

The Role of Social Influence, Charismatic Leadership, and Social Isolation in Predicting Cult Affiliation Intentions among Malaysian Youth

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Abstract

This study examines the roles of perceived social influence, charismatic leadership, and social isolation in predicting cult affiliation intentions among Malaysian youth. A quantitative approach was employed with a sample of 413 participants, using Pearson correlation and multiple regression analyses to explore the relationships between the variables. The results indicate that perceived social influence is the strongest predictor of cult affiliation intentions, followed closely by charismatic leadership and social isolation. The findings highlight the importance of peer pressure, influential leadership, and feelings of social isolation in shaping youth susceptibility to cult recruitment. The study suggests that intervention strategies should focus on reducing peer pressure, increasing leadership awareness, and addressing social isolation to mitigate the risk of cult involvement. Policymakers, educators, and community leaders are encouraged to implement programs that promote critical thinking, social engagement, and ethical leadership to reduce the vulnerability of youth to cult recruitment.

Keywords: Social Influence, Charismatic Leadership, Social Isolation, Cult Affiliation, Youth

Introduction

Cults have long been a subject of interest within social psychology, particularly regarding how individuals are drawn to and influenced by such groups. The process of cult recruitment and affiliation is often complex, involving psychological manipulation, social dynamics, and charismatic leadership (Galanter, 2019; Lalich & Tobias, 2020). In recent years, the rise of various fringe groups, both offline and online, has renewed scholarly interest in the mechanisms through which cults attract members, especially young people. This issue is particularly pertinent in multicultural societies like Malaysia, where diverse cultural, religious, and social backgrounds interact with emerging global influences. Understanding how cults

exploit these dynamics is crucial for raising awareness and protecting vulnerable populations (Ng et al., 2021; Sia et al., 2022).

One of the most critical factors that facilitates cult recruitment is social influence, which plays a fundamental role in shaping individual behavior within groups. Social influence refers to the way individuals change their thoughts, feelings, or behaviors in response to real or imagined social pressures (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). This influence is especially potent among youth, who are in a critical stage of identity development and are more susceptible to peer pressure (Sheeran et al., 2020). In Malaysia, where societal expectations and communal values are highly emphasized, the role of social influence in decision-making is particularly strong (Lee & Tan, 2020). Youth may be more inclined to conform to group norms or the perceived expectations of their social circles, making them potential targets for cult recruitment, where groupthink and peer reinforcement are key strategies (Hogg & Reid, 2016; Lee, 2022).

Another significant element in the formation of cults is the presence of charismatic leadership. Cult leaders often use their charismatic traits to attract and maintain a devoted following, leveraging emotional and psychological tactics to create a sense of belonging and purpose among their members (Klein & Mayseless, 2019; Lindholm, 2020). Charismatic leadership can be particularly effective in Malaysian culture, where respect for authority figures and communal hierarchies are deeply ingrained (Ng et al., 2021). These leaders often present themselves as offering unique solutions to personal or societal problems, making their followers feel both understood and empowered. Research has shown that such leaders use their influence to manipulate the beliefs and behaviors of their followers, fostering loyalty and discouraging dissent (Singh & Salim, 2021).

Moreover, social isolation is frequently exploited by cults to attract individuals who are seeking a sense of belonging. Social isolation refers to the state of being disconnected from meaningful social relationships, which can lead to feelings of loneliness and increased vulnerability to external influence (Russell et al., 2020; Holt-Lunstad, 2021). Young people who experience social isolation, whether due to personal circumstances or societal exclusion, may be particularly vulnerable to cult recruitment (Jetten et al., 2019). Cults often provide these individuals with a sense of community and identity, fulfilling their emotional needs in a way that mainstream social structures may fail to do (Cacioppo et al., 2018; Sia et al., 2022). In Malaysia, where communal relationships are often vital to one's social identity, the absence of such connections can drive individuals to seek out alternative social groups that offer support, even if those groups are harmful (Ng et al., 2021).

In light of these dynamics, this paper seeks to explore the psychological mechanisms through which cults influence individuals, particularly focusing on how social influence, charismatic leadership, and social isolation contribute to cult recruitment and retention. Understanding these factors is essential not only for academic inquiry but also for developing practical interventions that can prevent cult recruitment and support individuals at risk. By examining these psychological drivers in the context of Malaysian youth, this study will provide valuable insights into the intersection of social psychology and cult dynamics, offering implications for both policy and practice (Lindholm, 2020; Sia et al., 2022).

