Online cults and fringe groups prey on loneliness and disenfranchisement online

Online cults and fringe groups are a digital problem today

Our research found that cult-like and fringe hate groups are increasingly formed and sustained online, exploiting digital ecologies to spread disinformation, abuse, and hostility. These groups often provide a false sense of belonging, especially for individuals experiencing loneliness or isolation. They mirror traditional cult behaviours while adapting to digital environments, making them difficult to regulate. Members are vulnerable to scams and radicalisation, and existing platform and policy responses are inadequate. Addressing digital harms requires improving critical literacy, group-based ethical interventions, and broader community support strategies.

What has our research found out?

- Online cult-like and fringe groups are increasing and often begin in digital spaces.

- Loneliness and isolation are major drivers of recruitment into such groups.

- Critical literacy deficits play a central role in enabling individuals to adopt extreme or illogical beliefs.

- Group identity can override individual ethics, leading to abusive online behaviours or violence.

- Members of online hate groups are highly vulnerable to scams.

What do these findings mean?

- Research, funding and infrastructure is needed to increase the detection of online cults and fringe groups because they are a key mechanism for spreading disinformation, online abuse and toxification of the digital ecology.

- Addressing the increasing sense of isolation, disenfranchisement and loneliness is needed to combat dangerous and extremist fringe groups that start out online, because they are offering belonging in ways many cannot find elsewhere in society.

- Governments, policy-makers and stakeholders need to concentrate on increasing critical literacy skills among both adults and young people to help resist recruitment and recognise the false belonging and disinformation of online cults and fringe groups. Scammers often infiltrate groups by mimicking insider language and exploiting the trust and isolation of members.

Where can I find out more?

To read more about the RMIT Digital Ethnography Research Centre's work on online cults and fringe groups, please see our submission to the Parliament of Victoria's Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups:

Cover, R. Humphries, J. and Alamri, A. (2025). Submission to the Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups, RMIT Digital Ethnography Research Centre, RMIT University, prepared 30 July.

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