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# Separating Religion from Cult: An Analysis of Cult-like Organizations

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## Abstract

This paper aims to separate the term cult from religious and spiritual assumptions and create resistance to the growing cultish nature of organizations. Through analysis of sociological and communication literature, this paper demonstrates that the current definition of cult, “a religious group, often living together, whose beliefs are considered extreme or strange by many people,” (“Cult,” n.d.) is too restrictive. Rather, this term more accurately acts as an umbrella term for various types of organizations that operate in a manipulative and controlled environment. There is much research and discussion regarding the dark culture of organizations; however, there is minimal definition and consensus on the line between a strong culture organization, defined as having “a strong sense of mission ... and being adaptable,” and a cult-like organization (Lee & Yu, 2004, p. 341).

The literature review begins by defining the key characteristics of a cult and demonstrating how these traits are not at all restricted to religious or spiritual structures. Through analysis of cult formation models from Bainbridge and Stark (1979), it is clear that what constitutes a cult is not confined to religious beliefs and attitudes and that cult-like structures are increasing among the workplace. The literature review moves on to demonstrate how organizational structures have changed overtime, and I reinforce that this shift to social structures has provided more opportunity for control and manipulation, and thus the increase of cult-like businesses. We then analyze employee identification with an organization and the cultic relationship between a manager and an employee to determine that these two crucial elements of a cult are not as simple or as conscious as society portrays them to be. This paper concludes that while there is a blurred line between strong culture and cult, this line still exists and a way to identify this line is to look at the relationship between manager and employee. How controlled are the employee’s beliefs and values, and are managerial control and employee identity conscious or unconscious?

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## Introduction

For several years cults have existed and often carry a negative connotation. The term *cult* has been a buzzword in society, and as societal norms continue to change over time, the connotations of this term change along with them. It was not until organizations began to move away from traditional hierarchal structures, and towards more inclusive employee and social structures, that the term *cult* was applied to modern businesses and corporations (Paulsen, 2003). Kulik and Alarcon (2012) refer to Peters and Waterman (1982) and the term *positive organizational cultures*. We often see that when a business creates a strong culture within its walls, literally and figuratively, that pertains to its values and beliefs and secludes itself from the outside world, it can quickly be labeled with this term. Of course, some level of

identification with, and commitment to, an organization is expected of employees. However, when employees strongly identify with the values of their organization, this creates more of an opportunity for the workplace to control employees and become cult-like without the employee even realizing so. O'Reilly (1989) highlights a key difference between identifying with a cult and identifying with a strong culture by categorizing the group or organization based on "the type of commitment displayed" by its members (p. 18). O'Reilly points out that members of "cults and religious organizations" internalize the values of the organization, while members of a strong culture develop an identity with the organization because it "stands for something they value" (p. 18). Employees often go above and beyond for their organization—even to the point of not being able to define the line between their personal identity and their work identity.

It is not uncommon for an organization to be branded as *culty* or cult-like. An organization's ability to manipulate employees into strong identification is troublesome to say the least, and it begs an important question: are employees attracted to these cult-like organizations to the point where they are blind to the fact they are indeed a member of an organizational cult? Kulik and Alarcon (2012) refer to Peters and Waterman (1982) when they state that "'positive organizational cultures' can give an organization a competitive advantage over its rivals in any industry" (para. 4). In opposition to the majority of cult definitions, this paper posits that the term is not restricted to religious structures and beliefs; rather, it is an umbrella term for various organizations with cult-like traits, many of which operate in the corporate environment. The existence of these cult-like organizations is increasing, and the way employees identify with them is not as simple or as conscious as the average person might think. A workplace that exhibits a strong and positive culture is being sought out by the workforce, and the line between culture and cult in the workplace is quite blurred. Through analysis of sociological and communications literature, this paper will discuss and demonstrate how to separate the term cult from religious assumptions, how organizations come to be cult-like, and why employee identity with these cult-like organizations is a complex journey rather than a quick and conscious decision. To clearly articulate the separation between religious structures and the term cult, the usage of *cult* throughout this paper will be in reference to my proposed working definition of the term: a group that is under an inappropriate amount of conscious or unconscious control and manipulation of their behaviours, attitudes, and values. Upon analysis of the following literature, this paper posits that the key factor in determining whether a business is structured as a strong culture or a cult is centered around identity and control.