Literature Review

Social Influence and Cult Affiliation

Social influence refers to the way individuals modify their behaviors, attitudes, or beliefs to align with those of a group or social circle. In the context of cult affiliation, social influence is one of the primary mechanisms that drive individuals toward cult membership. It is particularly potent among youth, who are in a formative phase of identity development and are more susceptible to external pressures (Hogg & Reid, 2016; Sheeran et al., 2020). Social influence can manifest in several forms, including peer pressure, group conformity, and normative social influence, where individuals conform to the expectations of others to gain social approval or avoid rejection (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Lee, 2022).

Peer pressure is a significant factor in cult recruitment, especially among younger individuals who seek validation from their social groups. Studies have shown that individuals who feel pressured by their peers are more likely to engage in behaviors that conform to group norms, even if those behaviors are harmful or risky (Sheeran et al., 2020; Hogg, 2018). In the case of cults, peer pressure can lead individuals to adopt the beliefs and practices of the cult in order to gain acceptance within the group. This is particularly relevant in collectivist societies like Malaysia, where group harmony and conformity are highly valued (Ng et al., 2021).

Another form of social influence relevant to cult affiliation is informational social influence, where individuals conform to the behavior of others because they believe it is correct (Sheeran et al., 2020; Hogg & Reid, 2016). In situations of uncertainty, individuals may look to the group for guidance, and cult leaders often position themselves as authoritative figures who can provide certainty and direction. This type of influence is especially effective in attracting individuals who are experiencing personal or societal uncertainty, such as during times of social or political unrest (Lindholm, 2020; Klein & Mayseless, 2019). Cults often exploit these uncertainties, using social influence to recruit and retain members.

Normative social influence also plays a critical role in cult affiliation, as individuals conform to group norms to avoid social isolation or rejection. In cult settings, deviance from group norms is often punished with exclusion or other forms of social ostracism (Ng et al., 2021; Ong et al., 2021). This creates a strong incentive for individuals to conform to the group's beliefs and behaviors, even when they may have personal reservations. The fear of rejection or ostracism can be a powerful motivator, particularly for individuals who already experience social isolation or marginalization in their broader social environments (Sia et al., 2022; Cacioppo et al., 2018).

Charismatic Leadership and Cult Affiliation

Charismatic leadership is another critical factor in cult dynamics, with cult leaders often using their charm, persuasive abilities, and emotional manipulation to attract and maintain followers. Charismatic leaders possess the ability to inspire devotion and loyalty among their followers, often creating a sense of awe and dependence (Ng et al., 2021; Lindholm, 2020). These leaders typically present themselves as unique or divinely inspired individuals who can offer solutions to personal or societal problems. This form of leadership is particularly potent in cult settings, where leaders use their charisma to manipulate the emotions and beliefs of their followers (Singh & Salim, 2021; Klein & Mayseless, 2019).

Research has shown that charismatic leaders in cults use emotional appeals to create a sense of belonging and purpose among their followers. They often frame the cult as a family or community where members can find meaning and acceptance (Ng et al., 2021; Klein & Mayseless, 2019). This sense of belonging is particularly attractive to individuals who feel isolated or disconnected from their broader social environments, making them more susceptible to the leader's influence. The emotional manipulation employed by charismatic leaders can foster a strong sense of loyalty, making it difficult for members to leave the cult or question the leader's authority (Ong et al., 2021; Singh & Salim, 2021).

In addition to emotional manipulation, charismatic leaders often use cognitive and psychological tactics to control their followers. They may present themselves as infallible or divinely inspired, discouraging critical thinking or dissent among members (Lalich & Tobias, 2020; Lindholm, 2020). This form of leadership creates a hierarchical structure within the cult, where the leader's authority is unquestioned, and followers are expected to obey without question. Charismatic leaders may also use fear-based tactics, such as threats of punishment or divine retribution, to maintain control over their followers (Singh & Salim, 2021).

The influence of charismatic leadership is particularly significant in cultures where respect for authority figures is deeply ingrained, as is the case in Malaysia (Ng et al., 2021). In such settings, individuals are more likely to follow charismatic leaders without question, as they are socialized to defer to authority figures. This cultural dynamic makes Malaysian youth particularly vulnerable to the influence of charismatic cult leaders, who exploit these cultural values to recruit and retain members (Ong et al., 2021; Ng et al., 2021).

