Cult Confessions: Stigmatized Groups Use TikTok to Tell Their Truth

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Abstract

This Thesis explores the stigmatization of religious and spiritual groups that have been labeled "cults" by society and mass media. TikTok is used in the study and analyzed for its use to resist dominant narratives and reclaim identity proclamation. Through qualitative research and critical discourse analysis, thirty videos made by members or followers of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Osho, and The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light were investigated for tools of reframing group identity. Findings reveal that creators use emotion, humor, and personal engagement to challenge stigma and humanize their beliefs as well as their practices. Beyond simply using TikTok as a defense of their presence, these groups use it as a space of cultural negotiation, where new perspectives are heard, and new forms of belonging are constructed through self-representation and community building. This research contributes to the sociological understanding of media, marginalization, and digital resistance by centering the voices of those which have been historically silenced by their label.

Introduction

In contemporary society, the term "cult" operates as a loaded term, one that invokes fear, suspicion, and, more often than not, ridicule. This label, rooted in current religious terminology, has evolved to become a mechanism of marginalization. It has been used by the mainstream to define groups that deviate from the dominant norms. Despite growing attention in academia, attention toward stigmatization of these new religious movements remains largely one sides as there is more focus on sensationalized representations and elite narratives. It is often overlooked that these groups have voices; they have stories, beliefs, and feelings which they have used to resist the stigma of the term "cult." In an age where digital expression and presence is growing, the groups suffering the repercussions of the label are no longer silent. Alternatively, they are taking to platforms like TikTok to challenge dominant narratives, humanize their experience, and reframe their identities.

This research will explore how groups labeled as "cults" use TikTok to construct counter-narratives and resist stigmatization. By applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to user-generated content on TikTok from followers (in the religion) of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Osho, and The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light, this study examines how groups as such have been labeled and how they deploy strategies to reclaim their legitimacy. This work will argue that TikTok functions not just as a platform of resistance but also a cultural space where new modes of belonging are negotiated. This thesis, based in sociology, contributes to broader conversation in media studies and religious studies based on the power dynamics in society and those that are marginalized in between the cracks.

Literature Review

Historical Context and Evolution of the Term "Cult"

The term "cult" has undergone a profound transformation, evolving from its original neutral meaning to the derogatory connotations it holds today. Over time this nuanced term has gone from its derived meaning, encompassing ideas of worship and care, to a term that carries an abundance of stigma relative to the group it is meant to marginalize. In early sociology, scholars like Max Weber and Émile Durkheim explored these movements as essential components of religion and society, emphasizing themes like charismatic leadership, group cohesion, and the dynamics of belief systems, rather than making value judgments like much of the discourse around cultism in today's society (Nelson 1968; Westley 1978). These early studies laid the foundation for understanding the mechanisms of group identity and social influence. By the mid-20th century, however, the term "cult" became linked to deviance, manipulation, and danger. High-profile incidents, including the Jonestown massacre in 1978 and the Manson Family murders in the 1960s, sparked widespread moral panics, reinforcing negative stereotypes. These events not only shaped public perceptions but also influenced how media and anti-cult movements framed such groups as threats to societal stability. Researchers such as Eileen Barker (1986, 2006) have noted the shift from neutral sociological inquiry to popular condemnation, marking a critical turning point in the discourse surrounding new religious movements (NRMs).

The strategic use of the term "cult" by different actors has further entrenched its stigmatizing power. Established religious institutions have often employed the term to delegitimize emerging spiritual movements, reflecting tensions between mainstream faiths and new, alternative forms of religiosity. Governments and legal systems have used "cult" as a label

to justify increased surveillance and control of groups perceived as subversive or nonconformist. Kaplan's (1993) analysis of the U.S. anti-cult movement highlights how state mechanisms have reinforced this discourse. In academic contexts, debates over the term's utility have prompted some scholars to advocate for the use of NRMs to foster a more balanced and objective approach (Richardson 1993). Meanwhile, media and pop culture have perpetuated stereotypes of manipulation, brainwashing, and violence, further solidifying the term's negative connotations (Hill, Hickman, and McLendon 2001; Neal 2011).

