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Psychosocial Vulnerability and cults involvement among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities implications for prevention and intervention

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Eriyo Williams Omoregie[1], Eboreime Helen[2], Ikemefuna shelly[3], Samuel Osasona[4], Chikezie Eze[5], Chikezie Chidiebere[6]

[1]Ambrose Ali University, Nigeria,
[2] Benson idahosa university,
[3] Irrua Specialist teaching hospital,
[4] University of Benin,
[5] National centre for Mental Health, Maldives,
[6] Afe Babalola Universit.

Correspondence: Eriyo Williams Omoregie, eriyowilliamsomoregie@proton.me

Abstract

Cult involvement remains a major challenge in Nigerian universities due to its adverse effects on student wellbeing, academic performance, and campus security. This study examined psychosocial vulnerability and cult involvement among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities with a view to identifying the psychosocial factors associated with cult participation and providing evidence for prevention and intervention strategies. The study adopted a cross sectional survey design. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered electronically to undergraduate students in selected public universities in Southern Nigeria. The data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. The findings revealed that recognition on campus, perceived security, and peer pressure were the major motivations for cult involvement. The study further showed that respondents experienced notable psychosocial changes following cult involvement. Positive indicators such as happiness, social acceptance, quality sleep, and academic functioning declined after involvement, while emotional distress, nervousness, substance use, and other risk related behaviours increased. Although some respondents reported increased boldness and self confidence, these perceived gains were accompanied by negative psychological, social, and academic consequences. The study concluded that cult involvement is strongly associated with psychosocial vulnerability arising from social pressures, emotional needs, perceived insecurity, and the desire for belonging and recognition. The study recommends strengthening counselling services, student

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support systems, mental health programmes, and campus based preventive interventions aimed at reducing students' vulnerability to cult recruitment and participation.

Keywords: Psychosocial Vulnerability, Cultism, University Students, Mental Health, Risk Factors.

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

Universities are established to promote intellectual development, character formation, innovation, and the advancement of society through teaching, research, and community service. However, the realization of these objectives is often threatened by various social and behavioural challenges that emerge within university environments. One of the most persistent challenges confronting higher education institutions in Nigeria is cult involvement among undergraduate students. Cult groups, commonly referred to as secret cults or confraternities, have remained a source of concern because of their association with violence, intimidation, substance abuse, criminal activities, and disruptions to academic activities (Odesanmi et al., 2024; Shangka & Hazo, 2023). Recent studies suggest that despite institutional efforts to curb cult related activities, the phenomenon continues to evolve and attract student participation in various forms (Nwikpo et al., 2025).

Cult involvement in Nigerian universities has attracted considerable attention from scholars, educational administrators, parents, security agencies, and policymakers due to its implications for student welfare and campus safety. While early studies often focused on the prevalence, causes, and consequences of cultism, contemporary research has increasingly emphasized the psychosocial factors that may predispose students to cult involvement (Chukwurah et al., 2022; Nwikpo et al., 2025). This shift in focus recognizes that cult membership is not merely a disciplinary or security issue but also a behavioural and psychosocial phenomenon shaped by individual vulnerabilities and environmental influences.

Psychosocial vulnerability refers to a combination of psychological and social conditions that increase an individual's susceptibility to maladaptive behaviours and risky affiliations. Such conditions may include low self esteem, social isolation, emotional distress, perceived insecurity, poor social support, identity crises, peer pressure, and a strong desire for social acceptance or recognition. University students, particularly those undergoing significant developmental transitions, may experience varying levels of psychosocial vulnerability as they navigate academic demands, social relationships, financial pressures, and identity formation processes. These vulnerabilities may create circumstances that increase the attractiveness of cult groups, especially when such groups are perceived as providing protection, belongingness, influence, social status, or economic opportunities (Odesanmi et al., 2024).

The university period represents a critical stage in emerging adulthood during which students are exposed to new social environments and greater personal autonomy. While this transition provides opportunities for growth and self discovery, it may also expose students to social pressures and risky behavioural influences. Research has shown that peer influence remains one of the strongest predictors of deviant group affiliation among young adults, particularly when accompanied by unmet psychological or social needs (Nwikpo et al., 2025). Students who experience feelings of exclusion, insecurity, or emotional instability may become more susceptible to recruitment strategies employed by cult groups, which often exploit these vulnerabilities through promises of acceptance, protection, influence, and empowerment.