## Literature Review and Discussion

Cults have a negative connotation to them, and for good reason. We have seen several cults, such as Jonestown, assist in brainwashing members and resulting in mass suicide (Conroy, 2018, para. 2). However, these infamous religious cults have acted as a shield for other cults that continue to perform under the radar. Arnott and Juban (2000) describe the sociological definition of cults pertaining to three main traits: "devotion, charismatic leadership and separation from community" (para. 8). To separate the umbrella term *cult* from the stereotypical religious or spiritual setting, and to better understand what constitutes a cult in an organizational or corporate setting, Bainbridge and Stark (1979) offer three models of cult formation:

psychopathology, entrepreneur, and subculture-evolution (p. 283). Despite the age of Bainbridge's and Stark's article, their models remain relevant and applicable. To analyze what traits constitute a cult-like business, I will explore the psychopathology and entrepreneur models. These authors describe the psychopathology model as resulting in individuals finding "successful social expression" within the organization (Bainbridge & Stark, 1979, p. 285). While this model includes religion as a venue for successful expression, it most certainly does not limit itself to religion, including other expressions such as mental illness and societal crisis. Bainbridge and Stark explore venues such as mental illness and societal crisis by explaining that creation of or identification with cults are both novel cultural responses for an individual who suffers from a form of mental illness, and therefore may be more vulnerable to or find comfort in the predatory practices of cults (p. 285). More importantly for present purposes, relating to organizational cults is the entrepreneur model which focuses on cult founders or leaders who develop new systems and exchange them for rewards. Bainbridge and Stark state that if "social circumstances" provide opportunities to benefit or profit from the cult, many "perfectly normal individuals will be attracted" to joining (p. 287). These authors confirm that "cults can in fact be very successful businesses," and aside from obvious material or monetary profits, individuals are also susceptible to "intangible but valuable rewards" including praise and power (Bainbridge & Stark, 1979, p. 287). This point is crucial in understanding not only how common business cults currently are, but also how they are becoming increasingly attractive to society's workforce. Because of this function, employee identification with a cult-like organization is not as simple, nor as conscious as we might think.

The parallels between what we classically understand as a cult (demonstrating religious or spiritual values and beliefs) and cult-like organizations have not been extensively studied by communication scholars. Kulik and Alarcon (2012) state that while many related areas such as dark sides of leadership and organizational politics have been explored and discussed, "organizational culture's dark sides have been curiously overlooked" (para. 1). Four years later, Kulik and Alarcon (2016) remind us that "the undefined line and considerable gray area between strong cultures and business cults has not been clarified" (p. 252). The ambiguity of organizational cults is surprising given the heightened interest of workplace culture among scholars, and the increase of strong-cultured and social organizations. Paulsen (2003) confirms the growing popularity of these social organizations by pointing out that modern businesses are moving away from hierarchical structures and putting more emphasis on group relationships and alliances (p. 16-17). To truly understand the role that this organizational structure shift plays in the increase of cult-like businesses, we turn to the point Cheney and Lair (2005) make regarding the logic of bureaucracy. The authors state that "bureaucracy institutionalizes fairness even as it disregards individual circumstance" (p. 59). As modern organizations are increasing the value of socialization and flat hierarchical structures, individual circumstances are more highly regarded, and this plays a major role in how organizational cults use employees' circumstances to manipulate them into strongly identifying with the business.

Kulik and Alarcon (2012) point out that this strong sense of workplace culture is seen as positive and motivating by stating "the stronger the culture, the better" (para. 7). The authors suggest that managers should create a stronger workplace culture by modeling preferred behaviour, rewarding this behaviour, and expressing what they believe are the organization's values (para. 7). While strong workplace culture is becoming increasingly attractive and there is

indeed a gray area between identifying what is culture and what is cult in a workplace setting, perhaps the key indicator for cult-like behaviour is the level of control (Kulik & Alarcon, 2012).

While modern organizations' focus on employee identification and promotion of group relationships has dictated an important shift in the history of the workforce, this can (and should) be done in a way that does not exert undue control over the employee. Kulik and Alarcon (2012) refer to O'Reilly (1989) and Singer (2003) for their identification of the key characteristic of a cult: the ability to have a powerful influence over members' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours (para. 8). Cheney and Lair (2005) state that organizations are seen as authoritative entities and they share "some degree of control over behaviour and attitudes" (p. 58). While there is no definitive degree of control, we can conclude that there is an appropriate degree such as controlling workplace behaviours like tardiness and professionalism.

As stated earlier, there are several parallels between cults and common corporations beneath the surface, and many employees are blind to the fact that they are indeed members of what Arnott and Juban (2000) refer to as a "corporate cult" (para. 2). The authors describe this cult as a type of culture where "members are bound to the organization by a strong set of norms which elicit extraordinarily high levels of commitment from employees" (para. 2). Arnott and Juban (2000), along with a vast majority of sociological literature, restrict the corporate cult to being negative in that the employee becomes a prisoner within the corporate walls (para. 2). This paper posits that the corporate cult extends far beyond a simple prison-like environment.

I propose that an organizational cult, with a manager and an employee who both equally believe that they are simply in a strong culture environment, is the most dangerous type of organizational cult. This relationship becomes problematic when not consciously controlled. When we consider the fact that the key characteristic of a cult is a strong influence over members' attitudes and behaviours, we can conclude that this indeed takes place in the modern corporate setting.

