

# WHY DO CYBERBULLIED ADOLESCENTS STAY IN CONTACT WITH THEIR HARASSER? A Literature Review and Reflection on Cyberbullied Adolescents' Coping Strategies

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## SUMMARY

**Background:** Many young patients who are cyberbullied maintain communication with their harasser, despite the fact that this behaviour perpetuates the harassment. Numerous studies describe coping strategies adopted by cyberbullied adolescents. None describe what motivates adolescents to continue to communicate with their harassers.

**Methods:** We conducted a literature review of cyberbullying, taking into account the challenges of adolescence. We used several search engines (Scopus, PsycINFO, Cairn and PubMed), using the following keywords: cyberbullying, teens, behaviour, coping strategies, social network, Facebook, counterpart. Our search returned 526 results, which were subsequently sorted as a function of their relevance. We also consulted reference books on adolescent psychology.

**Results:** The adolescent, whose identity is being rebuilt, seeks a peer group, but also a relationship with a counterpart. This search is replayed on social networks and can lead adolescents to meet a counterpart harasser. Studies show that adolescents who suffer from cyberbullying are more likely than others to be in search of new friendships, and use social networks to make up for a lack or absence of fulfilling social relationships. They have fewer friends, have more difficulty maintaining social ties, and have fewer communication skills. In addition, cyberbullied adolescents have poorer relationships with their parents and teachers than their peers.

**Conclusions:** Narcissistically fragile adolescents are at greater risk of being unable to stop communicating with their cyberbully. If the adolescent has no other relationships that enable him or her to develop their identity, they will be unable to put an end to this harmful counterpart relationship. It would be interesting to supplement this review with an experimental study, and to consider the development of new, secondary prevention strategies in the adolescent population.

**Key words:** adolescent – cyberbullying – coping strategies – counterpart relationship – social networks

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## INTRODUCTION

With the democratization of the internet, social networks are omnipresent in our daily lives and are changing the way we interact with others and ourselves. Adolescents are the most affected by these transformations; this hyper-connected generation is eager for novelty in any form, and they invest in multiple social networks. According to a study by the Pew Research Center in 2015, 92% of American adolescents connect to the internet every day, and 71% use more than one social network.

New modes of harassment have emerged with the use of these modes of communication. They can be grouped under the term 'cyberbullying'. Tokunaga (2010) defines cyberbullying as "any behaviour performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicates hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others". These new types of harassment affect approximately one fifth of the adolescent population. A study by EU Union Kids Online (Livingstone et al. 2011) revealed that approximately 20% of European adolescents have been victims of harassment via the internet. The increase in this type of aggression has led many studies to look at the coping strategies

adopted by victims of cyberbullying, with the aim of secondary prevention (Navarro et al. 2016). Among the coping strategies reported by adolescents we find ongoing communication with the harasser (Slonje et al. 2012, Perren et al. 2012, Machackova et al. 2013). The aim of this behaviour may be to harass the harasser or to contact him or her in a more constructive way to ask them to stop. Approximately 60% of adolescents use such strategies and describe a positive impact on their emotional state. Yet such strategies are the least effective in ending cyberbullying (Price & Dagleish 2010, Machackova et al. 2013).

Why do these adolescents maintain contact with their cyberabuser when they could be using other, more effective strategies?

## METHODS

To answer this question, we used several search engines (Scopus, PsycINFO, Cairn and PubMed), using the following keywords: cyberbullying, teens, behaviour, coping strategies, social network, Facebook, counterpart. Our search returned 526 results, which were subsequently sorted as a function of their relevance. We also consulted reference books on adolescent psychology.

Our study is structured as follows: First we examine the construction of the body image and identity during childhood. Next, we address the questioning of body image and identity in adolescence, taking into account the influence of social networks on these processes. In the third and fourth steps, we look in detail at the importance of counterpart relationships in adolescence and the influence they can have on the occurrence and perpetuation of cyberbullying.

## RESULTS

### Construction of the body image and identity during childhood

The image of the body is built around the age of 6 to 18 months during the mirror stage described by Lacan (1949). Until this age the body is only perceived as parts through different sensory experiences. In the mirror stage the child sees him or herself through a reflective surface, which is not necessarily a mirror in the physical sense, but rather a mirroring element. Winnicott (1971) describes the maternal face as the first mirror used by the child. During this psychological experience, the child becomes aware of the unity of his or her body and acquires a unified body image, together with its limits. This operation also allows the child to discern what is external to itself. This first self-image represents the physical identity, which is supported by the affectionate feelings and words of the child's parents and relatives. This physical identity, together with the associated affects constitutes primary narcissism (Freud 1914).

Subsequently, secondary narcissism is constructed through verbal relationships with others. The child builds a symbolic identity from exchanges with his or her entourage and the place that is intended for it within society (Freud 1921). Symbolic identity constitutes a future form for the child, an ideal towards which he or she will tend.

### Revisiting identity in adolescence and the impact of social networks

The adolescent is confronted with a body in transformation, which becomes foreign, unknown, and which he or she must be able to reclaim. The individual must, once again, repeat the process of corporal appropriation and identity building what was first accomplished at the beginning of childhood.

In adolescence, the emergence of sexuality signals the need to distance oneself from parental images (Carbone 2013). The adolescent loses parental narcissistic support, which has become a burden, and consequently becomes narcissistically fragile (Carbone 2013). He or she is obliged to find new models of identification beyond the parental environment. Gozlan (2014) compares the adolescent to "a Narcissus in search of a body separated from his parents". The adolescent seeks to reconstruct his or her image by interacting with their peers.

