

## Past the Pejorative: Understanding the Word “Cult” Through Its Use in American Newspapers During the Nineties

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Within the academic study of New Religious Movements, it has become standard to understand “cult” as a pejorative term which is dismissive of minority religions and in some cases harms them. This article, through a quantitative content analysis conducted by the author of various uses of the word “cult” in twenty-five American newspapers through the 1990s, is an attempt to understand, in detail and supported by data, how “cult” was applied to particular religious groups and used more widely within popular discourse. It argues that the word “cult” was primarily used for subjects that were not religious groups, and when it was applied to religious groups, it was largely done so to a very small number that all shared several characteristics. It further argues that “cult” should be understood as a complex term with a range of meanings and applications.

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There is no question that when applied to religious groups the word “cult” can be a loaded term. A Gallup poll conducted in 1982 found that when faced with a range of options for potential neighbors, the American public was least hospitable to “members of minority religious sects or cults.” A survey of several thousand Nebraska residents over six months from 2003 to 2004 found that people supported “new Christian churches” and accepted “new religious movements,” but had sharply negative views of “cults” (Olson 2006). In 1985, the sociologist James Beckford saw the popular use of the word “cult” as having “pejorative connotations” and denoting “groups considered small, insignificant, inward-looking, unorthodox, weird, and possibly threatening” (Beckford 1985, 12–13). Beckford preferred to use the term “new religious movements” to describe the groups that the public labelled “cults,” and this has become the default term for scholars, who consider it “neutral and value-free” when com-

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pared to the problematic term “cult,” although they both often refer to the same religious groups (Arweck 2005, 28).

For some scholars of New Religious Movements, the word “cult” is usually placed in scare quotes and quickly explained away in a preface or introduction as an inaccurate term that creates confusion and carries with it the baggage of long-disproven concepts such as brainwashing. For other scholars, the consequences of the term are much more serious. In a recent review of Kent Evan’s book *MOVE: An American Religion*, Megan Goodwin described “cult” as a word that was used to label religious groups that one does not like as dangerous, abusive, and irrational in a way that reinforces “white supremacist, sexist, Christian imperialist assumptions” and justifies surveillance and violence by the state (Goodwin 2021). This view is a continuation of decades of previous scholarship that has argued that the classification and term “cult” has incited and rationalized the harm done against numerous minority religious groups such as the Peoples Temple and the Branch Davidians (Moore *et al.* eds. 2004, Moore 2009, Wessinger 2000).

Despite the insistence of scholars on its meaning and significance, there has been relatively little work on usage of the word “cult” itself. There has been previous work on the relationship between American media and groups understood by the public as cults. This scholarship has included an analysis of select articles in national magazines as a measure of wider sentiment (McCloud 2004), the history of cult scares through articles in newspapers and magazines through the twentieth century (Jenkins 2000), and numerous specific case studies. Many scholars of New Religious Movements have analyzed the fictionalized depiction of “cults” on television and in popular culture, and have used these portrayals to theorize how “cults” are viewed and treated in the United States, and by extension, understand the meaning of the word “cult” itself (Neal 2011, Laycock 2013, Goodwin 2018).

This article attempts to answer two questions: which religious groups are given the explicit label of “cult,” and how is the word “cult” actually used in popular discourse? To do so, a multi-step quantitative content analysis was conducted of uses of the term “cult” and related terms from a total of twenty-five newspaper titles from 1990 to 2000. Newspapers were selected as a representative form of media for two main reasons. The first reason was the prominent position that newspapers held in the American media landscape during the 1990s. This period mostly preceded the large decline in newspaper circulation and the popular use of the internet for

consuming news. The second is the accessibility of data and the ability to search by keyword and date through large online archives of historical newspapers such as ProQuest and Newspapers.com. A similar study would be much more difficult, if not implausible, without such tools.

The 1990s were selected as a timeframe because of the series of high-profile events involving groups understood by the public as “cults” during the decade: the raid on the Branch Davidian compound in 1993, the gas attack committed by Aum Shinrikyo in 1995, the deaths of thirty-nine members of Heaven’s Gate in 1997, widespread anxiety about the millennium and “doomsday cults” in 1999, the deaths of hundreds of members of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God in Uganda in 2000, and the series of murders and suicides of members of the Order of the Solar Temple that occurred in 1994, 1995, and 1997. These events have been described as uniquely significant by scholars of New Religious Movements for raising public concern over New Religious Movements (Dawson 2007), shaping much of the contemporary anticult movement (Gallagher 2004, Shupe *et al.* 2003), fostering an acceptance of the study of New Religious Movements by the established field of Religious Studies (Lewis 2004), and shaping the meaning of the word “cult” itself (Richardson 2006).

The use of eleven terms were tallied in fourteen national and large metropolitan newspapers across the United States: “cult” and “cults,” and then keywords for New Religious Movements who were in the news throughout the decade: “Koresch,” “Aum,” Heaven’s Gate,” “Solar Temple,” and “Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God,” “Jonestown,” “Scientology,” “Hare Krishna,” and “Unification Church.” The uses of those terms, over 80,000 in total, were then multiplied by the estimated circulation of each newspaper to arrive at the total number of times potential readers would encounter a term in a year.<sup>1</sup> As an example, “Heaven’s Gate” appeared in seventy articles in the *Philadelphia Enquirer* in 1997, and when multiplied by an average estimated readership of 511,000 people, the term would have been potentially seen by readers of that paper 35,770,000 times in that year.

