

# The Clothes Maketh the Cult

## Introduction

Many people interpret the word ‘cult’ through specific connotations, including, but not limited to, a community of like-minded people on the edge of civilization, often led by a charismatic leader, with beliefs that are ‘other’ to societal ‘norms’. Cults are often perceived as deviant, regularly incorporating elements of crime, especially physical and sexual violence. The adoption by some cults of a special uniform or dress code has been readily picked up by popular culture and has become a key ‘defining’ characteristic of the *nature* of a cult.

In this article, we use the semiotic framework of *myth*, as discussed by Barthes, to demonstrate how cult uniforms become semiotic myths of popular culture. Narratively, the myth of the cult communicates violence, deviance, manipulation, and brainwashing. The myth of on-screen cults has derived itself from a reflexive pop culture foundation. From popular culture inspiring cults to cults inspiring popular culture and back again, society generates its cult myth through three key mechanisms: medicalisation, deviance amplification, and convergence. This means we are at risk of misrepresenting the true *nature* of cults, creating a definition incongruent with reality.

This article traces the history of cults, the expectations of cult behaviour, and the semiotics of uniforms to start the discussion on why society is primed to accept a confusion between nature and the semiotic messaging of “*what-goes-without-saying*” (Barthes *Mythologies* 11).

## Semiotics and Myth

Following the basic groundwork of de Saussure in the early 1900s, semiotics is the study of signs and how we use signs to derive meaning from the external world (de Saussure). Barthes expanded on this with his series of essays in *Mythologies*, adding a layer of connotation that leads to *myth* (Barthes *Mythologies*). Connotation, as described by Barthes, is the interaction between signs, feelings, and values. The connotations assigned to objects and concepts become a system of communication that is a message, the message becomes *myth*. The myth is not defined by the object or concept, but by the way society collectively understands it and all its connotations (Barthes *Elements of Semiology* 89-91).

For scholars like Barthes, languages and cultural artifacts lend themselves to myth because many of our concepts are vague and abstract. Because the concept is vague, it is easy to impose our own values and ideologies upon it. This also means different people can interpret the same concept in different ways (Barthes *Mythologies* 132). The concept of a cult is no exception. Cults mean different things to different people and the boundaries between cults and religious or commercial organisations are often contested. As a pop culture artifact, the meaning of *cults* has been generated through repeated exposure in different media and genres. Similarly, pop culture (tv, films, news, etc.) often has the benefit of fiction, which separates itself from the true nature of *cults* (sensu Barthes *Mythologies*). Yet, through repeated exposure, we begin to share a universal meaning for the term and all the behaviours understood within the myth.

Our repeated exposure to the signs of cults in pop culture is the combined effect of news media and fiction slowly building upon itself in a reflexive manner. We hear news reports of cults behaving in obscure ways, followed by a drama, parody, critique, or satire in a fictitious story. The audience then begins to see the repeated narrative as evidence to the true *nature* of cults. Over time the myth of the cult naturalises into the zeitgeist as concretely as any other sign, word, or symbol. Once the myth is naturalised, it is better used as a narrative device when affixed to a universally recognised symbol, such as the uniform. The uniform becomes an efficient device for communicating meaning in a short space of time.

We argue that the concept of *cult* as myth has entered a collective understanding, and so, it is necessary to reflect on the mechanisms that drove the correlations which ultimately created the myth. Barthes's purpose for analysing myth was "to track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there" (Barthes *Mythologies* 11). For this reason, we must briefly look at the history of cults and their relationship with crime.

## A Brief History of Cults

'Cult' derives from the Latin root, *cultus*, or cultivation, and initially referred to forms of religious worship involving special rituals and ceremonies directed towards specific figures, objects, and/or divine beings. Early to mid-twentieth century sociologists adopted and adapted the term to classify a kind of religious organisation and later to signal new forms of religious expression not previously of primary or singular interest to the scholar of religion (Campbell; Jackson and Jobling; Nelson). The consequences were such that 'cult' came to carry new weight in terms of its meaning and reception, and much like other analytical concepts developed an intellectual significance regarding religious innovation it had not previously possessed. Unfortunately, this was not to last.

By the early 1990s, 'cult' had become a term eschewed by scholars as pejorative, value-laden, and disparaging of its supposed subject matter; a term denuded of technical and descriptive meaning and replaced by more value-neutral alternatives (Dillon and Richardson; Richardson; Chryssides and Zeller). Results from well-published surveys (Pfeifer; Olson) and our own experience in teaching related subject matter revealed predominantly negative attitudes towards the term 'cult', with the inverse true for the alternative descriptors. Perhaps more importantly, the surveys revealed that for the public majority, knowledge of 'cults' came via media reportage of particularly the sensational few, rather than from direct experience of new religions or their members more generally (Pfeifer).

