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## **New Religious Movements**

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### Abstract

**Background:** “Cults,” academically referred to as “New Religious Movements,” are religious groups that have modern origins but are peripheral to society’s dominant religious groups. New Religious movements have the potential to pose a threat to their members and the community.

**Objective:** Academics involved in religious studies suggest minimizing the risks and dangers that often follow New Religious Movements; it is essential to approach New Religious Movements without bias.

**Design and Method:** Academic journal articles, books, transcriptions of interviews, websites, and major newspapers are among the main sources. Most of the research was generated through the Purchase College Library using online databases, including Academic OneFile, Academic Search Complete, Academic Premier, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. The research questions are: *What are the characteristics of people who join New Religious Movements? What is the public’s perception of New Religious Movements: Religion or Cult? What influences do the public and media have on the power a cult can exercise?*

**Conclusion:** Research suggests that we can minimize the potential threats that a New Religious Movement may pose by approaching New Religious Movements without negative bias.

**Keywords:** Cults, New Religious Movements, brainwashing, leaders, members, followers, membership, worship, and psychology.

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## CHAPTER 1: Introduction

A cult, academically referred to as New Religious Movements, is a religious community or group of modern origins. The term New Religious Movements has been applied to all new faiths that have surfaced in the past few centuries. New Religious Movements exclude organized religions such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, or Hinduism. Rather, New Religious Movements may be new in their origin or on the fringe of a wider religion, and not widely recognized.

New Religious Movements are characterized by a number of shared traits. New Religious Movements are similar to each other despite that they may have different beliefs or values; they are often countercultural and deviate from mainstream religions such as those abovementioned; they also tend to have a sole leader who is often seen as charismatic, charming, and powerful; they also tend to be organized in a way that doesn't welcome outsiders, but instead emphasizes community, membership, or "family" relations; they often make great demands on the loyalty and commitment of their members; they often subscribe to beliefs that may be regarded as controversial by the general public, such as believing in an imminent apocalypse, doomsday, or invasion.

New Religious Movements have been the center of controversy in the media, especially during the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Better known New Religious Movements and their leaders who have received significant media coverage include Jim Jones and the Peoples

Temple, Charles Manson and the Family, David Koresh and the Branch Davidians, and Marshall Applewhite and Heaven's Gate. Although these New Religious Movements may subscribe to different beliefs, they all share several characteristics. Such characteristics include deception, manipulation, financial abuse, sexual abuse, and mass fatalities on record.

I have always had an interest in New Religious Movements. I wondered how these people were so successful in getting hundreds of these individuals to harm themselves or others. Now was a better time than ever to research New Religious Movements. This topic is significant for several reasons. If we can answer why people join New Religious Movements, we will be better able to build preventive measures. This could prove beneficial in many ways. The biggest benefits are: being able to prevent one individual from possessing and exercising power over others; preventing vulnerable people from seeking membership; and preventing unnecessary violence. The popularization of cults has led the public to ask questions that sociologists and psychologists have been attempting to answer for years. The goal of this research is to answer:

*RQ#1: What are the characteristics of people who join New Religious Movements?*

*RQ#2: What is the public's perception of New Religious Movements: Religion or Cult?*

*RQ#3: What influences do the public and media have on the power a cult can exercise?*

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Throughout the last decade, cults, sociologically referred to as New Religious Movements (NRMs), have become widely popularized in the media. With streaming services such as Netflix and Hulu airing documentaries, people have become exposed to notorious cults that have operated throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some of the more popular cults that have garnered public attention and media coverage via documentaries, series, or podcasts include Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple, Charles Manson and the Family, and David Koresh and the Branch Davidians, to name only a few.

### **What are the characteristics of individuals who join New Religious Movements?**

In the journal *Religious Youth Cults: Alternative Healing Social Networks*, author Mansell Pattison is one of many whom examined what motivates people, particularly youth, to join a New Religious Movement. In his study, Mansell found that youth become involved with New Religious Movements due to the lack of close familial bonds. Troubled youth who lack strong familial bonds exhibit a proclivity to join a New Religious Movement because they offer the promise of belonging and familial bonds. These promises tempt troubled youth to join as they are ultimately being offered what they do not have. Humans, being social creatures, will naturally seek belonging and the potential to form relationships (Mansell, 1980).