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1. The newspapers used were the *Arizona Republican*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Cincinnati Enquirer*, *Indianapolis Star*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Louisville Courier Journal*, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, *Nashville Tennessean*, *New York Times*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*. Circulation figures were taken from reports created by the Audit Bureau of Circulation and the Knight Foundation.

Then, over 17,000 uses of the word “cult” were tallied individually in an additional eleven newspapers and placed into six categories determined after an initial browsing.<sup>2</sup> Uses of the word “cult” that were applied to films and television were tallied under the category of “Cult Film and Television.” Positive uses of the word “cult” that were used to describe fans of products, athletes, celebrities, or musicians were placed within the category of “Cult Following.” When the word was applied to politicians, autocratic rulers, and corporate leaders, it was placed under the category of “Cult of Personality.” In cases where the term was used in a negative sense to describe a following or phenomenon, or to compare something to a cult, such as “the cult of celebrity” or the “dieting cult,” it was placed under the category of “Cult Analogies.” References to religious groups and their followers, whether specific, nondescript, or fictionalized, were placed into the category of “Religious Cults,” and the relatively few mentions of “cult” in terms of ritual observances and devotion such as “the cult of the saints” or “the cult of the goddess” were placed into the minor category of “Cults of Antiquity and Devotion.”

Misnomers and overlapping uses of the term “cult” were counted under the category more suitable to the term’s meaning than the literal wording. As examples, the “cult following” of Mao Zedong was placed in the category of “Cult of Personality,” and the use of “death cult” for the Solar Temple and the devoted posthumous following of Jimi Hendrix were respectively placed in the categories of “Religious Cults” and “Cult Following.” The uses of the word “cult” in proper names such as with the rock bands “The Cult” and “Blue Oyster Cult” were not included. Finally, in three of these eleven newspapers, an additional tally was done within the 2,795 uses of the word “cult” that referred to specific religious groups in order to determine which religious groups were referred to explicitly as a “cult.”<sup>3</sup>

### Religious cults

Scholars of New Religious Movements have openly struggled for decades over how their object of study is best defined, categorized, and labeled. Early scholars from psychology and sociology respectively focused on the

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2. Content analysis was done for the *Chicago Sun Times*, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *Denver Post*, *Kansas City Star*, *Miami Herald*, *Portland Oregonian*, *Rutland Daily Herald*, and the *Seattle Times*.
  3. Content analysis with an additional tally of specific religious groups labelled as “cults” was done for the *Casper Star-Tribune*, *Detroit Free Press*, and the *Tucson Citizen*.

beliefs and backgrounds of those who would join groups seen as “cults” and the organizational structure and charismatic leadership of those groups. As the study of these groups increasingly became the domain of religious studies during the 1980s and 1990s, some of the most influential approaches to the study of New Religious Movements saw the newness of these groups (Barker 2004), or their alienation from and tension with mainstream religion and society (Melton 2004), as their salient and defining characteristics. The academic study of New Religious Movements was also strongly influenced by its responses to major public events involving cults and the efforts of groups and individuals collectively known as the anti-cult movement (Shupe, Bromley, and Oliver, 1984).

The anti-cult movement had its own understanding of groups it saw as cults. The religious wing, mostly made up of Protestant and Evangelical Christians, opposed cults on largely theological grounds. In this perspective, cults were harmful because they espoused errant and heretical beliefs and they led people away from correct Christian doctrine. As a result they often have a unique focus on particular religious groups as “cults” such as the Roman Catholic Church, Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, and Seventh Day Adventists. The secular wing of the anti-cult movement opposed the groups they saw as cults on the grounds of individual freedom and safety. In their view, cults manipulated members into joining and staying within a group through deceptive practices and excessive control, and they often focused on the Unification Church, the Children of God, and the Church of Scientology.

Within the newspaper titles analyzed in this study, the explicit label of “cult” was largely reserved for a small number of religious groups and their leaders during the 1990s. Although nearly one hundred groups and their leaders were labelled as “cults,” only eight of them made-up nearly eighty percent of all direct references. In descending order, they were the Branch Davidians and David Koresh, Aum Shinrikyo, Satanism, Heaven’s Gate, Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple, the Solar Temple, the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God, and Charles Manson and the Manson Family.

These eight groups could all be seen as an exaggerated aggregate of the various qualities used by scholars of New Religious Movements, the religious anti-cult movement, and the secular anti-cult movement to describe their respective subjects. The eight groups labelled “cults” shared qualities of being perceived as outside the margins of mainstream Christianity or common forms of religion, having charismatic leaders who exercised

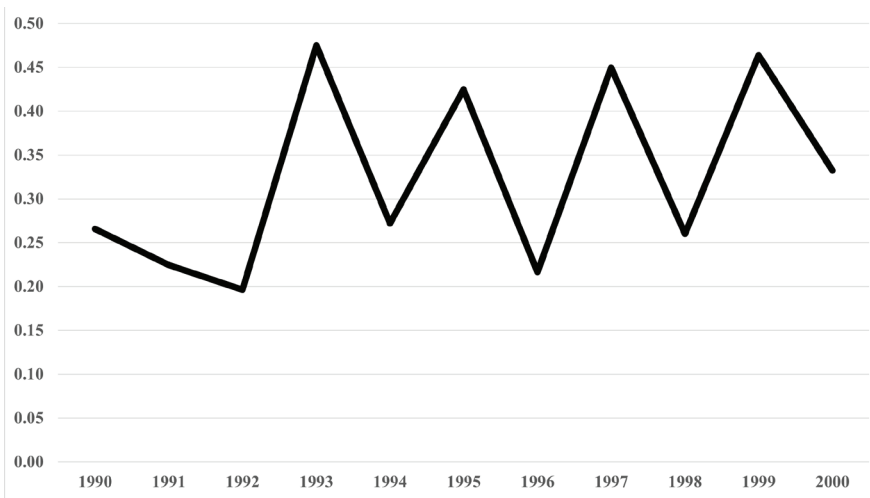


Figure 1. Total readership (in billions) from 14 newspaper titles of articles with the word “cult” from 1990–2000.

