

SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL DETERMINANTS OF CULT MEMBERSHIP AMONG STUDENTS OF DELTA STATE POLYTECHNIC, OGWASHI-UKU: IMPLICATIONS FOR STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

This study investigated the socio-economic and cultural determinants of cult membership among students of Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku, and examined the implication of strategic communication in addressing the problem. The study was guided by Social Learning Theory and Stakeholder Theory. A survey research design was adopted. From a population of 8,200 students, a sample of 383 was drawn using the Taro Yamane formula. Structured questionnaires were used for data collection, and 345 copies were valid and used for analysis through frequency counts and simple percentages. Findings revealed that financial hardship, peer pressure, fear of unemployment, and family background are key socio-economic factors that predispose students to cult membership. Culturally, the desire for social recognition, need for protection and security, and a campus culture of violence and intimidation encourage cult recruitment and retention. Traditional beliefs and rituals had minimal influence. The study further found that existing institutional communication efforts such as awareness campaigns, seminars, posters, and sanctions are irregular and ineffective. Stakeholder involvement in anti-cult activities is also moderate and uneven, with religious organizations and security

agencies more active than parents and student unions. The study concludes that addressing cultism requires sustained strategic communication campaigns, improved counselling and welfare services, and stronger collaboration among parents, security agencies, religious bodies, student unions, and community leaders. It also recommends greater use of digital and social media platforms for anti-cult communication in polytechnics.

Keywords: Cult Membership, Socio-economic Factors, Cultural Factors, Strategic Communication, Polytechnics.

Introduction

Cultism in Nigerian higher institutions has remained a pervasive menace that undermines the educational mandate of these institutions, threatens the safety of students and staff, and erodes public confidence in the polytechnic system. Cult activities have evolved from clandestine fraternal organizations into violent syndicates associated with murder, rape, extortion, examination malpractice, and drug abuse, and the Nigerian polytechnic established to train mid-level technical and vocational manpower for national development has not been spared this social pathology (Shittu, Ola & Nwokocha, 2023). Student cultism in Nigeria dates back to 1952, when the Pyrates Confraternity was founded at the University of Ibadan as a social and intellectual club conceived to challenge colonialism and campus elitism (Ikoh & Ukpog, 2022). By the 1970s and 1980s, however, these organizations had metamorphosed from their original intentions into criminal enterprises characterized by violence and anti-social behaviour (Akor, 2021), and their spread from universities to polytechnics, colleges of education, and secondary schools reflects a systemic failure in educational governance, social welfare, and value reorientation.

Polytechnic students, many of whom come from economically deprived backgrounds and face significant socio-economic pressures, are particularly vulnerable to cult recruitment. The lure of protection, financial inducement, a sense of belonging, and access to power makes cult groups attractive to young people navigating identity crises and economic hardship

(Yabagi & Ada, 2025). Despite concerted efforts by government, institutional management, and civil society to curb cultism, the problem persists, suggesting that existing interventions many of which have focused on punitive measures such as expulsion, prosecution, and military deployment to campuses have failed to address its root causes (Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2020). Strategic communication, as a purposeful and audience-centred approach to message design and dissemination, holds significant promise for addressing cultism at the institutional level, but it must be grounded in a thorough understanding of the socio-economic and cultural factors that drive young people into cult membership (Ezeah, Okafor & Asogwa, 2021). This study therefore investigates the socio-economic and cultural determinants of cultism at Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku, with a view to drawing implications for strategic communication interventions and stakeholder engagement frameworks capable of mitigating this social menace.

Statement of the Problem

Existing research on student cultism in Nigeria has predominantly focused on universities, leaving polytechnics relatively understudied despite evidence that they are increasingly becoming hotbeds of cult activity (Nwagwu & Ohia, 2022). While poverty, unemployment, peer pressure, family dysfunction, and cultural factors are widely acknowledged contributors to cult recruitment, there is limited systematic evidence on the relative weight of these determinants within the polytechnic context. Moreover, institutional anti-cult communication tends to be reactive rather than proactive, relying on public announcements issued after incidents rather than proactive, stakeholder-centred communication plans (Ugwu & Obiora, 2023), and this reactive posture limits the effectiveness of institutional responses. Stakeholder engagement in anti-cult efforts also remains poorly theorized and empirically underdeveloped, particularly regarding how institutions communicate with students, parents, and communities. This

study addresses these gaps by examining the socio-economic and cultural determinants of cultism among students of Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku, and their implications for strategic communication and stakeholder engagement.