For example, the Peoples Temple, Branch Davidian, and Heaven's Gate groups featured heavily in news and mass media. Importantly, reporting of each of the tragic events marking their demise (in 1978, 1993, and 1997 respectively) reinforced a burgeoning stereotype and escalated fears about cults in our midst. The events in Jonestown, Guyana (Peoples Temple), especially,

bolstered an anticult movement of purported cult experts and deprogrammers offering to save errant family members from the same fate as those who died [there]. The anticult movement portrayed all alleged cults as inherently dangerous and subject only to internal influences. They figured the charismatic leader as so powerful that he could take captive the minds of his followers and make them do whatever he wanted. (Crockford 95)

While the term 'new religious movement' (NRM) has been used in place of cults within the academic sphere, 'cult' is still used within popular culture contexts *precisely* because of the connotations it inspires, with features including charismatic leaders, deprogrammers, coercion and mind-control, deception, perversion, exploitation, deviance, religious zealotry, abuse, violence, and death. For this reason, we still use the word *cult* to mean the myth of the cult as represented by popular culture.

## Representations of Cults and Expectations of Crime

Violence and crime can be common features of *some* cults. Most NRMs "stay within the boundaries of the law" and practice their religion peacefully (Szubin, Jensen III, and Gregg 17). Unfortunately, it is usually those cults that are engaged in violence and crime that become newsworthy, and thus shape public 'knowledge' about the nature of cults and drive public expectations. Two of America's most publicised cults, Charles Manson and the Manson Family and the Peoples Temple, are synonymous with violence and crime. Prior to committing mass

suicide by poison in Jonestown, the Peoples Temple accumulated many guns as well as killing Congressman Leo Ryan and members of his party. Similarly, Charles Manson and the Manson Family stockpiled weapons, participated in illegal drug use, and murdered seven people, including Hollywood actor Sharon Tate. The high-profile victims of both groups ensured ongoing widespread media attention and continuous popular culture interest in both groups. Other cults are more specifically criminal in nature: for example, the Constanzo group in Matamoros, while presenting as a cult, are also a drug gang, leading to many calling these groups narco-cults (Kail 56).

Sexual assault and abuse are commonly associated with cults. There have been numerous media reports worldwide on the sexual abuse of (usually) women and/or children. For example, a fourteen-year-old in the Children of God group alleged that she was raped when she disobeyed a leader (Rudin 28). In 2021, the regional city of Armidale, Australia, became national news when a former soldier was arrested on charges of “manipulating a woman for a ‘cult’ like purpose” (McKinnell). The man, James Davis, styles himself as the patriarch of a group known as the ‘House of Cadifor’. Police evidence includes six signed “slavery contracts”, as well as 70 witnesses to support the allegation that Mr Davis subjected a woman to “ongoing physical, sexual and psychological abuse and degradation” as well as unpaid prostitution and enslavement (McKinnell).

## Cults and Popular Culture

The depiction of cults in popular culture is attracting growing attention. Scholars Lynn Neal (2011) and Joseph Laycock (2013) have initiated this research and identified consistent stereotypes of ‘cults’ being portrayed throughout popular media. Neal found that cults began to be featured in television shows as early as the 1950s and 1960s, continually escalating until the 1990s before dropping slightly between 2000 and 2008 (the time the research was concluded). Specifically, there were 10 episodes between 1958-1969; 19 in the 1970s, which Neal attributes to the “rise of the cult scare and intense media scrutiny of NRMs” (97); 25 in the 1980s; 72 in the 1990s; and 59 between 2000 and 2008. Such academic research has identified that popular culture is important in the formation of the public perception, and social definition, of acceptable and deviant religions (Laycock 81).

Laycock argues that representations of cults in popular culture reinforces public narratives about cults in three important ways: medicalisation, deviance amplification, and convergence. Medicalisation refers to the depiction of individuals becoming brainwashed and deprogrammed. The medicalisation of cults can be exacerbated by the cult uniform and clinical, ritualistic behaviours.

Deviance amplification, a term coined by Leslie Wilkins in the 1960s, is the phenomenon of ‘media hype’, where the media selects specific examples of deviant behaviour, distorting them (Wilkins), such that a handful of peripheral cases appears representative of a larger social problem (Laycock 84). Following the deviance amplification, there is then often a ‘moral panic’ (a term coined by Stanley Cohen in 1972) where the problem is distorted and heightened within the media. Cults are often subject to deviance amplification within the media, leading to moral panics about the ‘depraved’, sexual, criminal, and violent activities of cults preying on and brainwashing innocents.