Factors among familial bonds, such as one's relationship with their parents and siblings, include (a) spiritual or soul seeking, (b) security, (c) rebellion, (d) seeking adventure, (e) to differentiate themselves from their parents, (f) for attention, (g) their

idealism, and (h) unemployment and dead-end jobs (Barker, 1986). While there has been debate over whether or not “brainwashing” is a legitimate tactic used to lure in prospective members, the majority of sociologists dismiss this theory (Barker, 1986). Furthermore, those who favor the brainwashing theory have failed to produce as much empirical research as those who have attempted to disprove the notion of brainwashing. Instead, they tend to rely on former “deprogrammed” members’ accounts as evidence (Barker, 1986).

A similar study was conducted with 90 voluntary defectors and current members of New Religious Movements (Wright & Parker, 1986). The study’s goal was to determine what factors cause members of New Religious Movements to stay or escape. The study found that familial relations and adolescent experience, whether negative or positive, played a large role in a member’s decision to stay or escape (Wright & Parker, 1986). As one might predict, the study concluded that those with stronger familial bonds were more likely to flee from a New Religious Movement than those who lack familial bonds.

The majority of sociological literature describes New Religious Movements as “identity designating” environments that attracts individuals who desire to alleviate an identity uncertainty or crisis. Researchers theorize that New Religious Movements can help to absolve or resolve struggles pertaining to identity (Coates, 2014). Research on what scholars refer to “identity uncertainty” suggest that membership is motivated by a desire to establish, maintain, and embrace a newfound sense of identity, or “identity certainty.”

**What is the public's perception of New Religious Movements: religion or cult?**

This brings us to our next question: How does the public perceive New Religious Movements? The word “cult” has inherently negative connotations, more so than “New Religious Movements.” One of the reasons that New Religious Movements is a sociological term that replaced “cult” in scholarly circles was because of the negative social weight the word “cult” carried (Richardson & van Driel, 1997). However, that is not to say that the alternative term did not cause controversy in religious academia and beyond. The controversy was so widespread that the media and the courts discussed whether or not the term “cult” should be replaced with a neutral alternative. However, religious scholars in favor of substituting the term “cult” with the term “New Religious Movement” argued that “cult” is so negatively weighted that it can potentially make harmful assumptions regarding the victim(s) (Gallagher, 2007). For example, when most people hear the term “cult,” they imagine brainwashing, abuse, and in some cases, murder. In turn, most people imagine “cult” members as victims who have undergone a process of brainwashing. However, scholars suggest that by assuming that all “cult” members are brainwashed, people think they are “unlike us” and to be feared. In contrast, people who belong to the standard religious groups (Christianity, Judaism, Islam) as well as people who have since “escaped a cult” are “like us.” This “us vs. them” narrative creates problems for individuals involved in a New Religious Movement. For instance, dismissing those “unlike us” implies a difference between the average person and a



member of a New Religious Movement. However, scholars argue that there is no significant difference between “us and them” and that anyone is truly susceptible to religious influence (Gallagher, 2007). Furthermore, according to sociologists, who specialize in New Religious Movements, New Religious Movements “thrive” off media attention (Richardson & van Driel, 1997). When a New Religious Movement receives considerable media attention, the implications can be dangerous. Sociologists argue that media refrain from giving a New Religious Movement media coverage because it will have adverse effects such as giving them an audience and a platform where they can widely spread their message.

In 2006, a study was conducted to determine whether or not substituting an alternative term for “cult” influences people’s attitudes. Two thousand four hundred randomly selected Nebraskan citizens were asked to categorize their feelings towards cults, New Religious Movements, or a “New Christian Church.” Participants were asked to rate how uncomfortable they would be if their neighbor were a member of one of the three categories mentioned above (Olson, 2006). The majority of participants stated that they would be “very uncomfortable” if their neighbor was a member of a cult (Olson, 2006). When participants were asked how comfortable they would be if their neighbor joined a New Religious Movement or New Christian Church, the majority of participants reported that they would be anywhere between “very comfortable” and “somewhat comfortable” (Olson, 2006). The results of this study demonstrates that the term New Religious Movement has more neutral connotations than “cult,” despite the lack of difference between the two.

**What influences do the public and media have on the power a cult can exercise?**

The public's perception of a New Religious Movement can influence the power they exercise. Sociologists have argued that it is best to not give New Religious Movements significant media coverage for a plethora of reasons. Still, the most important reason being for the safety of its members and the community, or leaving room for the potential of a positive outcome. According to sociologists, who have extensively researched New Religious Movements, New Religious Movements thrive off media attention, and such attention can cause more harm than good (Richardson & van Driel, 1993). Several New Religious Movements have devoted considerable amounts of money and effort to receive or attract media attention (Richardson & van Driel, 1993). Media coverage and publicity benefit New Religious Movements as it aids them in their goals of spreading their message and the possibility of recruiting potential devotees (Richardson & van Driel, 1993). Furthermore, the truth is often lost in sensationalism. The media uses sensationalist headlines that dramatize the event to profit and gain viewership. As a result, misconceptions gain widespread traction. Sensationalists' reports do not use the term "New Religious Movement" and use the emotionally weighted "cult." Using the word "cult" leads the public to repeat false and negative stereotypes such as Satanism and brainwashing (Feltmate, 2016).

