

Invisible Chains: The Influence of Cults on Modern Society

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the role played by cults in modern society, as well as the psychology behind their ability to exist despite negative public perception. Based on the findings of research conducted within the field of Sociology and Psychology, the paper looks at the factors that help in sustaining the activity of cult organizations in modern society, including charismatic authority, ideological conditioning and group isolation, which are described in the article as invisible shackles, used by cults to keep followers under control. In addition, the paper discusses modern recruitment techniques employed by cults, such as making use of vulnerability of an individual, his or her crisis in identity, as well as the promise of inclusion in a community. Finally, the study looks at how cults managed to adapt to modern technology and the Internet, allowing them to spread their ideology even more efficiently.

Keywords: *Cult, Social media, Ideology, Swifties, Fandom*

The word ‘Cult’ is not only applicable to religion but also other fields like marketing, politics and self-improvement and this revolves around a cult leader who instructs people what to do by encouraging and assuring them of a great lifestyle and people blindly believe in them. Charismatic cult leader claims to complete what is missing in their lives. People tend to believe in such things, hoping that they will find the missing piece of themselves if they are part of the cult society. Conspiracy theory is also used in this book as there many scepticisms regarding the social media cults “Conspiracy theories offer a kind of reassurance that things happen for a reason, and can make believers feel special that they’re privy to secrets to which the rest of us ‘sheeple’ are blind” (188).

Scholars distinguish cults, fandoms, and highly committed communities based on authority, ideology, and social structure. While cults typically revolve around charismatic leadership, ideological control, and behavioural regulation (Lalich), fandoms are generally voluntary communities organized around shared admiration for media figures or cultural texts (Jenkins). Highly committed communities may demonstrate intense loyalty without necessarily exhibiting coercive or manipulative characteristics. This distinction is essential when analysing contemporary digital communities.

Non-religious cults such as fitness cults, social media cults, marketing cults and mass media cults have positive aspects as well as negative aspects. Social media cults, create many fan pages and are biased against some popular social media influencers who promote things that are too good to be true. These influencers advertise things like beauty, fitness and lifestyle, which are very unrealistic.

The influencers make their social media platforms more appealing by using promising terms like ‘believe me, I tried and I never regretted’, ‘try this for a week and you’ll see miracles’, ‘this made my skin gleam like glass’, and ‘this is my daily routine’. People who are insecure about themselves begin to believe those words and practice them without any guarantee of success. Influencers promote things for the sake of their own; they work on paid promotions or just social media posts, which makes their earnings by views and likes.

Not all social media influencers promote fake content; only the unreal content goes viral and people believe them blindly. People with a positive mindset can easily overcome these obstacles; they take just the good things and leave the things that could make their lives worse, whereas people who want to fill a void within themselves appear to be stuck in the situation. People in quest of something they lack cannot be satisfied with anything; they continue to search for something that fills their void, which appears to have no specific solutions. They had no idea what could potentially be the remedy to their lack of self-confidence. To acquire views and likes, influencers take advantage of people’s weak mindsets by posting videos that encourage them to live an unrealistic lifestyle. As observed by Fischer in his article *How Do Cults Affect Society*, “The illusion of comfort, having emotional comfort is one of the key qualities a cult needs to be successful. The human need for comfort is one of the things that often lead people to start to turn towards cults in order to quell their fears and anxieties”.

The main factor that differentiates cult and non-cult followers is their thinking. Non-cult followers think independently whereas cult followers strongly depend on their cult leaders. The non-cult followers critically evaluate and then proceed in whatever they do. However, the cult followers have a strong belief that cult leaders would guide them on the right path. The cult followers have a lonely feeling or might have experienced a traumatic past, which makes them believe that they might find a solution to it.

Social media cults are always interconnected with mass media, fitness and multilevel marketing cults, they use social media as their advertising platforms. As people tend to spend most of their time on social media, these advertisements reach them easily. According to Amanda Montell, the author of *Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism*, cult leaders use us-

versus-them techniques to attract people to join them. She says “technique like us-versus-them labels, loaded language, and thought-terminating cliches are crucial in getting people from open, community-minded folks to victims of cultish violence; but importantly, they do not ‘brainwash’ them—at least not in the way we’re taught to think about brainwashing” (70). Cult leaders make their followers believe that they are superior to people who lead a normal life.

