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PERSUASIVE COMMUNICATION IN CULT-THEMED MOVIES: A SOCIO-PRAGMATIC STUDY

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Abstract: The practice of cults has been proven to be dangerous to the mental health of the victims. This study analyzed and demonstrated some samples of persuasive communication techniques used by cults in recruiting and brainwashing their members in a cult-themed movie and a cult documentary, as well as their effects on the victims and how the victims respond to them. The study used a descriptive qualitative approach, and the data were taken from *Midsommar* and *The Sacrament*. The 70 data in words and non-verbal gestures were analyzed with a sociopragmatic approach, particularly Perloff's persuasive communication techniques, Miller's persuasive communication effects, and Cialdini's six basic human tendencies in responding to persuasive communication. This study found that 1) persuasive communication in *Midsommar* was dominated by using the interpersonal persuasion technique, whereas in *The Sacrament* was dominated by using the exact message, 2) the shaping effect dominated both movies and 3) the liking tendency dominated both. This study hopes to give an understanding among the readers and society about how persuasive the cults use communication to recruit and brainwash their targets so that they would not fall into the danger of cults in real life.

Key words: brainwashing; cult; movie; persuasive communication; socio-pragmatics

Introduction

While numerous good people have been using persuasive communication to implement change, a growing number of cults have also used it to change and manipulate people's attitudes and behavior to benefit them. A cult is generally defined as a small informal group lacking a specific authority structure, somewhat unsolicited in its development (although often having a charismatic leader or group of leaders), transitory, somewhat mystical and individualistically oriented, and deriving its inspiration and ideology from outside the predominant religious culture (Richardson 1996, 2). A cult is composed of people who have had physical or mystical, or ecstatic experiences and are concerned with individuals' problems.

Although their first intention sometimes is wrapped up for the common good, in the process, many illegal cults were discovered to be dangerous to the personal well-being such as harm to the mental health of the victims after being separated from their family and society (Schwartz & Kaslow, 1979, p. 21). This has been proved by many facts, such as the incident of the People Temple by Jim Jones in 1978 and Charles Manson in the late 1960s. Furthermore, the sudden change in a person's behavior caused by an illegal cult may affect the family when the parents of this new member begin to concern about the possible influence of the convert on the younger siblings since cults encourage their members to actively recruit their siblings (Schwartz & Kaslow, 1979, p. 21). This means that the practice of illegal cults negatively affects the victims mentally and physically.

Furthermore, following the growing phenomenon of cultism, which started in the 1970s (Mathijs & Sexton, 2011, p. 14), the film industry has been producing many cult-themed films ever since. Mathijs and Sexton (2011) described “cult films” as films that gained frequent audiences and would often show behaviors that are considered “ritualistic.” Thus, other rituals of “worshiping” a particular text, such as talking back at the screen or repeating the lines of the films and dressing up, were perceived as an affirmation of cult viewing practices, and such films would be considered “cult films.” This was begun by the production of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, which had become a series in its own right (Austin, 1981, p. 15). After that, the trend of cult films started to get recognized more. Some of them are *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), and *Fight Club* (1999), which gained massive popularity among the public. In 2019, A24 produced *Midsommar*, another cult-themed movie that instantly gained popularity among the public (IMDb, n.d.).

Addressing this issue, the researcher decided to study cult persuasion, specifically two cult-themed movies, *Midsommar* and *The Sacrament*. *Midsommar* is a horror film based on old Nordic beliefs on paganism, which brings the tradition of Midsummer, a Scandinavian festival held to celebrate the arrival of summer. The movie was released in the United States on July 3rd, 2019. It brings the story of a college-friends group who travel to Sweden to join the euphoria of the festival, only to get trapped in the snare of a Scandinavian pagan cult (Aster, 2019). *Midsommar* has gained worldwide popularity since its release in 2019 and has won 28 awards. Therefore, the researcher selected it to be one of the sources of this research. Besides, *The Sacrament* is a cult horror documentary movie following the journey of two VICE journalists through an isolated religious commune in California. The movie’s plot is based on the incident of the Jonestown Massacre committed by Jim Jones in 1978, known as one of the most-worldly infamous cult tragedies throughout history. *The Sacrament* was produced in the United States in 2013 (West, 2013). For all these reasons, the researcher decided to use these two movies in representing the data of the persuasive communication study in cult movies.

