



## Prevalence of Cultism Among Public Secondary School Students in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

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### Abstract

This study examines the prevalence, causes, and consequences of cultism among public secondary school students in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, through the lens of social learning theory. The study employs a descriptive survey design, with data gathered from 110 teachers via structured questionnaires. The aim was to explore their perceptions of how students' behaviors are influenced by peer pressure, personal security concerns, and the search for social identity, as posited by social learning theory. Key research questions focused on identifying the extent of cultism, its root causes, and the impact on students' academic performance as observed by these teachers. The analysis utilized frequency distributions, percentages, and mean rankings to assess cult-related activities and their educational implications. The results indicate a high prevalence of cultism, with 93.7% of respondents reporting a high prevalence of cultism among students. Peer group pressure and personal security concerns (7.7% each) were identified by respondents as primary causes of student involvement. The study further highlights severe consequences, including frequent school disruptions, declining academic performance, and parental reluctance to enroll children in affected schools, which has resulted in decreased student attendance and resource allocation. These findings reveal a pressing need for comprehensive, theory-driven interventions to combat cultism and foster a safer, more conducive educational environment in Uyo. The study recommends a multi-pronged approach involving school administrators, parents, law enforcement, and community organizations.

**Keywords:** Cultism; Peer pressure; Academic performance; Personal security; Social learning theory; Uyo-Nigeria.

## 1.0 Introduction

Cultism, defined by secretive, hierarchical, and often violent group activities, has become a serious social problem within Nigeria's educational system, particularly in secondary schools. This phenomenon threatens the fabric of the academic environment, student safety, and the overall development of society. The prevalence of cultism in public secondary schools in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, mirrors a broader national trend, which poses a danger to the educational system by promoting violence, fear, and instability (Ajayi and Ekundayo, 2010). The disruption caused by cultism not only undermines the primary goals of schooling education and socialization but also threatens the broader socio-economic future of Nigeria (Adeyemi, 2014).

The roots of cultism in Nigerian secondary schools can be traced to sociological theories of deviance, particularly Robert Merton's Strain Theory, which posits that when societal institutions fail to provide legitimate means for achieving cultural goals, individuals may turn to deviant behaviors (Merton, 1938). In the context of Nigeria, economic hardship, family disintegration, and the erosion of moral values create fertile ground for deviant behaviors like cultism to thrive. These societal failures, combined with inadequate institutional responses, enable the migration of cultism from higher institutions into secondary schools, where vulnerable youths are recruited (Ibrahim and Babatunde, 2016).

Cultism's rise in secondary schools can be understood through a socio-economic lens. Family disintegration, characterized by absent parental guidance and broken homes, has been identified as a significant factor contributing to cultism (Okpaga, 2012). Similarly, economic deprivation pushes young people towards cults, which promise financial rewards, protection, and social status (Adewale and Oladeji, 2018). Social Learning Theory, developed by Albert Bandura, also helps to explain how young people in dysfunctional environments may model the deviant behavior of cultists, particularly if they perceive such behavior as advantageous (Bandura, 1977). In environments where legal or formal avenues of success are inaccessible, students might view cultism as an alternative path to gaining power or financial benefits.

Another contributing factor to the persistence of cultism in Nigerian schools is the institutional failure to enforce discipline and ensure security. Many schools lack adequate infrastructure, guidance, and strong disciplinary frameworks. According to Nwagwu (2015a), ineffective policies and underfunded security systems create gaps that cult groups exploit, recruiting students under the guise of providing protection from rival cults or offering a sense of belonging. In Uyo, the rising number of cult-related incidents in secondary schools demonstrates the

systemic challenges faced by educational institutions and the broader community.

School environments that lack positive extracurricular activities to engage students leave idle students vulnerable to cult recruitment (Ojo, 2019). Without sufficient intervention programs or counseling services, these students are easily coerced into joining cults under pressure from peers or due to fear of violence. Moreover, schools often fail to provide psychological support to students affected by cultism, resulting in long-term trauma, anxiety, and poor academic performance (Uzoечи and Bamidele, 2017). The psychological effects of cultism on students are profound, with cult members often experiencing significant academic decline. This can be attributed to absenteeism, involvement in non-academic activities, and psychological stress associated with constant fear of violence and retribution. Cultism erodes the sense of safety and community within schools, which are critical components of a healthy learning environment (Daramola, 2015). According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, students need to feel safe to achieve self-actualization and excel academically (Maslow, 1943). The presence of cultism disrupts this safety, creating an environment where students are more concerned with survival than learning.