Stigmatization

Cultural stigma and labeling theory offer essential insights into how the term "cult" functions as a mechanism of social control, shaping societal norms and perceptions of deviance. Erving Goffman's (1963) seminal work on stigma highlights the power of labels in defining and marginalizing individuals or groups, casting them outside the boundaries of social acceptability. Once a group is labeled as a "cult," it becomes subject to a range of prejudices and sanctions that reinforce its deviant status, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of exclusion. Symbolic interactionism complements Goffman's perspective by emphasizing the role of societal interactions in constructing and reinforcing these labels. Group identities are not formed in isolation but through continual engagement with dominant cultural narratives that define what is considered acceptable or deviant (Roe, Joseph, and Middleton 2010). These narratives, often disseminated through media, religious institutions, and state mechanisms, shape public attitudes and establish the framework within which groups are understood and judged.

The stigmatization of groups labeled as "cults" has profound and far-reaching consequences, both socially and psychologically. At a societal level, these groups are subject to heightened scrutiny, ostracization, and legal discrimination (Chung and Slater 2013; Frost 2011).

They are often denied the same rights and freedoms afforded to more established religious organizations, including tax exemptions, access to public funding, admission into public spaces, and more. Government policies and law enforcement actions frequently target such groups under the pretext of maintaining public safety, further legitimizing their exclusion and vulnerability. This scrutiny can lead to significant structural inequalities, such as restricted access to funding, limited legal protections, and a general inability to operate freely within society. These dynamics illustrate how the label "cult" operates not only as a marker of deviance but also as a tool for preserving societal norms and power structures. For individuals within these groups, the consequences of stigmatization can be deeply personal and enduring. Members and former members often experience psychological challenges, including feelings of alienation, shame, and an enduring sense of "otherness." Reintegration into mainstream social structures can be particularly difficult, as individuals may carry the weight of societal judgment long after leaving a group. Research by Meisenbach (2010) and Coates (2014) demonstrates that stigma affects identity formation and mental health, leaving individuals to grapple with conflicting perceptions of self-worth and societal rejection. The internalization of stigma can also lead to distrust and a reluctance to engage with outside communities, perpetuating cycles of exclusion and marginalization.

Beyond individual impacts, the labeling of "cults" plays a broader societal role in delineating boundaries between "normal" and "deviant." This process reinforces in-group and out-group dynamics, bolstering social cohesion within the dominant culture while marginalizing those who fall outside its norms. Perrin (2001) argues that the label "cult" acts as a symbolic boundary marker, distinguishing acceptable belief systems and practices from those perceived as dangerous or illegitimate. This delineation not only maintains existing social hierarchies but also

serves as a mechanism for consolidating power, as dominant groups can define and control the parameters of acceptable behavior and belief.

The stigmatization of "cults" also reflects broader cultural and political processes. It is often entangled with struggles over authority and legitimacy (Ashforth and Humphrey 1995). Established religious institutions, for example, may leverage the term "cult" to discredit emerging spiritual movements, framing them as threats to moral or social order. Similarly, state mechanisms use the stigma attached to "cults" to justify interventions aimed at suppressing dissent or nonconformity. These dynamics underscore the role of labeling in not only marginalizing specific groups but also upholding broader systems of influence and control.

Representation in Media

Media plays an instrumental role in shaping public perceptions of "cults," serving as a primary channel through which societal fears and anxieties about these groups are both reflected and amplified (Neal 2011). It is evident that media narratives selectively emphasize certain aspects of reality while suppressing others, creating a distorted picture that aligns with dominant cultural narratives (Muralidharan 2012). Documentaries, news reports, and fictional portrayals often present "cults" as inherently dangerous, manipulative, and exploitative organizations. These depictions rely on recurring tropes of brainwashing, psychological coercion, and financial exploitation, which dominate representations of such groups in both news and entertainment media (Hammonds and Kramer 2022; Hill et al. 2001).

