

Anna Daszewska

Uniwersytet Warmińsko-Mazurski w Olsztynie

ORCID 0000-0002-3338-8190

Manipulative Techniques of New Religious Movements in the Polish Digital Space: Recruitment Stages and State Countermeasures

Introduction

This article provides an overview of manipulative techniques employed by new religious movements within the Polish digital sphere, their social implications, and preventive measures on the part of the state. Its purpose is to examine the materials concerning these groups, the content they disseminate, as well as their modes of operation and online communication strategies aimed at arousing interest, exercising manipulation, and recruiting new members. The phenomenon of their activity constitutes one of the most complex challenges facing contemporary society. Their presence in the on-line environment, grounded in sophisticated techniques of influence, leads to the transformation of individual identity and the weakening of family and social bonds. The analyses conducted reveal the mechanisms underpinning the activity of these groups in the context of cyberculture and highlight the social consequences arising from their operations. In the digital era, new religious movements use the Internet as a key tool for recruitment, control, and the spread of their ideas. Analysing these mechanisms clarifies the scale of threats they pose in Poland and the wider online environment, highlighting the need for media literacy and critical thinking as safeguards against destructive influence. The Polish state, together with international partners,

continues to develop strategies to protect citizens from the harmful effects of such groups. The findings presented here deepen understanding of how these movements operate in the digital sphere and provide a basis for further research on effective countermeasures, which remains essential as their methods continue to evolve.

Sect vs New Religious Movement

In its original meaning, the term *sect* is non-evaluative (Kuncewicz 2005: 11), deriving from the Latin *sequor* (“to follow”) and *secare* (“to separate”) (Pawłowicz 1996: 121). It denotes a group isolating itself from its surroundings, maintaining its own hierarchy of values and norms, and assigning a strongly defined role to its leader (Nowakowski 1999: 10). It adopts a negative stance toward the external world and cultivates exclusivity by restricting contact with society (Kaczmarek 2001: 79–80). It often breaks from the parent religious tradition, elevates alternative revelation above the Bible, limits salvation to its members, rejects interreligious dialogue and Trinitarian doctrine, and centres authority on a founder claiming renewed revelation (Kamiński 2021: 21). A destructive sect conceals its aims, demands total obedience, and uses manipulation to create dependency, exploit members, and sever their social ties (Ritchie 1994: 142).

To avoid value-laden language, the term *sect* is replaced with the neutral expression *new religious movement* (Libiszowska-Żółtkowska 2001: 48–50), understood as a group separated from an existing religion, operating outside the Church, establishing its own doctrinal principles, ritual practices, and organisational structures (Dłużyński 2017: 10), or existing within it (Libiszowska-Żółtkowska 2019: 118–119). The designation may remain imprecise (Nowak 1995: 13), since not all such formations are “new” or religious in nature (Van Der Leeuw 1997: 236–237). A new religious movement can be recognised by the presence of a charismatic leader, adult conversion, doctrinal fundamentalism, strict moral and ritual discipline, illuminism and elitism, a collectivist lifestyle, proselytism, and frequent social rejection. After formal registration, it becomes a religious association (Libiszowska-Żółtkowska 2019: 118–119). *Parareligious movements* address existential concerns without reference to supernatural forces, and their importance stems from uncertainty that intensifies focus on the present (Konecki 2013: 26–27). They usually offer methods of spiritual self-development (Ptaszek 2025: 182). *Destructive groups* use mind-control mechanisms influencing cognitive and emotional processes (Hassan 1997: 74).

Manipulation and Manipulative Techniques

The concept of manipulation emerged in the 18th century as the ability to direct others (Czerski 2019). It refers to shaping attitudes and behaviours through dishonest means while hiding true intentions (Puzynina 1997: 181). Unlike social influence, understood as any process altering behaviour and emotions through real or imagined pressure (Pratkanis & Aronson 2005: VIII), manipulation is an intentional form of influence (Łukowski 2019: 199) which keeps individuals unaware of being controlled (Łukaszewski et al. 2009: 21). New religious movements use techniques to produce lasting changes in attitudes and identity. Manipulators introduce mechanisms of suggestibility that lead individuals to interpret reality as personally addressed to them, while the community constructs its own norms and subjects members to intensive control, resulting in full subordination to the group (Frankowiak 2009: 41).

