

Research Paper

Cult Formation and Psychological Dependence: A Study of Authority and Obedience

Vanisha Pandey^{1*}

ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to present a critical analysis into the formation of cults and the psychological dependency it causes to individuals. It provides a detailed critical analysis of how authority and obedience are central to cult ideology. The existing research at the end indicates how cults use various techniques of manipulation to assert control and authority. It also highlights how situational factors and leadership play a major role in shaping such behaviors. In conclusion, our research points towards understanding of these mechanisms to develop intervention techniques and create awareness against such cult behaviors as addressing these dynamics require both theoretical research and practical efforts to promote autonomy and critical engagement with authority.

Keywords: *Cult formation, Psychological Dependence, Isolation, Authority*

The term “authority” refers to the power to influence or command thought, opinion or behavior. Obedience is a form of social influence where an individual alters their behavior to comply with direct orders or commands from a perceived authority figure.

According to the American Psychological Association, cult refers to a religious or quasi-religious group characterized by unusual or atypical beliefs, seclusion from the outside world, and an authoritarian structure. Cults tend to be highly cohesive, well organized, secretive, and hostile to non- members. It is a system of beliefs and rituals specific to a particular religious group. An exaggerated devotion to a charismatic political, religious, or other leader, often fomented by authoritarian figures or regimes as a means of maintaining their power. (APA, 2018).

Cults usually hold beliefs that deviate significantly from mainstream norms. It encourages isolation from outside world and non-members. The group operates under a rigid authority structure, centered around a charismatic leader. Cults are often believed to use psychological manipulation and pressure to control members, often leading to a loss of individual identity and critical thinking, this often leads to exploitation of members and can cause significant damage to individuals, families and communities.

¹Student, Department of Psychology, Mody University of Science and Technology

*Corresponding Author

Received: June 02, 2026; Revision Received: July 19, 2026; Accepted: July 23, 2026

Cult Formation and Psychological Dependence: A Study of Authority and Obedience

Cults usually create an authoritarian structure that suppress criticism and creates an “us vs them” mentality, starting with vulnerable people seeking meaning. It’s a process where individuals become deeply immersed, adopting unusual beliefs and rituals, losing autonomy, and viewing outsiders as enemies. The group controls information and individual behavior for leader benefit.

Another major aspect of cult psychology is brainwashing and mind control, a major theory in this field is the study of conditions of mind control by Margaret Singer.

Singer’s Conditions of Mind Control

Margaret Thaler Singer, an American psychologist and expert on cult psychology, states that there are six conditions of mind control.

These are-

- Keep the person unaware of what is going on or how is he/she being changed a step at a time.
- Control the person’s social and/or physical environment; especially the person’s time.
- Systematically create powerlessness in a person.
- Manipulate a system of rewards, punishments and experiences in such a way as to inhibit behavior that reflects the person’s former social identity.
- Manipulate a system of rewards, punishments and experiences in order to promote learning the group’s ideology or belief- system and group approved behavior.
- Put forth a closed system of logic and an authoritarian structure that permits no feedback or refuses to be modified except by leadership approval or executive order.

The system of rewards and punishments mentioned above are based on ideas from operant conditioning, a theory of learning developed by B.F Skinner.

Psychological Role and Dependency

Cults exploit the human need for belonging and meaning by presenting themselves as close-knit communities with a clear, compelling purpose. By fostering a strong sense of unity and significance, they make members feel valued and part of something exclusive and important- an appeal that is particularly powerful for individuals who feel isolated, directionless, or disconnected from society.

Psychological dependency is a condition in which an individual becomes emotionally or mentally reliant on a person, group or system for validation, support, a sense of identity, often to a point where independent functioning feels difficult.

This psychological dependency is asserted by cults using certain techniques and methods of brainwashing such as- *Isolation, Love Bombing, Gaslighting, Use of fear*. This creates a sense of loyalty to the group. These tactics also sometimes make members doubt their own perceptions and reality which makes it easier for the cult leaders to control and manipulate their members.

These techniques assert an authority over the members and leads to obedience. Authority refers to the power to give orders or make decisions. Obedience, on the other hand, refers to a person being submissive to the command of authority.

Cult Formation and Psychological Dependence: A Study of Authority and Obedience

Psychological dependence on cults is a form of coercive control that systematically exploits an individual's universal needs for belonging, purpose and security, replacing independent thoughts with intense, often anxious, dependency on the group and its leader. The psychological effects of cult involvement can be profound and long lasting, even after leaving the group. Survivors often report high rates of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder and trust issues.

Upon leaving the cult, individuals feel disconnected from themselves, caught between their past and present, experience flashbacks and difficulty with reintegration in the society. They often struggle with basic decision making, social and communication skills and living an independent life in the society.

Objectives of the Study

The research aims to highlight the psychological dependency of an individual over the ideology of a cult.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Yexin Xu (2025), examines how cults use social and psychological methods to manipulate individuals using the Movement to Restore God's Ten Commandments as a case study. The paper also highlights the threshold effect used by cults, where members are first encouraged to perform minor activities that gradually escalate into extreme behaviors such as self-immolation and mass suicides. The paper aims to expose cult brainwashing strategies and build resistance by providing warning signs. Lastly, it highlights how this method can be effective only with continuous social attention and collective efforts to reduce harm of cults.

