



## **Digital Emulation: From Moral Exemplars to Online Celebrities** **Matthew J. Dennis**

This is an unpublished conference paper for the 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> – Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> September 2022. These papers are works in progress and should not be cited without author's prior permission.



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## 1. Introduction

Moral exemplars are routinely identified as a cornerstone of character-based ethics across ethical traditions (Archer 2019, Gulliford 2019, Kristjánsson 2017, Zagzebski 2017). Morally exemplary individuals not only allow us to envisage what a life of virtue consists in in concrete terms, they provide a useful way to teach ethical excellence to children and young people. For these reasons, the lives of those who exemplify virtuous character traits are now a key part of virtue ethics teaching. Over the last decade, however, tech-savvy children and young people have become increasingly influenced by online celebrities. Celebrities and other famous individuals who use online platforms to promote their values or way of life are now so influential that it is no accident that they have been come to be known as ‘influencers’. Not only do these online stars offer children and young people a new array of ethical role models, the digital tools that online celebrities use to promote themselves have revolutionised the ability of persons to influence one another. Updates announced with a beep or a buzz, electronic recommender systems that ceaselessly promote content, and the possibility to directly interact with one’s favourite stars in real time, have collectively transformed how ethicists are now required to understand digital emulation, both in terms of virtue and in terms of vice.

Understanding the power of digital emulation becomes even more interesting when we consider how the wide availability of online technology means that anyone with access to a smartphone can become a digital exemplar themselves. The ideal of documenting one’s life and daily activities has become breathtakingly popular. As researchers found in 2019, out of 3000 children and young people from China, USA and the UK, only 11% desire to be an astronaut (the highest scoring ambition since 1969), compared to 29% who wish to be a YouTuber (see Dennis 2021 for a discussion). Statistics like this show that today’s young people face a twin challenge. As noted above, they find themselves in an online environment where they are bombarded by content from a diverse range of moral (and decidedly non-moral) celebrities. Alongside this, however, they are implicitly encouraged to document their own way of life for others to evaluate (in the form of ‘likes’ or retweets) and comment on.

This article charts how our conception of a moral exemplar has changed in the last decade as children and young people have increasingly begun using online technologies. After identifying the key features of moral admiration, I explore how the digital world introduces a new set of moral challenges that both present character-based ethics with difficulties and opportunities.

## 2. The Rise of Online Exemplars

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the effect of online behaviour on our well-being or what has now become known as our ‘digital well-being’ (Burr & Floridi 2020). Although much of this data is disputed (Orben 2019, Orben & Przybylski 2019), there is broad agreement that our online lives affect our offline lives, so theorists only really disagree about the nature and extent of this process. The first wave of this scholarship concerned the regulatory principles that should govern the availability of online technology, was quickly replaced by a second wave of scholarship that examined the new virtues and ethical ideals that are applicable to digital environments. Scholars such as Shannon Vallor (2016) and Tom Harrison (Dennis & Harrison 2020), argued that a range of strikingly new virtues are necessary –

‘technomoral virtues’ for Vallor, ‘cyber virtues for Harrison – in order for us to flourish online. This work has been fruitful, but has focused on how individuals can build up specific virtues to help them thrive in digital environments, rather than the other processes that might help influence or encourage online behaviours that are truly aligned with human flourishing. There has been much recent interest in how exemplars can help inform our ethical ideals (Warnick 2008, 2006; Zagzebski 2017), which may be able to be applied to the question of how we can orientate individuals towards living a flourishing life in digital environments. So are there ethical exemplars whose lives are capable of inspiring us to flourish better with online technologies? If so, how might they generate the right kind of imitation?

To answer these questions, it makes sense to consider the exponential rise in public interest in the lives of digital influencers – what I have termed online exemplars – over the last decade. In 2019, on the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing, Lego Group conducted an extensive survey that asked how popular the ideal of becoming an astronaut was among 8 to 12-year-olds. Since Neil Armstrong’s 1969 moonwalk, the vocation of astronaut has consistently been the top career goal among this age group, one that has encouraged countless students to study the natural sciences beyond their GCSEs. To their surprise, however, the researchers of the Lego Group study found that, of the 3000 children and young people they interviewed (from China, USA and UK), only 11% now want to be an astronaut, compared to 29% who wish to be a YouTuber. This result is significant because it gives us an intimation of popular the ideal of using online technologies to influence others is. Rather, than being taught how to behave online, these YouTubers directly influence others by expressing a vision of what they take the good life to be.<sup>1</sup>

YouTubers and other online influencers can influence others so effectively on account of what I term the ‘digital affordances’ of the SMTs they use. As philosopher of technology, Michael Klenk describes them, digital affordances are ‘relational properties of objects that make a particular action more likely’ (2020: 8).<sup>2</sup> In the case of the kinds of platforms that online exemplars use, the affordances of these platforms allow users to (1) *express* themselves with personal updates, (2) *share* content when they repost, (3) encourage them to *consume* content, and (4) *evaluate* the content of others. All of these can be easily done with great ease – the click of a mouse or the swipe of a trackpad (see Dennis & Steinert for an extended discussion). In the case of Jasmin Tookes and Martha Hunt, two popular fashion stars, Instagram allows these two individuals to directly communicate with a combined total of 7.5 million followers.

