

## PEER PRESSURE AND CULTISM AMONG YOUTHS IN GWER-EAST LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF BENUE STATE, NIGERIA

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### Abstract

Cultism constitutes a social problem in our contemporary society. The raising cases of cultism among youths in recent time have become a pressing issue globally. The scourge of cultism continues to ravage youthful population which is largely instigated by peer pressure. This study explored the relationship between peer pressure and cultism in Gwer-East Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria. The study examined the influence of identity formation on youths involvement in cultism, assessed the influence of manipulation on youths involvement in cultism and investigated how fear of rejection influences youths involvement in cultism in Gwer-East LGA. The study adopted *Social learning theory*. The study is cross-sectional. The sample for the study comprises 426. Data was collected through Questionnaire and In-Depth Interviews. Quantitative analysis was done using Statistical Service Package for Solution (SSPS). While qualitative data was analysed using manual content analysis. The study found that the search for a stable identity during adolescence age inspire youths into cultism. The study also found that fear of social exclusion from friends or social circles creates a powerful incentive for youths to join cultism, as they seek a sense of belonging, acceptance. The study concludes that desire for identity, acceptance and fear of rejection drives youths participation in cultism. The study recommends that community leaders, religious bodies and stakeholders should develop mentorship and counseling initiatives that will support the youths in building healthy self-identities and resilience against the allure of cult groups.

**Keywords:** Peers, peer pressure, youths, cultism, identity formation, manipulation

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## Introduction

Peer pressure is a compelling social force that plays a critical role in shaping the behaviour and attitudes of young people (Oludare, 2022). In recent years, the phenomenon has been linked to various detrimental behaviours, including substance abuse, delinquency, and involvement in cultism (Ugwu, 2021). Cultism refers to a form of organized group behaviour that often involves secret societies or groups with specific ideologies, rituals, and practices (Agbo, Okafor & Obi, 2020). Peer pressure significantly influences youths' decisions to engage in cult activities, particularly in areas where such practices are culturally embedded (Chukwu & Nduka, 2022).

According to Hamm (2019), the desire to feel accepted and to fit in is one of the strongest forces in young people. This can lead them to do things that they know are wrong, dangerous, or risky. The pressure to keep up with the peer group can also inspire them to achieve goals that they might never aim for on their own. Youths are individuals who are in their transitional stage between childhood and adulthood characterised by significant physical, emotional and social development, often within the age range of 15 to 35 years. Young people often prefer the companionship of their peers, who provide a sense of camaraderie and support, in contrast to their parents, whom they may view as being over restrictive (Obinna, 2022).

Cultism refers to the practices, beliefs, or rituals associated with a particular cult, often characterised by devotion to a charismatic leader or ideology, strict hierarchical structures, and a sense of exclusivity or secrecy (Ishola, Atere & Onadeko, 2020). Peer group influences are largely areas of interaction physically and impersonally. As a result of this company with friends, the decision of the friend influences their decisions or behaviours. The quest for peer acceptance is manifested in the way they dress, speak, walk and in their general interests so that they can fit in with the group (Tijani, 2018). Therefore, peers are often publicly blamed for the onset of risky behaviours ranging from substance use to teen pregnancies (Ogunode, 2018). Friends play an important role in both harmful and positive activities including alcoholism, gangsterism, robbery, rape, assassination, drug trafficking and destruction of properties (Salawu & Oyedemi, 2019). The influence of peer pressure on cultism has become significant concerns among youths globally, in Europe, for instance, a 2022 report in the United Kingdom revealed that approximately 25% of youths in urban centers had been influenced by peers to engage in gang-related or cult-like activities (World Health Organization, 2022).

In Germany, youths gang membership has risen by 18% since 2019, with peer influence cited as the primary cause for participation (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2023). The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2021) reported that over 46% of adolescents were pressured by peers into risky behaviours, including drug use and violent gang activities. In Australia, the prevalence rate of cultism among youths is slightly lower, with 2% of youths reported to be involved in cult activities (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2019).

