on_education
Journal for Research and Debate

the moral of the stories: can influencers be moral exemplars?

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The aim of this paper is to propose a distinction between 'morally conscious influencers' and 'moral influencers' in order to explore the distinctive risks and potential advantages arising from the interaction that these two categories establish with their followers when they decide to publicly support a moral project, and so become candidates to act as a moral role model. The purpose of this analysis is to assess the value in elevating people who enjoy different degrees of influence to the status of a moral exemplar within educational settings.

Keywords: character education, influencers, moral exemplars, moral influencers, role models

With the advent of the digital age and the proliferation of social media, new avenues have emerged for both ordinary individuals and celebrities to influence others. It is increasingly evident that influencers, in particular, excel at eliciting admiration, as they are perceived as "people like us" who possess a remarkable ability to create content on social media—an activity that, in principle, anyone could learn to do. These "people like us" have achieved success, and that success makes them admirable. This raises the question of whether influencers can have a constructive impact on the morally relevant choices of their (especially young) followers, beyond merely influencing their preferences in areas such as taste, clothing style, and shopping habits. Should we consider elevating individuals with various levels of influence to the status of moral exemplars? In this paper, we will propose a distinction between two categories of morally (and possibly educationally) relevant influencers and argue that while each has interesting potentialities from a character-educational standpoint, they also present risks educators should consider very carefully.

In the field of neo-Aristotelian character education it is commonly held that one of the most promising ways, if not the most effective, to develop virtuous character is by admiring individuals who embody virtuous qualities (Croce & Vaccarezza, 2017; Kristjánsson, 2015; Sanderse, 2015). When we hold in high esteem those who surpass us in moral virtue, we find in them examples of what we should do and how we should do it, often leading us to desire to emulate their conduct. This forms the essence of Linda Zagzebski's exemplarist viewpoint (2017), which emphasizes that moral exemplars are individuals we admire due to their virtuous attributes.

However, moral exemplars face several objections, including the argument that they can be challenging to imitate and might seem disconnected from our everyday lives (e.g., Athanassoulis, 2022; Croce, 2019; Tachibana, 2019; Vaccarezza & Niccoli, 2019; Watson, 2019). Because of these concerns, educators and virtue theorists are actively working on revising moral exemplarism also, though not exclusively, to identify new, effective candidates to the status of moral role models to incorporate into educational programs.

Exemplar-based approaches to moral education typically encompass a wide range of moral characters, from those who demonstrate a high degree of virtuousness to moral heroes, saints, and sages (Zagzebski, 2017). In general, these individuals represent what is commonly known as a moral exemplar: someone with exceptional moral standing who possesses the power to inspire their admirers and encourage them to emulate their behavior. Moral exemplars can be historical figures whose lives are woven into narratives, living individuals who have gained some level of recognition, or, as recently suggested (e.g., Croce & Vaccarezza, 2017; Han et al., 2017), even individuals within one's family, group, or community who serve as moral reference points.

Could new categories of influential people, and especially influencers, be helpful in promoting moral behavior? Could pointing the young's attention to some of them be a viable strategy to integrate into the broader exemplar-based educational endeavor?

According to Sudha & Sheena (2017, p. 16), influencers are "individuals who have an influence over a specific target audience or medium," and who take part in brand campaigns in order to promote and increase the brand's sales. Thus, being an influencer has related requirements: first, having the power to affect the purchasing decisions of others because of his or her authority, knowledge, position, or relationship with their audience; and second, a following in a distinct niche, with whom they actively engage (Geyser, 2023).

