Christian Union Students' Perception of Family Background as a Factor Contributing to Cultism in Public Universities in Kenya

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Abstract

This study examines the Christian Union students' perception of family background as a factor influencing cultism in public universities in Kenya. Studies have shown that cultism is prevalent among university students, resulting in suicides, drug abuse, crimes, unrest, withdrawal from family, academic malpractices and failure, attrition, and psychological and financial exploitation, among others. The study was conducted in six public universities in Kenya and employed a descriptive research design guided by the Bounded Choice Theory. It established that the nature of family background contributes significantly to the prevalence of cultism and that the setting in which a student lives affects their disposition toward cultism. Dysfunctional families and cultic households seem to foster the recruitment into cultism. Cults use expressions of overwhelming love, also referred to as "love bombing" techniques, to give their members a false sense of affection to feel secure and accepted. The study recommends that families be educated on the dangers of cultism, the importance of understanding the biblical truth, and solid parental care. Since Christian Union (CU) members hail from diverse family backgrounds, the CU should organise targeted discipleship programmes to help debrief and reorient students to sound biblical teachings. Furthermore, the CUs should provide a support system for their members from economically disadvantaged backgrounds to shield them from the allures of cultists. In addition, the study underscores the need for preemptive education, training, and psychological and spiritual counselling intervention to enhance family values.

Keywords: Christian Union Students, Perceptions, Cultism, Family Background and Public Universities

Introduction

Cultism has been reported among undergraduate students worldwide with devastating effects. Pager (2019) reports on the death and other atrocities of university students due to recruitment rituals and cult hazing at the University of Buffalo, where one in every ten undergraduate students participated in cultic groups. A study by Stack (2019) at Louisiana State University points to the same eventuality: a student was found guilty of homicide, jailed for five years and expelled from the University for involvement in the hazing death of a recruit during a cultic initiation ritual. A study by Smah (2001) in Universities in the Middle Belt Zone in Nigeria revealed that 67.9% of the students were aware of specific cult-related organisations on campus. The author further established that a typical campus of a university in Nigeria could have as many as 40 cult groups; 69.63 % of the students indicated that cult groups operated violently.

Hassan (2020) posits that cult leaders and recruiters capture the hearts, minds, and souls of the best and brightest active, productive, intelligent, and energetic students. These individuals would be helpful for the cult in fund-raising, recruiting other followers, running cult-owned businesses, and even facilitating cult-related seminars. Studies have revealed that cults approach fresh students upon their admission when they are most vulnerable. Ross (2014) concurs that cults target new students struggling to adjust to campus life, away from family support and friends, at the start of their college careers. The cultic groups take advantage of their transitional dilemma. As Wangeri, Kimani and Mutweleli (2012) found out, the new environment of the university can overwhelm new students because most have unexplained fears and reservations about university life.

The nature of the family of origin is influential and can determine whether someone would join a cult. The role of family relations during childhood and the year's preceding group involvement is viewed by researchers such as Coates (2011) as an essential antecedent to joining a cultic group. Curtis (1993) posits that factors such as tenuous, deteriorated, or non-existent family relations and support systems, inadequate means of dealing with exigencies of survival, history of severe child abuse or neglect, and exposure to idiosyncratic or eccentric family patterns can enhance recruitment into cultism. Comparing the modern ways of living and the traditional African settings, transitioning away from family, friends

and familiar environments is a new phenomenon associated with modernisation (Wangeri, Kimani & Mutweleli, 2012).

The lack of proper parental control of children contributes to their susceptibility to cultism. According to a study by Oxtoby and Segal (2012), young people from affluent families whose parents gave them everything they wanted become susceptible to cultic groups because cults appear to offer them strict and demanding discipline with structured goals, something the parents failed to provide them with. Conversely, Olajuigbe (2001) found that parental pampering is the main reason for cultism. According to Mgbekem (2004), some parents love their children to the extent of pampering them when they commit an offence instead of scolding them; such permissive parents allow their children to grow with behavioural habits that can easily lead them to cultic groups. Ajayi, Ekundayo and Osalusi (2010) agree with the above author that a lack of parental guidance and pampering is a soft spot for entry into cultism. Mediayanose (2016) concurs with this finding that pampering and lack of discipline expose students to cultism.