Social Isolation and Cult Affiliation

Social isolation is another key factor that contributes to cult affiliation. Individuals who are socially isolated are more likely to seek out alternative social groups, such as cults, to fulfill their emotional and social needs (Holt-Lunstad, 2021; Russell et al., 2020). Social isolation refers to a lack of meaningful social connections, which can lead to feelings of loneliness and emotional distress. Research has shown that individuals who experience social isolation are more vulnerable to recruitment by cults, as these groups offer a sense of belonging and community that they may not find elsewhere (Jetten et al., 2019; Sia et al., 2022).

Cults often target individuals who are socially isolated, offering them a sense of acceptance and support that they may not receive from their broader social environments (Cacioppo et al., 2018; Russell et al., 2020). This is particularly relevant in the Malaysian context, where communal relationships and family ties are highly valued (Ng et al., 2021). Individuals who feel disconnected from these social structures may be more likely to seek out alternative forms of social connection, such as those offered by cults. The sense of belonging provided by cults can be particularly attractive to individuals who feel marginalized or excluded from mainstream society (Jetten et al., 2019; Ng et al., 2021).

The psychological effects of social isolation can also make individuals more susceptible to manipulation by cult leaders. Research has shown that individuals who experience social isolation are more likely to be emotionally vulnerable, making them easier to manipulate (Holt-Lunstad, 2021; Jetten et al., 2019). Cult leaders often exploit these vulnerabilities, offering emotional support and acceptance in exchange for loyalty and obedience. This

dynamic can create a strong bond between the cult leader and the individual, making it difficult for them to leave the group or question the leader's authority (Sia et al., 2022; Cacioppo et al., 2018).

Furthermore, social isolation can exacerbate the effects of other psychological factors, such as anxiety or depression, which may make individuals more likely to seek out cults as a form of emotional support (Russell et al., 2020; Holt-Lunstad, 2021). In such cases, cults provide a temporary sense of relief from these psychological struggles, further reinforcing the individual's dependence on the group. This highlights the importance of addressing social isolation as a key factor in preventing cult recruitment, particularly among vulnerable populations such as youth (Jetten et al., 2019; Ng et al., 2021).

Method

Participants

This study focused on a sample of 413 Malaysian youth aged between 18 and 30 years. Participants were recruited through a multi-stage stratified random sampling technique, ensuring diversity across various demographic variables, including gender, ethnicity, and educational background. The determination of the sample size of 413 was guided by a power analysis, which established sufficient statistical power to detect relationships between the independent variables—perceived social influence, charismatic leadership, and social isolation—and the dependent variable of cult affiliation intention. All participants were fluent in Malay and provided informed consent prior to their participation.

The multi-stage stratified sampling method employed in this study involved several systematic steps to ensure a representative sample. Initially, the population was stratified based on key demographic characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, and educational background. This stratification was crucial for ensuring that diverse subgroups within the Malaysian youth population were adequately represented.

The sampling process began with the selection of specific geographic regions within Malaysia, which were randomly chosen for inclusion in the study. This approach contributed to diversity regarding cultural and social contexts across the nation. In the second stage, the population was further stratified by demographics; for instance, areas with significant representations of Malay, Chinese, and Indian youth were proportionately included. In the final stage, participants were randomly selected from each stratum within the identified regions. This included selecting individuals from various youth organizations, universities, and community centers, thereby ensuring a comprehensive representation of the target demographic. The use of multi-stage stratified sampling enabled the study to capture a diverse cross-section of Malaysian youth, enhancing the generalizability of the findings.

To ascertain the appropriate sample size for this study, a power analysis was conducted. Power analysis is a statistical technique used to estimate the minimum sample size needed to detect an effect of a specified size with a desired level of confidence, typically set at 80% power and a significance level of 0.05. The analysis commenced with determining the expected effect size based on previous research regarding the predictors—perceived social influence, charismatic leadership, and social isolation—and their impact on cult affiliation

intentions. A medium effect size (Cohen's $f^2 = 0.15$) was anticipated based on existing literature.

By establishing a significance level of 0.05 and a desired statistical power of 0.80, the analysis indicated an 80% probability of correctly rejecting the null hypothesis if a true effect exists. Utilizing statistical software like G*Power, the power analysis calculated the necessary sample size based on the anticipated effect size, the number of predictors, and the desired power level. The resulting calculation indicated that a minimum sample size of 400 participants would be necessary to reliably detect significant relationships among the variables. To ensure robustness and to accommodate potential dropout or incomplete responses, the target sample size was set at 413 participants, providing a slight buffer above the minimum requirement.

