DISCUSSING THE *ADOLESCENCE SERIES* – BETWEEN IGNORANCE AND THE REGULATION OF THE PUBLIC SQUARE

Karla Aparecida Zucoloto[1], Pedro Henrique Zucoloto da Silva[2]

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the adolescent phenomenon under the studies of the pedagogue, psychology, and legislation from the series Adolescence, of a subscription streaming service. The series consists of 4 episodes that deal with a crime committed by a 13-year-old boy from the point of view of the State, the school, forensic psychology, and the family, It was analyzed in its constitutive episodes to discuss human development in adolescence and the need for regulation of social networks. The objective of this study was to analyze the behavior of adolescents in the *hyperconnected world* and the increase in cases of violence among young people and adolescents to try to delimit the role of different adults in different social contexts. The data on the significant increase in violence among adolescents and young people point to the lack of control over social life, due to the early exposure of this group to different social media. Making us rethink the role of the State, the school, parents, and specialists in the role of taking care of our children and young people.

Keywords: Adolescence. Social media. Internet Regulation. Violence.

[1] Doctor in Educational Psychology
Faculty of Education of the University of São Paulo
Performance: IFSULDEMINAS – Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology of the South of Minas Gerais – Poços de Caldas, Minas Gerais, Brazil
Email: karla.zucoloto@ifsuldeminas.edu.br
[2] Higher education with the area
Master's student at the Faculty of Law of the University of Minas Gerais
Address: Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil
E-mail: pedrozucoloto1@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

In the book *The Anxious Generation: How Hyperconnected Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Disorders,* from July 2024, Jonathan Haidt states that children and adolescents are in danger with extensive exposure to the virtual environment. The author states that since the early 2010s, rates of depression, anxiety, and other mental disorders have grown sharply in these groups. Explaining the causes of this epidemic and defending a childhood away from the screens, the author demonstrates how *childhood-based play* went into decline in the 1980s and was replaced by *childhood-based on the cell phone*, accompanied by a hyperconnectivity that altered the social and neurological development of young people and has caused sleep deprivation, social deprivation, fragmentation of attention and addiction.

The author also examines why social networks harm girls the most and the reasons that lead boys to migrate from the real world to the virtual world, with disastrous consequences for them and the people around them. Faced with this catastrophic scenario, the author shows what parents, teachers, schools, technology companies, and governments can do in practice to reverse the situation and avoid even deeper psychological damage. One plan of action that we cannot afford to ignore, because what is at stake is not only the well-being of our children, but of society as a whole, is to regulate social networks or the *public square* that brings our adolescents together.

In the same sense, the series released by *Netflix[3], Adolescence*, has raised discussions in numerous groups linked to pedagogy, law, and psychology. The theme presented by the series can be summarized in a disturbing question: What *leads a 13-year-old teenager to murder his schoolmate?* This article aims to discuss how social networks impact this stage of development as well as the need for regulation of social networks, considered as the *public square* in virtual spaces.

It is intended to analyze part of the phenomenon, the series itself, in its general context, respecting the theme adopted by each episode, namely: detention, school, psychological report, and family context. In this analysis we will bring readings of *pedagogy* to explain the fierce context of the educational environment and the relationship between peers and adults, *of psychology* to discuss emotions and full development in adolescence with its cognitive and affective specificities and of the *law* to understand the legislation that regulates the age segment and the necessary discussion of a regulation of the environment of the different social networks. The problem that guides our analysis involves the increase

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[3] Netflix is a subscription streaming service that allows you to watch series and movies on a device connected to the internet.

in cases of violence among young people and adolescents and seeks to delimit the role of different adults in different social contexts.

According to Judge Vanessa Cavalieri[4], data from 2016 to 2019 show that half of the adolescents were involved in robbery, which is the subtraction with violence or serious threat, we had 20% of theft, 18% of trafficking, and the other 10% of various crimes. There were only a few sexual crimes, such as rape of a vulnerable person. These crimes were very directly related to social inequality in Brazil and an extremely consumerist society. However, there was a significant change after the pandemic, as another profile of adolescents began to arrive, which previously did not attend the Judiciary: young people from the middle class, upper class, students from the best schools involved in violent acts, terrorism or apology for Nazism.