Addressing cultism in secondary schools requires a comprehensive, multi-pronged approach that involves not only school administrators but also parents, law enforcement, and community organizations. Parents play a crucial role in monitoring their children's activities and instilling values that resist the allure of cultism (Adeyemi, 2014). Schools, on the other hand, must implement robust disciplinary frameworks and invest in security measures, such as surveillance and the presence of law enforcement officers, to deter cult activities (Okon, 2017). Moreover, according to the Social Control Theory (Hirschi, 1969), strong attachments to family, schools, and positive role models can prevent deviant behavior by fostering bonds that encourage conformity. The role of government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is also essential in funding educational campaigns and programs that provide positive alternatives to cultism. For example, engaging students in extracurricular activities like sports, arts, and academic clubs can offer a healthy outlet for youthful energy and help build a sense of community (Ojo, 2019). Furthermore, schools need to develop comprehensive counseling programs aimed at providing psychological support to students affected by cultism or those at risk of joining cults (Uzoечи and Bamidele, 2017).

## **2.0 Materials and Methods**

### **2.1 Study Area**

The study was conducted in Uyo Local Government Area located at 5°02'00"N 7°55'39"E. Uyo Local Government Area (LGA) is the capital of Akwa Ibom State. It serves a dual role as state capital and Local Government Headquarters. It is bounded by Abak, Itu, Uruan, Ibesikpo Asutan and Etinan LGAs. Uyo LGA witnesses two distinct seasons namely the dry and rainy seasons. The rainy season commences from early March - October, with high precipitation in July, while the dry season starts from November to early February with the peak in January during which the dusty harmattan wind occurs. The mean annual rainfall for the state is 3000mm. The temperature in the area varies between 28°C - 30°C depending on the season, while the relative humidity ranges from 10% - 90% (Jacob et al., 2024; Jacob and Nelson, 2021). The people of Uyo are predominantly Christians, with few still practicing traditional religion. Uyo became the capital of the state on September 23, 1987, following the creation of Akwa Ibom State from Cross River State. Public Secondary schools in Uyo LGA state comprise 15 schools with a total number of 1,211 staff members (State Secondary Education Commission, 2023).

### **2.2 Population and Sampling Technique**

The study population comprises all staff (1,211) in public secondary schools in Uyo local education commission. A two-stage sampling technique was employed in selecting a sample for the study. The first stage involved a random selection of 10 out of the 15 public secondary schools in the study area. The second stage involved a simple random selection of 11 teachers in each of the 10 schools making a total of 110 teaching staff which constituted the sample size.

### **2.3 Validation and Reliability of Research Instrument**

The research instrument was a structured questionnaire used to gather primary data from the field for analysis. The questionnaire was divided into five sections. Section A was designed to elicit information about the sex of respondents, and section B was a 10-item information on the prevalence of cultism in public secondary schools. Section C was a 19-item information on the causes of cultism among students of public schools. Section D contained 10 information on the effects of cultism on students' academic performance while Section E contained 14 information on the strategies for eradicating cultism among students. The questionnaire was prepared in line with the study's objectives to meet the study's goals. To ascertain that the research instrument (questionnaire) was adequate to achieve the result, it was validated by a professional in the Department of Home

Economics, University of Uyo. The instrument was examined for corrections and suggested restructuring was made as necessary. The research instrument was subjected to face and content validation. Also, to ensure that the survey instrument is reliable, the instrument was subjected to test-retest reliability, and a reliability index of 0.8 was obtained, which indicated that the instrument was reliable (Reis and Judd, 2000).

## 2.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Data for the study were derived from the questionnaires administered to 110 randomly selected respondents in the study area. All the questionnaires administered were retrieved from the respondents for analysis. The collected data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics such as frequency counts, percentages, means, and ranking. All these analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.