excessive or absolute control over their followers, being unknown or new to the public (either through obscurity, novelty, or small size), and being in strong tension or conflict with society. In almost all of these cases, they passed a very high threshold of tension or conflict through such occurrences as mass murder, mass suicide, abuse of children, and/or armed conflict with law enforcement (Figure 1). J. Gordon Melton has suggested that “the advocacy of any one of a small set of characteristics—minority sexual behavior, extreme diets, high-pressure evangelism, violence, or various illegal practices—will push a group to the cultic fringe,” but the evidence from this quantitative content analysis suggests that religious groups explicitly receive the label of “cult” only with many of these characteristics (Melton 2007, 107).

Although a small number of groups received the vast majority of direct references to being a “cult,” there were distinct tiers of media coverage that these “cults” received. The Branch Davidians and the raid on their compound in Waco, Texas was by far the most significant. It would be difficult to overestimate the amount of media attention received by David Koresh and the Branch Davidians throughout the decade, or the extent to which they were associated with the word “cult.” Among the fourteen newspaper titles in the quantitative analysis, articles that mentioned the Branch Davidians had 2.56 billion readers throughout the decade, more than the total number of readers for the other major “cult” groups of the

1990s combined: Aum Shinrikyo, Heaven's Gate, the Order of the Solar Temple, and the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God. In 1993, 79% of all explicit references to a religious group as a "cult" were to the Branch Davidians, and they represented 54% of such uses in 1994 and 35% in 1995.

The secondary tier of media coverage belonged to Aum Shinrikyo and Heaven's Gate which respectively had 759 and 997 million total readers during the course of the decade. Just as David Koresh and the Branch Davidians dominated explicit uses of the word "cult" for religious groups in the years 1993 and 1994, Aum Shinrikyo accounted for more than half of the explicit uses of the word "cult" in the year 1995 as did Heaven's Gate in 1997. In what could be considered a third tier, the deaths connected to the Order of the Solar Temple in 1994, 1995, and 1997, and those with the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God in 2000 received a comparatively small amount of media coverage with a respective 187 and 90 million readers. Combined, the Solar Temple and the Movement received one-third of the coverage of Aum Shinrikyo and only one-quarter of the coverage of Heaven's Gate.

The People's Temple received a large amount of media attention throughout decade with a combined total of 550 million readers. Similarly, Charles Manson and the Manson Family along with Jim Jones and the People's Temple accounted for a combined total of over 6% of all explicit references of religious groups as "cults," or nearly as much as Heaven's Gate. This reflected not only the attention that Manson, Jones, and their respective followers received from newsworthy events such as anniversaries or parole hearings, but their continued staying power as reference points for cults and cult leaders among Americans.

The word "cults" underwent a clear pattern of rising and falling in alternating years throughout the decade with the high points corresponding to the Branch Davidians in 1993, Aum Shinrikyo in 1995, Heaven's Gate in 1997, and in 1999 with the combined concerns about religious cults and the impending the millennium and retrospective coverage of the previous decade's newsworthy events involving religious cults (Figure 2, next page). The use of "cults" in the analyzed titles rose to a point between 350 and 430 million readers in those alternating odd-numbered years and then fell to a consistent average of approximately 300 million in the even-numbered years. Unlike the singular "cult" that could reference cult movies or cult followings, the plural "cults" was almost always used in reference to religious cults.



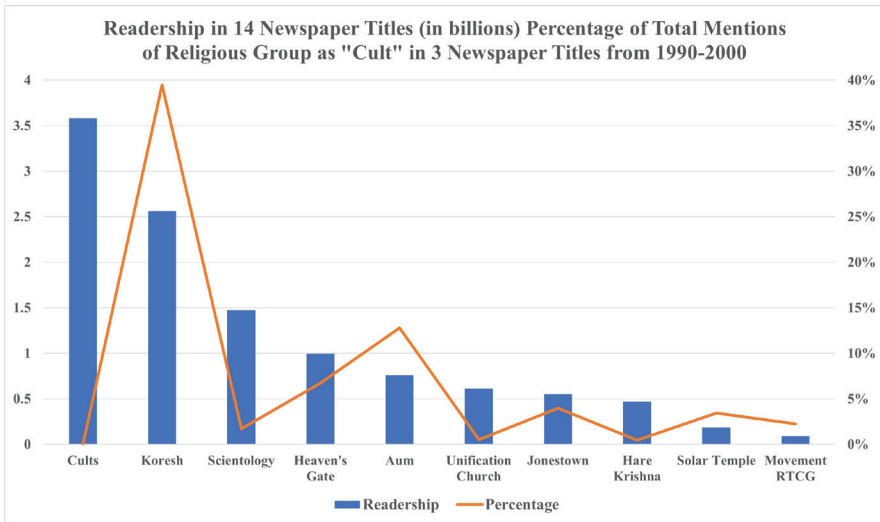


Figure 2. Total readership in 14 newspaper titles (in billions). Percentage of total mentions of religious groups as “cult” in 3 newspaper titles from 1990–2000.