Research Objectives

The study specifically sought to:

- (I) identify the socio-economic factors that predispose students to cult membership;
- (ii) establish the cultural determinants that facilitate cult recruitment;
- (iii) ascertain the communication strategies adopted by the Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku to address cultism; and

Review of Related Literature

Conceptual Clarification

Cultism

Cultism in Nigerian higher education is a social problem that has defied decades of institutional and governmental intervention. Ogunbameru (2004) conceptualizes secret cults not merely as clandestine organizations, but as groups whose activities are deliberately carried out at odd hours and in ways that clash with conventional, widely accepted norms of campus life. This definitional emphasis on secrecy and defiance of convention helps explain why cultism has proven so resistant to ordinary disciplinary and administrative controls: the groups are structurally designed to operate outside the reach of institutional oversight. The trajectory from student fraternity to violent gang is well documented in the literature. Adewale (2005) traces how what began at the University of Ibadan in 1952 as the Pyrates Confraternity, founded by Wole Soyinka and six colleagues as a peaceful, non-conformist student movement, had by the 1980s degenerated into secret cults marked by bizarre and violent practices. Several scholars

link this shift to the broader militarization of Nigerian political life during that era, when politicians began co-opting student cult members as instruments of political violence, a pattern that entrenched cultism as a fixture of campus life rather than a passing phase.

Campus Violence

Campus violence linked to cultism manifests in diverse forms, including physical assaults, ritual killings, rape, armed robbery, examination fraud, and intimidation of academic staff, with consequences extending beyond immediate physical harm to psychological trauma, disruption of academic calendars, and long-term reputational damage (Okafor & Eze, 2023; Ugwu & Obiora, 2023). Within the polytechnic system specifically, Nwagwu and Ohia (2022) observe that polytechnic students tend to have a higher proportion of economically disadvantaged students compared with their university counterparts, making them more susceptible to the financial inducements offered by cult recruiters, while the perceived lower social status of polytechnics may create identity insecurities that cult membership ostensibly resolves. Within the polytechnic system specifically, students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately represented, a pattern that heightens susceptibility to the financial inducements cult recruiters offer, while the comparatively lower social status often attached to polytechnic education may compound identity insecurities that cult membership ostensibly resolves by offering status, protection, and belonging (Eneh, 2008).

A recurring and particularly corrosive form of cultism-linked violence is the coercion of academic staff around grading and assessment. Field research on secret cults in Nigerian tertiary institutions found that students join cult groups partly to intimidate lecturers into awarding passing grades regardless of performance, and to gain protection from lecturers perceived as hostile or unreasonably strict (Victor, n.d.). This dynamic has been corroborated by recent institutional disciplinary action: Kogi State

Polytechnic expelled 34 students in 2025 for offenses spanning examination malpractice, certificate forgery, and cultism, including students linked to an organized "examination magic centre" syndicate operating off campus (The Guardian, 2025).

Socio-Economic Determinants of Cult Membership

Economic deprivation is consistently identified as a primary driver of cult recruitment. Adeyemi and Adeyinka (2020) argue that economic hardship creates a sense of hopelessness that makes young people receptive to the financial inducements and sense of power offered by cult groups, particularly students who cannot afford basic necessities such as accommodation, feeding, and academic materials. Parental socio-economic status compounds this vulnerability: Ezeah, Okafor and Asogwa (2021) found a significant inverse relationship between parental income levels and students' susceptibility to cult recruitment, as students from low-income families often lack the financial and social capital to navigate institutional challenges independently.