Convergence “is a rhetorical device associated with deviance amplification in which two or more activities are linked so as to implicitly draw a parallel between them” (Laycock 85). An example of convergence occurred when the Branch Davidians were compared to the Peoples Temple, ultimately leading the FBI “to end the siege through an aggressive ‘dynamic entry’ in part because they feared such a mass suicide” (Laycock 85). The FBI transferred responsibility for the deaths to ‘mass suicide’, which has become the common narrative of events at Waco.

Each of the three mechanisms have an important role to play in the popular culture presentation

of cults to audiences. Popular media sources, fictional or not, are incentivised to present the most diabolical cult to the audience – and this often includes the medicalised elements of brainwashing and manipulation. This presentation reinforces existing deviance amplification and moral panics around the depraved activities of cults, and in particular sexual and criminal activities. And finally, convergence acts as a 'cultural script' where the portrayal of these types of characteristics (brainwashing, criminal or violent behaviour, etc.) is automatically associated with cults. As Laycock argues, “in this way, popular culture has a unique ability to promote convergence and, by extension, deviance amplification” (85).

The mechanisms of medicalisation, deviance amplification and convergence are important to the semiotic linking of concepts, signs, and signifiers in the process of myth generation. In efficiently understanding the message of the myth, the viewer must have a sign they can affix to it. In the case of visual mediums this must be immediate and certain. As many of the convergent properties of cults are behavioural (acts of violence and depravity, charismatic leaders, etc.), we need a symbol that audiences can understand immediately. Uniforms achieve this with remarkable efficiency.

Upon seeing a still, two-dimensional image of people wearing matching garb it can be made easily apparent that they are part of a cult. Religious uniforms are one of the first visual images one conjures upon hearing the word cult: “*for most people the word ‘cult’ conjures up ‘60s images of college students wearing flowing robes, chanting rhythmically and spouting Eastern philosophy*” (Salvatore cited in Petherick 577; italics in original). The impact is especially pronounced if the clothes are atypical, anachronistic, or otherwise different to the expected clothes of the context. This interpretation then becomes cemented through the actions of the characters. In *Rick and Morty*, season 1, episode 10, Morty is imprisoned with interdimensional versions of himself. Despite some morphological differences, each Morty is wearing his recognisable yellow top and blue pants. While *our* Morty’s back is turned, five hooded, robed figures in atypical garb with matching facial markings approach Morty. The audience is immediately aware that this is a cult. The comparison between the uniform of Morty and the Morty cult exemplifies the use of cult uniform in the myth of Cults. The cult is then cemented through chanting and a belief in the “One true Morty” (Harmon *et al.*).

## Semiotics, Clothes, and Uniforms

The semiotics of clothes includes implicit, explicit, and subliminal signs. The reasons we choose to wear what we wear is governed by multiple factors both within our control and outside of it: for instance, our body shape, social networks and economic status, access to fashion and choice (Barthes *The Fashion System*; Hackett). We often choose to communicate aspects of our identity through what we wear or what we choose not to wear. Our choice of clothing communicates aspects of who we are, but also who we want to be (Hackett; Simmel; Veblen)

Uniforms are an effective and efficient communicative device. Calefato’s classification of uniforms is not only as those used by military and working groups, but also including the strictly coded dress of subcultures. Unlike other clothes which can be weakly coded, uniforms differentiate themselves through their purposeful coded signalling system (Calefato). To scholars such as Jennifer Craik, uniforms intrigue us because they combine evident statements as well as implied and subliminal communications (Craik). Theories about identity predict that processes similar to the defining of an individual are also important to group life, whereby an individual group member’s conceptualisation of their group is derived from the collective identity (Horowitz; Lauger). Collective identities are regularly emphasised as a key component in understanding how groups gain meaning and purpose (Polletta and Jasper). The identity is generally constructed and reinforced through routine socialisation and collective action.

Uniforms are a well-known means of creating collective identities. They restrict one’s clothing choices and use boundary-setting rituals to ensure commitment to the group. In general, the more obvious the restriction, the easier it is to enforce. Demanding obvious behaviours from

members, unique to the community, simultaneously generates a differentiation between the members and non-members, while enabling self-enforcement and peer-to-peer judgments of commitment. Leaders of religious movements like cults and NRMs will sometimes step back from the punitive aspects of nonconformity. Instead, it falls to the members to maintain the discipline of the collective (Kelley 109). This further leads to a sense of ownership and therefore belonging to the community.

