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### The Cultic Lifecycle: A Thematic Analysis of Fulfillment and Fear in Cult Membership

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THE CULTIC LIFECYCLE: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF FULFILLMENT AND FEAR IN  
CULT MEMBERSHIP

by

Shaelen Grant

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Forensic Mental Health Counseling

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The Cultic Lifecycle: A Thematic Analysis of Fulfillment and Fear in Cult Membership

Shaelen Grant

This Thesis has been presented to and accepted by the Office of Graduate Studies, John Jay College of Criminal Justice in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Forensic Mental Health Counseling.

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### **Abstract**

Prior research on susceptibility to cult recruitment has focused predominately on psychopathological risk factors, such as a prior personality disorder diagnosis and psychiatric and addictive disorders (Feldman & Johnson, 1995; Rousselet et al., 2017). While such studies contribute valuable information, they also inadvertently pathologize cult members. Furthermore, this focus has led to the overlooking of a more crucial question: what basic human desires does cult membership fulfill that cult leaders and recruiters exploit, to recruit and keep members in cults?

To address this dearth, research team members interviewed 52 former cult members (N=52) from a variety of groups (e.g., Christian-based, mindfulness-based, etc.) for 1.5-3 hours using a semi-structured interview guide developed within the coercive control theoretical framework (Doychak & Raghavan, 2018). Qualitative analysis was conducted utilizing grounded theory methodology to identify proximal and distal reasons given for joining, maintaining membership within, and putting off leaving a cult, as well as prevalent themes of needs fulfilled by cult membership. Questions (and therefore analysis) included: (1) Short and long-term stressors prior to joining the group, (2) Reasons identified by participants as cementing their commitment to the cult and contributing to sustained membership, and (3) Emotional, practical, and spiritual factors that made it difficult to leave the cult. Nuanced analysis of responses indicated that a sense of community, spirituality, and purpose emerged as the needs most consistently fulfilled by cults. These findings suggest that cult leaders and recruiters are targeting individuals during stressful times in their lives, exploiting the human need for connection and purpose in order to trap individuals in the cultic lifecycle, eventually inducing dependence and

instilling a deep fear of leaving. The similarity of this dynamic to other gender-based violence relationships is discussed.

**Keywords:** cults, high-control groups, high-demand groups, cult susceptibility, spiritual abuse, stress, coercive control, risk and resilience, hierarchy of needs, gender-based violence

Insidious and oftentimes abusive, an estimated 5,000 cultic groups made up of more than two million active cult members are currently operating in North America (Lottick, 2008). These estimates are likely inaccurate because data on cult membership is scarce, in part due to the often private or fleeting nature of many of these groups, but also because it can be challenging to discern cultic groups from healthy religious groups. For the purpose of this study, the defining difference between cults and healthy religion is the presence or absence of group member's freedom to negotiate their own experience within the group. This includes the opportunity to challenge and speak on doctrine, move freely within the group and the surrounding community, and the ability to leave the religion without external pressure or punitive repercussions (Rodriguez-Carballeira et al., 2014; Rousselet et al., 2017).

Recent estimates of cult membership suggest that cults continue to grow, possibly due to their increasing presence and accessibility on social media and the internet (Nastuta, 2012). Previous research on susceptibility to cult membership has largely focused on various psychopathological risk factors (e.g., Rousselet et al., 2017). While such perspectives are important, psychopathology alone does not explain why an individual may be successfully recruited into a cult and go on to maintain membership in that group for an extended period of time. Further, highlighting only mental health conditions may unintentionally promote a victim blaming (and thus stigmatizing) stance that cult recruitment is successful because the individuals targeted have underlying issues with mental health. Focusing solely on this risk factor trivializes other emotional and practical needs that may have been targeted and exploited by cult leaders to recruit members, keep them in the cult, and delay their departure.

To bridge this gap, I propose that members join cults because these groups initially promise to fill deeper needs that sustain meaning in life. More specifically, I propose to examine

the stressors, vulnerabilities, and desires that cult leaders and recruiters exploit in order to recruit and then contain people within these high-control groups. To help frame this research, I borrow from Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory. Developed in 1943, this theory suggests that some of these desires inherent to the human condition go beyond physiological needs, including the need for safety and security, love and belonging, self-esteem needs, and self-actualization needs.

Anecdotal and clinical studies indicate that these are needs that cult membership fulfills (Coates, 2012). In return, cult leaders demand unwavering devotion and loyalty despite dysfunction or even abuse within the group.

In the following section, I will begin by defining the term "cult," in more detail followed by a discussion of the two ways individuals are drawn into cults; from the top down by toxic, manipulative, and charismatic cult leadership (Goldberg, 2012; Puls, 2020) as well as bottom up in which cult members' own circumstances lead them to join (Davis, 1996; Rousselet et al., 2017). In the next section, I will review literature on existing stress as a possible risk factor for cult recruitment susceptibility (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004). Because studies on stress and cults are scarce, to contextualize this research I will consider why people may join cults by looking at existing literature on stress outside the cult context to understand how acute stress affects functioning. I'll also examine various functions affected by stress, including decision making (Wemm & Wulfert, 2017), executive functioning (Shields et al., 2016), coping skills (Bhanji et al., 2016), and self-efficacy (Schönfeld et al., 2017). In the final two sections I will explore the limited research available on why it may be so difficult for individuals to leave cults, as well as the other side of this conundrum, why individuals stay in cults (Coates, 2012).