Analyzing persuasive communication has attracted some researchers such as Gerwehr and Daly (2006), Joule, Girandola, and Bernard (2007), Greco (2015), and Bakir, Herring, Miller, and Robinson (2019) to conduct research in the same topic. Gerwehr and Daly (2006) used a psychological approach in examining persuasive communication used by Al-Qaeda in recruiting their targets. In contrast, Joule, Girandola, and Bernard (2007) analyzed persuasive communication made by teachers in an elementary school to make the students behave well. On the other hand, Greco (2015) examined persuasive communication practice in several religious groups using a sociological approach, whereas Bakir, Herring, Miller, and Robinson (2019) studied persuasive communication made by contemporary liberal parties in the United Kingdom. All of these researches discussed persuasive communication but did not specify the language used for this method of communication. Instead, they focus more on the psychological approach and the effect of communication. This research used a socio-pragmatic approach that focused on the language use of cults’ persuasive communication to understand the communication techniques and their effects on the victims and how the victims respond to them.

To avoid the broader discussion, this study was limited to intensifying the research analysis. The researcher came up to answer three research questions: 1) what are the techniques of persuasive communication made by the cults in *Midsommar* and *The Sacrament* in recruiting and brainwashing their members? 2) what are the effects of persuasive communication made by the cults on their members in *Midsommar* and *The Sacrament*? and 3) how do the targets respond to the persuasive communication made by the cults in *Midsommar* and *The Sacrament*? To answer these questions, the researcher used a socio-pragmatic approach by using linguistic proof, particularly on the techniques the cults use, how it affects the targets, and how they respond to it. By

utilizing three theories of persuasive communication, namely persuasive communication techniques (Perloff, 2003), persuasive communication effects (Miller, 2012), and six basic human tendencies in responding to persuasive communication (Cialdini, 2001), this research improved the studies from Gerwehr and Daly (2006), Joule Girandola, and Bernard (2007), Greco (2015), and Bakir Herring, Miller, and Robinson (2019) to have linguistic proofs in researching cult persuasion.

Literature Review

Socio-pragmatics is the study of the general condition of the communicative use of language to exclude specific local conditions of language use that involve the speaker and hearer's beliefs developed by related social and cultural values (Leech, 1983, p. 10). Socio-pragmatics is also considered to be the most practical approach to employ in this research since it also concerns the use of language and its contexts, such as the level of imposition, social dominance, and distance between participants of the conversation, and participant rights and functions in communication (Harlow, 1990, p. 1). Furthermore, this study is about persuasive communication, which involves communication between at least two people -the persuader and the person being persuaded. This kind of communication relies much on the speakers' and hearers' beliefs which are influenced by their cultural and social values. Thus, the socio-pragmatic approach is the most suitable way to discuss this study.

Persuasive communication is a symbolic process in which communicators try to convince other people to change their attitudes or behavior regarding an issue by transmitting a message (Perloff, 2003, p. 8). As a symbolic process, persuasive communication uses symbols in the form of messages transmitted through language with many cultural meanings. For instance, non-verbal elements such as the crescent and star symbols, the Star of David, or flags are often used to draw people's attention and immediately get recognized by them. Some persuasive communication theories which involve persuasive communication techniques, persuasive communication effects, and how the targets respond to them have also been appearing throughout these decades.

There are five techniques of persuasive communication called using charisma, using the exact message, targeting the same personality, which means those whose low self-esteem or low intelligence or women who are considered to be more emotional than men, applying dissonance theory, and using interpersonal persuasion (Perloff, 2003, pp. 149-246). Furthermore, dissonance refers to feeling personally responsible for unpleasant consequences and experiencing stress over actions that negatively affect the self (Perloff, 2003, p. 224).

Subsequently, there are at least six basic human tendencies in responding to persuasive communication: reciprocation, consistency, social validation, liking, authority, and scarcity (Cialdini, 2001, p. 76). By following these six tendencies, persuaders tend to get their targets to agree and follow them. Reciprocation is more than gifts and favors since it also applies to exchanges that people make with one another (Cialdini, 2001, p. 77). On the other hand, authority means several factors that tend to provoke the targets, and scarcity means the fewer items and opportunities are, the more desirable they are to us (Cialdini, 2001, p. 80).

Further, there are three effects asserted by persuasive communication called Shaping, Reinforcing, and Changing (Miller 1980 in Perloff 2003, 18). It is because persuasive communication shapes and changes a person's opinion and attitude toward something. Lastly, Reinforcing has also become one of the persuasive communication effects since it reinforces the position that the targets already hold (Miller 1980 in Perloff 2003, 18). For instance, a persuader may maintain a person's opinion by convincing them with supporting facts.