In Asia, cultism among youths is a prevalent issue, particularly in countries like Philippines and Indonesia (Asian Development Bank, 2020). A study conducted by the Asian Development Bank in 2020, approximately 6% of youths in Philippines reported being involved in cult activities. In Indonesia, the prevalence rate of cultism among youths is slightly higher, with 7% of youths report to be involved in cult activities (Asian Development Bank, 2020).

In the continent of Africa, cultism among youths is a widespread problem (Ogunode, 2018). Youths and cult members often employ various means of manipulation and coercion tactics to recruit and retain members. According to a study conducted by the African Union in 2017, the prevalence rate of cultism among youths in West Africa is approximately 10%, in East Africa 8%, in North Africa 6%, and in South Africa 9% (African Union, 2017).

In Nigeria, the situation is even more troubling, as an estimated 30% of students in tertiary institutions have affiliations with one cult group or another, a trend that can be traced back to the 1980s (Oludare, 2022). This issue presents a substantial public health concern, with many youths drawn into cult activities for protection, social status, or belonging. The implications of such affiliations extend to violence, mental health issues, and disruption of educational processes, thus necessitating serious attention from stakeholders in both public and private sectors. A study conducted by the Nigerian Institute for Cultism Prevention (2019), shows that cultism among youths in Nigeria has risen to 12%, with higher rates in regions like South-South (15%) and North East (14%).

In Benue State, the implications of peer pressure and cultism are particularly evident. A survey conducted by Ogbogo and Akpabio (2023) revealed that 35% of youths in Benue State have been linked to cult activities, with peer pressure cited as a leading cause. Gwer-East local government area is characterized by a youths population that is vulnerable to various social pressures. Economic disenfranchisement and unemployment contribute to the allure of cult membership, perceived as a means for economic advancement and social networking (Ibrahim & Abdulhafiz, 2019). Moreover, the absence of effective regulatory frameworks in educational institutions exacerbates the problem, allowing cult groups to thrive unchecked. The ramifications for community safety and youths development are dire, prompting an urgent need for research to understand this phenomenon in local contexts.

While existing studies such as those conducted by Okpako and Ayo (2020); Ugwu (2021) have examined peer influence on youths behaviour in urban centers, little attention has been given to rural settings like Gwer-East Local Government Area of Benue State. Okoro and Adekeye (2018) focused on cultism and violence among students in Nigerian tertiary institutions. The study revealed that, cult leaders

often exploit the vulnerability of young individuals by offering them a sense of identity, purpose, and belonging, which they may lack in their everyday lives.

Oladipo (2018) study on the menace of secret cults in Nigerian universities claim that cult leaders capitalize on this vulnerability by fostering a sense of camaraderie and solidarity among members, making it difficult for individuals to leave the group without facing social ostracism or retribution. However, the study failed to interrogate the role of identity formation processes in shaping youths's perceptions of themselves and their affiliation with the cult in Gwer-East LGA.

Oluwaseun and Oyefolahan (2019) in particular investigated socio-cultural factors and involvement in campus cultism among undergraduates in Nigeria and found that youths often grapple with issues of identity, belonging, and social status, which can lead them to seek affiliation with cults as a means of self-definition and empowerment. **This study paid no attention to** manipulation and coercion tactics employed by cult members in participating in cultism. Adediran and Kolawole (2021) was primarily concentrated with socio-economic factors while downplaying the fear of rejection youths face, the study seeks to bridge this gap by examining how fear of rejection by peers may contribute to cultism in Gwer-East among youths.

On this note, this study will bridge the gap created by previous studies. This study seeks to examine the influence of peer pressure on youths involvement in cultism in Gwer-East Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria by specifically examining the influence of identity formation on youths involvement in cultism, to assess the influence of manipulation on youths involvement in cultism and to investigate how fear of rejection among youths leads to cultism in Gwer-East Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria.

## Theory

### *Social Learning Theory (SLT)*

*Social learning theory (SLT) was developed by* Albert Bandura (1967) and expanded by Akers (1973). The theory stands on the premise that *behaviour is learned by observing and imitating the behaviour of others* (Akers, 1973). The theory holds that learning occurs through observation and imitation of others' behaviours. It posits that individuals are more likely to imitate behaviours that they perceive as leading to desirable outcomes or rewards. The theory assumes that people are more likely to imitate the behaviours of those they perceive as similar to themselves or as having a higher social status (Akers, 1973).