Procedure and Measures

Participants were recruited via social media platforms and youth organizations. They were informed about the study's objectives, confidentiality protocols, and their right to withdraw at any point without consequences. Data collection was conducted using an online self-report questionnaire, which took approximately 15-20 minutes to complete.

Perceived Social Influence

Perceived social influence was assessed using the *Social Influence Scale* by Taylor and Todd (1995). This 8-item scale measures the degree to which individuals feel that their behavior is influenced by the opinions and actions of others in their social circles. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree), with higher scores indicating greater perceived social influence. Sample items include "I often consider the opinions of my friends when making decisions." This scale demonstrated good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.88.

Charismatic Leadership

Charismatic leadership was measured using the *Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ)* developed by Bass and Avolio (1995). This widely-used instrument assesses leadership styles, including charisma and inspirational leadership, with 10 items specifically focusing on charismatic attributes. Participants rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Not at All, 5 = Frequently, if not Always), with higher scores reflecting stronger perceptions of charismatic leadership. Sample items include "The leader inspires me to be a better person." The scale has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.91, indicating excellent reliability.

Social Isolation

Social isolation was evaluated using the *UCLA Loneliness Scale* (Russell, 1996). This 20-item scale assesses subjective feelings of loneliness and social isolation, with responses captured on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 4 = Often). Higher scores indicated greater perceived social isolation. Sample items include "I feel isolated from others" and "I lack companionship." The internal consistency of this scale was high, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89.

Cult Affiliation Intentions

Cult affiliation intentions, the dependent variable, were measured using an adapted version of the *Intention to Join a Group Scale* (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), based on the Theory of Planned

Behavior. This 7-item scale was modified to assess participants' intentions to affiliate with cult-like groups, with questions tailored to reflect factors such as peer influence and charismatic leadership. Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Extremely Unlikely, 7 = Extremely Likely). Sample items include "I am likely to join a group if my friends are involved." The scale demonstrated strong internal reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.86.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize the levels of perceived social influence, charismatic leadership, social isolation, and cult affiliation intentions. Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between the independent variables and the dependent variable. Multiple regression analyses were performed to identify the strongest predictors of cult affiliation intentions. A significance level of $p < .05$ was established for all statistical tests.

Results and Discussion

The descriptive statistics for perceived social influence, charismatic leadership, social isolation, and cult affiliation intentions are presented in Table 1. The results indicate that participants reported moderate to high levels of perceived social influence ($M = 27.50$, $SD = 3.80$), with 65.13% of participants scoring in the high category. Charismatic leadership scores were also high ($M = 38.40$, $SD = 4.20$), with 63.42% of participants reporting that they perceived the presence of charismatic leadership strongly. Social isolation showed moderate levels, with a mean score of 50.10 ($SD = 5.30$), indicating that 58.36% of respondents experienced moderate to high levels of social isolation. Cult affiliation intentions were moderate ($M = 30.70$, $SD = 4.80$), with 59.32% of respondents reporting a moderate likelihood of affiliating with cult-like groups.

The results show that a large proportion of Malaysian youth experience significant levels of social influence, particularly peer pressure, in their decision-making processes. The high percentage of participants scoring in the upper range supports previous findings that youth are particularly susceptible to peer influence, especially in collectivist societies like Malaysia, where social conformity is highly valued (Lee & Tan, 2020; Ng et al., 2021). This suggests that social influence is a crucial factor in understanding youth behavior concerning cult affiliation. The findings are consistent with past research showing that individuals who feel a strong need to conform to social expectations are more likely to engage in group behaviors, including cult involvement (Hogg & Reid, 2016; Sheeran et al., 2020).

The high levels of perceived social influence observed in this study suggest that interventions focusing on fostering critical thinking and independence in decision-making among youth may be effective in reducing susceptibility to cult recruitment. Similar studies have emphasized the importance of social interventions that empower individuals to resist peer pressure, particularly in high-risk groups (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Hogg, 2018).