Tadeusz Gierat identifies five stages of recruitment and manipulation employed by new religious movements in relation to new members. The first one consists of *offering free goods*; the second involves *initiation into the doctrine of salvation through courses and lectures*, during which the candidate is assigned a new identity while previous experiences are eliminated. The third stage entails *embedding the individual within the group and severing ties with the outside environment*, accompanied by missionary activity and labour on behalf of the community. The fourth phase brings about *the rupture of family and social bonds*, while the fifth signifies *full consolidation within the doctrine and submission to the guru*. The entire process, grounded in manipulative practices, results in the complete enslavement of the individual (Gierat 2012: 141–142).

New religious movements employ manipulative techniques that influence behaviour and interventions that target values and motivation. They use the *foot-in-the-door* method, gradually integrating recruits into the group's structures, and *love bombing*, where ostensible affection turns into ostracism if not reciprocated. Another strategy is the *flirtation technique*, exploiting emotional ties for recruitment, alongside *flattery* aimed at insecure individuals. These mechanisms foster gradual indoctrination and subordination to the framework of the new religious movement (Soliński 2014: 25–26).

The Internet has become the primary source of information about these movements and an effective tool for disseminating their ideas, as it is inexpensive, accessible, and beyond censorship (Sokołowski 2005: 61–67). These groups use the digital environment to promote ideologies and attract new adherents (Mariański 2020: 11), and their websites are designed to arouse curiosity, offering regularly updated materials and event announcements on religion and everyday life issues, thereby enhancing the group's credibility. Internet users often engage with such content unreflectively, as it incorporates appealing slogans related to personal fulfilment (Szuppe 2018: 163–166).

Research Methodology

The content analysis related to the five examined new religious movements incorporated scholarly literature, press coverage, materials published on their websites, social media profiles, and their practices of operating within the digital environment. The aim of the study was to address the research questions formulated for this inquiry. The first concerned the identification of the stages of manipulative processes characteristic of new religious movements active in the digital sphere, in accordance with the typology proposed by Tadeusz Gierat. The second focused on determining which manipulative techniques described by Maciej Soliński are employed by each of the five movements under analysis. The third pertained to the measures undertaken by the Polish state to counteract the harmful practices of new religious movements.

The selection of the groups was based on purposive sampling, choosing the movements that met the criteria of high communicative activity in the digital environment and sufficient availability of materials enabling content analysis. The studied cases were subsequently compared to identify their applied stages of recruitment, manipulative techniques, and the scope of their online activity. The purpose of these analyses was to demonstrate the scale of this phenomenon and to examine the measures the Polish state may adopt to prevent manipulation employed by new religious movements operating in the digital sphere. The most significant limitation of the study was that only the public online data concerning the examined groups could have been analysed, without access to any nonpublic content. In accordance with the approach adopted by Maria Libiszowska-Żółtkowska, the term *new religious movement* was employed to describe the activities of the selected groups, rather than the word *sect*, to avoid the use of evaluative language.

Analysis of the Functioning of New Religious Movements

The Unification Church (Kościół Zjednoczeniowy), founded by Sun Myung Moon in South Korea in 1954 and active in Poland since 1990, is a transnational religio-social movement operating in over 140 countries through a network of educational, media, and economic institutions, often masking its religious character (Pasek 2000: 85–110). Its doctrine centres on humanity's spiritual redemption through mass wedding ceremonies that create "Holy Marriages" and the "True Family" (Doktor 1999: 60–75). In Poland, the movement has been described as a *parareligious* organisation and criticised for manipulative recruitment practices, including isolation from family, financial pressure, and a rigid hierarchy subordinated to the leader's messianic role (Golan 2003: 216).