As part of the Satanic Panic, a widespread fear of occult activity and claims of ritual abuse that peaked in the United States in the late-1980s (Hughes 2021), Satanism was the religious “cult” referenced more than any other in the first three years of the 1990s, at an average of about one-third of all direct references. In the later years of the decade it fluctuated between four and eighteen percent of all direct references. Not only did Satanic groups and activity often receive the “cult” label explicitly, but “cult” and other terms such as “cult ritual” or “cult activity” were regularly made as implicit references to Satanism. This was similar to the use of “cult” in implicit references to other specific religious groups, including compound phrases such as “UFO cult” for Heaven’s Gate or “doomsday cult” for the Branch Davidians. These implicit uses suggest that the pattern of a very limited number of religious groups comprising the vast majority of explicit uses of the label “cult” was even more pronounced than suggested by the data.

For the few religious groups that were explicitly labelled as cults, the label was reinforced and strengthened in two main ways. The first was the use of religious groups labelled as “cults” as referents to each other. As the decade progressed, there was a cascading pattern in which present day groups labelled as cults and their leaders were explained by compari-



sons to previous groups and their leaders. David Koresh and the deaths of seventy-six Branch Davidians invoked Jim Jones and the deaths of members of Peoples Temple in Guyana, and articles about the deaths of members of The Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God in Uganda invoked the deaths of Heaven's Gate members three years earlier.

The second main way that the label was reinforced was through the use of "cult" to describe things associated with religious groups labelled as "cults": cult leaders, cult patriarchs, cult members, cult followers, cult wives, cult rituals, cult houses, cult compounds, cult headquarters, cult killings, cult slayings, cult murders, arrests made by cult cops, and cult trials with cult prosecutors and cult lawyers. In one instance, a crime was committed with a weapon that was described as a "cult gun." In all three ways—explicitly labelling a group as a "cult," comparing them to another group that had already been labelled a "cult," and describing people, events, and objects connected with a group with the term "cult"—readers were given an immediate and clear context in which to view groups that in most cases they were previously unfamiliar with.

Within a smaller and separate analysis of select newspaper titles from 1987 to 1997, there was another pattern of religious groups labelled as cults who received significant coverage that was largely confined to their metropolitan area or surrounding region. In the *Hartford Courant*, lawsuits against the self-proclaimed "Sinful Messiah" Brother Julius Schacknow who led a group in Connecticut called "The Work" received coverage comparable to the mass suicides of Heaven's Gate members. In the *Nashville Tennessean*, the federal raid on the Arkansas-based Tony Alamo Ministries and the subsequent conviction of its leader on charges of tax evasion had as much coverage as the raid on the Branch Davidian compound did a few years later. In the *Akron Beacon Journal*, Jeffrey Lundgren, the former member of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints who killed five people in Kirtland, Ohio, similarly received nearly as much coverage as the Branch Davidians. These "local" religious cults suggest that the reference points and examples for religious groups explicitly labelled as a "cult" could vary from one part of the country to another, but the defining characteristics remained the same. Stories about both local and nationally covered "cults" contained similar elements of charismatic leadership, murder, financial exploitation, and/or sexual abuse.

### “Cults” that were not “cults”

One correlation to the small number of religious groups receiving the label of “cult” the vast majority of the time is that other religious groups were rarely given the explicit label of “cult” in newspapers even though they were some of the groups most studied by scholars of New Religious Movements, most targeted by the anti-cult movement, and most commonly thought of as cults by the public. As one example, Heaven’s Gate received nearly the same amount of newspaper coverage as both the Unification Church and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, but Heaven’s Gate received the label of “cult” seven times more often than the latter two groups combined. Aum Shinrikyo received about half of the total coverage as the Church of Scientology throughout the decade, but it was given the label of “cult” seven-and-a-half times more often (Figure 1). This pattern is even more dramatic considering that when the term “cult” was applied to the Church of Scientology, the Unification Church, and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, it was most often done indirectly through phrases such as “labelled a cult,” “often likened to a cult,” “some call a cult,” or “described by critics as a cult.”

This may have been a definitional issue. The majority of groups explicitly described as “cults” were small, unknown to the public, and came to popular attention only after dramatic and controversial offences to the law or accepted morality. Groups such as the Church of Scientology, the Unification Church, and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, may have been too large and familiar to fit the definition of “cult” and their reasons for being newsworthy may have not consistently broken that threshold of scandal. Familiarity with these groups may have also made the term “cult” unnecessary and redundant for most readers. The common use of specific monikers for their members, such as Hare Krishna for International Society for Krishna Consciousness or Moonie for a member of the Unification Church, may have functioned in the same way as the term “cult” itself. In fact, in 1990, the Unification Church’s president in America, James Baughman, told reporters that the church would “no longer tolerate irresponsible journalists (and) the gratuitous use of the ‘Moonie’ or ‘cult’ pejoratives” (Bell 1990, XQ3).

