

A Thesis

Entitled

Undue Influence and Destructive Cults in the Digital Age: Analyzing the BITE Model for
the Age of Destructive Internet Groups

by

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Liberal Studies

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An Abstract of
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Historically, destructive cult groups have recruited members in-person, lived in communal spaces, and had strong in-person bonds. Developed in response to these groups is the BITE Model of undue influence, which models ways in which a group can be classified as a destructive cult. However, online-facilitated destructive groups have emerged since the beginning of the internet, and while the BITE model is the best method to determine if a group is a cult, the ways these groups operate in terms of recruitment, indoctrination, and mind control look different than historical cults. This paper explores the historical groups, the BITE model, the internet, policy and regulation, online-facilitated groups, along with suggestions for further research, and a cautionary word to those who hope to further the research of online-facilitated destructive cults.

For Jay and Roo, who supported me and provided all the love and encouragement anyone needs in the world.

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List of Abbreviations

ARG.....	Alternate Reality Game
MLM.....	Multilevel Marketing
SIM.....	Social Influence Model
UFO.....	Unidentified Flying Object

Preface

When thinking about destructive cults, one might think back to past decades when Charles Manson and his “Family” created a media frenzy after brutally murdering actress Sharon Tate and friends at her home in the 1960’s. Some might think of Hare Krishnas handing out flowers in orange robes in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s. Some might think of the 1980’s Satanic Panic while New York City reeled from the satanic-cult potential of the Son of Sam. Watching in 1993 as news outlets broadcasted David Koresh’s apocalyptic Branch Davidians’ communal complex on Mount Carmel burning to the ground, killing 76 people (including 23 children) during an FBI and ATF standoff might come to mind. Or, possibly the strange, wide eyed, extraterrestrial doomsday group Heaven’s Gate, who committed suicide in 1997 as the Hale Bop comet swept past, and the media discussed their matching track suits. These groups, while their ideologies may have differed, all fit the concept of the BITE Model for identifying and categorizing the recruitment and subsequent control over members in destructive cults. According to Steven Hassan in his book *Combating Mind Control* (2018) there are four distinct types of cults: religious cults, political cults, psychotherapy/educational cults, and commercial cults (Hassan, 2018, p. 86). It is worth noting that in a follow up publication of Hassan’s in 2020, a mention of a fifth main type of cult: *the cult of personality* is made and will be given secondary attention in this paper as well.

Chapter 1

Influence Continuum: Healthy & Destructive Groups

Introduction

Not all cultic groups are destructive. A cult can be defined as any group with beliefs that are a niche interest or practice unconventional beliefs or practices. The term cult is also applied to art (cult classics are classified as such because of a large “underground” love for an obscure piece of art, film, or literature), and religious or cultural groups who follow a leader (cult of personality or religious figure). Cult is also a term that can sometimes be derogatory towards groups that are misunderstood by the mainstream and looked upon as strange or weird, but these groups, unless they fit the model described ahead are not destructive cults. There is danger in applying the term cult to a group before analyzing whether they fit the BITE model and, “to label a movement a cult can be to suggest that it is a dangerous pseudo-religion with satanic overtones which is likely to be involved in financial rackets and political intrigue, to indulge in unnatural sexual practices, to abuse its women and children, and to use irresistible and irreversible brainwashing techniques in order to exploit its recruits.” (Barker, 2014, p. 236) A destructive cult, as defined by Hassan’s BITE model, “...is a group that violates its member’s rights and damages them through the abusive techniques of unethical mind control. It distinguishes itself from normal, healthy social or religious groups by subjecting its members to systematic control of behavior, information, thought and emotion (BITE) to keep them dependent and obedient,” (Hassan, 2018, p. 82) For the sake of this research, careful attention will be paid to making sure that groups discussed in this paper fit the BITE model.

Certainly, the first thing that would come to mind upon the mention of cults would not be your cousin Julie who has just invited you to join her in becoming a #bossbabe and creating your own amazing opportunities with her multi-level marketing company on Facebook. Or, the new wellness center that just opened downtown, your local Yoga studio, or the hashtags your uncle uses on Twitter to express his views on politics. Since the advent of social media, the influence and use of the hashtag has become an increasingly powerful driving force in what information reaches people, allowing information and misinformation to travel globally and instantaneously.

It is important to acknowledge that there is debate on what high demand destructive groups on the influence continuum should be called. Some researchers feel that the word “cult” has emotional charge enough to be destructive itself when used as a description, which is correct if the group fails to fit the BITE model. Not all groups will fit in to this categorization, so the term can be reductive and leave much open to interpretation. Many scholars use more neutral labels such as “new religious movement”, “emergent religions” and “marginalized religions”. (Montell, 2021, p. 39) However, because the nature of these high demand destructive cults, the realm in which they exist (the internet), and because they can cross the boundaries of the four main types of cults in that they can contain aspects of all four categories, the terms “new religious movement”, “emergent religion”, and “marginalized religion”, do not cover the breadth of abuse in these groups. For example, discussed in a section ahead, religious cults can also operate as commercial cults, be politically driven, or operate under the veil of “self-help”. The term cult *should* invoke a strong emotion so that people can recognize the danger, and proper use of the term is necessary to convey the severity of potential damage these

groups can cause. “Since the word “cult”, therefore, imports a value judgement, can only properly be applied after the true nature of the organization has been ascertained.”

(Chryssides, p. 75) For this research, the term “cult” will be used to describe any group that fits Hassan’s (2018) BITE Model.

This paper will draw a parallel between historic destructive cults that fit the BITE model, and more modern groups that rely heavily on the internet (and the use of hashtags and algorithms) for recruitment to show ways that social and political climates cause reactions by the misrepresented, excluded, or underrepresented people and what this looks like in the digital age. This paper will identify the ways that internet-centered and online cultic groups fit the BITE model by analyzing groups that may currently not be viewed as cults because the model may need to be modified for modern, online, destructive groups. Whether the BITE model needs to be modified for the digital/hashtag age is something that will be explored, while building off the current research done by experts across the disciplines of sociology, psychology, economics, religion, health, and cultic studies.

The purpose of this study is to give a history of past cultic groups and how they fit the BITE model, explore the BITE model as it relates to modern online groups, destructive cult groups, and how, if at all, the BITE model needs to be revised so that groups online can be properly identified as a destructive cult. A secondary interest would be how these groups form, how the hashtag is used in recruitment, how the BITE model applies to online groups, and determine if an identification category needs to be added or modified. Also, secondary to the focus of applying the BITE model to online groups is a look at the history of media regulation as it applies to the internet, suggestions for further

research, recommendations for those looking to protect themselves from destructive internet groups, and a brief note on how researchers can protect their mental health while researching potentially disturbing or triggering content. Findings will show that while the BITE model is still the best way to determine if a high demand group is a cult, the way that internet cults recruit and operate is the main differentiating factor that needs to be explored.

Steven Hassan's Influence Continuum

According to Steven Hassan's work, *Combating Cult Mind Control* (2018), average people don't understand the concept of mind control, and therefore don't truly know how cults operate. In fact, the belief that someone could take control of your mind might be too frightening to think about. Hassan states, "we all have *a belief in our own invulnerability*" and want to think that we all can control our own lives. (Hassan, 2018, p. 89) The idea that humans are rational and responsible for their own actions, allows for a worldview that does not include the concept of mind control. So why are cult groups so successful in recruiting those who don't believe in the concept of mind control?

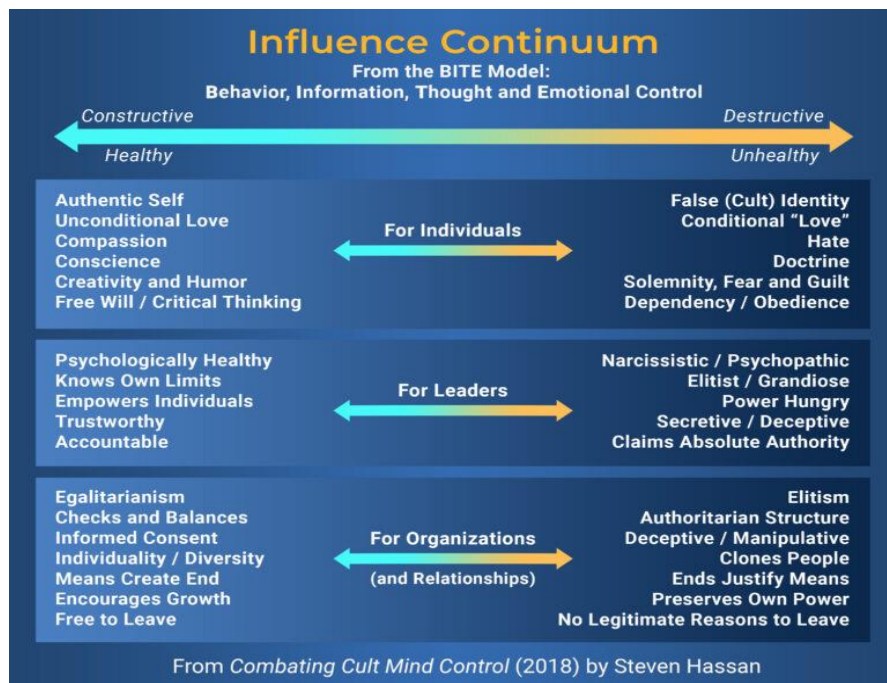
According to Hassan, "...the process of influence start from the moment we are born, so it's easy to take the position that everything is mind control" (Hassan, 2018, p. 90), or a normal part of life, so what's the worry? Influence is a part of life, but *undue* influence and destructive coercive persuasion should not be. Philosophers have debated for a long time the ability of humans to make choices that are not dependent on external influences, and exercise free will. While philosophically the concept of "everything is mind control" can be true if you apply it to the idea that we are influenced all day every day by those around us, the idea of "everything is mind control" also implies that humans are without

agency and passive beings unable to think for ourselves. Hassan (2018) presents a continuum of influence of which those at the destructive end of the continuum, particularly those who utilize the Internet, are the focus of this research which will cross disciplinary bounds.

When considering the overall health of a group of people, using Hassan's Influence Continuum is a helpful resource. Positioned at one end of the continuum are healthy and constructive groups. At the other end of the continuum are unhealthy and destructive groups. (<https://freedomofmind.com/cult-mind-control/influence-continuum/>)

Figure 1

Steven Hassan's Influence Continuum from the BITE Model



Healthy Groups. As social worlds expand, and people become more connected and available, it is interesting to find that research is showing that a large segment of the population is struggling with loneliness and isolation. Loneliness has been linked with

depression, increased mortality, and chronic illness. (Wakefeild et al, 2019) Research also shows that being a part of a group has a positive effect on people, “because processes of social identification make them meaningful and psychologically valuable.” (Wakefeild et al, 2019, p. 2) Healthy groups, as modeled by Hassan’s Influence Continuum, foster free will and empowerment, have checks and balances, seek regular and informed consent from its members, and members are free to leave. Leaders in these groups have what Luneneburg (2012) describes as *legitimate power*, meaning they have formal authority to influence and direct individuals which is in the scope of the position they hold. Leaders may have *reward power* which is used to influence behavior by rewarding group members with what they desire. (Luneneburg, 2012) A result of reward power might be better performance, if there is a clear correlation between the performance and the reward, and expectations have previously been clearly set and agreed upon. (Lunenburg, 2012)

Destructive Groups. Social psychology has also found the potential for groups to be highly damaging to people’s well-being. Social processes like inequality, stigma and discrimination can have a detrimental effect on a person’s health. (Wakefeild et al, 2019) On the destructive end of the continuum leaders create a false identity, lead with fear and guilt, are the absolute authority and are deceptive and manipulative. In groups on the destructive end of the continuum, group members’ rights are violated through systematic mind control. (Hassan 2018) *Coercive power*, or the ability to influence behavior by creating a perceived threat of punishment is often a part of these destructive groups. (Luneneburg, 2012) Leaving is not seen as an option, and those who do leave are looked at as traitors. “The more a group seeks to control any or all of these aspects of its

members lives, the closer to the extreme end of the influence continuum it falls- and the more likely it is to be a cult.” (Hassan, 2018, p. 93) We will explore more of this continuum, along with Hassan’s BITE model for authoritarian control, as we discuss groups both historically and modernly that fit these traits. Briefly described, Hassan’s (2018) BITE model operates the use of four categories used to analyze the danger of cult groups: control of behavior, control of information, control of thoughts, and control of emotions. In a following section a case study analysis will be used to apply each part of Hassan’s model to past cultic groups, along with applying each section of the model to groups who utilize the Internet or exist exclusively on the web. However, it is first important to define the main types of cults: religious, political, psychotherapy/educational, and commercial (Hassan, 2018).