The recruitment process is based on seemingly neutral initiatives, employing secular language that conceals ideological objectives. The Internet functions as the principal instrument for attracting sympathisers through free workshops and international programmes presented as personal development, which in reality constitute elements of a manipulative strategy tailored to the recipient and to online algorithms. A key method is the *foot-in-the-door*, whereby initial contact is established through events of a secular character, followed by the gradual disclosure of the religious foundation. This occurs in parallel with *relationship building* through private messages and group activities, reinforcing a sense of community and trust. The organisation applies *cognitive isolation*, restricting access to external sources and transferring communicative control to digital platforms. These practices are further implemented during workshops held in secluded centres, where an intensive schedule of religious activities facilitates the internalisation of doctrine (Barker 1984: 213–278). A central manipulative instrument remains the strategy of *authority and ritual*, grounded in the sacralisation of the guru as the “True Parent” of the loving “Holy Marriage.” At present, this role is fulfilled by the charismatic Hak Ja Han Moon, while regular online religious practices consolidate communal identity (Kościół Zjednoczeniowy 2020; Kościół Zjednoczeniowy 2025).

The Family International, founded in the 1960s by David Berg, constitutes an example of a *parareligious* movement with a strongly manipulative character. Its doctrine is grounded in a radical reinterpretation of Christianity and the utilisation of sexuality as an instrument of evangelisation. Pathological elements of the ideology include the practices of *flirty fishing* (recruiting members through sexual relations), *sharing* (the exchange of sexual partners), and *loving Jesus* (a mystical-erotic relationship with Christ) (Gajewski 2015: 73–84). Mechanisms of internal control include *isolation from the external environment*, manipulation through *restricted access to information*, the upbringing of children outside the public education system, and limited medical care. During the 1970s and 1980s, the organisation faced repeated accusations of promoting sexualisation within evangelisation and of child exploitation, underscoring its destructive social potential (Chapman 2025).

The movement uses the online space for enrolment and the dissemination of ideological content, creating a *virtual church* administered by anonymous leaders, where the absence of source verification fosters the illusion of community (Zwoliński 2008: 93). In Poland, the group operates under the name the Community of Independent Missionary Assemblies “Family” (Wspólnota Niezależnych Zgromadzeń Misyjnych “Rodzina”), numbering approximately 300 members in Warsaw, Wrocław, Piaseczno, and Karpacz. Yet, its decentralised structure enables functioning under different labels – Children of God (Dzieci Boga), Family of Love (Rodzina Miłości), and The

Family International (Międzynarodowa Rodzina) (Woźniak 2012). The strategy of *soft entry* constructs the image of a Christian educational, charitable fellowship, of a wellness or therapeutic movement, which reduces recipients' vigilance, facilitates recruitment, and reaches individuals in crisis. Websites containing "divine truths" are employed to attract followers by cultivating trust and offering emotional support. A central manipulative technique is *love bombing*, the intensive provision of attention and support to newly recruited people, which fosters emotional dependency. This process is reinforced through narratives appealing to fundamental needs, biblical quotations, and members' testimonies (Zwołiński 2008: 93–100). Participation in the movement produces long-term consequences, including identity disturbances, difficulties in social relationships, and emotional dependency on the community (Chapman 2025).

Himavanti Monastic Brotherhood (Bractwa Zakonne Himavanti), founded in Poland in 1983 by Ryszard Matuszewski, known as Mohan, functions as a federative social movement promoting the cult of Hindu deities (Śiva and Parvati) as well as the practices of tantra, yoga, and Ayurveda, without formal registration as a religious association (Krzyżak 2016: 55). The activity of the movement is based on local groups, such as the Amma-Polska Association, the Professional School of Vedic Astrology and Spiritual Rituals (Pudžas), the Atma Association, the Sathya Sai Baba Centre, and the Babaji Herakhandi Samaj Consciousness Movement, which practise in various cities (Bractwa Zakonne Himavanti 2025a). They are managed by independent leaders called Ācāryas (Bractwa Zakonne Himavanti 2025b).