### **What is a Cult?**

According to the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA), a cult is defined as an ideological organization consisting of charismatic relationships that necessitates high levels of commitment, often employing psychological manipulation and abuse. ICSA identifies 15 characteristics consistent across cultic groups, including though not limited to: “zealous and unquestioning commitment to its leader,” “a polarized us-versus-them mentality,” the use of “mind-altering practices,” and a primary preoccupation with “bringing in new members” and “making money” (Langone, 2015). Cultic groups typically promote a doctrine that crucially deviates from mainstream beliefs (Holoyda et al., 2016) while simultaneously preaching a message that resonates with individuals from different backgrounds.

### **Stress: An Overview of its Role in the Process of Joining a Cult**

New members join cults in two ways. Top down, cult leaders and recruiters ensure a steady stream of new members through the use of manipulation and deception to entice individuals to join the group, sometimes termed “narcissistic seduction” (Goldberg, 2012; Puls, 2020). Puls (2020) analyzed the personality of the cult leader and noted that narcissists demand ceaseless external admiration from others. Spiritual theatrics and extreme outward worship practices are central to many cultic groups, making a position of high status in a group, like that of a cult leader or recruiter, highly desirable to a narcissist. Puls (2020) explained that the process of narcissistic seduction in high-control religious groups is often mistaken for the building of an “energetic vision,” as many narcissists are perceived initially as grandiose leaders with compelling plans for change and betterment for the group. Goldberg (2012) proposed that cult leaders prey on individuals who are idealistic and in search of a parental figure and aim to recruit these people, offering them an opportunity to obtain the “perfection” that the leader



enjoys. This perfection is of course unattainable to anyone other than the leader, fostering shame in members and solidifying a sense of dependence on the omnipotent leader.

While leaders often play an important role in recruitment, the bottom-up process is also important. In many cases, individuals gravitate to the cultic lifestyle, and may even “fall” into the group without a leader or recruiter targeting them directly. Those seeking out cults have been drawn to what they see as an alternative or meaningful culture or lifestyle, rather than having been directly recruited (Coates, 2012). Related to seeking meaning, there is a small body of research that suggests that some individuals join cults on their own volition, oftentimes during a tumultuous or transitional time in their lives (Davis, 1996; Rousselet et al., 2017). Whether deceived or intentionally seeking out an alternative way of life, former cult members may be experiencing stress, and therefore vulnerable at the time of joining a cult. Below, I describe how stress might influence an individual’s susceptibility to entering a cult, as well as how different kinds of stress such as acute stress and early stress may precede cult membership.

Buxant and Saroglou (2008) found that proximal stressful life events may play a role in cult recruitment susceptibility. The authors found that over a third of their sample of former cult members had experienced one or more negative life events immediately prior to entering a cult. Granqvist and Kirkpatrick’s (2004) findings that some former cult members reported being in “a period of crisis” at the time of joining echoed this. Interestingly, conversions into the cult appeared to resolve these “periods” of high-stress, at least temporarily (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004) further supporting the idea that stressful events may increase the attractiveness of cults to some individuals.

Buxant and Saroglou’s (2008) findings – that many stressful life events that participants described happened immediately prior to joining the group – indicate that during transitional

periods (e.g., following divorce, the death of a family member, or the loss of a job) people may be particularly susceptible to joining a high-control group because vulnerable, stressed individuals may not consider the long-term consequences of an important decision. While not specifically conducted in cult settings, other research indicates that the presence of a stressor typically resulted in a failure to attend to the full range of possible consequences of a decision (Wemm & Wulfert, 2017). How individuals cope with stress may also influence the attractiveness of cults.

A large body of research has been devoted to understanding the relationship between acute stress and executive functioning (Shields et al., 2016) and more specifically, the ways in which individuals perceive their ability to cope effectively with stressful events (Bhanji et al., 2016). Bhanji et al. (2016) noted that an individual's belief in their agency over significant life experiences affects decisional processes positively. Similarly, lack of perceived self-efficacy hinders one's ability to make decisions in the face of adversity, making stressed individuals increasingly vulnerable (Benight & Bandura, 2004). Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2004) found that sudden converts into a high-control group overwhelmingly reported a relatively unhappy childhood, and that membership in the group offered some kind of compensation for individuals who experienced turbulent, neglectful, or abusive childhoods (Murken & Namini, 2007). This loop process (poorly managed stress leading to reduced self-efficacy, poorer coping, and failure to attend to larger consequences) likely accounts in part for why people join high-control groups immediately after stressful or traumatic life events.

In sum, a few studies suggest that stressful life events may be important to consider in order to understand why individuals join cults. Expanding upon this research, I examined

whether former cult members identified both short-term and long-term stressors in the time preceding their joining of a cult.

### **Rewards, Dependency, and Coercive Control: Maintenance of Cult Membership**

Once members join a cult, many stay for extended periods of time. While journalistic accounts of why people struggle to leave cults are plentiful, only one study has examined how and why cult membership is maintained. Coates (2010) identified two major factors responsible for the maintenance of cult membership: direct rewards and induced dependency. She noted that both former and current cult members identified the presence of a direct “reward” obtained from their cult membership, as well a significant dependency on the group as a whole and the structure it provided. Some of the perceived rewards to maintaining cult membership included career success, a community of friends, self-development or a sense of personal identity, heightened self-esteem, a sense of control over their life, improved health and happiness and a decrease in alcohol or other substances upon joining (Coates, 2010). In addition to positive perceived effects of membership, Coates (2010) found the presence of highly controlling tactics by the cult as another reason individuals maintain(ed) membership. Tactics included control over mobility, behavior, thought, relationships, and emotions. These findings echo the narratives of sex trafficking survivors describing the extreme and unrelenting control their pimps or traffickers wielded, making it difficult for them to leave (Doychak & Raghavan, 2018). Doychak and Raghavan (2018) proposed that this tactical and consistent coercive control creates an environment of psychological captivity, which may partially explain why individuals stay in cults despite the desire to leave.