Chinwe and Mag (2015) identified the influence of parents in a cult, revealing that broken homes and harsh economic situations may induce cultism. Cultism becomes a risk factor for students' faith and spiritual stability, especially those from unstable families and those without a solid theological grounding before joining the university. Thus, there is a need to establish the Christian Union students' perceptions of family background's influence on cultism in Kenya's public universities. The findings of this study would potentially assist parents and CUs in better understanding the menace of cultism, thereby advising their children appropriately before joining the universities.

Literature Review

Family background can determine whether someone would join a cult or not. The role of family relations during childhood and subsequent years is viewed by researchers such as Coates (2011) as an essential antecedent to joining a cultic group. The lack of proper parental control of children contributes to their susceptibility to cultism, and according to a study by Oxtoby and Segal (2012), young people from rich families whose parents gave them everything they wanted become susceptible to cultic groups because cults appear to offer them strict and demanding discipline with structured goals, something the parents

failed to provide them. Conversely, Olajuigbe (2001) found that parental pampering can contribute to cultism. As earlier pointed out, some parents love their children to the extent of pampering them when they stray instead of holding them accountable (Mgbekem, 2004). Such parents allow their children to walk scot-free. Such children grow up with such negative habits, which can potentially lead them to join cult groups. Ajayi, Ekundayo and Osalusi (2010) concur that a lack of parental guidance and pampering is a soft spot for entry into cultism. Mediayanose (2016) agrees with this finding that pampering and lack of discipline expose students to cultism.

Family challenges such as broken homes, parental negligence, and frustration of children contribute to the spread of cultism, as Ogunbameru (2004) found out. Cherono (2019) argues that students from highly religious families interpret all occurrences in the family with a religious persuasion, especially the belief in curses. Cherono further notes that students are easily lured into cultism due to their search for quick answers from charismatic healers, miracle workers and prophets who promise to deal with life's misfortunes. Rotimi (2005) asserts that "some individuals see cultism as a channel for making money through unwholesome activities such as prostitution, blackmail, examination racketeering, and other unscrupulous activities." This assertion is corroborated by Oyemwinmina (2015), who argues that cult members are given the impression that they would prosper economically more than non-members, making students from poor homes fall prey easily.

In addition, a lack of proper socialisation by parents may lead to cultism. Epkenyong (2010) highlighted the inability of the modern family to equip children with the effective socialisation needed to conform to acceptable cultural norms, arguing that children from malfunctioning families are ill-prepared to deal with the negative peer group influences that confront them, especially in urban centres. Ajayi and Ayodele (2002) agree that students engage in cultism due to the influence of parents, the home background, and the family environment. They assert that parents who are members of secret cults will not deter their children from engaging in cultism. According to Surajo (2018), broken homes and many frustrated individuals from broken homes are susceptible to joining cults (Girigiri, 2013). Parents who are members of secret cults may not see anything wrong with their children's involvement in cultism, thus aiding recruitment. Loveland (2003) stated that "the interest of the self depends on the cultural context within which the individual is situated." Ongonga and

Akaranga (2013) posited that socialisation is a factor which describes human beings. As Rotimi (2005) opines, the family is a powerful agent of socialisation and can play a central role in promoting cultism. He further states that parents who are members of cults often initiate their children from their homes even before they are admitted into the school and that some homes where the children are abandoned to neighbours get initiated into cults without the consent of the parents or guardians. Birabil and Okanezi (2017) concur that the home and society where students live in their formative years can be where they are introduced to negative societal values.

