A Comparative Study of Persuasion and Recruitment Techniques

Exhibited by Organized Groups on the Internet

Maria Kjaerland, M.Sc,

Laurence Alison, P.hD

Department of Psychology,

University of Liverpool

&

Samantha Lundrigan, P.hD

Department of Criminology,

Victoria University of Wellington

Address correspondence to: Maria Kjaerland, Tulipanveien 34, 4316 Sandnes,

Norway, Tel: +47 51623622, e-mail: mariakjaerland@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study explores the ways in which New Religious Movements (NRMs) use the Internet for reaching potential members. An analysis of twenty web pages taken from two different groups of NRMs; Bible-based and non-Christian Organisations provided the basis for the current study. Twenty recruitment techniques were identified. These drew upon established influence principles: Reciprocity, Authority, Liking, and Scarcity (Cialdini, 1984). Using a multivariate statistical analysis that geometrically represents the co-occurrence of individual items as a visual array (Guttman, 1954), two broad themes emerged: Information-based ideological recruitment techniques and Image-based idealised outcomes. Non-Christian religions movements tended to use more than twice as many techniques as the Bible-based organisations. Implications of the findings are evaluated in terms of the use of the Internet for recruitment and propaganda.

Key words: New Religious Movements, SSA, influence, Internet

AN EXPLORATION AND COMPARISON OF RECRUITMENT TECHNIQUES EXHIBITED BY BIBLE-BASED AND NON-CHRISTIAN NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS ON THE WORLD WIDE WEB

In the US, and to a lesser extent in other countries, there has been a rise in the number of cult-type 'New Religious Movements (NRMs) from the 1960's and onwards (Galanter et al, 1989). The terms 'cult' and NRM have often been used interchangeably and can mean different things to different people. Strict definitions can be quite problematic. Firstly, the sheer heterogeneity of cults frustrates attempts to derive a unitary definition (Bohm and Alison, in Press). The way in which NRMs have been defined in this study are as relatively coherent groups set apart from mainstream religion but with a cohesive ideology that promotes a particular form of identification and involvement with the group as a whole, functioning unit. This definition conforms to two principles previously identified in relation to NRMs: (i) the opposition of the group's ideology to many conventional societal norms, combined with (ii) a level of organisational strength resulting in a degree of group cohesion. For example, Wallis (1984, pg.4) suggests that; 'A new movement may embrace the world, affirming its normatively approved goals and values; it may reject that world, denigrating those things held clear within it; or it may remain as far as possible indifferent to the world in terms of its religious practice, accommodation to it otherwise, and exhibiting only mild acquiescence to, or disapprobation of the ways of the world.'

In terms of organisational strength, Stark and Bainbridge (1985) discuss degrees of group cohesion. An Audience cult is the most diffuse and least organised form of a cult. Cult audiences do not often gather physically, but consume cult doctrines entirely through magazines, television, Internet, and through other forms of

media. Thus, the membership remains a consumer activity. <u>Client cults</u> are organised among those offering the cult service, but clients remain less organised and are often part of another religious movement or institution. These less organised types of cults are more common than the Cult movements that are religious organisations who attempt to satisfy all the religious needs of converts. The fact that a cult group is a client cult today does not necessarily mean that it will remain so tomorrow. Scientology began as a limited psychotherapy service, but as it was novel, and because it was not based on verified scientific research, Scientology was later described as a magic client cult rather than a technical medical service. Later, Scientology's ideology developed into a complex system movement. Thus, a highly developed cult movement arose, and legal troubles grew as the cult started to seek major commitment from their members (Wallis, 1976). Today, one of Scientology's recruiting methods relies on gaining members through the Internet.

A major distinction between NRMs involves a split classification based on whether the NRM is a Bible-based organisation or a non-Christian religion. This differentiation is reflected in the formation of opinion of whether a NRM is a cult or not, but it also reflects trends apparent in the modern society. The interest in religiousness and spirituality has increased over the last 25 years. Over 400 new spiritual associations developed in the late period of the 1980's (Roof, 1993). Further, in a 1995 national survey of 1713 Canadians, 52% acknowledged that they had a "spiritual need". Thus, it is apparent that there is a potentially massive market to keep such groups financially buoyant and therefore a need for such groups to advertise their services through a variety of means. One obvious device to exploit in terms of advertising obviously lies within the Internet.