Scholars of New Religious Movements have spent considerable time researching how the media's narrative and portrayal of "cults" or New Religious Movements skews the public's perception. Scholars argue that the media has the ability to shape public

discourse about New Religious movements due to their ability to twist the narrative without consequence freely. Not only does the media dramatizing coverage on New Religious Movements further the circulation of negative and untrue stereotypes, but it also furthers moral panic (Laycock). Furthermore, in addition to news media, there is also commercial media. Research suggests an important distinction between news and commercial media: news media is often temporary, commercial media lasts forever. Commercial media refers to media content such as television shows and movies. Since it technically “lasts forever” and is replayed on cable nationwide on a regular basis, it can be just as, if not more, damaging in regards to the spread of misinformation and false stereotypes (Laycock).

### CHAPTER 3: Methods

The goal of this study was to assess individuals' understanding of "cults" or New Religious Movements. The research question for this study was:

**RQ:** *If the majority of people believe that "cults" or New Religious Movements can often be dangerous, illegal, or criminal, what factors make an individual more susceptible to seeking membership within a "cult" or New Religious Movement?*

This study was about "cults" more accurately known as New Religious Movements. The research aim was to answer why individuals join New Religious Movements and what factors make people pursue a position in a New Religious Movement. The research consisted of two phases. Phase I was a systematic literature search. Phase II consists of 50 anecdotal conversations about New Religious Movements.

#### **Phase I**

A systematic literature search was completed for the analysis of the content and context of literature about "cults" or New Religious Movements. Academic journal articles, books, transcriptions of interviews, websites, major newspapers, are the main sources. The majority of the research was conducted through the Purchase College Library's electronic portal during the February and March 2020 period. JSTOR provides content from over 900 publishers with more than 1900 academic journals. JSTOR proved to be the most valuable resource to my research. JSTOR was extremely helpful in uncovering academic journals from reputable sources such as *Review of Religious Research*. The majority of literature was generated through the Purchase College Library,

using online databases including, Academic OneFile, Academic Search Complete, Academic Premier JSTOR, and Google Scholar. Keywords used to find supporting documentation: *Cults, New Religious Movements, brainwashing, cult leaders, cult followers, New Christian Movement, worship, and psychology.*

## **Phase II**

The data collection consisted of anecdotal conversations with 50 participants (25 male and 25 female). The participants were chosen randomly. The conversation consisted of two questions. The question was *“What factors do you think make an individual more susceptible to seeking membership in a “cult” or New Religious Movement?”* This question asked the participants to speculate what type of individual would be interested in joining a “cult” or New Religious Movement. The second question asked the 50 participants to describe a “cult” or New Religious Movement. The question read, *“Based off your knowledge and understanding of a cult or New Religious Movement, describe what it is in two sentences maximum.”* The anecdotal conversations were compiled.

The data was analyzed and the results are reported in Chapter 4 results.

## **Bias**

It was important for me, as the researcher, to be objective about the subject of the study. I am biased because my understanding of cults or New Religious Movements is based on what I learned from the media and documentaries. These sources suggested that cults not only pose a threat to its members, but society as well. More famously known cults such as The Peoples Temple and The Davidians share fatalities of both its immediate members and bystanders. To avoid selecting journals that support my

understanding, I put my bias aside and included journals that argued that the media plays a negative role in reporting news and New Religious Movements. I read articles that did not influence the results of my study, and did not favor a certain outcome.

### **Limitations**

Some of the limitations in this study include a small participant group and a lack of access to former cult or New Religious Movement members. Ideally, I would like to question former members and ask them to explain why they joined a cult or New Religious Movement to the best of their ability. However, due to the length of the semester and the current state of the world now, I found that I faced a lack of time and resources to gather former New Religious Movement members who would be willing to answer my questions.

### Chapter 4: Results

#### ***RQ#1: What are the characteristics of people who join New Religious Movements?***

Research suggests that individuals, particularly youth, become involved with New Religious Movements due to their lack of familial or social relationships. Troubled youth who lack strong familial or social bonds exhibit a proclivity to join a New Religious Movement because they offer a sense of community and belonging. A sense of community, belonging, and socialization are appealing to those who feel as if they don't belong anywhere else. New Religious Movements tempt troubled youth to seek membership as they are ultimately being offered what they do not have.