Religious cults are most prominent and numerous. According to Hassan (2018) religious cults “operate with religious dogma”; the group might be based on the Bible, Qur’an, Eastern religions, the occult, or simply be made up by the leader. It is important to note that some of these groups operate under a religious veil, while incorporating psychotherapy and commercial components. (Hassan, 2018, p. 86) Leaders of these groups sometimes enjoy lavish lifestyles because they are capitalizing on the vulnerability of group members as easily manipulated consumers. Political cults are sometimes in the news, with a political theory and some religious undertones (Hassan, 2018). Usually these groups are described as “extremist” or “fringe” in the media (Hassan, 2018, p. 86) and exist under a political dogma. Psychotherapy/educational cults tout “enlightenment” or “ascension” to their members and often claim to have divine insight that they dangle before their followers. Oftentimes claiming omniscient

knowledge that will be shared with members if members do what is asked of them (Hassan, 2018). Expensive seminars and workshops are often a part of these groups, and members are encouraged to bring their friends, co-workers, and families into the fold of the group or else they should be cut out of the member's life. Commercial cults prey on people's desire for money and power, promising riches that never materialize. (Hassan, 2018). One might think of multi-level marketing groups (MLMs) like Amway, Mary Kay, LuLaRoe, Scentsy, Younique, and doTERRA. These groups usually require a monetary investment from members, and "salespeople are manipulated through fear and guilt, and are sometimes physically and sexually abused." (Hassan, 2018, p. 87) Members can be gaslighted in to believing that if you fail using the groups "fail safe" system that the problem lies with you, and not the program. (Montell, 2021) This may include being manipulated by buzzwords, false inspiration, thought-terminating cliches and false promises of power and wealth. A very distinct rhetoric tells you that you are being counted on by your associates and can't give up else you'll let them (and God) down. (Montell, 2021) Because these groups believe in the dogma of greed, they manipulate their members to work for very little pay, while dangling the dream of wealth and get-rich-quick results. Finally, some cult groups are a dangerous hodge-podge; A little bit of everything. Hassan states, "The average person...doesn't know how cults operate, doesn't know what questions to ask and what behaviors to watch out for, and doesn't believe they could ever be sucked in. That's why so many ordinary people are prime candidates for cult recruiters." (Hassan 2018, p. 89)

A brief note on brainwashing. According to Schein (1961) Brainwashing is a term initially used to describe the methods used by the Chinese government to persuade the

acceptance of Communist ideology through “thought reform” and “ideological remodeling”. (Shein, 1961) The term, in a more general sense can be applied to techniques that manipulate a person in to thought or action unbeknownst to the individual that is being targeted. (Shein, 1961) Hassan (2020) describes three steps involved in brainwashing: unfreezing, changing, and refreezing. Unfreezing is part of indoctrination, and for this to happen, a person’s reality must be shaken to the core, they must be confused and disoriented. “Their frames of reference for understanding themselves and their surroundings must be challenged and dismantled.” (Hassan, 2020, p. 73) Sleep deprivation, diet, malnutrition, hypnotic techniques, trance states, sensory overload, a bombardment of emotional messages, and confusion are all parts of the unfreezing process. (Hassan 2020) A double blind hypnotic technique -or, one that delivers two or more contradicting pieces of information, while also giving the illusion of having a choice is a most effective means of unfreezing: “[f]or example, cults will often tell a person that they are free to leave whenever they wish but that they will regret it for the rest of their lives.” (Hassan, 2020, p. 75)

Building off the process of creating emotional distress, the second step is changing. A new personal identity, a new set of behaviors, and new thoughts and emotions are established in this phase. (Hassan 2020) Repetition is an important piece of changing. Information provided repeatedly creates programming. This process also preys on the fact that humans are adaptable, and a charismatic leader understand how to exploit that fact to reprogram a person’s identity. (Hassan, 2020) When thinking about changing one might recall historical cults and the new names given to members, and because this persuasion

is accomplished by already indoctrinated cult members, it is highly effective in changing a person's identity.

Refreezing is the last step of mind control in which the new identity must be set in stone or refrozen. (Hassan, 2020) With a new identity, new purposes in life it allows a newly indoctrinated cult member to dismiss their old identities and embrace the new one.

“During this phase, an individual's memory becomes distorted, minimizing the good things in the past and maximizing their failings, hurts, and guilt.” (Hassan, 2020, p. 77)

Modeling is an important part of refreezing as well, this is a process by which old members of a group show new members of the group the way. This keeps the old members in line while fostering an ego boost, and helps the new recruits become someone who can now indoctrinate and recruit others. (Hassan, 2020)

Chapter Two

BITE Model and Historical Cult Groups

Hassan's BITE Model

Steven Hassan, while being a leading contributor to the study of cult groups, approaches his research from an insider perspective having survived his involvement with the Unification Church (also known as The Moonies). Hassan's work has been criticized by scholars and mental health professionals who argue that it lacks scientific rigor and empirical evidence. Because Hassan's book, *Combating Cult Mind Control* (2018) includes suggestions for how to speak to a person who is in the throes of involvement in a destructive cult, some critics say that the harm that can come from untrained people attempting to intervene in a cult member's lives is problematic. A 2010 article explores the dimensions of cult abuse while also criticizing Hassan for potentially oversimplifying and overgeneralizing the extremely complex dynamics of cults. Another criticism states that, "Hassan has inevitably alighted on characteristics that can be found in some of these groups, but faile[s] to offer any collective qualities that could be regarded as universal 'marks of a cult'." (Chryssides, 2021, p. 80). While Hassan's research is the foundation for the research in this paper, it is important to understand that there are also criticisms of Hassan's work as well. Another important note is that this research is being done by someone with no experience in a destructive or high demand group or "cult" and thus, this research will provide insight from the "outsider" perspective.

According to Hassan (2018), to understand mind control a grasp of behavior modification techniques, and the influences of conformity and obedience is needed first.

(Hassan, 2018, p. 114). Psychologist Leon Festinger (1962) describes three components of mind control: control of behavior, control of thoughts, and control of emotions. These three components are fundamental to *cognitive dissonance theory*. Festinger describes cognitive dissonance as “the idea that if a person knows various things that are not psychologically consistent with one another, he will, in a variety of ways, try to make them more consistent.” (p. 94) In other words, if presented with two pieces of information (this could be feelings, opinions, or behavior, etc.) that do not fit together psychologically, then they are in a dissonant relation to each other. Festinger’s theory asserts that humans are motivated by cognitive dissonance, just as they are to eat when they are hungry. This drive to regulate information to make it more consistent, and the changes that are required to regulate this information Festinger calls “dissonance-reducing changes”. (p. 95) For example, if a person can persuade themselves that the unattractive parts of the choice are not so unattractive, or if they conversely tell themselves that the attractive parts of a rejected choice are not so attractive, he will be able to reduce dissonance. According to Festinger (1962), “dissonance reduction should lead, after the decision, to an increase in the desirability of the chosen alternative and a decrease in the desirability of the rejected alternative.” (p. 96) Hassan’s (2018) BITE model has added a fourth component to this: *control of information*. An important note regarding cognitive dissonance: if any one of the three components of dissonance were to change, to reduce dissonance, the other two will change along with it. (Hassan, 2018, p. 115) According to Hassan, “The important thing to recognize about cult groups is that they deliberately create dissonance in people this way and exploit it to control them.” (p. 116)

Behavior Control. Behavior control can be categorized as any regulations of a person's physical reality. (Hassan, 2018) Joining a destructive cult can cause dramatic changes in behavior. (Balch, 1980) If, as part of a group, an individual's free time is restricted, they are told what to eat, where to work, how much sleep they are allowed to get, what to do, these are clear signs of behavior control. Group members are expected to ask permission to do pretty much anything, they are prescribed a rigid schedule (Hassan, 2018) and individualism is not allowed because it is required that the *group* is what's most important- and group belief is paramount. This means that someone might be required to take part in ritual behaviors such as using specific buzzwords or styles of speech, using specific facial expressions, dressing in uniform, expected to look a certain way, or maintaining a distinct posture- all things that could potentially lead group members to feel superior and special- what psychologists call social proof (Hassan 2018: p. 117), or informational social influence. Hassan reiterates the relational structure of cognitive dissonance by stating that "A cult's leaders cannot command someone's inner thoughts, but they know that if they command behavior, hearts and minds will follow." (p. 117)

In 1975, Robert W. Balch of the University of Montana joined a UFO cult as a participant-observer, a research strategy he admits was questionable, but also "the only strategy that could effectively penetrate the social barriers that insulated members of the cult from the outside world" (Balch, 1980, p. 138). During his time with the group, Balch observed that those wanting to join were expected to give up all their worldly attachments including friends, family, partners, their looks (cutting long hair is given as an example), their belongings, and were expected to cut all ties with outsiders after

joining. (p. 138) Balch (1980) observed members adopting a new style of metaphorical vocabulary that reflected the leaders' cosmology to play the role of believer. As the group progressed, the control over sexuality increased, leading many members, including the leader to have themselves castrated. It is important to understand that while the observation is now common sense, social scientists determined long ago that behavior is not always consistent with beliefs, attitudes, and values. Balch (1980) states, "Brainwashing, thought reform, and coercive persuasion are all terms that focus attention on psychological change as if minds must be altered to change behavior." (Balch, 1980, p. 142) At the end of his presented research, Balch concludes by expressing that when someone joins destructive cult, the first thing to change is behavior because the person is adopting a new role; "The changes may be sweeping and dramatic, but they are not necessarily supported by conviction" (p. 143), and only develop after immersion in a group's day-to-day activities.

