

The Representation of Viewpoint in Cult Victim Discourse

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ABSTRAKT

Tato bakalářská práce se zaměřuje na způsob, kterým bývalí členové kultů vyprávějí svůj úhel pohledu ve svědectvích sdílených na internetu. Analýza využívá kritickou perspektivu diskurzní analýzy a prvky narativní analýzy jsou použity k odhalení způsobu, kterým bývalí členové popisují své osobní zkušenosti a identitu. Práce pojednává o diskurzu, identitě a analýze diskurzu spolu s pojmem kult, přičemž se v teoretickém přehledu zaměřuje na Mormonskou církev a svědky Jehovovy. Druhá, analytická, část obsahuje analýzy výpovědí bývalých členů dvou vybraných kultů, které jsou následně diskutovány a porovnávány. Výsledky jsou uvedeny v závěru.

Klíčová slova: kult, diskurz, diskurzní analýza, úhel pohledu, oběť, identita, Mormon, svědek Jehovův

ABSTRACT

This bachelor's thesis focuses on how former cult members narrate their points of view in testimonies shared online. The analysis adopts the critical discourse analytical perspective, and the elements of narrative analysis are applied to uncover the way former members describe their personal experiences and identity. The thesis discusses discourse, identity, and discourse analysis, along with the notion of cult, focusing on The Mormon Church and The Jehovah's Witnesses in its theoretical overview. The second, analytical part, contains analyses of former members of the two chosen cults' testimonies, which are then discussed and compared. The results are presented in conclusion.

Keywords: cult, discourse, discourse analysis, point of view, victim, identity, Mormon, Jehovah's Witness

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INTRODUCTION

“The public takes care of their fear by thinking only crazies and stupid people wind up in cults. I’ve interviewed over 4.000 ex-cult members. There’s no one type of person who is vulnerable” (Singer, 1997).

Anyone can find themselves in a cult. It is not a secret that high-control groups, or cults, are in charge of their members’ personal lives, emotions, behaviour, and even thoughts. When deciding to leave, these members face the risk of losing everything they have ever known. Because of platforms such as YouTube, former members of cults have had the opportunity to share their experiences of their membership and later their exit from such organisations. They have been able to talk openly about the psychological impact that the membership has left on their lives. Due to this, the awareness of high-control groups can be spread easily, as these testimonies now provide an insight into how these organisations work, through the way these victims narrate their experiences and points of view.

The connection between religion, discourse, and power has been studied from the perspective of psychology and sociology, where according to Hjelm (2013), the discourse of religion is engaged in the creation of social identities and distribution of power, as nowadays, with the “mediation” of culture, religion is more influential and no longer exclusively a belief, but also a form of active communication shaping emotions or behaviours (Hjelm, 2013). In linguistics, the notion of perspective has been applied to the study of the way language use can form power dynamics, and social identities, and influence one’s cognition with the aim of manipulation of cult members (Blessing, 2024, 2-5). However, not enough attention is paid to the ways the victims of cults linguistically and discursively render their points of view on the experience in cults.

This thesis focuses on the ways the former members of the Church of Latter-day Saints (LDS, usually referred to as The Mormon Church) and Jehovah’s Witnesses (JW) construct their viewpoints in discourse. To achieve that, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is applied to recognise how the former members use language to express their viewpoint, their trauma, and the authority of the religious organisation.

The first part of this thesis aims to provide insight into the theory of discourse and discourse analysis, along with the way identity is constructed through discourse as well as the approaches to the analysis of victim discourses. The concept of cult is then explained in

more detail with a focus on the two cults, The Church of Latter-day Saints and The Jehovah's Witnesses.

The second part includes the analysis of former cult members' testimonies, which were posted on YouTube by the former members themselves. The analysis focuses on how the points of view are rendered via the foregrounding of the topics of fear, obedience, guilt, or cognitive dissonance.

A discussion chapter then follows, which summarizes the gathered results, and compares the two groups of analysed testimonies.

The thesis concludes with a summary of the findings.

I THEORETICAL PART

1 DISCOURSE AND IDENTITY

In the words of James Paul Gee, “we use language to get recognized as taking on a certain identity or role, that is to build an identity here-and-now” (Gee, 2014, 11). Therefore, other than for communication, we use language to form our identity and the way we perceive not only others but the whole world. This chapter ties together the terms discourse and identity while shining light on the matter of discourse analysis and victim discourses.

1.1 Discourse and discourse analysis

Defining the term discourse has been quite a challenging task in linguistics, social science, and beyond. In everyday communication, people often use the term “text” in association with written language and “discourse” with spoken language (Alba-Juez, 2009, 6).

Fairclough outlines three approaches to the interpretation of the term “discourse”: (1) In linguistics, in the narrow sense, it refers to extended examples of spoken language, which differ from written texts (Fairclough, 1990, 3). (2) Linguistics also uses the term to explain the structural features of language in use while also focusing on the interaction between speakers and listeners or writers and readers. (3) One of the “wide” definitions, extensively used in linguistics, belongs to the French philosopher Michael Foucault and refers to discourse as different ways of organizing knowledge and shaping social practices – the way people understand and engage with various aspects of our society and knowledge by systems of language and thought (Fairclough, 1990, 37-38). Within this approach, “text” is viewed as one of the aspects of discourse, which is the spoken or written result of the text production process (Fairclough, 1990, 4). As the language changes according to specific social situations and communicative function, various discourses emerge such as “newspaper discourse”, “advertising discourse”, “classroom discourse”, or “medical consultation discourse” (Fairclough, 1990, 3). Thus, discourses not only reflect or describe social entities and relationships, but they shape and define them as well. Each type of discourse assigns roles to people in society, such as those of a patient and a doctor (Fairclough, 1990, 64-65).

“Discourse analysis” (DA), a term introduced by Zellig Harris in 1952, originally focused on the analysis of language beyond just the sentence level while also exploring the connection between language and non-linguistic behaviour. The emphasis was on specific contexts, for example, in conversations or in written texts, and different language patterns (Paltridge, 2012, 2). Harris claimed that people use context clues from specific situations to interpret what the others are saying (qtd. in Paltridge, 2012, 2). DA is, therefore, the study

of language in its use (Alba-Juez, 2009, 10): the way individuals use language in real-life situations, e.g., through joking, arguing, or identifying with social groups (Jones, 2012, 2). Additionally, the focus of DA is to highlight how important it is to understand language in social and cultural contexts (Paltridge, 2012; Jones, 2012). Among other things, the study of discourse helps to understand identities, roles in society, and the case of this thesis, also the experiences of victims and their representation.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a branch of DA, with a focus on matters such as dominance or inequality as represented in or through discourse. CDA's objective is the comprehension of social issues embedded in language or other semiotic systems. A multidisciplinary approach is commonly used since these matters are complicated (Van Dijk, 1993, 252).