RECRUITMENT TECHNIQUES

The controversial question of whether 'cults' employ a distinctively dangerous type of indoctrination process that allows "brainwashing" of its members, has been extensively documented in the social sciences (e.g. Levine, 1984; Beckford, 1979; Barker, 1986), as well as in the law (e.g. Spear, 1979; Dressler, 1979). Zimbardo and Leippe (1991) state that cult methods of recruiting, indoctrinating and influencing their members are not exotic forms of mind control, but only more intensely applied mundane tactics of social influence practiced daily by all compliance professionals and societal agents of influence.

Modern cults might use sophisticated techniques similar to those used in, for example, advertising. According to Cialdini (1984), the majority of the tactics used fall into six categories, and each category is based on a psychological principle that directs human behaviour. According to Singer (1997) it is possible to apply these to the interaction between cult leaders and cultic groups, and their potential future members. For example, the Rule of Reciprocity, emphasises that people try to repay what has been given or provided to them by someone else whilst the principle of Liking focuses on the idea that people prefer to agree with people that they know and like. For example, instant friendship and acceptance of the new members, may encourage individuals to join cults. In Mormon recruitment, lay members build trust and friendship with non-Mormons, and the power of social bonds has given this church its great success in gaining new members (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985). As shown in Milgram's (1963) studies of obedience, Authority is also an extremely powerful control mechanism. Similarly, according to the Scarcity principle, people assign more value to opportunities when they are less available. Thus, some cults use strict deadlines and only allow a restricted number of members on, for example, 'cult-trips'.

Recently, The Heaven's Gate group demonstrated that recruiting is now also active over the Internet and across the World Wide Web (WWW). At the click of the mouse, it is possible to find a variety of on-line cults and visit their home pages. There are many reasons for why the Internet is a useful resource for cults. Not only is it relatively inexpensive, but also a large audience all around the world views it.

The aims of this study were to investigate (a) the predominant recruitment techniques employed via the Internet (b) how various recruitment techniques are used in combination and (c) whether there was any variation between Bible- based and non-Christian recruitment techniques.

METHOD

Sample

The sample was drawn from the homepages of 10 Bible-based Organisations and 10 non-Christian Movements. Table 1 shows the NRMs categorized into the two different groups based on their beliefs and mission. These pages were analysed according to the presence/absence of recruitment technique variables. Twenty variables were identified developed on the basis of the four principles of influence. Five strategies were identified in each of the four areas (see Appendix 1).

Analytical Tool

Based on the joint co-occurrence of behaviors, the 40 web pages were analyzed using Smallest Space Analysis (SSA). SSA is a nonmetric statistical analysis that represents the correlations between variables as distances in Euclidean space. The greater the similarity between two variables the greater their proximity in the corresponding geometric space (Guttman, 1968). This procedure is based upon the assumption that the underlying structure of complex systems is most readily appreciated if the relationship between each and every other variable is examined. SSA operates on the rank order of

the correlations between variables rather than their absolute values; therefore, SSA is able to produce solutions in the smallest possible dimensionality to adequately represent the correlations as distances. The resulting configuration of points is based solely upon the relationships among variables, and not from their relationship to dimensions as in factor analysis. Points on a SSA plot can be examined directly without assuming underlying orthogonal dimensions (Guttman, 1954). The distance between two variables (represented by points in geometric space) is the inverse of their correlation. The nearer a point (influence strategy) is to the centre of the configuration the stronger its average relationship with other points (influence strategy). Conversely, the more peripheral a point is, the weaker its average relationship with other points (Elizur and Sagie, 1999). The degree of fit between each and every other variable is indicated by Borg and Lingoes' (1987) coefficient of alienation. The coefficient of alienation between the points on the SSA plot and the original correlation matrix is achieved through a series of iterations until minimal stress between the dynamic variables is reached. Smaller values of the coefficient indicate a better fit between the representation and the actual ranked associations.

