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Social Psychological Techniques of Cults

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Abstract. With the development of religious culture, a extreme form of religion-cult is also becoming more rampant, they use specific means to brainwash the minds of believers and manipulate their behaviors, which negatively affects their physical and mental health. In this paper, This paper will analyze the foot-in-the-door technique and deindividuation used by the cult the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God (MRTCG) to explain the reasons why believers, after joining into the cult, end up in self-immolations. Also, this paper will give a solution to improve the social consequence - more people fall into the cult and end up following the organization's instructions to commit suicide - by placing more advertisements that popularize the cult's brainwashing techniques to the public in order to provide a forewarning to better resistance to the cult's persuasions, however, this method also has the disadvantage of being ineffective when the target audience is distracted.

Keywords: Cults, MRTCG, Foot-in-the-door Technique, Mass Suicide

1. Introduction

MRTCG is a fringe Catholic group with beliefs related to AIDS and government corruption, and their main goal of action is to restore the fundamental moral principles Ten Commandments in the Bible [1]. On March 17, 2000, MRTCG followers burnt themselves in a church in Kanungu, Uganda, resulting in the death of at least six hundred people. And in this case, a husband of a deceased believer stated that his wife joined the cult three years ago and gradually took away all their children, telling the children that Virgin Mary would come to save them.

2. Background

Prior to this incident, there were many villagers who witnessed that the cult group often sang together, with women wearing a uniform white veil while men wore black green or red uniform shirts [2], and that such behavior was a manifestation of deindividuation. And the progression from MRTCG believers agreeing to follow the organization's instructions to sing together during usual activities, to the gradual taking away of children, and finally to voluntary self-immolation also demonstrates the foot-in-the-door technique.

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3. Detriment

3.1. Case examples

And in addition to MRTCG committing suicides, there are also many other cults that have had similar results, such as the one in which the leader of Heaven's Gate and his 37 disciples decided to let go of their bodies and go to heaven, so they put plastic bags over their heads and let themselves die in sleep [3]. There are many cases of such cult suicides, but what exactly causes these cult believers to commit mass suicide? This paper will explain it based on the effect of foot-in-the-door technique and deindividuation on the deceased MRTCG believers.

3.2. Reason

Regarding the foot-in-the-door technique, it is a persuasive technique that refers to the tendency of people to maintain consistency and therefore acquiescence when they are first presented with a small request that they have a high probability of acquiescing to, followed by a larger request [4]. Some researchers conducted a relevant study in which experimenters posed as volunteers and asked people to put a large "Drive Carefully" sign in their yards, and only 17% of them agreed [5]. But when the volunteers asked another group of people to put a small "Be a safe driver" sign on their car windows, almost all of them agreed. And two weeks later, when the group was asked again by volunteers if they could put large signs in their yards, 76% agreed. So this study proves that ask a small request that people will agree to can be used to manipulate them into accomplishing something bigger that they might not originally agree to.

Like in the MRTCG case, at first the believers just agreed to the organization's instructions to perform religious activities and sing together, but over time they were asked to do something bigger like getting their children to join the religious commune, and then later on they followed the organization's instructions to collectively commit self-immolation and none of them ran away [2].

Such a step-by-step progression is an application of the foot-in-the-door technique, and such a persuasive technique is one of the reasons that led to their eventual agreement to what seemed to be such a weird thing as collective self-immolation.

3.3. Results

Furthermore, deindividuation, a technique that reinforces conformity, is also a cause of collective suicide. Deindividuation can lead to a loss of self-awareness (the ability to keep one's behavior in line with one's intrinsic values) and evaluation apprehension (the sense of caring about how other people evaluate one’s performance). Also, it can lead to more impulsive or deviant acts [6].

Typically, deindividuation is achieved through physical anonymity - a group wearing uniforms that cannot be easily recognized to individual identity. Some researchers conducted a related study in which he asked some women wearing identical white coats and hoods and others wearing large name tags [7], and all of them needed to give electric shocks to another woman. And the results showed that anonymous hooded women pressed the electric shock button twice as long as those wearing large name tags. Thus, physical anonymity has indeed been shown to lead to more impulsive behavior.