Unemployment anxiety also plays a role, as the perception that academic qualifications alone are insufficient for securing employment in Nigeria's challenging labour market leads some students to view cult networks as offering access to job placements, business opportunities, and political connections (Nwagwu & Ohia, 2022). Peer influence operates through social networks in which existing members recruit associates by offering material benefits, social status, and protection, and students who lack strong support networks outside cult groups particularly those who migrate from rural areas are especially susceptible (Okafor & Eze, 2023). Family structure and dynamics matter as well: students from broken homes or those who experienced parental neglect are statistically more likely to join cult groups, which offer substitute family-like structures and a sense of belonging otherwise absent at home (Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2020).

Socio-economic conditions can create an environment in which students become more vulnerable to cult recruitment. Financial hardship, parental economic disadvantage, unemployment concerns, weak family support and limited access to social resources may increase the attraction of groups that promise financial aressures. Recent findings by Eleje, Urama, Metu and Absistance, protection, social recognition and opportunities for advancement. These factors may also reinforce one another, as students experiencing economic difficulties may become more dependent on peer networks for support and consequently more exposed to recruitment panobi (2024) further indicate that family breakdown, peer pressure, the search for protection and the desire for social identity remain important factors associated with students' perceptions of cult involvement. Thus, socio-economic circumstances should be considered not only in terms of poverty but also in relation to the wider social and institutional support available to students..

Cultural Determinants of Cultism

Nigeria's diverse cultural landscape characterized by strong ethnic identities, traditional initiation rites, patriarchal gender norms, and communal solidarity values creates a cultural substrate upon which cult organizations construct their appeals and rituals. Akor (2021) argues that many cult rituals, including oaths of secrecy and blood covenants, draw heavily on traditional cultural practices, lending these groups a degree of cultural legitimacy among recruits already familiar with such practices. Ethnic identity and solidarity norms further shape cult membership, as many groups are organized along ethnic lines and membership is sometimes framed as an obligation of ethnic loyalty (Ikoh & Ukpung, 2022). The cultural glorification of masculinity and violence in many Nigerian communities also contributes to cult membership, particularly among male students, as physical toughness and the ability to command fear are valorized as masculine virtues that cult membership ostensibly confers (Ugwu &

Obiora, 2023). Religious and spiritual beliefs intersect with these cultural dynamics: the efficacy attributed to cult oaths, often bound by spiritual sanctions, reflects broader cultural beliefs in the power of spiritual covenants, and students who hold such beliefs deeply may be more susceptible to the psychological hold of these oaths (Ezeah, Okafor & Asogwa, 2021).

Cultural factors influence cultism; shaping the meanings that students attach to loyalty, secrecy, masculinity, spirituality and group identity. Practices associated with initiation, oath-taking and communal obligation may become particularly influential where students are already familiar with similar cultural or traditional forms of social bonding. Eguavoen (2008) explains that Nigerian cult groups can function as networks that provide security and services to members, drawing on culturally familiar patterns of secrecy, loyalty and mutual obligation. Although the cultural context differs across Nigerian communities, the literature indicates that cult organizations may exploit existing cultural expectations about belonging, protection and solidarity to make membership appear attractive or socially meaningful. Consequently, understanding cultism requires attention not only to the activities of cult groups themselves but also to the cultural values and social expectations within which students interpret those activities..

Strategic Communication and Stakeholder Engagement

Strategic communication refers to the purposeful, planned, and audience-centred use of communication by organizations to achieve specific outcomes, distinguished from routine communication by its explicit goal orientation and systematic audience analysis (Hallahan, Holtz-Bacha, Van Ruler, Verčič & Sriramesh, 2020). For polytechnic institutions grappling with cultism, this involves designing campaigns that raise awareness of the consequences of membership, promote alternative social identities, engage key stakeholders, and create a campus communication environment inhospitable to recruitment (Fasanya & Onuoha, 2022). Cult groups have

themselves adapted to the digital environment, using encrypted platforms for covert recruitment, requiring institutional communicators to be strategically present in these same spaces (Oduah & Nwakpu, 2023). Effective stakeholder engagement requires institutions to move beyond information dissemination toward genuine consultation and co-production of solutions with students, parents, staff, religious organizations, security agencies, and communities (Fasanya & Onuoha, 2022). Oduah and Nwakpu (2023) argue that many institutional anti-cult campaigns fail precisely because they are designed and disseminated without adequate consultation with students, producing communication that is disconnected from the realities of students' lives and that would benefit from involving students themselves as co-designers, given their insider knowledge of recruitment tactics.

