

The Charismatic “Saviors”: A Depiction of Cults and Leaders in Mainstream Film

Kamryn Trapane

Department of Sociology, MA in Sociology, College of Liberal Arts, Texas State University

Purpose

The purpose of my study is to evaluate four films to examine how cults and their leaders are portrayed in a fictional setting. My argument is that the media tends to focus on the most extreme examples of cults, and this is then exaggerated in films, leading to an overdramatization of what we typically associate with the term "cult."

Research Questions

1. How are cults depicted in mainstream film?
2. How are cult leaders depicted in mainstream film?

Abstract

This study evaluates four films regarding cults and cult leaders using discourse analysis or content analysis. Cults were depicted as having in-person or historical supernatural motives with both the followers and leaders participating in deviant behaviors. The leaders possessed confidence and charisma in their cultic responsibilities, using impression management (Goffman 1959), or a way to give a perceived perception to others within social interactions, and expressing their charismatic authority (Weber 1947), or a type of leadership which is unique in that it influences a group of people due to attractive qualities. The main characters exhibited anomie (Durkheim 1893), or the morals that the characters follow resulting in instability in their lives. Anomie becomes prevalent when the cult members and leader manipulates the characters, resulting in the characters exhibiting instability when navigating the cult as their morals do not align. Understanding cults and cult leaders in mainstream films can help recognize the social construction that the media has established in our society. These films can establish patterns and differences between real-life cults and fictional movie depictions.



Photo from *Midsommar* by Ari Aster. This photo shows Dani's morals being broken down as she experiences a cult ritual.



Photo from *The Wicker Man* by Robin Hardy. This photo shows the cult leader, Lord Summerisle, preparing a speech for the burning of the wicker man ritual.

Methodology

A qualitative content analysis was conducted of four religious cult films to show how the leaders were depicted in these selected mainstream films. Films analyzed: *Midsommar* (Ari Aster, 2019), *Hereditary* (Ari Aster, 2018), *The Wicker Man* (Robin Hardy, 1973), and *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968). To ensure accuracy, various methodologies were adopted in this analysis.

- A content analysis was conducted to determine how these fictional cults were portrayed in these carefully selected films, rather than, how society reacted to them.
 - To obtain an acceptable population sample, the films chosen obtained a high box office ranking at the time of release indicating the popularity of the film. Also, to avoid confusion or conflicting depictions of actual cult tragedies in documentaries and news media, these selected films are fictional.
 - Rotten Tomatoes proved to be an informative resource in this analysis to determine popularity of the films ensuring an acceptable study sample.
 - In addition to Rotten Tomatoes, IMDb (Internet Movie Database) was also an informative resource. This website lists ratings and award nominations that offered excellent data in determining the popularity aspect of this research. A good example is *Midsommar*. IMDb offered helpful data such as 315,000+ ratings in addition to nomination statistics.
 - To measure success and popularity, total box office earnings in the United States were measured with the data from both Rotten Tomatoes and IMDb.
- Open and focused coding determined how the cult phenomenon was depicted in these fictional films. Included are details and patterns of storylines, such as the main character's demeanor, how cult leaders are depicted, and how religious cults are presented, among several other categories of interest.

Findings

The Fair Folk Tactics and Anomie Production

- This finding focuses on isolation and manipulation of the characters.
- Environmental and emotional isolation was presented in the each of the films.
- The focus of this section is on the Anomie theory by Durkheim (1893).

Supernatural Impressions and Charisma of the Cult Leaders

- This finding focuses on the interactions between the cult leader and his followers, as well as other groups and individuals throughout the storyline.
- This section highlights both dramaturgy by Goffman (1959) and charismatic authority by Weber (1947).
- A common thread among these four films is a supernatural element that supports the motives and rituals regarded as authentic by the followers.

Sex, Drugs, and Rituals

- This finding focuses on one or more aspects of sex, drugs, and rituals showcased in the films.
- In each of the films selected, another common theme emerges. The main character is influenced or incapacitated by drugs followed by forced methods of manipulation using sexualized and ritualistic behavior.



Photo from *Rosemary's Baby* by Roman Polanski. This photo exemplifies Rosemary's morals being broken as she looks at her non-human baby she birthed.

Conclusion

These depictions reflect the cult phenomenon popularization by the film industry. Thus, resulting in dramatic supernatural incorporation of cult depiction in mainstream films (Richardson 2021:19). Made popular by success, many film genres, including horror, capitalize on the cult elements to enhance the storyline. Society can perceive cults based on movies and media consumed. It also supports the collective mainstream portrayal of cults in films by showing similar tactics and leaders. However, a gap remains in the fictional storytelling of a mysterious cult for entertainment and the actual reality of cults, and the tragedies left in their wake.



Photo from *Hereditary* by Ari Aster. This photo shows Charlie, the bodily host of Paimon, a demon who is worshipped by her grandmother's cult. Here she sees her grandmother who has died previously, in a field surrounded by fire.

Key References

- Durkheim, Emile 1893. *The Divisions of Labor in Society* (2014 Edition). Free Press, Simon & Schuster Inc: New York.
- Goffman, Erving 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (First Anchor Books Edition 1959). Random House Inc. (New York).
- Weber, Max 1947. *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (Martino Publishing 2012). Oxford University Press (New York).

System Thinking Award

My project exemplifies systems thinking in an unexpected way. By studying films about these fictional cults, I gained insight into the specific system used and how they manipulate the character. This system follows actual cults, such as the Peoples Temple (Jonestown massacre). Each film follows a similar pattern, with a leader, followers, rituals, and the manipulation of characters in order to achieve a goal. In these films, an unwilling character becomes a part of the cult's system, which the leader operates within to advocate for the manipulation of the character. Some of the cult followers may have been members from birth and therefore understand the system very well without question. Others may have joined due to a promise or cause that the cult seemed to offer. These relationships work together making it a good example of systems thinking.

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