprived of the power, mastery, and selfhood of adult existence (Lifton, 1956, pp. 65–85).

The individuals were forced to abandon their previous social and organizational structures, focusing on betrayal rather than betrayal of friends and colleagues. Another described the experience of thought reform as waking up with a profound emptiness prevailing within them, a sense of lifelessness as if they have been stripped of everything, including their capacity for knowledge. Stein (2021) continued to write that they fought the feeling of depravity from the processes by completely releasing themself to the group identity.

Furthermore, these groups foster a sense of dependence on the organization, effectively transforming their members into deployable agents who will act in alignment with the cult's agenda. Dr. Margaret Singer, a noted authority on cults and mind control, delineates six key conditions of thought reform commonly utilized by cults. These conditions include ensuring that

the person is unaware of the agenda to control or change them, exerting control over the person's exposure to information and social contacts, fostering feelings of powerlessness, fear, and dependency, suppressing outdated behaviors and attitudes, and instilling new ones that align with the cult's beliefs. All of these elements function within a closed system of logic, reinforcing the cult's narrative.

However, it is important to acknowledge the ongoing debate surrounding the concept of 'brainwashing.' The APA has criticized 'brainwashing' studies, raising ethical concerns and questioning their scientific validity (Dittmann, 2002). Nevertheless, the impact of thought-stopping techniques and other manipulative strategies within cults continues to be a subject of interest and concern for those studying the dynamics of these groups and their effects on individuals.

Susceptibility

Several factors related to susceptibility to cult recruitment have been explored in literature. For example, Curtis and Curtis (1993) highlight the significance of generalized ego-weakness and emotional vulnerability. These behaviors can lead to maladaptive responses to social behaviors. Additionally, it is shown that pent-up emotions such as anger and guilt are identified as contributing to an individual's susceptibility to cults, as they often promise a remedy for emotional distress, often offering a safe haven for those who feel wronged. Dissociative tendencies, characterized by avoiding emotions and thoughts and often coupled with limited analytical and reasoning abilities, are another factor that may make individuals more susceptible to cult involvement (Oathes & Ray, 2008). Furthermore, another study performed by Rousselet et al. (2017) underlines that "personal development" and "life dissatisfaction" were among the most common reasons an individual joined a cult. These factors collectively shed

light on the interconnectedness of emotional vulnerabilities, psychological tendencies, and motivations that contribute to an individual's vulnerability to cult recruitment.

The Big Five Personality Traits, commonly known as the Five Factor Model (FFM), encompass a widely embraced framework in social psychology for comprehensively understanding individual differences in personality. These traits are commonly referred to by an acronym: OCEAN. 'O' stands for an individual's openness to experience, which reflects an individual's inclination toward novelty and intellectual curiosity. 'C' represents conscientiousness, which gauges organization, responsibility, and dependability. 'E' is for extraversion, which is for an individual's capability to measure sociability, assertiveness, and energy levels. 'A' stands for agreeableness, indicating interpersonal tendencies such as compassion and cooperativeness. 'N' represents neuroticism, or an individual's emotional stability, which reflects emotional resilience or instability. Together, these dimensions offer a nuanced perspective on various aspects of human personality (Fiske, 1949).

Among the five personality traits highlighted earlier, our discovery posits that "agreeableness" emerges as the most vulnerable to cult recruitment. This belief is grounded in the findings of Lüders et al. (2016), which emphasized a prevalent positive correlation between religiosity and agreeableness in various studies. The trait of agreeableness encompasses individuals who embody values such as being "good-natured, compliant, modest, gentle, and cooperative." The hypothesis suggests that those with a high degree of agreeableness may be more susceptible to the recruitment strategies employed by cults, which often exploit these positive interpersonal qualities to establish a sense of camaraderie, trust, and shared values among members. The pleasant and cooperative nature associated with agreeableness may potentially render individuals more open to the influence and persuasive tactics commonly

utilized within cult dynamics (Fiske, 1949; Lüders et al., 2016). Agreeable individuals tend to be the most compliant. Conformity plays a pivotal role in cult dynamics, fostering a sense of unity among members. Those who readily conform to group norms and expectations contribute to the cohesive identity prized by cults. Furthermore, the emphasis on individuals willingly following leadership highlights the authoritarian structure of some cults, where adherence to the leader's ideologies is deemed absolute.

