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An Application of the Coercive Control Framework to Cults

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An Application of the Coercive Control Framework to Cults

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Abstract

The present study utilized the *coercive control* framework to systematically assess coercion in cults. Former cult members (N=52) of various groups (e.g., psychological & self-help related) were interviewed via telephone for 1.5 to 3 hours. The sample was 67.31% female, 67.31% Caucasian, and 63.46% American; age ranged from 24-68 years old. An existing codebook was used by multiple coders with high intercoder reliability (89.66%). Coercive control tactics were present in all 52 narratives. Manipulation, intimidation, and microregulation were the tactics most frequently utilized. Sexual coercion/abuse, deprivation, and degradation were used least. Data also provided coercive subtactics specific to cults but rarely noted in sex trafficking or intimate partner violence settings allowing for a nuanced understanding of abuse. Findings suggest the coercive control framework can be reliably used to assess how power imbalances are created and maintained in cults to entrap members. This is the first application of coercion control to cultic study of its kind, with strong implications for improved communication between cult researchers.

Keywords: coercive control, cults, new religious movements, high demand groups, spiritual movements, spiritual abuse, religious abuse, coercive groups

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Introduction

The Importance of Cultic Study

The 1978 Jonestown tragedy, among the most devastating mass murder-suicides in world history, amassed a death toll of 912, including nearly 300 children. Fifteen years later, a historic standoff ensued at Waco, Texas between Branch Davidians and the ATF, resulting in over 70 deaths. Within the last decade, less lethal but equally psychologically harmful groups such as NXIVM, the FLDS, and the United Nation of Islam have attained notoriety for illicit activities including but not limited to human trafficking, racketeering, child abuse, and sexual assault. The International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) approximates the existence of over 5,000 active cultic groups in the U.S. and Canada alone, with over 2,500,000 members collectively (Matthews & Salazar, 2014; Singer, 2003). There are also an estimated 125,000 in the United States who were either born or raised in a cult (Matthews & Salazar, 2014).

The consequences of cult involvement appear severe. According to a study by Healy (2017), while the prevalence of PTSD among veterans ranged from 10-25%, the prevalence of PTSD in American former cult members was 61.4% for males and 71.3% for females. A thematic analysis of second-generation cult members showed former members struggled with patriarchy and gender roles, decision-making, obedience to authority, group and relationship support, relationships with parents, religiosity and spirituality, abuse, outside influences, sense of identity, emotional consequences of life in a cult, fear and courage, and the long process of change (Matthews & Salazar, 2014). Such negative consequences of cult involvement underscore the need for both research and clinical attention to cult abuse, particularly the dynamics that potentially lead to long-term damage.

As such, a crucial question of interest is how cults recruit, retain, and negatively alter the

cognitive and emotional worldview of their members over long periods of time. Often loosely referred to as *indoctrination*, cult members become so deeply trapped in cult worldviews that they struggle to leave, and when they do, struggle to establish and maintain new relationships, hold jobs, and engage in fundamental human activities including identifying their own realities and needs over imposed cultic values (Dahlen, 1997; Goldberg, 2011; Healy, 2017; Matthews & Salazar, 2014). Existing research and clinical case studies have provided valuable data on techniques used by cults to achieve these immense shifts in worldview; however, much of this work does not use the same terms in explaining cult abuse, hampering communication across researchers. Furthermore, this research often conflates outcomes of abuse, such as "brainwashing" with techniques used to achieve these outcomes.

In furtherance of existing work, this study aims to comprehensively explore tactics employed by cult members to recruit and demand commitment from other cult members, using the coercive control framework: an abuse dynamic that is well-established in intimate partner violence (IPV) and sex trafficking literature. By using a sound framework to assess abuse dynamics in cult settings, researchers and clinicians alike will be better able to identify abuse across cult settings, as well as differences in power structure and coercive behaviors between and within groups. In the following sections, I will first briefly define cults, then discuss prior cult research findings. Next, I will summarize how other research has identified cult abuse, followed by a description of coercive control.

What is a *cult*?

The criteria for what constitutes an organization as a cult is not unanimous in the field of psychology, similar disciplines, or even society as a whole (Barker, 1986). Clinical psychologist Margaret Singer (2003) developed perhaps the most stringent criteria to define a cult. The seven

criteria included: 1) member devotion of the majority of their time to the group 2) perception of the leader as possessing special gifts or abilities 3) emphasis of allegiance to the leader or group as a whole 4) alienation of members from the outside world and anyone not in the group, especially family and friends 5) perception of outsiders as inferior 6) the doctrine, organization head, and/or members cause harm and 7) daily (or near-daily) interaction occurs between members (Singer, 2003). While all cults may meet several of the criteria laid forth, many international groups like Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church or the Church of Scientology boast thousands of followers with limited daily contact and are still perceived as cults. Most cults, however, have less than 100 members (Matthews & Salazar, 2014). While many mainstream religions (e.g., Christianity) share ideas with cults, healthy religions are not fanatical in their separatism (Salande & Perkins, 2011).