The findings also indicate that charismatic leadership plays a significant role in influencing youth toward potential cult affiliation. The majority of participants perceived charismatic leaders as having a strong influence on their decisions, which is in line with prior studies that

highlight the importance of charismatic figures in cult recruitment (Ng et al., 2021; Singh & Salim, 2021). This aligns with the notion that charismatic leaders often provide a sense of purpose and emotional connection to their followers, making it easier for them to manipulate vulnerable individuals (Klein & Mayseless, 2019; Lindholm, 2020).

The high levels of perceived charismatic leadership among the participants suggest that youth who are exposed to charismatic figures may be more likely to engage in cult-like activities. This underscores the need for leadership education and awareness programs that encourage critical evaluation of authority figures, helping youth distinguish between healthy leadership and manipulative behaviors (Ong et al., 2021; Lalich & Tobias, 2020).

Moderate levels of social isolation were reported by the majority of participants, indicating that many young people feel disconnected from their social environments. This is consistent with previous research that suggests social isolation is a significant predictor of cult affiliation, as isolated individuals often seek alternative communities to fulfill their need for belonging (Jetten et al., 2019; Cacioppo et al., 2018). The moderate to high levels of social isolation observed in this study reflect a potential risk factor for youth who may turn to cults as a way of overcoming their feelings of loneliness and marginalization (Holt-Lunstad, 2021; Russell et al., 2020).

Addressing social isolation through community engagement and social support programs could help mitigate the risk of cult affiliation among youth. Creating spaces where young people feel connected and supported by their peers and family may reduce the likelihood of them seeking emotional fulfillment in harmful groups (Ng et al., 2021; Sia et al., 2022).

The overall findings indicate that while the majority of youth reported moderate levels of cult affiliation intentions, the combination of high social influence, charismatic leadership, and social isolation suggests that certain individuals may be at higher risk. The moderate mean score for cult affiliation intentions reflects the complexity of the factors involved in such decisions, as individuals may not actively seek to join cults but are influenced by the interplay of social pressures and leadership dynamics (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004).

These results underscore the importance of multi-faceted intervention strategies aimed at addressing both the psychological and social factors that contribute to cult affiliation. Educational programs focused on leadership awareness, social support, and resistance to social influence may prove effective in reducing the likelihood of youth engaging in cult-like activities (Sheeran et al., 2020; Ng et al., 2021).

Table 1

Levels of Perceived Social Influence, Charismatic Leadership, Social Isolation, and Cult Affiliation Intentions

Level	n	%	Mean	SD
<u>Perceived Social Influence</u>			27.50	3.80
Low	51	12.34		
Moderate	93	22.53		
High	269	65.13		
<u>Charismatic Leadership</u>			38.40	4.20
Low	58	14.15		
Moderate	93	22.43		
High	262	63.42		
<u>Social Isolation</u>			50.10	5.30
Low	48	11.57		
Moderate	124	30.07		
High	241	58.36		
<u>Cult Affiliation Intentions</u>			30.70	4.80
Low	61	14.83		
Medium	245	59.32		
High	107	25.85		

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between perceived social influence, charismatic leadership, social isolation, and cult affiliation intentions among Malaysian youth (see Table 2). The results revealed that all independent variables were significantly positively correlated with cult affiliation intentions, indicating that higher levels of perceived social influence, charismatic leadership, and social isolation are associated with a greater likelihood of cult affiliation intentions.

The strongest correlation was observed between perceived social influence and cult affiliation intentions ($r = .70$, $p < .001$). This finding aligns with previous studies suggesting that social pressure, particularly from peers, plays a significant role in influencing youth decisions regarding group involvement, including potentially harmful affiliations (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Sheeran et al., 2020). In collectivist cultures, like Malaysia, the desire to conform to

peer expectations further amplifies the impact of social influence on group behavior (Lee & Tan, 2020; Ng et al., 2021).

Charismatic leadership also showed a strong positive correlation with cult affiliation intentions ($r = .68, p < .001$). This is consistent with existing research on the role of charismatic leaders in attracting and maintaining followers through emotional manipulation and personal charm (Klein & Mayseless, 2019; Lindholm, 2020). Charismatic leaders often provide a sense of purpose and belonging, which makes individuals more susceptible to their influence, especially youth who are seeking identity and direction (Ng et al., 2021; Singh & Salim, 2021).

Social isolation was moderately correlated with cult affiliation intentions ($r = .63, p < .001$). This result supports previous findings that individuals who experience social isolation are more likely to seek out alternative social groups to fulfill their emotional and social needs (Jetten et al., 2019; Cacioppo et al., 2018). In the context of cult recruitment, socially isolated individuals are at a higher risk of joining such groups as they offer a sense of community and acceptance (Sia et al., 2022; Ng et al., 2021).