In the same interview, Judge Vanessa Cavalieri highlights the responsibility of families in the digital education of children, criticizing the lack of intervention by parents in the face of inappropriate behavior, such as an eight-year-old boy reproducing violent speeches in WhatsApp groups. She warns that these behaviors often indicate a lack of maturity to be in virtual environments without supervision. Although virtual crimes still do not surpass crimes such as theft and trafficking, they have increased with increasingly serious cases, such as bullying, racism, and incitement to self-harm. She emphasizes the importance of parental vigilance and warns about the feeling of impunity and "lawless land" that many adolescents have in the digital environment. The judge reinforces the idea that the absence of consequences reinforces harmful behaviors.

Judge Vanessa Cavalieri reports serious cases of crimes committed by teenagers that were discovered through Interpol alerts, often based on complaints made by platforms such as Google, Meta, and Facebook. These crimes included planning terrorist attacks, such as attacks on schools and even the Angra plant, as well as child sexual abuse. Many of the teens were involved in dangerous *online* communities, such as *Discord groups*, in which there was grooming, sexual exploitation, and blackmail against emotionally vulnerable girls. She criticizes the lack of active moderation on the networks and warns that, often, parents only discover their children's involvement when the police are already at home with a warrant.

We begin by contextualizing the series and the issues that involve the context of the adolescent in the series and its correlations with the real life of the other contemporaries. Brazilian legislation contemplates comprehensive health care for adolescents in several

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4 Interview with Radio Novelo on March 10, 2025 available at: https://radionovelo.com.br/originais/fiodameada/vanessa-cavalieri-nao-quer-prender-o-teu-filho/

laws, which should be known to all professionals who propose to work with these young people. The Statute of the Child and Adolescent - ECA - (Law No. 8,069, of July 13, 1990) is a milestone in the recent history of citizenship of boys and girls in Brazil, which replaced the Minors Code (Law No. 6,697, of 10/10/1979) which was limited to children and adolescents in an irregular situation. This instrument dictated rules and norms for 10 years, and its cultural presence still endures, preventing society itself from recognizing the rights and duties of children and adolescents. However, it is necessary to delimit what adolescence is and in which areas the legislation can intervene.

In its fourth article, the ECA – Statute of the Child and Adolescent states that:

> It is the duty of the family, the community, society in general, and the public power to ensure, with absolute priority, the realization of the rights related to life, health, food, education, sports, leisure, professionalization, culture, dignity, respect, freedom, and family and community life.

Caring, caring, guaranteeing all the rights of children and adolescents is what the legislation states. And what does this mean? Understanding that adolescence comprises the age group between ten and twenty years old, according to the World Health Organization, it is a critical phase in the process of human growth and development, marked by numerous transformations related to the physical, psychological, and social aspects of the individual (Lourenço and Queiroz, 2010). Because it is located between childhood and adulthood, this phase of human development excels in the construction of identity and its place in society.

The Netflix streaming miniseries is called Adolescence and has 4 episodes. The story narrates a crime that completely changes the life of a normal middle-class family, and that shows the authorship of the teenager in the very first episode. The series, filmed in sequence, describes the plot of a crime committed by a 13-year-old named Jamie Miller, played by Owen Cooper, and which is analyzed from the perspective of the State, school, psychology, and family. The crime drama brings a conflict of perceptions as it questions how much Jamie's parents know about what happens in their children's lives. The series is written by Jack Thorne and Stephen Graham, who also plays Jamie's father, as well as directed by Philip Barantini.

The series aims to explore the growing number of violent events, which have adolescents as protagonists, today, to lead us to reflect on the time that children and adolescents spend in front of screens closed in the privacy of their rooms in their homes in a direct relationship with the data presented by Cavellari (HAIDT, 2024). According to an

article in O Globo, [5] one of the answers seems to be related to the so-called *machosphere*, a term that was first coined in 2009 and describes a network of online communities of male interest and that includes groups with a varied spectrum of ideologies ranging from believing that men have no institutional power to more extreme and misogynistic views. But now the *machosphere* has gone beyond the boundaries of the internet, with its extreme content being rewarded by social media algorithms, and has reached an audience that was not possible before.