Some researchers constrict their definition of cults to groups that stem from accepted religious traditions (Feldmann & Johnson, 1995), while others hold a homologous view of cultic groups, expanding their definition to political, social, and philosophical groups that "often operate with a similar premise: the world is bad, we are good, become a part of us" (Salande & Perkins, 2011, p. 382). For the present study, I operationally defined *cult* as "an ideological organization, held together by charismatic relationships, and demanding high levels of commitment" (ICSA, n.d.).

Existing Research on Cults: Conditions and Abuse Dynamics

To date, cult research has focused on two primary areas. First, most cult research has explored the conditions that lead to cult formation, such as membership susceptibility factors and the role of the charismatic leader; second, it has identified the consequences of cult involvement (Almendros et al., 2007; Eister, 1972; Lifton, 2020; Shaw, 2014; Walsh & Bor, 1996). To a

lesser extent, research has also explored abusive power used to control members and sustain that control, as well as the consequences of cult involvement (Rosen, 2014).

Important early work that laid background for subsequent research on cults proposed five conditions that inspire cult formation (Eister, 1972, p.322):

(1) An individual's "need for orientation," or rather grounded, moral values.
(2) The desire for explanation of concepts such as *evil* and *death*, supplied explicitly by belief systems and implicitly by rites and rituals.
(3) A specialized society that validates the belief system and defines "norms of communication."
(4) The "severe disruption" of "once widely-held orientations… and the institutions which helped formulate these and other patterns," causing a "culture crisis."
(5) The resulting confusion which shakes former "gatekeepers" against the "absurd" or "loss of faith." Such gatekeepers are "too demoralized and too scattered" to impede cult development.

These conditions identify membership susceptibility and shift in worldview but focus too closely on religiosity as a human need. Contemporary research recognizes non-religion-based cults, as such groups have become prevalent in the five decades since Eister's early theory emerged. Additionally, Eister focused on the conditions and social climate needed to generate cult interest rather than explaining the concrete actions taken by leaders and followers to configure and strengthen cultic groups. Cult research has since steered from answering *why* cults are formed and shifted to *how*; specifically, how cults obtain and retain members.

A few scattered studies have identified similarities among cult members that make them

susceptible to cult membership. Almendros et al. (2007) identified a correlation with young age and cult membership, while Coates (2011) explored pre-involvement factors and found the "desire for certainty," "need for belonging," and similar elements of anomie incite cult susceptibility (p. 201).

Another body of research focused on the individualized power and intention of cult leaders. Lifton (2020) and Shaw (2014) argued that cult membership is obtained and sustained by the charismatic leader. Lifton (2020) explained that the cult leader is perceived by their members as omnipotent or deified, and that his promises of spiritual renewal and claims to control reality are used as a means of recruiting and maintaining membership. Shaw (2014) described the cult leader similarly, proposing the term *traumatic narcissist*: a "cunning manipulator of others, grandiose, envious, aggressive, exploiting, and controlling," who presents as "charismatic, seductive, and intensely attentive," and enjoys their "grandiosity by proxy" (p. 5). Goldberg (2012), however, found that the relationship between the charismatic leader and their exploited member is characterized by *transference*, or a need to please authority figures and a strong desire for a powerful parental figure. While all of these explanations help understand the initial attraction to a cult, they do not adequately explain how members are recruited, robbed of their autonomy, and remain in cults even when they no longer desire to.

Abuse Terminology in Cultic Research

In addition to leadership, a second body of research focuses on the core abusive tactics of cult leaders reflected in terms such as milieu control, mind control, and brainwashing (Lifton, 1991; Ushiyama, 2019; Walsh, 2001). Milieu control, coined by Lifton (1991), is described as "the control of all communication within a given environment," where "individual autonomy becomes a threat to the group" (p. 1). Additionally, milieu control is expressed and maintained

"by intense group process, continuous psychological pressure, and isolation by geographical distance, unavailability of transportation, or even physical restraint" (Lifton, 1991, p. 1).

Brainwashing refers to "indoctrination under physically coercive environments" through the use of deconstructing techniques, while mind control includes a more descriptive list of abusive psychological and interpersonal techniques, such as "restricting food and sleep, memorization through repetition, emphasis on recruiting new members, restricting contact with friends and family, and controlling access to information" (Ushiyama, 2019, p. 1738). While such research is invaluable to exposing cult abuse dynamics, Ushiyama argues these terms—which lack in scientific credibility and are used interchangeably by proponents yet continue to resonate with the public—dismiss the traumatic significance of cult experience, and worse, make moral implications that "no rational, level-headed person would 'choose' to join a 'cult'" (p. 1738). Ushiyama (2019) further suggests these loosely defined terms are detrimental and disruptive to the advancement of cultic study.

To expand upon existing research and address Ushiyama's criticism, I propose coercive control be used to systematically assess and identify abuse in cult settings. Cultic concepts reference the idea of repeated pressured behaviors resulting in total commitment to the group and compromised decision-making abilities; core concepts that are reliably addressed by the coercive control framework.

In addition to providing valid and testable theories of power dynamics, coercive control offers pathways to understand how the power dynamic between individual cult members and leadership is developed, and importantly, identify which specific tactics build and sustain the power differential. Moreover, past research often conflates the abuse used to create compliance and submission, and further, does not distinguish systematically between members who stay

because of their altered worldview (i.e., *brainwashing* or *trauma bonding*, in some literature), and members who stay for other reasons such as fear or convenience. By applying the coercive control framework to cultic abuse, I will be better able to separate the actual abuse dynamics from the outcomes of that abuse.