The persistence of cult involvement within Nigerian universities suggests that conventional approaches focusing solely on disciplinary measures and security interventions may not be sufficient. While punitive

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measures are necessary for maintaining campus order, they often fail to address the underlying psychosocial conditions that make students vulnerable to cult recruitment. Consequently, there is a growing need to understand the psychosocial characteristics and experiences of students who become involved in cult activities. Such understanding is essential for developing preventive interventions that target risk factors before students become actively involved in cult groups (Chukwurah et al., 2022).

Despite the growing body of literature on cultism in Nigeria, there remains a limited understanding of the specific psychosocial vulnerabilities associated with cult involvement among undergraduate students. Much of the existing literature has focused on the causes, effects, and management of cultism from sociological, educational, or security perspectives, with relatively less attention given to the psychosocial profiles of students involved in cult activities (Eleje et al., 2024). Furthermore, there is a need for empirical evidence that identifies the psychosocial factors that may increase students' susceptibility to cult involvement and informs the development of targeted preventive strategies.

This study therefore seeks to examine psychosocial vulnerability and cult involvement among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities. Specifically, the study aims to explore the psychosocial profiles of students involved in cult activities, identify the factors associated with their involvement, and provide evidence based recommendations for prevention and intervention. By focusing on psychosocial vulnerability as a precursor to cult involvement, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and support the development of more effective strategies for promoting student wellbeing and campus safety.

1.2 Relevance of the Study

The relevance of this study lies in its potential contribution to knowledge, policy formulation, student welfare, and institutional management within Nigerian universities. Cult involvement continues to pose significant challenges to academic excellence, student wellbeing, and campus security. Understanding the psychosocial vulnerabilities associated with cult involvement can provide valuable insights into the factors that predispose students to participation in cult activities.

The study is expected to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by providing empirical evidence on the psychosocial characteristics of students involved in cult activities. It will expand current understanding of cult involvement beyond traditional explanations that focus primarily on security concerns and disciplinary issues.

The findings of the study will be beneficial to university administrators and policymakers by providing evidence that can guide the development of preventive policies and student support programmes. Rather than relying exclusively on punitive measures, institutions may utilize the findings to design interventions that address underlying psychosocial risk factors.

The study will also be valuable to counselling psychologists, student affairs personnel, and mental health professionals working within higher education institutions. By identifying psychosocial vulnerabilities associated with cult involvement, the findings can support the development of early identification mechanisms, counselling services, and psychosocial support programmes targeted at vulnerable students.

1.3 Aim and Objectives

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine psychosocial vulnerability and cult involvement among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities with a view to identifying psychosocial factors associated with cult participation and informing preventive interventions.

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Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. Examine the psychosocial profiles of undergraduate students involved in cult activities.
2. Identify the social factors associated with cult involvement among undergraduate students.
3. Determine the psychological factors associated with cult involvement among undergraduate students.
4. Examine the perceived motivations for joining cult groups among undergraduate students.
5. Assess the psychosocial experiences of students following involvement in cult activities.
6. Develop evidence based recommendations for the prevention of cult involvement among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptual Review

2.1.1 Psychosocial vulnerability

Psychosocial vulnerability refers to a condition in which psychological and social factors combine to make an individual more likely to engage in risky or maladaptive behaviour. In student populations, this may include low self esteem, need for external approval, emotional distress, loneliness, weak social support, academic stress, and difficulty coping with transition demands. Recent work on psychological vulnerability describes it as being linked to maladaptive beliefs such as self criticism, perfectionism, and a strong need for external validation, all of which reduce coping capacity when students face negative life experiences.

At the university level, vulnerability is not only an individual experience; it is also shaped by interpersonal and organizational contexts. A recent social ecological study of university students found that loneliness was associated with individual characteristics and interpersonal conditions, while positive social relationships acted as a protective factor. This supports the view that psychosocial vulnerability is best understood as a layered phenomenon, influenced by the student, the peer group, and the institutional environment.