In 1976, this same group, known as "Heaven's Gate", would become increasingly reclusive and more controlling over members' behavior. In the early 1990's, the group created a website (that still exists today: <https://heavensgate.com>) and used it to proselytize and recruit new members. Soon, the group would tie their ultimate Earthly salvation and heavenly ascension to the Comet Hale-Bopp. In 1996, the group rented "The Monastery", a large home near Rancho Santa Fe, California further isolating them. Leader Marshall Applewhite (known as Do to members) determined that mass suicide was the only means to evacuate Earth: having their souls join the spacecraft that was rumored to be trailing the Hale-Bopp comet which would take them to the group's idea of heaven. Between March 22nd and March 26th, 1997, 39 members of the Heaven's Gate

group took phenobarbital mixed with apple sauce washed down with vodka. In matching outfits and Nike shoes, the “Heaven’s Gate Away Team”, each with a \$5.00 bill and three quarters in their pockets (in reference to a Mark Twain story that stated “\$5.75 was the cost to ride the tail of a comet to heaven”), died of asphyxiation. A “press release” on the Heaven’s Gate website says “By the time you receive this, we’ll be gone—several dozen[sic] of us. We came from the Level Above Human in distant space and we have now excised the bodies that we were wearing for our earthly task, to return to the world from whence we came—task completed. The distant space we refer to is what your religious literature would call the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God.” (<https://www.heavensgate.com/misc/pressrel.htm>) According to cultural theorist Paul Virillio (2005), Heaven’s Gate can be described as a one of the first cyber-sects due to the groups reliance on “computer mediated communication” and internet-based recruitment efforts that preceded its mass suicide. (Virillio, 2005, p. 41)

Information Control. To understand reality, people need tools in the form of information. Without these tools, people can be easily manipulated, taken advantage of, and controlled. According to Hassan (2018), “Deny a person the information they require to make sound judgements and they will become incapable of doing so.” (p. 117) Being able to make informed decisions is halted when a person is lied to, information is withheld, and results in a person being robbed of what Hassan (2018) calls “informed consent”. (p.118) Cult groups will deem some information forbidden if it has not been censored by the leader, and often only the propaganda created by the cult is allowed. Cult members are not allowed the free time to think for themselves, and instead are kept as busy as possible. These groups create an ideology of “us” vs “them” and create

different levels of truth. Hassan states “By creating an environment where truth is multileveled, cult directors make it nearly impossible for a member to make definitive, objective assessments. If they have problems, they are told they are not mature or advanced enough to know the whole truth yet. But they are assured that all will become clear shortly. If they work hard, they’ll earn the right to understand the higher levels of truth.” (Hassan, 2018, p. 119)

In 1978, Congressman Leo Ryan was gunned down at a Guyana airport attempting to leave an investigative visit to the people of Jonestown. The People’s Temple had relocated from California to the jungle of Guyana with its leader Jim Jones- an ordained minister- and were living an isolated and terrifying reality. Jones had isolated his almost 900 followers, controlling every aspect of their lives, working them to exhaustion and preparing them for the day they would carry out the mass suicide. In a 1986 paper, Barker (1986) discusses the ways that the mass suicide at Jonestown affected the research of the sociology of religion. Prior to the events at Jonestown, there were hardly mentions of the group in the media, even in anticult literature, however after the event it was hard to find a magazine or publication not discussing the group. “Early in December 1978, a Gallup Poll found that 98% of the US public had heard or read about the People’s Temple and the Guyana massacre- a level of awareness matched in the pollsters’ experience only by the attack on Pearl Harbor and the explosion of the atom bomb.” (Barker, 1986, p. 330) 300 of the members of the People’s Temple were under 17 years old, and when the day came that Jones decided their time in Guyana had come to an end cyanide was forced down the throats of babies and young people, terrified members trying to flee were gunned down, and ultimately the others in the group lined up to drink

the cyanide laced Flavor-Aid. All in all, about 900 people died. Forever baked into the parlance after 1978 was the phrase “Don’t drink the Kool-Aid”, which can still be heard today expressing that going along with a crazy idea equates not thinking for yourself.

The public wondered how seemingly well-educated and smart people would agree that not only they needed to die but also their children and babies as well? How does this happen? “Whatever their particular concerns, anti-cultists throughout the world are, however, well-nigh unanimous in their opinion that the new religions procure their membership through the employment of techniques of mind control or brainwashing.” (Barker, 1986, p. 335) Jim Jones had controlled followers’ information by monitoring all of their communication, censoring any information that was critical of the group, isolating the group, skewing the information that was coming into the group by creating daily propaganda that was broadcasted across the compound. He utilized misinformation, making the group think it was under constant attack by the outside world and keeping followers in a constant state of confusion and fear, and lied to followers in that he expressed to them that the group was in some way morally superior, and that they were the ideal socialist utopia. Meanwhile, he profited and lived a luxurious lifestyle.

Thought Control. Thought control is another major component of mind control (Hassan, 2018). This includes “indoctrinating members so thoroughly that they internalize the group doctrine, incorporate a new language system, and use thought-stopping techniques to keep their mind ‘centered’.” (Hassan, 2018, p. 119) This indoctrination can cause group members to internalize the absolute doctrine as the truth and serves as a tool to create the “us vs. them” dichotomy by making any incoming information black and white. Members no longer think for themselves, because the

absolute truth of the doctrine does not allow room for assessment, it thinks *for* the group members. The way this indoctrination is successful is using “loaded language”. (Hassan 2018, p. 120) Unique words and phrases allow leaders to control members’ thoughts simply by way of sinching situations into a simplistic label that not only reduces the situation to cult cliches but governs the minds of the members.

Language is one of the main ways a leader can use thought control. Loaded language can “put up an invisible wall between believers and outsiders”. (Hassan, 2018, p. 120). Akin to a leader’s charisma, language empowers them to construct the values and truths of the group as way to reform member’s minds. In other words, language can create a veil obscuring the truth, can add an emotional charge to an experience, can curb independent thought and cause members to experience confirmation bias. (Montell, 2021) Outsider information that is critical of the group is often met with defenses causing group members to deny, rationalize and justify themselves with wishful thinking and thought-terminating clichés. The defense of a member’s new cult identity causes them to turn their backs on their former identity to reduce the feeling of dissonance experienced when a member’s new cult identity is criticized. Oftentimes, leaders will use “thought stopping” (Hassan, 2018, p. 121) as a mechanism for thought control. While different types of groups use different types of thought stopping techniques these controls usually take the form of meditation, praying, chanting, speaking in tongues, and, as this paper will assert later, visiting and interacting with the virtual locations required to understand what thought-stopping methods a group member should use to grow and excel in the group. “Through the use of thought- stopping, members think they are growing, when in

reality they are just turning themselves in to thought-stopping addicts.” (Hassan, 2018, p. 121)

In a study published in 2020, the unique terminology and linguistic effects of Scientology were analyzed. Scientology was created by science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard. The study asserts that because of Hubbard’s talent for writing fiction (he had no formal linguistic or psychology education) allowed him to create the unique linguistics used in Scientology. The study draws from research in linguistic relativism which is defined as “the idea that the kind of language spoken affects what and how one thinks...[and] influences or determines ways of thinking or perceiving.” (Fischer, 2020, p. 68) According to the Scientology website (www.scientology.org/what-is-scientology/) it is a “religion that offers a precise path leading to a complete and certain understanding of one’s true spiritual nature and one’s relationship to self, family, groups, Mankind, all life forms, the material universe, the spiritual universe and the Supreme Being.” Going on to say that “Scientology addresses the spirit- not the body or mind- and believes that Man is far more than a product of his environment, or his genes”. Man is described as good, with the goal of “true spiritual enlightenment and freedom for all.” According to the study, Scientology-Speak is made up of slang, abbreviations, technological terms, and formal nouns and have profound psychological effects on members. (Fischer, 2020, p. 69) Research has shown that acronyms can increase a perceived importance attached to words while creating in-group identities and ostracizing outsiders. Scientology not only uses acronyms but also uses pseudo-scientific language which has been shown to distract from a logical argument, because of its tone. (Fischer, 2020, p. 71) According to Fischer’s research, this allows Scientology to stand out among other new religious

movements in that the words they use suggest things that are grounded in science, and therefore, seem more legitimate and not as mystical as other groups promising enlightenment. (p. 81)

Emotional Control. The fourth component of Hassan's (2018) BITE Model is Emotional Control. Essential to keep a group's members under control is the use of guilt and fear. Unfortunately, this guilt and fear is hard for the members of a cult to recognize, because of the leader's use of control over behavior, information, and thoughts. This is where most cult leaders utilize fear to create an "us vs. them" narrative, making members afraid of outside entities whether it be their families, law enforcement, government, health care professionals, or even the devil. The fear created around anyone outside of the cult helps the leader to redefine feelings and bind the group together- this allows the leader to have control over all interpersonal relationships in the group. (Hassan, 2018, p. 123) Keeping group members in limbo is also a way that destructive leaders utilize emotion control. For example, group members may be in the leader's good graces at one point but then broken down and criticized the next, never quite knowing where they stand. This causes members to criticize themselves instead of criticizing leadership and causes strong feelings of guilt and shame when the approval is taken away.

The late 1970's began an American obsession with novel religions, which both fascinated them and terrified them. (Barkun, 2014) Although violence was rare, outsiders viewed them as potentially violent against those both inside the group and outside the group. Terrifying and fascinating was the news of the mass suicides in Guyana by the people of Jonestown in 1978 and the law enforcement stand-off between a group in Philadelphia called the MOVE in 1985. At the same time, numerous groups were also

being formed: The Church of Scientology, the Children of God, Hare Krishna, the Unification Church, and the Church Universal and Triumphant to name a few. (Barkun, 2014) Because of these movements, ordinary Americans considered the religious divergence of these groups a cause for concern, “The term [cult] evoked a set of characteristics generally ascribed to these new religious groups. The stereotype included a charismatic, manipulative, and malevolent leader; zombie-like followers who had lost the capacity to act rationally, in their own interests; and a propensity for violence either against themselves or others.” (Barkun, 2014, p. 66)

The Branch Davidians were a pre-millennial cult that began as a sect of a larger religion, the Seventh Day Adventists. Newport (2022) offers us Catherine Wessinger’s definition of pre-millennialism as, “...a pessimistic view of history. The world is evil and steadily becoming more corrupt every day. The millennium will be brought about in a catastrophic manner by supernatural or superhuman agents...things are getting so bad that only catastrophic intervention by a superhuman agent can rectify the degraded human condition.” (Newport, 2022, p. 9) Out of this is born Messianism, and that the Messiah is conceptualized as the redemption bringer and mediator between the divine and the regular person. (Newport, 2022) David Koresh, the leader of the Branch Davidians was the conceptualization of the Messiah for the cult and practiced totalitarian control over his followers. The group’s compound at Mount Carmel, Texas had no running water, heat or electricity and everything from what the followers wore, to their sexual relationships was controlled through manipulation. Emotional control was exercised in that Koresh would keep members of the family away from each other if Koresh felt that the bond between two people was too strong, which can cause strong emotional reactions

for families. Married couples had to become celibate, causing emotional pain for members in love- mostly because Koresh wanted the women to himself.

Phobia Indoctrination. Ultimately, the most effective use of emotional control is in the form of “phobia indoctrination”. (Hassan, 2018, p. 124) Phobias can take many forms and can be defined as “an intense fear reaction to someone or something. A phobic reaction can range from very mild to very severe. An intense phobic reaction can cause physical responses like racing heartbeat, dry mouth, sweating, and muscle tension.” (Hassan, 2018, p. 95) Not only can destructive cult leaders utilize phobias to create a troublesome mental pickle, but they can also play upon existing phobias by reinforcing them and utilizing that to make the idea of leaving the group a part of that phobia as well. Even though most phobias are irrational, they seriously limit a destructive cult member’s ability to make choices, “[m]embers truly believe they will be destroyed if they leave the safety of the group. They think there is no way outside the group for them to grow- spiritually, intellectually, or emotionally.” (Hassan, 2018, p. 97) David Koresh used phobia indoctrination to control his group: he made them afraid of the outside world, made them terrified for their salvation by convincing them that if they disobeyed God would turn his back on them, convinced followers that if they questioned him it was because they were being influenced by the devil, and told them that their ultimate sacrifice was necessary and that they would be rewarded in the afterlife. All these things made it easier for him to control his group and contributed to the tragic events at Waco.

There is importance in understanding the differences between historical cults and modern internet cults in the ways they recruit followers, how they indoctrinate members, and how they use the BITE model to create fear and loyalty. Because the internet allows

people to connect, share beliefs and opinions, and share life goals and activities membership in an internet group can have a substantial effect on people's lives. Internet groups have the power to create, organize and launch social movements such as Black Lives Matter. Because of this, the understanding of how internet groups thrive can help people and organizations understand and navigate social change. Misinformation and disinformation can spread rapidly and reach far and wide in internet communities. Understanding how to identify and mitigate misinformation will be an important tool not only to individuals but also governmental, social, and workplace communities. As we will explore further, commercial internet organizations can have significant impact on a person's behavior, and a person's financial wellbeing. While understanding how these groups work can be good for corporations and businesses who need to gauge social reactions to products and services, it can also very easily be used negatively as it relates to data mining. The following chapter will focus on the internet (specifically social media), and social influence to help understand why the functions and dynamics of online communities is an important subject for researchers.