### **A Risk and Resilience Perspective on Leaving a Cult**

The factors that influence when and how cult members terminate their relationship with the cult can be looked at using the risk and resilience model. Rousselet et al. (2017) examined the similarities between addiction disorders and cult membership through this lens to understand whether a set of protective factors exist, making it easier for people to separate from cults. The findings revealed that the involvement of a member's family network could be either a protective factor in leaving the cult or a vulnerability factor for cultic membership. Specifically, if a cult member's family was not in the group and was willing to assist the cult member in leaving the group safely and reintegrating into society, "family" acted as a protective factor. However, if a cult member's family was in the cult with them, "family" became a vulnerability factor for cult membership, as oftentimes the individual was raised in the cult or brought in through familial encouragement (Rousselet et al., 2017). In this case, the act of leaving is seen as an ultimate betrayal, sometimes resulting in completely severed familial contact. Building upon Rousselet et al.'s (2017) work, in this study I examined how former cult members perceived their own difficulties when attempting to sever ties with the group.

### **Present Study**

The primary goal of this study was bifold. First, I wished to understand the existing stressors and vulnerabilities that cult members identified prior to joining a cult. Next, I wished to understand why cult members stayed and what made it difficult for them to leave. To give voice to former cult members, they were asked to describe their experiences freely, rather than being constrained by a highly structured interview format or strict time limits. Accordingly, I proposed the following research questions:

Research Question #1: *What reasons did participants identify as contributing to their decision to join a cult?*

To understand short-term stressors, I asked what, if any, stressful events occurred immediately prior to joining the group. To understand long-term stressors, I asked if there were there any long-term stressors that participants felt the group addressed, and if there was anything missing in their lives that may have influenced their decision to join.

Research Question #2: *What reasons did participants identify as contributing to their maintenance of cult membership for an extended period of time?*

Specifically, I asked participants what made them feel the most committed to or involved in the group.

Research Question #3: *What reasons did participants give that made it difficult for them to leave the cult?*

Specifically, I asked participants what factors made it harder for them to leave the cult.

## **Methods**

Former cult members (N=52) of a variety of groups (e.g., Christian-based, mindfulness-based, etc.) were interviewed over the phone for approximately 1.5 hours using a semi-structured interview guide developed around the existing coercive control theoretical framework (Doychak & Raghavan, 2018). Responses to the following questions were subjected to qualitative analyses: (1) The types of short and long-term stressors prior to joining the group, (2) Factors that made

participants feel most committed to the group, contributing to sustained membership, and (3) Factors that made it difficult to leave the cult.

### *Participants*

Study participants were located through broadcast emails sent to the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) referral base and postings approved by online cult recovery/support groups. To meet inclusion criteria, participants had to be 18 years of age or older, have been a member of a cult for approximately one year or more, not be an active member of any cultic group or contributing monetarily to a cult, and have left the cult within the last fifteen years. Telephone screening, consisting of a series of scripted questions to determine if the potential participant met the study's inclusion criteria, was used to determine eligibility. To date, 115 former cult members have consented to interviews as part of this study, and data has been collected from these 115 participants. Preliminary data analysis for the purposes of the current study was completed for the first 52 participants, as this is the extent of the qualitative data that has been fully coded.

The current sample (N=52) was 67.31% female (n=35), 28.85% male (n=15), and 3.85% transgender/non-binary (n=2). Mean age was M=43.17, SD=11.53. This sample was more diverse in terms of race than previous studies (Ayella, 1990; Matthews & Salazar, 2014), though still predominately Caucasian at 80.77% (n=42). Participants were 9.62% Latinx (n=5), 3.85% Black (n=2), 1.92% East Asian (n=1), 1.92% Southeast Asian (n=1), and 1.92% Mixed Race (n=1). Participants were predominately from the United States, while participants from other countries accounted for 36.5% (n=19).

In answering the first question, I ran into an interesting problem. Of the 52 participants, 15 noted that they had been born or raised in a cult and therefore did not voluntarily join. Thus,

for the first question, I only used data from the 37 participants who identified as first-generation cult members, meaning they were not born or raised in a cult.

### *Procedure*

A 127-item semi-structured interview guide adapted from Doychak and Raghavan (2018) utilizing the coercive control theoretical framework was used to conduct interviews with former cult members from a variety of groups. Because a common deterrent of participation in cult research is the looming fear of a confidentiality breach, oftentimes resulting in defamation and character assassination campaigns commonly launched by certain cultic groups (Dole, 2008), oral consent was obtained prior to the start of each interview and no video component was used. Participants were not required to answer any questions that they wished not to answer. Interviews were conducted via telephone or WhatsApp™ (a free messaging software, in the case of international participants). Audio from interviews was not recorded in the interest of participant privacy; instead interviewers transcribed participant responses using Microsoft Word™ during the interview. Upon completion of the interview (regardless of extent of questions answered), participants were compensated with \$10 Amazon gift cards.