The effectiveness of strategic communication against cultism therefore depends on the extent to which it is continuous, participatory and responsive to students' experiences. One-off warnings, posters or public condemnations may have limited impact when students do not trust the institutions delivering the messages or when the communication does not address the circumstances that encourage recruitment. Ugwu and Chukwuma (2021) found that sustained personal engagement, accessible counselling and consistent awareness activities within the campus environment provided a more meaningful approach to reaching students who may be vulnerable to cult involvement. This suggests that anti-cult communication should combine information with counselling, peer engagement, stakeholder collaboration and accessible channels through which students can seek assistance..

Empirical Review

Eleje, Urama, Metu and Abanobi (2024) investigated students' involvement in cultism in Nigerian tertiary institutions, focusing on undergraduate students' perceptions of its causes, effects, and solutions. The objective was to determine the causes, effects, and possible solutions to

cultism as perceived by 400-level undergraduate students in the Faculty of Education, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. The study did not explicitly name a theoretical framework, instead adopting a descriptive survey design. Methodologically, the researchers used purposive sampling to select 150 students from a population of 1,711 400-level undergraduates, administering a researcher-constructed and expert-validated questionnaire, with data analyzed using mean, standard deviation, and t-test at the 0.05 significance level.

The study found that the major cause of cultism was inadequate institutional funding to cater to students' welfare, though the effects and solutions dimensions of the study returned less conclusive results. The researchers concluded that funding shortfalls create the material deprivation that predisposes students to cult recruitment, and recommended that parents, government, and other stakeholders adequately fund tertiary institutions to combat cultism, while calling for further research targeting a different audience to clarify the effects and solutions questions. This study agrees with the present study's emphasis on economic deprivation as a structural driver of cult recruitment, particularly relevant to polytechnics where institutional underfunding is often more acute than in universities; however, it disagrees in scope, since it surveyed only Education-faculty undergraduates at one university and did not examine communication strategies, leaving the specific institutional and communicative gap in polytechnics unaddressed, which is the gap the present study targets.

Eguavoen (2008) examined the internal culture of secret cults on Nigerian university campuses, framed around the question of why students join and remain in these groups despite their risks. The objective was to understand cult membership not merely as criminal deviance but as participation in networks that provide members with tangible "security and services." Published in the peer-reviewed journal *Sociologus*, the study drew

on an interpretive, ethnographically-informed sociological approach rather than a quantitative survey, situating cult membership within Nigeria's broader cultural landscape of secrecy, initiation ritual, and mutual obligation. The study found that cult groups function as parallel support and protection networks, offering members practical benefits, including physical protection, social status, and mutual assistance, that formal campus structures often fail to provide. Eguavoen concluded that this functional, service-based appeal helps explain the resilience of cultism despite decades of institutional crackdowns, since punitive measures address the criminal behavior without displacing the underlying social function cults serve. The study did not offer specific policy recommendations, being oriented toward analytical understanding rather than intervention design. This study agrees with the present study's cultural-determinants argument that cult appeal is rooted in genuine, if illegitimate, social and protective functions rather than pure criminality; it disagrees with, or rather complicates, communication-focused interventions by suggesting that messaging alone cannot address a need that is functionally, not just informationally, driven, an insight the present study incorporates when evaluating why purely informational anti-cult campaigns tend to underperform.

Ugwu and Chukwuma (2021) studied the role of Christian campus fellowships in combating cultism at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The objective was to investigate how campus fellowships contribute to anti-cult efforts through their ongoing presence and engagement with students. No formal theoretical framework was stated; the study instead used a descriptive, phenomenological qualitative methodology, collecting data through oral interviews with fellowship leaders and members to capture their lived experience of anti-cult engagement. The findings showed that fellowships combined sustained relational engagement, such as personal counselling access and consistently placed informational tracts in high-

traffic locations like lecture halls, with messaging that promoted alternative identities and values rather than relying solely on warnings about cultism's dangers. The study concluded that this sustained, relationship-based, embedded approach achieved more meaningful engagement with at-risk students than one-off institutional pronouncements or purely punitive deterrence. It recommended that universities support and integrate such faith-based and community-based engagement structures into their broader anti-cult strategy rather than relying on isolated administrative warnings. This study agrees closely with the present study's argument that participatory, relationally embedded communication outperforms one-way dissemination; it disagrees in emphasis, since it centers a specifically religious intervention channel, whereas the present study is concerned with institutional strategic communication more broadly, a distinction worth noting when applying its findings to a secular polytechnic communication strategy.