Chapter Three

Social Media, Internet, & Social Influence

Social Media and the Internet

Deibert (2019, p. 24) describes “three painful truths” about social media:

- 1) That the social-media business model is based on deep and relentless surveillance of consumers’ personal data in order to target advertisements
- 2) That we permit this staggering level of surveillance willingly, if not altogether wittingly; and
- 3) That social media are far from incompatible with authoritarianism, and indeed are proving to be among its most effective enablers

Recently, social media companies have been under some intense scrutiny, especially those companies who are dominant players: Facebook, Google, Twitter, and TikTok. “A focus of concern has been the abuse of social-media channels as part of efforts to influence the outcome of major political events” (Deibert, 2019, p. 25) as witnessed with the U.S. political election in 2016. There has been a climate change in the reputation of social-media outlets as of late. Once revered as allowing access to information, connecting the world, and enabling the civility of society, social-media platforms are being viewed as the cause of many of the problems in society today. (Deibert, 2019) Because an unhealthy amount of time is being spent on social media by the public at any given time, this is causing issues with society being cut off from one another without viewing their lack of real-life interaction as problematic. Deibert (2019) states that “Facebook, for example, refers to its users not as ‘consumers’, but as a ‘community’”. Google says that its mission is ‘to organize the world’s information and make it

universally accessible and useful,' which makes Google sound far more benign and empowering than what it really is: a massive commercial-surveillance system.” (Deibert, 2019, p. 26) One of the more startling pieces of Deibert’s research is that he discusses the technology being developed by Facebook which will help them to assess your personality and infer your gender, relationship status, and who your friends are. There are patents pending for technology that allows Facebook to use your credit-card transactions, location, and interactions to determine if you are experiencing an important event in your life, such as graduation or a birthday so that advertisers can target you, and so the social-media company can also make money. (Diebert, 2019, p. 27) Unfortunately, this means that millions of social-media users are just handing over their personal information that could be shared with literally anyone who pays for that information.

According to Andreas Bernard in *Theory of the Hashtag*, “One hallmark of the hashtag... is the complete absence of any overarching regulatory authority,” (Bernard, 2019, p. 33) The hashtag “is an index and a slogan at the same time,” (p. 42). What your uncle is most likely doing is using the hashtag to connect himself with other people who have the same interests and beliefs, “hashtags have become the nodal points of a new media public that allows members of the population who are accustomed to being misrepresented by others to describe their own experiences directly and more truthfully, to raise their own voices without any interference from the distortive filter of mass media...” (Bernard, 2019: p, 53) Hashtags also help those who use them to connect with and gain attention from a topic that is trending, allowing their content to fall into the feeds of users even if it isn’t directly related to the subject. Unfortunately, as we’ll

explore in this paper, the hashtag is not always used for good, and can cause people to be unintentionally exposed to content that may be harmful to them in many ways.

Social media is ever-present in the lives of people today. If you listen to conversations between your peers, it would be unusual to not hear something like “Oh, yeah- I saw that on Facebook,” or “Did you see her post on Insta?” or “I made a TikTok recipe last night for dinner”. Mentions of social media are present in day-to-day interactions even when the sites are not being used. When having a conversation about leaving social-media, you might hear someone say “it’s how I keep in contact with my friends across the country,” or “I don’t want to miss out on important events” but, what it really boils down to is that, “social relationships and having a sense of connection are important determinants of happiness and stress relief, mental and physical well-being, and even mortality.” (Firth et al, 2019, p. 124). Firth et al (2019) assert that even with how varied the opportunities are to connect with an internet group, it seems that connections made online are processed much in the same way as in-person connections and thus, “have much potential to carry over from the internet to shape “real-world” sociality, including our social interactions and our perceptions of social hierarchies, in ways that are not restricted to the context of the internet.” (Firth et al, 2019, p. 124)

The scary reality of social media is that people are now experiencing what researchers have called “infrastructural imperialism,” in other words “organizations often offer social media as the readiest way to access their services, excluding those who opt out of social media while subtly but powerfully shaping the choices of those who opt in.” (Deibert, 2019, p. 28) The problem is, that people might not understand what they are agreeing to when they join social media, we may think we know, but how many people

thoroughly read the “terms of service” and quickly hit “accept”? In his research, Deibert (2019) details a software company who placed an offer of a payout of \$1,000 at the end of their “terms of service” to see how many people read the terms before hitting the accept button. The answer: one.

Social media affects the human brain the same way that falling in love does. (Diebert: 2019) Therefore, social media companies are focused on creating content that is emotionally impactful, stimulates users in a hormonal and subconscious way, and cause what Deibert (2019) calls a “compulsion loop”. “Compulsion loops are found in a wide range of social media...They work via ‘variable-rate reinforcement’ in which rewards are delivered in an unpredictable fashion...shaping a steady increase in the desired behavior, apparently affecting the hormonal dopamine pathways within the human brain.” (Deibert, 2019, p. 29) This, ultimately, can cause Internet addiction, which can be described as the symptoms one might suffer from overindulgence in online activities. (Anand, et al, 2022) If the Internet is being used as a coping mechanism in response to stress to avoid negative feelings and emotions, this will lead users to be less likely to use healthy coping mechanisms in real life, causing them to rely on the Internet to modify their moods and thus increasing the likelihood of developing an Internet addiction. Researchers have found that there a positive correlation between excessive internet use and those who use coping mechanisms like avoidance. The Cognitive Phenomenological-Transactional theory states that the means in which people reduce their stress and how someone reacts to stressful situations play a role in the development of Internet addiction. (Anand, et al, 2022) This renders people unable to use problem-focused coping responses and are more likely to develop Internet addiction during times of stress, depression, and anxiety.

(Anand, et al, 2022) “According to the theory of compensatory internet use, negative life situations such as stress and depression can give rise to a motivation to go online to alleviate negative feelings...also support[ing] the hypothesis from the cognitive behavioral perspective that the presence of previous psychological distress could be a factor that will increase the risk of danger for the development of problematic or excessive internet use. (Anand, et al, 2022, p. 361)

The most rapidly adopted and widespread technology in human history is the Internet. (Firth, et al, 2019) Not only is the Internet allowing for users to access almost never-ending information, but it causes users to disengage from the real world, causing neurocognitive changes. (Firth, et.al., 2019) In their research Firth, et.al. (2019) discuss a controlled trial in which researchers discovered that after six weeks of playing an online role-playing game subjects had less grey matter of the orbitofrontal cortex, which is the area of the brain that controls impulse and decision making, showing that the internet can cause damage to cognitive processes.

The most interesting of Deibert’s (2019) “painful truths” is that “they propel authoritarian practices. Social media not only are compatible with authoritarianism; they may be one of the main reasons why authoritarian practices are now spreading worldwide.” (Deibert, 2019, p. 30) In other words, authoritarian practices are being driven by social media outlets. This is problematic because, “authoritarian practices aim to control people and to sow confusion, ignorance, prejudice, and chaos in order to undermine public accountability.” (Deibert, 2019, p. 30) Social media posts are more likely to be extreme, divisive, emotionally charged, and incorrect because of information overload, and users using cognitive shortcuts that cause them to get caught in “filter

bubbles”. This also helps users to be exposed to content that aligns with their opinions and take on information that is incorrect due to either a lack of time to research claims or because as Deibert (2019) states, “by the time they do [have time to research], the falsehoods may have already embedded themselves in the collective consciousness.” (Deibert, 2019, p. 32)

Social Opinion Amplification Theory. In a study conducted in 2022, Lim, et al, developed the Social Opinion Amplification Theory to investigate the cause of opinion amplification on social media outlets. Increasingly evident today is the highly contrasting opinions and beliefs shared on topics such as politics, environment, and other social issues. Repercussions of these highly polarized and extreme opinions is damaging to the democratic process and intolerance. In this study, Lim and Bentley (2022), “use the term opinion amplification to encompass the range of behaviors by users that may distort the original opinion with a more positive or negative sentiment. Such behaviors include making unfounded assumptions, making generalizations or summaries, selectively quoting, editorializing, or misunderstanding.” (Lim & Bentley, 2022, p.1) While opinion amplification may happen slowly at first, once a topic is trending it gets out of hand and can become extreme. Lim and Bentley (2022) hypothesize that through opinion amplification, opinions become biased towards either negative or positive sentiment. Conventional media may be to blame for the beginnings of expressing extreme sentiments online. (Lim & Bentley, 2022) According to the authors, “‘sensationalism’ is a close bedfellow when reporting general topics- a discourse strategy of ‘packaging’ information in the news headlines in such a way that news items are presented as more interesting, extraordinary, and relevant.” (Lim & Bentley, 2022, p. 2) In this paper’s

discussion regarding social media monetization by personal information mining, these ideas would present in the form of click bait, which are no more than amplified opinions, products or headlines that cause a user to be drawn into the sensational nature of the post and thus, click through. This can either cause the user's information to be mined, or for the user to be exposed to more negative, positive, or incorrect information. Because traditional media outlets are now all providing a type of outlet on the Internet, the competition for users to click through to new stories has increased, and therefore these traditional media outlets are also using sensationalized lures to attract users. For example, a makeup company might use filters to sensationalize the effectiveness of their products thus misleading the consumer. A wellness website might sensationalize the results of a product they are selling. Either way, people might accidentally be exposed to "...certain words [that] can make [them] believe causal relationships that may not exist. This is also known as "sentiment polarity", an important feature of fake news- to make their news persuasive, authors often express strong positive or negative feelings about the content." (Lim & Bently, 2022, p. 2) As a result, conspiracy theories that may have at one point been believed by a minority are now given the same kind of credit an evidence-based study would receive, and thus be backed by a larger population of users.

The *bounded confidence plus group pressure model* proposed by Cheng and Yu (2019) helps to explain why, in many social atmospheres, a person's expression of their opinion is the result of pressure from the group. Lim & Bently (2022) describe Cheng and Yu's (2019) bounded confidence plus group pressure model as "each individual form[ing] an inner opinion relative to the bound of confidence and express[ing] an opinion, taking group pressure into consideration. A group with all individuals facing

group pressure always reaches a consensus. In a mixed group with both pressured and non- pressured individuals, the consensus threshold [is] significantly reduced.” (Lim & Bently, 2022, p. 3). Concluding the discussion about their Social Opinion Amplification Theory, Lim and Bently (2022) argue that a person amplifying their own opinions is one of the causes of extreme polarization, and that because of this, an opinion held by a small minority can affect the population at large.