In the context of cultism among youths in Gwer East Local Government Area of Benue State, peer pressure plays a significant role in influencing youths to adopt deviant behaviours. According to Bandura (1967) individuals are likely to emulate behaviours observed in their social environment, especially if these behaviours are modeled by peers or figures they admire. Youths who associate with peers involved in cult activities are more likely to be drawn into cultism due to the perceived benefits of acceptance, protection, or social status. This reflects Bandura's assertion that

observing peers who gain rewards from cultism can create an incentive to imitate their behaviour.

Moreover, social learning theory emphasizes the importance of reinforcement in sustaining learned behaviours. When youths in Gwer East perceive that cultism brings social recognition or protection from victimization, these perceived rewards act as reinforcements. Many youths who join cult groups do so to gain a sense of belonging, especially in environments where alternative positive role models are scarce. This aligns with Bandura's concept of vicarious reinforcement, where individuals are influenced by the consequences experienced by others. In the case of cultism, youths see their peers being celebrated or feared for their involvement, which reinforces the desirability of such behaviour.

Furthermore, the role of the environment, as emphasized in social learning theory, is evident in the proliferation of cultism in Gwer East. The lack of strong social institutions, coupled with peer pressure, creates a fertile ground for deviant behaviours. Youths are particularly susceptible to negative peer influences when they lack parental guidance or societal support systems. This supports the social learning perspective that behaviour is shaped by interactions within one's environment. By observing, imitating, and being reinforced by peers, youths are drawn into cultism, perpetuating a cycle of deviance that is difficult to break. Through a combination of peer pressure tactics, positive reinforcement, and the promise of rewards, cults are often able to recruit and retain young members, making them particularly vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation.

## Method

This research is cross-sectional. The projected population of Gwer-East local government area is estimated at 243,500 (Solup, 2023). The target population was all the youths in the Gwer-East local government area. These include those who involved in cultism, community leaders, religious leaders, youths leaders and security personnel. The sample size determination formula developed by Bill (2004) was used to determine the sample size for this study, since the populations of those who engage in cultism were infinite or unknown. The formula is given as;

$$SS = \frac{z^2 p (1-p)}{c^2}$$

Where:

SS = Sample Size

Z = Z value (In this case 1.96)

P = Population Assumed, express in percentage (In this case 0.5)

C = Confidence Level (In this case 0.05)

$$SS = \frac{(1.96)^2 \times 0.5 \times (1-0.5)}{0.05^2}$$

$$SS = \frac{3.8416 \times 0.5 \times 0.5}{0.0025}$$

$$SS = \frac{0.9604}{0.0025}$$

$$SS = 395.66$$

Approximately, SS = 396

Therefore, to create room for questionnaire that were not returned or wrongly completed, 5% of the sample size (30) was added. This gives a sample size of  $396 + 30 = 426$ . The instruments for data collection were questionnaire and in-depth interviews. Each item was structured using a 5 point Likert scale of strongly agree (5), agree (4), undecided (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1). The data gathered were properly coded, identified, properly cleaned and examined for errors to enhance data entry. The analysis was facilitated with use of Statistical Service Package for Solution (SSPS).

Out of four hundred and twenty-six (426) questionnaire administered, a total of three hundred and eighty six (386) questionnaire were returned and found valid for the analysis. While in-depth interview was conducted among 10 participants including community leaders, law enforcement officers, youths involved in cultism and social worker. Respondents were identified through referrals from community stakeholders and law enforcement agencies. Purposive sampling technique was use to select participants who have relevant experience related to cultism and peer pressure among youths.

## Results

This section presents the study's results with detailed analysis based on the data gathered from the respondents.