RESULTS

The sum of recruitment techniques in the Bible-based organisations is 50, with 119 techniques observed in the non-Christian religions; giving a total sum of 169 observed recruitment techniques. Therefore, the non-Christian religions use more than twice as many techniques than the Bible-based organisations.

Table 2 shows the frequencies for all 20 variables in the Bible and non-Bible based web sites. It is apparent that the Bible-based organizations do not use authority on-line, or display free tests or on-line courses. In addition, the Bible-based movements do not use scientific status, or famous and attractive people. The

Christian organizations more commonly offer subscriptions to <u>newsletters</u>, <u>purchase offers</u> and <u>display writings</u> and <u>pictures from an 'authoritative source'</u> speaking God's word. In order to attract the Internet user, the Christian organizations also utilise pictures of <u>smiling people</u> on their sites and offer ways of <u>improving relationships</u> with other people.

Structural properties of influence techniques: SSA Analysis

The coefficient of alienation indicates the extent to which correlations between variables are successfully represented by the corresponding spatial distance output. The smaller the coefficient of alienation the better the representation (or 'fit'). Generally, a coefficient of alienation smaller than 0.2 represents an adequate fit (Shye, Elizur and Hoffman, 1994). The coefficient of alienation in this projection was 0.2.

An examination of the variables reveals that the SSA can be conceptually divided into two with recruitment techniques that are oriented towards presenting the NRMs ideological standpoint on the one hand and, on the other, promising an idealised image of the NRM on the other. Information based recruitment techniques focus upon disseminating the ideology of the movement through <u>writings from the 'leader'</u>, the <u>purchase of books</u>, and <u>offering subscriptions</u> to newsletters whilst the image based recruitment techniques offer <u>promises of successful relationships</u>, <u>happiness</u>, an association with <u>attractive</u> and <u>famous people</u> and even <u>cosmic awareness</u>. The latter portrays the NRM as friendly, approachable and desirable. With this comes the promise of empowering the new recruit with the capacity to change ones life instantly – a significant incentive for the disaffected.

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates how the influence methods used on NRM websites follow many of the patterns already established in the literature on more conventional persuasive methods used in the advertising industry. As NRM websites evolve exploiting technological opportunities, future research will likely reveal influence methods different from those in the classical advertising industry. The SSA demonstrated the ways in which these devices are used in combination, with a generalised emphasis on the provision of information on the ideological standpoint of the NRM alongside the idealised life changes that it implicitly or explicitly offers. The former are predominantly conveyed directly, through newsletters, information packs, writings etc whilst the latter are heavily reliant on imagery. Also, a region of highly correlated variables of the Authority and Reciprocity principles in the centre of the plot that may be interpreted as a cluster of 'Hard Sell' recruitment techniques that lie at the heart of some of these organisations.

Additionally, the current study has shown that the non-Bible based NRMs use more recruitment techniques and different techniques than the Bible-based organisations. In particular, non-Bible NRMs focus on Image-based techniques. Moreover, none of the Bible-based organisations used the techniques in the 'Hard Sell' region, with the exception of giving out free information packs. It is apparent from the current study that relatively modern 'NRMs' use very up-to-date techniques that may have contributed to a shift in the way cult-recruitment occurs. The fact that these modern NRMs use techniques that are apparent in every-day advertising may reveal a great deal about the sort of potential clients that they are aiming to reach with the Internet providing an efficient way of reaching a vast number of people from all over the world. Moreover, the findings derived from the current study have implications for understanding recruitment and persuasion on the Internet in general.