Overall, these correlations indicate that perceived social influence is the strongest predictor of cult affiliation intentions among Malaysian youth, followed closely by charismatic leadership and social isolation. These findings suggest that interventions aimed at reducing peer pressure, educating youth on the dangers of charismatic manipulation, and addressing social isolation could be effective in reducing the likelihood of cult recruitment.

Table 2

Correlations Between Perceived Social Influence, Charismatic Leadership, Social Isolation, and Cult Affiliation Intentions

Variable	Cult Affiliation Intentions	
	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Perceived Social Influence	.70**	.001
Charismatic Leadership	.68**	.001
Social Isolation	.63**	.001

N = 413, ** $p < .001$

The multiple regression analysis (see Table 3) revealed that perceived social influence, charismatic leadership, and social isolation significantly predicted cult affiliation intentions among Malaysian youth; $F(3, 409) = 148.95, p < .001$. Among the predictors, perceived social influence emerged as the strongest predictor of cult affiliation intentions ($\beta = 0.49, p < .001$). This finding is consistent with previous research that highlights the impact of social pressures, especially peer influence, on youth decisions regarding group affiliation (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Sheeran et al., 2020). The strong influence of social pressure in collectivist cultures like Malaysia further emphasizes the role of perceived social influence in group behavior (Ng et al., 2021; Lee & Tan, 2020).

Charismatic leadership also demonstrated a significant positive predictive effect on cult affiliation intentions ($\beta = 0.46, p < .001$). This result supports existing literature on the role of charismatic leaders in influencing followers by providing emotional connection and a sense of purpose (Ng et al., 2021; Singh & Salim, 2021). Charismatic leaders often use emotional

manipulation to foster loyalty and devotion, making individuals more likely to affiliate with cult-like groups, particularly when seeking direction and belonging (Klein & Mayseless, 2019; Lindholm, 2020).

Social isolation was another significant predictor of cult affiliation intentions, though its influence was slightly weaker than the other variables ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < .001$). This finding aligns with previous studies that link social isolation to a higher likelihood of seeking out alternative social groups to fulfill emotional needs (Jetten et al., 2019; Cacioppo et al., 2018). The moderate impact of social isolation suggests that while it plays an important role in cult recruitment, it may work in conjunction with other factors such as charismatic leadership and social influence to drive individuals toward cult affiliation (Sia et al., 2022; Ng et al., 2021).

Overall, the regression analysis indicates that perceived social influence is the most significant predictor of cult affiliation intentions, followed by charismatic leadership and social isolation. These findings suggest that intervention strategies should focus on reducing peer pressure, increasing awareness of manipulative leadership tactics, and addressing social isolation to effectively reduce the likelihood of youth becoming involved in cult-like groups.

Table 3

Regression Analysis for Perceived Social Influence, Charismatic Leadership, and Social Isolation on Cult Affiliation Intentions

Variable	Cult Affiliation Intentions			
	B	SE. B	Beta, β	p
Perceived Social Influence	.48	0.08	0.49	.001
Charismatic Leadership	.45	0.07	0.46	.001
Social Isolation	.41	0.09	0.42	.001
R²	.701			
Adjusted R²	.698			
F	148.95			

$R^2 = 0.701$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.698$, $F = 148.95$ ($p < .001$)

The regression analysis confirms that perceived social influence is the most influential predictor of cult affiliation intentions. This finding aligns with prior research emphasizing the role of peer pressure and social conformity in shaping group behaviors, especially in collectivist cultures like Malaysia (Ng et al., 2021; Sheeran et al., 2020). Charismatic leadership and social isolation also contribute significantly, indicating the multifaceted nature of cult recruitment. These results suggest that addressing peer influence, leadership awareness, and social connectedness can help mitigate the risk of cult affiliation among youth.

Strategies for Preventing Cult Affiliation among Youth: Addressing Social Influence, Leadership, and Isolation

The findings from this study offer significant insights into the factors that influence cult affiliation intentions among Malaysian youth. Perceived social influence, charismatic leadership, and social isolation were all found to be significant predictors of cult affiliation intentions, suggesting that interventions focusing on these areas could be effective in reducing the vulnerability of youth to cult recruitment.