**Table 1: Socio- demographic characteristics of respondents**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage %</b>
<b>Age</b>		
15-19	90	23.8
20-23	122	31.1
24-27	93	23.9
28-31	50	13.2
32-35	31	8.0
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	177	44.3
Married	120	32.4
Divorced	37	9.8
Widowed	19	4.7
Separated	33	8.8
<b>Level of Education</b>		
No formal education	81	21.8
Primary	52	13.5
Secondary	116	29.3
Tertiary	137	35.5
<b>Religion</b>		
Christianity	186	48.4
Islam	47	12.2
Africa Religion	153	39.4

**Source:** Field work, 2024

Table 1 presents the demographic distribution of respondents, revealing that the majority (31.1%) are aged 20-23 years, indicating a significant youths involvement in cultism. The marital status shows that 44.3% are single and 32.4% are married, while a smaller percentage are divorced, separated, or widowed. Educationally, 35.5% have completed tertiary education, followed by 29.3% with secondary education, and 21.6% have no formal education. In terms of religious affiliation, the respondents are predominantly Christian (48.4%), followed by traditional religions (39.4%), with a small percentage practicing Islam (12.2%). This implies that youths, particularly those aged 25-28, unmarried, with varying level of education are significantly involved in cultism. This means that youth involvements in cultism will increase violence, crime, insecurity, safety and development.

**Table 2: Identity formation and cultism among youths**

	SA	A	Response				
			UD	D	SD	X	STD
Unclear identity breeds cultism	117(45.9%)	78(20.2%)	25(6.5%)	30(7.8%)	76(19.7%)	2.35	1.57
Broken homes breed cultism.	175(45.3%)	67(17.4%)	31(8.0%)	64(16.6%)	49(12.7%)	2.34	1.49
Societal pressures shape cult membership	177(45.9%)	32(8.3%)	25(6.5%)	59(15.3%)	93(24.1%)	2.63	1.70
Joining of cult is not caused by the process of developing a sense of self or identity.	147(38.1%)	87(22.5%)	39(10.1%)	60(15.5%)	53(13.7%)	2.44	1.46
Youths who feel unaccepted join cult for acceptance	71(18.4%)	158(40.9%)	39(10.1%)	60(15.5%)	58(15.0%)	2.68	1.34

**Source:** Fieldwork 2024

The data presented on table 2 reveals that a significant number of respondents believe that identity formation has a crucial influence on youths involvement in cultism. Specifically, 66.1% of respondents indicated agreement that lack of clear identity formation facilitates youths recruitment into cults, while a lesser percentage opposed this view. This is further supported by findings indicating that 62.7% of respondents feel that youths from unstable family backgrounds are more vulnerable to cult recruitment. Additionally, societal pressures during identity formation were acknowledged by 54.2% of the respondents as a contributing factor, though opinions

were polarized. Overall, responses reflect a predominant belief in the negative influence of poor identity formation on youths, suggesting that addressing identity issues may be essential in combating cultism in the area. These findings align with the response of a participant during the interview session who asserts that:

*I have observed that during adolescence, many youths seek a strong sense of identity, and they often find this in cult groups that offer a structured role and status that they struggle to achieve elsewhere.*

In the same vein, 35 year old teacher in Aliade submitted that:

*From my experience, youths often join cults as they navigate their identity formation process, seeking a sense of belonging and purpose that they cannot find through conventional means. The need for social validation and a well-defined personal identity can drive youths towards cultism, where they find a sense of belonging and acceptance during critical developmental years.*

Again, a 17 year old boy in Howe affirmed that:

*I've noticed that cult groups provide an appealing alternative for youths who are still developing their self-concept, as these groups offer clear identities and roles during a critical stage of personal growth.*

**Table 3 Cultism manipulation among youths**

	SA	Responses				Mean	Std
		A	UD	D	SD		
Cult leaders manipulate young minds into cults	115(29.8%)	89(23.1%)	16(4.1%)	86(22.3%)	80(20.7%)	2.81	1.56
Youths are forced into cult activities.	167(43.3%)	90(23.3%)	19(4.9%)	53(13.7%)	57(14.8%)	2.33	1.50
Cult members exploit youths emotional needs	88(22.8%)	120(31.1%)	11(2.8%)	40(10.4%)	127(32.9%)	2.99	1.62
Youths are uniformed in joining cults.	140(36.3%)	129(33.4%)	17(4.4%)	32(8.3%)	68(17.6%)	2.38	1.47
Young people are vulnerable to cultmanipulation tactics including love and fear of being harm.	78(20.2%)	82(21.2%)	63(16.3%)	80(20.7%)	83(21.5%)	3.02	1.44

**Source:** Fieldwork 2024

Table 3 highlights the role of manipulation and coercion in youths involvement in cultism within Gwer-East local government area, with more than half of the respondents (52.9%) agreeing that cult leaders exploit youths vulnerability through manipulation tactics. A significant 66.6% further acknowledged that youths in cults often feel coerced into unwanted activities, emphasizing the coercive aspects of cult dynamics.