## 2.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant institutional review board before data collection. Informed consent was secured from all participating teachers, ensuring their voluntary participation and understanding of the study's purpose. Participant confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process by having anonymous responses and securely storing data.

## 3.0 Result and Discussions

### 3.1 Results

#### *Gender of Respondents*

The results from Table 1 show that the majority of respondents in this study were male, making up 57.3% of the total sample, with 63 male participants. Female respondents accounted for 42.7% of the total sample, with 47 participants. Overall, the sample consisted of 110 respondents, with males being more predominant.

Table 1: Gender of the Respondents

<b>Sex</b>	<b>Frequency (N)</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Male	63	57.3
Female	47	42.7
Total	110	100

## Cult-related activities among students in public secondary schools

The results in Table 2 reveal the prevalence of various cult-related activities among students in public secondary schools within the Uyo Local Government Area, as reported by the respondents. The data illustrates a high incidence of cult-related behaviors, with bullying emerging as the most frequent activity, reported by 107 respondents (13.4%). Fighting among students was reported by 102 respondents (12.8%). Disobedience to authority and examination malpractice were also frequently reported, at 12.5% and 12.3%, respectively. Absenteeism (11.8%) and disregard for school rules (11.0%) are also significant behaviors observed among students involved in cult activities. The occurrence of rioting was reported at 10.9%. While less frequent, smoking (6.4%), intimidation (3.6%), and rape (3.5%) were also reported as cult-related activities.

Table 2: Cult-related activities among students in public secondary schools

S/N	Cult-related activities	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
1.	Bullying of students by fellow students	107	13.4
2.	Intimidation of teachers and students by cult members	45	3.6
3.	Rape of female students by male students	28	3.5
4.	incessant fighting by students	102	12.8
5.	Planning and execution of riots in school by students	87	10.9
6.	Not obeying school rules/regulations	88	11.0
7.	Smoking within and outside the schools	51	6.4
8.	Exhibiting stubbornness and disobedience to constituted authority	100	12.5
9.	Engaging in examination malpractices	98	12.3
10.	Absence from school/missed classes	94	11.8
	<b>Total</b>	<b>800</b>	<b>100</b>

### *Prevalence rate of cultism among students*

The results presented in Table 3 underscore the alarming prevalence of cultism among students in public secondary schools in the Uyo Local Government Area, as reported by the respondents. A significant majority, 103 out of 110 respondents (93.7%), reported experiencing a high prevalence of cultism among students, with a prevalence scale score greater than 5. In contrast, only 7 respondents (6.4%) indicated a low prevalence rate, with a score below 5.

**Table 3: Prevalence Rate of Cultism Among Students**

Prevalence rate	Prevalence scale score	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Low	<5	7	6.4
High	$\geq 5$	103	93.7
Total		110	100

### *Causes of student involvement in cult-related activities*

The results presented in Table 4 outline the various causes leading to student involvement in cult-related activities within the study area, as identified by the respondents, revealing some significant underlying factors. Peer group pressure and the need for personal security emerged as the most influential causes, each cited by 108 respondents, representing 7.7% of the total responses. Following closely were the desire to avoid harassment and intimidation, and the pursuit of power, influence, and prestige, each identified by 102 respondents (7.3%). Additionally, the perceived ability to force and intimidate others was noted by 97 respondents (6.9%). Interestingly, 93 respondents (6.6%) cited a desire for belonging and worthiness in the school environment. The collapse of family institutions was cited by 66 respondents (4.7%). The desire to terrorize others and exhibit violent capabilities was reported by 88 respondents (6.3%). On the lower end, 78 respondents (5.6%) mentioned access to girls as a cause. The least cited cause was the influence of parents as role models, with only 25 respondents (1.8%) identifying it as a factor.