Research Method

This research applied qualitative descriptive methods. According to Stake, the purpose of this method is to present a comprehensive, holistic, and intensive study by presenting the case and suggesting the complexities for further information and investigation (Stake, 1995, p. 134). The objectives of this research were to find the techniques and effects of persuasive communication made by the cults in *Midsommar* and *The Sacrament* in recruiting and brainwashing their members, as well as how the targets respond to it. The significance of this research was to give contribution and knowledge in understanding persuasive communication techniques, their effects on the targets, and how the targets respond to them. Moreover, the data in this study were in the form of texts consisting of phrases, clauses, sentences, and non-verbal gestures indicating persuasive communication made by the cults in both movies, *Midsommar* and *The Sacrament*. The researcher applied documentation as a data collection technique allowing the following steps:

1. Watching *Midsommar* and *The Sacrament* repeatedly to gain a deep understanding of the background story and the information about the practice of persuasive communication made by the cults.
2. Identifying and collecting the data in the form of clauses, phrases, sentences, and non-verbal gestures visualization which indicates persuasive communication made by the cults in both of the movies.
3. Analyzing the data using the theory of Perloff's persuasive communication techniques (2003), Miller's persuasive communication effects (1980), and Cialdini's six human basic tendencies in responding to persuasive communication (2001). This would have determined which techniques of persuasive communication were used by the cult in each *Midsommar* and *The Sacrament* and what effects of the communication asserted during the recruitment and brainwashing process of the new members, as well as the kinds of responses that these members give during the communication process
4. Comparing the data from the two movies and taking the conclusion of the result

Findings

This study focused on finding the techniques and effects of persuasive communication made by the cults in *Midsommar* and *The Sacrament* in recruiting and brainwashing their members, as well as identifying how the targets respond to it.

The Techniques of Persuasive Communication Made by Cults

To answer the persuasive communication techniques that the cults made to recruit and brainwash their members, the researcher employed Perloff's five strategies for changing the attitude and behavior of a person (2003). The writer found 33 data in *Midsommar*, and 37 in *The Sacrament* which indicate persuasive communication made by cults in the form of phrases, clauses, sentences, and non-verbal gestures.

Table 1: The Findings of Persuasive Communication Techniques in Midsommar

Technique of Persuasive Communication	Frequency	Percentage
Using Charisma	7	21%
Using the Exact Message	8	25%
Targeting the Exact Personality	4	12%
Applying Dissonance Theory	4	12%
Using Interpersonal Persuasion	10	30%
Total	33	100%

As seen in Table 1, the researcher found 33 data containing persuasive communication techniques in the *Midsommar* movie in phrases, sentences, and non-verbal gestures. The table shows that Using Interpersonal Persuasion appears to be the most dominant technique with 10 data or 30%, followed by Using the Exact Message with 8 data or 25%, Using Charisma with 7 data or 21%, and 4 data for each Targeting the Exact Personality and Applying Dissonance Theory technique which contributes 12% to the total data.

Using the Interpersonal Persuasion

The examples below display the data that indicate Using the Interpersonal Persuasion techniques in *Midsommar*.

- 1) Pelle: *Here. I'll show you.*
- 2) Two teenagers: (giving fruits to Dani)
Dani: Oh, thank you! What is it? Strawberry? Oh, wow, thank you.
The girl: (offering to carry Dani's bag) *This bag?*
Dani: Thank you... Uh, sorry.

Example 1) is spoken to Dani (the persuaded) by Pelle (the persuader) on their first encounter after Dani's family's death. This utterance is taken from *Midsommar*. Here, he shows some interesting things from his cult community where he comes from, which draws Dani's interest. In this scene, even though Dani only asks how he is doing, Pelle immediately shows some pictures of his cult's activity. The utterance belongs to Using Interpersonal Persuasion since the sentence "Here I'll show you" indicates the foot-in-the-door technique, one of the common interpersonal persuasion techniques. It is a classic persuasion technique when salespeople knock on doors and ply all trade tricks on their potential customers (Perloff, 2003). Here, Pelle (the persuader) offers Dani something interesting about his cult right on their first encounter. This will help him to build a positive impression about the cult and eventually help his next step to recruit the girl into joining the cult.