Uniforms are an easy outward-facing signal that allows for ready discrimination of error. Because they are often obvious and distinctive dress, they constrain and often stigmatise members. In other collective situations such as with American gangs, even dedicated members will deny their gang affiliation if it is advantageous to do so (Lauger *Real Gangstas*). While in uniform, individuals cannot hide their membership, making the sacrifice more costly. Members are forced to take one hundred percent of the ownership and participate wholly, or not at all. Through this mechanism, cults demonstrate the medicalisation of the members. Leaders may want their members to be unable to escape or deny affiliation. Similarly, their external appearances might invite persecution and therefore breed resilience, courage, and solidarity. It is, in essence, a form of manipulation (see for instance Iannaccone). Alternatively, as Melton argues, members may want to be open and proud of their organisation, as displayed through them adopting their uniforms (15).

The uniform of cults in popular media is a principal component of medicalisation, deviance amplification, and convergence. The uniform, often robes, offers credence to the medicalisation aspect: members of cults are receiving 'treatment' — initially, negative treatment while being brainwashed, and then later helpful/saving treatment when being deprogrammed, providing they survive a mass suicide attempt and/or, criminal, sexual, or violent escapades. Through portraying cult members in a distinctive uniform, there is no doubt for the audience who is receiving or in need of treatment. Many of the cults portrayed on screen can easily communicate the joining of a cult by changing the characters' dress. Similarly, by simply re-dressing the character, it is communicated that the character has returned to normal, they have been saved, they are a survivor. In *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, while three of the four 'Mole women' integrate back into society, Gretchen Chalker continues to believe in their cult; as such she never takes off her cult uniform. In addition, the employment of uniforms for cult members in popular culture enables an instant visual recognition of 'us' and 'them', or 'normal' and 'abnormal', and reinforces stereotypical notions of social order and marginalised, deviant (religious) groups (Neal 83). The clothing differences are obvious in *The Simpsons* season 9, episode 13, "Joy of Sect": 'Movementarian' members, including the Simpsons, don long flowing robes. The use of cult uniform visualises their fanatical commitment to the group. It sets them apart from the rest of Springfield and society (Neal 88-89).

The connection between uniforms and cults derives two seemingly paradoxical meanings. Firstly, it reduces the chances of the audience believing that the cult employed 'deceptive recruiting' techniques. As Melton argues, because of the association our society has with uniforms and cults, "it is very hard for someone to join most new religions, given their peculiar dress and worship practices, without knowing immediately its religious nature" (14). As such, within popular media, the presence of the uniform increases the culpability of those who join the cult. Contrarily, the character in uniform is a sign that the person has been manipulated and/or brainwashed. This reduces the culpability of the cult member. However, the two understandings are not necessarily exclusive. It is possible to view the cult member as a naïve victim, someone who approached the cult as an escape from their life but was subsequently manipulated into behaving criminally. This interpretation is particularly powerful because it indicates cults can prey on anyone, and that anyone could become a victim of a cult. This, in turn, heightens the moral panic surrounding cults and NRMs.

The on-screen myth of the cult as represented by its uniform has a basis in the real-life history of NRMs. Heaven's Gate members famously died after they imbibed fatal doses of alcohol and barbiturates to achieve their 'final exit'. Most members were found laid out on beds covered in purple shrouds, all wearing matching black shirts, black pants, and black and white Nike shoes.

The famous photos of Warren Jeffs's polygamous Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, the subject of Netflix's *Keep Sweet: Pray and Obey*, depict multiple women in matching conservative dresses with matching hairstyles gathered around a photo of Jeffs. The image and uniform are a clear influence on the design of *Unbreakable's* 'Mole women'.

A prime example of the stereotype of cult uniforms is provided by the Canadian comedy program *The Red Green Show* when the character Red tells Harold "cults are full of followers, they have no independent thought, they go to these pointless meetings ... they all dress the same" (episode 165). The statement is made while the two main characters Red and Harold are standing in matching outfits.

## Blurring Nature and Myth

Importantly, the success of these shows very much relies on audiences having a shared conception of NRMs and the myth of the cult. This is a curious combination of real and fictional knowledge of the well-publicised controversial events in history. Fictional cults frequently take widely held perspectives of actual religious movements and render them either more absurd or more frightening (Laycock 81). Moreover, the blurring of fictional and non-fictional groups serves to reinforce the sense that all popular culture cults and their real-world counterparts are the same; that they all follow a common script. In this, there is convergence between the fictional and the real. The myth of the cult bleeds from the screen into real life.