What is Coercive Control?

Coercive control is defined as an abusive power dynamic maintained by the ongoing implementation of multiple interlocking tactics—some of which are invisible to outside perception—used to exert power over victims, eliminating autonomy, liberty, and sense of self (Doychak & Raghavan, 2018; Hanna, 2009; Stark, 2007). Such tactics include isolation, surveillance, intimidation, microregulation, manipulation, degradation, deprivation (Beck & Raghavan, 2010; Stark, 2007) and sexual abuse (Mitchell & Raghavan, 2019). While physical abuse may be present in the abusive dynamic, it is not required to maintain power imbalance (Stark, 2007). Coercive control has been extensively applied to IPV in the U.S. (Barbaro & Raghavan, 2018; Kaplenko et al., 2018; Loveland & Raghavan, 2017) and elsewhere (Myhill, 2015; Myhill & Hohl, 2016; Stark, 2006) as well as in sex trafficking contexts (Doychak & Raghavan, 2018; Pomerantz et al., 2021; Raghavan & Doychak, 2015; Unger et al., 2021).

Raghavan and Doychak (2015) argued that the concept of coercive control can be applied to many different contexts in which there is a power differential and/or an abuse of power. Indeed, prior research suggests coercive tactics such as manipulation, isolation, and economic abuse are widely utilized in cult contexts, albeit measured and identified somewhat differently (Lifton, 1991). Although coercive control is employed in various abusive contexts, subtle but important differences can exist between these contexts. For example, Unger et al. (2021) suggested third party coercive control, while less identified in IPV contexts, is very common in

sex trafficking contexts.

Present Study

Accordingly, the current study seeks to gain a clearer understanding of whether the coercive control framework can be used to identify power over members in cults, and if so, which coercive control tactics are used. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research team collected quantitative and qualitative data to assess the presence and frequency of coercive control tactics in cults. For this study, I examined the following questions:

1) Because cults are often hierarchical and may have different leaders, who primarily wielded coercive control tactics?

2) Which tactics are most commonly identified by participants?

3) Which tactic behaviors, or *subtactics*, emerged within the cult context that are less identified in IPV or sex trafficking, and appear to be cult-specific?

Methods

Participants

Study participants were gathered through broadcast emails sent to the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) referral base and online cult recovery/support groups, as well as snowball sampling. Participants were screened for inclusion. Inclusion criteria required participants be 18 years of age or older, have previously been a member of a cultic group for approximately a year or more, have ceased participation in any cultic group activities and/or monetary contributions, and have left that group within the last fifteen years. Data was obtained from 115 former cult members. Preliminary data analysis for the current study was completed for 52 participants; thus, a partial sample is presented here.

The sample (N=52) self-identified as 67.31% female (n=35), 28.85% male (n=15), and

3.85% transgender/non-binary (n=2). Participant age ranged from 24-68 years old with an average age of 43 years (M=43.17; SD =11.53). The sample was more racially diverse than previous studies (Ayella, 1990; Matthews & Salazar, 2014), but still predominantly Caucasian at 80.77% (n=42). Participants were 9.62% Latinx (n=5), 3.85% Black (n=2), 1.92% East Asian (n=1), 1.92% Southeast Asian (n=1), and 1.92% Mixed Race (n=1). The majority of participants were born in the United States; however, non-U.S. participants accounted for 36.54% (n=19). Over half of participants received a college education (n=35; 67.31%). High school graduates or participants with an equivalent diploma accounted for 30.77% (n=16), and only one participant did not finish high school (1.92%). The average length of participant membership was 18.11 years (SD=12.63).

Materials

A semi-structured interview guide was adapted from Doychak and Raghavan (2018) using the coercive control theoretical framework and revised with consent to include pertinent, cult-specific questions with respect to existing literature. The interview guide consists of 127 items and is comprised of five sections, addressing (a) demographics; (b) recruitment, group dynamic, ideology, and overall environment; (c) coercive control; (d) charismatic relationship(s); and (e) departure from the group/aftermath. Only data relevant to this study will be described. Participants were asked to identify basic demographics including age, race/ethnicity, gender, and education level. They were also asked to identify the type of cult with which they were formerly involved, their coercer(s), and the length of their involvement.

The third section—and central focus of the present study—evaluated the following coercive control tactics: surveillance, microregulation, manipulation/exploitation, isolation, intimidation, degradation, deprivation, and sexual coercion/abuse. See Appendix A for coercive

control tactic definitions. Using structured questions and relevant prompts, participants were asked if they experienced any coercive control tactics and if so, how frequently, with the following options: never happened, rarely, frequently during a period of time, frequently, and all the time. Coercive control-focused questions, cult-specific probes, and example responses can be found in Appendix B.