### *Coding and Analysis*

Interview data was coded qualitatively using software MAXQDA™ based on narrative responses. Both preliminary quantitative analysis of demographics and qualitative analysis of the data was conducted using the data analysis software MAXQDA™. Analysis utilized grounded theory methodology to identify prevalent themes with respect to temporal differences.

Intercoder reliability for this process (i.e., two coders agreed that the specific answers provided to each interview question were indeed correctly coded into the correct theme category, or “subcode”) was utilized in this study. This measure provided additional assurance that the

interview questions successfully solicited enough information to identify prevalent themes, agreed upon by other coders. The current study was complex in its coding process: interview transcripts were multiple pages long and covered many themes throughout, thus, coded units for variables could be identified anywhere in the transcript. Additionally, if applicable, researchers coded multiple subcodes for each qualitative code (e.g., a participant identified both emotional and spiritual factors that made it difficult for them to leave the cult).

It is important to hold qualitative data to the standard of possible replication despite the less structured nature of the interview process. Qualitative research offers rich data, however there is no clear standard for the analysis of coded interview transcripts nor for reporting intercoder reliability. After thorough consideration, study researchers elected to adopt an approach similar to the methodologies outlined in Campbell et al. (2013) and O'Connor and Joffe (2020). This approach required the reporting of both intercoder reliability (i.e., initial percentage of agreement between the individual coders), as well as intercoder agreement (i.e., the percentage of agreement between the coders after the tie-breaking process has taken place). As indicated in Table 1, the initial round of coding resulted in an overall intercoder reliability of 89.92%<sup>1</sup>. Upon tiebreaking, intercoder agreement reached 97.93%.

To provide additional transparency around this process, I reported the agreement percentages between each set of coders. Three coders (Coder A, Coder B, and Coder C) individually coded two-thirds of the data set. Initial intercoder reliability for the groups was 89.66% (AB), 90.26% (BC), and 89.86% (AC). For the one-third of the data set that a single

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<sup>1</sup> During analysis, researchers have the option to include “unassigned sub-codes” as matches or to ignore these unassigned sub-codes. To expand on this idea, if two coders both chose not to identify a sub-code as being present, this can either be thought of as a “match” or it can be ignored and not included in the analysis of reliability. This number represents overall intercoder reliability counting unassigned codes as matches.



coder did not code, they acted as a “tiebreaker” to aid the other two coders in coming to an agreement on the correct sub-code(s). In the event of a disagreement between two coders, they each explained why they selected their sub-code. If an agreement could still not be reached, the third coder would cast the deciding vote. However, this was rare, and the two coders in a set (i.e., AC, BC, or AC) were able to reconcile their initial disagreements on average 97.93% of the time (96.67%, 97.98%, and 99.15%, respectively). To check for potential bias in the intercoder agreement process, coders evaluated how often disagreements were reconciled in favor of one coder over the other.

**Table 1**

*Intercoder Reliability Measures*

Intercoder Reliability				
	AB	BC	AC	Overall
Intercoder	89.66%	90.26%	89.86%	89.92%
Reliability*				
Intercoder	96.67%	97.98%	99.15%	97.93%
Agreement				
* Unassigned sub-codes as matches				

## Results

### Why do People Join Cults?

My first research question sought to build upon existing literature to gain a deeper understanding of why people join cults. In order to understand short-term stressors, I asked participants if any stressful events occurred prior to joining the group. Since 15 of the 52

participants were born into cults, data from the remaining 37 first-generation former cult members was used to answer this question. Of the 37 participants, 30 identified the presence of one or more short-term life stressor(s) prior to joining the group. For the sake of brevity, I grouped each specific stressor into broad categories in order to provide a digestible overview of the data. From the short-term stressor data collected, four major themes emerged: interpersonal stressors, health stressors, anomie-related stressors, and economic stressors. Many participants indicated more than one stressor. Participant responses that fell outside of these themes were coded as “other.”

Interpersonal stressors were described by 51.3% of participants. This category includes romantic problems, parent’s divorce, general family issues, and coping with abuse. Participants not only identified stressors, they also explained how the stressors affected them, and in some cases, described the ways they believe this stressor had been exploited by the cult. One participant, Amber (all participants have been de-identified, and names have been changed to ensure anonymity) a 23-year-old East Asian woman, explained that prior to joining, she was *“going through a breakup and... trying to get involved in something else to get my mind off of it.”* Amber continued, *“I was in a vulnerable stage. Looking back, [the group] kind of took advantage of that... and a lot of other people there I saw were going through things too.”*

Health problems were described by 45.9% of participants as a short-term stressor present in their lives prior to joining. This category includes mental health issues, medical problems, illness of a close person, death of a close person, and substance abuse. Joanna, a 52-year-old white woman explains her experience of various health problems prior to joining: *“our lives were very stressful...I had a psychosis that they called a post-partum depression. I had a traumatic birth and my body was trying to alert me.... I became suicidally depressed.”* Joanna

goes on to relate these stressors to her process of joining the cult, explaining “*we didn’t have people... we were very wounded, and they took advantage of that.*”