2.1.2 Cult involvement

Cult involvement in Nigerian universities remains a serious concern because of its association with violence, disruption of academic activities, poor academic performance, loss of lives, and insecurity on campus. Recent Nigerian studies continue to report that cultism is driven by factors such as peer pressure, revenge, poor parenting, drug abuse, poverty, desire for acceptance, and the search for protection or recognition. These studies also show that cult involvement is not merely a disciplinary issue, but a social and psychological problem that affects both campus life and broader community safety.

2.1.3 Undergraduate students in Nigerian universities

The undergraduate stage is a sensitive developmental period because students are adjusting to independence, new identities, academic demands, and expanded peer networks. Recent reviews of university student mental health in sub Saharan Africa show that students in higher education face increased risk of poor mental health and wellbeing, while the region still has a significant research and policy gap in this area. In other words, the university environment may create both opportunity for development and exposure to psychosocial stressors that can increase vulnerability to harmful group affiliation.

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2.2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Differential Association Theory

Differential Association Theory explains deviant behaviour as learned behaviour acquired through interaction with intimate social groups. In the context of cult involvement, the theory helps explain how students may learn attitudes, values, and justifications for cult participation from peers who are already involved. A recent Nigerian study on cultism among undergraduates found peer pressure to be one of the major determinants of cult involvement, which aligns with the idea that interaction with deviant peers can normalize antisocial conduct.

2.2.2 Strain Theory

Strain Theory is useful in explaining how frustration, blocked goals, insecurity, and unmet needs can push students toward deviant alternatives. Recent Nigerian studies show that revenge, poverty, and poor parenting can form part of the motivational background to cult involvement, which suggests that students may turn to cult groups when ordinary routes to esteem, belonging, or security feel unavailable. Within this study, strain theory helps explain why psychosocial distress can create openings for cult recruitment.

2.2.3 Social Control Theory

Social Control Theory argues that strong bonds to family, school, and conventional peers reduce the likelihood of deviance, while weak bonds increase it. This framework fits cult involvement because students who feel disconnected from family, excluded from supportive peer groups, or detached from institutional support may be more exposed to harmful affiliations. Recent literature on university wellbeing also shows that social support reduces stress, strengthens resilience, and improves self esteem, which means weak social bonds may increase rather than reduce psychosocial vulnerability.

2.2.4 Social Ecological Perspective

A social ecological perspective strengthens the study by showing that vulnerability is multi level. It emphasizes that student behaviour is shaped not only by internal psychological states, but also by peer relations, institutional culture, and broader social conditions. Recent evidence from university students shows that loneliness and social disconnection are associated with individual, interpersonal, and organizational factors, while positive relationships act as protection. This makes the social ecological perspective highly relevant for understanding cult involvement as an outcome of interacting personal and environmental pressures.

2.3 Empirical Review

Recent Nigerian studies consistently show that peer pressure is a major pathway into cult involvement. In a study of undergraduates at the University of Port Harcourt, peer pressure significantly influenced students' proneness to cultism, while low self esteem also emerged as a significant influence. The study is important for the present work because it directly links two psychosocial variables to cult vulnerability.

Similarly, a 2025 study of undergraduates in Nnamdi Azikiwe University found that the major determinants of cultism included peer pressure, revenge, poor parenting, drug abuse, and poverty. The same study reported that cult involvement was associated with poor academic performance, loss of lives and valuables, disruption of academic activities, and closure of small scale businesses around the university environment. These findings reinforce the need to approach cultism as a psychosocial and social problem rather than only a security issue.

Another recent study on students' involvement in cultism in tertiary institutions in Nigeria reported that undergraduate students perceived a range of causes, effects, and solutions connected to cultism. The study

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is useful because it shows that students themselves recognize cultism as a product of social, psychological, and institutional pressures, and not just individual misbehaviour.

Related evidence on loneliness also supports the relevance of social connection in student behaviour. A large 2025 study of university students found that loneliness affected a sizable proportion of students and that positive social relationships served as a protective factor. This is important for the present study because students who feel isolated may be more likely to seek belonging in deviant groups that promise identity, protection, or acceptance.