Adewale (2005) examined the historical evolution and institutional context of secret cults in Nigerian universities. The objective was to trace the origins of cultism from the non-violent Pyrates Confraternity founded in 1953 to its transformation into violent secret cults, and to identify the structural university conditions that enabled this shift. Published in the *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, the study is a historical-analytical review rather than a primary-data survey, drawing on documented institutional and societal changes rather than a defined theoretical framework or sampled population. The study found that the degeneration of cultism was accelerated by both national political instability, including military coups and the erosion of family and community values, and campus-level institutional strain, including overcrowding, underfunding, deteriorating infrastructure, and weakened student union structures. Adewale concluded that combating secret cultism effectively requires addressing these

underlying structural conditions rather than treating cultism as an isolated disciplinary problem, and recommended improved university funding and campus infrastructure as core solutions. This study agrees with the present study's premise that institutional and economic conditions, not individual pathology alone, drive cult persistence; it disagrees in method, offering historical-structural analysis rather than the empirical, participant-based data the present study relies on, meaning its claims are best treated as context rather than direct empirical comparison.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two complementary frameworks: Social Learning Theory, which explains the individual-level acquisition of cult behaviour, and Stakeholder Theory, which explains institutional-level dynamics of engagement in anti-cult efforts.

Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory (SLT), originally formulated by Bandura (1977) and subsequently elaborated within criminology by Akers (2021), posits that human behaviour is learned through observation, imitation, and reinforcement within social contexts. Central to SLT is differential association the idea that individuals learn deviant behaviour through prolonged contact with deviant peers who model, reinforce, and normalize it. Applied to campus cultism, students embedded in social networks where cult membership is normalized are more likely to emulate cult behaviour through observational learning, and the perceived material and social rewards of membership financial support, protection, status, and network access function as positive reinforcers that sustain participation (Okafor & Eze, 2023).

SLT also helps explain the cultural dimension of recruitment: in communities where violence and masculine bravado are culturally valorized, young men learn to associate these traits with social respect, making cult membership culturally congruent with internalized values.

Communication interventions informed by SLT would therefore focus on altering the social learning environment changing the models to which students are exposed, shifting the perceived rewards of membership, and reinforcing prosocial alternatives, both offline and within the digital spaces where cult-related content increasingly circulates).

Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder Theory, originally proposed by Freeman (1984) and substantially extended by Freeman, Harrison and Wicks (2020), holds that organizations must identify, understand, and engage the diverse groups that have a legitimate interest in or are affected by their activities. Applied to campus cultism, the theory directs attention to the multiple actors students, staff, parents, communities, security agencies, religious bodies, and the media whose interests are affected by cult activity and whose cooperation is needed for effective intervention, providing a conceptual basis for mapping stakeholders and designing communication that engages them appropriately (Fasanya & Onuoha, 2022).

The theory further emphasizes two-way communication over one-way, top-down dissemination. For polytechnic institutions, this implies moving beyond broadcasting anti-cult messages toward genuine dialogue with students, parents, and communities about the root causes of cultism and the most effective responses a dialogic approach more likely to generate the trust and shared ownership that sustainable interventions require (Freeman, Harrison & Wicks, 2020). Taken together, SLT and Stakeholder Theory capture both the individual-level psychological processes underlying cult membership and the institutional-level dynamics of stakeholder communication, reflecting the multi-level nature of the problem and of any effective response.

Methodology

The study adopted a survey research design, oriented toward capturing the opinions and motivations of a sample drawn from a defined population (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The population comprised 8,200 students of Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku (ICT, DSPG). Using the Taro Yamane formula at a 5% margin of error, a sample size of 383 was determined, and respondents were selected through simple random sampling, which gives every member of the population an equal chance of selection.