Anomie-related issues, which encompasses feelings of social-isolation, loneliness, issues around faith and spirituality, and existential crises, were described by a little more than a quarter (27.0%) of the participants. Brigid, a 35-year-old white woman expressed these feelings, stating “*I was very lonely and wanted an instant community; I wanted community and I wanted it now...I had a huge void and was trying to fill it.*” Suzanne, a 50-year-old white woman spoke about a spiritual anomie-related issue: “*I was doubting my parents’ religion that I was raised in, and so I was checking out other churches.*”

Economic problems such as homelessness or general financial issues were described about a sixth (16.2%) of participants as a short term-stressor immediately prior to joining. This was illustrated by Arun, a 49-year-old South Asian man, who explained “*I was unemployed. The house was repossessed... I thought there was some hope from stuff I read in the book.*”

In addition, about a fifth (21.6%) of participants described very specific short-term stressors that were categorized as “other”. Two short-term stressors in the interpersonal and health categories were identified most frequently noted by participants: the presence of romantic problems, and the presence of mental health conditions immediately prior to joining a cult.

**Table 2**

*Short-Term Stressors (First-Generation Adults Only)*

Short-Term Stressors	Frequency	Percent
Interpersonal Stressors	19	51.3%
Health Stressors	17	45.9%

Anomie Stressors	10	27.02%
Other Stressors	8	21.6%
Economic Stressors	6	16.2%
No ST Stressors	7	18.9%

*N*=37

To understand what types of long-term stressors existed in participant's lives prior to joining a cult, I asked if any long-term problems were addressed or alleviated by joining, and if anything was missing in their lives that may have influenced their decision to join a cult. Of the 37 true first-generation adults in the sample, 29 identified the presence of long-term stressors prior to joining a cult. In contrast with findings around short-term stressors, the long-term stressors that participants identified as being alleviated or addressed by cult membership were far more existential in nature. In some cases, participants identified multiple long-term stressors, or important aspects of their life they perceived as missing out on prior to joining the cult.

About a third of first-generation participants explained that joining a cult brought them a sense of community (32.4%). Maxwell, a 26-year-old white man illustrated this: *"It gave me a sense of community. I was shy and didn't have too many friends."* Another third (29.7%) described various aspects of self-understanding. Gabriel, a 39-year-old Latinx man said, *"I was normally a shy person and I was more into reading and intellectual and that's something the group valued a lot, so I felt very much recognized and praised in the group because I liked to read and write."* Twenty-seven percent of participants perceived the cult as providing a sense of purpose or spirituality. Alan, a 35-year-old Latinx man explained *"one of the things it addressed well was this ongoing sense of powerlessness in the world ...they addressed the need for grandness, meaning, and power."* A minority of participants (2.7%) described practical or

financial long-term stressors, illustrated by Barbara, a 54-year-old white woman: *“I tipped over into adulthood and was thinking, ‘I’m always going to be impoverished.’ It helped me get a job! And it made me more confident and more mature about the reality of life.”*

**Table 3**

*Long-Term Stressors (First-Generation Adults Only)*

Long-Term Stressors	Frequency	Percent
Sense of Community	12	32.4%
Self-Understanding	11	29.7%
Sense of Purpose/ Spirituality	10	27.0%
No LT Stressors	8	21.6%
Practical/ Financial Issues	1	2.7%
Other	5	13.5%

*N=37*

### **Why do people stay in cults?**

To further conceptualize the cultic lifecycle, I asked why participants remained in their cults, sometimes despite years of abuse or dissatisfaction in the group. The average length of membership for our 52 participants was 18.11 years. To understand why individuals maintain cultic membership for such significant portions of their lives, I asked participants to describe the reasons they felt most committed to the group. Of 51 valid participant responses, 48 identified one or more factors that kept them most committed to the cult.

The themes that emerged were similar to those identified by participants when asked what long-term stressors the cult addressed or alleviated. The most frequent factor solidifying a participant’s unwavering membership was the desire for salvation or a deep appreciation for the

doctrine that the cult followed, identified by over half of participants (52.9%). When asked what made her feel most committed, Nina, a 27-year-old white woman explained: “*just my conviction that what they taught and what we practiced was the ultimate reality and that it was the way to reach salvation.*” To better understand why so many participants described spiritual devotion as keeping them committed to the cult, I explored the cult types that our participants belonged to. Of our sample of 52 participants, 56% belonged to a neo-Christian cult. Psychological/ Self-Help cults, and cults based in other-world phenomena, respectively made up 15% of our sample each. Cults based in Hindu, Zen, and Eastern ideologies made up 10% of our sample, and the cultic groups belonging to the remaining 4% of our sample fell outside these categories, for example, a cult based in environmental sustainability principles. Heaven and hell, or eternal damnation were explicitly mentioned in many of the narratives of former members belonging to religious cults, suggesting that a fear of damnation may have played a role in keeping some participants in the cult. However, this question illuminated the fact that over half of our participants explained that during the height of their membership, they genuinely agreed with the group’s messages and appreciated the ideas that were being shared with them.