The movement attracts participants through online spiritual workshops, yet in sociological discourse, it is classified as a destructive group marked by member isolation, psychological manipulation, and aggressive rhetoric toward state institutions and the Catholic Church. Its charismatic leader presents himself as a guru and prophet, and his authority – reinforced by a rigid hierarchy and member subordination – results in fanatical behaviour, threats of violence, and serious difficulties in leaving the community, creating a substantial risk of social marginalisation for former adherents (Karnowski, Potocki 2003: 16).

The organisation uses digital tools for recruitment and doctrinal dissemination. Mohan maintained private and institutional Facebook profiles, posting yogic, tantric, and therapeutic content alongside material critical of the Catholic Church. The group constructs its image through a manipulative *therapeutic-spiritual narrative* that builds social trust and collective identity online (Encyklopedia.org 2025). The nondisclosure of event locations necessitates direct contact with organisers and strengthens recruitment control. The website functions as a multimedia repository – video and audio recordings concerning yoga, spiritual and esoteric development, Vedic mantras, and

Sufi traditions, which reinforces the organisation's image as an alternative spiritual community (Bractwa Zakonne Himavanti 2025c).

The informal Community Love and Mercy of Jesus (Wspólnota Miłość i Miłosierdzie Jezusa), centred on a suspended priest Daniel Galus, operating in Czatachowa at the hermitage of St Anthony, has generated significant controversy due to irregularities such as clergy acting without the ordinary's consent, unapproved structures, and disobedience to episcopal decisions (Bakalarz 2020). Galus, suspended for canon-law violations, has cultivated a personality cult described by hierarchs as sect-like (Kwaśnicka 2025). Alongside reports of alleged healings and unusual phenomena during meetings, the community has been criticised for opaque spiritual practices and internal abuses. The Eucharistic celebrations have been deemed by the dioceses of Częstochowa and Łomża improper and lacking the character of ecclesial prayer, constituting merely the private initiative of a self-styled guru (Piega 2015).

The group maintains an intensive social-media presence, disseminating religious and formative content. The published online materials include sermons, livestreamed prayers and adorations, recordings of meetings, and members' testimonies. It reinforces internal religious identity and functions as a recruitment tool, using emotional and visual messaging to attract new audiences. The movement also runs a foundation, an online shop, and publishes the periodical *Fire of Jesus*, while links to social media indicate a communication strategy aimed at *broadening reach and engagement* (Wspólnota Miłość i Miłosierdzie Jezusa 2025a). These activities exemplify *the mediatization of religion*: the broadcasting of teachings strengthens the group's collective identity and emotional bonding, as well as the authority of its leader (Wspólnota Miłość i Miłosierdzie Jezusa 2025b; 2025c). Despite his suspension, Galus continues to engage in offline and online religious practices, which may mislead the faithful and undermine the authority of the Church (Bakalarz 2025). His charismatic message, marked by apocalyptic narrative and detachment from ecclesiastical hierarchy, attracts individuals in search of alternative forms of spirituality. This is achieved through manipulative techniques of *emotional intensification*, *the construction of communal bonds*, and *the accentuation of authority*, which contribute to the consolidation of collective identity (Matos 2025).

Jehovah's Witnesses, which emerged from the Bible Student movement founded by Charles T. Russell, have operated since 1931 as a registered religious association, characterized by strict control over the individual, isolation from the broader social environment, and complete subordination to the Governing Body. Their doctrine rejects the Holy Trinity, the divinity of Jesus, and the immortality of the soul, restricting salvation to members of their own community (Krawczyk 2016: 162–169). Family life is subordinated

to a patriarchal model and strict religious discipline, with deviations resulting in exclusion (Chojnacka 2007: 110–113). Although the organisation presents itself as Christian, within the sociology of religion it is classified as a new religious movement outside the mainstream of Christianity, a position confirmed by its own Bible translations and its critical stance towards the historic Churches.