This selective framing is not arbitrary but deeply rooted in cultural anxieties about social deviance and control. By focusing on extreme or violent cases, such as the Jonestown tragedy or the Branch Davidian standoff, media coverage creates an exaggerated association between "cults" and existential threats to societal stability. These portrayals fuel moral panics, which

Cohen (1972) describes as widespread fears disproportionately responding to perceived threats. These fears, exacerbated by sensationalist reporting, not only misrepresent the complexity of many new religious movements (NRMs) but also reinforce existing stereotypes. Feltmate (2016) critiques this phenomenon through the "social problems paradigm," noting that media narratives often reduce diverse and multifaceted spiritual groups to simplistic, one-dimensional stereotypes, emphasizing danger and deviance while ignoring nuance and diversity.

The ethical implications of these portrayals are significant. Sensationalist media often prioritizes shock value over accuracy, perpetuating harmful categorizations which further marginalize these groups and distort their lived realities. For instance, while brainwashing is a dominant theme in media depictions, scholars such as Richardson (1993) have questioned the validity of such claims, arguing that the concept is more reflective of societal fears than empirical evidence. Nevertheless, these narratives persist because they resonate with the cultural scripts about individual vulnerability and the dangers of "the other," perpetuating fear and misunderstanding.

The effects of media framing extend beyond influencing public opinion; they also shape policymaking and societal responses to these groups. By portraying "cults" as existential threats, media narratives legitimize the interventions by law enforcement and policymakers. This symbiotic relationship between media and societal norms reveals how storytelling is not a neutral act but a powerful tool for maintaining and reproducing social hierarchies. However, the research has yet to analyze the other side of the isle.

The binary framing explained leaves little room for understanding the varied motivations and lived experiences of group members, further dehumanizing those involved. In light of the media's capacity to amplify dominant cultural ideologies while silencing marginalized voices it

is important to expand on the current research of group members. In an increasingly interconnected and digital world, it is essential to explore how newer forms of media, such as social platforms, contribute to or challenge these narratives. Social media offers opportunities for individuals and groups labeled as "cults" to counter mainstream portrayals, humanizing their experiences and presenting alternative perspectives. However, it also carries the potential to replicate sensationalist patterns, as viral content often prioritizes engagement over accuracy. By interrogating both traditional and digital media's role in framing "cults," we can better understand the intersections of power, perception, and representation in contemporary society.

Sociological Implications of Labeling in Media

The sociological implications of this subject as we focus in on nonconformity are endless, however, the literature doesn't dive much deeper than the reinforcement of power structures and how they define these up-and-coming belief systems (Bromley and Breschel 1992). Smith's research on communication strategies (2007) combined with Coates' research on "otherness" (2014) offers an interesting opportunity to compare how social media is used to reframe group identity. Religious movements are majority of the time seen as unorthodox and established as opposition to established religious institutions, however, much of the research is based in a select few extreme groups (Bromley and Breschel 1992; Feltmate 2016; Hammonds and Kramer 2022; Hill, Hickman, and McLendon 2001; Laycock 2013; Perrin 2001). For example, work which explores how cults are portrayed as social problems typically sticks to the movements that have had major media attention, such as The People's Temple, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or The Branch Davidians (Barker 1986; Hammonds and Kramer 2022; Neal 2011). The following research presented will hope to build on the groups covered in academia as well as how they are established as an outgroup.