A sense of community or belonging was another common reason given by 33.3% of participants for staying in the group. Alan, a 35-year-old Latinx man, explained “*the world seems so fucked up that being inside something that was fucked up seemed to make sense.... They were so aggressive and loving that if something threatened me, they would destroy it. I thought, ‘These people really care.*” Xavier, a 24-year-old Latinx man echoed this: “*I felt a sense of belonging; that I was a part of something, a part of somebody’s life.*” A sense of purpose was described by 19.6% of participants, illustrated by Brennan, a 32-year-old white male who explained simply: “*[we were] saving the world.*”

The presence of a devotional or trauma-coerced attachment<sup>2</sup> (TCA), sometimes called a “trauma-bond,” to the cult leader or another high-status cult member was found in 17.6% of the sample, identified by these participants as one major factor that kept them committed to the group. Sienna, a 30-year-old white woman illustrated this bond, saying that she “*actually believ[ed] that God was speaking through him [the cult leader]. That was awe-inspiring.*” Non-trauma coerced specific friendships or romantic relationships within the cult were also described by 17.7% of participants as keeping them committed to the group. In this study, I differentiated a trauma-bond from a friendship by considering the extent to which the relationship involved a power imbalance in which the attached party had formed a deep emotional bond to their abuser, after routine psychological trauma has been inflicted upon them by the abuser (Herman, 1992). A non-TCA relationship in a cult context would involve two parties of equal status. For example, Harrison, a 31-year-old white man explained that he “*liked the people and the pace of life, the intentional way in which they wanted to connect with each other and build relationships...there were always people to go to, brainstorm with, and get help from*”. While Harrison valued his friends, he did not view them as more powerful and superior to him; he also did not describe any abusive practices among his friends, focusing instead on communal practices.

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<sup>2</sup> Trauma-coerced bonds” or “trauma bonds” (sometimes also known as Stockholm Syndrome in the media and indexed as Other Dissociative Disorder in the DSM-5) are a pathological dependency and loyalty to the abuser, including unquestioning obedience from a combination of terror of being punished and loss of agency from the abuse. Trauma-coerced bonds result from coercive control and abuse and are an extreme form of traumatic stress that should be viewed as a form of mental illness.

**Table 4***Reasons Participants Felt Most Committed to Cult*

Reasons Most Committed	Frequency	Percent	Percent (Valid)
Seeking Salvation/ Appreciation for Doctrine	27	51.9%	52.9%
Sense of Community	17	32.7%	33.3%
Sense of Purpose	10	19.2%	19.6%
Single Relationship (Trauma-Coerced Attachment)	9	17.3%	17.6%
Friendships/ Relationships (Non-TCA)	9	17.3%	17.6%
Nothing	4	7.7%	7.8%

*N= 51, 1 missing*

**What makes it difficult for people to leave cults?**

To understand why participants delayed leaving the cult, I asked them what factors made it difficult to leave. Three general categories emerged from the data: emotional factors, the fear of independence or the desire to maintain familial ties, spiritual factors, the fear of eternal damnation or spiritual retribution, and economic factors, the fear of losing housing or employment.

Participants were able to identify more than one factor that made it difficult to leave the cult. Emotional factors were by far the most common reasons participants gave for putting off leaving. The vast majority of participants (96.2%) explained that emotional factors kept them in the group. Karoline, a 28-year-old white woman articulated this when explaining her situation, “*I developed these fears. I was like, ‘I’m so different. What is it going to be like there? I don’t want to be alone. What will it be like to date there?’*” More than half of participants (53.8%) identified a spiritual factor as making it difficult for them to leave. Denise, a 51-year-old Black woman



expressed this after being asked what kept her in the group: “*just that I was going to go to hell. My mind suffered because I wasn’t thinking straight and was afraid.*” Practical factors were identified by 46.2% of participants as making it difficult for them to leave the group. Ava, a 30-year-old white woman explained that she had “*literally nowhere else to go,*” and was terrified of living in the real world, with no context or idea how to approach what most of us see as normal adulthood, for example signing a lease, going grocery shopping, or dating.

**Table 5**

*Factors That Made Leaving Cult Difficult*

Factor Type	Frequency	Percent
Emotional Factors	50	96.2%
Spiritual Factors	28	53.8%
Practical Factors	24	46.2%

*N=52*

### Discussion

The narrative of a typical survivor’s cultic lifecycle follows: “Jane” goes through a messy divorce and meets someone or accesses promotional material that draws her into the cult. She is hoping the group will address her long-time sense of loneliness and give her a community during this high-stress time in her life. She stays in the group for many years because she believes in the doctrine and doesn’t want to lose the sense of belonging. Even though she has thoughts of leaving, she puts this off due to fear of losing social support, and of what her life would look like without the group. When she does try to leave, leaders threaten her, and other members ostracize her, delaying her decision. She endures 15 years in the cult before finally leaving.