Social networks represent an opportunity to join a peer group, giving them an identity, and endorsement for their existence through integration into the group (Gozlan & Masson 2013). Social networks are spaces that parents cannot see into, where the adolescent has the opportunity to identify with a group of individuals who share the same language, norms and preferences. The creation of a profile is an opportunity for the adolescent to see themselves in a mirror, to create a virtual counterpart that will be seen and approved by others. Social networks are an environment that is conducive to revisiting the mirror stage (Gozlan 2014). Through this profile the adolescent is able to appropriate his or her physical identity, now sexualized, work on their relational identity, and build a self towards which he or she can evolve. Social networks allow adolescents to re-appropriate these new identities, enabling them to see themselves and be seen by others, confirming their existence.

### Counterpart relationships in adolescence

The adolescent looks for a narcissistic counterpart among their peers, 'someone else who looks like me'. It is a period of deep friendships and passionate loves. The function of this other self is to confirm the individual existence of the adolescent. This other, who is similar and at the same time different, allows the adolescent to contemplate a mirror image of him or herself and to come to terms with their strangeness (Maïdi 2012; Carbone 2013). Social networks enable adolescents to meet people who are similar to themselves and satisfy the need to search for this counterpart. Sharing intimacy is promoted by physical distance and a sense of anonymity; social networks heighten the illusion of continuity with the interlocutor (Jung 2014).

The function of the counterpart is to support the adolescent's identity. He or she protects the adolescent from the sudden disappearance of their infantile self-esteem. However, the counterpart can also become a persecutor (Maïdi 2012) who can be dangerous for the identity. He or she is able to seize the identity and transform it. The adolescent then becomes an impotent bystander, who can only watch the manipulation of his or her new identity. In this type of relationship, the counterpart comes to represent the 'uncanny' described by Freud (1919). The adolescent is confronted with feelings of loss of control and worrying unknown origin, while being in an intimate relationship. In their search for a counterpart, they can meet on social networks another who can take possession of his or her image, leaving the individual impotent and faced with the dark and undesired parts of themselves. A parallel can be drawn with Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). Dorian Gray thanks to his portrait (counterpart of himself), painted by one of his friends, becomes aware of his unusual beauty. He vows to remain young. His wish comes true and only his portrait changes over time. However, when the hero is confronted with his

aging portrait, which reflects all of his vices and the darkest parts of himself, he cannot bear it. He destroys the canvas and kills his friend, the painter. In the same way the adolescent is confronted with the loss of his or her identity, transformed by the counterpart into an unwanted mirror image of themselves. He or she then tries to regain their identity or destroy this unsightly reflection. This explains the behaviour of adolescent victims of cyberbullying, who desperately try to convince their harasser to change their mind or become aggressive in the hope of destroying the counterpart.

However, some adolescents do not use this type of coping strategy. Some end all relations with the aggressor or ignore their messages. They use cognitive and behavioural avoidance coping techniques, involving themselves in other activities (Navarro et al. 2016). These adolescents do not seem tormented by the search for a counterpart when confronted with a cyberbully.

How do we explain the choice of these types of behaviours?

### The role played by peers

Adolescents suffering from cyberbullying are much more likely to be in search of new friendships and use social networks to compensate for a lack or absence of fulfilling social relationships. They have fewer friends, have more difficulty maintaining social ties and have fewer communication skills (Navarro et al. 2016). In addition, cyberbullied adolescents have poorer relationships with their parents and teachers than others (Bjereld et al. 2017, Garaigordobil & Machimbarrena 2017). Most cyberbullied adolescents live in a family environment where communication is lacking and little attention, recognition and affection are given to their needs (Garaigordobil & Machimbarrena 2017, Elsaesser et al. 2017).

## DISCUSSION

The environment that surrounds cyberbullied adolescents is uncondusive to building a solid narcissistic foundation. They have the narcissistic fragility that is specific to adolescence but is exacerbated by a lack of investment from parental figures. These adolescents, who lack narcissistic security, are more dependent on a counterpart relationship. Compared to others, they have a greater need for integration into a peer group that they can identify with. Moreover, paradoxically, outside social networks, these adolescents, who have fewer communication skills, find it more difficult to integrate into a peer group and experience the counterpart relationship. If their relationship with a counterpart who harasses them is the only experience of revisiting the mirror stage that is available, then it is easy to see that they cannot turn their back and put an end to it. In this case, ending the relationship can be synonymous with a new confrontation with the disturbing question of existence. Leaving the social network and being ignored

by peers becomes equivalent to no longer existing, to being excluded. When the adolescent is confronted with the risk of the disappearance of his or her identity due to the complete indifference of their peers, they prefer to deal with a counterpart persecutor who they hope to be able to control or, failing that, to destroy in order to regain their initial place.

It would be interesting to supplement this review with an experimental study and to consider the development of new, secondary prevention strategies in the adolescent population.

## CONCLUSION

The goal of secondary prevention is to end the harmful counterpart relationship between cyberbullies and their victims. The management of an adolescent suffering from cyberbullying consists, primarily, of encouraging participation in a peer group that includes one or more counterparts, who are not harassers. These peers allow the adolescent to revisit the mirror stage and provide positive support during identity construction. In these circumstances, it becomes easier for the young person to end the relationship with their bully. It is essential for the family and professionals working with adolescents to identify individuals who are at risk, who may be isolated and whose identity is fragile, in order to do everything possible to promote positive social interactions with peers.

These findings give us hope for the future development of new, secondary prevention strategies for cyberbullying in the adolescent population.

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### Contribution of individual authors:

All authors made substantial contributions to the design of the study, and/or data acquisition, and/or its analysis and interpretation.

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