Theoretical Framework

This study was pegged on the Bounded Choice Theory, developed by Lalich (2004). Bounded Choice Theory is a model used to examine and analyse cults or high-demand groups. It is a socio-psychological theory developed to interpret the behaviour of true believers in a closed, charismatic context. The theory explains the seemingly irrational behaviour of the most dedicated adherents and attempts to consider individual choice within the context of an authoritarian, transcendent, and closed group. The theory posits that once people join cultic groups, they may cease to socialise with anyone outside the cultic group and become locked in or bounded. They become irrational in their thoughts, making it difficult for them to exit the group. The theory guided the study of the Christian Union students' perception of the influence of family background on cultism in public universities in Kenya.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive research design. Kothari and Garg (2014) and Serem, Boit and Wanyama (2013) argue that descriptive research design is concerned with specific predictions, narration of facts and characteristics of individuals, groups, or situations, and generalisability of the data. The descriptive research design allowed the researcher to capture respondents' feelings, opinions, and views (original data) on Christian Union students' perceptions of factors influencing cultism in public universities in Kenya. This design is appropriate for this study due to the need to collect data and establish the relationships between variables without manipulation.

Location of the Study

The study was carried out on the main campuses of six public Universities in Kenya, namely Kenyatta University, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT), Moi University, Egerton University, Maseno University and Chuka University. In these universities, cases of cultism have been previously reported (FOCUS Kenya 2020) and Kenya Police Service (2018).

Population of the Study

The study targeted fifty-five thousand six hundred (55,600) Christian Union students in public universities in Kenya (FOCUS Kenya 2022). The accessible population of the study was ten thousand nine hundred (10,900) Christian Union students in the six selected public Universities in Kenya, namely: Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT), Kenyatta University, Moi University, Egerton University, Maseno University and Chuka University. The study also included six (6) Christian Union patrons each from the six universities and sixty (60) small group Bible study leaders representing the six Universities.

Sampling Technique

The researcher used the random sampling method to select the subjects (Christian Union students) at the university level. Once the sample size was determined, a stratus was created per university using stratified random sampling. The researcher then used the purposive sampling method to select six Christian Union patrons, sixty (60) small group bible study leaders, and ten (10) from each of the six (6) universities. According to Babbie (2011), purposive sampling is a method utilised by researchers in selecting cases that would best answer questions and address research objectives.

The sample size was calculated using the Nassiuma (2000) propounded formula, independent of the population's underlying probability distribution. Thus, the sample size $n = \frac{NC^2}{C^2+(N-1)e^2}$ Where n is the sample size, C is the Coefficient of Variation, N is the accessible population, e is the error margin. Nassiuma (2000) suggested that the coefficient of variation (C) is <30 % while the error margin (e) is fixed between 2-5 %. The researcher picked C of 30 % and an error margin of 2 %. Where n is the required sample size, N is the total population of the six universities, C is the coefficient of variation (0.3), and e is the error

margin (0.02). Therefore, using the formula, the sample size for the study was two hundred and twenty (220).

Research Instruments

The study used a structured questionnaire to collect data from the Christian Union students. An interview guide was used to gather information from the Christian Union patrons and a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) for small group Bible study leaders. The instruments were used to answer questions regarding the influence of family background on cultism:

i) How does dysfunctional home, divorce, separation of parents, and child abuse make students vulnerable to cultism?

ii) What is the role of parents, neighbours, and social, moral and economic home environment in students' exposure to cultism?

Data Analysis

The data was analysed through descriptive and inferential statistics. In descriptive statistics, percentages means, and standard deviations were applied. In inferential analyses, Multiple Regression and Pearson correlation were computed. Multiple Regression was used to test the influence of independent variables on dependent variables. Pearson correlation was used to measure the relationship between the dependent and independent variables. Since this research utilised mixed methods, qualitative data was finally analysed thematically and combined with those analysed through quantitative methods.

Results and Discussion

The study sought to establish the Christian Union students' perception of the influence of family background on cultism in public universities in Kenya. Percentages, averages, and standard deviations were used to examine the trends of the variable.