Table 4: Causes of student involvement in cult-related activities

S/N	Causes	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Access to girls	78	5.6
2.	Collapse of family Institutions	66	4.7
3.	Peer group pressure	108	7.7
4.	Parents as role models	25	1.8
5.	Harsh economic condition	34	2.4
6.	The presence of some non-students in the schools	87	6.2
7.	Lack of adequate facilities which permits overcrowding in classes	86	6.1
8.	General poverty and unemployment	34	2.4
9.	High level of moral decay in society	68	4.9
10.	To guide against examination failure	57	4.1
11.	To avoid harassment and intimidation	102	7.3
12.	Promises of jobs	61	4.4
13.	Personal security purposes	108	7.7
14.	Having a sense of power, influence, and prestige	102	7.3
15.	Having a feeling of belonging and worthiness in the scheme of things in school	93	6.6
16.	Terrorizing people by exhibiting the capability to inflict violence on perceived adversaries	88	6.3
17.	Ability to force and intimidate people to grant unjust requests for their devilish design	97	6.9
18.	Avenue for financial assistance	50	3.6
19.	Inquisitiveness	57	4.1

### *Impacts of cultism on students' academic performance*

The findings presented in Table 5 illustrate the significant impacts of cultism on students' academic performance and the overall school environment, as observed by respondents. The most significant concern ranked highest with a mean of 3.73, is the reluctance of parents to send their children to schools affected by cultism. Following closely in impact is the decline in academic performance (mean = 3.06). Respondents also noted that students are afraid and not focused on their studies (mean = 3.05). Teachers also prefer to be transferred to safer schools (mean = 3.00). Other significant impacts include innocent students losing their lives due to cult-

related crises (mean = 2.96), and teachers not turning up for classes for fear of being molested (mean = 2.96). Students also exhibit caution and restrict their movement to avoid becoming victims of rape, assault, and death (mean = 2.95). Furthermore, cultism leads to the destruction of buildings, structures, books, and equipment (mean = 2.75). The frequent closure of schools due to fights, clashes, unrest, and bloodshed (mean = 2.50) is another critical impact, which consequently leads to students spending more years in school (mean = 2.24).

Table 5: Effects of cultism on students' academic performance

S/N	Effects	Mean	Rank
1.	Schools are closed down because of the frequent fights, clashes, unrest, and bloodshed	2.5	8
2.	Students are prone to spend more years in school when schools are closed down	2.24	9
3.	Teachers may not turn up for classes for fear of being molested	2.96	5
4.	Parents will find it hard to send their children to such schools	3.73	1
5.	Teachers will prefer to be transferred to another school where their safety will be secured	3.0	4
6.	Students are afraid and not focused on their studies	3.05	3
7.	Students are always cautious and restrict their movement so as not to fall victim to rape, assault, and death	2.95	6
8.	There is a decline in academic performance	3.06	2
9.	Innocent students lose their lives due to the crisis of cultism	2.96	5
10.	Buildings, structures, books, and equipment are destroyed	2.75	7

### 3.2 Discussion

The findings on cult-related activities among students, as reported by respondents, indicate that bullying, fighting, and disobedience to authority are prevalent behaviors. Bullying is often used by cult groups to create an atmosphere of fear and can act as a precursor to recruitment (Ofoegbu and Akpochafo, 2015). Cultists frequently target vulnerable students, coercing them into joining under threats of violence. This aligns with Social Control Theory (Hirschi, 1969), which suggests that students with weakened social bonds are more likely to engage in deviant behavior. Incessant fighting among students is also a dominant behavior associated with cultism, often occurring between rival factions to assert dominance or initiate new members (Ogunlade and Olusola, 2019). Disobedience to authority and examination malpractice is common, with cult members often disregarding school rules and orchestrating malpractice to benefit their members (Akinwumi and Ibitoye, 2020; Adewale, 2018). Absenteeism and disregard for school rules indicate disengagement from academic life, isolating students from positive influences (Nwankwo, 2017; Ojo and Olorunleke, 2019). Rioting highlights collective resistance and a public display of control (Umeh, 2016). While less frequent, smoking, intimidation, and rape are integral to cult operations, fostering group cohesion, maintaining control, and asserting dominance (Nwagwu, 2015a; Olufemi and Akindele, 2018). These activities reflect a broader pattern of social alienation and institutional failure, with cultism filling gaps left by weak educational and familial structures (Ogbu, 2017).