Echo Chambers, Misinformation, & Group Think. According to a study in 2021, Cinelli, et al explore social media outlets and how they can facilitate the formation of echo chambers and influence a person’s information. In a study of Twitter referenced by the research, it was determined that between truth and fake news on Twitter, fake news travels faster. (Cinelli, et al, 2021, p. 1) Because social media, along with the traditional media- who scrambles to remain relevant- has made a radical change in how people create their opinions and share information, the authors argue that more information is needed to understand how people seek this information, and how it is affecting their behavior. A limited attention span, complicated algorithms, and the fact that human nature causes people to align with information that best fits their beliefs and joining groups that validate their opinions causes what is best known as an “echo chamber”. (Cinelli, et al, 2022) While analyzing echo chambers using the group polarization theory, the authors tell us, “An echo chamber can act as a mechanism to reinforce an existing opinion within a group, and, as a result, move the entire group toward more extreme positions.” (Cinelli, et al, 2022, p. 1) Though there needs to be more research done on the concept of echo chambers, with some researchers questioning the very existence, some studies have shown that echo chambers do influence the way

humans act. However, more research needs to be done on the ways that humans consume news on social media, and this is outside the scope of this paper. It is important to understand that echo chambers can cause polarization, and when polarization is high misinformation spreads faster, thus potentially affecting and influencing policy making, politics, and damaging the ability for people to have constructive discourse. (Cinelli et al, 2022, p. 5) In its conclusion the study finds a that opinion segregation is highest on Facebook where users have little to no control over their feed algorithm, while social media platforms (i.e. Reddit) that have a feed algorithm that the user has control over are less likely to be impacted by the effects of an echo chamber as a social feedback mechanism. (Cinelli et al, 2022, p. 7)

Social media users can consciously or unconsciously encounter harmful content, false information, propaganda, AI-manipulated multimedia, and “bots” or AI generated automated accounts, with stressors like times of perceived crisis causing an amplification effect on every-day users. (Ferrara, et al, 2020) Factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on information needs “represents the ideal setting for the emergence of *infodemics* [sic]- situations characterized by the undisciplined spread of information, including a multitude of low-credibility, fake, misleading, and unverified information. In addition, malicious actors thrive on these wild situations and aim to take advantage of the resulting chaos.” (Ferrara et al, 2020, p. 272) Based on the need for more research to be done on the effects of misinformation and manipulation- and how people react to the information they are subject to, Ferrara et al (2020) summarize and analyze seven articles that discuss abuse on social media. While these articles provide helpful information to curb the spread of misinformation, manipulation, and abuse on social media, they are

outside the scope of this paper. However, they will be useful for future studies about conspiracy theories on social media and the news, how misinformation affects public health, how to identify low quality information, how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted global news and misinformation, abuse on social media, online hate, and international relations and propaganda. (Ferrara et al, 2020)

There is evidence that humans evolved in groups. Because of this, humans derive a sense of meaning, belonging, and security from being a member of a group. Van Bavel et al (2020) agrees with the assumption that “humans are a groupish animal with a propensity to engage in motivated cognition to support their group identities.” (Van Bavel et al, 2020, p. 66) However, when humans share the same worldview, they can be subject to groupthink guiding them away from the truth and resulting in biased research. Janis (1991) defines groupthink as “a process of excessive concurrence-seeking that leads members of small cohesive groups to maintain esprit de corps by unconsciously developing a number of shared illusions and related norms that interfere with critical thinking and reality testing.” (Haslam, 2004, p. 282) Another way to think about groupthink is a way for groups to make decisions and is an important part of the decision-making process in general having both “a *polarizing* and *consensualizing* impact on individuals” (Haslam, 2004, p. 100) In discussing Janis’ (1991) concept of groupthink, Haslam (2004) identifies three classical symptoms of groupthink: “overestimation of the power and morality of the group, close-mindedness, and the pressure towards uniformity. A group that has fallen prey to the [groupthink] syndrome thus tends to believe it is better, more powerful, and more invulnerable than it really is and has unquestioning faith

in its own moral authority” (Haslam, 2004, p. 100) As a result, an attempt at preserving the importance of a group decision can lead members to:

- a) restrict the options and goals they consider and then fail to reappraise them later,
- b) focus on the benefits rather than the risks associated with their decision,
- c) fail to solicit as much information as they might and then process the information they do obtain in a manner that favours [sic] their decision and, finally,
- d) fail to set in place any safety nets or contingency plans to protect against adverse outcomes. (Haslam, 2004, p. 102)

In terms of destructive groups, groupthink is encouraged and can be considered a form of behavior control. (Hassan, 2020)

Uncertainty-Identity Theory. Hogg (2013) states that, “Although society contains individuals, both human endeavor and the operation of human cognition tend to organize society into discrete social categories and human groups.” (Hogg, 2013, p. 436) Because of the influence of these groups, this determines much of what and who people are, specifically our attitudes, feelings, behaviors, social identities and how we are perceived and treated by others. “Because groups and identity are so fundamental to social life and so consequential for individuals, people are highly motivated to belong to and be accepted by those groups that best satisfy these motivations.” (Hogg, 2013, p. 436) In order to be a part of a group, a person needs to reflect on oneself and their identity and make self-categorizations to reduce self-uncertainty. (Hogg, 2013) As discussed previously in the section regarding Hassan’s Influence Continuum, we know

that a healthy group provides informed consent and have clear boundaries that reduce uncertainty. The uncertainty-identity theory builds on social identity theory in that social identity theory explains the social psychological processes between and within human groups. It also “explicates social cognitive, social interactive, and social structural process and their interaction that reciprocally link self-conception as a group member with group and intergroup phenomena.” (Hogg 2013, p. 437) The focus of uncertainty-identity theory is to understand how social identity is tied to the “motivational underpinnings of social identity process and associated group and intergroup behaviors” (Hogg 2013, p. 438). Human nature causes people to want to reduce feelings of uncertainty because uncertainty places a roadblock between the person and their ability to anticipate events, thus increasing uncertainty. In other words, Hogg summarizes that “uncertainty motivates behavior aimed at reducing uncertainty.” (Hogg, 2013, p. 438). Putting in the work to decrease uncertainty can cause cognitive fatigue, which leads people to make the decision to use their energy on the things that are most important to them, thus allowing closure so a person can move on and focus their cognitive energy on something else. It is human nature to need to understand who you are, how you should behave, who other people are, how they behave, and how they treat us, “Being properly located in this way renders the social world and one’s place within it relatively predictable and allows one to plan effective action, avoid harm, know who to trust, and so forth.” (Hogg, 2013, p. 43). Research has shown that uncertainty “triggers the process of identification with a self-inclusive category; that people identify more strongly with groups when they feel uncertain; that uncertainty-based identification reduces uncertainty, and that people who feel uncertain will identify even with a group that

mediates low status.” (Hogg, 2013, p. 43) Group entitativity is the level in which a group is considered legitimate. In other words, a group with high entitativity would be considered very legitimate, with clear boundaries and do more to resolve self-uncertainty. Whereas a person might be more likely to cut ties with a low entitativity group because they are more likely to be groups with poorly defined, vague, unfocused group prototype and less likely to help resolve self-uncertainty. (Hogg, 2013) As self-uncertainty increases to an extreme, Hogg asserts that the logic of uncertainty-entitativity may help to explain the development of extremism: “Taken to an extreme, entitativity could embody rigid, closed boundaries, internal homogeneity and consensus...[and] ritualized practices, profound ethnocentrism, hierarchical structure and emphatic leadership.” (Hogg, 2013, p. 440) Groups structured in this manner can be considered extremist, thus providing a solid self-identity in a world of uncertainty, allowing a person to resolve self-uncertainty because of the group structure. Unfortunately, the result of these extreme groups abilities to resolve self-uncertainty can cause members to become ideologues, zealots, true believers, and fanatics. (Hogg, 2013, p. 441)

Blind Trust, Social Proof. Blind trust is a concept that can be thought of in many ways and applied to many different avenues of research. In terms of this paper, blind trust will be defined as the trust that someone gives to a group or information without the proper research of the credibility of the source of the information. Research has shown that there is a correlation between long-standing conspiracy theories and internet use, and this may be because an abundance of misinformation is disguised as credible news online. Unfortunately, the belief in this misinformation is also shown to have negative effects on social and health attitudes. (Xiao et al, 2021) In a 2021 study,

Xiao et al (2021) discovered that people who blindly trust the internet as a news and information source are more likely to have a higher level of general conspiracy beliefs, and that, “frequent exposure of and higher trust towards social media news may result in negative consequences that scholars and health professionals should be wary of.” (Xiao et al, 2021, p. 986) Another interesting finding in Xiao et al’s (2021) research is that even if someone trusts a news source blindly on social media, and they can identify untrustworthy or incorrect information, they are still more likely to believe conspiracy theories. However, previous research shows that there are many components to media literacy, “digital literacy, information literacy, and news literacy and thus misinformation identification only constitutes a miniscule portion of media literacy in the context of social media.” (Xiao et al, 2021, p. 986) In other words, people are only able to process and compartmentalize the information they consume online if they have the tools to do so. Xio et al’s (2021) study also finds that among people who do not blindly trust social media news, a significant reduction in the belief of conspiracy theories is found because, “critical thinking and skepticism are protective shields that assist individuals to navigate through the complex digital environment.” (Xio et al, 2021, p. 986).

How actions and opinions influence people define social proof. (Hassan, 2022)

For example, if someone looks up a movie’s Rotten Tomatoes score to decide if they want to watch a movie, this is social proof. Asking friends for an opinion on a new restaurant that just opened in your town- or looking to see what people are saying on Yelp, this is also social proof. Social proof is built into people’s instincts. It is likely that if you observe someone doing something, and no harm comes to them, therefore you consider doing that thing, this is social proof. Social proof is amplified with uncertainty-

the more uncertainty someone is experiencing, the more likely to join the herd. Hassan states, “In our information-laden, time-strapped world, we tend to be overwhelmed, making us even more likely to default to the herd’s opinions.” (Hassan, 2022, p. 116)

Social Influence. In his book, *Combating Cult Mind Control*, Hassan (2018) details the work of Schefflin in his article for the *International Journal of Cultic Studies* titled Supporting Human Rights by Testifying Human Wrongs (2015). In this paper, Schefflin (2015) describes the Social Influence Model (SIM) that determines whether undue influence is occurring. Helpful to scientific data, this model analyzes six elements: “the influence itself; the influencers motives; the influencer’s methods; the circumstances under which the influence occurred; the influencee’s receptivity or vulnerability (regardless of their designation of a minor, a vulnerable adult, or a non-vulnerable adult); and the consequences for both parties. (Hassan, 2018, p. 311) “Destructive cults are just one manifestation of the application of what is now routinely studied academically, the science of social influence.” (Hassan, 2020, p. 19) Social influence as described by Schefflin (2015) is inevitable and is the bond that completes the process of striving to connect with others. “When brainwashing as a technique of intense indoctrination and mental hijacking passed from government to private cultic organization, the need for expert testimony to protect innocent victims became crucial.” (Schefflin, 2015, p. 70) Building on the fundamental research on thought reform by Robert J. Lifton, and Hassan’s BITE model, the Social Influence Model allows experts to use the model to use in court rooms against what has been called “pseudo-identity disorder” or “involuntary mental servitude”. (Schefflin, 2015)

Chapter Four

BITE Model & Online-Facilitated Cult Groups

Applying the BITE Model to Internet Groups

One might think that because of the endless amount of information available to people at any given time that there would be a decline in the number of people who enter cult situations. According to Hassan (2020), “[t]he opposite is true: computers and the internet have taken this phenomenon to the next level. Children, adolescents, and adults may become addicted to video games and deprive themselves of the social contact that people need to function in healthy ways.” (Hassan, 2020, p. 10) Alarmist ideas are being shared on the internet, through social media and media outlets. Information is easy to access, and the internet has afforded terrorist groups and cult groups alike to access all the advantageous and manipulative information needed to control a group. In other words, the issue has evolved instead of dying out. Cult groups emerge when society is experiencing dramatic change, especially when a breakdown in trust between people and institutions like the government (Hassan, 2020). Recently there has been significant and dramatic change, especially in the United States. The presidency of Donald Trump only heightened the mistrust between people and the government on both sides of the political spectrum. This, alongside social justice issues such as police violence, major racial issues, mass shootings and gun control, abortion, protests and most notably the January 6th Insurrection and the COVID-19 pandemic, have created a state of chaos. This has only elevated the level of uncertainty for people, and as we have discovered in the research in this paper, uncertainty and times of mounting stress are when groups hoping to take advantage of the chaos are most likely to emerge.