Table 1: Family Background and Cultism

Statement	SD	D	A	SA	Mean	SD
A student from a dysfunctional home is made vulnerable to cultism	2%	18%	64%	17%	2.94	0.65
A student with a history of child abuse and violence is vulnerable to cultic recruitment	6%	34%	45%	15%	2.68	0.80
Parents who are cult members could initiate their children into cultism	2%	7%	57%	34%	3.22	0.66
Cultic neighbours may initiate children in the neighbourhood	1%	11%	61%	26%	3.12	0.63
Divorce and separation of parents can cause students to join cults	3%	31%	51%	15%	2.77	0.72
Moral decadence in the home encourages students to join cults	2%	17%	58%	23%	3.00	0.69
Students join cultic groups to overcome family problems		3%	17%	51%	28%	3.05	0.76
The lack of proper parental care for children leads them to cultism	2%	9%	50%	39%	3.25	0.70
Students join cult groups because of financial distress or poverty at home	2%	10%	47%	41%	3.27	0.71
Students join cultic communities due to a lack of parental discipline	5%	30%	46%	20%	2.79	0.81
Family Background Mean index					***3.01***	***0.37***

Source: Research Data (2023)

Family background plays a critical role in shaping the lives of its members. The results indicate that 81% affirmed (*Mean*=2.94; *SD*=0.65) that a student from a dysfunctional home is made vulnerable to cultism. In addition, 66% of participants were of the view that divorce and separation of parents cause students to join cults (*Mean*=2.77; *SD*=0.72). This suggests that dysfunctional families may incline their members to cultism because they lack fundamental values of life. Family background can determine whether or not someone will join a cult. These views are consistent with those of Ajayi, Ekundayo and Osalusi (2010),

who concurred with the view that cult members might come from broken homes where child abuse and neglect are common. Similar views are stated by Coates (2011), who believes that the role of familial relationships during childhood is a significant antecedent to joining a cultic group. One of the patrons interviewed posited that:

> Students who have suffered depression and are from family backgrounds where they have experienced divorce and separation were easily swayed into cults. A patron said he had struggled journeying with students from cultic backgrounds and dysfunctional families suffering acute depression. Moreover, cults seem to offer explanations and promise a home. Furthermore, patrons affirmed that parents can easily recruit their children into cults if they are members. Parental authority over their children could contribute. The promise of quick answers – instantaneous healing in which the physical expression of touch is required, including using anointing oil!

Early childhood experiences could affect the character of an individual later in life such that they can easily be lured into cultism. According to the results, 60% of the participants agreed that a student with a history of child abuse and violence is vulnerable to cultic recruitment (*Mean*=2.68; *SD*=0.80). Moreover, 81% (*Mean*=3.00; *SD*=0.69) of the respondents affirmed this view by observing that moral decadence in the home encourages students to join cults. This finding agrees with that of Surajo (2018), who asserts that lack of parental guidance and broken families have a drastic negative impact on the upbringing of children, and such children grow up becoming ready candidates for cultism.

One of the interviewed patrons indicated that Students who have suffered from depression and are from family backgrounds where they have experienced divorce and separation were easily swayed into cults. He admitted he had struggled journeying with students from cultic backgrounds and dysfunctional families suffering acute depression. The environment where members of the society live affects whether they can withstand cultism. In the research, 91% of participants ascertained that parents who are cult members could initiate their children into cultism (*Mean*=3.22; *SD*=0.66). In a similar vein, 87% of these participants affirmed that cultic neighbours might recruit children in the neighbourhood (*Mean*=3.12; *SD*=0.63). This implies that the society from which individuals originate can be where they are easily exposed to undesirable societal vices such as cultism. According to Rotimi (2005), parents who are members of cults frequently initiate their children from home even before they are admitted to school, and some households where children are abandoned have their children initiated into cults without the approval of the parents or guardians. One of

