

## Peer Victimization in Campus Secret Cults: Response from Nigerian University Undergraduates

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**ABSTRACT** This investigation examined the possible individual behavioural patterns, and the behavioural and social risks as they relate to victimization by cult members in order for the victims to obtain membership. Ninety-two (92) students of Ambrose Alli University (both renounced and current members of campus secret cults) participated in the study. Four hypotheses were tested. Results indicated that students who perceived being harassed by their lecturers easily fall prey to victimization by cult members. Results also show that there was no significant difference between males and females in acquiring membership of a cult through bullying and victimization. Friends were found to be vessels through which victimization is visited on unsuspecting students. Undergraduates who externalize their problems, prone to anxiety, depression, and have low self-esteem were found to easily fall prey to victimization by cult groups.

### INTRODUCTION

Victimization, like aggression, is highly stable over the school years (Khatri et al., 1994) and is associated with a variety of negative adjustment outcomes across a wide age span. For example, kindergartners who are victimized are likely to avoid school and to report feelings of loneliness (Kochenderfer and Ladd, 1996). Elementary pupils who are victimized show gains in depression over time (Hodges et al., 1995; Khatri et al., 1994; Kupersmidt and Khatri, 1995). Young adolescents who are abused by peers report elevated depression and low self-esteem 10 years later in adulthood (Olweus, 1992).

Studies such as Smith (1991), found that there are substantial evidence that their peers consistently target a small minority of children for victimization. Researchers have suggested that these chronic victims are at high risk for later maladjustment. In view of this, investigators have devoted considerable efforts to identifying the correlates of peer victimization (Bjorkquist et al., 1982; Olweus, 1978), and designing effective prevention programs (Elliot, 1991).

Schwartz and Dodge (1993), in their study of the social interactions of boys who emerged as chronic victims within the context of small-contrived groups of previously unacquainted peers found that victims submitted to a greater propo-

rtion of aggressive overture episodes. In these play groups, boys who positively reinforced the aggressive and persuasive overtures of their peers were likely to emerge as chronic victims. They also found that the peer group environment acted to foster chronic victimization. Aggressors received positive peer group regards in a larger proportion of agonistic overtures directed toward boys who became chronic victims than toward non-victims. The peer group may contribute to the development of dyadic victimization by providing social reinforcer for aggressive acts directed toward chronic victims. Alternatively, aggressors may tend to target children who are not well regarded by the peer group as a whole.

To our best knowledge, most of the studies relating to bullying and peer victimization are mostly drawn from elementary schools and at most secondary schools. We decided to further peer victimization study to include cultism amongst university undergraduates. A cult is an assemblage of people united by certain ideals, or symbol and whose rites and ceremonies of veneration are unique, and shrouded in mysteries with a secrecy that cannot be broken (Ijomah, 2002). Cultism thrived and became known in Nigerian University in the 1970's. Incidentally this coincides with the era of military rule in Nigeria, when power was obtained as a result of violence (Ijomah, 2002). No surprise therefore, that most of the current campus cult groups were born during the period of military rule.

Like other studies on peer victimization and bullying, the present study is not only premised

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on the idea that children's behavioural attributes contribute to their victimization, but also, on the additional idea that the relation of behavioural vulnerabilities to victimization by students in procuring cult membership, depends on social context factors residing in the victim and the school environment. In particular, this present investigation focuses on the use of force by cult members in the recruitment of members. Thus, do victims succumb to the treatment of cult members in joining or as a result of other treatments within the school environment, such as intimidation from lecturers, desires to have a lot of girlfriends on campus, and within the secret cult itself, are there use of intimidation in obtaining obedience from members? Also examined is the extent to which assess to guns and other dangerous weapons, psychosocial risk factors (anger, feelings of depression and anxiety), and pro-social factors (sense of belonging, confidence, and intentions of social justice) were associated in the procurement of a membership of cult.

On the basis of the forgoing therefore, we predicted, that students who perceived that their lecturers are victimizing them are more likely to be victimized by cult members. Secondly, we hypothesized that group cohesiveness by cult members is achieved through victimization of members. Thirdly, we expected females to be less victimized in order to procure membership of a cult than males. Lastly we predicted that friendship would moderate the relation of behavioural risk to victimization.