Regarding psychological manipulation, 53.9% of respondents recognized its use in controlling youth's behaviour. Notably, 69.7% asserted that many youths who join cults are unaware of the level of manipulation they will encounter. Despite some ambivalence regarding specific manipulation tactics, such as love bombing and fear of punishment, the findings collectively indicate that manipulation plays a significant role in cult recruitment among youths. This was supported by the response from a 28 year old motorcyclist who asserted thus:

*I have witnessed how cult leaders use manipulation and coercion to recruit youths, often exploiting their insecurities and applying pressure to ensure they stay within the group. Cultist use psychological tactics and social coercion to control their members, making it difficult for youths to resist or leave the group once they are involved.*

In her words, a 25 year old trader at Ikpayongo market lamented:

*I observe that cult groups employ manipulation by creating a false sense of security, and coercion through social pressures and threats, to maintain control over their members. Also, the use of emotional manipulation and coercive tactics by cult leaders effectively binds youths to the group, even when they face personal conflicts or doubts.*

In the same context, a 21 year old farmer in Mbaivur said:

*Cultist use various coercion methods, including emotional and social pressures, to ensure that youths remain involved and do not challenge or question their membership.*

**Table 4. Fear of rejection and cultism among youths**

	SA	Responses				SD	Mean	Std
		A	UD	D				
Vulnerable individuals fall to cults recruitment	177(45.9%)	64(16.6%)	25(6.5%)	42(10.9%)	78(20.2%)	2.43	1.61	
Rejected youths find comfort in cults.	195(50.5%)	49(12.7%)	10(2.6%)	54(14.0%)	78(20.2%)	2.41	1.65	
	176(45.6%)	81(21.0%)	29(7.5%)	45(11.7%)	55(14.2%)	2.28	1.48	
Fear of rejection can lead youths to join cult.	94(24.4%)	126(32.6%)	18(4.7%)	90(23.3%)	58(15.0%)	2.72	1.43	
Youths join cults for social safety and acceptance	181(46.9%)	67(17.4%)	32(8.3%)	48(12.4%)	58(15.0%)	2.31	1.52	
Fear of exclusion from friends can lead youths to cults activities	77(19.9%)	69(17.9%)	81(21.0%)	91(23.6%)	68(17.6%)	3.01	1.38	

**Source:** Fieldwork 2024

The findings on table 4 illustrate how the fear of rejection significantly impacts youths involvement in cultism in Gwer-East local government area. A substantial 62.5% of respondents indicated that feeling misunderstood or marginalized increases susceptibility to cult recruitment. Similarly, 63.2% agreed that fear of societal rejection drives youths to seek acceptance in cults. Moreover, 66.6% acknowledged that cults exploit this fear to manipulate and control their members. The respondents generally believed that joining cults serves as a protective measure against societal rejection, with 64.3% asserting that fear of rejection from family and friends also motivates youths toward cult membership. Overall, the data suggest that fear of rejection is a powerful factor influencing young people's engagement with cults in the region. Some of the respondent's response aligns with the qualitative data. A 32 year old man in Howe opined that:

*I've noticed that fear of rejection by peers or family often drives youths to join cult groups, as these groups promise acceptance and a sense of belonging. Many youths are motivated to seek refuge in cults due to their fear of being excluded or judged by their existing social networks.*

Commenting, a teacher with government secondary school Aliade affirmed that:

*Many cult groups exploit the fear of rejection by presenting themselves as inclusive and accepting, which attracts youths who feel marginalized or threatened by their current social circles. From my experience, the anxiety of being socially ostracized drives some youths to join cults, where they can find the acceptance and support they fear losing in other areas of their lives.*