Masculinity influencers, such as *Andrew Tate*, are now famous all over the world, and their ideas are everywhere and can be accessed by children and adolescents without any control or filter. According to experts, influencers and groups are exploring the breakdown of the community and the gap left by the social and economic challenges faced by young people, as well as the myriad issues concerning the development of children and young people around the world.

American activist *Warren Farrell* became a prominent voice in the Men's Liberation Movement, a movement in response to feminist organizing in the 1970s, during the second wave of feminism, which focused on issues of equality and discrimination. He believed that gender roles and patriarchy harmed men and the construction of masculinity. However, when feminists drew attention to the epidemic of violence against women by men, the two movements came into conflict, explains Debbie Ging, a scholar who studies the machosphere[6].

The Men's Liberation Movement fragmented as Farrell and others became disillusioned with feminism and came to believe that feminists were more interested in power than equality, a view that resonates with an increasing number of men to this day. Farrell (1993; 2019) wrote books stating that men were being oppressed, that domestic violence was a two-way street, and that women were to blame for wage inequality once they decided to break with the pact that men work to support families and women would be responsible for caring for the family.

These ideas were shared in the first *online* forums, and many of today's men's rights activists consider this moment as their cornerstone, and argue that they need to overcome feminist logic through the imposition of men's logic. Such ideas were widely disseminated with the rise of the internet in the 1990s by men's rights activists who used the online environment to create forums and chat rooms, which were not toxic at first.

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[5]   https://g1.globo.com/tecnologia/noticia/2025/03/29/adolescencia-como-surgiu-a-sinistra-machosfera-retratada-pela-serie.ghtml
[6]   https://g1.globo.com/tecnologia/noticia/2025/03/29/adolescencia-como-surgiu-a-sinistra-machosfera-retratada-pela-serie.ghtml

The forum began as an open space for all, but as it grew, moderation waned and the direction of conversation turned to discussion of sexism, and new communities were formed using the term *incel*, *involuntary celibates*. Instead of a space to discuss relationship problems, men blame women for their loneliness in the face of the difficulty in establishing affective relationships.

These scenarios described can be perceived by different parents in different places with an uncanny resemblance. There is no effective regulation or control of the public that accesses such violent contexts, and even less of the damage derived from the exposure of young people and adolescents to these distorted scenarios.

The mechanism that allows our brain to adapt functionally and structurally to new experiences, to new information presented, can be called brain plasticity. This mechanism plays a fundamental role in the development of the human being, allowing the formation of neural circuits that are important for development, and in childhood and adolescence they are more diffuse, nonspecific and less economical in energy consumption compared to adulthood, which in turn has more localized, specific and more economical neural circuits. Purves et al. (2005), Kandel et al. (2014), and Lent (2022) explain that all this complex neural development reflects, finally, the progressive development of executive, mnemonic, and even emotional functions, which depend on the maturation of these processes.

In the school episode, the second of the series, the policeman's son, *Adam*, tries to explain to his father the languages of the networks, whose codes he does not understand, when he sees his embarrassed embarrassed in front of his class. This episode brings us to the other end of the spectrum, the forums of *seduction professionals*, *online* communities in which men discuss strategies to attract women, calling themselves *alphas*, a term used to indicate masculinity. Lisa Sugiura and seven other authors who specialize in cybercrime have written four books on the history of the *machosphere* and cybercrime and cybercrime claim that just like *incel* forums, these groups soon became rife with misogynistic ideas stating that women have no decision-making power, that they have no right to say no.

The ideas of the *machosphere* began to gain strength with the advent of social networks at the beginning of the twenty-first century, with the gathering of *incels* on *Facebook*, *YouTube* and *Reddit*, with expanded access to larger audiences, with groups that began to unite and borrow each other's ideology to gain more relevance. One of the pillars of these communities was the belief that the odds of dating were not favorable for men, known as the *80/20 rule*, mentioned in the *Adolescence series,* which argues that 80% of women are attracted to 20% of men, a claim originally based on a misinterpreted

survey (idem). In the groups, these men call this ideology as *taking the red pill*, a reference from the movie The Matrix, which indicates "awakening" to the injustices of society.