This statement by the Unification Church suggests another reason for the uneven application of the term to some groups and not others. Religious groups that were well-organized and large enough to have legal resources, engage in public relations, or mobilize their followers, often

took action against the negative press that they received. This may have preemptively dissuaded newspapers from using the term “cult” to describe them, or at the very least, from using it directly. The decade began with the Church of Scientology suing *Time* magazine, its parent company Time-Warner, and writer Richard Behar for the unflattering feature “Scientology: The Cult of Greed” in *Time*’s May 1991 issue. Members of the Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization or 3HO founded by Yogi Bhan regularly wrote responses to newspapers and magazines that described the group in ways they found objectionable such as calling them a “cult” or describing their leader as a “guru.” Members even picketed outside the headquarters of *Time Magazine* after it published an expose of the group in 1977. This may have been one of the reasons why 3HO was rarely described as a “cult” and existed for decades as what one scholar termed “the ‘Forgotten’ New Religious Movement” (Jakobsh 2008).

A sizeable number of the uses of the term “cult” for religious groups in the content analysis, forty-three percent, did not explicitly reference any specific religious group. While some of these included the previously mentioned implicit references, a large number of these references to “cults” were indefinite and referred to fictional religious cults or religious cults as a general type. Unlike the explicit and implicit labelling of specific religious groups as “cults” which mostly depended upon a combination of extreme qualities, these indefinite references to “cults” comprised a wider of range of characteristics that could define a religious group as a “cult,” from harm and isolation to unusual clothing and strange beliefs. It was common for religious groups that were accused of being cults to deny the claim by contrasting themselves to a general notion of what a “cult” was, and these counterexamples also reflected a range of ideas as to what a “cult” was. Various religious organizations argued that they were not “cults” because they did not proselytize, their tradition had a long history, their members were happy, or that their beliefs were similar to those of most Americans, and each of these reasons offered different understandings of cults as primarily being aggressive, new, oppressive, or unusual.

The word “cult” was applied to religious groups in a variety of ways. It was given strongly and explicitly to a small number of groups that fit a certain specific pattern, it was often used in a general sense with a wider range of meaning, and it was rarely applied at all to many religious groups who would be assumed to be considered “cults.” But to see the word “cult” as being synonymous with religious groups would be inac-

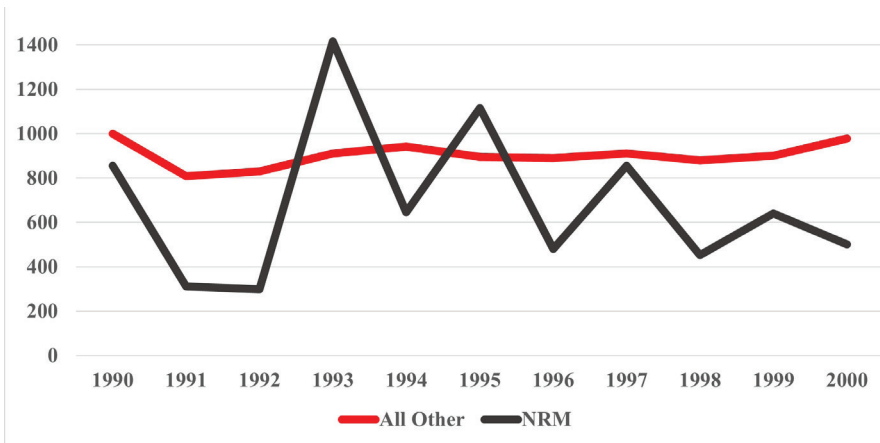


Figure 3. Uses of the word “cult” by count in 11 newspapers from 1999–2000.

curate. Total uses of the word “cult” to describe religious groups were outnumbered by all other uses of the term in each year with the exceptions of 1993 and 1995, and in total throughout the decade by 41% to 59%, or a ratio of roughly three-to-four (Figure 3). In simple terms, if the word “cult” was used in a newspaper in during the Nineties, chances are it was *not* in reference to a religious group.

### The positive cults: Cult film and television, cult followings

The most common application of these “non-religious” uses of the word “cult” was for cult media and cult followings, which comprised over a third of the uses of the word “cult” throughout the decade. Cult films, cult television, and cult fandom have been objects of study for decades, although there has been little agreement between scholars as to what exactly the “cult” is in the three (Hills 2002; Abbott 2010; Mathijs and Sexton 2011).

At times, cult has been defined by its content, and cult films and television have been associated with particular genres such as horror, science fiction, and fantasy. They have been thought of as a genre unto themselves marked by low-quality, offbeat material, or a departure from standard narratives and characters. This kind of “cult” has most often been defined by its audience. Cult followings are particularly intense and devoted, and they have been understood as active and organized communities who extend the lifespan and relevance of their object of their devotion as they continue to engage with it. Cult has also been understood as a

matter of identity, either in a general sense of cult audiences positioning themselves against the mainstream or as a matter of individuals making their devotion to a film or television series part of their own sense of self.

Shifts in the media landscape during the 1990s only added to this confusion. Cult films became more accessible and private as they moved from midnight viewings at theatres in urban centers to something that could be watched at home on video and DVD, or through digital streaming (Smith 2020). The move from a handful of broadcast networks to numerous satellite and cable channels meant that cult television shows were no longer just programs that had a small and devout following after failing to gain a large popular audience, but also started to include deliberately created programs that were “narrowly targeted at a niche audience” and “never intended to appeal to a mass audience” (Reeves, Rodgers, and Epstein 1996, 31).