*The Simpsons'* "The Joy of Sect" was televised in the year following the suicide of the 39 members of the Heaven's Gate group, and the storyline in part was influenced by it. Importantly, as a piercing, satirical critique of middle-class America, the "Joy of Sect" not only parodied traditional and non-traditional religion generally (as well as the 'cult-like' following of mass media such as *Fox*); scholars have shown that it also parodied the 'cult' stereotype itself (Feltmate).

While Heaven's Gate influenced to a greater or lesser extent each of the TV shows highlighted thus far, it was also the case that the group incorporated into its eschatology aspects of popular culture linked primarily to science fiction. For example, group members were known to have regularly watched and discussed episodes of *Star Trek* (Hoffmann and Burke; Sconce), adopting aspects of the show's vernacular in "attempts to relate to the public" (Gate 163). Words such as 'away-team', 'prime-directive', 'hologram', 'Captain', 'Admiral', and importantly 'Red-Alert' were adopted; the latter, often signalling code-red situations in *Star Trek* episodes, appeared on the Heaven's Gate Website in the days just prior to their demise.

Importantly, allusions to science fiction and *Star Trek* were incorporated into the group's self-styled 'uniform' worn during their tragic ritual-suicide. Stitched into the shoulders of each of their uniforms were triangular, *Star Trek*-inspired patches featuring various celestial bodies along with a tagline signalling the common bond uniting each member: "Heaven's Gate Away Team" (Sconce).

Ironically, with replica patches readily for sale online, and T-shirts and hoodies featuring modified though similar Heaven's Gate symbolism, this 'common bond' has been commodified in such a way as to subvert its original meaning – at least as it concerned 'cult' membership in the religious context. The re-integration of cult symbols into popular culture typifies the way we as a society detachedly view the behaviours of cults. The behaviour of cults is anecdotally viewed through a voyeuristic lens, potentially exacerbated by the regular portrayals of cults through parody.

Scholars have demonstrated how popular culture has internationally impacted on criminological aspects of society. For instance, there was a noted, international increase in unrealistic expectations of jurors wanting forensic evidence during court cases after the popularity of forensic science in crime dramas (Franzen; Wise). After the arrest of James Davis in Armidale,

NSW, Australia, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that Davis was the patriarch of the “House of Cadifor” and he was part of a “cult” (both reported in inverted commas). The article also includes an assumption from Davis's lawyer that, in discussing the women of the group, “the Crown might say ‘they’ve been brainwashed’”. Similarly, the article references the use of matching collars by the women (Mitchell). *Nine News* reported that the “ex-soldier allegedly forced tattooed, collared sex slave into prostitution”, bringing attention to the clothing as part of the coercive techniques of Davis. While the article does not designate the House of Cadifor as a cult, they include a quote from the Assistant Commissioner Justine Gough, “Mr Davis' group has cult-like qualities”, and included the keyword ‘cults’ for the article.

Regrettably, the myth of cults and real-world behaviours of NRMs do not always align, and a false convergence is drawn between the two. Furthermore, the consistent parodying and voyeuristic nature of on-screen cults means we might be at fault of euphemising the crimes and behaviours of those deemed to be part of a ‘cult’. Anecdotally, the way Armidale locals discussed Davis was through a lens of excitement and titillation, as if watching a fictional story unfold in their own backyard. The conversations and news reporting focussed on the cult-like aspects of Davis and not the abhorrence of the alleged crimes. We must remain mindful that the cinematic semiology of cults and the myth as represented by their uniform dress and behaviours is incongruent with the nature of NRMs. However, more work needs to be done to better understand the impact of on-screen cults on real-world attitudes and beliefs.

## Conclusion

The myth of the cult has entered a shared understanding within today's zeitgeist, and the uniform of the cult stands at its heart as a key sign of the myth. Popular culture plays a key role in shaping this shared understanding by following the cultural script, slowly layering fact with fiction, just as fact begins to incorporate the fiction. The language of the cult as communicated through their uniforms is, we would argue, universally understood and purposeful. The ubiquitous representation of cults portrays a deviant group, often medicalised, and subject to deviance amplification and convergence. When a group of characters is presented to the audience in the same cult dress, we know what is being communicated to us. Fictional cults in popular culture continue to mirror the common list of negative features attributed to many new religious movements. Such fictional framing has come to inform media-consumer attitudes in much the same way as news media, reflecting as they do the cultural stock of knowledge from which our understandings are drawn, and which has little grounding in the direct or immediate experience of the phenomena in question. In short, the nature of NRMs has become confused with the myth of the cult. More research is needed to understand the impact of the myth of the cult. However, it is important to ensure “*what-goes-without-saying*” is not obfuscating, euphemising, or otherwise misrepresenting nature.

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