The four remaining traits are characterized by a lack of inclination to conform, often coupled with an aversion to authority (Lüders et al., 2016). However, this then does introduce a counterpoint, suggesting that these individuals may not be actively targeted due to characteristics that may be perceived as unsavory or undesirable by the cult. These unsavory traits, while making individuals less likely to conform to societal norms, may not align with the cult's specific criteria for membership or the type of followers they seek. It is important to remember that cults would want individuals that are more likely to conform to their ideology and to follow the leadership. The most attractive individuals to cults are those that are malleable and amenable. This implies that those who score low in those personality traits may be susceptible to cult recruitment.

In addition to personality traits, there are a variety of factors that can make a person susceptible to cult recruitment. Research over the years has made it clear that everyone, regardless of background, is susceptible to the lure of cult leadership. Singer (1996) is quick to point out in her book that a majority of cult membership comes from adolescents and adults in middle-class backgrounds that are well-educated and do not display any psychological disturbance prior to joining a cult. In another study, the household income exhibited a median of $50,000 annually. Adjusted for inflation, that would be roughly 95,000 annually in 2023. The

average number of years of education stood at 15, with 87% of the population having

accomplished at least one year of higher education (Gasde & Block, 1998).

The surveyed respondents spanned an age range of 18 to 79 years, with a mean age of

45.1 (SE = 1.4). Regarding their age at the time of joining the cult, the spectrum extended from

birth (for individuals born into the group) to 58 years, with an average age of 25.7 (SE = 1.4).

Notably, a significant proportion, nearly 60%, joined between the ages of 18 and 28, as

documented by Gasde and Block in 1998. Contrary to stereotypes, it has become evident over

the years that susceptibility to the influence of cults is not confined to any specific demographic

(Singer & Lalich, 1996). This sentiment is echoed in research indicating that approximately

two-thirds of cult recruits come from well-functioning families, showcasing age-appropriate

behavior before joining. The remaining third, of which only 5 to 6 percent had major

psychological difficulties prior to joining, emphasizes the diversity of backgrounds among cult

members. According to Singer and Lalich (1996), two conditions render individuals particularly

susceptible to cult recruitment: experiencing depression and finding themselves in a state of

transition between significant affiliations. This multifaceted understanding challenges

preconceived notions and emphasizes the nuanced vulnerabilities that contribute to individuals

falling prey to cults.

Discussion

Ex-cult members often face psychological trauma stemming from various factors such as

coercive control, manipulation, emotional abuse, and the loss of personal autonomy. The intense

indoctrination and the constant fear of consequences for non-compliance can contribute

significantly to the development of psychological stress. Leaving a cult often prompts an identity

crisis. Individuals who grew up in cults may have their identities tightly intertwined with the

group's ideology. Upon leaving, they may grapple with redefining themselves, finding their own beliefs, and establishing an independent sense of identity. This process of reintegrating into mainstream society after leaving a cult can be overwhelming for an individual. Growing up in a cult can limit the social capabilities of an individual, which can enhance the overwhelming effect of reintegration into mainstream society. This may be encountered as difficulties in adapting to societal norms, engaging in everyday activities, and establishing connections with people who do not share the same experiences. Ex-cult members also experience trust issues stemming from the betrayal within the cult environment, where trust may have been exploited, and this can lead to difficulties forming new relationships. The individual may also experience a fear of retribution or retaliation from the cult they left. This can be a persistent source of anxiety. Cults often use tactics to discourage members from leaving, including threats of harm, public humiliation, or ostracism. Even after leaving, individuals may live with the lingering fear of potential consequences.

A study performed by Kern and Jungbauer (2020) collected information from 16 ex-cult members and provided an extensive look into the ramifications of growing up within a cult. Cult environments can disrupt normal attachment processes, preventing individuals from forming secure emotional bonds with caregivers. This disruption may result in challenges forming and maintaining intimate relationships in adulthood, as individuals may struggle with trust and emotional closeness. Many individuals who grew up in cults report a profound sense of loss and disorientation. The strict control within cults often limits personal freedoms and autonomy, leading to challenges in establishing a clear sense of self and identity. Cult members may face difficulties in defining their identity and establishing a sense of belonging outside the cult. The narrow-minded nature of these groups can leave individuals feeling disconnected from

mainstream society and its cultural norms. Growing up in a cult may foster a sense of deindividuation, where individuals feel like interchangeable parts rather than unique individuals. Additionally, the strict hierarchy within cults can lead to feelings of devaluation, as individual contributions may be minimized or ignored. Many also reported that the reason behind the devaluation was the public humiliation they faced when they were punished, to the point where it led to a feeling of helplessness and worthlessness. Participants report instances of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse during their upbringing in cults. This trauma can contribute to low self-esteem and low self-confidence, which in turn impacts their self-perception and ability to navigate the world with confidence. Individuals from cult backgrounds may struggle with issues of trust and obedience to authorities. The authoritarian structure within cults conditions members to unquestioningly follow leaders, making it challenging for them to trust others or exercise independent judgment. Participants in the study also often face difficulties in maintaining various social relationships, including platonic, professional, and romantic connections. The isolated and controlled environment of cults may hinder the development of social skills and the ability to establish healthy relationships (Kern & Jungbauer, 2020).