Applying the BITE Model to destructive Internet groups will require a researcher to think a little more abstractly about how groups might fit the model. In historical cases, there have been clear-cut actions by destructive leaders to manipulate followers- but what happens when there is no leader and no communal living situation? What if the leader is just a hashtag? What if the group's destructive business model is deemed legal?

Communal and intentional living cult groups still exist, but not as abundantly as they did in the past- so how is a person who seemingly has free will to decide to turn off their computer screen and walk away controlled by someone who isn't physically there? How are internet groups using language and psychological tactics to convince followers that the people around them are lizards and aliens, mistrust science and government, or that the world is ending? What type of person is subject to this kind of manipulation? Most importantly, what are the benchmarks of destructive internet groups as they relate to the BITE model? In the following sections, an analysis of various Internet cult groups will detail the ways in which the group fits each component of the BITE model, present new ideas on how groups can fit the BITE model and discuss whether the model needs to be modified for digital-age cults. For clarity, these will be organized in to the four main types of cults: religious, political, wellness, and commercial- with a BITE model analysis of each example.

Internet Religions. Positioned atop of a bed in a Crestone, Colorado residence, was Amy Carlson. It was April 28th, 2021, when law enforcement went to investigate the claim of a mummified woman in the home. Amy's corpse was wrapped in Christmas lights in a sleeping bag, in a makeshift shrine of sorts, with glitter decorating her decaying and startlingly blue face (the officers thought her face had been painted).

According to an article in Rolling Stone (2021), Amy's group, Love Has Won, was an online content generation machine and Amy was their Mother God. The group had been making money soliciting donations, selling jewelry, and their "snake oil" colloidal silver- which explained why Amy, who had been using the colloidal silver to attempt to curb her declining health due to alcoholism and anorexia- had been progressively turning blue over time. Up to the date of Amy's death, the YouTube channel maintained by Love Has Won had over 2,700 videos and was a religious-*ish* group- but in ways that vastly differed from other religious groups. The members were loud, crass, offensive, rude, and spouted anti-Semitic, homophobic, and racist rhetoric during their live broadcasts. The article describes Amy's rise as Mother God: She was a manager at a McDonald's with a husband and children who walked away from her family and friends- she was on a spiritual mission- and according to Amy, she had been for 19 billion years, having lived 500 lives (including as Jesus Christ, and Marilyn Monroe- she sat as queen of Lemuria, an ancient mythical city where Donald Trump was her father), she was in a constant battle with the Cabal- according to Amy, they had tried to assassinate her 600 times but she prevailed. The Cabal are the global elite lizard-or-aliens (depending on who you ask) tied to the Illuminati and they control every aspect of modern human life. Love Has Won had attracted over twenty live-in members, and about two hundred dedicated followers from around the world who connected with the group online- they communicated through Facebook and Skype in the hopes that Amy would be able to take them to higher vibrational frequencies. Interestingly, the group's YouTube channel content echoed the book of Revelation in the Bible, with Amy breaking through the seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls- becoming increasingly weaker as she processed all the

world's negative energy and now, because of the constant psychic attacks, she was paralyzed from the waist down and bedridden. In 2020, the group made a pilgrimage to Hawaii to benefit Amy's failing health- but the residents became combative after Amy declared that she was the reincarnation of the goddess Pele, and the group was run out of Hawaii and returned to Colorado. Sometime between when the group returned to Colorado and when the police visited the commune, Amy had died- and now, she was enshrined by her followers. To maintain buy-in from followers, the group claimed that Amy still moved occasionally and had a pulse when law enforcement found her. There were worries after Amy's death that the group may attempt a Heaven's Gate style mass ascension event, and even told followers in a live stream that members of Love Has Won should be willing to die for Mother God. Though there was discussion in the private chats, luckily this mass suicide event never happened. The six members of Love Has Won who were arrested and charged with abusing Amy's corpse had all charges dropped, and the group has splintered online into different groups, who continue to manipulate followers online selling them "etheric" surgeries, and some continue to work on creating the "Chrystal Schools" charter school.

Using the BITE Model, we can determine that this online-facilitated group is justified in being labeled a cult. *Behavior:* Love Has Won created strict dietary restrictions, created a mandatory daily ritual for inner-circle members, required that the group follow the orders and wishes of the leader, Mother God. Members were expected to cut ties with anyone not involved in the group and give all their money to Mother God. *Information:* Because the belief system of the group was not based on reality, members were encouraged to not look outside the group for answers or believe anything that might

conflict with the group's teachings which were secret from non-members. The group's activity on the internet was heavily censored and controlled. *Thought:* Thought-stopping and repetition was used in web streaming- and this included the idea that Mother God was all powerful and to question her was a sin. To combat negative thoughts and emotions the group used positive affirmations. *Emotional:* Mother God used fear tactics in that she would scream and rant at members who had not followed her wishes. This group was able to create a cult situation by using social media, a professional website, online workshops, direct messaging, and online forums which they used to recruit and indoctrinate followers.

Political Internet Groups. The right-wing conspiracy theory of everything, QAnon, appeared in 2016 after the Pizzagate hoax in which it was believed that Hillary Clinton was running a pedophilia ring out of a pizza parlor basement. Ultimately, this hoax resulted in a man driving to the pizza parlor to rescue the children being tortured. He was sentenced to four years in prison and is widely acknowledged as an example of what can happen in the real world when someone believes fake news. Unfortunately, the ramifications didn't stop there. QAnon is an enigma of sorts and appeared to begin as a means for four guys to make money selling t-shirts and other QAnon paraphernalia- but it quickly spiraled out of control because it appealed to human obsession with cracking codes, interpreting clues, and the very basic fear of "evil" in whatever form deemed appropriate. "Though fringe at first, the QAnon movement has gained ground through its circulation on alt-right websites and Reddit, YouTube, and other sites" (Hassan, 2020, p. 191) It is difficult to know how large the QAnon following is, however there is an intensely devoted group of acolytes who spend time researching old Q internet messages

or “drops”, watching videos, listening to podcasts. “To really understand QAnon, one must delve into a bizarre, hopelessly complex world of conspiracy theories, decades-old Internet chuff, cryptography, cultic thought, centuries-old anti-Semitic tropes, wellness and medical pseudoscience, and moral panic over child trafficking and white slavery.” (Rothschild, 2022, p. 13)

Cohen (2022) outlines a study of QAnon using various social sciences, including the scientific study of destructive cults. Cohen’s paper is also the only peer-reviewed piece of literature focusing on an online-facilitated destructive group that I could find during my research. It is also the best example of, and a good guide for, the modern understanding of destructive groups that exist on the internet. According to Cohen (2022), one thing that is unique to QAnon is the speed and voracity of its reach, its ability to be an all-encompassing explanation. However, the scramble to identify and categorize the group has muddied the waters for researchers. Is this group a cult? Is it a new religious movement? Is it a “political manifestation of the ‘new conspiracism’ discourse that took hold in present-day culture”? (Cohen, 2022, p. 38) Luckily, a framework has been established by scholars that can help to understand destructive groups with conspiratorial worldviews.

Cohen’s (2022) research focuses on analyzing QAnon in different ways: QAnon’s ideology as a religious belief-system, QAnon as a new religious movement, and QAnon as an online-facilitated destructive cult. Cohen (2022) states that, “Over the past two decades, the “Internet Revolution,” and the robust penetration of social media, have forced scholars to adapt the definition of ‘cult’ to render it less dependent on circumstances and technical capabilities.” (Cohen, 2022: p. 50) Scholars agree on the

core characteristics of a destructive group, however, real-time communication, virtualized interpersonal relationships have created what Cohen (2022) calls an “attention economy” where ratings and popularity denote a person’s significance, must be considered in the age of social media and the internet. (Cohen, 2022, p. 51) Cohen also asserts that, “cultism is often synergistically linked to advances in communication technology- at once a coping mechanism against the social upheaval that often coincides with disruptive new technologies, while being propagated through them.” (Cohen, 2022, p. 51) The analogy of the printing press is given in relation to the Catholic sect Lutheran Protestantism, the popularization of television in the 1960’s and 1970’s as related to the popularity of Evangelical Christianity, and now- the advent of the internet and the rise of political polarization creating niche channels and influencers. (Cohen, 2022)

The internet allows destructive groups to operate on a different level: instantaneously and globally, “with ever-increasing efficacy in inducing social-political polarization and mobilization- especially through the propagation of negative emotional states such as fear, anger and moral indignation.” (Cohen, 2022, p. 52) The internet allows influencers the luxury of metrics, algorithms, hashtags, and niche platforms to spread messaging far and wide, all while flying under the proverbial radar, and avoiding censorship or cancellation. (Cohen, 2022) Hassan (2020) states that the range of services that are readily available to a movement like QAnon online are unprecedented. Not only can groups reach far and wide, but they can mass produce content, they have historical accounts of effective destructive groups at hand, they can access any information that might be useful to manipulate followers to be their ‘digital soldiers’ or ‘Cyber Ninjas’. (Cohen, 2022, p. 53) In the age of the internet, influential people can, either knowingly or

unknowingly, share propaganda online through shares and users can “engage in a wide variety of digital services for the cause: from merely mass-forwarding propaganda messages, to minimal-effort expressions of support or moral indignation using emoticons (“slactivism”); To creating visual memes that encapsulate the ‘correct’ emotional stance as dictated by the propaganda using a pithy, recognizable image of an emotionally-equivalent situation, which can then serve as entertaining, highly- disseminable and innocuous-looking tidbit that is optimally poised to ‘go viral’.” (Cohen, 2022, p. 53)

Q of QAnon is aligned with a prophet, which fits well in the category of leaderless religious groups through history: highly symbolic like a priest. (Cohen, 2022)

Q claims to be at Q-level security clearance with the U.S. Government, which gives them almost omnipotence because of their access to information and thus the “truth”. Along with this, “Q-drops” which is what the messages from Q are called, are open to interpretation both literal and metaphorical, and as Cohen (2022) states, makes them resilient to refutations, critical thinking, and fact-checking: “...the paradox of survival as a religious group that wishes to eschew the perils of authoritarian ‘hijacking’ through leaderless-ness, but cannot survive without an identity and core ideology was solved- ...through collaborative, consensus-driven exegesis of hallowed texts.” (Cohen, 2022, p. 54)

QAnon’s “drops” fit this model of hallowed texts that can be distributed quickly and widely and because of the ways that users collectively work together to solve the real meanings behind the drops lends the group a strange dichotomy of also resembling an Alternative-Reality Game (ARG). This satisfies a rudimentary need for excitement through virtual treasure-hunting while staying within the confines of the belief-system. (Cohen, 2022)

Coercion and violence are also baked in to the QAnon cult (Hassan, 2020) as a good vs. evil system and apocalyptic worldviews (Cohen, 2022). A clear “us” versus “them” rhetoric is present with clear enemies and threats to the group. According to Cohen (2022) it is important to note that in analyzing QAnon as a destructive cult, that there is an internalized aggression that takes form in fighting against doubts, dissent, and introspection. (Cohen, 2022) Cultic studies explain cognitively how a conspiracy theory can weaponize a person’s emotional and personal struggles, along with how a person’s rejection by the status-quo can “often paradoxically serve to ratify both the conspiratorial mindset on the individual level, and the Manichean worldview on the group level, and cement its members conviction and commitment” (Cohen, 2022, p. 56), which is consistent with cognitive dissonance theory.

We can easily apply the BITE model to QAnon to qualify it as a cult. *Behavior control*: Acting in the form of protesting, spreading misinformation, boycotting, cyber attacking, “trolling”, and promoting the “save the children” rhetoric encompasses the dire worldview that QAnon holds. As we can see in the news, this behavior control can lead to troubling, illegal, and dangerous action as witnessed during the January 6th Insurrection. *Information control*: Conspiracy theories, a distrust of mainstream media, and a general distrust of medicine and science create a situation where the group is reliant on itself for information. Because QAnon is a “leaderless” group, this creates a swirl of misinformation as the group is relying on itself as a guide. *Thought control*: Outside information is met with immediate distrust if it is not part of the groups’ overall conspiracy rhetoric. The critical thinking abilities of group members is severely damaged by us versus them and black-and-white thinking, and because the ideas of the group are

startling and confusing members seek out the support of other members for validation.