From the newspapers in the quantitative content analysis, cult movies, cult television, and cult followings were defined by two main elements: a limited audience and intense devotion. Most often, the limits of a cult audience were a matter of size. Cult meant a small number of fans, and in some cases, it was implied or stated openly that something “cult” had a small number of fans because it was unusual, weird, or “not for everyone.” The limits of an audience could be geographic and describe artists or persons who were only known in a particular city or region of the country, or “cult” could describe something that had not achieved commercial or critical success.

Many artists were described as growing beyond or shedding a cult following, breaking the barrier of a cult following, or in profile of the R&B artist Maxwell “riding... from the cult periphery to the mainstream spotlight” (McCollum 1999, 5D). The limited audience of a cult was often coupled with or secondary to the intense devotion of its following. Some artists were described as having a cult allure, ascending to cult status, or attaining a cult following in a way that surpassed mere celebrity or commercial success. The actress Judy Davis was described as a cult since she was “more than a star.” The compound phrases “cult idol” or “cult hero” were often given to people with a cult following, and “cult hit,” “cult favorite,” and “cult classic” were similarly used for cult movies, cult television shows, and cult artists.

While less than a single percent of all the occurrences of “cult” in the newspapers analyzed fell within the category of “Cults of Antiquity and Devotion,” that particular sense of the word—*cultus*, or the honoring of

and tending to a deity through ceremonial observances and ritual, and the medieval cult of the saints which petitioned holy persons, venerated their relics, and recreated their images in art—was strongly present in the descriptions of cult movies, cult television, and cult followings. The difference between labelling someone a “cult hero” instead of a “folk hero” was often determined by the material and ritualistic adoration of the “cult hero” through signs and displays, commemorative t-shirts, makeshift altars, and offerings or gifts. The “cult followings” of deceased celebrities could be defined by the actions of devoted fans who kept the memory of these stars alive, such as the regular visits to the graves or death sites of such figures as James Dean or Rudolph Valentino. This sometimes caused these followings to be referred to as “death cults.” Similarly, a “cult film” or “cult television show” was often one that remained viable long after its expected life span because it had been kept from obscurity and given an extended afterlife by the efforts of a small group of dedicated fans.

### **The negative cults: Cults of personality and cult analogies**

Although the “cult” of a movie, television program, or following often signaled that it had a limited following or was off beat, it also meant that at the very least, it had some form of positive support. About one-fifth of all uses of the term “cult” during the decade could be considered negative: 17% uses were within the category of “Cult Analogies” and 4% fell under the category “Cult of Personality.”

Jan Plamper defined modern personality cults by five distinguishing characteristics: they were secular, directed at the entire population, used mass media, existed in closed societies, and only exalted men (Plamper 2012, xvii–xviii). In newspapers throughout the Nineties, the phrase was used in this sense to describe the rule of numerous autocratic leaders, both historical and contemporary, as they became newsworthy: the continued veneration of Joseph Stalin in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rule of Saddam Hussein in the buildup and aftermath of the 1990 Gulf War, and the death of North Korean leader Kim Il-sung in 1994. Ross Perot was described as having a “cult of personality” during his third-party campaign for the presidency in 1992, and the phrase alternately signaled Perot’s unusual personality and platform as a political outsider, his passionate grass roots support, and the unease many had with a potential head of state bypassing established political parties and the nomination process.

Often the term “cult of personality” did not reference large scale social engineering, but the rituals and materials of a *cultus*. Fidel Castro, for example, was said to have “an odd sort of reverse cult of personality” by one syndicated columnist because his birthday was not celebrated as a holiday in Cuba and few images of him were displayed around the country (Tamayo 2000, 2A). The term “cult of personality” was also used in a variety of looser and more colloquial senses as it was applied to domestic politicians as well a range of other leaders.

Thomas J. Watson Sr., the industrialist who built IBM into a massively successful global company, was remembered as creating a “personality cult” in articles that covered the publication of his son and successor Thomas J. Watson Jr.’s 1990 autobiography. The intense corporate culture created by the senior Watson—company songs and slogans, intense company policy that extended into an employee’s home and personal life, and the frequent use of Watson’s image and motto “THINK”—were all cited as examples of the “cult.” The idea that corporate heads created cults of personality continued through the decade as many technology companies became synonymous with the vision, style, and personal quirks of their founders and leaders.

Although the term “personality cult” could be used as a misnomer to describe popularity or charisma, it more often implied an adoration that was simplistic and overly familiar. More importantly, it could also signal a dangerous loyalty that could override rational thinking or other priorities such as work over family, or an individual leader over an institution. These uses of “personality cult” were similar to the many ways in which “cult” was used as an allegory throughout the decade as various things were labelled with the term. Unlike “cult movies” or the “cult following” of a vintage car, these negative descriptions were not defined by a small size, and they were rarely described as harmless. They could consist of millions of people or even a majority of the population, and they existed at the detriment of either the given cult’s members or others who suffered as a result of their fixed devotion. The “cult of the body” in Brazil created unattainable standards of beauty and pushed women to get plastic surgery. Medical doctors who treated heart disease were fixated on the “cult of cholesterol” and neglected other possible causes.