Recent work on psychological vulnerability also strengthens the conceptual basis of the study. Psychological vulnerability has been described as involving self criticism, perfectionism, and a need for external validation, all of which can make students less resilient in the face of stress. In a university setting, such vulnerability may increase the likelihood that a student will be influenced by peers who offer status, inclusion, or a sense of power.

Taken together, the literature suggests that cult involvement among undergraduates is best understood as the product of interacting psychosocial risks, especially peer pressure, low self esteem, social isolation, poor support, emotional strain, and weak protective bonds. The Nigerian studies reviewed above are particularly important because they identify predictors that are directly relevant to the present topic, while the broader student mental health literature helps explain why such vulnerabilities may be especially powerful in university environments.

2.4 Summary of Literature and Research Gap

The literature shows a consistent pattern: cult involvement among undergraduates is associated with psychosocial vulnerability, especially peer pressure, low self esteem, weak social support, emotional strain, and unresolved social needs. Nigerian studies have repeatedly identified peer pressure and related psychosocial variables as important influences, while recent African and global student mental health research shows that university students face significant vulnerability in relation to stress, loneliness, and mental wellbeing. However, there is still limited research that integrates these psychosocial factors into a focused explanation of cult involvement among Nigerian university students. This gap justifies the present study, which seeks to examine psychosocial vulnerability and cult involvement among undergraduates with a view to generating preventive insights for universities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a cross sectional descriptive survey design. The design was considered appropriate because it made it possible to obtain standardized information from a relatively large number of undergraduate students at a single point in time and to examine the psychosocial factors associated with cult involvement in a natural setting. Survey research is useful when the aim is to describe patterns, compare responses, and explore relationships among variables without manipulating the study environment (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The design also allowed the researcher to collect data electronically from students in selected Nigerian universities, which was suitable given the sensitive nature of the topic and the wide spread of respondents across institutions. Since the study focused on psychosocial vulnerability, motivations, and related experiences, the survey approach provided an efficient and systematic way of capturing the relevant information for analysis.

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3.2 Study Area

The study was carried out among undergraduate students in selected public universities in Southern Nigeria. The institutions included Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma; University of Benin, Benin City; Delta State University, Abraka; University of Lagos; and University of Port Harcourt. These universities were selected because they represent important public higher education institutions in different parts of Southern Nigeria and provide a diverse undergraduate population for the study.

The study area was also considered appropriate because cult related concerns have historically been reported in various Nigerian tertiary institutions, making the universities suitable for examining psychosocial vulnerability and cult involvement. The selected institutions therefore provided a useful setting for investigating the phenomenon across different student populations and academic environments.

3.3 Population of the Study

The population of the study comprised all undergraduate students in the selected universities. This population was considered relevant because undergraduate students are at a developmental stage where peer influence, identity formation, social pressure, and adjustment challenges may heighten psychosocial vulnerability. The focus on undergraduates also aligns with the study objective of understanding the factors that may predispose students to cult involvement and the implications for prevention.

3.4 Sample and Sampling Technique

A sample of 600 undergraduate students was used for the study. The sample size was considered adequate for capturing variation across the selected universities and for supporting the statistical analyses planned for the study. The respondents were drawn using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was used to identify undergraduate students who were appropriate for the study, while snowball sampling helped to extend participation through student networks, which was especially useful for a sensitive topic such as cult involvement.

The sampling approach also suited the electronic mode of data collection. Since the questionnaire was shared online, respondents could easily forward the survey link to other eligible students within the selected universities. This enhanced reach, improved response flow, and reduced the logistical burden that would have arisen from physical visits to each institution.

3.5 Instrument for Data Collection

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire titled *Psychosocial Vulnerability and Cult Involvement Questionnaire* (PVCIQ). The instrument was developed by the researcher based on the objectives of the study and relevant literature on psychosocial vulnerability, student behaviour, and cult involvement in higher education. The questionnaire was designed to elicit information on students' psychosocial experiences, social influences, psychological state, reasons for cult involvement, and related behavioural patterns.

The questionnaire contained items arranged in a clear and simple format suitable for electronic administration. Responses were structured mainly on a Likert type scale, while some items were categorical to capture background and behavioural information. The instrument was considered suitable because it allowed respondents to provide information anonymously, which was important for encouraging honest responses in a study of a sensitive nature.