#### METHOD OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Ninety-two (92) undergraduates of the Ambrose Alli University participated in the study. They were either a cult member or have renounced membership of cult. Their age ranges between 20-30 years, with a mean age of 26.59 (SD= 2.24).

#### Instrument

**Cult Membership and Victimization Questionnaire (CMVQ):** This questionnaire was developed by the present authors, which was made up of two sections. Section A was made up self-reports of gender, age, religion, dad separated from mum, dad has other wives apart from mum, were included as demographic characteristics. Section B was made up of a 19-item scale that had a four-point Likert type response format of Strongly Agreed, Agreed, Disagreed and Dis-

agreed. This instrument was largely adapted from the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 (MMPI-2), and the low self-esteem subscale of the MMPI-2. Items such as, my friends or non-friends bullied me to procure membership of a cult. I obtained membership of a cult as a result of harassment and victimization from my lecturers. The scale had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.72)

**Focus Group Discussion (FGD):** Members of secret cult who renounced membership openly in Ambrose Alli University participated in a group discussion that focused on how they were singled out for recruitment and the modalities of this recruitment on one hand; and how campus secret cult members maintain group cohesiveness on the other hand.

**Procedure:** The questionnaires were administered to seven hundred and fifty (750) undergraduates of Ambrose Alli University. Seven hundred and ten returned their questionnaire and out of which only 92 have at one time or the other been a cult member or are still in the cult. Irrespective of the students present status as long as they had something to do with cult, we collapsed the results of the 92 respondents into Positive (all the Strongly Agreed, and Agreed) Responses and Negative Responses (all the Strongly Disagreed, and Disagreed). We further approached twenty (20) of those who have openly renounced their membership of secret cult, to participate in the Focus Group Discussion (FGD). On the appointed day only eight (8) turned up for the Focus Group Discussion (FGD).

#### RESULTS

The result of the data collected displays descriptive statistics for the demographics. While 68 (representing 73.9%) of the respondents were male undergraduates, the remaining 24 (representing 26.1%) were females. Furthermore, 63 (representing 68.5%) of the study sample were Christians, 8 (representing 8.7%) were Muslim. In addition, 12 (representing 13.0%) practiced African Traditional Religion, while the remaining 9 respondents (representing 9.8%) did not specify their religion. Fifty two (52) of the respondents indicated that their mum live with their dad, while the remaining 40 (representing 43.5) indicated that their mum do not live with their dad. Fifty of the respondents indicated that dad had many wives, while the remaining 42 revealed that their dad had only their mum as only wife.

Table 1, displays descriptive statistics for 6 items on the CMVQ. Forty-six (46) of the respondents indicated that their friends made them to join the secret cult. Sixty-nine (69) of the respondents were bullied to join, 46 joined because they seek protection from the cult group against harassment from their lecturers and fellow students. 45 joined because they seek political powers on campus, while 47 joined because they seek to make more money.

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics for some items on the CMVQ**

<i>Items</i>	<i>Response (Positive)</i>	<i>Response (Negative)</i>
Did your cult friends ever successfully make you join a cult group?	46(50%)	46(50%)
Did cult friends or non-friends ever bullied you to join	69(75%)	23(25%)
Did cult groups coerce or bully their members to obey	92(100%)	
I join cult to seek protection	46(50%)	46(50%)
Membership of cult gives me an advantage in Campus politics	45(48.9%)	47(51.1%)
Membership of cult avails me the opportunity to make more money	47(51.1%)	45(48.9%)

Result shows that there is no significant difference in victimization of male and females in the procurement of membership of a secret cult ( $t = 1.63; P > .05$ ). There was a positive relationship between broken homes and obtaining membership of a cult ( $r = .67 P < .05$ ). Response to items on how cohesiveness is achieved by cult shows that they (all the cults) use victimization and bullying in achieving cohesiveness of the group. The hypothesis, which states that friend-ship moderate the relation of behavioural risk to victimization was tested using the Pearson's correlation. We tested the number of friends and the quality of friends. Number of friends correlated positively with victimization ( $r = .52, P < .01$ ).