In contrast to traditional celebrities, who are often seen as distant and unrelatable figures, influencers are perceived by their followers as closer to ordinary people, or even ordinary people themselves (Abidin, 2015; Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2023). In particular, they encompass two features which apparently make them ideal to overcome the problems traditional role models face: their persona is "both aspirational and ordinary" (Arnesson, 2023, p. 529; see also Banet-Weiser, 2021). They (at least give the impression to) engage directly with their audience, respond to messages, and appear somewhat dependent on their followers. Consequently, influencers seem to possess a unique ability to shape the preferences and choices of young people, also from a moral, political, and ideological perspective. However, even though such impact is now widely recognized[1], a tentative categorization of influencers depending on their moral impact has not until recently been proposed.[2] The first attempt in this respect is a classification put forth by Croce, Liberti, and Vaccarezza (forthcoming), a first significant category to consider is that of *morally conscious influencers* (MCI)—individuals who initially build their following and, once they have gained the power to influence a substantial number of people, decide to support socially or morally relevant causes. For instance, Chiara Ferragni and Nabela Noor serve as prime examples of this category.[3] Ferragni started as a fashion blogger in 2009 and, in less than a decade, became a globally recognized celebrity, even topping Forbes' list of top influencers (O'Connor, 2017). In addition to her fashion-related ventures, in 2020, Ferragni and her husband, the Italian rapper Fedez, initiated a fundraising campaign to aid Milan's San Raffaele hospital during the COVID-19 outbreak, raising 17 million euros in just three months, swiftly becoming the largest crowdfunding campaign in Europe at that time.[4] Similarly, Nabela Noor commenced her journey in 2013 with makeup tutorials on YouTube and rapidly became a successful entrepreneur with her clothing line and homeware brand. As her popularity grew—she now boasts over one million subscribers to her YouTube channel—Noor began to use her social media platforms to promote self-love among plus-size individuals and advocate for a more diverse and inclusive perception of beauty.

The second category comprises *moral influencers* (MI)—individuals whose influencer status is primarily due to their exceptional morality or unwavering commitment to moral causes, a

commitment which is likely antecedent to their appearance on the social media. While MCI may occasionally endorse a moral cause alongside various other products, MI owe their social recognition and the power to influence their followers' behavior entirely to the endorsed moral cause. In their case, the moral cause serves as both the source and the purpose of their influencer status.

Take Greta Thunberg as a typical example of a moral influencer. Thunberg's journey began when she started to influence people's choices through her environmental activism. At the outset, her "brand" was exceedingly simple—a white sign bearing the words "skolstrejik for klimatet" in black letters, a message that has been widely replicated by countless other activists. This iconic sign played a pivotal role in earning her numerous accolades, to the point of becoming an influencer proper (besides gaining other recognitions such as being named Time's Person of the Year in 2019).

However, her cause transcends borders; it's global. While many influencers typically cater to niche audiences, Thunberg's environmental advocacy has the potential to impact everyone. In this regard, both morally conscious influencers and moral influencers possess the capacity to shape the choices of a large number of individuals by virtue of the moral values they promote—a level of influence not all types of influencers can aspire to achieve.[5]

The advantages of incorporating both morally conscious and moral influencers into educational strategies are immediately apparent: they wield significant influence, and there's no need to actively cultivate young people's admiration for them since they are likely already following and emulating them. However, these advantages come with certain drawbacks. When dealing with MCI, a primary educational concern is the risk of misdirected admiration. Essentially, there's a risk that we may end up admiring and emulating them for the wrong reasons. This is not surprising as these individuals, unlike traditional moral heroes or saints, are not morally exceptional. In fact, they often are ordinary individuals with both virtues and flaws, much like the rest of us. Second, and related to this, their influencing power is primarily derived from their fame or other non-moral accomplishments that people admire. Consequently, it's not always guaranteed that people can consistently differentiate between (a) what is admirable for non-moral reasons, (b) what is morally commendable, and (c) what is morally reprehensible about them.