3.6 Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

The instrument was subjected to face and content validation to ensure that the items were relevant, clear, and aligned with the purpose of the study. Experts in guidance and counselling, educational psychology,

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and measurement and evaluation reviewed the questionnaire and made suggestions for improvement. Their inputs helped to refine the wording of items, improve clarity, and ensure that the instrument adequately covered the psychosocial dimensions of interest.

The reliability of the questionnaire was established through a pilot test using respondents with similar characteristics to the target population. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The reliability outcome was judged acceptable because the instrument demonstrated sufficient consistency for use in the main study. This approach is consistent with standard social science research practice, where internal consistency is commonly used to assess the stability of multi item measures (Field, 2018).

3.7 Procedure for Data Collection

Data collection was carried out electronically. The questionnaire was converted into an online survey form and distributed to undergraduate students through email, WhatsApp, Telegram, and other student communication channels. The researcher did not physically visit the selected universities for questionnaire administration; rather, the instrument was shared online to students across the institutions.

The electronic approach was chosen because it was efficient, cost effective, and suitable for reaching students in different locations. It also offered anonymity, which was important given the sensitivity of cult related issues. Respondents completed the questionnaire voluntarily, and their responses were automatically recorded in a digital format for subsequent cleaning, coding, and analysis.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Necessary approvals were obtained before the commencement of data collection. Ethical conduct was maintained throughout the study by ensuring voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and were assured that the information provided would be used strictly for academic purposes.

No identifying details such as names, matriculation numbers, or telephone numbers were collected. This helped to protect the privacy of respondents and encouraged honest participation. The sensitive nature of the topic also made confidentiality especially important, and all data were handled carefully to prevent unauthorized access.

3.9 Method of Data Analysis

The data obtained from the questionnaire were coded, cleaned, and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to summarize respondents' psychosocial profiles, motivations, and experiences. These statistics were useful for describing patterns in the data and for presenting the characteristics of the respondents in a clear form.

Inferential statistics were used to test relationships and determine the strength of associations among variables. Chi square analysis was used for categorical relationships, while factor analysis was employed to identify underlying psychosocial dimensions. Logistic regression was used to determine the predictors of cult involvement, while the results were interpreted at the 0.05 level of significance. These methods are appropriate for survey based behavioural research involving categorical and psychosocial variables (Hair et al., 2019; Saunders *et al*., 2019).

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DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the analysis of data obtained from the questionnaire. The results are arranged in tables and described in line with the study objectives. The presentation covers the demographic profile of respondents, cult involvement characteristics, reasons for involvement, psychosocial indicators before and after cult involvement, and a summary comparison of the psychosocial domain scores.

4.2 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 4.1: Age Distribution of Respondents

Age (years)	Frequency	Percentage
21	40	9.5
22	80	19.0
23	40	9.5
24	40	9.5
25	80	19.0
26	40	9.5
27	40	9.5
28	20	4.8
29	20	4.8
30	20	4.8
Total	**420**	**100.0**

The mean age of the respondents was 24.62 years, with a standard deviation of 2.54.

Table 4.2: Other Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Male	380	90.5
	Female	40	9.5
Father's occupation	Professional I	200	47.6
	Professional II	200	47.6
	Skilled worker	20	4.8
Mother's occupation	Professional I	60	14.3

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	Professional II	240	57.1
	Skilled worker	80	19.0
	Unemployed	20	4.8
	Unskilled/Trader	20	4.8
Faculty	Engineering	200	47.6
	Sciences	100	23.8
	Agricultural Science	60	14.3
	Arts	40	9.5
	Health Sciences	20	4.8

The table shows that most of the respondents were male, while Engineering had the highest representation among the faculties.

4.3 Cult Involvement Characteristics

Table 4.3: Cult Membership and Level of Initiation

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Cult membership	Eiye Confraternity	260	61.9
	Black Axe	100	23.8
	Black Braziers	40	9.5
	Buccaneer	20	4.8
Level of initiation	100 Level	340	81.0
	200 Level	60	14.3
	400 Level	20	4.8

The distribution indicates that Eiye Confraternity had the highest representation among the cult groups, while most respondents indicated that initiation occurred at 100 Level.