Procedure

Interviews were conducted for 1.5-3 hours with former cult members from a variety of groups. Oral consent was obtained, as a common deterrent of cult research participation is the fear of confidentiality breach and consequent character assassination by certain cultic groups (Dole, 2008). Participants were able to skip any questions they did not want to answer and were provided monetary compensation in the form of $10 Amazon™ e-gift cards at the conclusion of the interview. Interviews were conducted via telephone or WhatsApp™ (a free messaging software) for participants residing outside of the United States, Canada, and Mexico. No audio or visual was recorded to protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants. Interviewers employed shorthand and recorded participant responses as close to verbatim as possible. Participant accounts were transcribed using Microsoft Word™. Quantitative analyses of demographics and other variables were conducted using SPSS™, while qualitative analyses were conducted using MAXQDA™.

Coding

Data for the present study was coded by the first author and two MA-level trained research assistants (RAs) using an existing coercive control codebook (Doychak & Raghavan, 2018). Tiebreaking was conducted by faculty supervisor and senior doctoral students. RA training was trifold. First, RAs familiarized themselves with the coercive control framework and

existing cult research through literature review. Next, RAs were trained to interview for several months. Interview training involved role play and observation. Slippage and inconsistency were corrected by supervising faculty and senior doctoral students to ensure consistency throughout the process.

Eight previously established coercive control tactics (Doychak & Raghavan, 2018) were retained without modification: surveillance, microregulation, manipulation/exploitation, isolation, intimidation, degradation, deprivation, and sexual coercion/abuse. In addition, the research team identified cult specific *subtactics (or examples of tactics)* that were used to delineate whether or not a participant experienced a particular tactic. Subtactics themselves were not coded for the purpose of statistical analysis but rather to support coding decisions during tiebreaking and illustrate qualitative examples of behaviors. For example, a subtactic of intimidation that emerged frequently was around threatening the *loss of salvation*. This subtactic example was included in the interview guide to provide context to RAs during interviews and coding; however, some subtactics were identified during the coding process. Finally, although researchers asked questions in a linear manner, participants often answered in a disjointed manner. As such, responses were sometimes culled from other parts of the interview, and if so, were clearly indicated in the coding sheet so as to increase transparency and reliability.

While coercive control tactics were easily captured and recorded by the pre-existing coding schema, the frequency of tactic occurrence proved more challenging. The original interview guide employed the following scale for tactic frequency: Daily, Few Times Per Week, Monthly, Rarely. This Likert scale was not appropriate for cultic study, as membership length varied greatly between participants, tactic frequency fluctuated over time, and lengthy cult involvement often made recall difficult. Thus, the frequency scale was revised to the following:

a) *Never Happened*: happened zero times; b) *Frequency Unspecified*: happened but insufficient information to determine frequency; c) *Infrequently*: rare but did happen; d) *Sometimes*: happened multiple times but not on a consistent basis; e) *Frequently during a period of time*: happened on a consistent basis for a marked period; and f) *Frequently*: happened often/on a consistent basis throughout membership.

To establish whether the coercive control coding schema was applicable and reliable in cult settings, participant responses were coded by three trained independent raters. This triple coding had two functions: reliability and flexibility. Coders were able to correctly categorize participant answers and capture data despite often disjointed and spontaneous narratives of coercion, with agreement by other raters. Additionally, coders were able to explore the possibility of emerging codes for tactics that had not occurred in previous research. The length of our near-verbatim transcripts varied between 3,000-7,000 words, allowing for rich coding.

The final coercive control coding schema included 8 tactic codes, 8 frequency codes, 39 tactic behavior codes, and 13 micro-tactic behavior codes. A detailed codebook outlining definitions, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and indicator questions (i.e., interview questions for which coders might find pertinent information) was developed to ensure reliability and discriminant capability (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

The final intercoder reliability by coding set (between coders A, B, and C) was high and ranged from 83.33 to 93.38% (i.e., 83.33% for AB, 92.65% for AC, and 93.38% for BC). Overall agreement for individual tactics ranged from 71.15 to 98.08% (i.e., 71.15% for deprivation, 86.54% for degradation, 90.38% for sexual coercion/abuse, 90.38% for microregulation, 92.31% for surveillance, 94.23% for intimidation, 94.23% for isolation, and 98.08% for manipulation/ exploitation). Deprivation had the lowest agreement in contrast to manipulation/exploitation,

which had the highest. Final intercoder agreement of 100% was achieved unanimously during tiebreaking. Primary reasons for disagreement included subjective use of data from other parts of the interview rather than disagreement on presence or absence of a tactic, or differences in definition.

Analysis and Results

Cult Types in Present Sample

As a first step, prior to examining the three study research questions, I explored the type of cults identified by participants. Cult types were adapted from Singer's categorization (2003); see Appendix C. It is important to note many cults endorsed multiple schools of thought; however, we categorized each cult based on its most emphasized, overarching ideology. Cults that did not have one clear central focus or theme were categorized as *Other*. A little over half of participants identified as Neo-Christian (n=29; 55.77%), followed equally by those belonging to Psychological and Self-Help Related groups (n=8; 15.38%) and Other-world Phenomena groups (n=8; 15.38%). Hindu, Zen, and Eastern Religious participants (n=5; 9.62%) and participant from other groups (n=2; 3.85%) were least represented.

Coercers Identified

As cults often have complicated hierarchies, my first research question sought to identify the primary coercer. Of the 52 participants, half were coerced by the collective group (n=26; 50.00%), while 40.38% (n=21) of participants endorsed one individual as their coercer. Two participants (9.62%) identified a pair of individuals as equally enforcing abuse. Secondary coercers were typically the group leader's spouse or a cofounder of the group.