Emotional control: QAnon uses moral panic and phobia indoctrination to control its members. Fear is the largest theme that runs through the group, which creates anger and emotional reliance on the group and its beliefs.

Psychotherapy/ Educational Internet Groups. According to Google, the word “influencer” increased in popularity in 2016. (Montell: 2022). “Less than a decade after Instagram’s launch, thousands of astrologers, self-help sages, and holistic wellness guides like Bentinho Massaro and Teal Swan, who might never have even developed an interest in metaphysics before the internet (much less monetized it), use apps and algorithms to spread their gospel.” (Montell, 2022: p. 263). Digital gurus sell transcendent wisdom. If you are looking to obtain a higher vibration, transcend Earthly bounds, access alternate dimensions all you must do is click and subscribe. According to Montell (2022), in her book *Cultish, The Language of Fanaticism*, “Unlike the cults of the ‘70’s, we don’t even have to leave the house for a charismatic figure to take hold of us. With contemporary cults, the barrier to entry is the simple fission of tapping Follow.” (Montell, 2022: p. 264) Buzz words, visually pleasing photos and art, an attractive guru, help those seeking to soothe their uncertainty to justify following seemingly harmless content on the internet. However, some of these gurus are pernicious- and look to maximize the opportunities to sell whatever is popular with the zeitgeist- whether it be snake-oil style supplements, and conspiracy theory driven wellness advice (see the group that took Donald Trump’s COVID-19 bleach-as-a-cure suggestion to heart), healing inner trauma, or even convincing you that you are not really committed to living your life and thus, should decide to end it.

Teal Swan is a classically beautiful woman with long dark hair and piercing blue eyes. She is a spiritual teacher who has millions of followers online and claims to have the secret to heal all past trauma and pain. She has 1.2 million followers on Facebook and sells paintings that she claims have spiritual vibrational qualities. Swan, who details an awful “origin story” claims over a decade of abuse by a family friend, and because of this she was enlightened with the Completion Process. Described in her own words in the Freeform docuseries *The Deep End*: “Not a trite self-help technique, it is an extremely intense soul retrieval process, by where you are undoing the entire trauma, and the reason I have to give such a big warning relative to this process is we’re coming up against mainstream psychology in a lot of ways.” (*The Deep End*: timestamp 21:15) Teal claims to be an expert in human suffering, offering expensive workshops for her followers where they explore the dangerous practice of uncovering “repressed memories” (a psychology tactic that emerged during the 1980’s), and where she challenges her follows to decide if they are committed to their lives. The Freeform docuseries discusses the idea that Teal Swan is a “suicide catalyst” because she encourages followers to either commit to life or commit to death which is an extremely dangerous place for someone struggling with their mental health to dwell. Not only does Swan encourage followers to ruminate on the idea of committing to life or death, but she also wants them to experience their own deaths in their minds. During her spiritual retreats she asks her followers to envision their own deaths- really experience it in their minds- a sort of “death meditation”.

How does a self-professed spiritual guru gain her followers? Swan seems to understand how. She describes her process for amassing followers in an interview by Jennings Brown for *The Gateway: Teal Swan* podcast (2017). He visited her at her

retreat center in Costa Rica, and she details the ways that her content finds her followers (known as the Teal Tribe),

Most people are going through a fucking huge crisis, like, gun-to-your-head type of crisis- and then, you know, they typed in something like ‘how do I not kill myself’ and my videos popped up... I specifically try to go for tags and things like that that capture an audience. When you’re in a desperate state, it’s not sophisticated, people who are in that state type in shit like ‘I just lost my mother what the fuck do I do?’ Literally, that will be the google search...even when we are doing videos, we add things like that so that if someone is suicidal or somebody’s just had a breakup that’s the video that will pop up. (The Deep End, Ep. 3: timestamp 30:03)

Teal Swan is using hashtags, and capitalizing on those who might be searching Google for an answer to their suffering. As detailed by Jennings Brown (2017) in his podcast about the guru, he helps us to understand that Teal’s followers have had a “relationship” with her long before attending any of her workshops- the amount of video and content she has on her YouTube page allow followers to feel as if they have a strong personal relationship with her. (Brown, 2017)

The Deep End (Freeform, 2022) docuseries shows Teal’s inner circle, a group of about a dozen or so people who live in her “intentional community”, discussing the ways in which the group can protect Swan from those who question her methods- and even how she can be protected from her inner-most circle, and they discuss a list called the “Non-Negotiables”. Teal, reeling from losing one of her closest inner-circle members to a relationship that she felt threatened by, coupled by the fact that the group had hired a

private detective to “prove” that Teal Swan was not running a cult (the expert tells Swan that her investigation shows that Teal’s group is problematic based on her list of things that were not negotiable), we see Teal dig her heels in. Now, the “Non-Negotiables” were going to come in contract form for her inner circle: They are not allowed to put their family first- Teal is first always, the priority of the community is whatever Teal says it is, followers are not allowed to have any personal boundaries that might affect Teal, and to not expect a normal life. In summary, she tells her inner circle surrounding her at a table that she fully intends to control every aspect of their lives, and that at any time they can be cast away from the group if Teal feels necessary. This is something they all agree to. (The Deep End, Ep 4) Research suggests that cult leaders (among other destructive leaders such as pimps, dictators, and human traffickers) have one or both very serious personality disorders: antisocial personality disorder, and narcissistic personal disorder (NPD). (Hassan, 2018) While an exploration of narcissistic personality disorder and antisocial personality disorder are important topics in cultic studies, a deep analysis of how this presents in internet gurus is outside the scope of this paper.

Using the BITE model, we can analyze Teal Swan’s tribe and justify calling the group a cult. *Behavior control*: Teal has been accused of pressuring members to conform to her beliefs and cut off all contact with anyone who does not believe in her teachings. Because Teal requires full belief in her teachings without question, her group members can feel an increasing sense of reliance and dependance on her as they change their beliefs to conform to hers. *Information control*: Teal’s philosophy is not grounded in any scientific research or backed by any studies, however- she expects her tribe to consult her for the answers, which can hurt a member’s ability to think critically and rationally. She

claims to have access to the Akashic records, which is the record of all events, words, emotions, and thoughts of the past, present, and future that gives her ultimate knowledge and therefore the group is expected to never question her totalistic knowledge. *Thought control*: The belief system Teal uses requires strict obedience. She uses thought-stopping techniques and intimidation to keep members in line. Teal's use of "non-negotiables" discussed previously ensure that members do not think for themselves. *Emotional control*: Former members claim that they felt trapped and forced to manage Teal's emotional state to keep her happy. She uses gaslighting, and emotional blackmail to control members' feelings, and casts those that question her out of the group, requiring that the rest of the group no longer interact with them. Overall, the group is in no way allowed to make independent decision, and all decisions that are made must benefit Teal.

Commercial Internet Groups. Many of us have experienced a close friend or relative (or even an acquaintance) reach out on Facebook with an amazing opportunity for wealth and independence. Montell (2021) discusses Multi-Level-Marketing schemes at length in her book *Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism*, "Multilevel marketing, network marketing, relationship marketing, direct sales...there are at least half a dozen synonyms for MLMs, the legally loopholed sibling of pyramid schemes...MLMs are pay-and-recruit organizations powered not by salaried employees but by 'affiliates'. (Montell, 2021, p. 157) MLMs in the United States number in the hundreds and are known as popular brands like Mary Kay, LuLaRoe, dōTERRA, Scentsy, Younique, Herbalife, and Rodan + Fields just to name a few. These companies have become staples of online shopping, utilizing its sales recruits to drive income for the company, while leaving its sales workforce in debt. "Study after study shows that 99 percent of MLM recruits never

make a dime, and the lucky 1 percent at the top only profits at every else's expense.” (Montell, 2021, p. 164) These recruits build strong and deeply emotional connections with the leaders of the group, who use love-bombing and familial buzzwords like “family”, and “sisters” and can invoke emotional responses from those who are lacking in familial connections. This causes recruits to ignore the fact that there hasn't yet been a windfall of cash, because the codependent nature of an MLM makes recruits feel personally responsible for their failures- even as far as making recruits feel as if they have disappointed God. “MLMs have strong and pervasive ideologies that are missionary in character, and members revere their founding leaders, who share a desire not just to run a successful company but to rule the free world, on the level of religious worship.” (Montell, 2021, p. 165) These groups gaslight their recruits in to believing that the failure to make money is their own- they aren't trying hard enough, because the group's system is flawless, so therefore the fault is on the recruit. These groups do so by using “thought-terminating clichés”, manipulation, and guilt. “In the end, MLMs aren't in the business of selling start-up ventures to entrepreneurs. Like most destructive ‘cults’, they're in the business of selling the transcendent promise of something that doesn't actually exist. And their commodity isn't merchandise, it's rhetoric.” (Montell, 2021, p. 167). The experience instead is attending very expensive retreats and conventions, incurring large startup costs, claiming the company's rhetoric as your own, and committing to a community whom you can easily let down if you're not trying hard enough- because of this only the rhetoric, not the numbers, make sense. (Montell, 2021)

According to Hassan (2018), MLMs have been investigated by the Federal Trade Commission for years. In 2013, a group of around 40 consumer advocates filed a petition

with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) requesting investigations in to the MLM industry. (Hassan, 2018) “New recruits are pressured to attend rallies and conferences where they are influenced to buy materials, such as books and CDs; to keep a positive, unquestioning mental attitude; and most importantly not to give in to family and concerned friends who raise questions.” (Hassan, 2018, p. 314) Caution should be given when considering any business venture that tells recruits that buying and selling their products will make them millionaires. (Hassan 2018) Another important point about commercial cults, is that they intersect with the sex-trafficking world. “Perhaps the most pernicious of all commercial cults are pimps and human trafficking rings who deceptively recruit people with dreams of making money, and then buy and sell them for sex and labor.” (Hassan, 2020, p. 18) According to Hassan (2020), it is estimated that 4.8 million people worldwide are victims of sex trafficking, while 40 million are victims of organized crime’s labor trafficking: gangs, drug cartels, and organized crime. It is important to note that these cult groups can exist, even if there are only two people (pimp and the trafficked) in the group.

Facing criticism and backlash regarding its cult-like behavior is LuLaRoe, who faces allegations of controlling, exploiting, and abusing those that work for them. Just like many of the other multilevel marketing organizations mentioned here, LuLaRoe can be analyzed using the BITE model, and is justified in being labeled a cult. *Behavior control*: LuLaRoe’s distributors follow strict rules regarding what they are allowed to say about the company and the merchandise. Distributors are expected to use positivity as an empowerment message to those they are selling to. Regular training at expensive conferences is encouraged and sometimes required, as is meeting lofty sales goals.

Information control: Distributors are discouraged from seeking outsider knowledge about the products they are selling, although little information is given to the distributors about the products and the company. Limited information in this way keeps distributors from being able to make decisions for themselves and limits critical thinking. *Thought control:* Distributors are not allowed to make independent decisions regarding the products they are selling, and a clear us vs. them ideology is baked into the message. *Emotional control:* Emotionally charged success stories are offered to recruits with a side of guilt. Telling recruits that selling LuLaRoe will solve all their internal struggles and real-world tribulations creates an emotional dependence on the group, not only for confirmation but also to keep them engaged. One of the most troubling aspects of a commercial cult is that the money spent by followers is actively taking away the ability for people to show the value of their time. Leaders of these groups can convince a follower that the things they should be spending their money on like saving for retirement, sending a child to college, owning a home, and taking a vacation, for example, are secondary to the importance of spending money on the business. Therefore, this robs followers of the ability to make meaningful and important financial decisions for themselves and their families and could potentially lead to poor financial planning and anticipation of important financial needs.