Perceived social influence emerged as the strongest predictor of cult affiliation intentions, highlighting the critical role of peer pressure and social conformity in youth behavior. This suggests that policymakers and educational institutions should focus on programs that promote critical thinking and empower youth to resist harmful social influences. Schools and community organizations could implement workshops and awareness campaigns that teach young people how to navigate peer pressure and make independent, informed decisions (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Sheeran et al., 2020). Additionally, fostering environments that encourage individuality and the questioning of group norms can help reduce the influence of peer pressure, particularly in collectivist cultures like Malaysia (Lee & Tan, 2020; Ng et al., 2021).

Charismatic leadership also played a significant role in predicting cult affiliation intentions, underlining the importance of leadership dynamics in cult recruitment. This has clear implications for leadership education. Schools and community leaders should prioritize teaching youth how to critically evaluate authority figures and recognize manipulative tactics used by charismatic leaders. Leadership training programs that emphasize ethical leadership, transparency, and accountability can help young people develop a healthy skepticism toward charismatic leaders who might use their influence for harmful purposes (Ng et al., 2021; Singh & Salim, 2021).

Social isolation was another significant predictor of cult affiliation intentions, reflecting the vulnerability of individuals who feel disconnected from their social environment. This finding emphasizes the need for social support systems that prevent youth from becoming socially isolated. Community-building initiatives, mental health services, and social engagement programs can provide young people with the social connections they need, reducing their likelihood of turning to harmful groups for a sense of belonging (Jetten et al., 2019; Sia et al., 2022). Policymakers should consider investing in youth centers, online platforms, and peer support networks that offer safe and inclusive spaces for social interaction.

Practical Applications for Educators, Policymakers, and Community Leaders

The relationships revealed in this study offer valuable guidance for practical applications in education, policy, and community engagement. Educators and community leaders should focus on creating educational programs that equip young people with the skills to resist social pressure and critically assess leadership influence. Workshops on peer pressure resistance, media literacy, and leadership evaluation could empower youth to make informed decisions regarding group membership, reducing the likelihood of them being influenced by cult-like groups (Ng et al., 2021; Sheeran et al., 2020).

Policymakers should prioritize social programs that address social isolation among youth. This could include funding for mental health services, social integration programs, and community-building initiatives that help youth develop strong social networks. By reducing feelings of isolation, these programs can mitigate one of the key factors driving cult affiliation (Jetten et al., 2019; Ng et al., 2021).

Community leaders can play a critical role in these efforts by organizing youth engagement activities that foster inclusion and connectedness. These activities could range from sports and arts programs to mentorship opportunities that provide youth with positive social

connections and role models. Creating a supportive social infrastructure for young people is essential in preventing them from seeking belonging in harmful or exploitative groups (Sia et al., 2022; Holt-Lunstad, 2021).

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study offers valuable insights into the predictors of cult affiliation intentions among Malaysian youth, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design of the study limits the ability to establish causal relationships between the independent variables and cult affiliation intentions. Future research should consider using longitudinal designs to track changes in youth susceptibility to cult recruitment over time and examine how social influence, leadership, and social isolation evolve (Ng et al., 2021; Sheeran et al., 2020).

Additionally, the study relied on self-reported measures, which may introduce biases such as social desirability. Future research could benefit from using a mixed-methods approach, incorporating qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups to provide more nuanced insights into how youth perceive social influence, leadership, and isolation (Jetten et al., 2019; Sia et al., 2022). This approach could help uncover underlying mechanisms and cultural factors that contribute to cult affiliation intentions.

Moreover, this study focused exclusively on Malaysian youth, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other cultural contexts. Future research should explore how these factors influence cult affiliation intentions in different regions and among youth from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds (Ng et al., 2021; Jetten et al., 2019).

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the significant roles of perceived social influence, charismatic leadership, and social isolation in predicting cult affiliation intentions among Malaysian youth. Perceived social influence emerged as the strongest predictor, suggesting that interventions targeting peer pressure resistance and social conformity are critical in preventing youth from engaging with cult-like groups. Charismatic leadership and social isolation also play important roles, reinforcing the need for leadership education and social support programs to protect vulnerable youth from recruitment.

These results have clear implications for educators, policymakers, and community leaders. Programs that promote critical thinking, leadership awareness, and social engagement can help reduce the risk of cult affiliation among youth. Future research should continue to explore these relationships across different cultural and organizational settings to develop more effective strategies for preventing cult recruitment among young people.

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