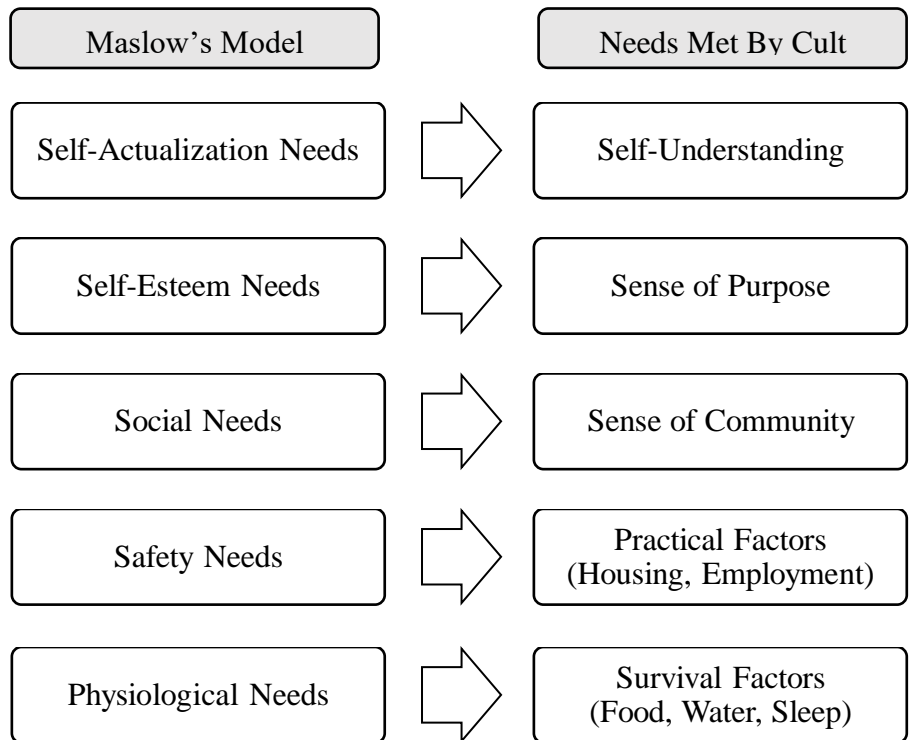
My goal in this study was to better understand cult membership trajectories from the perspectives of former cult members: or namely, why do members join, remain in, and struggle to leave cults? Participants were able to richly describe their motivations, fears, and challenges as they entered and exited cults. Similar to Jane, most first-generation participants identified short-term stressors prior to their cult membership that contributed to their decision to join a cult. These could include a loved one passing away, romantic problems, or mental health difficulties. It is worth noting that although previous research has highlighted the presence of psychiatric disorders as a risk factor to joining a cult (Rousselet et al., 2017; Buxant et al., 2008; Spero, 1982) only eight individuals in the present sample identified prior mental health issues as a stressor linked to their decision to join a cult. An important finding in this study is that most of these stressors are relatively common in any human life; the two most frequently identified short-term stressors – interpersonal and health issues – are experienced by most people at some point in their lifetime. These findings suggest that individuals join cults in the midst of some stressful life transition or struggle, though the stressful event tends to be relatively common in nature, like divorce or a depressive episode. Further, many participants spoke freely about how these vulnerable moments were exploited by cult recruiters, further supporting the notion that cult recruiters are aware of how to exploit and entrap potential members, not unlike how sex traffickers prey upon vulnerable young girls (Shamsudeen, 2022). These results suggest that further investigation into how and when this exploitation takes place is necessary to understand the intricate and oftentimes invisible factors that make individuals vulnerable to cult recruitment.

One of the most intriguing findings in this study was the nature of the long-term stressors that participants identified. While I expected narratives to focus on financial insecurity or lengthy illness, most participants described desires inherent to the human condition. Although some

participants identified secure employment or housing as needs met by the cult, the major themes that emerged had to do with higher fulfillment, specifically a) Sense of community; b) Sense of purpose c) Self-understanding. Interestingly, these responses — given freely without instruction — map onto the hierarchy framed by Maslow, and correspond to Maslow’s “higher-level,” needs. According to Maslow, once basic needs such as food and shelter are met, other higher-level needs become salient. As illustrated in Figure 1, a sense of community corresponds to a social need, which is the third tier, only after physiological and safety needs. A sense of purpose corresponds to the fourth level of Maslow’s hierarchy, self-esteem needs. Finally, self-understanding falls into the top level of Maslow’s hierarchy, corresponding to self-actualization needs. In sum, the current study indicated that most individuals joined cults because of a lack of meaning in their lives that had prevailed for some time prior to joining the cult.

**Figure 1**

*Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Compared to Needs Met by Cult*



Participant narratives around staying and delaying leaving were equally complex and frequently linked to the need for a higher purpose, in some cases, and out of fear, in others, or often, both. Participants described that they remained in cults because of a sense of community, a purpose in life, and a spiritual path — all higher human needs. Cults provided security, often in the form of promised salvation or a structured doctrine.

In addition, many participants explained that during the period they were most committed to the group, they agreed with the group's messaging and were grateful for the ideas being shared with them. These responses reflect the powerful group-think and indoctrination processes present in many of these high-control groups. Nearly a fifth of the sample (n=9) described trauma bonds with a cult recruiter or leader. Of the participants who endorsed the presence of a trauma-coerced attachment as making it difficult to leave the cult, all but two were women. Given how rare this phenomenon is, these numbers are important to note. The nature of the trauma-coerced attachments described by our participants varied, both within this study and from the typical seduction trauma bond commonly described in sex trafficking (Sanchez et al., 2019). Different kinds of abuse including spiritual, sexual, and financial were present in participant accounts; as a post-hoc analyses I explored these. Erin, a 51-year-old white woman explained that *"I felt like he was fighting for my soul...he knew me in a way that no other human being knew me."* Nora, a 55-year-old white woman explained her trauma bond to a cult leader, *"I considered myself his student...he has this thing where he love-bombed me every time he needed money. I felt most loved whenever he needed money."* Tara, a 33-year-old white woman described her experience with her abuser: *"He put me on a pedestal....as much as he was a father figure, I was also kind of afraid of him."* Tonya, a 54-year-old white woman described a different type of relationship with her abuser: *"he forms his likeness to your way of being. He*

*really went towards me as psychic, intuitive, aware.... He nurtured that with me.*” She goes on to explain how her abuser cemented her commitment to him, *“He was seducing me, talking soft and in-my-face... really being caring and magical. He got deep into prayer.”* Edward, a 30-year-old white man explained his attachment with the cult leader. When asked how he felt when the abuser treated him well, he responded *“like a little kid who got a chocolate, like a prize. I emphasize like a little child; a child’s joy... he embodied piety... like he was God himself.”*

Though the scope of trauma bonding is beyond the limits of this study, additional studies should explore how these bonds form, as well as the differences between trauma bonds and friendships within the cult to better explain how abuse and narcissistic seduction play out in a cultic context.