In addition to opening communication channels with staggeringly large numbers of followers, SMTs have digital affordances that allow online influencers to display aspects of their life that would be otherwise inaccessible. The embedded cameras of smartphone, combined with constant online connectivity, allow influencers to capture the self-cultivatory process through which these individuals shape their online identities. One term, ‘instamacy’, taken from a rapidly expanding nomenclature that caters to online exemplars, captures this well. This portmanteau word combines the name of the social media platform ‘Instagram’ and the ‘intimacy’ to refer to a new aesthetic-ethical ideal that many

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<sup>1</sup> Lego Group (2019). ‘The LEGO Group Kicks Off Global Program to Inspire the Next Generation of Space Explorers as NASA Celebrates 50 years of Moon Landing’. Available at: <https://www.lego.com/en-nl/aboutus/news/2019/july/lego-group-kicks-off-global-program-to-inspire-the-next-generation-of-spaceexplorers-as-nasa-celebrates-50-years-of-moon-landing> [accessed 30 April 2021]. For an extended discussion of this study, see my general-audience article, ‘Digital Technologies & the Power of Online Celebrities’, in *Eton Journal for Innovation & Research in Education*, Issue 5, June 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Davis and Chouinard (2016) propose six ways that affordances can work. An artifact can request, demand, allow, encourage, discourage, and refuse certain actions. We can also find these mechanisms in the online environment. For instance, some features of websites are specifically designed so that they afford certain actions, like scrolling or clicking (Dennis & Steinert: under review).

influencers employ when documenting their lives. It involves sharing intimate details with a global audience, especially those that would be ordinarily unavailable to view. Rather than a choreographed studio shot, or an image that has been carefully photoshopped, online celebrities who practice Instamacy are concerned to document themselves in a way that purposely exposes their vulnerabilities.

In the terms that Warnick initially defines an exemplar, those who aspire to Instamacy seem to be partaking in new ethical ideal, one which has much potential to affect the lives of their fans and followers. Compared to Zagzebski, Warnick emphasises the educative dimension of exemplars, so it is well applied to influencers as these are predominately followed by adolescents and young people.<sup>3</sup> Instamacy prioritises personal struggle, failures, gritty relationships, and the daily process of becoming (and failing to become) who one wishes to be. It prioritises the character traits of transparency, honesty, and authenticity, as nothing is hidden or presented as a *fait accompli*. It encourages fans and follows to come to celebrate foibles and their idiosyncrasies – and most importantly to record their own journey of self-development, so that others can engage in the same process too. While this is clearly not educative in the sense of formal training or learning, the exposure to this kind of content is no doubt instructive, perhaps in ways that are more influential on one's life view than what is learnt in the classroom. So are there any special ways that the SMTs that online influencers use allow them to do this?

### 3. The Influence of Digital Affordances

Now that we have introduced how the digital affordances of SMTs encourage certain kinds of emulation, we are ready to explore how digital affordances affect the ability of online exemplars to influence their audience more widely. To do this, we need to survey how the tools of SMTs are connected to digital affordances that define how online exemplars influence their audience. As I explain in the following subsections, these tools give online exemplars a wide range of powerful – and increasingly expanding – ways to influence others. It is important to appreciate how the SMTs these individuals typically use have distinctive characteristics that change the conditions under which one individual can influence another. I explore the three main dimensions of digital affordances below:

#### *a. Ordinary people doing ordinary things (with the possibility of going viral)*

One of the hallmarks of the SMTs that online influencers use is their ability to record ordinary people doing ordinary things. As we saw in our discussion of Instamacy, this is due to the digital affordances contained within the smartphone itself. SMTs are explicitly designed to be used on an Internet-enabled device with a camera that can be carried snugly in one's hand. This ability of smartphones, in combination with how SMTs operate, allows users to capture themselves doing a wide range of different things. Often it is the most innocuous recordings and documentations of one's life that provides content that eventually goes viral.

#### *b. Interaction with individual fans (both comments & replies)*

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<sup>3</sup> Warnick's emphasis on education is well illustrated by the following quote: "This process of (a) representing a person's actions, (b) relating the benefits that have come from the action, and then (c) using these benefits to motivate the student to be like the model, has been one of the most popular ways of thinking about role models in education." (2008: 15).

The digital affordances of online technologies introduce the possibility of one-to-one interaction with user-generated content. Not only can the fans and followers of online exemplars comment on the posts of those they follow, online celebrities can – and often do – respond back. This sets up a two-way set of correspondence between users and online exemplars that can result in powerful bonds being formed.

*c. Real-time communication in posting and sharing.*

The digital affordances of SMTs give online exemplars the ability to share their lives with their users in real time. This applies both to the updates that online exemplars post, and to the ability of their audience to view these posts, which can be done on demand.

It is also worth noting that gender is an important factor in these debates, as the users who either take up the ideal of instamacy or are inspired by it predominately identify as female. In her book, *Perfect Me: Beauty as an Ethical Ideal*, Helen Widdows notes does an excellent job of showing how visual culture increasingly permeates ethical ideals, especially for young women and girls. This takes many forms, Widdows argues, but it is especially prevalent on social media. Although she does not discuss Instamacy specifically (or online technologies at any great length), Widdow's estimates that '90 percent of young women in the United States, UK and Australia use social networking sites' (2018: 59). From what we have seen from the Lego Group study, there are signs that the ideal to be an influencer is growing among the very young, so it is reasonable to anticipate this ideal will grow in future years.

## 5. Conclusion

In this article I have outlined the following claims. First, online technologies radically change how ethical exemplars interact with those who are inspired by them (fans, followers, etc.). Furthermore, I have suggested that over time the aspects of ethical exemplars that digital affordances are able to expose will inform the ethical ideals we value. One reason for this, I've proposed, is that digital affordances are especially suited at capturing character traits relating to Instamacy (vulnerabilities, transparency, honesty, authenticity, idiosyncrasies, and self-development. Because they are so well suited to capturing these traits, digital affordances can be regarded as being responsible for the emergence of a new ethical ideal (Instamacy) and new ethical exemplars (influencers) that epitomise it.

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