The FGD reveals that undergraduates who are weak, loud and externalize their problems are more likely to be victimized by cult members in order to get them to their fold. Desire for new experience, desire for security, desire for recognition and the desire to succeed and master what the individual set out to do, motivate individuals to seek cult membership.

It was also found that apart from bullying and victimization in getting unwilling candidates to join a secret cult, most students join as a result of

student politics, to achieve personal desire and to influence academic achievement. Most of secret cult members were discovered not to have willingly obtained membership of a cult. In addition, most of the students who were intimidated to join campus secret cults were later to discover that upon joining that they could not opt out for fear of being killed. Most often students are either persuaded or victimized to obtain membership of a cult, by friends and in some occasions by lecturers who themselves were cult members when they were students.

### DISCUSSIONS

Peer victimization within secret cult among Ambrose Alli University undergraduates was examined. Rather than focusing on classmates report on students who serve as victims of aggression and those who serve as aggressors, using the traditional elementary school pupil, this study shifted to the use of university undergraduates that could predispose a colleague to be victimized by cult members in getting such unsuspecting students into their fold.

Results indicated that aggression is not distributed evenly across all available peer targets, but it is rather directed toward a minority of the student population. About 1 student in 50 appears to be severely abused by cult members in order to make their victims procure membership of their cult. It was found that before the birth of female cult groups on campus, males seem to be at risk for victimization, but with the birth of female cult groups, males as well as females are at risk for victimization. Little wonder that results obtained in this study show that there was no significant difference in victimization of females and males in order to procurement membership of a cult. This finding did not support that of Perry et al. (1988), which indicates that girls seem to be more at risk for victimization than as boys. This disparity in findings is not surprising in that our sample of study was drawn from the university environment where upon any newly admitted student is expected to be at least 16 years of age and capable of taking decisions, as against the elementary school pupils used by Perry et al. (1988). Another possible explanation could be seen from the fact that joining a secret cult is a function of several variables, which go beyond just victimization and seeking for protection.

The theory that social risk moderates the

relation of behavioural risk to victimization by peers was supported. Through the focus group discussion (FGD), we found that undergraduates who possess behavioural problems that put them at risk for victimization are more likely to be chronically abused if they are also at social risk for victimization. That is, if they do not have friends who can protect them or are not loved by peers. Hartup (1992), Hodges et al. (1995), found that childhood friendships serve several important functions. Friendships are contexts for learning social skills, are information sources for self-knowledge and self-esteem, furnishes emotional and cognitive resources for support and coping, and provide practice for later relationships. Bukowski et al. (1995), Hodges et al. (1995), also affirmed that friendship serves an additional important function- that of protection against bullies and aggressors. Surprisingly, the protective role of friendship is negated in this study, as friends were found to be the vessels through which victimizations is visited on victims. Friends bullied their best friends to join secret cults. Most of the cultists who have renounced confirmed that they had joined campus secret cult group as a result of being bullied by their friends and wide promises of protection and fight against injustice. On the long run they ended up being brutalized the more, made to tell lies, steal in order to meet the needs of officials and all those of high ranking in the cult. Echekwube (1999) found that the mode of extorting money in terms of dues and other financial obligation by cult members is through bullying and victimization.

Results also confirmed the hypothesis that social context factors residing in the student community, such as the nature and number of one's friends, serve to actualize vulnerabilities. Most students victimized are characterized by externalizing problems, are prone to anxiety, depression and have very low self-esteem. Though this finding is somehow similar to that of Perry et al. (1992), but, differs from that of Perry et al. (1992), in that it found that students who externalized their problems are likely to be victimized; as against the findings of Perry et al. (1992) that children who internalized their problems are likely to be victimized. On maintenance of cohesiveness among the different cult groups, the entire respondents agreed that it is only through bullying and victimization and the regular creation of fear that members are made to adhere strictly to the society laid down rules and regulations.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is however, limited in such that the study sample-members of campus secret cults were difficult to locate to respond to the questionnaire. Hence, we had to elicit information from those who had renounced membership of campus cult groups. Though all those who participated in the FGD, agreed with most of the points raised, it would have been much better if students who are presently actively involved in cults were part of the FGD. All these limit the possible generalization of the findings of this study for campus cult groups in the university.

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