Finally, and strikingly, responses for why participants stayed were overwhelmingly the same — fear. Though the situations and consequences that participants were afraid of varied, participants put off leaving cults — sometimes for years despite discomfort — because of pervasive and all-encompassing fear. Some participants expressed emotional fear, others fear of spiritual retribution, or fear of practical backlash.

This is a novel study with exciting findings that tracked participant’s reasons for joining, staying, and delaying their exit from harmful cults. Participants were able to identify and reflect upon short-term stressors, including primarily ordinary stressors that felt overwhelming because of their life circumstances, as a reason for finding cults attractive. Surprisingly, and quite unlike short-term stressors which were material, the long-term stressors identified by participants fell within one major theme: fulfillment. This pattern suggests that longstanding distress may have become unbearable when a new short-term stressor occurred at an especially difficult time, and the combination of the two rendered the participant particularly vulnerable. Alternatively, although many people may join cults during stressful times in their lives, the decision to join a

cult and become an active member may be more driven by the hope of achieving some greater fulfillment. Tragically, cult recruiters and leaders exploit the greater human desire for meaning and self-improvement.

The terror that participants expressed illustrates how impossible it felt to leave a cult, keeping them trapped in the group for considerable portions of their lives. Cult leaders and recruiters create a seemingly safe and structured environment within the group, but eventually used coercively controlling tactics — an abuse dynamic that is comprised of multiple subtle and other more aggressive tactics used to entrap the victim into obedience. Through implied threats, cult leaders and recruiters force dependence to instill fear in their members, making them believe that they need the group to survive. Some of these tactics likely lead to trauma bonds; others lead to paralysis and gaslighting of their own realities. While coercive control is well established in the domestic violence and sex trafficking literature (Myhill & Hohl, 2019; Pomerantz et al., 2021) more research on coercive tactics in cult contexts would allow us to better understand cult entrapment.

Though prior research has been conducted on cult recruitment susceptibility, much of it has been focused on psychopathological risk factors, including a high prevalence of diagnosed personality disorders (Feldman & Johnson, 1995), mood disorders, anxiety disorders and addiction disorders (Rousselet et al., 2017) prior to joining. These new data challenge the focus on pathology and suggests that researchers reorient to a fuller understanding of victim susceptibilities. It is worth noting that the sample in the current study is predominately female (67% female identifying). This disproportion holds true across many prior studies with former cult members, including Rousselet et al. (2017) with a 74% female identifying sample and Buxant et al. (2007) with a 56% female sample.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that historically, a similar framework was often used to explain why and how women become victims of domestic violence (e.g., weak, masochistic, poor judgment), in turn hampering advances to prevent gender-based violence dynamics and support survivors. Similarly, attributing cult survivors' mental health diagnoses as the reason they were successfully recruited and indoctrinated into a cult undercuts the far more insidious and harmful techniques that cult leaders and recruiters use to target people during stressful times in their lives, promising the fulfillment of basic human needs such as connection and purpose. While perhaps a radical call, I further suggest that given that most cult leaders are men and the majority of members appear to be women, cults can be seen as a form of gender-based violence. Values such as dominance, authority, misogyny, punishment, and purity, are reinforced in a spiritual or communal context to direct and control the thought and actions of women according to dangerous male cult leader's instruction. Further study of cults through the lens of gender-based violence will also unpack the coercively controlling element of cult indoctrination.

### **Conclusion and Future Directions**

This is an ongoing study. To date, 115 interviews have been conducted, and the full extent of participant data is in the process of being coded. As we continue to gather and code data, I will be able to more fully represent answers to the research questions in order to understand if the themes identified in the current study hold true across a larger sample size. In addition, while interviews were comprehensive and semi-structured, to aid in recall while keeping reliability across researchers, some participants had left the cult 15 years ago and some one year ago. This variability likely affected the quality of the data. Finally, while many survivors interviewed by the research team remained terrified of backlash, this is the tip of the

iceberg. Studies such as this may not be able to reach survivors who are (or believe they are) in danger, and/or survivors who simply do not wish to relive their experiences. As such, this sample must be considered selective — only survivors who spoke English, had access to phones/internet, and felt safe enough to talk to us participated.

Nonetheless, even with this smaller dataset and with the limitation inherent in a cross-sectional study, the data suggest that it is time to shift the narrative away from mental illness or moral weakness as the reason people join, stay, and put off leaving cults. Rather than mental illness, these data suggest that a broader vulnerability to cultic organizations exists because recruiters and cult leaders successfully prey on basic human needs, creating atmospheres that place high value on community, spirituality and doctrine, and unending commitment. Future research should examine the ways in which basic human desires are being exploited throughout the cultic lifecycle by dangerous, often narcissistic cult leaders and recruiters.

Refocusing on the predatory nature of the abusers and the coercive techniques they are employing will be an important step in the right direction to understand the complex entrapment of cult members.



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