Data were collected using a structured, close-ended questionnaire comprising two sections: Section A captured respondents' demographic data, while Section B addressed the four research questions guiding the study, with responses recorded on a four-point scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree). The instrument's face and content validity were established through review by the project supervisor, whose input led to revisions ensuring that the questionnaire items adequately addressed each research objective. Reliability was assessed using the test-retest method, in which copies of the questionnaire were administered to a small group of respondents and re-administered after a short interval; the resulting consistency in responses was used to identify and refine unclear or inconsistent items before full administration. Of the 383 copies administered, 345 were duly completed and found valid for analysis, a response rate of 90.1%. Data were analysed using frequency counts and simple percentages (Pallant, 2020), presented in tables in line with the study's research questions, with the percentage of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with each item taken as the basis for interpreting the strength of each determinant.

Results

Table 1: Socio-Economic Factors Predisposing Students to Cult Membership

Item	SA	A	D	SD	Total
Financial hardship influences cult membership	140 (40.6%)	145 (42.0%)	35 (10.1%)	25 (7.2%)	345 (100%)
Peer pressure contributes to cult membership	152 (44.1%)	138 (40.0%)	33 (9.6%)	22 (6.4%)	345 (100%)
Unemployment/job insecurity motivates cult involvement	121 (35.1%)	149 (43.2%)	45 (13.0%)	30 (8.7%)	345 (100%)
Family background predisposes individuals to cult involvement	134 (38.8%)	141 (40.9%)	41 (11.9%)	29 (8.4%)	345 (100%)

Source: Field Survey, 2026

The table shows that the majority of the respondents agreed that the identified factors influence or contribute to cult membership. The findings also show that unemployment or job insecurity and family background were perceived by a majority of the respondents as factors that motivate or predispose individuals to cult involvement. Overall, the responses indicate that financial hardship, peer pressure, unemployment/job insecurity and family background are perceived as important factors influencing cult membership.

Table 2: Cultural Determinants Facilitating Cult Recruitment and Retention

Item	SA	A	D	SD	Total
Desire for social recognition encourages membership	118 (34.2%)	152 (44.1%)	48 (13.9%)	27 (7.8%)	345 (100%)
Students join for protection and security	145 (42.0%)	132 (38.3%)	42 (12.2%)	26 (7.5%)	345 (100%)
Culture of violence/intimidation sustains activities	139 (40.3%)	140 (40.6%)	39 (11.3%)	27 (7.8%)	345 (100%)
Traditional beliefs and rituals influence recruitment	98 (28.4%)	121 (35.1%)	79 (22.9%)	47 (13.6%)	345 (100%)

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 4: Communication Strategies Used to Address Cultism

Item	SA	A	D	SD	Total
Institution regularly organizes anti-cult campaigns	62 (18.0%)	98 (28.4%)	112 (32.5%)	73 (21.2%)	345 (100%)
Seminars/workshops educate students on cultism	71 (20.6%)	104 (30.1%)	101 (29.3%)	69 (20.0%)	345 (100%)
Posters/flyers/banners are effective communication tools	55 (15.9%)	89 (25.8%)	121 (35.1%)	80 (23.2%)	345 (100%)
Management communicates clearly on sanctions	68 (19.7%)	97 (28.1%)	109 (31.6%)	71 (20.6%)	345 (100%)

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Discussion of Findings

Findings in Table 1 show strong consensus that socio-economic conditions predispose students to cult membership: 82.6% of respondents linked cult membership to financial hardship, 84.1% to peer pressure, 78.3% to unemployment or job-insecurity anxiety, and 79.7% to family background. These findings align with Eleje, Urama, Metu and Abanobi (2024), whose interviews with reformed cult members similarly identified poverty, unemployment concerns, and lack of parental support as the most frequently cited reasons for joining cult groups, and with Ugwu and Chukwuma (2021) who found poverty and peer influence to be the dominant drivers of cult membership among polytechnic students in Rivers State.