the interviewed patrons affirmed that: "Some children go into cults in search of father figures, especially girls who never had a father figure at home, or those with tattered relationships with their fathers are attracted to cults. Cultic groups term themselves as solution bringers-e.g., father and mother figures, those from humble families, and student's situations are taken advantage of." Cultism is seen by many as an alternative route to problem-solving of daily challenges. In this study, 79 % of respondents asserted that students join the cultic groups to overcome family problems (*Mean*=3.05; *SD*=0.76). In addition, 88% thought that students are joining cult groups because of financial distress or poverty at home (*Mean*=3.27; *SD*=0.71). This implies that individuals could find themselves in cultic organisations for financial freedom. The findings of this study agree with those of Oyemwinmina and Aibieyi (2015), who found that some students join cultic groups in search of financial and economic gain, and others join cultic groups out of financial and economic discontent.

Furthermore, research by Oyegoke (2003) observes that cult members are misled into believing that they have a better chance of being financially independent than non-members. This technique easily wins over students from low-income families. They are informed that the only way to live comfortably and have access to so many opportunities for making money on campus is to join a cult organisation. The interview results established that searching for quick fixes and faster solutions causes them to end up in cultism. One of the respondents remarked:

> Many unsuspecting students are told that God is a little late at times! They end up in witchcraft, drugs, and substance abuse. This especially takes place in single-parent homes. Cults seem to provide answers and solutions to all problems at home. They seem to have answers to past traumas and prescribe the dos and don'ts. Cults appeal to abandoned people since they seem to explain situations and occurrences and give reasons why things happen the way they do. They seem to provide a home for the ostracised since they exhibit a high life, money, and hope. Cults presents the offer of 'Join us to break family poverty, curses to gain academic success.' Cults state they are the only ones who must bind and break generational curses…

Broadly, parental care and discipline influence children's attitudes toward cultism. In light of this study, 66% of participants acknowledged that students join cultic communities due to a lack of parental discipline (*Mean*=2.79; *SD*=0.81). Similarly, 89% of those who opined that lack of proper parental care for children leads them to cultism (*Mean*=3.25; *SD*=0.70). The findings are consistent with those of Surajo (2018), who believes that a lack of parental

direction and shattered families have a significant detrimental impact on children's upbringing and that those children grow up to be the perfect targets for cultism. The family background mean index was 3.01, with a standard deviation 0.37. This shows that this factor was thought to be significantly related to cultism. The interview with one of the patrons found that students who lack warmth, love, belonging, and acceptance of the home are quickly captured by cults. A patron observed that "Cults took advantage of family challenges to recruit students. Students searching for a sense of meaning, family, community, friendship, and money can be easily led into cults. In addition, students who feel ostracised from family may find a home in cults." The results from Small Group Bible Study (SGBS) leaders indicated that strict parents might force their children to join cults while they are young and lack a strong understanding of scripture. Some, however, argued that the family's impact could only go so far since university students were adults and their joining of cults in university could partly be their own decision.

They maintained that abuse in childhood could contribute to cultism. However, there was disagreement, with some arguing that there is an age after which the children cannot blame parents, so parental recruitment is limited. Students from families that struggle with poverty, parental absenteeism, separation, and divorce may be inspired to join cults in search of hope and the promise of a better future, which cultists promise to offer. Cultists were said to be opportunistic, masquerading as a solution to the crisis.

The participants affirmed that students who have no family at all are also exposed to cultism since cults become their new family. Parents who lack time with their children can promote a situation that can cause children to fall into the deception of cults. The respondents acknowledged that the nature of the upbringing of children can determine whether one joins a cult or not. In addition, a lack of support from families may trigger one to join a cultic group in search of solace and love. Violence during early childhood years may motivate students to join cultic groups to find peace, love and acceptance. Several respondents observed that the desire for revenge, especially those who have experienced violence from family and friends, may cause them to join cultic groups. Small group Bible study leaders affirmed that some students join cults to overcome family problems, e.g., poverty and unconducive environments. Parents who are cultic tend to influence their children to join cultism for continuity in instances where the cult is a family business. Many students from dysfunctional

families join cultism because they are looking for hope and fulfilment missed in their families. Those in pursuit of hope, home and support are highly susceptible to cultism. The participants also affirmed that those who lack doctrinal grounding from home and church are inspired to join cults.