1.2 Identity in discourse

Discourse is important for the formation and expression of identity. People use language to communicate who they are and signal their position in society. According to Jenkins (2008), identity is a human ability helping to understand 'who is who'. Therefore, knowing who we are, knowing who others are, and considering how they perceive us, are important for effective communication (Jenkins, 2008, 5). Jenkins also explains that identity represents a complex classification of our world and the roles we have in it, whether as individual people or as parts of a group (Jenkins, 2008, 5). Even if the person has a certain role or an identity, they must perform that identity properly based on the right circumstances to be successful (Gee, 2014, 11). Identification is not something we can grasp, it is not a 'thing', but rather a process in which a person actively participates (Jenkins, 2008, 5). From a discourse perspective, identity is constantly shaped and changed, while reflecting the way individuals are perceived or the way they present themselves (Goddard and Carey, 2017, 151). For example, a person's social identity influences their language use (Fairclough 1990, 45; Gee 2014, 11). At the same time, language practices could influence or even shape someone's social identity (Fairclough, 1990, 45). When it comes to the formation of social subjects, matters such as subjectivity, which is "the influence of personal beliefs or feelings, rather than facts" (Cambridge Dictionary), social identity, and "selfhood" should be the main focus not only discourse and linguistic analysis, but also in discourse language theories (Fairclough, 1990, 44).

In relation to identity, discourse has three key constructive effects (Fairclough, 1990, 64). First, it helps to build social identities, which are, according to Tajfel (qtd. in Hogg 2003), a person's feeling of belonging to a group, which is constructed by perception of it and emotional gain from it. In all likelihood, individuals tend to join a group or aim to remain a member of one that is positively contributing to their social identity (Hogg, 2003, 29); second, it shapes relationships between people; and lastly, discourse contributes to the creation of knowledge and belief systems. These align with the three functions of language outlined by Fairclough: (1) identity function, or the way identities are formed; (2) the relational function which means how relationships are established; (3) the ideational function, or the way discourse represents the world and its elements (Fairclough, 1990, 64).

De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2015) explained that narrative and identity are generally recognised as being closely associated with each other, especially in terms of narratives being a tool for conveying identity. Narrative analysts have even claimed that the stories we tell shape us into what we are. A famous quote by Bruner (1990) suggests that “in the end, we become the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives” (qtd. in De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2015, 351).

To conclude, discourse is important in the construction of identity, as it helps build the way people perceive themselves and how others perceive them. According to Jenkins, identity is a fluid process, constantly developing with the help of social interactions (Jenkins, 2008, 17). Discourse, on the other hand, creates relationships and forms belief systems apart from building social identities (Fairclough, 1990, 64-65). By studying discourse, we explore the way identity is formed and shaped at both the personal and social levels.

1.3 Point of view

According to Bamberg (2014, 692), perspective in fictional narrative concerns the impact of the viewpoint, the character, and the standards of the narrator on the representation of the narrative. In Anglo-American criticism, this is described as a “point of view” (Hühn et. al., 2014, 692). Point of view, or a viewpoint, can be both physical, as a place that something is perceived from, and psychological, connected to a person's beliefs, feelings, or knowledge, also called a cognitive viewpoint (Shi and Xie 2016). By expressing this perspective with the use of language a linguistic viewpoint is created, formed by said physical and psychological viewpoints, and expressed by lexicogrammar, word order, or structure used (Shi and Xie 2016). Margolin (2009) explained that the term focalisation, as the way the

point of view of a character or a narrator is presented by a narrative. It outlines the way elements of the story are perceived, registered, or recorded by a mind or a device. In this perspective, focalisation considers the internal record of external data. Therefore, any occurrence, that is expressed in a text can be tied to an individual, time, and place through focalisation (Hühn et. al., 2009, 42).

According to Uspensky, it is possible to express viewpoint by ‘planes’ such as planes (1) ideological, expressing the narrator’s beliefs and values; (2) phraseological plane exploring the language use, (3) spatial and temporal plane concerning the position of the narrator, and (4) psychological plane dealing with the emotions and thoughts, ultimately having an impact on the narration (Uspensky, 1973, 8 – 82). The following analysis will focus on the ideological and psychological panes of cult victim narratives.

1.4 Victim discourses

Victim discourses represent the way victims are perceived by others or by themselves. However, because every victim’s experience is different, victim discourses vary. The study of these discourses helps us as a society understand victims’ points of view, their experiences, and identities while helping them get the justice they deserve.

Vandermaas-Peeler, Subotic, and Barnett (2024) explain that, in order for someone to be recognized as a victim, facing trauma or suffering is not the only factor determining that status. The way victimhood is defined in the cultural, political, or social aspects plays an important role as well. People expect victims to be vulnerable and innocent, so they require sympathy. This creates sort of a victim hierarchy due to which some victims get more compassion and sympathy than others. This can also lead to the support of stereotypes connected to victimhood. Victim discourses help us understand how power divides what is and is not seen as important in our society concerning victim experiences. Therefore, understanding victim discourses under these circumstances leads to being able to support victims better (Vandermaas-Peeler, Subotic, and Barnett, 2024, 174-175).

In 2006, in a study, that examines how battered women both accept and reject victim discourses and identify as victims, Amy Leisering shows, that victim discourses are both empowering and limiting in these situations. There were four key views of “victimhood” influenced by the way these women shaped their identities. Two of these representations led women to take on the identity of a victim, while the other two rejected it. Those who embraced the victim identity wanted to make it known that they suffered and had no control

over it to emphasize their need for comfort and sympathy. On the contrary, to not be seen as being responsible for what happened to them, the others stayed away from the victim's identity. Another important conclusion of the study was that the identity of a victim is not a stable construct, since it changed in some cases throughout the interviews (Leisering 2006, 315).

1.4.1 Media

Media attention is an important factor when defining who is and who is not a victim. Media coverage, for example, tends to shine a light on the "ideal victims" (Greer, 2017, 4). According to Christie (1986, 18), the so-called ideal victims are those who, after being affected by a crime, are perceived by society as vulnerable, defenceless, and innocent, such as elderly women or children. On the contrary, the media does not usually portray victims such groups as young men, the homeless, or people who are addicted to drugs (Greer, 2017, 4). This happens due to what Greer calls a "hierarchy of victimisation", when the "ideal victims" draw a lot of media attention, have an impact on the societal and criminal justice system, and reshape the views of society, while those judged to be "undeserving" of the victim title can often receive very little media attention and therefore are left unnoticed in the society (Greer, 2017, 4).

1.4.2 Approaches to the analysis of victim discourses

One way of looking at the victim discourses is through the critical discourse analysis (CDA) perspective since its aim is unveiling power abuse and social inequality, mainly their establishment, reinforcement, and justification through language when analysing discourse (Van Dijk, 2015, 466). The focus of this critical approach to analysis is to reveal, analyse, and challenge social disproportion, especially regarding the hierarchy of victims mentioned earlier.

Another possible way of analysing victim discourses is by using narrative analysis. According to Riessman (2005), this type of analysis resides in using a qualitative approach which explores the structure of stories to examine human experiences, more specifically, how people, groups, or even organisations establish their narratives with the aim of understanding and communicating. Reissman further explains, that there are four models of narrative analysis. Firstly, thematic analysis aims to convey the contents of a narrative while pinpointing repeating themes. Secondly, there is structural analysis, which focuses on the way a story is constructed and organised along with its linguistic features. Another type of a

narrative analysis is a structural analysis focusing on the way narratives between the speaker and listener are cocreated in social interactions. Lastly, a model of narrative analysis that approaches storytelling as an act, analyses how the speaker is portraying themselves and captivating the audience, is called the performative analysis. These four types of narrative analysis are focused on a social comprehension, social, and cultural matters being shaped by narratives, including points of view (Reissman, 2005, 1-5).