In the case of the MRTCG, some witnessed villagers noted that members of the group often sang together, and that the women wore white veils while the men wore specific colored shirts [2]. Such uniform white veils and specific color shirts make the individuality of the members diluted, which is

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a demonstration of deindividuation. And the believers lose their self-awareness and evaluation apprehension through repeated similar activities, which leads them to develop higher conformity to the organization's instructions and engage in more impulsive behaviors such as self-immolation.

4. Possible solutions to change social impact

4.1. Advertising role

The ad would make the public realize when they encounter someone using similar speech in ad to communicate with them that this person might be a cult member trying to brainwash them, and they can refute the arguments by using the counter-arguments in the ad, so that they will not be successfully brainwashed by the cult. Besides that, there are also experiments that prove the positive effect of forewarning on resistance to persuasion [8]. This paper created a study to explore whether forewarning has an effect on resistance. The participants were first required to type in a paragraph without using the letter e and the space bar, and the purpose of this task was to make the participants exhaust their self-regulationary resources. Then participants were randomly assigned to the group with and without forewarning, where the former received an alert about the following persuasive message, and both groups were then faced with a persuasive situation.

4.2. Flaw

However, the act of placing advertisements also suffers from flaws due to distraction. Imagine if the attention of passersby was not focused on these advertisements, then they would not be able to know what information the advertisements were conveying, and thus the advertisements would not be able to serve as a forewarning to popularize the cult's viewpoints and to help the public to generate counter-arguments.

Overall, in the tragic case of the massive self-immolation of MRTCG members, the organization used foot-in-the-door persuasion, exploiting the psychology of the members' consistency to make them go from agreeing to participate in religious ceremonies to committing suicide; meanwhile, the organization also used deindividuation, making the believers gradually lose self-awareness and strengthening their conformity to the organization's instructions, and leading to the ultimate impulsive and deviant behavior of self-immolation.

4.3. Suggestion

The tragedy of the MRTCG self-immolation has already occurred, and in order to prevent more people from being misled by cults into committing suicide, the authors argue to increase the public's ability to resist being persuaded by running more advertisements promoting cult brainwashing techniques and to provide a counterargument to cults through the use of early warnings. Forewarning refers to the process of alerting people to the fact that someone is about to try to persuade you, and helps people generate counter-arguments to the arguments that persuaders typically use [4].

The results of the study showed that participants in the forewarning group who exhausted their self-regulatory resources had relatively lower compliance when confronted with persuasive requests, suggesting that forewarning does increase resistance to persuasion. Thus, the forewarning effect of placing cult-related ad can lead to higher resistance and lower compliance when the public is subsequently confronted with persuasive requests from cult members, thereby reducing the number

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of people who are misled by the cult into joining the cult and progressing to the horrific consequences of suicide.

In this regard, This paper propose to use advertisements to popularize the cult's speech and promote counter-argument against the cult, by making passersby increase their resistances through forewarning, but since passersby may not always focus on the advertisements, the distraction makes this method may not be effective.

All in all, though, cults are scary existences, and it will take the efforts of more people and more sustained attention from society as a whole to combat cult beliefs, and so that fewer people are brainwashed into joining cults and leading to the horrific consequences of suicide.

5. Conclusion

This paper takes the "Movement to Restore God's Ten Commandments" (MRTCG) as the research object, and analyzes the social and psychological methods of cults to manipulate believers and the reasons for the tragedy of collective self-immolation. The cult uses the threshold effect, starting from small things such as allowing believers to participate in group singing, and gradually escalates to taking away children and eventually collectively self-immolating, using people's psychology to maintain behavioral consistency to achieve extreme goals. Weakening believers' self-awareness and concerns about others' evaluation, making them more prone to impulsive self-immolation, is consistent with the mechanism of cult collective suicide cases such as "Heaven's Gate".

In order to cope with this problem, this paper suggests popularizing cult brainwashing techniques through advertisements and enhancing public resistance with the help of early warning effects, which have been shown to reduce the compliance rate. However, this method has the flaw of ineffectiveness when the audience is distracted, so it requires continuous social attention and efforts to reduce the harm of cults.

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