In Poland, Jehovah's Witnesses use their official website as the central tool of communication, evangelisation, and recruitment, functioning as a digital doctrinal hub with extensive educational and multimedia resources, and the strict supervision by the Governing Body ensures uniformity of teaching. The site enables direct contact with representatives and access to local branches. In Poland, the organisation broadcasts meetings exclusively through secured digital platforms, which allows it to regulate participation, protect content, and maintain strong internal cohesion while limiting external influences (Bielecki 2018: 121–138). These practices constitute part of a broad strategy of the *organisation's digital presence*, the principal aim of which is to sustain the continuity of religious participation among existing members and to recruit new adherents. The implementation of this objective is achieved by a professionally constructed, coherent, and *emotionally charged message, centred on an eschatological vision of the end of the world and hope reserved solely for the chosen*. This serves as an instrument of manipulation, communal integration, and religious expansion within the virtual sphere.

The comparative analysis of the digital presence of the five examined movements reveals substantial disparities in scale, platform diversification, and communicative reach. The Community of Love and Mercy of Jesus demonstrates the strongest online influence, with 106,000 followers on Facebook, 16,200 on YouTube, 1,339 on Instagram, and 28 on X, amounting to a combined audience exceeding 123,000 users. The Unification Church occupies the second position, with 15,000, 9,100, and 164 followers across its three Facebook pages and 1,280 subscribers on YouTube, totalling 25,500 users. The Family International maintains the third place, with 4,000 followers on Facebook and 489 on YouTube, while the Himavanti Monastic Brotherhood records 858 followers on YouTube, 754 and 712 on its Facebook pages, and 106 on X, totalling 2,400 users. Jehovah's Witnesses in Poland operate primarily through private or semi-private Facebook groups, with 2,300 and 156 members respectively, reflecting a strategy oriented toward internal cohesion rather than broad public outreach. They publish all materials on their official website, which contains an extensive multimedia library and a simple contact form, and this constitutes their primary method of attracting new adherents online. Overall, the Community of Love and Mercy of Jesus and The Unification Church emerge as the most influential examined movements in the Polish digital environment, distinguished by both the scale of their

audiences and the intensity of their multimedia activity, whereas the remaining groups rely on more internally focused online communication strategies.

Manipulation by New Religious Movements and State Countermeasures

Within activities related to the detection of online threats, Polish liaison officers cooperate in their identification and neutralisation. In the field of information security, “FIMI” phenomena associated with the activity of new religious movements are monitored, enabling the analysis of manipulative mechanisms, disinformation strategies, and attempts to influence public opinion through ostensibly neutral narratives (Szczęsna 2022). The state also participates in international initiatives of Europol and Interpol against cybercrime, including online religious manipulation, notably through projects such as the “Joint Cybercrime Action Taskforce” and “HAECHI,” aimed at combating fraud and crossborder disinformation (Olech 2024).

The Polish online system also allows citizens to report dangerous content, including manipulation and criminal activity in the digital sphere, while parallel educational campaigns provide training on preventing manipulation by new religious movements. Schools conduct workshops on manipulation and cyber violence, and specialised guides for parents and teachers help identify potentially destructive content (Fundacja UNIQA 2024). These initiatives raise public awareness of the risks posed by such movements, their techniques, and recruitment methods. The national online-security system is based on statutory regulations and resilient infrastructure enabling information exchange, covering the prevention of digital crime, informational manipulation, disinformation, and the activities of destructive groups (NASK – Państwowy Instytut Badawczy 2025).

Despite initiatives undertaken to limit the activity of new religious movements, significant gaps remain in the Polish system of citizen protection. The absence of a centralised register of destructive groups hinders both the ongoing monitoring of their activities and the comprehensive assessment of potential threats. There is also a noticeable lack of effectiveness in identifying concealed forms of manipulation, particularly those employed by esoteric and pseudotherapeutic milieus, which frequently operate on the margins of existing legal regulations (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli 2022). The Polish state must continually undertake new measures aimed at detecting and neutralising threats associated with manipulation in the digital sphere.