1.4.3 Cognitive dissonance

In the year 1957, Festinger introduced a theory, that individuals carry different thoughts or beliefs, which are called cognitions. These can relate to each other in various ways. If two of these cognitions connect, they can either complement each other, also called consonant, or in conflict, also called dissonant. When in consonance, these cognitions follow each other, on the contrary when they are dissonant, they contradict one another. This dissonance is uncomfortable for an individual; therefore, people are motivated to minimize it, which then leads to the dismissal of any information that would support the dissonance. The bigger the measure of the dissonance is, the bigger the urge to reduce it (Harmon-Jones and Mills, 2019, 3).

According to Hassan, cults keep their followers under control by manipulating four main areas: (1) behaviour, (2) thought, (3) emotion, and (4) information. These four areas are connected to each other, meaning that when one area is controlled, the remaining three will likely be as well. Taking from the previously mentioned Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory, Hassan explained that cults, by coercing their members to act in contradiction to their usual and past perception of self and their morals, create internal conflict, or in other words cognitive dissonance. To lessen the unease that this dissonance creates, members usually alter these previous beliefs to line up with the requirements that the organisation established (Hassan, 1988, 53-66).

2 THE NOTION OF CULT

Cults are defined as religious groups that promote belief systems contrasting more traditional religions, such as Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, or Buddhism, that most people are familiar with (Melton and Moore, 1982, 15). Melton and Moore also add that cults are groups whose members participate in chanting, private rituals, and devotion to a guru or a spiritual leader. These members are committed to their beliefs and often focus on recruiting new members (Melton and Moore, 1982, 15). As cults deviate from common religions, they are usually feared, disliked, and seen as a threat to personal values, family, and social stability. This opinion was intensified by the 1978 Jonestown tragedy when media shared the images portraying the deceased as the result of mass murder-suicide and reports of the violence in the Peoples Temple in the Guyanese jungle (Melton and Moore, 1982, 15-16). The Jonestown tragedy was, according to Conroy, the “largest single incident of intentional civilian death in American history” before 9/11 (Conroy 2018). This massacre resulted in more than 900 deaths caused by the consumption of poison after the leader Jim Jones commanded such an act to his followers (Waxman 2024). The phrase “drink the Kool-Aid” developed from this incident as the victims drank a cyanide-laced punch. The investigation into the cult activity revealed that the residents of the Peoples Temple were deprived of human rights: e.g., they were not allowed to read any books, had no privacy, food limitations, and to stop them from leaving the cult leader Jim Jones even confiscated the residents’ passports (Waxman 2024).

Originally, in social science (Gordon and Moore, 1982, 16-17), small religious groups were identified as cults if they possessed the following three key traits: (1) deviation from the dominant religion in the society; (2) charismatic leader who personally knows each member and is often seen as supernatural; and (3) a temporary membership, often ending after the leader’s death. However, this definition was based on first-generation religious cults, such as Spiritualism, Theosophy, Father Divine’s Peace Mission, and Christian Science. Scientists have reevaluated their definition of this term, as it was discovered that even after the leader’s death, some cults have continued to exist, meaning that the criteria above no longer apply. Therefore, these days, a cult is understood as “a religious group that presents a distinctly alternative pattern for doing religion and adhering to faith perspective than that dominant in the culture” (Gordon and Moore, 1982, 16-17). Many modern cults are charismatic groups, which can consist of a dozen, hundreds and even thousands of members (Galanter 1989, 5), as for example Mormons. These members often share a

common belief system, strong social bonds, and strict behavioural norms set by the group leaders. The focal point of the groups is the leader who is a charismatic authority for the members and whom they worship (Galanter, 1989, 5). It is common for such groups to encourage beliefs of immortality or the supernatural, which is enforced by the sole authority of the leader (Singer, 1995, 20 - 21).

Signer (1995, 20 – 21) explains that cults portray themselves as exclusive groups, providing solutions to their followers' life issues, while declaring that they are the "chosen" ones, and on the contrary, those who are not a part of that cult are subordinate. She further added that from an ethical point of view, cults have double standards. On the one hand, these groups order honesty among the members, but on the other hand, they encourage these members to mislead those who are not a part of these groups. This contrasts with other groups of religious or ethical nature, which promote honesty towards all individuals regardless of their beliefs.

2.1 Cult leaders

According to Singer, cult leaders are usually people who portray themselves as those who hold unusual knowledge. Mostly male, these self-proclaimed cult leaders are often charismatic which is used as a tool for drawing in and then controlling their followers, from which they demand faithfulness, which mostly leads to these followers isolating themselves from their families, quitting jobs, and even disposing of their personal belongings. Cult leaders might also put their followers to the test of their faithfulness by disconnecting them from their closest people. By focusing on themselves, cult leaders establish an authoritarian system, putting themselves at the very top, which leaves other members below (Singer, 1995, 20 - 21).

2.2 Christian cults

In his article, Zukeran (2003) defines a cult as "a religious group which differs significantly in one or more respects from the doctrines of historic Christianity". There could be instances in which cults define themselves as Christian religions, but Zukeran explains the differences between the two, which are mainly at the centre of the beliefs. For example, different cults have differences in faith in The Holy Trinity or the essence of Jesus Christ, such as Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses. Usually, cults claim to have exclusive dominance in truth and the connection to God. Cults put a lot of effort and emphasis into education and thus subjugation

of followers via their own interpretations of the Bible or other sacred texts: e.g., Mormon Universities are spread throughout the USA (Zukeran, 2003).

3 THE MORMON CHURCH

According to Willingham (2023), members of the Mormon (also known as the LDS) church believe, that a man named Joseph Smith had a vision in which an angel called Monori appeared and led him to a book written on gold plates, which was said to have included texts of ancient prophets living in America. Smith was then asked by Monori to translate this text into English. Introducing the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith labels it as “the most correct of any book on earth” claiming to bring people closer to God. This book was first published in 1830 and in the few following years, Smith and his supporters claimed that they had been visited by prominent biblical figures, such as John the Baptist or the three apostles of Jesus. John Smith then created the initial Mormon church with his supporters. The Book of Mormon and the Bible are the two key books supporting this faith. Willingham (2023) also adds that Mormons do not identify themselves as being Christian, although, Christianity itself is hard to define.

The terms “Mormonism” and “The Church of Latter-day Saints” are used interchangeably, but there is a certain distinction. Members of this organisation do not want people to call them “Mormons” anymore and prefer the name members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Besides the LDS Church, which is located in Salt Lake City, there are two other groups tightly associated with Mormonism: (1) the Fundamentalist Church, known for allowing polygamy (2) and (2) the Community of Christ. These groups differ due to their location (not being in Utah as the LDS Church) and their differences in philosophy. While every LDS member is Mormon, not every Mormon is a member belonging to the LDS Church (Willingham, 2023).

A dominant part of Mormonism is missionary work, which has been promoted among the members from the beginning and has been partially a reason for the growth of the church in its early stages. It is also a reason why LDS is different from mainstream Christianity. There are approximately 53,000 people on these missionaries full-time, all around the world. Usually, it is a case of young men who are on these missionaries for about two years, and young women for around eighteen months. Some of the beliefs held by the members of the LDS church include full rejection of alcohol and coffee, premarital sex abstinence, and dismissal of same-sex marriages (Willingham, 2023).

4 JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

As stated by Harvey (2020) Jehovah's Witnesses (JW) were founded in the late 19th century in the United States by Charles Taze Russell who started a Bible study group which later formed into the International Bible Students Association. Later in 1879, Charles Taze Russell formed another group called Zion's Watch Tower which later yielded into The Watchtower. The name Jehovah's Witnesses was established in 1917 by Joseph Franklin Rutherford, who also formed the key practices that are still functioning today such as door-to-door evangelism, political neutrality, and the dismissal of secular and religious holidays, for instance, Christmas (Harvey, 2020).