Example 2) is addressed to Dani (the persuaded) by a group of teenagers from the cult (the persuader) upon their arrival to the cult village. This utterance is taken from *Midsommar*. Here, they immediately offer help to Dani and even give her some food. In this scene, not only does one person welcome Dani and her friends, but a group of cult members immediately come to them and offer something. The utterance belongs to Using Interpersonal Persuasion since the sentence "This bag?" and the gesture of giving fruit indicate the foot-in-the-door technique, one of the common interpersonal persuasion techniques. Here, a group of teenagers who act as the persuaders immediately offer something interesting to Dani and her friends. This will help the persuaders to build a positive impression about the cult and eventually help their next step to recruit the targets into joining the cult.

Targeting the Exact Personality and Applying Dissonance Theory

The examples below display the data that indicate Targeting the Exact Personality and Applying Dissonance Theory in *Midsommar*.

3. Pelle: *You know, I'm very, very glad you're coming. I... I think it's very good you're coming.*
4. Ingemar: *If you prefer against the taste.*

Example 3) is expressed to Dani (the persuaded) by Pelle (the persuader) on their first encounter after Dani's family's death. This utterance is taken from *Midsommar*. Pelle is already a member of the Harga cult. Therefore, he can approach and recruit new members. In this scene, even though he invited his other close friends, he only says this utterance to Dani, who has no close relation to him. The utterance belongs to

targeting the exact personality since the sentence “I’m very glad you’re coming” shows great excitement, implying that he is already targeting Dani as one of his cult members. Here, Pelle, who acts as the persuader, can already recognize the potential in Dani’s personality, which allows her to be his potential target.

Example 4) is delivered to Dani (the persuaded) by Ingemar (the persuader) in *Midsommar*. Ingemar is already a member of the Harga cult. Therefore, he can approach and recruit new members. The utterance is spoken to Dani, the main character. Here, Ingemar offers a kind of drug to Dani and her friends, which they happily receive. However, when Dani seems to object to taking it, Ingemar keeps giving another form of drug that has a lighter taste. This utterance belongs to Applying Dissonance Theory because Ingemar keeps pushing Dani into taking the drug even though he sees her clear objection. Here, as the persuader, he plays a clever strategy that does not allow his target to reject it for politeness. Eventually, this will help the cult influence the girl’s behavior and recruit her into joining the cult.

Table 2: The Findings of Persuasive Communication Techniques in The Sacrament

Technique of Persuasive Communication	Frequency	Percentage
Using Charisma	4	10%
Using the Exact Message	22	60%
Targeting the Exact Personality	4	10%
Applying Dissonance Theory	0	0%
Using Interpersonal Persuasion	7	20%
Total	37	100%

Table 2 shows 37 data containing persuasive communication techniques made by the cult in *The Sacrament* in phrases, sentences, and non-verbal gestures. The table shows that Using the Exact Message appears to be the most dominant technique with 22 data or 60%, followed by Using Interpersonal Persuasion with 7 data or 20%, and 4 data for each Using Charisma and Targeting the Exact Personality technique, which contributes 10% to the total data. On the other hand, no data in *The Sacrament* indicates Applying the Dissonance Theory technique

Using the Exact Message

The examples below display the data that indicate Using the Exact Message technique in *The Sacrament*.

5. Father: *We are not sinners, no, we're proving our faith here. Let's offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to the Lord, Romans 12:1.*
6. Father: *Romans Chapter 12 verse 2. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. And that way you can test and prove God's will. God's good and pleasing and perfect will. That's what we do here, see?*

Example 5) is conveyed to the cult people (the persuaded) by Father (the persuader) after Sam and his friends decide to leave the cult. This utterance is taken from *The Sacrament*. Here, Father knows that letting them leave would only cause harm to him and the existence of his cult. Therefore, he thinks that death is the only solution. In this scene, he brainwashes his people into seeing suicide as a noble deed to defend their life principles. He seems to have fully controlled his people into doing what he asks them to do since they immediately do what he commands. The utterance belongs to Using the Exact Message since Father understands that his people would never argue his every

command. The sentence "We are not sinners" seems to be an evasion of the suicide deed. This utterance also shows Father's ability to form the exact message to brainwash his people into committing a harmful action without them realizing it.

Example 6) is addressed to Sam (the persuaded) by Father (the persuader) during their interview. This utterance is taken from *The Sacrament*. When asked about the cult's activity, he mentions the reasons he built the cult. Sam, who happens to become Father's interviewer, cannot avoid becoming one of his persuasion targets. Upon hearing his "noble" intention, which he bases on a verse from the Bible, Sam cannot seemingly help to sympathize with what Fathers had created. The utterance belongs to Using the Exact Message because of the sentence "Romans Chapter 12 verse 2. "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" is a religious statement. Here, by quoting a verse from the Bible to Sam, Father, who acts as the persuader, is trying to create a positive impression to get his sympathy and eventually join his cult. Using the Exact Message, the persuaded would not so easily realize that he is trying to be recruited by the cult.