Still the same authors claim that these networks together created a new form of political activism against feminism, a true *digital witch hunt* that aimed to warn women about the consequences of transgressing certain limits, imposed by these groups in the most diverse *pots,* chat groups and discussion forums on *discord, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook* among others. In 2014, communities in the machosphere organized a hate campaign against women in the *gaming* community, practicing *doxing* (publication of private data) and making threats to women in general. That same year, the machosphere moved from online forums to real-world violence. Although these groups have gained notoriety, they have remained on the fringes of the internet.

In these networks and groups, influencers from the machosphere share extreme ideas, borrowing concepts from *incel communities* and seduction professionals. Social media platforms that prioritize short-form videos propel topics of discussion from the manosphere into the *mainstream* through influencers like Andrew Tate, who calls himself a misogynist. They associate these concepts with self-help, fitness, and financial advice, often offering simple solutions to complex issues through the sale of products or courses.

Judge Vanessa Cavalieri explains that parents are civilly responsible for the acts of their children and may be required to pay compensation for moral damages and psychological or psychiatric treatment to the victims. She cites the case of a 16-year-old girl who had intimate videos leaked by her ex-boyfriend, which caused serious emotional damage and led her to drop out of school. The teenager was held criminally responsible with a socio-educational measure.

Cavalieri also highlights the growing presence of middle- and upper-class adolescents involved in sexual crimes, especially related to gender-based violence. In response, she created, in the Court where she works, a reflective group aimed at adolescent offenders, to promote awareness and prevent these young people from perpetuating misogynistic and violent behavior in adult life.

Jack Thorne, screenwriter of the series *Adolescence*, states that masculinity influencers are part of an ecosystem of issues that affect the adolescent at the center of the series, filling a gap for young men who seek community and, according to Sugiura (2021), feel the pressure to conform to the image of a masculine man, without having space to talk about her loneliness, depression and anxiety. The author suggests that this is how influencers made these extreme messages more palatable, making the machosphere not only a *locus* of misogyny and hatred, but a form that seems to be about self-help and

personal evolution. For the screenwriter, the parents who do not see the boy, the school system that left him in the lurch, and the ideas he consumed on the social network form the plot that may be within a common family and a common world.

Although *Adolescence* is not a direct adaptation of a real case, the series is inspired by an alarming scenario: the increase in knife violence among young people in the United Kingdom and the growing influence of figures from the *global manosphere*. Stephen Graham expressed to Netflix the central concern of the series: understanding the pressures that shape youth. The creator also contrasted his adolescence, in which the bedroom was a haven, with the current reality, where smartphones expose young people to constant dangers.

The greatest merit of the series is to provoke discussions, especially about the education of teenagers, about how it is possible for a 13-year-old boy, raised by a loving family, with no significant history of delinquency, to commit a brutal murder. The scene between Jamie and the psychologist illustrates one of the main reflections on how the adolescent perceives the world, his absolute ignorance about the many dimensions of the act he committed.

Forensic psychologist Briony Ariston's insistent question about whether Jamie is aware that the girl died and what that means portrays the absolute absence of awareness of her actions, a fact that is evident in the statement but I didn't rape her, that is, I can't be that bad. We realize that Jamie tries to treat the psychologist as an object, oscillating between the little boy and the alpha male, the little boy to whom she takes chocolate and a sandwich, and the male who kicks chairs and screams.

Jamie Miller's insistent and desperate question to the forensic psychologist: *Do you like me?* Instigates us to revisit the need for shelter that adolescents need. Desperate, Jamie advances on her, screaming and repeating the same question. The psychologist, finally, responds that she is a professional and that she was there to play her role. Angry and enraged to realize that his game of being *a cute little boy* and being *alpha* doesn't work again, Jamie goes on a physical assault, being restrained by a police officer. The issue, once again, is not the crime committed or the consequences of that act, but the need to find affection and approval in the eyes of the other.

A common point between these fields is the recognition that adolescent behavior is guided mainly by emotions (Almeida and Mahoney, 2007). Jamie's despair in the face of the psychologist's refusal to answer whether she liked him reveals precisely this difficulty in separating the emotional bond from the institutional and rational relationship. The boy's behavior is also loaded with distrust about the adult world, with provocations that try to

destabilize the interlocutor and lay bare his supposed hypocrisy. At the same time, there is a strong need for affection and acceptance on the part of these same adults.