The main beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses are that the end of the world and the battle of Armageddon are approaching the Earth, and God's kingdom will bring peace and justice. The aim of JW is to restore the real truth of Christianity which was lost during time. JW also dismisses the belief in the Holy Trinity (God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in one). Jehovah's Witnesses believe in only one supreme being and that is Jehovah, who is God to which Jesus is not equal but a son of his. Jehovah's Witnesses are mostly known for their door-to-door missionaries or "witnessing" for Jehovah, generally handing out literature to passersby while standing in public, usually crowded places. When a passerby is intrigued, the members of the Jehovah's Witnesses' job is to then try to arrange recurring visits to the person's home with the intent of Bible studies free of cost (Harvey, 2020).

As Harvey explained, there are several controversies that are not secret about the Jehovah's Witnesses. Presumably, the most known is the fact that members of the Jehovah's Witnesses do not accept blood transfusions as they believe that blood is sacred, and accepting such transfusions can even lead to disfellowshipping. To avoid these blood transfusions even in emergencies and in cases when they are not conscious, members of this organisation carry documents that state the rejection of blood transfusions and are promoting alternatives to such transfusions. Another controversy that JWs practice is disfellowshipping, which happens when a member is remorseless towards the sin that they have committed. It is the absolute shunning of the remaining members, including their families (Harvey, 2020).

II ANALYTICAL PART

5 MATERIALS AND METHODS

The primary focus of this analysis is the points of view of former members of The Mormon Church and The Jehovah's Witnesses on the experiences they have been through. Therefore, six YouTube videos were selected, three of former members of The Mormon Church and three of former members of The Jehovah's Witnesses posted during the years 2018 to 2024. Said YouTube videos were searched for using specific keywords or phrases, such as 'leaving the Mormon Church', 'My story of leaving the Mormon church', 'why I left the Jehovah's Witnesses', 'Mormon Church', 'Jehovah's Witnesses', etc. The video testimonies were then selected based on their length, which is around one hour, and relevance. The criterion for YouTube video selection was their focus on the person's story regarding their life either in the LDS or JW as well as their exit from the organisation. An additional criterion was the author's identification as a former member of either of these organisations. Of the chosen videos, five belong to former male members and one to female. The estimated age of the former members is around 25 to 45 years old. Among these six people, only one has not shared his name, therefore he will be referred to according to the name of his YouTube channel on which he posted the testimony. The total approximate number of words in the three former LDS members' testimonies is 27,758, and as for the three former JW members' testimonies, that number is 26,363 words. These YouTube videos were transcribed into text using the NoteGPT convertor; therefore, there might be instances where a word has not been correctly understood by the convertor. As the materials analysed are spoken YouTube videos converted into text form, the authors of these videos used a casual tone of speech, and the speech was not continuous in some parts.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with elements of narrative analysis were applied to examine the linguistic features of the testimonies of former cult members along with the themes and narratives these former members foreground (*sensu* Halliday 1978) while talking about their experiences. The viewpoint representation was analysed along Uspensky's ideological and psychological planes, focusing on how the former cult members speak about the church (for LDS members also about the role of women in the church hierarchy) and their own fears. The AntConc software was used as a tool to collect data related to word count and lemma frequencies.

6 ANALYSIS OF FORMER MORMON MEMBERS' TESTIMONIES

The following section focuses on the analysis of three transcribed testimonies of three different former members of the Mormon church: Alyssa Grenfell, Johnny Harris, and Chad Brown. Alyssa Grenfell is a teacher; having left the organisation at the age of 25, she is now sharing her previous experiences of being a member of the Mormon Church, as well as her journey of leaving the Church on her YouTube channel and has written a book on the topic of how to leave the Mormon Church. Johnny Harris is a YouTuber, filmmaker, and journalist, who has also been born and raised as a member of the LDS Church. Harris' YouTube channel focuses on significant global issues and events. The third former member of The Mormon Church is Chad Brown, whose YouTube channel called 'Learning to Think with Chad Brown' contains 12 videos in total, mostly discussing cults in a warning manner. These three former members have altogether over seven million subscribers to their YouTube channels as of April 2025, which is positive as their experiences can reach a large number of people.

Below I focus on the ideological and psychological planes of viewpoint construction in the narratives. Different themes that are recurring in these testimonies, such as the authority of the Mormon church, overwhelming fear of leaving the organisation, position of women in the church, or cognitive dissonance that members face are discussed in detail.

6.1 Ideological plane: the church as an authority

The three former Mormon members speak about the authority of the church, which is the recurrent theme. This includes references to the feeling of being controlled by the church and the fear of the consequences that would arise when they decide to leave. The word "church" itself is mentioned 192 times throughout the three videos, which indicates how important the topic is for the speakers. The way the content creators talk about the Church reveals a set of particular ideological beliefs they share: the requirement of obedience, the church's authority of truth, and the church being a substitute for a family.

The church demands obedience: This part explores how the former members narrate their experiences of the church expecting complete obedience.

For example, in his testimony, Johnny Harris stated, "*The culture is not one of discourse and debate. It's one of obedience, obedience, obedience, obedience. Obedience is a hallmark belief and tenet of the LDS experience, and as a member, you feel it*" (Johnny Harris, 15:59

– 16:13, 2021). The members of the Mormon church are taught not to question the organisations and to remain obedient, as is prominent from the repetition of the word “*obedience*” in Harris’ statement, which he mentioned eight times in total in his testimony and suggests the importance with which it is taught. Harris mentions that the organisation’s culture is not to be discussed nor questioned, only followed.

Talking about obedience, Grenfell explains what it means to her: “*You’re setting up a false dichotomy of choice where one choice will lead you to absolute happiness and eternal life and one choice will leave you to damnation and unhappiness*” (Alyssa Grenfell, 1:28:10 – 1:28:22, 2024). The definition of the word “*dichotomy*” listed in the Cambridge dictionary is “a difference between two completely opposite ideas or things” (‘Dichotomy’ 2025). Grenfell points out the logical fallacy underlining the authority of the church and more specifically their power of presenting their followers with only two choices. She further highlights that it is an absolute necessity that a person must choose between them. As a former member, Grenfell is aware that these two choices are in prominent contrast with each other, as by choosing obedience, a person receives “*absolute happiness*”, but when choosing to digress from the “conventional” way, a consequence in the form of “*damnation*” follows. In this sentence, Grenfell chose very emotionally charged language, such as “*damnation*” or “*absolute happiness*”, probably used by the Church leaders to keep the followers in obedience.

The church is the only source of truth: In their testimonies, former members also reflect on how the church is the self-proclaimed possessor of truth.

For example, Harris shares his current feelings towards the authority that the church puts itself into, along with being the one which carries the truth about the world and its ending: “*I felt deep frustration at the church’s claim to have a monopoly over the fullness of truth that the few million members are the only keepers of the real truth of what God wants today for us... through prophets and apostles and modern-day revelation, the Mormons are actually the ones who have the full picture*” (Johnny Harris, 14:03 – 14:25, 2021). Harris uses emotionally charged language to highlight how he feels about the Mormon ideology, such as “*deep frustration*”. He repeats the belief shared and instilled by the Church, “*claim to have a monopoly over the fullness of truth*”, which underlines the idea of only LDS and LDS members are able to reach God and the truth. This is Harris’s representation of how controlling the organisation can be.