Using the Charisma

The example below displays the datum that indicates Using the Charisma technique in *The Sacrament*.

7. Father: *Hurry up, children, please hurry. I need you all to hear what I have to say. Every family, every one of them, come on, we don't have much time. You must be here. This concerns all of you. I need you here with me now*

Example 7) is spoken by the leader of the Jonestown cult in *The Sacrament*. He sees Sam and his crew are about to leave the cult, which he knows would potentially harm the cult's existence. As the leader of the cult, Father has the capability to influence his members' actions. The utterance is spoken to the cult people as the persuaded ones. In this scene, he seems to have fully controlled his people into doing what he asks them since they immediately come to him without questioning anything. This utterance belongs to using charisma because to give such order to the cult people, Father must have a certain charisma that allows him to hold such authority. This indicates that he is already successful in influencing and brainwashing his people.

The Effects of Persuasive Communication Made by Cults

To answer the effects of persuasive communication that the cults made to recruit and brainwash their members, the researcher utilized Miller's persuasive communication effects (1980). There are three effects of persuasive communication described by Miller: Shaping, Reinforcing, and Changing.

Table 3: The Findings of Persuasive Communication Effects in Midsommar and The Sacrament

Effect of Persuasive Communication	Frequency		Percentage	
	Midsommar	The Sacrament	Midsommar	The Sacrament
Shaping	17	19	52%	52%
Reinforcing	4	6	12%	16%
Changing	12	12	36%	32%
Total	33	37	100%	100%

Table 3 shows that Shaping is the most dominant effect in *Midsommar* and *The Sacrament*. In *Midsommar*, there are 17 data, or 52% of the total data indicating the Shaping effect, followed by Changing with 12 data, or 36%, and Reinforcing with 4 data contributing 12% to the total data. On the other hand, the Shaping effect contributes 19 data or 52% in *The Sacrament*, followed by Changing with 12 data or 32% and Reinforcing with 6 data or 16% of the total data in the movie.

Shaping

The examples below display the data that indicate the Shaping effect in Midsommar and The Sacrament.

8. Father Odd: *Welcome home. We are so very happy to have you.*
9. Father: *Do not let your hearts be troubled. Do not be afraid. It's another day for us in paradise.*

Example 8) is uttered to Dani (the persuaded) by Father Odd (the persuader) on her first arrival in Harga, the cult village. This utterance is taken from *Midsommar*. Father Odd is Pelle's charismatic father figure in the cult. Here, he utters the friendliest welcome to Dani and even hugs her. In this scene, he even refers to the cult as 'home' for Dani, a word he does not mention when welcoming the other guests. This utterance belongs to Shaping because the sentence "Welcome home" expresses hospitality. People normally greet their family -and only their family, with 'welcome home' when they come home. However, Father Odd says this to Dani. This means he is trying to shape Dani's mind into believing she is already accepted as one of them, even from their first encounter. Convincing the target that they are already considered as a family will make them feel more comfortable and secure around them and able to trust them more. This will help the cult fully influence Dani's thoughts on the cult and its people without her realizing it and eventually recruit her into joining them.

Example 9) is conveyed to the cult people (the persuaded) by Father (the persuader) through a loudspeaker. This utterance is taken from *The Sacrament*. Upon their first arrival to the cult, Sam and his friends keep hearing this kind of announcement which is regularly given to the cult people, and this is the second time they hear it. The utterance belongs to Shaping because the sentence "It's another day for us in paradise" reminds the people how lucky they are to live in this place. Here, Father used the word 'paradise' to refer to the parish. This means that he equates the cult with paradise regarding the comfort and happiness given off by paradise -and the cult he implies. In other words, he is trying to indoctrinate his people using the Biblical term paradise. By saying this, Father, who acts as the persuader here, is shaping his people's thoughts about the cult into a positive one. This will help his next move to control them for his gain in the future fully.