This concern becomes particularly relevant when we consider the spreading or pervasive nature of admiration (Archer & Matheson, 2022, p. 22): admiration, much like other moral emotional responses, can be characterized as a globalist attitude. In other words, it is directed towards a person as a whole rather than specifically toward their actions (see Bell, 2011). It's not difficult to see how this globalist nature of admiration can become troublesome if the admired person exhibits both genuinely admirable and questionable traits and attitudes. We understand that the exemplarist approach can be educationally beneficial when admiration is directed toward the right target—namely, the exemplar's virtues and praiseworthy actions (Archer, 2021; Croce, 2020; Croce & Vaccarezza, 2017; Zagzebski, 2017). However, if admiring an influencer's achievements leads individuals to overlook their bad behavior, there's a risk that over time, they may develop a problematic tolerance for the immoral actions of the people they admire and the specific kinds of objectionable deeds they have committed.

Misdirected admiration can potentially lead to a related issue of epistemic nature: specifically, misplaced trust. Within this context, misplaced trust may manifest when followers place their trust in the statements and claims made by their favorite influencer simply because they admire them,

without regard for the influencer's actual expertise on the issues they are addressing.

Moreover, misplaced trust can give rise to two forms of polarization. First, when a follower admires an influencer who, like them, supports the unrestricted circulation of, say, firearms, that follower may implicitly consider the influencer's endorsement as the sole reason for deeming that stance correct (monothematic polarization: Dellsén, forthcoming). Second, the follower might also start to unconditionally support other unrelated causes endorsed by the influencer, such as private healthcare (interthematic polarization: Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008; Abramowitz, 2018). This is especially true of so-called 'nano' or 'micro' celebrities, who "have a very dedicated audience within a certain segment" (Arnesson, 2023, p. 529; see also Grandien & Falasca, 2020), and who may be uncritically taken as reliable sources by that audience.

This doesn't mean that we should avoid discussing MCI. Quite the contrary, there are compelling reasons to incorporate their stories into educational contexts or narratives due to their significant impact on young people. However, education theorists and practitioners should be mindful of the challenges we've outlined, allowing them to devise strategies that effectively address these challenges while harnessing the undeniable benefits and influence of these prominent individuals. But what about MI?

We've defined MI as those influencers who make a moral cause the core of their online persona and achieve fame by advocating for this moral cause. The quintessential example we've chosen is Greta Thunberg. MI enjoy the advantages typically associated with influencers: they are closer to their followers than celebrities, allowing them to have a substantial impact on their followers' behaviors and to build a relationship of trust with them. Moreover, since they attain fame solely through their endorsement of a moral cause, it's more likely that their followers admire them for their moral advocacy rather than their fame or non-moral accomplishments.

We contend that MI represent a powerful resource in the realm of morality, as their ability to captivate others' attention carries immense potential for moral transformation. In particular, the connection between MI and their followers can provide a solid foundation for emulation, often rooted in genuine moral admiration. Nevertheless, this potential is not without its drawbacks. On one hand, achieving a degree of fame can make it challenging for MI to maintain virtuous habits, thereby threatening their moral status and their power to impact positively on others. On the other hand, the complexity of distinguishing the moral mission from the influencer's role can lead to adverse consequences for followers. Following someone whose fame stems not only from their moral cause but also from their influencer status can cause followers to admire the wrong, non-virtuous character traits of the MI.

Furthermore, MI may inadvertently be more effective in polarizing their followers. Due to the closeness and intimacy they establish with their followers, MI build strong emotional connections, making them exceptionally influential in generating or fostering the previously mentioned interthematic polarization. As a result, followers may be inclined to support not only the influencer's moral cause but also unrelated stances that have little to do with the original moral mission. These intimate relationships are particularly effective in triggering the emotional component of polarization, leading to a tendency to view opposing partisans negatively while favoring like-minded individuals. This often entails a partisan evaluation of others' moral beliefs and intellectual traits, ultimately resulting in a tendency to consistently and uncritically criticize those with differing viewpoints.