Overall, these internet-centered cults operate in the same ways that historical cults operated with a twist. Using algorithms, hashtags, targeted advertising, buzz words, click bait, and other methods of reaching potential followers on the internet adds a new dimension to the dangers posed by these destructive groups. It is easier to be exposed to their content, recruited by current members, and indoctrinated because of the voracity of information's ability to travel quick and far online. The fact that the internet is available

every day, all day, allows for destructive groups to always operate, which is different from past in-person groups who had to recruit during waking hours and were at the mercy of how far they could travel to find new recruits. There is a new dynamic added to a person's belonging on the internet. "For instance, whereas real-world acceptance and rejection is often ambiguous and open to self-interpretation, social media platforms directly quantify our social success (or failure), by providing clear metrics in the form of 'friends', 'followers', and 'likes'" (Firth, et al, 2019, 1250) Members of these groups can easily be cast away, especially if the relationship is totally virtual. Being "blocked", removed from a group, or attacked in droves, does not allow for the real-world defense in the form of in-person interactions. More research needs to be done on the causal relationship between mental health and social media use along with the detrimental effects of being cast away from an online social group. This will allow for a clearer picture of how internet regulation efforts, policy, and law should be amended or created to combat the effects of destructive internet groups.

Chapter Five

Internet Regulation, Policy & Law

Internet Regulation

According to a 2019 paper in the *Journal of Digital Media & Policy*, the large communication platforms known as FAANG (Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, Google) or FAMGA (Facebook, Apple, Microsoft, Google, Amazon) are continuing to grow in global importance. (Flew, et al, 2019). Flew et al (2019) also state that it is estimated that 70% of all internet traffic is now directed by Google and Facebook, with Google controlling 90% of search advertising, and Facebook controlling about 80% of mobile social traffic. Researchers have come to call this “platform capitalization” because of the tendency of monopoly or oligopoly in internet industries. (Flew, et al, 2019, p. 34) Many concerns have been raised about the lack of digital platform regulation, especially since 2016, including how platforms are involved in the spread of “fake news”, the potential manipulation of politics, data and privacy breaches, the abuse of market power, online hate speech, harassment, abuse, and the promotion of terrorism. (Flew, et al, 2019)

Applying traditional forms of media regulation and policy to digital platforms is difficult. (Flew, et al, 2019) One of the arguments for new policy regulating internet companies is whether they can be considered media outlets at all, and therefore whether they can even be subject to the same policies as traditional media content. A reason for this is the blurring of lines between traditional media and internet media- the struggle to distinguish between publishing, broadcasting, and telecommunications has become tricky when there is an attempt to apply regulation to contemporary internet platforms. (Flew, et al, 2019) In the 1980’s, the Regan administration pushed communications deregulation

that “largely eliminated content requirements and license renewals for broadcasters, taking the view that the liberalization of entry for new providers such as the largely unregulated cable channels would ensure that all providers were responsive to consumer needs and expectations. (Flew, et al, 2019: p. 37) However, from an international perspective the “core structuring principle of Internet governance” since the 1990’s has been platform self-governance, reliance on market competition “as an alternative to nation-state regulation, and decentralized authority.” (Flew, et al, 2019: p. 37)

There is emerging research regarding the impact of the internet and social media on voting outcomes and political participation. Initially, the internet was not used for political reasons, and those voters who accessed the internet were not as engaged in politics. However, according to Zhuravskaya, et al (2020) “Over time...the situation has changed, and new populist political actors have emerged who manage to mobilize voters by connecting to them directly through the internet. This change coincided with the emergence of social media.” (Zhuravskaya, 2020, p. 418) Studies find that social media and the internet have contributed to mobilizing voters, but it also allows for an increase in the number of people who are able to express their dissatisfaction of government, and thus potentially facilitate in-person protests, with a 2019 study showing that Facebook is associated with a higher number of protests globally (see Fergusson & Molina, 2019) “People no longer need to be physically isolated to be indoctrinated by destructive cults. Digital technology has provided access and a powerful set of tools for destructive groups and individuals to indoctrinate, control, and monitor believers’ day and night.” (Hassan, 2020, p. 197)

Hassan (2020) argues that there need to be changes to our legal system as it relates to undue influence. “Part of the challenge is that our legal system needs to get a better grip on how undue influence operates on the internet.” (Hassan: 2020, p.223)

Hassan (2020) gives examples of how other areas of the world are starting to deal with undue influence in the legal system: Germany now has a law requiring social media networks with over two million users to remove blatant hate speech within twenty-four hours of it being reported. On the other extreme, China controls data and collects information on all internet activity which is akin to totalitarian surveillance. (Hassan, 2020) In his book, *The Cult of Trump*, Hassan (2020) stresses that while the internet should not be controlled by totalitarian surveillance, it should also not be unregulated. Because of the lack of regulation in the United States, there is danger in internet companies monetizing data which encourages potentially damaging activity by large internet companies and moves the needle towards totalitarian surveillance, “companies like Facebook and Google should move out of a business model of selling data to third parties- laws to that effect should be written and enforced.” (Hassan, 2020, p. 223)

Discussed in Hassan’s (2020) book in a section on mental health, is an acknowledgement of Other Specified Dissociative Disorder, or in other terms: identity disturbance. This is a specific designation for victims of undue influence. (Hassan, 2020)

Using the definition found in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition*, Hassan (2020) describes this identity disturbance as being the result of “prolonged and intense coercive persuasion”. (Hassan, 2020, p. 226) Interestingly, this mental disorder is popping up in the defenses of those being prosecuted for the January 6th Capitol Insurrection. “When brainwashing as a technique of intense indoctrination and

mental hijacking passed from government to private cultic organization, the need for expert testimony to protect innocent victims became crucial.” (Schefflin, 2015, p. 70) Building on the fundamental research on thought reform by Robert J. Lifton, and Hassan’s BITE model, the Social Influence Model allows experts to use the model to use in court rooms against what has been called “pseudo-identity disorder” or “involuntary mental servitude”. (Schefflin, 2015)

While it may be easy for the public to dismiss the Capitol rioters as terrorists who understood what they were doing that day, the legal system needs to recognize that undue influence, persuasive coercion, and all the tactics used by charismatic leaders of the movement to indoctrinate believers can cause Other Specified Dissociative Disorder. Because Other Specified Dissociative Disorder is recognized as a diagnosis in the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, it should be recognized as something that causes social and occupational impairment because of the significant distress it can cause a person. The classification in the DSM-5 allows for proper diagnosis and treatment (and protection under disability rights laws including the Americans with Disabilities Act) and therefore should be taken into consideration during prosecution and legal defenses of those who fall victim to undue influence and destructive internet cults.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Discussion. Much of this paper's research has been dedicated to understanding the ways in which cult groups operate online, with special care taken to showcase current problematic groups to provide examples of how an internet group can control someone's behavior, information, thoughts, and emotions. While the BITE model is still the best framework for determining if a group is healthy or destructive it will not be possible to determine if the BITE model needs to be amended, or categories added, until more research into the unique dynamics of a destructive internet group are more thoroughly researched. Online destructive groups can hurt people in the same ways that a historical cult was able to hurt people, but the ramifications for mental health may differ and this deserves exploration. As discussed, destructive internet groups use different methods to recruit members that look different from historical cults. Thus, consideration needs to be made when counselors and "deprogrammers" work with former internet cult members because the damage to cognitive, social, and occupational functions may differ from the damage from in-person destructive groups. This research finds that destructive internet groups can have a broader impact on the internet because of the ways that information travels online, the fact that a group can recruit all day every day, the use of the hashtag, algorithms, and flashy, attention grabbing click bait. Indoctrination can also look different on the internet, with social relevancy and popularity determined by "likes" and reinforced by comments and on message boards. Misinformation and disinformation are both powerful tools for destructive internet groups. Because of the amount of information being delivered to a person at one time causing cognitive changes, mental health issues,

and social issues a person can be easily indoctrinated because a group uses this to their advantage. The need for internet regulation, accountability of large social media platforms to regulate the spread of damaging information, and legal ramifications of undue influence is shown in this research as well. Once there is more research into the dynamics of destructive internet groups and the damage they cause, a better understanding of the BITE model as it applies to destructive internet groups can happen, and changes can be made based on those findings.

Suggestions for Research. We mainly explored Hassan's BITE model, and the four main types of cults. However, as mentioned before, Hassan has updated the main types to five, including personality cults. "Sometimes, charisma, fame, money, and celebrity of a single person-often male- can form the basis for a high-demand relationship or group." (Hassan 2020, p. 19) A suggestion for future research would be to understand how a person with the attributes mentioned use tactics to create a following on the internet, and how undue influence is facilitated online. Large internet companies like Google and Facebook should be subject to laws that make them accountable for selling user data for profit. "Across the board, social media and app companies need to be vetted and responsible standards established to protect citizens' private information." (Hassan, 2020: p. 223) Artificial intelligence poses another troubling layer to undue influence on the internet, and more research is needed on the responsibility of creators to adhere to ethical standards. Even though humans are intrinsically social beings, how does social media negate actual belonging and what are the long-term effects of being sorted into algorithms that only support the ideas that we hold close?

Another important line of research was presented in Cohen's article on QAnon as a destructive online-facilitated cult. "As a relatively new phenomenon, this link between externalized and internalized aggression may still be largely obscured in QAnon, although there is already some anecdotal evidence for both online and offline banishment ("cancelling"), shaming ("doxing" in the online sphere), and harassment of dissenters." (Cohen, 2022: p. 56). Researching the interpersonal relationships between QAnon believers and how they control the validity of a member's place in the group, those who leave the group and those who speak out about the group is an important piece of understanding how online-facilitated cults manage their recruitment and membership. Cohen also suggests that further research should be conducted regarding the "decentralized and crowdsourced nature of the movement" (Cohen, 2022: p. 56) and whether it will continue to be collaborative and further its reach and evolve its ideology, or whether it will close its ranks and increase in orthodoxy. Hassan (2018) also calls for a "profound need for epidemiological studies to investigate the public-health effects of undue influence." (Hassan, 2018, p. 305)

Author's Note on Researcher Mental Health. Researching destructive cult groups can be taxing on a person's mental health. Because of the destructive ways in which cults operate, researchers can find themselves accessing extremely troubling and triggering content. As a researcher, I found myself struggling to understand why I was having difficulty with regulating my moods and sleep. I was having troubling dreams that included some of the content that I had researched, and I found myself ruminating on very dark subjects. It was not until it was pointed out to me that the content of my research wasn't exactly uplifting and positive that I connected my feelings to these

unsettling subjects, and this may be influencing my mental health. The research on destructive groups as they exist on the Internet is an extremely important one, especially now, so this message is not intended to sway anyone from conducting this research. However, one might take extra care to monitor their feelings, practice self-care, have a heightened awareness of your own personal triggers, take the necessary breaks from researching, and express any negative results of researching with someone you trust. It is also my recommendation that if you are researching these topics that you do not use your own social media accounts to do so, do not give personal information to groups online (i.e. joining mailing lists or “subscribing” in order to monitor content), and be extremely mindful of all of the ways in which you may fall in to the mind-control trap, experience social influence, or filter yourself in to an echo-chamber. Knowing when to take a break is an important tool to cult researchers. Being aware of the research presented in this paper is a good place to start. If someone you know seems to be falling into the trap of undue influence, I would recommend reading Steven Hassan’s *Combating Cult Mind Control* (2018) for ways to compassionately speak to a friend or loved one about their involvement in a destructive group.

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