Tactic Prevalence

Next, I examined the prevalence of coercion within the narratives. Coercive control

tactics were present in all 52 narratives. The minimum number of coercive control tactics present in each narrative was four; however, 30.77% endorsed experiencing 5-6 tactics and 63.46% of participants endorsed experiencing 7-8 tactics.

Tactic Presence

As can be seen in Table 1, manipulation/exploitation, intimidation, and microregulation were identified by almost all participants, followed by isolation, surveillance, and degradation. Sexual coercion/abuse was least identified at about 20%. To better understand the salience of each tactic, I examined which tactics participants identified as occurring *frequently* (i.e., happened often/on a consistent basis throughout membership).

As can be seen, once I considered frequency, a slightly different qualitative pattern emerged. Microregulation surfaced as the most consistently employed tactic with manipulation/ exploitation closely following. Although almost all participants reported intimidation (nearly the entire sample at 98.08%) only 53.85% reported experiencing it frequently. Similarly, surveillance occurred frequently for under half of participants despite being present in 88.46% of the narratives. Degradation and deprivation, while pervasive, revealed to be much less consistently occurring than other tactics at 26.92% and 23.08%, respectively. Sexual coercion/abuse was both least present and least likely to occur frequently.

Table 1

Tactics Present vs. Tactics Occurring Frequently

Tactic	% Present	% Frequently Occurring
Microregulation	96.15	76.92
Manipulation/Exploitation	98.08	71.15
Isolation	90.38	57.69

Intimidation	98.08	53.85
Surveillance	88.46	48.08
Degradation	88.46	26.92
Deprivation	78.85	23.08
Sexual Coercion/Abuse	19.23	3.85

Note. (N=52). The percentages featured in the third column reflect the ratio of participants who experienced each tactic "Frequently," whereas the percentages in the second column reflect the ratio of participants who endorsed experiencing any level of tactic frequency.

Subtactic Commonalities and Differences Across Contexts: An Overview

Next, I qualitatively explored the kinds of subtactics that participants described to understand how extensively subtactics in cults resembled those commonly seen in IPV contexts, and which subtactics were unique to cults (see Table 2). Additionally, some subtactics bore similarity but were expressed differently in cults than other contexts.

Table 2

Subtactics Identified in Present Sample

Tactics and Overlapping Subtactics Across Contexts	Cult-Specific Subtactics
Manipulation/Exploitation • Deception • Guilt Tripping • Gaslighting • Economic Exploitation of Time • Economic Exploitation of Money	
Intimidation	

• Threats • Punishment • Physical Abuse • Displaced Aggression • Punishment of Others	
Microregulation (of)	
• Romantic Relationships • Dress Code • Schedule • Financial Decisions	• Mainstream Materials • Mainstream Activities • Diet • Sexual Expression
Isolation	
• Villainization of naysayers • Emphasis on relationships within the group only	• Segregation from other members (e.g., on the basis of gender)
Surveillance	
• Reporting • Check-Ins • Stalking	• Record-Keeping
Degradation	
• Verbal Abuse	• Manual Labor • Demotion • Public Humiliation
Deprivation (of)	
• Food • Sleep • Medical Care	• Psychiatric Care • Shunning • Education
Sexual Coercion/Abuse	
• Forced Sex	

Commonalities Between Contexts

Many subtactics identified by participants are also documented extensively in IPV and sex trafficking (Doychak & Raghavan, 2018; Hanna, 2009; Stark, 2007). Such microregulation subtactics included control over *dress code*, *romantic relationships*, *schedule*, and *financial*

decisions. Manipulation/exploitation subtactics included *deception* (i.e., fraud, lying, withholding information, etc.), *guilt-tripping,* and *gaslighting* in the forms of *cognitive overload* (i.e., repeating an argument until the listener is overwhelmed) and *invalidating perception/denying facts* (i.e., making the abused feel like their understanding of things, emotional response, etc. is incorrect or blown out of proportion). The intimidation subtactic of *physical abuse* was identified across contexts; however, it is less-commonly featured in cults. Deprivation subtactics like denying *food*, *sleep,* and *medical care* and sexual coercion/abuse in the form of *forced sex* were also endorsed. Isolation subtactics included *villainization of naysayers* (i.e., making the victim believe outsiders or those against the group are enemies, etc.) and *emphasis on relationships with members only* (i.e., viewing contact with coercer(s) and/or group members as a priority for growth, spiritual purity, etc.). It is important to note that *villainization of naysayers* takes a different form in IPV and is more common in sex trafficking (Unger et al., 2021). Lastly, surveillance subtactics included *reporting* (i.e., being snitched/tattled on), *check-ins* (i.e., required calls, texts, etc. by victim to coercer), and *stalking*, all of which are considerably documented in sex trafficking (Pomerantz et al., 2021) and vary according to IPV contexts.

Overlapping Subtactics With Context-Specific Expression

Several subtactics of manipulation/exploitation, intimidation, and degradation were identified across contexts, but their expression varied across groups. In addition to overwhelming the victim or invalidating perception, doctrine was frequently used in manipulation subtactics to elicit compliance. These doctrine-fueled subtactics included *justifying hypocrisy* (i.e., creating twisted versions of or caveats within doctrine), *deflecting conflicting messages in doctrine* (i.e., dismissing, ignoring, or changing subjects when confronted on conflicting messages), and *dismissing rape* (i.e., not addressing, blame shifting, redefining, explaining away, and/or

minimizing sexual assault).