Reinforcing and Changing

10. Pelle: *...but I was... I was so very sorry to hear about your loss. What happened, I mean, I can't even imagine. I mean... I lost my parents, too, so...*
Dani: *Okay*
11. Father: *You see, I love these people here just as much as you love your wife and your unborn child. These people, my family, my children.*

Example 10) is expressed to Dani (the persuaded) by Pelle (the persuader) in *Midsommar*. In this scene, Dani's boyfriend, Christian, takes her to see his friends. When Christian's friends seem to avoid Dani, Pelle is the only person to approach and talk to her. This utterance belongs to Reinforcing because such a sentence as "I was very sorry about your loss" only brings back Dani's sad memories that she has been trying so hard

to forget. Pelle seems to put her in her most vulnerable mental state intentionally. This will help his next move to get closer to the girl and eventually offer her the solution to her sorrow and mental problems (the cult life).

Example 11) is spoken by the leader of the Jonestown cult, who is referred to as Father in *The Sacrament*. As the cult leader, Father can approach and recruit a new member. The utterance is spoken to Sam (the persuaded) during their interview. When asked about the reason he built the cult, Father mentions his love for these people. In this scene, he seems to have fully brainwashed them into thinking that whatever he asks them to do is always based on love, therefore, they would voluntarily do it without question. This utterance belongs to Changing because such a sentence as “I love these people” aims to tell Sam about his love for his people. By reasoning with the word ‘love,’ he wants to ensure Sam only sees his good intentions. This would change his previous negative perception of him.

The Targets’ Respond to Persuasive Communication Made by Cults

To answer how the targets respond to persuasive communication the cults made, the researcher applied Cialdini’s six human basic tendencies in responding to persuasive communication (2001).

Table 4: The Findings of Persuasive Communication Responds in Midsommar and The Sacrament

Respond to Persuasive Communication	Frequency		Percentage	
	Midsommar	The Sacrament	Midsommar	The Sacrament
Reciprocation	2	6	6%	16%
Consistency	5	6	15%	16%
Social Validation	3	3	10%	8%
Liking	15	9	45%	24%
Authority	2	8	6%	22%
Scarcity	6	5	18%	14%
Total	33	37	100%	100%

Table 4 shows that Liking appears to be the most dominant tendency of how the targets respond to the persuasive communication made by cults in *Midsommar* and *The Sacrament*. In *Midsommar*, there are 15 data or 45% of the total data, which indicates a Liking tendency followed by Scarcity with 6 data or 18%, Consistency with 5 data which contributes 15% to the total data, Social Validation with 3 data or 10%, and 2 data for each Reciprocation and Authority tendency which contributes 6% to the total data. On the other hand, the Liking tendency contributes 9 data or 24% in *The Sacrament*, followed by Authority with 8 data or 22%, 6 data for each Reciprocation and Authority tendency, which contributes 16% to the total data in the movie, Scarcity with 5 data or 14%, and Social Validation with 3 data or 8% of the total data.

Liking

The examples below display the data that indicate Liking tendency in *Midsommar* and *The Sacrament*.

12. Pelle: (giving Dani a drawing of her) *Happy birthday.*
13. Caroline: *We're planning an event for your visit. It should be really fun... It's gonna be music and dancing, you'll love it, especially you.*

Example 12) is spoken to Dani (the persuaded) on her first arrival to the cult village by Pelle (the persuader) when none of her friends does even seem to remember her birthday. This utterance is taken from *Midsommar*. However, although she does not seem to mind it at all, she still looks surprised and happy when someone wishes her a happy birthday, indicating that Pelle has been able to get Dani's fondness for him. The utterance belongs to Liking because the sentence "Happy birthday" uttered by Pelle has a positive effect on Dani at the moment when nobody seems to remember her birthday. Here, Pelle, who acts as the persuader, is trying to get Dani's admiration, and he successfully does it. This eventually would help his next step to recruit her into joining the cult.

Example 13) is spoken to Sam and his friends (the persuaded) on her first arrival at the cult complex by Caroline (the persuader). This utterance is taken from *The Sacrament*. Here, she tells them about the upcoming party that was planned to welcome them on that night. She also directly points out her brother, Patrick, who also comes with Sam, implying that they know he likes music and dancing and intentionally planned the party for him. By telling them about the party, she seems to be able to catch Sam and his friends' interest. The utterance belongs to Liking because the sentence "We're planning an event for your visit. It should be really fun... It's gonna be music and dancing," uttered by Caroline, gets a positive response from Sam and his friends. Here, Caroline, who acts as the persuader, is trying to get their admiration, and she successfully does it. This eventually would help the cult's next step to recruit them into joining the cult.