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Table 1:Bible-based Organisations and non-Christian Movements

Bible-based Organisations (a)	non-Christian Movements (b)
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) (LDS)	Scientology (Sci)
Jehovah's Witnesses (SWs)	Movement of Spiritual Inner Awareness (John Rogers) (MSIA)
The Family (formerly called the Children of God) (Family)	Eckankar (Eck)
Seventh-Day Adventism (SDA)	Deepak Chopra (Chopra)
Christian Science (Church of Christ, Scientist) (CS)	Transcendental Meditation (T.M)
Holy Spirit Association for the Unifiation Of World Christianity (Unification Church) (US)	A.K.A. Rama (Dr. Frederick Lenz) (Rama)
Swedenborgianism (Church of the New Jerusalem) (Sweden)	World Church of the Creator (Creator)
Unity School of Christianity (Unity)	New Age (NewAge)
Christadelphians (Christa)	Friends of Osho (Osho)
Bruderhof (T M) (Bruder)	Hare Krishna (iskcon)

Table 2: Frequencies of Recruitment Strategies

Variable Number	Variables Identification Name+ influence principle	Frequencies (Bible)	Frequencies (non-Bible)	Sum
5	Purchase offer (Reciprocity)	5	9	14
14	Smiling people (Liking)	7	5	12
6	Authority pictures (Authority)	4	8	12
7	Authority writings (Authority)	4	8	12
16	Happiness (Scarcity)	2	9	11
17	Cosmic awareness (Scarcity)	2	9	11
1	Incentives (Reciprocity)	5	6	11
13	Ethnical diversity (Liking)	4	6	10
18	Change world instantly (Scarcity)	1	8	9
19	Successful relationships (Scarcity)	5	4	9
3	Newsletter (Reciprocity)	5	4	9
9	Knowledge based on authority (Authority)	2	7	9
15	Friendliness (Liking)	2	6	8
20	Taught courses (Scarcity)	0	7	7
10	Scientific status (Authority)	0	6	6
8	Authority online (Authority)	0	5	5
4	Free information pack (Reciprocity)	2	3	5
11	Famous and admired people (Liking)	0	3	3
12	Attractive people (Liking)	0	3	3
2	Free test online (Reciprocity)	0	3	3
Sum:		50	119	169

Appendix 1: Coding Dictionary

Variables used to describe Recruitment Techniques used by New Religious Movements (NMRs) on their Home Pages on the World-Wide-Web (WWW).

RECIPROCITY
1. Incentives
The offer of free daily e-mail messages, free tickets to film, free screen-savers etc.
2. Free test on-line
The offer of free personality tests or body type tests on-line
3. Subscription to newsletter
 The offer of subscription to any kind of newspaper held by the NRM
4. Free information packs
The offer of free information packs about the NRM and its purpose
5. Purchase offer
Purchase offers such as books, audiotapes etc.
AUTHORITY
6. Authority pictures
The portrayal pictures of some sort of a leader on the NRMs home page
7. Authority writings
The portrayal of writings submitted by a leader on the NRMs home page
8. Authority online
The availability of an authority on-line; either through e-mails or audio/movie slides
9. Knowledge based authority
Where the authority claims some sort of special or superior knowledge
10. Scientific status
Where the NRM refers to their members as students and meetings as lectures
LIKING
11. Famous and admired people
The portrayal of famous or admired people on the NRMs home page; either through writings or through photographs
12. Attractive people
The portrayal of attractive people through photographs
13. Ethnically diverse people
The portrayal of pictures of ethnically diverse people, a display of members from all over the world or a home page given in several different languages.
14. Smiling people
Photographs of smiling people
15. Friendliness
Refers to the feeling of kindness one obtains while scrolling through web-page (i.e. love-bombing)
SCARCITY
16. Happiness
The offering of happiness by the NRM
17. Cosmic awareness and bliss
The offering of higher awareness and consciousness by the NRM
18. Change the world/self instantly
The offering of either a change of self or a change of the external world through the principles, beliefs and practices of the NRM
19. Good relationships
The offering of ways to improve relationships with other people
20. Taught courses
The availability of on-line courses related to the doctrine of the NRM

Figure 1: SSA plot of Recruitment Strategies for 20 NRM Home Pages

Information/
Ideology

Newsletter

Authority writing

Ethnic
diversity

Cosmic
awarenss

Purchase offer

Knowledge based
on authority

Relationships

Incentives

Free test

Friendliness

Authority pics

Information pack

Happiness

Authority
online

Famous people

Science
status

Attractive people

Taught
courses

Change world

Image/Idealised

Smiling people