Research shows that other characteristics of individuals who join New Religious Movements include: spiritual or soul seeking, security or stability, rebellion or non-conformity, seeking adventure or a thrill, desire differentiate themselves from their parents or family, and desire for attention.

#### ***RQ#2: What is the public's perception of New Religious Movements: Religion or Cult?***

Studies have shown that the word "cult" has inherently negative connotations, more so than "New Religious Movements." Individuals' perceive cults and New Religious Movements differently despite the fact that they are indistinguishable from each other. The reason for this is because New Religious Movements has neutral connotations that do not provoke a sense of negativity in the individual. Researchers suggest that New Religious Movements is the appropriate substitute for the word "cult" because it emphasizes the notion that anyone is susceptible to becoming victim to control.

***RQ#3: What influences do the public and media have on the power a cult can exercise?***

Research suggests that the public's perception of a New Religious Movement can influence the power they exercise. Sociologists, who have extensively researched New Religious Movements, claim that New Religious Movements thrive off media attention, which can prove harmful to both its members and the community. Research has shown that several New Religious Movements have spent considerable amounts of time, money, and effort to receive or attract media attention. The church of Scientology, a New Religious Movement based in California, is one example of a New Religious Movement that promotes themselves through the media. For instance, the church of Scientology runs a commercial ad during the annual Super Bowl each year, receiving up to millions of viewers nationwide. As indicated previously, research suggests a notable distinction between news and commercial media: news media is often temporary, commercial media is permanent. Since it technically "lasts forever" and is replayed on cable nationwide on a regular basis, New Religious Movements can spread their message and fulfill their goal of recruiting potential devotees.

For the first question, "*What factors do you think make an individual more susceptible to seeking membership in a "cult" or New Religious Movement?*" the results revealed that several participants were in agreement with one another. Out of 50 responses, 17 participants answered "brainwashing." In addition, 20 participants answered either "manipulation," "coercion," or "threats." Furthermore, 7 participants answered history of "substance abuse," "physical, sexual, or emotional abuse," "mental



illness,” or “low self esteem.” The answers that appeared the least included “loneliness” or “attention seeking” “low intelligence” or “slow.” For the second question, “*Based off your knowledge and understanding of a cult or New Religious Movement, describe what it is in two sentences maximum*” the results also showed that majority of participants described “cults” or NRMs negatively. Out of 50 answers, 37 responses used words such as “murder,” “suicide,” “rape” or “sexual abuse,” “abuse,” “financial gain,” “narcissist,” “lies,” and “brainwashing.” Participants who did not describe a cult or NRM with negative terms suggested that a cult or NRM could be simply described as a “religious group.”

### **Chapter 5: Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the characteristics of people who join New Religious Movements, public perceptions of New Religious Movement and how the media influences the power a New Religious Movement can exercise. I found that New Religious Movement leaders use their charm and power to invite people who are seeking acceptance, direction, a sense of belonging, and the promise of being part of family that is special that not just any outsider can join.

Public perception of New Religion Movement which sociologists have coined over the term “cult” which was deemed to have too many negative connotations associated with it. Public perception of the word cult brought to mind brainwashing and abuse. This view of the word cult prompted scholars to use New Religion Movement in its place for fear it would view New Religious Movement members and ex-members in a negative light as brainwashed and therefore different from other people and therefore something to be feared. Studies found New Religion Movement persons are really not different from others because anyone can be susceptible to religious influence.

The media also plays a role in how it influences the power a New Religion Movement can exercise. Sociologists have found that media can empower a New Religion Movement because it thrives from media attention. Media coverage and publicity helps fund their movement and the potential to attract more members and aids them in spreading their message. The media can also negatively impact New Religion Movement members by putting their lives at risk because it can spur their religious leader

to do something dramatic and dangerous as we have seen the Jim Jones and The Davidians do.

### **Future Research**

In terms of future research, researchers should investigate current New Religious Movements. By investigating current New Religious Movements researchers would be able to better understand how New Religious Movements recruit their members in the modern era. Not much research has been done on how current New Religious Movements operate to date with the advanced technology we have today. With social media being at the height of its popularity, one can conclude that recruiting potential members is easier than ever. By researching how New Religious Movements reach the public via avenues other than commercial and news media, such as social media, researchers could raise public awareness. By rising public awareness, individuals could be aware of the signs or tactics that New Religious Movements use to recruit members. This could help people avoid falling victim to the control of a New Religious Movement.

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