Although there is, in this phase, a cognitive progress that expands the ability to reason and abstract, it is the emotion that will determine the desire, or its absence, to study, to socialize, to be present, to like a discipline, or to create a bond with teachers. Emotion sustains ties with institutions, families, groups of friends, career choices, and one's knowledge. It will also be emotion, except in situations of extreme vulnerability, that will be the determining factor for the abandonment of these bonds. Jamie goes into crisis when he discovers that he will no longer see the psychologist after that session. He feels abandoned and betrayed.

Adolescents act as someone with few emotional resources to deal with tense situations, leading to aggression and threats. It is interesting to make the parallel between this scene and the scene in which Jamie states that he likes history classes and that he likes the teacher, but he can't talk about the boy and doesn't even know who he is.

In the series and real life, the internet is a key element, as it is in virtual communities that such ideologies find fertile soil to flourish. In the opinion of psychologist Ilana Luiz Fermann, author of the book *Harmful Use of the Internet and Social Media – Mental Illness and Cognitive-Behavioral Intervention Protocol,* published in 2025, the topic should not be treated only from the perspective of the villainization of networks. For the author, social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram are considered a communication resource and are used by the population in Brazil and in the world, and the internet, as well as communication technologies, have been used as facilitators of daily tasks and interpersonal relationships. However, its excessive and uncontrolled use can be harmful to cognitive aspects, consequently interfering in a harmful way with your mental health, in the emotional and behavioral aspects of all people.

As beings deeply driven by emotions, teenagers become easy prey for social media algorithms; when faced with a post, our reaction is usually emotional: we like, reject, or ignore, and look for another post that brings us immediate satisfaction, creating an endless cycle sustained by an infinite menu of content. This process increases anxiety, reduces tolerance for longer activities, and makes us addicted to evaluating complex situations based on primitive emotions. If this already occurs with us, adults, with a greater capacity for self-regulation, we can imagine the effect of these practices with adolescents who tend to be unaware of the consequences of their actions, have difficulty concentrating, and face intense insecurities (HAIDT, 2024; SUGIURA, 2021).

The police investigation and sessions with psychologist Briony reveal that Jamie was an insecure young man, vulnerable to the influence of misogynistic figures *online*, such as Andrew Tate, and the target of *bullying* at school. His distorted view of women is evident in his statements about Katie and in his behavior with the forensic psychologist. Jamie reveals that Katie sent an intimate photo to a colleague, who shared it and ridiculed it. He interpreted Katie's reaction as weakness and asked her out, but she rejected him. This episode fueled his obsession. On the day of the crime, Jamie confessed to having wanted to abuse Katie, but claimed to have controlled himself. All these issues demand the difficulty in building a cause-and-consequence relationship that is typical in adolescents, whose ability to reflect is limited by the lack of full development of the *frontal lobe* (Kandel et al, 2014; Lent, 2022; Purves et al, 2010), part of the brain responsible for this discernment.

Fermann (2025) draws attention to the importance of developing education for the use of social networks and digital tools in which parents and guardians of child and adolescent upbringing need to be prepared to deal with the *online presence* of young people and guide them as to the posture they adopt in the virtual environment. The psychologist recognizes that the practice is considered sensitive, but argues that such supervision is necessary and can be done in a friendly way. It is necessary to monitor to guide, and establish a space for communication, exchange, acceptance, and limits; supervising is not invading privacy, which is a very sensitive issue in the culture of relationships in England. Such a posture includes supervising the content to which children are exposed and the way they communicate *online*.

Another aspect addressed by the series concerns the distance between the protagonist and the adults around him, which can be corroborated by the surprise that Jamie's parents and teachers show when they learn the facts that can be proven by the drama of the central character of *Adolescence*, for example low self-esteem, the feeling of insecurity and inadequacy. The series portrays the little connection that most young people have with their parents and educators.

Jamie is not an abandoned teenager; he has a structured family, he studies at a good school, and he is surrounded by a network of attention. However, no part of this care network is truly attentive to it. There are many adults around the character, but all have shown themselves to be unable to look at him individually. The presence of adults is essential for young people to go through the typical changes of adolescence in a healthy way. Amid the whirlwind of feelings and discoveries that mark the period, precise guidance is needed.