When a cult is analyzed (for example, Jonestown) two crucial elements are of automatic concern: the leader and the follower. In turn, when we analyze a cult-like business, these two crucial elements are parallel to two parties: the manager and the employee. Although Arnott and Juban (2000) portray this relationship as prison-like, this paper posits that an employee's identification with a cult-like organization is not as simple, nor as conscious as that. Employee identification and cult-like managerial behaviour are perhaps the two most important elements in understanding how a business can operate as a cult and have employees willingly, yet unknowingly, engage with it.

Henderson, Cheney, and Weaver (2015) describe employee identity as a process, where identity becomes a way for individuals to cope with societal divisions as well as positioning themselves inside or outside the "cultural crowd" (p. 15). These authors state that employee identity is dependent on a web of multiple parties: "individuals, groups, and organizations" that identify with each other based on a particular set of values and interests (p. 15). These values and interests are particularly important, especially in terms of an employee's identification. Henderson, Cheney, and Weaver (2015) refer to Foucault's (1984) argument wherein there is a "sustained and often-obsessive concern about identity" being a defining factor in our industrialized world (p. 16). The authors reiterate that identification with organizations is under control by the organization itself, and this control operates through rhetorical strategies. Henderson, Cheney, and Weaver (2015) discuss how the "discovery, expression, and

management of the organization's 'true identity'" can be difficult, but it is the primary goal for the employee (p. 16). This point is crucial in understanding the cult-like relationship between a manager and an employee. If it is an employee's primary goal to discover an organization's true identity, once they succeed at this their connection with the organization becomes so strong that they start to become blinded to the control that they are under. This is just one example of the types of non-monetary rewards Bainbridge and Stark (1979) state that employees receive and feed off of.

It could be argued that the manager (leader) is the most important element of organizational cults due to the large focus on the leader almost exclusively in the majority of cult studies. However, it is the level of managerial control along with the level of employee identity that together make up a "corporate cult" (Arnott & Juban, 2000, para. 2). One cannot exist without the other. Although all cult-like behaviours in the workplace are deemed negative, the way a manager performs these behaviours can be clear and forceful, or unapparent and manipulative. Arnott and Juban (2000) mirror the three definitional traits of a cult (devotion, charismatic leadership, and separation from community) with three corporate cult traits: "sense of purpose, inspiring leadership, and knockout facilities that provide for employees' personal needs" (para. 8). It is important to note that each of these traits are parallel to the traits included in the definition for the well-known term "cult," and all of the traits are cast in a positive light. This is the key factor which allows for employee identification to often be unconscious and willing.

Like Bainbridge and Stark (1979), Arnott and Juban (2000) point out that if an organization provides its employees with intangible rewards in addition to the typical monetary reward (a salary), the ability for the organization to have more control increases. Arnott and Juban (2000) use dry cleaning services as an example of how a business can quickly become an employee's "community" (para. 8). This isn't to say that an organization cannot offer its employees extra perks aside from a salary or encourage them to participate in a close and strong workplace culture, but this type of behaviour can quickly become manipulative and turn into a cult-like structure. While analyzing the difference between a strong culture and an organizational cult, Kulik and Alarcon (2012) state that cult leaders (managers) set up "social constructs" that are designed to manipulate followers (employees) into conformity. They point out that an individual's behaviour is "programmable" according to their surroundings (para. 6). Kulik and Alarcon confirm that the manager and employee are the two most important elements in a cult-like business by referencing Singer's (2003) statement that "damage is caused by the 'cultic relationship' between leader and follower" (para. 9).

## Conclusion

Although organizations often adopt a strong culture and social structure within the walls of the organization so to speak, the overarching argument here is that this idea should not be used as a fallback to perform cult-like behaviours. Society tends to quickly attach religion-focused structures to the term cult, and sociological literature confirms that this is not the only structure seen with cults. The term *cult* is broad, and it can be used to describe several organizations that are often looked at as having a strong culture. While the line between culture and cult is blurred, this line still exists. The modern workforce must understand what constitutes a cult structure

and how to determine if a business is operating under this type of environment. As this paper has demonstrated, employees are becoming increasingly attracted to organizations that portray a strong culture and provide additional non-monetary rewards. In the modern workplace, employees want to feel respected and valued. When employees are given this respect, the opportunity for an organization to manipulate them increases drastically. The process through which an employee identifies with and ultimately becomes a member of an organizational cult is not one-sided. As the literature confirms, a cult is dependent on the relationship between a leader and a follower. For an employee to become a member of an organizational cult, there needs to be controlled behaviour from the manager as well as an opportunity of vulnerable behaviour from the employee. As these cult-like organizations (unknowingly) become more attractive to the workforce, employees need to be aware of whether or not they are identifying with a value they and the organization have in common or identifying with the organization itself.

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