Yuxin Xiang (2025), presents how systematic manipulation and control affects mental health of ex- cult members. The paper highlights how mental manipulation techniques such as brainwashing and fear indoctrination along with physical control techniques like social isolation and physical abuse leads to prolonged effects even after exiting the group. The major disorders reported by ex- members includes anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. The result of this paper shows positive correlation between cult manipulation and control. Overall, the paper aims to develop intervention techniques, provide support to ex-cult members and raise awareness of the harms caused by such highly manipulative cult groups.

Bryan Collins (2024), explores how cults manipulate social, emotional and cognitive mechanisms to cultivate compliance and loyalty amongst members. Drawing on social influence theories, including Cialdini's principles of persuasion and Festinger's theories of cognitive dissonance, the analysis identifies core strategies such as isolation, love bombing, fear- based appeals and the construction of a charismatic authority figure. The paper further examines the neurological and emotional underpinnings of cult influence, highlighting how stress, uncertainty and groupthink inhibit critical thinking. By highlighting these mechanisms, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of enduring power and appeal of cults, while providing insights into prevention and deprogramming strategies.

Castano, et al (2022) focuses on the definition of cults and the process of cult conversion from the perspective of family members. The study also focuses on aspects like cult recruitment and conversion, also taking a deep dive into the experience, perceptions and needs of cultist families and the measurable mental health and well-being consequences impacting the family members who are often helpless and lack psychological support. This

is followed by highlighting the need for clinical and psychosocial interventions in such cases.

Barnabas Barnty (2024), focuses on the psychology of indoctrination within coercive cults and discusses how these cults exploit individuals who are often going through isolation, life transitions or distress making them vulnerable to emotional dependency and control. The paper also highlights some key techniques like love bombing, isolation and repetitive reinforcement of ideology used to manipulate individuals and how the use of guilt, fear and punishment ensures obedience and discourage dissent. This study provides an interplay of psychological principles such as individual identity, group dynamics and social influence in the indoctrination process and developing strategies to counter it, support individuals in exiting such cults and foster a sense of resilience.

Yvonne Walsh (2010), explains the rise of cultic activities and the need for counselling psychologists to be aware of the psychological impact that the techniques of control practiced within the cult has on the members. The paper also highlights the need to educate counselling psychologists in the techniques used within cults and to equip them to work with a diverse group of clients, that they might meet due to the new millennium.

Dingcheng, Chenhong and Tianjia (2018), presents an analysis on the definition, measurement and mechanism of the physical and mental injury caused by participation in cults. The literature presents how the harm caused by cults has changed from brainwashing to psychological abuse, the change of observation from personal to group experience, shift in the measurement of harm from traditional tools to group psychological abuse scales and development of a interactive pathological model based on cult milieu factors and personal vulnerability. The paper also uses epigenetics and interpersonal neurobiology to study physiological mechanisms.

DISCUSSION

The findings from the reviewed studies highlights how participation into cults leads to emotional and psychological decline of an individual, marked by dependency and obedience and a change in the overall behavior of a person. Cults usually create an authoritarian structure that suppress criticism and creates an “us vs them” mentality, starting with vulnerable people seeking meaning.

Majority of findings focus on how cult leaders are characterized by their ability to establish authority and control often through charisma, ideology or manipulation. The studies show how cult formation is not just about individual vulnerability and loss of identity but also social and psychological processes that shape behavior within the context of a group.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings from the research we can conclude that cult formation is based on the dynamics of authority and obedience, shaped by individual and situational factors. There is a need for development of intervention techniques and providing support to members of such cults and addressing the psychological mechanisms that sustain such cults and to develop effective preventive measures. A deeper exploration of these dynamics is essential for both theoretical or research advancements and practical interventions.

REFERENCES

- Castano, et al (2022) Cult conversion from the perspective of families: Implications for prevention and psychological intervention. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, Vol 14 https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Alvaro-Castano-Garcia/publication/350576059_Cult_conversion_from_the_perspective_of_families_Implications_for_prevention_and_psychological_intervention/links/606855daa6fdccad3f6a2453/Cult-Conversion-From-the-Perspective-of-Families-Implications-for-Prevention-and-Psychological-Intervention.pdf
- Toulmin S., & DE Leary (1985) the cult empiricism in psychology and beyond. *A century of psychology as a science*. American Psychological Association <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1020&context=psychology-faculty-publications>
- Xu, Yexin. (2025). Social Psychological Techniques of Cults. *Lecture Notes in Education Psychology and Public Media*. 122. 1-4. 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.CB26836. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/395552713_Social_Psychological_Techniques_of_Cults
- Best, Jonica V. Carlton, "Cults: A Psychological Perspective" (2018). *Theses and Dissertations*. 361. https://csuepress.columbusstate.edu/theses_dissertations/361
- Xiang, Y. (2025). Under the Influence: The Psychological Impact of Manipulation and Control Mechanisms on Ex-cult Members. *Communications in Humanities Research*. 98. 88-94. 10.54254/2753-7064/2025.NS29586. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/397766679_Under_the_Influence_The_Psychological_Impact_of_Manipulation_and_Control_Mechanisms_on_Ex-cult_Members/citation/download
- Walsh, Y. (2001). Deconstructing "brainwashing" within cults as an aid to counselling psychologists. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 14(2),119–128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515070110058558>

Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Pandey, V. (2026). Cult Formation and Psychological Dependence: A Study of Authority and Obedience. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 14(3), 270-274. DIP:18.01.025.20261403, DOI:10.25215/1403.025