In the following example, Alyssa Grenfell shared her view on how the church created situations where only they could provide the solutions to the members: “*The church kind of invented a lot of psychological pain you feel and then gives you the antidote which is prayer, scripture study and Jesus*” (Alyssa Grenfell, 9:17 – 9:23, 2024). Grenfell uses hedging “*kind of*” when she says that the church “*invented*” the psychological pain; it is indicated that the fear and trauma were brought about by the organisation and its doctrine. By then providing the ‘antidote’ in the form of prayer etc., an ongoing pattern is then created, both inducing and treating the members’ pain.

Church is above family and friends: What was also mentioned is the imbalance between how much church is prioritised above close relationships.

For example, as Brown shared in his testimony, “*the church is 100% guiding our parenthood, it’s guiding our relationship, it is the central point between the two of us, between our families... it is the connection point to all our friends.*” (Chad Brown, 5:36 – 5:54, 2024). Brown expresses certainty, by using the expression “100%”. He, like the other speakers, points out the control of the Church over all relationships of the members, which then leads to great fear of losing them and being left alone when a person decides to exit the Mormon Church. Here Brown uses pronouns such as ‘our’ and ‘us’, which indicate that he is referring to himself as if he were still a part of the organisation, and the one among those who are being “guided” by the church. The church is also personified as an entity guiding the personal lives of its followers.

Church is a family: The prioritising of the church is then further implied when it is presented as a substitute for a family. When talking about their experiences with leaving the church and the fear that accompanies that process, all three of the ex-members in the selected testimonies have shared, that there is emphasis put on the idea of eternal family, or being in heaven with one’s family forever, and that it is lost completely when parting from Mormon Church.

John Harris shared, that when leaving the church, “*you are no longer able to be with your family in the celestial glory of the top ties of heaven*” (Johnny Harris, 10:36 – 10:39, 2021). Another example of this matter can be noticed in Chad Brown’s testimony, where he explained, that “*The entire doctrine of the Mormon church is built on the idea that families can be together forever after this life so this life is an opportunity for you to prove your faithfulness... and then one person leaves... it means that they won’t be with you for all eternity, and it’s actually messing up all of the plan of heaven*” (Chad Brown, 10:34 – 11:20,

2024). To ensure that members remain faithful and don't digress from the doctrine, they are taught to be motivated by life after dying and to be with their family forever in heaven. By leaving, that person disturbs this and is left with nothing. By saying that if someone leaves, they are "*messing up all of the plan of heaven*", Brown makes it clear that it is perceived as them ruining that opportunity not only for themselves but for their family and friends as well. This creates a sense of responsibility laid upon the members, making the decision to leave more difficult.

6.2 Ideological plane: women's position in the Church

Another ideological belief shared by the former members relates to the differences between gender roles in the organisation. Only Grenfell and Brown raised this topic. As the only female in the corpus, Grenfell naturally focuses more on this prominent gap between the genders, compared to Brown. As the analysis shows, the language used by the two ex-members indicates female obedience and male superiority: cf. "*a good Homemaker*" vs "*a faithful priesthood holder*". The following ideological constructs were singled out: the projection of women as child-bearers and caretakers, and women being below men.

Women as child-bearers: Grenfell shared her experiences of what is expected of women and their position in this organisation. In this example sentence from her testimony, "*I was told my most important thing I would ever do was to have children*" (Alyssa Grenfell, 3:19, 2024), it is prominent, that as a woman, her purpose was to birth children and take care of the family. The use of passive construction "*was told*" indicates a passive viewpoint as Grenfell is in the position of a recipient rather than being the agent. This highlights the lack of authority of members, specifically women in these high-control groups.

Women as caretakers: Grenfell shares that from an early age, young girls were taught to align with the idea of women being the caretakers. As Grenfell mentions, "*The girls would be doing something like sewing, making a meal, learning how to put together an outfit, how to run a home, and all of the curriculum always seemed to be very much focused on how to be a good Homemaker*" (Alyssa Grenfell, 1:29 – 1:41, 2024). She also compares her experiences as a girl in the Mormon church to how the boys were raised: "*At the same time in the same church building, I'd see all the young men or the boys ... playing basketball or planning hikes and learning to build a fire. I always felt like I wanted to be doing what the boys were doing ... I always felt jealous of what the boys got to do versus the girls.*" (Alyssa

Grenfell, 1:48 – 2:24, 2024). This creates a prominent gap between the roles that girls and boys are assigned from the very beginning.

Women below men: This stratification applied to all members of the church, as Brown explained in his testimony, “*Another idea within the church is that you need a faithful priesthood holder in the home, this of course is the man, so that the male can have the power to talk to God and receive revelation for your family and guide your family*” (Chad Brown, 2:21 – 2:34, 2024). According to his words, only men can have the leading power and are the only ones who are in contact with God and can be in high positions within the church. His words “*this of course is the man*” suggest how common for Mormons it is to see men in authority, as it seems like he is used to this information.

In her testimony, Grenfell shared a memory of a bishop visiting a class she was in, and talking about modesty and how when a young girl dresses immodestly, meaning wearing a tank top or short shorts, men will automatically view her as if she is naked: “*I felt like I was naked, I left like I was totally vulnerable because this adult man in his 50s or 60s is describing that if he sees too much skin he’s going to picture you naked and that is your fault as a woman*” (Alyssa Grenfell, 10:26 – 10:40, 2024). Here, her saying that she “*felt naked*” indicates internalised feelings of being on display and in danger of being seen a certain “wrong” way.

6.3 Psychological plane: fear

When analysing the testimonies made by former members of the Mormon Church, the most recurring theme is fear, more specifically the fear of other members of the LDS Church, fear of committing a sin, and the fear of leaving the organisation and the life after their exit. Although the word “fear” was used only six times, indications of such feeling were present in these testimonies. References to the content creators’ senses, thoughts, and feelings shape the psychological plane of the point of view presentation.

Fear of sin: Since early childhood, members are faced with internal fear of committing a sin. The fact that this fear is inculcated from the very beginning of one’s life, is visible in Alyssa Grenfell’s testimony. She shared how even her childhood was accompanied by internal fear: “*I had so much anxiety around getting baptised because people would be constantly telling me that before you turn eight, you’re perfect... and then once you’re eight, you can sin, and so it was so terrifying to me... that basically as soon as I turned eight, I was going to fall down this mountain of sin that I could never climb back up from.*” (Alyssa

Grenfell, 6:21 – 6:53, 2024). Her choice of the word “*terrifying*” is indicating the amount of impact the Church interpretation of sin had on her as a child. The metaphor of falling down a mountain of sin and not being able to climb back up is signalling helplessness and guilt. In this metaphor, the “*mountain of sin*” implies the significance of one’s fear of sinning and when Grenfell states that she “*could never climb back up from*” the mountain of sin, it is in all probability that the meaning behind this statement is that once a person sins, they can never return or reconcile with the church. Grenfell then goes on explaining that “*I started to wish I was going to die around the time I was turning eight because then I would never have to be able to sin.*”, “*I even asked my mom... isn’t it better essentially to die before you get baptised, because if you die before you get baptised, it’s a sure thing, you’re definitely going to heaven. But if you wait and you grow up past eight, you’re risking going to Mormon hell, you’re risking getting covered in sin*” (Alyssa Grenfell, 7:30 – 7:51, 2024). As Grenfell shared, when she was a child, the thought of death seemed like a better option than committing a sin later in life, which highlights the deep-rooted fear of not being a perfect Mormon and is an example of how this fear is embedded in a person’s mind from early age.