MI can exert a significant influence on their followers' emotional inclinations. For instance, Greta Thunberg's followers may initially support her due to her moral cause, but as they engage with her content on social media, they are likely to form an emotional connection with her. While this content remains relevant to the moral cause, it also provides an intimate view of the morally outstanding person, showcasing her daily habits and actions in line with her moral mission. The public exposure of their lives affects the emotional equilibrium of MI, but importantly, it also affects their followers. This exposure may trigger polarizing emotional tendencies, causing them to uncritically view everything the MI shares as good (moral polarization) and consider the influencer herself as consistently aligned with the truth (epistemic polarization). Relatedly, it may lead followers to identify other moral influencers and their followers as opposing partisans, consequently causing them to uncritically disparage both the moral and intellectual aspects of these groups.

This phenomenon is particularly pronounced among MI, as opposed to MCI, as they combine two critical aspects: the power to influence people's choices and beliefs and the capacity to elicit uncritical endorsement (although not necessarily). MI may provoke in their followers a desire to emulate their perceived moral sanctity or moral uprightness, rendering them susceptible to the moral and epistemic risks outlined earlier – misdirected admiration, polarization, partisanship, and so on. Furthermore, being the object of admiration, if not managed appropriately, can engender feelings of arrogance and entitlement (Rozeboom, 2020), potentially undermining humility and healthy self-assessment (e.g., Tanesini, 2021). In essence, it can jeopardize the virtues that initially propelled the moral influencer's mission. Since we assume that MI are not moral saints, acknowledging them as morally worthy individuals with fragile morality, akin to any other human being, requires us to take this danger seriously. It's important to clarify that we're not asserting that feelings of arrogance and entitlement may have a negative impact on the moral cause; after all, a moral influencer may be excessively arrogant yet still advocate for a virtuous cause. Our concern is how these feelings impact the moral influencer's exemplarity, which is the focus of this paper.

As we can observe, none of the identified categories appear to be risk-free choices for moral exemplarity. This conclusion should not diminish the significance of these figures; instead, it is intended to provide guidance to educators and education theorists as they navigate the intricate process of integrating influencers into character educational journeys with their students.

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Recommended Citation

Vaccarezza, M. S., Croce, M., & Liberti, M. (2024). The moral of the stories: Can influencers be moral exemplars? *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, *7*(19). https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2024.19.7

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1. Arnesson, e.g., shows that some influencers "personify and/or promote issues such as sustainability, feminism, and queer activism on their platforms", and that they can act as "ideological intermediaries" (2023, 529).
2. It is important to note that we are not proposing here a distinction between commercial and morally-relevant influencers; rather, we are introducing a distinction between two kinds of morally-relevant influencers, who may or may not be at the same time commercial influencers as well.
3. For the sake of brevity, we have chosen to discuss very few cases studies per category. A longer list would have implied nuances and provisos which the space limit of this paper does not allow. However, in our forthcoming paper we offer more examples and a more fine-grained analysis of these issues.
4. The Italian couple is also a good example of how endorsing moral causes – especially in the case of MCI, who frequently intertwine commercial and moral purposes – can backlash: in December 2023, Ferragni has been fined 1 million euros by the Italian antitrust authority for false advertising in the context of a fundraising campaign. See https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/cronaca/2023/12/15/antitrustmaxi-multa-a-chiara-ferragni-e-balocco-per-pandoro_17fa1374-8eee-4ca5-82ee-09c290121ae9.html.
5. The category of moral influencers significantly overlaps with that of "activists"; as a matter of fact, Thunberg can be legitimately labeled as both a moral influencer, since she owes her fame to the moral cause, and as an activist, since she

actively calls for action on social media. However, activists need not have a significant influence on the lifestyle of followers: that is, they may just advertise their events (e.g., Extinction Rebellion activists), while the moral influencer has an impact on followers' choices (e.g., Thunberg who avoids travelling with the plane). For a recent insightful analysis on online activism, see Lee & Abidin, 2023.