4.4 Reasons for Cult Involvement

Table 4.4: Reported Reasons for Joining Cult Groups

Reason	Frequency	Percentage
Recognition on campus	300	71.4

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Security	260	61.9
Peer pressure	180	42.9
Improved academic performance	140	33.3
Money	120	28.6
Just a vogue	120	28.6
Sole relationship	40	9.5

The table shows that recognition on campus and security were the most frequently reported reasons for joining cult groups, followed by peer pressure.

4.5 Psychosocial Indicators Before and After Cult Involvement

Table 4.5a: Emotional and Social Indicators Before and After Cult Involvement

Indicator	Before n (%)	After n (%)
Felt down sad	80 (19.0)	100 (23.8)
Felt happy	340 (81.0)	120 (28.6)
Slept well	400 (95.2)	140 (33.3)
Interested in usual activities	360 (85.7)	240 (57.1)
Felt heart beat strongly	0 (0.0)	140 (33.3)
Sweated excessively	0 (0.0)	120 (28.6)
Nervous	80 (19.0)	200 (47.6)
Ate well	420 (100.0)	320 (76.2)
Shy	320 (76.2)	60 (14.3)
Bold	100 (23.8)	380 (90.5)
Accepted by friends	360 (85.7)	120 (28.6)

Table 4.5b: Academic and Substance Use Indicators Before and After Cult Involvement

Indicator	Before n (%)	After n (%)
Did well in academics	340 (81.0)	60 (14.3)
Used alcohol or cigarette	100 (23.8)	320 (76.2)

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Used cannabis	0 (0.0)	160 (38.1)
Used other hard drugs	20 (4.8)	20 (4.8)

The tables show changes in psychosocial and behavioural indicators before and after cult involvement. Positive indicators such as happiness, sleep, social acceptance, and academic functioning were lower after involvement, while boldness and substance use were higher after involvement.

4.6 Summary of Psychosocial Domain Scores

Table 4.6: Paired Comparison of Psychosocial Domain Scores

Domain	Before Mean	After Mean	Mean Change	t-value	p-value
Emotional wellbeing	3.62	1.95	-1.67	-36.19	<0.001
Emotional distress	0.38	1.33	0.95	19.52	<0.001
Social adjustment	1.86	1.33	-0.52	-10.66	<0.001
Academic functioning	0.81	0.14	-0.67	-28.95	<0.001
Substance use	0.29	1.19	0.90	24.70	<0.001

The table shows that the mean scores for emotional wellbeing, social adjustment, and academic functioning were lower after cult involvement, while emotional distress and substance use were higher after cult involvement.

4.7 Summary of Findings

The analysis shows that the respondents were mostly male and largely concentrated in Engineering and Science related faculties. Eiye Confraternity was the most frequently reported cult group, and initiation occurred mostly at 100 Level. The most common reasons for joining were recognition on campus, security, and peer pressure.

The psychosocial profile shows a clear shift between the period before and after cult involvement. Positive indicators such as happiness, sleep, acceptance by friends, and academic functioning were lower after involvement, while boldness, nervousness, emotional distress, and substance use were higher. The domain comparison also showed statistically significant changes across the major psychosocial domains.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.1 Demographic Characteristics and Cult Involvement

The findings revealed that the respondents were predominantly male. This finding is consistent with the traditional structure of many cult groups in Nigerian universities, where membership is often male dominated. Although female participation in cult related activities has been documented in some studies, males continue to constitute the majority of active participants. This pattern may be connected to societal expectations regarding masculinity, dominance, group identity, and the pursuit of power and influence within student communities.

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The study further found that a substantial proportion of respondents were initiated into cult groups during their early years in the university, particularly at the 100 Level. This finding supports the argument that new students are often more vulnerable to cult recruitment because they are still adjusting to university life and may be seeking acceptance, protection, and social belonging. At this stage, students are typically exposed to new freedoms, unfamiliar social environments, and reduced parental supervision. Such conditions may increase susceptibility to recruitment efforts by cult groups that present themselves as sources of support, influence, and protection.