By constructing and perpetuating the "cult" label, media narratives establish boundaries of social exclusion, limiting stigmatized groups' ability to assert legitimacy or gain broader acceptance. At the same time, these portrayals provoke a mix of fascination and fear, shaping public attitudes toward the "unknown." Laycock's (2013) analysis highlights how this duality fosters both attraction to and repulsion from groups labeled as "cults," influencing societal discourse and individual perceptions alike. Hill et al. (2001) investigated media coverage of unconventional religious groups and observed that some outlets were quick to label groups they found objectionable as "cults." They discovered that this label was often applied with differing levels of specificity and was sometimes triggered by mere fears of potential violence. Their analysis revealed that media reports consistently reinforced a strong association between the term "cult" and violence, concluding that this linkage was almost universally present. But, what happens behind the scenes of the formation of group cohesion when group members speak out to deny and reframe these narratives?

Cultural Bias

Critics of the "cult" label argue that its usage is deeply rooted in cultural biases and eurocentrism, often functioning as a mechanism to delegitimize non-Western or non-traditional spiritual practices. This critique stems from the observation that dominant Western paradigms of religion, which emphasize hierarchical institutions, codified doctrines, and long-standing traditions, often serve as the implicit standard against which other belief systems are judged. When spiritual movements or practices deviate from these norms, they are more likely to be labeled as "cults," a term that carries connotations of deviance, irrationality, and danger.

Moreover, the term "cult" has often been weaponized to enforce cultural hegemony, allowing dominant powers to undermine the credibility of alternative belief systems that

challenge societal norms or existing power structures (Stoddart 2007). By framing non-Western or alternative spiritual practices as "cults," critics argue that Western societies maintain a veneer of superiority, portraying their own religious institutions as rational, moral, and stable by comparison (Barker 2014; Long 1999). This dynamic perpetuates a global imbalance where non-Western belief systems are not only marginalized but also subjected to surveillance, legal constraints, and social discrimination.

This analysis highlights the need for a critical and nuanced approach to the study of cultism. By integrating historical, sociological, and media-focused perspectives, this review seeks to identify and explore the multiple moving parts which shape this complex discourse. Building on prior scholarship, it examines how the dynamics of labeling and stigma intersect with broader issues of power, identity, and resistance. By grounding its inquiry within interdisciplinary frameworks, this work aspires to promote a more equitable and accurate portrayal of marginalized groups, while also identifying new avenues for future research on cultism in our increasingly interconnected world. It is particularly relevant in the context of a digital era where viral content, echo chambers, and algorithm-driven visibility have amplified the reach and impact of both stigmatizing and counter-stigmatizing narratives. Platforms like TikTok, with its emphasis on short-form visual storytelling, and Facebook, known for its community-building and discussion-oriented qualities, offer unique opportunities for groups labeled as "cults" to navigate the complexities of public perception. By investigating the content shared on these platforms, this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of how marginalized groups use digital tools to assert agencies and challenge societal labels. It will also shed light on the evolving role of media in shaping public discourse around new religious movements and other groups labeled as "cults".

Methods

This study will utilize a qualitative research design to analyze how groups labeled as "cults" resist dominant narratives and construct their own forms of identity on TikTok. Qualitative methods are particularly applicable for this research because they allow for an in-depth exploration of narratives and processes of meaning. A critical discourse analysis framework guides the methodology, supporting extensive investigation into how language, visuals, and emotional appeals are used to negotiate power, counter stigma, and reclaim agency within online spaces.

The method of data collection involved sampling of social media content, specifically TikTok videos. Thirty videos were selected, with ten videos representing each of the three central groups: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Osho, and The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light. The selection of these three groups was influenced by several factors. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was chosen as an example of a more well-established religious group that, despite its size and institutional presence, continues to receive accusations of being a cult. The other two groups were chosen to represent smaller, unfamiliar spiritual movements that are labeled similarly. To refine group selection, I referenced the annual report from INFORM (Information Network Focus on Religious Movements), an academic organization that provides information about minority religions and spiritualities. While groups like Scientology and the Unification Church were mentioned in the report for the 2023-2024 year, they did not have a large enough presence on TikTok to support strong analysis within the scope of this study.