Fear of the future without church: The testimonies indicate that members are taught that the life after leaving is filled with failure and misery. Alyssa Grenfell explained in her story of leaving the Mormon church, “*I was told that if I ever left the church, I would lose my family, my eternal salvation, and my place in the afterlife*”. The use of passives and uses of conditionals in this sentence points to the prominent position of the members of LDS, who constantly led Alyssa to believe that the only consequence for leaving is losing everything that is important to her and others like her and that they would be left with nothing, which creates a sense of isolation and hopelessness. Similarly, Brown stated in his testimony that “*there’s one thing you have to know about high demand organisations... the consequences for leaving are really grave*” (Chad Brown, 10:16 – 10:34, 2024). From Brown’s words it is clear that when a member starts having thoughts that do not align with the ideals of the organisation, they start to worry about their future in terms of losing close relationships. Brown then goes on to explain and lists what he thought he was going to lose if he were to leave the organisation: “*I could lose everything, I could lose my marriage to my wife that I loved so much, I could lose my kids, I could be shunned by my family, I could be shunned by my community*” (Chad Brown, 16:17 – 16:35, 2024). The repetition of “*I could*” shows how anxious Brown was even thinking about what could happen to him when leaving. This indicates the feeling of spiraling as he is listing everything that he loves being in danger.

What can be noticed as well is that the Mormon church has not only control over a person's beliefs, but also of their social life. When Brown lists these important connections that he would lose, through this he emphasizes the fear and isolation one feels when carrying thoughts of leaving. Brown is also repeating that he would be "*shunned*", which has been mentioned in the testimonies in connection with the negative consequence of exiting, indicating that it is a common word used in the Mormon church to discourage members from leaving. So naturally, when a person is exposed to such beliefs for so many years, usually their whole life, they have a rough time even coming to terms with the idea of leaving.

6.4 Cognitive dissonance

Another recurring theme in the testimonies of ex-members of the Mormon church is cognitive dissonance, which can be a common experience for individuals who hold strong beliefs or are members of religious and similar organisations. The only indications of cognitive dissonance were found in Alyssa Grenfell's testimony. It is possible that the remaining two former members have not experienced it or chose not to comment on it. Grenfell shared her experience with this matter as follows, "*I had a really powerful feeling during a prayer that I would marry this person. Spoiler warning: I met my husband after my mission. So, when I got home from my mission, this person didn't want to date me anymore... and that's two counts of times God told me something would happen and then didn't.*" (Alyssa Grenfell, 34:53 – 36:15, 2024). Members of the Mormon church are taught to always tend to God for answers to any issue, which can lead to confusion when God then does not answer or something that they prayed for does not happen. Everything that the person was taught is then different than they thought. Grenfell also uses sarcasm, specifically in the sentence: "*spoiler warning: I met my husband after my mission*" which highlights the contradicting information she was given, and she believed. Relating to Grenfell's struggles regarding God showing her who she is supposed to marry, she then shares, "*No matter what I say, I've had so many people try to say, 'Well, maybe the reason God told you that you were going to marry that guy was because He wanted you to learn that human relationships are still important even if you're on a mission' it's like okay so did God lie to me.*" (Alyssa Grenfell, 38:12 – 38:30, 2024). Here it is again noticeable that even if one member experiences inconsistency in what they believe in, and are aware, other members are trying to find reasons for the inconsistency over questioning whether the belief is aligned with the reality. "*So did God lie to me*" is clearly a rhetorical question, as the negative thoughts of the faith started to emerge. Grenfell then goes on to explain, that "*I feel like when people try*

to discredit this Revelation I had and say, well God was just trying to teach you something... it's all just mental gymnastics, there's always a logical way to weasel your way out of objective truth through spiritual experience." (Alyssa Grenfell, 36:46 – 37:05, 2024). Here, she shares that when an organisation of this sort is the holder of the perceived truth, and it claims to be of a higher power, they can be perceived as the ones who are correct, even if the reality is opposite. All of this is through religious doctrine. By using the metaphor of what she was told being "*mental gymnastics*" she criticises the thought process of other members who were trying to make sense of her questioning the faith. This is further noticeable in this testimony when Grenfell explains her struggle with discovering what the real truth is "*I was like a pendulum going back and forth between I'm wrong, the church is right, God is real, the Book of Mormon is true... an hour later being like it's all false, it's all fake, none of it's real, it's all made up*" (Alyssa Grenfell, 1:07:36 – 1:07:53, 2024). The metaphor of pendulum, and her going "*back and forth*" between the two thoughts, highlight how confusing and uncomfortable it is when a person has two contradicting beliefs and is trying to understand the reality.

7 ANALYSIS OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES' TESTIMONIES

The focal point of the following analysis is three testimonies of former members of the Jehovah's Witnesses organisation: Chris Stuckman, Lloyd Evans, and The Falling Tower. Chris Stuckman is a movie director and writer, who also posts movie reviews on his YouTube channel with 2.03 million subscribers as of April 2025. Stuckman was a Jehovah's Witness until his early twenties when he left the organisation in order to pursue filmmaking. The next former member of Jehovah's Witnesses whose testimony is analysed in this thesis is Lloyd Evans, who is a writer, activist, and filmmaker. On his YouTube channel, he shares videos mostly concerning Jehovah's Witnesses. The Falling Tower is the name of the YouTube channel of the last former member, who focuses on Jehovah's Witnesses as well, mostly talking about ways to converse with present members of JW. This former member does not share much information about his personal life. Similarly to the rather large number of subscribers of LDS former members, these three former Jehovah's Witnesses' subscribers count added up to over two million as of April 2025. This also means that there is a high chance of their videos reaching a lot of people.

The focus of this part of the analysis is on the themes that were mentioned the most throughout these testimonies, such as the authority of the church, fear, or cognitive dissonance.

7.1 Ideological plane: the church as the authority

Contrary to the frequent use of the word 'church' by the former LDS members, former Jehovah's Witnesses mentioned the word only 11 times in total throughout the videos, likely because in the JW doctrine, there are different versions of the way the organisation is referred to by the members, such as "the organisation" or the term "Jehovah's Witnesses". There is a significant difference between the LDS and the JW testimonies concerning the church and its authority, as in the testimonies of former members of the Jehovah's Witnesses this matter is not mentioned as much.

The church has a hierarchy: While JW claims egalitarianism, it hides its power relationships and control. In his testimony, Chris Stuckman shared, how the power is spread in this organisation *"In the Jehovah's Witness faith, there is absolutely a hierarchy. They don't like to admit that, but it's true. At the top is the Governing Body. These are a group of men in New York at what Jehovah's Witnesses refer to as Bethel, the Jehovah's Witness headquarters. These men decide every single rule, principle, and regulation for the*

Jehovah's Witness faith" (Chris Stuckman, 18:43 – 19:02, 2021). This example shows how the former member now clearly sees (*"it's true"*) and exposes the way power is structured in this organisation, with the use of the word *"absolutely"* which is a confirmation of his statement. Stuckman is also implying that the Jehovah's Witnesses organisation hides this information, or is aiming to do so at least, therefore there is an image of equality that the JW organisation is sustaining.