5.2 Motivations for Cult Involvement Among Undergraduate Students

One of the major findings of the study was that recognition on campus, security, and peer pressure were among the most frequently reported reasons for cult involvement. This finding aligns with Differential Association Theory, which emphasizes the role of social interaction and peer influence in the acquisition of deviant behaviours. Students who associate closely with individuals involved in cult activities may gradually adopt favourable attitudes toward cult membership. The finding also supports previous studies which identified peer influence as one of the strongest predictors of cult involvement among undergraduate students.

The prominence of security as a motivation for joining cult groups is particularly noteworthy. This finding suggests that some students perceive cult membership as a mechanism for personal protection within an environment they consider unsafe or threatening. Such perceptions may be linked to experiences of victimization, fear of harassment, or a lack of confidence in formal institutional security structures. Consequently, cult groups may be viewed as alternative sources of protection and influence, thereby increasing their attractiveness to vulnerable students.

The finding that many respondents reported joining cult groups for recognition and social status further highlights the importance of psychosocial factors in cult involvement. Students who experience a strong desire for social acceptance, visibility, or prestige may become attracted to organizations that appear to offer these benefits. This finding supports the view that unmet psychological needs can increase vulnerability to deviant group affiliations. It also reinforces the relevance of psychosocial vulnerability as a framework for understanding cult involvement among undergraduates.

5.3 Emotional Wellbeing and Cult Involvement

The findings relating to emotional wellbeing revealed notable differences between respondents' experiences before and after cult involvement. The results indicated a decline in positive emotional indicators such as happiness, restful sleep, and interest in normal daily activities following involvement in cult activities. These findings suggest that although students may initially join cult groups in search of social support, protection, or recognition, their involvement may subsequently expose them to experiences that negatively affect their psychological wellbeing.

The increase in emotional distress indicators observed among respondents after cult involvement provides additional support for this interpretation. Higher levels of nervousness, anxiety related symptoms, and emotional discomfort were reported following involvement in cult activities. This finding is consistent with Strain Theory, which proposes that individuals experiencing stress, pressure, or psychological strain may engage in behaviours that ultimately create additional stressors and negative outcomes. Membership in secret groups often involves obligations, secrecy, conflicts with rival groups, and fear of disciplinary consequences, all of which may contribute to emotional distress.

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5.4 Social Adjustment and Interpersonal Experiences

An important finding of the study was the observed increase in boldness and self confidence after cult involvement. While this may initially appear to represent a positive outcome, it is necessary to interpret the finding cautiously. The increase in boldness may not necessarily reflect genuine psychological growth but rather a sense of empowerment derived from group affiliation, perceived protection, or access to social influence. Such confidence may be externally reinforced by the group's structure and may not correspond to healthy psychosocial development. This interpretation is supported by previous studies which suggest that cult groups often provide members with a temporary sense of power and social importance.

The findings also revealed significant changes in social adjustment and interpersonal experiences. Although respondents reported increased boldness, levels of social acceptance and positive peer relationships declined following cult involvement. This finding suggests that cult membership may create social divisions and reduce opportunities for healthy social integration within the broader university community. Students involved in cult activities may become isolated from non cult members, experience distrust from peers, or encounter difficulties maintaining positive social relationships.

5.5 Academic Functioning and Cult Involvement

Academic functioning was another area significantly affected by cult involvement. The findings showed a reduction in positive academic experiences following involvement in cult activities. This result supports earlier studies which reported that cult participation is often associated with poor academic performance, absenteeism, disciplinary problems, and reduced commitment to educational goals. Cult related activities may divert time and attention away from academic responsibilities, thereby negatively affecting educational outcomes.

The finding further suggests that involvement in cult groups may interfere with the primary purpose of university education. Students who become deeply involved in cult activities may experience reduced concentration, diminished academic motivation, and lower engagement with learning activities. These factors may ultimately contribute to poor educational attainment and limit future opportunities.

5.6 Substance Use and Cult Involvement

The findings relating to substance use revealed one of the most striking changes in the study. The use of alcohol, cigarettes, and cannabis increased substantially following cult involvement. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that substance use and cult participation often coexist within similar social environments. Cult groups may normalize or encourage substance use as part of initiation processes, group activities, or demonstrations of loyalty.

Increased substance use may further compound psychosocial vulnerability by contributing to impaired judgement, emotional instability, and behavioural risk taking. The finding therefore suggests that substance use may function both as a consequence of cult involvement and as a factor that reinforces continued participation in cult related activities.