One of the most commonly used cult analogies was the phrase “cult of celebrity,” described by one columnist as “that amorphous category of the famous” into which “movie stars, sports figures, royalty, even murderers are all collapsed” (Goodman 1997). At its most basic, the “cult of celeb-



rity” was used to critique the movie industry and its focus on big name stars over storytelling and cinematic craft. It also referenced television shows like “Entertainment Tonight” and supermarket tabloids that did a brisk trade by offering endless sensational news and gossip about celebrities. Some commentators pointed to a “cult of celebrity” that privileged telegenic personas and familiar faces in political campaigns and on television as a corrosive influence on politics. For others the endless media attention given to the poor behavior of athletes and actors was a reason for general moral decline. The “cult of celebrity” was cited by many as the cause of Princess Diana’s death after being chased by paparazzi in 1997 and the morbid entertainment that the American public found in the murder trial of O.J. Simpson in 1995.

“Cult” was often used as a negative descriptor for religious-like qualities that were seen as outside the realm of Protestant Christianity, such as chanting, or group activities done in silence. One writer wondered if yoga would become mainstream after hearing the “cult-like” word “Namaste” used in a studio’s outgoing voice mail message. Religious elements could be used in analogies to cults to emphasize that something had become like a religion, implying a dangerous and inappropriate object of fervent devotion. One opinion piece described environmentalism as “a shrill self-righteous cult” that was “on a crusade,” had “rituals of self-denial,” and “worshipped at the altar” of saving the planet (Young 1991). Cult analogies that employed religion were often used to create a boundary between what was acceptable and what was unacceptable, with “cult” firmly belonging to the latter. After Indiana University basketball coach Bobby Knight was lightly disciplined in 2000 for choking one of his players, a columnist for the *Los Angeles Times* noted how the community would tolerate frightening behavior in order to win championships. “It’s fun to wax poetic about a sport so ingrained in a community it is like a religion,” he wrote, but “it’s scary when that religion becomes a cult” (Plaschke 2000, D1).

All of these various meanings and uses of “cult” in newspapers throughout the decade co-existed with each other. Newspapers sometimes covered the trial of a religious cult on one page, discussed the cult followings of musicians and athletes on another, and mentioned a political cult of personality on still another, all within a single issue. There were few clear and strict boundaries between religious and secular uses of the term, and both positive and negative associations seemed play off the many associations with religious cults. Further, within the quantitative content analy-

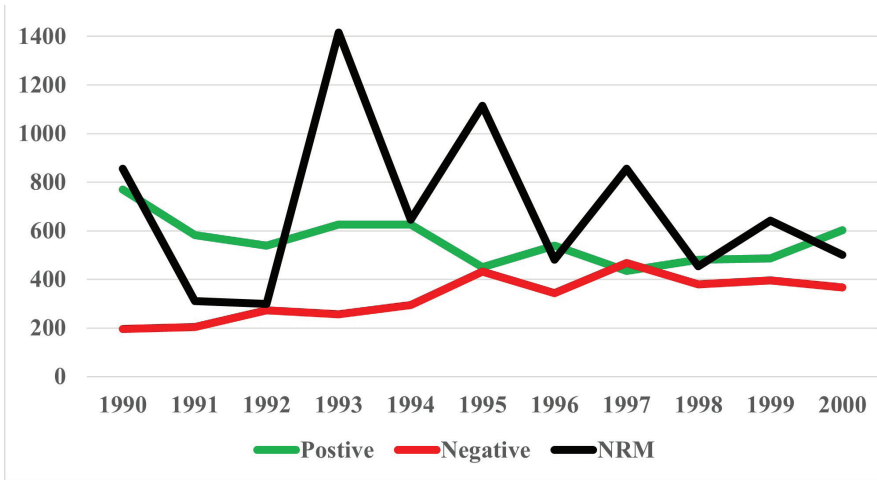


Figure 4. Uses of the word “cult” by count in 11 newspapers from 1999–2000.

sis, there are indications that these many uses of “cult” influenced each other in both the short and long term, and that the word “cult” experienced semantic drift, or changes in meaning over time.

To measure semantic drift of the word “cult,” positive uses (references to cult media and cult followings) were charted alongside negative uses (cults of personality and cult allegories) and those used to describe religious group (Figure 4). In 1995, 1997, and 1999, the years that corresponded to media coverage of Aum Shinrikyo, Heaven’s Gate, and fears of the impending millennium, there was a decline in positive uses of the term and an uptick in negative uses. Over the course of the decade, there was a noticeable semantic drift. In 1990 to 2000, positive uses of the word “cult” reduced by about one-third while negative uses nearly doubled.

“Cult” was mostly a word to describe religious groups or something with a positive meaning at the beginning of the Nineties, but at the end of the decade the three main uses of the word reached something close to parity, with positive associations, negative associations, and labelling of religious groups being nearly equal. From year to year, it may have been easier to decry the “cult” of something bad and harder to positively describe the “cult” of something good when the same term was being frequently used to describe suicide, death, and violent conflict within religious groups described with the same word. The accumulated weight of that coverage may have fostered the more long-term change over the decade.

### **Conclusion: The cult of Apple and thinking different about the word “cult”**

In March 2001, only a few months after the millennium came and went, Apple announced a new operating system for their computers, and later that same year, the company opened its first two retail stores and launched the iPod portable music player. These three developments would mark a turning point for Apple in which it would not only massively expand its size and profits, but also become known for its intensely devoted consumer base. For the next several decades, the word “cult” would be applied to Apple in numerous ways that reflected not just on the company, its leaders, and its following, but also as an example of the many ways in which the term “cult” itself was commonly used.