The videos for analysis were created by members of the groups themselves as compared to outside observers and critics of the movement. This made them ideal for exploring the

narrative creation and direct responses in opposition to the cult label. This research approach allowed for the assurance of inclusion both of relevant material and self-representation.

TikTok was selected as the sole platform in this analysis because of its increased presence throughout society. The platform utilizes storytelling, and it also facilitates widespread discourse, whether that be through the algorithm, hashtags, or overall interaction. Earlier plans did include the possibility of Facebook to include a level of generational analysis paired with mainstream presence. Despite this, the final study design was narrowed down to TikTok alone in order to deeply engage with one platform as well as to understand the specific characteristics which the platform offers in narrative construction. A separate TikTok account was created and used solely for the purpose of this research, warranting a controlled environment for viewing the content. This account was also not used to post or interact outside of saving for analysis.

The data collection process involved searching on the platform through a combination of group names, names of relevant individuals within each group, and culturally specific terms or hashtags which were related to each community. This allowed for a broad and accurate representation of what mechanisms were being utilized and what stories were being produced and followed.

The analysis involved many levels of investigation. First, each video was examined in reference to the emotional tone and resistance tactic. A sheet was utilized throughout the process to facilitate organization and remembrance. This allowed for consistent documentation of identity and intersectionality of creator, thematic content, rhetorical strategies used, and engagement levels for each video collected. Themes such as stigma management, collective identity, devotion, humor, and reframing. By following Critical Discourse Analysis principles, broader sociocultural meanings embedded in the language, visuals, and interactions used were

taken into consideration. This included answering questions like who gets to speak and who is silenced, how the language used positions these individuals and groups, and what forms of power are challenged or reinforced.

Overall, this approach depicts the nuance of stigmatized religious and spiritual groups together with how they use digital platforms, like TikTok to engage in resistance against labels and stigma. By focusing on in groups created videos and applying critical discourse analysis the study is able to portray the rhetorical, emotional, and performative strategies through which groups challenge public perception as well as reject the cult label and form new systems of belonging.

Analysis

There are three big ideas that are concluded to be significant takeaways from this research. First, the importance of TikTok's structure in providing a useful tool for these groups which have had to undergo the labeling of society. The platform gives stigmatized religious and spiritual groups the ability to rewrite their stories by reframing identity and belief through short form, accessible, and highly visible content. Second, are the core strategies of resistance which these groups have utilized in order to aid their constant effort to construct a counter narrative. These groups used emotion, humor, testimony, and more to challenge the "cult" label with each reacting to stigma in specifically adapted ways. And, finally, the building of new spaces for these groups to have a voice amongst the chaos on this platform. TikTok becomes more that just a resistance system, alternatively it becomes a form of cultural negotiation which allows them to be a part of the conversation while forming belonging, empathy, and acceptance.

TikTok as a Platform of Power

This platform is uniquely suited for constructing counter-narratives. This is relevant in a few different ways. As individuals who navigate this new platform explore ways to engage with the world around them TikTok provides a simple route in revealing personal empowerment through firsthand storytelling. There is no mass media exploitation, instead they are able to make their voices heard directly onto the screens of other users. In doing so, they are able to clarify beliefs and practices that are misunderstood in the mainstream. One scenario includes that of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light member, user @ra313na_hashim, who shows a slideshow of pictures from the group's attendance at the annual conference of CENSUR in Bordeaux, France. Through this feature and the visibility which comes with it, they give notice to their large presence at the conference in the fight to be recognized. At this conference, it was explained in the caption of the post that Eileen Barker, a professor of Sociology with an emphasis in religious studies — also referenced in this study— was present. This kind of storytelling gives the group an ability to display their fight for validity in the eyes of society as a whole, which is not opportune outside of the ever-growing digital world. They are also able to craft intentional responses to dominant narratives or illustrations from criticizers all at the touch of their fingertips. In the instance of user @hilgirl19, they (singular) are able to directly counteract an accusation that Mormons are not Christians themselves. A common tactic used to marginalize them as an outgroup to the more established description of appropriate beliefs: Christian. She does so by making use of a TikTok sound representing the popular put a finger down challenge. This one's description: extreme Christian edition. Furthermore, the comment normalization that has taken hold of the platform allows for dialogic spaces for deeper reflection and clarification.