The *economic exploitation of time* (i.e., expected and/or obligated, frequent participation in group activities) and the *economic exploitation of money* (i.e., high-pressure sales, large donations, etc.) were frequently identified in cult narratives but appeared differently than in sex trafficking. While the sex trafficker controls their victim's money and holds their passport, or the violent partner controls their victim's bank accounts, participants noted being forced to contribute to special funds and purchase literature or trainings which they could not always afford or did not desire. As for exploitation of time, cultic groups exploited members' time through forced service and mandatory meetings, while traffickers controlled their victim's time by forcing them to engage in sex work.

Intimidation subtactics such as witnessing violence or *displaced aggression* (i.e., directing hostility away from the source of frustration/anger and toward either the self or an object, animal, etc.) which is commonly reported in IPV, and the *punishment of others* (e.g., witnessing the public shaming of another member) which is less common in IPV but used in group sex trafficking contexts, were typically rationalized as a means of self-improvement or spiritual purity.

Punishment and *Threats* in the cult context were unique. Punishments were typically non-physical (e.g., being forced to sit separately from other group members), while punishments in sex trafficking and IPV usually entail physical abuse or some form of bodily deprivation. Similarly, threats of violence were rare in cults in contrast to IPV and sex trafficking contexts (Myhill, 2015; Stark, 2007). Instead, cult members were threatened with the loss of salvation/enlightenment, expulsion, losing position/status, bad karma, and/or legal and social repercussions.

Finally, while *verbal abuse* was present across contexts, the content is significantly different in cult settings. Sex traffickers and violent partners often use swear words and make derogatory statements to their victims regarding their appearance, abilities, etc. Cults, however, often use their own lexicon and verbally abuse their members with terminology deemed derogatory by the group. Cults use words intended to belittle which, in most cases, would not elicit an emotional response from people outside the group.

Cult-Specific Subtactics

Unique subtactics emerged for all coercive control tactic except manipulation/ exploitation, intimidation, and sexual coercion/abuse. The surveillance subtactic of *record-keeping* was endorsed by multiple participants, especially in cults that were long-established. One participant described their group as possessing a file which included their personal information, records of their level of participation, and changes in address.

Microregulation subtactics included control over *mainstream materials* (e.g., music, books, etc.), *mainstream activities* (e.g., going to the movies, participating in holiday celebrations, etc.), *diet*, and *sexual expression* (i.e., masturbating, dating, kissing, etc.). Some of these forms of control exist in all abusive relationships but rarely by use of doctrine.

The isolation subtactic of *segregation from other members* (e.g., on the basis of gender) was endorsed by several participants. Segregation was upheld by doctrine and reinforced by the community. It is a unique form of isolation in that disconnection was between the participant and the larger community rather than the participant and the abuser, as is more typical in IPV and sex trafficking contexts.

Degradation subtactics in the cult context were unique and included *demotion*, *manual labor*, and *public humiliation* (e.g., having to stand at the front of a church and apologize for

having sex). Deprivation subtactics included *denying psychiatric care*, *denying education*, and emotional deprivation in the form of *shunning*.

While many of these tactics exist in gender-based violence, these findings suggest that cult-specific subtactics were collectively enforced more than seen in other contexts and were more consistently enforced because of multiple enforcers. Additionally, publicly harmful acts and the use of doctrine to punish or intimidate was a prominent theme unique to cults.

Discussion

A major goal of this study was to determine if the coercive control framework can help explain how power is abused to entrap people into cults. The findings overwhelmingly imply cult leadership uses a wide variety of coercive control tactics to establish and maintain compliance. Further, these findings dispel the popular, victim-blaming notion that cult members are inherently vulnerable and easily overpowered by the charismatic leader. Instead, findings suggests an ongoing, abusive process—recognized in other contexts—is at play. Participants experienced highly-coercive environments with no less than 88% of participants experiencing at least 6 tactics. Further, high reliability suggests the framework is valid, reliable, and can be used to examine coercion within the cult context, thereby providing common grammar and improving communication among cult researchers.

Who wielded coercive control tactics?

One of the most intriguing findings was who enforced coercive control. Despite the commonly-held notion that cults are led by a single charismatic leader, less than half of the sample endorsed one coercer; surprisingly, 50% of participants endorsed the collective group. This structure is quite different from IPV contexts with different levels of enforcement, as cult members are often complicit and act as secondary abusers (Unger et al., 2021). While this

hierarchy sometimes exist in sex trafficking, the degree of surveillance in cults is much more invasive and long-lasting; typically enforced by a higher number of secondary abusers for years. This structure and enforcement should be incorporated into understanding how control is established and maintained in cults.