Concluding Remarks

The analysis shows that all five examined new religious movements reproduce, in varied forms, the stages of recruitment and manipulation identified by Tadeusz Gierat. The Unification Church presents the full sequence: *offering free goods* through seemingly neutral initiatives, *doctrinal initiation* during intensive retreats, embedding within the group via controlled digital communication (*cognitive isolation*), *rupture of family and social bonds* through hierarchical pressure, and *consolidation within the doctrine and submission to the guru* as the “True Parent.” The Family International follows a similar trajectory, from offering free goods to doctrinal reinterpretation, ending in growing isolation and dependence on community leaders. The Himavanti Monastic Brotherhood moves from free spiritual online workshops to doctrinal initiation, embedding in decentralised groups, social isolation, and subordination to the guru Mohan. The Community of Love and Mercy of Jesus uses a digital model: offering free goods through online sermons, doctrinal initiation via livestreamed teachings, severing ties with the outside world through the narrative of “us” – the persecuted – versus “them” – the clergy – and consolidating around the doctrine and submission to the guru through charismatic messaging. So far, no rupture of family or social bonds has been observed within this movement. Jehovah’s Witnesses association enacts a more institutionalised version of Gierat’s model, beginning with free initial contact through their website, followed by doctrinal initiation via structured multimedia materials, embedding through regulated digital meetings, and consolidation through strict organisational discipline, supervised by the Governing Body. Across all cases, the digital environment intensifies each stage of the manipulative process.

With respect to the manipulative techniques described by Maciej Soliński, the findings indicate that each movement employs a repertoire of strategies. The Unification Church and The Family International use all four practices: *foot-in-the-door* (gradual initiation and recruitment), *love bombing*, *flirtation*, and *flattery* (intensive provision of attention and support, reinforced by emotional narratives of love, families, and supporting insecure individuals). The Himavanti Monastic Brotherhood, The Community of Love and Mercy of Jesus, and Jehovah’s Witnesses rely primarily on the *foot-in-the-door* method (initial contact is followed by the gradual disclosure of the religious foundation) and the *flattery* technique (aimed at people looking for emotional support). These practices, combined with varying levels of online reach, enable recruitment, identity consolidation, and control over new adherents. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that Soliński’s techniques – *foot-in-the-door*, *love bombing*, *flirtation*, and *flattery* – are skilfully adapted and employed by new religious movements in the digital environment.

The Polish system for counteracting manipulation by new religious movements includes monitoring, international cooperation, reporting mechanisms, and educational initiatives, yet its effectiveness is limited by the absence of a centralised register of destructive groups and the difficulty of identifying concealed forms of manipulation, particularly in esoteric and pseudo-therapeutic environments. Strengthening prevention requires the development of digital literacy, closer cooperation between educational and cybersecurity institutions, and specialised training for professionals working with at-risk groups. At the same time, religious movements effectively use digital tools for recruitment, identity consolidation, and maintaining control, which underscores the need for coordinated state action, increased public awareness, and active civil society engagement in building resilience against manipulation and disinformation in the digital sphere.

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Abstract

The article provides a sociological analysis of the functioning of five new religious movements in the Polish digital sphere, with emphasis on their modes of operation and techniques of social influence. The theoretical section discusses the definitions of a sect, a new religious movement, and manipulation. The analysis then examines the stages of recruiting new members, manipulative practices, the online activity of these groups, and state measures aimed at counteracting manipulation. The study draws on the movements' websites, social media platforms, and sociological literature.

Keywords: new religious movements, manipulation, techniques, cybersecurity

Anna Daszewska – doktor nauk społecznych w dziedzinie socjologii, magister filologii angielskiej, pracownik naukowo-dydaktyczny na Wydziale Nauk Społecznych Uniwersytetu Warmińsko-Mazurskiego w Olsztynie. Publikacje: *Teaching English online based on the experience of the “AZS” Language School in Szczytno* (Kraków 2021); *Koncepcja socjologii religii Roberta Wuthnowa* (Poznań 2022); *Religious and spiritual motifs in the works of Sergei Parajanov* (Poznań 2024); *Religia i polityka w Ameryce a konflikt w sferze publicznej* (Lublin 2024); *Biblical Language in the Songs of the Soul Metal Band Hunter* (Kraków 2024). Zainteresowania badawcze: socjologia religii, socjologia edukacji.