The alarming prevalence rate of cultism among students underscores its deep-rooted nature in Nigerian secondary schools. This prevalence can be attributed to factors such as peer pressure, poor parental supervision, and the quest for social identity, contributing to its entrenchment (Adewale, 2018; Akinwumi and Ibitoye, 2020). The significant presence of cult activities in schools creates an unsafe environment, which disrupts both the academic and social development of students (Nwagwu, 2015b). Moreover, this high prevalence can be linked to institutional failures, such as inadequate security measures and insufficient efforts by school authorities to effectively curb these activities (Adebayo, 2019). The near-ubiquitous nature of cultism in this study area indicates that current interventions may be ineffective or insufficient, calling for more robust policies and enforcement strategies aimed at addressing the root causes of cultism (Ojo and Olorunleke, 2019).

Regarding the causes of student involvement, peer group pressure and the need for personal security were identified as the most influential factors. These are interconnected, as peer influence often shapes students' perception of safety and social acceptance, with cults promising protection from bullying and harassment

(Adewale and Oyedeji, 2020; Ogunbameru, 2004a). The desire for power, influence, and prestige, alongside the ability to intimidate others, further suggests that cult membership is seen as a means to assert dominance and gain social recognition (Eze, 2019; Adesoji, 2010a; Nwadiolor, 2014b). The need for belonging and worthiness in the school environment also plays a crucial role, as cult groups exploit emotional vulnerabilities to offer a sense of community and importance (Nwagwu, 2018; Ogbemudia, 2013).

The collapse of family institutions, characterized by weakening structures and lack of parental guidance, also significantly contributes to cultism, pushing students towards cults as a substitute for stable home environments and security (Akinwumi and Ibitoye, 2020; Nwadiolor, 2014a; Odi and Omofonmwan, 2007). This highlights a complex interplay of societal, institutional, and personal factors driving cult involvement (Adesoji, 2010b). The desire to terrorize others and exhibit violent capabilities (Ojo and Olorunleke, 2019) and access to girls (Ajayi, 2015) were also identified. The minimal role of parental influence as a direct driver suggests a broader lack of parental engagement (Eze, 2019).

The impacts of cultism on academic performance are severe, with respondents ranking parental reluctance to send children to affected schools as the highest concern. This highlights the profound disruption to the educational process. A direct decline in academic performance is evident (Ojo and Olorunleke, 2019), compounded by students' fear and lack of focus. Teachers' preference for transfers also underscores the impact on staff retention and morale (Ogunlade, 2017). Furthermore, cultism leads to violence, loss of life (Ogbemudia, 2013), property destruction, and frequent school closures, all of which impede the continuity of learning and undermine the foundational goals of education (Daramola, 2015). These findings underscore how cultism destabilizes the academic environment and compromises safety for both students and staff.

#### **4.0 Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study underscores the urgent need for comprehensive and theory-driven interventions to address the pervasive issue of cultism in public secondary schools in the Uyo Local Government Area. The findings reveal a high prevalence of cultism among students, primarily driven by peer pressure, personal security concerns, and the breakdown of family institutions, as perceived by respondents. These factors align strongly with Social Learning Theory, where students may model deviant behaviors from their peers or perceive cults as avenues for protection and belonging in the absence of stable social bonds, and with Social Control Theory, which posits that weakened attachments to prosocial institutions can lead to deviant behaviors.

The severe consequences, including a significant decline in academic performance, frequent school disruptions, and widespread fear among students and teachers, highlight a critical threat to the educational system. The reluctance of parents to enroll children in affected schools further exacerbates these challenges, demonstrating the broad societal impact. Therefore, a coordinated and multi-pronged response is essential, involving educators, parents, law enforcement, and community leaders. Policy implications stemming from this study include the urgent need for school administrations to implement robust anti-cultism policies, enhance security measures, and foster a supportive school climate. Parents must be empowered through educational programs to strengthen family structures and provide consistent guidance to their children. Community organizations and government agencies should collaborate to fund and support positive extracurricular activities and comprehensive counseling services, offering students healthy alternatives and psychological support to counter the allure of cultism.

Future research could explore the direct experiences and perceptions of students regarding cultism, utilizing qualitative methods to gain deeper insights into their motivations and challenges. Additionally, longitudinal studies could assess the long-term effectiveness of various intervention programs in mitigating cultism and improving academic outcomes in affected areas. By addressing the root causes of cultism with evidence-based strategies and creating safer, more supportive educational environments, it is possible to mitigate the negative effects and ensure a better future for the students of Uyo Local Government Area.

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