This paradigm also helps explain why cult members may find it so difficult to leave. Cults effectively exploit their members' desire for belonging (Coates, 2011) by providing a community which paradoxically becomes a main source of comfort and simultaneously an abusive network. Cult members, as part and parcel of the community, possess a dual identity; participants identified fellow members as their closest friends but also enforcers of abuse, sometimes assuming the role of enforcer themselves. Enforcers manipulate, surveil, punish, shun, and threaten one another, thereby perpetuating their abusive environment and preventing their own escape. The cult member's complicity, fueled by like-minded peers, can escalate to criminality: engaging in, ignoring, or dismissing trafficking, fraud, child abuse, sexual abuse, and other illicit activities. At minimum, however, being complicit entraps cult members further in a paralyzing loop, increasing obedience and mistrust. Physical violence and stark intimidation are hardly necessary once the member is trapped. This is distinctive to cults but exists to a lesser extent in sex trafficking, as pimps maintain power even when physically absent through the unsafe social network and secondary abuse perpetrated by their victims (Unger, 2021).

Which tactics were most commonly identified?

Participants identified manipulation/exploitation, intimidation, microregulation, and isolation as the most prevalent tactics, respectively. What is interesting to note is unlike IPV and sex trafficking contexts, sexual abuse, deprivation, and degradation are used least in cults, respectively. This suggests shattering the victim's self-esteem is less imperative in cults than sex

trafficking and IPV contexts. In contrast, "brainwashing" and "milieu control" are prioritized and developed through the use of invisible tactics.

A closer look at which tactics occur frequently clarified which tactics play the biggest role in maintaining control: microregulation and manipulation/exploitation. Cult leaders foundationally utilized microregulation to maintain group cohesion, as cult members were barraged with daily activities and overly-structured rules which had to be carried out and adhered to in minute ways. Opposition was met with manipulation, predominantly in the form of gaslighting (i.e., using psychological manipulation to make the victim question their sanity).

While this frequency pattern is consistent with research in IPV and sex trafficking, where smaller and more pervasive dynamics such as microregulation dominate while larger and more threatening acts of intimidation occur some of the time to establish credibility, two fundamental differences emerged in how cult leaders kept members trapped (Baldwin et al., 2014; Hardesty et al., 2015; Raghavan & Doychak, 2015). First, as described above, members likely stayed because they were enmeshed in a community of secondary abusers; second, abuse was legitimized by written doctrine.

Which subtactics emerged?

An exploration of subtactics revealed how tactics were carried out similarly and with nuance across contexts, and also highlighted differences in cults. Manipulation in all contexts is used as a means to shift one's perspective of reality (Stark, 2007). Abusers initially manipulate in the form of deception, then enforce gaslighting as maintenance manipulation; however, in cults specifically, we found forms of gaslighting uniquely upheld by doctrine. Similarly, while each context depicts the abuser as chiefly employing isolation to create a strong emotional dependency, and relentless, meticulous governance (i.e., microregulation) of the victim to wear

down their decision-making ability—abusers in cults integrate doctrine into tactic behavior, which empowers them and even fellow members to abuse others without blame, guilt, and/or consequence.

Further differentiating cults from IPV is a strong lean toward indirect and/or displaced abuse. Most punishment faced by cult members is non-physical in the form of threats. Intimidation in cults takes shape as displaced aggression and punishment of others, which occur less commonly in IPV (Myhill & Hohl, 2019). These findings suggest cults abuse with subtlety, utilizing little to no physical abuse.

Perhaps the most distinctive difference between cults and other contexts is how degradation is employed. Degradation only shared one common subtactic between cults and other contexts (i.e., verbal abuse) which was expressed much differently in cults. Public humiliation, demotion, and manual labor were identified as publicly harmful forms of degradation aimed at shattering the self-perspective and replacing with doctrine. Cults heavily focus on changing reality; thus, when one challenges cult leadership, they are degraded until they comply.

Limitations

As with any study, the present study posed many challenges. The greatest challenge centered around issues with recall. Participants were asked to detail their experience, but the sheer volume of abuse they endured required specific and detailed probes to mitigate recall issues and capture as much qualitative data as possible. It is likely participants did not recall all abuse or misremembered some events. While we cannot control for memory, how we addressed the cult experience was concrete and detailed; we often framed questions to promote clear retrospection, using phrases such as, “Think about the time when…”

Also challenging were the methods of sampling. The COVID-19 pandemic began shortly after data collection began, limiting sampling to online methods and thereby excluding participants without internet access and those who would have otherwise participated without an online trace for fear of retaliation.

Future Directions

As mentioned earlier, the present study is ongoing with a current sample size of N=115. I endeavor to analyze coercive control tactics using the entire sample. I believe the refinement and replication of this study will help expand the theoretical framework of coercive control to cultic study to better understand entrapment but also life after cult involvement. In addition, understanding power structures can help legal professionals identify conspirators and victims, and assign culpability fairly. Similarly, clinicians will be better prepared to help clients with past cult experience. Although over one-third of therapists have aided former cult members, none have felt equipped to help with the unique issues their clients face (Matthews & Salazar, 2014). I hope this study will make a lasting impact in reducing stigmatization of ex-cult members, promoting awareness of insidious cults, and assisting ex-cult members in their recovery from what is often a deeply traumatic experience.

Conclusion

This is the first study to apply the coercive control framework to cult settings and the results are promising. In some sense, the most important finding is that all eight tactics used in sex trafficking and IPV contexts were able to fully capture the cult experience. These results suggest that the adapted, semi-structured interview guide is a valid and reliable measure, but also that the theoretical framework of coercive control is appropriate for cultic study, allowing other researchers to reliably expand this work.