Exiting a cult environment can lead to significant psychological distress. Many ex-cult members report experiencing anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as they grapple with the aftermath of their experiences, including the need to rebuild their lives outside the confines of the cult. In another survey conducted by Rousselet et al. (2017), 31 individuals were instructed to complete a survey based on their experiences while growing up in a cult. Their answers were compared against the Mini International Neuropsychiatric Interview (MINI), which allows for a standardized examination of their answers in comparison to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). Out of 31 participants, 61.3% displayed

symptoms of anxiety disorders after 12 months of their departure from a cult. Mood disorders were also prevalent within the group, 54.8% showed symptoms within 12 months of departure. Six members also reported symptoms of PTSD within 12 months of leaving the cult. Future research should look into possible methods of minimizing the traumatic aftermath of leaving a cult and treating those effects.

Research for this topic is very limited. There seem to be no papers that directly correlate personality traits with susceptibility to cult recruitment. Personality is a particularly nuanced and complicated topic, and identifying specific traits that universally predispose individuals to cult susceptibility is challenging. Research involving curls and vulnerable populations also poses ethical challenges. Since cults are known for their manipulative tactics, studying individuals within these contexts raises concerns about potential harm, and especially the violation of research ethics. Additionally, the isolated nature of cults make it difficult for researchers to gain access to current members for study purposes. As for individuals who have left cults, many of them are hesitant to participate in studies due to a variety of reasons relating to the fear instilled in them by the cult or the trust issues they developed from their prior involvement. Current research on cults focuses on broader aspects, such as organizational structures, psychological manipulation, and social dynamics, rather than solely on individual personality traits. Previous research tends to focus on the sociocultural context of cults rather than individuality. Further research studying specific traits of individuals and the impacts on a cult's organizational structure should be pursued.

Another limitation of this paper is the research that does exist on cults is primarily self-report. Self-report relies on an individual to provide responses based on their own perspectives, emotions, and interpretations, introducing potential biases. Social desirability bias

is the most common concern, where respondents may shape their answers to conform to societal norms (Brenner & DeLamater, 2016). Moreover, memory limitations pose another challenge, with individuals struggling to accurately recall past events. Some may even shift their answer to reflect a positive change, which is common in families that required intervention from government bodies (Rosenman et al., 2011). Despite these issues, self-report measures provide a way to quantify and study complex constructs such as personality traits, offering a standardized method for measurement. Self-report measures are also the most efficient and most cost-effective of all assessment methods, as they allow for large group sampling and do not take a large amount of time. Furthermore, self-report provides a non-invasive means of gathering information, respecting participant's autonomy and privacy (Brenner & DeLamater, 2016).

Future research should look into possible ways to minimize bias in self-report measures. If possible, researchers should look into using the Experience Sampling Method (ESM). ESM is a research technique used to collect real-time data on an individual's experiences, thoughts, and behaviors in their natural environment. Unlike traditional retrospective self-report measures that ask participants to recall events over a period, ESM captures information as it occurs, providing a more accurate and contextually rich understanding of daily life. One way of achieving this is by having them journal throughout each and every day so it is accurately portrayed. This can be extremely useful to studying current cult membership as it provides more authentic reflections of daily life compared to assessments conducted in a controlled laboratory environment. ESM can also collect multidimensional data, including participants' emotional states, social interactions, environmental context, and activities. This approach allows for a researcher to examine interaction between various factors. ESM is often facilitated through smart devices, such as a smartphone or a computer, where a participant receives a random prompt or signal at random

intervals. Individuals are then to report on their current thoughts, emotions, or activities. This allows for more validity within the self-report and also allows researchers to capture information on specific events. In other words, researchers can explore how specific events, interactions, or environmental factors contribute to the reinforcement of cult-related thoughts and behaviors. It also allows for the research into cognitive processes within the cult, such as thought-stopping techniques or cognitive dissonance reduction strategies. Real-time reporting through ESM can provide a more accurate depiction of how these processes unfold in an individual's mind. There are many other research options that minimize the effect of biases in self-report measures that should be explored in future research in addition to ESM (Larson & Csíkszentmihályi, 2014).

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