Leander Kahney wrote two books about the communities of people devoted to Apple: *The Cult of Mac* in 2004 and *The Cult of iPod* in 2005. (The cover of the books invoked the stereotypical religious cult member by respectively featuring someone with the Apple logo and the distinctive iPod click wheel interface shaved into their head.) Kahney’s books were filled with funny and outrageous examples such as people with tattoos of the Apple logo and a \$1,500 Fendi designer carrying case for up to a dozen iPods, but there was a more serious and consistent theme underneath the anecdotes. Loyal Apple consumers, aligned with Apple’s advertising campaigns and internal messaging, felt themselves to be set apart from those who did not use a Mac or an iPod, and felt strongly that they were part of a cognizant elite, or a group of maverick outsiders opposed to larger and stodgier companies like IBM or Microsoft.

The devotion of Apple customers was noticed by many in sales, advertising, and marketing. Matthew Ragas and Bolivar Bueno frequently invoked Apple for their 2002 book *The Power of Cult Branding*, in which they argued that the best model for “magnetic brands,” or brands that became part of a customer’s life and identity, was a religious cult. Advertising executive Douglas Atkin mentioned Apple throughout his 2004 book *The Culting of Brands* in which he compared religious cults to the intense and exclusive devotion consumers had to particular brands. Atkin’s comparison was neither flippant nor uninformed. The bibliography of his book was filled with references to the work of scholars of New Religious Movements. The author and speaker Shep Hyken held up Apple as an ideal example in his 2009 book *The Cult of the Consumer* as a company that not only successfully made and kept customers, but was able to turn those customers into evangelists for the brand (Hyken 2009).

After the death of Apple's co-founder Steve Jobs in 2011, the association between his personal quirks and the company, along with the sense that he was a uniquely skilled visionary, led the BBC to describe him as having had a cult of personality within the company (Dailey 2011). Later, the cultural historian Erica Robles-Anderson told *Atlas Obscura* in 2015 that the company Jobs left behind was "so obviously a cult" because of the ways that the company functioned like a religion, creating personal meaning and collective experiences through everything from the use of its products to the design of its retail stores (Laskow 2015). Recently, Cory Doctorow wrote an article for *Slate* magazine titled "Against the Cult of Apple" in which he argued that the myopic and cult-like loyalty consumers hold to the Apple brand insulated the company from legitimate criticisms over its business practices and labor policies (Doctorow 2020).

The "cult" in the cult of Apple was complex. It referred to its devoted following, the isolated communities of its users, the sense of meaning customers derived from its products, the advocacy of those customers for the brand, the veneration of its founders and top executives, and the dangerous, unbalanced loyalty to the company that allowed harm and misconduct to occur. The "cult" of Apple could be harmless, positive, bizarre, dangerous, or an exemplary model to be emulated. The subject of these uses was a technology company and not a religious group, but ideas about religion and religious cults were a constant, if indirect, presence within all of those uses.

The "cult of Apple" was not unlike the phrase most associated with religious cults for the last four decades, "drinking the Kool-Aid," a reference to the over nine hundred members of Peoples Temple who died at Jonestown in 1978 after they ingested poisoned Flavor Aid. According to Rebecca Moore (2003), the expression underwent a "radical shift in meaning" in American culture and speech in the quarter-century after Jonestown, with uses that were both somber and flippant, tied to the tragedy at Peoples Temple and far removed from it. "Drinking the Kool-Aid" stood in as a reference for cult-like disasters, served as a metaphor for political suicide, and was also used to describe loyalty and devotion in a positive sense.

These two examples reflect the complexity and diversity of the uses of the word "cult" within the quantitative content analysis upon which this article was based. "Cult" seemed to have three main elements at its core: obscurity or a small size, intense devotion, and a potential for neglect or harm. But there were a host of other minor and more specific elements tethered to the word "cult" such as: newness or novelty, being unusual,

distinctive types of dress especially those worn by a group of people, insider jargon, reticence and secrecy, immorality, fraud or imposture, aggressive proselytizing, isolation, or the performance of ritual.

Often “cult” was used with the implication of several these major and minor elements. Uses of the word “cult” to describe the 1975 film *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* referred to its small and devoted fan base, the offbeat style of the film, the ritualized midnight screenings of the film where fans would dress up in costume and reenact scenes, the way that devoted fans kept the film in theatres decades after its release, or any combination of these. Cult could also have a clear singular connotation from its many possible meanings, and some uses made those singular connotations obvious by using “cult” as a prefix, suffix, or analogy. Finally, most uses of the word “cult” in this quantitative content analysis, although applied to secular subjects, contained references of varying degrees to the religious elements of a *cultus* or the elements most strongly associated with religious cults.

In a sense, the perception that “cult” is a pejorative term used against religious groups that the American public does not like and finds dangerous is correct. Its limited and select use as a direct and explicit label for religious groups is perhaps even more dramatic and pronounced than thought by scholars of New Religious Movements. But that is not the entirety of the word. “Cult” is a complex term—neither fully secular nor religious, neither strictly positive nor always negative—whose many overlapping meanings exist both with religious subjects and beyond them. Further, these meanings change over time, and in something like a semantic feedback loop, they are shaped by their many uses. To understand the word “cult,” and by extension, the public’s understanding of religious groups that have been given the label, it would seem that the term would need to be understood as much more than just a pejorative.

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