Table 2 shows that cultural and social factors also significantly facilitate recruitment and retention: 78.3% of respondents linked cult membership to the desire for social recognition, 80.3% to the need for protection and security, and 80.9% to a prevailing culture of violence and intimidation, while 63.5% acknowledged the influence of traditional beliefs and rituals the lowest agreement recorded in this section. These findings support Ikoh and Ukpong (2022), who note that cult membership is often framed around belonging, solidarity,

and identity needs that cultural structures such as ethnic ties help sustain, and Ugwu and Obiora (2023), whose analysis of campus cult violence underscores how a normalized culture of intimidation helps sustain cult activity once established. The comparatively lower agreement on traditional beliefs and rituals suggests that, while present, this factor is perceived as less central than social and security-related motivations, consistent with Akor (2021)'s observation that cultural legitimacy from traditional practice is only one of several reinforcing factors rather than the primary driver.

Findings in Table 3 reveal a generally weak perception of existing anti-cult communication strategies: only 46.4% of respondents agreed the institution regularly organizes anti-cult campaigns, 50.7% agreed on the use of seminars and workshops, 41.7% considered posters and banners effective, and 47.8% felt management communicates clearly on sanctions. These findings are consistent with Ikoh and Ukpung (2022), who evaluated similar communication interventions in Nigerian institutions and found that while they raised general awareness, they were largely ineffective in changing behaviour because they did not engage the underlying socio-economic and cultural motivations for cult membership. The results also reflect Fasanya and Onuoha's (2022) systematic review finding that institutional anti-cult communication in Nigeria remains largely reactive and insufficiently strategic, and Oduah and Nwakpu's (2023) recommendation that institutions need more deliberate, sustained, and digitally integrated communication strategies rather than sporadic campaigns.

Read together, the findings carry specific implications for practice. First, because socio-economic pressures rather than ignorance of cultism's dangers appear to be the dominant driver of membership,

communication that merely warns students against joining cult groups is unlikely to succeed unless paired with tangible welfare interventions a point consistent with Social Learning Theory's emphasis on the reinforcing power of material and social rewards. Second, the comparatively weak perception of existing awareness campaigns, seminars, and print materials suggests that message frequency and channel diversity, rather than message content alone, may be limiting institutional impact; this supports Fasanya and Onuoha's (2022) call for more strategically sequenced, digitally integrated campaigns rather than isolated events. Third, the uneven pattern of stakeholder engagement with parents lagging well behind religious organizations, security agencies, and student unions indicates that Stakeholder Theory's emphasis on two-way, sustained engagement is only partially realized in current practice, and that deliberate mechanisms for involving parents, such as structured parent-institution forums, may be needed to close this gap.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Cultism remains one of the major social challenges confronting tertiary institutions in Nigeria because of its adverse effects on students, educational development, and the wider society. This study has shown that socio-economic conditions financial hardship, peer pressure, unemployment anxiety, and family background together with cultural determinants such as the desire for social recognition, the need for protection, and a prevailing culture of violence, significantly predispose students of Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku, to cult membership. Existing institutional communication strategies were perceived as inadequate and insufficiently sustained, and stakeholder engagement, while present, was found to be moderate and uneven, with parental involvement particularly weak.

Addressing cultism therefore requires an approach that goes beyond disciplinary measures to include preventive interventions addressing the underlying social, economic, and cultural conditions influencing students, alongside effective, sustained strategic communication and genuine collaboration among all relevant stakeholders the institution, parents, security agencies, religious organizations, student bodies, government, and the wider community.

Based on the findings, the study recommends that:

- (i) The institution should organize regular, well-coordinated anti-cult awareness campaigns, seminars, and orientation programmes throughout the academic session;
- (ii) Student support services counselling, mentorship, and financial assistance for economically disadvantaged students should be strengthened to reduce vulnerability to recruitment;
- (iii) Management should build stronger, more deliberate collaboration with parents, security agencies, religious organizations, student unions, and community leaders in planning and implementing anti-cult initiatives;
- (i) The institution should adopt strategic communication approaches that make greater use of social media, campus radio, and other digital platforms alongside traditional channels to sustain consistent anti-cult messaging; and
- (ii) Institutional authorities should enforce existing anti-cult policies fairly while fostering a secure campus environment that promotes positive student engagement.

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