Scarcity and Authority

Another tendency that also often appears in *Midsommar* is Scarcity, whereas Authority tendency also frequently appears in *The Sacrament*. The examples below display the data that indicate Scarcity and Authority tendency in *Midsommar* and *The Sacrament*

14. Pelle: *And I was raised by a community that doesn't bicker over what's theirs and what's not theirs. That's what you were given. But I have always felt held. By a family. A real family. Which everyone deserves. And you deserve.*
15. Father: *Children, we have some special visitors to the parish today. Let's show them our hospitality and represent ourselves in the ways the Lord has taught us.*

Example 14) is spoken by Pelle (the persuader) to Dani (the persuaded) in *Midsommar*. This scene shows Dani's catatonic mental state after seeing a terrible bloody ritual practiced by the cult, which intentionally killed two of their elderly members. Since she can no longer hold herself, Dani distances herself from anyone, including his boyfriend, Christian. However, Pelle decided to approach her and uttered words of encouragement to calm her down. Pelle seems to catch Dani's attention in this scene through his words. The utterance belongs to scarcity because the sentence "I was raised by a community that doesn't bicker over what's theirs and what's not theirs" smoothly refers to the banter that previously happened between Christian and his friend, Josh regarding their thesis topic. Here, Pelle, who acts as the persuader, implies the positive side of living in the cult that Dani would not get from the common society. By mentioning this scarcity, the persuader's next step to recruit Dani as the cult member would become easier.

Example 15) is conveyed by the leader of the Jonestown cult in *The Sacrament* to all the cult members through a speaker. Here, he utters an announcement regarding the visit of Sam and his friends. As the cult leader, he holds the authority to give orders to the cult people to do something. In this case, he can command his people to behave nicely to their guests during their stay in the cult. This utterance belongs to authority

because the sentence “Let’s show them our hospitality” is an imperative expression that can only be said by one who holds power among these people. Father, who acts as the persuader, has a right to utter such a statement to his people. By instructing their behavior through authority, the persuader’s next step to recruit Sam and his friends as cult members would become much easier.

Reciprocation, Consistency, and Social Validation

The examples below display the data that indicate Reciprocation, Consistency, and Social Validation in *The Sacrament* and *Midsommar*.

16. Father: You come down here and I'll give you a place to live. *I'll give you a job, I'll give you some good, I'll give you a bed. Whatever you need.*
17. Ingemar: Hey, Dani! *How are you?*
Dani: They were laughing at me.
Ingemar: What? No, no, no, I'm sure they weren't. They've been laughing. *Want to come to meet my friends?*
Dani: Thank you. I'm sorry, thank you.
18. Pelle: *I know what you're going through, Dani*
Dani: What am I going through?
Pelle: *Because I lost my parents, too.*

Example 16) is delivered by the leader of the Jonestown cult, who is referred to as Father (the persuader) in *The Sacrament*, to Sam, the movie’s main character. When asked about the cult’s activity, Father mentions numerous benefits if Sam wants to join his cult. Sam, who happens to become Father’s interviewer, cannot avoid becoming one of his persuasion targets. Upon hearing his “noble” intention, Sam cannot seemingly help to sympathize with his deed. This utterance belongs to Reciprocation because the sentence “I’ll give you whatever you need” is an expression of promise that implies giving something to the persuaded in exchange for their willingness to join the cult. Here, by promising some good stuff to Sam, the Father, who acts as the persuader, tries to reciprocate with him in the hope of him eventually joining his cult. Using Reciprocation, the persuaded would not so easily realize that he is being recruited by the cult.

Example 17) is spoken by Ingemar (the persuader) to Dani (the persuaded) in *Midsommar*. Ingemar is one of the members of the Harga cult. This utterance is spoken on the first arrival of Dani and her friends to the cult. In this scene, she is experiencing a panic attack after consuming a drug previously given by Ingemar to her and her friends. Since, among the other guests, Dani is the only person who just faced a terrible event of family loss, the drug triggers only herself, not the others. Upon seeing her awful state, Ingemar approached her and constantly followed her, offering her to join his group of friends to get close to her. This utterance belongs to Consistency because Ingemar keeps uttering nice sentences such as “How are you?” and “Want to come to meet my friends?” to Dani while constantly following her around. These sentences indicate a kind attitude that intended to gain the persuaded’s interest as the first step before recruiting her to join the cult. Here, by constantly uttering nice words to Dani, Ingemar, who acts as her persuader, is trying to build a good relationship with her.