The cult leaders make the workout sound fun; they add affirmations to the normal workout. This makes people join the fitness studio. Current people are more into technologies and gadgets; they have become more and more lazy as technology grows. These fitness studios are also advertised through social media as influencer promotions. Amanda Montell says that her father is part of a fitness studio called ‘SoulCycle’. Instead of workout comments, the fitness instructors use affirmations like ‘WILLPOWER’, ‘STRONG’, ‘BRAVE’, and ‘ABUNDANCE’. This has turned into a money-motivated business and people have started investing their money and time into it. Montell has also been a part of the Plant Fitness Membership, for which she has paid \$99 a year.

People who are a part of cult culture make normal people believe that the people who are a part of cult fitness are more holy, superior, and perfect than the rest of the world. The instructors make the people devote their bodies and souls to the fitness culture. According to Montell’s ideology, the followers are psychologically attached to their instructors, she assumes that the gurus hold the answers to their happiness. Even though cult fitness has many positive aspects, people consider it as a ritual and as a daily necessity of life because of how the cult leaders project it. She says:

Alyssa’s box next to one of his most famous quotes, a fitness proverb that would soon sear into her brain: Eat meat and vegetables, nuts and seeds, some fruit, little starch, and no sugar. Keep intake to levels that will support exercise but not body fat. Practice and train major lifts . . . master the basics of gymnastics . . . bike, run, swim, row . . . hard and fast. Five or six days per week. (12)

The above schedule is the CrossFit routine which is likely to be followed by the followers of that particular group. The non-cult followers have a vast viewpoint and ideology; they always think out of the box and think of multiple choices when it comes to decision-making. But the cult followers have a firm belief in something. They have a strong belief in what the cult leaders preach. They believe that the cult leader’s preaching could be the solution to all their problems. The cult followers isolate themselves from their families and friends for various reasons. The major reason for their isolation is the control of their cult

leaders; isolation helps the leaders to gain the cult followers mentally. Isolation helps to stop mingling the thoughts of cult and non-cult followers. The cult followers having a casual relationship with the outsiders might ruin the different ideologies communicating with the outsiders. Another reason they isolate themselves from non-members is they don't believe the non-members' ideology and they think that they might ruin their belief.

Amanda Montell's book *Cultish: The Language of Fanatism* fully explains the concepts and methodology of online marketing. In simple terms, Online Marketing makes the common people do the jobs of the employee instead of recruiting an employee and paying the wages. Here, the sellers of the company are the buyers of the company too. They buy products in bulk and sell them to the people they know, or they use social media as the platform for their sales.

Fitness studios are termed cults because they induce promise into the minds of people with no assurance of results. People believe it as they fantasize about the different lifestyles that these cult cultures promise. People start to lose track when they cannot reach the goal of the cult culture. This can lead some people into self-doubt and mental illness by accusing themselves. People who are part of cult journeys can never go back to the person they were.

Unlike religious cult leaders who restrict the members' social contact, this non-religious cult encourages people to gather more recruiters. People trust their family members to ask to follow their social media page so that they can enjoy great benefits. The same goes for the sales too. Rather than buying a product that is advertised by a stranger or a celebrity, people trust their closest circle, who are their friends or family, to buy the product.

Social media cults are related to religious and also non-religious cults. Cult leaders like Bentinho Massaro claim that he has a higher vibration than humans. He uses social media platforms to attract people to join his community. Unlike Heaven's Gate, which did physical gatherings, they gathered a large number of social media followers and worshiped virtually. As the new age technologies grew, people started to influence people through social media in various categories such as fitness, religious activities, talk shows, beauty, and sales. In her book *Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism* Amanda shows how various cult groups like QAnon and SoulCycle use social media to attract people to join their community. She narrates:

Even Lululemon had its distinctive vernacular. It was printed all over their shopping bags, so customers would walk out of the store carrying mantras like, "There is little difference between addicts and fanatic athletes," "Visualize your

eventual demise,” and “Friends are more important than money” all coined by their so-called “tribe” leader, Lululemon’s founder, Chip Wilson. (Montell 12)

The cult owners try to spread their products by displaying their mantras and logos in bags and they create an atmosphere where they make the people believe that their product is the best. In this context, Behavioural Economic Theory takes place where the buyers are forced to buy high-priced leggings like Lululemon which cost over \$400. Not all the buyers are in good financial growth so they buy with all their pennies which later affects their psychological life thinking about the future and it also affects their financial background.