Also, security personnel stationed at Igbor market submitted that:

*I find that the fear of social rejection is a powerful motivator for youths to align with cult groups, as they seek to avoid exclusion and gain validation within a supportive group environment.*

## **Discussion of Findings**

The finding of the study in respect to identity formation in youths involvement in cultism revealed that adolescents experiencing identity crises are particularly vulnerable to joining cult groups in search of belonging and self-definition. This is consistent with Nwosu (2022), who argued that family and peer influence play a pivotal role in shaping youths identity and making them susceptible to cultism. Furthermore, the study underscores the desire for power, status, and influence within social circles as a motivating factor for many youths to join cult groups, corroborating Okoroafor and Ugwumba's (2023) conclusion that cultism is tied to socio-cultural identity, particularly in regions where cult groups hold symbolic powers. The educational environment is also identified as a key factor in youths identity formation, either promoting a sense of belonging that deters involvement in

cultism or contributing to alienation that fosters it. This supports the findings of Eze and Adiele (2023), who emphasize the influence of educational settings on identity and cult involvement.

The study also revealed that cult leaders strategically employ psychological manipulation, promising protection, status, and a sense of belonging to vulnerable youths, seeking to fulfill their emotional and social needs. This aligns with Okafor's (2022) assertion that psychological coercion, including fear of exclusion and intimidation, plays a pivotal role in drawing youths into cults. Emotional manipulation is another critical strategy, where cult leaders portray membership as a form of family or brotherhood, which resonates with Adeyemi's (2023) findings on coercive promises of social and economic gains. Furthermore, physical coercion, such as threats of violence or harm to family members, forces some youths to join cult groups, supporting Olajide and Akinyemi's (2020) work on the prevalence of fear-based tactics. The study also highlights that cult groups exploit youths' desire for power, influence, and social recognition, convincing them that joining a cult is essential to achieving these goals, which is corroborated by Ibrahim's (2023) observations. Together, these findings illustrate a complex web of coercive tactics employed by cult leaders to manipulate and control vulnerable youths in Gwer-East LGA, Benue State.

More so, the study revealed that many youths join cult groups to avoid social exclusion, with peer rejection being a primary driver for seeking belonging in such groups. This finding is consistent with Chukwu and Nduka (2022), who also emphasized that fear of social isolation pushes youths toward cults. Additionally, the study shows that youths experiencing rejection from family or community members are more likely to turn to cultism as a means of countering feelings of alienation. This supports Adeboye and Ibrahim's (2023) conclusion that youths often seek cult membership to address rejection and feelings of isolation from their immediate environments. The finding further indicates that fear of rejection in academic settings, especially among underperforming students, plays a key role in driving youths involvement in cultism. This aligns with Uzochukwu and Olatunji (2021), who observed that academic struggles and the associated fear of rejection by peers and teachers often push students toward cult groups for validation. On the whole, these findings underscore the importance of fear of rejection, whether from peers, family, academics, or societal institutions, in influencing youths' decisions to join cult groups.

### **Conclusion/Recommendations**

It can be deduced from the study that identity formation, manipulation and fear of rejection are pivotal factors influencing youths involvement in cultism in Gwer-East local government area. The study concludes that the quest for a stable and clear identity during adolescence often leads youths to seek out cult groups that provide a structured sense of belonging and purpose. Also, cult groups employ sophisticated psychological tactics to recruit and control their members, including leveraging youths' insecurities and applying social pressure. Furthermore, many youths are

driven to join cults as a means of escaping perceived or real social exclusion from their peers, family, or community. Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- i. There is need for community leaders, religious bodies and stakeholders to develop mentorship and counseling initiatives in Gwer-East local government area that support youths in building healthy self-identities and resilience against the allure of cult groups.
- ii. There is need to strengthen local anti-cult campaigns and educational programs to highlight the dangers of manipulation and coercion, and to equip youths with strategies to recognize and resist such tactics by cultists.
- iii. There is need for local, state and federal governments to create and promote community-based programs and peers support groups in Gwer-East that address social isolation and foster a sense of inclusion, reducing the vulnerability of youths to cult recruitment.

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