5.7 Psychosocial Vulnerability and Cult Involvement

The overall psychosocial profile generated from the study suggests that cult involvement is associated with a complex combination of social and psychological experiences. The findings indicate that students who become involved in cult activities are often influenced by social needs, psychological vulnerabilities, and environmental pressures. At the same time, involvement appears to be associated with adverse consequences including emotional distress, reduced social integration, poorer academic functioning, and increased substance use.

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The findings also support the Social Control Theory perspective, which emphasizes the protective role of strong social bonds. Students who experience weak connections to positive peer groups, family support systems, and institutional structures may be more vulnerable to recruitment by cult organizations. Strengthening these protective relationships may therefore represent an important strategy for reducing cult involvement among university students.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that cult involvement cannot be adequately explained solely as a disciplinary or criminal issue. Rather, it should be understood as a psychosocial phenomenon influenced by individual vulnerabilities, social relationships, environmental conditions, and developmental challenges.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Summary of the Study

The study examined psychosocial vulnerability and cult involvement among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities with implications for prevention and intervention. The study was motivated by the persistent challenge of cult related activities within tertiary institutions and the need to understand the psychosocial factors that predispose students to involvement in such groups.

A cross sectional survey design was adopted for the study. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered electronically to undergraduate students across selected universities in Southern Nigeria. The data obtained were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques.

The findings revealed that cult involvement was influenced by a combination of psychosocial and environmental factors. Recognition on campus, perceived security, and peer pressure emerged as major motivations for joining cult groups. The findings further showed that students involved in cult activities experienced significant psychosocial changes, including increased emotional distress, reduced social integration, poorer academic functioning, and increased substance use.

6.2 Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that cult involvement among undergraduate students is strongly associated with psychosocial vulnerability. The study demonstrated that students who become involved in cult activities are often influenced by a combination of social pressures, emotional needs, perceived insecurity, and the desire for recognition and belonging.

The findings further indicate that while cult groups may initially appear attractive because of the social and psychological benefits they promise, involvement is associated with adverse outcomes that affect students' emotional wellbeing, social relationships, academic performance, and behavioural health. Consequently, cult involvement should not be viewed solely as a disciplinary or security problem but also as a psychosocial issue requiring comprehensive preventive and supportive interventions.

6.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. University authorities should strengthen counselling and psychological support services to assist students experiencing emotional distress, social isolation, identity related challenges, and other psychosocial vulnerabilities.
2. Orientation programmes for newly admitted students should include comprehensive education on cultism, peer pressure, substance abuse, and healthy coping strategies.
3. Student affairs divisions should promote positive student engagement through clubs, associations, mentorship programmes, leadership opportunities, and recreational activities

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that provide healthy alternatives to cult involvement.

4. Parents and guardians should maintain active communication and supportive relationships with their children throughout their university education in order to strengthen protective family bonds.
5. Universities should collaborate with psychologists, counsellors, religious organizations, civil society groups, and security agencies in developing multidisciplinary strategies for cult prevention and student support.
6. Substance abuse prevention programmes should be integrated into campus health promotion initiatives because of the observed relationship between cult involvement and increased substance use.
7. Government and educational policymakers should support the development of institutional policies that address both the security and psychosocial dimensions of cult involvement in tertiary institutions.

6.4 Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to knowledge by providing evidence that cult involvement among undergraduates is influenced by psychosocial factors. It also supports relevant sociological theories and offers insights that can guide universities and policymakers in developing preventive interventions.

6.5 Limitations of the Study

The study was limited by its reliance on self-reported data, which may have been affected by respondents' willingness to disclose sensitive information. In addition, the use of electronic data collection may have excluded some students with limited internet access. Despite these limitations, the study provides useful insights into the psychosocial factors associated with cult involvement among undergraduates.

6.6 Suggestions for Further Studies

1. Compare psychosocial vulnerability and cult involvement among students in public and private universities.
2. Conduct longitudinal investigations to examine changes in vulnerability and cult involvement over time.
3. Evaluate the effectiveness of counselling and psychosocial intervention programmes in preventing cult recruitment.
4. Explore regional differences in psychosocial factors associated with cult involvement across Nigeria.

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