As an elder in the organisation, The Falling Tower provides information about the higher positions in it. He mentions how these people in high positions received writings that were hidden from 'regular' members: *"There are letters that are given to elders, there are books that are given to elders that the regular member of the congregation cannot see. It is top secret"* (The Falling Tower, 17:07 – 17:13, 2021).

The church promises hope: While the former members of the LDS church haven't mentioned this matter, JW testimonies reveal that 'hope' is used as a tool for keeping the members obedient. For example, Lloyd Evans talks about his and his mother's experience with this religion. Evans's other died and he, as the only one of the three former members, shared his experience of how the death of close relatives is approached in this organisation: *"If you're in a religion that's telling you well the way for you to see your mother again is to be the best Jehovah's Witness you can be, is to cling as closely as possible to the organisation because she's not quite dead, she's still alive in Jehovah's memory and you get to see her again someday if you... follow the faithful slave so, all of these doubts I was having got put on the back burner and I just threw myself into the religion"* (Lloyd Evans, 9:04 – 9:45, 2018). The use of progressive *"is telling you"* indicates that the organisation is the sole authority, establishing the rules. The choice of present continuous, the former member also indicates that the power is still ongoing. Here it is prominent that Evans held onto every last piece of hope that he would ever see his mother again, so to have that chance, he believed that by being an exemplary Jehovah's Witness he would be given this chance.

Lloyd Evans also shared how although his father was born into the Jehovah's Witnesses organisation, his mother was not. He explained that his mother had a *"tragic life"*, and that the theology of Jehovah's Witnesses was inviting and attractive to her, especially in the emotional and mental state she was in, and that this organisation was promising her a happy and satisfied life with the potential of no more pain and misery. This suggests that people tend to be more prone to joining such organisations when they are in a poor mental disposition (Lloyd Evans, 1:39 – 2:14, 2018).

The church promising hope but also ensuring obedience out of fear is indicated in the testimony from The Falling Tower, where he talked about a list of issues he had with the organisation when having doubts about faith. One of these issues is as follows: “*You must be a Jehovah’s Witness to survive Armageddon*” (The Falling Tower, 58:19 – 58:26, 2021) The Falling Tower then explains that the ‘witness apologists’ claim that it is not true and that the organisation has not said that, but after researching online, even if the organisation does not use the exact words, it is true. Members of the JW organisation are therefore hopeful that by believing and being the ideal Jehovah’s Witnesses, they will be able to survive the world ending, “*Armageddon*”.

The church is above all: The members are taught that the church is the only holder of truth. Lloyd Evans adds that his parents allowed him to attend college for two years even though it is “quite rare” according to him, as “*the Jehovah’s Witness religion looks down on higher education*.” (Lloyd Evans, 5:01 – 5:07, 2018). It is left up to interpretation why it is that this organisation is not favourable of such education.

Chris Stuckman then shared a story about a friend of his, who came out as a homosexual to his parents while being in the Jehovah’s Witness organisation. In response to this, his parents banished him, and he became homeless. This friend’s parents now claim to have only four children, excluding him, therefore not considering him as their own child. This is, according to Stuckman, tied to the homophobia of this organisation, and anything contradicting their teachings is incorrect (Stuckman, 6:10 – 6:54, 2021).

7.2 Psychological plane: fear

Just as in LDS testimonies, the word “fear” is not frequently mentioned, only three times in the JW testimonies. However, indications of this emotion and the psychological plane are present. Whether it is the fear of exiting from such organisations, the fear of committing a sin or fearing the so-called ‘apostates’, fear tends to accompany the membership in such establishments.

Fear of disfellowshipping: One of the greatest fears that the former JW members have is that of “disfellowshipping”. Throughout the three testimonies, the word “*disfellowshipped*” was mentioned by the former members 18 times in total. The speakers focus on the range of feelings they experienced considering or knowing about the disfellowship. For example, Chris Stuckman shared in his testimony that “*The consequences of leaving that religion are disastrous*” (Chris Stuckman, 2:10, 2021). The word “*disastrous*” signifies how impactful it

is for an individual to consider leaving such organisation, as Stuckman is using emotionally charged language.

Similarly to previously analysed testimonies of former members of the Mormon Church, former Jehovah's Witnesses shared how leaving the organisation can impact their friendships and families. *"If you are what's called disfellowshipped, once you are baptised as a Jehovah's Witness, your Jehovah's Witness friends, and family are not permitted to speak to you ever again."* (Chris Stuckman, 5:46 – 5:58, 2021). The isolation that people who decide to leave the Jehovah's Witnesses face has, understandably, a great influence on the fear of even having the thoughts of exiting.

Fear of apostates: According to the definition in the Cambridge Dictionary, the word *apostate* refers to "a person who has given up their religion or left apolitical party" ('Apostate' 2025). Unlike LDS, JW use this term to create a sense of fear of those who are branded as apostates, which further intensifies the overall fright of leaving the JW organisation. The word *apostate* has been mentioned by these three former members 10 times in total. *"The consequences of even me making this video will likely result in my father never speaking to me again because even though I left this organisation 10 years ago I was never officially disfellowshipped... I will be labelled what's called an apostate."* (Chris Stuckman, 7:52 – 8:22, 2021). According to how this word has been used, apostates are seen by the Jehovah's Witnesses as people who left the organisations and are spreading lies and deceiving everyone and cannot be trusted. In this particular example, Stuckman explains that by filming and posting this video, he will be faced with shunning by his own father. Stuckman is consciously accepting this fact as he explains this matter, likely due to this being a common experience for former members of such organisations. One of these former members also shared his input on the way Jehovah's Witnesses view and are taught to view 'apostates' as follows, *"apostates, people who leave the organisation are among the most horrible people on the planet and so anything that they say is going to be twisted, it is going to be a lie, something taken out of context, it is not going to be true, they are not trustworthy"* (The Falling Tower, 7:56 – 8:13, 2021).

Fear of seeking truth outside of church: The testimonies reveal that information and ideas outside of the religion are prohibited, as the organisation is supposed to be the only correct source. While having initial doubts about the organisation's beliefs, The Falling Tower shared the process of him trying to find out as much information as possible to ensure that he has enough evidence to either support or refute these thoughts. For the purpose of that

research, he has decided to search beyond websites and materials available to Jehovah's Witnesses, more specifically search through Google.com. When discovering a website he had not been familiar with prior to this research, he felt quite a discomfort "*I still remember the feeling that I got when I was about to click on the website I remember as my hand was like kind of hovering over the mouse you got that feeling... is super nervous, that you were doing something wrong, your heart started beating hard, you could feel like a little bit of sweat... this was dangerous but I did it anyway*" (The Falling Tower, 11:52 – 12:16, 2021). This former member had not only mental but also physical reactions to performing a simple action of clicking onto an online source 'from the outside', because in all likelihood, since early childhood, members are taught that any materials outside of the JW organisation are prohibited to read. This therefore creates such a sense of danger and stress when accessing 'banned' sources.

Fear of sin: The fear that one commits a sin and then is punished for such an act is noticeable from the following sentence taken from one of the testimonies, "*You're constantly terrified of sin and you sort of develop a guilt complex because everything you do even small things like if a curse word slips out, it's like you feel like you're gonna die at Armageddon*" (Chris Stuckman, 19:48 – 20:06, 2021). To ensure obedience, organisations of this sort likely evoke such fear, that as Chris Stuckman mentioned "*even small things*" are inducing fear and guilt of behaving inappropriately. Similarly, he also shared the following, "*Because you are brainwashed, you are conditioned to believe all those things are true and that the consequences that come with breaking those rules are literally death*." (Chris Stuckman, 10:04 – 10:09, 2021). In this example, Stuckman's choice of words '*brainwashed*' and '*conditioned to believe*' show how manipulation and the lack of free will can be a part of usual teachings to ensure that members do not act in a way that does not align with the beliefs and principles of the organisation. By using the word "*literally*", he is highlighting that by naming death as a possible consequence for not following rules, he is not exaggerating nor speaking figuratively.