According to Judge Vanessa Cavalleri states that:

"If you cut, you kill yourself". I had a case now, recent, of racism by a student against a teacher. So, it's a 13-year-old girl who records a story on her Instagram. And then, she starts talking about the math teacher, that she will have a test, that the teacher is bad, that she doesn't know anything, and '*no no*'. At a certain point, she says: "I don't know what the school is...", the school where she studies, "... He went to hire this black whale to teach. This fucked up nigger." Someone prints the screen, records the screen, it starts to run in WhatsApp groups, and then a mother who gives general to her daughters' WhatsApp sees it. So, that's why it's important, you know? Look. Because if this mother doesn't see it, no one *would know*. I mean, teenagers know.

It is necessary to be clear that adolescents are people in development whose frontal lobes will only reach full maturity around the age of 25. This frontal lobe is responsible for the cause-and-consequence relationship, which will allow the young person to anticipate the effects of their actions (MLODINOW, 2018). Causality is built with development and neural development, and without this maturity, it is not possible to curb impulses or evaluate responses to actions. To contain the impulses will require guidance, care, supervision, and experience. Haidt (2024) reminds us of the lost rites of passage that we insist on forgetting; These are the ones that allow us to enter the universe of adults with adolescent eyes to mature under the tutelage and supervision of the elderly.

The fourth episode takes place about one day after the incident that led to the teenager's arrest. The family continues to deal with the consequences of the crime committed by Jamie and the community's reading of the case, such as having the *work van* sprayed with graffiti by neighborhood boys or suddenly coming across the respect of the material store clerk who offers help because he *understands* what Jamie felt. There is growing tension in the family and with the neighbor, and it is understandable. It is the consequence of a crime that shocks and causes a lot of strangeness.

But what to do with the free territory that exists on the internet? Who regulates this public square? On what basis and for what reason? Adolescents enter any virtual environment and access what they want and want and are under the supervision and administration of parents, perhaps schools. The question remains: wouldn't it be necessary for such *big techs* to follow the laws in the countries in which they operate?

At the end of the fourth episode, Jamie informs his father that he will change his testimony and admit that he is guilty, as opposed to what he stated as a mantra in the first episode: *I did nothing*. The father is in the van and tells the boy that his mother and sister are listening to the call, and it is interesting to note that Jamie apologizes to his father and that he does not seem to care about the women in the vehicle, once again denoting the objectification of women.

At home, father and mother have a very tough conversation, as the father claims that he saw the video and knows what his son did, but admits that he did not welcome his son when other parents laughed at him in football and that he did not know how to deal with his son's way of being. And here we add to what Stephen Graham, who plays the boy's father and is co-creator of the series along with Jack Thorne, says about the motivation behind the work: to understand *why* the boy does this? And we can go further: what are we going to do with this public square that looks more like no man's land?

The goal of the series may be to talk about the impact of social networks on our lives as a whole, that is, on our relationships. The series invites us to think about the victim's family in the first episode, and shows us the author's family shaken by all the events in the last episode. Collapse is perhaps the best word to describe all the scenarios in the series and our lives. Jonathan Haidt (2024, p. 75) states that:

> In real life, it takes a while—many weeks—to get a good idea of what the most common behaviors are, because you have to look at multiple groups in multiple scenarios. On the networks, however, a child can go through a thousand units of information in an hour (considering three seconds per publication), each of them accompanied by numerical clues (likes) and comments that indicate whether the publication was a success or a failure.
> Social media is therefore the most effective compliance machine ever invented. They can set the mental template for what is acceptable behavior for a teenager in a matter of hours, while parents may spend years in fruitless attempts to get their children to sit up straight or stop whining. Parents have no way to harness the power of conformity bias, so they are often no match for the socializing power of networks.

With this long reflection, the author invites us to think about the whole process of social learning, the process of identifying the person who has prestige in the group and starting to imitate them at the same time that they realize that they are the losers to isolate and exclude them from the group instead of educating children and young people to perceive the value of each person, to understand that the best group is the most diverse and to know how to live with different differences. Social networks annul differences and various models, teach conformity, swallow time, talents, and identities to gain followers, in the mold of a sect.

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