There is a limit to everything. Being a part of any religious activity without harming oneself or others is important. One can be a runner or a fitness member, but the thing is that losing the true self for the sake of these is not worth it. The key is not losing oneself in anything they do. Upholding themselves in everything they do and prioritizing themselves is a must. One should think before investing their heart and mind into something. “I’m confident there’s a healthy way to do that.” (193).

Taylor Swift is an American singer, songwriter, and actress. She has a massive fan base; they call themselves ‘Swifties’. The word ‘cult’ is used when a large number of people have blind beliefs and practices that revolve around the leader. Taylor Swift can also be said as a cult leader because of their fan base which holds the characteristics of a typical cult. It can be more of an addiction rather than manipulation.

Taylor Swift started her music career in the mid-2000s. Her debut song was “Tim McGraw” which was released in 2006. Her second song released after two years (2008) called “Fearless” became a huge success, this song brought her great recognition. She is the only artist whose songs were ranked as top 10 hits on the Music Billboards, which is her greatest achievement. As her music career gradually grew, her fans also grew worldwide. Her fans were known for their dedication and loyalty. People started worshiping her and her music as if they were worshiping God. The ‘Swifties’ might have related their life with the Taylor Swift songs. Her song “Love Story” which was released in 2008 became iconic to date. People started incorporating the theme of this song “Love Story” in everything including love proposals and weddings and the most iconic line of this song ‘Marry me, Juliet, you’ll never have to be alone’. Not only this song but also other songs by Taylor Swift have created a huge impact on ‘Swifties’ life.

‘Swifties’ have supported Taylor Swift throughout her music career. Critics may have some other views on her songs but her fandom always uplifts her. Taylor Swift’s songs might be mentally soothing for people but for ‘Swifties’ it is everything for them. A recent concert

known as ‘Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour’ is described as her journey throughout her music career. It started in March 2023 and is said to end in November 2024, with 146 shows in total. Only with 56 shows that have been conducted to date, the box office has collected an estimate of 780 million dollars in total. This is insane how people are investing tons of money just to see a singer singing in person, not they spend money on concert tickets but also they spend on her merchandise which is costlier than the other similar products which is available. There is no answer to the question, of why people spend this much on things which have no particular benefit.

Nowadays most of the artists and influencers have been brainwashed. K-pop, K-dramas, and Instagram reel artists who are part of them have been worshiped like gods and goddesses. People spend their money, health, and energy on them without any assured benefits. It only costs their money so much. It’s the artists and influencers who get benefits out of this. They make a luxury and dream-like living out of this. They are never going to meet the billions of people who spend their blood and sweat just to see them once. Thus, not only the spiritual ones called cults, this type of cult also exists in the name of fandom.

One of example this type of cult is BTS: Bangtan Sonyeondan, a Korean K-pop band with seven boys under the Big Hit Music. This group has ruled the globe for over a decade now. The concept of this gold digger band is similar to the ‘Swifties’. Their fandom is called as ‘Army’. Their fandom is to be over 90 million people across the globe. Their fandom is called as “army”. The music reflects the hard work of the artists; it can be appreciated without overdoing it. It is not necessary to adore a composer as a deity or adopt their daily routines in order to comprehend the true essence of music and their labours.

The examination of cult influence underscores that their authority does not stem from explicit coercion but rather from intricate psychological conditioning, deliberate social isolation, and the systematic manipulation of belief frameworks. Operating as mechanisms of ‘invisible constraint,’ cults fundamentally reconstruct individual identities and erode the capacity for critical reasoning, with consequences that frequently extend beyond their membership to affect broader familial and communal structures. The same point is mentioned by Ella O’Keeffe’ in her article *A New Age of Enlightenment* as, “It is important to realise that these groups may reflect as many different aspects of human thought and action as are found in society at large – and that each, in its own way, represents an attempt to solve the common human problem of identity”.

Scholarly discourse within Sociology and Psychology affirms that cult proliferation is most pronounced at the convergence of personal vulnerability, societal uncertainty, and the

fundamental human desire for belonging. Furthermore, their capacity to assimilate contemporary communication technologies amplifies their influence considerably, rendering them a significant and enduring concern within modern societal contexts. In conclusion, the identification and systematic dismantling of these ‘invisible constraints’ remain imperative for the preservation of individual autonomy and the sustenance of a critically conscious and intellectually vigilant society.

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