Mistreatment by family can cause children to go into cults in search of a conducive home environment and a sense of love and belonging that breeds loyalty, friendship, and fellowship. Parental discrimination, favouritism of children, and social exclusion is another reason young people join cults. The love for money is one of the reasons people join cults. This is usually one of the material benefits cult groups promise. They promise money and fame, which attracts students or children to the group. The study indicated that family background is a major factor in joining cultic movements; an upbringing devoid of good guidance and scriptural foundations can make one fall into cultism.

Correlations

The correlation analysis is used in research to quantify an association between two variables and to evaluate how strongly two variables are linearly correlated (Mukaka, 2012). In contrast to a low correlation, which indicates a weak association between the two variables, a high correlation indicates a strong relationship. In this research, Pearson correlation was run at 0.05 alpha, 2-tailed; the findings are presented in Table 2.

Correlations for Family Background

The most typical approach to gauge a linear correlation is via the Pearson correlation coefficient (r). The coefficient's sign indicates whether the association is positive or negative.

Table 2: Correlations for Family Background

		Prevalence of Cultism
Family Background	Pearson Correlation	.580[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	193

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Research Data (2023)

These results established that there exists a statistically significant relationship between

family background and the prevalence of cultism (r=0.580[**]; p<0.05). This suggests that families that are dysfunctional and also with cultic environments have a contributory effect on the prevalence of cultism.

Regression Coefficients

The link between a predictor variable and the responder is described by regression coefficients, which are estimations of the unknown parameters of the population. In order to create models that predict a significant dependent variable from a group of predictor factors, Regression is typically used.

Table 3: Regression Coefficients

Model	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients			Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	-.111	.207		-.534	.594		
Family Background	.233	.078	.186	2.998	.003	.592	1.691
Socio-Psychological Manipulation	.174	.081	.160	2.159	.032	.412	2.427
Sense of Belonging	.229	.075	.222	3.064	.003	.431	2.323
Theological Grounding	.206	.070	.194	2.924	.004	.515	1.941
Peer Pressure	.210	.080	.180	2.632	.009	.482	2.076

a. Dependent Variable: Prevalence of Cultism
Source: Research Data (2023)

The regression analysis shows that family background contributes significantly to the prevalence of cultism (β=0.186; p<0.05).

Conclusion

The study examined the Christian Union students' perception of family background as a factor influencing cultism in public universities in Kenya. The study conducted in six public universities in Kenya indicated that the nature of family background contributes significantly to the prevalence of cultism and that the setting in which a student lives affects their disposition toward cultism. Dysfunctional families and cultic households seem to foster the recruitment into cultism. Parents who are cult members might convert their children to the cultic group. Also, many people view cultism as an alternate method of overcoming problems

that arise daily. Cults appear to have answers and fixes for all domestic issues. They offer advice on the dos and don'ts and appear to have solutions for past tragedies. Cults might attract students looking for money, family, friends, or significance. The study underscores the need for preemptive education, training, and psychological and spiritual counselling intervention to enhance family values.

Recommendation

Owing to the prevalence of cultism in Kenyan public Universities, university authorities need to monitor the religious groups that operate in their universities, including vetting the doctrines of the preachers who join the University. Disciplinary proceedings should be instituted against culprits and rogue charismatic preachers who abuse, exploit and manipulate students for their selfish ends.

Churches, schools and families need to be trained on the existence and dangers of cultism in public universities to prepare students adequately to deal with the recruitment onslaught of cults in public universities in Kenya.

Christian Unions should be equipped, and CU patrons should be trained on handling students who may be recovering from cultism or facing the allurement of cults in public universities. Data should be collected on new students to establish their family dynamics so that relevant doctrinal and spiritual support is given to them early in their academic journey at the university.

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