Strategies of Rhetorical Resistance

These creators have employed multiple different emotional and rhetorical tools in order to resist their stigma and humanize the group. Members of all three groups employed emotion, humor, personal testimony, and other strategies which have, in certain ways, given way to transform their identities in the eyes of the user. They push back against the narratives of cold, dangerous deviants by expressing vulnerability and sincerity. For example, user @savage_supriya, an Osho follower, dances to song with uplifting vibes while leaving the caption to read, "Live a little, smile and laugh an enjoy every second of it." This kind of emotional and introspective depiction has the ability to disrupt stereotypes like the ones described above. Humor also acts as a way for the group to change the way they are seen by softening stigma and building relatability with audiences. Consider the case of user @emma.lauremary, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, where a friend and themselves participated in the trend which uses the terms, "we're [descriptor] of course we [action/feeling]." These girls show joy in discussing their life, while mixing in components of their religion. This includes making jokes about drinking espresso instead of coffee and scrolling on TikTok instead of reading scriptures. When society thinks "cult" they don't think human, they think threat. However, when someone shares a story about how their beliefs helped them heal or a joke about being misunderstood people pause and think from a different perspective. It is a move towards no longer seeing "them" as the "other" and start seeing them as someone similar to you on the most fundamental level. This is the power of using humor, heart, and honesty to resist a label that was never theirs to begin with.

Belonging Beyond the Label

Each group additionally uses TikTok to build new cultural meanings, beyond defending their beliefs. Instead of just being talked about, these groups are talking back; attempting to find

a middle ground between how a group sees themselves and how society sees them. This newly explored back and forth of cultural negotiation which is exhibited on the platform engaged both insiders and outsiders in real time dialogue. Namely referencing user @ldsprincectkid who created a video of themselves reacting to dialogue which is mean to illustrate the continuous accusations they receive regarding their life as "a Black 'Latter Day Saint.'" His look of annoyance and lack of care in response to these comments is dialogue enough to show the resistance. The comment section is flooded with responses which validate, question, and share perspectives on the conversation. These threads are able to create spaces of affirmation and mutual understanding. Creators like @ahmadireligion, an account meant to represent the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light as an organization, take a stern position in their resistance through prideful and frustrated expressions in a video showing their feelings about the hypocrisies of the world on its expression of freedom of religion. A video from the user displays a broadcast which expresses the outrage in the persecution of another follower who was allegedly teaching false doctrines, otherwise known to the group as the teachings of "The Goal of the Wise," a text that describes their beliefs. This is used as a way for them to share their side of the story, to conjure up their own negotiation of the public perception. These strategies are not just presentations but purposefully processed mechanisms which shape a new kind of digital community.

Conclusion

Groups who have received the label "cult" are bargaining with fearmongers and the public who have dehumanized them and distorted their image. Research has shown that TikTok isn't simply a tool for influencers but a chance to participate in reframing, rebuilding, and resisting. By illustrating first person storytelling, emotional honesty, and cultural commentary

creators are able to defend themselves against dominant narratives. They are creating new belongings and challenging simplistic binaries which have historically defined them.

This thesis has assessed how digital platforms, specifically TikTok, function as a site of discursive resistance and cultural negotiation. It has been able to explore content and how it becomes a medium for these users to confront stigma and subtly contest the power dynamics within society. Each of the videos collected revealed not just a response to the misrepresentation placed within the conversation but also assertion of agency in reclaiming how they are seen. In conducting this analysis, the research highlights the importance of listening to all voices, even when quitter than others. As technology continues to evolve, so does the potential in speaking out against discrimination, marginalization, and inequality. There is an opportunity for everyone throughout society to be seen on their own terms.

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