Example 18) is spoken by Pelle (the persuader) to Dani (the persuaded) in *Midsommar*. This utterance is spoken during Dani’s catatonic state after witnessing a terrible bloody ritual practiced by the cult, which killed two elderly cult members. Here, she is shown unable to contain herself after seeing the ritual. Therefore, she distances herself from everyone. However, Pelle, who happens to see her leaving, decides to approach her. In this scene, he catches Dani’s attention through his words. This utterance belongs to social validation because such a sentence as “I know what you are

going through because I lost my parents too” expresses solidarity and indicates a similar event experienced by the persuaded and the persuader. By uttering these words, Pelle, who acts as the persuader, tries to make Dani realize that she is not the only person in the world who has been through a terrible situation. Therefore, he can get her attention by putting himself in the same state as her. This eventually would help his next step to recruit her to join the cult and meet other people with the same background as hers.

Discussions

The findings above show the variety of persuasive communication techniques that cults apply in recruiting and brainwashing their members in a fictional cult-themed movie, *Midsommar*, and real life, which is portrayed in a documentary movie, *The Sacrament*. In *Midsommar*, the cult uses interpersonal persuasion to recruit and brainwash its members. Interpersonal persuasion concerns the persuader and the persuaded, particularly how people follow the persuader's offer and several techniques applied to reach interpersonal purposes. However, despite using this particular technique in most of their persuasive communication process, the cult in *Midsommar* also combines it with other strategies such as Using Charisma, Using the Exact Message, Targeting the Exact Personality, and even Applying Dissonance Theory which involves subtle coercion that often is not realized by the persuaded.

On the other hand, the cult in *The Sacrament* seems to avoid applying dissonance theory in their persuasive communication process. This might be because the practice of cult persuasion in fictional work often gets more exaggerated and dramatized compared to what the real cults did, as portrayed in *The Sacrament*. In reverse, the cult in *The Sacrament* tends to use the exact message when persuading their targets. For instance, Jim Jones, the cult leader, likes to base his doctrines on his cult members with religious reasons taken from the Bible. By reciprocating his people with holy verses, he effectively gets more people to agree with him and eventually join his cult.

The practice of cults in real life, as depicted in *The Sacrament*, also shows the tendency to use interpersonal persuasion and charisma as their persuasive communication technique. Moreover, they are also shown to easily understand people who indicate certain personality traits to become their members. By targeting the right personality, such as people with low self-esteem or intelligence, the cult in *The Sacrament* has gained more followers successfully.

Furthermore, the findings also show the most dominant effect found in *Midsommar* and *The Sacrament*. In both movies, the targeted members tend to show the Shaping effect since their attitudes and behavior have been shaped into believing the cults' doctrines. Further, the findings also show the Liking factor as the basic human tendency to respond to the cults' persuasive communication. This means that the cults need to create the best impression in front of their targeted members to get their sympathy and liking before recruiting them.

In addition, the cult in *Midsommar* also seems to like utilizing the Scarcity factor in practicing persuasive communication with their targets, whereas, in *The Sacrament*, the cult leader likes to employ the aspect of Authority. For instance, after ensuring a certain person is their target, the cult in *Midsommar* approaches her by demonstrating positive qualities that outside society does not.

Conclusion

This study attempted to analyze the techniques and effects of persuasive communication made by the cult in two movies, namely *Midsommar* (2019) and *The Sacrament* (2013), in recruiting and brainwashing their members, as well as how the targets respond to it using the Sociopragmatic approach. It employed the theory of persuasive communication techniques (Perloff, 2003), persuasive communication effects (Miller, 1980), and six basic human tendencies in responding to persuasive

communication (Cialdini, 2001). The result showed that Using Interpersonal is the most dominant technique in *Midsommar*, whereas Using the Exact Message dominates *The Sacrament*. The study also finds that Shaping dominates the effect of persuasive communication in both *Midsommar* and *The Sacrament*. In contrast, Liking is the most dominant response of persuasive communication in both movies.

The practice of cults has been proven to be dangerous to the mental health of the victims, particularly after they get separated from family and society. This is shown through persuasive communication by cults as the weapon to change and manipulate people's attitudes and behavior to benefit them. This study revealed some persuasive communication techniques commonly applied by cults in recruiting and brainwashing their members in a fictional cult-themed movie and a real-life one portrayed in a documentary movie. The writer hoped that this research could give the readers and society an understanding of the application of persuasive communication used by the cults to recruit and brainwash their targets so that they would not fall into the danger of cult seduction in real life. For other researchers interested in conducting research on cult persuasion, the writer suggested using data sources from real life so that the data taken are more authentic and relevant to society

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