Chris Stuckman shared that as Jehovah's Witnesses do not celebrate holidays, his first time celebrating Christmas was at the age of 24. When he received his first Christmas present, he shared his feelings at that time concerning this experience in his testimony, which shows that even after leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses, the organisation's rules make their way into the most 'fundamental' aspects of everyday life: "*The first time I got a Christmas present I was like shaking because I thought that I was sinning*" (Chris Stuckman, 25:48 – 25:54,

2021). This shows how dangerous simple things like receiving a gift felt when being exposed to the teachings of the organisation. By saying “*I was sinning*” he is expressing that it is his own thought that was triggered by receiving the gift even after not being a member anymore. The use of “*like*” in the phrase “*I was like shaking*” hints at uncertainty, hesitancy, and perhaps the softening of his statement as if he was not entirely sure of his emotions. This whole sentence could also indicate cognitive dissonance, as receiving a gift is normally seen as cheerful and great but instead, he immediately feels anxious and on edge, therefore these are contradictory emotions.

7.3 Cognitive dissonance

Similarly to the experiences of the former members of the LDS Church, cognitive dissonance accompanies the journey of leaving the JW organisation. These are examples that former Jehovah’s Witnesses shared indicating this psychological conflict.

“I know what a crisis of faith feels like, and I know how hard that was to realise that I was doing something I didn’t believe anymore” (Chris Stuckman, 13:24 – 13:31, 2021). By using the term “*crisis of faith*”, this former member might have indicated that not only did he lose his belief, but he also had to deal with the trauma of deciphering this loss and coming to terms with it. He describes what a person goes through when experiencing cognitive dissonance, as he had contradicting thoughts and tried to make sense of them.

Similarly, Lloyd Evans explained his way of making sense of his beliefs when met with the first contradicting thoughts as follows, “*I thought I’m gonna write down a list of everything I don’t agree with... it was mostly to do with theological inconsistencies but once I’d actually written them down it was like well, I know I’m no longer a Jehovah’s Witness because if I were a Jehovah’s Witness I would... be fine with all of these issues.*” (Lloyd Evans, 22:18 – 22:53, 2018). Conditional “*if I were...I would*” indicate the contrast between being a member and not being one. Evans implies that by creating this list, he realised that he no longer has that faith because the inconsistencies he has written down do not align with the organisation’s beliefs. When Evans did the action of writing down his disagreeing thoughts, he likely realised that they were no longer in his head, but became ‘real’, which further deepened his doubts.

8 DISCUSSION

The following chapter clarifies the findings in the analyses of testimonies of former members of the Church of Latter-day Saints and the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Uspensky's model allows us to see how testimonials, which are in the form of the first-person narration, allow focalization on the inner feelings, thoughts, and beliefs of the former cult members. This internalized perspective is revealed through themes such as fear, authority, social control, or cognitive dissonance, which are explored through the way that the former members use language to convey them.

The language that the former members used disclosed how the ideology of the church shapes the beliefs of its members and, therefore even the way these members speak. Terminology full of emotion such as "*apostate*", "*Armageddon*", or "*disfellowship*" even further enforces obedience, as these terms are connected to fear. Authority, control, and obedience are themes prominently expressed throughout the testimonies of both LDS former members and JW former members. Several mentions of the severe consequences of leaving the organisation are present in both, as well as the emphasis put on the hierarchy and power structure of these groups. The frequent use of passives further indicates the way power is delegated and the undeniable authority of the church and if one digresses from this system, they are faced with isolation, avoidance, and ignorance from their closest ones. This of course is connected to fear.

At the psychological plane, fear plays a great role in these testimonies, because not only when exiting the religion, but throughout their lives as Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses, fear accompanies them in multiple spheres of their lives, such as relationships within the families and communities, or attitudes to sin. The focus on certain terms favoured by the cults, e.g., the mentioning of disfellowshipping by the former Jehovah's Witnesses, reveals how the cults thrive on fear, especially since social avoidance and isolation are the tools that cults use in order to control their members fully, in all aspects of their lives.

There have also been similarities in the way these former members narrated their stories, starting by talking about their childhood and upbringing, then leading towards adulthood and social relationships, tying the story together with their leaving and life after, now as a former member.

There are many similarities between the former members of the two groups who talk about fear, control, or authority; however, certain differences are also present. While former Jehovah's Witnesses' testimonies are focused more on the shunning processes after one

decides to leave the organisation and the structure of authority, the former members of the LDS church's testimonies are leaning more towards expressions of the important role that the church conveys, emotional control and also of shining a light onto the position of women and what is expected of them in this religion.

All the speakers also assume the roles of guides or helpers to those who wish to break away from the cults. It seems the aim of the videos is educational and motivational. It is important to point out that the ending to most of these video testimonies was recommendations for further resources for victims of such cults. They encouraged the current members not to be afraid to speak up if a current member is having doubts, wants to leave, or if someone has a similar experience, all while trying to approach this in a non-forced and calm manner, offering understanding and support. Along with that, some former members have rather surprisingly shared that even after the trauma and negative memories that the organisations have left them with, amid that they still find good memories during their times in the organisations.

The information gained from this research has been a confirmation that both mass media and discourses circulating there are powerful tools in spreading awareness and allowing the cult victims to express their points of view of victims of cults. The analysis of these testimonies contributes to the understanding of how controlling these groups are even during present days and how action is required in order to prevent them from continuing this abuse. It is important to enable every victim to be able to share their story and narrate their experiences to spread awareness of this matter.

CONCLUSION

This bachelor's thesis explored how former members of the Church of Latter-day Saints and the Jehovah's Witnesses narrate their viewpoints and experiences. Six video testimonies posted on YouTube from the years 2018 to 2024 were analysed for viewpoint representations along the ideological and psychological planes. The results show how the former members use language to render their beliefs, thoughts, and fears related to their membership in these groups.

The theoretical part aimed to provide background information on matters that are related to the topic of this thesis. The main sections of the theoretical part are discourse and identity and discourse analysis, and the notion of cult.

The results from the analytical part indicate that in both the church of Latter-day Saints and the Jehovah's Witnesses former members have faced internal conflict and have had struggles with their faith when first confronted with thoughts and information that challenged it. The themes which emerged most frequently in testimonies of former Jehovah's Witnesses were authority, disfellowshipping as the consequence of leaving, or sin. Emotional control, expectations laid upon the members, and the organisation's authority were mentioned by the former Mormon members. Even though there were differences, these testimonies were similarly expressing how membership in high-control groups can affect a person, especially when they make the decision to leave the religion. It is important to note that most of these testimonies ended by motivating people with similar experiences to speak up, and to raise awareness.

For further research, it would be beneficial to investigate other groups of this nature, to get even more information on how victims of cults narrate their experiences with the use of language or even other factors. Cults of this sort are common even in the present day and it is important to spread awareness of how threatening and harmful they are.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CDA Critical Discourse Analysis

JW Jehovah's Witnesses

LDS Latter Day Saints