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Appendix A

Coercive Control Definitions

Surveillance	Monitoring location and/or activities
Microregulation	Governing minute aspects of everyday life
Manipulation/ Exploitation	Using intentional deceit, misrepresentation, or existing vulnerabilities to induce compliance and/or alter perception
Isolation	Restricting or denying access to outside sources of support in the forms of family, friends, people, or places
Intimidation	Engaging in behaviors that induce fear, self-blame, or compliance with or without the threat of physical harm
Deprivation	Denying basic needs, which can be physical (e.g., food), physiological (e.g., sleep), or emotional (e.g., warmth/support)
Degradation	Using tactics designed to erode sense of self-worth (e.g., verbal abuse, manual labor, etc.)
Sexual Coercion/Abuse	Occurs when the victim resists unsuccessfully, does not give consent, or complied under duress, which results in forced compliance

Appendix B

Coercive Control Questions, Probes, and Examples

Coercive Control Questions	Cult-Specific Probes	Example Responses
Surveillance		
Did they ever follow you or have others keep track of you or your whereabouts?	Did they ever report on your behavior?	Participant 71: "Through phone calls, yes. You were expected to take phone calls or jump on spontaneous meetings. If you weren't available, you had consequences."
Microregulation		
Did they control aspects of your everyday life, daily tasks, and/or daily functioning?	• Did they tell you how to dress, what to eat, how to spend money, or assign you chores? Prohibit you from reading certain books, listening to genres of music, or participating in mainstream activities? • Were you told to refrain from sexual contact by them?	Participant 3: "Yes, all the time. They have all these standards about what they call 'worldly' things that they don't think meet pure enough standards. There was no worldly music. For girls: no short skirts, no logos because that's idolatry... everyday life was controlled by the associations you have. No friends from school or workplace, including family who are not [in-group] ... even your hair, piercings; there's none of that. I would get counseled about wearing too much makeup or that shirt's too low-cut... they'd be micromanaging your appearance. There were no tattoos... no creativity and no autonomy."
Manipulation/Exploitation		
Did they ever lie to you to get you to do something they wanted you to do or did you ever feel manipulated?	• How much money do you think you spent on your group in contributions in comparison to your earnings? • Did you have much free time outside of work and group activities? Were you ever pressured by him/her to give money? • Did they ever make you question yourself or doubt what you believed to be true?	Participant 8: "I had very little money and they told me I had to buy a release of tapes because the pressure was so high to sell them that they sold them to senior staff. Another time it was a different release, like a monthly subscription and they still got me to sign up. We were paying for services, books, donations…"
Isolation		
Did they keep you from seeing or speaking to family, friends?	• Other people outside of [the group]?	Participant 34: "Yes, many times. Actually, he would limit my contact with them. He discouraged me from talking to people that left. My stepmom had died and I was at the funeral hanging with family. He told me, 'Let the dead bury the dead.' It was very cold of him to do that."
Intimidation		
Did they ever threaten you? Engage in behaviors to make you afraid?	• Did they ever imply you were risking something by not complying (e.g., yours or someone else's [salvation])?	Participant 10: "Yes… there was this constant feeling of, 'You're not doing your homework right and enough,' and if you're not doing it and taking it seriously then you're really risking your life, your soul development… There is this feeling that if you're resisting opening up to the divine then you're squandering your life."
Degradation		

Did they ever use degrading language in private?	• Did they ever use degrading language *in public*? • Were you ever shunned if you did something perceived as wrong? • Did you ever witness anyone else being degraded? • Did you ever receive physical punishment? • Did you ever receive any other forms of punishment, such as public shaming?	Participant 27: "Yes, all the time. Daily. They'd say, 'You're such a piece of f***ing s**t. You deserved that, your rape.'"
Deprivation		
Did they ever deny you basic necessities?	• (e.g., food, medication, healthcare, etc.).	Participant 40: "The water we had was very unsanitary and probably not considered potable… People would try to boil it, but it was never healthy water. The strangest part about it that people had the most ramifications for was that no medicine was allowed. You should die before taking meds… If God wanted it, He would have put it here."
Sexual Coercion/Abuse		
Did they ever force you to have sex or engage in sexual behaviors you did not want to participate in?	• Did they ever force you to have sexual relations with a group member or as part of a group activity?	Participant 11: "Yes, just before I left. There was a build-up of little things over a week. The big thing is he doesn't engage in sex. It's not a physical thing to him; it's about becoming more spiritual."

Appendix C

Reclassification of Cult Categories

Cult Categories for Present Study	Singer's Categories
Neo-Christian Religious	Neo-Christian Religious
Hindu, Zen, and Eastern Religious	Hindu and Eastern Religious Zen and other Sino-Japanese philosophical-mystical orientation
Other-world Phenomena	Flying saucer and other outer-space phenomena Occultic, witchcraft, and Satanist Spiritualist
Psychological and Self-Help Related	Psychological and psychotherapeutic Self-help, self-improvement, and lifestyle systems
Other	Political Racial Other

Note. Adapted from *Cults in Our Midst*, by M. Singer, 2003.